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MONTE LA DIFENSA

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20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) From 2-8 Dec 1943, a composite US-Canadian elite force of highly trained soldiers attacked German forces on one of the mountains in the Camino hill mass, a key terrain feature on the route to home. The battle analysis provides valuable information on mountain warfare and small unit factors.			

MONTE LA DIFENSA

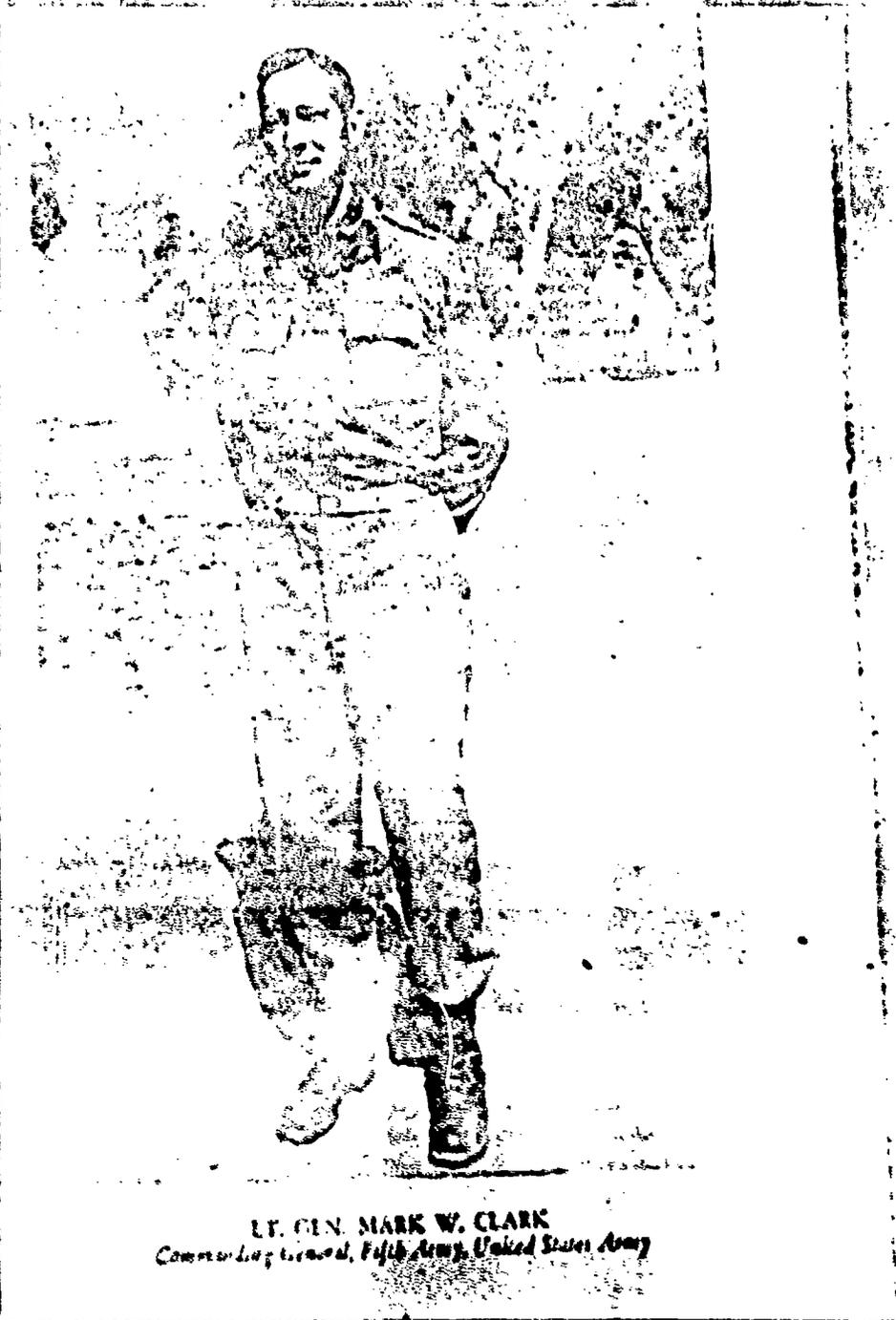
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LT. GEN. MARK W. CLARK  
*Commanding General, Fifth Army, United States Army*

Photo 1

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Photo 2

## Section I - INTRODUCTION

This paper is an analysis of the Battle of la Difensa, an engagement between elements of the Fifth United States Army and the Tenth German Army Group during the 1943-1944 Italian Winter Campaign of World War II. The battle was for control of a mountain located approximately 50 miles southeast of Rome which was part of the German "Winter Line" defenses that stretched across the Italian Peninsula.

Specifically, the battle was between the First Special Service Force, a combined special warfare unit of Canadian and American airborne soldiers under the operational control of the 36th (US) Infantry Division, and elements of the German 15th PanzerGrenadier Division. The fight, which lasted from 2 to 8 December 1943, resulted in the Allied capture of Monte la Difensa. This was an important step in securing the Camino hill mass, which gave the Allies control of the heights along one side of the corridor providing them access to the Liri Valley, the "gateway to Rome." 1/

This single battle did not have a significant impact on the outcome of the war or even the Italian Campaign. The battle of Monte la Difensa is worthy of careful study, however, because it is an example of mountain warfare conducted under the most severe terrain and weather conditions.

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1/ Fifth Army at the Winter Line, p. 8 & 28.

## Section II - STRATEGIC SETTING

### Introduction:

The Battle of Monte la Difensa was fought during World War II as part of an Allied operation in December 1943 against a German strategic defensive position known as The Winter Line. The Winter Line was a defensive belt in depth situated across the entire peninsula of Italy and located slightly south of Rome. Monte la Difensa itself is an imposing mountain that dominates surrounding terrain. It was situated in the middle of that defensive belt.

### National Level Overview:

Three occurrences at the national level during 1943 set the stage for the Battle of Monte la Difensa. These were the shift in the relative success of the war, the Allied decision to invade the Italian mainland, and the manner in which Adolf Hitler chose to defend Italy. A short discussion on each follows.

The fortunes of war started shifting from Germany and the Axis powers to the Allies in 1943. The Allied victory in North Africa had been accomplished, and the Allies gained momentum as the summer progressed. A successful invasion of Sicily commenced on 10 July 1943. An Italian government seeking to end hostilities with the Allies deposed Benito Mussolini, Hitler's most stalwart Fascist ally in Europe, on 26 July 1943. In eastern Europe, Soviet forces stopped the German attack on the Russian-held salient west of Kursk, inflicting considerable German casualties (see Map #1). The subsequent Russian

counterattack broke through German lines in the vicinity of Kharkov, forcing the German center and southern forces to retreat. A follow-up Soviet assault on the Dnieper River defenses maintained the Allied initiative in eastern Europe, but the Russians suffered heavy casualties.

As a result of these casualties, Stalin reinforced his previous demand that the western Allies open a second front in Europe. However, American and British leadership seriously disagreed on when and where that front should be. Finally, buoyed by the successful invasion of Sicily, and partially to project overall Allied cooperation, the western Allies agreed to invade the mainland of Italy. However, as will be noted in more detail later, the invasion of the Italian mainland was more a supporting attack than a "second front." The western Allies actually invaded the Italian mainland more in consideration for forcing Italy out of the war than for establishing Stalin's "second front," although it did serve that purpose in the short run. Nevertheless, the Allied decision to invade the Italian mainland contributed directly to the setting of the stage for the Battle of Monte la Difensa.

Hitler struggled during this same period with the decision to abandon southern Italy or to defend the entire mainland. His surprise decision to defend all of Italy had a profound effect on the entire Italian campaign, including of course the Allied assault on The Winter Line and the Battle of Monte la Difensa. This decision had more impact than might be expected simply because it was unexpected, as will be seen later. Had Hitler chosen not to defend southern Italy the Battle of Monte la

Difensa would not have been fought.

Detailed Examination of War Aims:

With the above as general background, an examination of the war aims of the principal Allied and Axis adversaries provides additional perspective and detail on why and how the Battle of Monte la Difensa came to be fought.

Hitler made his decision to defend Italy in depth for three principal reasons. First, he wanted to maintain Italy as an ally or to at least maintain some lodgment in Italy should that country sue for peace with the Allies. In doing so, Germany would be able to maintain access to the resources in the Po Valley and the rest of the Balkans. Second, Hitler intended to deny the Allies access to air bases within easy striking distance of southern and central Germany, and he also wanted to deny all potential bases or staging areas where Allied amphibious operations could be launched against southern France or southeastern Europe. Last, Hitler wanted to tie down the maximum number of western Allied units with as few German troops as possible. At this point he still wanted to regain the initiative against the Soviet Union in eastern Europe.

For their part, the Allies had many varied and often conflicting war aims. About the only aim they held in common was defeating Germany and her Axis partners. The United States, which had been the latest entrant into the conflict, was the most eager to attack the German strength through a direct cross-channel invasion of France. The American leadership, both political and military, was convinced that the cross-channel

approach was the best way to defeat Germany. Two strategic considerations formed the basis for this position. First, the United States was confident that its superior industrial might would carry the Allies to victory. Second, the United States desired a relatively accelerated victory in Europe so a higher proportion of its resources could be devoted as soon as possible to defeating Japan in the South Pacific. In this context, it is not surprising that the United States did not support making Italy the main European effort.

The United Kingdom, on the other hand, favored a strategy of peripheral assaults on the "soft underbelly" of Europe. A strong argument can be made that Great Britain, after suffering heavy losses in World War I and the first part of World War II, was attempting to save lives by attacking areas where enemy forces were not as strong. Further, and in addition to the ultimate aim of defeating Germany, England had as a primary war aim the restoration of the status quo in Europe. Other western Allies who directly shared this war aim were Canada and the Free French. Thus, while in part welcoming the Soviet successes against Germany in eastern Europe in the summer of 1943, England already viewed with alarm the demonstrated Soviet might and potential for "future" unwelcome operations in eastern Europe. The Canadians shared and supported the British view of the world. The Free French, for their part, certainly were concerned about restoring their national sovereignty in addition to avenging their earlier ignominious defeat.

In sum, the European Allies felt that getting their land

back at the same time they were defeating the Axis was as important as actually defeating the Axis. They also wanted no other interlopers (e.g., the Soviets) in a position to do the same things the Axis had done. The Americans, for their part, were simply oriented on what they perceived as the fastest way to beat the Axis.

Conflicting Allied strategic objectives were finally resolved in the Trident and Quadrant Conferences (May and August, 1943). Essentially, Mussolini's fall on 26 July 1943 and the successful conquest of Sicily by 17 August 1943 led to a western Allied decision to seize the Italian mainland. However, operations in the Mediterranean would be primarily supporting in nature, designed to immobilize sufficient German divisions to enable the primary United States - British effort in Europe to succeed. This effort, which was to be a direct cross-channel attack and which would command the priority in men and material, was named Operation OVERLORD and was scheduled for 1944. Out of this scenario the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) ordered General Eisenhower to land forces at the Bays of Salerno, Reggio Calabria, and Taranto (see Map #2) on the mainland of Italy.

One final point under war aims deserves mention. A war aim which the Allies universally endorsed was the total and unconditional surrender of every Axis power. Some speculate that this stance might very well have contributed to the stubbornness with which the Germans defended the Italian mainland. Although the terrain heavily influenced the tactics, history certainly shows that the Italian campaign in general, and The Winter Line operation in particular, was a bitter hill to hill slugfest.

## Theater Strategy

From the foregoing it is clear that the Allies designed an invasion of the Italian mainland designed primarily to force Italy out of the war and threaten Germany's southern flank. In addition to securing airfields and key staging areas in Italy, the Allies also hoped that Italy's demise would promulgate the defection of thousands of Italian soldiers on occupation duty in southern France and the Balkans. Initial progress was good. With the beachheads at Salerno, Reggio Calabria, and Taranto secured by 14 September 1943, the Allies went on to control an uninterrupted line across the peninsula by 25 September. Unfortunately, determined German determined rear guard actions enabled the Axis to destroy the Naples harbor. However, the Allies occupied Naples on 1 October, and reached the Volturno River by 8 October (see Map #3).

Summarizing, Allied accomplishments by early October 1943 were as follows: Italy had surrendered; Germany had evacuated Sardinia and Corsica; the port of Naples was being rapidly restored; and the capture of the Foggia airfields gave the Allies some excellent bases for air raids. Germany had also committed additional troops into Italy and the Balkans, taking them away from Russia and occupied France.

Eisenhower now ordered the XV Army Group under the command of Field Marshall Alexander, who was in charge of the Italian campaign, to continue the offensive to Rome. This essentially meant that Field Marshall Alexander was to overcome the Volturno River defenses and then proceed to Rome. The decision to assault

the Volturno River defenses was based on several reasons: the prestige of capturing Rome, an important political objective; the importance of the numerous airfields around Rome which would increase the reach of the Allied air forces; the potential for drawing additional German troops from other fronts, especially France; the objective of maintaining a politically viable "second front;" and finally, the expectation that the Germans would not defend southern Italy, but would immediately withdraw to northern Italy as soon as they saw a serious Allied advance.

Consequently, both Eisenhower and Alexander had planned on a rapid advance to a line approximating Leghorn - Florence.

Therefore, in spite of the facts that the terrain favored the defense, most Allied troops lacked mountain warfare training, the weather was in the Italian wet season, and supply lines were becoming over-extended, the Allies decided to push north. Allied forces won beach heads across the Volturno River by 12 October (see Map #4). However, by 15 November it was clear that the Germans did indeed intend to defend southern Italy, and the exhausted and heavily attrited Allied forces were obliged to rest and regroup.

On the German side, Field Marshall Kesselring, the German Commander in Chief in Italy, had decided that he could more successfully defend further south than originally planned. His desire to defend south of Rome was endorsed by Hitler, who had been wrestling with the Italian problem and welcomed Kesselring's recommendation. As a result, the Allies ran into a strong, determined defense much further south than anticipated,

beginning with stout resistance at the Volturno River. This resistance enabled Kesselring to organize a "winter position" (actually a series of defense lines, organized in depth) south of Rome along the general trace of the Garigliano and Sangro Rivers.

Summarizing, Hitler's unexpected decision to defend southern Italy caught the Allies unprepared and over-extended. This set the stage for The Winter Line operation and the Battle of Monte la Difensa, one of its more notable actions.

#### Winter Line - Overview:

The Winter Line operation officially began on 15 November 1943 and lasted until 15 January 1944. The Allied effort was an offensive designed to breach the series of well-prepared positions along the shortest possible line across the waist of Italy - from the Garigliano Rivier in the west through the mountains in the center to the Sangro River in the east (see Map #5). The advance from the Volturno River epitomized what was to become characteristic of the entire Italian Campaign. That is, the bitter hill to hill fighting, slugging through mud and rain, and meat grinder type tactics were totally illustrative of the nature of warfare in Italy in World War II, of which the Battle of Monte la Difensa became a representative microcosm.

The Winter Line was actually composed of two primary lines of defense. The forward (or more southern) line was known as the Bernhardt Line. Its primary purpose, along with the delaying tactics from the Volturno River, was to delay the Allies sufficiently long enough to construct the main Italian line of defense slightly farther north, which was named the Gustav Line.

The Winter Line as an entity was thus a formidable barrier to operations of the Allied Armies. There was no single key, no opportunity for a brilliant stroke that could break it. Each mountain had to be taken, each valley cleared, and then there were still more mountains ahead and still another line to be broken by dogged infantry attacks. 2/

Monte la Difensa and the other mountains forming the Camino hill mass formed the Bernhardt Line, the first defensive line of The Winter Line positions. The steep and barren Camino hill mass was the southern anchor of the defensive line and Mount Sammuero the northern anchor. The Camino hill mass not only effectively guarded the approaches to the Mignano Pass and blocked the access into the Gari and Liri Valleys, but it also afforded excellent observation of the area beyond Gari and Carigliano. Thus the Camino hill complex was key to the German defense and of utmost importance to the German command. The Germans realized that if they lost the Mount Camino - Monte la Difensa - Mount Maggiore hill mass, it would be impossible to halt the Allied troops in the terrain bounded by the mountain chain and the courses of the Rapido, Gari, and Carigliano Rivers. The Allied forces also realized the importance of the Camino hill mass and for similar reasons they considered it to be decisive terrain. 3/

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2/Starr, From Salerno to the Alps, pp. 57-58.

3/Critical Evaluation of Italian Campaign Based Upon German Operational and Tactical Viewpoints, pp. 40-41.

### Winter Line - Allied Participants:

The advance up the peninsula toward the Winter Line was accomplished by Alexander's XV Army Group, comprised of the British Eighth Army commanded by General Montgomery in the east, and the Fifth Army commanded by General Mark Clark in the west. General Montgomery's Eighth Army was divided into two corps, the XIII and the V Corps. General Clark's Fifth Army was divided into three corps, the VI, X, and II Corps (see Map #6). This combat organization was in effect from 1-10 December 1943 for the clearing of the Camino hill mass. The II and X Corps did the primary fighting for the Camino hill mass. These two corps contained British, American, and Canadian forces.

The II Corps of General Clark's Fifth Army, commanded by Major General Geoffrey Keyes, was in charge of the fight for Monte la Difensa. The primary force attacking Monte la Difensa was a mixed American and Canadian unit, the 1st Special Service Force (SSF). This unit had been attached to the 36th Division specifically for this mission. The 1st SSF was specially trained for cold weather and mountainous warfare. Their specialized training and unique makeup were a key in taking Monte la Difensa.

The primary force Field Marshall Kesselring had at his disposal to defend The Winter Line was the XIV Panzer Corps, commanded by General Frido von Senger und Etterlin (hereafter referred to as von Senger). However, the quality and composition of Kesselring's forces changed from time to time because German units were periodically rotated in response to various contingencies and also to keep fresh troops on the front line.

During The Winter Line operation, General von Senger's 14th

Panzer Corps contained five divisions of varied combat experience. The 94th and 305th Grenadier Divisions had recently been reformed in France after having been destroyed at Stalingrad. The 15th Panzer Grenadier Division was comprised of hand-picked veterans who were used to occupy positions in the Monte Camino and Monte Maggiore area. 4/ The 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division was a problem unit, primarily because it contained a considerable number of so-called VOLKSDEUTSCHEN who came from the occupied zone of Poland and were serving on probation. 5/ These men could earn decorations for bravery but could not advance in rank until their probation expired. This discriminatory practice "according to racial principles did not enhance troop morale or performance." 6/ Additionally, these soldiers were receiving information from their homeland that their families were being mistreated by local officials. This situation explains why the 3rd Panzer Division reported troops "missing" in numbers that had no relation to the intensity of the fighting. 7/ Finally, the 305th Infantry Division consisted of Wurtemberg-Baden men who, according to World War One experience, were rated as effective fighting men. 8/

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4/Adleman and Walton, The Devil's Brigade, p 121.

5/Senger, Neither Fear Nor Hope, p 183.

6/Ibid.

7/Ibid.

8/Ibid.

The primary defense of Monte la Difensa was conducted by the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division of General von Senger's 14th Panzer Corps. The 15th Division had defense in depth, good artillery, and the following troop dispositions: Third Battalion, 104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment; Third Battalion, 129th Panzer Grenadier Regiment; and the 115th Reconnaissance Battalion. As previously noted, all members of these units were handpicked veteran soldiers. 9/

Winter line - Operational Considerations:

Fifth Army's plan was "Operation Raincoat," which was designed to breach the mountain passes, control the entrance to the Liri Valley, and advance to Rome. However, strategic planning and guesswork on both sides played an important part in planning The Winter Line operation. Fifth Army eventually issued four operations instructions, each with a different plan of attack, giving clear indication of the expected difficulty of gaining the first objective. It was also clearly understood that the offensive would prove costly and would possibly be unproductive; however, the alternative of a long drawn out defensive campaign was not given serious thought.

In the end the difference in the fight was the German failure to account for the special abilities of the 1st Special Service Force. This major miscalculation is demonstrated in

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9/Starr, p. 121. Haddenon, p. 121

General von Senger's comments about the strategic importance of the passes of Cassino. Von Senger said,

"Facing the center of the Bernhardt Line was the dominating Monte Cesima, situated to the east of the low-lying hill-pass between Magnano and San Pietro. In our opinion this was where a breakthrough threatened, and we gave the place all our attention. We assumed that the enemy would attempt to capture the pass, send his tanks over and over-run the broad valley of the Liri at Cassino and southwards, thus preparing the way for a bold operation to capture Rome. That he would attack the mountainous part of the front seemed unlikely to me as well as to the commanders of the Army Group and the 16th Army, although we had not excluded this possibility at our conferences." 10/

However, the first phase of the version of "Operation Raincoat" finally selected called for an attack by the II and X Corps of Fifth Army on the mountainous part of the hill mass, and the Germans were caught flat-footed. The main attack began on the night of 1 December as the British 46th Division attacked the southern tip of the Monte Camino hill mass. The British 56th Division assaulted in a head-on drive against the ridges of the Monte Camino peak. With the Germans heavily engaged, the 1st Special Service Force moved up Monte la Difensa and attacked. Although hampered by constant rain and severe terrain, which also made resupply a major problem, this attack captured the key terrain and placed other German defensive positions at risk. The entire Camino area was completely cleared by 10 December.

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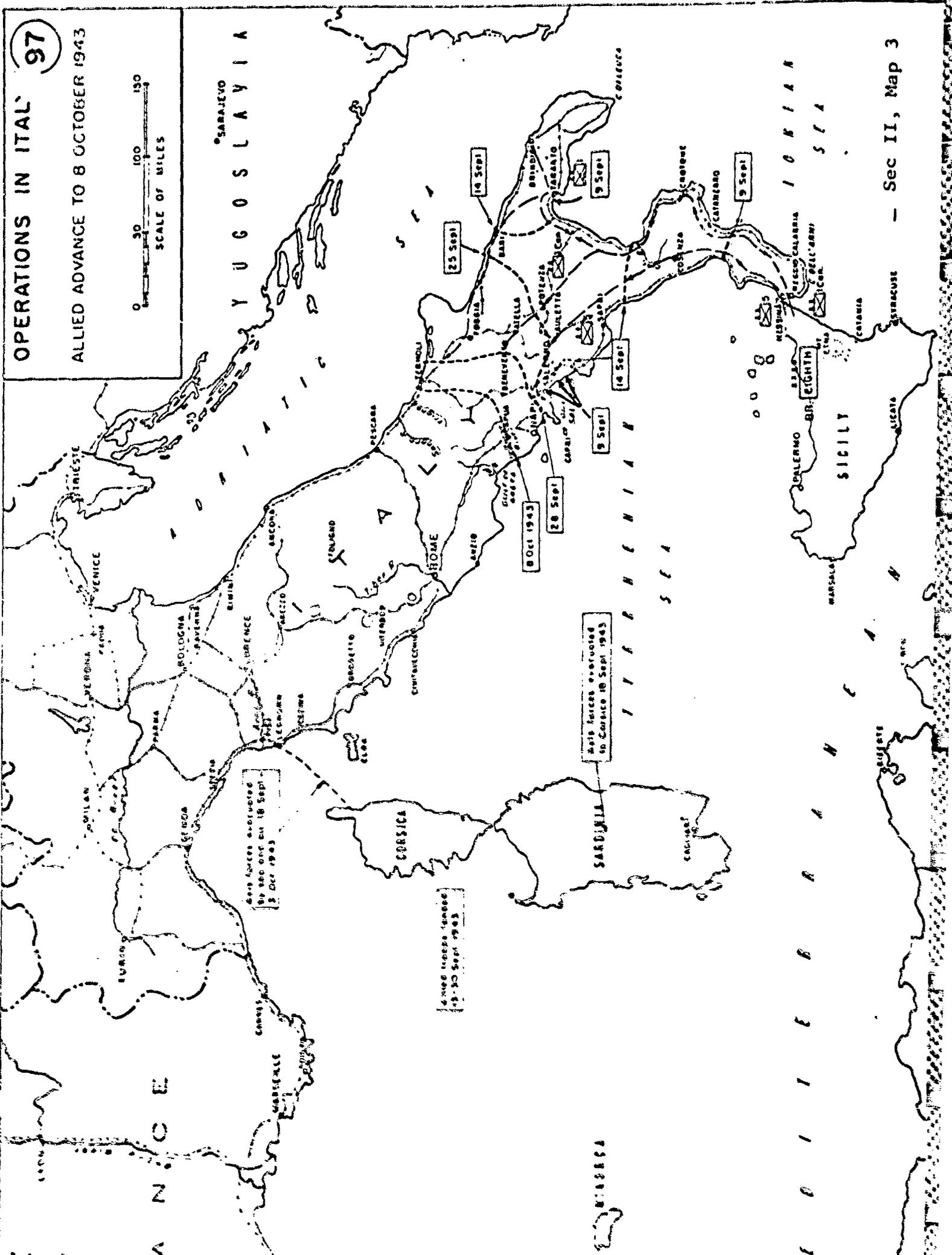
10/Senger, op. cit.





# OPERATIONS IN ITALY 97

ALLIED ADVANCE TO 8 OCTOBER 1943



5th Army evacuated by sea on 18 Sept - 3 Dec 1943

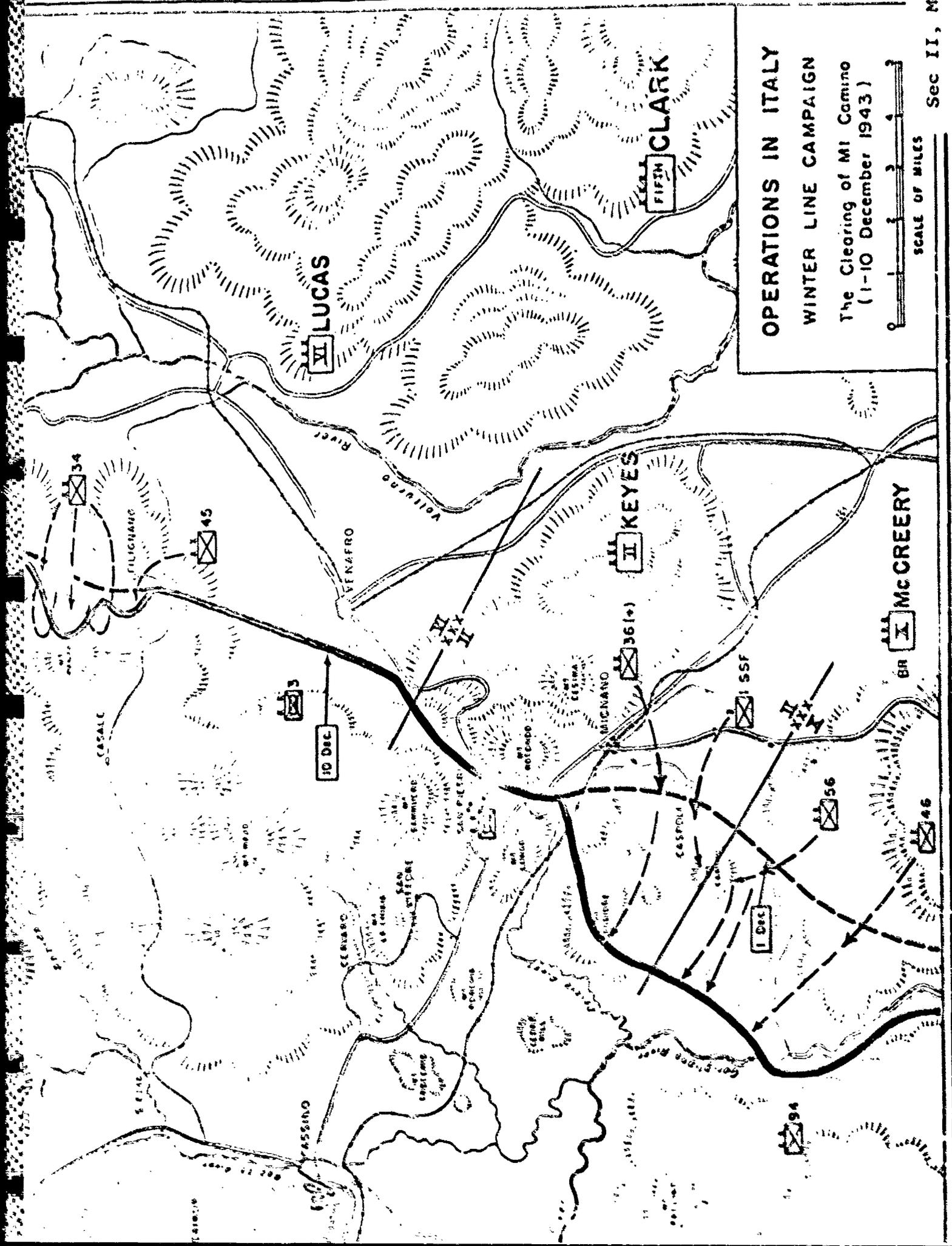
4 new troops landed 13-20 Sept 1943

5th Army evacuated to Corsica 10 Sept 1943





**OPERATIONS IN ITALY**  
**WINTER LINE CAMPAIGN**  
The Clearing of Mt Camino  
(1-10 December 1943)



### Section III - TACTICAL SITUATION.

#### Climate and Weather.

The climate in Italy during the autumn is cold and wet. Italy's rainy season begins in late summer and continues until winter. November is characteristically Italy's month of heaviest precipitation. During the rainy season, the higher elevations are continuously enshrouded in clouds, fog, or heavy mist. By late November the precipitation begins to turn to snow at the higher elevations. The temperature varies from above freezing during the day to below freezing at night. The winds are variable and moderate.

In the weeks preceding the La Difensa action seasonal rains had fallen increasingly and unusually heavy since mid September. Rivers were up, hurriedly constructed bridges and roads were threatened with washouts. Roads put in rapidly without ballast or much surface had ceased to be roads at all. Travel by road became virtually impossible. Along the shoulders of the roads, the mud was usually a foot deep, sometimes more (Photo 3). 11/ The muddy road conditions and flooded rivers and streams made resupply of Allied and German forces extremely difficult. The Allied forces resorted to man pack for the delivery of ammunition and other supplies to front line forces. The muddy conditions also made it difficult for Allied forces to respond quickly to

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11/Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino, p. 249.

changing artillery fire missions because the guns had to be wrenched out of the mud before they could be repositioned for fire missions. Additionally, the cold, mud, and rain affected the soldiers' morale and contributed to fatigue and exhaustion. The toll of the weather and terrain on the First Special Operations Force led Colonel Frederick, commander of the force, to report on 4 December 1943: "Every man in unit exhausted." <sup>12/</sup> Based on German reports the weather had similar effects on the soldiers occupying German defensive positions on La Difensa. The German troops suffered severely from the bad weather because they lacked warm clothing and adequate shelter within their defensive positions. The German defenders still wore the same light weight uniforms used during the fighting in warmer Sicily and southern Italy. <sup>13/</sup>

The weather was an important influence during the tactical operations conducted to seize the Camino Hill Complex. The cloud cover and fog restricted visual observation of friendly forces by German forces occupying the Camino Hill Complex. This facilitated the movement of forces into attack positions and hindered German attempts to place friendly forces under indirect fire. Although the clouds and fog often limited visibility, unpredictable clearing required most friendly movements to take place during the cover of darkness. Air operations were often

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<sup>12/</sup>Ibid, p. 266.

<sup>13/</sup>Critical Evaluation of Italian Campaign Based Upon German Operational and Tactical Viewpoints, pp. 40-41.

hampered by the dense cloud cover and fog. Numerous preplanned support missions were cancelled due to bad weather. However, when the weather cleared, even for a short period of time, Allied air provided extensive air support. Aerial resupply attempts were unsuccessful on La Difensa because of inability to clearly see the drop zone and terrain roughness. When the weather permitted, aerial reconnaissance was used extensively by friendly commanders to observe enemy positions providing Allied forces with valuable planning information on German defensive positions. 14/

### Terrain

The Camino Hill mass, some six miles long by four miles wide, is composed of three ridges running in various directions, which rise steeply on the east and northeast sides, then fall away gradually to the west toward the Carigliano River. (See photographs 4 and 5). Mount Camino, the southern most of the ridges, consists of two main razorbacked spurs running approximately north and south, Hill 727 - Hill 819 on the west and on the east Hill 963, crowned by a monastery. One mile to the north is Mount La Difensa (960 meters), which bends to the west to Mount La Remetanea (907 meters). North of Remetanea - Difensa feature is the Vallevona Plateau, to the northwest of which is the third ridge of Mount Maggiore, composed of Hills 619, 630, and 510. Third class roads skirt the east and west

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14/Burhans, The First Special Service Force, p. 89.

slopes of the entire mass, but the only access to the mountains themselves is by rough trails. 15/ (Photo #4 & Map III-1).

The Mignano Gap is a major passage point through the mountainous region that separates the Volturno Valley from the next low ground, the valleys of the Garigliano and Rapido Rivers. Mignano Gap is flanked on the left by Camino, La Difensa and Maggiore mountain mass, and on the right by Mount Cassino, Cannavinelle Hill and Monte Rotondo. The mountain masses flanking the Mignano dominate the surrounding terrain and provide excellent observation south toward the Volturno River and north toward the Garigliano and Liri Rivers. Narrow winding roads, steep hills with barren rocky peaks several thousand feet high, with deep gorges, jagged ridges and overhanging cliffs and swift streams which characterize the divide, favors the defense. Sharply defined corridors through this terrain forced the use of frontal attacks against the defensive forces. Highway 6 and the railroad to Rome traverse the valley approach to Mignano and come together at Mignano where they pass between the Camino-Difensa-Maggiore mountain mass, on the left, Presentano, the Cannavinelle Hill and Monte Rotondo, on the right. Just beyond Mignano the highway and railroad separate. The railroad tracks going around the western edge of Monte Lungo, the road around the eastern edge. The road continues to wind through the mountain masses and

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15/Starr, From Salerno to the Alps, p. 61.

traversing Cassino and finally on to Rome. 16/

La Difensa is an inhospitable piece of terrain wedged between the equally inhospitable Mount Camino and Mount La Remetanea. The lower slopes of La Difensa are covered with large boulders and scrub pine which provide limited concealment from enemy observation and limited cover from enemy direct and indirect fire weapons. [The upper half of the mountain, <sup>little</sup> vegetation and the slopes. <sup>incl. steep.</sup>] The top of La Difensa is a shallow saucer shaped depression hemmed in by a circling ridge. Numerous trails cross the depression on top of La Difensa and on <sup>ridge</sup> connecting La Difensa with Mount La Remetanea. Just below the top of the mountain, the hard limestone cliffs become perpendicular, requiring ropes and other mountain climbing equipment to negotiate. The mountain slopes contain numerous trails which are too steep and rough to be used even with pack mules. Additionally, the slopes surfaces are broken by numerous deep and narrow ravines that increased the difficulty in climb the slopes. (Photo 4 & 5)

The roughness of the terrain, almost vertical slopes and perpendicular cliffs of La Difensa restricted food and ammunition resupply of forces and delayed the evacuation of casualties. Seven hours were necessary to reach the top of the mountain with supplies and six hours to return casualties to the base of the mountain. Two battalions of infantry were removed from the fight

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16/Fifth Army History, (16 Nov 1943 - 15 Jan 1944), p. 3.

and detailed to resupply and casualty evacuation duties. Communication was hampered by the difficulty in laying wire in the rough terrain. 17/

The ruggedness of the terrain and the wet soil conditions in the Mignano Gap area also greatly effected the Allied use of indirect fire weapons. The muddy conditions, resulting from excessive rains, caused the Allied artillery to sink in, requiring the guns to be winched out of the mud before they could be shifted to new firing positions. Additionally, artillery high angle firing tables had to be improvised which would allow firing at targets which were masked by the mountain peaks. Even with the difficulties imposed by the weather and terrain, the artillery support to allied forces was not significantly hampered as was evidenced by the massive artillery preparation on La Difensa before the First Special Service Force's attack.

The Germans encountered problems similar to the Allies in the use of their indirect fire weapons. The Germans had difficulty in covering all the approaches because of the terrain masking. The artillery could not be massed effectively on the slopes in front of the defensive positions. However, the rough terrain allowed the Germans to place their howitzers in defilade positions from which they could reach the assembly areas of nearly every Allied force attacking the Camino Complex. As a consequence, the trails, roads, bivouac sites and front

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17/Burhans, pp. 89-124.

lines were subjected to German harassing artillery fires. The peaks of Mounts Camino, La Difensa, Sammucro, Pantano and Marrone provided excellence post from which to observe all Allied day time movements. <sup>with direct artillery fire.</sup> The Germans had meticulously planned their unobserved artillery fires to make road use dangerous at all times. 18/

What did they do?

The Germans were generally safe behind their mountain barrier and could resupply their forces with relative ease. They could move forces at will to reenforce the relatively small detachments which held the defensive postions. 19/

The cover and concealment for the Allied forces attacking La Difensa was minimal and primarily restricted to the narrow deep ravines that etched the slopes of La Difensa and the scrub pine and large boulders that dotted the slopes. The excellent observation from La Difensa and the surrounding hill masses negated any concealment provided by the sparse vegetation and boulders. Consequently, Allied forces were constantly harassed by German direct and indirect fire weapons. The Germans on the other hand, had excellent cover and concealment that was provided by their prepared defensive positions. The German defensive positions had been hewed out of solid rock and were adequate to withstand heavy Allied artillery and air bombardment with minimal casualties and damage. Their defensive positions consisted of //

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18/Fifth Army History, p. 6.

19/Ibid.

complex caves and pillboxes which were designed to have mutually supporting fires. Trails interconnected the positions facilitating reinforcement by reserve forces. 20/

The terrain was a major obstacle to Allied forces and favored the German defense. The Germans had made skillful use of the natural terrain obstacles to enhance their overall defensive complex. They laid mines on the roads, trails and natural cross country routes of advance. All bridges and culverts were destroyed, and more mines buried in possible by-passes. Machine gun and mortar emplacements, many of them dug four or five feet into solid rock, covered nearly every approach to the German positions. Not even intense artillery concentrations could neutralize these defenses. On the slopes of the mountains, behind stream beds, and across narrow valleys dozens of mutually supporting machine guns were sited to weave a pattern of death. The gullies, draws, and treacherous trails that led into the mountains could be easily held by small forces against strong attacks. Where the terrain features were not significant barriers such as in the relative flat land of the Mignano Gap to military movement, the Germans built strong points. These strong-points were combinations of minefields, wire and log-and earth bunkers, and were protected by expertly sited machine guns. 21/ The natural terrain obstacles and expertly designed man-made

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20/Burhans, pp. 89-124.

21/Fifth Army History, p. 6.

obstacles were enhanced by the excessive rains that occurred in the area. The heavy rains washed out roads and bridges, turned the roads into quagmires of mud and the normally quiet flowing streams into raging torrents.

Even though, the natural and prepared defensive positions enhanced the German defensive capabilities, the man-made obstacles in many instances were a hindrance to a flexible defense. Weapons could not be easily reoriented to cover Allied approaches other than those which had been previously anticipated. The Germans attributed this problem to the lack of sufficient officer personnel in the German 10th Army Group to conduct a coordinated reconnaissance in cooperation with the German engineers and to properly plan for the construction of integrated defensive positions. As a result, many defensive positions were constructed to cover the most likely approaches without due consideration for backdoor approaches to the German defensive positions. This weakness in the German defense complex was known to the Allies before the la Difensa action. Immediately prior to the 1SSF attack, Colonel Frederick conducted aerial and personal reconnaissance. The reconnaissance and information obtained from German prisoners provided extensive vital information concerning the German defensive positions. This permitted Col Frederick to exploit the German weakness by attacking along the unlikely approach up the steep side of La

Difensa. 22/

### Avenues of Approach

The avenues of approach into the Mignano Gap were restricted to sharply defined corridors imposed by the topography of the area. This forced a frontal attack on the Allied forces and favored the German defense. Information concerning the avenues of approach to La Difensa is sketchy. However, based on these sketchy sources, there appeared to be three approaches available to forces attacking La Difensa. The two most favorable avenues of approach were from the north and east. The third and most difficult approach was up the almost vertical slopes in the northeast quadrant of the mountain. The Germans considered the north and east approaches as the most favorable and had constructed their defensive positions to cover these approaches.

23/ Col Frederick opted to take his force around the heaviest defenses by scaling the shear side of La Difensa. He achieved surprise and took La Difensa.

### STRENGTH AND COMPOSITION

#### Allied Forces:

During this battle the 1st Special Service Force was attached to the 36th Infantry Division. The Division parent unit

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22/Bessell, Construction of Strategic Field Fortifications in Italy, September 1943 to October 1944, pp. 1-13.

23/Burhans, pp. 89-124.

was II Corps within Fifth Army. The 1stSSF was made up of Canadian and Americans under the command of Col. Robert T. Frederick and was attached on 23 November 1943. The unit consisted of a headquarters, air and communications detachments, a base echelon service battalion of about 600 men, and three "regiments," each authorized 417 men but containing closer to 600. Each regiment had two battalions, each battalion three companies, each company three platoons. Armed like infantrymen, with rifles, carbines, rocket launchers, light machine guns, and 60-mm mortars, but lacking organic artillery, the troops had parachutes, winter equipment, and flame throwers. They had 1,190 trucks and cars and were authorized 600 T-24 carriers, tracked amphibious vehicles capable of moderate speeds over hilly and snow-covered terrain. To give the unit support firepower, the Fifth Army headquarters attached to it a battalion of airborne artillery. 24/

The 36th Infantry Division to which the 1st Special Service Force was attached comprised the following:

36th Infantry Division

Headquarters and Headquarters Company  
36th Infantry Division Band  
36th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop (Mechanized)  
IIIth Engineer Battalion  
36th Infantry Division Artillery, Headquarters and  
Headquarters Battery  
155th Field Artillery Battalion (155-mm Howitzer)  
131st, 132d, and 133d Field Artillery Battalions  
(105-mm Howitzer)

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24/Blumenson, p. 256.

IIIth Medical Battalion  
736th Ordnance Light Maintenance Company  
36th Quartermaster Company  
36th Signal Company  
Military Police Platoon  
141st Infantry Regiment  
142d Infantry Regiment  
143d Infantry Regiment  
Special Service Force (attached on 23 November):

1st Special Service Force, Headquarters and  
Headquarters Detachment

1st, 2d, and 3d Regiments  
Service Battalion

Attached:

456th Parachute Field Artillery  
Battalion (A, Batteries C and D)  
(75-mm Pack Howitzer)

Corps and 36th Division provided normal combat support and combat service support to the 1stSSF which was beyond the capability of its organic service battalion. Besides the support provided by its organic elements during Operation Raincoat the Division received air, combat engineer, and corps artillery support.

A formidable concentration of artillery units supported II Corps, which was to make the main effort in the Winter Line campaign. The four battalions of artillery in the 36th Division were supplemented by the direct fire support of the 636th Tank Destroyer Battalion (3-inch guns). Three groupments of Corps artillery, totaling 14 battalions and 2 tank destroyer battalions, were available for direct and general support, as follows:

Groupment B

71st Field Artillery Brigade, Headquarters and  
Headquarters Battery  
15th Field Artillery Observation Battalion  
2d Field Artillery Observation Battalion  
985th Field Artillery Battalion (155-mm Gun)

976th Field Artillery battalion (155-mm Gun)  
932d Field Artillery Battalion (155-mm Howitzer)

194th Field Artillery Group:  
194th Field Artillery Battalion (8-inch Howitzer)  
995th Field Artillery Battalion (8-inch Howitzer)

Groupment M

18th Field Artillery Brigade, Headquarters and  
Headquarters Battery  
936th Field Artillery Battalion (155-mm Howitzer)  
937th Field Artillery Battalion (155-mm Howitzer)  
77th Field Artillery Regiment (155-mm Howitzer)  
805th Tank Destroyer Battalion (3-inch Gun)

Groupment D

1st Armored Division Artillery:  
27th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (105-mm Howitzer  
SP)  
68th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (105-mm Howitzer  
SP)  
91st Armored Field Artillery Battalion (105-mm Howitzer  
SP)  
701st Tank Destroyer Battalion (3-inch Gun)

69th Armored Field Artillery Group (attached):  
69th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (105-mm Howitzer  
SP)  
93d Armored Field Artillery Battalion (105-mm Howitzer  
SP)

Missions were assigned to each groupment according to its positions and capabilities. Groupment B, with its 8-inch howitzers, was assigned the missions of long-range counterbattery, interdiction, and harassing and destruction fires on enemy fortifications. Groupment M was to reinforce the fires of the 36th Division Artillery, furnish close-in supporting and counterbattery fires, and interdiction. This groupment was also to harass enemy reserve areas, observation and command posts, and to concentrate one battalion exclusively on the San Pietro flank during the preparation and attack. Groupment D was in direct support of the 36th Division Artillery. One-half of all pieces

in each groupment were to be prepared to fire as far north as Mount Sammucro, and one-half in each groupment would be prepared to fire southwest as far as Mount Camino. All medium and heavy artillery would be able to fire from San Pietro to the junction of the Liri and Gari rivers. The mass of the artillery was positioned along the general line Presenzano-Mount Fricello and on to the southeast. 25/

This massive amount of artillery which fire<sup>d</sup> preparations and support the attack on 2 December was an asset but the high angle fire did not have as great an effect on the dug in positions in the mountains that it would have in less mountainous terrain.

#### German Forces:

The strength and composition of the German forces had been accurately determined by II Corps. The 15th PanzerGrenadier (Armored Infantry) Division held the sector in which the critical terrain of Monte Camino, Monte la Difensa and Monte Maggiore lay.

The Special Service Force objective area of Monte la Difensa was occupied by 3d Battalion, 104th PanzerGrenadier Regiment with about 250 men. Also, approximately one-half of the 3d Battalion, 129th PanzerGrenadier Regiment was in the 1stSSF zone with the other half in the British zone on II Corps left flank. The 115th Reconnaissance Battalion was the reserve for these two units.

The Hermann Goering Armored Division (Pz. Div. Hermann Goering) was the rear reinforcement unit. Enemy artillery numbered 114

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25/Fifth Army History, p. 24.

pieces, capable of covering the mountain objectives of the First Special Service Force and the British.

The advantage in numbers obviously was with the 1stSSF. The Germans were solidly entrenched in prepared mountain positions. The 1stSSF had not yet seen combat but was specially trained for the mountain environment. This training along with good leadership, high morale and elite character would be major factors in the victory at la Difensa.

#### TECHNOLOGY

The technological level of the U.S. Forces was probably as good as any in the world. However, the mountainous terrain and horrible weather conditions made it difficult to bring any superiority of technological advances to bear. While the Germans made use of their new and deadly artillery round "Nebelwerfer" (Screaming meemies) as a psychological ploy, the introduction of the 8" howitzer by the Americans was a significant technological advance. Its use provided greater stand-off capability to pound defensive positions while remaining out of German artillery range. However, the German positions dug into the mountain provided much protection as the granite withstood even the greater firepower of the 8" gun.

The artillery was also important in that it was responsible for killing many of the German pack mules used for carrying supplies. This would prove to be a factor as the days of the battle wore on and the resupply situation proved to be important ~~an important~~ during the La Difensa battle and counterattacks.

Improvements made in field artillery between the First and

Second World Wars provided a longer range medium artillery weapon which, with its improved munitions, provided much more effective fires than its predecessor. The improved fire control system which the Americans had developed allowed unprecedented massing of fires.

By this point in the Italian campaign, Allied air superiority was a fact. Unfortunately, the poor weather during the la Difensa period obviated much of this advantage, although XII Air Support command dropped 902 tons of bombs in 1532 sorties in support of the 10 Corps offensive on 1 and 2 December 1943. 26/

The 1st Special Service Force had the advantage of the latest in mountain equipment. Their unit had not been in combat previously so they did not have a problem with equipment shortage. Equipment such as special <sup>2</sup>repelling ropes and packs plus the mountain training they had received prior to arrival in Italy was a distinct plus when scaling the sheer cliffs. This equipment assisted in their surprise attack on an area the Germans felt was a unlikely avenue of approach.

The 1SSF used .50-caliber machine gun ~~was used~~ with the other small arms to support the frontal assaults with direct fire. The machine guns were employed primarily on the flanks of the attack to suppress the Germans both on the objective and supporting positions. The machine guns were of limited value during cave and bunker clearing operations which were conducted

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26/Blumenson, p. 262.

once the assault elements of the attacking force reached the German positions. Flamethrowers, military demolitions, and hand grenades definitely proved their worth during the clearing operations. Flamethrowers and hand grenades provided close-in suppression, while demolitions were used to seal positions. Any advantage the Germans' may have enjoyed were nullified by successive retreats and their resupply and replacement difficulties. Second, the nature of the constricting terrain reduced the importance of the role of technology that required US forces to fire and maneuver for every inch of ground. The German mortars and individual weapons were the equal of their US counterparts. Their light machine gun was also equal in capability, but it was probably available in lesser quantities. Tactical unit communications were close to parity for both sides--both had great difficulty communicating due to the shortage of radio equipment and the almost exclusive use of wire which was continually being severed by artillery and vehicular movement.

The technological superiority of US forces provided some advantages, but they were not decisive. Initiative and valor were important factors required to counter the effectiveness of the dug-in, fortified, mutually supporting positions. The rough terrain and weather precluded the unlimited use of technological advantages of the 1stSSF and forced them into deliberate, lightly supported attacks. Weather and terrain dictated the tactics, not technological superiority. Technology's major contribution was to the massive air and artillery support and interdiction of supply lines and personnel replacements from the rear.

## LOGISTICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS

### Allied Forces

During the operations by Fifth Army against the Winter Line, the most serious problems of quartermaster supply were the procurement and use of pack trains and the furnishing of adequate food and clothing to front-line troops. In each case units had to make adjustments in transportation and supply to meet the requirements of mountainous terrain, cold and rainy weather, long lines of communication, and heavy traffic on the restricted road net. During parts of November and December the Peninsular Base Section could not unload and sort rations, clothing, and equipment fast enough to meet the needs of Fifth Army. Although these conditions produced serious strains on the transportation and supply system, they did not at any time cut off the flow of supplies. During November and December, the Army Quartermaster frequently unloaded supplies directly from shipside in Naples and sorted them without assistance from the Peninsular Base Section.

Next to terrain, the weather and heavy traffic had the most serious impact on transport of quartermaster supplies. Rain fell almost daily during the period, turning supply dump areas into quagmires and making roads nearly impassable. At times trucks bogged down and had to be winched out, dump sites were moved, and tons of gravel were laid on the roads. Heavy rains in late November flooded the Volturno River, swept away all the bridges except the one at Capua, and threatened to halt the flow of supplies to the front. The limited network of supply routes and enemy damage to roads and bridges throughout the campaign,

resulted in serious traffic congestion at many points. Only strict traffic control enabled the movement of supplies to continue without interruption.

Because of the mountainous terrain, primitive methods of transportation, <sup>which</sup> men and mule pack trains became of critical importance during the Winter Line operations. 1stSSF regiments had to rely mainly on these pack trains during the battle for the delivery of supplies to forward areas. Even the mules could not be used on the steep slopes of Monte la Difensa <sup>requiring</sup> the men to pack the supplies to front-line units.

The procurement of animals, equipment, and forage also presented many problems during the period 15 November-15 January. An adequate supply of mules for the 36th Division (and the 1stSSF) was obtained only after the arrival of the 1st Italian Pack Train from Sardinia . 27/ Once 1stSSF occupied la Difensa, the time to transport supplies up the mountain <sup>was</sup> estimate<sup>d</sup> at between 8-12 hours. Men from the 141st and 142d Infantry Regiment (reserve force to the 1stSSF) were used to transport supplies and casualties from 2-8 December. The muddy trails were so steep in places that the men had to crawl, dragging their packs up by ropes. Attempts on 5, 6, and 7 December to drop rations from A-36 fighter bombers failed because of bad weather.

German Forces:

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27/Fifth Army History, p. 68.

As miserable as the conditions were for the 1stSSF, the Germans were even worse off. While the Allies had sufficient supplies and only had the problem of transporting them (and suffering through six long days of no hot food and bitter conditions), the Germans had the same miserable conditions and had been virtually cut off from supplies by the air and artillery strikes. Hot food that had been prepared behind the lines and brought up the mountains in special containers usually did not arrive till after dark and was by then cold. Reinforcements were likewise difficult to obtain. The German units simply held out until exhausted. They could be viewed as having the one advantage of being able to stockpile supplies in their defensive positions, but <sup>it</sup> was nullified by Allied air strikes against LOCs and the flooding Garigliano River to their rear. Their rail and truck transportation had also been significantly reduced by previous Allied attacks. Logistics became a problem of importance to the highest levels of the German command.

The British 56th Division on the U.S. left had advanced and virtually cut off a depleted regiment and the weakened armored reconnaissance battalion of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division - the unit responsible for reinforcing the German battalion on la Difensa. 28/

#### COMMAND AND CONTROL

The 1st Special Service Force was well organized and ready

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28/Blumenson, p. 267.

for combat. Although this was the unit's first battle, it had gone through extensive preparation before arrival in Italy. The unit contained both Canadians and Americans soldiers, totaling approximately 2400 men specially trained and organized for winter operations. While no operation<sup>s</sup> order could be found, all indications pointed to a well organized and effective use of combat power. Field artillery and mortars were used to increase combat power. Engineers were used where possible for clearing obstacles, minefields and preparing roadway advances. However, the terrain hampered their on-going value when they could not traverse the steep mountains. The staff coordinated the use of resources, but factual resource<sup>s</sup> information on staff responsibilities and functioning is lacking. Inferences based on existing records and unit performance allow some suppositions concerning staff expertise. Written orders were provided during the battle, and these orders followed the standard format. The relationship between Colonel Frederick and his regimental commanders appears to have been excellent.

Perhaps the two most difficult problems of command and control lay in negotiating the terrain and in maintaining good communications. The months of November and December in Italy soon brought home the cold facts of position warfare. Fighting would have to be accomplished in the extremely rugged terrain; during low temperatures; rain or snow and fog; and all the consequent difficulties these conditions brought to tactics and logistics. Secondly, the attack on la Difensa would have to rely heavily on communications. This was mainly by wire and messenger

due to the shortage of tactical radios. The great difficulty and slowness of movement over the hazardous terrain made messenger communications slow and dangerous. The continuing problem of wire communication has been discussed earlier. Enemy artillery, mortars and infiltration proved to be a continuous deterrent to effective command and control.

The extent of concern over battlefield communications security had little relevance in this operation. In fact, primarily focus was on just being able to communicate in any fashion. Because of the nature of the fight, command and control was handled well by aggressive unit leaders. However, this is not to say that unity of effort was not maintained. There was a clearly defined chain of command from the commander to the small unit level.

#### German Forces:

The German command and control on la Difensa was roughly equal to our own. Messengers and wire were the main forms of communication. Perhaps command, control and communications could have been better had they placed their forces in better defensive positions and had been able to respond more rapidly when 1st SSF's main attack unexpectedly came from the direction of the steep cliffs. The fog and visibility hampered their effectiveness as it did ours. The heavy artillery fires they received made wire transmissions more difficult and also added an additional unique problem for them. The mountains acoustically magnified the noise of the guns firing and rounds exploding. The lingering peals and echos make communication more difficult and

adds psychological stress to the soldiers who were repeatedly subjected to it.

Therefore, the German's problems in C3 were roughly the same as our own. But the small area of this battle and the static nature of defense for whoever occupied the mountain top(s) helped overcome the major communications problems.

#### INTELLIGENCE

##### Allied Forces:

II Corps intelligence gathering assets were attached to its organic 53d Signal Battalion. These included Detachment A, 128th Signal Company (Radio Intercept), which had attached to it Detachment A, 849th Signal Intelligence Service and the 52d Wireless Intercept Station (British).

Allied intelligence officers had no illusions about the German intention to resist. "To judge by the violence of the enemy counterattacks," one estimate read, "Fifth Army appeared to have broken into the forward areas of the Winter Line. If the hills over-looking the Mignano defile in fact comprised the forward line of wide belt of defenses stretching to the Rapido River in the Cassino area, the stubborn resistance around Mignano was likely to continue to block Allied entrance into the Liri valley." 29/

Prisoners of war, civilians and reconnaissance flights

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29/Jackson, The Battle for Italy, p. 231.

made it clear that the Germans were placing extensive supply positions and dumps throughout the Cassino (including la Difensa) area. Along the Garigliano River to the rear of la Difensa, estimated by Allied intelligence to be some of the best natural defensive positions south of Rome, German units were blasting gun pits and other positions out of solid rock. 30/

The poor visibility and especially the ground fog limited Allied use of aerial collection. An additional problem associated with aerial recon was the difficulty of identifying the "dug in" concentrations in the mountains and the problem still plaguing intelligence collectors today, timely dissemination of analyzed intelligence information.

The interrogation of prisoner's of war (PW's) was a primary source of intelligence once the battle started. Numerous times the PW's yielded relevant information on enemy approximate strengths and counter attacks. The soldiers of the 1stSSF, having had previous training on enemy identification, were able to help identify targets and assist in intelligence acquisition tasks. Thus, as in many battles the primary intelligence was derived from soldiers identifying units and estimating strengths of the forces in contact.

The Allied intelligence collection effort was effective in integrated human, imagery, signal and air reconnaissance. Additionally, the earlier 10 day effort by 3rd Division to take

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30/Blumenson, p. 261.

la Difensa provided first hand experience and data on terrain, emplacement and the most defended avenues of approach. This information coupled with the 1stSSF mountain training probably led to the decision to scale the mountain at the point of the least amount of defensive fires.

German Forces:

The Germans did not have the capability to match the allied intelligence collection system. There is no indication in the reserch material that they knew of the 1stSSF training in mountain warfare. This bit of information alone could have drastically alterød the battle and greatly increased loss of U.S. and Canadian lives had the Germans suspected and prepared for an attack up the sheer cliffs of la Difensa. One senior German officer proclaimed:

"We knew very little about the enemy. My intelligence officer received continuous guidance from the 10th Army G.H.O., who usually knew which enemy divisions stood opposite us. We had practically no reconnaissance of our own; occasionally a prisoner would be taken by chance and interrogated at Corps H.Q. before being sent to Army H.Q." 31/

Another real weakness lay in the lack of facilities for reconnaissance. Although they still possessed a good intelligence service which functioned through the General Staff organization, they could no longer use the normal means of reconnaissance. The Luftwaffe had been so decimated that it could

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31/Jackson, p. 184.

barely venture into the air for routine reconnaissance. The Germans took few American prisoners and were denied this valuable form of intelligence. 32/ Thus, the Allies faced an unsophisticated German intelligence collection effort based primarily on radio intercept, patrolling, and to a greater on extent battle-field observation. As stated above, Allied air superiority definitely reduced their air reconnaissance capabilities and greatly assisted the 1stSSF.

#### DOCTRINE AND TRAINING

##### Allied Forces

Doctrine called for employment of foot infantry with fire support in the rugged terrain found on Monte la Difensa and Monte la Remetanea. The restrictions that mountainous terrain places on mobility make anything other than foot soldiers impractical. Traditional doctrine called for artillery preparation followed by assault units using fire and maneuver. The element of surprise was accomplished through careful planning and execution.

The 1st Special Service Force was composed of specially selected Americans and Canadians in about equal proportions. The unit had initially been trained for long-range sabotage operation in snow-covered country. When air bombardment and Office of Strategic Service saboteurs proved to be effective against targets deep in the enemy rear, the mission of the 1st Special

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32/Ibid, p. 218.

Service Force was changed. Already trained to fight on skis, the members then received intensive training in demolitions and became parachutists.

The 1st Special Service Force had been first employed in the unopposed landings at Kiska in the Aleutians during the late summer of 1943. Because the troops were versatile and had extraordinarily high moral, the Combined Chiefs of Staff felt they would be useful in the mountain warfare of Italy. Alerted to their availability, General Eisenhower requested their shipment for special reconnaissance and raiding operations during the methodical winter advance up the Italian peninsula. <sup>33/</sup> Thus, the 1stSSF was a fresh force highly trained in mountain warfare. However, this advantage was partially off-set by their lack of combat experience which had been gained by the defending German forces.

In accordance with doctrine, II Corps initiated operations to deceive the Germans. Preliminary operations, starting a week before the major effort, were designed to deceive the Germans about the location of the attack. Along the lower Carigliano River, British troops patrolled aggressively, established false supply dumps, set up dummy gun positions, and conspicuously moved men and vehicles in a manner to suggest the intention of an assault river crossing.

#### German Forces

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33/Ibid, p. 194.

The Germans employed doctrinally sound defensive tactics. Once forced to withdraw from a defensive position, the Germans would immediately counter attack with the largest force available under the local commander. Counter attack doctrine as stated by a senior German commander included,

"The counter attack struck the enemy at the moment when, from long experience, the impetus of his attack was bound to slacken and there could be no resumption until he had re-grouped and re-inforced his troops and drawn up a new plan of attack. If in this process he is disturbed by the defender's counter-attacks and has himself to resort to defense, his morale will suffer, and the defender has then virtually won the game, even if he has not recaptured the main battle line as the German operational doctrine expects him to do." 34/

The training and instruction of the German troops in mountain warfare could be carried out only on the front line and in special courses, because most of the divisions were committed to front line duty soon after arrival in theater. A small cadre of experienced mountaineers could be made available to the troops by forming groups of instructors consisting of officers and NCO's from the high mountain school and mountain reserve divisions. In spite of all difficulties, the troops became reasonably familiar with the special features of mountain campaign and the dangers of mountainous terrain. The troops also learned to use crowbars, hammers and explosive charges to dig themselves in at the ridge positions. The spade, supplied as standard equipment, was useless. Additional equipment had to be purchased from the local

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34/Burhans, p. 88.

markets. Once they acquired the techniques the German soldiers settled into the rocks quickly, finding excellent cover on the ridges' dugouts.

## CONDITION AND MORALE

### Allied Forces

The condition of the men of the 1st Special Service Force had been brought to a state of readiness through its arduous training in the United States in the months before la Difensa and from the combat landings made on Kiska Island in the Aleutians. Even though the Japanese evacuated the island just before the 1stSSF arrived and no fighting ensued, the soldiers experienced a real maneuver, with the proper mental preparation for combat that no practice maneuver or war game could inspire. Physical conditioning was resumed on arrival in Italy in anticipation of rugged mountain requirements. The combat echelon immediately started strenuous training to re-sharpen shooting eyes, harden the legs, and prepare service gear. 35/

The men were in a positive state of both mind and health when the battle began. Feelings of esprit de corps were strongly felt and the belief in the cause of the fight had been instilled by their NCO's and commanders. The time available for preparation since commitment on Kiska, along with the previous

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35/Ibid.

allied successes at pushing the Germans back and the public support at home, yielded a high state of unit morale.

The men of the Force would soon need to draw on their excellent conditioning and high morale. As the operation began, the troops quickly became soaked and covered with mud, and the freezing cold added to their discomfort. Once on la Difensa there was nothing for the men to do but hang on and fight the cold and rain, the limited visibility, the nearly impossible supply and evacuation problems, and the active German defense. When a reconnaissance patrol was pushed back from Monte la Remetanea to Hill 960 on 4 December, a battalion of the reserve regiment was too depleted to take back the ground. A biting wind, cold, clammy fog, virtually incessant rain, rocky ground, no shelter, insufficient blankets, cold food, and accurate German mortar and artillery fire made life miserable on Monte la Difensa. "Every man in unit exhausted," Frederick reported. "Needs minimum three days rest after he gets down from Hill," he added, before there could be thought of further assignment for the force. 36/ But hold on they did, until relieved after six days on the mountain. The strong commitment of these men to evacuate their wounded comrades and the 116 cases of exhaustion attest to the fortitude, unit esprit, and morale of the 1stSSF.

German Forces:

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36/Critical Evaluation of Italian Campaign Based Upon German Operational and Tactical Viewpoints, p. 41.

As miserable as the conditions were for the 1st Special Service Force and the 142d Infantry, the Germans had a more difficult time. Outnumbered, burned by white phosphorus shells, without supplies or reinforcement, the units held out until exhausted. In the mountains the German soldiers felt more lonely, and the proximity of death was more real under heavy fire. The terrible pounding the enemy soldiers took from Allied artillery and mortars had an adverse affect on his morale as did the lack of replacements during the battle.

The troops operating during these cold rainy days in high and steep mountainous terrain suffered severely from the bad weather and the men could not be supplied with winter clothing. Once driven from their mountain battlements, the German soldiers were exposed to the rain and cold with little shelter. They still wore the uniforms they had on during the mobile fighting in Sicily and Southern Italy. They had to hold their own against heavy odds and fought stubbornly for possession of la Difensa. No relief could be sent to them. These troops had to repel the constant Allied attacks and when forced from their positions conducted continuous counter attacks in attempts to regain the important defensive positions. 37/

Despite the conditions and losses incurred, the German soldier held true to his cause. Discipline and courage were constantly present in his life and even while losing the fight,

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37/Ibid.

his resolve was unwaivering.

## LEADERSHIP

### Allied Forces:

At the beginning of the battle for la Difensa the officers and men of 1st Special Service Force were well trained noncombat veterans. During the fight it was evident the leaders were well schooled, courageous and effectively led their men. These actions led to individual and small unit initiative and a positive effect on the offensive operation.

Col. Robert T. Frederick, a West Point graduate and artilleryman, commanded the 1stSSF from its inception in July 1942. He was a dynamic leader who's wartime leadership would result in his promotion to Major General at age 37 and was to become one of the Army's youngest division commanders. Frederick, soft-spoken and of a mind favoring analytical challenges, counterbalanced these traits with physical readiness. He made his first parachute jump after 15 minutes of instruction. Asked afterwards if he had been nervous, he replied, "A little," paused and added, "No, hell, more than a little, but the purpose was twofold: to lessen qualms others might have and to let them know I won't be sitting on my haunches." 38/

He and his officers were compassionate - they would compensate

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38/Fredrick-Hicks, "The War Made Him, Peacetime Broke Him",  
Armor Magazine; Sep 82, p. 49.

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for leading others to possible death by being where their troops were and exposing themselves to the front line dangers. The 1stSSF soon learned the commander's credo of being near the troops and respected him for it. Considered "resourceful" and "of rare physical activity and endurance," by Gen. Mark Clark, Frederick was also considered by some as "eccentric" because of his battle strategies and "crazy" to repeatedly risk his life at the front or in forward scout reconnaissance. His presence under fire undoubtedly inspired his troops, but perhaps no more than when battle lullied to sniper exchange and he was observed praying over wounded or carrying one of them down a mountain path. In quieter moments, standing on the side of a trail, he offered each passing man a cigarette. 39/ This type leadership endeared him to his men and led subordinate leaders to emulate him.

The U.S. had extensive pre-war training schools which helped produce tactically and logistically proficient leaders. The lower ranking leaders (small unit) were generally replacements who had gained less extensive skills in training at basic state-side locations. Thus, individual initiative was many times the center of leadership style and led to unit cohesion and esprit.

German Forces:

German training in leadership is best illustrated by a quote from a senior German officer on leadership philosophy.

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39/Ibid, p. 51.

"All ranks in the German Army were well trained in leadership, for with us this was a tradition. In regard to the quick and accurate appreciation of a situation, the making of clear decisions and the framing of concise orders our General Staff was probably superior to those of all other countries. In maneuvers, discussions on the terrain and General Staff exercises all our officers had been constantly schooled to acquire a mastery of the subject. The tasks were always set in such a way that the local leader was compelled to make more or less independent decisions." 40/

While the 1stSSF had the strong leader in Col. Frederick, the Germans had no exceptional personalities who materially affected the battle. They were, however, flexible in their leadership in adjusting to the changing nature of the battle. The German leaders had recently experienced several defensive actions while withdrawing. Thus, the la Difensa battle did not provide many opportunities for dynamic leadership, but their leadership tenacity and high state of discipline led to their soldiers' respect and willingness to obey orders.

#### MILITARY OBJECTIVES OF THE GERMAN FORCES

The mission of the forward elements of the German XIV Panzer Corps was to defend along the Bernhardt Line, the forward (most southern) line of defense of the Winter Line. Behind the Bernhardt Line was the Gustav Line, which was intended to be the main German defense line in southern Italy. German forces along the Bernhardt Line were to gain as much time as possible for the defensive preparation of the Gustav Line. Monte Rotondo was the strongpoint of the Bernhardt Line, which ran from the mouth of the Carigliano River through Monte Camino-Monte la Difensa and across the Mignano Gap at Monte Rotondo. The Camino hill mass,

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40/Jackson, p. 219.

which included Monte la Difensa, was the hinge upon which the German defenses in the Mignano Gap lay. The Camino hill mass not only effectively guarded the approach to the Mignano Gap in the north and blocked access into the Gari and Liri valleys, it also afforded excellent observation of the area beyond Gari and the Garigliano. The Camino hill mass was thus of the utmost importance to the German Command.

The 15th Panzer Grenadier Division had the mission of defending the front arch which extended from the Garigliano River across the hill mass of Monte Camino and Monte la Difensa. Succinctly stated, its mission was to deny the use of the hill mass to Allied forces.

#### MILITARY OBJECTIVES OF THE ALLIED FORCES

The 1st Special Service Force (SSF) was assigned to II Corps on 22 November 1943 and attached to the 36th Division under Major General Fred L. Walker. The 36th had reached the Winter Line after suffering heavy losses both in Salerno and the Volturno crossings. Fifth Army Operation Directive No. 11 implemented Operation Raincoat on 24 November 1943. Under Operation Raincoat, II Corps was to send one reinforced division against the Monte la Difensa-Monte Maggiore portion of the Camino hill mass as Phase I of a movement to seize the Mignano Gap and the entrance to the Liri Valley. Concurrently, X Corps was to attack and seize the Monte Camino portion of the Camino hill mass and the village of Rocca d'Evandro, thus closing its front on most of the Garigliano River.

The 1st SSF was to attack and seize Monte la Difensa

( Hill 960) and Monte la Remetanea (Hill 907). This attack was in conjunction with the British attack on neighboring Monte Camino (Hill 963) and the 36th Division attack on Hills 596, 619, and 630 in the Maggiore heights. The attacks against Monte Camino and Monte la Difensa would have to be closely coordinated; if either hill were seized singly, the German forces on the other would make it untenable. The lower Maggiore mass could not be secured until the high ground overlooking it, that assigned to the SSF, had been taken. Thus, the mission of the 1st Special Service Force was to attack and seize Monte la Difensa and Monte la Remetanea in order to make possible the seizure of the Mignano Gap area.

#### COURSES OF ACTION AVAILABLE TO THE GERMAN FORCES

The courses of action available to the elements of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division on Monte la Difensa were limited. Prior to reaching the Bernhardt Line, the Germans had essentially been conducting a very skillful delay in Italy. On 25 September 1943, 10th Army issued an order for the construction of a fortified field position following a line including the Camino hill mass. According to General Major Hans Bessell, a defensive line of somewhat limited value was finally completed by the end of November which included the Garigliano front, the Camino hill mass, and the Mignano Gap. Essential defensive weapons were placed under cover, secure shelter was available for part of the forces manning the position, and protection against surprise was provided for means of barbed wire and mines.

( The very nature of the terrain served to limit the feasible

courses of action. The key to Monte la Difensa was the crest of the hill itself; whoever held it could dominate the rest of the hill mass with direct fires and observation for indirect fires. Any course of action which did not serve to deny the Allies the crest of the hill was unsatisfactory.

The German commander on Monte la Difensa was thus constrained by the requirement to hold the crest of the hill, which severely limited his options, and by the limited field fortifications. By this stage of the campaign in Italy the Germans had learned that the overwhelming Allied air superiority and extensive use of artillery made it essential that defending forces be placed in field fortifications. Due to the fact the Monte la Difensa was composed of hard limestone rock, fortifications could only be constructed using special equipment and concrete. Most of these resources were now being fully employed in strengthening the second line of defense, the Gustav Line, and thus were not available to the troops on Monte la Difensa during most of November. What efforts had been made had not allowed the luxury of constructing covered trenches to allow the shifting of local reserves and reinforcement of fighting positions while under heavy air or artillery fire.

Another limiting factor was the relative scarcity of forces available. At this stage of the Italian campaign the strengths of German units were low. Many battalions were less than 85 to 100 men strong. Wide frontages were defended by limited numbers of men. Only small local reserves were available. The German corps commander noted that there were insufficient troops to man a continuous defensive line, even could one have been constructed.

Adding yet another limitation was the sheer volume and accuracy of fire that the Allied forces could place on any observed target. This meant that any course of action which entailed the use of forces on a frontal slope, exposed to direct fires, was very dangerous.

The possible courses of action available to the German commander on Monte la Difensa for the defense of the hill thus became narrowed very rapidly. The basic underlying question of whether to use a static defense or rely on maneuver was decided in large measure by the essential factor of survivability. Maneuver of large forces was impossible both due to the terrain and the lack of protected routes or protected means (armored vehicles, for example), not to mention the lack of large forces being available. On the other hand, the relatively small available forces precluded a continuous defensive line. The German commander found himself with little alternative but to employ a series of strongpoints, manned by relatively small forces, and relying on mutually supporting fires and the use of limited counterattacks by small forces to regain lost positions.

The question of where to actually position forces was also heavily influenced by factors beyond the local commander's control. Placing forces on the frontal slopes was not feasible both due to the extreme slope, actually perpendicular cliffs in many areas, and the vulnerability of the slopes to Allied fires. Defending from the crest of the hill mass or defending from the reverse slope were the remaining alternatives. Defending from the crest would satisfy the requirement to retain control of the crest as long as forces there could survive. It also gave the

defending forces the maximum fields of fire and observation. Defending on the reverse slope was difficult because of the extreme slope of the hill; the closest to a reverse slope defense was to place forces in the saddle between Monte la Difensa and Monte la Remetanea.

In the end the German commander chose to employ a combination of forces on the crest and forces in the saddle. The question as to whether or not this was a wise choice can in part be answered by what happened during the first attack on Monte la Difensa. On 5 November 1943, the 3d Division attacked Monte la Difensa. Initially attacking with one battalion it eventually reinforced the attack with an entire regiment. The German defenses on Monte la Difensa held and the attacking forces finally gave up the attack on 15 November after suffering heavy casualties.

The final question to consider is whether the Germans did a complete and thorough analysis based on the traditional factors of mission, enemy, terrain, time, and troops available. From the earlier discussion it is apparent that mission and terrain were carefully considered. Evidence that troops available was considered is supported by the relative importance attached to the survivability issue and also by the fact that additional troops were moved into the positions just a few days prior to the attack on 2 December (elements of the 115th Reconnaissance Battalion). The critical shortcoming that the Germans suffered in their estimate process appears to be that of analyzing their enemy. There is no evidence that they knew prior to the

attack on 2 December that they would be faced by a unit of fresh troops specially trained in mountain and cold weather warfare tactics. The German defenses remained primarily oriented to counter the expected avenues of approach that a traditionally trained and equipped infantry force would tend to employ. As a result of this there was little apparent effort to use the roughly two week period between the time of the attack by the 3d Division and the time of attack by the 1st Special Service Force to defend against an attack up the cliffs.

#### COURSES OF ACTION AVAILABLE TO THE ALLIED FORCE

The 1st Special Service Force had the mission of attacking and seizing Monte la Difensa and Monte la Remetanea in conjunction with other units on neighboring hill masses. The possible courses of action therefore revolved around the issues of time, direction, size of force, and type of support. Planning could not be done in a vacuum. Some elements were defined by higher headquarters. Deception operations were planned and conducted by Fifth Army, X Corps, and II Corps. Heavy air support and the heaviest concentration of artillery fire yet seen in Italy were also available.

Intelligence on the enemy order of battle on the Camino hill mass was very good. Size, type, location, and strength of the enemy forces were known. Also available to the planners were results of the previous attempt to seize Monte la Difensa by the 7th Infantry Regiment, 3d Division, in November.

The basic questions to be answered became whether to attack during daylight or darkness; attack frontally or attempt to find

an unexpected approach; and what size force should be committed initially? In analyzing these questions the unique capabilities of the 1st Special Service Force had to be kept in mind, particularly their training to operate in mountainous terrain.

The key decision was the choice to use the SSF in terrain other forces would find impassable in order to achieve surprise. The desire to use surprise required movement by a relatively small force during periods of reduced visibility and over terrain which the enemy would not be expecting. The danger of using a small assault force was partially offset by the anticipated massive Allied artillery fires upon the German positions; these fires would not only mask the noise of movement and keep the Germans' heads down, but also would tend to prevent movement of German reserves and counterattack forces. Concluding the analysis, the planners decided to execute a deliberate night attack with the equivalent of one battalion as the assault force, along an axis of attack which would be considered impassable by conventional forces.

The detailed nature of the planning, not to mention the resounding success the execution enjoyed, indicates that a thorough analysis was conducted. Furthermore, the fact that significant combat forces were allocated during the planning process to provide the labor force necessary to transport supplies and equipment onto the objective area indicates the staff planning process was relatively complete and detailed.



Photo 3

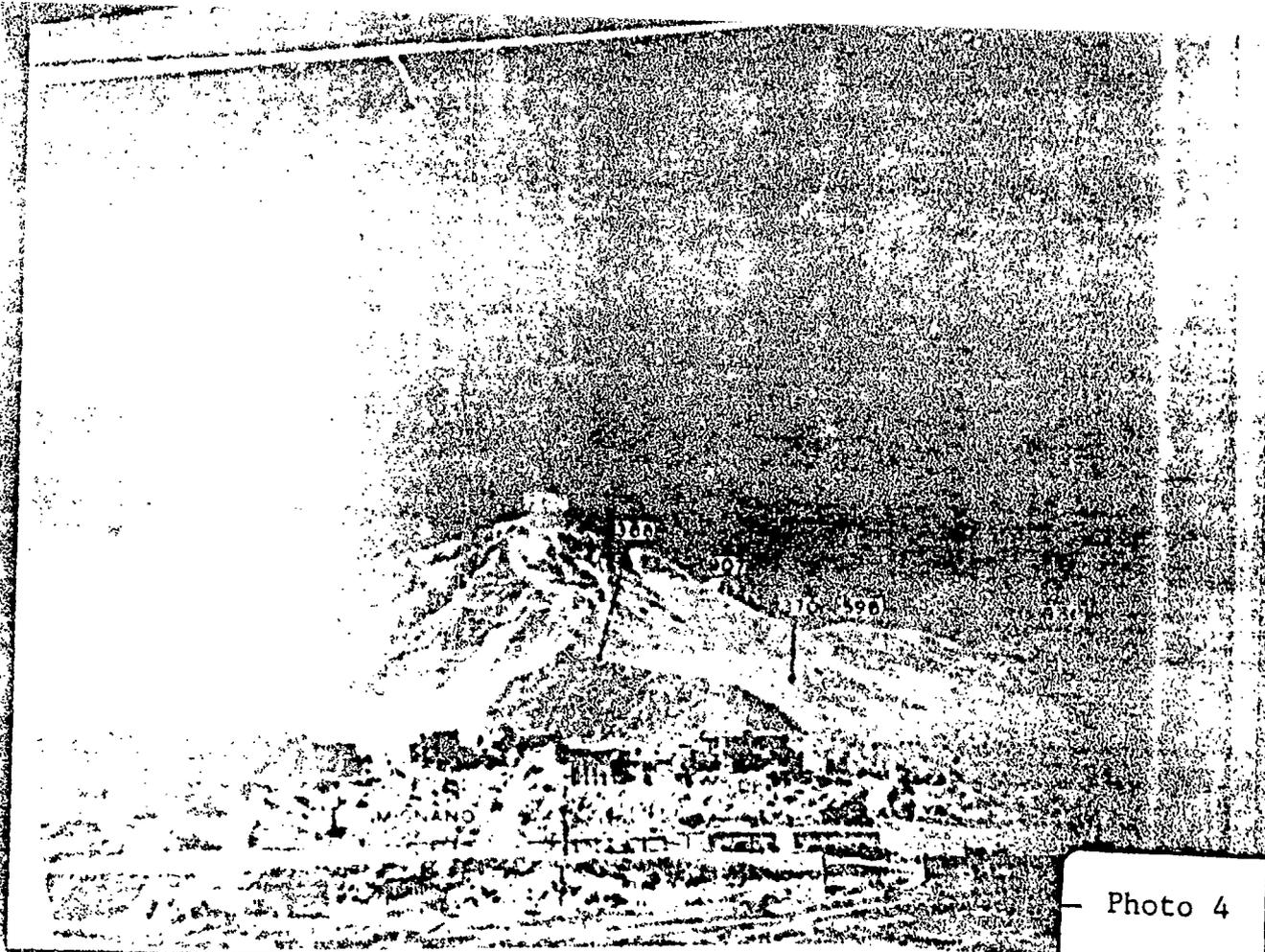
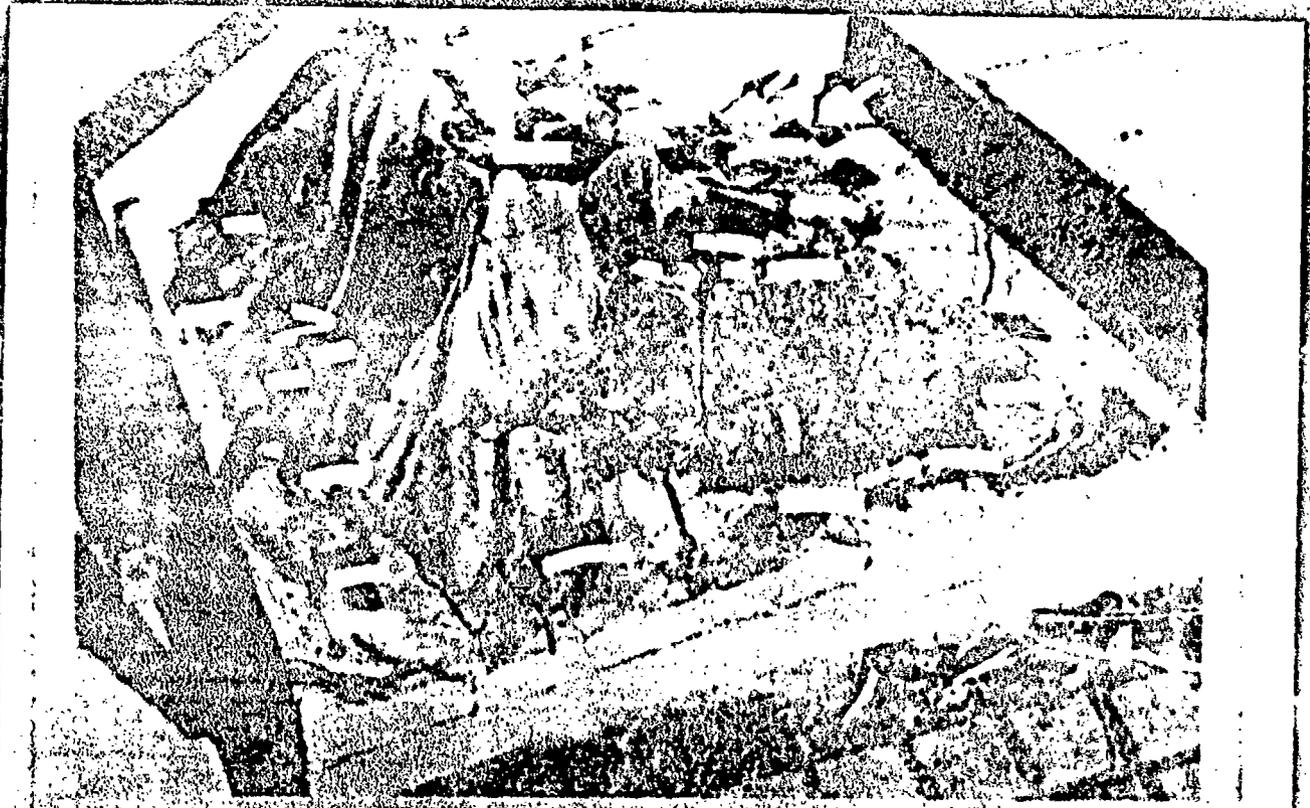
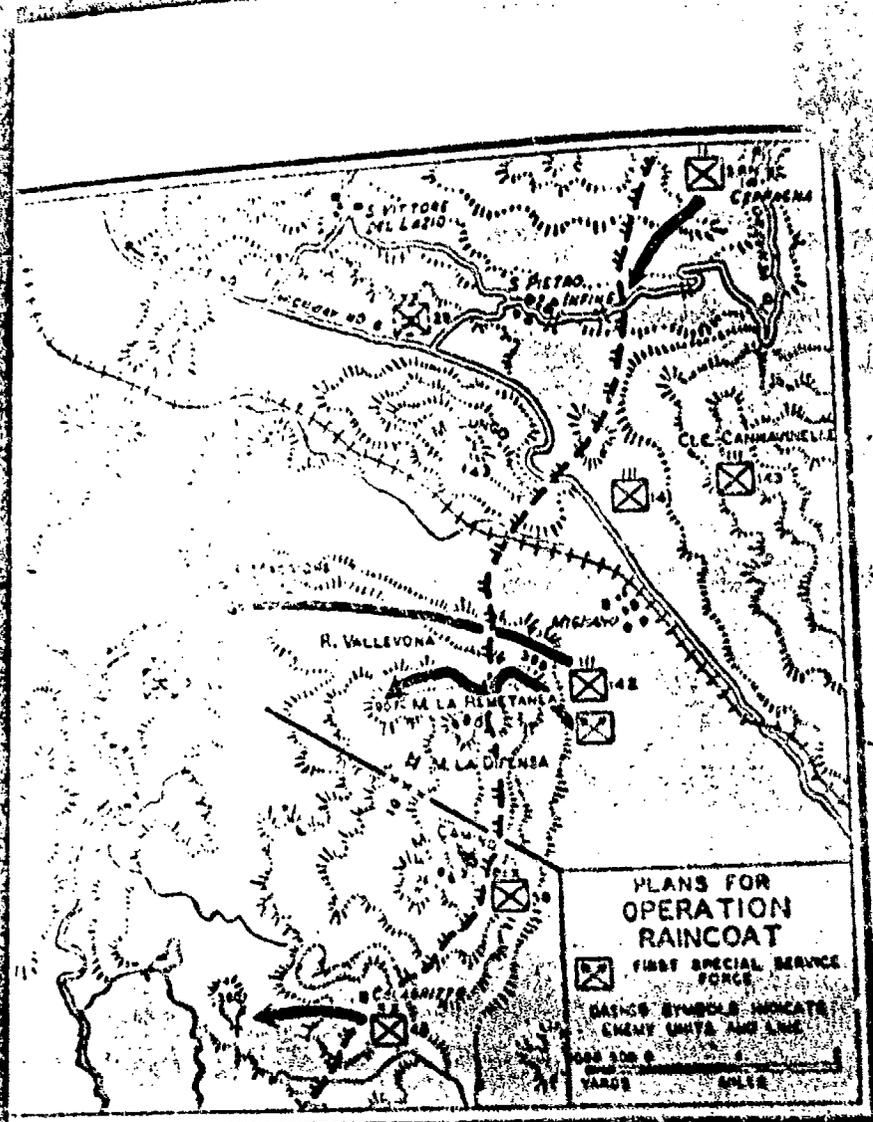


Photo 4



A scale model of Monte la Difensa, one of the key positions in the German "Winter Line" in Italy, which the First Special Service Force successfully assaulted in December, 1943, by ascending the steep slope at left.

Photo 5



MAP NO. 5

ordered to take Hill 560, the southernmost spur of Cantino, during the night of 1/2 December (Map No. 5, page 18). Then the 56 Divi-



1943 - a ...  
problem throughout  
this chapter

#### Section IV - THE FIGHT

The battle for the Mt. La Difensa area began on 2 December 1943. Initial planning called for the battle to begin on 28 November 1943, however, severe weather delayed the battle until sufficient air support could be provided. By 1 December, the weather had cleared sufficiently and the long range forecast indicated that the maneuver forces were able to receive air support. General Clark, Commander 5th Army, decided to begin the battle against the "Winter Line" on 2 December 1943.

The 1stSSF was directed to take the Mt. La Difensa/Mt. La Remetanea area. The mission of the 1stSSF was to attack and seize Mt. La Difensa (Hill 960) and, on order, continue the attack to the west to seize Mt. La Remetanea (Hill 907).

The 1stSSF was initially garrisoned in the Santa Maria area. During the late evening hours of 1 December 1943, the force deployed into assembly positions as indicated on sketch 1. All three regiments were in position by 0300 hours 2 December. The initial concept of operation, as outlined by the Commander, 1stSSF, was as follows:

1st Regiment: Deploy to the south of Hill 370 to be the 36th Infantry Division reserve.

2nd Regiment: Attack Mt. La Difensa and on order continue the attack to seize Mt. La Remetanea.

3rd Regiment: 1st Battalion deploy to the 600 meter level and be the force reserve.

2nd, 3rd Battalions: Assist the service battalion in resupply of the main assault forces.

The main enemy forces facing the 1stSSF consisted of four companies from the 3rd Battalion, 104th Panzer-Grenadier Regiment

and two companies from the 115th Reconnaissance Battalion (Sketch 1). The 3rd Battalion/104th had established Mt. La Difensa as a major strong point of the Winter Line. The two companies of the 115th Reconnaissance Battalion had deployed into the Mt. La Difensa area on 1 December 1943 to reinforce the 3/104th before the expected attack. The enemy's defensive line was exceptionally strong. They had occupied the mountain tops in early November and had prepared them against attack by constructing interconnected fortified positions/bunkers. The enemy had approximately 340 people on the Mt. La Difensa/Mt. La Remetanea complex. However, the force ratio was approximately 1 to 1, which favored the defenders, at the critical point of attack.

The actual battle began on 2 December and lasted until 8 December. It can be separated into two phases; Phase I consisted of the movement to attack positions, the attack of Mt. La Difensa, and the consolidation of the area; Phase II consisted of the expansion of the initial objective and the attack and securing of Mt. La Remetanea.

#### PHASE I (Sketch 2)

The order to execute the attack plan was issued at 1630 on 2 December. As shown on Sketch 2, the 1st Regiment/1stSSF was to deploy south of Hill 370 (36th Division Reserve) and the 1st Battalion/3rd Regiment was to move up to the 600 meter line as the force reserve. The plan called for the 2nd Regiment to conduct the main attack.

The key element of this attack, given the terrain, weather,

enemy, numerical superiority and fortified positions, was surprise. It was therefore necessary to hide all indications of an attack.

Numerous aerial bombardment missions as well as field artillery fire had impacted on the hills constantly for two days. The force moved their position during the hours of darkness and remained undetected throughout the 2nd of December. Additional movement of the force in the attack of Mt. La Difensa was always conducted during the hours of darkness. To further prevent the enemy from detecting the force's movement, no firing of weapons was permitted until 0600 on 3 December unless pinned down by the enemy. Only knives and grenades could be used.

At approximately 1800 on 2 December (darkness), the force moved out. Each unit was led into position by scouts who had reconnoitered the route in daylight. The field artillery that was supporting the force intensified their fires on Mt. La Difensa at approximately 2000 on 2 December. By 2230, units of the force were in position as shown on Sketch 2. The 2nd Regiment had reached the base of Mt. La Difensa's crown. The force had encountered sporadic FA fires directed at the known supply trails, yet the enemy had not detected the attack by that evening. The 2nd Regiment had paused at the base of the crown because the last 100-200 meters was a vertical climb, requiring the use of rope ladders. By 0100 on 3 December, the rope ladders were positioned and the 1st Battalion/2nd Regiment began its final movement into their assault positions. Order of march was 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Company. (Sketch 3) The 1st Battalion had conducted the initial attack with 3 companies on line; 1/1/2 on

the left, 2/1/2 in the center and, 3/1/2 on the right. By 0300, the 1st Company had arrived at the top of the hill and moved to the left (south) into its initial assault positions. At 0330, the 2nd Company had arrived and moved into the center assault position. At 0400, the 3rd Company had arrived and moved to the right (north). The attack was to begin no earlier than 0600 on 3 December when each company of the 1st Battalion was in position and the 2nd Battalion was in its supporting position.

The actual plan never materialized. At 0430, 1st and 2nd Companies were in position, 3rd company was still moving north and the 2nd Battalion was still on the ladders. At that point, this well-executed plan began to fall apart. The enemy's forward outposts had detected the movement of the 3rd Company and immediately began to engage them, and subsequently the entire Battalion, with machine gun, mortar and sniper fire. That early outbreak of the battle put immediate command into the platoon leaders hands. The platoons in 1st and 2nd Company began the attack, but it was not until 0500 that the entire 1st Battalion was oriented on the objective. The battle was fought at the section level. Each section became concerned with its individual problems, plans, and techniques of advancing on the mountain crest. By 0600 on 3 December, 1st Company in the south was within 100 meters of the peak and its advance sections were engaging the main enemy defensive strong point. The 2nd Company, in the center (northeast section), enjoyed more success and had assaulted the main enemy defenses on the top of Mt. La Difensa. The battalion quickly exploited its success, and the 1st and 2nd

Companies rapidly overran the enemy defensive positions. By approximately 0630, the 1st and 2nd Companies were on top of Mt. La Difensa.

By 0700 on 3 December the entire 1st Battalion had reached the top of the hill, with the 2nd Battalion following close behind. Supported by the 2nd Battalion, the 1st Battalion immediately began the consolidation of Mt. La Difensa, supported by 2nd Battalion. The battalions were assigned sectors and began to clean out remaining snipers, reorganize their sections, platoons, and companies, and finally dig in and prepare for a counterattack (Sketch 4). By 0800, the consolidation was complete.

The original plan had called for the immediate continuing of the attack by the 1st Battalion on Mt. La Remetanea. 2nd Battalion was to remain on Mt. La Difensa. The enemy was concentrating mortar fires on Mt. La Difensa, but they were not conducting a counterattack. The 1st Battalion commander wanted to get his Battalion on the move toward Mt. La Remetanea but the unit was low on ammunition. Colonel Frederick signalled to halt their advance until ammunition resupply could be conducted. The units requested that they be resupplied while improving their positions. Throughout the day the enemy did not counterattack but subjected the 2nd Regiment to intensive artillery and mortar fires.

Although 2nd Regiment was dug in on Mt. La Difensa, they had conducted limited offensive actions during the afternoon of 3 December. The Regiment had sent out patrols to clear snipers around the peak and also survey the German strength on the 2nd

objective. Outposts were placed along the 960-907 ridgeline, covering the general direction of expected counterattack. It was not until 1700 on 3 December that the first resupply trains had arrived. The climb had taken six hours. Throughout the night of 3 December, the resupply had continued and reconnaissance patrols were sent out to survey the area. The enemy had continued to concentrate mortar and FA fires on Mt. La Difensa. During this initial attack, 2nd Regiment had sustained 15 killed and in turn killed 75 of the enemy.

The remainder of the 1stSSF was also busy on this initial day of battle. As previously indicated, the service Battalion, 2nd, 3rd Battalion of the 3rd Regiment/1stSSF were busy moving supplies. The 1st Battalion/3rd Regiment, initially in reserve, moved to the top of Mt. La Difensa and was in position by 0600 on 4 December. The 1st Regiment, initially in reserve for the 36th Division, had a quiet day. At 1800 on 3 December the enemy FA harassing fires had caused the regiment to move but had not committed them to the battle. At 2300 on 3 December, the commanding general of the 36th Division had directed the 1st Regiment to send one battalion to reinforce the 1stSSF. The 1st Battalion/1st Regiment immediately moved out, but the enemy had sighted them. Immediately, the enemy began a barrage of intensive artillery fire. The battalion had dispersed, but not before it had sustained 25 dead. By approximately 2400 on 3 December, the 1st Battalion had regrouped and continued its movement to Mt. La Difensa. The 2nd Battalion/1st Regiment had remained to collect and evacuate the wounded. The 1st Battalion/1st Regiment would

not get to the top of Mt. La Difensa until 0600 on 5 December (over 24 hours).

By dawn on 4 December, the 2nd Regiment plus 1st Company/1st Battalion/3rd Regiment was firmly established on Mt. La Difensa. 2nd and 3rd Companies/1st Battalion/3rd Regiment had joined the packers to assist the resupply effort. (Sketch 5) The original plan, after the initial delay of the attack on Hill 907, was to continue the attack on 4 December. However, the supply situation was still critical. The long trip and limited number of routes available had restricted the amount of supplies that could be delivered. This lack of supplies had delayed the attack to secure Hill 907 until 5 December.

During 4 December, the 2nd Regiment had continued heavy patrolling of the area to the north, west and south. Their patrolling efforts had resulted in significant information concerning the whereabouts of the enemy. A heavy mortar and machine gun complex was identified to the south and was engaged with unobserved FA fire. At 1500 on 4 December, the 2nd Regiment had received two reports locating an enemy assembly area. Prisoners caught during that day's patrolling had indicated that 3 companies of the 3 Battalion/104th would counterattack at 0300 on 5 December. A FA forward observer had reported 400 Germans assembling southwest of Mt. La Remetanea. The force was engaged in a 30 minute barrage by a battalion of 105mm, and corps 155mm howitzers. This barrage had resulted in completely disrupting the enemy's counterattack forces.

Throughout December 4th, the enemy had continued to fire mortar and artillery onto Mt. La Difensa, but had conducted no

counterattack. That evening and early the next morning passed quietly, out posts were alert, and all troops were ready to man guns if the counterattack came.

With the end of 4 December, the first phase of the battle was completed. The 1stSSF had successfully attacked and seized the Mt. La Difensa hill top. The key to the success of this battle and subsequent consolidation was the ability of the force to apply the principle of surprise, mass, and simplicity. The Germans had not realized that they were being attacked until the force had closed to within 200 meters of their defensive positions. This action had taken the enemy completely by surprise, even though the enemy had discovered the forces before their arrival in their attack positions. The plan was simple and unit leaders took the initiative and immediately pressed the attack on being discovered. 1st Battalion had massed its troops at the right time and place and sufficiently caught the enemy off guard which negated the enemy's superior number and defensive positions. The battle had lasted less than three hours. The attacking force had employed all supporting fires that it could muster. The Air Force had dropped over 500 tons of ordnance on and around the Mt. La Difensa, Mt. Camino, Mt. La Remetanea areas. The U.S. forces had massive amounts of artillery either in direct support or general support, including reinforced artillery units from the II Corps, 5th Army, and 36th Infantry Division. The artillery employment on Mt. La Difensa was the heaviest concentration of FA fires on any one point in the brief history of the Italian campaign.

Not only was artillery employed, but the numerous mortar units and machine gun teams added to the fire power available to the force. This massive bombardment normally resulted in the wearing down of the enemy forces. Although this practice was employed in the attack of Mt. La Difensa, the results were far less than satisfactory. The artillery had done little physical damage because of the deep bunkers and fortifications, ~~the artillery had done little physical damage.~~ Of more importance, the artillery fires had masked the forces approach and probably was a major factor in the force's ability to achieve surprise.

It is also important to note that the 1stSSF had maintained its unit cohesion during the confusion of the early attack hours. Unit leaders were the key. They had effectively seized the opportunity and had moved to the objective. The troopers had confidence in their fellow soldiers, who, when out of sight, would achieve their objective. This individual initiative, coupled with confidence in their fellow soldiers, was vital to the success of the final coordinated attack on the mountain top.

The final point of the first phase focuses on the initial assessment of the importance of supply. Colonel Frederick allocated 25% of his combat power to move supplies. With the effective employment of his remaining forces, he had achieved success. Logistics is an important part of any battle. If Colonel Frederick had not recognized this need and had not allocated the forces that he did, the outcome of the battle may have been completely different.

## PHASE II

The second phase of the battle began on December 5. The force's units were deployed as indicated on Sketch 6. By 5 December, the 1st Battalion/1stSSF had arrived to assist the 2nd Regiment. At 0600, the commanding general had relieved the 2nd Regiment from its defensive positions on Mt. La Difensa to prepare for an attack to take objective 2 to the west and expand the area of control to the boundary between the II and X Corps. Additionally, the commanding general had relieved the 1st Regiment of its 36th Infantry Division reserve duties and ordered them to bring up their Headquarters and 2nd Battalion for defensive employment on Mt. La Difensa.

The 2nd Regiment plan for the attack was to form two Battalion size task forces consisting of four companies each (Sketch 7). One task force, consisting of 1st Battalion/2nd Regiment with 1st Company/1st Battalion/3rd Regiment attached, was to attack west to secure Hill 907 and one task force, consisting of 2nd Battalion/2nd Regiment with 2nd Company/1st Battalion/1st Regiment attached, was to attack south to the Corps boundary.

During the morning of December 5th, patrols had continued to deploy throughout the area. The primary mission given these patrols was to continue to reconnoiter objective 2, and tie the northern and southern flanks of the 1stSSF with the 142nd Regiment, 36th Division and British forces respectively.

By mid morning the 2nd Regiment was ready to begin the attack. The original plan had called for the attack to begin at dusk, however, by 1200 the situation had changed sufficiently that Colonel Frederick had decided to take objective 2 before

dark. The factors influencing his decision were; (1) enemy artillery harassment had lightened, (2) no counterattack had been launched, (3) the British were reported just short of success on Mt. Camino to the south, and (4) by attacking now, the force would be able to cover the British right flank during their move into Rocca.

At 1200, the 1st Battalion/2nd Regiment Task Force had moved out in echelon formation along the northern slope of the ridge. The task force had patrols working the southern slope toward the known direction of resistance. By late afternoon the task force had taken Hill 907, but the elements of the 3rd Battalion/104th PanzerGrenadier Regiment counterattacked and forced back the task force, while receiving many casualties, into a position about half way between Hill 907 and 970. The 1st Battalion task force was under intensive fire from an enemy pocket in the valley to the southwest. The unit dug in and had improved their position. Because of intensive enemy fire along the exposed ridge line, no attempt was made to reinforce this task force until nightfall. This task force had remained in position until 6 December. At approximately 1500, the 2nd Battalion/2nd Regiment Task Force had moved out to the south to clear out the enemy in the saddle of Mt. Camino, being held by approximately two companies of the 3/104th Panzer-Grenadier Regiment. The 2nd Battalion task force had encountered heavy enemy resistance approximately 1 km from its line of departure. The Task Force had successfully countered this resistance and took a series of small knobs on the tip of the southern exterior of Mt. La

Difensa. The Battalion Task Force, after securing these knobs, had consolidated its position and had remained there until 6 December. As the 5th of December came to an end, the force was deployed, as shown on Sketch 8, with neither task force accomplishing their original mission. The exposed ridge lines and clear weather had aided the enemy to stall the attacks. The night of December 5th was quiet with little enemy artillery harassment.

The enemy forces had concluded, during the evening of the 5th and the morning of the 6th, that their position was untenable. The British had taken the Mt. Camino area on 5 December and were advancing toward Rocca. The German high command had decided not to commit any more reserve forces in the area. Under the cover of darkness, the remaining elements of the 3/104th and 115 Reconnaissance Battalion had moved out of their defensive positions on Hill 907.

At dawn on the 6th, 1st Battalion Task Force had launched its attack on Hill 907. By 1200 Mt. La Remetanea was taken without opposition. The task force had consolidated its units along the hill top and had sent two companies towards Rocca. Simultaneous with this action, the 2nd Battalion Task Force had attacked south to the boundary between II and X Corps. Again little enemy resistance was met. By the afternoon of 6 December, the 1stSSF had finally secured their original objective on Mt. La Difensa (Sketch 9). Throughout the remainder of the day, the attacking units had consolidated, resupplied, and conducted feeler patrols beyond their current holdings. The 1st Regiment, with its 2nd Battalion, had arrived on Mt. La Difensa to consolidate the

positions vacated by 2nd Regiment.

December 7th was relatively quiet. The enemy <sup>occupied</sup> occupied the important hill masses on Mt. La Difensa. The 1stSSF was receiving sniper fire from hidden enemy positions that were bypassed during the initial assaults. The commanding general ordered the 1st Regiment to send out several anti-sniper patrols to definitely and finally clear the southeastern and southwestern sides of Mt. La Difensa. The 2nd Battalion Task Force/2nd Regiment finally made contact with the British 168th Brigade/56th Division in the south. By the close of December 7th, the 1stSSF had consolidated the entire Mt. La Difensa area and had established contact with the British in the south and the 142nd Regiment/36th Division in the north (Sketch 9).

December 8th was the last day of major action before the 1st 1stSSF was relieved. The day had consisted of sending out strong patrols to confirm enemy movements. With the British moving up on the 1stSSF left flank and the 142nd moving up on the 1stSSF right flank, the 1st Battalion Task Force was ordered to establish contact with their forward units (Sketch 10). The patrols had also identified that the last enemy strong point was Hill 604, west of Mt. La Remetanea. 1st Battalion/2nd Regiment was ordered to attack this stronghold at 2200 on 8 December. (Sketch 10). 1st Battalion had attacked with three companies while accompanied by massive artillery fire. The German position was taken with 25 Germans killed.

During late 8 December through early 9 December, the 142nd Infantry Regiment relieved, in place, the 1stSSF, therefore the

second and last phase of the battle was complete. The second phase of the battle was the expansion of the area of control to include the entire Mt. La Difensa mountain top area and also to establish control with the units to the north and south. The separate battles characterized this phase with separate battles to the north and south to secure critical terrain and the employment of strong patrols to clear by-passed enemy pockets of resistance. Supply constraints had continued to hamper the force in consolidation of its position. However, despite these constraints the Force was able to accomplish its mission. The Force had continued to rely on massive artillery support to disrupt potential enemy counterattacks. The Force actively used patrols to insure the security of its main force. Continual patrolling was the key to their success and provided the force commander an accurate assessment of the enemy's situation. The attack on 5 December was the Force's only major setback. Although the Commander 1stSSF originally wanted to attack at dusk, he had changed his mind to attack during midday. His reasoning at the time looked good, yet, in retrospect, he probably should have waited until darkness. Surprise had been the key to his prior successes, yet he gave up this element in this attack. The results were an unsuccessful attack and many casualties. Despite this setback, the force was successful in employing the full spectrum of combat service support available to them. Artillery, mortar, heavy machine guns were used extensively. The force had accomplished its mission.

## CONCLUSIONS

The initial assault by the 1st Battalion/2nd Regiment was the key event of this battle. By achieving almost complete surprise, it threw the enemy forces off balance. The quick reaction of the 1st and 2nd Companies to immediately press the attack when the battalion was in position was a recognizable turning point. Due to their initiative, Mt. La Difensa was taken and the enemy was thrown back. The enemy was never able to recover from this initial assault. Given the attacking force's low ammunition situation after the 1st day, the enemy had not conducted an effective counterattack.

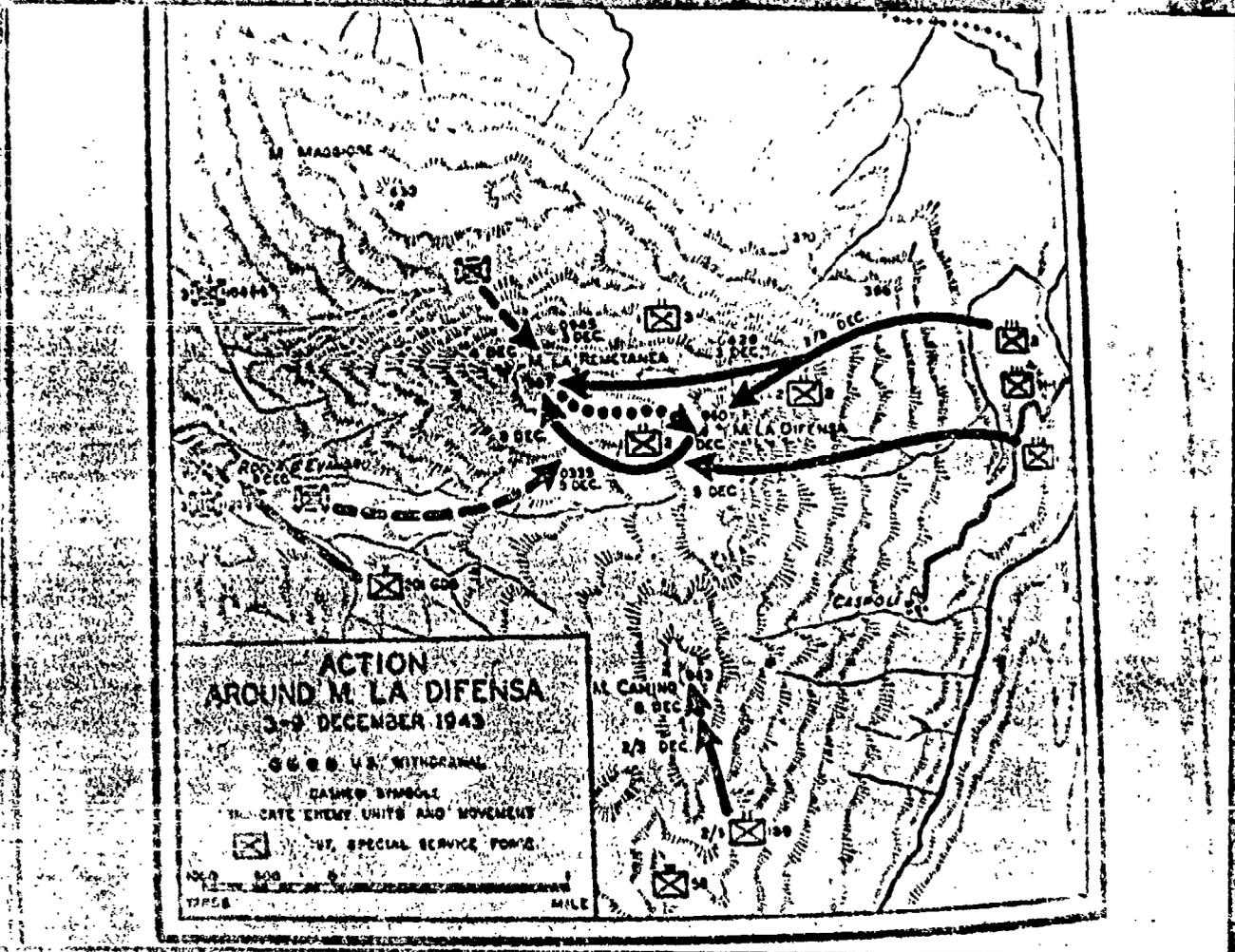
The Force had clearly won a tactical victory in this battle. The enemy was completely driven off the Mt. La Difensa area and lost one of its major strong points in the "Winter Line."

The Force had won this battle due to their tactics, unit cohesion, and morale. The force had effectively employed the principles of war to initially gain an advantage over the enemy, primarily through using surprise. They had maintained the initiative by ensuring the security of the force through active patrolling. The force was well trained and well led. It had won its first major battle despite its lack of battlefield experience. The force was a highly motivated, specialized unit which was able to maintain its unit cohesion in the thick of battle.

As to why the enemy did so poorly, little information is available. They had the superior position and number of personnel yet they obviously had lacked any initiative. The enemy never did recover from the initial assault. Friendly

( artillery had played a decisive role in destroying the enemy's ability to react to the attack. Combined with continuous patrolling, the artillery had completely disrupted the unit cohesion of the enemy. This enabled the 1stSSF to succeed on the battlefield and prevent the enemy from taking advantage of the force's initial critical ammunition shortage.

The final consideration in the analysis of this battle is logistics. The 1stSSF, as well as the enemy, were at the extremity of their lines of supply. Colonel Frederick had recognized this important aspect and had allocated sufficient forces to insure the uninterrupted flow of supplies to the top of Mt. La Difensa. The logistic support of the force was definitely a critical aspect of the battle. Initially, the lack of ammunition hampered the force, yet, as the battle continued, the situation progressively improved. The key was the commander's ability to recognize this important aspect and allocate sufficient forces to include combat elements to accomplish resupply.



- Photo 7

## Section V - SIGNIFICANCE

The battle of Monte la Difensa was a tactical victory for the First Special Service Force, but it had little strategic or operational significance. It was an important step in securing a vital hill mass that in turn provided the Allies with control of the heights on one side of the entrance to the Liri Valley, a potential attack corridor toward Rome. By itself, the battle did not have a major impact on the outcome of the war or even the Italian Campaign. Rome did not fall until after another six months of bitter fighting. The German troops in Italy did not capitulate until May 2, 1945, six days before the date of the unconditional surrender of the German Wehrmacht was implemented.

Despite being an Allied victory, it is difficult to justify the terrific cost that the Allied forces paid in human lives and material. The official Army histories argue that the Italian Campaign was necessary because it tied up German resources that would have otherwise been available for the German Russian Front or strengthening the Atlantic Wall. 41/ What they fail to mention is that the campaign tied up a proportionately large amount of the Allies resources that delayed OVERLORD and substantially detracted from Allied efforts in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Far East. 42/ Furthermore, the official Army histories fail to acknowledge that there was a reasonable alternative to

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41/See for instance Fifth Army at the Winter Line, p. 1.

42/Leighton, "Overlord Verses the Mediterranean at the Cairo-Tehran Conferences," Command Decisions, op.cit.

the Allied strategy of fighting a war of attrition.

The battle of Monte la Difensa was typical of the bloody hill to hill fighting that characterized Allied efforts throughout the Italian Campaign. The Allies landed troops on the southern tip of Italy on September 3, 1943 and then spent nearly two years grinding their way up the entire length of the peninsula to the Alps. Twice the Allies attempted short amphibious turning movements, although neither had a substantial effect. Salerno briefly expedited the Allies movement up the peninsula, but at Anzio they narrowly escaped disaster. Both Field Marshall Albert Kesselring, the German Commander in Italy, and General Siegfried Westphal, his chief of staff, were highly critical of the overly cautious and methodical methods of the Allies. 43/ Westphal commended the Allied efforts to minimize the bloodshed, but concluded:

"... it would probably have cost less blood in the end if in September 1943, the Allies had landed not at Salerno but near Rome, and in January 1944, not at Anzio but near Leghorn, or if they had at least made good this omission in May 1944." 44/

Dr. Martin Blumenson, the author of the United States Army's official history of the campaign and perhaps America's foremost expert on the subject, recently stated that he had come to the

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43/Kesselring, pp. 225 & 231 and Westphal, p. 166.

44/Ibid.

The greatest historical significance of Monte la Difensa is that it is a superb example of how to attack a fortified mountain position under the most severe climatic conditions. As has already been mentioned, the la Difensa attack was not a faultless operation and the United States forces had a substantial advantage in logistics and weaponry. Nevertheless, the First Special Service Force must be credited with conducting an admirable operation. The technological advantages helped the 1SSF. Massive artillery fires and airstrikes made a significant contribution by cutting off German supplies and reinforcements, but the principal reasons for the 1SSF's success was their initiative, valor, fortitude, training and leadership. COL Frederick did a magnificent job of planning and directing the operation. The innovative planning of <sup>him</sup> ~~he~~ and his officers was the key to the success of the initial assault, and their inspirational leadership from the front carried the soldiers of the 1SSF through to their final objective.

From the tactical perspective, the most important lessons we can learn are in regards to training. Despite being organized with personnel of two different nationalities, several of whom were castoffs of their own army, and the lack of combat experience, the 1SSF fought superbly. Again Frederick and his subordinate leaders deserve the credit. They challenged their

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45/Personal conversation between Major Marcus Erlandson and Dr. Blumenson on March 13, 1984.

fight under the adverse conditions. Pride and unit cohesion gave them the desire.

A regrettable note about the 1SSF's employment in the attack against la Difensa is that General Clark did not choose to use this unit for missions for which it had been designed and trained. Originally designed to fight in winter warfare in Norway, Colonel Frederick retrained his force as a special warfare unit with airborne and mountaineering expertise when the Norway mission was cancelled. General Eisenhower had sent the 1SSF to Italy for the expressed purpose of having them used for reconnaissance and raiding missions. Clark committed the error of either not knowing how to use special warfare units or being indifferent to the capabilities this unit brought to his command. Had he been a more bold and innovative commander, perhaps he could have found more useful ways in which to use the talents of the 1SSF than for a frontal assault up a sheer mountain against heavily fortified defensive positions.

From the German perspective, the battle of Monte la Difensa was a tactical loss, but this did not have serious adverse consequences. They never intended that their Winter Line be more than a temporary holding measure. They merely wished to buy sufficient time to build more substantial positions along the Gustav Line. Although the Allies forced the Germans back more quickly than the German command had intended, the defenders of the Winter Line had substantially accomplished their mission. It

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It is ironic that the German's strategic objective in defending southern Italy was to prevent the Allies from going into the Balkans, considering that the Allies had no intention of going there. 46/ In a strategic sense, the best that can be said for the German's tenacious defense along the Winter Line is that it delayed the inevitable. The German reverses in Russia had already sealed the fate of the Third Reich.

Tactically, the Germans learned how to deal with the extensive Allied firepower superiority by building defenses into the mountain sides. This use of natural resources, caves, boulders, and ravines was largely successful. A weakness, however was the lack of all round defense and adequate consideration of the less likely avenues of approach. The Germans were unable to cope with the Allied interdiction of the lines of communication which severely restricted the Germans from supplying and reinforcing the forces at critical moments. A major failing at all levels within the German command was the lack of good intelligence. This probably contributed significantly to the weaknesses in the German tactical deployment along the Winter Line. These lessons learned may have contributed to the effectiveness of later German defensive operations.

The most significant contribution of the battle of Monte la Difensa to US military history is the establishment of the traditions of the 1SSF. The 1SSF became known as the Devil's Brigade

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46/Mavrogordato, "Hitler's Decision on the Defense of Italy",  
Command Decisions, p. 322.

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because of this battle and their courageous, tenacious fighting.

This lagacy has been carried forward into the prodigy of the  
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