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SALERNO:

Offensive Airborne Assault

82nd Airborne Division

September 1943.

Prepared by: Staff Group A, Section 20

|                          |                     |                           |
|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
|                          | MAJ Kent V. Hufford |                           |
| MAJ Maurice J. Amarger   |                     | MAJ Richard C. Horne      |
| MAJ Richard P. Beers     |                     | MAJ Gregory D. Lebeda     |
| MAJ Michael B. Cavanaugh |                     | MAJ Rodeny S. Okabayashi  |
| MAJ Paul P. Christopher  |                     | MAJ Sandra L. Outerbridge |
| MAJ Alan S. Fojt         |                     | MAJ George P. Ritter      |
| MAJ Robert B. Gatlin     |                     | MAJ Philip B. Straley     |
| MAJ Norman D. Greczyn    |                     | MAJ Dennis A. Strobel     |

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May 1984

ABSTRACT

COMMON REFERENCE: Salerno

TYPE OPERATION: Offensive, Hasty Assault, Airborne

OPPOSING FORCES: Allied: Fifth U.S. Army  
82nd Airborne Division

German: 16th Panzer Division  
29th Panzer Division  
Assorted Unit Defense  
Positions and Garrisons

SYNOPSIS: For the Salerno operation, the 82nd Airborne Division was placed under the control of the Fifth Army Commander, General Mark Clark. Initial plans called for a near beach drop to provide support for the amphibian forces. This was cancelled due to changes in the amphibious force landing sites. A second plan, Grant I, called for a division to seize and destroy crossing sites on the Volturno River, hold positions for five days and effect linkup with British forces. This was cancelled due to the inability of support forces to provide logistical support. A third plan, Grant II, involved the seizure of Rome; it too was cancelled. As a result, the 82nd did not participate in the initial landing but was alerted for reinforcing drops at Avellino and Paesturn. These operations were conducted but hasty planning and navigational errors combined to create conditions that scattered the forces over a wide area. Their effect on the battle was minimal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: BLUMENSON, Salerno to Cassino.  
CARTER, Those Devils in Baggy Pants.  
DEVLIN, Paratrooper.  
GALVIN, On To Berlin.  
MORRISON, Salerno: A Military Fiasco.  
TUGWELL, Airborne to Battle.

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## I. Introduction to the Battle of Salerno.

The hasty airborne assault conducted by the 82d Airborne Division in support of the Salerno landing was actually two separate parachute operations distinguished from each other by the size of the forces involved in each of the operations, the locations of the drop zones, the operations' purposes, and the successes and failures which resulted from each of the drops. The first operation, an assault into a secured dropzone near Paestum, Italy by 504th (-) and the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiments, took place on the nights of 13 and 14 September 1943. Its purpose was to provide reinforcement to the beachhead line defenses which were stretched dangerously thin and which were being heavily pressured by German attacks. The assault was very effective; more than 1,300 paratroopers were moved from bases in Sicily to the front lines at Salerno in less than forty-eight hours. Their contribution to the defense of the beachhead line assisted in repelling heavy German counterattacks which, two days earlier, had threatened to cut the defenses in half. Of particular note in the assault was the effective use of pathfinders and electronic navigation means to guide the C47's carrying the paratroopers to the dropzone. The second operation was an assault near the small town of Avellino some twenty miles north of the beachhead line. The purpose of the assault was to secure critical mountain passes and communications centers in the vicinity of Avellino through which German reinforcements were moving to the beachhead at Salerno. In the assault, 640 paratroopers, most of whom were from the Second Battalion of the 509th Parachute Infantry Regiment,



were scattered in error over 100 square miles of rugged, enemy-held terrain on the night of 14 September 1943. While some soldiers formed small groups and set ambushes, the majority of the paratroopers spent their time evading German search parties. In short, this second drop had little, if any, positive effect on the battle at Salerno.

The sources used for the analysis of the airborne assault conducted by the 82d Airborne Division at Salerno are of three major types: book-length historical analyses, commentaries, and narratives; essays and articles from professional military journals; and primary source documents written just prior to, during, and just after the division's assault in 1943. In many cases, the book-length historical analyses and professional articles rely heavily on information gleaned from the official documents but fail to bring out details of tactical military significance, something which this analysis does attempt to do. There is also a paucity of German primary source documents concerning the view of the 82d's assault from "the other side." However, in several of the book-length analyses, German information, primarily gleaned from interviews and memoirs, is present.

There is, in fact, no "authoritative work" about the hasty airborne assault by the 82d Airborne Division at Salerno, but there are several basic sources about the Salerno Invasion or about airborne operations in World War II that comment on the two drops made by the "All Americans." The noted historian Martin Blumenson wrote the official history of the Salerno invasion, and it was published in 1964 with the title Salerno to Cassino.

However, even in this very detailed work, only a few pages contain information about the airborne assault operations, and this pattern of treatment is present in each of the book-length historical analyses that are available. Perhaps one of the most detailed commentaries on the airborne assault is in Gerard M. Devlin's book Paratrooper: The Saga of U.S. Army and Marine Parachute and Glider Combat Troops During WW II. In this work the author devotes an entire chapter to the "Sacrifice Play at Avellino." In Eric Morris' work, Salerno: A Military Fiasco, the reader finds an authoritative and well-researched analysis of the planning which went into operations for the 82d in Italy which were aborted, and an entertaining look at individual experiences of paratroopers who participated in the assault. Morris also gives the reader a close look at how the Germans viewed the operation at Avellino and its minimal effect. General James Gavin's works, On To Berlin: Battles of An Airborne Commander 1943-1946 and Airborne Warfare, provide a detailed analysis of U.S. parachute operations in the European Theater during World War II, but, as one might expect, the comments sometimes smack of parochialism. Gavin finds that the operation at Avellino did have a positive effect in slowing German reinforcement at Salerno. However, most other writers, such as Maurice Tugwell in his work Airborne to Battle: A History of Airborne Warfare, 1918-1971, see the deep assault by the Second Battalion of the 509th as "ineffective" at best.

In terms of the strategic setting of the assault, there are several very good articles from professional journals.

Blumenson's two essays, "Sicily and Italy: Why and What For?" and "Why Southern Italy?" do an excellent job of setting the strategic stage for an analysis of the battles fought by the soldiers of the 82d Airborne in support of the Salerno beachhead. Liddell Hart, the great British military historian, offers a rather negative but enlightened view of the strategic setting in his essay "Italy--The Fumbled Opportunity," and, in a short article, Robert Haymon-Joyce looks back at the Salerno invasion in "Salerno: D plus 26 Years--Retracing the Steps of Battles Past." In a book-length analysis, Samuel Morrison traces the strategic links in the Italian campaign in his work Sicily-Salerno-Anzio: January 1943-June 1944. However, the most detailed and interesting material is the primary source documents of the 82d Airborne Division and the Fifth United States Army.

The History of the Italian Campaign, Part I from the Fifth U.S. Army files contains important operational information at army level from 5 January 1943 to 31 May 1945. The history includes plans for airborne support and specifically discusses initial plans for using the 82d Airborne Division to drop on Rome and plans for securing crossings of the Volturno River, both of which were cancelled. From the records of the 82d Airborne Division come several important sources of information about the assault at Salerno. Contact Imminent: A Narrative of Pre-campaign Activities of July and September, 1943 discusses problems of training and resupply in the division. Information About Italy is a study of the strategic area of operations done by the division; it discusses geography, population, topography, coasts and beaches, climate, water supply, and communications. Suitability

of the Planned Operations for Execution by Airborne Troops analyzes potential operations at the Sarno passes, Volturno River, Rome, Avellino, and at the Sele River. Field Order #3, OPERATION AVALANCHE contains overlays, annexes, intelligence, movement tables, security information, flight plans, terrain studies, and an enemy order of battle which had been produced for earlier operations in support of Salerno; this order was hurriedly modified and put into use when the 82d was given the order to jump at Paestum and Avellino. Admin Order #4 contains the combat service support information and pre-deployment requirements to include basic loads, Graves registration information, supply requirements, personnel figures, medical services support, ordnance support, and even chemical warfare services. The 82d Airborne Division after-action report titled Sicily and Italy, 9 July 1943-22 January 1944 discusses the operations at Salerno in detail and contains division and parachute combat team reports, lists of casualties for the entire campaign, and gives command and staff assignments.

As one can see, no authoritative, historical analysis has been written specifically about the two hasty airborne assaults conducted by the 82d Airborne Division at Salerno. Instead, what the researcher finds are a group of sources primarily about the Salerno invasion or about airborne operations in general and which deal with the parachute assaults at Salerno only as "side shows." Many of these short analyses are incomplete or parochial in their viewpoint and Combat Record of the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, April 1943-July 1945 by William Mandle is an

excellent example of the latter. This battle analysis which follows, then, becomes both an extension and a filter of these earlier sources, and the writers hope, therefore, that what follows will fill the void discovered in their research.

## II. The Strategic Setting.

What Next?

The campaign of southern Italy, launched in September, 1943, by the combined Anglo-American forces against the Axis powers of Germany and Italy, proved to be one of the most bitter battles of World War II. Although successful in the long run, it cost a quarter of a million allied casualties and was fought against a skillful enemy in terrain favoring the defense.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the decision to invade Italy was the result of months of discussions between the Americans and British, the culmination of which was the goal of a successful cross-Channel invasion of France.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and their military advisers, the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS), meeting at Casablanca in January, 1943, realized they had met a strategic impasse. While their forces were still fighting in North Africa, the tide was turning in favor of the Allies. With a successful campaign in Africa, the invasion of Sicily was next. The holding of Sicily, along with North Africa, would secure their lines of communication in the Mediterranean, would prevent Germany from reinforcing its Eastern Front in Russia, and hopefully force the surrender of Italy.<sup>2</sup>

What to do beyond the campaign in Sicily became the unsolvable problem. The Americans were ever cognizant of their efforts in the Pacific, and were hoping to stage a cross-Channel invasion of France as soon as possible in order to meet the Germans head on, defeat them, and then concentrate their efforts in the Pacific battle. The British, on the other hand, did not

believe the invasion could be staged in 1943. They felt it was too complex for hasty planning and required more men, air support, lift assets, and logistic support than were available at the time. They also believed that further success in the Mediterranean would provide additional airfields and logistic support facilities for the final invasion. Lastly, moving the Allied forces from North Africa to England would only show Axis intelligence sources where the Allies would strike next.

Several factors became apparent at the Trident Conference conducted at Washington, D.C. in May, 1943. The Axis could not be allowed idle time, nor a chance to shift their forces to their Eastern Front. The Allied forces in North Africa could not remain idle, once having seized the initiative. And, if Italy did not capitulate following the Sicily campaign, it would witness an invasion of its own country. Moreover, if Italy surrendered, the Germans would lose twenty-nine Italian divisions in the Balkans and four in France, thus forcing Hitler to stretch his resources even thinner, possibly withdrawing from Italy altogether, and diverting forces from the Russian front.<sup>3</sup>

As the prospects for a 1943 cross-Channel invasion waned, the invasion of some area of the Mediterranean seemed to be the only alternative. The British favored the eastern side, while the Americans favored the west (Map A, page 12). The Trident conference concluded without agreement. The CCS did, however, issue a directive which offered no concrete guidance: (1) force Italy to capitulate; and, (2) keep the Germans occupied in as many places as possible.<sup>4</sup>

The invasion of Sicily demonstrated the potential disintegration of Italian military power. On 25 July, just ten days after the invasion, King Victor Emmanuel III removed Mussolini from power and established the Badoglio government. The Allies viewed this as a strategic opportunity to knock Italy out of the war. Even though it possessed considerable military power, Italy was suffering industrially and financially; its forces were ill-equipped and ill-trained, and its warships refused to go beyond home waters.

In August, the Badoglio government began making overtures to the Allies. Italy wanted to surrender. However, it became readily apparent that a surrender would be impossible without an Allied invasion. With strong German forces occupying Italy, no surrender was possible without the aid of Allied land forces; thus, the Allied decision to invade southern Italy. The requirements of the CCS directive issued at the close of the Trident Conference would be met.

### The American Forces

After much discussion among Allied commanders, Salerno was selected as the landing site for the American forces. Titled Avalanche, the invasion would be conducted by the U.S. Fifth Army commanded by Lieutenant General Mark Clark. Fifth Army had been activated in North Africa in January, 1943. General Clark had established and operated several training centers, including one for amphibious operations. The troops were combat ready, and General Clark was eager for action.

The 82d Airborne Division, under command of Major General Mathew Ridgway, was part of the Fifth Army. Only recently



activated, parts of the division had combat experience in North Africa and Sicily. The value of airborne troops was extremely controversial<sup>5</sup>, and the hasty assault operations of the 504th and 509th Parachute Infantry Regiments described in this analysis only added to the controversy. As discussed in other sections, the 504th's operation was successful and contributed significantly to the securing of the beachhead at Salerno; the 509th's drop on Avellino was disorganized and ineffective. Nevertheless, these operations did contribute to the development of airborne doctrine and the emergence of sound principles for the use of airborne troops.<sup>6</sup>

#### The Germans in Italy

In the spring of 1943, Germany was losing the strategic initiative. Hitler had no overall war plan because losses in North Africa and on the Eastern Front had depleted his strategic reserve. He had also lost his air superiority, which rendered his lines of communication increasingly vulnerable.

He had long been aware of Italy's weaknesses, so it was no great surprise to him when Mussolini was removed and Italy surrendered ten days later. His options were to take over the defense of Italy and the Balkans, surrender Italy to the Allies and avoid commitment of his forces, or defend Italy along some geographic line.<sup>7</sup>

He decided at last to secure northern Italy by withdrawing his troops in the south to Rome, then to the Apennines. Once northern Italy was secure, he would commit three or four divisions to the Balkans, which were vulnerable to Allied attacks

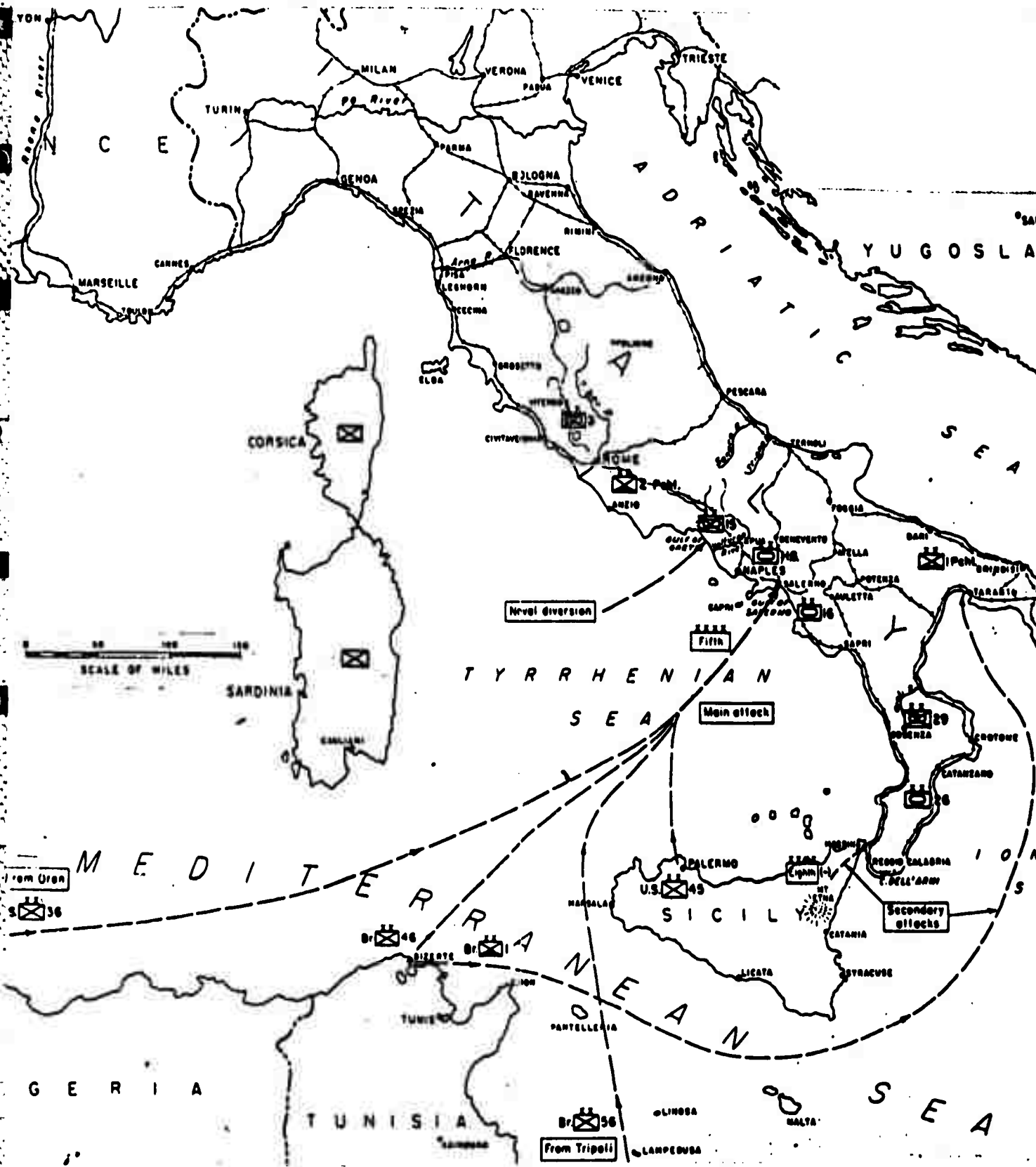
from the heel of Italy.

The Italian army was disarmed, and the Germans took over the coastal defenses. Hitler also demanded freedom of movement anywhere in Italy, withdrawal of all Italian troops from the Italy-German border, subordination of the troops in the Po Valley to Field Marshall Rommel, and public acknowledgement of German command over Italy.

In the south, Field Marshall Kesselring was convinced that he could defend Italy and defeat the Allied invasion. Around the Salerno area were two corps: the 76th Panzer corps with the 26th Panzer and 29th Panzer Grenadier Divisions; and the 14th Panzer corps, with the reconstituted Hermann Goering Division, the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division activated in Italy, and the 16th Panzer Division, which had been destroyed at Stalingrad and reconstituted in France.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, when the Allied invasion forces landed at Salerno, they found the Germans ready to oppose landings up and down the west coast of Italy. Despite the earlier intentions to withdraw to the north, the Germans stood their ground, and Hitler became reluctant to move his forces as long as there was any possibility of holding Italy.<sup>9</sup>

Map A, German Dispositions and Allied Plan  
for Invasion September 1943



ENDNOTES

(The Strategic Setting)

Martin Blumenson, "Sicily and Italy: Why and What For?" Military Review, 46, (Feb 1966), p. 62.

Martin Blumenson, "Why Southern Italy?" Army, 19, (Sep 1969), p. 38.

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James Alvin Huston, Out of the Blue: U.S. Army Airborne Operations in World War II. West Lafayette, Ind.: Perdue University, 1972, pp. 161-167.

James Maurice Gavin, Airborne Warfare. Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1947, p. 35.

Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. p. 59.

Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. p. 66.

Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. p. 70.

### III. The Tactical Situation.

#### Area of Operations.

The operational areas for the Salerno drop, although similar in some ways, vary markedly in most. We will first discuss those similar areas such as weather, climate, and sunshine/moonlight, and then address the two drop zones' terrain features and their main differences.

The weather for the 13-14 September 1943 operation was clear to partly cloudy with good visibility. Field Order No. 3, published by the 82nd Airborne Division, told units to expect dry weather (an average of 2.9 inches during the month of September), excellent ground visibility both night and day, and less than 4/10 cloud cover for 20 days of the month. This assesment proved accurate. The temperature for the operation also fell within the predicted 65 to 70 degrees F. nightttime range. The land and sea breezes which generally have little importance in winter but are marked in summer were true to form. While considerable during the month of August, they begun falling off rapidly in September. On the evenings of 13 and 14 September, the winds had no direct effect on the airborne operation. Sunset for the evenings of 13 and 14 September was 1941 and 1939 hours respectively. Of more importance, and having a direct impact on the operations, was the fullmoon rise at 1914 hours with the drop scheduled for 2400 hours. The full moon's aid to navigation was offset by the aid to German visual capability. With the exception of the moon's illumination, the weather had no adverse effects on the airborne operation.

The Salerno airborne operation took place in different types

of terrain. We will begin with a discussion of some general characteristics of the Italian Peninsula and then focus on the area of the Selles Plain and Avellino. Refer to Map B, page 29 for the general layout of the geography. About 4/5 of the Italian Peninsula is made up of hills and mountains. The general area at Salerno is dominated by the Campanian Apennines Mountains with much highland having altitudes of near 5000 feet. The main watershed runs up the crest of the dominate Apennines; however, the Campanian Apennines do not form a major watershed due to the breaching by the Seles, Volturno and Calore rivers. The soils are related to the underlying bedrock except for blankets of wind-blown volcanic ash. The crystalline rocks give the soil a comparatively thin sandy and clay consistency. Where there is limestone, we find a thin "red earth" soil. The coastal and river valleys have a sand and gravel soil varying little by area. The vegetation in the Campanian Apennines consisted, much the same as it does today, of oak, chestnut, and pine trees. The river courses are usually bordered by bushes and occasional trees. The remainder of the area is covered by grass, occasional shrubs, and trees.

The airborne drop into the area around Paestum in the Seles Plain on the evening of 13 September might best be categorized as "a drop into a German Stadium." Basically the Germans occupied the mountainous terrain completely surrounding the Sele Plain, thus giving them excellent observation, fields of fire, and the advantage of higher ground. It should be noted, however, that the airborne drop took place beyond enemy small arms range. Here,

too, the soil composition is rocky as compared to the sand within a beach area. However, this factor only caused minor injuries. The only real significant terrain feature influencing the Sele Plain operation was the Sele River. The river divides the plain into two areas of operation. In the area north of the drop, the Sele is approximately 300 feet wide. The major road through the area is Highway 18 which enters the Sele Plain from Sapri in the south, crosses the Sele River to Battipaglia and then goes on to Salerno. The road provides a good north/south lateral mobility corridor. In the area, Highway 18 crosses numerous canals, streams and rivers with a major bridge spanning the Sele River.

In direct contrast to the beach drop on 13 September, the jump in the area of Avellino was made into high terrain consisting of thick woods and vineyards. While concealment was relatively good, it adversely affected efforts to organize the troops after the disastrous drop. Trafficability in the area was basically poor due to the heavy forest. Fields of fire were also limited due to the density of the vegetation. Major highways 7, 90, and 88 quarter the area from the cardinal points. All major roads are characterized by sharp bends and numerous bridges with good observation points. Off road mobility is difficult due to the lack of secondary roads and heavily forested area.

In summary, the weather had little effect on either operation after completion of the airborne phase. Clear skies and moonlight illumination did assist the pilots in their navigation to the drop zones. The terrain, however, played a significant role in both operations. The high altitudes of the terrain around Avellino caused the aircraft to fly at altitudes which impeded

navigation and widely dispersed the paratroopers. The cross compartmentalized nature of the terrain also made assembly very difficult. For the opposite reasons, the beachhead assault was near perfect. The planes found the drop zone easily, the paratroopers landed where intended, and units were able to assemble and move to the front lines within hours.<sup>1</sup>

#### Comparison of Opposing Forces.

The Germans in Italy from Rome southward were controlled by Field Marshal Kesselring, an excellent tactician and strategist, and included the German Tenth Army with its headquarters at Calabria. The Tenth's commander was Heinrich Gottfried Von Vietinghoff Cennant Scheel, who unlike his American opponents, had a tremendous amount of combat experience. He had commanded a Panzer division in Poland, served in the Balkan campaign, and commanded a corps on the Russian front. Before moving to Italy, Von Vietinghoff commanded an army of occupation in France. The Tenth Army included the 1st Parachute Division, the 14th Panzer Corps at Graeta/Salerno, the 76th Panzer Corps, the Herman Goring Division, the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, and the 16th Panzer Division.<sup>2</sup>

All the German units had a nucleus of combat hardened veterans which gave them a bit of an edge in terms of experience over the Americans and some of the British units. The 16th Panzer Division is perhaps typical of most German units. This Division, destroyed at Stalingrad in January 1943, had been reconstructed around those men who for various reason (on leave or wounded) escaped the fate of their comrades at Stalingrad. The division

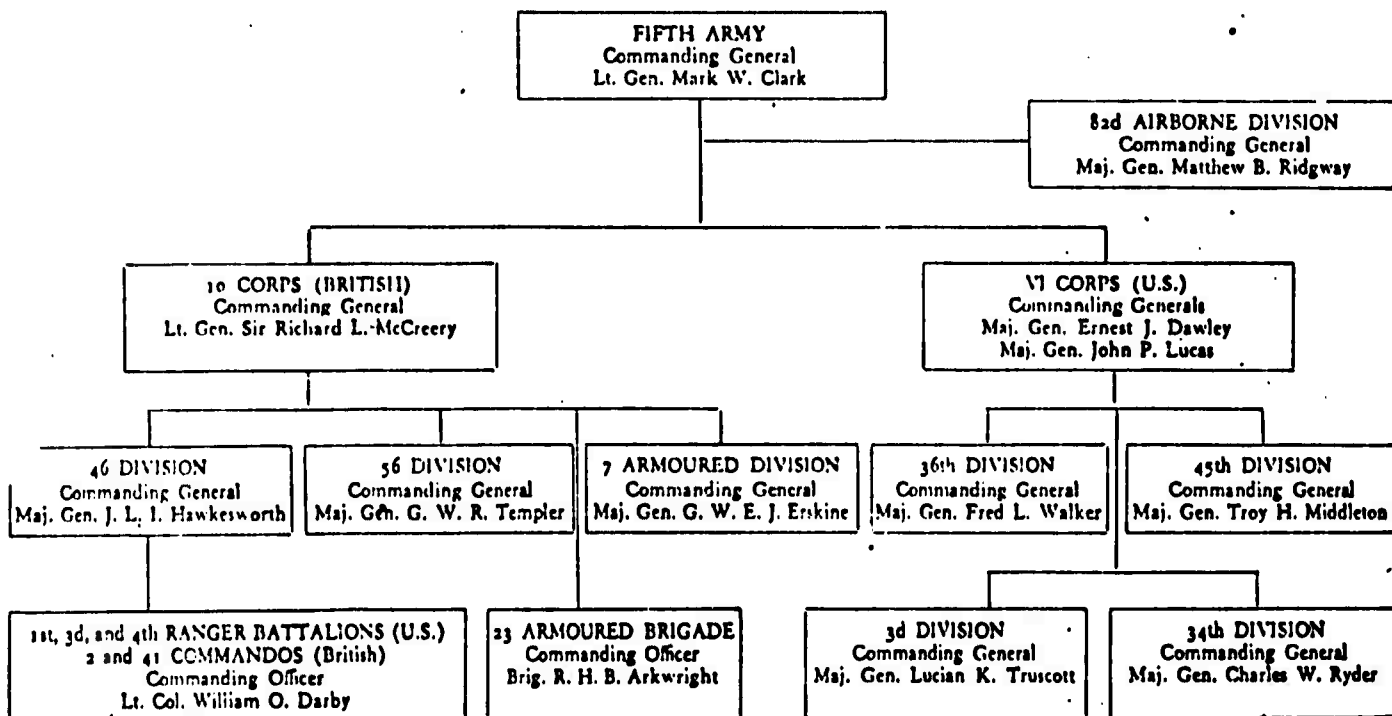


thus consisted of approximately 30% battle-trying officers and men; the remainder were recruits who were integrated among the veterans. In May 1943, this division moved to Italy-- first to Florence and then to Apulia.<sup>3</sup> There it completed its training. At the same time it was brought up to full strength except for its battalion of heavy tanks. The crews for this battalion were still in Germany training on their newly acquired "Tiger" tanks. Given this division's mobility and offensive training, it was a very potent strike force. On the whole the Germans were well-trained in combined arms warfare and were very aggressive, tenacious fighters. They believed they could drive any Allied invasion of the Italian mainland back into the sea. See Map A, page 12, for German unit dispositions.

The American Fifth Army was commanded by Lt. General Mark Wayne Clark, a graduate of West Point, whose previous combat experience consisted of a few short weeks during WW I. After 1940, Clark's rise to high command had been meteoric. He served as the deputy commander in chief of the forces which took part in the North African landings. Clark, anxious for high command, was given the 5th Army upon its creation by his old friend Eisenhower. The mission was to land at Salerno. Clark's command included the British X Corps and American VI Corps. The X Corps consisted of the 46th and 56th Infantry Divisions, both of which had been blooded in North Africa. The veteran 7th Armored Division, the original "desert rats" of North African fame, were available as an exploitation force once the beaches were secure. The X Corps also had three battalions of U.S. Rangers and some British commando and special forces type units. The American VI

Corps consisted of the 36th and 45th Infantry Divisions. Both were reasonably well-trained, but only the 45th had seen substantial combat during the Sicily campaigns. The 36th, a National Guard unit from Texas, was anxious to fight but lacked experience. The VI Corps also had the 3d and 34th Infantry Divisions as follow-on units.

ORGANIZATION OF THE FIFTH ARMY AT SALERNO (9 September—6 October 1943)



The 82nd Airborne Division, commanded by General Ridgway, was also under Clark's command and was initially stationed in Sicily. The Assistant Division Commander was Brigadier General James M. Gavin. Organic elements of the 82nd Airborne Division included the following units:

- 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment
- 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment
- 325th Glider Infantry Regiment

82nd Parachute Maintenance Battalion

307th Airborne Engineer Battalion

307th Airborne Medical Company

80th Airborne AA Battalion

The 82nd Airborne Division Artillery consisted of the:

319th Glider Field Artillery Battalion

320th Glider Field Artillery Battalion

376th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion

456th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion

Special Troops included the 407th Quartermaster Company, 782d Airborne Ordnance Company, 82nd Airborne Signal Company, and a Military Police Platoon. Also the 509th Parachute Battalion was attached to the 82nd for this operation, and would be dropped at Avellino.

The 82nd Airborne Division was an elite, highly trained unit. The attached 509th Parachute Battalion had made combat drops in North Africa at Youkks Les Bains Airfield and El Djem Bridge. The 82nd had jumped at Sicily. The commanders and men were very aggressive, eager to demonstrate their prowess, and maintained a high degree of readiness. However, the unit was only equipped with light weapons and had no armored vehicles and few anti-tank weapons. Divisional Artillery utilized the light 75mm pack howitzer. Overall, the 82nd was an excellent reserve unit, capable of reacting to any emergency on short notice.

#### Military Objectives.

At 0330 hours on 9 September 1943, the Fifth Army began its assault at Salerno. Both of the corps involved, the Tenth British and the VI U.S., made some headway against the determined

defenders, but were not able to seize their initial objectives. The Germans in the 16th Panzer had held and were now awaiting the arrival of other Panzer units to bolster the defense and launch a counterattack. The Germans held much of the dominating key terrain overlooking the beachhead, and with each passing hour their defenses got stronger and while the Allies' positions grew more tenuous.<sup>4</sup> See Map C, page 30 for the situation prior to the airborne operations.

Thus the Fifth U.S. Army faced a critical situation on the beachhead. The British were standing firm but there was no possibility of a breakout in the face of strong resistance. In the American sector there was a real possibility that the Germans would cut the bridgehead in two with a strong counterattack. The Allies had to first thwart the Germans' efforts, and then launch a breakout in order to accomplish their mission.

On the morning of 13 September, General Clark sent a letter to General Ridgway in Sicily calling for help:

"I want you to accept this letter as an order---I want you to make a drop within our lines on the beachhead and I want you to make it tonight. This is a must."<sup>5</sup>

Specifically he wanted a reinforcement of the beachhead by two regimental combat teams to be dropped inside of the beachhead south of the Sele River.

Clark had also previously asked for the 509th Parachute Infantry to be dropped near the mountain village of Avellino far behind the German lines on the night of 14-15 September to disrupt enemy lines of communications.

The Germans' objectives were to contain the beachhead and eventually destroy it. On the morning of 14 September, a planning conference was called by the Commanding General of the 14th Panzer Corps. At this conference it was decided to launch a large-scale attack on 16 September, with the object of splitting the Allied Forces in two groups and pushing them back into the sea. Salerno was the Herman Goering Division's objective. This division would drive along the highway to Battipaglia to join the 16th Panzer Grenadier Division which was ordered to attack simultaneously through the gap to the Paestum area.<sup>6</sup>

The 82nd Airborne Division used the staging and loading plans prepared for a previous drop at CAPUA. The 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment(-) with Co C, Airborne Engineer (Attached) was to jump on the night of 13-14 September. The 3rd Battalion of 504th was attached to the 325th Glider Infantry and would be transported by ships to the beachhead. The 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment with Co B, Airborne Engineer (Attached) was to be dropped the following night. Also, the 82nd's attached 509th Parachute Battalion was to drop deep behind enemy lines at Avellino. The drop zone was selected at Paestum, a flat area about 1200 yards long and 800 yards wide lying between the sea and the coastal highway. The two regimental combat teams were to be attached after assembly to the 36th Infantry Division.<sup>7</sup>

The reinforcement mission for the 82nd was consistent with 5th Army's overall goals. On 13 September, when Clark asked for Ridgway's help, he desperately needed more troops. He had no reserve available to stop a breakthrough between the U.S. and British sectors. The reinforcement by the 82nd Airborne Division

was therefore essential to mission accomplishment.

Disruption of the lines of communication by the 509th in the enemy's rear was consistent with the doctrinal goal of alleviating the pressure in the British sector. The town of Avellino is a small town nestled in a deep mountain pass about 20 miles north of Salerno. It lies at the junction of several important routes to the north towards which German reserves were likely to come from farther south where hard-pressed German divisions were withdrawing under pressure of the 8th Army to Salerno and Battipaglia. As a logistic center, Avellino was a stopping point for numerous transient units and was the location of several German service units. A successful interdiction at Avellino by the Allies could seriously impair German logistical and reinforcement efforts.

The 509th Parachute Infantry had no real objectives due to the short notice they received for this mission. Clark had envisioned that the 509th would gain control of the crossroads and disrupt the enemy's LOC's, but this was never translated into a formal map objective. Insufficient time was available for the leaders to develop specific objectives. Just a few hours before leaving Sicily the 509th received its orders: "During the night of 14 September, the 2nd Battalion 509th Parachute Infantry, with a demolition section attached will drop in the Avellino area and block all roads leading to and from the area."<sup>8</sup>

The Germans did not change their plan to compensate for the reinforcement of the beachhead. The drop in the Avellino area confused the Germans at first, but commanders took the initiative

to search out and destroy the U.S. Paratroopers.

### Courses of Action.

During the period of August through early September 1943, the 82nd Airborne Division was in Sicily planning for virtually every contingency from division to task force level operations. This was a period of orders, counterorders, plans, changes in plans, marches and countermarches. The division planned to conduct these operations by land, air and sea.<sup>9</sup> Because of this detailed planning and the numerous changes, the 82nd Airborne was able to react to short-fused missions. Thus, at Salerno, the Division could have been either air-dropped or landed amphibiously--although it obviously was far better prepared for an air drop.

Few airborne operations in Europe, with the exception of Normandy and the crossing of the Rhine River, were successful, primarily because higher commanders never appreciated the limitations of the lightly equipped parachute and glider troops.<sup>10</sup> This period of time was no exception. The new Fifth Army Commander, LT Gen Mark Clark, had several courses of action for the employment of the 82nd. He originally planned to make a airborne drop on the plain's northwest of Salerno and Southeast of Mount Vesuvius.<sup>10</sup> The airborne troops were to block the movement of any German divisions coming from Rome and Naples. This plan was disapproved primarily by the Air Force. General Clark then wanted another drop across the Volturno River to blow up bridges and delay the enemy. This plan placed airborne troops forty miles from the friendly lines of the 5th Army. Although finally approved, this plan was not implemented because of "Giant II," a

plan which involved dropping the entire division into airfields around Rome to help the Italians defend Rome. This impressive, but somewhat foolhardy, plan was cancelled just minutes before lift-off of the division. Ultimately, General Clark selected the Salerno plan. Thus, on the evening of the 12th of September, Lt General Clark had three courses of action:

(1). Continue to defend with the available troops he had and prevent a breakthrough by the Germans until additional forces could arrive from Sicily by sea, or

(2) Use Airborne forces of the 82nd to :

(a) Reinforce the beachhead near the Sele River and/or

(b) Land forces well within the German territory to interdict enemy supply routes and delay the reinforcements, or

(3) To withdraw one of his Corps by sea and consolidate it with his other Corps. For instance, VI Corps could withdrawal and reinforce the 10th Corps. This, however, would have been an extremely risky operation, given strong resistance and an alert, well-trained foe.

The German counterattack on 12 September 1943 had a fair degree of success and threatened to divide the American lines all the way to the beach. So the Germans options for a course of action were:

(1) To continue to counterattack with forces already available, or

(2) To go on the defensive until reinforcements from the North arrived and then go back on the attack, or



(3) Go on the defensive with all available forces.

All courses of action stated for both sides were feasible; however, as is frequently the case, time was the limiting and determining factor. For Lt. General Clark and the Fifth Army, the situation on the evening of the 12th of September was critical; he had to select a course of action immediately. He needed to get reinforcements to the beachhead rapidly, and an air drop of elements of the 82nd was the quickest, most secure technique.

The Germans felt confident that their mobile defense and counterattack scheme would be successful in pushing the Americans back into the sea. The German build-up was proceeding at a greater pace than the Americans expected. The Germans had five divisions in action and were urging commanders to continue to keep the pressure on the Americans. The High Command in Berlin was prepared to announce that the Allies had been driven out of Italy and the Axis still controlled the European continent. Their best course of action was to use offensive action to limit the scope of the Allied beachhead and ultimately push it back into the sea.

For the Fifth Army, to continue to defend while waiting for reinforcements by sea was not a favorable option. The situation was critical and additional troops had to be brought on line immediately. The troops coming ashore were taking too long and were not strong enough to influence the battle. The Allies' defenses were thin and spread out. VI Corps had already fallen back to secure its flanks. If the Germans continued to reinforce their line, General Clark would have to consider another course of action--that of withdrawal and consolidation. He was aware of

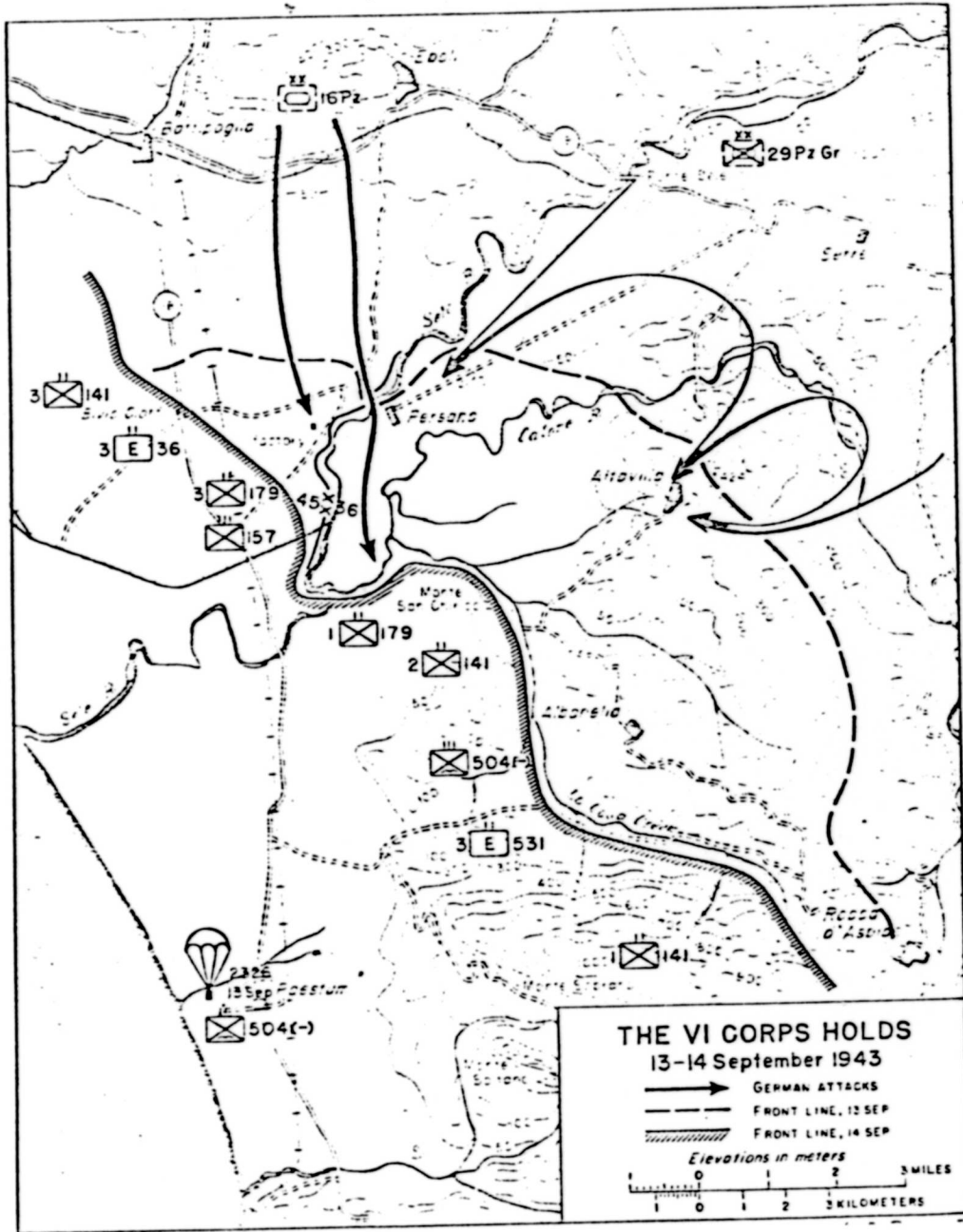
problems involved in the withdrawal of one Corps by sea to make another amphibious landing to reinforce the other Corps; however, he did direct that contingency plans be drawn up for possible implementation.<sup>11</sup> This planning met with much resistance, especially from the Navy; however, the staffs developed these plans and some ships were even diverted from vital missions of resupply and put on stand-by.<sup>12</sup> General Clark was determined not to withdraw and consolidate until every other option was exhausted. The reinforcement operation could be carried out in the critical time frame by using airborne troops. To accomplish this mission with only a few hours of planning, required the use of staging and loading plans prepared for another operation. No formal estimate of the situation was developed because of the limited time.

.. Likewise, the Avellino mission did not fully develop an estimate of the situation because of time, and also because of limited available information. Detailed maps were not available and information about the enemy was very sketchy.

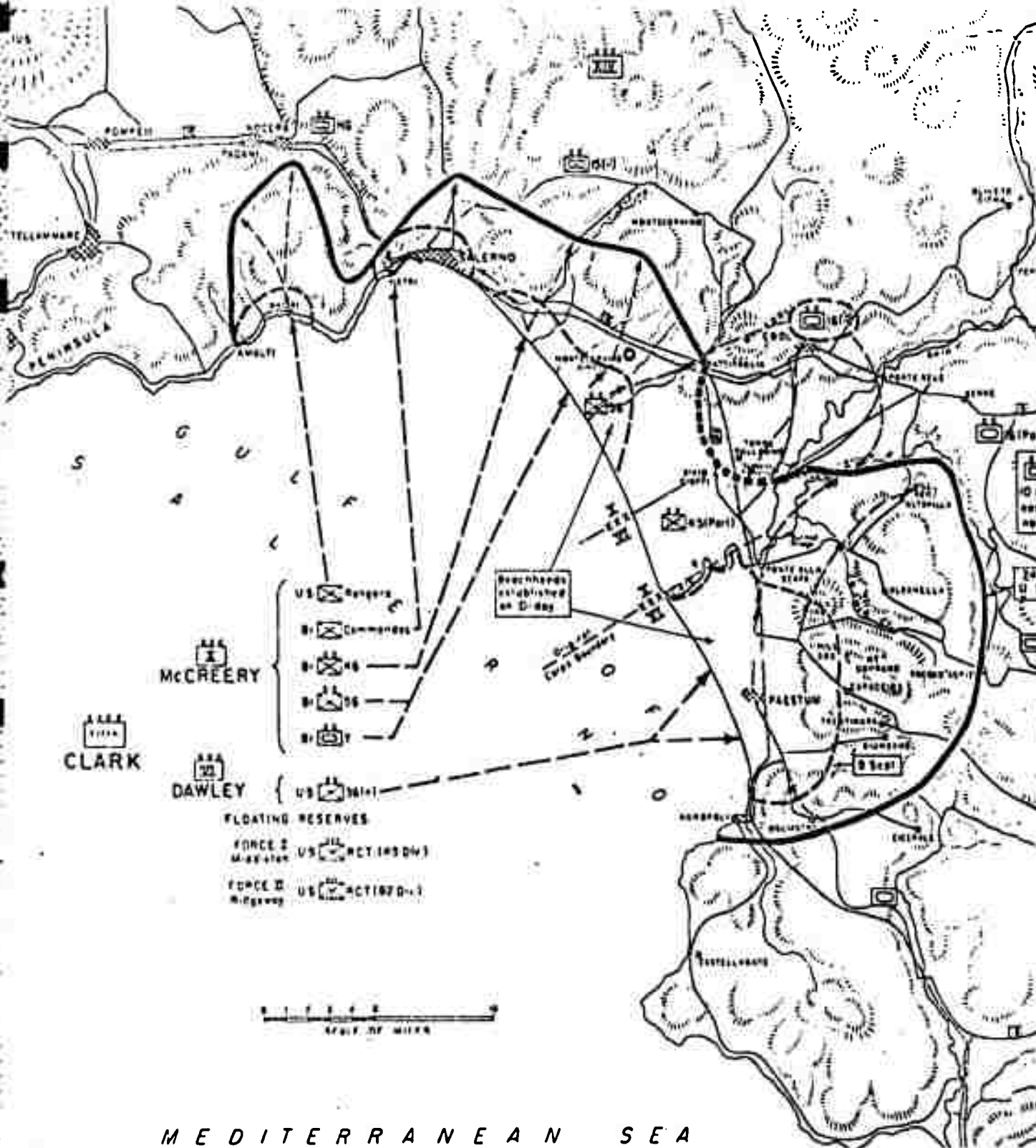
The course of action adopted by the Germans was to continue to attack. The Germans were already alerted prior to the Allied invasion of Italy and had completed much of their defensive preparations. They even developed plans for a early counterattack by strong armored forces. The Germans based their strategy on a mobile defense with strong forces capable of moving from one trouble spot to another. They also employed a series of strong points supported by tanks and heavy guns.<sup>13</sup> Almost all the strongpoints were capable of mutual support; behind them were

batteries of field artillery, counterattack battalions, and tanks. Field Marshall Albert Kesselring was very confident that he could push the Fifth Army back into the sea where his artillery and Luftwaffe could destroy them.<sup>14</sup> The 26th Panzer and 29th Panzer Grenadier Divisions were moving south to oppose the Americans. So the course of action the Germans selected was to continue the attack while reinforcements arrived to strengthen their effort. Given the historical record on what happens at beachheads, the Germans selected the best course of action. They needed to contain the beachhead and then eliminate it before the Allied forces got too strong. Although the Germans selected the best course of action, they could not get there "first with the most," and thus they went down ultimately to defeat.

Map B



Map C, Plan for Landing at Salerno 9 September 1943  
 and Situation at Nightfall 11 September



ENDNOTES  
(The Tactical Situation)

1. 82nd Airborne Division, After Action Report, Italy. September 1943, unnumbered pages.
2. Eric Morris, Salerno: A Military Fiasco. New York: Stein and Day, 1983, Appendix A.
3. Morris, Salerno. p. 47.
4. Morris, Salerno. p. 205.
5. Hugh Pond, Salerno. Boston: Little and Brown, 1961, p. 169.
6. Pond, Salerno. p. 180.
7. Martin Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1964, p. 118.
8. Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. p. 132.
9. 82nd Airborne Division, After Action Report, Italy.
10. Morris, Salerno. p. 33.
11. Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. p. 124.
12. Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. p. 125.
13. Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. p. 78.
14. Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. pp. 150 and 167.

#### IV. The Fight.

Salerno was selected as the site of Allied landings on the west coast of Italy after it was determined that the preferred objective, Naples, was out of range of ground based fighter support in Sicily. The amphibious landing on Salerno beach under the direction of 5th (US) Army was conducted by elements of the British 10th Corps (2 divisions) on the left (north) and the US 6th Corps (2 divisions) on the right (south). The 82d Airborne Division was not included in the initial invasion plans as it was to conduct an airborne operation to seize the Rome airfields at the request of the new head of the Italian government, Marshal Badoglio. That mission was never executed. Had the 5th Army been more successful in its beachhead operation, the 82d Airborne Division might have sailed into Italy instead of soared.<sup>1</sup>

Despite Allied attempts to deceive the Germans into believing that the invasion would come in the vicinity of Naples, German analysts were well aware of our fighter's range limitations and were able to predict Salerno as the real invasion site for the same reason that the Allies selected it.<sup>2</sup>

The initial 5th Army elements first landed on Salerno beach at 0330 hours, 9 September 1943. Despite the substantial opposition offered by the Germans to the initial landing, 6th US Corps was able to advance and occupy the ridgeline from Altavilla to Roccadaspide along the west bank of the Calore River by the evening of 11 September.<sup>3</sup> However, on the morning of 12 September the Germans counterattacked in a sector between the 10th British and 6th US Corps. This sector, having only one armored brigade covering a front of five miles, was easily penetrated by the

German counterattack. By the night of 12 September the German advance had reached a point approximately six miles short of the sea and threatened the cohesion of the 5th Army beachhead. In an effort to block the German advance down the Sele-Calore corridor, the 5th Army commander, General Clark, had taken support (CSS) troops from the beachhead rear, and combat units from the right flank of 6th Corps. This was necessitated by the lack of a reserve within the beachhead. Thus the stage was set for the 82d Airborne Division airborne operations in support of the Salerno beachhead.<sup>4</sup>

During the invasion the 82d had been staging in Sicily for a succession of on-again/off-again politically and militarily oriented operations. The first mission called for deploying a combat team into the Volturno River sector with the remainder of the Division acting as a floating reserve. This was cancelled when the Division was alerted to prepare for a division airborne assault on airports north of Rome to coincide with Italy's capitulation in the war. That mission was cancelled at the last moment when Italian leaders notified the Allies that they could not provide necessary support and security for the drop.<sup>5</sup> When the Rome mission was cancelled, General Eisenhower made the Division available for AVALANCHE. Clark was notified by General Alexander the night before the Salerno landings of this fact. Clark considered using the Division in an amphibious landing north of the peninsula that lies between Salerno and Naples. His intent was to secure the passage through the Sorrento barrier for the Army which would have to transit this sector in its advance



from the beachhead to Naples. The 82d was asked to prepare plans for this possibility. On the night of 10 September, Alexander sent a message to Clark suggesting he move the Division from Sicily to Salerno by sea.<sup>6</sup> This would have had to be done piecemeal as there were only nine landing craft immediately available for such a move. On 11 September Clark requested that as much of the Division as possible be transported by these craft to Salerno. Even though the 325th Glider Infantry Regiment began loading at once, they in fact did not sail until 13 September. That same day (11 September), Clark notified Alexander that he wanted two airborne landings conducted: the first being a battalion drop near Avellino, and the second a regimental drop northeast of Naples. Both were to be executed, if possible, that night; if not possible, then the following night (12 September). The Division began preparing immediately for both missions. However on the morning of 12 September, Clark requested postponement of both operations until the night of either the 13th or 14th of September to allow 10th British Corps sufficient time to break out of the beachhead and effect quicker "link-up." By 12 September the situation had deteriorated. Because the only glider strip (vicinity Paestum) would probably not be ready in time, even if enough gliders could be assembled for the operation, the 5th Army staff was now considering reinforcing the beachhead with an airborne drop. Clark's final decision came on the morning of 13 September. He dispatched a personal letter via a reconnaissance plane to General Ridgway ordering him to make the Salerno drops.<sup>7</sup>

By 1830 hours that night, the Division had completed its

plan in coordination with the staff of the Troop Carrier Command. Colonel Tucker's 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment(-) (3d Battalion was to sail with the 325th Glider Infantry) would depart various airfields around Sicily at 1930 hours and drop at Paestum. During this abbreviated planning cycle it was necessary to reallocate the departure airfields, move the troops to the appropriate fields, and select the air routes to be used. Fortunately, the Division had been planning for the drop on Capua for several days and had completed most of the detailed planning that must accompany any airborne drop. Also, all of the equipment had already been packed and all that remained for the troops to do was to pick up their chutes, rations, and ammunition prior to loading onto the C-47 cargo planes.

At maneuver level there was no ground tactical plan; the troops were simply told that the Salerno beachhead was in trouble and that 5th Army needed their help. At Division and higher level there were two aspects of the planning which merit attention.

During the Division's drop into Sicily the transport planes were engaged by friendly naval and shore based antiaircraft gunners. This resulted in significant losses of men and planes. To preclude another such tragedy, General Clark directed that from 2100 hours on the night of the 13th, until further notice, all antiaircraft guns in the Salerno area (land and sea) would be silenced and that the barrage balloons would be lowered. To make sure that the antiaircraft crews within the beachhead actually "got the word," Clark sent two of his staff officers around to the gun emplacements to ensure that each crew was so instructed.<sup>8</sup>

A problem often encountered during this early period in airborne doctrine development was finding the drop zone in night airborne operations. Due to the short planning time for the Salerno drops, neither air corridors nor guide ships were available to assist the planes in navigating to the drop zone near Paestum. To get from their air bases in Sicily to the Salerno area the planes simply followed the Italian coastline. Once in the general area there were two measures planned to ensure that the troops were dropped on the correct drop zone. First, troops within the beachhead would prepare cans filled with gasoline and sand, and emplace them in the shape of "T" with each leg of the "T" being one-half mile in length. The "T" was to be in the center of the drop zone. As the planes approached, the cans would be ignited and would burn until after the troops were dropped. The second measure used to aid in navigation to the drop zone was the use of pathfinders. For the drops by the 504th RCT and the 505th RCT the next night, the pathfinder teams were to be headed by LTC Billingslea, later to become commander of the 325th Glider Infantry Regiment. The entire team was divided among three planes which would drop the pathfinders into the drop zone an hour or so before the arrival of the first elements of the main lift. The equipment used by the pathfinders was also divided among these planes with the first two carrying the Rebecca-Eureka "radar" devices and all loads carrying supplemental lighting equipment.<sup>9</sup>

At 1930 hours on 13 September, planes of the 61st, 313th, and 314th Carrier Groups began departures from airfields in western Sicily. The pathfinders were dropped first and had their

equipment in operation in short order. The first planes of the main body carrying the 2d Battalion, 504th RCT arrived over the drop zone at 2326 hours.<sup>10</sup> The jump was made from an altitude of 800 feet above ground level and the majority of the troops landed within 200 yards of the drop zone and all within one mile of it. Due to mechanical difficulties, 41 aircraft started from Sicily several hours late and finally arrived at 0130 hours on the 14th. Some of these planes were unable to identify the right drop zone and consequently B Company, 2d Battalion was dropped some 8-10 miles away. Only three planes of the ninety used that night failed to reach Salerno. A total of approximately 1300 troops of the 504th RCT (-) and C Company, 307th Airborne Engineer Battalion were dropped on the night of 13-14 September.<sup>11</sup>

At 0330 hours on 14 September, the commander of the 504th RCT, Colonel Tucker, reported to 6th Corps headquarters. His two battalions were moved by truck from the drop zone on the morning of 14 September to the front line near Monte Soprano. It should be noted here that control of both RCT's passed to 5th Army upon their departure from Sicily. The 82d Division staff participated in planning of the various drops around Salerno but in fact had no hand in the combat operations within the beachhead. The day of the 14th was spent preparing the positions of the 504th for a possible tank attack with little actual combat.<sup>12</sup>

The 505th RCT with B Company, 307th Airborne Engineer Battalion attached was scheduled to depart Sicily at 2100 hours on the 14th of September. Unit commanders and aircrews were briefed at 1600 hours. The planned drop zone was again near

Paestum with the lead elements of the main body (3d Battalion), arriving over the jump zone at 0110 hours, 14 September, followed by Headquarters Company, B/307th Engineer Battalion, 2d Battalion, and finally the 1st Battalion at 0255 hours. The RCT, again aided by pathfinders, the flaming "T," and cooperating antiaircraft crews, arrived essentially without incident. Approximately 5-7 planes did not make the mission for various reasons. Units were quickly assembled within the drop zone and were trucked to the front line. The 505th RCT positions began to the right of the 504th and extended along the beachhead to the shore at Agropoli. Subsequent to the drop there was little significant action in the area of the 505th. Such was not the case with the 504th.<sup>13</sup>

After some action on the 14th and 15th (one battalion assisted in repulsing an attack, supported by tanks, near the Sele River), the Regiment marched approximately four miles to occupy the town of Albanella and the surrounding high ground. The 1st Battalion was given Hill 424 as an objective and Hill 415 was the objective of the 2d Battalion. The 3d Battalion which had sailed from Licata, Sicily had arrived at the beachhead on the 15th of September. The initial assault of the objectives was successful despite accurate artillery bombardment by German forces. The Alto Villa area (Hill 424) had been a range area for German artillery training prior to the invasion and their shelling of key terrain features and targets in the vicinity of such was particularly effective.<sup>14</sup> Despite several (probably four in number) German counterattacks in an attempt to dislodge the two battalions, the 504th held its ground. However, as the result

of such counterattacks, the RCT was cut off from units in the beachhead.

Upon learning that the 504th was indeed cut off, General Dawley, 6th Corps commander, suggested that the regiment withdraw. Colonel Tucker, the Regimental Commander replied, "Retreat Hell!... Send me my other battalion (3d Battalion)." <sup>15</sup> General Dawley dispatched the 3d Battalion, 504th RCT immediately. The Battalion was successful in reaching the "cut off" force and occupied Hill 344. In the meantime 1st and 2nd Battalions were successfully fighting off the German forces in the Alta Villa area. The next day the 504th was relieved in place by elements of the 36th Division. <sup>16</sup>

There are no reports of the casualties suffered by the 505th RCT but presumably they were light. The 504th RCT was recorded as having 30 KIA, 150 WIA, and 1 MIA. <sup>17</sup> The majority of these casualties came from the previously described German artillery. Estimates of German casualties were several times that of the 504th based on the numbers of casualties that were left on the battlefield by the Germans.

Coincident with the arrival of the 82d Division staff within the beachhead on 18 September, General Vietinghoff, on order from Field Marshall Kesselring, began a withdrawal of German units along the front near Salerno. By the 20th the two regiments (504 and 505) were back in reserve positions within the beachhead and once again under Division control.

The commitment of the 504th and 505th Regimental Combat Teams to the fighting for the Salerno beachhead appears to have

been a sound decision on the part of General Clark even though the regimental commander argued for a more "daring" use of airborne troops behind enemy lines. The airborne drop by 2d Battalion, 509th Infantry on Avellino was the other airborne operation in support of the Salerno landings.

The 2d Battalion, 509th was initially located in an olive grove near the town of Licata on Sicily's southern coast on 14 September 1943. It was from this location that the battalion was to receive a briefing from General Ridgway, the CG, 82d Airborne Division, at 1600 hours on 14 September. LTC Doyle R. Yardley was the Commander of the 509th during this time.

General Ridgway personally conducted the briefing that afternoon at the battalion CP location. He began the meeting with:

Gentlemen, the Fifth Army is in serious trouble over at Salerno. They need immediate assistance...You and your men will be jumping tonight well behind the lines at a place called Avellino. Your mission there will be to occupy, prior to daylight, a large crossroads area at the south edge of town and deny its use to enemy units moving through it down to Salerno.<sup>18</sup>

The battalion was to hold the crossroads until the Fifth Army pushed inland to link up with them. The estimated time for the link up was five days after the jump into Avellino. The battalion was also informed that if it could not accomplish its primary mission due to the anticipated overwhelming enemy forces around Avellino, it was to break up into smaller groups and fight guerrilla style. It was then to do as much damage to whatever

Germans it encountered until the Fifth Army arrived in Avellino.

The crossroads at Avellino was the key junction point of routes 7, 88, and 90 that were now crawling with German tank and infantry units travelling south, unrestricted, to Salerno. Unknown to Allied intelligence at that time was the movement of the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division to Avellino during the past two days. Regiments of this division had been deployed in and around the town.

After General Ridgway's departure, LTC Yardley assembled his staff for as detailed a planning of the operation as time would allow. Approximately one hour later he assembled the battalion members to explain the mission of the 509th. After about a half hour of briefings, the men of the 509th dispersed to their respective company areas to hurriedly prepare for the mission.

A little after 1900 hours, 14 September, a lone C-47 took off carrying a small detachment of pathfinders from the 509th heading for a large open field three miles south of Avellino. The plan was to set up radar devices to guide the remainder of the battalion into the drop zones.

At approximately 1930 hours, forty planes of the 64th Troop Carrier Group took off with the remainder of the battalion. The 509th was headed for Italy undaunted by the lack of preparation time and confident in their abilities. But the small town of Avellino looked like many other small mountain towns, and the lower air was full of haze. From the high altitude at which the mission had to be flown because of the mountains, the pilots were unable to find the town.<sup>19</sup>



Starting at midnight, the 509th Battalion was dropped helter--skelter deep within enemy territory. Unable to home in on the pathfinder beams that were blocked by the mountains, only ten planes found the drop zone near Avellino.<sup>20</sup> Several of the subordinate units landed with half of the troops on opposite sides of mountains. Isolated groups thought their comrades had either been killed or captured. The battalion was now strung out all the way from Avellino northward to Caserta, nearly forty miles above Salerno. The battalion basically was scattered over an area of more than a hundred square miles.<sup>21</sup>

This situation had definitely violated the principle of mass. Had the battalion all dropped in one close group however, it is questionable that they could have carried out the primary mission of seizing the Avellino crossroads due to the presence of the 15th Panzer Grenier Division in the town. Despite the scattered landings, some unplanned surprise was achieved because for the next several hours after the drop, hundreds of paratroopers searching for the crossroads bumped into many panicky German patrols.

Despite the scattered drop, small groups aggressively attempted to carry out the primary mission of seizing the crossroads. LTC Yardley had jumped from one of the planes that found the proper DZ. He collected his men and anxiously waited at the assembly area for the remainder of his battalion before beginning the three mile march to Avellino. He was determined to continue with his primary mission. Shortly after 0100 hours, 15 September, unable to wait any longer, LTC Yardley set out for Avellino with only 160 of the 641 men with which he had left

Sicily. He had made the decision as the commander to continue the mission with only 25% of his battalion.

The Germans, two miles down the road, had massed a reinforced tank battalion and had LTC Yardley's force outnumbered and outgunned. Machine gunners buttoned up inside the tanks proved more than a match for LTC Yardley and his men. The Germans employed flares for illumination on the battlefield and exposed all the paratroopers who were not lying in ditches. Several of the men to include LTC Yardley, were wounded and subsequently taken prisoners.<sup>22</sup>

Elsewhere, members of the battalion adapted their tactics to their respective battlefield environment. Lieutenant Dan DeLeo, platoon leader in Company A, landed with his stick in the San Stefano del Sol Valley southeast of Avellino. Immediately upon landing, they encountered intense small arms fire from the wooded areas. Four of his men were wounded by the initial burst. Lt DeLeo quickly grouped his men and withdrew with the wounded into the surrounding hillsides. A couple of days after the jump, Lt DeLeon's men met four Italian partisans who joined forces with them and acted as guides during nightly skirmishes with the Germans. For the next two weeks they slept in a cave during the day and at night prowled the countryside harassing German units in the area.<sup>23</sup>

Major William A. Dudley, the battalion XO, was in command of about sixty paratroopers. Other officers in the group were the battalion supply officer, Captain Edmund Tomasik, and Lieutenant Justin MacCarthy, a rifle platoon leader. Maj Dudley's best

estimate was that their group was dropped considerably farther behind the lines than intended. He believed to be nearly forty miles from the friendly troops down in the Salerno beachhead area. He decided that it would be suicidal to fight back to Avellino, and directed the group to go into hiding at their location until arrival of friendly troops.<sup>24</sup>

The decision was an unpopular one with the paratroopers. They wanted to initiate offensive actions against the Germans in their area. Maj Dudley's assessment was that it was too risky for offensive operations with only enough ammunition on hand for one or two good firefights.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the location of the supply bundles that were dropped for the operation were unknown to them.

For several days this group hid in the mountains with clear sounds of firefights taking place in the surrounding valleys. They became hungry for some combat activity. Against the wishes of the XO, and without his knowledge, Lt MacCarthy and twenty-one others slipped away from the group to execute a self-assigned offensive mission of blowing a bridge not far from their hiding place. They had observed German ammo trucks hauling supplies southward over the bridge toward Salerno.<sup>26</sup>

Although this action can be viewed as a direct violation of unity of command from Maj Dudley's point of view, it did demonstrate the spirit of offensive actions on the part of Lt MacCarthy and his men. The men positioned themselves so half were on a knoll overlooking the bridge site, while the remainder proceeded down to the bridge. About five of these individuals took up defensive positions on the northside as a security force while the bridge was being prepared for demolition. The operation

was a success and the bridge was destroyed.

Other small groups of paratroopers and individuals continued isolated fighting in the mountains behind Avellino. It is doubtful that these fights had any decisive bearing on the outcome of the battle of Salerno.<sup>27</sup> The small group actions of the men of the 509th Battalion did, however, disrupt German communications and partly block the movement of supplies and reserves. Their actions also caused the Germans to keep units on rear area security missions that otherwise could have been directed at the main effort at Salerno.<sup>28</sup>

General Mark Clark, CG, Fifth Army had given up the 509th Battalion as lost to enemy action. Several days of desperate attempts to initially establish contact had not produced any response. The only sure thing Gen Clark knew about the battalion was that it had apparently done its job, wherever it was, for the pressure was off the beachhead.<sup>29</sup>

While in the skirmishes around Avellino no side gained a clear victory, the 509th Battalion collectively did relieve some pressure from the Salerno beachhead. Although the 509th did not accomplish the primary mission of seizing the crossroads just outside Avellino, the men of the 509th did, as individuals and in small groups, successfully fight guerrilla style behind enemy lines.

A combination of luck, individual leadership, initiative, and high morale accounted for the individualized successes during the Avellino operation. Of the 640 paratroopers who jumped, approximately 510 eventually filtered back to Allied lines.<sup>30</sup>

While Naples was being cleaned up, the survivors of the Avellino operation were assigned the mission of guarding Fifth Army headquarters. During this timeframe, the 509th Battalion received many new replacements, CPT Tomasik, the battalion supply officer, was promoted and became the new battalion Executive Officer. The new Battalion Commander was the recently promoted LTC William P. Yarborough.31

ENDNOTES  
(The Fight)

1. W. Forrest Dawson, Saga of the All American. Atlanta: A. Love, 1946. unnumbered pages.
2. Martin Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1969, p. 121.
3. James Maurice Gavin, Airborne Warfare. Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1947, p. 28.
4. Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. p. 122.
5. Gerard M. Devlin, Paratrooper: The Saga of U.S. Army and Marine Parachute and Glider Combat Troops During WW II. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979, p. 295.
6. Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. p. 122.
7. Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. pp. 123-124.
8. Devlin, Paratrooper. p. 290.
9. This may sound fairly sophisticated for that period of time, but it is unlikely that the "radar" devices were anything other than portable non-directional beacons or even simple radio homing transmitters. It was noted in the planning of the operation that the use of such devices during the drops on the night of the 14th (Avellino and Paestum) would not be possible in both locations as the devices might interfere with each other. This is characteristic of navigation aids using a common frequency. The "supplemental lighting devices" for this drop were nothing more than flashlights.
10. 82d Airborne: Sicily-Italy, July 1943-January 1944, p. 87.
11. The plan for the Capua operation called for an antiaircraft battery, medical detachment, reconnaissance detachment, and an air support party to be attached. Most sources indicate that only the engineer company accompanied the 504th on this jump and that other support was furnished by the 36th Division upon attachment to that unit.
12. 82d Airborne: Sicily-Italy, p. 88.
13. 82d Airborne: Sicily-Italy, p. 90.
14. Dawson, Saga of the All American. unnumbered page.
15. 82d Airborne: Sicily-Italy, p. 78.
16. 82d Airborne: Sicily-Italy, p. 89.

17. Devlin, Paratrooper, p. 303.
18. Devlin, Paratrooper, p. 308.
19. Gavin, Airborne Warfare, p. 32.
20. Devlin, Paratrooper, p. 310.
21. Gavin, Airborne Warfare, p. 32.
22. Devlin, Paratrooper, p. 325.
23. Devlin, Paratrooper, p. 312.
24. Devlin, Paratrooper, p. 318.
25. Devlin, Paratrooper, p. 318.
26. Devlin, Paratrooper, p. 320.
27. Gavin, Airborne Warfare, p. 32.
28. Gavin, Airborne Warfare, p. 32.
29. Devlin, Paratrooper, p. 321.
30. Gavin, Airborne Warfare, p. 32.
- 31.. Devlin, Paratrooper, p. 327.

## V. Significance of the Action.

### Immediate.

The hasty airborne assault conducted by the 82d Airborne Division at Salerno had several positive results for Fifth Army. Its primary value stemmed from the psychological lift it gave to the commanders, officers and soldiers bottled up on the Salerno beachhead. After 4-5 days of exhausting combat with no relief, and facing the possibility of a withdrawal from the beach under pressure, the divisions on the beach received a much needed boost in morale with the arrival of the 504th and 505th Parachute Infantry Regiments. The action of the paratroopers helped turn the tide of battle. Tactically, they provided valuable security to the perimeter, helped stop a German counterattack threatening to split the beachhead and throw the Allies back into the sea, and frustrated the German attempt to contain the Fifth Army on the coastal plain by securing the village of Altavilla. The result was a hastened German withdrawal from Southern Italy to the vicinity of Rome. The airborne drop at Avellino, however, has to be classified a tactical failure since it dispersed the 2nd Battalion 509th Parachute Infantry over such a wide area that the battalion never entered the battle as a cohesive fighting unit. Nevertheless, it did help the ongoing battle on the beach by providing some minor disruption of the enemy's lines of communication, and by forcing the defenders to keep more than an equal number of units tied up in rear area operations that might have been used to counterattack the Allies on the beach.

### Long Term.

The Germans had expected an attack at Salerno and had



already planned on a withdrawal from Southern Italy to the vicinity of Rome, with their main defense starting along the Rapido River line. Of course if the Allied invasion at Salerno had failed, the German High Command probably would have taken advantage of the situation and stayed in Southern Italy. The long term result of the hasty airborne assault on the beach, therefore, was that it enabled the Fifth Army to establish a lodgment on the Italian mainland from which it was able to base operations toward Naples. This reinforced the German decision to withdraw from Southern Italy. Additionally the landing reassured the survivors of the airborne fiasco in Sicily that hasty airborne operations were feasible, and it forced the Germans to hold back large reserves on all fronts in order to cope with anticipated use of airborne forces.

.. Both sides considered the outcome of the battle to be to their own advantage, especially with respect to how the battle could have ended. The Germans were able to evacuate Southern Italy with acceptable losses and retain the easily defensible terrain in Northern Italy. The Allies were able to obtain a lodgment on the Italian mainland, retain the offensive, and tie down large enemy forces in Italy that could otherwise have been moved to France to fend off the Normandy invasion or to reinforce their efforts on the Eastern Front against the Russians.

Though limited, the tactical successes of airborne operations in the Italian campaign convinced the Allies that "with hard work and thorough training, the (airborne-troop carrier) team could be made into an extremely effective battle

force, a force that could tip the scales of victory in any future combat operation."1 Building on each success, airborne operations continued to show their usefulness in WW II in Operation Overlord (the Normandy invasion), Operation Market Garden, the invasion of Southern France, and the Rhine crossing. Airborne operations have continued to be used whenever rapid deployment of U.S. ground force was needed, as demonstrated in Korea, Viet Nam and Grenada. However, in our future employment of airborne forces, we must be extremely selective. The Avellino drop demonstrated that we should not employ the airborne forces too far beyond supporting fires and link-up forces, unless we are willing to write off the airborne force. Of course the benefits of a deep drop may well outweigh the negative aspects of losing the force; thus the commander who orders such a drop must consider all the possibilities, however grim. Airborne units in a deep drop must have anti-tank weapons and indirect fire support included as assets if they are to have any chance at success. Furthermore, these units must be resupplied, something which may be difficult to achieve if the enemy had control of the skies. Fortunately, the Germans did not have that control for the Salerno and Avellino drops. Examining the Avellino drop from another perspective, we should realize the threat enemy airborne and airmobile assets pose to our lines of communications. With a few more assets, and a little more thought and planning, the Avellino drop could have been very disruptive to the Germans. Thus we need to consider very carefully how we will conduct Rear Area Combat Operations, or RACO, with limited assets.

In conclusion, the Salerno and Avellino drops have without a

doubt provided the U.S. Army with some very important lessons on the use of airborne and the need for RACO. We can ill afford to take either one lightly; both demand extensive thought, planning, and coordination for success.

Lessons Learned - Short Term.

The airborne operations at Salerno and Avellino reinforced lessons already learned from the Sicily drop and provided new ones for future operations. Unfortunately, we failed to take action on many of these past lessons learned, and thus we had similar problems at Salerno and Avellino. First of all, troop carrier aircraft were still not in the best possible condition for an airborne operation. Many were being utilized to move freight and passengers for administrative purposes, and consequently did not get the needed maintenance time. As a result, many aircraft had as much as 500 hours on their engines and were badly in need of overhaul. On the day of the operation, some planes were unable to takeoff even though the units had known of the intended airborne operation for weeks. On 13 September 1943 mechanical problems delayed 45 aircraft which subsequently arrived several hours late over the Salerno DZ; thus one lesson was that we had to provide adequate maintenance time and repair parts for the planes.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally the lack of adequate time for mission preparation was a problem. The 2nd Battalion 509th Parachute Regiment had two hours to study maps, plan and brief personnel, and load the aircraft.<sup>3</sup> This short planning time was a contributing factor to the difficulties this battalion

encountered once on the ground. This time constraint most certainly did not provide jumpmasters time to memorize the route of flight and the appropriate checkpoints necessary to keep track of the flight, as was their duty. The 504th's drop on Salerno was more successful despite the fact that the unit had only eight hours to receive notification of the mission and be briefed, load the aircraft, jump on the DZ, and begin fighting. Thus one lesson learned, or relearned, was the need at all levels to provide adequate troop leading time.<sup>4</sup> The 504th's quick reaction time could partially be credited to the fact that these troops had been continuously preparing for operations which were always scrubbed at the last moment; thus they had plenty of prior training. In fact many troops thought this was another dry run.

Aircraft navigation to the DZ's was also a substantial problem. The units employed Pathfinder teams at both Salerno and Avellino. At Salerno units had made coordination for a large "T" on the ground formed with cans full of sand soaked with gas, to be lit as the lead aircraft approached. The "T" was lit as the first troops exited the aircraft. This marking was certainly a factor in the large number of aircraft that accurately dropped their troops on this DZ. In fact, only one company landed 8 to 10 miles off the DZ. We can also attribute this accuracy to the DZ's proximity to the coast with its identifiable terrain features. In contrast, at Avellino, further inland, despite the fact that a pathfinder detachment was dropped in earlier and had set up operations, troops were dropped helter-skelter into enemy territory. Flying in a complete blackout, the aircraft did remain in formation during the first hour in the air. However, as they

flew up the coast, they started to separate. As aircraft turned inland and climbed to avoid the mountainous terrain, formations became separated from each other. The navigation aids provided by the pathfinder detachment were ineffective due to the signal masking of the mountainous terrain. Adding to the problems of DZ location, was the 2000 ft. drop altitude (AGL). This added to the dispersion of the troops. Consequently, the 509th was scattered over 100 square miles during its drop and never become a combat-effective battalion. Thus we discovered that we had to improve our pathfinder and navigational techniques to ensure success.

Adequate communication between corps headquarters and the deployed units must be established and maintained to ensure an successful operation. At Avellino the units had not worked out any radio procedures or schedules to ensure communication. Additionally, there was no opportunity to secure special radio equipment to maintain contact with Fifth Army.<sup>5</sup> This resulted in no communications between the battalion and Fifth Army Headquarters for several days. Until paratroops linked up with friendly units, the unit was presumed lost.

#### Lessons Learned - Long Term.

Many high ranking commanders in the Allied armies viewed airborne operations with a jaundiced eye. These endeavors bore the appearance of luxury--an impressive display but not essential to the task at hand. Salerno changed that view. Airborne troops fulfilled the mission of reinforcing threatened or surrounded units and thus were instrumental in the overall accomplishment of the mission. The commitment of the 504th as a unit turned the

tide of the German attack on the Salerno beachhead.

By the end of 1943, planners had overcome many of the hundreds of small technical problems of individual and unit equipment. They knew how to marshall, takeoff and fly three or four hundred C-47's in close coordination with fighter, bombers, and friendly anti-aircraft units.

The Salerno drop demonstrated that airborne troops must be employed in mass and not sent in piece-meal. The success of the Salerno drop can be attributed to the adherence to the principle of mass. Also, airborne drops must be coordinated with all participating forces. Direction and coordination for the operation must be provided by the highest headquarters in a theater of operations.

General Gavin's planning figures showed that it took 37 to 45 C-47's to deliver a battalion of parachutist in a area 1000 yards by 500 yards.<sup>6</sup> He estimated that a trained battalion, if properly dropped, could be assembled and moving in 20 minutes, and at worst should not take over an hour. Drop Zones must be as close as possible to the objective. It is better to take 5 to 10% jump injuries and land on the objective than to travel long distances to reach it. Once on the objective, the troops must dig in, and hold against enemy counterattacks. Furthermore, the units must destroy enemy communications and send out reconnaissance and security patrols.<sup>7</sup>

Allied airborne commanders realized that an airborne action is a jump into the unknown. Difficulties and peculiarities will arise which cannot be foreseen. Tasks are limited not just by troops available, but by how many can be put down in the first

lift. Isolation on the battlefield is to be expected as shown at Avellino, where one battalion was cut off. Time will work against the airborne soldier as shortages of reinforcements, ammunition, and fatigue take their toll. Without ample training of both aircrews and parachutists, even the most simple operation may be doomed from the start. The Avellino drop is a classic illustration of the multitude of things which can go wrong on an airborne operation. Unit commanders employing airborne drops must carefully weigh the risks with the potential gains. Since troop carriers are normally in short supply, weak technique cannot be overcome by overwhelming numbers. Success depends on the superior quality and training of the limited manpower involved.<sup>8</sup>

An advantage to holding airborne troops out of battle waiting the right moment to strike is the difficulties it causes the enemy; this fact is readily apparent in the Salerno operations. If the existence of the force is known to the enemy, it usually causes him to devote large numbers of troops to the defense of targets in his own rear areas in anticipation of attack.<sup>9</sup> General Student, the German Airborne Commander, stated after the war that Allied airborne units compelled German leaders to hold out large reserves on all fronts in order to cope with the anticipated use of those forces.<sup>10</sup>

In conclusion, the U.S. Army learned several lessons. We had to provide better training to the aircrews as well as more maintenance time. We needed to improve our techniques for getting to the DZ's with our plane formations intact. We also required better communications equipment. The troops must get adequate

troop leading time for preparation. On the positive side, we discovered that airborne units would successfully reinforce a beachhead. We also found out that the mere threat of an airborne operation can cause the enemy a great deal of consternation. In the final analysis, although the Salerno and Avellino drops were fairly expensive man power wise, they did contribute markedly to the success of the overall invasion of Italy, and they certainly provided us with a foundation for the highly successful drops at Normandy.



## ENDNOTES

(Significance of the Action)

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2. James Alvin Huston, Out of the Blue: U.S. Army Airborne Operations in WW II. West Lafayette, Ind.: Perude University, 1972, pp. 168-169.
3. Huston, Out of the Blue, p. 169.
4. Ross S. Carter, Those Devils in Baggy Pants. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951, p. 558.
5. Martin Blumenson, Salerno to Cassino. Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1969, p. 132.
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10. Huston, Out of the Blue, p. 235.

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