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ANZIO

Trapped behind the lines Anzio Problems set the Stage for Disaster at Cisterna

Bob Price/Editor

<p>Italy</p> <p>The initial drive into Italy slowed to a halt; as the Allied Forces encountered the formidable Gustav line at Cassino. Only an end-around play could work against stiffened German resistance.</p> <p>In an effort to break the stalemate, the invasion of Anzio was planned to outflank both the Gustav and Adolf Hitler lines. The enemy expected such a move, but anticipated a landing much farther to the north.</p> <p>Instead; the Allies set their sites on the lower Lazio Province at Anzio.</p>	
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At 0200 on the 22nd the 6615th Ranger Task Force comprised of the 1st, 3d and 4th Rangers, 509th Parachute Bn and Cos. A and B of the 83^d Chemical Mortar Battalion landed in the city of Anzio. Their immediate mission was to clear the beach-head. The mined beach was crossed and only a handful of enemy was encountered. The Beach was secured and Colonel Darby established a Ranger Headquarters. By noon, enemy reconnaissance vehicles were making contact with the Ranger Force; and the 83^d went into action.

Mortar fire caused the German motor advance to withdraw. And during the next several days, the Allied force advanced rapidly along the main road to Rome. 83^d Mortar fire was coordinated with all advances and light resistance was met and only stiffened as the Germans recovered their foothold.

The Anzio landing was almost a complete surprise. Just as surprised were the Allies. No one at Allied Headquarters could believe that total surprise was possible; as the local population seemed to know as much about Allied operations as the Allied Command.

One specific area of Intelligence baffled the Allied Command under General Lucas.

The US command was almost completely in the dark about the numbers of enemy troops they were facing or what units they represented. In fact, intelligence reports and prisoners represented almost every unit known to be in that part of Italy; as the Germans only had a hodge podge of newly assigned and attached units.

Lucas and his staff could only assume they were facing all the elements of each unit represented; which was not the case at all. Instead of an aggressive offensive, Lucas built up a ten mile beach-head; and opted for a defensive posture expecting a German Counter-Attack at any moment.

The Anzio Operation was supplied by England's Captain Clay under direction of General Lucas. Clay had 39 British LSTs, 20 LCI(L)s, and 6 LCTs.

By D+1 the Allies had over 40,000 soldiers ashore. Had the Allied Forces advanced it is assumed by historians that the German forces would have collapsed in short order. But as the beach-head grew the Allies needed even more weapons, ammunition and food. German artillery and air attacks were a constant threat.

On the evening of the 24th, the first major follow up convoy arrived off Anzio and was pummeled by 15 German fighter bombers, then 40 more, then 50 after dark in a continuous raid. The raids were brutal.

The USS destroyer Plunkett took a grievous hit by a 500 pound bomb, with heavy loss of life and disablement of one engine. She made it back to port. The action occurred just before an underwater explosion on the USS Mayo killed several crewmen.

In the same raid, while fully lighted in accordance with International Law, the British hospital ship St. David suffered a direct hit and sunk.

The Allies were not deterred. And Lucas built his beach-head (By the first of February, more than 100 LST off loadings would be accomplished at the port alone, using the speed-up scheme of the pre-loaded trucks).

The night of Jan. 26, the follow up an LST (landing ship tank or truck) loaded with Headquarters of the 83'd Chemical Mortar Battalion and companies C and D, was sunk by enemy action. There were many men lost in the rough sea. The survivors were sent back to Pozzuoli to re-organize, re-equip and train. It was a hard blow to the 83'd Mortar Battalion. And their numbers were missed in the later actions of the Ranger Task Force.

By the 27th of Jan., the enemy had moved considerable strength into the area and resistance was stiffening.

Higher headquarters pushed Lucas to move inland before it was too late to take advantage of the German reorganization; but it was too late already.

The Navy continued to support the land operations with Naval gunfire but again suffered heavy losses on the evening of the 29th from the air.

HMS Spartan, a British cruiser, went down right at the mole at Anzio; a direct hit from a German guided bomb which tore open vital compartments.

Shortly after Spartan capsized, the **Liberty ship Samuel Huntington** was also hit.

These attacks took place just after sunset as helpless **USS Edison** crewmen looked on in horror. The Germans appeared to be tightening the noose General Lucas was afraid of.

At Anzio, the German radio-controlled ballistic bombs and the radio-controlled glider bombs were entering their peak period of use. German pilots practiced at Salerno and got in some telling blows. But, the German's were experienced by the time the Anzio Battle took place.

(Admiral Lowry's action reports stated that 70 "red" alerts occurred in the first ten days at Anzio and that 30 resulted in actual attacks. The most effective Luftwaffe tactic was the heavier type raid at evening twilight, when dive bombers, torpedo bombers and radio control "mother" plane bombers were used in combination).

This tactic had worked to sink Spartan and the Liberty Ship Huntington and plagued land based operations.

Reportedly the Spartan was anchored and floated as a sitting duck for enemy fighters and bombers. An action which has never been fully explained; except to note she was undergoing repairs.

Once the Huntington was caught on fire she was pulled out a short distance by a tug which gamely fought Huntington's fires. The Liberty Ship was loaded with ammo and gasoline however and the fires could not be brought under control and she had to be abandoned. The Huntington blew up and sank early the next morning.

But, despite losses at sea; by the 29th, between the beaches and the port, the Allies had landed almost 70,000 men from 200 LST-trips and seven Liberty ships. And over 500 guns and 200 tanks were moved to the beachhead in preparation for a breakout yet to be ordered by the Lucas HQ.

Under pressure by higher headquarters Lucas was forced to field an offensive force; and his decision was to use Darby's Ranger Units as the spearhead. The Rangers movements were to be coordinated with advances by units of the US 3rd Infantry Division, and 504th Paratrooper unit toward the vital highway and railroad junction of Cisterna di Lattina. Just a rout march in-land from the coast.

Darby protested the use of the Rangers in this role to no avail; and later Mark Clark the Commanding officer in the theatre would show his displeasure as well.

Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, the commanding general of Fifth Army with overall responsibility for the landing at Anzio, entered in his diary that he was...

"distressed to find that the 3d (Infantry) Division had led with the Ranger force in its attack on Cisterna. This was a definite error in judgment for the Rangers do not have the support weapons to overcome the resistance indicated." (A)

Clark's reservations were well founded...

The USS Edison participated in this last major Anzio push in support of the Cisterna infiltration getting off 336 rounds of 5" ammunition on the Allied flanks, and earning the dispatch;

" VERY EFFECTIVE. MANY ENEMY TROOPS KILLED BY YOUR FIRE. GOOD WORK . "

Later on the 29th, the Allied Ranger force and supporting units assembled in the right portion of the beachhead in preparation for spearheading an attack on Cisterna di Latina.

As the US troops moved on Cisterna the British 1st Division moved toward the crossroad at Campeleone. And the Ranger Force dubbed the 6615th Ranger Force advanced out of range of Naval gunfire support.

The plans called for the Rangers to infiltrate and fight their way into Cisterna if necessary; with the 7th Inf. and 504th Parachute regiments attacking on their right, and the 15th Inf. Reg. attacking on the left. Total surprise was hoped for and expected as earlier intelligence had shown a light defensive force.

Initial battle plans had called for the paratroopers to be parachuted behind enemy lines to secure such objectives as the Cisterna Crossroads and Rail yards on L or D-Day; but, plans were cancelled before the Anzio invasion began; when the British protested against the idea; and the Paratroopers came ashore with the Infantry; instead. This proved to be a tactical blunder as it allowed the Germans to re-enforce at will.

At 0100 on the 30th, the 1st and 3d Rangers jumped off with the 4th Bn advancing to their left rear. The Rangers made a fatiguing march in the darkness towards their objective. Rangers worked their way into the outskirts of Cisterna undetected and then began to take machine-gun, artillery or tank fire before daylight. By

0700 hrs it was obvious the Rangers had stumbled into a major German concentration of troops.

Cisterna was to be a coordinated attack with the other ground troops. But, the Rangers outdistanced the other units in order to gain their objective by using the cover of darkness. And the loss of the element of surprise disrupted the plan. The infantry on the left and right did not advance according to schedule as well. And the enemy had reinforced this sector heavily with their 1st Parachute Div., supported by tanks trapping the Rangers just 400 to 800 yards short of their objective.

The Rangers were surrounded and, as they fought, the mortars of the 83d placed heavy concentrations on the enemy. But by dusk, it was apparent that most of the Rangers were lost. In order to hold the line, elements of the 83'd became rifle companies out of necessity. B Co. became the infantry and established a defensive position, while A Co. fired heavily with their mortars. B Co. sent out many patrols as all efforts were made to contact the 1st & 3rd Rangers. The 4th Battalion was unable to move.

Due to the action of companies A and B, many of the 4th Bn were able to withdraw and re-assemble. The following morning, the 4th Rangers again attacked in an effort to reach the 1st and 3d Bns. They gained a key road junction and were unable to advance further. The 15th Inf. Reg. then attacked through the 83'd and the 4th Battalion Ranger line; but could not break thru to the trapped 1st & 3rd Bn's. Gallant efforts were made by members of all these forces; and casualties steadily grew.

The Infantry continued the assault on Cisterna against heavy opposition. The Germans were deeply entrenched and after 16 hours of fighting, the 3rd Division was still a mile away. After learning that more reinforcements were on the way, the 3rd Division was again ordered to hold in place and dig in. The infantry attack was halted short of Cisterna, where the 1st and 3d Rangers were surrounded, and the situation stabilized. The Allies were to advance no further; and the Ranger radio's were long since silenced.

Two nights later, "Axis Sal" broadcast:

"...Now that the Rangers are finished, the 83'd is next..."

Headquarters was unaware of the fate of the Rangers except for the information obtained from six survivors.

The six survivors related the whole story. On that morning January 30 on the fringe of Cisterna; the 1st, & 3rd, Rangers were within 800 yards of the town; when they stumbled into a bivouac area of an entire German Motorized Infantry Division; supported by elements of German, Polish and Italian Paratroopers; and elements of Herman Goering's Panzer divisions.

At about 800 yards from their objective; the Rangers caught the bivouac area still asleep; and the sleeping enemy paid a heavy toll as they were fallen upon by the Rangers.

But, as the Rangers approached within 400 yards of their main Cisterna Objective they were met with heavy resistance and what appeared to be a prepared ambush.

According to the Leavenworth Papers the German's had become aware of the Ranger movements early on; and had set up a warm reception in Cisterna itself; ambushing the lead Ranger elements according to a captured German Officer later on. (1)

Later intelligence analysis of the Ranger Radio Communications indicated a broad range of radio etiquette violations that could have compromised portions of the Cisterna operation.; detailing information that would benefit a determined defensive force.

The Rangers were driven to ground by the withering machine-gun fire coming from the Cisterna center and driven out into the open plain by the German Armored Division. But, it was soon clear that the Rangers were tossed into the fray far and above their offensive capabilities.

The two US Bn's had no anti-tank weapons and those not cut down initially dug-in using minimal cover and running out of ammunition quickly. But the Rangers made the Germans pay a heavy toll in casualties.

Out of 767 men, only those 6 Rangers escaped and the others were either killed or captured after putting up a gallant fight that lasted for hours; last radio contact with the Rangers indicated the Rangers were being over-run and were destroying their radio equipment. The two Battalions were numbered among the lost. Their fate; unknown. And their radios silenced forever.

The 3rd Division's movements stalled as well; and a lull settled over the Anzio area for the next three months.

Both sides were exhausted and could not conduct major operations.

On May 5, Gen Truscott ordered VI Corps to prepare for their breakout offensive and on May 23, the 1st Armored Division with the 3rd Division in support, broke through the main German line. VI Corps quickly encircled Cisterna and attacked the trapped German forces. Fighting was heavy in the town but on May 25, German resistance ended; and the Allies controlled Cisterna di Latina once and for all.

Cisterna Battle Casualties were Heavy:



The walking wounded ^{3rd}

Division Casualties at Cisterna

(National Archives Photo)

The price for Cisterna was heavy:

The 1st Armored Division:

lost 100 tanks in the first day.

VI Corps suffered over **4,000 casualties**; including the 1st & 3rd Ranger Battalions.

VI Corp casualties were moved to the rear. The surviving members of the 1st & 3rd Battalions were for the most part; transported to Stalag IIB POW Camp; Hammerstein Prussia.

A successful Anzio Invasion now turned to disaster and a stalemate that would last for weeks and slow up the allied advance to liberate Rome.

(news clip: Daily Oklahoman or Granite Enterprise 1944)

Isobella Crossroads and Cisterna Area

Critics of the Anzio Invasion assert that the Army could have and should have moved inland quickly seizing the major intersections and moving into Rome...had the Rangers been used as trained the Cisterna Crossroads would have been seized early in the invasion trapping the Germans in the South cutting the Italian boot in half and disrupting the road and rail movements to the north.

After action analysis of **Operation Shingle** indicates the misuse of Darby's Rangers by higher headquarters contributed significantly to the Cisterna fiasco. (1) Hind sight is 20/20. (National Archives Photo)

