

WAR

Salerno Diary



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The Commando Role in the Salerno Bridgehead



THE plan for this operation comprised an assault on the mainland of Italy in the Bay of Salerno by the Fifth (U.S.) Army consisting of two U.S. and two British Divisions.

The object of the operation was the capture of Naples and in broad outline the plan was for the Americans to hold the right flank and for the British to turn north-westward after landing and push on to Naples.

The shortest road to Naples passes through the towns of Salerno and Vietri and then turns N.W. through the La Molina and Nocera gap where it opens out into the Plain of Naples. See Diagram II, page 3.

In order to help on the advance of the British Divs., it was decided to land two commandos at Marina with the task of capturing the C.D. Bty. which commanded the western area of Salerno and then holding the Molina pass until the field army came through. A period of from three to five days was considered to be the probable duration of the action.

A force of American Rangers (U.S. Commandos) were to land farther to the west and hold the Nocera defile in a similar role.

Salerno Diary



Operations
in Italy.

by Capt. H. H. BLISSETT, The King's R.

Formerly Adjutant and Second-in-Command — Commando.

I WAS Adjutant of a Commando and the Cdo. task was to capture the coast defence battery at Vietri and afterwards threaten the western end of Salerno on the orders of Brigadier Laycock (now Chief of Combined Operations). A Royal Marine Cdo. were to land after our Cdo. and hold the Molina defile.

Our security measures for this operation were good, and only the colonel and second in command knew where we were going. The Cdo. had, of course, practised the operation in outline—no names being mentioned.

The force set sail from N. Sicily and passed the Isle of Capri in broad daylight about 13.00 hrs. The sea was perfectly calm. No incidents took place until the late afternoon, when a single bomber flew over the convoy and dropped one unidentified missile which did no damage.

Towards Midnight Great Fires

At 8 p.m. the B.B.C. announced the end of hostilities as far as Italy was concerned—an announcement which caused the wildest speculation. There was a good deal of apprehension lest the show be called off at the last minute.

We were not left in doubt long. At 9 o'clock the convoy was attacked by a force of enemy bombers but no damage was caused in our vicinity.

Towards midnight great fires could be seen on the eastern beaches and explosions could be heard. There was a blazing ship on the waterline some distance away which cast a dull glow over the surface of the sea. Between midnight and one o'clock in the morning, 9th September, the ships proceeding to the eastern beaches put up a lively concentration of A.A. fire at the attacking aircraft which were now leaving us severely alone.

A Pressure Wave Could be Felt

The Commando was lowered over the side on time and we proceeded to our stations for the run in. It was quite warm and the naval officer commanding my boat, which contained most of Headquarters, gave a running commentary which was much appreciated by the troops. After each explosion he would say: "Explosion well away to starboard"—or, "I can see a huge oil fire ahead," etc.

At 3.20 we were just off-shore at Vietri and our escorting destroyer began to pump shells into the battery. There was a comforting

crump as the shells went off and a pressure wave could be felt in our landing craft as she fired.

On the left we could see the houses on the hillside illuminated by the shell flash—dogs could be heard. But there was no hostile firing yet. I was worried by this as I thought there might be a sticky welcome on shore—the enemy lying doggo for the purpose.

But the More Cautious Said, "Look Out"

9 As we came in for the assault across the beaches, two white very lights were fired from the battery position. Men said—"They have thrown in the sponge"—but the more cautious said, "Look out for it now." The Colonel heard rifle fire, but no one was hit.

I prepared for disembarkation and moved H.Q. under the side of the houses by the beach road. No one had detonated any mines and the beachhead troop began to clear the houses.

The Colonel marshalled his forces to attack the battery and H.Q. moved to their allotted place in the town. There was no noise and so far all was going well. An Italian civilian was captured who volunteered to take the Colonel along the path to the battery. The assault parties went off and H.Q. was moved to a position in a small square.

But the Target Gave Itself Up

Firing was heard from the east of the town and a file of Marine Commandos passed through on their way to hold the Molina defile. One of their columns knocked out a big gun and killed the crew. They also fired a fusillade at a German motor cyclist at close range and all shots missed, but the target gave himself up.

A German soldier came squealing into the square. He had been out drinking the night before and had gone to bed in a drunken daze. A shell from the destroyer had passed through his bedroom and he was rather shaken by it.

By now more prisoners were coming in and the Colonel came back to me and fired the success signal—the bty. showed all signs of very hasty evacuation and the guns were all dismantled or smashed with a hammer. The equipment in this battery was excellent. Each officer had a telephone to his bedside.

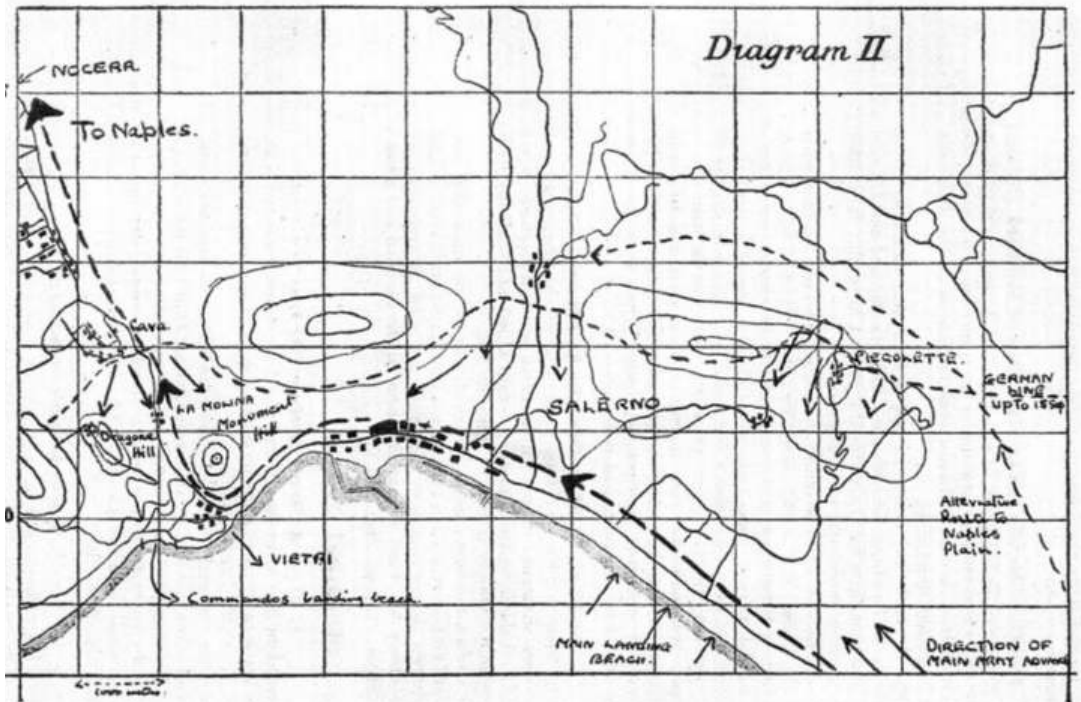
Caused Consternation at the Higher H.Q.

Our second wave of reinforcements landed and there was intermittent mortar fire on the beaches. A report that the town was in enemy hands was passed back to the Army Commander, which caused consternation at the higher H.Q.

The Commando organised around the battery position and two troops were sent off to harass the western edge of Salerno. Three troops came into Bde. reserve and one troop was left to clean up the town and outlying houses.

There were still Germans about and one German was killed and one

Diagram II



wounded by the batmen of Bde. H.Q. as they confronted the H.Q. on the beach.

He Was Not Wearing His Steel Helmet

News now came in from one of our Divs. A Brigade was now on shore and the Commandos came under its command. This brigade was held up east of Salerno and our troops moving in on the west were meeting increased opposition.

A Mark IV tank had made its appearance and casualties were caused by it. It had been hit with the PIAT mortar and also by a 6-pounder gun sent there for the purpose by Col. Churchill. This tank moved into Salerno and did not reappear.

Our casualties included one officer, who was killed when a tank shell burst in the branches of a tree above his head. He was not wearing his steel helmet at the time, and a fragment hit him on top of his head.

Lieutenant Bare went into Salerno with some troops and as they passed down one road, there was a German sentry on the other side of the road marching up and down, Buckingham Palace fashion.

Resistance was now increasing in the Molina pass and the only real success seemed to be in the Salerno area where three tanks with three armoured cars tried to break through. They were forced to withdraw after hits had been scored with the PIAT.

It Was Slowly Becoming Clear

North of Vietri 3 Troop were sent out to patrol the area of Monument hill—see diagram. Recce patrols came across a German patrol—evidently on the same task—and a sergeant killed all the enemy with his tommy-gun. One of our patrols did not return.

At the end of the first day it was slowly becoming clear that the enemy were getting ready for a thrust towards Vietri and Salerno, and their activities during the first day were intended to test out our strength. They had fired mortar shells on all the beaches and cross-roads, bridges, etc., all day.

10

Second Day

It Was a Good Thing We Did

The first night the Colonel and I stayed in a room at the Battery H.Q. As it was between the road and the medical inspection room, a stream of people interrupted us all night.

At dawn the Colonel decided to move to another room with me. It was a good thing we did, for half an hour later a shell hit the window and completely wrecked the room.

Later in the morning a determined attack developed on the hill behind Vietri, and there was a lively action as German patrols advanced within 300 yds. of our H.Q.

A Donkey Continued to Graze

Brigadier Laycock spotted with a telescope and Col. Churchill, Major Lawrie, the mortar officer and myself and my batman, with a

captured German machine-gun, managed to pin the enemy down as they were in the act of setting up a machine-gun supported by about a company of infantry.

There was a grand shoot and we saw one German blown into the air with a 3" mortar. During all this shooting a donkey continued to graze not 50 yds. from the centre of the target and never moved.

The threat was held in this vicinity, but there were a number of casualties and the fighting was very bitter in difficult country where patrols could bump the enemy at very short range. From the top of Monument Hill a good view was obtained on the Molina defile area and information about enemy activity was radioed back to H.Q. for the colonel to direct artillery fire, which surprised the enemy.

The Enemy Was Creeping Forward

To return to the other front. The Marines had reported increased pressure on their front and mortars were sent forward. These were the American mortars, and the U.S. troops fought well with them throughout.

This support did not stop the enemy, who was creeping forward in the wooded slopes of the defile and was getting stronger. The enemy mortar fire was particularly accurate and caught many troops when they were obliged to come into the open during a movement.

Little Did We Realise

By midday some support had come from the main army—R.E. detachments, etc. Little did we realise that the conditions on the eastern beaches were so bad that these men had been sent to us as infantry, as they could spare no others. We were to learn our lesson later.

By 14.30 the Marines in the valley near Molina were being shelled and Vietri itself came under mortar fire. The casualties in the town were mainly civilians who would keep coming into the open. These latter casualties threw an additional strain on an already over-worked medical section. The Brigade had received a visit from the divisional commander, who complimented the Bde. on their holding action—but could promise no relief.

Both Cdo Hqs. Were Hit

The mortaring of the town was resumed at 16.30 hrs. and both H.Q. were hit. The Royal Marines C.O. and Signals officer were wounded and several signallers killed. Our Cdo lost one man killed and another wounded.

There was still increased pressure on the Marine Cdo front.

Casualties Were Mounting Up

The colonel again asked for help from the Bde. at 18.30 hrs. and the O.C. of a battalion arrived with the information that he could

not attack the positions we wanted before dark and would have to postpone his effort till the next day. So there was nothing else to be done but to attack with our remaining strength if Vietri was to be held at all.

So the Cdo assaulted the hill ground to the left of the Marine positions along the Molina defile and stopped the enemy infiltration on the left of the Marines' position. The day ended with both sides licking their wounds and preparing for the morrow. Casualties were mounting up.

Third Day

We Were Visibly Dwindling In Numbers

The positions of the Marines had been withdrawn a little during the enemy pressure of the day before. But units of the field army arrived during the day and took over the Monument Hill feature and thickened up the Marines' position to such an extent that the Bde. was relieved in stages lasting until midnight and the Commandos were able to get a little rest in houses on the roadside outside Vietri and about three-quarters of a mile from Salerno. The men were very tired and hungry and the absence of our reserve food and ammunition was felt. We were also visibly dwindling in numbers.

Fourth Day

After Their Brief Rest, Ordered Back

Salerno and Vietri came under heavy mortar fire and shell fire overnight and the enemy were stepping up their attack north-east of Salerno.

The Commandos, after their brief rest, were ordered to go back to their positions as the Field army were required to stem this new threat to Salerno.

The Commandos accordingly took up their former positions. This time H.Q. moved well out of Vietri to a position about 600 yards from the small village of Dragone, with the hills on either side.

I chose the H.Q. so that we had sheltering buildings on either side—a good thing as we had about twelve mortar shells in our vicinity but none did any damage to us, although they were mighty close.

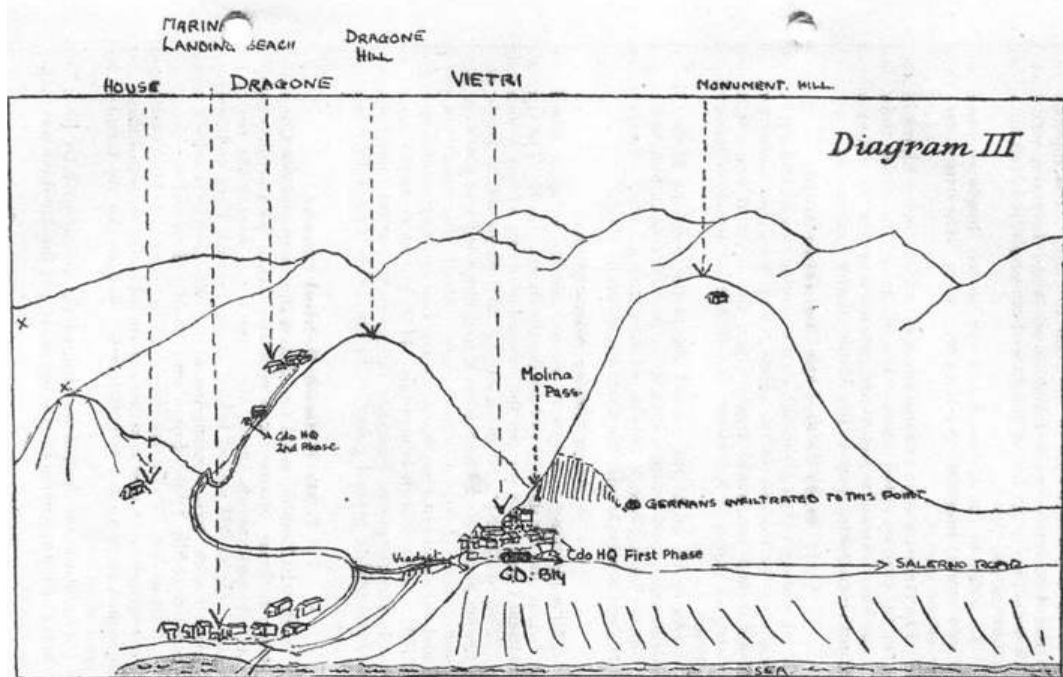
One of the Bitterest Periods

There followed during the next 24 hours one of the bitterest periods of fighting in the bridgehead. The country was close and nowhere

Diagram III



It was suspected that the Germans had O.P.s at Points X. The Commandos were too thin on the ground to spare recon patrols so far off. Dragone Hill was the scene of the fiercest fighting, and twice the M.O. had his dressing station surrounded at Dragone. The extensive areas of woodland, particularly on Dragone Hill, are not shaded in. The viaduct was under constant bombardment and was damaged.



was there a longer field of fire than 50 yards. The hillsides were terraced and trees grew thickly—each small field was surrounded by a wall up to six feet in height and movement involved a constant effort up and down.

In addition, the Germans had the ranges already prepared and could mortar important positions with ease. They used here their multiple mortar.

13 The Germans were in some strength in Cava and occupied Molina. During the afternoon contact was made all along the front and casualties in killed, wounded and missing mounted up. Many officers became casualties, particularly in the Marine Commando.

Only to Get the Amazing Reply

Mortaring went on throughout the day and night and the viaduct carrying the road across the valley outside Vietri was under constant mortar and long-range machine-gun fire. As this was our only artery of supply it was rather serious, but fortunately we never failed to get across.

During the night the colonel visited the positions in the Molina defile and found a man asleep at his post. He woke him, upbraiding him for his negligence, only to get the amazing reply: "Don't worry, sir, you are quite safe, the Commandos are in front."

As a Sower Sows Wheat

All night long messages of enemy activity came in and it was obvious that the dawn would see developments. It did. The Germans attacked in force, over-ran the forward elements of our Commando.

Their columns came on, shouting their heads off, in single file—tommy gunner ahead and grenade men throwing grenades as a sower sows wheat. It was a grim struggle. Attack after attack was put in under the cover of a murderous mortar barrage and casualties streaming back to H.Q. told their own tale. H.Q. had its protective screen out and twice the enemy passed by on the right, but they never managed to consolidate ground gained. As fast as they came they were put back.

He Retired Behind Smoke

Colonel Churchill asked for help at this stage and one Commando troop and one Marine troop counter-attacked with artillery support and the position was saved. By 13.30 it was over. The enemy had had enough. He retired behind smoke towards Cava and contented himself with furious mortaring of the old objectives which caused more casualties to the troops now holding their old positions.

We had won the day, but the price was heavy. In H.Q. the Colonel and myself remained—an association of months was broken, the Commando had risen as it did at St. Nazaire and the Germans had met their match.

This battle on the hill had caused the enemy to relax his efforts in the valley of Molina and during the rest of the day there was nothing to report.

By nightfall we had orders to withdraw and the Commando moved into billets in Salerno. There were a few commitments of a minor nature overnight, but the majority of the men were able to feed and sleep.

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Fifth Day

The Commandos Rested and Washed their Clothes

During this day all the Commandos rested and washed their clothes. We wore every variety of civilian clothing, whilst our own were drying. One officer and 14 other ranks who had been missing turned up. There was intermittent shell fire on the town throughout the day, and endless reports came in from friendly Italians of German positions in the rear of the town.

As an example of our general nerviness during this period, there is the story of a Cdo sentry by the roadside, near the entrance to a railway tunnel used as an air raid shelter, who fired fifteen rounds at a hanging enamel sign, thinking it was a file of soldiers.

Sixth Day

15

Orders to Move Quickly

The morning was spent in doing a variety of administrative tasks. Sorting out weapons, etc., and moving rapidly inside cover as the shells whistled over. There was more information from Italians, but orders had now come through that many Italians were really German agents so all suspects were handed over to the police.

In the early afternoon orders came that the Commando was to move as quickly as possible to Mercatello, some 2½ miles east of Salerno, and that Cdo H.Q. was to move there immediately.

The Colonel and I moved off and we found the Marines had been ordered there also. It was glorious weather, but over the hill the sound of small arms fire and heavy bumps could be heard.

The General Plan was a Two-fold Thrust

The Brigadier outlined the situation. A serious situation had developed in the area of White Cross Hill and the Pimple (see diagram, p. 11).

The enemy had put in a counter-attack overnight just as one battalion was taking over the area from another. The Brigadier suspected considerable infiltration in the valley and the general plan was to make a two-fold thrust—Marines on the left, east of the Pimple, whilst our Cdo was to clear the valley leading up and slightly west of it.

Which Completely Fooled the Germans

Colonel Churchill organised six columns and a H.Q. He went

forward with his six columns, leaving me to command H.Q. and the mortars.

The plan was for me to have the control wireless set and fire the 3in. mortar into the woods beyond the line of the pylons, fire to cease when leading troops arrived at the wire.

The troops were to maintain contact by shouting loudly, an admirable idea, which completely fooled the Germans as to our numbers.

I fired about twelve rounds at targets in the valley and then maintained listening watch. There were some tank drivers near the bridge by my position who were trying to mend the bridge which had been damaged by a tank falling into the stream, and the presence of these men encouraged the troops. There was a sort of feeling that it would not be long before our tanks were knocking hell out of the Germans on top.

The Change in Plan was Particularly Exasperating

The next few hours were tremendously exciting. The Cdo was doing wonderfully well—prisoners in their tens and twenties came rolling in. By 21.00 hrs. we had captured about 150. The boys back at H.Q. were jubilant. But there was disappointment to follow.

The troops were on their way back when I received the order to return and occupy the positions we had just vacated during the drive. This change in plan was particularly exasperating as the troops were very tired after their exhausting and fruitful drive.

Low Gears Advertised their Presence

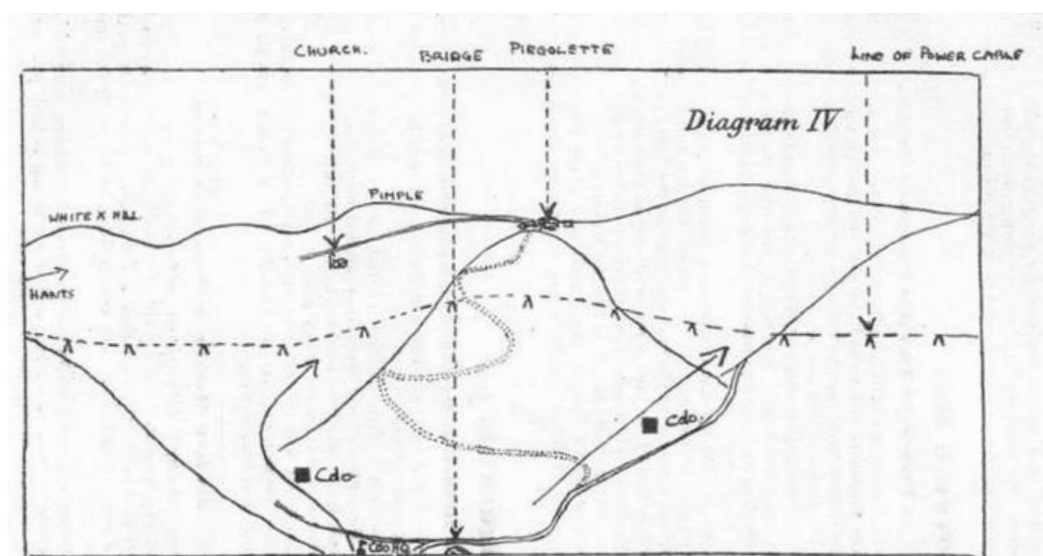
So back they went, this time proceeding up the road to Piegolette village. The moon was rising and enemy resistance was stiffening. There was no doubt from the volume of enemy fire that he was smarting under his recent blow.

There was close quarter fighting in the village now and on the Pimple there was the fiercest fighting—grenades were thrown freely—mortars used well and frequently. A terrific volume of machine-gun fire greeted any man who showed himself, or any vehicle which ran the gauntlet over a stretch of about 100 yds. along the road where it came into enemy view.

Diagram IV



A tank fell off the bridge into the river and blocked the road to all vehicles except jeeps. All stores, etc., had to be off-loaded here and replaced on jeeps. The track leading to Piegolette would only take vehicles up to 15 cwt. Captain Blissett fired the 3in. mortar from the bridge at targets beyond the line of pylons. The area between the Pimple and Piegolette was bombarded by both sides with every kind of ammunition. Arrows show the direction of the Cdos' respective drives. The diagram does not attempt to show the wooded nature of the country. Beyond the Pimple was the valley which the main Army wanted. White X Hill was the scene of the enemy counter attack just as one battalion was being relieved by another.



This latter was quite a business, for the vehicles going up the hill advertised their presence by their low gear noise. Going down one could coast and then whip round the dangerous part like blazes.

Seventh Day

Prisoners had Told Us their Orders

Morning came with both sides sitting either side of the valley. Our Commando held Piegolette village and the high ground to the east—but being very hard pressed by the enemy who were well dug in on the slopes of the opposite Pimple.

Prisoners had told us their orders were to fight to the last round and the last man, and it was interesting to find that at this stage we had a few deserters who gave in because they were tired and thought their chances were pretty thin.

Throughout the day the Commandos remained in action with their losses steadily mounting. It was during the attempt by two troop to recapture a part of the Pimple that Captain the Duke of Wellington was killed leading a gallant attack on some well dug-in positions. Weapons found in the vicinity afterwards showed that they had reached the trenches and I saw many dead when I visited the area later.

It was decided to assault the Pimple during the night under the covering fire of the Divisional artillery, and the other Cdo were chosen for this attack.

Eighth Day

Had Returned Depleted, Exhausted, Very Shaken

Zero hour was fixed at 02.00 and the attack was to be preceded by 11 minutes of intense artillery fire.

For a variety of reasons the Cdo did not get much notice of this attack and tired as they were they immediately moved off to their start line on the slopes facing the Pimple. Major Edwards, the 2/i/c, was killed and there were many other casualties.

By dawn the Commando had returned to their old position—depleted, exhausted and very shaken. So our Cdo was left in its old position in and around Piegolette village.

He had Hardly a Moment to Spare

During the day the Americans with mortars reported to me and I despatched them to a firing point near the village where they could come under the orders of the Colonel. They kept up a lively fire on the enemy's positions all day. The enemy kept up his firing but on a decreased scale.

I found myself with hardly a moment to spare—sending ammunition and supplies round to the troops and endeavouring to keep pace with casualty returns and situation reports, etc.

Ninth Day

The Pimple Had to be Captured

As the enemy were still on the Pimple, and as it was necessary for this feature to be captured in order that the valley beyond it could be covered for the passage of the army advancing from the S.E., a determined effort was to be made by a neighbouring brigade to capture it.

Under the supporting fire of artillery and the endless withering fire of our Cdo from all weapons the attack went on, but with only limited success.

By midday the volume of enemy fire from the Pimple had dwindled, and by evening had ceased with the exception of isolated mortar shells, both H.E. and smoke. All the same, the Commando continued to fire at the positions whilst there was daylight.

Towards evening orders came that we were at last to be withdrawn and two infantry companies relieved the Commando in stages between 22.00 hrs. and 02.00 hrs. on the morning of the tenth day. These fresh troops went forward after taking over and found the area strewn with enemy dead.

Tenth Day

Jaded Men Lay Watching

The Commando having rested in reserve all night, moved into a rest area on the beaches east of Salerno. They were to have no rest. A full divisional artillery shoot took place from the place we occupied for three hours in the early morning to cover the advance of the army beyond Salerno. The jaded men lay on their backs in the open fields and watched the guns spitting out their flames, getting a grim satisfaction that the enemy were being pushed back at last and that the Commando had not fought in vain.

We had fought a long and costly battle. Casualties had been high. But we had held the beaches. The German boasts that they would push us into the sea were idle. The battle for Salerno was won.

The Military Lessons Learned

1. One of the outstanding lessons was the priceless advantage of being able to mount a counter-attack quickly. On several occasions the enemy were caught out by the speed of our counter measures.
2. Troops can never be too fit. The 10 days of fighting only allowed for one complete night's rest. All men must learn to conserve every ounce of energy.

3. The value of knowing your men was proved again and again. In our Cdo we worked on the long-term principle of every officer staying with his men for a very long time—as a result he knew what men would do under varied circumstances.
4. Weapon training is most important and men should learn to fire as many weapons as possible, including enemy weapons.
5. We had an example of a forward movement of our troops being delayed owing to their mistaking the fire and thinking the enemy were in a position occupied by another unit. Take care to warn other units of your positions.
6. Identity discs must be carried by all ranks and secured round the neck. It is most unsatisfactory when an identity disc of a man who is alive is found on a dead body. It leads to unnecessary pain and worry to the next of kin.
7. It is a good plan to practise living with only one meal a day. At Salerno the troops were very hungry, had no cigarettes and received no mail for six weeks.
8. Water discipline is most important.
9. After the initial mortar bombardment troops needed no second telling to dig in.
10. In a building it is a good plan to keep behind an inner wall and have, where possible, a room between your room and the outside.
11. The volume of fire directed at us by the enemy seemed terrific at times, yet on reflection it is remarkable how hard it is to kill a man. Troops should be told this and the actual figures given. It cheers them up a great deal.

Lines of Thought

Captain Blissett has provided some detailed sketch maps to illustrate his story. They give a much clearer picture of the circumstances of an action than is usually available, and should be thoroughly exploited for illustration purposes.

For a wider picture of the Italian front, including the Anzio Bridgehead, see the back of Map Review No. 34, published simultaneously with this bulletin.

Having given your account of Captain Blissett's account, and before enumerating the military lessons he tells us he learned, it would be interesting to ask your men what lessons they consider to emerge from the story. Then compare the two sets of findings as an introduction to the morbidly absorbing topic of bridgeheads and how to establish them.