



Rangers in World War II:

Part II, Sicily and Italy

by Kenneth Finlayson and Robert W. Jones Jr.

THIS is the second installment in a four part series concerning the Ranger Battalions in World War II. This article begins with the formation of two new Ranger battalions in North Africa, covers the Ranger operations in the invasion of Sicily in July 1943 and the Allied landing at Salerno, and carries them through to the battle of Cisterna following the Anzio landing in January 1944. The destruction of two of the three Ranger battalions at Anzio ended the employment of the Rangers in the Mediterranean Theater. New Ranger battalions were formed for the Normandy invasion and will be the subject of a future article.

The Rangers took part in the invasion of Sicily and in three operations in Italy. The Italian campaign began with an amphibious landing near Salerno, on 9 September 1943, and included the subsequent seizure and defense of Chiunzi Pass. The second operation was during the Allied drive on Naples and the prolonged fighting in the mountains that formed the German Winter Line. The third part of the Italian campaign began with the amphibious landing at Anzio on 22 January 1944, and came to an abrupt end eight days later with the disastrous operation at Cisterna di Littoria (Cisterna). The battle of Cisterna marked the end of the use of the Rangers in the Mediterranean Theater.¹

The performance of the Ranger battalions in Sicily and Italy is characterized by the slow erosion of the effectiveness of the units. The 1st Ranger Battalion formed and commanded by Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) William O. Darby in Scotland and which fought in North Africa was superbly led and extremely well-trained.² In the spring of 1943, following the battles at Arzew and Djebel el Ank, the Rangers were a unit at the peak of combat efficiency. The expansion from one battalion to three, the inability of replicating the rigorous training of Scotland, and the constant addition of new replacements caused a steady decline in the Ranger's capabilities after North Africa. While the Rangers were an effective fighting force in Italy, the unit would never regain the extremely high

standard set in Algeria and Tunisia.

The success of the Allied forces in defeating the Germans and Italians in North Africa led to a decision to invade the continent of Europe through the Italian peninsula. At the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff worked out a strategic plan for the conduct of the war against Germany that included Operation HUSKY, the Allied invasion of Sicily.³ The long-term strategy for the conduct of the war was often a contentious issue between the Allies. Operation HUSKY was developed as a compromise between the American desire for a major offensive across the English Channel into France and the British position that favored continued operations in the Mediterranean—which could be expanded to encompass Turkey and the Balkans—as well as the need to open a second front to relieve the pressure on the Soviet Union.⁴ The decision to launch HUSKY initiated the build-up of Allied forces in North Africa, a build-up that included the Rangers.



British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt with the Combined Chiefs of Staff at the Casablanca Conference. The meeting resulted in the decision to invade Sicily and Italy.



Ranger operations in Sicily followed a clockwise course around the island, from the Gela landings to Palermo and ending near Messina.

Because of the successes of the 1st Ranger Battalion in North Africa, LTC Darby was ordered to form two new Ranger battalions.⁵ The Allied planners had asked Darby for a recommendation on the number of Ranger battalions he thought would be needed to support Lieutenant General (LTG) George S. Patton's Western Task Force in the assault on Palermo, Sicily. Darby's estimate of fifteen battalions was deemed too high and he was told to stand up three battalions.⁶ Darby, his officers, and non-commissioned officers traveled throughout North Africa giving speeches to soldiers,

"When I spoke to one thousand men, I got a hundred volunteers. When I spoke to two thousand, I got two hundred."⁷ From the hundreds of combat-tested soldiers available in the Seventh Army units, Darby and his recruiters picked "... true volunteers with a clean record who hopefully had basic infantry training. . . . To ensure that Ranger veterans would be in leadership positions, the volunteers who were not technicians would not be over the grade of private first class."⁸

Using the veterans of the 1st Battalion as cadre, the 3rd and 4th Ranger Battalions were activated and trained by Darby at Nemours, Algeria, in April 1943. The 1st Battalion was reformed from A and B companies; the 3rd Battalion from C and D companies; and the



The Rangers trained near Arzew in Tunisia prior to the invasion of Sicily.

4th Battalion from E and F companies.⁹ (The Army's 2nd Ranger Battalion had been activated on 1 April 1943 at Camp Forrest, Tennessee, and was not affiliated with Darby's force). The officers of the original 1st Battalion became the leaders of the new units. Major Herman Dammer took command of the 3rd Battalion, and Major Roy Murray the 4th Battalion. Darby remained the commander of the 1st Battalion, but in effect was in command of what became known as the "Darby Ranger Force." The Army still viewed the Rangers as provisional or temporary units and thus did not allocate manpower for a force headquarters.¹⁰ This proved to be a source of constant frustration for Darby who had declined a promotion and a regimental command in expectation of forming a Ranger brigade.

The expansion of the Rangers from one battalion to three inevitably caused a dilution in the overall quality of each battalion. The Ranger battalions were organized with a headquarters company and six line companies. A Ranger company was manned with between sixty-three



Seventh Army shoulder patch



William O. Darby organized and led the Rangers in North Africa and Italy. This picture is taken following his promotion to Colonel.



The Rangers of 3rd Battalion preparing to load landing craft for the amphibious landings in Sicily.



November 1942. Major General Terry de la Mesa Allan (White Arm Band), Commander of the 1st Infantry Division, and Lieutenant Colonel Darby (third from right) confer during a training exercise in North Africa. Also pictured are Rangers Captain Stephen J. Meade (on Darby's right) and Captain Frederick J. Saam (far right).

and sixty-seven men, far less than the standard infantry company of 1943 that contained 193 infantrymen.¹¹ With the expansion, the veteran leadership and experience from two companies was spread through the six in each battalion.

Once the men were selected, training began. The Ranger cadre began an arduous three-week training program preparing the new units for Operation HUSKY. This was a daunting task as the Rangers had less than six



Lieutenant Colonel Darby (standing center back) addressing the Rangers at the beginning of the crossing to Sicily, 9 July 1943. The Rangers landed at Gela on 10 July 1943.



1st Infantry Division shoulder patch



39th Combat Engineers Distinctive Unit Insignia



83rd Chemical Mortar Battalion shoulder patch



7th Infantry Division shoulder patch

weeks to prepare both the new units and soldiers for the invasion.¹² Forced marches, cliff climbing, weapons training, and amphibious operations formed the core of the Ranger training program. The plan for HUSKY called for the Rangers to land at two locations and secure key port facilities on the southwest side of the island.

Attached to Major General (MG) Terry de la Mesa Allen's 1st Infantry Division of LTG Patton's Seventh Army, the three Ranger units spearheaded the American landings in Sicily on 10 July 1943. For the capture of the key port of Gela, Allen formed "Force X" consisting of the 1st and 4th Ranger Battalions, the 1st Battalion, 39th Combat Engineer Battalion, three companies of the 83rd Chemical Mortar Battalion (4.2-inch mortars), and the 1st Battalion, 531st Engineer Shore Regiment (who prepared the landing beaches to receive follow-on forces).¹³

Commanded by LTC Darby, Force X landed at Gela and the 3rd Ranger Battalion, under Major Dammer, landed twenty miles to the west at Licata. At Gela, the lightly-armed Rangers secured the port facilities and fought their way into the city after sustaining a number of casualties from mines and machinegun fire. In Gela, they engaged enemy tanks using captured 37mm anti-tank guns, the 4.2-inch mortars, and their own small arms against the counterattack of an Italian armored column. This experience convinced Darby that the Rangers needed more firepower. After the battle, Darby acquired four M-3 Half-tracks mounting 75mm guns to provide heavier supporting fires. These became known as the Ranger "Gun Trucks"



The 4.2-inch Chemical Mortar (Four-Deuce) fired high explosive and white phosphorus rounds. The 4.2-inch mortars of the 83rd Chemical Mortar Battalion provided fire support to the Rangers throughout the campaign in Italy.



Lieutenant General George S. Patton, Commander of Seventh Army, greets Lieutenant Colonel Darby after the landing at Gela, Sicily. Darby's Rangers led the American amphibious assault.



Rangers of the 3rd Battalion going ashore at Licata on 10 July 1943. The 3rd Battalion opened the way for the 7th Infantry Division landing.

for the duration of the campaign.

At the Licata beachhead, the 3rd Battalion, attached to the 7th Infantry Division, landed on schedule and quickly seized the high ground around the landing beaches located three miles west of the town. Once the infantry regiments passed through them, the Rangers reorganized and moved to capture Castel San Angelo, a prominent villa overlooking the city of Licata from the west. The Allied naval bombardment of the city prevented the Rangers from entering Licata, and they remained at Castel San Angelo until the town was secured by follow-on units. In the ensuing days, the 3rd Battalion screened ahead of the 7th Division on the drive westward and played an instrumental role in the capture of the towns of Montepuerto and Porto Empedocles as the



Major General Geoffrey Keyes commanded the Provisional Corps that captured the city of Palermo. The Provisional Corps was composed of the 82nd Airborne Division, the 2nd Armored Division, and the Rangers.



Private William E. Ketchens of the Ranger Cannon Company with the M-3 Half-track. Ketchens later served with the First Special Service Force when the Cannon Company moved to the Force after the Rangers were disbanded. Photo was taken in Castellar, France, in late 1944.



82nd Airborne Division shoulder patch



2nd Armored Division shoulder patch



39th Infantry Regiment Distinctive Unit Insignia

American forces took the city of Agrigento.¹⁴

After the capture of Agrigento, the U.S. Army turned its attention northward across the island to the city of Palermo. MG Geoffrey Keyes' Provisional Corps, composed of the 82nd Airborne Division and the 2nd Armored Division, led the drive on the city. Keyes resurrected Force X under LTC Darby. As before, the 1st and 4th Ranger Battalions were joined by the 39th Engineer Battalion and two companies of the 83rd Chemical Mortar Battalion. The 1st Battalion of the 531st Engineer Shore Regiment was no longer part the organization. Keyes assigned Force X the mission of pushing west to cover the northern flank of the 2nd Armored Division's assault on Palermo. The Force moved rapidly along the line of advance and the reconnaissance platoon captured over

400 Italian soldiers at Castelvetrano. The rapid advance brought the Force to within twenty-five miles of Palermo. The Rangers captured over 4,000 Italian prisoners and opened the way for the armored thrust that took the city on 22 July 1943.¹⁵ With the fall of Palermo, the way was clear for the U.S. forces to drive on Messina.

Located in the northeast corner of the island, Messina was the gateway for the Italian and German forces on Sicily to make their escape onto the Italian mainland. From the beginning of Operation HUSKY, the primary objective of the

British Eighth Army in Sicily was the capture of Messina, and the city now became the focus of Patton's Seventh Army after Palermo was taken. The rugged terrain, poor roads, and stout Axis defenses slowed the Allied advance to a crawl. For the 3rd Ranger Battalion, recently attached to Major General Lucien K. Truscott's 3rd Infantry Division, the last Ranger operation on Sicily took place on 11-12 August, as the U.S. forces continued to grind toward Messina. In an effort to accelerate the advance



Lieutenant General George S. Patton confers with Lieutenant Colonel Lyle A. Bernard on the drive to Messina. LTC Bernard's 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry, was inserted behind the German lines at Brolo Beach.

on Messina and cut off the German and Italian forces on the island, LTG Patton used a series of amphibious "end-runs" to insert forces behind the German defensive lines. On 11 August, the 3rd Infantry Division landed the 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, in the German rear on the beach at Brolo on the northern coast of Sicily, about sixty miles from Messina.

Simultaneously, the remaining battalions of the 3rd Infantry Division, including the 3rd Ranger Battalion attacked the German 15th and 71st *Panzer Grenadier* Regiments that held the high ridge separating the Americans from their unit on the beach. In two days of fighting, the American forces punched through the German defenses and linked up with the beleaguered battalion on the beach. The Rangers fought as conventional infantry, and at the conclusion of the battle, took no further part in the operations in Sicily. The 3rd Battalion rejoined the 1st and 4th in the vicinity of the town of Corleone, where the Rangers received replacements and began training in preparation for their next mission, the landing at Salerno.¹⁶

Sergeant (SGT) George G. Sabine Jr. was one of the new volunteers to join the Rangers in Sicily. Assigned to 3rd Battalion, Sabine took part in the train-up for the invasion of the Italian mainland. "I joined the Rangers right after the campaign in Sicily. I was one of the first replacements that they had. We had some marginal training in Sicily. We didn't have a lot of time before we made the invasion of Salerno."¹⁷ Sabine was assigned duties as a Scout. "We concentrated on scouting and patrolling. They made me a scout and I used to go out with the company commander and the first sergeant, and we'd do a lot of talking and a lot of looking. A lot of Boy Scout



Major General Lucien K. Truscott's 3rd Infantry Division with the attached 3rd Ranger Battalion led the U.S. drive to capture Messina.



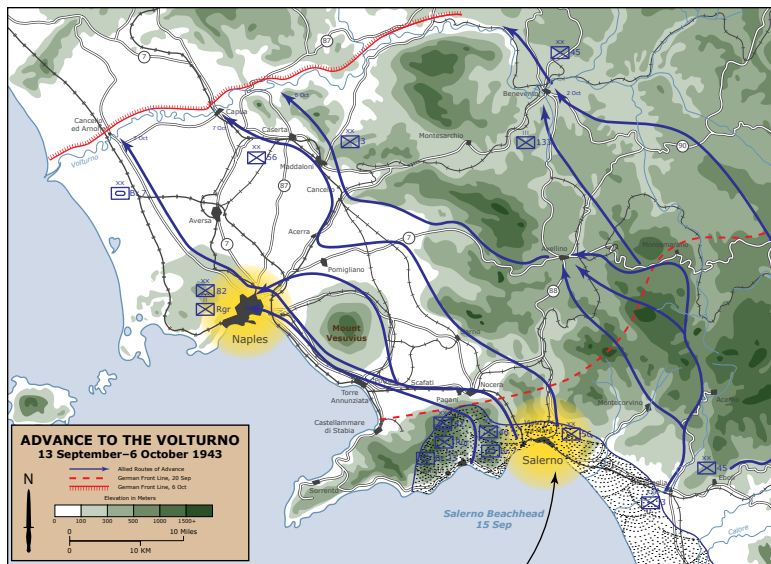
531st Engineer Shore Regiment shoulder patch



30th Infantry Regiment Distinctive Unit Insignia



3rd Infantry Division shoulder patch



The Allies landed at Salerno to capture the port of Naples.

work. You listen for sounds and look for tracks, that sort of thing.”¹⁸

Operation AVALANCHE was the codename for the Allied landing near Salerno. The mission was to secure a beachhead in the vicinity of Naples, the second largest city and largest port in Italy. The capture of Naples would force the evacuation of the German forces in the south, secure the port and possibly precipitate Italy’s exit from the war. Heading into the landing, the Allies were elated to learn that Italy had surrendered on 8 September 1943. The Germans reacted quickly to disarm the Ital-



Maiori beach and the rugged terrain above the town. The Rangers landed at Maiori and quickly moved to secure the Chiunzi Pass above the town.

ian forces, but the initial feeling among the Allied troops was that the landing would be a simple one. This proved to be far from the truth, as the Germans began to rapidly move forces to the vicinity of the Salerno beachhead.

The Ranger Force was part of the British 10th Corps and consisted of the 1st, 3rd, and 4th Ranger Battalions, the British Number 2 and Number 41 Commando, and Companies C and D of the 83rd Chemical Mortar Battalion.¹⁹ The Rangers came ashore before daylight on 9 September 1943 at Maiori, about twenty miles west of Salerno on the extreme left flank of the Allied landing. Their mission was to take the town, destroy the nearby coastal defenses, then move to the high ground above the town, and seize the Chiunzi Pass over which passed the main road to Naples. Once at the pass, they were to prevent any German attempts to retake the pass which would hold up the Allied advance toward Naples. The 4th Battalion under Major Roy Murray quickly secured the beach and cleared the way for the 1st and 3rd battalions, who headed northwest to secure the Chiunzi Pass.²⁰ The Rangers surprised the few defenders around Maiori, and they quickly gained their objectives by midmorning of the first day, occupying the heights on both sides of Chiunzi Pass.²¹ Unlike the Rangers, however, the main invasion force failed to achieve most of its D-Day objectives. The Fifth Army was slow to break out of the beachhead as the Germans quickly moved to contain the landing. The Rangers’ two-day mission to hold the heights ended up lasting more than two weeks. The Rangers fought off successive German counterattacks and suffered through sustained artillery barrages as the Allied divisions continued to try to break through the stubborn German defenses.²² The Rangers’ defensive position stretched steadily westward toward the sea as they were forced to extend the line to match the movement of the Germans trying to outflank Salerno.²³ In the days following the landing, Darby’s Ranger Force grew with the addition of a battalion of the 143rd Infantry, a battalion of the 325th Glider Infantry (minus one company), as well as tank, tank destroyer, and artillery elements. When the Allies finally broke through and reached Naples on 8 October 1943, LTC Darby was in command of a force of roughly 8,500 men.²⁴ Not until 9 February 1944 did the Rangers reach Naples and establish themselves in the city as the German Army evacuated and pulled back to defensive positions further north.

The 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions won the Distinguished Unit Citation for their success at Chiunzi Pass, but the recognition came at a high price. In the month of September, Darby’s Ranger Force lost twenty-eight killed, nine missing, and over sixty-six wounded—approximately 10 percent of the force. Most of the casual-



Fifth Army shoulder patch



325th Glider Infantry Regiment Distinctive Unit Insignia

ties were suffered during the conventional fighting that followed the seizure of Chiunzi Pass.²⁵

For the next few months, all three Ranger battalions were employed as conventional infantry in the bitter winter mountain fighting near San Pietro, Venafro, and Cassino as the Allies sought to pierce the German Winter Line. Not used as assault troops in a manner befitting their training, they were used to hold terrain on the defensive line. The small size of the Ranger companies, 63 men versus the 193 of the regular infantry, meant that the Ranger lines were stretched very thinly. Combat along the Winter Line was heavy.

Sergeant Sam Sabine was wounded at this time. "I got wounded on the eighth of December, on Hill 960 near San Pietro. I got hit with a hand grenade, set off a mine, and that knocked me out. Then my platoon sergeant and I got hit with another hand grenade."²⁶ Sabine was evacuated and returned to the unit at the end of the Italian campaign. The Rangers suffered significant casualties in the vicious fighting, most notably the 1st and 4th battalions, who were in heavy combat from 11–13 November near Venafro.²⁷

Private Donald H. Golde of F Company, 3rd Battalion, was detailed as a stretcher bearer in support of the 1st and 4th battalions. "I was helping carry down a stretcher in the mountains near Venafro. Under fire, I had to jump backwards off a rock terrace and hurt my arm, neck, and elbow. At the time, I also had trench foot and so I was evacuated."²⁸ Golde later rejoined the battalion at Anzio.

After the tough fighting in the Italian mountains, the three Ranger Battalions were redesignated as the "6615th Ranger Force." On 11 December 1943, LTC Darby was promoted to colonel and assumed command of the force. The 6615th included the three Ranger Battalions, with the Ranger Cannon Company; the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion; the 83rd Chemical Warfare Mortar Battalion; and H Company, 36th Combat Engineer Battalion.²⁹ There was little time to relax; new recruits had to be found to make up the losses and the newcomers trained for the upcoming missions. After a short period of resting, reorganizing, and recruiting new volunteers, the unit was again part of an Allied amphibious operation.

Attached to Major General John Lucas' VI Corps, the first employment of the 6615th Ranger Force was as the spearhead of the surprise night landings at Anzio. Operation SHINGLE was meant to be an end run around the tough German defenses of the Winter Line and open the way to Rome, but, as at Salerno, it became a defensive stalemate. In this case, a lack of aggression on the part of the Allies allowed the Germans to bottle up the VI Corps.

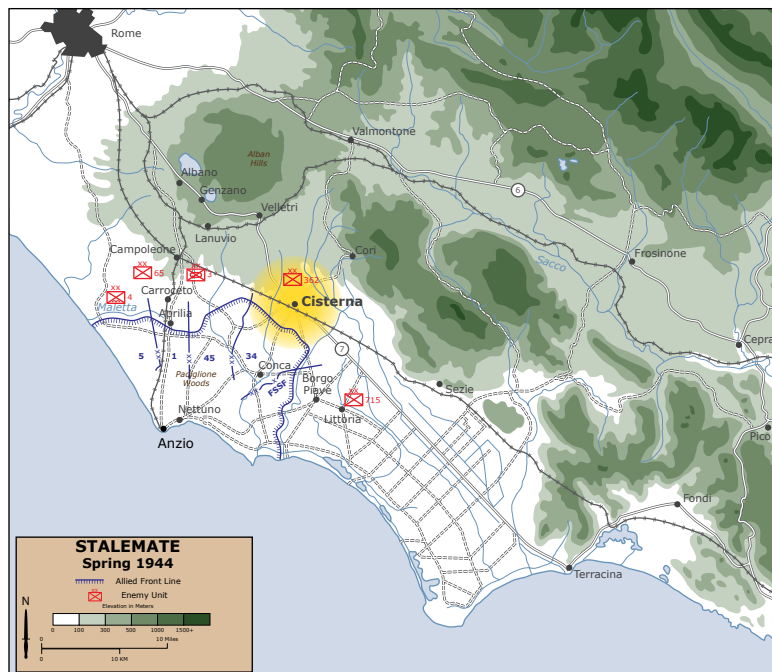
The mission was a classic Ranger operation: seize the port facilities, destroy gun



Rangers of D Company, 3rd Battalion, in combat near Santa Maria, Italy, November 1943. The bitter combat in the Italian mountains took a heavy toll on the Rangers.

batteries, and secure the beachhead. The 6615th Ranger Force landed at Anzio before dawn on 22 January 1944. The landing was the smoothest of any in which the Rangers had taken part. They landed successfully and with no opposition. Only two undermanned German battalions defended the area and offered little opposition for the twenty-seven battalions of the Allied force coming ashore. The German troops, who had come to Anzio from the Winter Line for rest and rehabilitation, were quickly overrun. By midnight, VI Corps had landed over 36,000 men and 3,200 vehicles, and had taken 227 prisoners at a cost of 13 killed, 97 wounded, and 44 missing.³⁰ The landing was an unqualified success.

During the next few days, VI Corps cautiously expanded its beachhead. General Lucas hesitated to make a decisive thrust inland toward Rome, giving the Germans time to seize the high ground surrounding Anzio and prepare for a counterattack. By 25 January, German Lieutenant General (*Generaloberst*) Eberhard von Mackensen



Intended to open the way to Rome, Anzio was to be the end of the Rangers.



509th Parachute Infantry Regiment Distinctive Unit Insignia



VI Corps shoulder patch

had elements of eight divisions deployed for the defense with five more on the way. Mackensen's mission was to counterattack as soon as possible and drive the Allies into the sea.

Soon the entire VI Corps was trapped within the Anzio perimeter. As British Prime Minister Winston Churchill later noted, "I had hoped that we were hurling a wildcat onto the shore, but all we had got was a stranded whale."³¹ A bold move was required to achieve a breakout of the beachhead. The VI Corps staff developed a plan for a general offensive to break out of the German encirclement. The Ranger mission was to infiltrate two battalions through the German lines and attack the small town of Cisterna di Littoria, a key VI Corps objective. On the night of 30 January 1944, the 1st and 3rd battalions were to infiltrate five miles behind the German Lines and seize the town. Simultaneously, the 4th Battalion would attack to clear the main road toward Cisterna.

The Ranger Force order, which was signed by Major Dammer and issued at Darby's command, was simple and in keeping with the type of missions for which the Rangers were designed.

Of the mission, Darby said, "The plan was not an unusual one for my Rangers. In fact, it was down our alley and one that would have delighted the heart of Major Rogers in pre-Revolutionary days."³² The 1st Ranger Battalion would cross the line of departure, which was a road running east to west, and move roughly four miles to Cisterna under cover of darkness. The terrain between the line of departure and Cisterna was flat farmland with little cover other than drainage ditches and scattered farm buildings. Because the Rangers would be vulnerable in the open country, they were to use the

irrigation ditches for concealment when possible and avoid enemy contact before reaching their objective. Upon arriving at Cisterna, the 1st Battalion was to enter the town, destroy the enemy units in it, occupy the ground to the immediate northwest, and prepare to repel enemy counterattacks. At daylight, the Battalion was to send a patrol to the northwest to make contact with the 7th Infantry Regiment, whose mission was to attack east of the town.

The 3rd Battalion would cross the line of departure fifteen minutes after the 1st Battalion and follow the 1st Rang-



*7th Infantry
Regiment
shoulder patch*



*15th Infantry
Regiment Dis-
tinctive Unit
Insignia*



*601st Tank
Destroyer
Battalion
shoulder patch*

ers to Cisterna. If the enemy interfered with the 1st Battalion, the 3rd Rangers were to engage them, thus freeing the 1st Rangers to continue their attack on Cisterna. The 3rd Battalion would assist in the capture of Cisterna and, if necessary, occupy the ground immediately northeast of town, and then prepare to repel enemy counterattacks. At daylight, it was to send a patrol to the northeast to contact the 15th Infantry Regiment whose attack took them west of the town.

The 4th Battalion, with an eight-man minesweeping party attached, would cross the line of departure at 0200 hours and advance on Cisterna astride the Conca-Isola Bella-Cisterna road, clearing the road of mines and enemy troops. At Cisterna, it would become part of the Ranger Force's reserve. The Ranger Cannon Company and a platoon of the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion would be prepared to move on Cisterna by way of the Conca-Isola Bella-Cisterna road and furnish anti-tank protection for the Ranger Force once in Cisterna. The 83rd Chemical Battalion was to assemble on the Conca-Isola Bella-Cisterna road and move forward to give fire support to the Rangers with their 4.2-inch mortars.

At 2315 hours on 30 January, the Ranger Force began to move the command post forward from a location well behind the lines, set up in an isolated house near the line of departure and just to the right of the Conca-Isola Bella-Cisterna road. From here, Colonel Darby would direct the attack. At 0200, the attack commenced.

The 1st and 3rd battalions passed through the line of departure as planned and began to move toward Cisterna through a ditch that offered cover and concealment. At 0248, however, the first of several events took place that did not augur well for the mission. Four radio operators from the Ranger Force headquarters element, who were to have accompanied the 3rd Battalion, became lost and returned to the Force command post. A second problem developed when the 3rd Battalion lost contact with the 1st Battalion about halfway to the objective. The three trail companies of 1st Battalion halted, but the unit split when the three lead companies continued to advance. The dangers of conducting a night infiltration with so many relatively untrained and inexperienced men was becoming painfully evident.

Captain Charles Shunstrom took command of the 1st Battalion's three rear companies and sent a runner back to find the 3rd Battalion. The runner returned with word that the battalion commander, Major Alvah Miller, had been killed by a German tank round.³³ However, the battalion was moving forward to link up with the 1st Rang-



Private First Class Ed Wall of the 4th Ranger Battalion at Anzio. Wall was one of the Rangers who moved to the First Special Service Force when the Rangers were disbanded.



First Special Service Force shoulder patch

ers. They did not fire on the Germans and tried to radio Darby. They failed to make contact and continued to creep forward through some empty trenches until they reached a flat field on the southern edge of Cisterna.

The 3rd Ranger Battalion and the three companies of the 1st Ranger Battalion that had been separated were able to get within 300 yards of the three lead companies before running into the Germans. After Ranger bazooka men destroyed two tanks that had been blocking the way, Shunstrom went forward with a runner and two other men and made contact with Major Jack Dobson, who briefed him

on the situation. Dobson, who was new to the Rangers, had been given command of the 1st Ranger Battalion by Darby shortly before the landing at Anzio. The two battalions were halted 800 yards short of the town.

The 4th Battalion began its attack up the Conca–Isola Bella–Cisterna road as scheduled, but was stopped short of Isola Bella by fire from German tanks, self-propelled guns, automatic weapons, and small arms. Cisterna was more strongly held than anyone had anticipated. Darby, who was gravely concerned about the virtually nonexistent communications he had with the two lead battalions and the difficult time the 4th Rangers were having, saw the urgent need to break through the German roadblock. Indeed, the survival of the 1st and 3rd battalions depended on their doing so. The two battalions were coming under ever-increasing pressure.

Three German tanks that approached were destroyed by bazookas, but automatic and small arms fire continued to tear through the Rangers, most of whom had gathered in an area about three hundred yards in diameter. German attempts to overrun the 1st and 3rd battalions, and the Ranger attempts to break out of the encirclement, were each turned back with mutual ferocity. After two hours, the Rangers' ammunition began to run out and the men started searching the wounded and dead for ammunition. By now, it was full daylight and the situation was becoming untenable.

Almost out of ammunition and facing German tanks and infantry closing in, surrender became the only option. Calmer men disassembled their weapons and destroyed radios before the Germans overran the area. The 3rd Battalion sergeant major, Robert Ehalt, was the last man to speak to Darby by radio from Cisterna. "Some of the fellows are giving up. Colonel, we are awfully sorry." Ehalt concluded, "They can't help it, because we're running out of ammunition." Ehalt then destroyed his radio and continued to fight on until two German tanks blew the roof off the house he and his men were defending.³⁴

Unfortunately for the Rangers, the Germans had been preparing for an attack of their own in the same sector and had reinforced their lines only the night before with elements of three divisions. This led to the 1st and 3rd

Battalions being surrounded by superior forces. The Rangers fought bravely, until both ammunition and time ran out. The 4th Battalion, with armored reinforcements, tried desperately to break through to the 1st and 3rd Battalions as all along the Anzio perimeter VI Corps units attacked in their sectors to try to pierce the strong German positions. Only eight Rangers survived to return to American lines. The 1st and 3rd battalions suffered 12 killed, 36 wounded, and 743 captured.³⁵ Among the killed in action (KIA) was the 3rd Battalion commander, Major Alvah Miller. The 1st Battalion commander, Major John Dobson, was wounded. The 4th Battalion sustained 30 killed and 58 wounded in their attempt to relieve the trapped battalions.³⁶ Later intelligence revealed that the Ranger attack on Cisterna had thwarted the planned German counterattack, but at an extremely high cost.³⁷

Cisterna marked the end of the Ranger Force. In a later action on 4 February, the 4th Ranger Battalion helped turn back a German counterattack. On 19 February, those Rangers still surviving were temporarily attached to the Canadian-American First Special Service Force. Those men who had recently joined the Rangers and had not spent enough time overseas to justify being returned to the United States were absorbed into the First Special Service Force.³⁸

At this point, the Rangers were disbanded. About 150 returned to the United States and about 400 were permanently transferred to the First Special Service Force where they participated in the liberation of Rome and the invasion of Southern France.³⁹ The Rangers would return for the D-Day invasion in the form of the 2nd and 5th Battalions and as a distinct entity in the 6th Rangers in the Philippines. Colonel Darby would go on to command the 179th Infantry Regiment in the 45th Division for two months before being sent to Washington DC for assignment to the War Department. During an inspection tour of Europe, he obtained a position as assistant division commander with the 10th Mountain Division. He died from shrapnel wounds on 30 April 1945, near Lake Garda in northern Italy. Two days later, the Germans in Italy agreed to an unconditional surrender.⁴⁰

The Ranger campaigns in Sicily and Italy demonstrated the viability of the Ranger concept for specialized missions. They also revealed the importance of a rigorous training program to accomplish those specialized missions. The decline in the quality and intensity of the training and the number of new, untested recruits led to an erosion in the effectiveness of the Rangers. The Rangers paid a heavy price for this at Cisterna, where the small number of veteran Rangers were not enough to offset the lack of experience in the battalions. ♣

Endnotes

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