

THE RANGER FORCE AT THE BATTLE OF CISTERNA

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## ABSTRACT

THE RANGER FORCE AT THE BATTLE OF CISTERNA, by Jeff R. Stewart, 92 pages.

The purpose of this research project is to determine what factors led to the operational failure and destruction of the 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions during the battle of Cisterna on 30 January 1944. Subordinate questions include: Why did experienced combat commanders, like General Truscott and Colonel Darby, utilize the lightly armed Ranger Force against a fortified town? Did the training level of the new ranger replacements compromise the infiltration and affect the outcome? Did the Germans detect the infiltration and emplace an ambush for the unsuspecting Ranger Force? What was the intelligence preparation of the battlefield, and how did it affect the plan? Did General Truscott's and Colonel Darby's previous experience lead to assumptions about effectiveness of the Ranger Force in such a mission?

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## ACRONYMS

ALC	Assault Landing Craft
AT	Antitank
CP	Command Post
LD	Line of Departure
LOC	Line of Communication
MLR	Main Line of Resistance
NCO	Noncommissioned Officer
OPLR	Outpost Line of Resistance
TD	Tank Destroyer

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Shortly after midnight on 30 January 1944, with blackened faces and muffled equipment, the men of the 1st Ranger Battalion began crossing the Mussolini Canal and entered the Pantano Ditch just outside of Anzio, Italy. They were closely followed by the 3rd Ranger Battalion. The mission of this special operations force was to infiltrate enemy lines, seize the key village of Cisterna, and link up with the attacking troops of the Third Infantry Division the following day. Instead, less than twenty-four hours later, more than 740 of the 767 Rangers would be dead or prisoners of war.

The role of the 6615th Ranger Force, comprised of the 1st, 3rd, and 4th Ranger Battalions, in the Anzio invasion and its subsequent destruction during the battle of Cisterna is well known. But little research has been done to determine what factors contributed to the failure of the Ranger Force mission, and which resulted in the loss of the 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions and the subsequent disbanding of the Ranger Force. Several theories have been espoused over the years in an effort to explain the complete annihilation of this special operations force. Unfortunately, Anzio historians see the battle of Cisterna and the loss of two battalions as a mere footnote in the history of the campaign, while Ranger historians tend to gloss over the events and portray the desperate battle as an unavoidable Shakespearean tragedy. Little research has been done to expose the factors that led to the failure of the Ranger Force mission and eventual destruction of the two battalions. This research will investigate the factors that led to the decimation of the 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions during the battle of Cisterna on 30 January 1944.



The purpose of this research project is to determine what factors led to the operational failure and destruction of the 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions during the battle of Cisterna on 30 January 1944. Subordinate questions include: Why did experienced combat commanders, like General Truscott and Colonel Darby, utilize the lightly armed Ranger Force against a fortified town? Did the training level of the new ranger replacements compromise the infiltration and affect the outcome? Did the Germans detect the infiltration and emplace an ambush for the unsuspecting Ranger Force? What was the intelligence preparation of the battlefield, and how did it affect the plan? Did General Truscott's and Colonel Darby's previous experience lead to assumptions about effectiveness of the Ranger Force in such a mission?

The answers to these questions are important in both the historical and modern contexts. The integration and use of special operations forces has long been a problem for the United States Army. American social attitudes, conservative Army culture, doctrine, and training are all predisposed to raise suspicions about anything related to elitism, including special operations units. Yet the need for and employment of special operations forces in the continuing war on terrorism is more urgent than ever. Operations now require the accurate assessment of intelligence information and the integration of conventional and special operations forces. Contemporary commanders must be well versed in the roles, missions, and functions of unconventional units and special operations forces, especially their capabilities and limitations. From Afghanistan to Iraq, conventional unit commanders are finding that their units are either supporting or being supported by special operations forces. Historical case studies of the successful or unsuccessful use of special operations forces can guide modern commanders in

determining the appropriate and conscientious use of such forces. The example of the World War II Ranger Force in Italy serves as an example of what can happen if such a unit is used inappropriately.

The Italian campaign of 1943-1944 was a bloody, grinding affair that sapped both the Axis and Allied forces. The mountainous terrain was perfectly suited for the defense and the Germans used it to full effect. The Allies continued to slog their way foot-by-foot north along the peninsula while pounding the defenders with artillery and air support whenever the weather would allow. The Allies desperately searched for a way to break the German line and transform the deliberate frontal assaults into a rapid war of maneuver.

After the successful Allied invasion of Salerno, the German High Command decided to make the Allies pay for every inch of European soil. Field Marshall Albert Kesselring took command of Army Group C in November 1943 and immediately demonstrated his determination to defend as far forward as possible. Army Group C was composed of the German Tenth Army, with nine divisions, charged with the defense of the southern portion of the Italian peninsula while the Fourteenth Army, with nine divisions which were not at full strength, occupied the north.

The invading Allies consisted of the 15th Army Group, commanded by General Sir Harold Alexander. The Allied command was split into two sectors, with the US Fifth Army attacking in the west and the British Eighth Army attacking in the east. Following the initial breakout from the beachheads, Allied progress was slow at best. Brutal weather, unforgiving terrain, and German tenacity combined to punish the Allied advance in the winter of 1943-44. Eventually the Allies stalled against the main line of resistance,

the “Gustav Line,” which guarded the southern approaches to Rome and stretched from Minturno to Ortana. The Germans had made full use of the defensive nature of the mountainous terrain and had improved on nature with an elaborate network of pillboxes, minefields, and obstacles. Ahead lay the bloody battles of the Garigliano, the Rapido, and Monte Cassino as the Allies tried to force a path through the German entanglement.

The Allies needed an alternative to a costly battle of attrition along the Gustav Line. They looked to an “amphibious end run” to break the stalemate. The Allied plan called for an offensive along the southern front, which would require the Germans to transfer fresh units from the Fourteenth Army in the north to the Tenth Army in the south. This would be followed by an Allied amphibious landing to the north which would cut the German lines of communication and isolate the Gustav Line. The Germans would then be forced to withdraw their forces or wither on the vine under the Allied assault. A successful Allied attack in the south could significantly degrade the German ability to oppose an amphibious landing in the north.

The Allies decided on a Fifth Army landing in the Anzio-Nettuno area preceded by a supporting attack on the Gustav Line across the Garigliano River. Once the German reserves had been committed to the battle in the south, the amphibious force would cut the lines of communication to the southern sector and secure the high-speed avenues of approach to Rome. The plan was code-named “Shingle.” Final plans were completed and D-Day set for 22 January 1944.

The American Fifth Army launched its offensive against the Gustav Line on 17 January. The X Corps attack across the Garigliano was successful and resulted in the immediate German commitment of reserves to the southern front. However, the II Corps

attack across the Rapido into the Liri Valley failed. The Anzio amphibious landings were conducted under the conditions of this partial success.

The American VI Corps landed at Anzio on 22 January against light resistance. Following the initial landings, General Lucas decided to build up combat power and a secure base of supplies before advancing on Rome, which he believed would be heavily defended. Consequently, little offensive activity took place on the Anzio front until 25 January.

The German commanders reacted to the situation skillfully and swiftly. They diverted the northern sector's reserve to the Anzio area and immediately began preparations to stabilize the southern front while planning a counterattack to throw the Allied landing force into the sea. The Germans used their peculiar ability to cobble effective combat groups out of disparate units to begin building an effective defense to blunt Allied expansion from the beachhead. They encircled the beachhead with a series of interlocked defensive strong points concentrated on villages and farmhouses. Effective use was made of surviving structures, irrigation ditches, and railroad embankments to establish interlocking defenses and to establish "kill zones" upon the open plains. They gave particular attention to the buildup of key areas, such as the villages of Cisterna and Campoleone. Thus, when the Allied advance finally began on 28 January, it faced a formidable defense, rather than scattered resistance. Behind this defensive perimeter German preparations continued nonstop, as Field Marshal Kesselring hurried to build up a combat force strong enough to counterattack the Allied positions and remove the "abscess" below Rome.

The objective of the Third Infantry Division's attack on 30 January 1944 was the village of Cisterna di Littoria. (See figure 2) Cisterna is located approximately 14 miles northeast of Anzio and was a transportation hub that controlled the German lines of communication between Rome and the Gustav Line to the south. The major roadway, Highway 7, bisected Cisterna and ran from Velletri in the north southeast along the Italian coast. The main rail line between Rome and Naples ran immediately outside Cisterna's southern outskirts. Additionally, surfaced roads from Cisterna gave access to the overlooking heights of the Albanese Mountains and the nearby city of Cori. The seizure of Cisterna would sever the German lines of communication on Italy's western coast.

The Third Infantry Division's plan called for a small force to infiltrate enemy lines and seize Cisterna, while two infantry regiments attacked to seize objectives along Highway 7 and to relieve the infiltration force. The 7th Infantry Regiment was assigned objectives northeast of the town while the 15th Infantry Regiment was assigned objectives to the southeast. The attached 504th Parachute Regiment would also attack to the south. The 1st and 3rd Battalions of the Ranger Force would conduct the infiltration and seize Cisterna, while the 4th Battalion would spearhead the attack up the Conca-Cisterna road to link up with the infiltration force. The 30th Infantry Regiment would hold the line of departure and act as the division reserve.

The infiltration began just after midnight, followed by the main attack commencing at 0200. The attack began well, with all units crossing the line of departure at their assigned times. However, the operation's momentum bogged down by 0400 when the main attacking elements of the 7th and 15th Infantry Regiments were all engaged in

heavy fighting along the Germans' main line of resistance. Dug-in enemy positions and minefields halted the 4th Rangers' attack along the Conca-Cisterna road. The attacking units continued to try to penetrate the ring of enemy defenses, while the 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions cautiously tried to weave a path through the numerous German troop concentrations.

Dawn found the lead elements of the infiltration force still 800 meters short of Cisterna's southern outskirts. The flat, open terrain afforded no concealment in the light of day and the Germans quickly detected and engaged the infiltration force. German paratroop and panzer units quickly surrounded the two battalions and proceeded to pound the exposed force with direct and indirect fires. The 4th Ranger Battalion battered itself against the German line in an attempt to reach their besieged comrades. Their efforts proved fruitless, despite the use of tank destroyers and even General Truscott's release of division reserve assets. The end came by early afternoon, when the last of the surrounded Rangers were overwhelmed or ran out of ammunition. Only six men of the 767-man infiltration force made it back to friendly lines.<sup>1</sup>

The 3rd Infantry Division's attack had failed. After two days of savage fighting, the American forces had culminated and were still two miles from their objectives. The subsequent German counterattack very nearly drove the invasion force back into the sea, and Cisterna would remain in German hands until the end of May 1944, a period of four months. The surviving elements of the 4th Ranger Battalion never returned to full strength, and the three battalions of the 6615th Ranger Force eventually disbanded. The older Rangers returned stateside with training assignments while the newer Rangers

became replacements for the First Special Service Force. The battle of Cisterna saw the end of an effective Ranger force in the Mediterranean theatre.

The Cisterna literature records several theories regarding why the Ranger Force was utilized in the attack and why they suffered such complete destruction. William Allen, in his book *Anzio: Edge of Disaster*, reports that General Clark felt the Rangers were used inappropriately. “The Fifth Army commander on the 31st visited 3d Division headquarters, where he told Truscott that he believed the Rangers were not suited for the task they had been given.”<sup>2</sup> Clark even confided his misgivings in his diary, calling the use of the Rangers “a definite error in judgment.”<sup>3</sup> General Truscott vociferously defended his decision, citing his involvement with the Rangers since their inception in June of 1942, as well as his operational experiences with the Rangers in Africa and Sicily.

A second theory is that the new Rangers brought in to replace casualties of the African and Sicilian campaigns did not have the same level of training as the original Rangers and that these training deficiencies directly contributed to the failure of the mission. John Lock espouses this theory in his book *To Fight With Intrepidity*, stating, “The combined 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions at Cisterna suffered excessively heavy losses as a result of having to commit untrained and unseasoned Ranger replacements in specialized operations before they were ready.”<sup>4</sup>

The third theory is that the Germans detected the Ranger Force during the infiltration and deliberately ambushed the doomed battalions. This theory appears to have its beginning in a Polish prisoner’s report to the VI Corps G-2 in which he reported that the German commanders had ordered their frontline troops to allow the infiltrating force

to pass through the main line of resistance. This theory is also put forth by Milton Shapiro in *Ranger Battalion: American Rangers In World War II*<sup>5</sup> and by Martin Blumenson in *Anzio*.<sup>6</sup>

David Hogan believes the fault for the operational failure may be found in assumptions made by the Allied leaders about the enemy defenses and the Rangers' capabilities. He reviews these issues in *Raiders Or Elite Infantry*, his study of Ranger forces from World War II to the 1980s. He believes that American leaders underestimated the speed with which the Germans were able to build up their defense, and that General Truscott and Colonel Darby had too much confidence in the ability of the Ranger battalions.<sup>7</sup>

Another theory is that the battle was the result of an intelligence failure by the Allies. Proponents of this theory cite the many G-2 reports from 16 to 31 January that constantly underestimated the Germans' ability to concentrate forces in the Anzio area. Such estimates led to the 3rd Infantry Division's G-2 annex to Field Order 3, dated 29 January 1944, which states: "To sum up, it does not now seem probable that the enemy will soon deliver a major counterattack involving units of division size; on the other hand, the enemy will probably resort to delaying action coupled with small-scale counterattacks in an effort to grind us to a standstill, as on the CASSINO line."<sup>8</sup> This was certainly not the situation the 3rd Infantry Division faced during their attack on 30 January.

The true answer may indeed require a more holistic approach, involving a combination of factors. Such an approach is taken by Dr. Michael King in his *Rangers*:



*Selected Combat Operations in World War II*. Dr. King believes the operational failure was a result of the culmination of the previously mentioned factors.<sup>9</sup>

The destruction of the Ranger Force at Cisterna was a significant loss to the Fifth Army and resulted in loss of a Ranger unit capability in the Mediterranean theatre for the remainder of the war. Unfortunately, the battle has been overshadowed by the overall desperate situation of the Anzio beachhead and the failed 3rd Infantry Division attack. This thesis will provide additional study into the factors which led to the loss of the Ranger Force. While this study will not seek to apportion blame or to prove a particular theory, it will attempt to determine what mistakes were made and what impact those mistakes had on the outcome of the battle. The study will attempt to provide insight into the planning and use of a special operations unit in conjunction with a conventional attack, a subject with a high degree of relevance to current operations.

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<sup>1</sup>Michael J. King, *William Orlando Darby, A Military Biography* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1981), 157.

<sup>2</sup>William L. Allen, *Anzio: Edge of Disaster* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), 83.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>John D. Lock, *To Fight With Intrepidity* (New York: Pocket Books, 1998), 569.

<sup>5</sup>Milton Shapiro, *Ranger Battalion: American Rangers in World War II* (New York: Julian Messner, 1979), 109.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Blumenson, *Anzio* (Norwalk, Connecticut: Easton Press, 1963), 98.

<sup>7</sup>David W. Hogan, *Raiders or Elite Infantry* (Westwood, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), 58, 60.

<sup>8</sup>3rd Infantry Division, G-2 Annex to Field Order #3 (Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas), 29 January 1944.

<sup>9</sup>Michael J. King, *Rangers: Selected Combat Operations in World War II* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, 1985), 39-40.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE RANGERS

The European situation in the spring of 1942 did not look good for the Allies. Axis forces controlled the continent and appeared to be within inches of engulfing all of North Africa and the Mediterranean. America's arsenal of freedom had just begun rumbling towards wartime production, while her forces tentatively entered England, looking for a likely role that did not require enormous resources. President Franklin Roosevelt and the Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall had declared a "Germany First" policy, but a peacetime America lacked the combat power to immediately assault fortress Europe. Consequently, American forces looked for ways to participate in ongoing British operations.

The British had faced much the same problem since their ouster from mainland Europe. With their forces dispersed defending the far-flung Empire, the British had to find ways to strike at the Nazis in Europe without becoming decisively engaged. Winston Churchill directed that: "Enterprises must be prepared, with specially trained troops of the hunter class, who can develop a rain of terror down these coasts."<sup>1</sup> These enterprises were a series of amphibious raids, designed to fix German forces on coastal occupation duty and raise English morale with successful offensive actions.

Churchill acknowledged this when he said, "If we are to have any campaign in 1941, it must be amphibious in its character and there will certainly be many opportunities for minor operations, all of which will depend on surprise landings of lightly equipped, nimble forces accustomed to work like packs of hounds instead of being moved around in the ponderous manner which is appropriate to the regular formations . . .

For every reason, therefore, we must develop the storm troop or commando idea."<sup>2</sup> Thus were born the British Commandos, who prosecuted a war of amphibious raids under the direction of the Combined Operations Staff.

The Americans realized that the Commando operations were the only feasible alternative when it came to ground operations in the European theatre in early 1942. General Marshall was adamant about gaining a modicum of combat experience for American forces prior to the planned European invasion in the spring of 1943. He attached General Lucien Truscott to the Combined Operations Staff of Lord Louis Mountbatten, with the purpose of studying British Commando training and employment and to initiate plans for the participation of American forces in order to gain combat experience.<sup>3</sup> On 26 May 1942 Truscott proposed to the Army staff that an American unit be formed using the Commando organization.<sup>4</sup> Marshall approved the suggestion; and responsibility for forming the new unit, designated the 1st Ranger Battalion, was given to Major General Russell Hartle, commander of the American forces in Ireland.<sup>5</sup>

General Hartle appointed his aide Captain William O. Darby as the new unit's commander.<sup>6</sup> The unit was to be battalion sized, with the members drawn from the 34th Infantry Division and the 1st Armored Division, then the only American units in Great Britain. The unit would be attached to the British Special Service Brigade and supported administratively by the 34th Infantry Division. Darby and his officers were given full latitude in selecting the members of the new unit. Interviews were conducted and selections stressed initiative, judgment, stamina, and athletic prowess. Men with skills, such as woodcraft, mountaineering, seamanship, demolitions, and self-defense, were preferred. The 1st Ranger Battalion was officially activated on 19 June 1942, with an

authorized strength of 26 officers and 447 enlisted men from different units, ranging from infantry line regiments to quartermaster detachments.<sup>7</sup>

The organization of the new battalion was unique in the American Army. It was modeled on the British Commando, which in turn had been developed for use on amphibious raids. Amphibious craft have limited space and the quick raids, often at night, required extremely efficient command and control. As a result of these factors Commando units were considerably smaller than their regular army counterparts. Commando platoons only had a strength of twenty-five men, the number who could fit aboard an assault landing craft (ALC).<sup>8</sup>

The new battalion would consist of a headquarters company and six line companies, A-F.<sup>9</sup> The battalion headquarters consisted of the primary staff (S-1 thru S-4) along with a medical officer and a communications officer. The Headquarters Company had two platoons: the communications platoon and a staff platoon. The staff platoon included the Administration and Personnel section, the Intelligence and Operations section, and the Supply and Transportation section.<sup>10</sup> Notably missing are any cooks or mess section. The new unit was expected to attach itself to a parent organization for rations during training and to subsist on field rations during operations.

Ranger companies were considerably smaller than their regular line counterparts. Each company had a complement of three officers and sixty-three enlisted men organized into a company headquarters, which included two mortar sections, and two rifle platoons (see figure 1).<sup>11</sup> This was around 40 percent of the assigned strength of a regular infantry company. This misleading fact would continually confuse higher units who worked with the Rangers. The Ranger units were originally only equipped with small arms, to include

Springfield 1903 rifles, M-1 Garand rifles, Thompson submachine guns, and 2.36-inch Bazookas.<sup>12</sup> The Rangers' light armament enhanced their mobility, but greatly limited their effective combat power, especially against hardened positions or armored vehicles.

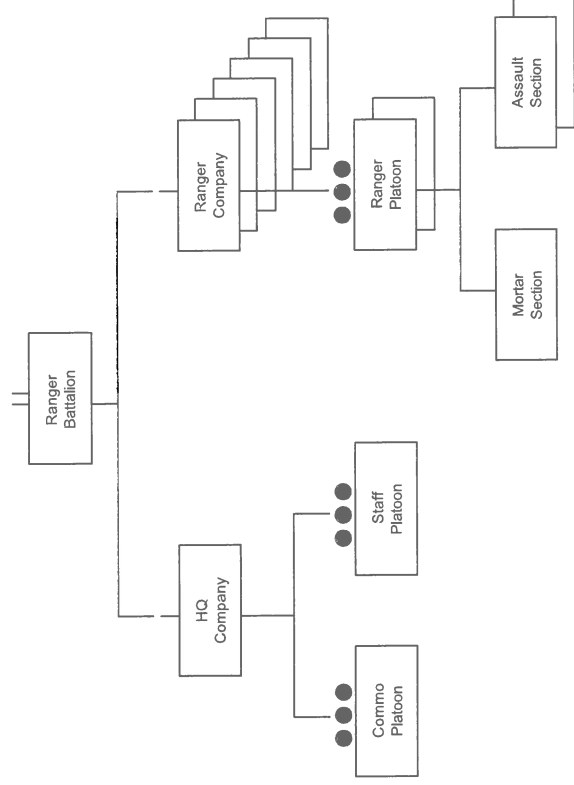


Figure 1. Ranger Battalion Organization, 1942

The battalion was trained at the Commando Depot in Achnacarry, Scotland from 28 June to 1 August 1942.<sup>13</sup> The training regimen at Achnacarry was brutal and nonstop. The program was decidedly harsh with the intent of developing lean, hardened men accustomed to physical hardship and skilled in working in any weather conditions. Calisthenics, log training, obstacle courses, and the brutal speed march became daily events. Stream crossings, cliff climbing, abseiling, and rope climbing were included to build confidence and show that physical obstacles could be overcome. A daring rope slide over the River Arkaig while live ammunition was fired and demolition charges

exploded became known as the “death ride.”<sup>14</sup> A series of ropes strung high in the trees had to be negotiated ala Tarzan. Any man who could not conquer his fear of heights would be unable to complete the training. Everywhere the Rangers went they ran at the double.<sup>15</sup>

The tactical training began with individual weapons proficiency and progressed through patrolling, scouting, and small-unit tactics. Since the Rangers were to be amphibious raiders the training included beach landings using inflatable dinghies, the infantry landing craft known better as the Higgins boats, and the British ALCs. Landings were conducted with live ammunition, and after adequate proficiency was displayed, at night. Tactical training exercises were physically and mentally arduous, focusing on stealth, speed, and violence. Indirect fire was incorporated into all exercises. The use of naval gun support was also demonstrated.<sup>16</sup> This emphasis on realistic training came at a cost. The battalion suffered one dead and three wounded Rangers during July 1942.<sup>17</sup>

Following their initial training at Achnacarry, the battalion continued to hone their skills at amphibious landings and raids.<sup>18</sup> In keeping with their *raison d'être*, a group of six officers and forty-four enlisted men under Captain Roy Murray Jr. were selected to participate in the upcoming Dieppe raid.<sup>19</sup> The men were picked to represent every company and a large proportion were noncommissioned officers (NCO). Forty were assigned to Number 3 Commando, six to Number 4 Commando, and the remainder to the Canadian Division.<sup>20</sup> The Rangers and the Commandos fared much better than the Canadians on this ill-fated raid, but the Rangers still suffered seven missing in action and seven wounded.<sup>21</sup> Darby specifically cited the lessons of the Dieppe experience, which

taught the Rangers the need for thorough detailed planning based upon accurate intelligence and reconnaissance.<sup>22</sup>

Dieppe would prove to be the only operation the Rangers would execute under the British Commandos. The war had continued apace, and the Rangers' skills were needed for Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa. Attached to the 1st Infantry Division, the battalion entered combat on the night of 8 November 1942 in Arzew, Algeria.<sup>23</sup> The Rangers made a surprise landing north of the town, captured the docks, and neutralized the coastal guns protecting the harbor with the loss of only one casualty. The Rangers themselves credit their success to the element of surprise, coordination between small units, and the speed of the assault, all hallmarks of the past Commando training.<sup>24</sup> Immediately after the landings, Major General Terry de la Mesa Allen, commanding General of the 1st Infantry Division, used the Rangers as conventional infantry during the advance inland. Some of the Rangers felt that this was an inappropriate use of the unit.<sup>25</sup> However, there is no evidence that Darby felt this way and his executive officer Major Herman Dammer believed Darby felt this was simply part of the job the Rangers needed to do.<sup>26</sup>

Following the Arzew operation, the Rangers settled in as demonstration troops at the Fifth Army Invasion Training Center. At this time 108 replacements were assigned to replace casualties and transfers. Extensive training was conducted over the next three months, mirroring the Commando training they had received in Scotland. The Rangers were used again during the chaotic battles of the Tunisian campaign in February and March of 1943. Their use ran the gamut from an infiltration and night raid on Italian positions near Sened Station to occupying frontline defensive positions in the battle of

Kasserine pass.<sup>27</sup> In the Allied drive through Tunisia, General Allen used the Rangers to spearhead advances or infiltrated them behind enemy lines for surprise attacks on the enemy rear in support of a conventional frontal attack. The Rangers experienced several successes with this method, most notably at Djebel el Ank during the battle of El Guettar.<sup>28</sup> There, the Rangers conducted an infiltration and envelopment that resulted in the unhinging of a key Italian defensive position and in the taking of 200 prisoners for the cost of one wounded Ranger.<sup>29</sup> This was the last such use for the Rangers in North Africa. They would fight as conventional infantrymen for the remainder of the campaign.

By April 1943 the Rangers had been withdrawn from the front lines to Gafsa, and the Axis forces in North Africa surrendered on May 13. During the campaign the Rangers had not only been used as spearheaders and raiders, but also as civil administrators, police, recruiters, trainers, and line infantry.<sup>30</sup> The unit was experiencing the phenomena of “mission creep.”

Generals Allen and Patton were Ranger enthusiasts by this time and recommended that Darby expand the organization for the upcoming invasion of Sicily. Consequently Darby submitted a request to General Eisenhower for 52 officers and 1,000 enlisted volunteers for the formation of two more Ranger battalions. The War Department authorized this request, but acknowledging the Department’s opinion of the Rangers as a temporary organization, the new battalions were only given a provisional status and no higher headquarters for the organization was authorized.<sup>31</sup> The replacements were drawn from inexperienced arrivals at the replacement centers. Darby reorganized the battalions, assigning each one a core of officers and two companies from



the old 1st Battalion.<sup>32</sup> Thus the new 1st, 3rd, and 4th Ranger battalions each had leadership and a contingent of combat veterans to leaven the new recruits.

The three battalions would be designated the Ranger Force.<sup>33</sup> Since no higher headquarters would be authorized, Darby would command the Force, and the other two battalions would be attached to the 1st. Darby's sphere of control also expanded with the addition of more firepower. He successfully lobbied for the attachment of the 83rd Chemical Battalion, a 4.2-inch mortar unit, to the Force to increase their organic indirect fire capability.<sup>34</sup> This attachment would become effectively permanent, and the relationship would continue for the life of the Ranger Force.

The old Rangers of the Force served as cadre for a rigorous training regime based on the Commando training program, but supplemented by lessons learned in North Africa. This program lasted for approximately two months, May and June, in preparation for the upcoming invasion of Sicily. The experienced leadership was effective, and the training progressed rapidly. "Though the hard core of veterans of the 1st Battalion was now dispersed, there was time to bring all three battalions to a high state of readiness."<sup>35</sup>

The Rangers once again spearheaded the Allied amphibious landings in Sicily, as part of Patton's 7th Army. The 1st and 4th Battalions were attached to II Corps and fought their way ashore at Gela against a tenacious defense. The D Company of the 4th Battalion, for example, lost all of its officers.<sup>36</sup> The 3rd Battalion had an easier time attached to General Truscott's 3rd Infantry Division at Licata. Patton continued to use the Rangers to spearhead his offensive, but usually in the role of conventional infantry. Only General Truscott used the Rangers effectively to strike behind enemy lines, and then only once. He used the 3rd Battalion to infiltrate and attack the city of Porto Empedocle in

support of a conventional advance. The operation was a rousing success, with the Rangers capturing 675 Italians and 91 Germans, almost double the battalion's own strength.<sup>37</sup> The cost was one Ranger casualty.

The Rangers completed operations in Sicily as regular infantry. Darby once again requested the creation of a Force headquarters and was once again denied. However, the experiences in Sicily did lead to a significant change in the Ranger Force organization. The landings at Gela were the first time the Rangers had faced a significant armored threat. The Italian tanks had come very near to shattering the invasion force, and Darby himself had personally destroyed one with a commandeered antitank (AT) gun.<sup>38</sup> To make up this perceived lack of organic firepower, Darby created a cannon company, composed of four 75-millimeter AT guns mounted on M-3 halftracks.<sup>39</sup> This company would remain part of the Ranger Force organization until the end. Additional replacements were received and a short training program prepared the new Rangers for the next mission.

Three weeks after the fall of Sicily, the Ranger Force once again spearheaded an amphibious landing as the Allies invaded Italy. Following the initial landings at Maiori, the Rangers manned defensive positions against German counterattacks at Chiunzi Pass and Polvica.<sup>40</sup> Their use as line infantry took a heavy toll on the Ranger battalions. The Force suffered 95 casualties in the month of September alone.<sup>41</sup> Small numbers of volunteer replacements were obtained, but were put directly into the line with little or no additional training. The Ranger Force lost approximately 20 percent of its strength during this period, many of them veterans.<sup>42</sup> On 8 October the Force was designated as the Fifth Corps reserve and established a training camp to process replacements for the lost

veterans. But early in November 1943 the Ranger Force was once again committed to combat in the Venafro sector, fighting as line infantry units.

The Rangers fought alongside the 45th and 3rd Infantry Divisions as the Fifth Army attempted to batter its way past the Gustav line. The combination of dangerous missions, enemy artillery fire, and bad weather whittled away the already understrength Rangers. At one point in the 4th Ranger Battalion's fighting, Company A consisted of three officers and forty-three enlisted men, or about the size of a conventional rifle platoon. Company E was even worse off with only one officer and thirty-four enlisted Rangers.<sup>43</sup> The core of experienced Rangers was being quickly eroded, and there were no trained men to replace them. It was during this period that the Rangers first began to suffer significant numbers of combat stress casualties, caused by the constant and prolonged combat.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, on 14 December 1943 the 1st and 4th Battalions were pulled from the line and sent to an assembly area near Naples.<sup>45</sup> The 3rd Battalion joined them on the twentieth. At this time the battalions were at approximately 60 percent strength, having lost many of their seasoned officers and NCOs.<sup>46</sup> New Rangers were found at the local replacement depot, and a training program was initiated.<sup>47</sup> The Rangers were needed to spearhead another invasion.

Once again, the training emphasis was placed on night amphibious operations and live-fire exercises. However, the new training program suffered from some serious obstacles.<sup>48</sup> First was the recruitment of replacements. Trained infantrymen were in short supply and high demand in Italy at this time. Additionally, the proximity to the front line limited the training areas, ammunition, and indirect fire support available for training

purposes. Landing craft were in short supply as precious resources were diverted to England to prepare for the upcoming Normandy invasion. Finally, the veteran Rangers themselves were exhausted and badly in need of rest and relaxation. Darby himself noted, “Aware of my soldiers’ exhaustion, I decided that Christmas was to be a season of rest and recreation. Though the Rangers were physically rugged, their spirits needed a lift.”<sup>49</sup> All of these factors compounded the training problem and lowered the overall readiness of the Ranger Force as it prepared for its next mission.<sup>50</sup>

The War Department continued to resist lobbying to formalize the Rangers as a permanent force with a regimental headquarters.<sup>51</sup> General Clark attempted to alleviate this problem by promoting Darby to full colonel and creating a temporary headquarters element for the Ranger Force, designated the 6615th Ranger Force (Provisional).<sup>52</sup> The Ranger Force received the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion and a company of combat engineers in preparation for their next mission.<sup>53</sup> The Ranger Force loaded transports and shipped out on 21 January 1944, bound for the last Ranger amphibious operation in the Mediterranean theatre.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Winston Churchill, *The Second World War: Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1949), 246.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 466.

<sup>3</sup>L. K. Truscott Jr., *Command Missions* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1954), 16-23.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>5</sup>Michael J. King, *Rangers: Selected Combat Operations in World War II* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, 1985) 5.

<sup>6</sup>William O. Darby and William H. Baumer, *We Led The Way* (New York: Jove Books, 1985), 3.

- <sup>7</sup>Ibid., 28.
- <sup>8</sup>King, 5.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid., 10.
- <sup>10</sup>Robert W Black, *Rangers In World War II* (New York: Ivy Books, 1992), 19-20.
- <sup>11</sup>King, 10.
- <sup>12</sup>Black, 20.
- <sup>13</sup>King, 8-9.
- <sup>14</sup>James Altieri, *Darby's Rangers* (Arnold, Missouri: Ranger Book Committee, 1977), 18.
- <sup>15</sup>James Altieri, *The Spearheaders* (New York: Popular Library, 1960), 24-44.
- <sup>16</sup>Darby, 34-44.
- <sup>17</sup>King, 8.
- <sup>18</sup>Darby, 39.
- <sup>19</sup>Altieri, *Darby's Rangers*, 27.
- <sup>20</sup>Darby, 48.
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid., 50.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid., 60.
- <sup>24</sup>Altieri, *Darby's Rangers*, 36.
- <sup>25</sup>Altieri, *The Spearheaders*, 115.
- <sup>26</sup>King, 14.
- <sup>27</sup>Altieri, *Darby's Rangers*, 38-42.
- <sup>28</sup>King, 15-20.
- <sup>29</sup>Black, 75

- <sup>30</sup>Ibid., 76.
- <sup>31</sup>King, 21.
- <sup>32</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup>Ibid., 22.
- <sup>35</sup>Black, 79.
- <sup>36</sup>Patrick K. O'Donnell, *Beyond Valor* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 38.
- <sup>37</sup>King, 27.
- <sup>38</sup>King.
- <sup>39</sup>John D. Lock, *To Fight with Intrepidity* (New York: Pocket Books, 1998), 259.
- <sup>40</sup>Black, 118-120.
- <sup>41</sup>Ibid., 123.
- <sup>42</sup>King, 30.
- <sup>43</sup>Black, 129.
- <sup>44</sup>Ibid., 139.
- <sup>45</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup>Darby, 157.
- <sup>47</sup>Altieri, *Darby's Rangers*, 68.
- <sup>48</sup>Thomas H. Taylor, *Rangers Lead the Way* (Paucah, Kentucky: Turner Publishing Company, 1996), 41.
- <sup>49</sup>Darby, 161.
- <sup>50</sup>Taylor, 41.
- <sup>51</sup>Black, 141.
- <sup>52</sup>Lock, 260.
- <sup>53</sup>Taylor, 42.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE BATTLE

By December 1943 the Allied advance in Italy was stymied by the stiff German defenses of the Gustav line, extending across the boot of Italy from Minturno to Ortona. Every yard gained in the harsh mountain fighting was paid for in blood. The fighting had settled into a grim campaign of attrition, reminiscent of the First World War. A way was needed to break the deadlock, to reinvigorate the Mediterranean theatre, and hopefully to capture Rome. The main proponent of such a plan was Winston Churchill, and he was able to force this opinion on the Allied staff, despite serious opposition from the Americans who wanted to focus all efforts on the cross-channel invasion of France.<sup>1</sup> The result was a plan involving a “left hook” invasion of the seaside resort of Anzio, which was to cut the German lines of communication, to force their withdrawal from the Gustav Line, and to open the way to seize Rome.<sup>2</sup>

General Clark gave the mission, code-named Operation Shingle, to Major General John Lucas and his VI Corps. The history of the 3rd Infantry Division notes the short time allowed for the invasion planning and preparation. “Only past experience and an expeditious and enthusiastic approach to all problems enabled the Division to accomplish its assigned task in the three weeks allotted.”<sup>3</sup> The Sicilian operation had taken a full three months to accomplish the same.<sup>4</sup> The landings were conducted by the Ranger Force, the British 1st, and the US 3rd Infantry Divisions on 22 January 1944, following a supporting attack by the American Fifth Army against the Gustav Line on 17 January.<sup>5</sup>

The initial landings were extremely successful and the town of Anzio was seized.

The initial German resistance was scattered and ineffective as elements of the 29th



Panzer Grenadier Division reacted to the invasion.<sup>6</sup> The Ranger Force seized the port facilities, reduced the enemy defensive positions in the town, and secured the beaches for the follow-on forces.<sup>7</sup> By midnight of the first day, more than 36,000 men and 3,200 vehicles had been landed.<sup>8</sup> Given the slight German resistance, the opportunity existed for a swift advance on the Alban Hills overlooking Rome. But General Lucas, cautious by nature and remembering the dangerous German counterattacks on the Salerno beachhead, decided to advance slowly while building overwhelming combat power. In particular he wanted the striking power of the 1st Armored Division available before risking an aggressive advance.<sup>9</sup> Strong sorties by the remaining Luftwaffe forces reinforced his impression of a strong German presence.<sup>10</sup>

This slight reprieve was exactly what the German commander Field Marshall Kesselring needed. Optimistic by nature, he was sure German forces could contain the Allied beachhead if given an opportunity.<sup>11</sup> He immediately ordered elements of the newly activated 4th Parachute Division and some nearby replacement units of the Hermann Goering Division to establish blocking positions on the avenues of approach leading from Anzio to the Alban Hills and Rome.<sup>12</sup> Hitler, alarmed by the landing, gave Kesselring priority for replacement units. Units from northern and southern Italy, Germany, France, and Yugoslavia all began winding their way toward Anzio to counter the Allied threat.<sup>13</sup> These units included the 3rd Panzer Grenadier and 71st Infantry Divisions as well as the bulk of the Hermann Goering Division.<sup>14</sup> Soon a series of German strong points ringed the high ground overlooking the beachhead, and Kesselring began building forces to launch a counterattack.

The Germans established a main line of resistance (MLR) composed of interlocking defensive strong points which ran through the towns of Cisterna and Campoleone.<sup>15</sup> These two towns were key terrain, sitting astride the improved road networks and the rail lines which constituted the German lines of communication (LOCs). Occupying these areas gave a natural advantage and freedom of maneuver to any force which controlled them, making them desirable from both the defensive and offensive aspects. Additionally, the area was historically marshland, recently drained to provide farmland by the Fascist government, and still disposed to become a sea of mud during the winter rains.<sup>16</sup> The Germans had exacerbated the problem by deliberately flooding some of the fields. Consequently the few improved roads acquired even more importance as even tanks and tracked vehicles quickly became bogged down in the muddy fields.

The Germans supplemented their defensive line with outposts and fortified positions south of the MLR.<sup>17</sup> The defenders made extensive use of the stone farmhouses, barns, and outdoor ovens in the area, strong pointing the structures and digging trenches nearby.<sup>18</sup> “Only tanks, TDs [tank destroyers] and heavy artillery proved effective against these positions.”<sup>19</sup> These strong point positions also gave the impression of a scattered resistance, concealing the Germans’ true strength and disposition.

Following the initial landings, the Ranger Force once again came under the control of General Truscott and his 3rd Division. The twenty-fourth through the twenty-eighth of January saw the Allies slowly advance against increasing German resistance in a series of limited attacks and reconnaissance-in-force operations. The Rangers were used in the line alongside the 3rd Division’s own infantry regiments.<sup>20</sup> By 28 January the 3rd

Division was within three miles of Cisterna, and the British 1st Division occupied Aprilia, an equal distance from Campoleone.<sup>21</sup> “By 29 January, VI Corps had expanded its beachhead . . . but was still two to four miles short of its intermediate objectives.”<sup>22</sup> General Lucas, under urging by General Clark, at last felt confident enough to launch a general attack.

The VI Corps plan called for attacks on two axes. The main effort would be an attack by the British 1st Division and the 1st Armored Division along the Albano Road, the most direct route inland. A supporting effort attack would be made by the 3rd Infantry Division reinforced by the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment. The 6615th Ranger Force would spearhead the attack to capture Cisterna and cut the German LOC along Highway 7.<sup>23</sup> The attack was initially planned to take place on 29 January, but was delayed until the thirtieth to allow the 1st British and the 1st Armored Divisions to complete coordination for their attack.<sup>24</sup>

The German forces were also planning offensive operations during this time. “As VI Corps prepared to launch its offensive toward Cisterna and Campoleone on 30 January, the German forces were being regrouped for a major counteroffensive. Thirty infantry battalions, supported by armor and artillery, were being organized into combat group for this offensive, and six more infantry battalions were to be held in reserve.”<sup>25</sup> These combat groups were positioned on the MLR, in front of Cisterna and Campoleone, directly in the path of the planned Allied attacks. Some of this activity was detected, and patrols from the 3rd Infantry Division reported the enemy digging in along the railroad tracks west of Cisterna.<sup>26</sup>

The information, however, was improperly interpreted, and the G-2 estimate of 29 January stated that “The enemy’s attitude on our front is entirely defensive.”<sup>27</sup> It described the defensive positions along the railroad as an Outpost Line of Resistance (OPLR) and stated that “His MLR will undoubtedly be found on true high ground both east and west of Velletri,” some four to five miles beyond Cisterna.<sup>28</sup> The intelligence estimate went on to make further inaccurate statements, including “The enemy’s immediate situation with respect to tanks and artillery is not too good,” and that the mission of German reserves “is to prepare and man defenses on the MLR rather than to be used in a counterattack against the beachhead.”<sup>29</sup> The report went on to describe the recent perceived drop in the quality of non-German units in the area, stating that: “For this reason, our own actions, if carried through with particular vigor and firmness, whether in attacking or defending, may enable us to attain successes which would not have been possible against old-type, all-German formations.”<sup>30</sup>

Against these assumptions, the 3rd Division plan was carefully coordinated by the commanders at an afternoon meeting on 29 January.<sup>31</sup> The 7th Infantry Regiment was assigned a zone of attack to the west with a final objective astride Highway 7 northeast of Cisterna. The 15th Infantry Regiment was assigned a similar zone of attack to the east with a final objective on Highway 7 southeast of Cisterna. Both regiments were to infiltrate an infantry battalion at H-Hour (0200 hours) followed by armor and infantry attacks prior to daylight. The 30th Infantry Regiment was to hold the line and act as the division reserve.

The Ranger Force, in the center, was to capture the town of Cisterna. The Rangers received the following tasks in the division Field Order:

1. Occupy assembly area (to be designated) after darkness night 29-30 January

1944

2. Cross LD (line of departure) at hour to be announced, move rapidly by

infiltration, seize Cisterna Di Littoria, and destroy enemy forces therein

3. Hold Cisterna Di Littoria area until relieved<sup>32</sup>

Darby briefed his battalion commanders on the plan at Ranger Force headquarters

at 1800 that night.<sup>33</sup> The Ranger Force plan called for the 1st Battalion to cross the LD at

0100 hours 30 January, avoid enemy forces while infiltrating to seize Cisterna, and

destroy any enemy forces therein. The 3rd Battalion would follow fifteen minutes later,

supporting the 1st Battalion and engaging any enemy encountered during the infiltration.

After seizing the town the two battalions were to establish a perimeter to the north of the

town and await relief. The 4th Battalion would cross the LD at 0200, advancing on

Cisterna astride the Conca-Cisterna road, clearing the route. The Cannon Company along

with a platoon from the 601st TD would act as the reserve and provide AT support for the

4th Battalion. The 83rd Chemical Battalion would provide indirect fire support.<sup>34</sup> The 3rd

Battalion of the 15th Infantry would follow and support the 4th Battalion in its attack.<sup>35</sup>

The plan called for the Rangers to use “previously reconnoitered routes.”<sup>36</sup> The

Ranger Force had just moved from positions ten miles away to prepare for the attack, and

so was forced to rely on reconnaissance information from other units.<sup>37</sup> Patrols from the

15th Infantry reported that the buildings along the Conca-Cisterna road were clear of

enemy for some distance.<sup>38</sup> Colonel Darby was worried because, “There was no

opportunity to send our reconnaissance patrols since we were to attack after dark the

same day.”<sup>39</sup> Major Dobson, the 1st Battalion commander, did give Company A the

mission of patrolling forward for the first two miles of the infiltration route, but this was less than half way to Cisterna.<sup>40</sup> He instructed the unit to avoid engagement except in self-defense. The plan was for this patrol to be picked up enroute, unless they returned with information that the route was impassable.<sup>41</sup> The Rangers would be moving over strange terrain, during limited visibility, to conduct their attack. An infiltration under such conditions was possible, if the enemy positions were only scattered strongpoints manned by weary German units, as the intelligence summary indicated.

That night, the Ranger Force headquarters was moved forward to occupy a house near the line of departure.<sup>42</sup> The 1st and 3rd Battalions completed their preparations for the infiltration, studying maps, distributing ammunition and sharpening knives. Generous amounts of bazooka ammunition and sticky bombs were taken in anticipation of an armored counterattack, but curiously, the machine guns were left behind.<sup>43</sup> Darby reported the men in good spirits as they marched approximately seven miles from the assembly area to the LD.<sup>44</sup> The Ranger commanders held a final conference at midnight, confirming the plan and reiterating that radio silence would be maintained until the 4th Battalion crossed a phase line which ran east through Isola Bella, about two miles from Cisterna.<sup>45</sup>

At 0100 the 1st Battalion crossed the LD to the accompaniment of German interdicting fire on the Conca road junction, to be followed by the 3rd Battalion fifteen minutes later. The terrain between Anzio and Cisterna was billiard table flat, with little cover or concealment other than the scattered farmhouses and drainage ditches.<sup>46</sup> The long winding column of Rangers entered the west branch of the Mussolini canal and then used the Pantano Ditch, which runs to the right of the Conca-Cisterna road, for cover.<sup>47</sup>

No contact was made as the Rangers successfully bypassed the initial German outposts. The infiltration was off to a good start.

At 0200 30 January 1944, the 4th Battalion crossed the LD and advanced north along the Conca-Cisterna road in an approach march formation.<sup>48</sup> The Battalion Journal records the initial hours of the action.<sup>49</sup> The order of march within the battalion was C, D, HQ, A, B, E, and F companies. After twenty minutes the battalion moved 500 yards to the right flank and continued to advance parallel to the road. At approximately 0300 Company C received machine gun fire from the front. Company C immediately deployed to the left flank while Company D moved to the right. But the German positions were well sited with good defensive protection, and by 0315, both companies were pinned down in a cross fire. Companies A and B were similarly pinned down when they tried to flank the position to the east. Darby reports that this was his first intimation that all was not well, and that the intelligence reports of light resistance might not be accurate.<sup>50</sup>

Doggedly the Rangers continued to work along the route, clearing enemy resistance from houses, farm buildings and dug-in emplacements. At one point they encountered an improvised road block made up of two damaged jeeps and an Italian truck.<sup>51</sup> The infiltrating battalions of the 7th and 15th Regiments also ran into trouble almost immediately. Both units ran into strong German resistance just north of the LD and their stealthy infiltrations were transformed into intense firefights with all companies heavily engaged.<sup>52</sup>

The 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions continued to sneak along the Pantano ditch while all hell broke loose behind them. The two Battalions suffered their own problems however. The formation was strung out, single column, along the covered position

offered by the ditch. The lack of training amongst some of the replacements was tested by the darkness and muddy terrain. Some inadvertent noises carried through the night as Rangers slipped or banged their equipment.<sup>53</sup> Despite these problems, the units bypassed several German units, including artillery, mortar, and machine gun positions.<sup>54</sup> At one point, about two miles from Cisterna, a break in contact occurred between the two battalions.<sup>55</sup> When the trail three companies of the 1st Battalion discovered the error, they halted to try and establish contact with the rear battalion. This caused another break within 1st Battalion as the three lead companies continued their movement. Runners worked frantically to reestablish contact as the force raced against the coming dawn.

The Rangers continued to feel their way forward. The night was often split by the thunder of artillery while tracers and flares from the fighting near the LD lit the night sky. At one point the lead company was halted by German traffic on the Conca road. Major Dobson heard the capture of a large motorized patrol element.<sup>56</sup> This was later identified as a platoon of forty-three men of the 3rd Reconnaissance Troop, of which only one man escaped.<sup>57</sup> The Germans now knew there were elements to the rear of their outpost line!

Morning was fast approaching and the Pantano ditch was shallowing. The Rangers were forced to cross to the west side of the road where another deeper ditch provided better cover.<sup>58</sup> Crossing the road by sections and reforming on the far side ate more precious time. Attempts by the battalion commanders to contact the Force headquarters were fruitless. The low ground and wet conditions interfered with effective radio communications.

Back in the rear, the 4th Battalion had been involved in a running fight all night. Dawn found the unit bogged down still short of their intermediate objective of Isola



Bella.<sup>59</sup> Snipers, entrenched positions, and interlocking fire from mutually supporting positions forced the Rangers to fight for every inch of ground as they pushed toward the town.

At approximately 0610, Major Dobson, unable to establish contact with the Force Headquarters, decided that speed would have to act as their security if the infiltrating force stood a chance of entering Cisterna before full light. Accordingly the 1st Battalion began using a series of trails that ran parallel to the Conca-Cisterna road on the west side, skirting the Calcaprini house where a German self-propelled gun unit was bivouacked.<sup>60</sup> Elements of F Company attempted to silence the unit's sentries, but the dawn was shattered by the scream of a knifed German, ending all efforts at concealment.<sup>61</sup> The infiltration became an assault, indeed a footrace, towards the outskirts of Cisterna 800 yards away. Elements of the 1st Battalion raced through the sleeping Germans, shooting and stabbing anything that moved.

The Rangers found themselves caught in a flat open plain, roughly triangular in shape and one thousand yards per side, hemmed in by the Ponte Rotta road to the north and the Conca road to the east.<sup>62</sup> (see figure 3) These roads formed the apex of a triangle that narrowed to a point in Cisterna. The Rangers of F Company, 1st Battalion charged forward towards Cisterna. At the outskirts of the town they were stopped by intense small arms fire in the area of a house that became known as the "White House."<sup>63</sup> This was as far as the Rangers were destined to penetrate. The company lost two Lieutenants killed and two wounded in the first exchange of fire.<sup>64</sup> The company began to dig in and occupy hasty defensive positions under the leadership of the surviving noncommissioned officers. The company mortars quickly expended their available ammunition firing at the

Conca/Ponte Rotta intersection and fought the remainder of the day as riflemen.<sup>65</sup> T/5

Lawrence Gilbert checked the command post of the bivouacked German unit and answered the ringing telephone to be queried “was ist los?” by a bewildered staff officer.<sup>66</sup>

As the remaining 1st Battalion Rangers moved through the bivouac site, they came under fire from German positions and vehicles to the north. The first German attacks caught the Rangers on the left flank, coming from the Ponte Rotta road. Reacting to these attacks compelled E and D Companies, 1st Battalion, to move to the north and fight off the tank-infantry teams emerging from the far side of the road.<sup>67</sup> The three leading assault companies of the 1st Battalion would remain pinned down by accurate and intense German fire from this point.

Back in the 3rd Battalion area, German reaction was not long in coming. Company C arrived at the Conca in the early dawn. The Battalion headquarters element was moving with the lead elements of the company and Major Miller, the 3rd Battalion commander, decided to move to the high ground provided by the road in an attempt to establish radio contact with the Force headquarters.<sup>68</sup> Engrossed in his task, Major Miller failed to hear the shouted alarm as a German tank came into view and opened fire. Major Miller was killed instantly. The company was able to fight off two tanks and a half track with sticky grenades and bazookas, but the attack shattered C Company’s organization.<sup>69</sup>

Across the Conca road, the remaining three companies of the 1st Battalion moved to the sound of the guns, eager to get into the fight.<sup>70</sup> Company C moved to the left flank, tying in with Company D. Company B assaulted the Calcaprini house, and after securing it, moved into line on C Company’s left flank. Company A extended the line to the west,

tying in to Company B on its right. The 1st Battalion now occupied hasty defensive positions roughly on line from the White House in the east along the Ponte Rotta road.<sup>71</sup> A deadly game of cat and mouse began as the Rangers tried to hold the enemy infantry at bay while attacking the marauding tanks and self propelled guns with phosphorous grenades, sticky bombs and bazookas.

Major Dobson established the 1st Battalion command post (CP) in the Calcaprini house and an aid station was started in a large shed to the rear of E Company.<sup>72</sup> Upon receiving news of Major Miller's death by runner, Major Dobson decided to move back along the trail system to coordinate further action with Captain Joe Larkin, now commanding the 3rd Battalion. Before leaving, Major Dobson counted fifteen armored vehicles burning within sight of his CP.<sup>73</sup>

With their forces split by the Conca road at first contact and the battalion commander killed, the situation in the 3rd Battalion was more chaotic.<sup>74</sup> Company A, 3rd Battalion, followed Company A, 1st Battalion, and fell in on the left flank of the 1st Battalion's defensive line. Company B became involved in a firefight with German elements on the right flank of the trail system along the Matto creek line. They were able to destroy a German flak wagon that had been interdicting movement around the Calcaprini house. Company C remained engaged with German elements along the Conca road and the Matto creek. Companies E and F were called forward by Captain Larkin and deployed to secure the western flank of the defensive line along the Ponte Rotta road. Company D remained in the rear, just north of the Conca road, and provided rear security for the force.

By approximately 0710, the Ranger Battalions were arrayed in a crescent shaped hasty defense oriented to the north along the Ponte Rotta road while B, C, and D Companies of the 3rd Battalion provided a semblance of rear security to the south and east.<sup>75</sup> (see figure 4) Tanks, self propelled guns and flak wagons constantly swirled through the area, blasting any visible Rangers before withdrawing to rearm. Enemy infantry, machine guns and snipers took a heavy toll of any Rangers who exposed themselves trying to attack the armored vehicles. A German infantry attack formed in the south near B Company, 3rd Battalion's position. The Germans showed considerable skill at fire and movement as they maneuvered against the Rangers to the north. "This action definitely blocked any early orderly withdrawal to or an early linkup via Isola Bella and the 4th Ranger Battalion-15th Infantry operations."<sup>76</sup>

Just after dawn, while the 1st and 3rd Battalions were fighting for their lives, the 4th Battalion was trying desperately to batter its way into the town of Isola Bella. At 0610 the 4th Battalion journal records that E, F and Headquarters Companies were moving under heavy machine gun and artillery fire while there was no communication with C, D, A, and B Companies or the battalion headquarters element.<sup>77</sup> Colonel Darby, frustrated with the slow progress, finally committed two halftracks and two tank destroyers in an attempt to break the deadlock.<sup>78</sup> The vehicles moved up to where the Rangers were halted by a roadblock and attempted to flank the German position. Unfortunately, they maneuvered right into a minefield where two of the vehicles were lost.<sup>79</sup> The desperate nature of the situation was revealed in a telephone conversation recorded in the 3rd Division War Room journal. "The machine-gun fire is terrific from both flanks. The shells are landing all over the place. Look like 170s. 4th Battalion is the

boy that is in the jam.”<sup>80</sup> Even the relentless mortar fire of the faithful 83rd Chemical Battalion could not suppress the German defenses. A later entry at 1030 hours stated simply, “4th Battalion well shaken up.”<sup>81</sup>

Initially the 3rd Battalion of the 15th Infantry had followed the progress of the 4th Ranger Battalion. As the 4th Battalion’s attack ground to a halt, the commander of the 15th Infantry directed his 3rd Battalion to swing to the east of the Conca road and attempt to follow the route of the infiltration in an effort to relieve the beleaguered Rangers and get a sizable force into Cisterna.<sup>82</sup> This attempt was unable to make it into Cisterna in daylight against an alerted enemy, but was able to make significant progress to the north which would allow them to flank Isola Bella through the gap found by the infiltrating Rangers. Although too late to save the 1st and 3rd Ranger Battalions, the 3rd Battalion, 15th Infantry would be able to seize Isola Bella and drive south down the road to assist the 4th Ranger Battalion.<sup>83</sup>

Things were getting desperate for the surrounded Rangers at Cisterna. By this time Major Dobson was wounded and many of the officers and senior noncommissioned officers were casualties. The terrain, virtually devoid of cover except for the shallow irrigation ditches, provided the Germans with excellent fields of fire and observation. Their undisputed control of the road system radiating from Cisterna allowed them to reposition quickly and reinforce threatened sectors. At some point communications were established between the surrounded battalions and the Ranger Force headquarters, although the exact time is questionable. Even this small victory brought no solace as the Rangers were unable to direct effective indirect fires on the Germans due to the proximity

of the attacking enemy and the protection offered by the excellent defensive positions they occupied.<sup>84</sup>

With all hope of reinforcement blocked along the Conca road, the 1st and 3rd Battalions were in desperate straits. They faced continued cannonades, mortar and artillery barrages, small arms, and even direct fire from flak wagons all through the morning hours.<sup>85</sup> The German forces continued to grow as fresh units, including tanks and paratroopers from the 2nd Parachute Lehr Battalion, were thrown into the fray.<sup>86</sup> The growing numbers of Ranger wounded were moved to safer areas in the rear as the perimeter slowly shrank under the German onslaught. The Calcaprini house, utilized as the CP for the 1st Battalion, evolved into a strong point for the weakening defense.<sup>87</sup> Gradually the Rangers fire slackened as men expended all their ammunition. German tanks grew bolder as the precious supplies of sticky bombs and bazooka rockets dwindled. Eventually small groups of Rangers were forced to surrender. The Germans began lining up prisoners and advancing on the remaining pockets of Rangers, exhorting them to surrender or their comrades would be killed.<sup>88</sup>

The end of the Ranger's final battle occurred in the early afternoon. Most accounts generally agree that the main defensive line was rolled up between 1200 and 1400 hours.<sup>89</sup> The final radio contact with the surrounded Rangers was fittingly a conversation between Colonel Darby and Sergeant Major Ehalt, one of the original 1st Battalion Rangers, at 1215. Ehalt, in an unhurried and unexcited voice, stated, "Some of the fellows are giving up. Colonel, we are awfully sorry . . . . They can't help it, because we are running out of ammunition. But I ain't surrendering. They are coming into the

building now.”<sup>90</sup> The radio then went dead. Asking his staff to give him a moment alone, Colonel Darby, the hardened combat leader, lowered his head into his hands and wept.

The surviving Rangers were herded into a nearby ravine and placed under guard. The Germans were still battling the 3rd Division’s attack and seemed tense. When machine guns were placed along the ravine’s rim, many of the Rangers thought they were about to be executed. Instead, the wounded were evacuated. That evening, the remaining Rangers would be put on trucks and begin their long journey to the interrogation points and POW enclosures.

This battle sealed the fate of a Ranger force in the Mediterranean theatre. That day only six of the 767 men who infiltrated into Cisterna would return to friendly lines.<sup>91</sup> The 4th Battalion spent a difficult night under fire, and the following morning advanced along the Conca road clearing the remaining German resistance.<sup>92</sup> They were able to link up with the 15th Infantry regiment in Isola Bella and together they took 250 prisoners.<sup>93</sup> From February 1 to 4, The Ranger Force remained in position along the Cisterna-Conca road.

On 10 February, the 4th Battalion was attached to the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment and the 83rd Chemical Battalion was attached to the 45th Infantry Division, leaving the 6615th Ranger Force a headquarters without units.<sup>94</sup> On February 17th, General Lucas appointed Colonel Darby as the commander of the 179th Infantry Regiment of the 45th Infantry Division.<sup>95</sup> At the end of March the 4th Battalion was broken into two groups. Men with sufficient overseas time and combat experience were designated as veterans and earmarked to return stateside. The remaining men were used as replacements for another special operations unit, the 1st Special Service Force. At

1030 hours on 27 March 1944, the 19 officers and 134 men remaining in the 4th Ranger Battalion left Anzio bound for Naples, and then America.<sup>96</sup> The Rangers' battles in the Mediterranean were over.

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Blumenson, *Anzio* (Norwalk, Connecticut: Easton Press, 1963), 45-53.

<sup>2</sup>John Bowditch, *Anzio Beachhead* (Washington, DC: United States Army Center of Military History, 1990), 3.

<sup>3</sup>Donald G. Taggart, *History of the Third Infantry Division in World War II* (Nashville, Tennessee: The Battery Press, 1987), 107.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Blumenson, 66-76.

<sup>6</sup>Major Allen, Combat Studies Institute Battlebook, "Operation Shingle" (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, 1984), 58.

<sup>7</sup>John D. Lock, *To Fight with Intrepidity* (New York: Pocket Books, 1998), 261.

<sup>8</sup>Bowditch, 18.

<sup>9</sup>Robert W. Black, *Rangers in World War II* (New York: Ivy Books, 1992), 149.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas H. Taylor, *Rangers Lead the Way* (Paucah, Kentucky: Turner Publishing Company, 1996), 42.

<sup>11</sup>Blumenson, 83.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>14</sup>Allen, 59.

<sup>15</sup>Anthony J. Abati, "Cisterna di Littoria, A Brave Yet Futile Effort." *Army History* (Fall 91), 15.

<sup>16</sup>William O. Darby and William H. Baumer, *We Led The Way* (New York: Jove Books, 1985), 174.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>18</sup>Taggart, 111.



- <sup>19</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup>Darby, 168-173.
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid., 176.
- <sup>22</sup>Bowditch, 24.
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid., 27.
- <sup>24</sup>Ibid., 26.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid., 27.
- <sup>26</sup>Taggart, 112.
- <sup>27</sup>3rd Infantry Division, “Annex #2 to Field Order 3” (Combined Arms Research Library, Archives, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 29 January 1944), 1.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid., 2.
- <sup>31</sup>Taggart, 114.
- <sup>32</sup>3rd Infantry Division, “Field Order 3” (Combined Arms Research Library, Archives, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 28 January 1944), 1.
- <sup>33</sup>Black, 158.
- <sup>34</sup>Ranger Force Headquarters, “Field Order 2” (Combined Arms Research Library, Archives, Fort Leavenworth, KS), 29 January 1944. 1.
- <sup>35</sup>Bowditch, 28.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid., 1.
- <sup>37</sup>Black, 156.
- <sup>38</sup>Ibid., 161.
- <sup>39</sup>Darby, 178.
- <sup>40</sup>Clarence R. Meltesen, *After the Battle . . . Ranger Evasion and Escape* (San Francisco: Oflag 64 Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Michael J. King, *Rangers: Selected Combat Operations In World War II* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, 1985), 34.

<sup>43</sup>Darby, 179.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 179-180.

<sup>46</sup>King, 33.

<sup>47</sup>Meltesen, 19.

<sup>48</sup>4th Ranger Battalion, “Journal Of Operations” (Combined Arms Research Library, Archives, Fort Leavenworth, KS), January 1944. 2.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Darby, 180.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Abati, 16.

<sup>53</sup>Darby, 181.

<sup>54</sup>Meltesen, 19.

<sup>55</sup>Darby, 181.

<sup>56</sup>Meltesen, 20.

<sup>57</sup>Bowditch, 30.

<sup>58</sup>Meltesen, 20.

<sup>59</sup>Darby, 181.

<sup>60</sup>Meltesen, 22.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 232.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 235.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 230.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 230-232.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 235, 239.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>77</sup>4th Ranger Battalion, “Journal Of Operations” (Combined Arms Research Library, Archives, Fort Leavenworth, KS, January 1944), 2.

<sup>78</sup>Darby, 182.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.

<sup>80</sup>Taggart, 115.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

<sup>82</sup>Bowditch, 30.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

<sup>84</sup>Abati, 17.

<sup>85</sup>Meltesen, 234.

<sup>86</sup>King, 38.

<sup>87</sup>Meltesen, 234.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 234-236.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>90</sup>Darby, 186.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 189.

<sup>92</sup>Bowditch, 33.

<sup>93</sup>Darby, 189.

<sup>94</sup>Black, 169.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 173.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 175.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS

Previous study has produced four major theories concerning the causes of the tragedy at Cisterna. One theory believes that the Ranger Force was misused and that the mission was inappropriate and never should have been given to the Rangers. A second theory contends that the Germans were aware of the impending attack and deliberately baited an ambush to destroy the Rangers. Another theory holds that it was the degraded experience level of the Ranger replacements which resulted in their compromise and destruction. Finally, Allied intelligence and its underestimation of the German troop buildup played a prominent role in addition to the previous theories.

This study will prove that the direct cause of the destruction of the Ranger Force at Cisterna was the failure of Allied intelligence to correctly determine German troop strength and disposition. The evidence shows that while some of the other factors may have contributed to the situation, they did not influence the final outcome of the battle. The Ranger Force might have been misused, but this misuse resulted from lack of doctrine, an established precedent, and their leaders' judgment. The Germans were aware of an impending attack on Cisterna, but there is no satisfactory evidence that any type of ambush was planned or executed. Indeed, the evidence is quite to the contrary, as the attack was stronger than the Germans anticipated and had an immediate impact on their operational plans. The degraded experience level of the Ranger replacements may have contributed to the breaks in contact during movement, but did not result in the compromise of the infiltration and had little impact on the battle's final outcome. The facts show that the majority of the blame for the disaster at Cisterna must sit squarely

with the Allied intelligence failure to determine the German troop strength, unit disposition, and defensive plans.

The initial question is whether the Ranger Force should have been given the mission. Proponents of this theory point out that using a lightly armed, amphibious raiding force to attack prepared defensive positions and tanks can only result in failure. Such an analysis is short sighted and does not consider the battlefield realities of the Mediterranean theatre in 1944.

In order to declare misuse of the Rangers, it must first be established what their proper use would be. This was never done. The Ranger Force had started as an amphibious training and raiding unit in an attempt to lighten the American army with combat experience prior to large-scale engagements.<sup>1</sup> Their role quickly evolved into amphibious spearheaders for the landings in North Africa. The Rangers found their special niche as an assault force to seize key points and clear the way for following regular units.<sup>2</sup> This role easily transitioned from amphibious assaults to infiltration attacks during ground operations. Raids were also conducted. Their early success in these roles led to the activation of the 3rd and 4th Ranger Battalions.

Yet no doctrine for the use of the Rangers was ever written during World War II.<sup>3</sup> The Rangers were never recognized as a permanent entity, remaining provisional units until the end of the war. General Marshall even went so far as to direct that the units be disbanded once the requirement for their services was complete.<sup>4</sup> The War Department never produced a written document to guide the development, use, and support of Ranger units. This oversight was probably due to wartime demands, the Rangers' provisional unit status, and lack of interest in such small-scale units at the War Department level.

Consequently, field commanders were provided a highly trained, very capable unit with little or no guidance as to how it was to be utilized. “Field commanders were left with only a vague, intuitive sense of the purpose of such troops. Only an extraordinarily perceptive officer would have seen the danger of misuse.”<sup>5</sup> Without doctrinal guidance or a permanent higher headquarters, there was no system in place to screen potential missions for suitability and viability. The British Commandos successfully avoided this problem by creating a series of Special Service Brigade headquarters under a Special Service Group who worked directly for Lord Mountbatten, chief of Combined Operations.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, the Allied demands for manpower were such that the Rangers frequently found themselves used as line infantry. General Terry Allen began using them as conventional infantry a mere fourteen and one-half hours after the initial landings in North Africa.<sup>7</sup> The Allies were always short of trained infantrymen, and the temptation to use the Rangers would have been irresistible to most commanders. Given the infrequent opportunities for amphibious operations in the European theatre, it would have been impossible to utilize the Rangers solely in that role. An Army Ground Forces memorandum on the subject noted that such special operations units would probably remain inactive for lengthy periods and might be tempted to seek out “unprofitable missions” to justify their existence.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the Rangers often found themselves committed to battle as conventional infantry.

Michael King noted in his study of Ranger operations in North Africa, that the 1st Ranger Battalion was utilized almost four times as often in conventional combat as in true Ranger operations.<sup>9</sup> This trend would continue throughout the campaigns in Sicily

and Italy. General Clark commented on the subject, stating that always chronically short of troops, he could not afford to hold special formations in reserve until suitable missions presented themselves.<sup>10</sup> Darby himself realized that the Rangers must become more versatile if they were to maintain their existence as an organization.<sup>11</sup> In an attempt to capitalize on the Ranger forces capabilities, a tactic was developed in which the Rangers infiltrated to seize key terrain in conjunction with a conventional attack. This tactic was successfully executed twice in Sicily, at the battles of Porto Empedocle and Butera.<sup>12</sup> These operations directly foreshadowed the use of the Ranger Force at Cisterna. Precedent had been set.

The final factor pertaining to misuse of the Ranger Force was the attitude of the leadership involved. General Clark, although he did not approve the plan, was “distressed to find that the 3d 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.”<sup>13</sup> General Clark ordered an investigation which, owing to the absence of so many of the participants, was inconclusive. The report on the operation stated, “Its failure was an incident of campaign contributed to by so many factors that it can be ascribed only to chance.”<sup>14</sup>

General Truscott, having been intimately involved with the Rangers since their inception, knew more about their capabilities and limitations than any other general officer. He had followed their initial training and deployment carefully and had controlled Ranger elements throughout the fighting in Sicily and Italy. He had contributed to the development of tactics which took advantage of the Rangers’ unique capabilities. “General Truscott continued to employ the Rangers in the manner for which



they had been trained—night attacks, surprise thrusts against enemy strongpoints, and silent assaults over difficult terrain.”<sup>15</sup>

But General Truscott was a conventional officer and an old school cavalry officer at that. He had only his brief experience as an observer and staff officer at the Combined Operations Headquarters to guide his use of the Rangers.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that he continued to use the Rangers as a highly trained infantry unit, in support of conventional operations. Born in combat, the Rangers and their leaders did not have the luxury of time to develop a doctrinal framework to guide their employment, and instead utilized the unit in conventional roles with which they were already familiar.

General Truscott adamantly defended the mission as a suitable one. He felt that luck and the enemy had been the downfall of the Rangers, not incompetence or misuse.

He related his confrontation with General Clark over the matter in his memoirs:

There was quite a flap when I reported to General Clark by telephone that night the loss of the Rangers. He came to see me the next morning and implied that they were unsuitable for such missions. I reminded him that I had been responsible for organizing the original Ranger battalion and that Colonel Darby and I perhaps understood their capabilities better than other American officers. He said no more. However General Clark feared unfavorable publicity, for he ordered an investigation to fix responsibility. That was wholly unnecessary for the responsibility was entirely my own, especially since both Colonel Darby and I considered the mission a proper one, which should have been well within the capabilities of these fine soldiers. That ended the matter.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly General Truscott was unambiguous in his opinion, and without doctrinal guidance, his view would carry the day.

The only one who could have challenged General Truscott’s use of the Rangers was their commander Colonel Bill Darby. But Colonel Darby and General Truscott had worked closely together since the inception of the Rangers and shared many of the same

attitudes. Darby himself was not a maverick or a specialist in unconventional operations. He was a West Pointer and an artillery officer, and most of his pre-war-time duties were unremarkable.<sup>18</sup> His meteoric rise in rank was due primarily to combat command abilities, not his time in grade or experience. After all, he was only a captain when appointed commander of the 1st Battalion.<sup>19</sup> Subsequently he was promoted to major in June 1942 and then to lieutenant colonel in August of that year.<sup>20</sup> He was a brilliant tactician, but had received no specific training in special operations prior to his involvement in the creation of the Rangers.

Consequently, Darby saw his Rangers as a highly trained infantry fighting force and not necessarily as specialists reserved for unique situations. He always referred to them, not as supermen, “but highly trained infantrymen.”<sup>21</sup> He also said, “With a combat record like this, some people think of the Rangers as supermen. This they are not. They don’t think of themselves as home run hitters or star quarterbacks. They are just garden-variety infantry foot soldiers, every one of them, young and willing to do a job. They train for weeks on one particular mission until they can do it blindfolded. Then they go out and do it at night against a real enemy.”<sup>22</sup>

Captain Ralph Ingersoll, a journalist, accompanied the Rangers at El Guettar and spent considerable time with Colonel Darby. He wrote that:

The Rangers are somewhat misunderstood young men. They are thought of as American Commandos. And, as the term *Commando* is popularly thought of, that would make them specialists in raiding enemy coastal defenses. Actually they are either more or less than that, depending on the point of view. They are simply specially trained infantrymen, the specialness of their training being its rigourousness. There is nothing that a *Commando* or a *Ranger* can do that an infantryman should not be able to do or which many infantrymen are not able to do. But the *Ranger* can simply do more of it and do it harder . . . . In the end, the *Ranger* turned out neither a special new kind of soldier—like a paratrooper—nor

a superman, as the feature stories would have him, but simply a close approximate to the ideal basic unit of any army—the perfectly trained infantryman.<sup>23</sup>

Although aware of the special characteristics of the Rangers, Colonel Darby continued to think of them as a conventional force with additional training and skills. Darby may also have downplayed the uniqueness of his Rangers, knowing the hostility towards elite formations inherent in the War Department and being without a higher headquarters to battle such hostility. Consequently, he seldom fought assignments as conventional infantry. These assignments often resulted in the Rangers confronting an enemy who controlled superior firepower.

As an artillery officer, Darby understood the importance of firepower and constantly sought new ways to increase the Rangers' organic capabilities. Following the North African campaign, he successfully lobbied to have the 83rd Chemical Warfare Battalion, a 4.2-inch mortar battalion, attached to the Rangers to increase their available indirect fire.<sup>24</sup> Experiences against Axis tanks at Gela convinced Darby that the Rangers needed some kind of organic AT asset, so he formed a cannon company consisting of four French 75millimeter guns mounted on half-tracks.<sup>25</sup> Ironically, the increased firepower may have contributed to the Rangers increased commitment to conventional roles. Increasing the Rangers' firepower undoubtedly increased their survivability in heavy combat, but also detracted from their unique role as a light assault force and made it more practical to use them in roles normally reserved for conventional infantry.

Finally, Colonel Darby never publicly decried the use of the Ranger Force at Cisterna. Based on the intelligence estimate, an infiltration of fragmented enemy lines against a thinly held town preceding a combined arms attack was perfectly feasible.

Indeed, similar missions were given to infantry battalions of the flanking regiments also.<sup>26</sup> The Rangers had achieved spectacular success in similar circumstances at El Guettar, Porto Empedocle, and Butera. Past experience and a commander's faith in his unit's abilities may well have blinded both Colonel Darby and General Truscott to the reality of the situation.

Ranger lore holds that Darby never felt comfortable about the mission and was even angry about the assignment. In particular, he was concerned about the limited time for preparation and reconnaissance.<sup>27</sup> However, he never voiced these concerns to General Truscott and never second guessed the decision following the battle. In fact, his own commentary agrees with the choice of mission. "The plan itself 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."<sup>28</sup>

Was the Ranger Force misused in the attack on Cisterna? Knowing the capabilities of the force and with an accurate knowledge of the enemy disposition, the answer can only be yes. However, given an inaccurate intelligence estimate, lack of doctrine guiding the use of Ranger units, precedence from previous battles, and the unfaltering string of successes previously enjoyed by the Rangers, it is unlikely that other commanders would have reached a different conclusion than Colonel Darby and General Truscott. Without a realistic doctrine or a higher headquarters capable of screening potential missions for suitability, it is likely that a Cisterna-like battle was unavoidable at some point in the war. American special operations were in their infancy, and difficult growing pains were to be expected. Given the command climate, available intelligence, and the operational situation, the mission was not unreasonable.

If the mission was an acceptable risk, why did it go so badly? Did the German forces detect the infiltration and deliberately ambush the Rangers? How could such a capable force utterly cease to exist?

The allegations of a German ambush have long been a part of the Cisterna myth. Some of the Ranger veterans felt that the German reaction was too strong and well coordinated to be a simple counterattack. But the strongest support for the ambush theory comes from two associated documents. The first of these is an interrogation report of a young Polish private captured near Cisterna. In it, he claims to have tried to warn the troops not to enter the town because the Germans were on both flanks. He claimed to know the plan of the battalion commander, which was to “withdraw hurriedly through the town, as though they were forced to give ground, they were to fire all weapons including AT guns just to make it look as real as possible. They were then to move to both flanks of the town and await orders to counter attack with the purpose of cutting off all troops, which had followed up the withdrawal.”<sup>29</sup>

The second document is Captain Charles Shunstrom’s report written for Colonel Darby following Captain Shustrom’s escape after the battle. In it he interprets the enemy’s tactics as a prepared ambush. He bases this assumption on the fact that the Rangers encountered prepared but unoccupied positions leading up to the town while the Germans made maximum effective use of the terrain and camouflage.<sup>30</sup>

On the face of it, these documents seem very damning, but further investigation downplays their importance. Firstly, it is unknown how a Polish private pressed into German service was given a battalion plan. Secondly, he states that this was only a battalion plan, and not a coordinated trap. Thirdly, the report is dated 5 February 1944.

There is no indication of when the prisoner was seized. Since he warns the soldiers not to enter the town, it is reasonable to assume that he was seized prior to the attack at 0100 hours on 30 January 1944. The attack wasn't planned until 28 January 1944, giving a window of approximately 24-36 hours for the Germans to discover the planned attack, devise the ambush strategy, disseminate a complex plan and then for the Polish private to be captured. While possible, this chain of events is unlikely.

Close examination of Captain Shunstrom's report will reveal discrepancies in it also. The report was not written until 10 July 1944, somewhat removing its immediacy. He claims in his report that Rangers attacking the flanks met "stiff resistance," but that those attacking toward the center of town met no resistance until reaching a position approximately 800 yards short of the objective.<sup>31</sup> Yet Captain Shunstrom was in no position to observe the initial contact because he was attempting to correct a break in contact between the 1st and the 3rd Ranger Battalions. The battle was significantly developed and very confused before he was able to work his way to the forward elements.<sup>32</sup> The elements Captain Shunstrom used to identify the ambush tactic, use of terrain and camouflage, are also key elements of prepared defensive positions, as are alternate and supplementary fighting positions which remain empty until needed. Finally, it must be noted that Captain Shunstrom's report was submitted with a copy of the Prisoner Of War report attached. It is highly likely that Captain Shunstrom incorporated the information in the Prisoner Of War report when writing his own, in an attempt to include the latest information in his account.

German sources make no mention of a deliberate ambush or a trap. The German operations report for 30 January 1944 states only that the anticipated large-scale attack

had begun and that “The first attack force made several penetrations, which were repulsed by local counter attacks. Enemy units which advanced to Cisterna were destroyed.”<sup>33</sup> Specific targeting of the Rangers based on their previous employment may also be discounted, since the Rangers are not even mentioned in the German intelligence summaries until 31 January 1944.<sup>34</sup>

The German tactics are described in an order from the Fourteenth Army to subordinate units: “Only a battle position based on the system of strong points and supplemented by a system of tank defense is capable of breaking up a large scale attack by the enemy. Penetrations cannot be avoided, but a breakthrough must be prevented.”<sup>35</sup> Such a system of strongpoints leaves gaps that can be exploited by a skillful opponent. The German situation map for 26 January 1944 clearly shows a 3,500-meter gap between strong points, directly on the route used by the infiltrating Ranger Force (see figure 5). Yet, far from being in the enemy’s rear once through this gap, the infiltrating Rangers would next encounter the built up defenses of the German MLR, running directly through Cisterna.

The lightly armed, unsupported Rangers would therefore be caught at daylight in prepared engagement areas by Germans in dug-in defensive positions with interlocking fields of fire. A frontal attack in such conditions is nearly impossible to complete. Once the attack had been blunted, the vaunted German counter attack would close in to complete the destruction. One German commander recalls, “To check a force of Rangers who had thrust into the positions held by a neighboring company, I launched a counter-attack at one of their flanks, thus cutting off a large number of Americans from their unit. About 4-500 Americans fell into our hands. However, others had escaped and entrenched

themselves in surrounding farms. They surrendered after a heroic stand.”<sup>36</sup> A German squad leader noted that: “We had no details about the direction of the thrust, as the operation was primarily aimed at keeping the enemy from outflanking us.”<sup>37</sup> If a Polish private had been informed of an ambush plan, one would think that a company commander and a squad leader would also. A German trap is unlikely given the testimony of those involved in the fighting.

Many of Captain Shunstrom’s fellow Rangers had no doubt that the infiltration was a success. Ranger Ken Markham was the lead scout during the movement and believes the infiltration was a complete success. “There is no one who can make me believe the German let us slip by. We could have killed them at any time. I think we did an excellent job of bypassing the enemy without their knowledge.”<sup>38</sup> Carl Lehmann, from his position farther back in the column, is even more emphatic. “I reject the assertions of half a dozen historians—most of who were in swaddling when our ramps went down—that it was an ambush. The Kraut yelling firing orders surely did not know we were there, nor did those we killed rolling out of their blankets”<sup>39</sup>

Clearly, based upon the facts of the battle and the testimony of those involved, the possibility of a German trap may be ruled out. The plan referred to by the Polish private would have been part of a local commander’s defensive plan, and not some grand conspiracy to annihilate the Ranger Force. Captain Shunstrom undoubtedly tried to provide as accurate a report as possible and so would have incorporated additional information and sources such as the POW report, which he attached. His description of the “ambush” all too accurately describes the plight of a force caught in front of a meticulously prepared defensive position. Unfortunately, later historians would take these



two statements at face value without comparing them to German sources or to the reconstructed German situation maps. Additionally, the ambush theory is an emotionally satisfying response to the loss of the gallant Ranger Force.

Donald Taggart summed it up best in his *History of the Third Infantry Division in World War II*: “The tactics [infiltration] used were not those best adapted to the attack on a numerous enemy, well dug in on a more or less continuous line. Later beachhead operations showed that these defenses could be penetrated only by overwhelming them from the front in a series of violent, carefully coordinated attacks against forward positions. Elements which infiltrate the forward positions are apt to find themselves cut off without succor, because, to reach them, other troops have to attack and eliminate the intervening defenses anyhow.”<sup>40</sup> The Rangers were not ambushed, but their infiltration tactics were not suited for use against the prepared defensive positions of the Germans.

The third theory contends that the Ranger Force embarked on the mission with degraded capabilities, due to the large number of replacements in the ranks. This theory holds that the replacements lack of training and experience resulted in the compromise of the infiltrating force, which the Germans swiftly cut off and annihilated. While the training and experience level of the new Rangers was certainly not equal to that of the veterans, they acquitted themselves well during the battle and no evidence exists that the infiltration was compromised. In fact, accurate assessment of the facts shows that the infiltration corridor used was not detected and remained open and exposed for some hours following the Ranger infiltration.

The fighting in Sicily and Italy had taken a severe toll on the Ranger Force prior to the Anzio landing. Colonel Darby, in a 1944 lecture, estimated that after the Sicilian

campaign, “The 1st and 4th Battalions were about 40% understrength and the 3rd was 50% understrength.”<sup>41</sup> These casualties were replaced, but when the units were again consolidated to prepare for the Anzio invasion, Darby estimated another forty percent had become casualties.<sup>42</sup> Several historians have contended that the Rangers faced a “decline in the unit’s combat skills resulting from the dilution of a well-trained, extremely cohesive unit by less well-trained replacements for those original members who had become casualties.”<sup>43</sup> Such a decline was unavoidable, given the circumstances, but did it directly contribute to the disaster at Cisterna?

Following the Sicilian campaign, some time was available for the training of replacements prior to the landings in Italy. But once the Rangers were committed to combat in Italy, unit attrition continued unabated while there was no time available to train the replacement volunteers. “Lacking a system to ensure a flow of specially trained replacements, each battalion detached an officer and a few enlisted men to remain in the rear and select and train volunteers for Ranger duty, but this improvised arrangement provided only a limited amount of time in which to train recruits. Thus, the quality of the battalions declined as veteran casualties were replaced by enthusiastic but inadequately trained personnel.”<sup>44</sup>

The best examples of this decline can be seen in an examination of an amphibious exercise conducted by the Ranger Force on 17 January 1944 as part of the 3rd Infantry Division’s rehearsal for Anzio. Several mistakes were noted by the senior observer. The 1st Ranger Battalion was criticized for bunching up, excessive noise, and failure to establish local security. The 3rd Ranger Battalion performed better, but still failed to disperse its landing craft adequately. The 4th Ranger Battalion moved on a road without

an advance guard and failed to conduct reconnaissance of possible ambush sites. All three battalions made the novice mistake of moving at night under flare light, needlessly exposing themselves to possible enemy action.<sup>45</sup> Actions would have been taken by veterans to correct these mistakes, but it is reasonable to assume that not all deficiencies were corrected prior to the Anzio landings four days later.

The Ranger Force which began the infiltration on 30 January 1944 was less well trained than it had been in the past. The level of inexperience undoubtedly contributed to the breaks in contact suffered by the force just short of their objective. However, the evidence clearly suggests that the infiltration was undetected and successful up to the point that contact was initiated.

Ken Markham remembers bypassing a German gun battery about three thousand yards into the infiltration.<sup>46</sup> The German battery continued to fire as the Rangers passed by, close enough to hear the fire commands.<sup>47</sup> Frank Mattivi remembers, “We heard these Jerries: you could hear them talking. We kind of scooted by them.”<sup>48</sup> Carl Lehmann remembers, “That Kraut screaming firing orders at his artillery battery, which grew in volumn (sic) from a whisper to a loud screech then faded to a whisper again as we passed in the Potano.”<sup>49</sup> Ranger Luckhurst, a member of the lead squad, helped deal with German sentries as the Rangers moved up the Potano ditch. “We went up the trail and whenever we found a Kraut that was close to the trail or showed signs of being awake, well, you know. We dispatched them.”<sup>50</sup>

The Ranger Force also initially achieved surprise once contact was initiated. Ranger Markham, the lead scout, found himself in “a bivouac area for what seemed to be a whole division.”<sup>51</sup> Carl Lehmann’s group “leapt into and sped through a Kraut bivouac

(a hasty one for sure, because there were no tents or foxholes—just men asleep in their blankets) as the Germans, startled awake by the shells, were rolling out of their blankets and running away hands up with us shooting them back and front.”<sup>52</sup> Gustave Schunemann believes “we caught them asleep in the trenches.”<sup>53</sup> Another telling incident that indicates a successful infiltration was T/5 Gilbert’s field telephone conversation in a German command post as told in chapter 3.<sup>54</sup>

Another indication that the Ranger Force was successful in their infiltration, despite training deficiencies, is the lack of success enjoyed by the other two infiltrating battalions. The division plan called for the infantry regiments flanking the Ranger Force, the 7th and the 15th, to infiltrate one battalion each starting at H-Hour, to be followed up with general attacks by armor and infantry.<sup>55</sup> These two battalions met resistance almost from the line of departure and their infiltrations rapidly devolved into a fight for survival. The 1st Battalion, 7th Infantry was designated to infiltrate to Highway 7 northwest of Cisterna, but by late morning had only advanced 1000 yards and was engaged on three sides.<sup>56</sup> By the end of the day, the battalion would be reduced to only 150 effectives.<sup>57</sup> The 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry, faced similar problems to the east of the Ranger Force, battling for every yard from the line of departure. By nightfall they had only advanced 2000 yards.<sup>58</sup> By 1 February 1944, after three days of fighting, the battalion would have only eighteen to twenty men left in each company.<sup>59</sup>

It is highly unlikely that the German commanders would have allowed the two battalions of the Ranger Force to penetrate their lines without opposition while engaging the other two battalions almost immediately. The German reaction to infiltrating units is demonstrated by the fate of a platoon of the 3rd Reconnaissance Troop. This platoon,

consisting of forty-three men and their reconnaissance jeeps, were detailed to outpost the road behind the Ranger Force advance.<sup>60</sup> Losing contact with the Ranger Force during the infiltration, the platoon overtook the Rangers on the Conca road. Detected and trapped by the Germans, the platoon was captured within hearing distance of MAJ Dobson and the Ranger Force hiding in the Potano ditch.<sup>61</sup> Only one man escaped.

By far the most convincing evidence that the Ranger Force infiltrated undetected is the fact that the route remained open for hours after the battle began. With the 4th Ranger Battalion attack stalled at Femina Morta, the 3rd Battalion, 15th Infantry, was unable to launch its planned attack. On General Truscott's order, the battalion, augmented with tanks and tank destroyers, swung to the east and followed the Ranger Force infiltration route in an effort to reinforce them.<sup>62</sup> After the surrender of the Rangers in Cisterna, the battalion was ordered to attack Isola Bella in an effort to break the deadlock on the Conca road. "Under cover of a heavy concentration of smoke and shells laid down on the village, the battalion found a gap in the enemy defenses and filtered across the bloody fields."<sup>63</sup> By noon the 3rd Battalion, 15th Infantry, had seized Isola Bella. A coordinated attack with the 4th Ranger Battalion that afternoon succeeded in reducing the strongpoint at Femina Morta. The Rangers' infiltration route was still open almost twelve hours after the start of the infiltration.

The Rangers' performance during the battle itself is remarkable, and no aspersion can be cast on the behavior of the replacements. Eyewitness accounts credit the lightly armed Rangers with destroying at least fifteen armored vehicles during the engagement.<sup>64</sup> Even their enemies paid homage to the ferocity of the battle. One German credited the Rangers with "a heroic stand," and another relates that after the two-day battle for

Cisterna, “These [German] successes were dearly paid for as of a 750-man force, only 52 survived.”<sup>65</sup> One German soldier poetically remembered Cisterna as “Blood soaked fields and harvests of steel.”<sup>66</sup> There can be no question of the fighting abilities of the Ranger Force during their final battle.

The effect of the battle was felt immediately, as the Germans were forced to throw into the fight their units which had been saved for the upcoming counterattack. The German operations report for 31 January 1944 relates that “the bulk of our own forces, including those which had been withheld for our planned offensive, were now committed in the defense of the front. Consequently, the offensive for the annihilation of the enemy had been postponed.”<sup>67</sup> Later on the report noted, “The enemy has suffered heavily, but our own losses have also been high. We are not certain whether the forces, at our disposal, will be sufficient to drive the enemy into the sea.”<sup>68</sup>

This evidence demonstrates that the Ranger infiltration was successful. The initial surprise achieved, the failure of other infiltrating units, and the continued existence of a gap in the German defenses clearly indicate a successful infiltration. A lack of Ranger skill can only be discerned by the breaks in contact among the infiltrating units. Such breaks are far from uncommon in such circumstances, even among well-trained units. At worst, these breaks slowed the Ranger advance and resulted in initial contact with the German MLR at dawn rather than in darkness. Although a night attack would have been advantageous to the Ranger Force, it is unlikely that such an event would have resulted in a different outcome, given the German defensive preparations and their overwhelming numerical superiority.

The final theory places the blame for the battle squarely on the failure of Allied intelligence to correctly discern German troop strength and disposition. Intelligence estimates of the German reaction to the Anzio invasion were woefully inaccurate. The Germans were able to move great numbers of troops quickly, despite Allied air interdiction attempts. In addition to underestimating German troop strength, the true intelligence failure lay with incorrectly assessing German dispositions and intent. This failure directly led to the commitment of the Ranger Force to a plan of action that was doomed to fail.

The 3rd Division G-2 Estimate of the Situation used for the Cisterna battle portrayed an enemy force against which an infiltration supported by a combined arms attack stood a high probability of success. It identified the units facing the 3rd Infantry Division as the Hermann Goering Division augmented with a scattering of units from larger formations.<sup>69</sup> It correctly identified a line of outposts southwest of Cisterna. It also identified a defensive line, interpreted as an Outpost Defensive Line (OPLR), along the railroad track and in Cisterna. But it asserted that his MLR would “undoubtedly be found on true high ground both east and west of Velletri” designed to “keep us off Colli Laziali and Highway 6.”<sup>70</sup> This would place the German MLR more than 6 miles north and east of Cisterna.

The estimate went on to state that the enemy’s attitude was entirely defensive and that his “immediate situation with respect to tanks and artillery is not too good.”<sup>71</sup> Consequently, German reaction to threatened areas was expected to be “counterattacks by small units including two or three tanks,” while his larger weapon systems would be concentrated on usable roads.<sup>72</sup> It did recognize the possibility that elements of the 356th

Division, the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, and the 26th Panzer Grenadier Division might be earmarked to arrive at the beachhead, but stressed the opinion that such units would be fed into the line piecemeal and not be committed en masse. It also stated that “Even if he were to do so, it is likely that the division’s proximity to the line would be discovered by air reconnaissance, Prisoner Of War or civilian reports before the counterattack could be delivered.”<sup>73</sup> It also noted the possibility of encountering a newly-formed parachute division, but reiterated the most likely mission for these additional units would be “to prepare and man defenses on the MLR rather than be used in a counter attack against the beachhead.”<sup>74</sup>

The estimate continued by assessing the recent perceived deterioration of the German troop quality, particularly at the squad and platoon level. This deterioration, combined with a generally defensive rather than offensive mind-set, seemed to offer an opportunity for an audacious strike to achieve considerable success. “For this reason, our own actions, if carried through with particular vigor and firmness, whether in attacking or defending, may enable us to attain successes which would not have been possible against old-type, all-German formations.”<sup>75</sup> Such enemy situations mirror those in which previous Ranger infiltration missions had achieved success, most notably at Djebel el Ank and Porto Empedocle.

The estimate concluded on an optimistic note regarding future enemy actions. “To sum up, it does not now seem probable that the enemy will soon deliver a major counter attack involving units of division size; on the other hand, the enemy will probably resort to delaying action coupled with small-scale counterattacks in an effort to grind us to a standstill, as on the Cassino Line.”<sup>76</sup> Against the enemy described, the 3rd Division plan



would have had a good chance of success. Alas, the true situation was substantially different.

Field Marshal Kesselring, the German commander in Italy, had reacted with lightning speed to the Anzio invasion. He immediately ordered elements of the 4th Parachute Division, the Hermann Goering Division, the 715th Division, the 114th Division, and three divisions of the Fourteenth Army to begin moving to Anzio.<sup>77</sup> This would take time however, as these units would deploy from all over Europe. Nonetheless, the Germans moved quickly, establishing ad hoc formations as units arrived and stabilizing their defensive lines. By 24 January 1944, Kesselring was confident he could contain any immediate breakout and began planning a counterattack to annihilate the beachhead. When the Fourteenth Army headquarters arrived to take command of the defense on 25 January 1944, elements of eight different divisions were in place at Anzio while five more divisions were enroute to the threatened position.<sup>78</sup> By D+7, 29 January 1944, German strength surrounding the beachhead had swelled to 70,000.<sup>79</sup>

The Fourteenth Army began planning a counterattack to annihilate the beachhead. The original date for the attack was 28 January 1944, but was postponed until 1 February 1944 so that reinforcements would be available.<sup>80</sup> The attack would consist of three prongs, Combat Group Pfeiffer in the north, Combat Group Graser in the center, and Combat Group Conrad, in the south. Combat Group Conrad would launch its attack from Cisterna in order to penetrate to the Astura creek to the west.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, the Ranger Force would attack right into Combat Group Conrad.

Combat Group Conrad was composed of elements of the Hermann Goering Panzer Division and the 114th Infantry Division, giving it a total of four infantry

battalions in addition to its organic tanks and self-propelled guns. It received substantial fire support assets, also, to include thirty-two 15-centimeter guns, forty-two 10.5-centimeter guns, and three 10-centimeter guns, while it received eleven 8.8-centimeter, nine 3.7-centimeter, and thirty-one 2-centimeter antiaircraft guns.<sup>82</sup> It must be remembered that this combat group was organizing for the planned counterattack while the MLR was held by other units of a Parachute Division. During the battle, the Hermann Goering Division would be reinforced by elements of the 114th Jager Division as well as those of the 26th Panzer Division, which was located to the north as part of Combat Group Glaser.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, the Ranger Force faced roughly three to four times the estimated enemy strength. Additionally, these were not ad hoc units with low morale, but were crack veterans picked to spearhead the planned counterattack. Against such a force, the lightly armed Rangers had no chance of success. But was this truly an intelligence failure, or were the Allies simply outmaneuvered by Field Marshal Kesselring?

The tell-tale signs of the German intentions and buildup were available, even to the harried division staff engaged in the day-to-day fighting of the battle. Unfortunately the information was never consolidated and never given in packaged form to the commanders who would ultimately make the decisions. Such a situation is truly a failure.

Allied intelligence efforts consistently underestimated the German strength buildup facing the beachhead. The VI Corps G-2 report for 26 January 1944 estimated enemy strength at approximately three divisions.<sup>84</sup> It stated that the maximum strength of all units capable of reinforcing the Anzio front would only amount to four divisions. In

actuality, the Germans had elements of eight divisions present and five more on the way.<sup>85</sup>

Allied intelligence had indications that a German buildup was in progress. The VI Corps G-2 report for 29 January 1944 contained reports of vehicles traveling the highways quickly, with headlights on, in spite of Allied bombings. Analysis of this phenomena concluded that: "This would indicate the haste in which the enemy is moving equipment and men to oppose our beachhead."<sup>86</sup> The same report indicated that "motor movements, new arty locations and increased activity on the NW flank of the beachhead . . . indicate that the enemy may be reinforcing the NW flank with a view to future offensive action."<sup>87</sup> The VI Corps G-2 report for 30 January 1944 continued the pattern, citing "heavy traffic" and "great activity" on the German controlled highways.<sup>88</sup> The same report also noted that "the Rome marshalling yards are full indicating that the enemy is definitely bringing reserves into the area from the N to oppose the Anzio front."<sup>89</sup>

The Allies obviously were aware of a German buildup. General Clark admits knowing about the German reinforcement orders from the beginning, due to the excellent Ultra intelligence available.<sup>90</sup> How would the increasing German strength be utilized? The Allies were aware of Kesselring's plan to "push them into the sea" along with Hitler's directive to "remove the abscess" south of Rome.<sup>91</sup> Clearly a counterattack was in the offing, but where would it fall?

Again, proper analysis would have indicated that Cisterna was a suitable site from which to launch such an attack. The VI Corps G-2 report for 26 January 1944 correctly outlined German options. It listed three possible jumping off points for a counterattack:

Cisterna, Albano, and Velletri. It analyzed each course of action and concluded that the Albano axis was the most likely, closely followed by the Cisterna axis. The analysis concluded with the warning that: "In view of the above considerations, capability a. [to hold the Southern front with minimum forces while concentrating all available troops opposite our beachhead in order to launch a counteroffensive to drive us into the sea] is favored at this time, with simultaneous counterattacks from Albano-Anzio and Cisterna-Anzio a very strong possibility."<sup>92</sup> This is almost exactly what the Germans planned for 1 February 1944.

The Allies knew the German buildup was in progress and had even correctly anticipated the location of the planned attacks. Yet, for whatever reason, this knowledge was not pushed down to the level where it could have impacted the Cisterna mission. Instead, the 3rd Infantry Division estimate concluded that the attack would face elements of one division and that "it does not now seem probable that the enemy will soon deliver a major counter attack involving units of division size."<sup>93</sup>

Even without this information, the 3rd Infantry G-2 should have known that considerable defensive positions would be encountered in the Cisterna area. As early as 27 January 1944 patrols from the 30th Infantry detected enemy digging in along the railroad track west of Cisterna.<sup>94</sup> Previous attacks to seize the town had been sharply rebuffed. Enemy strongpoints were encountered along the major roads and patrols on 28 and 29 January 1944 revealed more dug-in positions in the vicinity.<sup>95</sup>

Examination of a map reveals that Cisterna is key terrain, controlling five major roads, as well as the railroad track. Any experienced commander would see it as an area that must be defended, and in fact, strong pointed. The Germans would have left such a

position lightly defended only under the severest manpower constraints. All indications pointed towards a hardened defense, and possibly the German MLR. The Allied failure to identify it as such directly led to the optimistically false assumption that an infiltration into the town would be successful.

Given the 3rd Infantry Division's intelligence estimate, the division attack plan was reasonable. The failure of that estimate to take into consideration the German strength build-up, the possibility of a counterattack force in the area, and the key importance of Cisterna in the German defensive plan is not reasonable. The inclusion of any one of these factors may have been enough to make General Truscott or Colonel Darby question the plan. Including all three of them would surely have resulted in a different plan.

Examination of the facts sheds light on the various theories regarding the battle of Cisterna. The evidence shows that while the Ranger Force might have been misused, this misuse was probably inevitable given the lack of doctrine regarding their use. The established precedent and their leaders' absolute faith in the Rangers to accomplish any mission made the infiltration at Cisterna appear to be a viable course of action. Only a higher headquarters with approved doctrinal criteria would have been capable of screening such missions under the circumstances. The Germans were aware of an impending attack on Cisterna, but no ambush was planned or executed. Indeed, the evidence is quite to the contrary, as the attack was stronger than the Germans anticipated and resulted in postponement of their planned counterattack. The degraded experience level of the Ranger replacements contributed to the breaks in contact during movement, but did not result in the compromise of the infiltration and had little impact on the battle's

final outcome. The facts show that the majority of the blame for the disaster at Cisterna lies with the Allied intelligence failure to determine the German troop strength, unit disposition, and defensive plans.

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<sup>1</sup>David W. Hogan, *Raiders or Elite Infantry* (Westwood, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), 14.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>6</sup>James Ladd, *Commandos And Rangers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 251.

<sup>7</sup>Michael J. King, *Rangers: Selected Combat Operations In World War II* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, 1985), 14.

<sup>8</sup>Hogan, 37.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>12</sup>Robert W. Black, *Rangers In World War II* (New York: Ivy Books, 1992), 98, 100.

<sup>13</sup>King, 39.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>Jerome J. Haggerty, "A History of the Ranger Battalions of World War II" (Dissertation, New York: Fordham University, 1982), 149.

<sup>16</sup>Black, 8.

<sup>17</sup>L. K. Truscott Jr., *Command Missions* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1954), 314.

- <sup>18</sup>Michael J. King, *William Orlando Darby: A Military Biography* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1981), 18.
- <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.
- <sup>20</sup>Black, 14.
- <sup>21</sup>William O. Darby and William H. Baumer, *We Led the Way* (New York: Jove Books, 1985), 53.
- <sup>22</sup>Mary Pat Kelly, *Home Away From Home* (Belfast, Ireland: Appletree Press, 1994), 91-92.
- <sup>23</sup>Ralph Ingersoll, *The Battle Is the Payoff* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943), 125-126.
- <sup>24</sup>King, *Rangers*. 21.
- <sup>25</sup>Hogan, 41.
- <sup>26</sup>Donald G. Taggart, *History of the Third Infantry Division In World War II*, (Nashville, Tennessee: The Battery Press, 1987), 114.
- <sup>27</sup>Black, 156-157.
- <sup>28</sup>Darby, Baumer, 179.
- <sup>29</sup>V Army Headquarters. "G-2 Section IPW Special Report" (United States Military Academy Library, Archives, West Point, NY), 9 March 1944, 1.
- <sup>30</sup>Report of Action. Captain Charles M. Shunston. "Capture of the First and Third Ranger Battalions" (United States Military Academy Library, Archives, West Point, NY), 10 July 1944, 2-3.
- <sup>31</sup>*Ibid.* 3.
- <sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.
- <sup>33</sup>United States War Department, German Military Document Section. "The German Operation At Anzio" (Camp Ritchie, Maryland: GMDS, 1946), 21 (hereafter cited as GMDS).
- <sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.
- <sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.
- <sup>36</sup>Jean-Yves Nasse, *Green Devils* (Paris, France: Histoires & Collections, 1997), 116.

- <sup>37</sup>Ibid., 117.
- <sup>38</sup>Kenneth Markham, “My Version of the Landing At Anzio” (Monograph, Undated. Author’s collection), 2.
- <sup>39</sup>Patrick K. O’Donnell, *Beyond Valor* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 90.
- <sup>40</sup>Taggart, 118.
- <sup>41</sup>Jerome J. Haggerty, “A History of the Ranger Battalions of World War II” (Ph.D. Dissertation: Fordham University, New York, 1982), 162.
- <sup>42</sup>Darby, Baumer, 157.
- <sup>43</sup>King, *Rangers*. 29.
- <sup>44</sup>Hogan, 42.
- <sup>45</sup>King, *Rangers*. 31.
- <sup>46</sup>O’Donnell, 89.
- <sup>47</sup>Ibid., 90.
- <sup>48</sup>Ibid., 92.
- <sup>49</sup>Carl Lehmann, electronic message to author. Fort Lewis, WA, 31 Aug 2001. (Author’s collection).
- <sup>50</sup>J. B. Luckhurst, Oral interview by the author, 20 May 2001. (Author’s collection).
- <sup>51</sup>O’Donnell. 89.
- <sup>52</sup>Ibid., 90.
- <sup>53</sup>Gustave E. Schunemann, “Memoirs of a Ranger” (Monograph, Undated. Author’s collection). 8.
- <sup>54</sup>Clarence R. Meltesen, *After the Battle . . . Ranger Evasion and Escape* (San Francisco: Oflag 64 Press, 1997), 24.
- <sup>55</sup>Taggart, 114.
- <sup>56</sup>Ibid., 119.
- <sup>57</sup>Ibid.



<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 116.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 120.

<sup>60</sup>John Bowditch, *Anzio Beachhead* (Washington, DC: United States Army Center of Military History, 1990), 30.

<sup>61</sup>Meltesen, 20.

<sup>62</sup>Bowditch, 30.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Meltesen, 22.

<sup>65</sup>Nasse, 116.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 117.

<sup>67</sup>GMDS, “The German Operation At Anzio” (Camp Ritchie, Maryland: GMDS, 1946), 22.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>3rd Infantry Division. “Annex 2 to Field Order 3” (Combined Arms Research Library, Archives, Fort Leavenworth, KS), 29 January 1944, 1.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>Martin Blumenson, *Anzio* (Norwalk, Connecticut: Easton Press, 1963), 82.

<sup>78</sup>Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, *Anzio: The Massacre At The Beachhead* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), 58.

<sup>79</sup>Bowditch, 21.

<sup>80</sup>GMDS, “The German Operation At Anzio” (Camp Ritchie, Maryland: GMDS, 1946), 19.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>84</sup>VI Corps Headquarters, “G-2 Report No. 120” (Combined Arms Research Library, Archives, Fort Leavenworth, KS), 26 January 1944, 1.

<sup>85</sup>Vaughan-Thomas, 58.

<sup>86</sup>VI Corps Headquarters, “G-2 Report No. 123” (Combined Arms Research Library, Archives, Fort Leavenworth, KS), 29 January 1944, 3.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>VI Corps Headquarters, “G-2 Report No. 124” (Combined Arms Research Library, Archives, Fort Leavenworth, KS), 30 January 1944, 4.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>90</sup>Ronald Lewin, *Ultra Goes to War*, (Norwalk, Connecticut: Easton Press, 1999), 285.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

<sup>92</sup>VI Corps Headquarters, “G-2 Report No. 120” (Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, KS), 26 January 1944, 2.

<sup>93</sup>3rd Infantry Division, “Annex 2 to Field Order 3” (Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, KS), 29 January 1944, 2.

<sup>94</sup>Taggart, 112.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 114.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The battle of Cisterna and the destruction of the Ranger Force serve as a dramatic demonstration of what can happen when units are poorly used against a thinking, aggressive enemy. A lack of coherent doctrine combined with an inaccurate intelligence picture resulted in the loss of one of the most effective combat units in the Mediterranean theatre. The US Army has taken steps to correct these deficiencies through the creation of special operations headquarters, well defined doctrine for the use of special operations units, and increased intelligence capabilities to assist the commander. But, given the conventional operating environment and the stated goals of future development for the Army, the potential still exists for a similar disaster if we do not heed the lessons of the past.

Perceiving the need for light infantry units capable of supporting special operations, the Army reactivated the 1st and 2nd Ranger Battalions in 1974.<sup>1</sup> The 3rd Ranger Battalion was activated in 1984, and a headquarters element under the 1st Special Operations Command, the 75th Ranger Regiment, was activated in 1986.<sup>2</sup> Colonel Darby's efforts to secure a higher headquarters to support and control the Ranger Battalions finally bore fruit more than forty years after his death. Now, even though Ranger units are habitually deployed under Army component command or Joint Task Force control, they have supporting headquarters at the regimental and component command levels capable of screening mission acceptability and protecting the forces from misuse.

Additionally, the Army has developed coherent doctrine to guide the use of its special operations forces. The current doctrine for the use of Ranger units is detailed in Field Manual 7-85. It distinctly outlines the capabilities and limitations of Ranger units, giving doctrinal guidelines for a commander who may not have a clear understanding of how such units may best be utilized. It details specific Ranger capabilities such as infiltration, exfiltration, raids, strike operations to seize key terrain, and short duration reconnaissance.<sup>3</sup> It further clarifies the inherent limitations of such units, to include: limited capability against armored or motorized units, no organic transport, limited sustained combat and indirect fire capability, no casualty evacuation capability, and the extended reconstitution and retraining needed to replace combat losses.<sup>4</sup>

Doctrine is the synthesis of theory, history, and practice. The current doctrine details the lessons learned from past Ranger missions in considering the employment of such units. It stresses the fact that Ranger units should only be used against targets and under conditions that require their unique capabilities. It further cautions commanders against assigning missions that can be accomplished by other means or conventional units.

Such considerations can be applied to all special operations units and to any other unit with specialized or limited capabilities. The new Stryker Brigade concept is a case in point. The Army must develop and distribute a coherent doctrine for the use of these units, so that commanders do not misuse or waste such unique assets. Commanders and their staffs must be educated on the employment considerations for such units. The current use of liaisons helps facilitate a thorough understanding of the capabilities and limitations of these elements.

But doctrine is not a set of concrete rules given from on high. It must continually be developed and improved, based on actual usage and employment. The development process must include the opportunity for doctrine to evolve in response to battlefield conditions. The lessons of the past must be integrated into that doctrine, or they will be repeated with disastrous results. Doctrine is only fully operational when it has been confirmed by practical application, and then it must be continually reviewed and amended in accordance with changes in technology, society, and enemy nature or tactics. Field Manual 7-85 includes a warning which every veteran of the Cisterna battle would heartily endorse: “Decision-makers must consider the enemy’s strength in the area, his intentions, his ability to reinforce or to alter the target area, and the consequences of success or failure.”<sup>5</sup>

The failure of the 3rd Division staff to do this at Cisterna was the major factor in the destruction of the Ranger Force. Intelligence preparation has always had a tremendous impact on the battlefield, and will be even more important in the future as we transform the Army into a smaller, more versatile organization. The conventional operating environment places an increased demand on commanders to refine their information requirements. Consequently, their staffs must leverage information systems and filter massive amounts of input to meet those requirements.

The Army vision for its future, as outlined in the Army *White Paper*, sees this capability as essential for the conduct of combat operations. It proudly describes an army that will “see first, understand first, act first, and finish decisively.”<sup>6</sup> It describes an army that uses advanced technologies and information systems to employ decisive force and conduct simultaneous, non-contiguous, distributed operations.<sup>7</sup> The “see first” principle

requires a force that utilizes unprecedented intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance assets to detect, identify and track individual enemy elements. The “understand first” principle describes a shared comprehension of the operational environment at all levels that allows the army to understand the enemy’s intention and anticipate his future actions. The “act first” principle then allows commanders to utilize this situational dominance to engage the enemy at the most opportune time and place, rather than reacting to enemy actions.<sup>8</sup>

Such a capability would almost guarantee victory. But this viewpoint fails to take into consideration some of the very elements that resulted in the disaster at Cisterna. The broad range of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets required to achieve this common operating picture are currently achievable only through stovepipe applications. The various systems are tremendously capable and provide needed capabilities, but they do not have the ability to connect and share information. The stated aim of utilizing networked ground, air, and space sensors may be achievable in the future, but is not likely in the near term, especially given the recent trend of rapid advances in technology. Operating systems may well be superseded by new technologies before they are fully fielded. Given the past experiences of integrating new technologies in the Army, it is unlikely that a fully integrated array of systems will be available in the near future. The US Army must continue to take advantage of its asymmetric advantage in information, but it must remain cautious about relying on such a capability.

Even if such an integrated array were available, the amount of information available would be overwhelming. A commander would still require a staff to process, collate, and filter the available information to provide the intelligence required to make

timely and accurate decisions. The human element will still be the weak link in the chain. Simply having the information available does not guarantee success. Ample information on the German buildup was available to the 3rd Division staff, but they failed to interpret it correctly or to inform the appropriate commanders, whom may have realized the implications.

The increased intelligence capabilities outlined in the Army *White Paper* are admirable goals which will assist the future commander in combat operations. Any increased capability in this area will make the Army more efficient and capable. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this will be 100 percent effective, especially when a thinking enemy targets these capabilities and looks for ways to circumvent or to use them against us. As our area of operations becomes more dispersed and our enemy more asymmetric, it may be necessary to fight for information, rather than simply collecting it. It is unlikely that Clausewitz's "fog and friction" of war will disappear from the future battlefield. The very nature of an adaptive, thinking opponent ensures that some measure of uncertainty will remain, despite our attempts to control this aspect of warfare.

The role of the Ranger Force at the battle of Cisterna provides important examples on the use of special operations forces and the accurate assessment of intelligence information. The development of doctrine and the education of commanders are crucial to the effective use of special operations units. The effective collection, analysis, and distribution of accurate intelligence are also essential to success on the battlefield. The bravery and sacrifice of the Ranger Force on the bloody field in front of Cisterna echo through the years, providing modern soldiers with lessons applicable in the contemporary operating environment and the war on terrorism. The story of these men,

forging a new unit during time of crisis, facing a dedicated and efficient enemy in austere environments, and fighting their final desperate battle has a high degree of relevance to an army at war.

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<sup>1</sup>Geoffrey T. Barker, *A Concise History of US Army Special Operations Forces* (Tampa, Florida:Anglo-American Publishing Company, 1993) 128.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>FM 7-85, *Ranger Operations*, Headquarters, Department of the Army (Washington, DC, 1987) 1-4.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 1-5

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>United States Army White Paper: *Concepts for the Objective Force* (Leavenworth, Kansas: US Army Command and General Staff College, 2003) iv.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.



FIGURES

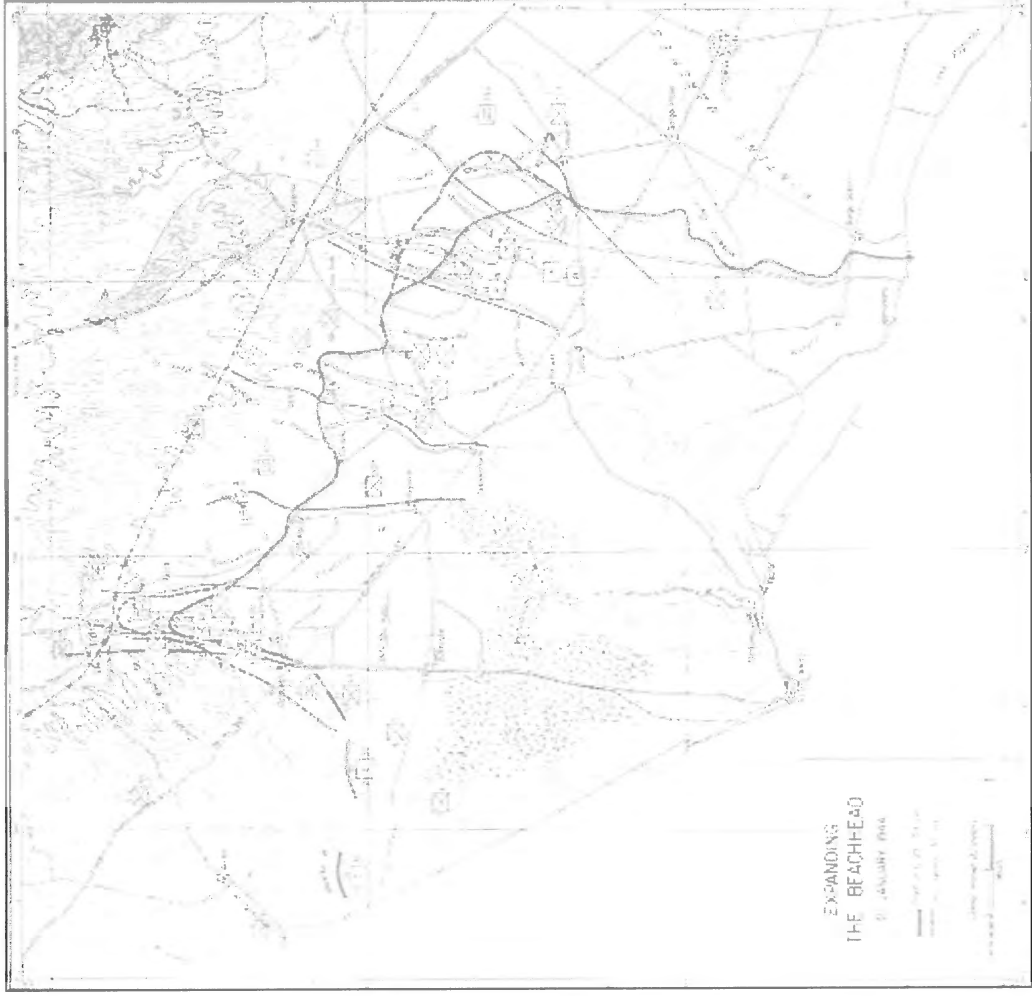


Figure 2. Map of the Cisterna Attack

Source: John Bowditch, *Anzio Beachhead*. United States Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C. 1990, Map No. 6, 28-29.

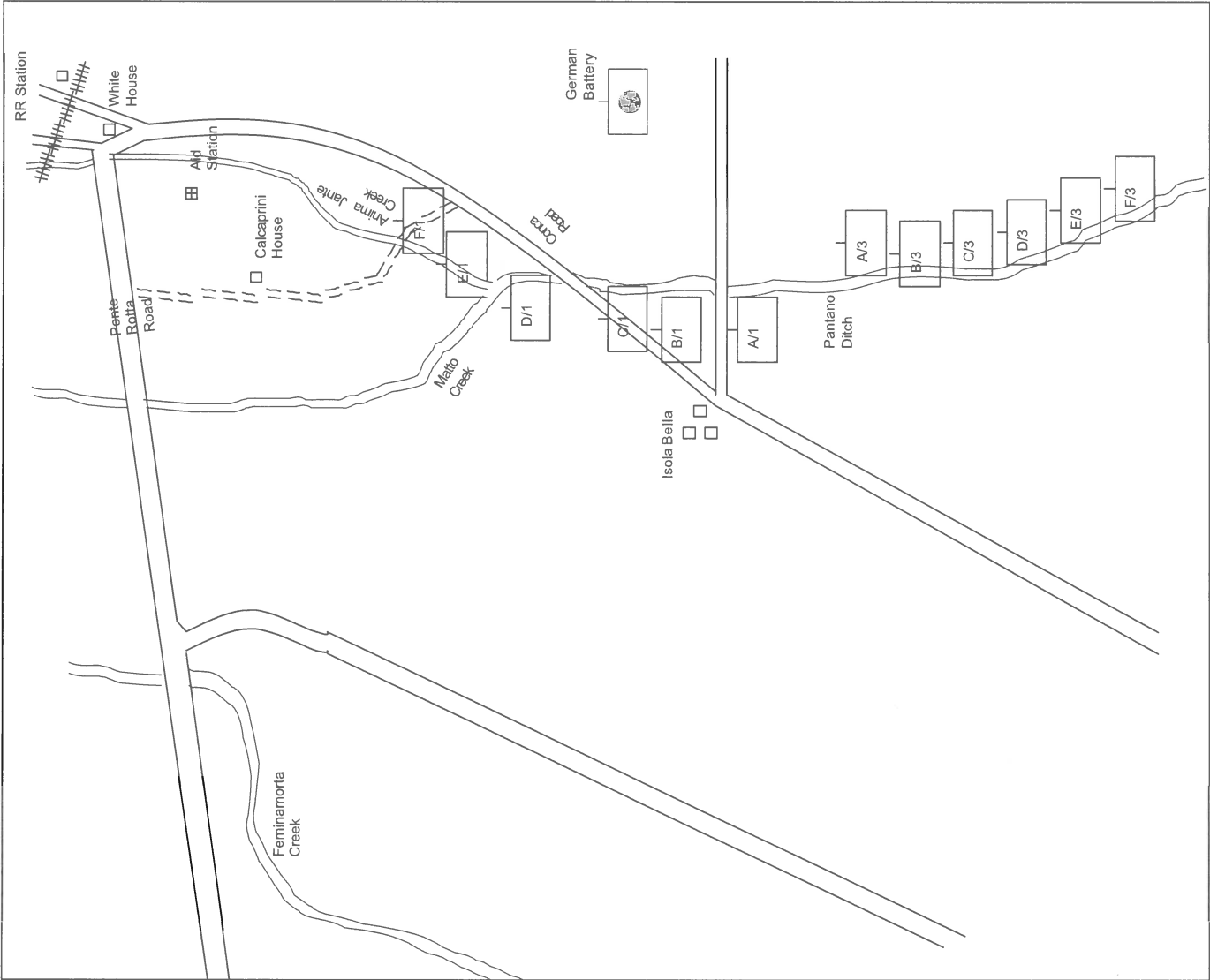


Figure 3. Forces at Initial Contact

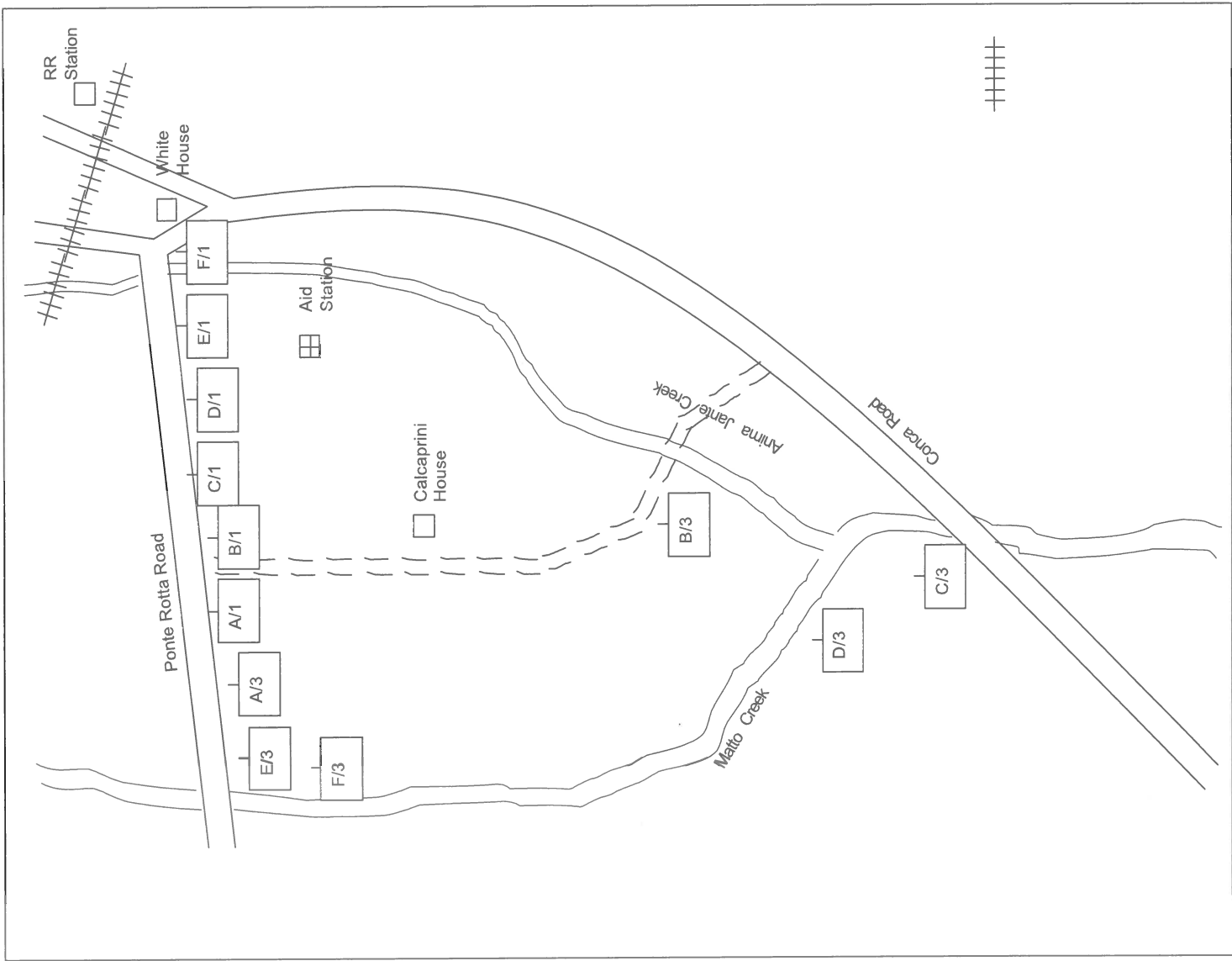


Figure 4. Final Disposition of Forces

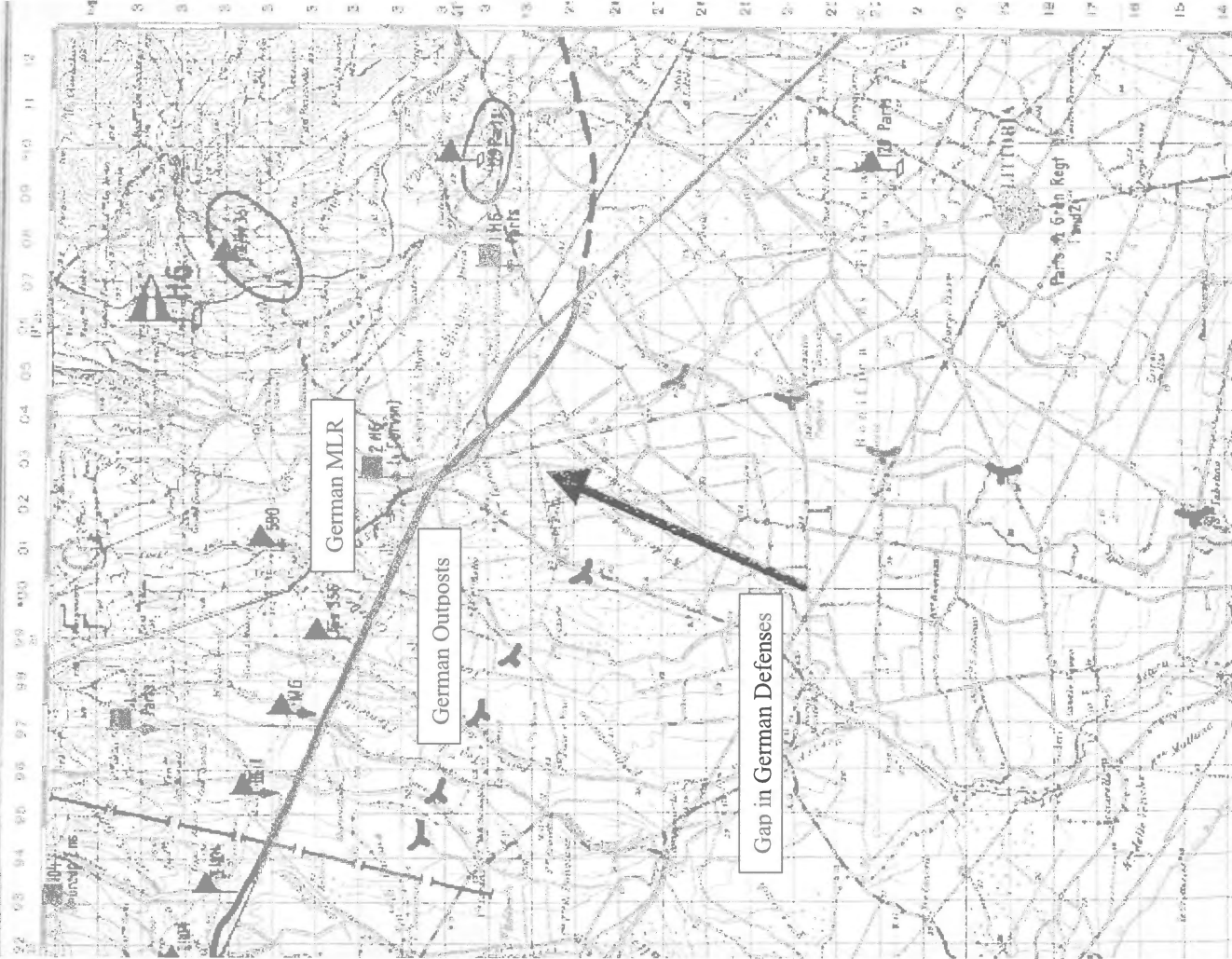


Figure 5. German Defenses 26 January 1944

Source: United States War Department, German Military Document Section. "The German Operation At Anzio." Camp Ritchie, Maryland: GMDS, 1946.

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