

Termoli, Italy – 1943

On the third of October 1943 I was with No. 3 Commando for the assault on the town of Termoli. This was to be the last engagement for No. 3 as after this action they returned to the UK, their numbers sadly depleted, to reform for the coming second front. It was also the battle in which their C.O. Colonel Durnford-Slater, recorded saying it was the battle that at one time he thought we would lose.

Termoli, is a small eastern coastal town on the Adriatic, north of Bari. The 78th division, 8th Army, was pushing the Germans north but they were forming a defence line, using natural sources, north of the river Biferno some two miles south of Termoli. The plan was for our force of 1000 to land on their flank and to their rear which would require them to pull back. Three commando was to go in the first to form the bridgehead for the main force to pass through and take the town. We landed in the early hours of the morning and the Germans had no idea of our presence. With not a shot fired the main force landed and passed through our lines. Many of the Germans were still sleeping when attacked. By early morning the town was in our hands and various defence positions around the town were made.

For a couple of days all was calm with infantry from the 78th division gradually coming through. Engineers were working hard to repair destroyed bridges to enable tanks and heavy equipment to cross the river. Our calm was suddenly shattered when the German 26th Panzer division came from inland to retake the town. Prior to this we were about to rejoin our LCL's [landing craft], to be on call again, and leave the town to the 78th division. Instead 3 Commando found itself in an olive grove about two miles southwest of the town. We were ordered to hold out as long as possible to enable troops to reform in and around the town. The German attack with their tanks had forced several infantry units back to the town. In the olive grove - which looked down on open fields that sloped away from us making an incline for attackers - besides No. 3 were a few men from the Argylls, a troop of SRS, and a machine gun unit that had all chosen to stay and assist. There had been an antitank unit in the grove but when a German tank knocked out one of their guns they withdrew having immobilised their guns.

All that afternoon we were under constant attack with their infantry taking cover from tanks until a final rush at our position. The tanks had been aware of the antitank guns so would not come too close. These attacks were repulsed time and time again. Whether the lower positions the Germans had to fire from was the cause I don't know, but it had the effect of causing their fire to pass over our heads. The trees took a bashing from the tank fire and I remember one right behind me suddenly being snapped in half from a hit. Nightfall brought an uneasy peace with everybody alert. Next morning the same format occurred and messages from the town kept asking us to hold on. The morning saw the addition of some plane sorties, three planes at a time at tree height straight across the grove with the machine guns strafing and each dropping two bombs. I was at a loss to know whether they were ours engaging Jerry, not far from our single line, or theirs having difficulty at such a small unseen target. Either way it was for a bit too close for comfort.

The day continued in the same way but by now the Germans were easing frontal attack and were passing our flanks heading for town. During the night we were told to leave and pull back to town and about 2 a.m. we formed a single line and made it back. There at HQ I was told to find a hole and have a rest. I did and went into an exhausted sleep, unaware of a fierce battle that raged and ended with the Germans forced to retreat. We finally left Termoli on 12th October, 1943.

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