Communications are a vital part of any army’s command system; without efficient communications, an army will struggle to operate at all, let alone successfully. Despite this fundamental importance, the in-depth study of communications as a discrete subject has been much neglected in military history in general and in particular in the study of the British Army’s experience during the Second World War. The objective of this chapter is to redress this balance and to examine the impact that forward British Army communications (those at corps level and below) had on the outcome of its campaigns in North Africa, Sicily and Italy between 1942 and 1944.

The historiography of British Army communications during the war exhibits widely different opinions on their effectiveness. Apart from an unpublished account of Signal Communications by Col. T.B. Gravely, issued in 1950, the only detailed books concerning British Army communications in this period are the two official histories of the Royal Signals, written by Major-General R.F.H Nalder and published in the 1950s. Nalder was the Chief Signal Officer of 15th Army Group in Italy from 1943 to 1945, so the picture that he portrays of British communications in the theater as being an overall success with some blemishes can, perhaps, be considered over-optimistic.

The majority of other books covering this period, on the other hand, never talk about success and only mention communications when they failed; an approach which certainly gives a distorted impression of their effectiveness and impact on the outcome of British operations. In his official history of the Italian campaign, for example, Molony criticised communications after the landings

at Salerno, talking about the “undependable wireless sets of the day”, while noting that at Cassino communications within battalions “usually broke down”.\(^3\) Elsewhere, the official history is peppered with examples of failure which leave the abiding impression of a thoroughly unreliable communications system. Carlo D’Este’s book on the Italian campaign provides another example: he wrote that “the notoriously inefficient British wireless sets were all too frequently the bane of the Army during the war”.\(^4\) Such wording suggests that there were not just problems with wireless communications in general, but British wireless in particular. In other words, D’Este implies that not only were British sets inefficient, but also that they were worse than those of other armies, for example, those of the Americans or the Germans. The contrasting accounts offered by Nalder, Molony and D’Este serve to emphasise that no clear picture is available from published sources as to the efficacy of the British Army’s communications during the Second World War. It is the intent of this chapter to try to fill this gap by providing a more balanced, objective assessment.

Following a brief summary of the main methods of communication employed by the British Army during the Second World War, this chapter will use the case study of the 5th Infantry Division’s crossing of the Garigliano River in Italy in January 1944 as an example of how it is possible for different commentators to draw opposite conclusions about the effectiveness of communications from the same events. Using this example, it will thus be possible to propose a more appropriate method of judging the success or failure of communications in battle. This template will then be used to analyze the effectiveness of British Army communications in amphibious, land and airborne operations in the Mediterranean theater, 1942 to 1944.

The Main Methods of Communication

Communications, as related to the army, are the processes by which information (for example orders or situation reports) is transferred from one location or person to another. During the Second World War, these processes within the British Army were usually in the hands of the Royal Corps of Signals down to battalion HQ level, but were the responsibility of regimental signalers below that. The main methods of battlefield communication available to British
