On 9 August 1943, at the height of the Allied campaign in Sicily, the war diary of the British Eighth Army’s 5th Infantry Division recorded how:

For the past five days the Div[ision] has been pushing forward against an enemy intent on withdrawal. The enemy’s intention to abandon Sicily is apparent. The nature of the country, which is steep hills interspersed with lava fields, render it impossible in many places to leave the roads. The many bridges and the precipitous nature of the country render it easy for the enemy to impose delay out of all proportion to his fighting strength.¹

Indeed, the skillfully executed withdrawal performed by German forces in Sicily facilitated a remarkably orderly evacuation of the Axis armies from the north-eastern corner of the island; one that the Allies proved powerless to either prevent or seriously interdict. Between 1 and 17 August, when the campaign ended, a total of 39,951 German troops, together with 14,772 casualties, were safely ferried across the Straits of Messina. In addition, German forces removed 9,789 vehicles, 51 tanks, 163 guns, and 18,665 tons of ammunition, fuel and equipment to the Italian mainland. At the same time, Italian forces withdrew an estimated 59,000 troops, 3,000 sailors, 227 vehicles, and 41 artillery pieces in a separate evacuation.²

In many respects, the final phase of fighting in Sicily proved a successful testing ground for the highly effective defensive doctrine subsequently practiced by the German Army on the Italian mainland, for which the geographical and topographical make-up of the country was ideal. A key element of this, as


© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2014 | DOI 10.1163/9789004255708_007
the Allies soon appreciated, was disengagement and withdrawal. Conducted in an aggressive fashion, and only when forced, these actions sought to regain operational freedom by hindering the enemy in his pursuit. This was achieved by coordinated “delaying actions” directed by mobile rearguards equipped with tanks, anti-tank guns, mines, and snipers, which aimed to inflict “heavy casualties on the enemy without allowing him to get to grips, this means surrendering ground systematically.” Aided by extensive demolitions, these rearguards acted as a buffer between the enemy and the main German force, facilitating the latter’s withdrawal into the next defensive position. Delaying actions were therefore fought from “lines of resistance,” comprising strong points on commanding features, with enough distance between each line to prevent enemy artillery from engaging more than one from the same position. When in danger of concerted attack or outflanking, the rearguard would then withdraw, usually at night and under the cover of demolitions, to the next line of resistance.3

Any measure of Allied fighting effectiveness in the Mediterranean theater must therefore assess the competence with which the Allied armies responded to these “delaying actions” at the tactical level. With regard to the final phase of the battle for Sicily, where these German tactics were encountered for the first time in terrain ideal for their execution, Allied combat effectiveness has generally been judged unfavorably. The British official historian, Brigadier C.J.C. Molony, declared that Allied formations were often “tactically slow. Action took a long time to get going, and until experience was gained, advances sometimes appeared rather like efforts to cram a number of corks into a bottle.”4 Other commentators have been particularly critical of the tactical performance of General Sir Bernard Montgomery’s British Eighth Army, which conducted the campaign in concert with the U.S. Seventh Army under Lieutenant-General George Patton. In the face of the German withdrawal, Eighth Army’s infantry, “well versed in Monty methods, advanced slowly, hit the enemy, sat back letting the artillery do its worst, to go forward as and when the Germans permitted it”;
