

which would have come as a very welcome present to the German people at the beginning of a hard winter. I devoted my attention, therefore, to the exclusion of adventures further afield, to the task of containing, and man-handling as far as possible, the German forces facing us in Italy.*

Battles of Termoli and the Volturno.

Now that the Foggia plain had been overrun the sector allotted to Eighth Army was a mountain and foothill region separated from the Adriatic Sea by a narrow coastal plain. The lower slopes of this area offer only moderate difficulties to an advancing army; but on the left the centre of the peninsula is in all places steep and precipitous, completely unsuited to the manoeuvre of armour, for all movement is confined to the roads. The coastal plain with its gentle slopes presents greater opportunities but here trees and intensive cultivation also favour the defence by limiting the field of view and the effectiveness of weapons. Major rivers cross the whole region at approximately ten mile intervals, at right angles to our line of advance; in the mountains they are swift-running streams usually between high banks and in their lower reaches they spread out into broad sandy and gravel beds where the streams meander widely, normally shallow but liable to sudden flash floods. We could expect plenty of rain in the autumn, up to five inches a month†, and snow above two thousand feet as early as December. This would assist the effectiveness of bridge demolitions and render movement off the roads most difficult. The only good continuous roads forward lay on either side of the Army sector, forty miles apart; these were the coast road through Termoli and Vasto (Route 16) and a mountain road through Vinchiaturro and Isernia (Route 17). A number of first or second class laterals connected these roads by tortuous routes over mountains and along river valleys, and between them lay other less direct routes forward which could be used by up to one division.

Eighth Army's maintenance situation was now better and likely to improve and General Montgomery decided to seize with light forces a line including Termoli, where there was a small port which might be of use, and Vinchiaturro, a communications centre on Route 17. After this it would be necessary to pause to establish our administrative facilities on a firmer basis before advancing to contact the main German winter line on the Sangro. The enemy on this front consisted of the LXXVI Panzer Corps with 1 Parachute and 29 Panzer Grenadier Divisions, holding a front from the Adriatic to Benevento. 26 Panzer Division, originally under command of XIV Panzer Corps in the Benevento area, came under command after the beginning of October, operating south of the Benevento-Isernia road with a detachment operating on the Foggia-Isernia road. General Montgomery's plan was to employ 13 Corps for his advance with 78 Division

right and 1 Canadian Division left while 5 Corps took command of the remaining formations, 1 Airborne, 5 Infantry and 8 Indian Infantry Divisions, with the task of organising the administrative build-up, securing the Army lines of communication and protecting the left flank of 13 Corps. On 3rd October the Royal Navy landed 2 Special Service Brigade (Commandos) at Termoli ahead of the advance of 78 Division and captured the town and port intact, together with a number of prisoners. They made early contact with the leading brigade of 78 Division across the Biferno but the difficulties of the crossing rendered this contact precarious. A brigade of 78 Division was therefore landed in the bridgehead area on the night 3rd/4th October and a further brigade was taken in by sea on 5th October. The enemy reacted violently and rushed over 16 Panzer Division from Army reserve in the western sector. Fierce fighting continued for some days. The Biferno rose in flood and cut communication by road, but by the 7th the enemy had accepted defeat and drew off westward to his next line behind the River Trigno.*

While the fighting at Termoli was in progress 1 Canadian Division was advancing up Route 17 against skilfully conducted German rear-guards who forced our troops to deploy against every defensible position without themselves imperilling their withdrawal. 5 Division came under command of 13 Corps on 9th October; it was put in on the right of the Canadians on 11th October and on the 13th entered Casacalenda on Route 87. On the 14th the Canadians captured Campobasso and on the 15th Vinchiaturro. The first part of the Army Commander's plan was thus completed and the necessary pause ensued.

On the west Fifth Army's maintenance position, from its nearer bases, was much easier and by the end of the first week in October both 10 and VI Corps had reached the River Volturno. They were now faced with a difficult military problem in the crossing of this broad and swiftly flowing river and the recent change in enemy intentions made it certain that the defence, though not pushed to the last extreme, would be stubborn and protracted. The weather was miserable. It was originally hoped that VI Corps would be able to force a crossing on the night 9th/10th October and 10 Corps on the following night, but delays were imposed by heavy rain and bad going, combined with extensive demolitions and mining. The enemy forces opposing Fifth Army consisted of XIV Panzer Corps with, from east to west, 3 Panzer Grenadier, Hermann Goering Panzer and 15 Panzer Grenadier Divisions. In the lower reaches they had the advantage of a higher flood bank on the northern side of the river and superior observation from Monte Massico, just in rear. Sites for a crossing were restricted, by the difficulties of the going, to existing sites and the river continued to rise and fall in a baffling manner.

The attack eventually went in on the night of the 12th. 10 Corps made diversionary attacks with 56 Division at Capua and 7 Armoured Division at Grazzanise and a main attack by 46 Division at Cancellor. The latter was successful but heavy fighting followed in difficult and open country while 56 Division

* I have here dealt with the proposed operations in the Balkans from the purely military point of view. There were, of course, political reasons both for and against such a course.

† For those to whom such statistics mean little, the mean annual rainfall of London is 23½ inches. The Italian winter climate came as a great disappointment to all those who were only acquainted with it from tourist propaganda.

* Known as the "Barbara" line.