

THE II ITALIAN CORPS DEPLOYMENT ON THE WESTERN FRONT
DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR (APRIL 1918-MAY 1919)

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE
Military History

by

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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
2015

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			<i>Form Approved</i> OMB No. 0704-0188		
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 12-06-2015		2. REPORT TYPE Master's Thesis		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) AUG 2014 – JUN 2015	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The II Italian Corps Deployment on the Western Front during the First World War (April 1918-May 1919)			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S) MAJ Fassero Massimiliano			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army Command and General Staff College ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301			8. PERFORMING ORG REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT This thesis is a case study about little known instance of coalition warfare during the First World War. Specifically, it analyzes the deployment of Italy's II Italian Corps to the Western Front during the final months of the First World War. The II Corps' deployment to the Western Front was needed to demonstrate Italy's commitment to the Allied Forces coalition. After Italy's defeat at the Battle of Caporetto, II Corps' deployment outside of Italy's national borders came at a crucible moment in the country's military history. Italy had to man, sustain, and employ forces on both the Western and Italian Fronts. A component of the Italian general reserve, II Corps was chosen partly because of its availability, but also because of both its prior achievements and its commander, Major General Alberico Albricci. General Albricci's ability to balance national guidance versus tactical concerns ensured that II Corps fully supported Allied objectives. This thesis analyzes the success of II Corps deployment and it highlights how the understanding of the different national goals inside a coalition is still relevant today. It also demonstrates the fundamental requirement for providing the necessary resources for a small force deployed in a multi-national coalition.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS II Corps, Italian Army, Western Front, World War One, coalition warfare,					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			19b. PHONE NUMBER (include area code)
(U)	(U)	(U)	(U)	93	

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std. Z39.18

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

THE II ITALIAN CORPS DEPLOYMENT ON THE WESTERN FRONT DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR (APRIL 1918-MAY 1919), by MAJ Fassero Massimiliano, 93 pages.

This thesis is a case study about little known instance of coalition warfare during the First World War. Specifically, it analyzes the deployment of Italy's II Italian Corps to the Western Front during the final months of the First World War. The II Corps' deployment to the Western Front was needed to demonstrate Italy's commitment to the Allied Forces coalition. After Italy's defeat at the Battle of Caporetto, II Corps' deployment outside of Italy's national borders came at a crucible moment in the country's military history. Italy had to man, sustain, and employ forces on both the Western and Italian Fronts. A component of the Italian general reserve, II Corps was chosen partly because of its availability, but also because of both its prior achievements and its commander, Major General Alberico Albricci. General Albricci's ability to balance national guidance versus tactical concerns ensured that II Corps fully supported Allied objectives. This thesis analyzes the success of II Corps deployment and it highlights how the understanding of the different national goals inside a coalition is still relevant today. It also demonstrates the fundamental requirement for providing the necessary resources for a small force deployed in a multi-national coalition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank the Italian Army Staff Historic Office in Rome for its complete and total support during my research. This work would not have been possible without the efforts of many officers serving in this institution.

I owe a special thanks to my thesis committee, Dr. Donald Stephenson, Mr. Michael J. Burke, and LTC Christopher Johnson for their constant attention and precious advice.

Many thanks also to Bonnie for accepting the challenge of helping me with this project, and her uncommon patience and professionalism.

My special thanks also to BG Mauro D'Ubaldi and Col. Carlo Di Somma for the steady guidance they have offered me over the last year. You told me what a field grade officer means. I will never be thankful enough.

A special thanks to Emanuele, the best "buddy" a soldier can ask for.

Last, a grateful thank you to all II Corps soldiers who went where their Country told them, and paid an unthinkable price to fulfil their Nation's will. They have been preceded and followed by thousands of other soldiers, who accomplished their duty with silent, humble, and real commitment. May you all be remembered with pride.

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ACRONYMS

AEF	American Expeditionary Force
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
FR	French
GEN	General
IT	Italian
LTG	Lieutenant General
MG	Machine Gun
MG	Major General
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Coalition warfare is currently a structural feature of all conflict waged by Western powers. A nation's involvement in any military operation at war without the support of allies is almost unthinkable today. The cost of resources and the need for international recognition can easily exceed any benefits of unilateral action when considered in terms of national strategic goals.¹

A single-nation's path to war is no longer the Western way to consider war. In the case of the United States, there are different methods of building alliances by nations in conflicts. Excluding the Grenada and Panama military interventions during the 1980s, which are not being considered for the purpose of this paper because of their limited duration and goals, it is necessary to go back to the Spanish American War in 1898 to find a war fought by the United States without the support of allies.

Other nations have more recent records of wars conducted without Allies. Italy conquered the Abyssinian Empire in 1936 without any third-nation aid. The United Kingdom's intervention against Argentina in 1982 is a more recent example of a unilateral, national intervention without direct allied contribution. However, it could be argued that the Falklands War was a case of national sovereignty restoration, and the United Kingdom's effort to create a consensus among Western countries was not needed.

¹ For the purposes of this work, the word, *coalition*, will be used in a broader sense than the one normally intended in U.S. military doctrine, and will not be limited to the arrangement between two or more nations for common purposes, but will also encompass the idea of alliance.

It is also interesting to note that although only United Kingdom soldiers fought effectively on those islands, the military of many other countries provided effective, direct support.

There are many reasons to seek allies when waging wars. One obvious fact is that results are achieved easier with multiple resources. National contributions to military alliances can enhance national and international politics. The subject of this case study of coalition warfare refers specifically to the experience of the Italian Armed Forces. In the last two centuries, significant origins of wars fought with allies are:

1. Common enemies, as with the Italian Third Independence War in 1866, fought with Prussia against the Austrian Empire, known as the Prussian-Austrian war of 1866 in the United States Common ideology, as with Italy's participation in the Second World War on the Axis side;
2. Common ideology, as with Italy's participation in the Second World War on the Axis side;
3. Demonstrating consensus with international aims, as with Italy's limited participation in the Korean War or Desert Storm; and
4. Common goals, as the Italian participation in the Global War on Terror.

At the base of any coalition intervention, the first and most important aim should be the identification of a nation's political objectives. The deployment of Italy's II Corps on the Western Front in 1917 is an example of the pursuit of all the previously highlighted reasons, reasons that were the basis of its achievements and how it fought. However, II Corps' deployment demonstrates another fundamental character of today's Italian coalition participation. While II Corps was limited in the number of resources

deployed, it is a clear example of how a small contribution of forces can be fundamental for the achievement of national strategic goals.

This study highlights the deployment of a tactical unit, characterized as a corps in terms of numbers, during the First World War as part of a larger national plan. It will also highlight that a tactical unit is effective as long as it is militarily successful. The basic features of a small expeditionary force must be properly equipped and manned, and receive the correct guidance to achieve the national strategic goal to be successful; finally, the right person must lead it.

This last feature is probably the most important because it can influence and drive the others. II Corps Commander, Major General (MG) Alberico Albricci, was the right person for the job. He was able to handle the given equipment in order to maximize its effectiveness. He drove the manning of his units in order to maintain the highest level of performances. Finally, he was extremely keen in understanding and interpreting provided guidance toward their final purpose.

Understanding II Corps' achievements is important today because it is highly improbable that the Italian Armed Forces will face the prospect of conducting a "stand alone" war. A successful example of a limited intervention coalition provides positive suggestions to tomorrow's commanders when called upon to confront future threats through the help of a coalition.

The deployment and employment of II Corps was a precursor of today's coalition limited efforts, and can be interpreted as a significant precedent of today's commitment. Its record acts as a guide for tomorrow's commanders because of its success. Even if the Italian Armed Forces during World War One were able to manage the Italian Front on

their own, this commitment created ties that could be positively exploited, if necessary, in the successive stages of the war.

General Political Overview

At the end of 1917, Italian Forces were fighting a defensive battle in order to stop the Austrian exploitation of the Caporetto battle. A defensive line was prepared and stubbornly held along the Piave River, which became the Sacred River of Italy a few months later. While the Italian Army was fighting for its survival, eleven Allied Divisions (five British and six French) gathered in the area between Mantova, Brescia, and Verona, ready to support the fight if necessary.

Because the Allied Forces feared the possibility of a complete success by the Austrian Armed Forces on the Italian Front, this deployment was made with a sense of urgency. Losing to the Austrians could have jeopardized the entire Allied effort by allowing large numbers of Central Powers troops to move onto the Western Front. Italy's defeat could have meant the downfall of the Allied Forces, had the bulk of Austrian troops reached the Western Front before commitment of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in October 1917. The AEF was not yet complete or ready to face half a million Austrian veterans that could have been easily dispatched from the Italian to the Western Front, had the Italians capitulated.²

² David Trask, *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993). Only the 1st and the 26th American Divisions had reached Europe when the Battle of Caporetto took place (24 October through 12 November). The 42nd and 2nd Divisions were still at their port of debarkation. As of 31 December 1917, only 176,655 American Soldiers had been transported to France.

Due to this critical situation, a conference was held in Rapallo, Italy, on 6 and 7 November 1917, between the Prime Ministers of the Allied Countries. As a result, a Supreme War Council was established consisting of the Prime Ministers and other government officials of the Allied countries.

The Executive Committee proposal was presented to the Commanders in Chief with a message on 6 February 1918; this proposal identified a suitable force for the Allied General Reserve of thirty divisions allocated as follows:

1. British Expeditionary Force Front: Six divisions (UK);
2. French Front: Ten divisions (FR); and
3. Italian Front: Three UK divisions, four FR divisions, and seven IT divisions.

The Committee stated these divisions should remain in each Army's respective area of operations, but the UK and French divisions allocated to the Italian Front should remain in Italy. The Committee also recommended the seven Italian divisions should be located in the Po Valley in such an area that allowed rapid movement to the Western Front, if required.

The Italian reaction to this proposal was strictly related to the situation on the Italian Front that will be discussed in more detail later. The Italian representative proposed that of the eleven allied units stationed in Italy at that moment, four (two UK and two French) were to be organized into two different corps and integrated completely into the Italian chain of command. The remaining seven divisions were to be allocated to the strategic reserve, and would be located between Garda and Como Lakes, in readiness for employment on the border between Italy and Switzerland in case of a violation by the

Central Powers of Switzerland's neutrality.³ To give more strength to this plan, the new Italian Commander in Chief, GEN Diaz proposed immediately sending an Italian corps to the Western Front; this corps would be based on two divisions taken from the seven Italian divisions of the common reserve. As the aforementioned numbers show, the proposal of this deployment of a corps to the Western Front was the toll to be paid by Italy in order to achieve a stronger association with the Allies on the Italian Front.

Before the Committee could discuss the Italian proposal, the British War Cabinet ordered the movement of two UK divisions stationed in the Po Valley to the Western Front. This unilateral British decision deprived the Committee of authority, causing a fervent Italian protest. As a result, only one UK division was moved from the Italian Front, and the UK War Cabinet indicated that the decision to move the second one should have been evaluated by the Executive Committee of which GEN Foch had been appointed president.

This British order was part of their general policy of retaining as much operational independence as possible. A few days later, Marshal Haig told the Supreme War Council there was no chance for the UK Army to provide any divisions to the General Reserve. Nevertheless, the posture of the United Kingdom was characterized by the internal civil military conflict between Prime Minister David Lloyd George and the British Expeditionary Force Commander in Chief, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig. The

³ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia. in L'esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra (1915-18)* [The Italian Army in the Great War (1915-18). Operations outside the national territory. Italian soldiers in France (trans. by author)] (Rome: Poligrafico dello Stato, 1951), 7:v-viii.

politician tried to minimize the influence of his military commander in order to maintain consensus for the war inside the Empire, especially after the sickening casualties lists that the offensives of 1917 produced. The achievement of a unity of command was, in the eyes of Lloyd George, a way to better control Field Marshal Haig.⁴

The British military posture was in open contrast to Italy's strategic goals. If a coordinating inter-allied structure was not empowered, there was a greater chance that the Italian Front would be considered as a secondary effort useful only to divert the Austrian Army and large numbers of German divisions instead of being a valuable part of the Allied effort.

In order to pursue this strategic view, the Italian Supreme Command made every possible effort to maintain the idea of a common reserve and to increase the power of the Executive Committee. In order to achieve this goal, GEN Diaz proposed again to deploy an Italian corps on the Western front in substitution for the two divisions that the UK War Cabinet wanted to move away from Italy.

The Italian position found unexpected help from US representative at the Supreme War Council in December 1917. GEN Bliss stated the formal US position, "We [US] not only approve a continuance of the plan for a war council, but insist on it." This position was the result of the Americans' desire to maintain their freedom of action while contemporarily enhancing the efficiency of the coalition. Even if the common reserve was not established as a result of the Paris conference in December 1917, significant

⁴ David Trask, *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 30.

steps were taken to create more efficiency throughout the Allied effort, such as the creation of inter-Allied organizations, specifically in the logistic sector.⁵

The Supreme War Council discussions lasted until 14 March when the idea of a common reserve was reasserted. The final decision of the Supreme War Council, as stated in Joint Note No. 14, was that a common reserve was to be established, but due to the growing German buildup on the Western Front and the impediment in the flow of American divisions, a major focus on the British Expeditionary Force sector was considered. This resulted from the opposition of both Field Marshal Haig and GEN Henri Pétain to the idea of a common reserve. In their opinion, it would have interfered with their own sectors of responsibility and operational independence. They agreed to move the French Third Army to the British sector in case of necessity.⁶ Nevertheless, the Italian position could not be completely disregarded by the Allies, and so, in order to establish the practical details of the constitution of the general reserve and the Italian contribution, a conference was to be held in Torino as soon as possible.

The Situation on the Western Front, Late 1917–Beginning of 1918

The overall situation was not good for the Allies on the Western Front in the fall of 1917. Although the United States of America declared war on the Central Powers on 6 April 1917, the flow of American soldiers to Europe was slow, and they could not offer decisive support during the latter part of 1917. On the other hand, the situation on the

⁵ Trask, 31-32.

⁶ Ibid., 35.

Eastern Front was quickly becoming critical for the Allied powers due to the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, which finally led to the signing of an armistice between the Central Powers and Russia on 16 December 1917.

The formal closure of the Eastern Front, which became effective with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918, freed a significant number of German units that could become available to be employed on the Western Front. Except for a consistent contingent of divisions moved to the Italian Front that were employed in the Caporetto battle, this did not happen immediately because of the German desire to create a strong Teutonic empire in Eastern Europe to exploit Russia's weakness after the revolution.⁷

Furthermore, the situation of the French Army in late 1917 was anything but good. The short tenure of GEN Nivelle as Commander-in-Chief of the French Army led to a series of useless and extremely costly offensives during the spring and summer of 1917, which deeply undermined the trust of the French soldiers in their military leadership as witnessed by the mutiny of some units.⁸

The situation was not much better in the British Expeditionary Force Area of Operation where Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig launched a series of offensive operations during the summer and the fall of 1917 that, again, reached no major objective, but caused the Allies to suffer an extraordinary number of losses.

For the purpose of this work, it is important to highlight that even if these offensives did not achieve substantial gains, they were the proof of a marginal advantage

⁷ Geoffrey Parker, ed., *The Cambridge History of Warfare* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 288.

⁸ Trask, 8.

for the Allied powers on the Western Front that lasted until the end of 1917. Offensive operations were pursued on this front on the same days while the Italian Army faced the terrible Austro-German strike at Caporetto. The French Army attacked in the Soissons area between 23 and 27 October, while the British Expeditionary Force attempted to break the German defensive system close to Ypres up until November 10. Furthermore, between 20 and 27 November 1917, while the Italian Front was still unstable and defensive lines were created on the Piave River, the British Expeditionary Force was thought to have enough superiority of forces in the Cambrai area to try a new attack that reached limited gains after an initial armored breakthrough.

All of the aforementioned conditions contributed with the post-war Fascist propaganda that shaped the Italian public view of World War I as the Fourth Independence War for the Italian country⁹. The idea that Italy had been abandoned by the Allied powers to face alone German and Austrian forces freed from the Russian front was an easy justification for the Italian failure at Caporetto. This sentiment was easily exploited by the nationalistic, Fascist policy when the Allies did not fulfill the promised gains of the London Treaty after the war.

After the operational pause during the winter of 1917 and 1918, the Germans gambled on a series of offensives that started in the spring of 1918. This was the result of

⁹ All the Italian Independence Wars were fought against the Austrian Empire, which led to the unification of North Italy under the Savoia Royal Family. The First Italian Independence War was fought 1848-1849, the Second was successfully conducted in 1859, and the Piedmonts Army won the Third in 1866. As a result, all North Italy was annexed to Italy except the Trento and Trieste regions that were the final strategic objectives of the Italian participation in the First World War.

a perception that they could gain a short-term tactical superiority on the Western Front in the spring of 1918 before the commitment of fresh US divisions.¹⁰

Erich Ludendorff planned the initial attack, code name St. Michael, on a 43-mile front along the Somme River between Arras and La Fere. It started on 21 March 1918 with the final objective of separating the French and British forces, and then pushing this attack on to the coast. A great deal of attention was given by the Germans to the other part of the front in order to achieve deception and cause the commitment of as many Allied forces as possible away from the Somme sector.

The German attack achieved an extraordinary, initial success, and it proved that failing to create an effective common reserve might have been disastrous for the Allies. In fact, Field Marshal Haig asked GEN Pétain to commit part of his forces in the British sector (as previously agreed and highlighted on page 8), but GEN Pétain was not able, due to the current situation in the French sector, to provide all the divisions asked for by Haig. As a result of this controversy, Haig asked his government to appoint GEN Foch as Commander in Chief of all the Allied forces.¹¹

Allied political leaders recognized the lack of unity of command on the various fronts as a source of weakness in the Allied coalition, and proper measures to correct this problem were finally taken on 2 May 1918. GEN Foch was appointed Commander in Chief of all Allied Forces fighting in the First World War in Europe; he was responsible for a front stretching from the North Sea to the Adriatic Sea.

¹⁰ Trask, 43.

¹¹ Ibid., 49.

Meanwhile the German attack continued, but the new unified command was able to cope with it in a better and more effective way. A German breakthrough was avoided, and the Allied defense stiffened. This was possible also because these German offensive operations caused the culmination of its armies; they lost their momentum in Flanders by 1 April.¹²

In the following months, other German offensives were conducted in different areas of the Western Front, but none of them was as dangerous as Operation St. Michael.

In May, the German Supreme Command mounted another great offensive operation named Bleucher, which concentrated in the Chemin des Dames and Aisne River area of operation. This offense, beginning on 27 May, initially gained both operational and tactical surprise, permitting German forces to reach the Marne River, 56-miles away from Paris and capturing 50,000 prisoners. Again, the German attack was not able to achieve any strategic success because it ran out of momentum and reached culmination due to exhaustion of the employed troops.¹³

The German Supreme Command called for a halt on 4 June, leaving the German forces in a difficult position. Due to the tactical success of this attack, a salient was created in the Aisne River Area. As a result, German troops were overextended and now had to watch a front that was 94-miles long, almost double of the one prior to their attack.

The German Supreme Command conducted this operation as part of a larger strategic plan that was sought to draw as many Allied forces into the Aisne area of

¹² Trask, 52.

¹³ Ibid., 70.

operation. The Germans sought this commitment of forces before delivering a final strike in Flanders where the German intent was to cause the final British collapse.

In order to achieve this goal, and secure the Marne salient, the German command ordered a new offensive on 9 June. On this occasion, the Germans failed to achieve surprise, and they were easily stopped by the French defense in depth.¹⁴

Due to the continuous flow of American reinforcements to the Western Front, the German Supreme Command was forced to maintain an offensive posture. They were aware that their chance of victory was lessening because of the overwhelming combat power brought to the Western Front by the double-sized American divisions. This drove the Second Battle of the Marne that started on 15 July 1918, which proved to be the last appreciable German offensive during the First World War. The objective of this German offensive was to seize Reims, which should have produced a tangible advantage for future operations. The Germans failed to achieve any appreciable gain, and had to suspend offensive operations on 17 July.¹⁵

This was probably the turning point of the war. The five German drives of 1918 conducted to achieve a favorable peace agreement before full commitment of the American forces had strongly depleted German reserves. In fact, the Germans suffered about one million casualties between March and July as a result of these operations. Consequentially, the Germans were unable to mount any credible offensive operations

¹⁴ Trask, 73.

¹⁵ Ibid., 83.

through the end of this conflict, and virtually gave the Allies the advantage of the initiative from this moment on.

GEN Foch began his counteroffensive operations in the Marne salient area, conducting a limited counteroffensive between 18 July–22 July and early September 1918. This limited counteroffensive was aimed to close the salient between Soissons and Epernay. This successful Allied offensive operation was the first operation of its kind in 1918, and it can be considered the prologue for the massive Allied offensive that started on 26 September and lasted until the end of the war on 11 November.

It is not part of the purpose of this work to analyze how the German offensives and Allied counteroffensives were actually developed; but it is necessary to provide a general understanding of the operational and strategic situation on the Western Front in 1918 in order to appreciate better the environment in which II Corps was committed.

II Corps fought in the most of the battles on the Western Front in 1918. Its deployment was the fruit of a political need to enhance a more shared idea of coalition fighting amongst the Allied forces as this chapter has discussed.

The detailed political guidance given to II Corps and its interpretation by MG Albricci will be discussed in depth later in this paper, but it is worthy to highlight as the crisis of June 1918 immediately tested II Corps. This was a crucible moment on the Western Front for the Allied, and it is arguable that they probably never faced the risk of a major defeat as close as in June 1918. The political guidance for II Corps commander was to maintain unity of command on his forces at any time. He instead committed them piecemeal where the French command asked him, recognizing that the corps was

probably not yet ready to operate as a unit. At the same time, he recognized that the moment required any available force be employed to the best of their capability.

II Corps commander was able to understand and visualize properly the situation on the battlefield at the higher level, and he was able to give the right orders to contrast the threat at the lower level. He was able to do this because he had a clear idea of what his country had asked him to do: specifically to gain the Allied favor.

The general political situation, the particular situation on the Italian Front in late 1917, and the general situation on the Western Front in 1918, are all elements that are fundamental to understanding the importance of the decision to commit Italian forces and to set the stage for an analysis of the deployment of II Corps on the Western Front.

CHAPTER 2

THE FORCE GENERATION PROCESS

The mission of II Corps came at a moment of great crisis for the Allied Cause as highlighted in the previous chapter of this work. This chapter will analyze the reasons why II Corps was chosen, how it prepared for deployment to France in one of the most dramatic moments of the Italian Armed Forces, and what guidance the II Corps commander received before this deployment. These facts are fundamental to understand the role that II Corps played during this deployment because they set the stage for all of the corps' achievements, and because a less careful preparation might have hampered its possibility of success. The political importance given to deployment of this corps will also be analyzed and defined as part of the importance of this case study in coalition warfare.

On 20 March 1918, an Allied Conference was held in Turin, Italy, where General Armando Diaz, the Italian Supreme Commander, ordered the Supreme Command to start planning a corps movement to France. He ordered an evaluation of the suitability to send a corps from either the Second or Fifth Italian Armies. He considered choosing either II Corps, another corps of the Fifth Italian Army, or XIII Corps of the Second Italian Army to go forward to France instead of being added to the Italian strategic reserve. These units were focused on improving their effectiveness as part of the Italian General Reserve after years at war. At time, the Fifth Italian Army was located south of Lake Garda, while the XIII Corps was stationed on the plains northwest of Mestre.

Because of the immediate need for deployment to France, II Corps was chosen primarily for its location being the closest unit to France on the southwestern part of Lake

Garda, which made it easier to move because of its local infrastructure. Additionally, II Corps was also Diaz's first choice because of its achievement during the previous three years of World War I.

The Previous Experiences of the II Italian Corps

At the beginning of hostilities, the 3rd and 4th Divisions formed II Corps, which was commanded by Lieutenant General Ezio Reissolli. II Corps was posted in the Ippis plains as part of Second Army. On 24 May 1915, as part of the initial offensive, II Corps entered Austrian-Hungarian territory, breaching the Judrio River. It reached the Planina-Medana frontline on May 25, where it received its baptism of fire and suffered its first casualties.¹⁶ As a result of the first offensive Italian battle, 24 May-16 June 1915, II Corps was able to cross the Isonzo River in order to create a bridgehead in front of Plana with its 3rd Division. The 32nd and 33rd Divisions were added to II Corps on 12 June to create a strong second defensive line, north and south of Korada.

The corps fought effectively during the first fall offensive, October-December 1915, enlarging the Plava bridgehead with the 3rd and the 32nd Divisions reaching the village of Zagora. The 4th Division suffered huge losses in the Mount Sabotino area attempting, without any real chance of success, to frontally attack the fortified Austrian position. The corps remained on line for the most of 1916, taking part in consecutive, unsuccessful offensive battles for Gorizia, and consolidating the bridgehead on the Isonzo River. On 13 May 1917, Lieutenant General Badoglio, a future Italian marshal during the

¹⁶ The operational details on pages 17-19 come from Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 7:8-12.

Second World War, assumed Command of II Italian Corps. Under his leadership, II Corps took part in the tenth battle of the Isonzo that finally overcame Austro-Hungarian resistance along the river. From 14 May to 29 May 1917, II Corps fought without interruption, continuously gaining terrain, until finally reaching the Rohot Valley. This successful attack on the Baisanizza Plateau was the enabling operation for one of the most successful actions on the Italian Front during the war.

II Corps also distinguished itself during the 11th Battle of the Isonzo, August-September 1917, conquering the strong Austro-Hungarian position of Monte Santo, and reaching the Chiapovano Valley and Mount Zgorevnice. On 10 September 1917, MG Alberico Albricci assumed Command of II Corps; he maintained command of the corps up until the end of the war, successfully leading it into France.

The first major operation that the new II Corps commander faced was the day following the disastrous defeat at the Battle of Caporetto. As previously highlighted, II Corps was one of the units that achieved major penetration of the Austro-Hungarian lines. In those days of confusion and chaos, II Corps received the order to fight as the rearguard of two fleeing Italian armies. II Corps demonstrated cohesion and discipline in the days following the worst defeat ever suffered by the Italian Army. At a moment when everything was collapsing within the Italian Army, II Corps conducted a retrograde battle that bought time and established successive defensive lines along the Monte Santo-Vodice, and later along the Valisella River. From this new position, II Corps received the order to retreat beyond the Tagliamento River in order to destroy the bridges on the Versa, Judrio, and Torre Rivers, suffering great losses in doing so. General Cadorna ordered the attachment of II Corps to the 4th Army, the Italian Strategic Reserve, at the

direct orders of the Supreme Command. In Cadorna's words, "whether [II Corps] has suffered huge losses during the continuous retreat of the last week and has faced tremendous efforts, they are still steady and disciplined, and may be decisive in defending the Piave River."¹⁷

Despite this critical situation, MG Albricci proved himself a reliable and independent commander. He was one of the few corps commanders able to maintain unit effectiveness and discipline during the Caporetto retreat. The Italian Supreme Command recognized this achievement by awarding him the *Medaglia d'Argento al Valore Militare*, the second most important military decoration, as result of his behavior in this battle. This is one of the reasons why GEN Diaz selected Albricci's II Corps as his first choice for a unit to send to France.

Preparation of the Force and Political Guidance

While assigned to the Italian Strategic Reserve, II Corps focused its efforts on training. The corps' training focused mainly on a war of movement, still thought possible on the Italian front, unlike the static trench warfare fought in France. The facts following the Battle of Piave and the Vittorio Veneto offensive demonstrated this. While field grade and liaison officers were assigned to specialized courses held by the Fourth Army, II Corps focused on training its company grade officers at a special instruction camp in Cola, and machine gun operators received instruction in Villa Bottona. On 10 March 1918, II Corps received the order to complete the reconnaissance of the positions

¹⁷ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 7:32.

occupied by Seventh Army in vicinity of Salo in order to relieve the deeply compromised units fighting there. This tasking was a normal routine for a corps, retired from the front line in late 1917. However, everything changed on 14 April 1917 when Fourth Army Command verbally informed II Corps of its deployment to France as a result of the aforementioned Allied Conference held in Turin with General Diaz on 20 March.¹⁸ After that moment, everything went extremely fast for II Corps. On 19 April 1918, in accordance with the Corps' Historical Journal, Vittorio Emanuele II di Savoia, the King of Italy, surprised the II Corps command group by paying a visit to the unit to wish them the best for their oncoming deployment, and to emphasize his pride that Italy had been called to serve so far from the homeland.

Furthermore, on 19 April 1918, General Diaz visited MG Albricci in Lonato in order to provide his guidance for the corps' next employment. That same day, MG Albricci left for Rome where he met the Italian Prime Minister, S.E. Orlando, who personally gave his guidance for the corps employment in France. It was uncommon for a corps commander to receive instructions directly from the Supreme Commander or the Prime Minister, but the task given to the II Corps was uncommon, too.

The exact guidance given to MG Albricci is not available, but the Corps Commander summarized it in his introduction of a book, edited posthumously by the Italian Military Archives in 1951.

Regarding the disposition and the tactical employment of II Corps, the Commanding General will follow the orders of the Commander under whose authority he will be posted, and he will have to provide all the possible help; besides this guidance he will consider himself as an independent commander, and

¹⁸ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 7:32.

he will be firstly and mainly responsible to the Italian Government while employing the troops at his orders. Whenever he will receive orders regarding operations that in his opinion might put at risk the Italian troops under his command he must formally present his objection to the Allied Commander and, if necessary, he will inform the Italian Supreme Command and the Italian Government in order to receive instructions. Finally, the Commanding General is not allowed to give up the command of any Italian troops to other Allied Commanders, exception provided for short and exceptional periods of time.¹⁹

The Supreme Command also provided the permanent Italian representative of the Versailles committee with special instructions regarding II Corps. He was identified as acting army commander for all issues related to personnel management of the Italian troops employed in France.

The special instructions given to MG Albricci are an example of national caveats while performing a multinational operation. However, in order to better understand the burden placed on MG Albricci, it is important to analyze these instructions with consideration of the environment in which II Corps was called to operate. The corps was primarily a tactical unit in the trenches during World War I on the Western Front. Communication with the central Italian leadership was poor, and rapid communication not always possible. This left MG Albricci alone in making his decisions during much of his service on the Western Front. While he never formally complained to his army commanders, he sometimes did not thoroughly obey orders, especially when that guidance disregarded II Corps' capabilities to exploit favorable, albeit risky, opportunities or to gain territory. An exception to this was at a formal meeting with GEN Pétain at the very beginning of the Italian employment in France that will be analyzed

¹⁹ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 7:32.

more in depth further during this work. It is important to point out this behavior, characterized by “intelligent initiative,” demonstrated how well MG Albricci understood his mission in France. He understood how his corps was a means of national power, going further beyond just its tactical aspects. Thus, he always tried to motivate his units in the fight in order to achieve physical territorial gains, which were recognized as important achievements in daily French official communications.

On the other hand, he applied the directive less strictly regarding unity of command of the Italian troops under his command, often accepting the positioning of one of his divisions under a French commander when the tactical need called for it, or whenever he thought it was necessary to build trust with other Allied commanders. These cooperative efforts were reciprocated in appreciation as on many occasions French troops were assigned to II Corps during important phases of II Corps’ presence on the Western Front.

The 3rd and 8th Divisions, with their respective organic brigades, comprised the bulk of II Corps. They had trained and prepared for employment as an organic unit since the fall of 1917 when the decision to send a corps to France was first made. However, ideological and political reasons undermined this unity only a few days before the corps’ deployment. In fact, on April 15 the Italian Prime Minister, S.E. Orlando, insisted that one of the brigades going to France had to be the Alpi Brigade, custodian of the traditions of the *Cacciatori delle Alpi*.

The Alpi Brigade was a unit with strong tradition in the Italian Army. The original *Cacciatori delle Alpi* [Hunters of the Alps] was a military corps created by Giuseppe Garibaldi in 1859 that fought side by side with the French Army during Italy’s

independence wars. Under this name, a regiment of Italian volunteers joined the French Foreign Legion at the end of 1914 and was completely annihilated in the Argonne at the beginning of 1915.

On April 17, in order to send a corps to France, the 8th Division had to give up its organic Udine Brigade to relieve the Alpi Brigade on the northern Italian front line.²⁰ This change in its operational assets delayed II Corps' full operational capability, but was handled as expeditiously as possible by II Corps command to make it ready to deploy. This demonstrated how II Corps' deployment was driven by political and ideological reasons rather than practical military ones. In fact, the total strength of II Corps on the Western Front never exceeded 40,000 men, which was not a significant presence compared to the total number of other national forces present in that theater of war. However, the message of their willingness to fight in France was far more important than their effective contribution to any operation. Nevertheless, the French leadership that employed II Corps, which will be further discussed in the next section of this work, appreciated Italy's participation significantly.

²⁰ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 7:85.

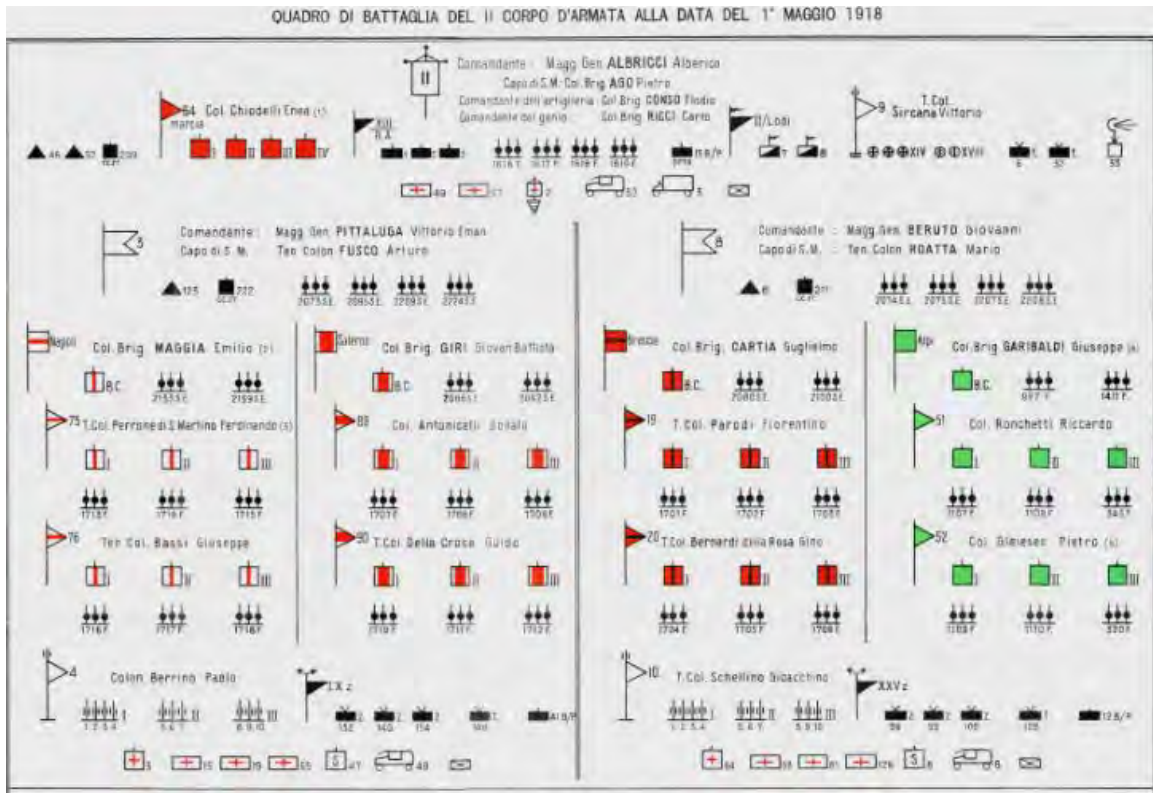


Figure 1. Order of Battle of II Corps Army, May 1918

Source: Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia. in L'esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra (1915-18)* [The Italian Army in the Great War (1915-18). Operations outside the national territory. Italian soldiers in France (trans. by author)] (Rome: Poligrafico dello Stato, 1951), 7: Quadro 1.

The Deployment of II Corps

In October 1917, at the end of a long defensive battle, II Corps' strength had been attrited to 6,000 men and 270 officers from an original 40,000 in the 8th and 44th Divisions. There was virtually no artillery or engineer support because those assets were left with I Corps at the Piave River. The 44th Division, with less than 40 percent of its

nominal strength, disbanded on 30 November and 3rd Division was given back to II Corps after an eight-month attachment to the Fourth Army.²¹

During the following December, the corps received personnel and equipment to form two field artillery regiments that were given, one each, to the divisions. During January 1918, general support heavy field artillery was assigned to II Corps with a total strength of three heavy howitzer batteries and four heavy artillery batteries. A machine gun (MG) company was formed during the same period. The 8th Division was equipped with the French 1907 F (Saint Etienne) light MG, but this weapon was retired and substituted with the Italian Fiat MG. This is an example of the lack of planning during the winter of 1917 for the employment of II Corps on the Western Front. In fact, it would have helped during the deployment if the French MGs had been left with the Corps to create some kind of logistical commonality with the French Army. It took months after the effective deployment of the corps to retrain personnel on the employment of the Saint Etienne MG, but this equipment change was pursued for the much simpler sustainability of this weapon on the Western Front instead of the Italian MG that was used only by II Corps.

During this period, II Corps commander was in charge of training the Fourth Army *Arditi* battalions (the Italian designation for these elite storm troops). It is important to understand MG Albricci's attitude toward this elite unit. Even though he was never part of this elite unit – he was too old when they were created in July 1914 – this particular assignment underlines his knowledge and personal interest in the use of this

²¹ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 7:31.

kind of special troops. This experience likely contributed to form a remarkable offensive mentality that he showed more than once on the Western Front.

Throughout the winter of 1917-1918, II Corps received troops to rebuild its original strength. Twelve march battalions were added to II Corps in that period, dispersing about 12,000 recruits throughout the various units.²² These troops contributed to the total strength of II Corps of 39,605 soldiers and 1,436 officers that were the effective numbers deployed at the end of April 1918 to France.²³

These troops traveled from the Padana Valley (English: *Po Valley*) to the French Maily area of Bourgogne using ninety-two trains over ten days. Their movement began on April 18 with the last troops reaching French soil on 28 April 1918.

Of particular interest was the organization created to provide effective support to new men of II Corps in France. When the Supreme Command ordered deployment of the corps, it created four march battalions (one for each brigade) as well as the 64th March Regiment consisting of four march battalions. This unit, with a total strength of 116 officers and 6,900 soldiers, provided most of the replacements for II Corps during its combat operations on French soil. On April 21, the Supreme Command ordered constitution of the 70th March Regiment, created for II Corps. This was to provide the

²² *Battaglione di Marcia*—a march battalion was a temporary unit initially formed to bring the replacement from the regimental deposit, far from the frontline and where the recruits were equipped, to the effective position of the unit. This unit was formed to make the recruits march from one point to another. The task to provide the recruits the basic training was added to this units later and that became the first unit to employ the replacement assigned to a specific unit.

²³ Ufficio Storico, *Diario Storico Del Secondo Corpo D'armata Del Regio Esercito* [Historical Office. Historical Journal of the Second Corps of the Army (trans. author)] (Rome: Army National Archives, 1917).

Italian commander in France with an entire march brigade, giving him maximum flexibility while operating outside the national border. Because of the resulting shortage of men from the massive casualties suffered by the Italian Army during the Caporetto disaster, about 350,000 men, it was impossible to create this march regiment. After MG Albricci's insistence, an Arditi march company, two march MG companies, and two march artillery companies were formed and added to the 64th March Regiment to provide replacements for the elite trained and skilled soldiers.²⁴

Throughout the period of deployment in France, these march units worked as inductee or reception stations where new personnel were trained and equipped in accordance with corps standards before being attached to the march battalions for assignment orders for deployment to the fighting units.

The official records of the 64th March Regiment indicate that from May through November 1918, 389 Officers and more than 22,000 Soldiers were assigned to the regiment. Three hundred and fifty-four Officers and 15,229 Soldiers were sent to first line units in the same period.²⁵

This data is in consonance with the total casualties suffered by II Corps that are accounted on a total of slightly more than 15,000 men, 4,500 deaths; 7,500 wounded and gassed; and 3,500 missing in action.²⁶ These figures are an important factor in the

²⁴ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 7:64.

²⁵ Ufficio Storico, *Diario Storico Del Secondo Corpo d'armata Del Regio Esercito*.

²⁶ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia* 7:12, 492.

evaluation of how important this effort was in the eyes of the Italian political leadership and Italian Supreme Command.

Few Italian units employed on the Italian Front received sufficient numbers of replacements during the same period to replenish their casualties. Most of the fighting units in 1918 were about 85 percent of their nominal strength; because of the unit's political importance, this did not apply to II Corps. II Corps maintained almost 100 percent of its nominal strength for the entire period of its employment, even when deployed far from the main front because of the Italian Supreme Command. Although fighting on a secondary front, II Corps was favored for its role in the achievement of Italian strategic goals during late 1918. This preferential treatment for replacements to II Corps, even if not clearly stated in any official document, indicated II Corps' importance to the Italian leadership, which was sustained by the Supreme Command.

By highlighting the previous combat experiences of II Corps, the way it was chosen amongst the available forces, how it was prepared, and the political guidance given to its commander it is possible to understand the political importance of this effort for the Italian leadership in 1917-1918. This force received unique treatment in the contemporary Italian Army because it was assigned a unique mission. It had to create deep ties with the Allies during a moment in which the interests of the other partners inside the Entente were mainly focused on their critical situation on the Western Front. By acknowledging the importance of these concerns, the Italian leadership was willing to share the burden of the fight and put itself in a most favorable position if more consistent help on the Italian front was to come.

CHAPTER 3

THE PARTICIPATION OF THE II ITALIAN CORPS

AT THE OPERATION ON THE WESTERN FRONT

The spring and the summer of 1918 saw some of the fiercest fighting of the war on the Western Front. II Corps had to cope with such an environment when deployed to France. This chapter describes II Corps participation in operations on the Western Front from both a tactical and operational perspective. It is fundamental to understand how II Corps fought during its relatively short deployment, April 1918-January 1919, in order to assess if this unit obtained its national objectives. The most important reason for its deployment to the Western Front was to create ties with the Allies, and this would not had been achieved if II Corps had fought poorly. However, they fought well, and the Allied commanders who operated with II Corps recognized their efforts. Its employment on one of the most critical parts of the Western Front, mainly in the Reims Soissons area, is proof of Allied appreciation of II Corps efforts in 1918. Another proof in the corps' capability was its selection to occupy several of the bridgeheads into Germany after the Armistice.

The Initial Training and the First Employment

On 28 April, the entire II Corps and its units were deployed to their training areas in France. A period of training to acclimate to a new front was scheduled for II Corps. During this period, it was dependent upon Army Group North, GEN d'Esperey, for support. The French Army provided a telephone station, optical communications system, bombs for rifles, and hand grenades to the corps during its train-up. Special lectures had

to be prepared for the use of French topographic maps, because the French system was significantly different from the Italian system. The training regimen put in place was based on the concept of “train the trainers,” which was necessary due to the difficulties of communicating in two separate languages. Nevertheless, use of the French language was widely diffused amongst the officer corps, and many soldiers had a basic knowledge of French due to a long tradition of emigration to that country.

MG Albricci gave instructions for the corps headquarters to put a completely different system of communication in place because dependent units were ignoring the Italian communication systems and procedures. This disposition, partially in contrast with the guidance received to retain unity of command of the Italian troops, was essential during the following months as Italian units up to battalion level became able to communicate and operate with French units without needing to go through corps headquarters to communicate. Special training was also conducted in the use of protective devices against the effects of mustard gas, which had not been employed as much on the Italian Front.

During this initial period of training and acclimatization, II Corps received its first permanent French augmentation. In fact, it received several air corps companies for artillery and communication functions. This required extensive training on the use of the special signal panels used by French planes to coordinate fires.

On 2 May, a complex exercise of the 8th Division was performed in the presence of the commander of the Army Group North, to certify the Italian troops were ready to be employed immediately on the front line. On 4 May, the French General Command issued an order for employment of the Italian divisions on the line as the final stage of their

preparation. The two divisions had to be employed, not as a part of a Corps, but alone to acclimate to the trench organization on the Western Front. An order issued by GEN Pétain stated that this employment should not last more than three weeks. After that period, the corps would be employed organically in battle. As a result, the 3rd Division relieved the 120th French Division in place in the Ardennes as part of the XIII French Corps. At 0800 of 16 May, the Italian division commander assumed responsibility of this sector in front of the Aire River. During this period on the line, the Italian expeditionary force suffered the first of almost 15,000 casualties. On 23 May, Corporal Di Martino was shot to death while defending his trench with hand grenades against a big enemy scouting party. His actions were cited for particular bravery in the XIII Corps' daily journal, emphasizing the importance of joint employment of Allied troops on the Western Front.²⁷ The 8th Division relieved the 3rd Division on 28 May; this period was fundamental to understanding the way battles were fought on the Western Front. This assigned sector had been quiet during the last months, and consisted of the standard French defensive organization based on two principal defensive lines alternating with two other temporary defensive lines augmented with the use of strong points (*ilots de resistance*) for mutual assistance, even if cut off.

The First Employment of the Organic II Corps on the Aisne

On 1 June, the French Command ordered the 3rd Division, temporarily unemployed and one of the few available units in the sector, to move immediately to the

²⁷ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia* 7:12.

Marne in order to contribute to stopping the German offensive begun on 27 May. This offensive was conducted by elements of the Army of the Imperial Crown Prince between Reims and Soisson and had achieved success in that area. This employment was contrary to the Italian national directives and existing French orders, but it was executed in order to demonstrate the Italian troop's will to fight to French commanders. On the other hand, MG Albricci formally protested to GEN Pétain about the scattered use of his Italian troops. In a fervent protest, MG Albricci wrote to the Commander in Chief, "Italians are in France to fight, not to see how the Frenchmen fight;" these words remained impressed upon the mind of the French general.²⁸ In fact, in May of 1921, at the inauguration of the monumental cemetery in honor of the fallen Italian in Bligny, the old general remembered that first encounter with the Italian general. In his words, he placed his trust in General Albricci, and his trust was repaid on the Montagne of Reims.

Under direct order of the French Commander in Chief, II Corps was reunited on the night of 17 June as it entered the line as an organic unit in the Fifth Army area of operation along the Ardre River. The corps, with one of its divisions, assumed the responsibility for this sector on the morning of 12 June. These sectors assigned to the Italian troops had to be redefined because of the different organic constitution of the Italian divisions that were based on four regiments instead of three as with the French brigades. This difference was favorable for the Italians, when called on to relieve a French unit in place for the entire time they were employed on the Western Front,

²⁸ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia* 7:28.

because it allowed the Italian commanders on the field to retain a strong reserve force for use in moments of great vulnerability.

This sector given to the Italian troops was about 12 kilometers wide, and it was along the eastern limit of the bulge created by the German offensive of May-June 1918 in the Reims area. II Corps defended access to Epernay, covering the southwestern flank of Reims. This was a crucial part of the French defensive sector, and employment of the Italian troops in this contested area was again proof of the trust that the French Supreme command invested in the valor of the Italian troops.²⁹

The given area was characterized by a high level of risk as assessed by II Corps commander. In fact, the defensive position was not prepared in depth. With the Marne River only a few kilometers behind, this was not the best situation for a protracted defense. Furthermore, the right end of the sector was in common with the Reims defensive structure that had already been contested by the Germans on the sides, and could be seriously hampered by any movement along the Arde River. Finally, another risk factor highlighted by MG Albricci was his connection point with the French V Corps on his left flank, consisting of an area characterized by ground lines of communications to include an important railroad node in Epernay.³⁰

The French Fifth Army ordered II Corps to create a defensive system within its sector based on three different lines of resistance instead of four. Almost nothing existed in place when the Corps assumed responsibility for this sector because of the many

²⁹ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia* 7:58.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7: 64.

defensive battles fought to stop German penetration in the area. II Corps gave orders to its division to identify a primary line of resistance that was to be kept at any cost, and that it must be reoccupied if it fell into enemy hands for any reason. In front of this line of resistance, a line of surveillance was to be prepared and occupied with minimum force necessary in order to provide early warning of any enemy movement. A second defensive line was to be prepared, and it was to be occupied only if an order from the superior command was given to the Corps.

Because of this situation on the ground and foliage obstructions on the assigned front line, MG Albricci abandoned the option of creating a continuous line of defense. Instead, he ordered the construction of several defensive belts in the assigned area with different strongpoints to exploit terrain features with the capability to mutually sustain each other by fire in case of attack. This solution was partially the result of further orders received by II Corps on 16 June. Fifth Army tasked II Corps to provide defense to the passages on the Marne River from Ay and Cumieres, which were considered strategically important in case of any further German penetration. Especially since the Marne River was considered the most significant natural obstacle between the front line and Paris. The situation was so critical that II Corps received its order to develop a contingency plan in case of a withdrawal south of the Marne River. The timelines and positions on the left bank of the river were highlighted, and retention of the passages along the Marne were fundamental to allow disengagement of the entire Fifth Army.

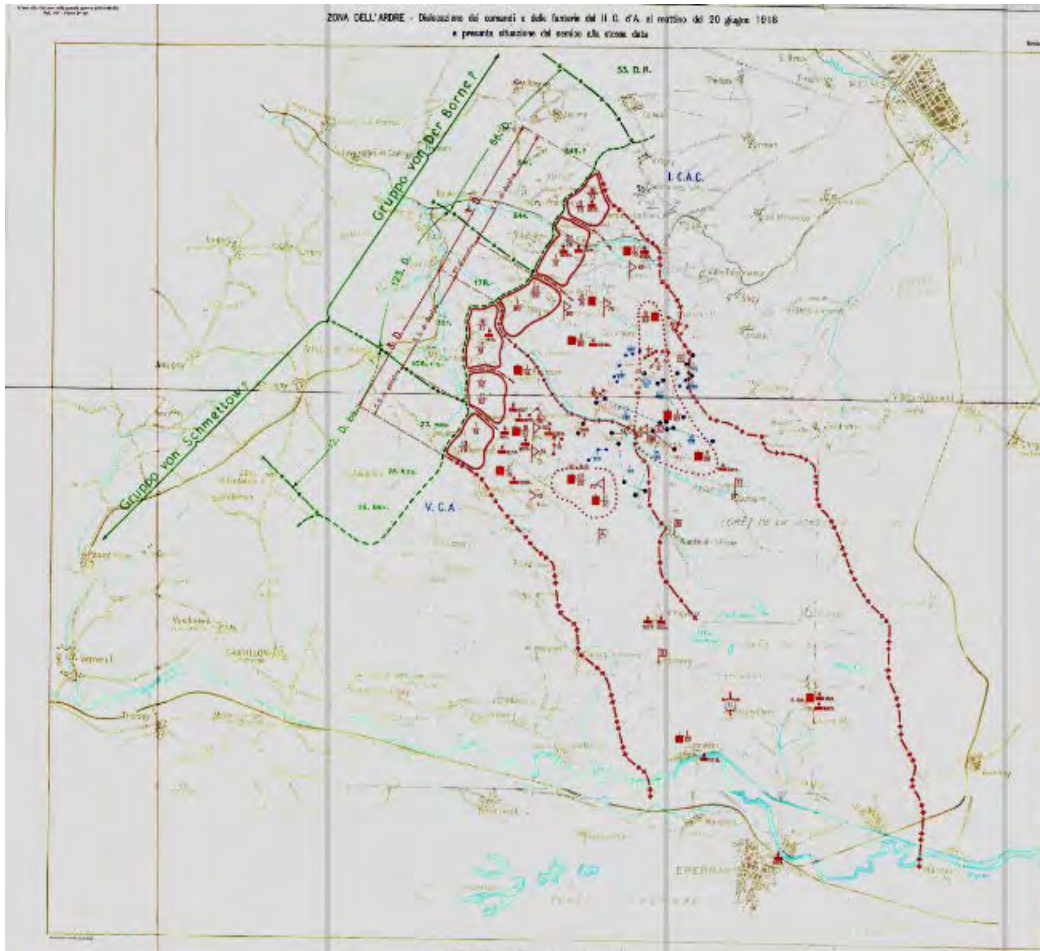


Figure 2. Tactical Disposition of II Corp, 10 June 1918

Source: Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia. in L'esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra (1915-18)* (Rome: Poligrafico dello Stato, 1951), 7: Schizzo 1.

It is important to highlight that the Italian Corps was completely integrated into the Fifth Army's defensive plan. This unit was considered an integral part of the Fifth Army's corps, and received the same information and guidance as the rest of the units. Furthermore, because the sector given to the Italians was considered critical to the entire

defensive system, II Corps received augmentation of eight additional heavy artillery battalions from the Fifth Army's reserves.³¹

The situation was extremely confusing in those days as to guidance. In fact, only a few days after issuing the 28 June 1918 order for development of a contingency plan for a retreat along the Marne, GEN Pétain released a permanent order stating that no piece of land should be abandoned with the only exception being the belt of surveillance posts.³²

Because of these conflicting orders, all planning efforts and works on the battlefield performed by II Corps were focused on strengthening the main defense line that was to be defended at any costs. This situational chaos was also demonstrated by the issuance of another order during the same period by GEN Pétain. While ordered to prepare a contingency plan for a retreat along the Marne and an order to defend the actual positions at any cost, the French general also asked the Fifth Army to prepare a plan for an offensive operation to be conducted before the end of June in order to flatten the bulge near the mountain of Bligny.

On the same day of 28 June, the Fifth Army issued a warning order to the corps to plan two different offensive operations: one to be performed by the II Italian Corps, and one by the French I Colonial Corps, aimed to diminish pressure on the western part of the Reims defenses. This order is interesting because, in accordance with the official Italian analysis after the war, that under the directions of MG Albricci, II Corps command

³¹ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 7:64.

³² *Ibid.*, 7:66.

started to prepare a contingency plan to achieve the same objectives given ten days later by the Fifth Army Command.³³ It emphasizes MG Albricci's understanding of the French command, and is further proof of his notable offensive thinking. None of these plans were followed because the last massive German offensive in the sector occupied by II Corps was close to starting, and there was little intelligence available to prevent it.

Analyzing the tactical situation is important to understand the level of "combinedness" of these operations on the Western Front during late June 1918. II Corps relieved unprepared Allied units directly on the front line after a defensive battle that caused French troops to withdraw from their original lines. II Corps' main objective at the end of June was to improve – or better yet – create a line of defense while the commands were planning for any possible situation. This improvement of the defensive positions was particularly difficult because the defensive line was partially exposed to enemy fires.

Since the very beginning of its employment on the front line, II Corps had to cope with a constant enemy intent to regain the initiative and break the battered Allied line. On 23 June, a first offensive was conducted by the 123rd Saxon Division, and after a little initial German success, II Corps counterattacked. As result, the line was reestablished on its initial positions. Enemy efforts continued during the following two weeks with attacks by the Germans on 29 June and 3 July. In both cases, the fighting lasted for many hours on the Italian positions with attacks and counterattacks that caused an impressive number of casualties. The Italian headquarters began to notice decreased fire support of the

³³ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale*, 7:69.

attacking German troops during early July. Inexperienced with German tactics, the Italian Command failed to recognize this as German stockpiling of munitions in preparation for a major offensive. The II Corp's unawareness of this tactical indicator was likely compounded by GEN Berthelot's assumption of command of Fifth Army on 1 July 1918. Because of this, the Italian command continued planning an offensive operation in accordance with the previously issued Fifth Army orders without understanding that the German army was preparing to mount a major operation. The Fifth Army established a stabilized front line on 7 July and this restricted any kind of defense, except for prolonged opposition in accordance with GEN Pétain's directives. In order to achieve this *defend the line* mission in accordance to the given orders, II Corps prepared strongpoints to resist capture, even if isolated, with a plan for reconquering them at any costs.

Fifth Army provided additional forces to II Corps as a result of the new defensive posture within the Italian sector and the requirement for sufficient forces to perform a counterattack on the main defensive strongpoints if cut off. On 8 July, the French 120th Division was attached to II Corps in recognition of Italian dependability; in fact, the French would not have assigned that extra division to the corps if they did not think the Italians were able to meet the challenge.

Furthermore, while assigning missions to the division, the Fifth Army commander proposed to task-organize II Corps' divisions in order to enhance the sense of brotherhood amongst the Italian and the French troops as much as possible. As a result, MG Albricci ordered that three battalions of the 8th Italian Division be given to the French 120th Division. At the same time, the French 120th Division gave two of its battalions to the 8th Division, which immediately dispatched them to the front line.

This decision is fundamental to understanding the mindset that characterized the deployment of II Corps to France. The importance of this effort was to demonstrate the Italian's willingness to participate in the war as a part of a coalition, even if the most of the Italian army was employed at a different and separate front. It would have been simpler for II Corps commander to employ the dependent, multinational divisions as separate and independent units. This would have diminished problems related with communications as well as command and control issues, but the decision to integrate tactical units at the battalion level is proof of the persistent will to fight a common war with common objectives. MG Albricci was aware of this real, final goal since the beginning of his deployment on the French Front. Many of his decisions created initial problems for his units. An example was the enforcement of the French communication procedures at the battalion-level that were made in pursuit of this higher goal of fighting a common war.

II Corps on the Fourth Battle of Champagne and the Second Battle of the Marne River

As previously mentioned, because of his limited situational understanding, the new Fifth Army commander was still considering the possibility of conducting offensive operations at the beginning of July 1918. The commander of Army Group Centre, GEN Maistre, did not share the Fifth Army ideas about the opportunity of performing offensive operations, and stated that the Fifth Army mission was exclusively defensive at that time.

This difference in opinion was possibly due to a different understanding of the "big picture." The army group Commander was aware of a possible German offensive in the Reims area to force the French to commit its last available reserves, divide the British

from the French, and directly threaten Paris while temporarily relieving the situation of the German troops in the area of Reims and Soissons. Because of the offensive of March-June, the Germans achieved good results at first, but failed to reach their strategic goals.

In order to break this stalemate, a large-scale offensive operation was planned by the Army Group of the Imperial Crown Prince to attack with fifty divisions organized into five armies. Particularly critical was the area between Reims and Soissons where the line created a deep bulge about thirty-five kilometers deep and sixty kilometers wide. The plan was to avoid attacking Reims directly, which was considered too strong to be taken, and reach the Marne River through the Epernay.

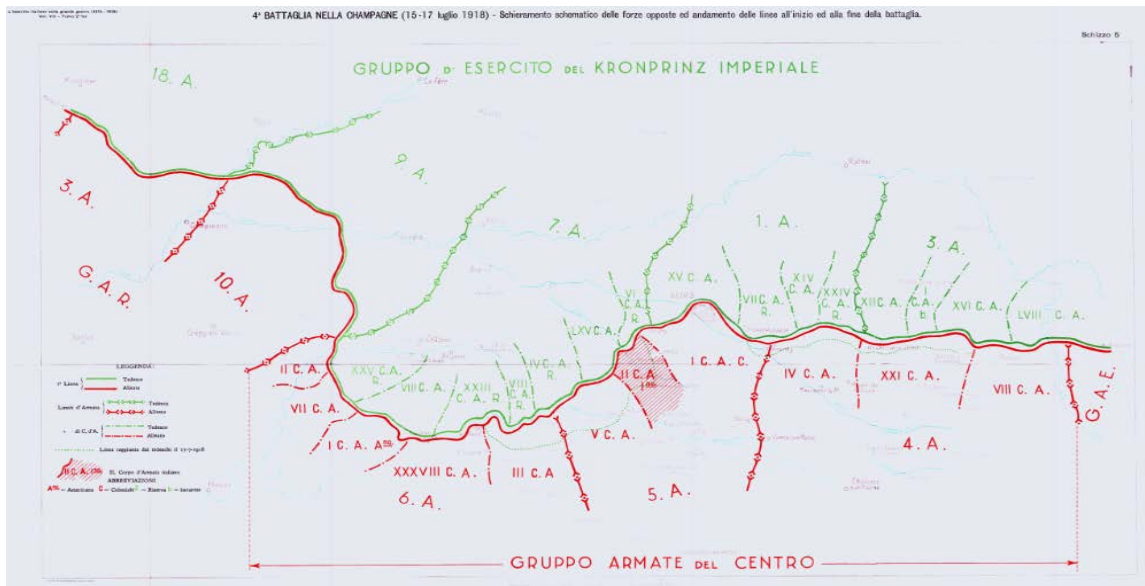


Figure 3. Fourth Champagne Battle, Disposition of the Forces at the Beginning of the Battle

Source: Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia. in L'esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra (1915-18)* (Rome: Poligrafico dello Stato, 1951), 7: Schizzo 4.

The Fifth Army, particularly II Corps, was unprepared for start of this German offensive on the morning of 15 July. In this specific case, the need to show Italian commitment to the Allied cause became a disadvantage for the corps. The corps began its major fighting experience on the Western Front without one battalion, which had been assigned to participate in the July 14 Bastille parade in Paris. The First Battalion of the 89th Regiment was unable to return to the line until July 23 when the battle was almost over.³⁴

Most affected by the initial German fires, the 8th Division was caught in the middle of changing units on the front line resulting in increased casualties. The advanced line was not prepared for the number of troops that had to cope with the first heavy barrage of their deployment.

³⁴ Ufficio Storico, *Diario storico della 3d Divisione del Regio Esercito* [Official Daily Journal of the 3rd Division] (Rome: Army National Archives, 1918).

ZONA DELL'ARDRE - Schieramento dei corredi e della truppe del II C. d'A. alle ore 0 del 15 luglio 1918

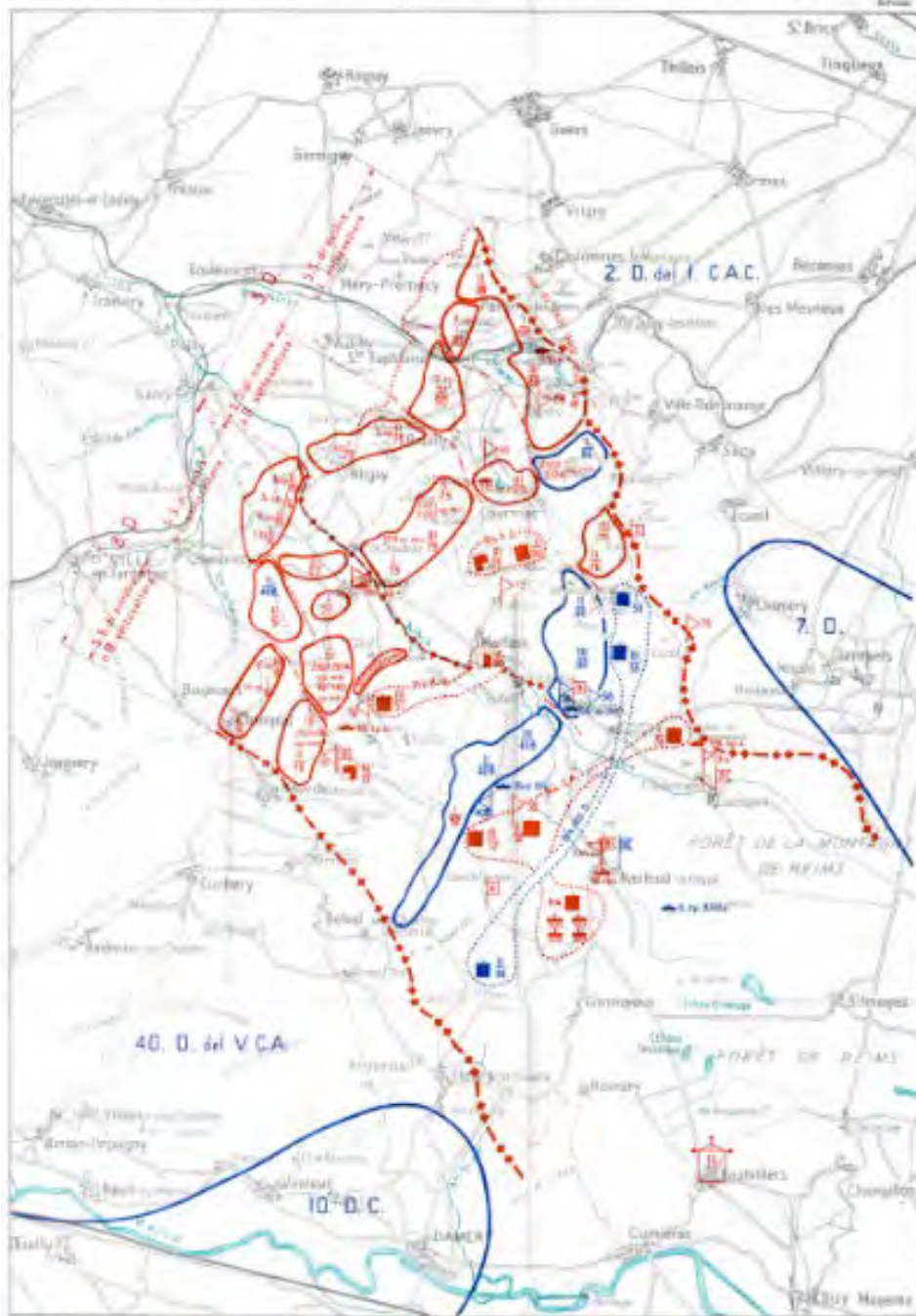


Figure 4. Ardre River Area. II Corps Disposition, 15 July 1918

Source: Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia. in L'esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra (1915-18)* (Rome: Poligrafico dello Stato, 1951), 7: Schizzo 5.

Army Group Centre dispatched an order regarding the main defensive mission of the Fifth Army on 7 July 1918. In accordance with that order, the position of the corps' artillery had moved from an offensive position to a defensive one starting on 13 July 1918. This repositioning occurred just as the last three heavy batteries were moved from their previous position between the two main resistance lines to a more protected position on the night of 14 July. Their previous positions were heavily hit by German fire on 15 July 1918. Because of this repositioning, II Corps was able to begin the battle with all of its effective artillery; approximately 298 tubes of various caliber between 75mm and 155mm.³⁵ Nevertheless, while this repositioning of the artillery protected it from the enemy fires, it also limited the artillery's effective support because the artillery lacked time to prepare firing positions and register targets. This issue particularly affected the corps' artillery ability to effectively conduct counterbattery fires. Furthermore, some 155mm guns were placed in reserve to be used in case of the employment of German tanks. These weapons were completely unfamiliar to the Italian troops, and known only through information received from the various French commands.

The planning for an offensive operation in the Italian sector at the beginning of July had drained II Corps units' ability to conduct reconnaissance patrols to gain necessary intelligence. This hampered preparation of the Italian sector that had been stabilized only one week before the German offensive.

II Corps faced the German VI and LXV Corps, which were the left wing of the Seventh German Army. From the left to right, the 86th, 123rd, 22nd, and 195th Divisions

³⁵ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 7:79.

were massed in front of the Italian sector, with the 12th and 103rd Divisions as second echelon. Some tanks reinforced the 123rd and 22nd Divisions.

At ten minutes after midnight on 15 July 1918, the German offensive started with an intense preparatory fire that was particularly effective on the 8th Division sector. Due to the lack of depth in its defensive lines, fires aimed at the advanced trench line caused great damage throughout these unprepared defensive positions. This resulted in the collapse of the communication system within the corps. In order to restore communications, the corps commander tasked his cavalry units to act as couriers. They performed this role throughout the duration of the battle, suffering massive casualties.

After four hours of intense and effective preparatory fires, the German infantry used chemical rounds to attack the line between the Bligny Mountain and the Marne River. While the purpose of this work is not to analyze the tactical development of the defensive battle, it is significant to highlight that due to the already cited lack of preparation, German assault parties were able to reach the main defensive line at 0830. Italian troops fought bravely throughout various parts of the line, but had no central guidance, and companies and platoons often became isolated. This fierce Italian resistance, even if unable to stop the German advance, bought time to better organize a successive defensive line. The 8th Division that was the target of the primary German effort in the sector was allowed to withdraw at 1830, after ten hours of uninterrupted fight, paying an exorbitant toll of 162 officers and 6,100 soldiers.³⁶

³⁶ Ufficio Storico, *Diario storico della 8ª Divisione del Regio Esercito* [Official Daily Journal of the 8th Division. Army National Archives] (Rome: National Archives, 1918).

The situation on the front of the 3rd Division was less dramatic, but required the conduct of many counterassaults to maintain the main defensive line. Particularly critical was the situation at the junction with the French V Colonial Corps, where an uncoordinated withdrawal of these troops caused a break in the line that required the commitment of part of the Italian reserve and two Arditi battalions in particular.

At the same time, the 120th Division was in secondary defensive position and coped with penetration by small-sized German units and attrited through the first resistance line.

The Fifth Army command appreciated the significant efforts of II Corps. The V Corps line was penetrated multiple times during the day due to its inability to maintain the defense. In order to close this gap, the Army command committed one of its reserve unit, the 14th Division. The initial order gave command of this division to V Corps, but the Fifth Army commander later changed his order and gave this division to II Corps. This action shifted the original assigned sectors while enlarging II Corps sector. This change was based on the perceived reliability of the Italians.³⁷

It is particularly interesting to understand the level of common effort achieved by II Corps to emphasize the composition of dependent units at the dawn of 16 July. The corps defended along the secondary defensive line. The 8th Italian Division, due to the casualties it suffered, was withdrawn while its still effective battalions, the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 20th Regiment, joined with the 3rd Division. The 3rd Division was then integrated into the French 120th Division. The 3rd Division was seriously compromised,

³⁷ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 7:203-235.

but still operative on its positions. The 120th Division was strongly entrenched in its defensive position. The French 14th Division reached its position, and employed as a reserve force by the corps commander. The 14th Division mission was to perform a counterattack to link II Corps with V Corps. MG Albricci did not consider this an achievable task, and retained the division as his reserve. This behavior probably would have cost a French commander his command in the late 1918, but did not cause Albricci any particular problem in the aftermath of the battle because of political considerations. The decision to retain the command of this division was critical for the success of the corps. On the evening of 16 July, the 120th was strongly attrited on its position, running the risk of being overwhelmed by German attackers. The commitment of two battalions of the 14th Division Regiment allowed them to block the German penetration. Summarizing, II Corps was in command of two French divisions and only one Italian division, and the tactical units were badly intermingled due to their movement on the battlefield. Significant is the fact that the units at the battalion level did not attempt to gather with their respective regiment commands, but obeyed orders of the superior command in the area they found themselves, whenever possible.

By the end of 16 July, the German Supreme Command recognized that its offensive had failed, and started to assume a defensive posture. It issued an order to avoid any further offensive operations in the Marne River area for the units on the south bank of the river. Those units on the north bank were to continue to attack, specifically the 22nd, 123rd Division, and 103rd Divisions, between Fleury and Chamery. The Fifth Army command recognized that the German offensive was losing momentum. Late in the night of 16 July, it issued an order to II Corps to prepare for a massive counterattack

based on the 14th Division reinforcements with elements of the 120th and all available Italian units in order to regain II Corps' original main defensive position between Courton and Ste. Euphrasie. V Corps was supposed to attack at the same time to regain the lost terrain as well.

The orders given by MG Albricci to the 14th Division commander, Major General Jean J. H. Mordacq, were specific and were acknowledged by the French commander before dawn on 17 July. The maneuver scheme directed the advance of the 14th Division through the Courton Forest with the 3rd Italian Division providing security on its flank by performing a feint attack on a parallel avenue of advance.

The 3rd Division started its operation as ordered at 0900, but the 14th Division did not perform its ordered task. At 1015, due to French inactivity, MG Albricci had to send a new, energetic reminder to the 14th Division commander to start his attack.³⁸ This delay in the execution of the plan allowed some German units to infiltrate between the advanced battalion of the 14th Division and threaten the center of the exhausted 120th Division. To neutralize this threat, MG Albricci ordered the massing of all available fires in front of the 120th in order to block any adversary penetration, and at the same time he ordered the 3rd Division – due to the inactivity of the 14th – to intensify its feint attack in order to distract as many enemy troops as possible.³⁹

The feint attack was particularly successful, and diverted a great number of enemy troops on the 3rd Division sector. The 3rd Division had to cope with three

³⁸ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 7:266-268.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7:270.

successive German counterattacks between 1230 and 1900, but it was able to maintain its positions. During these continuous attacks and counterattacks in the 3rd Division sector, the 75th Infantry Regiment began an engagement in the Ardre Valley about 1730. This engagement started as a local counterattack to block the enemy in a specific sector, but encountered a massive reaction by the Germans. After two hours of fighting, the regiment was almost completely destroyed, but as reported by German prisoners captured during the fight, it delayed the German main effort at their starting position, stopping this effort before the Germans could launch their last significant effort in the area.

Analysis of the engagement of 16 July is not fundamental from an operational perspective, they were not significant in the great picture of the final German drive, but is important to understand how II Corps and its commander envisioned and conducted the coalition fight. MG Albricci planned the battle with consideration that all of the different international units were equal. He diverted the corps artillery assets to protect the 120th Division while the Italian troops were engaged because he thought that it was the most critical part of the corps' sector. When the situation became critical, due to lack of coordination with the 14th Division, he asked Italian troops to provide an extra effort, probably believing that his orders would have been more easily executed. This is a common pattern in most of the contemporary coalition operations. Many multinational commanders still prefer to rely on their own countrymen in a moment of need. In this specific case, it was a successful decision, but could not be taken as an always-correct paradigm.

On the morning of 18 July, the 14th Division was finally ready to commence the ordered counterattack. At 0900, after one and half hours of preparatory fires, the

movement started with good success throughout the corps' sector, sustained by the remaining forces of the 3rd and 120th Divisions. Movement at the extreme right end of the sector, occupied by the Salerno Brigade of the 3rd Division, was particularly effective. This area, which linked II Corps with the 2nd Colonial French Division, had been less challenged by the German offensive in the previous days. The Allies were able to exploit their success because the German offensive did not meet its objectives in the area occupied by II Corps and the French 2nd Colonial Division.



Figure 5. Ardre River Area, Lines of Advance of the Allied Forces, 18-20 July

Source: Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia. in L'esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra (1915-18)* (Rome: Poligrafico dello Stato, 1951), 7: Schizzo 11.

Fifth Army command issued an order to the 3rd Division to provide all possible help to the 2nd Colonial Division. Because the French commander was more senior than

the Italian division commander, he acted under his orders. This combined effort was successful, and the Allied line reached the Courmas River by the end of the day, practically erasing all German gains in the area. The latter three days of fighting had been extremely intense for II Corps and the Fifth Army. Recognizing that there was no more urgent threat to the integrity of the front on the night of 19 July, the XXII UK Corps arrived to replace II Corps. Not all the available II Corps artillery followed the corps to its designated reorganization area. Instead, some remained on the line to provide possible assistance to XXII Corps, as well as two regimental-sized units attached to the 2nd Colonial Division, as requested by the French division commander as long as the Fifth Army identified a suitable reserve for this unit.⁴⁰ This unit remained on the line with the 2nd Division for five more days until 24 July, being employed by the French commander in multiple engagements. Once again, MG Albricci violated his national guidance about retaining command of the Italian units in order to provide the maximum possible help to the Allied effort.

Eventually II Corps reached the assigned reorganization area near Mailly, missing 327 officers and about 10,000 soldiers. On 27 July, II Corps was assigned to the 4th Army, and was granted a period to reorganize until 3 August. Due to the difficulties in sending needed replacements to France, the Corps took until 6 August to be considered ready for employment. Due to the lack of time and other operations ongoing in Italy, II Corps lacked necessary materials, especially horses and MGs. The French Army provided these resources, which resolved the problem of interoperability of the MG

⁴⁰ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 7:299.

sections on the line. The entire remaining inventory of Italian Fiat MGs were replaced with the French Saint Etienne, and Italian personnel were trained to operate these new weapons during this operational pause.

On 4 August, Fourth Army ordered II Corps to prepare to be attached to the Second Army. II Corps was supposed to relieve XIII Corps in the Ardennes. 3rd Division was supposed to move first in order to assume the 35th Division sector on August 12. The assigned area had been relatively quiet over the previous days, and the defensive positions were in an optimal state of preparation along the Biesme River. II Corps assumed command of this sector on 15 August, receiving the 36th and 73rd Divisions under its command. This was due to the decision of the 2nd Army to retain the 8th Division as its own reserve. MG Albricci accepted this change in his organization because the 8th Division was located immediately behind the II Corps area of operations.⁴¹

This situation did not last long for II Corps; on 6 September, the Second Army ordered the 8th Division to replace the American 77th Division in the Dormans area. This movement served as an initial step for substitution of the American III Corps by the French XVI Corps, which was later replaced by II Corps. This period of quiet, during which no major engagements were fought, allowed II Corps to regain its full operational capability. During this period, the President of the French Republic made a visit to II Corps on 26 August. Speaking in Italian to the units, he appointed the 89th Regiment colors and the 2nd Arditi Battalion colors with the French *Croix de Guerre* with Palm for

⁴¹ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale*, 7:335-341.

their exceptional bravery on the Marne River. MG Albricci was awarded the Grand Officer of the Legion of Honor, one of the highest French awards in recognition of the Italian effort on the Western Front. Few foreign units have been awarded these French decorations.⁴²

II Corps from the Aisne River to the Mosa River: The Battle of Chemin des Dames

During September 1918, Marshal Foch wanted to exploit the advantage of existing conditions and ordered simultaneous offensives in three different sectors. In the north, the British Army was to attack the Cambrai-Saint Quentin area; while in the center, the French armies were to continue their offensive to push the Germans back to the Aisne and Ailette Rivers. The Americans were to perform two separate actions: one beginning 10 September in the St. Mihiel sector to reach Regnieville, and the other at the end of the month in the Meuse-Argonne sector to seize Mezieres.

After a period of rest, II Corps with the Second Army returned in line with the Fifth Army along the Aisne River. Its mission was to replace the XVI Corps, which was temporarily formed from the French 62nd Division and the American 77th Division. Due to the evolution of the tactical situation, an American division faced a similar situation as the Italian division with overall command under another national commander. The XVI Corps command requested MG Albricci to provide artillery support to the American 77th Division. MG Albricci promptly accepted the request, so the 10th Artillery Regiment of II Corps artillery entered in line along with the 77th Divisional Artillery, providing direct

⁴² Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale*, 7:344.

support to the American soldiers. The employment of French and American divisions, and an Italian regiment, by the French XVI Corps exemplifies the implementation of coalition warfare during this period of the war. While this could be considered an example of missed unity of command, in reality it is an example of unity of effort for a common purpose. This cooperation increased throughout 15 September when the XVI Artillery Group joined the battle in the American area of operations. This multinational environment lasted only a couple of days. On the night of 16 September, the 52nd Italian Regiment relieved the American 305th Regiment, and the 51st assumed the role of corps reserve previously performed by the American 306th Regiment. The American 77th Divisional Artillery was relieved from the line the next day.

II Corps remained in this sector for few days, and was ordered to move to the extreme left end of the Fifth Army sector between III Corps and the Tenth Army, just in front of the fortified German position on the Chemins des Dames.

On 26 September, the Allied offensive started with the American First Army and the French Fourth Army attacking towards Monfaucon and Mont Notre-Dame. After initial success, the attack was close to culmination, but the Fifth and Tenth Army were ordered to attack between Vesle and Aisne in the face of strong German resistance.

Initially, II Corps was not involved in the Fifth Army's offensive operations because it was the pivot point of the movement for the attack of Fifth Army. Part of the corps artillery was diverted in support of the III Corps, but this did not stop MG Albricci. He ordered his staff to plan an offensive operation to join the fight if any local advantage was identified. Furthermore, he ordered all engineer units to gather the material needed to create temporary bridges on the Aisne River.

The Tenth Army's success on the left precluded II Corps' chance to attack the retreating enemy. Not wanting to be left out of the biggest Allied offensive on the Western Front, and without authorization, MG Albricci ordered the 3rd Division to the other side of the Aisne River by using a military bridge in the French 25th Division (Tenth Army) area of operation. In order to facilitate this movement, he provided all the corps' available trucks to the 3rd Division. Once the far side of the river was secured by a vanguard of the 3rd Division, he ordered the 8th Division to cross the river as well. On official orders of the Fifth Army, II Corps continuously gained terrain over the next five days, and reached Chavon on the night of 6 October.

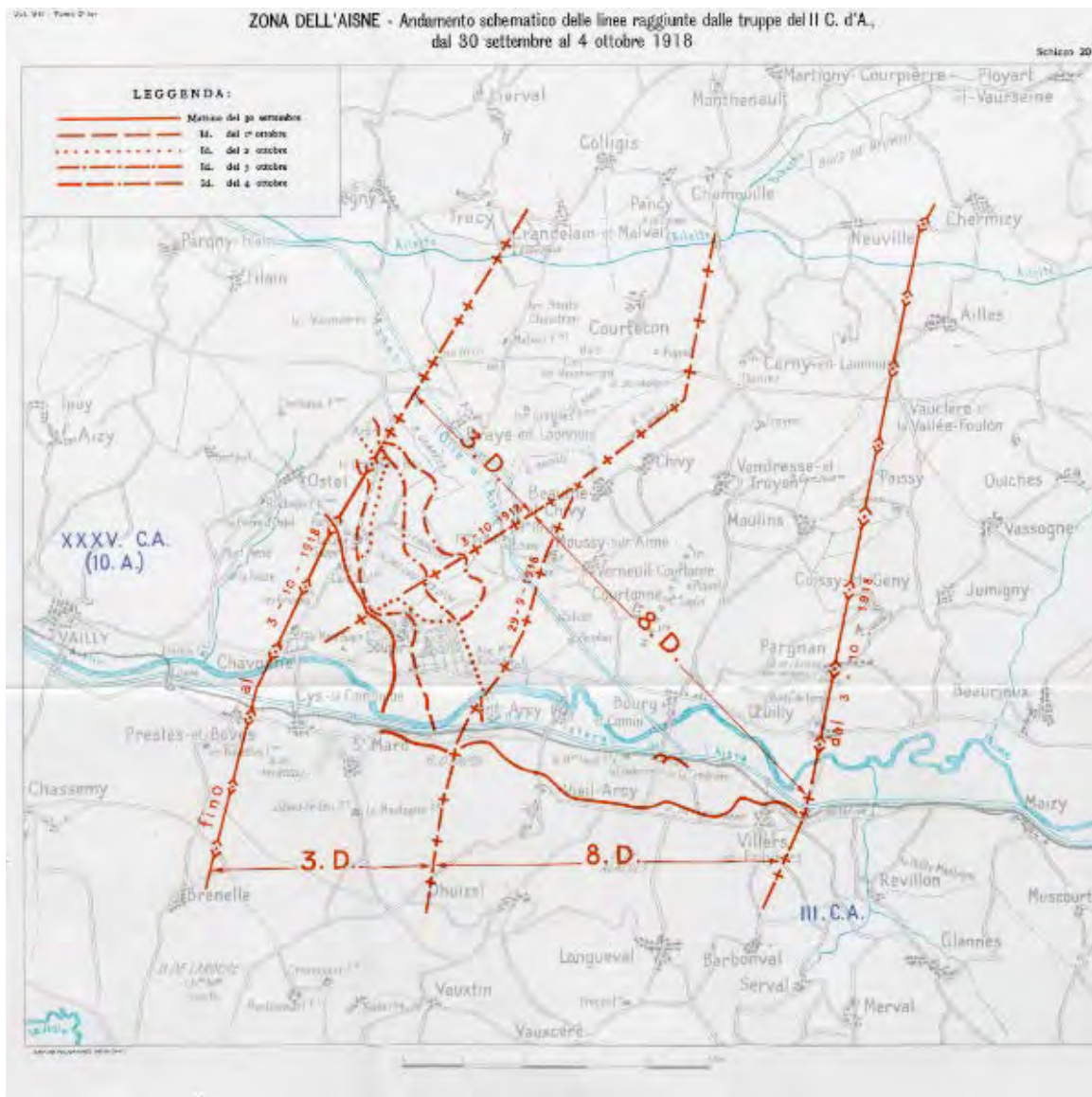


Figure 6. Aisne River Area—Operations of 30 September–4 October

Source: Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia. in L'esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra (1915-18)* (Rome: Poligrafico dello Stato, 1951), 7: Schizzo 20.

MG Albricci's conduct is best understood by his determination to fulfill the mission ordered by the Italian government. Examined out of context, moving an entire division beyond its army boundaries to exploit a situation of advantage is probably close

to insubordination, but it was necessary that the Italian commander continue pursuit of the Germans in those days of attack. He needed to prove that II Corps was a valuable effort to the overall Allied strategy, and gaining terrain was considered a measure of effectiveness in those days of trench warfare. After a two day operational pause, a new advance started on 8 October.

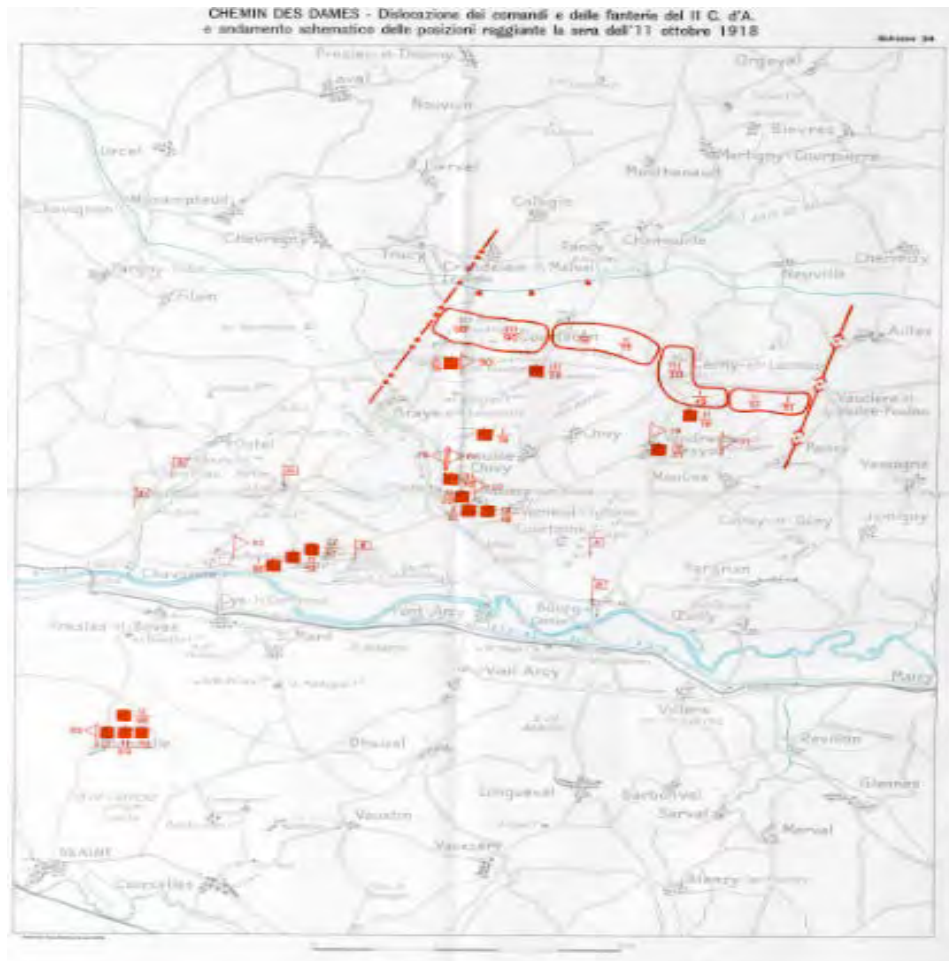


Figure 7. Chemines des Dames–Operations of 11 October 1918

Source: Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia. in L'esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra (1915-18)* (Rome: Poligrafico dello Stato, 1951), 7: Schizzo 24.

II Corps received the order to cross the Ailette River first and seize Sissonne. This objective was reached on the evening of 14 October by both the 8th Division of II Corps and the French 6th Division. In six days of unstoppable advance, II Corps was able to free the formidable defensive position of the Chemin des Dames to reach the strategic node of Sissonne. Due to the success of this operation, MG Albricci received a formal letter of appreciation by the Tenth Army Commander, LTG Charles Mangin. Due the fluidity of the operational environment, and the already depicted aggressive mentality of MG Albricci, II Corps operated mainly in this area of operation in close coordination with the Tenth Army. This behavior could have created many French complaints had not the result been one of the most significant tactical victories since the beginning of the war.

Upon reaching Sissonne, II Corps could not continue its advance because of the swamps that characterized the terrain east of Sissonne. All available axes of advance were oriented towards the *Hunding Stellung*, which was a formidable, prepared German defensive belt that was impossible to take without a carefully planned operation. Due to the terrain, II Corps was unable to continue its advance, and was stopped in Sissonne until 5 November. During those two weeks, II Corps was assigned to the Third Army. Its primary concerns were reorganizing its units and permitting replacements to join those units in order to prepare for a further offensive task. The Third Army command ordered II Corps to be prepared to move on order to exploit any breaches in the German defensive organization.

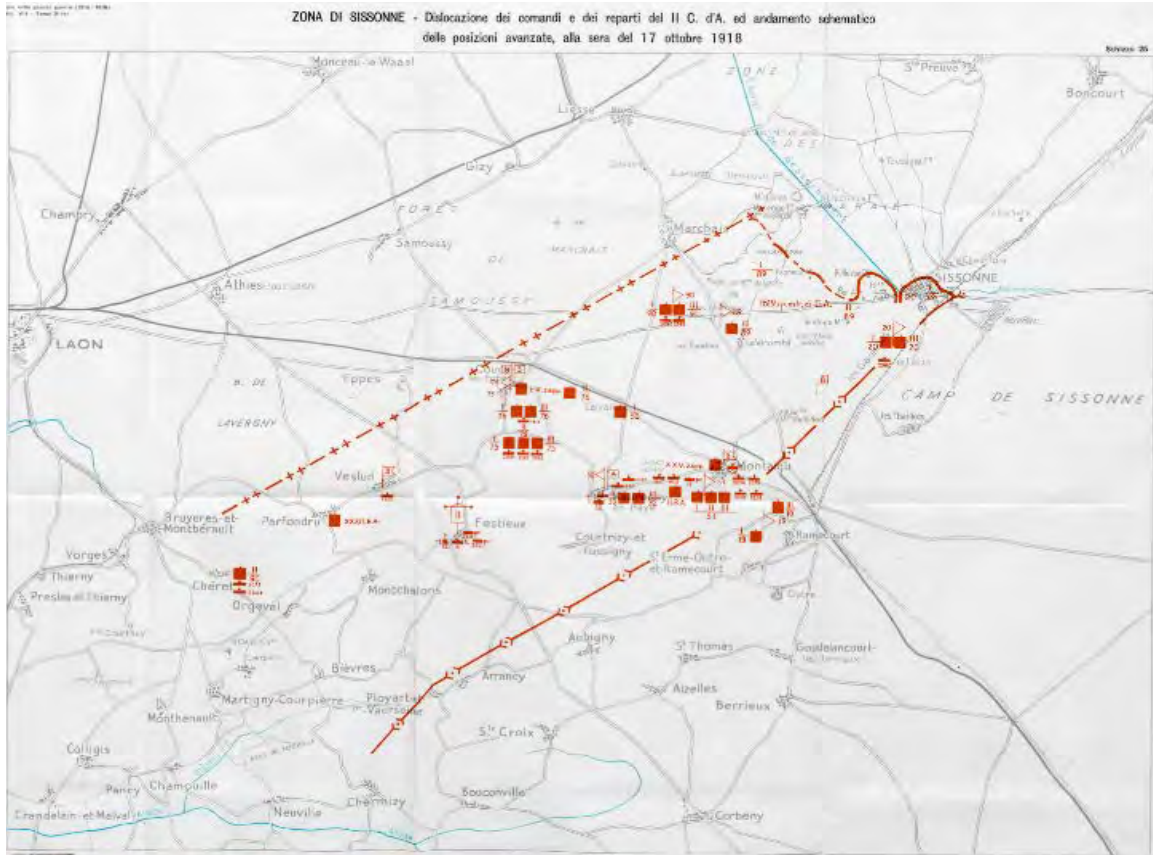


Figure 8. Sissonne Area—II Corps Dislocation 17 October 1918

Source: Ufficio Storico, Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia. in L'esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra (1915-18) (Rome: Poligrafico dello Stato, 1951), 7: Schizzo 25.

Due to the continuous Allied efforts, the Germans had to withdraw. II Corps was allowed to continue its offensive progress, first occupying the town of Chivres, and later Resigny and Parfondeval. German resistance weakened daily, and the battle resembled more of a pursuit than a deliberate attack during those days. The 8th Division liberated Rocroi at dawn on 11 November. II Corps occupied a sector, seventy kilometers deep in six days. This magnificent effort happened after fifty-five days in the line. This effort happened after the capitulation of Austria and an already stabilized Italian front. There

was no longer an urgent political need for commitment of II Corps, but the idea of a coalition fight was so deeply embraced by MG Albricci that he did not try to avoid the battle.

On November 11, the Armistice went into effect, and all major combat operations finished. In General Order 689, dated 11 November 1918, LTG Humbert said these words in recognition of the Italian effort complete by the Third Army:

Soldats Francais and Italiens de la III Armee! En six jour, dans une ruede ardente, da la Serre a la Meuse, malgre le intemperies, le boue, le destructions operees par l'ennemi, vous avez boute hors de la France le derniers Allemands . . . Glorie a vous! [French and Italian soldiers of the Third Army! In six days, on a road of fire, from the Serre to the Meuse, despite the bad weather, the mud, the destruction caused by the enemy, you have kicked out the last Germans from France! . . . Yours is the glory].⁴³

According with the disposition of the Armistice, II Corps was called to create a line of outposts along the ground they had reached and was assigned to the sector between Anchamps and Rocroi. According to Armistice clauses, the Germans were to leave occupied Belgium and Luxembourg, and the region of Alsace and Lorraine, withdrawing through six further lines in the first fifteen days. During the next sixteen days, the Germans were to free all the territory on the west bank of the Rhine River and the bridgeheads within a 30-kilometer radius near Koln, Coblenz, and Magonz, and a 10-kilometer deep belt from the Rhine River was declared neutral.

On 15 November, II Corps was assigned to the First Army, and received the order to be ready to move through Belgium and Luxembourg to reach the Rhine and take part in the occupation of the Coblenz bridgehead. The original French plan expected

⁴³ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 7:452.

VII Corps to be the vanguard of the First Army, followed by the parallel movement of the XXXVI Corps and the II Italian Corps. Due to the limitation imposed on the number of authorized divisions on the far side of the Mosa River, this plan was abandoned on 21 November, and the deployment of a vanguard corps was canceled. II Corps, in accordance with the First Army directive, would lead the Allies in this area of operation following the route Fumay-Graide-Maaisin-Tille-Bastogne-Wiltz-Dasburg. This would have recognized II Corps' achievement by actively participating in freeing Belgian territory, but GEN Foch issued a new order on 21 November that assigned the Koblenz bridgehead to the American Expeditionary Force. Because of this order, II Corps was moved back under Fifth Army authority, and was allocated to guard part of the border between France and Belgium in the Paliseul area. Italian leadership accepted this order, choosing not to criticize to criticize the diminished visibility of II Corps in doing so. During this period in Belgium, II Corps was under Fifth Corps until that unit was disbanded on 22 January 1919 when it passed under the responsibility of the Third Army.

On 29 January 1919, the Italian Supreme Command ordered MG Albricci to arrange for a provisional brigade to remain in France after II Corps withdrew to Italy. The Alpi Brigade was chosen for its previous bonds with the French; however, it was formed not by its organic regiments, but with elements of the younger classes of the 8th Division.

In one month, between 6 February and 8 March 1919, II Corps reached Italy with troops arriving daily by train. II Corps command left France on 25 February 1919, and was deactivated on 10 March 1919.

The Alpi Brigade in Belgium and in Germany
February-August 1919

A force of 220 Officers and 6,000 soldiers remained in Belgium after the withdrawal of II Corps. They were assigned to the XI Corps on 28 February 1919, and successively moved under the command of the Eighth Army. Between 9-13 March 1919, this brigade was moved to Germany via train, reaching the villages of Winden and Schaidt, close to the city of Karlsruhe. On 1 April, the Alpi Brigade assumed the sector previously held by the 2nd Colonial Division between Lauterbourg and Pfortz.

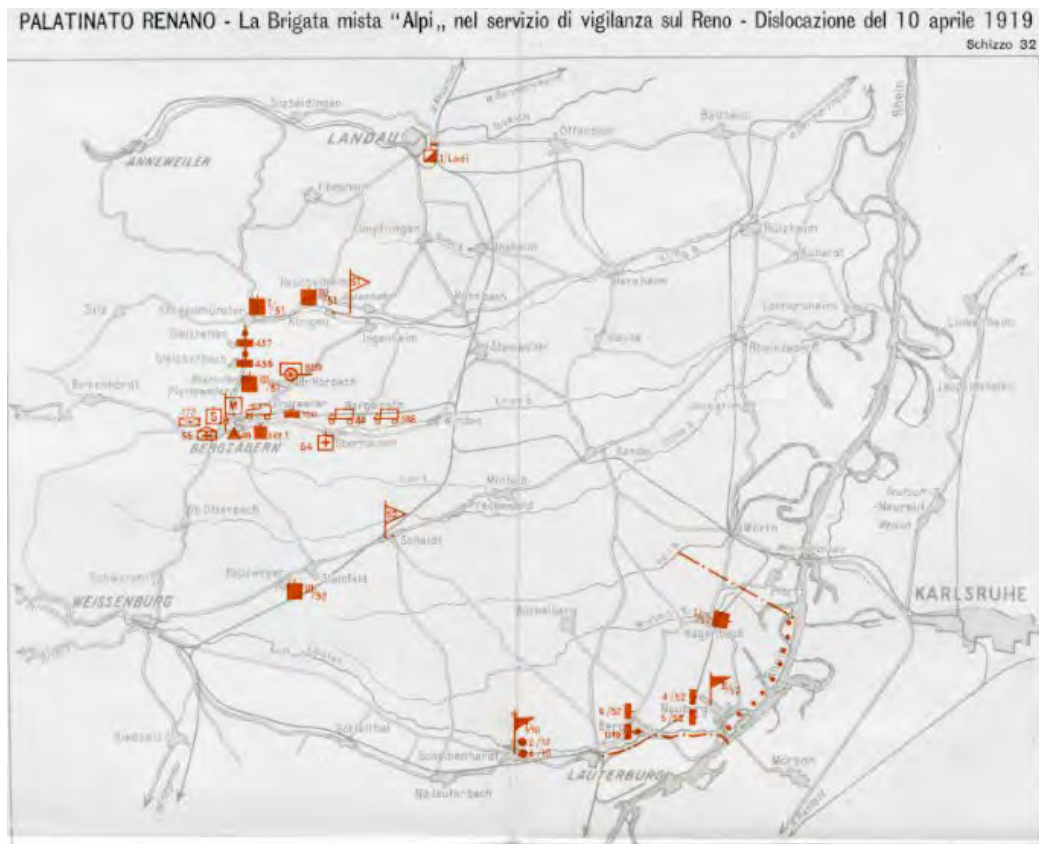


Figure 9. Initial Dislocation of “Alpi Brigade” during the Occupation

Source: Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia. in L'esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra (1915-18)* (Rome: Poligrafico dello Stato, 1951), 7: Schizzo 32.

On 17 May, the sector assigned to the Italian Brigade was expanded to Jockgrim, becoming 18-kilometers wide.

On 22 May, the Eighth Army command issued an order in case hostilities were to restart. The Alpi Brigade was moved north in the Worms-Oppenheim area between 17 and 19 June, and on 20 June, the brigade was passed to XXXII Corps.

On 23 June at 1900 hours, the brigade commander was informed that the German Government had accepted all peace clauses and the Versailles treaty was signed on June 28. The Alpi Brigade remained in Germany until 28 July.

PALATINATO RENANO - La Brigata mista "Alpi,, nel servizio di vigilanza sul Reno - Dislocazione del 19 maggio 1919
Schizzo 33



Figure 10. Final Dislocation of “Alpi Brigade” during the Occupation

Source: Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia. in L'esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra (1915-18)* (Rome: Poligrafico dello Stato, 1951), 7: Schizzo 33.

With two trains every day between 4-10 August 1919, the Alpi Brigade left the Western Front. This was the final page of the deployment of II Corps during this war effort. This was the end of the Italian deployment on the Western Front. II Corps fought bravely on the Reims Soissons area, gaining the respect and the appreciation of Allied commanders. This was the main reason for its deployment on the Western Front, despite occurring during a moment of crisis on the Italian Front. MG Albricci was a successful

interpreter of his mission. He disobeyed orders, both national and allied, but always keeping in mind the overarching reason for his deployment. Deployment of II Corps, even if marginal in the overall Allied effort on the Western Front during the last German drives and Allied counteroffensives, achieved its goals with thanks to the understanding of its commander and the bravery of its soldiers who paid a huge price in losses, but never disappointing expectations.

CHAPTER 4

EVALUATION OF II CORPS DEPLOYMENT

II Corps' deployment on the Western Front lasted for fourteen months, during which it was involved in some of the bloodiest battles of the First World War. In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, it is important to understand the strategic importance of II Corps' mission. II Corps was not deployed to win the war, but to create deeper ties with the Allies. In order to achieve this goal, II Corps fought to demonstrate Italy's commitment to the Allied cause. To properly evaluate II Corps' efforts, both the perceptions of the Allies and the Italian government must be addressed. Only by understanding these features, is it possible to properly understand the value of II Corps' deployment to today's military. These issues will be analyzed in the final chapter of this work.

The Evaluation of II Corps Deployment among Allied Forces

It is difficult to know how the Allies perceived II Corps' efforts through only official documents. It is easy to depict in an extremely positive way, the efforts of all the units that contributed to the achievement of a great Allied victory in World War One. Because of a natural human tendency to highlight only the positive parts of any war, especially in the immediate aftermath, the various official messages addressed after the war provide a partial, and probably biased, insight about the real appreciation of their effort. Nevertheless, it is possible to develop a general idea of the value given to Italian contributions on the Western Front by the French Supreme Command's daily communications. These messages were affected by a level of inherent political

correctness to avoid offending the Allies, but a general trend can be discerned. After all the major engagements that involved II Corps, the French official communication used words describing its approval of the Italian effort.

Since the very beginning, French commanders employed positive descriptions of II Corps. MG Linder, the XIII Corps Commander, was the first French commander to employ an Italian division in May 1918 in the Argonne sector. The employment of the corps' subunit was in contradiction with national guidance, but used nonetheless during a major German drive. When II Corps received its own sector and the troops were returned to MG Albricci's command, the French general sent a message of appreciation to the Italian troops that showed "great valor" in defending the assigned front. The same appreciation was shown by LTG Castelnau, the Army Group East Commander, who described the Italian forces as a "*superbes division*."⁴⁴

The positive attitude towards the Italian troops continued throughout the war. On the occasion of the fight for the Bligny Mountain (see Chapter 3), the Italian effort was cited in the daily French Official communication in these terms:

*Entre la Marne et Reims, les Allemands ont attaque la Montagne de Bligny et ont reussi a s'emparer un istant du sommet. Un contre-attaque vigoureuse des troupes italiennes les en a rejetes peu apres, en faisant des prisoniers. Notre ligne est integralment retablie [The Germans attacked the Mountain of Bligny between the Marne and Reims, and they managed to temporarily seize the summit. A vigorous attack by Italian troops rejected them shortly after, making them prisoners. Our line of integrity restored].*⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

The French Supreme Command credited the Italian effort for this success in the only official daily document issued to the public in those days. This became a trend repeated throughout II Corps deployment. French official communications of 16 July declared, “Between Dormans and Reims, the French and Italian troops’ resistance has successfully stopped the Germans, thanks to their incredible tenacity.”⁴⁶ The 22 July communication announced, “Close to Reims an incredibly violent fight erupted. The French and English troops in close collaboration with the Italians, attacking with an uncontainable strength, stopped an important enemy force.”⁴⁷

Recognition of the Italian efforts can be found repeatedly throughout official French records. It is worthwhile to highlight some of these accolades in order to understand the general viewpoint of the French Supreme Command towards the Italian troops as II Corps did not suffer serious defeats as did other Allied contingents during their deployment on the Western Front. References to the Italians’ success became more and more frequent during the last Allied offensive of October 1918. Italians were specifically cited in the official communications of 11 October for taking the Chemin des dames⁴⁸

Recognition of Italian efforts during the war was not limited to citations in official communications. The French Supreme Command awarded important decorations to both II Corps leaders and their units (see Chapter 3). These awards were given in the midst of

⁴⁶ Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni Fuori Del Territorio Nazionale. Soldati Italiani in Terra di Francia*, 270.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 369.

the war, not after the end of the conflict, indicating that the French recognized their efforts and gallantry instead of simply awarding them for political reasons.

The highest officials of many Allied countries recognized II Corps' efforts during official visits. Because their acknowledgements came during the midst of the war, rather than during the hagiographic process that often follows a major victory, appreciation of II Corps' achievements seem more credible. The King of Belgium's official address during a visit to II Corps on 21 December 1918, included thanks to the "magnificent and brave Italian troops that contributed with their effort and their blood to liberate his country." GEN Pétain's address at the 1921 inauguration of the Italian military cemetery in France (see chapter 3) where the French general also paid tribute to the Italians' contributions during their deployment on the Western Front.

The numerous citations in the official French statements during the war, the many awards to both individuals and units during the midst of the biggest crisis on the Western Front, as well as the laudatory words of Allied officials after the war, all provide a general idea of the Allies' appreciation for II Corps. This was part of its mission and it is possible to state that it was achieved. If the Italian Army would not had been able to stop the Austro-German offensive on the Piave River, and later defeat them during the last part of 1918, II Corps achievement could have been better evaluated. Fortunately, this was not the case.

The Evaluation of II Corps in Italy

If the Allies' assessment of II Corps is not simple to understand, Italy's estimation is possibly more difficult. After the end of the conflict, a sense of national pride became a predominant factor in the war's depiction. Italy's little appreciation of II Corps may have

been influenced by the results of the Paris Conference, where Italy did not receive all of what it had been promised by the London Treaty.⁴⁹ In the Italian contemporary vision, the sacrifice of Italian troops in favor of Allies, who did not keep their promises, might have resulted in an ultimately smaller recognition for II Corps' achievement.

The disavowal of the London treaty, mainly due to the US position at the Paris Conference, caused the Italian representatives to leave the conference for months, and created conditions for a strong nationalistic sentiment in Italy. The idea of a "mutilated victory" became immediately extremely popular among the veterans and some politicians, who used it to build a consensus for their political goals. The "mutilated victory" was one of the arguments used by the growing Fascist Party in its early political statements, staging conditions for its later success. These are just some possible reasons why an official history of II Corps deployment on the Western Front was not written until 1951. The assertion was that II Corps had wrongly fought along the front belonging to the Allies, which was now frustrating Italian efforts and failing to recognize Italy's sacrifices of 650,000 military casualties and one million wounded during this war.

After gaining power, the Fascist leadership exploited the myth of the First World War as the final independence war. It played down the importance of II Corps deployment because it was not necessary to Fascist political goals. II Corps'

⁴⁹ Italy, France, Great Britain, and Russia signed a secret treaty on 26 April 1915 that committed Italy to leave the Triple Alliance, and enter the war against the Central Powers within thirty days. At the end of the war Italy, was to be compensated with territorial gains, mainly concerning the Austrian provinces where Italian speakers were living, a great portion of the Adriatic coastline, control over Albania, a footprint in Turkey, and part of the German colonies in Africa and Asia. The Versailles treaty granted only the first of the aforementioned goals.

achievements became a useless effort in a war that the Fascist regime portrayed mainly as fought by the Italians on their own, and successfully won by the Italians without the help of the Allies.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, despite the absence of an official history of II Corps' deployment after the conflict, it is possible to observe its success by looking at the personal history of II Corps commander, MG Albricci, in the years that followed his deployment to France.

In recognition of his military successes in France, the first postwar Italian government appointed MG Albricci as the Minister of War on 24 March 1919, only weeks after II Corps' return to Italy. He retained the position until 13 March 1920, when he was faced with the challenge of demobilizing an enormous number of troops that had been called to serve in the armed forces during the final four years at war, one of the most critical political periods for the government while dealing with the armed forces.

⁵⁰ This is an important methodological specification for this work. It relies heavily on the official history and primary sources, which could limit the data accountability. The only available official history of II Corps deployment was written in 1951, thirty-three years after the events, and in a completely different political environment. The information provided by the official history were at this point no longer driven by political interests and national goals, but were a simple account of the Italian soldiers who fought on the Western Front. They were means of national power that had been forgotten for decades because their sacrifice was no longer compliant with the political goals of the Nation.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

II Corps' deployment was a unique experience for the Italian Armed forces during the First World War. This thesis analyzes the Italian Armed Forces' selection, training, deployment, and employment of the Italian II Corps and an evaluation of the Corps' efforts during the war. II Corps' story is about the successful deployment of a small unit in order to achieve greater national goals in a coalition environment. Some features allowed II Corps to be successful and they are mainly the political guidance provided, the role of the commander, the adopted command and control structure and the ability to manage equipment and replacements away from the homeland. All these elements, plus and undefined numbers of others that are inherently part of von Clausewitz' idea of friction, allowed II Corps to be successful and they can talk to today's commander about what is needed to be successful in similar situations. The extraordinary conditions of the First World War will hopefully never be replicated again, but small contingency deployments are worthy of studying.

II Corps was able to succeed primarily because the corps' commander and staff understood the corps' mission and limitations. The corps commander was briefed on his mission directly by Italy's political leadership, which set the conditions for success. MG Albricci understood II Corps' real objectives, and was able to make the right decision to achieve these goals. He had a clear purpose, and was able to adapt his tasks and limitations in order to pursue that goal. From the very beginning, he disregarded orders received from the Italian leadership to retain unity of command. Due both to the critical operational situation during March through May 1918 and to MG Albricci's

understanding that he could not gain the Allies' favor while denying them his troops during the final struggle against the Germans on the Western Front. Italy's contribution was relatively minor in the overall Allied defense, but II Corps demonstrated a desire to fight and an ability to accomplish the given tasks by joining the Allied battle. While the employment of a division piecemealed in the carnage of the German drive did not significantly contribute to the operational environment, the employment of the division's units achieved the strategic goal of gaining Allied Supreme Command's recognition of the Italian presence on the Western Front. This enabled MG Albricci to ask for more visible and important tasks. On the other hand, the national political guidance allowed II Corps to disregard or the ability to favorably reinterpret orders from the higher echelons during the final Allied counteroffensive. The need to be active and effective in gaining terrain allowed MG Albricci to leave assigned positions on the Aisne River on 1 October (see page 57). His goal was to place the Italian forces in a positive light, which could not have been done remaining in place as originally ordered.

The best political guidance would not have been useful if their interpreter was not such a successful and capable man. Leadership played a major role in II Corps' success. MG Albricci was a competent general as shown during the Caporetto retreat, but he was also a man with a natural disposition for the political arena as demonstrated during his appointment as Minister of War. He was able to visualize the environment at different levels. His tactical and operational understanding has been largely discussed during this work, but his tactical and operational skill would have been useless if he had not placed it into a strategic context. He was a general, but in line with that period's environment, he was also a skilled politician. There may have been better generals in the Italian Army at

that point of the war, but MG Albricci was the best possible choice for his mix of tactical, operational, strategic, and political skills.

It is difficult to consider a commander with such a broad span of authority today. The environment in which II Corps fought was completely different from today. Contemporary communications are easier, and the ability to reach back is usually an option. Politicians stress the importance of staying informed and participating in the operational and tactical level decisional process. This would limit the span of autonomy that a commander of a small contingent could have today. There is a broad variety of political interference in military affairs between different countries, and this is something that must be considered both by those who employ small contingents inside a bigger unit and by the commander of the deployed unit. MG Albricci had an unusually impressive autonomy in commanding II Corps on the Western Front. The choice of a deployed force is a central and fundamental step for setting up a force for success. A commander must be able to understand the political guidance provided, and, at the same time, he must be able to adapt to different scenarios. However, in today's environment, a commander is asked to do more: he must be able to communicate with allies and understand his political limitations without jeopardizing the force's efforts.

The commander's understanding is also fundamental in the choice of the best available command and control structure. In 1918 there was no mandatory doctrine regarding multinational operations in the Italian Army. Any comparison with today's doctrinal structure is difficult. Nevertheless, political guidance that stressed the need for a constant unity of command of II Corps' units might suggest that there could only have been an exchange with the Allies at the corps level. This would have limited the

capability of the corps to work with Allied units, but excluded any violation of that guidance. MG Albricci decided to endorse the French command and control procedures, and fostered the distribution of the French communications system at the lower levels by ordering his units to utilize French procedures (see page 31). This proved to be a successful choice for II Corps. This thesis has provided examples of how units were able to provide valuable contributions to the fight while employed with other nation's forces. A fully integrated command structure was developed, allowing the Italian forces to be always ready to respond to any critical situation, and join any battle without the need to wait for a corps order. The capability to fight in intermingled units was a critical element of II Corps' success. This allowed a broader audience to understand and visualize the Italian commitment on the Western Front. Without this choice, there would have been a significant limitation to the possibility of intervention of II Corps' units during critical moments of those battles when the corps headquarters had no chance to direct the units for lack of situational awareness. These decisions probably also simplified French decisions to place French units under Italian tactical control during various engagements. French leadership understood those troops would be employed to the best of their ability in accordance with French standards.

However, perfect guidance and the best commander's skills would not allow a deployed contingent's success if the deployed contingent lacked the right manning and equipment. II Corps was able to adapt its equipment during its deployment, and was able to standardize its equipment thanks to the common efforts of France and Italy. Some of the initial equipment provided was not the best choice for the operational conditions, such as the Italian Fiat machine gun. This situation was corrected when the St. Etienne French

machine gun was provided to many Italian units. Understanding the challenge of providing sustainment and replacement parts for this particular piece of equipment located hundreds miles away from the industrial base of II Corps, led to the decision of replacing the Italian machine gun with the French one (see page 53). This is an example of a successful organization that is able to exploit its own success. The French Army provided the new machine guns after an intense period of fighting for II Corps with subsequent, significant attrition suffered. Arguably, if the French had not recognized the effectiveness of the Italian units deployed on the Western Front, they would not have used their own resources to make II Corps more effective and ready to join the line.

This is a significant issue for today's deployable multinational forces. In fact, a strong recommendation is that different national contingents have some kind of similarity in equipment in order to drastically diminish logistical problems. Looking at this situation from an Italian perspective, this experience provided valuable feedback with regards to sustainment. Nevertheless, comparing II Corps' experience with recent Italian deployments and possible future ones is difficult. Recent Italian deployments have been conducted in collaboration with NATO partners or under the NATO command where the standardization of equipment has been a fundamental value for over sixty years.

II Corps was manned in an appropriate way to achieve its goals. II Corps received the necessary number of replacements during its whole deployment with a reliability and rapidity that exceeded most of the Italian units deployed on the Italian Front. This was likely due to the political importance given to II Corps' deployment.

Force structure is another fundamental lesson that must be considered today in the occasion of a small contingent deployment. The force must be structured in a way that is

suitable for achievement of its goals. If the final goal of the deployed force is to obtain political advantage, as in II Corps case, this is even more important. It might be more useful committing a smaller force, but fully operational and capable, than a bigger less effective one. The final objectives of II Corps would not probably had been achieved if it were not able to join the fight for lack of personnel. In the same way, a deployed force is not useful for national purposes if it is ineffective on the ground, especially when it is part of a bigger coalition and was in the case of II Corps. Attention must be paid to the overall responsibilities of the force, specifically if the force is the main force responsible for a theater of operation or if the force is simply a supporting effort.

In II Corps' experience, the political importance of its deployment was sustained by a generous flow of replacements for the Italian Army and this is an important lesson today especially in high intensity conflicts. This paradigm might be changed in lower intensity scenarios where different political interests might call for a bigger, but less effective force. Regardless, the proper force structure is a prerequisite for the success in a case such as the one II Corps was employed.

Final Considerations

Most of the armed forces involved in coalition warfare during the First World War tried to maintain unity of command within their own units during the war. This can be explained by the will of the nations to be able to quantify their contribution in terms of independent efforts that had led to the final victory. The final goals of this behavior can be identified in the need to retain a higher level of control of the national units, but also and mainly to provide a better position when sitting at the peace treaty table.

The AEF commander, GEN Pershing, was particularly sensitive to this issue, and stressed the importance to retain unity of command of American troops on the Western Front on many different occasions. During the most critical moment of the battle, when the AEF started its deployment, GEN Pershing was forced by circumstances to accept the temporary assignment of some of his units to foreign command. GEN Pershing stated, “Amalgamation of American and Allied troops for battle could not take place except in case of absolute necessity. . . . We must insist on our men being returned when called for.” This sentiment informed his decision making process throughout his time in Europe.

A call for national unity of command characterized the BEF experience, especially through March 1918. During July 1917, GEN Pershing’s assessment of the relationship between the French Army and the BEF can be summarized as a total absence of real teamwork between the two armies⁵¹. Even when a strategic direction of the military operations was granted to GEN Foch, the commanders of the national armies retained tactical control as well as the right to appeal to their respective governments to object any particular decision involving national units.⁵²

II Corps guidance was issued in a very similar way, but its goal was different. Forty thousand Italian soldiers fought on the Western Front, not to simply win the war, but in order to create a sense of urgency for a common cause amongst the Allied Forces. Those soldiers were ambassadors of a nation at war with a very specific and limited goal. They shared the effort on the Western Front in order to create the conditions necessary

⁵¹ Edward Coffman, *The War to End all Wars* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 130.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 154-155.

for providing assets to the Italian Front if the Italian Armed Forces needed a major Allied commitment. This is a modern concept, and can be applied to today's small contingent deployments. Many nations will commit limited forces to operations that may not provide any significant advantage for the nation when the conflict is over, but the deployment of those small, well-equipped and mission-ready forces creates the conditions for a more substantial recognition for the nation; and can be useful to the nation in case of future need.

This is a recognizable pattern in recent NATO or US-led operations performed. Many nations offer small contingents (company or even platoon sized) that had almost no practical effect on the conduct of the operation itself, but were fundamental for enhancing the idea of a shared international cause and achieved the national goal of creating closer political ties with other participating nations. When need, these small forces can be used to ask for additional support during local crises.

Like these forces, II Corps was a military instrument of national power with a diplomatic purpose. It was successful because it created a better understanding of the Italian will to fight, and could have been a valuable asset if Italian Front had not stabilized in the summer of 1918. The description of II Corps' deployment is valuable today because it is highly improbable that any Western country would deploy in a unilateral war effort in the near future.

Coalition warfare will characterize most of the commitments of the US and the Italian Armed Forces for the next twenty years. Looking at the way II Corps had been selected, trained and equipped, and the manner in which it had fought, can provide tomorrow's commanders a viable way to better understand coalition warfare.

Political guidance, commander's visualization, and a commander's ability to achieve national goals are all elements that are necessary to be successful in coalition warfare. MG Albricci was able to mix these elements in a positive way, and the final recognition of his efforts, achieved by the good record of the units under his command, provided his country a better position amongst the Allies at the end of the war.

This might have been fundamental if the Italians were not able to stop the Austro-German offensive on the Piave River and to defeat them in the fall of 1918.

In conclusion, II Corps deployment was a successful story. Its success was due to the sum of multiple elements, and may provide valuable lessons for today's deployment of small units for political reasons. Part of its success was certainly due to the fact that II Corps was equipped and manned in a way that set it up for success. In 2003, the US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stated, "As you know, you go to war with the Army you have. They're not the Army you might want or wish to have at a later time." This is certainly true when a nation is involved in a war with all its capabilities and all of its Armed Forces. The statement might not be true when the political leadership decide to deploy a small force for a limited political goal, which often happens in the contemporary environment. That force, to be successful, must be provided with the best available equipment for the envisioned operational environment. A politically mandated prerequisite is to authorize the employment of enough forces to fully accomplish the given task.

II Corps was mainly successful because it was granted these capabilities from the very beginning of its employment outside the Italian national borders, and because the effort was continued throughout the whole deployment. The military must be able to

maximize the given instrument but that instrument of political power must be suitable for accomplishing the mission, as II Corps was.

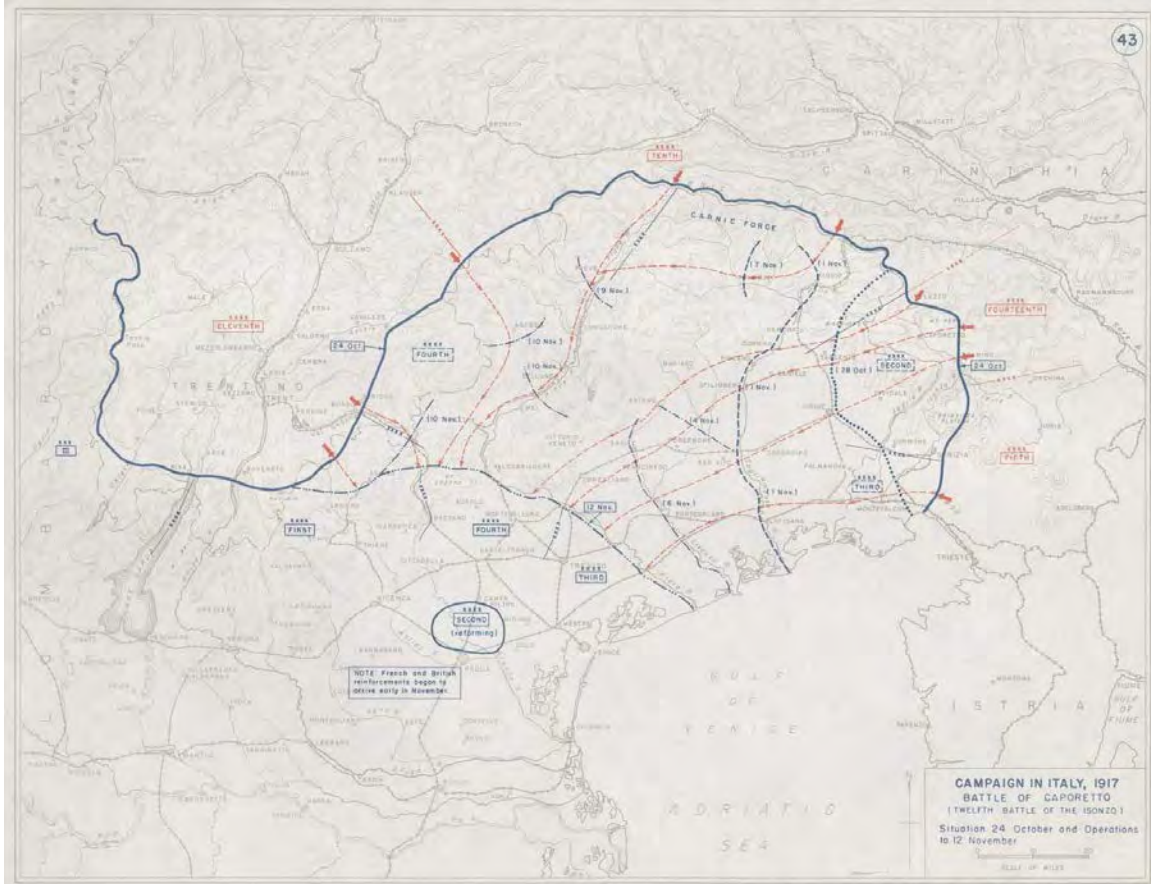
GLOSSARY

Arditi. Arditi was the name adopted by Royal Italian Army elite storm troops of World War I. The name derives from the Italian verb *ardire* (“to dare”) and translates as “The Daring Ones.”

March battalion. A march battalion (Italian: *Battaglione di marcia*.) is a battalion-sized military unit formed of all the rear-echelon units of an infantry regiment. It usually includes all the tabors, field kitchen staff, reserve soldiers, military police, commander's reserves, guards, aides, and raw recruits who did not arrive at the mobilization centre before the unit to which they were attached left for the front. Alternatively, the name can be used for all provisional units made up of companies from various battalions for the purpose of giving them a command structure during their march.

Medaglia d'Argento al Valore Militare. Silver Medal of Military Valor is the third highest Italian medal for gallantry.

APPENDIX A
CAMPAIGN MAPS



Battle of Caporetto

Source: First World One, "Campaign in Italy. Battle of Caporetto," 22 August 2009, accessed 1 March 2015, <http://firstworldwar.com/battles/caporetto.htm>.

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