

Free France

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FRANCE AT WAR

I. FRENCH VICTORIES ON THE ITALIAN FRONT

Allied Communiqués

The French troops commanded by General Alphonse Juin, Chief of the Expeditionary Corps, are part of the American Fifth Army, commanded by General Clark. They were holding their lines in particularly difficult mountain positions, in the Cassino sector and at Anzio. The night of March 11, a communiqué from Naples reported that the American Fifth Army, and the British Eighth Army had attacked the Gustav Line, and that they were making progress along the whole front. On May 14, they were still continuing their advance, in spite of stiff German resistance. On May 15, 16 and 17, communiqués from Naples mentioned the success of the French troops in the following words:

(A. P.) Naples, May 15 — More progress has been made by the Allied armies in Italy in their attack on the Gustav Line. Eighth Army troops in the Liri Valley have penetrated deeper into defenses, overcoming fierce resistance in many places, and mopping up enemy strong points which had been by-passed in the first twenty-four hours.

French troops of the Fifth Army, after capturing the predominating mountain, Mount Maio, an important bastion in the enemy defense lines, have been quick to exploit their success. Pressing forward in the mountains with infantry and tanks, they captured more hill features and the villages of San Ambrogio, Vollemato and Ansonia. Thus, a significant breach has been made in the Gustav Line. Enemy strong points have been by-passed and mopping-up continues.

American troops have also advanced and cut the Ansonia-Formia road . . .

(NEW YORK TIMES, May 16, 1944)

(U. P.) Naples, May 16 — ". . . while the Eighth Army's bridgehead over the Rapido in the Liri Valley has again been expanded and more strong points have

been taken, French troops of the Fifth Army have made further advances in the mountains in the South. All German resistance now has ceased up to the road which runs north-south through Ansonia. American troops also have advanced and have taken the town of Spigno, which is west of the road."

(NEW YORK TIMES, May 17, 1944)

(U. P.) Naples, May 17 — The battle for the Gustav Line continues without pause . . . South of the Liri River, all positions of the Gustav Line have been overrun. French and American troops of the Fifth Army continue to fight their way forward to gain contact with the Adolf Hitler Line . . .

(NEW YORK TIMES, May 17, 1944)

(A. P.) Naples, May 19 — Following the capture of Cassino the Eighth Army has been quick to exploit its success and has pressed the enemy vigorously back against the Adolf Hitler Line. French and American troops of the Fifth Army have continued their drive across the mountains south of the Liri River and are now in contact with the enemy on hill features which constitute the southern bastions of the line. On the coast Americans have captured the town of Formia.

(NEW YORK TIMES, May 20, 1944)

The Task Assigned the French Troops

From the Military Commentator of "France-Afrique," Alger, May 16 — The main lines of the action started against the Gustav Line begin to be clear. In the north, the Cassino section, the Eighth Army has crossed the Rapido and is making progress along the west bank of the river, where the town of San Angelo has been occupied. In the center, the French troops are concentrating their attack on the massif south of the confluence of the Liri and Garigliano rivers. And at the extreme end, near the shore of the Tyrrhenian Sea, American troops are engaged in an operation which seems to be developed parallel to the coast line.

Up to now, the honor of having made the widest

and deepest breach in the enemy defense positions goes to the French troops, who are a part of the Fifth Army. The capture of Mount Faito and Mount Maio has given them the northern slopes of the mountainous massif which walls in the Liri Valley. During fighting on May 15, a number of fortified heights fell into our hands, in particular, Mount Rinchiuso, the Agrifoglio Hill, and, at the end of the day, Mount Castellone, which dominates the village of San Giorgio, an important key position in the Liri Valley. Our troops are now forming a spearhead, the extreme point of their advance cutting Ansonia, a strategic highway which runs parallel to the front, and joins Cassino to Formia on the Mediterranean. This road has also been cut further south, in the Santa Maria Infante sector, by American troops who are advancing in the direction of Spigno, after having occupied San Pietro. The other sectors of the Italian front are quiet. However, it is reported that an enemy patrol, composed of about one company, had penetrated a little way into the Eighth Army lines in the Orsonia region. It was immediately counter-attacked.

(Commissioner of Information, Alger, May 16, 1944)

From Charles Farrel, War Correspondent for "France-Afrique" — The task assigned to the French troops as part of the general fighting plan, was not the easiest one. The sector assigned to us, and which we occupied some week ago without the Germans noticing our movements, included the bridgehead at the lower loop of the Garigliano River, and ended in the north at the confluence of the Liri and the Rapido. As a moveable pivot of the attack, we had first to cut through to the west, and then go down to the south. The terrain we had to conquer was very hard going. These heights and these villages form strategic key positions which the Germans had made every effort to render impregnable: mine-fields, blockhouses, barbed wire were set up across places where infiltration might be possible, and special troops had been sent up quite recently to hold them. The success of our arms depended, — as the commentator from headquarters had explained before the attack — on the unexpectedness, the violence, and the speed of our assault. The Germans were certainly expecting an offensive on the Italian front, but it is also certain that there had been no leakage of information about the sector chosen for it, and they did not know when the signal for attack would be given. This knowledge was our trump card.

Indeed, for the first time, breaking all army traditions, it had been decided that the attack would take place at 11 o'clock at night, and that it would not only be a night raid, limited to the first line of the enemy's defense, but, on the contrary, a general dash forward, kept up until its success had been completely and quickly exploited. There was to be no artillery preparation. "The moment firing begins, from Cassino

to the sea," — said the commentator from headquarters — "the infantry will attack." Finally — last break with tradition — at daybreak the Air Force would not support the attacking troops. It would only be ordered to isolate the battlefield, to turn it into an immense island, by cutting off communications from the rear. A stubborn resistance had been expected, and the fighting was savage, but the Moroccan troops, who were given the worst task, had seized their first objectives in the morning. The Faito was captured, the edge of Castelforte, and the foot of Mount Maio had been reached. A dense fog which only lifted at 10 in the morning, covered the valleys with a thick, dust-absorbing curtain. It was time to make the best of our gains and go on to a tougher job. The tanks came into action, forging ahead toward San Ambrogio. They were met by a wall of fire which forced them to stop, and they had also to repulse and intercept a counter-attack by German tanks.

Accordingly, the Command judged that it would be wiser not to attack the Castelforte front, and to halt the infantry on the outskirts of the village. The decision was also made to give our troops a breathing space before storming Mount Maio. These two places were our immediate objectives.

In the evening, after the first 48 hours' fighting in all the Allied sectors of the attack, the old expression, "our fondest dreams may come true," became reality. Notable successes had been gained. Fortified towns and important heights had been captured by troops who were determined to get the job done and to push ahead. The desperate resistance offered by the Germans is very revealing. It proves that the Gustav Line is the backbone of the enemy's plan of defense, and that victory will be in sight once this line is passed.

(Commissioner of Information, Alger, May 17, 1944)

From Glen Perry — There is real jubilation in Washington today over the showing made by French troops in the battle south of Rome. The struggle, not so much for territory as for the destruction of more than twenty German divisions in Italy, has thus far been highlighted by the work done by Gen. Alphonse Juin's troops. This resurgence of the Tricolor in major operations will, it is believed here, stir the hearts of Frenchmen everywhere. It was nearly four years ago that the French Army crumpled before the Nazi blitz. In the days that followed it seemed that France was finished as a first-rate nation.

Now Washington finds reason to believe that France is on the road back. News of what is happening in Italy will hardly be disseminated in France by the Germans, or by the Vichy Government, but it will spread across the nation, none the less. And when it does, observers here are convinced, it will fan fires of resistance that the Nazis have sought to extinguish. Washington believes the blaze will become a holocaust when Allied troops storm France . . .

French troops have played a heroic part in earlier fighting in the Mediterranean theater. At Bir Hacheim their fight contributed much to the ultimate stopping of Marshal Rommel's Afrika Korps. They were in the final push that cracked German last-ditch opposition in Tunisia. But there is a significant difference now, for this fighting is on European soil. It is against positions ideal for defense . . .

(NEW YORK SUN, May 16, 1944)

From A. C. Sedgwick, Naples, May 16 — French troops, continuing their advance along the upper Garigliano sector, reported the "disorganization of the German 71st Infantry Division." They have virtually destroyed the 131st Infantry Regiment of the 44th Division and captured the commander of the 194th Grenadier Regiment and the whole regimental headquarters, which, according to plan, they had by-passed in their drive through the mountains. From the fact that the headquarters of both battalions of the 194th Grenadiers had been overrun earlier in the battle and both the commanders had been seized, it may be presumed that this distinguished regiment is now useless.

Yesterday the French captured San Giorgio, in the Liri Valley, Cresta Santa Lucia, Le Forche, Casale, Annunziata and Castelnovo. The last two are between Ansonia and San Giorgio. The French cut the road from San Giorgio to the northwest. Other French elements pushed on to Mount Fammera, gaining the advantage of high ground in the region west of Ansonia, and occupied Mount Castello and points between. The Germans lodged on the high ground west of the Fifth Army's front are now dependent on mountain trails . . .

(NEW YORK TIMES, May 17, 1944)

General Clark Congratulates the French Troops

Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark sent a message of congratulation to General Juin, who commands the French Expeditionary Corps in Italy:

I send you my sincere congratulations on the performance of your troops since we launched our present offensive. The occupation by a French unit of the height mentioned in the last Allied communiqué is of immense importance for the Fifth Army's offensive.

I know that you will continue to press forward, during this phase of the campaign, aiming at the destruction of our common enemy and the final liberation of France. I know that you are looking forward with eagerness to the moment when the French Army will set foot on the sacred soil of the homeland. You are proving to France, — impatiently waiting, — that the French Army has recovered its most splendid fighting traditions. I am honored to have your troops under my command in the Fifth Army.

(Commissioner of Information, Alger, May 18, 1944)

General Juin's Order of the Day to His Troops

After two days of battle, in spite of fierce resistance

from positions which he believed to be impregnable, the enemy is in disorderly retreat. Considerable ground has been gained. One position of major importance, the Mount Maio, is in our hands. More than 1,000 prisoners, among them 18 officers, have been taken. Our advance continues. I ask you all to redouble the strength of your efforts. Yesterday's splendid success is a pledge of to-morrow's victory. Forward!

(Commissioner of Information, Alger, May 14, 1944)

II. VICTORIES AT SEA

Off the African Coast

Communiqué from the Office of the Commissioner of Air — On May 4, in the evening, a French combat plane brought down a Focke-Wulf-190 after a desperate fight which took place almost at sea level. The winning pilot belongs to a French fighter group which, since this recent engagement, has 11 similar victories to his credit.

(Commissioner of Information, Alger, May 6, 1944)

Attack on an Enemy Convoy in the English Channel

Light French coastal units intercepted and attacked a heavily escorted German convoy in the English Channel, the British Admiralty reports. Two of the escort vessels were probably sunk and several others were damaged by fire from the French.

Under command of the British Admiralty, French Naval Forces are operating in the North Sea as well as in the Channel. An Earlier British communiqué reported a skirmish last week between the "H.M.S. Raleigh" of the British Navy, and "La Combattante," a French ship, and several German destroyers. "La Combattante," already becoming a legend, has escorted more than 100 convoys since the end of 1942.

(Commissioner of Information, Alger, May 12, 1944)

Defense of an Allied Convoy in the Western Mediterranean

During an attack on an Allied convoy in the Western Mediterranean, by a formation of 25 to 30 German planes which came over in two successive waves, five enemy machines were destroyed by pursuit planes belonging to the Allied Coastal Command who lost only one of their own machines.

British "Beaufighters" and "Mosquitoes" shared this success with French "Aircobras."

(Commissioner of Information, Alger, May 13, 1944)

The Corvette "Lobelia" Receives the Croix de Guerre

On May 8, 1944, the French corvette "Lobelia," proudly flying a small Cross of Lorraine pennant, on the way to the Algiers naval station, on the right bank of the Mississippi, was decorated with the Croix de Guerre by Admiral Fenard, Head of the French Naval Mission in Washington. Admiral Andrew C. Bennett, commanding the naval district; Brigadier General O. I.