

CHAPTER IX * * * * *

Stalemate at Anzio

A. *STABILIZATION OF THE BEACHHEAD*

WITH the abandonment of the enemy offensive to destroy the beachhead on 4 March the German Fourteenth Army was able to reduce substantially its containing force around Anzio. (See Map No. 18.) Two divisions, the 29th Panzer Grenadier and the 26th Panzer, were withdrawn into general reserve between Anzio and the southern front, ready for switching to either threatened sector. In early March the Hermann Goering Panzer Division left for Leghorn for rest and refitting, preparatory to an expected move to France. Elements of the 16th SS Panzer Grenadier Division present at the beachhead were also withdrawn to north Italy. The 114th Light Division withdrew in early March for a rest period and then reappeared on the Eighth Army front. By the end of March the enemy force around Anzio had been reduced by over four divisions.

There were few replacements for these seasoned troops, and those which did arrive were mostly second-rate. Only the 8th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, belatedly returned from the southern front to complete the 3d Panzer Grenadier Division, was a first-line unit. Except for the 510th Mobile Battalion from an antiparachute brigade in France the remainder of the reinforcements were Italian troops. In mid-March the Barbarigo Battalion of the San Marco Marine Regiment and a battalion of the 1st Regiment, Milizia Armata, appeared in the Littoria sector. The enemy placed little reliance on his Axis partners, brigading them with German formations down to alternate platoons in the line and taking over from the Italians every night. In spite of these precautions 50 of the San Marco Marines managed to desert during their first 10 days in the line. His best troops withdrawn, the enemy faced VI Corps at the end of March with only five divisions reinforced by three infantry regiments, a force probably inferior in strength to the troops under General Truscott.

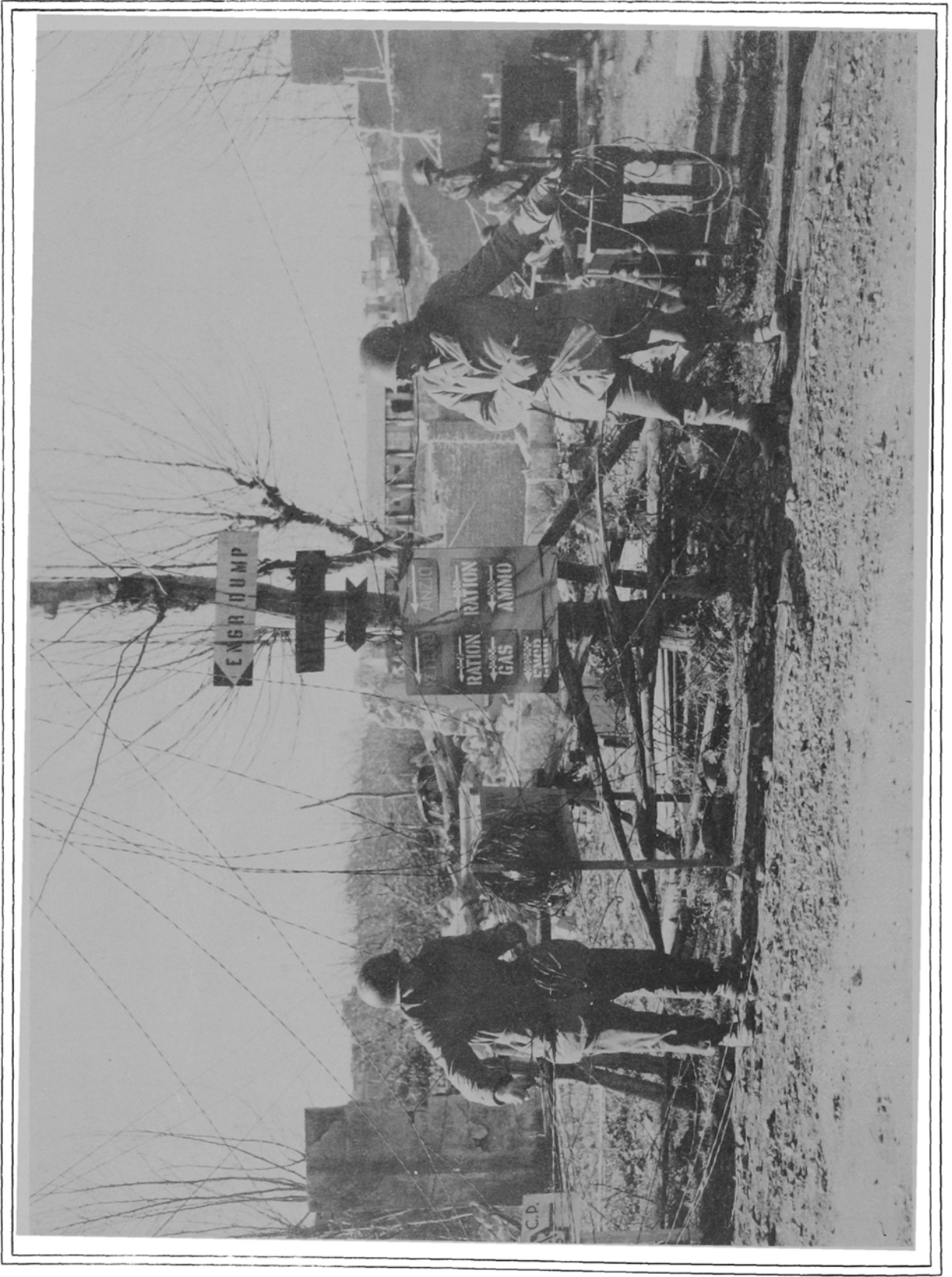
On 29 February Allied Central Mediterranean Force (successor to 15th Army Group) directed a large-scale program of reliefs and regrouping by Fifth Army in preparation for an eventual resumption of the offensive. The 56 Division, which had been rushed to Anzio in the critical period of mid-February, was relieved by the 5 Division from 10 Corps during 5-11 March so that it could refit before leaving for the Middle East. All 56 Division vehicles were left at the beachhead to be taken over by relieving troops. It was decided to replace the 24 Guards Brigade of the 1 Division, which had suffered heavily in the fierce fighting around the Factory, by the 18 Brigade and send the former to Naples to reorganize. The 504th Parachute Infantry, long overdue to rejoin the 82d Airborne Division in the United Kingdom, was finally released in late March. The 9 and 40 Royal Marine Commandos and the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion also left the beachhead. Partly to offset these losses the beachhead garrison was further increased by the veteran 34th Division. On 28 March this unit under General Ryder relieved the 3d Division before Cisterna, after the latter had completed 67 consecutive days in the line. At the end of March VI Corps combat units at the beachhead totalled five infantry divisions and an armored division less one combat command.

Exhausted by 40 days of almost constant fighting, neither the enemy nor VI Corps was in position to do more than rest its troops and prepare for the next active phase. In accordance with the Fourteenth Army order of 4 March the enemy, certain of another Allied offensive, began intensive work on defenses to contain our forces. Within the beachhead VI Corps maintained its aggressive defense while preparing for an eventual resumption of the march on Rome. After the last German attempt to reduce the beachhead had died out on 4 March, there ensued a period of stalemate at Anzio.

Although no large-scale action occurred after 4 March, nightly raids and patrol clashes, the constant exchange of harassing fire, and continual air attacks kept the beachhead front very much alive. Aggressive patrolling and frequent raids were undertaken by both Allied and German troops to improve their positions, feel out the enemy, and keep him under constant pressure. On the night of 13 March the 18 Brigade launched a limited objective attack to improve its positions in the rough country northwest of the overpass on the Albano road. With artillery support the infantry made good progress, but in heavy fighting with the 1027th Panzer Grenadier Regiment two companies of the 9 KOYLI were lost. A highly successful raid by one company of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion on 15 March seized two houses along the road northwest of Carano, taking 23 prisoners. The British 5 Division, continuing the effort to improve the positions west of the Albano road, launched its first

German prisoners, taken in March at the Anzio beachhead, are evacuated to the rear.





Linemen of the Signal Corps straighten out their wires at an Anzio road junction.

offensive action at the beachhead the night of 18 March with a successful raid by the 6 Seaforths and the 9 Commando. With 10,000 rounds of supporting fire by division artillery they seized a foothold along the upper Moletta River gully west of the overpass. In the last action of the month a German company-strength attack the night of 24 March on Company L, 157th Infantry, above Carano was quickly repelled by defensive artillery fire. German activity declined as ours increased, and the enemy seemed content to accept the passive role of building up his defenses around the beachhead. By the end of March VI Corps had definitely regained the initiative at Anzio.

B. *SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE ANZIO OPERATION*

1. *Development of the Beachhead Defenses.* The role of defensive fighting forced upon VI Corps at the beachhead was something new and foreign to the experience of American troops in Italy. In the past Fifth Army had been constantly on the offensive. Our infantry troops, in particular, had had little experience in planning defensive positions, stringing barbed wire, laying minefields, and handling demolitions. Engineer troops, trained for this work, were at a premium. During February a large percentage of Corps and division engineers was employed as infantry troops either to hold front-line positions or as reserves. Even when utilized only in a supervisory capacity on defense works the supply of trained engineers was inadequate. There were other difficulties. Due to the relatively level nature of the beachhead terrain and the enemy's superior observation, all work had to be done at night; it was often necessary to work under heavy artillery fire; and with each breach made in the lines by enemy attacks new defenses were necessary.

To provide protection against enemy infantry attacks stress was laid on the development of self-sustaining, mutually supporting centers of resistance. The stone-walled Italian farmhouses scattered over the countryside frequently provided the kernel for these strongpoints, which were protected by wire and antipersonnel mines. Antipersonnel mines and booby traps were used sparingly while the front remained fluid as they frequently were the source of casualties to our own troops. They proved most effective laid in conjunction with wire obstacles and to block the ravines and ditches used by the enemy when infiltrating our positions. Construction of field defenses was hampered by the high water table which was characteristic of the drained swamp land of the beachhead. It was generally impossible to dig deep dugouts and foxholes and keep

them dry. Sandbags were used in huge quantities to build up positions above ground level and to provide revetments against the sandy soil. As time permitted, dugouts were provided with overhead cover, communication trenches were completed, and strongpoints were interconnected. The expenditure of engineer supplies was extremely high. During February the 120th Engineer Battalion (45th Division) issued 5,000 rolls of concertina wire, 151 rolls of barbed wire, and 128,465 sandbags.

To provide the strongpoints with the capacity to hold out when isolated by enemy attacks, VI Corps ordered that within each company and battery line position a dump of rations and ammunition sufficient for five days be maintained. Each day units drew sufficient supplies to replace the expenditure of the past 24 hours. During the enemy's all-out offensive, when many units were overrun or forced to fall back rapidly, the system resulted in the loss of supplies. However, these losses were more than compensated in cases of units such as the 2d Battalion, 157th Infantry, which managed to go on fighting long after its supply routes had been cut.

Passive antitank defenses consisted principally of minefields and road blocks. On the 3d Division front the 10th Engineer Battalion laid 22,109 anti-tank mines in February and March. The task of laying minefields at night in the open, often featureless terrain resulted at first in many improperly marked fields. The practice was finally adopted of first marking a field, then recording it, and only after these two steps were completed laying the mines. The Corps engineer issued at regular intervals an overlay of all antipersonnel and antitank minefields on the beachhead with each field numbered and located by co-ordinates. Since enemy tanks were largely confined to the roads, road craters were used extensively and with success. In addition, bridges were either blown or prepared for demolition and guarded by engineer troops. To improve the west branch of the Mussolini Canal as an obstacle, the water level was raised by the construction of earth dams, and barbed wire was laid below the surface.

Where possible antitank guns were located on reverse slopes to provide flanking fire. They were supplemented by tank destroyers and tanks. Tank destroyers were used well forward in dug-in positions and as a mobile reserve, thereby strengthening and adding depth to the antitank defense. Tanks also were placed well forward on a scale of approximately one tank company to a regiment in the line. This practice violated the principle of employing tanks in masses, but their usefulness as antitank guns and in bolstering the morale of the front-line troops outweighed the loss of mobility and dispersion of strength. Both tanks and tank destroyers frequently directed artillery fire with excellent results. In addition to the normal allotment of bazookas and antitank grenades,

infantry troops were equipped with British sticky grenades, Molotov cocktails, and flame throwers.

Although the small size of the beachhead and the relatively fixed nature of the front line resulted in reduced distance between the command posts of the various echelons, the quantity of signal wire necessary to maintain communications was if anything increased. Enemy artillery fire repeatedly cut the wires, and command posts themselves were frequently knocked out by bombing or shelling. Wire crews partially solved this problem by laying double and triple communication lines, plowing under the wire, and establishing alternate switchboards. Communications improved rapidly during March as the quantity of enemy artillery fire tapered off and the front was stabilized.

Under the direction of the Corps Engineer the work of developing and improving the defenses went on continuously through the months of February and March. At the end of the period the beachhead was protected by a cordon of strong and well integrated defenses in depth. The emphasis then shifted from the development of the defenses to the equally important problem of maintaining the fighting efficiency of the beachhead forces.

2. *Problems of Replacements and Morale.* Heavy casualties during the attack of January and February and constant attrition during the period of stalemate caused the replacement problem to assume major significance at the beachhead. When the 3d Division lost heavily in the attack on Cisterna, 2500 replacements were rushed to Anzio to restore the battle strength of the division. Similar emergency measures were taken when the 45th Division was hard-hit in the February offensive. To keep units up to strength during this crucial period Anzio was given first priority on replacements, and men in replacement depots were shipped upon arrival. By 4 March 14,602 replacements and men returned to units from rear area hospitals had been dispatched to Anzio. The 6648th Casual Battalion was set up at the beachhead to process men leaving the hospitals and return them to their units. With diminished losses during the period of stalemate and the arrival of a greatly increased flow of replacements from the United States the manpower problem was much eased. All units were kept at full strength, and a new plan of allotting a 750-man overstrength to each division was instituted in preparation for the spring offensive. By 23 May, when the beachhead was finally broken, 17,848 men had been returned from hospitals to units at Anzio and 18,849 replacements dispatched. The 3d Division alone had received 14,165 and the 45th Division 11,202.

With the entire beachhead under constant enemy artillery fire and air attack, personnel at the beachhead were under a severe strain. Front-line troops, dug in along the almost level plain, had little cover to conceal them from enemy

observation. They had to stay underground during daylight hours, and even at the rear there were no areas safe from shelling. During the critical weeks of February troops were forced to remain in line for long periods of time without relief and often in foxholes half-filled with water. Non-battle casualties, especially from exposure and trenchfoot, were heavy during the cold and rainy weather of late winter.

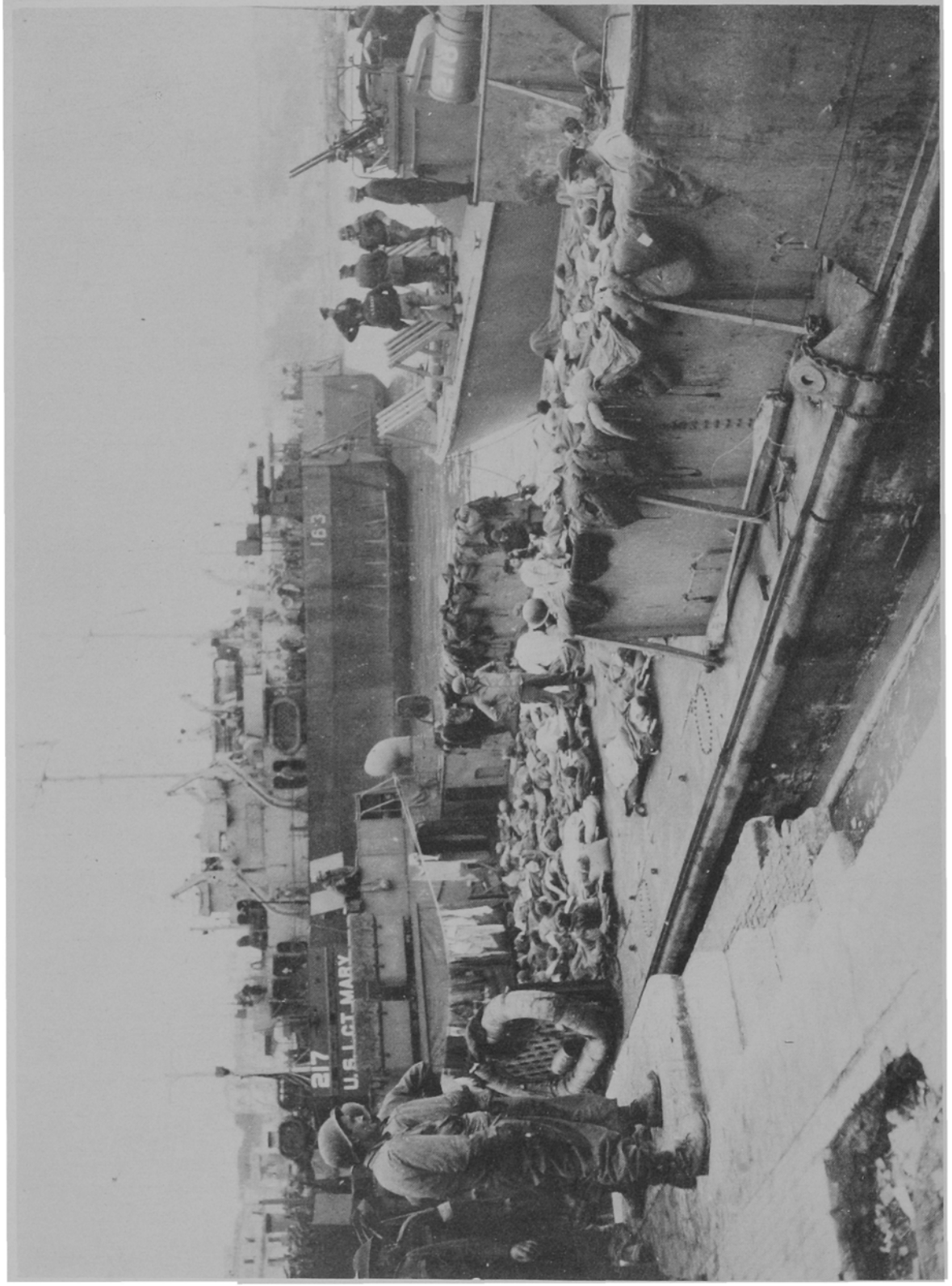
Special efforts were made to keep up the fighting spirit of the beachhead troops. To counter the debilitating effect of defensive warfare constant patrolling and aggressive small-unit actions were stressed. No troops could be relieved during the critical February period, but as soon as the front was stabilized 750 men every 4 days were sent by LST shuttle to the Fifth Army rest center at Caserta, and the 3d Division set up its own rest center in the southeast sector of the beachhead. Troops at Anzio were given priority on mail, post exchange supplies, and recreation equipment. By these means the troops were kept fit for the resumption of the offensive.

3. *Medical Problems.* The confined area of the beachhead and the lack of distinction between the front line and rear areas were nowhere more clearly evident than in the district northeast of the Nettuno airstrip where the American evacuation hospitals were located. For almost 17 weeks medical personnel gave aid and comfort to the sick and wounded in an area only a few miles from the enemy's artillery and so close to the harbor and other military targets that it was constantly subject to air bombardment as well as to shelling. Troops dubbed the hospital area Hell's Half Acre and freely admitted their preference for the protection of a front-line foxhole to a cot in a hospital ward. When the shells were coming over or the air raid siren signalled a red alert, the soldiers could seek cover; for a doctor performing an operation or a nurse tending a patient there was no choice but to continue in the performance of his or her task. Of the medical personnel at the beachhead in hospitals and in divisions, 82 were killed in action, 387 wounded, 19 captured, and 60 reported missing in action.

It was impossible to locate the hospitals in an area free of enemy bombing and shelling, but steps were taken to mitigate the losses of personnel and equipment and to maintain the operating efficiency of the hospital units. At the end of March, when the ground began to dry out, the 36th Engineers set to work excavating foundations three and one-half feet deep for the hospital tentage. Although there was no overhead cover except in the operating theater, the sides of each tent were strengthened by the construction of sandbag walls held in place by iron stakes and chicken wire. Patients were able to lie on their cots entirely below the surface of the ground, where they were safe from flying fragments, if not from direct hits. To relieve some of the pressure on overworked

Two wire repairmen of the 3d Infantry Division restore the lines leading toward Cisterna.





The wounded are placed aboard ship at Anzio, to be transported to hospitals at Naples.

doctors and nurses and to permit the reorganization of units which had lost key personnel and equipment the policy was instituted of rotating medical units. This was made possible by the long periods of relative inactivity on the southern front. The policy was inaugurated in February when the 15th Evacuation Hospital was moved from the Cassino front to replace the shattered 95th Evacuation Hospital; it was repeated when the 38th replaced the 56th in April and the 11th replaced the 93d. By shifting units the burden of operating on the beachhead was distributed equitably while at the same time a high standard of professional service was maintained on both fronts.

Evacuation of the wounded from the beachhead posed equally difficult problems. Air evacuation, which proved very effective in the May offensive, could not be used earlier because the dust raised by the planes in landing or taking off from the airstrip invited German shelling. Planes were used only for the transportation of vital supplies such as plasma, blood, and intravenous fluids. Evacuation by sea was complicated by the shallow beaches, stormy weather, and the constant enemy shelling. Since the hospital ships could not dock at the wharf, they received casualties from the shore by means of LCT's. Storms and high seas frequently interrupted this method of evacuation, and at one time no hospital ships arrived at Anzio for 14 days.

The whole of the beachhead medical system was affected by such interruptions. The hospitals maintained an emergency reserve of 900 beds in anticipation of periods when violent fighting would occur. When hospital ships were held up by stormy weather, the emergency reserve of beds was seriously threatened. Though the use of LST's to evacuate patients had been contemplated only for emergencies, the stormy winter months forced their employment as one of the principal means of transporting patients to base medical installations. The LST's could operate in any weather and they were generally available, but by LST it was a 30-hour trip from the beachhead to base hospitals. Medical personnel and medical supplies and utilities, not normally carried by LST's, had to be installed for the care of patients in transit. Two hospital ship platoons composed of limited service personnel were placed aboard the ships and served until they were ultimately relieved by a clearing platoon of the 56th Medical Battalion.

The large number of casualties suffered by personnel working on the docks required the establishment of an easily available aid station. Accordingly the 1st Platoon, 602d Clearing Company, was brought up from the southern front and quartered in the port area. It was formed into rescue squads for emergency cases arriving at the port and also operated a mobile dispensary which it sent out to isolated units on the beachhead. It supervised the loading of patients

on hospital ships and provided necessary litter bearers. Responsibility for the movement of all casualties from the beachhead hospitals to waiting ships and craft fell to the 549th Ambulance Company, which controlled all medical transport at Anzio.

In the period 22 January-22 May 18,074 American soldiers suffering from disease, 4,245 from injuries, and 10,809 battle casualties—33,128 in all—were given comprehensive care in American hospitals at the beachhead; 14,700 casualties from all causes among British troops received the same careful treatment in British hospitals. In the same period 23,860 American casualties and 9,203 British casualties—33,063 in all—were evacuated by sea from American and British medical installations without injury or the loss of a single patient's life in the process of their movement from the hospitals to the waiting ships.

The existing civilian hospital was totally inadequate to provide for the numerous civilian casualties. Beginning with the early days of the beachhead, these cases were treated along with the combat troops. If the course of recovery required 14 days or less, the casualty remained in the evacuation hospital and would not be removed from the beachhead; if the course of recovery required more than 14 days, the casualties—soldier and civilian alike—were evacuated to base installations the moment they were strong enough for movement. When the greater number of civilians living in the Anzio area were evacuated from the beachhead, the medical care of civilians ceased to constitute a major concern of the medical department.

The community of effort between American and British medical personnel, which had always existed throughout the Fifth Army campaign, was further advanced on the beachhead through an exchange and pooling of medical services. Many British casualties requiring neuro-surgery were transferred to American hospitals for that purpose. At the same time whole blood was made available to both American and British casualties through the efforts of the British 12th Field Transfusion Unit. From D Day until 25 February this unit distributed its own stores to all beachhead hospitals; after that date it was aided by regular shipments of blood from the American blood bank in Naples.

With the arrival of warmer weather came the danger of malaria. The Pontine Marshes adjacent to the beachhead are notorious for their high malarial rates. In the Anzio district proper 50% of the Italian troops once stationed there had contracted malaria while an equally high incidence prevailed among the civilians who resided in the cities of Anzio and Nettuno. Incessant rains had flooded the low-lying land held by our forces astride the Mussolini Canal, and the Germans to improve their defensive positions destroyed the system of dikes which had formed part of the drainage system for the Pontine Marshes.