

SAVED BY ARTILLERY

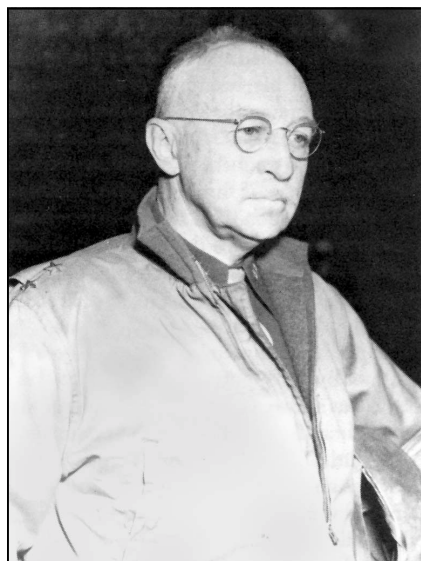
How MG Lucas Lost the Initiative at Anzio and the Allied Artillery Regained It

By Captain Colin J. Williams

According to *FM 3-0, Operations*, “initiative is setting or dictating the terms of action throughout the battle.”¹ Historically, units that lose the initiative rarely are able to recover and reassert themselves in combat against the enemy.

In the American and British invasion of Anzio, Italy, on 22 January 1944, the Allies in Major General (MG) John P. Lucas’ VI Corps quickly lost the initiative to the surrounding German units. The Germans sent some of their best units to push the Allies back to the sea. They came close to succeeding. The conflict devolved into a costly defensive struggle characterized by an intense exchange of indirect fire. Due to effective counterbattery fires that met the five requirements for accurate predicted fire and the intelligent use of different firing techniques, the Field Artillery demonstrated FM 3-0’s validity by turning the tables on the Germans.

How Lucas Lost the Initiative. The invasion of Anzio occurred on 22 January when the US VI Corps landed the American 3d Infantry Division and the



Major General John P. Lucas

Second Place



British 1st Infantry Division on the Anzio-Nettuno beachhead. Enemy resistance was minimal, and by the day’s close, the Allies had advanced seven miles inland. Over the next few days, Lucas allowed his division commanders to make piecemeal attacks by battalion or regiment.

For example, Major General Lucian Truscott, the 3d Infantry Division Commander, had his forces conduct a reconnaissance-in-force on the town of Cisternia on 24 January. This reconnaissance failed to take the town, forcing Truscott to plan for a larger assault.

On 26 January, four days after the Allies first landed, he ordered an assault by two battalions while a third battalion conducted a diversionary attack. Truscott backed this advance by division artillery fires and naval gunfire from one cruiser and two destroyers. After the Germans pushed this attack back, Truscott asked Lucas for the corps reserve (the 179th Infantry Regiment) to use in a corps-supported assault by his division. Lucas denied this request because he did not want any more attacks against the Germans until Combat Command A from Major General Ernest Harmon’s 1st Armored Division had arrived.

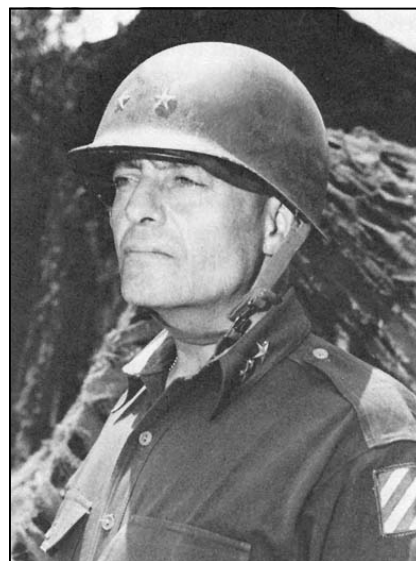
Unfortunately, the wait for Harmon’s tanks delayed a corps-level attack until the 29th of January.² When the attack

did finally materialize, the reinforced German defenders were ready.

After several days of fighting, the Allies gained little ground. In mid-February the Germans counterattacked, causing more than 3,500 Allied casualties.³ With the Germans now present in large numbers, Lucas feared his command would be pushed back to the sea. He placed his corps in a defensive posture and concentrated on building up combat power. This concentration ensured a successful supply system,⁴ but it paralyzed his corps and surrendered all initiative to the German commanders.

Lucas’ decision to attack with more later instead of with less now proved costly to the corps. Instead of forcing the Germans to react to the plans of VI Corps, VI Corps reacted to German initiative.

Lucas did not push off the Anzio beachhead partly because he had received conflicting guidance from his superiors, 5th Army Commander, Lieutenant General (LTG) Mark W. Clark and 15th Army Group Commander, General Sir Harold Alexander. Neither officer agreed with the other on VI Corps’



Major General Lucian Truscott

exact mission. Alexander wanted the corps to advance 25 miles inland to seize the Alban Hills, thereby threatening both Rome and the rear of the Germans defending the Gustav line (See the map.)

Clark, who had commanded the difficult Salerno invasion, wanted an advance on Rome but also felt that Lucas, as the senior commander on the ground, needed the flexibility to decide when and how far his penetration should go. His final instructions, therefore, ordered Lucas to “seize and secure a beachhead in the vicinity of Anzio” before an advance on the Colli Laziali (Alban Hills).⁵

Lucas, an experienced commander, was overjoyed to learn that he wasn’t expected to take the Alban Hills. Although he respected Clark, he had less confidence in the operation’s success than his superior did. Lucas foresaw his corps surrounded, attrited and cut off from supply lines if forced to advance that far inland.

As a corps commander, he did not have access to the Ultra intelligence used by high-level commanders like Clark. Lacking Ultra knowledge and depending upon information gleaned from unreliable prisoners of war, Lucas and his staff assumed that partly deployed enemy divisions on the Anzio beachhead had arrived at full strength. He feared that “they [the Germans] could build up faster than I could.” While Field Marshall Albert Kesselring did surprise the Allied Command by having all or part of 11 divisions on the move in just six hours after the landing, Lucas still outnumbered his enemy.⁶ Over estimation of the enemy’s size combined with a confusing commander’s intent from Clark caused Lucas to keep his corps dug in on the beachhead.

The Consequences. With the conflict at Anzio in a stalemate, the various branches of the Allied forces began to adapt their doctrine to match the changed style of war.

One change occurred in the 1st Armored Division. The topography, presence of villages and limited operational space did not suit tank warfare. Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Schull, the commander of the division’s 1st Armored Regiment, advised his subordinates that “care should be taken by all commanders to avoid committing more tanks than can be used effectively on the contemplated mission.”⁷

Armored commanders began to use their tanks as artillery pieces. Platoons

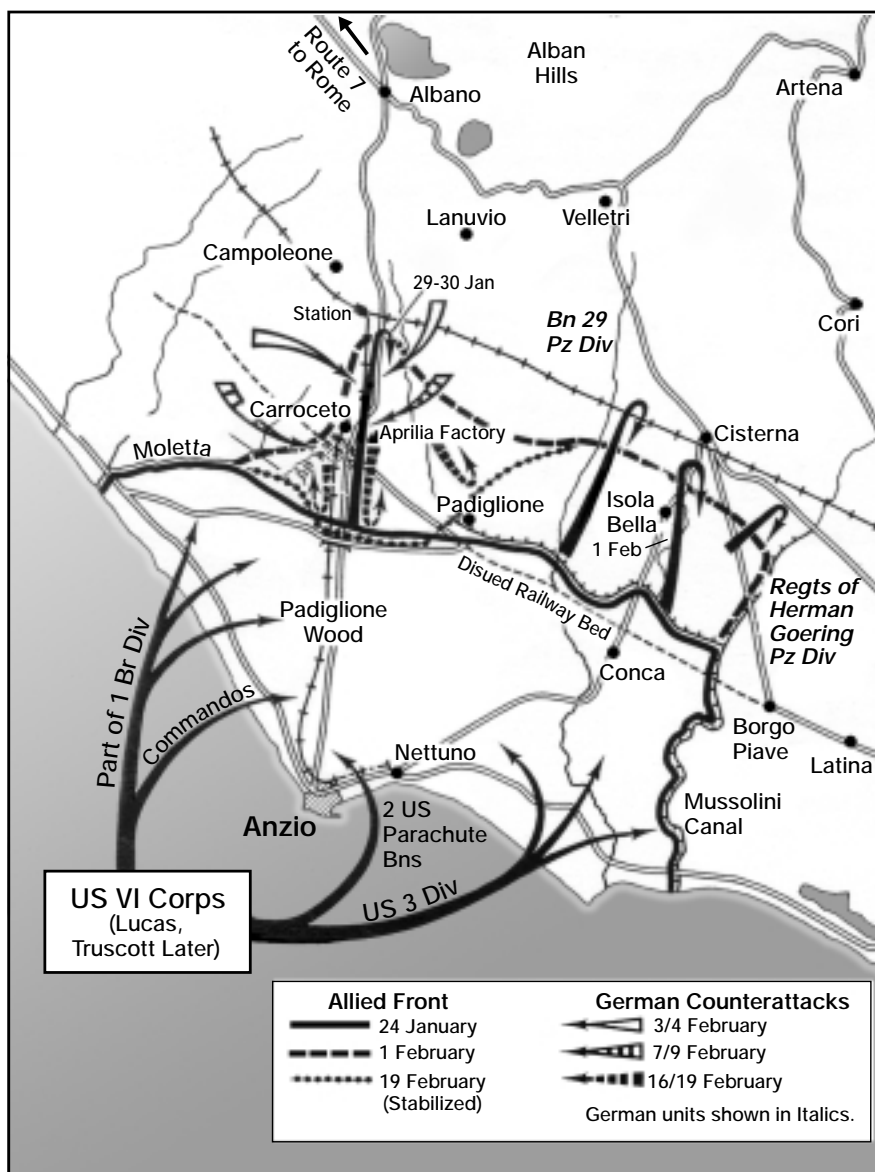
would either attach themselves to artillery battalions or fire as an independent battery. By allowing his armor to fight as artillery, Lucas wasted his best breakout-enabling asset in needless and minimally effective fighting. He had, in effect, surrendered initiative to the enemy.⁸

The loss of initiative also changed the types of missions fired by the corps artillery. Instead of targets of opportunity and preparations on objectives, the artillery had to shoot mostly harassment and destruction missions.

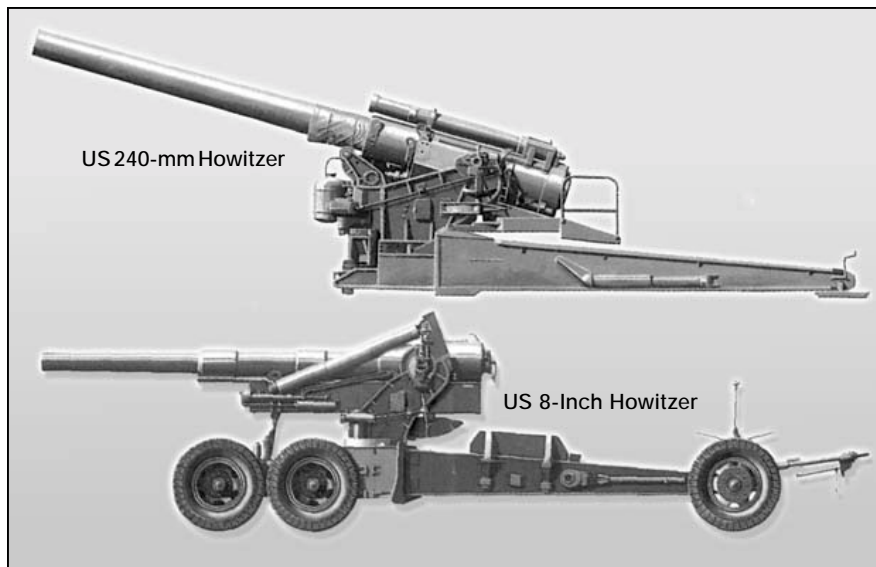
For example, the 698th Field Artillery Battalion (-) was general support (GS) tactical to the VI Corps Artillery. From 11 May to 4 June, the battalion fired 513 harassing missions out of a total of 746

(69 percent). During the same period, the battalion shot 54 destruction missions (seven percent) for a total of 567 (76 percent)⁹—numbers that prevent regaining the initiative. Furthermore, 698 FA had only large caliber pieces: four 240-mm howitzers and three 8-inch guns. Relying on large caliber weapons to shoot harassment and destruction missions increased the battalion’s logistical train and took rounds away from counterbattery and other offensive missions.

A bigger consequence of the “inexplicable, hesitating conduct of the American VI Corps”¹⁰ was that the Germans had time to build up their defenses, especially in artillery. Within a week or so, the Germans outgunned the Allies



Anzio Beachhead, 22 January 1944– US VI Corps. The remainder of the British 1st Division stayed in ships off shore as a floating reserve. The US 1st Armored and 45th Infantry Divisions were follow-up reserves.



both in number of pieces and caliber.¹¹ The enemy dug his guns and gun crews into naturally good fighting positions while Lucas lost the initiative as he built up combat power on the beachhead.¹²

The Germans also made good use of the buildings in the towns of Carroceto and Aprilia. From these buildings, German observers could see the entire Allied position and direct fire onto it with ease. In order to move unobserved in daylight over the flat, open terrain, the British and Americans had to fire intense smoke screens to obscure themselves from the enemy.¹³

German observation posts (OPs) proved especially effective before German counterattacks when observers directed fire on the defending Allied forces. VI Corps soldiers suffered from German artillery fires because Lucas did not push fast enough, strong enough and early enough to seize the high ground.

How the Artillery Regained the Initiative. After four months of stalemate on the beachhead, the Field Artillery enabled the 3d Division to resume offensive operations at Anzio. Major General Truscott, the new VI Corps commander, called for a conference on how to improve the effectiveness of counterbattery fire. This conference resulted in the splitting of the beachhead into two separate (but collocated) counterbattery offices.

Brigadier General Frederic B. Butler, the Assistant Corps Commander, staffed these offices with a handful of junior Field Artillery officers and one major. He dedicated several battalions to each office in order to decrease response time.¹⁴

These changes, with help from the Allied air corps, limited the effectiveness of the extremely well dug-in German artillery. While the constant air cover forced the enemy to take cover and abandon his weapons, rapid counterbattery destroyed the enemy's fire control and command telephone networks.

In addition to improvements in counterbattery procedures, the Allied artillery leadership used the pause in movement to increase the accuracy of corps and division artillery fires. They improved the accuracy of target location and size by manning OPs when and wherever possible. Throughout the campaign, the Allied artillery shot a large percentage of its fire missions with observers. During the 3d Infantry Division's attack on Cisterna on 31 January, 630 of the 1,216 fire missions were observed (52 percent).¹⁵

Even when not on the attack, the Allies managed to post observers. The 3d Infantry Division's artillery shot 55 percent of its fire missions with observers in February, 49 percent in April and 53 percent in May.¹⁶ Comparatively, the US XV Corps, fighting in a static campaign around Strasbourg from 26 October to 22 December 1944, fired a mere 17.75 percent of its missions with observers. As the corps switched to purely defensive operations from 22 December to 13 March 1945, the percentage increased to 24.72 percent but fell to 12.19 percent during the 13 to 22 March offense.

Although not a perfect comparison, a study of World War II gunnery practices in the European Theater used XV Corps artillery numbers as a basis for its recommendations.¹⁷

Throughout the 3d Division battle, forward observers (FOs) like First Lieutenant (ILT) Donald E. Knowlton of the 160th Field Artillery Battalion, showed many examples of heroics. Knowlton refused to retreat from his OP during an enemy attack on the town of Aprilia. When two German soldiers entered the abandoned building he was using for his OP, Knowlton shot them dead with his carbine. With more enemy approaching and assuming that all was lost, he called for fire on his own location. Immediately after this call, a German shot Knowlton in the head. As Germans approached the injured Knowlton, the rounds that he called for impacted. Scared by the fire, the Germans left Knowlton alone. Later that day, Allied forces counterattacked and recovered the injured observer.¹⁸

In addition to OPs, leadership also stressed using shell reports for target location. According to LTC Prichard, the 68th Armored Artillery Battalion's commander, shell reports "proved very helpful in counterbattery work."¹⁹ For the final breakthrough on 23 May, the Allies conducted extensive reconnaissance of enemy positions to plan, not just template targets.

Allied Field Artillery battalions used both survey and meteorological reports (Met) to ensure accurate battery locations and account for the variances in the atmosphere. According to LTC Prichard, his battalion fired noticeably more accurately with Met data applied.²⁰

During the Army Ground Forces Board report of 24 April 1944, Colonel (COL) L. S. Griffing suggested codifying some techniques used by artillery units at Anzio. Suggestions included accounting for the fact that smoke is a heavier projectile than high explosive (HE) and supplying units with more timepieces (stopwatches).²¹ The increased accuracy obtained by measures such as these enhanced the artillery's lethality in a fight where success turned, in part, on the artillery's lethality.

In addition to increased accuracy and improved counterbattery fire, the Allied artillery hurt the enemy by effectively using time-on-target (TOT) fires, time fuzes and HE followed by white phosphorus (WP) fires. Captain (CPT) L. E. Weisenburg, Jr., 10th Field Artillery Battalion, found HE followed by WP effective in defeating the enemy's tactic of infiltration. When a platoon of 20 Germans infiltrated at night in between a parachute troop and units from

the 7th Infantry Regiment, small arms, machine guns and HE rounds failed to dislodge them. HE followed by WP worked.²²

Perhaps the factor contributing the most to artillery success in regaining the initiative was the massive number of FA rounds fired. Many of these rounds were fired in massed missions where several different firing units fired at the same target at the same time.

In the early fighting, the Allies massed by combining fires from several battalions. For the 15th Infantry Regiment's attack on 31 January, for example, three Field Artillery battalions fired intense preparatory fires on the enemy.²³ Later in the campaign, however, massing occurred at the corps level. When a corps piper cub pilot spotted 2,500 German soldiers massing for an attack against the American sector of the beachhead, his call-for-fire was answered in less than 12 minutes by 224 British and American guns. The guns kept firing on remnants of the enemy force for 50 minutes, breaking up the attack before it occurred.²⁴

During the German counterattack that started on 16 February, the Allies fired approximately 65,000 rounds on the first day and 45,000 and 25,000 rounds during the next two days.²⁵ When this German attack failed, Lucas in the last few days of his command, counterattacked on 19 February. The Allies attacked with a regiment of infantry and a

regiment (-) of armor. This force was preceded by fire from eight British Field Artillery regiments, eight Field Artillery battalions from corps artillery, naval gunfire, 90-mm anti-aircraft gunfire used in indirect fire, 132 fighter bombers and 92 medium bombers.²⁶

Due to this massive indirect fire support, the attack succeeded in capturing a key road intersection south of Aprilia. More importantly, it stopped the counterattack and blunted the enemy's initiative. The Germans lost 5,389—killed, wounded and missing—plus 609 prisoners during their five-day counterattack.²⁷ Shell fragments from British and American artillery accounted for 75 percent of these casualties.²⁸

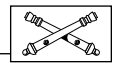
From 14 February on, the Allies fired approximately 20,000 rounds a day as compared to 1,500 for the Germans. Of course, these round counts exclude naval gunfire shells and the weight of munitions dropped by Army air forces. The resupply capabilities of the British and American forces proved their worth at Anzio.

Lessons Learned. Anzio stands as an example of how artillery can take initiative away from the enemy at the operational level. The outstanding lessons learned from the conflict still apply today.

First, meeting the five requirements of accurate predicted fire increases artillery lethality. Second, the timeliness of counterbattery fires can turn a defensive fight into an offensive one. Third,

the use of smoke and WP munitions increases a commander's options on the battlefield. Finally, artillery is at its most effective in mass missions, especially when supported by planned naval gunfire and aviation.

As an experienced maneuver commander, MG Lucas must have realized the capability of his indirect fire branch. Unfortunately, he did not see the operation as an artillery officer would have seen it. If Lucas had fought the battle with an artillery point of view, he would have taken the high ground and pushed forward until his rear echelon was out of range of enemy artillery. If Lucas had understood the artillery, he would not have had to be saved by artillery.



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Endnotes:

1. *Field Manual (FM) 3-0, Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2001), 4-15.
2. According to Carlo D'Este, Lucas should have attacked no later than 26 January. On 26 January, the Allies had approximately 41,000 troops while the Germans had 43,700. Carlo D'Este, *Fatal Decision: Anzio and the Battle for Rome* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 146, 450.
3. Total German losses were more than 5,000. William L. Allen, *Anzio: Edge of Disaster* (New York: Talisman/Parrish Books, 1978), 115.
4. Lucas had his supply vessels dock at mobile piers. Trucks loaded with a single class of supply would roll off to a pre-designated site on the beachhead. Lucas had these trucks cross-loaded on ships to prevent a shortage in one particular class. Convoys would load in Naples, sail and unload in less than two days. *Ibid.*, 51.
5. *Ibid.*, 43.
6. Lucas expressed his fear in his diary on 1 Feb 44. By that time, the Germans had managed to send about 90,000 troops to Anzio. Clark, however, reinforced Lucas to a strength of 100,000, giving him more than the Germans. *Ibid.*, 84.
7. *Comments on Anzio Operations by Various Commanders of Units of 1st Armored Division*, (Morris Swett Technical Library, Fort Sill, 1944), text-fiche, 8.
8. According to LTC Schull, firing as artillery gave his "medium tankers something 'effective' and interesting to do." Lucas needed his tankers to be offensive, not just effective. Allen, 6.
9. If measured by the number of rounds instead of missions, the numbers are 2,952 out of 5,215 rounds fired in harassment missions (57 percent) and 796 rounds fired in destruction missions (15 percent). *The 240-mm Howitzer Battalion and the 8-inch Gun in a Mobile Situation* (Morris Swett Technical Library, Fort Sill, 1944), text-fiche, 5.
10. Walther Kuhn, *The Artillery at Anzio-Nettuno* (Privately printed, 1947), 10.
11. By 4 February 44, the Germans had 372 pieces, with many of these having large caliber. By 16 February 44, the Germans had 452 pieces as compared to the Allies' 432. *Anzio Beachhead, 23 January-25 May 1944* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1990), 51, 70. The German division artillery was organized into two Panzer regiments, six full artillery regiments and three partial artillery regiments. The German headquarters artillery consisted of four 100-mm guns, eight Italian 100-mm guns, 18 170-mm guns, three French 220-mm guns,

- two French 240-mm guns, two 280-mm railroad guns, 20 150-mm howitzers, eight self-propelled howitzers, 36 150-mm mortars and 21 210-mm mortars. Kuhn, Appendix A.
12. L. S. Griffing, *Army Ground Forces Board of 15 July 1944*, (Morris Swett Technical Library, Fort Sill, 1944), text-fiche, 8.
13. MG Kuhn, a German artillery general at the battle, recalled that the towns of Cisterna and Carroceto were "still 70M above sea level, so that excellent ground observation toward the coast is everywhere possible." Kuhn, 2.
14. Griffing, *Army Ground Forces Board of 21 April 1944*, (Morris Swett Technical Library, Fort Sill, 1944), text-fiche, 3-4.
15. *Anzio Beachhead*, 33.
16. The division did not tally the number of observed fire missions in March. "3d Infantry Division Report of Operations," *Historical Documents of World War II* (Morris Swett Technical Library, Fort Sill, 1944), text-film, Roll 81, Document 1181, 5, 8, 14.
17. *Report on Study of Field Artillery Gunnery, #6* (Headquarters, European Theater of Operations: General Board, US Forces Europe), 27-28.
18. *Anzio Beachhead*, 72.
19. *Comments, 1st Armored Division*, 4.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Other suggestions included announcing "splash" to observers five seconds before impact, combining the roles of horizontal control officer and vertical control officer, and turning aiming post lights on and off by yanking on a wire attached to switches. Griffing, *Board of 21 April 1944*, 21-22.
22. *Ibid.*, 21.
23. Fires came from the 39th Field Artillery Battalion, the 69th Field Artillery Battalion and the 1st Battalion, 77th Field Artillery. *Anzio Beachhead*, 33.
24. *Ibid.*, 81.
25. Kuhn, 13.
26. *Anzio Beachhead*, 86.
27. *Ibid.*, 87.
28. This percentage comes from a report filed by General Eberhardt von Mackensen to Kesselring on 28 February 1945. *Ibid.*, 89.