

TAC NEWS

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OPERATION AVALANCHE The Salerno Landings

On September 9th of 1943, a combined British/American army invaded the Italian mainland along the Gulf of Salerno. Allied leaders had hoped that General Mark Clark's 5th Army landing near the port town of Salerno, combined with a drive up the southern Italian coastline by the British 8th Army and the imminent surrender of Italy, would compel all German forces to abandon southern Italy. Although the allies took great pains to conceal the location of the landing, anyone with a map and knowledge of Allied fighter aircraft's maximum range could deduce where the Allies would land: in or near the Gulf of Salerno. Success of the landings depended on the Allies establishing a secure beachhead before the Germans could concentrate the mechanized divisions of von Vietinghoff's 10th Army to drive the 5th Army back into the sea before Montgomery's 8th Army could relieve it.

Geography was another factor that worked against the Allied landings. The beaches at Salerno were dominated by mountainous terrain, from which the defender could call down observed fire on any part of the beachhead. Compounding the Allied problem was a lack of amphibious assets with which to establish and quickly reinforce the beachhead. The British 10th Corps, with the battle tested 46th and 56th Infantry Divisions, three Ranger battalions, and two Commando units, would land north of the Sele River, capture the port town of Salerno, secure the Montecorvino airfield, and seize the mountain passes north of Salerno leading to Naples. They were to be reinforced six days after the initial landings by the British 7th Armored Division. The U.S. 6th Corps, with the green 36th Infantry Division and two regiments of the veteran 45th Infantry Division, would land south of the British 10th Corps and capture the high ground south and east of the beaches, protecting the right flank of the 5th Army. One regiment of the 45th division would remain offshore to serve as a floating reserve. No further U.S reinforcements were scheduled to land until the capture of Naples, which was anticipated less than two weeks after the initial landings.

There were several plans to use the U.S 82nd Airborne Division to support the landings. General Clark had originally intended to drop the 82nd on the plain northwest of Salerno in order to block German reinforcements coming down from Rome and Naples. After this idea was vetoed by the Air Force command, Clark proposed to land the division further north,

along the Volturno River to destroy the bridges leading from Rome and delay German reinforcements from that direction. The Italian surrender on September 3rd changed the plans for the airdrop once again. The Allied high command planned to land the division's 504th Parachute Regiment northwest of Rome to aid the Italians against a German occupation of the capital. This too was cancelled after the division's commander, Brig General Maxwell Taylor, made a secret trip to Rome to ascertain the Italian's willingness and capability to cooperate with the American paratroopers. Taylor was left with the impression that the operation would fail and advised its cancellation on September 8th, just one day before the landings. The 82nd would be left out of the initial assault but, would serve as an additional reserve unit should it be needed.

Elements of six German mechanized divisions were stationed between Rome and the advancing British 8th Army. Furthest south were the 26th Panzer and 29th Panzergrenadier Divisions, in Calabria, or the 'toe' of Italy, slowing the advance of Montgomery's 8th Army. The Hermann Goering Panzer Division, resting and refitting after the Sicilian campaign, was positioned north of Salerno, near Naples. Further north, the German 15th Panzergrenadier Division guarded the coast at Gaeta. 3rd Panzergrenadier and 2nd Parachute Divisions were located near Rome. Occupying the Gulf of Salerno, the 16th Panzer Division was organized into four *kampfgruppen* guarding strategic points around the gulf.

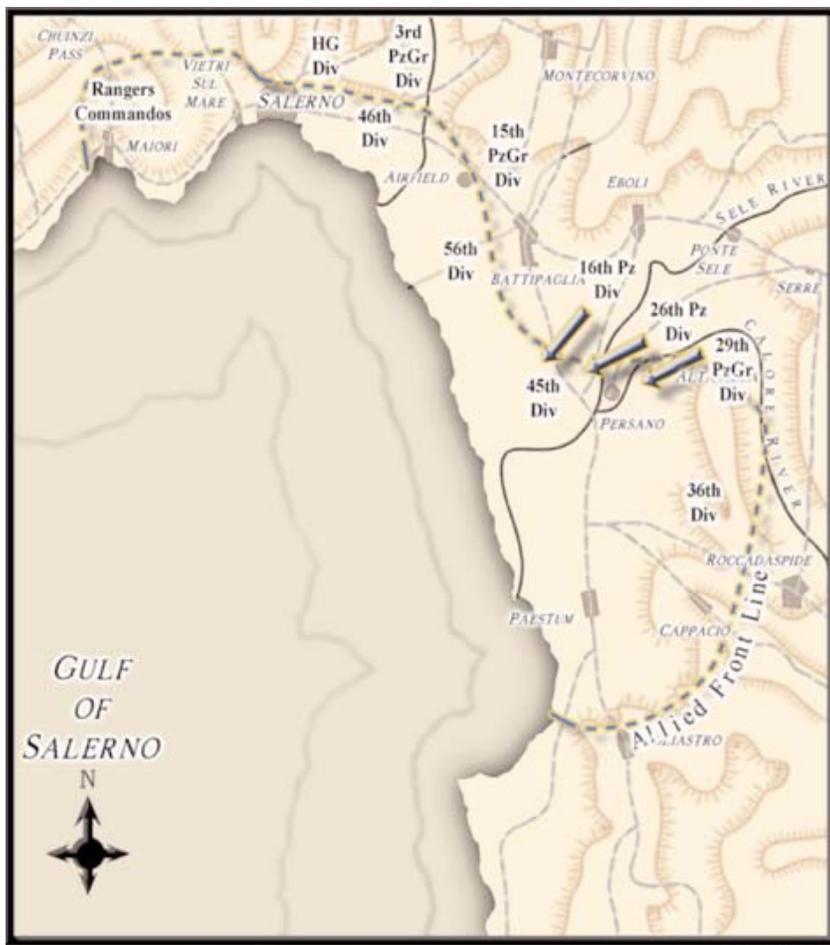
The U.S. 36th Division landed near the ancient town of Paestum, where it met scattered but determined opposition from two companies of panzergrenadiers reinforced with several tanks and supported by artillery located inland near the base of Monte Soprano. After some initial confusion, the U.S. infantry moved inland rapidly, occupying positions well ahead of schedule. Much of the initial American success was attributable to von Vietinghoff's decision to order the 16th Panzer to disengage from the U.S. 6th Corps area and concentrate on the British 10th Corps. 29th Panzergrenadier Division was expected to arrive later that evening in the southern part of the beachhead, but was delayed due a German naval commander's panicked decision to destroy stores of fuel intended for the division. This error would delay the 29th Panzergrenadier's arrival for several days.

Opposition to the British 10th Corps landings was more intense. Although the 46th Infantry Division was able to seize the town of Salerno and link up with the two Commando units at Vietri sul Mare, further progress was stopped by elements of *Kampfgruppe* Dornemann, formed around the 16th Panzer Division's reconnaissance battalion. 56th Infantry Division was able to briefly seize the Montecorvino airfield, destroying 35 aircraft caught on the ground. The tanks and infantry of *Kampfgruppe* Stempel, formed around the 64th Panzergrenadier/16th Panzer Division, soon halted its advance. At the end of the day, the 56th Division's 169th Brigade was left holding the western edge of the airfield while the enemy was still holding the northeastern corner. On the extreme left flank of the British 10th Corps, the three U.S. Ranger battalions, commanded by Colonel Darby, landed unopposed at the small port town of Maiori. Two of these battalions advance inland and took possession of the Chiunzi Pass, overlooking the approaches north of Salerno.

Over the next several days, elements of several German divisions arrived to reinforce the beleaguered 16th Panzer Division. The Hermann Goering Division started arriving north and northeast of Salerno on the 10 September opposite the British 46th Infantry Division, the two Commando regiments, and the three U.S. Ranger battalions. That same day 15th Panzergrenadier Division started deploying to the east and northeast of Salerno, preparing to strike at the 46th Infantry Division. Elements of the 26th Panzer and 29th Panzergrenadier Divisions started arriving

from the south on the 11th and 12th, reinforcing the 16th Panzer Division in the Battipaglia-Eboli area opposite the U.S. 6th Corps. The only Allied reinforcements to land during this time were the 157th (two battalions only) and 179th Regiments. They belonged to the American 45th Infantry Division. These two formations were used to extend the 6th Corps line north of the Sele River, closing the gap between the two Allied corps. This still left the American lines dangerously overextended, with the 36th Division holding over thirty miles of front. Northwest of Altavilla, one of the key obstacles to the American advance was circular array of large concrete buildings, the Persano Tobacco Factory, which dominated the surrounding terrain and a major route inland, the Eboli road. The first assault against the Factory took place on the afternoon of September 11th. Two battalions of infantry from the 157th Regiment/45th Infantry Division, supported by tanks and artillery, ran up against stiff opposition from panzergrenadiers of the 16th Panzer Division. Intense anti-tank, mortar, and machinegun fire drove the U.S. forces back, inflicting heavy casualties. During the second assault against the factory the next day, assault guns of the 191st Tank Battalion shelled the farm north of the factory itself, while a company of tanks put 180 rounds into the factory. After a fight of more than an hour and a half the enemy withdrew up the Eboli road. Company B/1st Battalion occupied the factory at 1130.

A German counterattack followed very quickly. At 1305 eight enemy tanks and a battalion of panzergrenadiers attacked down the Eboli road. Howitzers of the US 158th Field Artillery Battalion stopped the attack momentarily, but by 1340 the 1st Battalion, 157th Infantry, had been forced out of the Factory. Fire from the 158th and 189th Field Artillery Battalions, supported by three naval gunfire missions, checked the enemy at 1500. The German force retreated back to the safety of the Factory. Late in the afternoon of 12 September U.S. troops moved up again under a smoke screen fired by Company C, 2nd Chemical Battalion. Companies A and C, 191st Tank Battalion, spearheaded the advance toward the Factory at 1700. After clearing the factory grounds, the tanks pushed on into the woods at the northeast end of the Tobacco Factory swell and withdrew at 1830. They left the 1st Battalion/157th Infantry in command of the area from the factory to the road junction in the Grataglia.



Black Monday

SEPTEMBER 13, 1943

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meaningful gains for the British in that sector. To the east, elements of the 201st Guards Brigade/56th Infantry Division attempted to capture the Battipaglia Tobacco Factory, a large depot for agricultural goods consisting of heavy buildings surrounded by an eight foot spiked iron railing and held by a battalion from the 64th Panzergrenadier/16th Panzer Division. Advancing behind a divisional artillery barrage, the Scot Guards were able to reach and enter the factory but were unable to sustain their attack due to a lack of available reserves to commit to the action.

A series of German counterattacks, beginning on the 12th of September, seriously threatened the Allied beachhead. During the night, elements of the 29th Panzergrenadier Regiment infiltrated through the overstretched lines of 1st Battalion/142nd Infantry Regiment holding Hill 424 near Altavilla. At daybreak on the 12th, 2nd Battalion/15th Panzergrenadier Regiment started firing on the U.S. troops from all directions while massive concentrations of artillery pounded the American positions. All this was too much for the 2nd Battalion, which abandoned Hill 424 and Altavilla that afternoon after suffering severe losses. Further north, in the 45th Infantry Division's sector, the German reinforcements stopped any further advance towards Eboli by the 179th Infantry Regiment. A force of panzergrenadiers reinforced by several tanks forced the 1st Battalion/157th Infantry, holding the Persano Tobacco Factory, out this position. In the X Corps sector, counterattacks launched by elements of the Hermann Goering, 16th Panzer, and 15th Panzer Grenadier Divisions kept the British 46th and 56th Divisions in check.

The German 10th Army commander perceived that a gap existed between the Allied beachheads at the corridor formed by the Sele and Calore rivers, leading him to believe that the Allies were preparing to abandon one or both of their beachheads. German forces launched a series of strong counterattacks in order to capture or destroy as many Allied units as possible before they could complete their evacuation. On September 13th, a German force comprising two separate *kampfgruppen*, the Kruger Battle Group formed around the 1st Battalion/71st Panzergrenadier Regiment of the 29th Panzergrenadier Division, and the Kliene Limburg Battle Group, formed around the 16th Panzer Division's engineer battalion, attacked the Sele-Calore corridor. First to meet this German thrust was the 1st Battalion/157th Infantry Regiment, holding Persano. After overrunning this unit, the two columns crossed the Sele River and assaulted 2nd Battalion/143rd Infantry Regiment, nearly annihilating it. By late in the afternoon the combined German battle group was poised to drive towards the American beachhead. All that was present to stop them were two American artillery battalions firing over open sights, a force of infantry culled from artillery crews and rear area personnel, a platoon of obsolete 37mm anti-tank guns, and a handful of tanks and tank destroyers. Together with naval gunfire, this scratch force was just able to turn back the German thrust.

Reacting to the German attacks of the 12th and 13th, the 5th Army headquarters staff started preparing contingency plans to evacuate either one of the Allied corps and use those forces to reinforce the other corps. The Allied naval command was steadfastly opposed to any evacuation attempt, arguing that German artillery fire combined with infantry-tank attacks would decimate any force attempting to re-embark. These objections deterred General Clark's staff from proceeding with their evacuation plans. Hedging his bets, General Clark realized that infantry reinforcements were desperately needed to the keep the

Allied beachhead intact and called for elements of the 82nd Airborne, stationed in Sicily, to be airdropped behind the Allied front line on the night of September 13th/14th. Simultaneously, the U.S. 36th Division was ordered to shorten its lines by pulling back approximately two miles and digging in, fortifying their positions with mines and wire. Two battalions of the 82nd Airborne were successfully dropped shortly before midnight on the 13th and transported by truck to their positions in the front line. Six more battalions of the 82nd Airborne would be airdropped the following night while the division's glider regiment and the 45th Infantry Division's 180th Regiment were scheduled to arrive by ship the same night.

Additional Allied reinforcements came in the form of the British battleships H.M.S. *Warspite* and H.M.S. *Valiant*, arriving in the Gulf of Salerno on night of September 13th/14th as well as the British cruisers *Aurora* and *Penelope*, arriving offshore on the 14th. Allied naval reinforcements were sorely needed due to incessant attacks by the *Luftwaffe*. At the time of the landings, the *Luftwaffe* had just made operational two types of radio-controlled guided missiles, the Hs-293 and the FX1400. They were launched primarily by Dornier Do217E-5 bombers from a standoff range of from 3 to 8 miles with top speeds ranging from 570-670 M.P.H. They wreaked an impressive amount of damage on the Allied fleet. These new weapons seriously damaged the cruisers H.M.S. *Uganda*, U.S.S. *Philadelphia*, and U.S.S. *Savannah*. Although the U.S.S. *Philadelphia* was able to stay in the fight, both the H.M.S. *Uganda* and U.S.S. *Savannah* had to be towed to Malta for extensive repairs. Although they wouldn't be ready for fire missions before early afternoon on the 15th, just the presence of the British battleships, with their broadside of eight fifteen inch guns, boosted morale to those troops ashore. The commitment of Allied airpower was also increased. Heavy and medium bombers of the Mediterranean Air Command were diverted from strategic bombing missions to interdiction missions attacking German supply and reinforcement routes leading to the beachhead as well as troop concentrations.

Combinations of naval gunfire support, close air support, and reorganized and reinforced infantry formations stopped German attacks on the 14th cold, inflicting heavy losses in both men and material. The first elements of the British 7th Armored Division arrived onshore as well the 180th Infantry Regiment, which was kept in army reserve. That night, 2100 paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne jumped onto the beachhead, further bolstering the Allied commander's confidence that the beachhead would hold until the linkup with British 8th Army. Realizing that his best chance to destroy the Allied beachhead had come and gone, von Vietinghoff requested permission to break off the attack and assume a defensive posture. On the 15th, all attacks against the U.S. 6th Corps were cancelled with both 16th Panzer and 29th Panzergrenadier Divisions going on the defense.

One last attack would be launched in the British 10th Corps sector against the 46th Infantry Division and the left flank of the 56th Infantry Division by elements of the Hermann Goering and 15th Panzergrenadier Divisions. The German objective was no less than the capture of the port of Salerno. Group Schmalz, organized into two separate *kampfgruppen*, was to make the main effort. The infantry *kampfgruppe* of Group Schmalz, consisting of the first and second battalions of the 129th Panzergrenadier Regiment, launched its attack on the right flank of the British 46th Infantry Division. The armored *kampfgruppe* was to attack south from the vicinity of San Cipriano, break

through the left flank of the British 56th Infantry Division, and link up with a thrust by the 26th Panzer Division from the southeast. The infantry contingent of Group Schmalz was able to dislodge elements of the 128th Brigade from hilltop positions northeast of Salerno, but this success was short lived. Once again, the 41st Royal Commando and 2nd Commando regiments were pulled out of reserve and used to counterattack, recapturing the lost positions and inflicting serious losses on the panzergrenadiers. To the east, the armored *kampfgruppe*, consisting of the third battalion of the 129th Panzergrenadier Regiment mounted on tanks of the Herman Goering Panzer Regiment, moved south from Pezzano and were soon engaged by a reconnaissance squadron, a battery of 6-lbr anti-tank guns, a battalion of infantry, and a squadron of Shermans from the 40th Royal Tank Regiment. This *kampfgruppe* was less successful than Schmalz's other unit, incurring heavy casualties with nothing to show in return. The 26th Panzer Division's drive never got underway, sealing the fate of von Vietinghoff's last chance to disrupt the Allied beachhead.

Additional Allied reinforcements arrived on the 15th. The 82nd Airborne's 325th Glider Regiment arrived via landing craft and was immediately placed in the front line. In the British sector, the balance of the 7th Armored Division landed, providing the Fifth Army with a fully rested and powerful mobile striking force. Although German attacks continued on the 16th, no serious threat to the Allied beachhead materialized. All units of the Vietinghoff's 10th Army went over to the defense late on the 16th. That same day, U.S reconnaissance troops made contact with forward elements of the British 8th Army south of Agropoli, heralding the link up of the two Allied armies. The first few days of the landings went according to the Allied plans, with only scattered but growing opposition impeding their advance. However, for two days, September 12th and 13th, the preservation of the Allied beachhead at Salerno was in serious doubt. The rate of German reinforcements arriving at the beachhead far outstripped those the Allies could put ashore until September 14th, when a combination of Allied reinforcements, increased Allied air effort, and naval reinforcements redressed the balance.

In several instances, Allied naval gunfire was crucial in turning back several German attacks. Allied fighters and bombers mercilessly bombed German troop concentrations and supply lines, delaying and weakening many German assaults. But, for

the most part, it was the Allied soldier, grimly holding on in the face of determined German combined arms attacks, which saved the Salerno beachhead.

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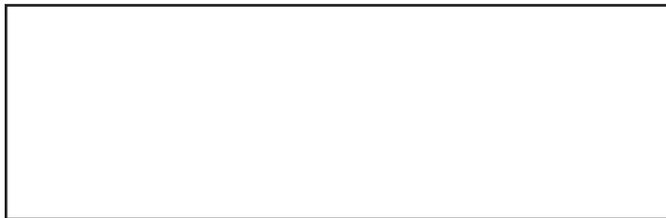
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