

General Subjects Section  
ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT  
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL  
Fort Benning, Georgia

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE  
1947 - 1948

THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 1ST REGIMENT  
(FIRST SPECIAL SERVICE FORCE) AT ILE DE PORT CROS,  
OFF THE SOUTH COAST OF FRANCE, 14-17 AUGUST 1944.  
(SOUTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Battalion Executive Officer)

Type of operation described: BATTALION IN THE ATTACK

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INTRODUCTION

The Combined Chiefs of Staff, during the Quadrant Conference in Quebec in August 1943, resolved that a diversionary effort on the Mediterranean coast of France would be made in conjunction with the main invasion effort in Northern France. This decision was later modified at the Sextant Conference in Cairo late in November 1943, when the Combined Chiefs of Staff decided that: the Southern France Operation would be a major assault; and, the two assaults on France would be the "Supreme Operations" of 1944. (1)

On 6 December 1943, they advised General Eisenhower (then Commander-in-Chief of Allied Forces, Mediterranean Theater of Operations) that the Southern France Operation would be conducted in connection with the Northern France assault, and would tentatively be timed for the "most suitable date during May 1944". (2)

General Eisenhower, after completion of an appreciation and outline plan of the proposed operation, pointed out to the Combined Chiefs of Staff that an experienced Army Headquarters was needed for the detailed planning and operational control of such an undertaking. He requested permission - which was promptly granted - to retain the Seventh Army Headquarters for this task.

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

### THE GENERAL SITUATION

Seventh Army Headquarters, since the completion of the Husky Operation (Sicily) in August 1943, had been relatively idle. The divisions it had previously used had been committed elsewhere and only a few service units and a skeleton staff remained. Duties during the period August-December 1943 were comprised of routine administration, command post exercises, and conditioning. (3)

On 19 December the Headquarters was electrified into activity by a message from Allied Force Headquarters which inquired as to the accommodations which would be required for its planning staffs if it should be asked to undertake the planning of an operation similar in size to Husky. In late December preparations were made to move and organize the nucleus of a Seventh Army planning staff just outside Algiers. (4)

On 29 December the planning staff received instructions from Allied Force Headquarters which contained general objectives and directives. The operation, to be known as Anvil, would be launched against the South Coast of France during May 1944. Anvil was to establish a bridgehead and subsequently exploit toward Lyon and Vichy. American and French forces would be involved, but the proportion and strength of each was as yet unknown. (5)

On 12 January 1944, the planning staff, or "Force 163" as it was designated, arrived in Algiers, and promptly undertook the study of the AFHQ plan. (6)

(3,4) A-2, p. 1; (5) A-2, p. 2; (6) A-2, p. 3

The AFHQ plan broadly envisaged the operation to be a two or three division assault and a build up to ten divisions for the exploitation northward. Several assumptions were made: that the Mediterranean Theater would be engaged in no other offensive operations other than the Italian campaigns; that the internal security of North Africa would not limit the availability of American and French Divisions; that no other amphibious operation would take place prior to Overlord. (7)

Although Toulon and other smaller ports could be used temporarily; Marseille, without question, was the only port capable of serving as a major supply base. Studies of the Mediterranean beaches indicated that sites east of Toulon in the vicinity of Rade d'Hyeres and Cavalaire Bay were most suitable for landings. The islands off the coast, it was felt, would have to be neutralized by commandos or rangers prior to the H-hour assault. Airborne troops would be utilized to help extend the bridgehead and also prevent movement of enemy reinforcements into the target area. Finally, the AFHQ plan recommended that the assaulting forces would be American with French troops first landing on D plus 3. (See Map A) (8)

The five months following this early discussion phase in mid January 1944 were, for the planners, well seasoned by interminable change in plan and countermanding instruction.

Their activities, overshadowed by the anxious and hurried preparations being made for Overlord and the bitter campaign in process on the Italian Mainland, were frequently curtailed

(7) A-2, p. 3; (8) A-2, p. 3-4

or nullified. The tactical and service units - their supplies and equipment - needed for the operation, were ever changing factors due to the ever changing situation. The Shingle (Anzio) Operation was making its effect felt. Two fronts in Italy, both supplied by water, were taxing the supply and service facilities. Withdrawal of any troops from Italy was impossible until a linking between the forces was made and Rome captured. Target dates and commanders were changed. Of great significance too was the lack of a final decision from the Combined Chiefs of Staff that Operation Anvil would be made. Nevertheless, planning had to continue. (9)

On 23 June, the months of uncertainty came to an end; and at a London Conference attended by representatives of SHAEF and AFHQ, Anvil received the go ahead signal. Seventh Army Headquarters was now able to complete its plan for the Dra-<sup>gon</sup> goon (Anvil) Operation. (10)

The weeks following were filled with coordination of plans between Naval, Ground, and Air Forces involved. Selection of units was completed, and training in amphibious operations commenced.

The General Ground Mission, as previously planned, was to establish a beachhead east of Toulon as a base for the assault, to capture Toulon, Marseille, and then to exploit towards Lyon and Vichy.

(9) A-2, p. 4-8, 10, 11, 18, 21-24; (10) A-2, p. 26, 52

The final plan for the assault landings, in brief, directed the following:

1. U.S. VI Corps, (3d, 36th, 45th Infantry Divisions, 1st French Armored Combat Command) was to land its three infantry divisions at H-hour over the beaches between Cape Cavalaire and Agay. A rapid advance was to be made inland to contact the Airborne Task Forces. The Combat Command would land as soon as the beaches were clear.
2. The Provisional Airborne Division was to land on the high ground in the vicinity of Le Muy beginning at H-3½. They would assault enemy positions from the rear and assist the advance of sea borne forces by neutralizing enemy installations to the east.
3. The First Special Service Force was to land under cover of darkness at H-6½ and neutralize all enemy defenses on the islands of Port Cros and Levant. (It was felt that the islands were a definite menace to the beaches on Cavalaire Bay. The Navy was insistent that the hostile shore batteries there be neutralized or else shipping would be within easy gun range).
4. Two French Groups were to land under cover of darkness prior to H hour and by demolitions and defensive fires protect the flanks of the assault. (See Map B)  
(11)
5. French Army B(-) was to land on D plus 1, pass through the left of VI Corps and capture Toulon.

(11) A-2, p. 57-59



The First Special Service Force was selected for the Port Cros and Levant assault because it was an organization which had the training, experience, and equipment needed to make a night amphibious attack under the conditions peculiar to this particular operation. To better understand the selection of the Force for this mission, a brief biography, it is felt, must be given here.

The activation and organization of the FSSF can be attributed directly to the novel and intriguing theory of an Englishman, Mr. Geoffrey Pyke. "Plough" as it was referred to, was based on what he considered a fourth element of war - snow. Pyke, after years of meteorological and climatic research, established an elemental fact: Seventy per cent of the European land area was covered by snow in excess of four months out of the year. He then hypothesized that whoever controlled the snows controlled seventy per cent of Europe's land surface in the winter time. In order to control the snow surfaces, he further reasoned, a superior snow vehicle would have to be developed that would serve in the same capacity as vehicles of military forces did in controlling air, sea, and land elements. After two years of pressing his theory on the British War Office, he was successful in 1942 in interesting Lord Mountbatten, then British Chief of Combined Operations. Pyke had prepared a paper titled, "Mastery of the Snows", in which he cited that with cross-country snow machines capable of climbing almost all gradients and out-distancing the enemy, the following could be accomplished:

1. The elimination of Norway as an economic asset to Germany by destruction of its hydroelectric stations.

2. The freezing of large enemy forces in an anti-sabotage role.
3. Destruction of a large proportion of the oil producing and refining capacity of Rumania.
4. Destruction of seventy per cent of the Italian hydroelectric power located North of the Povon on the southern slopes of the Alps. (12)

His paper fitted favorably in the diversionary scheme then planned to support the cross-channel operation into France. As a result, when General Marshall and Mr. Harry Hopkins attended the Chequers Meeting on 9 April 1942, the Pyke theory was discussed. General Marshall and his staff, after consideration of all the presented factors, accepted the project which called for the production of 1000 snow vehicles and the implementation of the plan as outlined in Pyke's paper. (13)

This project then evolved itself into two distinct problems: the design and production of the vehicle; and organization activation and training of personnel while planning for their employment. (14)

Major General R. T. Frederick (then Lieutenant Colonel) on duty in the operations Division, WDGS, was assigned the mission of writing a strategic estimate of the plan. Shortly after completion of this estimate in May, he was directed by General Eisenhower (at that time Chief of the Operations Division) to activate, organize, equip and train the military force which would be the "Plough" force. He was further advised by Lord Mountbatten at the Quebec conference in June that Canadian forces would be amalgamated into this unit. (15)

(12) A-3, p. 2-4; (13) A-3, p. 1, 3-5; (14) A-3, p. 5;  
(15) A-3, p. 8-10, 12

Activation of this bizarre organization with its international character took place near Helena, Montana, in July 1942. Based upon the unique mission with its demands for a variety of skills, selection of personnel was restricted to those whose occupations were of a highly individualistic order i.e., lumber jacks, forest rangers, explorers, game wardens, prospectors, north woodsmen and hunters. (16)

Organization was tailored to fit the mission. As a result, the task force was split into two echelons - combat and service. For security measures the subordinate units of the combat echelon were given the normal infantry titles - regiment, battalion, company and platoon. The combat force consisted of three regiments of two battalions each. Each battalion had three companies of three platoon each. Each platoon had two sections. The section, the basic unit, had assigned to it 4 snow machines, or "weasels" as they are commonly known. Each weasel carried 2 men; the entire combat echelon was weasel borne. Each regiment had 32 officers and 570 enlisted men. (17)

The target date for the Norwegian Operation was late December 1942. Of necessity therefore, the training had to be as concentrated as it was diverse. The troops, in addition to mastery of all infantry small arms, were qualified in parachuting, rock climbing, skiing, technical use of demolitions (i.e. the destruction of high head hydroelectric dams, bridges, mines, power plants, factories), operation and repair of the weasel, night operations, and small unit tactics modified to fit Pyke's theme: "The force should be trained as small groups

(16) A-3, p. 12, 14, 16; (17) A-3, p. 14-15

of individuals rather than in regular military formations". Emphasis in training was placed on hand to hand fighting. Normal rate of march at all times was at 140 steps per minute. It is interesting to note that the combat echelon concentrated in its entirety on training. All personnel of the combat force had a combat assignment; and, as a matter of regulation, all work details were handled by the service echelon where the cooks, K.P.'s, clerks, parachute packers, and supply personnel were assigned. (18)

During this period of intensive activity however, certain conditions in the diplomatic and other fields were changing; conditions upon which the Plough scheme was based. Colonel Frederick, after countless conferences in London and Washington, was forced finally to suspend the Norwegian operation for which the Force had trained so assiduously. (19)

Now that the Plough operation had been side-tracked, Colonel Frederick and his staff set about changing the tables of organization and equipment to fit the force more readily into a versatile assault group able to undertake any task that might be assigned. Dependence on the cargo carrier (weasel) was eliminated. The significant changes were made in the combat section. It was increased to 12 men led by a staff sergeant. The weapons of that basic unit, comparable in strength to a rifle squad, were: one light machine gun M1919, one Johnson automatic rifle, one rocket launcher, and three rifles M-1 (with grenade attachments)\*. A battalion of approximately

(18) A-3, p. 12, 15, 19, 20, 23,24; (19) A-3, 26-30, 35-38

\*Two sections comprised the platoon. The second section differed from the first only in the replacement of the three rifles by a 60-mm mortar.

280 men had a total of 18 light machine guns, 18 automatic rifles, 18 bazookas, and 6 light mortars massed in the role of front line fire. Additionally, each man carried a personal weapon, usually a rifle. Lacking in the entire organization however, were the heavier mortars, machine guns and other armament common to the infantry. This change underlined the new concept of the force's mission -- assault combat rather than sabotage.

Training was amplified to meet the new requirement. Tactics as well as all phases of amphibious operations were thoroughly covered. As the months passed, the Force perfected its many techniques; and when it entered combat in December 1943, it was an American-Canadian team with an esprit de corps surpassed by none -- a team wherein nationality no longer was considered by the men when thinking in terms of each other. They were simply Force men. (21)

This Force as described, with the exception of the considerable combat loss of original personnel, was the Force assigned to Isles d'Hyeres operation.

On the west coast of Port Cros, the enemy was reported to have a coastal battery, protected by antiaircraft artillery and machine guns. On Levant the most significant fortifications were constructed on the northeastern tip of the island. Three or four 164-mm guns protected by searchlight and pill boxes were believed in position there. Four medium coast defense guns were thought to be on the other end of the island. (22)

(20) A-3, p. 42; (21) A-3, p. 48-50, 53, 57, 87;

(22) A-2, p. 43

The Seventh Army order reached the Force shortly after its relief at Rome, where it concluded a four-month "show" at Anzio and a two-week offensive follow up. General Frederick, regrettably leaving the Force for assignment of greater responsibility, was relieved by able, respected, Colonel E. A. Walker, former commander of the Third Regiment. Colonel Walker, aware that invasion training was scheduled to begin shortly in southern Italy, ordered the Force out of its pleasant "diggings" on the shores of Lake Albano. On 2 July the Force debarked at Salerno, and early on the 3d, arrived at the fishing village of Santa Maria di Castellabate, forty miles further south. (23)

The relaxed character of the Force which had prevailed for the past three weeks quickly gave way to the familiar one of urgency and secrecy which always precedes an attack. Headquarters expanded with the arrival of Naval personnel and others concerned with the forthcoming operation. (24)

Admiral Davidson, commanding Sitka Force (the SSF and Naval elements who would cover the left flank of the VI Corps landings), ordered several personnel destroyers to remain off Santa Maria and work with the Force throughout its training schedule. Army and Navy, in an atmosphere of cooperation and friendliness, labored together working out the minutiae of logistical plans, loading tables, movements, and tactics. (25)

The success of the plan was predicated on the principle of surprise. Colonel Walker with his staff, estimated that, because of the steep cliffs on the southern or seaward shores

(23) A-3, p. 248-250; (24,25) A-3, p. 251-252

of the islands, the German defenses would be covering the obvious landing sites on the north. He hoped that, as in the French defense of Quebec in 1759, the Germans would assess the cliffs as being effective obstacles to landings. In brief, the plan embodied the following:

1. Movement of the Force to within 35 miles of the French coast by dusk on 14 August; and
2. arrival in the transport area 8,000 yards off the Isle d'Heyeres by 2300.
3. A Rubber boat landing by battalion on premarked scramble (or cliff side) beaches, H-7, D-Day.
4. Rapid movement inland and neutralization of enemy positions. (See Map B) (26)

1st Regiment was assigned the mission of Port Cros. Lt. Colonel J. F. R. Akehurst, commanding, gave the 1st Battalion the responsibility of clearing the eastern half of the island, and securing the Port Man area where regimental headquarters would be established. This would also serve as the supply and evacuation beach. 2nd Battalion had as its mission the clearing of the western half, first securing Fortin de la Vigie, the highest point on the island; where it was suspected, a *not shown* radar station was located. Boundary *←* between Battalions ran along the ridge line Fortin de la Vigie to Fort de Lestissac, inclusive to 2d Battalion. (See Map C) (27)

Little in the nature of intelligence could be gained about enemy dispositions on the island. It was believed to be garrisoned by a coastal defense battalion; and a Naval

(26) A-2, p. 57, 87; A-3, p. 253; Personal knowledge;  
(27) FO 29, FSSF, 9 August 1944

intelligence estimate indicated that 102 guns of 75-mm to 120-mm caliber could shell Port Cros from the Mainland and the Giens peninsula. What exactly the German defense system might be was not known. (28)

#### BATTALION SITUATION

The First Battalion when relieved at Rome consisted of 5 officers and 39 enlisted men. By mid July, many of the battalion's wounded had returned from the hospitals; and those veterans of the deactivated Ranger Battalions in Italy who were not returned to the United States, filled the ranks up to a T/O status. The Naval beach marking and shore fire control parties joined the battalion and ate, slept, and worked with the people they would work with on the operation.

Training, in preparation for the forthcoming attack, initially emphasized conditioning, night compass marches, weapons firing and small unit problems. Then, as efficiency increased, followed rubber boat training and ship to shore exercises. Problems simulating the actual attack were rehearsed and critiqued.

The problems were not without their humorous moments. One night the battalion, thinking it on its beach marking light, swarmed over a startled fisherman who was repairing his boat on the beach by light of a lantern. Seeing the blackfaced soldiers apparently emerge from the stygian cover of the night and the water, he dropped his tools and ran toward his shack yelling "Tedeschi, Tedeschi ritorna!" ("The Germans, The Germans have returned.") (29)

(28) A-3, p. 252; Intelligence Memorandum U.S. Naval Forces, 9 July 1944; (29) Personal knowledge



A dress rehearsal for all units in the Sitka operation was held on the night of 7-8 August when landings were made on the Pontine Islands of Zannone and Ponza. These sites were chosen because they closely approximated the terrain features and conditions which would be encountered. The battalion had a perfect rehearsal. Movement from ship to shore, and from beach to objective was without incident. Everyone in the battalion knew that he was ready and that he was good. All preparations were complete. (30)

On 11 August the battalion gratefully took its leave of Italy. Ruck sacks were loaded and by 1200 all personnel were aboard the troop landing ship, HMS Baudouin. By dawn on the 12th, the battalion landed on the beaches of Propriano, Corsica.

The next two days ashore were spent in final discussions of the battalion mission and map study of the terrain. Assignments to companies were:

1. 1st Co (-) to seize and secure the Port Man point, and Port Man, to include securing the harbor area.
2. 2d Co to seize Hill 139 and await further orders.
3. 3d Co to seize Hill 149 and await further orders.
4. 1st Platoon, 1st Co to mark and secure Emerald landing beach. (See Map C) (31)

On the morning of 14 August the troops again boarded ship. The Sitka Force arranged itself in battle formation and at 1130 moved out. (31)

(30) A-2, p. 88; A-3, p. 255; (31) A-2, p. 96, 105; A-3, p. 255, 256; Personal knowledge

### THE ATTACK OF ILE DE PORT CROS

By twilight, HMS Prince Baudouin stood some 35 miles off the Cote D'Azur. Steaming slowly she reached the transport area some 8000 yards off the dim silhouette of Port Cros at 2300 hours. The Beach Marking and Security Platoon, commanded by Lieutenant E. R. Stevens loaded in three rubber boats, and accompanied by Ensign Fowler's Beach Marking party, were towed away by LCA at 2330 hours. Loading of the battalion commenced immediately. Troops dropped their rubber craft over the side of the ship, and as crew members of the LCA's steadied them to shipside, they scrambled down the nets burdened with the tools of their trade. Quietly then, they paddled up to their predesignated LCA's standing nearby. As soon as each LCA had hooked up its nine rubber craft, it pulled off to the port side of the ship and slowly executed long circles under the starlit sky.

As the last boat pulled away, the stealth of the movement and tenseness felt by all personnel was abruptly shattered when the red bearded Executive of the ship leaned over the bridge and roared, "I say, I say down there, do you have your dinghies buttoned up?" Finally when the entire battalion was afloat and in proper formation, it moved off toward shore, resembling somewhat a well disciplined colony of water bugs. The PT boat which was to guide the battalion ashore on its radar track, failed to materialize. As a result the battalion was forced to move toward the island on compass bearing because the silhouette of Port Cros, so easily distinguished from the ship, was not to be seen due to our proximity to the water. By 2400 however, the island was seen again and shortly thereafter

the emerald marking light of Ensign Fowler and his man aboard his tiny GORP (2 man electric surf boat) was picked up. (32)

According to plan, the naval crewmen manning the LCA's were to tow us to within 1000 yards off shore, cut us off there and remain with motors seaward until we were safely ashore. Apparently the darkness debilitated their powers of distance estimation, because, at a distance some 2000 yards from shore, the masters of the LCA's informed their respective towed personnel that they were to be on their own. Quick deliberations punctuated by none too thinly veiled imprecations dissuaded them from their original intent and the cutoff was made as planned. As if to add a last stimulus to all who paddled toward the beach light to get there and fast, the LCA's did a right about turn when the leading elements were about 500 yards off shore, and with a deep throated roar raced back to the transport area. (33)

At 0120 the Battalion reached shore, organized by company and scrambled up the cliff on the fixed ropes installed by the security platoon. Upon reaching the high ground already held by the 1st Platoon 1st Company, the Battalion was reorganized prior to seizure of its area. Surprise was complete.

At this point, the Battalion, breathing a sigh of relief because the enemy had made no demonstration yet, was first introduced to a new element, unknown and unappreciated. Myrtle, or Maqui as it is locally known, a foliage so dense that it is nearly impassable and grows to heights of up to

(32,33) Personal knowledge

10 feet, literally covered the island (with exception of a strip of forest on the central ridge). (See Map C) After struggling through this growth for nearly three hours, 2d and 3d Companies were not at all certain where they were; and understandably so.

1st Company whose sector lay to the front and right of the Battalion assembly area was more fortunate. Captain Whittemore, commanding 1st Company, quickly dispatched his 3d Platoon to capture the Anciente Batterie and Pointe de Port Man. He accompanied his 2d Platoon toward the other objective: the Port Man Cove and its environs. 3d Platoon, after a brief soiree with the small garrison at the Batterie, bluffed the enemy into surrendering by the simple ruse of informing them that they were surrounded. Prior to dawn, all of 1st Company area was cleared and the cove secured. (34)

With daybreak, 2d and 3d Companies, now oriented on the terrain struck out for their objective and by 1000 hours reported their areas cleared. Except for the fringe of forest extending from Vigie to Lestissac, the 1st Battalion area was covered by Maqui with few trails through it, and the Germans apparently chose to stay out of it.

In the meantime 2d Battalion had seized its first objective--Fortin de la Vigie--which was located on the dominating feature of the island. The German garrison initially put up a spirited fire fight, but when pressed, evacuated the fortress through tunnels leaving 2 dead and 1 wounded. Major McFadden, 2d Battalion Commander, then directed his 4th Company to press the attack on Fort del Eminence. (35)

(34) A-3, p. 263; Statement of Capt. Whittemore; Personal knowledge; (35) A-3, p. 264

Eminence, built in Napoleon's time as part of Toulon's outer defense system quickly proved itself to be by no means an obsolete defensive position. The central fort was a concrete and rock amalgam structure, the sides and top 12 feet thick. On top of the roof was an additional 20 feet of earth and gravel. Three sides of the outer wall were sheer drops of 40 to 80 feet and the fourth was on ground level on which the only road into the fort was constructed. A deep wide moat separated the inner and outer walls. All around fields of fire were affected by clearing all trees and bush to ground level. (See Map C) (36)

The enemy, alerted by the firing at Fort Vigie, reacted violently to 2d Battalion's attempted assault. The one artillery piece in Eminence, supported by artillery from the mainland systematically began working over the island along trails and at the cove of Port Man where regimental headquarters was established. (37)

Prisoners captured at Port Man revealed that the enemy was concentrated in three main strong points: the Chateau overlooking the entrance into Port Cros harbor, Fort de Lestissac and Fort del Eminence, the latter containing the headquarters of the enemy garrison. (38)

Because of the apparent impregnability of Eminence, Colonel Akehurst at 1300 ordered 2d Battalion to concentrate its entire force upon it, and gave 1st Battalion the task of clearing the village of Port Cros, the Chateau and Fort de Lestissac. (See Map C) (39)

2d and 3d Companies were immediately ordered forward from their initial objectives into assembly areas in the

(36) A-3, p. 264; (37) A-3, p. 262, 266; (38,39) A-3, p. 265;  
Personal knowledge

vicinity of trail junction 116. (See Map C) (40)

Based on personal observations and the reports of scouts, Major Heilman, 1st Battalion Commander, determined that the only logical route into the village area was down the Vaillon de Salitude. The route into the village, additional reconnaissance disclosed, was under direct observation from Eminence; and further, that any movement down the Vaillon de Solitude drew heavy accurate fire upon it. However, the movement into the village was not held up. At 1900, and with twilight fast fading, 2d Company moved out from its assembly area near the trail junction. (See Map C) Two machine guns opened fire on the extended column 500 yards down from the assembly area, and in the ensuing fight, Lieutenant MacLean, company commander, was mortally wounded and 3 men injured. Sergeants Olson and Helming, Battalion scouts, crept around to the rear of the guns, and in fast order destroyed them, killing 3 and capturing 2. Movement then was continued into the village which was systematically cleared. By midnight the village, with exception of the Chateau, was entirely free of the enemy. Nine prisoners had been taken, and an unknown number of the enemy had been killed. (See Map C) (41)

The Battalion Commander decided that, because of a considerable ignorance of the construction of the two forts, any attempt on his part to schedule an assault that night would have scant chance of success.

3d Company in the meantime had been ordered into Port Cros. Reconnaissance elements from the companies carried

(40) Personal knowledge; (41) A-3, p. 265; Personal knowledge

on a systematic patrol in the fort areas. Both the Chateau and Lestissac were sensitive to our probings, and although the enemy did not attempt to leave either fort during the night, they did fire on the village and on suspected targets with machine guns and heavy mortars throughout the night.

Shortly after dawn, Sergeant Helming of Battalion Headquarters discovered enemy telephone wire leading into the Chateau. He was able to converse with the German commander at the Chateau and demanded the surrender of his garrison. The German arrogantly declined, stating that a handful of raiders did not warrant his surrender. Moreover, he said, it was his understanding that Americans did not take prisoners. Would he surrender, queried Sergeant Helming, if he could speak to one of his men captured the night before? After some deliberation the commander avowed that he would. Word was transmitted back for the return of one prisoner. (42)

This parley had by no means delayed planning for the attacks on the Chateau and Lestissac.

Daylight reconnaissance revealed the following: Lestissac at 100 meters dominated the village area. The terrain surrounding the fortress had been completely cleared of all foliage; and an extensive barbed wire and mine field covered this area. The Fort itself was star shaped--the outer walls about 15 feet high and once protected by a wide dry moat. There was one entrance through this wall, shuttered by an iron gate. It appeared that an inner wall existed inside which was the main bastion. The outer diameter was about 75 meters. Previous enemy fire indicated that the Fort's defenses were alert and

(42) Personal knowledge

planned. In all, Lestissac presented a more than considerable challenge to the attacker. (See Map C)

The Chateau, located astride a rocky spur jutting out forming the northern lip of the harbor stood about 30 meters above the water. The north face of the spur was a vertical one plunging into the sea. The southern side of the spur sloped more gently toward the harbor, its face scarred with a horse-shoe road running from the harbor into the Chateau. The eastern side of the spur rose gently toward Lestissac some 500 meters away. The ground was barren, covered with broken boulders and scree. The Chateau itself, a large fortified dwelling was protected on all sides by walls from 5 to 15 feet high. (See Map C)

The Fort, from point of domination perhaps, demanded first priority in the attack. However, due to the extensive defense system and lack of covered approaches to Lestissac, Major Heilman decided to first attack the Chateau whose passive defenses were less formidable. The German prisoner earlier sent to assist in surrender negotiations had not shown up.

The plan of attack was a simple but audacious one. 2d Company was assigned the mission of eliminating the Chateau garrison. By 1110 hours reconnaissance and plans for the attack were completed. 1st Platoon, commanded by Staff Sergeant Phillips was to move by stealth into assault positions near the base of the ridge prior to H hour which was at 1130 hours.

2d Platoon from its present position was to lay down covering fire on the Chateau beginning at H hour, and to



maintain it until the 1st Platoon was within 10 yards of the walls of the Chateau.

3d Platoon was to initially supplement 2d Platoon's covering fire. As soon as the assault started it was to move forward to the base of the slope ready to assist 1st Platoon, if necessary. (43)

The attack commenced on schedule. 1st Lieutenant L. L. Stuart commanding 2d Company moved out with his assault platoon at 1120 hours. The movement was perfectly executed and the Germans apparently did not detect it for not a shot was fired. At 1130 the covering fire blazed down on the Chateau and its walls. Every weapon in the supporting platoons was firing. Bazookas banged at gun ports on the walls and 60 mm mortars dropped their rounds on the Chateau proper. The machine guns, "Johnnie" guns, and rifles literally sprayed the area. The enemy, taken by surprise, was slow to respond; and when finally they did, their fire was extremely inaccurate. As 1st Platoon climbed toward the assault section of fort (that portion near the road entrance) they increased the tempo of their marching fire. As they neared the walls the covering fire lifted. At this point the men firing their weapons and yelling ran toward the walls and gate. Scrambling up and still firing they got up on the walls themselves and fired on the still confused Germans who were running about in the court yard. The enemy, bewildered by the violence of the attack, surrendered practically en masse. By 1140 hours, 20 minutes after the attack was begun, the fortress Chateau was in our hands. Nineteen prisoners were taken with several dead and wounded. Significantly

(43) Personal knowledge

the commander who refused to surrender was killed. Our losses were 1 dead and 6 wounded. (44)

For some unexplained reason, Lestissac held its fire until several minutes after the fort was captured. This fortunately permitted our own troops--2d Company--to move into the shelters and comparative comfort of the Chateau safely. During the day however, three casualties were sustained from intense heavy mortar fire from the star shaped fort.

Earlier in the morning, negotiations had begun between Force headquarters, the Navy, and Air Force for reduction of the strongholds remaining. Colonel Walker, anxious to get the operation over, arrived on Port Cros just after the reduction of the Chateau. He personally surveyed the situation and then outlined what was to be the hoped for final step in the eliminations of the two remaining strongholds. An air strike was to be made, he said, and at 1600 hours dive bombers were to attack the Lestissac-Eminence area. (45)

Major Heilman ordered 2d Company to withdraw from the Chateau at 1500 hours, and with 1st and 3d Companies, to move up to the Fort La Vigie area. First Company, at this time, was relieved of responsibility of the regimental headquarters area, it being believed that it was now safe from any enemy attack.

The movement from the village area was made secretly and without incident. The air strike came off as planned and the 16 Marauders screamed down on the two ancient bastions. Reverberations of the rocket explosions shook the island, but as the smoke settled, the forts still stood intact. There was

(44) A-3, p. 266; Personal knowledge; (45) A-3, p. 267; Personal knowledge

no signal of surrender from the defenders, so 2d Company, according to plan, raced back under cover of the dust and smoke in the air, and reoccupied the Chateau. 3d Company and battalion headquarters moved back into the village. First company assembled around trail junction 116 and prepared to move into the harbor area after first darkness. (See Map C) (46)

Heavy mortars from Lestissac, in rebuttal to our aerial bombardment, showered the harbor area with HE during the afternoon but with no effect.

The Fort, if it were to be captured, obviously had to be approached under cover of darkness. At 1800 hours in a conference with 3d Company officers and NCO's, Major Heilman ordered the capture of Lestissac. The plan of attack again was simple. H-hour was to be at 2230. 1st Platoon, by stealth, would approach the walls of the Fort from the west in that area near the one entrance. The attack, of necessity, would be through the entrance. The other two platoons would take position where they could cover the assault platoon with fire. Realizing the difficulty of approach to the Fort, provisions were made for the supporting platoons to place fire on any known German position which might fire on the attacking platoon during its approach. Covering fire would cease on a green flare signal given by company commander Lieutenant Merritt, who would accompany the attacking platoon. 2d Platoon commanded by Lieutenant Wright was to be prepared to reinforce 1st Platoon's attack on order of the company commander. (47)

(46) A-3, p. 267; Personal knowledge; (47) Personal knowledge

At 2000 hours, 3d Company moved silently and carefully toward the Lestissac area. A covered route paralleling the road to the Fort was used with complete success; and the two hours used to cover the 500 yards was obviously well spent. By 2215 hours Lieutenant Merritt had word from all platoons that they were in position. 1st Platoon, commanded by Lieutenant Running, quietly moved out, accompanied by the Company Headquarters Group. The first band of barbed wire was met, cut expertly and passed through. The crucial moment of the approach was at hand. The platoon was in the mine field and with no alternative but to rely on feel of the ground for detection. Fortunately, not a mine was set off. The platoon neared the shallow wide moat. The entrance was closed by a shuttered iron gate. Lieutenant Running ordered his men down in place. He brought up a bazooka which fired into the gate. The gate burst open, and the platoon surged forward, up and through the gate. Climbing steps leading to a second moat they spotted a plank across it, and sprinting over it, they broke for the inner fort.

The Germans, for the second time that day, were temporarily surprised by the ferocity of the attack. Consequently, they were unable to bring their machine guns to bear on the platoon after it had reached the cover of the walls. However, as soon as the platoon was within the outer wall they reacted viciously with aimed rifle fire and grenades.

The enemy position was nearly incontestable. With positions on top of the dominating fort, protected by a high parapet, some crouched and hurled hundreds of hand grenades from previously opened cases, while others fired out in the general direction of the supporting platoons. (See Map C)

This fire was immediately returned by 2d and 3d Platoons; but 1st Platoon nonetheless was in a grim situation. Caught in the open with no means of stopping the barrage of grenades, men began dropping. 1st Platoon was stopped.

Lieutenant Merritt although seriously wounded, sent 1st Sergeant Bunch to bring up 2d Platoon. Meeting them as they moved up, Merritt led them into the fort. The platoon crossed the moat matching the fire of the supporting 3d Platoon with their own weapons. As they reached the walls of the inner fort a white flag popped up. The fight was over. The German commander surrendered with 21 remaining of his garrison. (48)

The task of reorganization was complicated by machine gun and some mortar fire from Fort Eminence which fell in the Lestissac area. The wounded and dead had to be located and evacuated. Major Neeseman, Regimental Surgeon, ignoring the mine field appeared on the scene and with assistance of the company aid men directed the search for the wounded some of whom had wandered back into the mine field. Hastily improvising a surgical table in the Fort, he administered plasma, performed emergency operations where needed and evacuated 29 wounded personnel prior to dawn of the 17th. Lieutenant Merritt, twice wounded was killed as well as Scout Sergeant Harry, Privates Wilson and Glew. (49)

The remainder of the night was uneventful. The Battalion remained in position until 0900. Word was received that the attack of 2d Battalion's 6th Company that night on Eminence had been unsuccessful, and that Naval fire was again to be employed in hopes of forcing a surrender. (On the afternoon of 15 August

(48) A-3, p. 267; Personal knowledge; (49) Personal knowledge

the Cruiser Augusta had fired several rounds from the Fort with absolutely no effect). This time the battleship Ramilles was to use her 15-inch batteries.

Again 1st Battalion withdrew from its positions to the Fort Vigie in order to get away from the GT line. At 1300 hours, His Majesty's Ship Ramilles poked out a fusillade of 4 rounds. They whistled into the walls of the huge fort--one tearing through the wall--through the protected sleeping quarters of the enemy and out the other wall. Again, the symbol of surrender was hoisted; and the battle for Port Cros ended. (50)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

This operation, although projected in narration as a battalion in the attack, should be critically considered as a series of coordinated company assaults. A study of this operation should be further qualified. The achievements of this organization in large are predicated on the fact that all personnel were volunteer combatants--selected for individualistic traits--well trained.

Despite the unforeseen absence of a guide craft, the landing was executed as planned. This was made possible due to the skill employed by all personnel in the use of the compass. The incident regarding a cut off point might have been avoided had the crews who operated the LCA's trained with the battalion. Unfortunately, the landing itself was the first time that the two had met. The following quotations from an official report on the landing are considered moot. "An Army officer riding in the landing craft until the rubber boats are released to assist in determining the rubber boat

(50) A-3, p. 268

release point is recommended." "Landing Craft Assault (Br.) were superior to the Landing Craft Personnel (U.S.) for rubber boat towing craft. the quietness of the motor enables the rubber boats to be towed much closer to the shore." (51)

The assaults clearly demonstrated how success can be attained by proper application of basic principles of combat. The plan of attack on the Chateau was simple, brief and concise. The plan included the employment of surprise. The hour of attack although somewhat determined by necessity was selected to serve the attacker advantageously. It was estimated that the enemy would least expect an attack at high noon. Their state of unpreparedness during the assault fully supported that premise. Cover and concealment were properly used by 1st Platoon during its movement from the assembly area to the line of departure. The assault and its covering fire were perfectly coordinated. Every man fired his weapon at the time when fire was most needed. The attack was aggressive.

Again in considering the Lestissac attack, highlights were--simplicity of plan--use of cover and concealment, coordinated fires, achievement of surprise, and aggressive action. Reflected too was the use of darkness to advantage. Lestissac could not be approached in daylight. At night, the platoon was able to cross a barren mine field right to the fortress walls without detection. The quick action on the part of Lieutenant Merritt in bringing up his support when he did is worthy of mention. Had the arrival of the support platoon been delayed, there is no doubt that Lestissac would have not been taken that night.

(51) A-4, Incl. 3, Section III

A few criticisms can be made on the broader aspects of the operation. Although a Naval Shore Fire Control Party was on the island, it was unable to observe and direct any fire which could have been used by the 1st Battalion. Principally, this was because the naval fire was masked when such fire could have been used. The Battalion was delayed somewhat in the attack of the Forts due to inadequate maps of the island. The scale 1:25000 was much too small. As a result, more time was spent in reconnaissance than was necessary. The effectiveness of an air strike varies directly with the number of aircraft involved, accuracy on the target, and type of projectile used. In this case, rockets were not adequate.

The initial success of the landing is a tribute to Colonel Walker's wisdom in selecting a site which, because of the sheerness of the cliffs, both the Navy and French Officers (those intimately acquainted with Port Cros) emphatically opposed.

In summary, it is felt that this operation emphasizes the value of night operations--of value when troops are fully trained in all phases of combat at night, and as a result engage in night combat with confidence.

#### LESSONS

Some basic doctrines emphasized in this operation are:

1. Thorough training in the fundamental techniques and tactics of warfare as are applicable to the basic units of Infantry.

2. Specialized training of combat units to meet all phases of modern warfare.



3. The principal of surprise, as it pertains both to time and to maneuver.

4. Coordinated fires in the attack at a maximum rate.

5. Night attack; particularly when troops are well trained for night operations.

6. Orders which are brief, accurate, concise.

7. Aggressiveness in the assault.

8. Effective control of the situation at all times.