

The first reports spoke of heavy fighting on the beaches but steady progress. The greatest gain in ground was made on the southern flank where VI Corps by the night of 11th September had captured a line from Altavilla to Albanella and back to the coast at Agropoli; at its furthest point this represented an advance of some ten miles inland. Resistance in this sector had been very heavy on the beaches but considerably lighter when the first beach-head had been consolidated. The enemy resisted much more strongly on 10 Corps' front, both on the beaches and further inland; Salerno was captured on the morning of the 10th and Montecorvino airfield, one of the Corps' most important objectives, on the evening of the 11th, but it could not be brought into operation as yet since it was still under artillery fire. Very heavy fighting raged on the 10th and 11th around Battipaglia, the most important road junction in the plain; by the night we had a battalion in the town, fiercely engaged by the enemy.

Fighting of this intensity showed how different the Sicilian campaign would have been had we been opposed on the beaches by German troops and seemed to augur ill for the time when enemy reinforcements should arrive. On the afternoon of 10th September, I signalled to General Montgomery to the effect that if the Germans had dealt successfully with the Italians in the Naples-Rome area I was anxious about their possible rate of concentration against Fifth Army. It was of the utmost importance that he should maintain pressure upon the Germans so that they could not move forces from his front and concentrate them against AVALANCHE.

The Germans were indeed reinforcing fast. From the north-west the Hermann Goering Division and part of 15 Panzer Grenadier Division were rushed down to oppose 10 Corps, followed by 3 Panzer Grenadier Division, its task of pacification in the Rome area completed. LXXVI Panzer Corps was ordered to accelerate its disengagement from Calabria and despatch to the Salerno battlefield 29 Panzer Grenadier Division, all but a battle group of 26 Panzer Division and the third regiment of 1 Parachute Division from Apulia. Eighth Army's advance was henceforward to be delayed almost entirely by geographical and logistical difficulties while Kesselring sought to snatch a quick success over Fifth Army. There was an obvious danger that the German build-up would be quicker than ours at a time when only our initial objectives had been reached and we had neither a port nor an airfield, and to meet the threat all means of increasing our fighting troops in the bridgehead, even at the expense of their administrative units, must be sought. It was fortunate, therefore, that there were at Oran eighteen Landing Ships, Tank, *en route* for India; permission was asked and granted on 11th September for these to be employed at Salerno; they were to be released again by 12th October at the latest.

Before this reinforcement programme could take effect large-scale German counter-attacks had begun and soon caused grave anxiety. The critical period was 12th to 14th September. On the 12th a strong attack drove VI Corps out of Altavilla and on the 13th the enemy advanced down both banks of the River Sele, threatening to cut our bridgehead in half. This latter attack made dangerous progress and on the night of the 13th/14th VI Corps withdrew from

Albanella to a shorter line on the La Cosa creek to conform with the withdrawal on its left. Our lines had been pushed back at one point to within a thousand yards of the beach. Even more dangerous was the attack on the 10 Corps front. On the 12th the enemy succeeded in driving us out of Battipaglia, inflicting heavy losses on 167 Infantry Brigade which had to be relieved by 201 Guards Brigade. In a signal which I received early on the 13th from General Clark he described 10 Corps' situation as unfavourable and 56 Division as exhausted. The enemy pursued his advantage; regrouping his forces he attacked again in strength from Battipaglia and Eboli on the night of the 13th/14th, clearly intending to break right through to the beaches. The 14th was the critical day and the attacks on all parts of our front were pressed with the greatest vigour. We suffered heavy casualties and lost ground in some places, but by the use of every remaining reserve and by employing administrative troops in the line the enemy was held. It was an impressive example of stubborn doggedness in defence, for the sea at our backs was very close and all troops were exhausted by six days of uninterrupted struggle.

We had taken such steps as we could to improvise extra assistance but there was not much we could do which would have immediate effect. Admiral Cunningham ordered "Warspite" and "Valiant" at full speed to the Gulf, in spite of the danger of German air attacks, which had been scoring some successes with the new radio-controlled bombs. Their accurate and deadly shooting against the troop concentrations at Battipaglia and Eboli, reinforcing the fire of the British and United States cruisers and destroyers already on the spot, undoubtedly contributed very considerably to the defeat of the counter-offensive in the most dangerous area. An equally valuable contribution was made by heavy bombing attacks by the Strategic Air Force. To bring sea and air power to bear was a relatively easy and rapid affair, but other reinforcement could not be so speedy. On the 12th I had ordered Eighth Army to press on with all possible speed, accepting the administrative risks involved, and sent General Richardson*, my Chief of Staff, to General Montgomery to explain the full urgency of the situation. On the 13th I made arrangements to put 82 Airborne Division into the bridgehead as quickly as possible and bring 3 United States Division from Sicily on top priority. A Regimental Combat Team of 82 Division was dropped by parachute behind our own lines on the night of the 13th-14th and went into action at once, another was dropped in the same way the next night and the third came in by landing craft on the 15th. We also dropped a battalion of parachutists in the Avellino area to disrupt enemy communications there; this was originally requested for the night of the 12th-13th but could not be mounted before the night of the 14th-15th. This was fairly quick work; the first elements of 3 Division, on the other hand, could not begin to arrive before the 18th.

I went to the bridgehead myself on 14th September and was able to see both the acute difficulties of the situation and the gallant

* The late Major-General A. A. Richardson.