

THE ARNO THROUGH THE WINTER STATIC PHASE

A. The Tactical Situation

Although the attack which was supposed to end the war in Italy came in September, the roots of it were based in the late summer months. It was at that time that the planning of the operation was begun and the participating units maneuvered into position. The 91st Division had reached the Arno River at Pontedera on 18 July; Leghorn had fallen the following day; the 34th Division had entered the southern half of Pisa on 23 July; the Eighth Army had occupied Florence on 22 August. The British XIII Corps, with the 8th Indian, 1st and 78th British Infantry Divisions, and 6th British Armored Division, was put under Fifth Army control.

The Arno was the barrier all along the Fifth Army front, an obstacle which had been crossed at only a few points, an obstacle which had to be overcome before the Army could strike at the Germans in their strongly fortified natural defenses of the Gothic Line. Experience at Salerno, the Volturno, the Garigliano and Anzio, had proved that any assault on carefully prepared German positions had to be well planned, and had to be executed with an overwhelming superiority of arms. To achieve surprise, a deception scheme, showing a build-up in the Pontedera area was inaugurated in August by the engineers. Actually, the strong Fifth Army forces were to attack from the Florence area, after a feint made by the Eighth Army along the Adriatic coast.

The attack began as planned (the official starting date of the Northern Apennine Campaign was 1 September). The Fifth Army engineers bridged the Arno at numerous spots, as the troops crossed the river the last days of August and the first part of September. Rapidly the drive went up Highway #65 until by 10 September the Gothic Line had been reached, high in the Northern Apennines. Here the 34th, 85th, 88th and 91st Divisions ran up against the strongest defenses yet encountered in Italy. Artillery and direct tank and tank destroyer fire did little damage to the deeply dug-in paratroopers and infantry. But the Gothic Line was broken and the troops were beyond Futa Pass by 17 September (about the time the fall rains began again).

Yet the fighting was still hard. There were still twenty-eight German divisions in Italy, and they contested every hill, fighting stubbornly until II Corps was stopped within sight of Bologna, the immediate objective. The wind, snow, rain and mud of the Apennines helped, but it was the German soldier who stopped the attack.

Trails were pushed up the slippery slopes, the few highways in the sector were opened, demolished bridges gapped everywhere, and mud sloughs rocked until passable. The rains, which began in September, increased in October. By 3 November, all gullies were rushing rivers and the rivers virtual floods. Bridges were swept out throughout the Fifth Army sector, but enough remained to prevent the crippling of communications. Waters of the Arno lapped the lower sides of Bailey bridges, as the river rose to a height unequalled in ninety-nine years and fifty-one weeks.

The tactical situation became static, and combat was limited to artillery duels and patrol clashes. Preparations were made for an attack about the beginning of 1945, but this was prevented by a German attack in the Serchio River Valley in IV Corps sector at Christmas time. Troops were rapidly switched to meet the threat, and it was soon stopped.

In February, two limited objective attacks were made in the IV Corps area, one in the coastal sector north of Viareggio by the 92nd Division, and one by the 10th Mountain Division, in the Mount Belvedere - Mount Torraccio sector.

As spring approached, preparations were made once again for an attack. Supplies were built up, troops rested and re-equipped, units regrouped and artillery moved into position. As April came, the offensive was ready for the go ahead sign.

1108th Engineer Combat Group

235th Engineer Combat Battalion

At the beginning of September, the 1108th Engineer Combat Group, commanded by Colonel A. F. Clark, Jr., was responsible for the engineer work along the entire IV Corps front of fifty-five miles, yet the only American unit with the group was the 235th Engineer Combat Battalion under the command of Lieutenant Colonel W. P. Jones. Task Force 45, whose mission it was to fight the Germans on the west coast, had no engineers whatever. As a further complication, the heavy equipment problem was severe at this time; there were few spare parts and fewer maintenance units. The shortage of prime movers was critical.

On 14 September, Company "C" of the 235th built a 230-foot, double-single Bailey bridge across the Serchio River, using as a base the pile bents of a destroyed German bridge. The bridge was dedicated to nine men of the company who had been killed while building a Bailey bridge at Cassino in March.

235th Engineer Combat Battalion (cont'd).

In the first days of October, the Serchio River rose to flood proportions and threatened to wash the bridge out. The low-level treadway bridges at Lucca and Vecchiano had already gone and another bridge near Lucca was in danger. In two days, Company "B" and one of the attached Italian engineer companies built two Bailey bridges at the same site. The American bridge was a 160-foot, double-double; the Italian a 130-foot, triple-single.



235TH BYPASS NEAR MOUNT TERMINALE

Thus, in September, the weeks of effort to train the 23rd Artieri Battalion began to bear results. The magnitude of the engineer tasks assigned to the 1108th required that jobs of the 235th be shared by the Italian unit. The 1108th had a 70-mile front, two task forces and two divisions to care for. The 23rd opened the Autostrada from Lucca to Pistoia, using 6,000 pounds of explosives to prepare bridge sites, construct bypasses and clear debris in towns. It built ten Bailey bridges totalling 800 feet and a 60-foot Class 40 timber trestle bridge.

During September, the 235th Battalion built thirty-three Bailey bridges totalling 2,160 lineal feet, and eight other bridges, timber and treadway, totalling 175 feet. It also constructed twenty-two bypasses, filled sixty craters, installed fifty culverts, dismantled four bridges totalling 410 feet, checked forty-two areas for mines, destroyed 762 enemy mines, cleared paths to remove bodies from minefields, operated twelve water points and one air beacon, prepared six cub strips and two Quartermaster dumps, dug in ten artillery units, built six fords and used 10,000 pounds of explosives in the work. October continued to be a month of work and sweat on roads and highways.

In November, the 235th Battalion Headquarters and the 1108th Group Headquarters were located near Porretta, high in the mountains above Pistoia. A lot of the work had to be done under cover of smoke or darkness because of the enemy's dominating positions overlooking the highways. It was the job of the Corps Engineers to keep the roads open between the two main elements of IV Corps, the Brazilian Expeditionary Force and the 6th South African Division.

