

Report on Operation "DECOMPOSE II"
1st - 3rd August 1944
TOP SECRET

(Ref Maps 1/25,000 Sheets 124 I NW/BIS and 124 IV NE/BIS.)

1. INTRODUCTORY.

The importance to the enemy of KORKULA and OREBIC lies on their position either side of the narrow channel between the PELJESAC peninsula and the island of KORCULA.

All enemy sea-borne traffic must pass through this channel or face the open waters to the west of these islands and the certainty of being spotted by our aircraft when daylight breaks.

The strength of the German Garrison in of OREBIC fluctuates between 500 and 1200 depending on whether a "drive" in PELJESAC or KORCULA Island is contemplated.

Accommodation for temporary residents is provided at the "Football Ground" transit camp.

KORCULA has a good harbour at US Bay (5687) which is used as a staging post for shipping.

There are dumps and installations and both sides of the straits are commanded by guns and strong AA defences.

The garrison of KORCULA, which remains a fairly constant 400 strong, is sitting on hills commanding the town and US Bay.

POSTRANA is a small Garrison of 1 Company outside the village of that name (5385) and is a half-way point on the road between KORCULA and PUPNAT, the largest and most westerly Garrison on the island of KORCULA.

The positions at both KORCULA and POSTRANA are bunkered and protected by wire and mine. The defences of OREBIC are less advanced.

The Garrisons, together with the dumps, installations and shipping in US bay present a tempting artillery target and several plans had already been considered to deal with it.

2. OBJECT.

As stated in the "Intention" para of the Operation Order the object was:-

To cause casualties and damage and reduce the morale of the Garrisons of OREBIC (5990), KORCULA (5588) and POSTRANA (5385)

3. PLAN

Briefly to land a Bty of 25pdrs in the LUMBARDA Area during darkness and with OPs previously positioned and intercommunication by wireless to shoot up the three Garrisons at first light.

To re-embark and withdraw by daylight after about 3hrs shooting. Much of the Detail is contained in the Operation Order which was strictly conformed to (Appendix I to this report).

4. REECES

The plan was based on information from the sources as stated in Paragraph 1 of the Operation Order.

Reeces were carried out:-

- a. By Lieutenant Colonel J. S. Elliot: Tgt areas of KORCULA and POSTRANA - 11 to 17 July
- b. By Lieutenant A. G. A. Owen (211 Bty): Gun positions in LUMBARDA 5884 and PRZINA Bay 6083 and the 100 M feature to the east for a HQ and to BADIJA Island 5787 for an OP covering OREBIC and KORCULA from the East - 18 to 23 July.
- c. By Lieutenant M. A. L. Cole (2 Bn, HLI): For infantry positions covering gun positions in the LUMBARDA Area (accompanied Lieutenant Owen in the first part of his reece.) - 18 to 22 July.
- d. By Lieutenant J. Leeming with Naval Beach and RE reece parties to reece for alternative gun positions in Area 5682 and to take soundings of the Beach - 23 to 24 July.
- e. By Major P. S. Turner (Commander 211 Bty) for OPs covering KORCULA from the west and POSTRANA - 18 to 27 July.

In the original plan it had been considered that the Target Areas could be sufficiently covered by OPs at 5487, 5787, with the covering force on

the high ground about 574842, and on the 100 M Ring Contour in 6083. None of these, however, due to the high ground that encloses US Bay (5687) to the East, South and West could see into the Bay itself and the shipping which might be lurking there.

At the request of Lieutenant Commander Giles, without whose enthusiastic and unfailing collaboration the operation could not have been possible, it was decided to send an additional OP to the Area about 560917. This Area had already been reeced by Lieutenant Colonel J. S. Elliot and on two occasions by Lieutenant J. A. R. Barnes (212 Bty) in connection with a previous project, and was well known.

The reeces were carried out in close collaboration with Partisans who could not have been more helpful. A great deal of most valuable information was obtained.

5. OP AREAS

As a result of these reeces it was decided to establish OPs as follows:-

- "X" OP. Major P. S. Turner and 5 ORs - 453880 - covering KORCULA Defences from the West. By moving SW to the 200 M contour in 5387, a good view of POSTRANA could be obtained.
- "A" OP. Captain A. L. McTiffin and 4 ORs - 576880 Main OP covering OREBIC Area. 57458800. Subsidiary OP manned by OPA covering KORCULA defences from the East.
- "Q" OP. Lieutenant J. A. R. Barnes and 2 ORs (all of 212 Bty) 56169168 - covering US Bay and obtaining most perfect "bird's eye" view of the KORCULA town defences.
- "B" OP (Partisan LO and OP). Captain J. L. Hart and 4 ORs (211 Bty) covering POSTRANA from the East and KORCULA from the South.
- "L" OP (Local OP and Force HQ). Lieutenant-Colonel J. S. Elliot, Lieutenant G. Harris, wireless and line signallers, RAF Fighter Controller and Party, Naval Liaison Officer and signal personnel. Lieutenant-Colonel J. R. Blagden from 64 HAA Regt accompanied Force HQ. Good general view of all Target Areas.

From these five OPs there was hardly a bit of enemy territory which was dead to observation with the exception of about 50 yards of coastline in US Bay at 561877.

All OP Parties with the exception of "Q" carried 22 sets and 22 AH batteries, which in addition to arms, rations, water and basic equipment, works out at an overall load of over 60lbs per head, "Q" OP Party had particularly difficult ground to cover. They carried an 18 Set and three water bottles each.

6. GUN POSITION

The gun position was selected on the sandy part of the PRZINA Beach about 200 yards long.

Concealment and flash cover was afforded by the sandy neck of the Isthmus to the North. The track leading North was through a water course and is only a footpath.

The beach shelves gradually and it was estimated (and proved to be the case) that the RCLs and LCAs would beach about 30 yards from the shore in 2ft 6 inches of water.

Exercises by day and night were carried out on a sandy beach presenting conditions approximating very similar to the actual beach.

Trackways Mk 1 No 2, which had been previously indented for in anticipation of such conditions, were joined together in pairs to bridge the gap between the RCL ramp which was at water level, and the sea bed.

The guns were manhandled ashore and for re-embarking were winched onto the RCLs. As an alternative to RCL's hand winch, blocks and tackle were obtained and detachments were trained in their use.

Ammunition was carried or ferried ashore in British assault boats. Firing trials were carried out on a sand beach on ordinary platform, on Army track and on a wooden platform built by the Sappers. The wooden platform of 2" Class II timber made into 7' square battened by 4" by 2" Grade II timber runners, was found to be the most satisfactory, and the Sappers made eight of these for us. They were floated ashore and proved very useful.

7. GUN DETACHMENTS

A word is due to the Detachments, who, landing in darkness, unloaded their guns into 2' 6" of water, manhandled through 30 yards of water, returning to carry nearly 50 tons of ammunition ashore. The work was done in silence and in a most orderly manner. Later, the guns were served magnificently and finally re-embarked, again through water, and all surplus ammunition reloaded, including every empty box and cartridge case. Marks of the gun platforms were obliterated and the beach, excepting for footmarks, was left exactly as it was found.

The gunners had been warned that the German guns would out-number us and it would be a question of who were the better gunners. The answer did not remain in doubt for long.

8. FIRE CONTROL

See "Arty Policy" para of operation order (para 14).

Guns, OPs and Force HQ were on one net.

The problem was to obtain the maximum effect on a large number of targets in a short space of time.

To this end:-

- a. It was decided to standardise bursts of fire.
Targets were engaged with standard concentrations of 3 minutes from all guns i.e. 72 Rounds for each burst.
- b. As targets were for the most part pin-points, it was decided to fire with lines of concentrated and to cover the target by the zone of the gun and switches by OPs during fore for effect.
- c. As Targets were in three distinct groups, it was decided to register early one Datum point in each group and from previously recorded gun data to obtain maximum surprise effect on each target by bringing a full concentration straight down on it and switching from Group to Group. By this means much time spent on ranging was eliminated.
An exercise in the Datum Point method of engagement was carried out and the method was found most effective. In the actual shooting it was found that in some cases the concentrations fell wide of the mark but near enough for a quick correction to put them right.

A postmortem carried out ascribed causes of inaccuracy to the following:-

- a. Absence of Aiming Point at longer range than 500 yards.
- b. Inaccuracies in the Map. The Beach line is not accurately marked at the Point and there are flagrant inaccuracies in the positions of Houses, Roads, etc.
- c. Possible error in fixation of Pivot Gun during darkness.
- d. Very rapid variation in atmospheric conditions between 05:00hrs and 09:00hrs.
- e. Shifting platforms - In the soft sand it was found even with the wooden platforms that the whole gun in some cases crept by as much as 3 or 4 yards.

9. FIRE DISCIPLINE AND RESPONSE

A very great deal of preliminary work had been done at Command Post. Guns were in one line together on the beach and were treated as a troop of eight guns for all instrumental and technical purposes. Troop command posts were connected by telephone but used only to pass fire orders.

The Command Post work and response of the guns was quick and showed no signs whatever of flagging. Barring two guns which were out for short periods due to shifting platforms all guns were in action throughout. There were no delays due to equipment. The appetite for the guns was almost embarrassing. At one period when a short pause between targets was allowed, a peremptory message from the Command Post was received demanding another target.

The division of duties between Command Post and personnel was that the CPO, Lieutenant Owen, who was also "Forward Agent" at LAGOSTA and had carried out the preliminary reece of the gun position, left VIS some days ahead of the guns and landed on the beach 24hrs ahead of them.

The preparation of target records and the gun programmes was carried out by the ACPO, Lieutenant J. K. D. Lacey and his Command Post personnel. The ACPO and Troop GPOs landed with the Partisan covering force about 1 hour ahead of the guns.

10. COVERING FORCE

Protection was to have been found by 2nd Highland Light Infantry (HLI) but there were unable to take part and Commander XXVI Division NOVJ stepped into the breach and made available a Battalion of 1st (Assault) Brigade. Lieutenant Cole who carried out the preliminary reece for a covering position accompanied the Partisan covering force and Captain Hart also accompanied as Liaison Officer and Representative of Force HQ.

Major Bogdan Stupar (the Brigade Commander) himself commanded the Partisan Forces.

Once ashore, the Partisan force (who wore rubber tyre soled shoes) moved with great speed and were soon in position and well concealed. Their system of intercommunication by runner was very efficient, and when ordered to withdraw they pulled out quickly and unobtrusively.

11. AA PROTECTION

AA Protection was provided by three sections of "C" Bty RSR commanded by Captain Bocquet. The nine .5" Brownings were distributed amongst the RCLs and LCAs on their AA mountings. Captain Bocquet complained of the difficulty experienced in moving the present very cumbersome type of mounting and getting it into position in bad country. Unless the difficulty can be overcome and the time of getting into action substantially reduced it is considered that the present equipment is unsuitable in its dual purpose role for supporting land operations. It is strongly recommended that a light mounting be provided.

12. DIVERSIONS

At the suggestion of Lieutenant-Commander Giles, RN, one of the LCI's is decorated to resemble a destroyer by the addition of a dummy funnel, an enormous "gun" forward and a beautiful bow wave. The Sappers carried out the re-fitting. 2 75mms with detachments and dummy charges and a wireless party with a 22 Set were provided by 212 Bty, with an officer in charge. By wireless the dummy gun flashes were synchronised to the fire of the real guns, and whilst no reflection is intended against the designers and re-fitters, a considerable effort of imagination was needed to complete the illusion. Handsome, however, is as handsome does, and so long as the ammunition supply held out the

“destroyer” was completely effecting and in the early stages, whilst the German gunners still had the will to resist, it drew to itself the bulk of the enemy’s retaliation.

The Highland Light Infantry landed a section of carriers at BRNA (3381) and created a diversion in the PUPNAT Area by flares and small arms fire on D Day.

13. NAVAL COOPERATION

In making beach reeces, in landing Army reece parties, in providing craft for practices and in the admirable Naval arrangements and protection during the operation itself, the Navy could not have possibly been more helpful.

14. RAF

The Air Force requirements set out in Para 17 of the operation order were fully satisfied and even exceeded. Close liaison with Wing Commander Bartlett and Captain Wardle was maintained and as complete information for briefing the pilots as possible was supplied before departure.

The RAF wireless set at force HQ worked well and was in continuous touch with the aircraft at LUMBARDA and during withdrawal. Smoke was used as a means of indication of targets to RAF and worked well.

15. ROYAL ENGINEERS

Reference has already been made to the assistance given by RE in providing platforms, and decorating the “destroyer”. In addition much valuable advice and instruction was given.

16. PROGRESS OF SHOOTING

Firing opened at 05:23hrs, eight minutes late due to Zero Lines being recorded in daylight. The programme opened with a concentration on the “Football Field” Camp at OREBIC, which, with a small alteration to line was effective. Datum, Point “O” as then registered. As this was in

progress, guns at 586907 opened up. Counter measures were delayed until registration of the Datum Point was completed; then the guns were temporarily silenced and recorded as 0.32.

Datum Point "K", the "Martello Tower" was then engaged. About this time guns at 561878 opened up. On completion of registration of "K" these guns were engaged and silenced. Guns at 587906 were then engaged and recorded as 0.33. The programme was then resumed. At intervals during the first hour's shooting enemy guns opened fire. Their shooting caused little inconvenience and was either directed against the "destroyer" or was wide of the gun area. In each occasion they were quickly silenced and in the case of the OREBIC guns they were caught in a concentration while actually firing. There can be little doubt that casualties and damage were caused to these guns and detachments. All that can be said for certain is that an ammunition dump was blown up and continued to burn and explode for an hour. The RAF also did good work and were believed to have scored a direct hit on a gun. By 07:00hrs all enemy opposition had been completely eliminated and after that time not a gun, machine gun or rifle opened fire whether in ground or AA role. The extent of the enemy demoralisation can be judged from the fact that when two Spitfires passed low to test the AA defences, not a round was opened up on them, though the area was well provided with AA defence, in fact it is considered to be a particular hot spot. OPs had been instructed to look out for AA fire.

When the decision had finally to be made to evacuate, the original intention to leave two or more guns in action whilst the remainder embarked was given up and all guns were re-embarked simultaneously. This decision proved to be justified for though one unidentified gun did re-open fire, there was only one and its fire never caused any anxiety.

17. PROPAGANDA

Propaganda shells provided by SLS Psychological Warfare Board were fired at selected targets.

18. ALLIED MISSION

Allied Missions were to instruct their saboteurs to take advantage of the confusion resulting. Much useful information and help was obtained through Captain Langford of the British Mission at LAGOSTA.

19. US SPECIAL OPS GROUP

USSOG landed a party of about 15 on PELJESAC with "Q" OP. These had as their task the liquidation of the OP at 576925 and a subsidiary OP which had been located on a previous reece at 571916. The first of these OPs found to be wired and organised for defence and was considered too tough a proposition for the small party. The second OP location was kept under observation but was not occupied by the enemy.

20. AIR PHOTOGRAPHS

Air photographs are of great value both for fixation of targets and for selecting beaches, gun areas etc. Delay occurs in receiving air photographs asked for. Photographs disclosing the position of guns at OREBIC for this operation were not received until after the operation.

21. RCLS

Guns and ammunition were transported in RCLs. Each carried two guns, 700 rounds ammunition, a 0.5" Browning and about 30 men. They seemed to do the job very well.

22. INTERCOMMUNICATION

Details of wireless nets employed are given in Appendix "E" to the operation order. All sets were No. 22 with the exception of the "Q" OP set which, due to the extremely difficult nature of the country on PELJESAC was a No. 18 set and was in touch with another No. 18 set with "A" OP.

Wireless silence was broken at 04:30hrs when it was still dark. As had been anticipated, the interference was very strong at that time and efficient R/T Artillery communications would not have been possible. It was most marked as dawn broke so the interference faded out. By 05:15hrs the air was quite clear.

It was most gratifying to hear all station, most of which had been separated for several days and had been through various vicissitudes and experiences on their way to the OPs "come up" on the net. The net was working well by 05:00hrs with the exception of "X" Op which was weak

and sometimes had to be relayed by "A" OP. "A" OP was also control for the "C" net and had to relay orders to them. The operator performed his difficult duties very well.

The No. 22 set has been found to be the best set we have yet experienced and an improvement from the No. 19 set. Yet the set is very heavy and susceptible to screening and not really powerful enough for the job in mountainous country. If an OP party has to be detached for any time it may require as many as four or more 12-volt 22-AH batteries (the smaller and more portable type), each a one man load weighing 36lbs.

Fortunately no attempt was made to jam the "A" net frequency. The No. 18 set frequency was deliberately jammed on its normal frequency, then when it changed to the alternative, was again picked up and jammed. It then returned to the normal frequency and after an interval was jammed and finally jammed on both normal and alternative frequencies.

Assault cable with metallic return was used between HQ and Bty command post and worked very well.

23. ENGAGEMENT OF SHIPPING

A concentration was fired at the corner of US Bay 561877, which could not be seen by "Q" OP and is known to be a popular hide for enemy craft.

A vessel suspected of being an "E" boat but heavily camouflaged was engaged by a single gun with observation by "Q" OP. At least four very near hits were obtained by before it could finally be disposed of the shoot had to be abandoned due to the frequency being jammed.

24. SECURITY

A compromise has to be struck between the need for security and the need for recce. In the case of this operation it is remarkable that complete surprise should have been possible in spite of the large number of civilians to whom our intention must have been clear, particularly in the LUMBARDA Area.

25. PARTISAN HELP

Apart from the covering party provided by the Partisans it would be difficult to overstate the assistance given to the recce parties by the Partisan organisation on KORCULA Island. Guides, messengers, boats and meals are laid on and complicated journeys through enemy territory are planned with the precision of Cook's Tours.

Deserving of special mention are VISKO, a young Partisan of 19 years who accompanied Lieutenant-Colonel Elliot and later Major Turner on his two visits to the OP area; and PRSONA the indomitable personality who rules the LUMBARDA area and who made arrangements for the safe conduct of Lieutenant Owen and Captain McTiffin to and from the OP on BADIJA Island and provided guides and a reception committee on Green Beach for the arrival of the guns.

26. RESULTS

Reports of the effect of shelling are meagre so far owing to the difficulty of access to the German positions.

No reports of damage in OREBIC area, which is believed to be extensive, have so far been received; but "Football Field" camp was well covered, the shelling at the Bty areas was observed to be effective, an ammunition dump was blown up and the Bty position was also bombed with what appeared to be good effect.

A direct hit was observed on a gun in the KORKULA area and here also the guns were completely silenced.

An "E" boat is believed to have sustained damage and was reported later in the day to be in trouble.

No reliable estimate of the total casualties and damage can be formed at this stage.

Apart from material damage the degree of demoralisation of the Garrisons appears to have been very great. The report of Major Turner's Ambush seems to indicate that evening reinforcements from the PUPNAT Garrison, which had not been subjected to shelling, had to be called in. It is unusual for there to be movement on the road at this time.

Better proof of demoralisation of the Garrison can hardly be afforded than the fact that throughout, no flak of any sort opened up on our aircraft.

No casualties or damage to equipment were suffered by our own or the Partisan forces taking part.