

Sappers on the Hitler Line – May 1944

Background

In the spring of 1944, the Germans still held the line of defence north of Ortona, as well as the mighty bastion of Monte Cassino that blocked the Liri corridor to the Italian capital. Determined to maintain their hold on Rome, the Germans constructed two formidable lines of fortifications: the Gustav Line, and the Adolf Hitler Line, further up the valley.

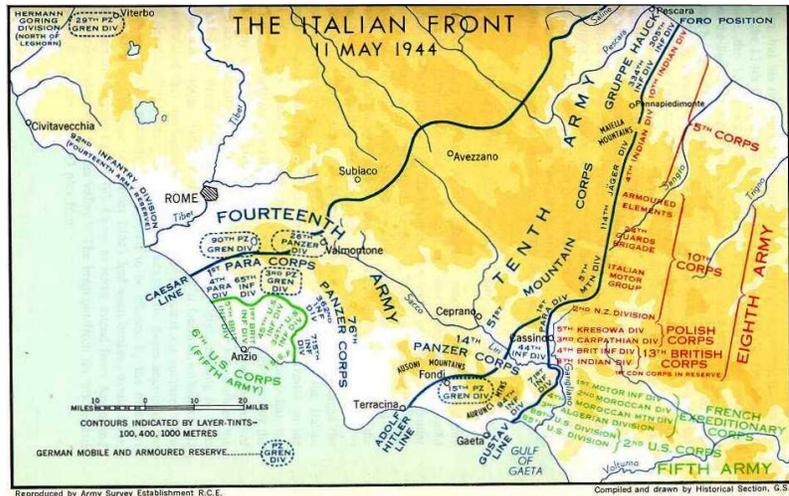
During April and May 1944, the Eighth Army, including the 1st Canadian Corps, was secretly moved across Italy to join the Fifth U.S. Army in the struggle for Rome. Here, under the dominating peak of Monte Cassino, the Allied armies hurled themselves against the Gustav Line.

Tanks of the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade supported the Allied attack. After four days of hard fighting, the German defenses were breached and the enemy moved back to the Adolf Hitler Line. Monte Cassino fell to a Polish attack on 18 May.

The 1st Canadian Corps had already started moving forward in anticipation of attacking the Hitler Line. Early on 23 May, the 1st Division launched a three-brigade attack on the Hitler Line. Under heavy enemy mortar and machine-gun fire, and at great expense in killed and wounded, the Canadians breached the defences that day and the tanks of the 5th Armoured Division poured through toward the next obstacle, the Melfa River.

RCE Role

The biggest task for the Engineer was breaching minefields. Besides dug-in Panther tank turrets and pillboxes, the minefield was over 200 feet deep with heavy barbed wire on either side. It was made up of Italian box mines,



mostly surface laid. Each brigade went into battle with a supporting field company. The Sappers started during the night of 22/23 May, gapping minefields even before the assaulting troops were in position.

The main attack started just before 0600 hours on the 23rd supported by 800 guns. On the right, the breaching party from 3rd Field Company supporting the 2nd Brigade were pinned down until Lt. Carr-Harris took a second party forward and pushed through with the PPCLI. He was wounded and three sappers were killed. The Seaforth Highlanders on the far left lost over 50 killed but penetrated the deepest in that sector.

In the center, the 3rd Brigade did better. The Sappers of 4th Field Company had a relatively easy day with only a few soldiers wounded. On the right, 1st Field Company with the 3rd Brigade worked to finish the breach they started during darkness, often working 400 yards ahead of the assaulting Infantry with small Infantry parties for local protection. Once completed, they safely withdrew, but the Infantry covering parties were all killed. Later in the day, they removed prepared demolitions from the route forward and by nightfall, the Hitler Line had been breached. Early the next morning, tanks and infantry of the 5th Canadian Armoured Division poured through towards the Melfa River. That is a story for another day.

Gallantry

The following paragraphs are the citations for Military Crosses and Military Medals awarded for the Hitler Line battle. More were awarded in the following days for action on the Melfa River.

Sergeant Joseph Abel Boudreau, 4th Fd Coy, Military Medal

On the 22 May 1944, Sappers Matheson and McNaughton were operating two bulldozers engaged in opening up a new route forward. The last mile of work involved working in an area that was being constantly shelled. Due to the importance of this route being opened, it was decided that the work must continue.

Sergeant Boudreau climbed up on the cab of Sapper Matheson's bulldozer and by his example and guidance enabled this bulldozer to complete its work and return out of the danger area. Then this Non-Commissioned Officer took Sapper McNaughton's machine up in the same manner. Due to the noise of the engines, it was impossible for either operator or Sergeant Boudreau to hear the approach of shells and take cover. It was only through Sergeant Boudreau's leadership and example, and personal bravery of all three, that the work was completed.

Sgt Bourdeau was later wounded by an artillery burst in the closing days of the Gothic Line Battle in September 1944.

Lieutenant Peter Raymond Carr-Harris, 3rd Fd Coy, Military Cross

On 23 May 1944, the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, supported by the North Irish Horse, Royal Armoured Corps, attacked the Adolph Hitler Line between Acquino and Pontecorvo. Lieutenant Carr-Harris was detailed to command a mine sweeping party to move forward with the leading battalion, the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. This was to ensure that the tanks in support of the regiment got through the enemy defences.

At 0740 hours, the tanks ran into a minefield in the area. This Engineer officer at once moved forward with his party and in spite of heavy enemy artillery, mortar and machine gun fire began to sweep a line through the minefield. He carried on this task until he was wounded in the arm. In spite of his wound, he refused to leave the battlefield until he was certain that the tanks were able to advance.

Lieutenant Carr-Harris' personal bravery and determination were an inspiring example to his men to carry on with the difficult task.

Acting Corporal Oscar Lyndon Harrison, 3rd Fd Coy, Military Medal

On 23 May 1944, the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade attacked the Adolf Hitler Line between Acquino and Pontecorvo, Italy. Sapper Harrison was detailed as a member of a mine sweeping party that moved in support of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, the leading battalion. At 0740 hrs, tanks of the North Irish Horse encountered mines. This mine sweeping party moved forward and in the face of heavy enemy fire began to sweep a lane for the tanks. During this action, both the officer and Sergeant moving with his party were wounded and unable to carry on. Sapper Harrison, showing great determination, then took charge of the sweeping party and in spite of ever-increasing enemy fire, completed the task.

As a result of this gallant action the tanks were able to push on to give the infantry the close support they sorely needed. Sapper Harrison's coolness, determination and devotion to duty are worthy of the highest praise.

Lance Sergeant Alfred Irvine, 3rd Fd Coy, Military Medal

On the 23 May 1944, the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, supported by the North Irish Horse, Royal Armoured Corps, attacked the Adolph Hitler Line between Acquino and Pontecorvo. Lance-Sergeant Irvine was detailed to a mine sweeping party moving forward with the leading battalion, the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. At 0740 hours, the tanks of the North Irish Horse encountered mines in the area and were unable to advance.

The Engineer Non-Commissioned Officer moved forward with the mine sweeping party led by Lieutenant Carr-Harris and in spite of intense fire assisted in the organization and conduct of the detail. While proceeding with his task, Lance-Sergeant Irvine was wounded in several places by shrapnel. In spite of these wounds, this Non-Commissioned Officer continued to direct the party for several minutes until unable to proceed any further. His determination and devotion

to duty inspired the entire party and was no doubt a major contribution to the final accomplishment of the task.

Lieutenant Frank Ellis Ladner, 1st Fd Coy, Military Cross

During the first phase of the attack on the Hitler Line on 22 and 23 May 1944, Lieutenant Ladner was in command of a troop that had been ordered to sweep and clear all mines on the Acquino-Pontecorvo road lateral. During the whole of this time, the road was consistently under heavy enemy shell and mortar fire but this officer was always in the lead of his troops and, with absolute disregard for self-protection, was ever encouraging and assisting his men by every means in his power. His inspiring example was largely responsible for enabling the road to be quickly cleared of mines, thereby allowing the leading brigade of the Division to push ahead at best possible speed in their attack on the Hitler Line, allowing the enemy no time to reorganize his defences.

On 30 May 1944 during the action about the Ceccano area, Lieutenant Ladner travelled forward under intense enemy mortar and machine gun fire to contact the leading armoured regiments of the 5th Canadian Armoured Brigade and then proceeded from there to reconnoitre enemy minefields that were in the area between San Filippo and Cole Bove and covered by German patrols. Although these patrols at times were within 200 yards of him, this officer successfully completed his task and through the information he gained was able to organize mine-lifting parties to clear a path for the tanks to advance and continue the attack at a time when delay might have been critical to the divisional plan.

By the performance of his tasks at imminent risk of capture by enemy patrols and death from enemy fire, Lieutenant Ladner demonstrated courage, initiative and determination far beyond the normal line of duty.