

In the general area of Rome there were 2 Parachute Division on the coast near Ostia and 3 Panzer Grenadier Division around Viterbo. These were Kesselring's eight divisions already mentioned; they were organised, under Headquarters Tenth Army (Colonel-General von Vietinghoff), into two corps: XIV Panzer Corps north and LXXVI Panzer Corps south. Directly under Kesselring was XI Flieger Corps (Air Corps); this had been moved from Avignon when the two parachute divisions, 1st and 2nd, came to Italy. It was responsible for the training and administration of all parachute units (and directly commanded 2 Parachute Division) and for the defence of the Rome area and the west coast between a point north of the Gulf of Gaeta and Kesselring's northern boundary.

In North Italy was Army Group 'B', Field-Marshal Rommel, with headquarters on Lake Garda, commanding all forces in Italy and Italian-occupied Slovenia north of a line from Grosseto to Rimini. By the beginning of September it totalled an equivalent of ten divisions (including one and a half divisions in Sardinia and Corsica which were technically under the local Italian commanders) of which two were armoured divisions. Reinforcement had been proceeding throughout August and at the same time an extensive development of lines of communication and administrative facilities had been rapidly pushed ahead, in particular the creation of a very large staging and maintenance area around Verona. There were four Corps Headquarters under the Army Group, the most important being LXXXVII Corps which, with four divisions, was responsible for the protection of Liguria and Tuscany.

The effect of these dispositions was, first of all, to ensure German control of Northern Italy. For the rest forces were disposed to meet an Allied invasion at the points considered most threatened: Calabria, Gaeta-Naples-Salerno, the Rome area and Genoa-Spezia. All these points were considered as possible Allied objectives with the degree of probability increasing towards the north. Any landing we made, except in Calabria, would be strongly opposed. The chief lesson the Germans claimed to have learned from Sicily was that it was vital to destroy the assaulting forces actually on the beaches and not to hold back defending forces for a deliberate counter-attack. But an intention to resist a landing in the hope of a spectacular victory is quite consistent with a decision on general principles not to hold Southern and Central Italy if an invasion were successful. It was a decision rather at variance with ordinary German, and in particular Hitlerian, psychology and appears to have been based on two misappreciations; the usual over-estimate of Allied strength and too gloomy a judgment of the dangers which Italian treachery would involve. Although the Germans had no higher an opinion of their Axis partners than had the Allies they realised that Italian defection would at least leave many doors open for the invader and, in the worst case, Italian arms turned against them might lead to more serious disaster; they also expected, as we did to a certain extent, that the allegedly turbulent population of Northern Italy would present them with a grave security problem which would engage the attention of all the troops allotted to that area.

There was also the danger of a complete breakdown of all facilities, such as transport and power, with an additional strain on German resources in consequence which might be more than they could stand unless control was limited to the Northern Italian area. This was a factor on which we also placed some hopes; it seemed reasonable to expect that the workers in these industries would, even if they took no other action, at least achieve a high degree of "absenteeism". It was natural, therefore, in the midst of such dangers and uncertainties, that the German High Command should decide to restrict its ambitions to what seemed within its powers and not wish to risk disaster by attempting too much.

I must touch, in closing, on a question which was hotly debated both at the time and subsequently; whether the Germans expected us to land in the Naples area and, more particularly, at Salerno. It is essential to be clear what is meant by the question.* Certainly the Germans expected us to land somewhere in Italy and almost certainly on the west coast. It is standard form for all armies to prepare appreciations to meet all possible cases and there was undoubtedly somewhere in Kesselring's headquarters an appreciation based on the assumption that we should launch an assault on Naples and one of the sub-headings undoubtedly considered a landing in the Gulf of Salerno. What we have to consider in order to arrive at a just conclusion is not all the possibilities that passed through the mind of the Commander-in-Chief but what actual physical steps he took; his dispositions will give the answer. As I have already pointed out, he had made dispositions to meet attacks in the Naples area, the Rome-Civitavecchia area and the Genoa-Spezia area. Turning to the first mentioned, the reasons, which I need not detail again, that urged Naples as an objective so strongly on us must have been obvious to the Germans as well. In the circumstances I consider it surprising that they should have allotted only three divisions, two of which had scarcely recovered from their severe losses in Sicily, to cover the whole stretch of a hundred and fifty miles of coast from Gaeta to Agropoli. That they knew of our intention to land actually in the Gulf of Salerno I do not believe, nor do I believe that they even considered it the most likely hypothesis. They had disposed two divisions to cover Naples and the beaches to the north, either side of the Volturno, and had only brought over the third, 16 Panzer Division, from Apulia to Salerno at the end of August. Actions speak louder even than wisdom after the event. I have already described the excellence of the Salerno beaches. Four battalions of infantry and a battalion of tanks, even adding in the divisional reconnaissance and engineer battalions, are a very slender force to defend over thirty miles of coast; although there were Italian troops also in the line Sicily had clearly demonstrated their uselessness and the Germans should have suspected, though the evidence is clear that they did not know, that Marshal Badoglio was about to follow the example of General Yorck in 1812.

* The fact that we gained strategic surprise is sometimes obscured by the fact that we did not gain, nor had hoped for, tactical surprise. To sail so large a fleet into the Gulf of Salerno without attracting the attention of somebody on shore would have been too much to expect.