

PRIMOSOLE BRIDGE

During the night of the 13 July, 1943 part of the 1st Parachute Brigade was dropped in the area of the Primosole Bridge which stretches across the River Lentini in Sicily. It removed the demolition charges placed there, however, many of the troops had been dropped wide of the target and consequently only a small force was available to hold the bridge against repeated German attempts to recapture it. It was, therefore, essential for troops of the 50th Division to reach the Bridge sometime during the 14th or at latest by nightfall As 69 Brigade had so far borne the brunt of such fighting as there had been during the advance, 151 Brigade now took over from them. The three Battalions set out on a forced march of some 25 miles, the 9th Battalion leading, followed by the 8th and then the 6th. By afternoon the 9th Battalion was well over half way and by dusk, together with 4 Armoured Brigade, it was within a mile of the bridge.

The paratroopers had bad news to relate. All day they had fought back repeated counter-attacks with success, but at about 7.30 pm, just two hours before the arrival of the 9th Battalion, lack of ammunition had forced their sadly depleted force to withdraw in the face of another counter-attack. With demolition charges removed, of course, the bridge could not be blown and the paratroopers were near enough to prevent the enemy planting any more. But the Battalions of the 151 Brigade were too tired after their forced march to fight a battle that night and the Brigadier decided to postpone any such attack until the following morning. It was not the Italians with whom they would have to deal but Germans of the 3rd Parachute Regiment, most of whom were veterans of the Crete and Russian campaigns and all of whom had been flown from the Italian mainland only a short while before.

The country round about the Primosole Bridge is flat and open. The road running north from Lentini runs along the ridge and from about 1,000 yards south of the bridge a good view is obtainable not only of the bridge itself but also of the country beyond it. The bridge was four hundred feet long with a superstructure of iron girders about eight feet above a sluggish reed-bordered river. North of the bridge were two small farms, one each side of the road, each consisting of two or three buildings and a barn. The road beyond the bridge could be seen running absolutely straight, between two lines of poplars, towards Catania. North of the river are thick vineyards, dotted with olive groves, to a depth of some four hundred yards; beyond them lies open country. Nothing, however, could be seen of the enemy positions nor of a sunken road some few hundred yards north of the river; indeed such cover as there was lay all on the enemy side of the bridge for the British side was completely flat and open.

Both the 8th and 9th Battalions tried to snatch a few hours rest during the night. The 6th Battalion was still some way behind, after clearing up at Solarino, and did not arrive until later on the 15th. But at 4 a.m. the 9th was attacked by some Italian Armoured cars which penetrated as far as Battalion Headquarters before being halted. The Battalion anti-rank gunners quickly came into action and soon put an end to this desperate Italian bid from which there were few enemy survivors.

Sharp at 7.30 a.m. the 9th Battalion attacked as planned, supported by the fire of two Field Regiments. But the companies advancing over open ground were heavily machine-gunned before they reached the river bank and lost a number of men. Only a few platoons were able to cross the river and where they did so, ran into heavy resistance from Germans concealed in the vineyards and lining the sunken road which hitherto no one knew existed. Many were drowned in the river as they crossed. After fierce hand-to-hand fighting the Battalion's precarious hold north of the river was finally broken and those men who had gone across were driven back, leaving their dead and wounded behind them.

After this first encounter it was clear to the Brigadier that the bridge was a tougher nut to crack than had been hoped. Although a further attack by the 6th Battalion was planned for later in the day news had been received from Corps Headquarters that there was no immediate urgency for the capture of the bridge provided that a proper footing was secured on the far side by the 16 July. Another daylight attack would be suicidal; so the 8th Battalion's attack was postponed and timed to take place by the light of the moon at two o'clock the next morning.

The Battalion was fortunate in having the help of Lieutenant-Colonel Alastair Pearson - CO of the Parachute Regiment - in the operation. The information he provided was invaluable, and he offered to lead the attacking companies over the river at a crossing place he knew of, some hundred yards upstream from the bridge. Two companies were to cross here, then move back towards the bridge and when once they had captured it, the rest of the Battalion was to cross over it.

For an hour and twenty minutes before Colonel Pearson guided "A" and "D" Companies across the river the guns put down concentrations upstream of the bridge and a squadron of tanks and a platoon of machine-guns joined in the overture. For the last ten minutes every gun was concentrated on the area of the bridge. Then at 2.10 a.m. the two

companies waded the river at two points fifty yards apart. Once across, the thickly planted vineyards made movement difficult - it would have been difficult enough by daylight - and platoons had to shout their numbers to maintain contact. However, the unexpected form of attack took the Germans by surprise and when the companies reached the bridge only a few of them were encountered. So far so good, wrote David Rissik in his book "The DLI at War". Both companies established themselves across the Catania road, though "A" Company had to run the gauntlet of Spandau machine-gun fire to get there; and once in position visibility was limited to only a few yards due to the thickness of the vines, shrubs and tall grass for it was the middle of the growing season. Constant vigilance was needed to keep the Germans at bay.

Now it was the turn of the rest of the Battalion to cross the bridge. Colonel Lidwill, who was with the leading companies, had arranged a number of alternative signals for bringing up the Battalion; but when he got back to the bridge every one of them broke down. The mortar flares had got separated from the mortars; the wireless sets had got "drowned" during the crossing, and an R.E. Carrier with a wireless received a direct hit as it reached the bridge. Just at the critical moment, however, a War Office observer turned up at the bridge riding a bicycle. It was rather like a fairy tale but the C.O. dispatched him back to the Battalion to tell it to come forward at once.

Night fell and the Brigade prepared to deliver the coup de grace. Ibis was the task of the 6th and 9th Battalions who, shortly after 1.30 am, forded the river upstream from the bridge area where the 8th had crossed the night before. They had little difficulty in crossing; but once on the far bank they encountered savage resistance from the German paratrooper who stood and fought it out until they either shot down their assailants or were shot down themselves. Movement was not easy through the vineyards and companies got split up in the thick undergrowth. As they fought their way forward in the moonlight they cleared up opposition in their path but inevitably left pockets of resistance on their flanks. "B" Company of the 6th Battalion, under Captain Reggie Atkinson, had just such an experience. Once in the vineyards it met intense automatic fire from the Germans in the sunken road and cleared the Germans from it. Then they struggled on, using bayonets and grenades, to a position beyond it on the left of the Catania road. There, approximately one platoon strong and entrenched in a shallow ditch and a large shell crater, Reggie Atkinson and the remnants of his company were able to engage any Germans trying to advance up the road to reinforce the bridgehead and, what is more, to prevent any in the bridgehead from withdrawing from it. At dawn the Germans managed to infiltrate back into the sunken road and for a time they made things difficult for the Company; but for three and a half hours the enemy were kept at bay and finally driven back. This gallant action very materially influenced the course of the battle.

"A" Company of the 9th Battalion was less fortunate. It started out only two platoons strong and almost at once came under heavy fire. The advance was not made any easier by loose telephone and barbed wire lying among the vines; but the Company pushed on towards the main road and captured a machine-gun post and took three prisoners; by which time the Company Commander, Captain Hudson, found he had only fifteen men left.

Heavy fire was then opened on this small party from their rear. So they began to withdraw towards the main road. As it got lighter, fire was opened on them from the road itself, but Hudson, recognising the Commander of another Company advancing on the far side of the road, managed to attract his attention and signal to him to attack the post on the road. This they both did but were halted by very heavy fire. Hudson then found himself both short of ammunition and with only seven unwounded men left so he ordered them to make their way back to the Battalion as best they could. He himself was wounded and was soon afterwards taken prisoner.

At about 6 a.m. the Germans counter-attacked with tanks, but the attack was broken up by shell-fire; and shortly afterwards both the 6th and 9th Battalions reported they were well beyond the bridge. At 7 a.m. some Sherman tanks crossed into the bridgehead and broke through the grapevines shooting at everything in sight. The effect of this added support was felt at once. The sunken road was quieter than for 24 hours and gradually white handkerchiefs began to appear in increasing numbers along the length of it. The Germans had had enough. By mid-day all resistance had ceased; over 150 Germans had surrendered; and their dead on the ground numbered over three hundred. The area around the bridge was a regular hell's kitchen; it was littered with smashed rifles and automatics, torn pieces of equipment, bloodstained clothing, overturned ammunition boxes and the bodies of British and German dead. It was a scene of terrible destruction and telling evidence of a bitter struggle in which neither side had asked or given quarter. There can have been few better German troops in Sicily than those who held the bridge. They were Nazi zealots to a man, but they fought superbly well and as their Battalion Commander was led away to captivity, Colonel Clarke of the 9th Battalion quietly shook him by the hand.

Apart from the British paratroopers the brunt of the fighting had fallen on the 8th Battalion who owed much to the conspicuous leadership of their C.O., Colonel Lidwill, and to the countless deeds of individual heroism that occurred

over the period of the battle. But when at the end of the fighting the three DLI Battalions counted their casualties they had lost between them five hundred killed, wounded and missing.

Six regiments were awarded the Honour which the Durhams, Parachute Regiment and the London Scottish elected to carry.