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THE CROSSING OF THE VOLTURNO RIVER BY THE 34th INFANTRY DIVISION

OCTOBER 12-13, 1943

and

THE CROSSING OF THE INN RIVER BY THE 71st INFANTRY DIVISION

2 MAY 1945

TYPE OF OPERATION DESCRIBED: RIVER CROSSING

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RIVER CROSSINGS

The purpose of this monograph is to present examples of two general types of river crossings. The first is a deliberate crossing characterized by careful planning and preparation, the success of which is directly proportional to the thoroughness of the planning and preparation. The other type is the hasty and aggressive crossing which is characteristic of the pursuit phase of an operation when the enemy is off balance and a commander may be justified in taking unusual chances not ordinarily warranted in order to achieve surprise and assure the success of his mission.

As an example of the deliberate type of crossing I shall discuss briefly the action of the 34th Infantry Division in its crossing of the VOLTURNO River on the night of the 12-13 October 1943. For an example of the hasty crossing I shall touch upon the crossing of the INN River by a battalion of the 71st Infantry Division in the spring of 1945. The first crossing was made against an enemy as yet unbeaten, while the second was carried out against an enemy that was beaten and was exerting every effort to delay the relentless pursuit of General Patton's Third Army.

As the German forces were forced to retreat from SALERNO they conducted an orderly withdrawal to the VOLTURNO where it became evident that they intended to make a determined stand to secure time for the preparation of their winter line in the mountains.

On 15 September, the Commanding General of the 15th Army Group instructed the Fifth Army to cross the VOLTURNO River and drive the enemy some 30 miles into the mountains. To carry out this mission the Fifth Army had at its disposal the VI US Corps, composed of the 3d, 34th, and 45th Infantry Divisions and the X British Corps made up of the 7th Armoured Division and the 46th and 56th Infantry Divisions. The total strength of this force with supporting troops amounted to approximately 100,000 men.

Arrayed against this force was Marshal Kesselring's Tenth Army, consisting of the Herman Goering Division, the 3d and 5th Panzer Grenadier Divisions and elements of the 26th Panzer Division. This force was outnumbered by the Fifth

Army but it had both weather and terrain on its side.

The western part of the Fifth Army zone was a broad level stretch of farm land 15 to 20 miles wide, extending northwest along the coast for 30 miles from NAPLES to the MOUNT MASSICO Ridge line. This area was assigned to the X British Corps by General Clark. The VI Corps was assigned the area of mountains and valleys extending from the coastal plain to the MATESE Range.

This country varies from low hills covered with olive groves and terraced fields to barren rocky crags that tower to a height of 6,000 feet. The mountains present a formidable barrier to the movement of troops and their logistical support. This barrier is strongly reinforced by the VOLTURNO and CALORE Rivers. The VOLTURNO is not a large river and is generally not over 100 yards wide. Except after severe storms it can be waded in several places. Its real strength as an obstacle lies in the steep, almost vertical banks which are from 15 to 40 feet high. It rises in the mountains north of VENAFRO and pursues an erratic course southeast to its confluence with the CALORE. Together these rivers form an almost continuous barrier about sixty miles long directly in the path of any advance on ROME from the south.

SLIDE



The attack of the Fifth Army was originally scheduled for the night of 9-10 October, but constant rain and mud had so slowed down the operations of the army that it was postponed to the night of 12-13 in order to allow the X Corps and the 34th Infantry Division more time to prepare for the coordinated attack of five divisions against the VOLTURNO Line and to permit bringing forward sufficient bridging material.

By 12 October the corps had reached the river all along the front. The 34th Division had relieved the 30th Infantry Regiment on the right of the 3d Division. The 45th Division had established a bridgehead across the CALORE River and everything was set for the attack.



General Ryder's orders for the attack, issued on 11 October, divided the 34th Division front of approximately 8 miles between the 168th Infantry Regiment (which was to make the main effort on the left toward CAIAZZO) and the 135th Infantry Regiment on the right.

The 133d Infantry was held in division reserve with one battalion ready to move whenever directed. The high ground north of the river precluded any use of tanks initially so the 756th Tank Battalion was also held in reserve.

On the two nights preceding the attack patrols were very active and in spite of intense counterreconnaissance measures by the enemy, patrols of the two assault regiments and the division engineers carried out aggressive probing of the enemy's defenses and made careful reconnaissance of the river for fording, ferrying, and bridging sites.

On the night of 10-11 a patrol from the 168th Infantry probed the area west of LIMATOLA. They followed a tree-lined ditch to within 15 feet of the river and then three enlisted men waded out into the river. As they tried to cross they were fired upon and forced to withdraw. They reported that this was a good place for a ford but that it was well guarded. The following night engineers accompanied a patrol to a spot about 600 yards down the stream from the place where assault boats could be used to carry infantry across the river.

During the day of 12 October all men in the first and second battalions were given dry-land training in the use of assault boats. Patrols of the 135th Infantry were also active and found fords in their zones. In most places the muddy banks and sandy bottom prevented the use of vehicles although a spot was found near an old dam where waterproofed vehicles might be crossed.

The plan for the 135th Infantry called for the first battalion and Company E to cross and capture the high-ground back of the village of SQUILLE. When this had been accomplished the second battalion was to pass through the first battalion and continue the attack. After dark on the night of 12 October the engineers joined the two assault regiments and moved with them to their final assembly areas.

At 0145 the division artillery supported only by the fire of the attached tank destroyer battalion began the preparatory barrage. At 0200 the fire was shifted to prearranged targets and the infantry began their attack.

In the zone of the 168th Infantry one company of the first battalion, crossing by the ford as planned, ran into a mine-field and suffered several casualties. The balance of the battalion started across in assault boats about 800 yards downstream. The first wave of this group made the crossing in good order but the boats drifted so far downstream because of the swift current that they could not be used for the next wave. The troops had no alternative other than to wade across in shoulder-deep water.

SLIDE



The second battalion in column of companies started to cross the ford north-east of L'ANNUNZIATA but in the darkness lost their way and as a result guide ropes were strung over water that was much deeper than anticipated. The banks were steep

and slippery and several men were required in order to pull one man from the water up onto the bank. Some men were drowned and a large amount of equipment was lost. Because of this unforeseen delay the battalion did not complete crossing until 0640. Having reached the other side the battalion pushed rapidly forward and by 0730 had reached their initial objective, the high ground east of SAN GIOVANNI.

The first battalion did not meet with the same measure of success. Running into heavy automatic weapons fire they were unable to advance beyond a point about 400 yards from the river until shortly after noon. At 1400 it was ordered to continue the attack supported by the fire of the division artillery. Advancing closely behind this fire the battalion fought its way up the hills and by dark had reached its first objective, the high ground above SAN GIOVANNI. In this attack the battalion received unexpected assistance from Company G which had been directed to support it by fire. One platoon of G Company actually penetrated to the streets of SAN GIOVANNI but as no one was aware of this uncoordinated effort they were caught in the fire of our artillery and suffered some casualties. They did however, succeed in causing the enemy to withdraw sooner than he had planned.

Having secured the hills above SAN GIOVANNI the 168th continued the attack against CAIAZZO, the division objective. This was captured shortly after daylight on the 14th of October. The first battalion pushed on to the north and the second battalion moved northeast to protect the right flank of the regiment.

In the zone of the 135th Infantry the first battalion and Company E supported by the fire of the 125th Field Artillery Battalion jumped off at 0200 and meeting practically no resistance, initially, moved rapidly across the plowed fields toward their objective. One company of the first battalion was across the river by 0220 and Company E was sending prisoners back by 0250. By 0712 the last elements of the first battalion had closed on the first phase line and were pushing toward the second. The enemy now began to put up a much stiffer resistance and his fire became more intense and his mine fields more numerous. The first battalion made little progress during the afternoon. The second battalion moving up after dark had to fight through a pocket that had been bypassed in the fighting in the morning. As the day came to a close the regiment had failed to reach phase line two.

SLIDE

SLIDES



Continuing the attack on the following morning the first battalion occupied hill 283 at 0400 and brought up four tank destroyers that had managed to ford the river. These tank destroyers from the 776th Tank Destroyer Battalion supported the infantry from hull down positions. By the end of the morning the area south of phase line two had been cleared of the enemy and contact made with the 168th Infantry on the left and the 45th Infantry Division on the right.

Before the division could continue the advance it was now necessary that the bridges be constructed so that essential supplies and supporting weapons could be brought forward. This proved to be the toughest part of the battle.

On the morning of the 13th of October Company A, 36th Combat Engineers began moving the divisional bridging material to previously selected bridging sites north of L'ANNUNZIZATA. In an effort to speed up operations the rubber floats were inflated prior to loading on trucks. This attempt to save some time nearly proved disastrous because the enemy guns opened fire and as the head of the column reached L'ANNUNZIZATA scored hits on several of the trucks. Shell fragments pierced many of the floats and damaged them beyond repair. Men patched the repairable floats and repaired the other material and finally managed to get them down to the river by way of an unimproved dirt road and had started to launch the bridge when the enemy opened up a second time and destroyed more floats and equipment and caused heavy casualties among the engineers. Operations had to stop. During the afternoon the equipment was pulled back to a concealed position and again repaired as much as possible. In the evening, in the cover of a smoke screen, another attempt was made to construct a bridge. No sooner had the smoke started than the enemy started shelling the area again and made work impossible. In the meantime, a reconnaissance party had found

another site in a defiladed spot near SQUILLE. This place presented more difficult technical problems than had the first site as the river was wider and the banks and approaches were more difficult to exploit.

However, the advantage presented by defilade outweighed all of the disadvantages and the bridging equipment was moved to the new site. By borrowing floats from another unit, Company A was able to finish a workable bridge by 1030 on the morning of 14 October, and shortly thereafter the approaches had been improved and the grades cleared of mines assuring the 135th Infantry a supply route.

To supply the 168th Infantry it was planned to construct a 30-ton ponton bridge at the old ferry site below CAIAZZO. The enemy by means of the artillery observers located on the high ground around CAIAZZO prevented Company B of the 16th Armored Engineers from starting work on this bridge until the afternoon of 14 October. Once started the work went rapidly forward until the action was completed by the morning of 15 October.

Prior to this time the 168th Infantry had been forced to evacuate their wounded and transport its food and ammunition in assault boats. This involved the difficult task of fighting the swift current and of handcarrying all of the supplies up the hills to the troops.

With the winning of the fight to construct the bridge and get the supplies rolling across the river, the first battle of the VOLTURNO was won and the division took up the pursuit of the fleeing army.

In the action just discussed the 34th Infantry was confronted by very difficult problems of weather, terrain, and enemy. The success achieved was proportional to the care with which the action was planned.

What lessons may be learned from this action?

1. Lives and equipment were lost due to the fact that after suitable crossing sites had been found, one unit neglected to provide a means by which the troops could find the correct crossing under cover of darkness and smoke during the excitement of battle. Guides or other means must be provided to assist troops in moving from their final assembly area to proper crossing sites.

2. Much time was lost and a great deal of invaluable equipment destroyed because of failure to pick a defileaded bridging site when one was available and due to the failure of our troops to remove ground artillery available observation from the bridging sites. Reconnaissance for bridging sites must be as thorough as that for the selection of fording and ferrying sites. Ground observed artillery fire must be pushed back without delay.

3. The aggressive patrolling and probing prior to the attack paid-off in several instances where battalions were able to make crossings practically unopposed. The one exception to this was the case where the company ran into the mine-field. Patrolling prior to a river crossing should be aggressively carried out in order to probe the enemy's defenses.

4. Coordination of plans down to company and platoon level is important. Because of the lack of coordination in the case of the penetration of SAN GIOVANNI by Company G of the 168th Infantry our troops were killed by their own artillery and full advantage of their move could not be exploited.

Having discussed the deliberate type of crossing, let us consider briefly the hasty type.

On the afternoon of May 2, 1945, the Commanding General of the 71st Infantry Division found that the only crossing over the INN River, in the zone of his division, were two dams (one of which was located at ERING and the other at OBENBERG, AUSTRIA). Judging from the fact that the leading elements of the division were still 35 to 40 kilometers from the dams, it was apparent that some action must be taken without delay or the division would be forced to make an assault crossing of the river when it was reached. General Wyman immediately decided to attempt to seize the two dams intact in the hope that at least one of them could be used to carry the division into AUSTRIA.

It was decided to motorize one battalion from the 66th Infantry and one battalion from the 5th Infantry and to make a headlong dash for the two dams counting heavily on surprise and aggressive action to decide the issue in our favor.

The first battalion, 66th Infantry, was ordered to capture the dam at OBENBERG.

In order to make the utmost speed and assure success the battalion commander decided that rather than wait until sufficient vehicles to motorize his battalion arrived, he would organize a small task force consisting of one rifle company, an 81-mm mortar section, a tank destroyer platoon from the 635th Tank Destroyer Battalion, the battalion antitank platoon (for direct fire missions, not for antitank purposes) a platoon of chemical mortars, and a heavy machine gun platoon. The regimental intelligence and reconnaissance platoon was assigned as a reconnaissance and covering force. The balance of the battalion was placed under command of the battalion executive who was ordered to follow as soon as the battalion was motorized and go into an assembly area in the vicinity of ESSFLING, GERMANY, it was also directed to clean up any enemy bypassed by the task force.

At about 1400, 2 May, the task force after very careful briefing, moved out with orders not to stop short of the dam under any circumstances. Since the situation at the time was what is usually termed "fluid" it was felt that there was a good chance of running on through the enemy without stopping to fight. That is actually what happened.

After passing through the corps covering force, the 3d Cavalry Group (Reinf), the task force ran into several small groups of the enemy that were almost too surprised to react and with the exception of one instance when the leader of the intelligence and reconnaissance platoon displayed sufficient lack of judgment to halt his unit and engage in a fire fight on foot, the task force rushed past these groups firing only when absolutely necessary, and then from their vehicles.

All wire lines along the route of advance were cut with the result that when the leading elements of the task force arrived at the dam they found the bulk of the troops on the German side seated comfortably in the mess hall enjoying their usual stew. The arrival of the task force naturally alerted the Germans on the Austrian side of the river. In spite of heavy fire from the Austrian side, the troops on the near side of the dam were quickly subdued and taken prisoner. An officer in the meantime had forced an engineer employed on the dam to lead him under the river into the tunnel which contained approximately 6-tons of demolitions, placed

in order to destroy the dam. He quickly removed the detonating caps from the charge and the dam was saved. It was learned later that the enemy enlisted men detailed to blow the dam had been killed by the first round from the 76-mm Tank destroyer guns.

The destruction of the dam having been prevented, the next step was to secure a bridgehead on the Austrian side. This was accomplished by sending the rifle company, under cover of a smoke screen and all available fire power, through the tunnel and out onto the Austrian approach. As the men cleared the tunnel and started up the dike, they became heavily engaged and progress was very slow. In the meantime the battalion executive arrived on the scene and was directed to send a force across the river by means of captured boats and barges to envelop the enemy right flank. As soon as this force appeared on the enemy flank all resistance collapsed and by 2200 the bridgehead was firmly established.

During the night the battalion was busily engaged, gathering in units as large as companies that had been dispatched to the defense of the dam, totally unaware that it had already fallen. By morning the prisoners taken outnumbered the battalion, the total being about 1,000 . The battalion had to guard the prisoners as well as hold the perimeter of the dam until the arrival of the regiment the following day.

From this example we can learn that when speed is the essential ingredient for the success of an operation, the final decision must rest with bold commanders, willing to make decisions, and with aggressive troops that are willing and able to carry out the missions as called for by these decisions.

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