

advancing, prisoners taken, HERMIONE's diversion had proceeded satisfactorily, and air attacks successful both on the aerodrome and hangar and on ships including an A.M.C. and a submarine, in harbour.

On the debit side, it was clear, however, that the unswept mines in Courrier Bay were causing delays to disembarkation and the rejection of my "ultimatum" by the Military Commander showed that opposition might be expected to stiffen.

In view of the probable presence of French submarines, I was apprehensive for the safety of RAMILLIES and the carriers operating in restricted waters to seaward, and also to some extent for the ships inshore, though the establishment of A/S patrols by the corvettes in the entrances was some comfort.

33. During the forenoon, although news was somewhat scanty, it seemed clear that the disembarkation was proceeding satisfactorily, and our assault troops advancing to their objectives though it was evident that resistance on the Antsirane axis was stiffening.

SECTION III

AFTER THE ASSAULT LANDING TO THE FLEET'S ENTRY INTO DIEGO SUAREZ.

D.1.

34. As soon as the 17th Brigade started to land, the G.O.C. expressed his wish to disembark and accordingly RAMILLIES proceeded down the channel to the Eastward of Nosi Fati and at 1430, G.O.C. and Staff, together with my Chief of Staff, were disembarked into ANTHONY and thence to KEREN and the shore.

35. During the afternoon two Morane fighters machine-gunned the beaches on two occasions without causing any casualties. This was the only time throughout the entire operation when enemy aircraft caused any inconvenience.

36. At 2325 orders were given to sail the fast convoy at 0400/D.2 and the slow at 1600/D.2 for Diego Suarez. At 0245 these orders were cancelled as it had become obvious that the entry into Diego Suarez could not be made on D.2. As DEVONSHIRE was no longer required for bombarding she was ordered to refuel and put to sea; later she was ordered to join HERMIONE in readiness for bombarding Oranjia. Four ships of 14th M/S Flotilla were also sailed to be ready to sweep the entrance channel to Diego Suarez.

37. G.O.C. reported that the attack on the Antsirane position had been held up but that a fresh assault would be made at daylight. He asked for air support and this was arranged.

D.2.

38. As the time when entry into Diego Suarez would be possible was so uncertain, I deemed it advisable to refuel RAMILLIES and screen forthwith. This was commenced at 0800/D.2 in the Ambararata anchorage. Subsequently the aircraft carrier screening destroyers were relieved to enable them to refuel.

39. During the forenoon, no information was forthcoming as to the progress of the assault, and it was not until 1250 that I learnt that it had failed.

40. At about 1400 the General arrived on board. Things were not going well, he said.

The 29th Brigade had been held up about 3.5 miles South of Antsirane since the previous afternoon. The enemy held a strong, well-sited defensive position; they were plentifully equipped with 75 mm. and machine guns. The 29th Brigade in 30 hours had marched 18 miles, and had made two unsuccessful attacks on this well-defended position. Their casualties were high—25 per cent. over the whole brigade.* The General decided to put in a night attack against the Antsirane position with the 17th Brigade, assisted as necessary by 29 Independent Brigade, with zero hour at 2000 hours. The 17th Brigade were gradually getting up to the front line, mostly on foot, and the majority should be in position by 1800. He considered that after a two hours' rest they should be ready to go into battle.

He was emphatic the attack must be carried out before the moon rose at 2300, as the position was too strong to be captured in moonlight or daylight in the absence of strong artillery support. Any further delay to give the troops longer to rest would be playing into the enemy's hands.

41. I offered any and all assistance the Fleet could give. The enemy's position was outside the range of RAMILLIES' and cruisers' guns. Aircraft bombing up to zero hour was promised. The General asked if I could land a party on Antsirane peninsula to create a diversion in the enemy's rear. I replied that I would try to get 50 Royal Marines there by means of a destroyer. I asked for zero hour to be delayed till 2030 in order to give a little more time (it was then 1430) to put this project into effect, as the party had yet to be collected, a destroyer detailed, and a 100 miles' journey lay before them. Assistance from No. 5 Commando who were in control of Diego Suarez North peninsula would be forthcoming, the General said, if they could find boats to carry them across Port Nievre.

42. H.M.S. ANTHONY was called alongside and the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Commander Hodges, given his instructions. Captain Price, R.M., of H.M.S. RAMILLIES, was sent for, given his instructions and told to collect 50 Royal Marines and embark as quickly as possible in ANTHONY. The General then left RAMILLIES in order to organise the night attack by the 17th Brigade. At 1530 ANTHONY sailed with the Royal Marines. I then proceeded to sea in RAMILLIES.

43. The impression left with me after the General's visit was that the intended quick capture of Diego Suarez was already a 90 per cent. failure. The night attack, planned in a hurry, to be carried out by tired troops against very strong positions, had only a 10 per cent. chance of success. Prolonged operations, which we so much wished to avoid, was the unpleasant alternative.

ANTHONY's chance of success I assessed as about 50 per cent., my advisers thought 15 per cent., and of the Royal Marines I did not expect a score to survive the night. The next few hours were not happy ones.

Admiralty footnote —

* The estimate of 25 per cent. casualties in 29 Independent Brigade Group was caused by the complete disappearance behind the lines of about two and a half companies of the 2nd Battalion South Lancashire Regiment. Actually they were doing stout work, killing and taking large numbers of prisoners.