

From Salerno to the Alps

A History of the Fifth Army

1943-1945



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the Ombrone behind which enemy resistance appeared to be stiffening. On 20-21 June the first withdrawal of French troops in preparation for the invasion of southern France took place when the 2d Moroccan Division under General Dody relieved the 1st Motorized Division, and the latter moved to Naples.

By 20 June Fifth Army had raced halfway up its zone between the Tiber and the Arno. A separate operation under the control of AFHQ, using French troops, had taken the island of Elba off Piombino on 17-19 June, thus protecting the left flank of our further advance; on the right Eighth Army was roughly abreast of the FEC on the line Lake Trasimeno-Perugia. Our reorganization was largely complete for the time being, except for the imminent relief of the 36th Division. However fast we had pursued, the enemy had retired more rapidly, abandoning stragglers, wrecked equipment, and a few rear guards behind him. At first his resistance was spotty, then in the past ten days it had stiffened, and our advance guards had occasionally been forced to stop, deploy, and engage in more or less severe skirmishes and small battles. The main enemy units used in this sacrifice mission had been the 162d Grenadier Division and the 20th GAF Field Division, tossed in before IV Corps, and the 356th Grenadier Division before the French.

3. THE ADVANCE TO HIGHWAY 68

21 June-7 July 1944

The enemy was now ready to turn and fight, for some of his better units had been able to reform, cross over from east of the Tiber, and reenter the battle after short periods of rest and reorganization. Fourteenth Army did not wait for entire divisions to be made ready but flung units as small as battalions into the fight. Thus the 1st Armored Division on the 24th took prisoners from nine regiments belonging to seven different divisions. Along the coast elements of the 16th SS Panzer Grenadier Division were being identified by 20 June opposite IV Corps while inland troops were from the 19th GAF Field, 162d Grenadier, 3d Panzer Grenadier, 26th Panzer, 20th GAF Field, 4th Parachute, 356th Grenadier, 29th Panzer Grenadier, and 90th Panzer Grenadier Divisions. This imposing list of divisions did not represent a corresponding strength in combat troops since most of the units were far below strength. The 162d Grenadier Di-

vision, in particular, had lost more than half its forces in the past two weeks; the 20th GAF Field Division had also been badly cut up. To bolster the defense the 504th and 508th Panzer Battalions, the former rushed from France, were available, and mustered nearly 100 Mark VI Tigers between them.

With these forces the enemy, if not capable of making a prolonged stand, could within certain limits determine the circumstances of his withdrawal through the rough hill country north of Grosseto. Henceforth he had to be persistently routed out of his delaying positions and never withdrew until he was certain that our assaults were backed with sufficient strength to make it wiser for him to retire than to fight. He was constantly playing for time to rush work on his still unfinished Gothic Line defenses, and was not adverse to sacrificing lives to gain additional days and weeks. Along the coast the enemy fought especially to delay our advance on Leghorn and to permit systematic destruction of the dock facilities there, for he fully realized the value to Fifth Army of a large port so far up the Italian boot.

The enemy, however, could not, and did not try to stop us, and IV Corps and the FEC pushed steadily ahead. On 21 June, partly to meet the stiffening enemy opposition and partly to fill the widening IV Corps zone as the coast bent to the northwest, the 1st Armored Division (reinforced by the 361st Infantry) under General Harmon was committed on the right of the 36th Division and so replaced Task Force Ramey. The 36th Division was already being turned northwest to keep its flank on the sea, and continued up Highway 1 for five more days. The 25th of June was to be the final day of combat in Italy for the division, which had fought its way from the bloody beaches of Salerno nearly 300 miles up the Italian Peninsula. On its last day in the lines the 36th Division brought about the fall of Piombino and pushed the front forward as much as nine miles on the left. The port itself fell without a struggle in the afternoon when a small patrol from the 39th Engineers on road reconnaissance entered the town. A short battle occurred with Italian partisans who mistook the engineers for Germans; after this error was corrected the engineers and partisans rounded up the seven Germans left in the entire area. Salvage parties reached Piombino on the 28th, and three weeks later two Liberty ships could dock at once for unloading by steam cranes.

Preparations for the relief of the 36th Division had been made

for several days; since enemy resistance was still extremely fluid and entirely defensive, transfer of the coastal zone to the 34th Division was carried out with comparative ease, and control passed at 0700, 26 June. The 517th Parachute Infantry also left the line and on the 28th the 117th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron was relieved from its mission of screening the advance. In their place the 34th Division initially received the Nisei 442d Regimental Combat Team (less the 1st Battalion), the 100th Infantry Battalion, the 804th Tank Destroyer Battalion, and other units. Before it reached Leghorn the division was to be a small corps in itself.

At the outset General Ryder placed in line three regiments, the 133d Infantry under Colonel Schildroth on Highway 1 to the left, the 442d Infantry under Col. Charles W. Pence in the center, and the 168th Infantry under Col. Henry C. Hine on the right. The latter regiment beat back a German counterattack in battalion strength early on the 27th, and then moved forward steadily. By the 30th the division had struck a serious snag at Cecina on the coast, and it became vitally necessary to secure the right flank against a possible German counterthrust down Highway 68 from the east. Accordingly the 168th Infantry was entrucked and rushed forward to the Cecina River. With the aid of Italian partisans mine-free crossings were found, and by midnight leading elements of the 3d Battalion had reached the north bank unopposed by the enemy. The entire battalion followed before dawn of 1 July, occupied a hill line a mile north of Highway 68, and blocked out approximately two and one-half miles of the road. In the center the 442d Infantry pushed up speedily and took the mountain villages of Belvedere and Sassetta by skillful encircling movements of the veteran 100th Battalion. On the 29th the regiment was relieved by the 135th Infantry under Colonel Manhart for the final drive to the Cecina, which elements of the 2d Battalion crossed on the following morning. The 135th Infantry and tanks of the 752d Tank Battalion spent the next two days in fairly heavy fighting to maintain the bridgehead and protect the main thrust of the 133d Infantry at the town of Cecina.

The advance of the 133d Infantry along Highway 1 had proceeded without serious difficulty to a point two miles south of Cecina proper, which the 3d Battalion reached in the late afternoon of the 29th. Then the battalion was halted on the road by

heavy fire from small arms and self-propelled guns, and by a small counterattack from west of the road. On the regiment's right the 2d Battalion slowly edged forward against heavy resistance until it reached a point about a mile southeast of Cecina where it also was counterattacked. When the 3d Battalion attacked again along the road just before midnight, it ran into an ambush and had one company severely cut up before the enemy was beaten off. To hold Cecina and block us from Leghorn as long as possible the major part of the 16th SS Panzer Grenadier Division with some elements of the 19th GAF Field Division lay before us on either side of the highway. Along the sea were pine groves and sand dunes; the rest of the area was interlaced with small canals and ditches and covered with olive groves, vineyards, and open fields—the whole forming an admirable defensive position.

The 3d Battalion attacked again at daybreak on 30 June, supported by a platoon of tanks and by engineers to help clear the mines, which were spread profusely. Shortly after noon advance elements pushed to within 300 yards of the town, but a heavy counterattack from the west almost cut them off; in the end they were forced to withdraw about a mile back down the highway. The 3d Battalion had been hit hard; the 2d Battalion also had been unable to move ahead; so the reserve 1st Battalion took up the attack at 1800, pointed northwest between the other two battalions. For three hours it inched its way forward, but was unable to break the German line. At midnight the 133d Infantry, with all battalions in action, was still 1000 yards east of Cecina and considerably farther to the south.

Three hours later the regiment launched an all-out attack, the 2d Battalion advancing north and the 1st Battalion moving northwest across the front of the 3d Battalion. The SS troops again put up fierce resistance, but by 0630, 1 July, the 2d Battalion had cracked through elements of the 19th GAF Field Division and reached the river on the regiment's right flank. Tanks and infantry then turned west and entered the eastern outskirts of the town. By 1700 the part of Cecina east of the highway had been cleared; three hours later most of the west portion was occupied. A counterattack by 5 Mark VI tanks and about 100 infantry was beaten off, and at the end of the day the town was securely in our hands.

Fighting to the south of the town meanwhile had been a series

of fierce, close-in struggles against isolated groups of the enemy who resisted stubbornly throughout the entire day, but by evening the worst was over; the next morning the 1st and 3d Battalions made their way through the mines to the river. The battle of Cecina was the most bitter action yet fought by the Americans north of Rome, for it cost the 133d Infantry 16 officers and 388 men killed, wounded, or missing in action. With the other regiments of the 34th Division already across Highway 68, the entire division was now ready for the final drive on the great port of Leghorn, nearly 20 miles farther up the coast.

While the 34th Division was pushing north in this drive, the rest of Fifth Army was still pulling up to the line of Highway 68, which was not reached all along the front until 7 July. In the right half of the IV Corps zone the 1st Armored Division made its way forward on a front sometimes 20 miles wide in rugged, mountainous terrain where roads were few and tortuous. Initially Combat Command A under Colonel Daniel was on the right and Combat Command B under General Allen on the left on the Massa Marittima-Pomarance road, but the cut-up nature of the area dictated the commitment of the division reserve as Task Force Howze in the center on the 22d. The combat commanders took advantage of every minor road in their zones to divide their units into smaller columns; at one time during the early stages of the advance elements of the division were moving northward on seven different roads or trails. Seldom could more than two lead tanks in each column find firing positions off the roads; the progress of the armor was marked chiefly by small skirmishes which lasted half a day or less. Men died, others were wounded; but the advance continued.

At the beginning of July the left flank of the division was the most advanced with Combat Command B's left column looking down on Highway 68 about seven miles southwest of Volterra. The rest of Combat Command B, Task Force Howze, and Combat Command A were echeloned to the right rear. In the past nine days the division had advanced 33 miles as the crow flies, or nearly thrice as far as measured on the devious routes followed through the rough terrain. In the next nine days only six miles were gained, for the enemy defended stubbornly along the line of Highway 68. On the far right Combat Command A spent 1-4 July before the small hilltop town of Casole d' Elsa, ten miles southeast of Volterra, after a first try in which two infantry

companies were shot up and six medium tanks, three light tanks, and two tank destroyers were lost to enemy fire. The town was finally taken early on the 4th after seven attempts; thereafter the 1st Armored Division held its lines, pending relief by the 88th Division and Task Force Ramey.

Undoubtedly the most severe fighting anywhere in the Fifth Army zone during the advance to Highway 68 had been that on the 25-mile French front during 21-26 June. On the 20th the 3d Algerian and 2d Moroccan Divisions had been stopped south of the Orcia River, where the Germans had a naturally strong position extending on east into the Eighth Army zone beyond Lake Trasimeno. The enemy had dug pits for his machine guns and riflemen and backed them with a larger concentration of artillery than he had used thus far north of Rome. The center of this line along the Orcia was the strongest, for on the east the river line gave way to hills and on the west the upper Ombrone River Valley formed a by-pass running toward Siena. The Orcia itself was easily fordable. The enemy garrison, however, was formidable, with part of the 20th GAF Field Division, all of the 4th Parachute Division, and all of the 356th Grenadier Division from west to east; elements of the 26th Panzer and 29th Panzer Grenadier Divisions were also present. Although the total number of infantry in positions near the river did not appear to be large, crossfire from well sited automatic weapons raked the stream.

After very little advance on the 22d the FEC put its emphasis on outflanking the line from the west. While the troops below the Orcia kept up their pressure, the Guillaume Group, reinforced by the light armor of the 4th Moroccan Spahis, pushed north along the west side of the Ombrone, fording the river on the 24th and keeping pace with the 1st Armored Division on its left. The advance of IV Corps and the Guillaume Group began to unhinge the enemy line, and at noon on the 25th the 8th Moroccan Infantry succeeded in crossing the Orcia just west of Highway 2. Later in the day the 3d Algerian Division to the left also crossed the stream against lighter opposition than previously. By the 26th the FEC was completely over the river; in the five days 22-26 June its casualties had amounted to 972 killed, wounded, and missing. To the right Eighth Army had also broken the section of the line before it, likewise after considerable casualties and fierce fighting.

Throughout the 27th the enemy continued to resist stubbornly