The British Army enjoys an unenviable reputation for command and control in wartime. Only in recent years, with the increasing reassessment of the Army’s methods of command between 1914 and 1918, has the pervasive image of British military buffoonery really begun to recede. Recent studies of the British Army’s performance during the Second World War have afforded a more balanced view, but still paint an unimpressive picture of the Army’s higher management of battle, which fell far below the competency achieved by its key opponent: the German Army with its much admired system of devolved “mission” command. Command and control in the British Army was instead characterized by strict adherence to the hierarchy of command and its orders, with planning and decision making centralized at the highest level. Combined, it is claimed these factors produced an inflexible system of command both vulnerable to, and unable to fully exploit, the uncertainties of the battlefield.1

Nowhere in the conduct of the Second World War does it appear that the ill-effects of this approach to command were more apparent than in the Italian campaign, during which one French officer complained, “Eighth Army does not pursue the enemy; it follows them”.2 Senior British commanders often agreed.

---


Whilst noting their ability to effectively conduct the deliberate, corps-sized offensive operations required to puncture German defensive lines, typical of much of the fighting in Italy, they bemoaned a general inability to fully exploit these victories. High amongst the factors cited were slow decision making in effecting the transition from a break-in to a breakthrough, and a lack of enterprise and flexibility shown by higher commanders in developing mobile operations. A single sentence in the 1945 War Office publication, *Notes from Theatres of War – No. 20*, covering the fighting in Italy during 1943 and 1944, encapsulated the whole problem, stating ‘our ... tactical methods are thorough and methodical, but slow and cumbersome.’

Focusing primarily on the brigade, division and corps level of command, this chapter examines command, control and operational planning during XIII British Corps’ part in the successful Fourth Battle of Cassino in May 1944, and the subsequent exploitation of that victory during the months of June and July. In contrast to prevailing characterizations of British Army command during the Second World War, and the languid, un-enterprising approach to operations in Italy it apparently engendered, it illustrates the considerable degree to which British formations devolved responsibility down the chain of command and utilized an approach to planning and orders surprisingly modern in concept. The devolution of command responsibility increased during the pursuit phase of the battle, in which British division and brigade commanders handled their formations aggressively, making considerable efforts to maintain the momentum of advance and defeat the numerous German rearguards in the mountainous terrain of central Italy.

Planning Operation HONKER

Between mid-January and mid-March 1944, three successive Allied attacks under Lieutenant-General M.W. Clark’s U.S. Fifth Army had aimed to puncture the German Gustav defensive line, running from north-east to south-west of the town of Cassino, located little over twenty miles from the west coast of Italy. Each had as their aim the opening of the main regional transport artery, Highway 6, for an advance in strength up the Liri Valley towards Rome; each

---