

24 to relieve the battle-weary 34th Division along a ten-mile sector west along the Arno from the Ligurian coast.

The hurried deployment of Task Force 45 was essential to the overall regrouping of the Fifth Army across a 30-mile front from the coast east to the Elsa River, near Empoli. Task Force 45 shared a 23-mile IV Corps sector with the revamped First Armored on its right. Five miles east of Pontedera, a regimental (362nd) combat team of the 91st Division covered II Corps' seven-mile front. This disposition enabled the bulk of the Fifth Army to rest, giving Clark five outfits—four infantry and one armored division—ready to resume the offensive by mid-August. (American strength was down to 147,036 from 231,306 on June 4; the British were down to 15,758 from 43,784; the Italians, 8,242 from 9,356. The French, who had been reduced to 88,460 from 95,142, left to join the fighting in France.) By now, two other outfits were on the way to Italy, however—the American all-black 92nd Division and the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, consisting of three regimental combat teams and auxiliary support. Even so, this gave the Fifth Army but seven divisions; as historian Ernest F. Fisher, Jr., remarks, “only half as many as in May along the Garigliano River at the beginning of the drive to Rome.”⁵

An Army at rest is rarely an army at ease, as Shakespeare well knew: “From camp to camp. . . /The hum of either army stilly sounds,/ That the fix'd sentinels almost receive/The secret whispers of each other's watch:/ Fire answers fire, and through their pale flames/Each battle sees the other's umber'd face;/ . . . and from the tents/The armourers . . . closing rivets up,/Give dreadful note of preparation,” he wrote, in *Henry V*. The dread notes heard on the eve of the battle of Agincourt were echoed along the Arno as August 1944 drew to a close.

Casualties were light, although troops were harassed by enemy artillery. Not much else happened during the day, but at night enemy patrols, often forty to fifty men strong, crossed the river to probe Fifth Army lines. Some enemy patrols holed up in houses south of the river during the day and resumed their forays in the dark. It was said that the Germans were offering a reward of a two-day furlough, twenty Reichsmarks (then about four dollars) and an Iron Cross Second Class for one Allied soldier brought back unharmed or slightly wounded. If so, one German patrol, “in strength,” did well in mid-August when it caught out a 91st Division outpost on the San Miniato–Fucecchio road some 500 yards from the bank of the Arno. The Germans took ten men and two

officers prisoner.

Fifth Army combat patrols of five to twenty men scouted the Arno for the “secret whispers” of this war, enemy strongpoints and possible river crossings. The 91st's History records laconically: “Their success varied greatly.”⁶ Powder River experiences during August suggest that the men had, indeed, to tread warily. More than one patrol had to return because the banks of the river—it was low and fordable that time of year, only two feet deep in places—were so heavily strewn with Schu mines (designed to blow off feet, legs, and, causing great trepidation among the infantry, sometimes other body parts). When the 3rd Battalion, 337th Regiment, of the 85th Division, relieved the 3rd Battalion, 363rd, of the 91st Division, along the Arno northwest of San Miniato, it found that “enemy patrolling had been very aggressive.”⁷

The Arno loops north here, and it provided the Germans with a salient into the Allied sector. The Germans greeted the 337th's 3rd Battalion with a thirty-man raiding party that took one officer and fourteen men from L Company and four men from K Company prisoner at 0800 on August 17. The next night, the Battalion countered with ambush patrols. **Lieutenant Tom F. Sneary's L Company 2nd Platoon patrol engaged in a firefight—three men wounded, casualties inflicted on the enemy “unknown.”** Several nights later, another L Company patrol ran into sniper fire from a house 800 yards south of the Arno. Lieutenant Ferris E. Ceccinelli was wounded and evacuated. Other patrols that night returned with nothing to report except Schu mines aplenty. Booby traps were also planted in the vineyards and drainage ditches. Eight-man teams were sent out to clean up the trails in the sector—with some success.

One night, an enemy SP gun drew up north of the river opposite I Company. It shelled the American lines intermittently for four hours, killing two and wounding three. Patrols kept prodding the enemy towards the river in an effort to clean out the salient. Booby traps and mines exacted most of a toll of five enlisted men killed, 21 and two officers wounded and 19 men and one officer “missing” in ten days on what was deemed a quiet front. Twenty Germans were reported killed, five wounded and three taken prisoner.⁸

For all the patrol activity along the Arno front, the pause allowed weary soldiers hot baths, a change of clothing, hot meals, and the opportunity to catch up on mail from home. Blue Devil Private Alvin J. Buckinger got a notice from his draft board telling him that they had

Sassoleone above the Sillaro, or on the left flank, where the Red Bulls battled for Monte Venere, the Germans came out when called to do so. East of Loiano, rocky, sprawling Monte Bibeles rose 2,000 feet to dominate the Indice Valley. General Coulter of the 85th Division ordered the 339th Infantry to attack north from Canda and take Bibeles, while the 337th Infantry cleared the ridge east of the Indice Valley.

Both regiments made good progress despite stiff opposition during the first two days, reaching Spedaletto on the eastern ridge and clearing La Martina and the fortified villages blocking the approach to Bibeles. When Captain Clayton N. Little's I Company was stopped by heavy fire from hill positions overlooking the Indice River, he led his men in an attack across seven hundred yards of open terrain.

On his hilltop, Captain Little discovered that the enemy's main defense was on the reverse slope of two adjacent ridges. He then led thirty of his men across another fifty yards of open ground, personally killing fifteen Germans to force the enemy back. After an uneasy night under enemy fire, Little was ordered to take Colle de Tattini, a tiny hilltown in the Indice Valley dominating his segment of the front. His men managed to surprise the enemy, who nonetheless fought back. In the firefight, about fifty Germans were killed and sixty captured. When five enemy tanks counterattacked, Little directed artillery fire from an exposed position. The tanks were forced to withdraw.

The 106th Grenadier Regiment had fallen back on Monte Bibeles, digging in to hold off the Custermen. On October 4 at 0700, the 1st Battalion of the 339th Infantry advanced east of the mountain while the 2nd headed straight for Bibeles. While the 1st made some gains, taking its first object, Hill 504, early in the morning, the 2nd ran up against a fortified village, Quizano. Tanks broke down enemy resistance by direct fire on the stone houses. But other strongholds held out as the battle continued on into the night. The next morning, the Battalion resumed its attack. By late afternoon, one company was on top of the mountain.

On the ridge to the east, the 337th attacked beyond Spedaletto, inching forward under heavy artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire. Doggedly, the Custermen pushed ahead until they were south of the village of Palmona. From all sides, the Germans pounded the Americans. **Sergeant Robert F. Hixon of Company L** spotted a tank to the rear of his company's position. Ignoring enemy sniper fire, Hixon managed to get in position to fire antitank grenades, capturing the tank and its crew. On the

way back to his company CP with his prisoners, he came across another tank. Working his way through the trees, he captured it and its occupants. After leaving his prisoners at the CP, Hixon returned through shell and sniper fire to render the two German tanks useless. **The 337th had forced a salient well ahead of all other units of II Corps.**

On the left flank, the 34th Division was southwest of the 91st. Working down the Sambro Valley the morning of October 2, the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 168th Infantry met with such heavy opposition from SS Panzer Grenadiers in a church on Hill 789 that Colonel Hines ordered the two battalions to bypass the position. The enemy then withdrew that night as the position was no longer tenable. Colonel Hines' Regiment moved on to take the villages of Campiano and San Benedetto. At midnight, October 3, the 133rd Infantry's 1st Battalion attacked Monte Venere.

Supported by seven tanks, slogging up a muddy trail, the infantry gained the summit on the afternoon of the 4th. Pressing his advantage, Colonel Braun ordered his reserve battalion to mount one company on tanks to seize Monzuno, one and one-half miles north. Only three of the eleven tanks reached the line of departure; the rest bogged down in mud or threw their tracks. The lead tank was struck and set afire by a German bazooka a thousand yards short of the town; the remaining two bogged down as they tried to bypass the burning vehicle. The infantry were forced to dig in for the night. However, Monzuno was taken the next day, cutting the lateral road that led east to Loiano. II Corps' left flank was now anchored on a line that swept southwest down from Venere to the Sambro Valley, a thousand yards north of Campiano, where a blown bridge blocked the road.

The first phase of the October drive for Bologna netted four miles—and at two points, five miles—an average gain of slightly more than one mile a day. Bologna was only twenty-two miles away, lending hope for an anticipated breakout into the Po Valley “before the October rains turned to snow.”¹⁰ II Corps had taken 858 prisoners and enemy casualties were thought to be high. Ominously, Allied losses were heavy: 88th Division, 726 casualties (most on Battle Mountain); 85th, 443; 91st, 331; 34th, 234. There were also an equal number of non-battle casualties.

Rain and fog aided and abetted the enemy. Allied planes were grounded and few planned missions were flown. Tanks chewed up mud instead of the enemy. Rain-soaked trails and rutted roads bedeviled the