



## SIXTH SUPPLEMENT

TO

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FRIDAY, 12 APRIL, 1918.

War Office,  
12th April, 1918.

The Secretary of State for War has received the following Despatch from General Sir Herbert Plumer, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., G.C.V.O., Commanding the British Forces in Italy:—

General Headquarters,  
British Forces in Italy,  
9th March, 1918.

My Lord,

I assumed command of the British Forces in Italy on the 10th November, 1917.

I submit now a brief recapitulation of events together with a summary of the services rendered by the various branches of the force.

The instructions I received on proceeding to Italy were:

- (a) To take command of the British Force then in course of transit to Italy;
- (b) To report on the general situation and the number of troops required for the task before us.

I found on arrival that the general situation was certainly disquieting. The Italian Army had just received a very severe blow, from which

it was bound to require time to recover and reorganise, and although every effort was being made to despatch the French and British Forces to the theatre of operations, it was obvious, owing to the limited railway facilities, that some time must elapse before these forces could be regarded as a material factor.

Reconnaissances were made at once to arrange for their employment according to the number available and the development of the situation.

The Italian retreat had been arrested on the River Piave, but it was uncertain whether they would hold this line, and in the first instance it was arranged that in conjunction with the French two of our divisions should move forward on arrival to the hills north and south of Vicenza; where a stand could certainly have been made.

The forward march was well carried out. The marches were necessarily long, as time was, or might have been, all important. The troops everywhere met with an enthusiastic reception from the inhabitants.

By the time we had reached the above position the general situation had improved, and we accordingly made an offer in conjunction

with the French to take over sectors in the foothills of the Asiago plateau, which would have placed us in a strategically sound position to withstand attack either from the north or north-east. At this stage, however, snow was imminent, and it was considered by the Italian High Command that our troops would suffer considerable losses and hardships from the cold in the hills, especially as they were unaccustomed to such warfare, and there were many difficulties in providing the special mountain equipment necessary, and it was suggested that we should instead take over the Montello sector with the French on our left, to which we agreed.

The Montello sector is a feature by itself, and an important one. It acts as a hinge to the whole Italian line, joining as it does that portion facing north from Mt. Tomba to Lake Garda, with the defensive line of the River Piave covering Venice, which was held by the Third Italian Army.

There is no doubt but that the entry of French and British troops into the line at this time had an excellent moral effect, and it enabled the Italians to withdraw troops to train and reorganise.

There were at this time several German divisions east of the River Piave, and it was quite likely that an attack to force that river and capture Venice was in contemplation. We took over the line on 4th December and at once got to work to organise the defences in depth, keeping as large a reserve as was possible in hand in case of unforeseen eventualities occurring in other portions of the line. Such did occur, as the enemy commenced to develop local attacks on the Grappa and Asiago sectors, first in one and then in the other, assisted undoubtedly by German batteries. These attacks fell principally on the First and Fourth Italian Armies, who fought well, and though they had a good number of casualties themselves they inflicted heavy losses on the enemy.

December was an anxious month. Local attacks grew more frequent and more severe, and though the progress made was not great and Italian counter-attacks were constantly made, yet the danger of a break through into the plains undoubtedly increased.

The general impression conveyed by these attacks was that the Austrians were being encouraged to persevere with their attacks in the hope of getting down into the plains for the winter, and that the German divisions were being kept in reserve with the intention of concentrating them at short notice to force home an attack should opportunity offer.

Rear lines of defence were constructed under our supervision, and as time passed and preparations became more forward the general atmosphere of security improved. This was increased by the attempt of the Italians to recapture Mt. Asolone on 22nd December, which resulted in the southern slopes being again in Italian hands. The following day, however, the pendulum again swung to the Asiago, as the enemy captured Mt. Melago and Col Rosso. The Italians retook the former by counter-attack. Christmas Day found us, therefore, with the situation both on the Grappa and Asiago serious, the latter the more so, but the Italians, though suffering from prolonged strain and cold, were offering a stubborn resistance.

From this time the situation gradually im-

proved. The French carried out a brilliant attack on 30th December in the Mt. Tomba sector, resulting in the capture of over 1,500 Austrian prisoners. British artillery assisted in this operation.

During all this period we had carried out continuous patrol work across the River Piave and much successful counter-battery work. The Piave is a very serious obstacle, especially at this season of the year, the breadth opposite the British front being considerably over 1,000 yards and the current 14 knots. Every form of raft and boat has been used, but wading has proved the most successful, but the icy cold water made the difficulties even greater. In spite of this there has never been any lack of volunteers, both officers and men, for these enterprises.

On 1st January our biggest raid was carried out by the Middlesex Regiment. This was a most difficult and well-planned operation, which had for its objective the capture and surrounding of several buildings held by the enemy to a depth of 2,000 yards inland, provided a surprise could be effected. Two hundred and fifty men were passed across by wading and some prisoners were captured, but, unfortunately, the alarm was given by a party of 50 of the enemy that was encountered in an advanced post, and the progress inland had, therefore, in accordance with orders, to be curtailed. The recrossing of the river was successfully effected, and our casualties were very few. An operation of this nature requires much forethought and arrangement, even to wrapping every man in hot blankets immediately on emerging from the icy water.

The Third Italian Army also opened the year well by clearing the Austrians from the west bank of the Piave about Zenson. This was followed on 14th January by the attack of the Fourth Italian Army on Mt. Asolone, which, although not entirely successful, resulted in capturing over 400 Austrian prisoners.

The situation had by this time so far improved that I offered to take over another sector of defence on my right in order to assist the Italians. This was agreed to and was completed by 28th January. On this day and the following the First Italian Army carried out successful operations on the Col Del Rosso—Mt. Val Bella front, on the Asiago plateau. The infantry attacked with great spirit, and captured some 2,500 Austrian prisoners. British artillery took part in the above operation.

Since the beginning of February the weather has become bad, a considerable amount of snow has fallen, and visibility has been poor, which has interfered considerably with air and artillery work.

It is certainly the case that the general situation on the Italian front has gradually but steadily improved during the four months which have elapsed since the British Force was sent there, and, although we have not taken part in any serious fighting, I think we can fairly claim to have had some share in this improvement.

The work of the R.F.C. under Brig.-General Webb-Bowen during the period under review has been quite brilliant. From the moment of arrival they made their presence felt, and very soon overcame the difficulties of the mountains. They have taken part in all operations, and rendered much assistance to the Italians in the air. They have carried out a large number of

successful raids on enemy aerodromes, railway junctions, etc., and have during the period destroyed sixty-four hostile machines, a large proportion of which were German, and nine balloons, our losses to the enemy during the period being twelve machines and three balloons, a record which speaks for itself.

The Artillery has rendered very useful service. Our gunners soon became accustomed to the altered conditions, and carried out many successful destructive shoots. A comparison of the photographs of hostile battery positions when our artillery entered the line with the positions now occupied shows that the enemy batteries have been successfully forced back almost throughout the whole front. Some British Artillery assisted both in French and Italian operations, and a frequent interchange of British and Italian batteries was made, together with Counter Battery Staff Officers, in order that experience of each other's methods might be gained. Every effort was made to illustrate the value of counter-battery work, the value of which we had learned by experience in France, but which the Italians had not hitherto fully appreciated.

The Italians were only too anxious to profit by any experience we could give them, and this was done not only by frequent interchange of visits of Commanders and Staffs to the various sectors of defence, but by the establishment of Schools of Instruction at which a large number of Italian officers actually underwent the courses. About 100 Italian officers attended the courses at the various schools, together with some French officers. Similarly British officers underwent courses at French and Italian schools.

The organisation of the Intelligence Service in Italy has been carried out very satisfactorily. The adaptation of Italian maps and means of interchange between Italian and British batteries also entailed much work.

The close co-operation between the Artillery, Intelligence and R.F.C. under conditions strange to previous experience was entirely satisfactory.

The organisation of the Lines of Communication was very well carried out by Lieut.-General Sir H. Lawson, K.C.B. The various Base Depôts, Hospitals and Convalescent Camps have been well arranged, and are in thoroughly good working order. The Medical and Sanitary Services have been well organised. The policy of establishing General and Stationary Hospitals at Genoa and on the Riviera worked well, as the effect of these hospitals in such a good climate naturally tended to early recovery.

The health of the troops has been excellent, and the casualties slight. The men felt the cold considerably during the winter, but I am convinced that they have benefited much from the change after the severe fighting they had had in France.

The conduct of the troops has been excellent. They have been very well received everywhere, and have themselves set the high standard expected of them.

I cannot speak too highly of the kindness we have received from the Italian authorities, with whom we established most cordial relations. Everything possible was done to help us. The provision, employment and maintenance of the Force has entailed a considerable amount of work between the Allied Staffs, and this had been conducted throughout in complete harmony.

We are all much indebted to His Excellency General Diaz, Chief of Staff, Royal Italian Army; and to the Staff of the Italian High Command, and to the Commanders and Staffs of the various Armies, and to the Liaison Officers, Colonels Ragioni and Gloria, with my Headquarters, who have given us every assistance; as also to Generals Fayolle and Maistre, who commanded the French troops during the period, and with whom we worked in the closest association, and Commandant De Massignac, French General Staff, at my Headquarters, has been especially useful to me.

I have received the greatest assistance throughout from Brigadier-General Delme-Radcliffe, C.B., C.M.G., C.V.O., head of the British Mission in Italy, whose knowledge of Italian and the Italian Army has been of great value to me.

I feel that the close alliance and interchange of ideas and methods between the three Allied Forces cannot fail to have produced beneficial results.

I shall have an opportunity of bringing to your Lordship's notice the names of the officers of the Force who rendered service of value, but I would like to make a special reference to Major-General C. H. Harington, C.B., D.S.O., the Chief of the General Staff, to whom is due the fact that all the varied and frequently difficult Staff problems were solved, and that complete harmony prevailed between all the Allied Staffs throughout the whole period.

I have the honour to be

Your Lordship's obedient servant,

HERBERT PLUMER,

General,

Commanding British Forces in Italy.

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