

## CHAPTER XVI

### ITALY

ITALY entered the War in May 1915, at once seizing positions across the Austrian frontier, with a front stretching from west to east through the Carnic Alps and then, turning southwards, following the course of the River Isonzo to the Adriatic. During the next two years the capture of important mountain positions, especially that of Monte Nero in the upper region of the Isonzo, enabled the Italians to make headway across the lower reaches of the river and in the spring of 1917 an effort to capture Trieste was determined upon.

To assist in this operation ten batteries of artillery, armed with six-inch howitzers, were lent by England; the gunners being accompanied by half a company of the A.O.C. under Lieutenant Colonel Hayley who was appointed A.D.O.S. to the force. Headquarters were installed at Gradisca, with an Ordnance workshop nearby, while Palmanova, nine miles to the rear and once a fortress on the frontier of the Venetian Republic, was allotted as the site for the Ordnance depot, mainly for ammunition, as the force consisted solely of artillery. In front of Gradisca two ammunition dumps were formed, each under an Ordnance officer—one for each group of howitzers—connected with Palmanova by railway. No mechanical transport accompanied the expedition, as the Italians undertook to furnish what was required.

For materials the force was based directly on England, and the War Office was to send what was wanted to Havre, whence consignments were to be transmitted by rail straight through to Palmanova. But there must have been some hitch over the arrangement, for nothing arrived before the 12th May, the very day the bombardment was to open, by when the batteries had almost exhausted the ammunition they brought from England in preliminary registration. The supply of ammunition that came to hand that day arrived therefore in the nick of time and was at once diverted to the forward dumps. After this, ammunition and stores began to arrive regularly;

and when the operation, which resulted in a gain of ground in the coastal region, came to a close at the end of May, good stocks had been built up and normal arrangements for supply and demand were possible.

In July the depot was inspected by the Duke of Connaught, who expressed his satisfaction with the arrangements made for the men's comfort ; and it may be noted here that the Italians were always most ready with help whenever anything was asked for. In August the enemy tried to destroy by air raid the 60,000 rounds of gun ammunition by then accumulated at Palmanova ; but though a big fire was started in the adjacent Supply Park, the Ordnance detachment contrived by smothering the burning materials to prevent it from spreading to their munitions. In this month also our force was increased by six more batteries, bringing the number of howitzers up to sixty-four, so as to take part in a fresh attempt on Trieste. This attempt never materialized as the Italians decided to remain on the defensive. The number of batteries was reduced to five, one of the forward ammunition dumps was closed and steps were taken to reduce the stock of ammunition to 20,000 rounds.

On the 13th October, 1917, however, with 9000 rounds of ammunition still to be evacuated, the movement was suspended, as news came to hand that a counter-attack was to be expected in which German troops would take part.

This German conducted attack opened on the 20th October with the usual preliminary bombardment and was pursued with great vigour. On the 24th, working round both flanks of Monte Nero, the Germans captured Caporetto, a key position held by Italian troops infected with communism, who made little or no attempt at resistance. They then pushed forward towards Cividale, threatening the flank of the Italian army in the coastal region where our artillery was engaged. By the morning of the 27th there could be no further doubt that the enemy had effected a complete breach in the Italian lines, necessitating a general retreat to the River Tagliamento.

At that time Mussolini had not yet arisen to rekindle the torch of Italian patriotism and revive the ancient spirit of Rome. The party in power had declared war on Italy's old enemy, Austria, from political motives, hoping to rectify an unsatisfactory frontier and gain territory; but the soul of the nation had never been stirred by the war. The army of Italy, an emotional race, had performed miracles in getting guns up precipitous heights and had certainly fought valiantly both in the mountains and in front of Trieste; but casualties had been severe and the war-weary troops, after thirty months of fighting without much to show for it, were not proof against reverse.

Panic developed. The retreat became a rout which the Tagliamento failed to check, and it was only after crossing the River Piave that a fresh stand was made; the attack having by then petered out because the enemy artillery had lagged far behind its infantry advance.

During this time our batteries, after firing off all their ammunition, had pulled out of action and taken the road to a rendezvous at Treviso; and there was nothing for the Ordnance to do but endeavour to save what it could and follow suit.

Here obviously the crux of the matter was transport, for which we were entirely dependent upon the Italian authorities. Every train was thronged with soldiers and civilians making their way to safety; the lorries usually allotted for Ordnance work had disappeared and no others could be got in spite of urgent appeals to Italian army headquarters. Two lorries only were forthcoming to remove the reserve howitzers, which were looked on as honoured guests; and some of the A.O.C., boarding these, succeeded in towing the equipments to Treviso in safety.

The workshop at Gradisca had to be abandoned on the evening of the 27th, and its staff, together with that of the ammunition dump and headquarter details got away by road, picking up a train later on.

The contents of the depot at Palmanova were all packed ready for removal by the same evening, the most valuable

stores being parked at the entrance ready for any lorry that might arrive ; but with the ammunition it was impossible to deal. By arrangement, this was left for the Italian engineers to destroy at the last moment—to set it on fire at this stage would have been disastrous, so crowded was the place with refugees. At 8 a.m. on the 28th, with the enemy reported in Udine to the north, the Italian authorities started to set fire to their own dumps in and around Palmanova. No lorries had arrived, trains had ceased running, and Hayley had no option but to give orders for the depot to be abandoned and the staff to find its way to Treviso.<sup>1</sup>

The march of this little band proved a weary business. Most of the men were of low medical category, and those employed as clerks were in no condition to make a big physical effort ; while, to make matters worse, rain fell in torrents and the road was blocked with traffic. Codroipo was reached at 10 p.m., only to find that trains had also stopped running there, so that four more miles had to be covered to the Tagliamento and safety. But quite half the men were incapable of this further effort without a rest, and it was not until 7.30 the next morning that the river was crossed after a march of 25 miles in under 24 hours. Three more miles, taken very slowly, brought them to St. Vito, the first place where food could be bought and whence the rest of the journey could be covered by rail. But at Treviso there was a great shortage of food and, there being nothing further to be done for the time being, the whole detachment, now linked together, was sent to rest at Faenza.

Thus ended the first phase of our campaign in Italy.

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The defeat that has gained Caporetto such an ill name in Italy resulted in immense numbers of men being

<sup>1</sup> *In Scenes from Italy's War*, G. M. Trevelyan, who had charge of a British Red Cross Hospital, writes : " One part of our nurses had been accompanied by Colonel Hayley of the British batteries who, reduced like them to pedestrianism, had fallen in with them by the way and shown them the same friendliness that all the officers of the British batteries had always shown to the Croce Rossa Britannica."

captured by the enemy, and completely demoralized the Italian Army for the time being. All the mountain positions in the Alps up to which siege artillery had been hauled with such infinite labour had to be abandoned with their guns to conform to the new front on the Piave, the line now forming a quadrant round Venice.

It was at once decided to despatch a substantial body of French and British troops to assist in preventing a further break through and irruption of the enemy into the Italian plains. Our force comprised two Corps from the Second Army in France under General Plumer, who was accompanied by his army staff, including Hale his D.D.O.S., who became Director of Ordnance Services Italian Expeditionary Force, a post he continued to hold for the rest of the war.

After the retreat to the Piave the situation on the Italian front relapsed into comparative quiet; and the chief troubles with which the Ordnance were confronted were due to the strength of the force to be provided for and the length of its sojourn in the country being so uncertain, rather than to the severity of the fighting.

Two Corps had been hurriedly sent to Italy to save a critical situation, but an attack in strength by Germany on the French front in the following spring was already anticipated, to meet which it was likely that both might have to be recalled. Actually only one of the two was recalled in February 1918, but G.H.Q. Italy was warned on several occasions that it might have to part with more divisions, while on others it was proposed once more to strengthen the British force in Italy. Everything hinged on the development of events on the two fronts.

As our assistance was only expected to be of a temporary nature, the Italian Expeditionary Force was treated, for maintenance purposes, as a detached portion of the main body in France. The D.O.S. France had already estimated in his demands on England for its needs and continued to do so. The War Office ceased, except in special instances, to send stores direct to Italy, whose demands were met from the main depots in France. Directors were ordered to use the greatest economy in

personnel, stores and buildings; not more than one month's stock was to be held, while repair establishments were not to be started for any work that could be sent to France. For similar reasons, line of communication establishments were concentrated in the neighbourhood of Genoa, whence they could be easily evacuated. The whole intention, in fact, was not to commit ourselves further than was absolutely necessary.

All this uncertainty made it far from easy to organize an efficient service. The requirements of a force liable to sudden and violent fluctuation in strength could not be anticipated with any precision and initiative of every kind was cramped. Such accommodation as was at once forthcoming was accepted for Ordnance establishments and neither time nor money spent in equipping it adequately for the work to be done.

Experience soon showed that these provisional arrangements would not work. The first point that came to light was that it was impossible to carry on with such a small stock margin as one month's supply. It took goods far longer to reach Italy than had been expected. The distance over which they had to travel, stretching the whole length and breadth of France and a part of Italy, was immense; and the railway was already working at high capacity. Goods trains were continually sidetracked to make way for troops and travellers. The least hitch on the part of France in immediately complying with a demand or the least delay in transit, and the machinery failed to respond. Thus the base depot in Italy was perforce compelled by degrees to accumulate much more ample and varied stocks.

The proposal to undertake in Italy no repairs that could be effected by France proved even less practicable. Clothing alone, when sent there for renovation, absorbed a large number of trucks that could ill be spared; and it was a very costly business to send it all the way to Paris and back again when firms close at hand were capable of doing the work. Contracts were therefore entered into with firms at Milan and elsewhere for cleaning and disinfecting textile articles, for the making of wooden

tent bottoms and other items, and a substantial workshop was installed at the base. Thus, in the course of time, the Italian Expeditionary Force became just as self-supporting as any other.

The store depot was formed by Hayley at Arquata, with the aid of the Ordnance detachment already in the country, supplemented by extra personnel; while at Genoa, 20 miles to the south, a small transit staff was posted to receive and forward anything arriving by sea. Later on Lieutenant Colonel Smyth, who had accompanied one of the Corps to Italy as A.D.O.S., became Chief Ordnance Officer; and when it was decided to increase the stocks and do more repairs, there was great difficulty in finding the necessary space. The A.O.C. and A.S.C., who had also started business on a small scale, were crowded together and work was hampered by cramped conditions.

Once more, as in so many other theatres, the importance of making ample provision for expansion when planning a new depot in time of war was shown.

It was the same with ammunition, first dumped by the side of the railway at the small village of Ovada, 15 miles to the east of Arquata. The site was utterly unsuited for an ammunition depot, the available space was inadequate, and as soon as possible a properly constructed depot was built at Rivalta Scrivia, some four miles south of Tortona, the headquarters of the Italian lines of communication. It was a great relief when the stock was all safely housed in these premises where it could be properly safeguarded, as warning had been received from the Italian Government of anarchist threats to destroy trains and dumps of ammunition.

But the building up of substantial depots at Arquata and Rivalta Scrivia with the usual concomitant establishments for repair and salvage was not the only extension needed. Both were tucked away in the north-west corner of Italy while our troops were operating near the opposite coast, 250 to 300 miles away; and an organization further forward became imperative to cope with the more vital and urgent services. At Padua, General

Headquarters, a substantial dump was formed to hold reserves of important stores, with a gun park and workshop.

In fact the whole organization as originally conceived had to be remodelled as our stay in the country was prolonged, though only three divisions remained. What was to have been merely a temporary advanced base became a base; and a fresh advanced base was thrown out at Padua. This, however, was only small and was fairly mobile, being organized on the same lines as the Ordnance establishments of an Army in France.

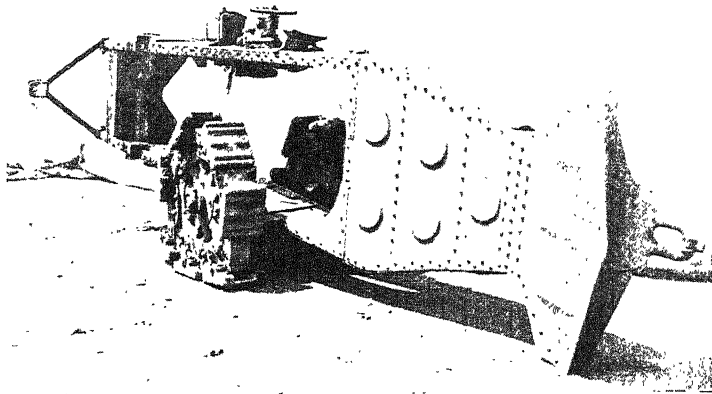
Besides its own line of communications, which ran from west to east right across the north of Italy, the Italian Expeditionary Force became responsible for the portion of the Mediterranean line, 1000 miles in length, stretching north and south from the French frontier to the foot of Italy. Indeed a substantial part of the business of Lieutenant Colonel Sheppard, D.D.O.S. L. of C., lay in organizing Ordnance services along this route, equipping rest camps and halting places, particularly at Taranto, the terminus, where there was a depot to house goods in transit for the east and to provide for troops waiting embarkation or on their way home.

The other outstanding feature of this campaign, from an Ordnance point of view, was due to our troops being at times in the plains and at times in a region of precipitous, ice-clad mountains. Varying conditions had to be provided for, khaki clothing and sun helmets on the one hand, fur garments, fur-lined trench slippers and sleeping bags on the other. Mountain warfare introduced many novelties in equipment. Our ordinary transport was unsuitable and had to be modified or exchanged for pack-saddlery, while alpenstocks and ice-axes, snow-shoes and skis, sleighs<sup>1</sup>, ice grampons, splinter-proof goggles as protection from rock fragments, non-freezing oil, special mule-shoes and heavily nailed boots were needed.

<sup>1</sup> 1000 of these bobsleighs had been sent to France from Canada early in the war but remained, an incubus, at Havre until it was thought that they might be of use in Italy. Eventually they found their way to North Russia.







ITALIAN TRANSPORTER ADAPTED TO CARRY TRAIL OF SIX-INCH HOWITZER



MUZZLE PORTION OF SIX-INCH MORTAR AS A MULE LOAD

Lastly the final operation, in which the Piave was re-crossed, entailed the provision of several thousand life-jackets and long waders, with quantities of bridging material.

Nor was the technical staff of the A.O.C. without its special problems, although guns were not exposed to the severe strain of intensive firing and ammunition expenditure was comparatively small. The fact that snow was prevalent in some localities in winter gave plenty of work for those engaged on ammunition duties, for snow is far more insidiously penetrating than rain. All our guns that took part in the retreat from the Isonzo needed a thorough overhaul before they were once more ready for action; and 120 complete six- and eight-inch howitzer equipments, presented to the Italian army to replace what they lost in the retreat, had to be assembled and their officers instructed in their care and in details of the ammunition by technical officers of the Corps.

The most notable feat consisted of improvising means of transporting artillery in the mountains. As a basis, the Italian army supplied us with transporters of its own type, and these had to be modified to suit our own equipments—18-pdr. and 60-pdr. guns and six-inch howitzers; the gun and its carriage being parted and divided into two or more loads according to weight. Moreover it was considered that our six-inch mortar would be a very efficient mountain weapon, as the height of its trajectory enabled it to search out reverse slopes and deep ravines that no howitzer could reach. But this equipment was immobile in such regions without pack transport. The mortar itself therefore, 170 lbs. in weight, was cut in half, the two pieces were joined by an easily removable collar with gas-tight joint, and the bed, which formed a third load, was greatly reduced in weight; other loads comprising ammunition and appliances. Not only had the equipment to be transformed in this way but special pack-saddlery was needed to carry it; design and manufacture being all the result of local improvisation. This extemporized heavy mountain mortar equipment

was quite a success ; its accuracy was unimpaired by this surgical operation, fifteen miles was a normal day's journey, while one section climbed 1200 feet over difficult ground in forty-three minutes.

For the last operation on this front, in October 1918, our one Corps remaining in Italy was split up ; two of its divisions were incorporated in the 11th Italian army—commanded by our Corps Commander—while the third formed part of the 6th Italian army ; and this mingling of forces naturally made the work of those engaged on supply services more difficult. But by then there was no heart left in the Austrians and victory was soon assured, an Armistice being signed on this front on the 4th November. Then followed for the A.O.C. the lengthy and tedious process of demobilization, which needs no description, for the lines followed were similar to those elsewhere.