



## Historical notes - 2017 edition

### TASK FORCE DUFF

To allow the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division to proceed as fast as possible to the Po river, on April 21, 1945 a task force was formed under the assistant division commander, Brig. Gen. Robinson E. Duff. Task Force Duff included the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 85<sup>th</sup> Mountain Infantry; Company C, 751<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion; one platoon, 701<sup>st</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion; one company, 126<sup>th</sup> Mountain Engineer Battalion; and the 91<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron. Its mission was to move rapidly to Bomporto and secure the bridges crossing the Panaro River, before continuing to speed towards the Po.

By April 22, 1945, Task Force Duff had crossed the Panaro at Bomporto and its units were at or nearing Casoni di Ravarino and Bastiglia. The advancing columns were to advance through Ravarino, Carpi and Sozzigalli. There they would have turned north towards Cortile, San Marino, and Fossoli, finally getting on the Romana highway towards Novi di Modena. Orders were to bypass towns, and specifically Carpi, to minimize delays by German covering forces and demolitions. The task force had the objective to reach the Po by the night of the 22, reconnoitering to find crossing sites there.

However, the task force was stopped by German rear guards a little beyond San Marino, where a leading tank was hit by a German *Panzerfaust*. The Infantry detrucked and deployed to deal with about 200 Grenadiers of the 90. *Panzer-Grenadier-Division*. Notwithstanding this and other similar skirmishes, the task force proceeded very fast towards the Po river. During the advance, on several occasions ammo and weapons caches previously mined by the retreating Germans, went up with big explosions destroying houses or isolated spots in the countryside. By 1800 the town of San Benedetto Po was secured. The serious wounding of General Duff by an antitank mine didn't stop the advance, and by 2300 the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain division began to assemble along the south bank of the Po river. Meanwhile, Italian partisans operating in small bands mopped up surrendering Germans from fields and farmhouses and turned them over to the Americans.

The first crossing of the Po by the Allies took place near Bardelle. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 87<sup>th</sup> Mountain Infantry was designated as the unit to make the initial assault, crossing the 300-foot wide river on 50 M-2 assault boats brought forward from the IV Corps area. H Hour was set at 1200, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion crossed the river under a heavy barrage by German anti-aircraft guns lowered to fire airbursts on a flat trajectory. The rest of the 87<sup>th</sup> Mountain Infantry followed, and by late afternoon the Americans had established a bridgehead 2,000 yards square on the north bank of the Po river, notwithstanding artillery, machine-gun, mortar, and sniper fire hitting hard on the attackers, causing serious casualties. The remainder of the Division crossed the river during the night and the following morning, also using a battalion of DUKWs.

On April 24, Colonel William O. Darby took General Duff's place, and Task Force Darby started anew its advance north of the Po, with the objective of cutting off German troops retreating towards the Brenner Pass.

### FERRARA

Late on April 21, 1945, the 26. *Panzer-Division* units, finding themselves in a dire situation, started retreating towards the Po di Volano area south of Ferrara. Blocking positions were hastily set up to the west and

east of the city. But when the fast advancing British troops reached the southern outskirts of Ferrara on the night of April 22, the Germans abandoned those positions hoping to defend collecting points more to the north to afford the disarrayed German units a chance to crossing the Po. The lack of suitable means to cross the river, however, proved insurmountable. Bridges had been bombed, ferries and barges largely unavailable. Each unit and soldier was engrossed in trying to find makeshift ways to cross the Po river, using wooden doors, windows, or logs as makeshift floating devices. Many soldiers drowned, many others fell under a hailstorm of hostile fire, Allied artillery and planes giving no respite, hitting crossing sites also at night with the help of flares or artificial moonlight.



At 1330, 22 April, the 1<sup>st</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders replaced the 3/8<sup>th</sup> Punjab Regiment, as the leading 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade's unit of 8<sup>th</sup> Indian Division along the Statale Adriatica highway about eight miles south of Ferrara, while armoured cars of the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Connaught's Own Lancers, the reconnaissance regiment of the Indian Division, were spearheading the advance. The 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade, with the 1/5<sup>th</sup> Mahratta Light Infantry, was covering the same line of advance west of the Po di Primaro, along a parallel highway, again behind an advance guard screen by AFVs of another squadron of the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Connaught's Own Lancers, and by tanks of

the attached North Irish Horse. Stubborn resistance by the German Infantry units supported by tanks, as well as demolitions and blown bridges delayed the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Connaught's Own Lancers, which reached the Po di Volano only in the late afternoon. Meanwhile, the 5<sup>th</sup> Royal West Kent Regiment of the 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade advanced along the San Bartolomeo in Bosco - San Martino – Cassana axis, circling Ferrara to the west and succeeding in gaining a bridge on the Burana Canal. The following day, the unit, supported by *Churchill* tanks, crossed the bridge to get to the Po river, which was reached at 1045 near Malcantone di Occhiobello. While this advance was taking place, the 1/5<sup>th</sup> Mahratta Light Infantry moved towards the Statale Porrettana highway to neutralize the German forces defending the airfield area. The southern banks of the Po di Volano and the Burana canal were secured only late on April 23.

At 0445, 24 April, a company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders crossed the Po di Volano and entered the southeast outskirts of Ferrara meeting no opposition: the Germans had left the city the previous day. The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were met by a huge cheering crowd of Italians welcoming them as liberators.

## **HERRING I AIRBORNE OPERATION**

In March 1945, the whole 117 strong Italian paratroops "F" Recce Squadron (12 squads under Captain Carlo Gay) and 109 volunteers (four platoons, each made up by three squads, led by Lieutenant Guerrino Ceiner) from the Italian Nembo Paratroops Regiment, were picked for Operation Herring. They received a rapid but thorough training update under the supervision of the British paratroops Major Ramsay, who was reportedly pleased by the paratroopers' excellent performance.



The mission would entail battle drops on many areas south of Po River, southeast of Ferrara, the Mirandola area, and Poggio Rusco and the Modena-Mantua highway. It would last 36 hours. Every paratrooper would be equipped with an Italian Beretta MAB submachine gun with 400 rounds, high explosive charges, four hand grenades, dagger, maps, and foodstuff for 48 hours. On the night of 19 - 20 April 1945, the Italian paras jumped from 14 Douglas C-47 Skytrain transport aircraft of the U.S. 64th Troop Carrier Group and on

their drop zones. Scattering was considerable, but it did not significantly hinder the paratroops' effectiveness.

Operation Herring lasted over 72 hours instead of the 36 initially foreseen, but it turned out to be a success. With some help on the part of the local partisan groups, according to some sources 481 German soldiers were killed, 2,083 surrendered, 44 vehicles were destroyed and many captured including some tanks, armored cars and guns, 77 telephone lines severed, three bridges taken intact, an ammunition storage site blown up. The price the Italians paid for the success was 31 dead and 10 - 12 wounded.

## SERMIDE

After the death of General Hans-Hellmuth Pfeifer, the *65. Infanterie-Division* commander, General Friedrich von Schellwitz, *305. Infanterie-Division* commander, took over what was left of the two divisions and ordered their retreat to the north on the night of April 22, heading for the Po river. Movements during the daylight hours were almost impossible because of the complete air supremacy of the Allied air forces. Infantry units were able to move cross country avoiding major roads and reached the Po even without maps of the areas. During the night of April 23, part of the retreating troops was moved across the river, carrying only their individual weapons. Ferries had been all but destroyed by air raids. Soldiers were often left to find their own means for crossing, and many were drown.

The US 91<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division had been assigned the task to advance north from Bologna after it had bypassed the liberated city on April 22. By the late afternoon of April 23, the advance guards of the 91<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division were nearing the southern part of the Sermide area with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 363<sup>rd</sup> Infantry, riding tanks of the 757<sup>th</sup> Tank battalion and tank destroyers of the 804<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion, followed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion riding on trucks. Acting as guard on the right flank of the advancing column, two M4 tanks of the 757<sup>th</sup> battalion were hit and destroyed by a German self-propelled gun while proceeding along the road to Pilastri, just one moment before the Germans blew up the Ponte dei Santi bridge. The Americans however were not stopped, bypassing Malcantone on their left flank and proceeding towards Santa Croce, notwithstanding the harassing machine gun fire hitting them from positions on the north side of the Fossalta canal. At the end of the day however the point units were called back from Santa Croce to allow for the supporting Artillery to hit the German positions the whole night long.

At 0800, 24 April, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 362<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, crossed the Fossalta canal at several locations and advanced to Sermide, which was reached around noon against scattered resistance. Once they reached the banks of the Po, the 91<sup>st</sup> Division found a large number of German stragglers and soldiers who had been unable to retreat across the river. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 363<sup>rd</sup> Infantry, picked up more than 500 prisoners along the river banks

between 0800 and 1200, 24 April. In one instance an Italian farmer, after having tried repeatedly with no success to attract the attention of US troops, escorted in 75 prisoners himself.

The first units of the 91<sup>st</sup> Division crossed the Po river near Sermide at 2200, 24 April, when two companies of the 362<sup>nd</sup> Infantry reached the north banks on M-2 assault boats. Other units followed, using DUKWs and LVT-4 tracked Landing vehicles, establishing a safe bridgehead.

## FELONICA

At 0900, 23 April, the 278. *Infanterie-Division* was ordered to fall back to the Po at Felonica without delay and cross it the following night. Continuous strafing by Allied aircrafts destroyed any semblance of order in the retreating columns, which were split into small disorganized groups, reaching the river at several locations after a perilous day.



During the morning of April 23, the German Infantry, joined by the *Battaglione d'Assalto Forlì* of the Italian National Republican Army, was deployed along the railway line running south of Felonica, as a perimeter defense for river crossing operations and a collecting point for the mixed units reaching the area and stragglers. Late in the afternoon on April 23, German commanders met at the presence of General Richard Heidrich, the *I. Fallschirmkorps* commander, taking stock of the situation. All materiel which had been assembled for crossing the Po river had been destroyed by Allied air attacks, and a lone ferry survived. Ferrying operations were begun soon after

sunset, slightly to the west of Felonica, and went on till the following noon, when also that was destroyed by Allied aircrafts. Many soldiers crossed using makeshift ways, many more swam, and several drowned in the river currents at that time of the year.

The 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armored Division, which had advanced north of Bologna covering the right flank of the US II Corps, reached the area during the morning of April 24. The Royal Durban Light Infantry, supported by tanks of the Prince Albert's Guard, was ordered to proceed directly to the Po banks, which were reached at three different locations by as many companies around 1700, after having captured more than a thousand Germans along the way. The South African troops were met only by sporadic sniper fire coming from the north banks; the area south of the river had become an immense dump of German vehicles and equipment of all types. Several Royal Durban Light Infantry patrols attempted unsuccessfully to cross the river during the night, but it was found necessary to await supporting Artillery, to neutralize German strongpoints north of the river.

At 0500, 25 April, Company B, Royal Durban Light Infantry, started crossing the Po using M-2 assault boats, to establish a bridgehead. All of Company B was north of the river by 0710, and by 0930 had been joined by Company A. The beachhead established, by noon the arrival of 10 DUKWs allowed the fast crossing of Company C, securing the crossing site and allowing for its future employment for the race to the Alps