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HISTORICAL DIVISION

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I. Author: HANS BESSELL

GENERALMAJOR

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HISTORICAL DIVISION SEAL.

CONSTRUCTION OF STRATEGIC FIELD FORTIFICATIONS

IN ITALY

SEPTEMBER 1943 - OCTOBER 1944.

A. The positions in the combat sector south of Rome

September 1943 to the beginning of June 1944.

I. Construction of field fortifications in the Garigliano -

Sangro-area, September 1943 to the middle of January 1944.*)

by

Generalmajor Hans B e s s e l l

Written at: Garmisch (Germany)

Completed on: 26 March 1947

Sources: a) personal: Own recollections

b) documents: Operations in SICILY and ITALY (Department of Military Art and Engineering U.S. Military Academy West Point, New York 1945).

Sketches and

Map tracings: None. Documentation for this area:

Aeronautical map of Italy,

scale: 1 : 500 000

Abbreviations:

MG - Maschinengewehr	- Machine gun
usw. - und so weiter	- etcetera
Btl.Kdr. - Bataillonskommandeur	- battalion commander
Mot.-Fragen - Fragen der Motorisierung-	motorization matters
Mt.Cassino - Monte Cassino **)	- Cassino mountain
Mt.Trocchio- Monte Trocchio	- Trocchio mountain

[see page 2]

*) Additional chapters are being prepared and will be submitted

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**) Translator's note: Probably typographical error, should read
Mt. Camino instead of Mt.Cassino.

[Abbreviations, continued:]

Mt. Caizo - Monte Caizo - Caizo mountain
 Mt. Majo - Monte Majo - Majo mountain

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Hans B e s s e l l

Garmisch, 26 March 1947

Generalmajor

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a. Feldmarschall Kesselring's [strategic] decision.

By his decision of September 1943, to install the 10. Armee which, after the landing of the American - British Armies was withdrawing from the Salerno - Taranto area in a delaying action, in a position previously selected and prepared, and thereby to bring the attack on Central Italy and Rome to a standstill, Feldmarschall Kesselring decisively influenced the development of the fighting in the Italian area and thereby definitely stated, as early as that time, his basic opinion on the value of strategic field fortifications in a battle against superior enemy forces. As a matter of fact, it can be followed, like a red thread, through all of the

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reinforcements for the German forces in Italy were out of the question, gaining back the lost territory was utterly impossible, and, on the other hand, the enemy's efforts became more and more obvious to bring about a decision in the battle for Italy by all means. In this connection the command had the opportunity of basing its operational plans on a terrain particularly well suited for defensive action; both the command and the troops cleverly took advantage of this fact. Conversely, this circumstance forced the enemy to proceed in troublesome, energy and matériel consuming action, in some sectors actually requiring a severe struggle for every single foot of Italian ground taken.

Already at this point it appears opportune to state that naturally the success of the command, which delayed the attacker for almost one year in the heavy fighting for the Rome-Appenin area, was due in the first place to the German soldier fighting in the front who, setting an example of willingness to go into action, enduringly and courageously, again and again opposed potentially far superior forces; however, there is no doubt whatsoever that recognition must be given also to the performances of the many staffs and construction troops, as well as to units of front troops and especially engineer battalions employed in the construction of the fortifications who gave the fighting front not only material but also moral support by quietly performing their hard work which was often of decisive importance although it was hardly ever mentioned officially. Moreover, the same recognition and gratitude ought to be extended also to the Italian construction battalions, the battalions of Slovak units, and the thousands of German and Italian civilian workers.

b. The initial order for the construction of fortifications.

On 25 September 1943 Oberbefehlshaber Sued issued the order for the construction of a fortified field position following a line western bank of the Garigliano - Mt. Camino - north of Mignano - hills west of Colli - Alfedena - Roccaraso - the Maiella massif - Orsogna - Ortona to be used as main line of resistance for the defensive action of the 10 Army

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Purpose: To receive the 10. Armee which was withdrawing after

the landing of the American - British Armies, in order to arrest, in this line, the attack on Central Italy and Rome, and to prevent it further on. Main points of effort for defensive action were designated as follows: The Garigliano sector, the Mignano area, the hills on either side of the roads going through the mountains via Colli, Alfedena, and Roccaraso, and finally the Adriatic Sea sector Orsogna - Ortona, which was particularly well suited for armored operations.

The responsibility for exploring and constructing the position was given to Generalmajor Bessel; he was instructed by Feldmarschall Kesselring in person about his mission. Particular emphasis was placed on the decisive importance of this position for the further development of the battle in the Italian area, apparent not only from the operational but also from the political point of view.

Although this was fully understood, for the time being all of the measures taken had the appearance of improvised expedients, due, in the first place, to the insecure and unclear situation following the upheaval in Italy, and to repercussions thereof on all steps taken by the military command. For this reason the actual performance in the construction of the fortifications, in the end, did not come up to the necessary requirements, especially if it is kept in mind that preparations were made according to carefully drawn plans, using all necessary means, and the construction of this position, planned to fulfill a certain operational purpose, was finally executed by sufficient numbers of trained personnel. The reasons for the fact that in the end the expected defensive success was nevertheless realized [qualities of the] in this position, may be found rather in the command and the troops, in terrain features, and, to a certain extent, in weather conditions, finally also in given circumstances prevailing on the attacking side, but not, to any decisive extent, in the support of the defense by increasing the defensive power through means of field fortifications.

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c. Basic requirements for the organization of a position fulfilling the expectations of the command and the needs of the troops.

The basis for careful planning of the organization of previously

selected and prepared positions, once the general location of the position has been mapped subsequent to an intensive study of the topography, consists in reconnaissance carried out by experienced front officers of all services. In the final analysis, reconnaissance must include every last detail of the terrain. It is imperative that accurate information is gained about the terrain and all possibilities are explored to take advantage of its features for purposes of the most effective defense, studying the problem both from our own side and from the side of the enemy. In conformity with the subdivision into defensive - (Divisional) - sectors, the reconnaissance staffs are formed out of the personnel of the Divisions scheduled [to occupy the position]. An experienced infantry commander is appointed as chief, to whom officers of all services, including special weapons units (M.G.etc.) are assigned according to current requirements. Starting from a general impression of the sector resulting from a joint study of the terrain, tactical questions (subdivision of the sectors, main points of effort, emplacement of weapons, communications, distribution of reserves) are cleared up by reconnaissance procedure, and finally all details are worked out which may increase the fighting power and the security of the forces [in the position].

The results are entered on large-scale maps, a description and evaluation of the sector is prepared, including every additional explanation necessary or of value to the command. Any experiences gained are passed on to all of the reconnaissance staffs during joint conferences. This insures uniformity of tactical interpretations.

Simultaneously with the decision to construct an operational position measures must be taken for the moving up of the necessary construction materials as well as of arms and ammunitions. It is possible to prepare an estimate of requirements before information on the terrain has been gained on the basis of map study adding a supplementary amount for the main points of effort selected in the meantime. As far as priority is concerned the above movement of materials, arms, and ammunition is equal to that of ammunition supplies - , at the beginning of operations for the construction

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priority. The supply services for the construction of field fortifications will be assigned their own transport trains, their own transport space [trucking], their own unloading depots, their own storage spaces; whenever possible measures to this effect should be carried out at as many places as feasible already while current reconnaissance of the defensive area is still under way. An enumeration of details may be omitted as far as requirements of the supply services for the construction of fortifications are concerned. However, it should be remembered that the same consideration should be given to the necessity of preparing sufficiently comfortable billets for the reserves to be stationed ready for action within the main battle field, as to the increase of the defensive power of the weapons.

Of no less importance than the early procurement of construction material is the employment of trained construction personnel, at least in the beginning, for the first start in ^{construction} operations. Beside using trained construction battalions assembled according to purely technical points of view, it appears advisable to secure the participation of units of the Divisions scheduled to occupy the position, which, because of their practical experience on the front on one hand, and because of their particular interest in their own sector on the other hand, are in a position to give the construction operations ^{an} invigorating and stimulating impetus.

Right from the beginning it is necessary to appoint commanders responsible for the various sectors. Any construction detachments which might be brought up later on, may be incorporated into their sectors subsequently. Uniformity of interpretation, steady progress of work, and practical experience will bring about the best results in this manner. To every one of these commanders one experienced infantry officer will be assigned to act as representative of the directive staff [Leitungsstab], and whenever possible also one artillery officer from the reconnaissance staff of the sector, in order to guarantee that tactical requirements are properly taken care of in the construction. His suggestions constitute

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his instructions, given by order of the directive staff and according to its instructions, are binding for the commander of the construction sector.

As far as the actual construction of individual installations is concerned, it is advisable to provide the commanders - down to those of the individual construction detachments - with uniform construction sketches, to be prepared by the directive staff with the approval of the commanders of the reconnaissance staffs.

Active cooperation with the commanders (incl. of Btl. Kds.) of the Divisions scheduled to occupy the position is necessary. Aside from their personal influence, it is their particular duty to make recommendations with regard to assuring proper fire concentration of the weapons to be emplaced in the points of main effort and along the boundaries.

The staff appointed to direct the organization of operational positions should consist of officers of all services. These officers should have front experience, tactical training, a good understanding of terrain, and a practical common sense, furthermore, they should be young, resilient, industrious, and very eager to go into action. It is not advisable to appoint a staff consisting mostly of engineer officers because this may result in over-emphasis of matters of a technical nature. The emplaced weapons' ability to fulfill their tactical mission completely is more important than their tactically perfect protection against loss or damage. And, on the same token, it is more important that the combat and reserve troops will be able to leave their quarters and be ready for action in the shortest possible time than to see to it that they are absolutely protected against enemy fire, as desirable as this may be as such. Therefore, the most outstanding infantry officer will be appointed leader of the staff and first in charge, while an artillery officer of exceptional qualities will act as the second in charge. One or two young and able engineer officers interested in tactical problems are necessary. These will be joined by an experienced, possibly older officer, who must be both thorough and untiring in his work, to act as officer in charge of the supply movement and who will be assisted by technical experts assigned to him according to the size of the task to be completed. The supply

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of one experienced officer each for questions of motorization and for administrative purposes, as well as one higher medical officer, and, if necessary, also of one veterinary officer cannot be dispensed with.

Because of psychological, but also because of practical reasons, well known to the front officer, it is not advisable to give the staff a designation which emphasizes its construction activity. In the interest of an understanding cooperation with the command authorities, especially with the strategic offices in the front, a designation pointing up the tactical qualities is preferable. Furthermore, the appointment of such a staff for every individual and definite mission seems to be more suitable than an automatic selection made according to a prearranged system similar to mobilization procedure.

d. The organization of the Garigliano - Sangro = position.

A "Kuestenverteidigungsstab" previously employed in the construction of artillery emplacements along the coast was placed at the disposal of the director in charge of the construction as his staff. In view of its previous activity and due to its composition, this staff soon proved to be unable to complete the assigned mission of constructing fortifications for the fighting front. Neither was this staff able to contribute materially to reconnaissance. Moreover, the 10. Armee had been fighting in a greatly extended area and had suffered serious losses including casualties among its officers during the action of the previous weeks, and was, therefore, unable to release but very few officers for reconnaissance purposes. Consequently, reconnaissance had to be concentrated on the points of main effort and greatly limited as far as time^{allowed for it} was concerned; particular attention was given to the Garigliano area, the defile of Mignano, and to the defensive possibilities of the Maiella massif, inclusive of the respective approaches. There was no time for checking over the reconnaissance reports, nor was there any chance to compare and adjust the results with regard to uniform interpretation. Nevertheless, by the first days of October, the basic data were ready and the construction troops on the spot were started on the work.

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For the time being only the following were available: 2 construction battalions which were being brought up, and individual engineer companies

which were not needed for duty in the withdrawal operations. Furthermore, several thousand civilian workers were to be made available by the prefects of the prefectures located within the general area of the position. As a matter of fact, this disposition did not become effective -- hardly more than a few hundred workers reported for work in response to the respective appeals -- because, as a consequence of the recent political upheaval in Italy, in most cases the new prefects had very little authority.

On the other hand the materials which could be brought up right away were rather scanty compared to the size and importance of the project. Posts for obstacles and wood for the construction of shelters -- tasks which had to be postponed anyhow giving precedence to the more important construction of combat positions -- had to be felled and prepared by the construction troops themselves, an additional workload which delayed the progress considerably, especially since the terrain was a difficult one. Because of poor transportation conditions the delivery of mines was lagging. Any available amounts had to be distributed first of all to the units fighting in the front. Other materials were just about not available at all. Only the most urgently needed tools could be assigned to the construction crews for their entrenchment and other work.

Therefore this broadly planned and decisive construction project ordered by Oberbefehlshaber Sued did not appear very promising in the beginning, and all of the commanders connected with it felt considerable anxiety waiting to see how it would stand up under the expected concentrated attack by the American - British Armies. However, due to the 10. Armee's excellent conduct of battle time was gained so that a considerably longer period was available for the construction of the position than had previously been anticipated. In this connection it [the command] was depending on excellent, battle-experienced troops, whose commanders were able again and again to delay a rapid advance of the attackers by carefully thought-out countermeasures. They were aided by unfavorable, rainy weather conditions which caused much greater difficulties for the attacking than for the defending forces in that difficult terrain with practically no roads.

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during November additional units could be assigned to the position for construction work, that is to say, not only complete engineer battalions, but also troop units of recently brought-up Divisions, and finally even several construction detachments. Since the supplies moved a little more fluently from about the end of October on, by the end of November it was finally possible to complete a defensive line of a somewhat limited defensive value at least on the Garigliano front, on Mt. Camino, furthermore especially at the Mignano defile, and finally in the Adriatic Sea Wing, where important elements of a new Division had been employed in the construction of fortifications. Its essential defensive weapons were emplaced under cover, secure shelter was available for a part of the forces manning the position, and protection against surprise was provided for by means of barbed wire and mines.

Faced by the 8. British Army, the 10. Armee dominated the area in front of the entire northern half of its front and east of this ^[new] position for almost one and a half month longer by fighting stubbornly. It was only during the last days of December 1943, and after suffering severe casualties in his action, that the attacker entered the immediate effective range of the fortified position. For the time being attacks considerably beyond this line did not succeed.

Experiences gained during the fighting since the Salerno - Taranto landing had greatly increased the understanding of our troops for taking advantage of any terrain conditions particularly favorable for the defense, as well as their determination in carrying through the defense, which in the front was given further impetus because of the final political and military objective involved. For instance, in the southern front of the Armee, the troops used their own materials and their own forces to establish additional lines of resistance to the rear of the defensive position proper. Subsequently, these lines fulfilled their purpose when at the beginning of December the 5. American Army assembled for a large-scale attack with the ambitious objective of conquering the capital. On 8 December Mt. Camino was lost, by 19 December the attackers had crossed the Mignano defile, and on 15 January the conquest of

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Rapido was crossed, and the attacker was facing the ruins of Monte Cassino.

This meant that by approximately the middle of January 1944 the attack by the American - British Armies was brought to a standstill along a line which, in its wings did not, or at least not to any considerable extent, reach beyond the defense zone [Verteidigungszone] originally selected as the main combat area; -- in its center, along the main Naples- Rome Highway, a deeper penetration up to the massif of the dominating Mt. Cairo had developed. And this was stopped in front of a switch position organized during several weeks of work by strong forces using considerable amounts of materials, forming a part of the Garigliano - Sangro defensive front system, and which, echeloned in great depth and resting on the dominating mountain groups of Mt. Majo and Mt. Cairo, formed an additional block of the Liri valley.

The 10.Armees owed its defensive success mainly to the stubborn determination and the unyielding, selfsacrificing courage and stoicism of its Divisions. Besides, these were strongly backed up by a system of lines of resistance in a naturally favorable terrain, where well thought-out constructions had further increased the defensive strength from a strategic point of view.

This development in the Italian area proved first of all and beyond any doubt that, in constructing strategic fortifications to give support to the defensive action forced upon us by the fundamental realization of the attacker's superior strength, the correct decision had been taken.

signed: Hans Bessell

(HANS BESSELL)

Historical Division Seal

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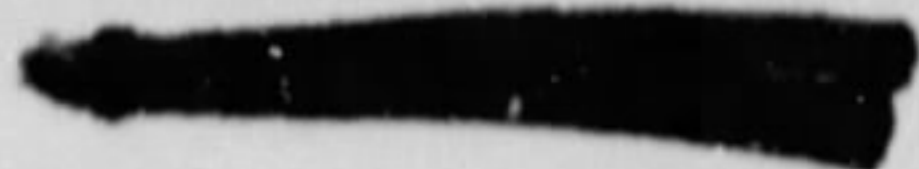
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Translated:
4 Dec. 1947: M.B.



[Sketch]

The Garigliano - Sangro position

Aeronautical map of Italy

Scale: 1 : 500 000



signed: Hans Bessell

(HANS BESSELL)

Generalmajor.

Gulf of Gaeta

Scale: 1 : 500 000

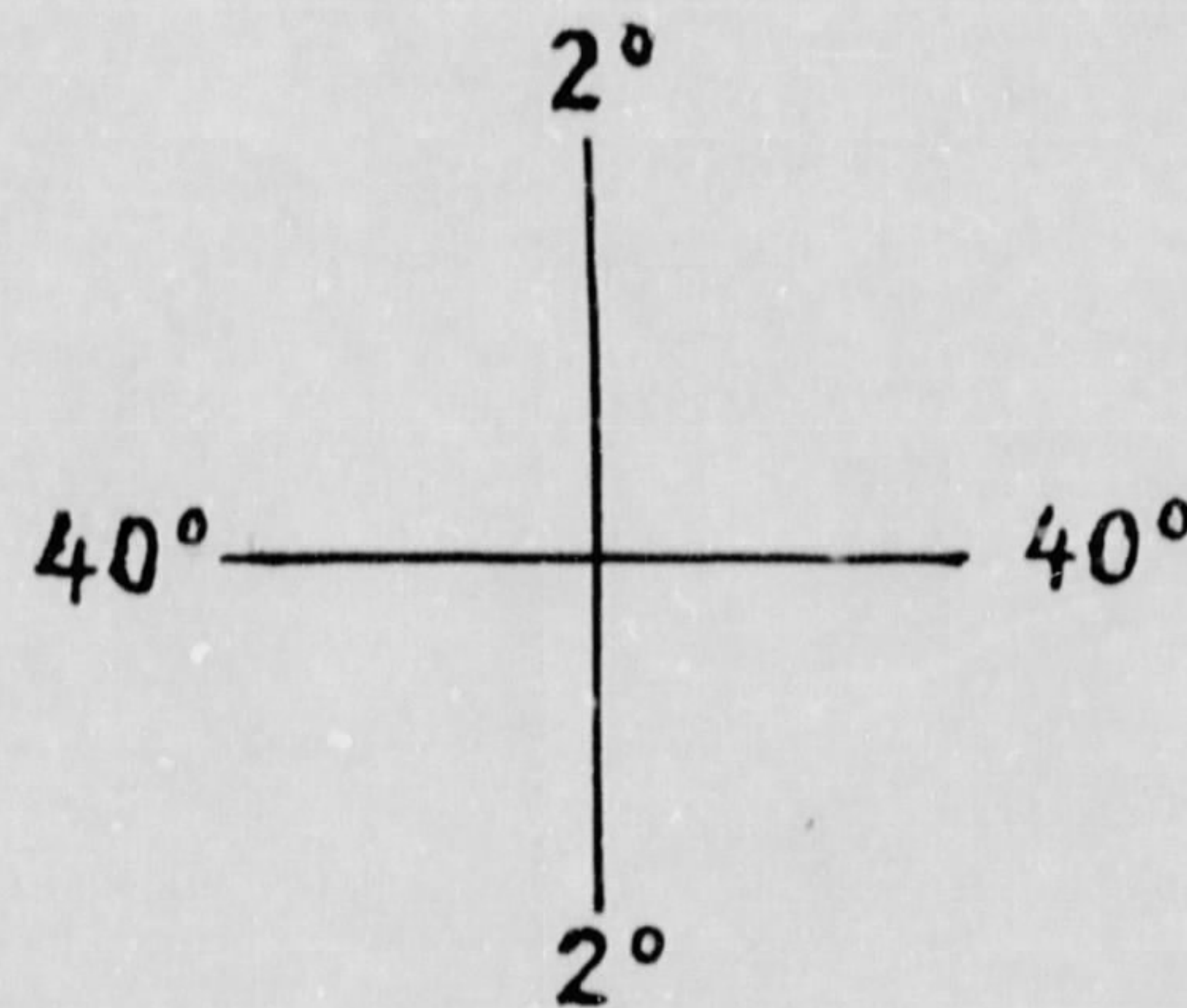
Die Garigliano - Sangro Stellung

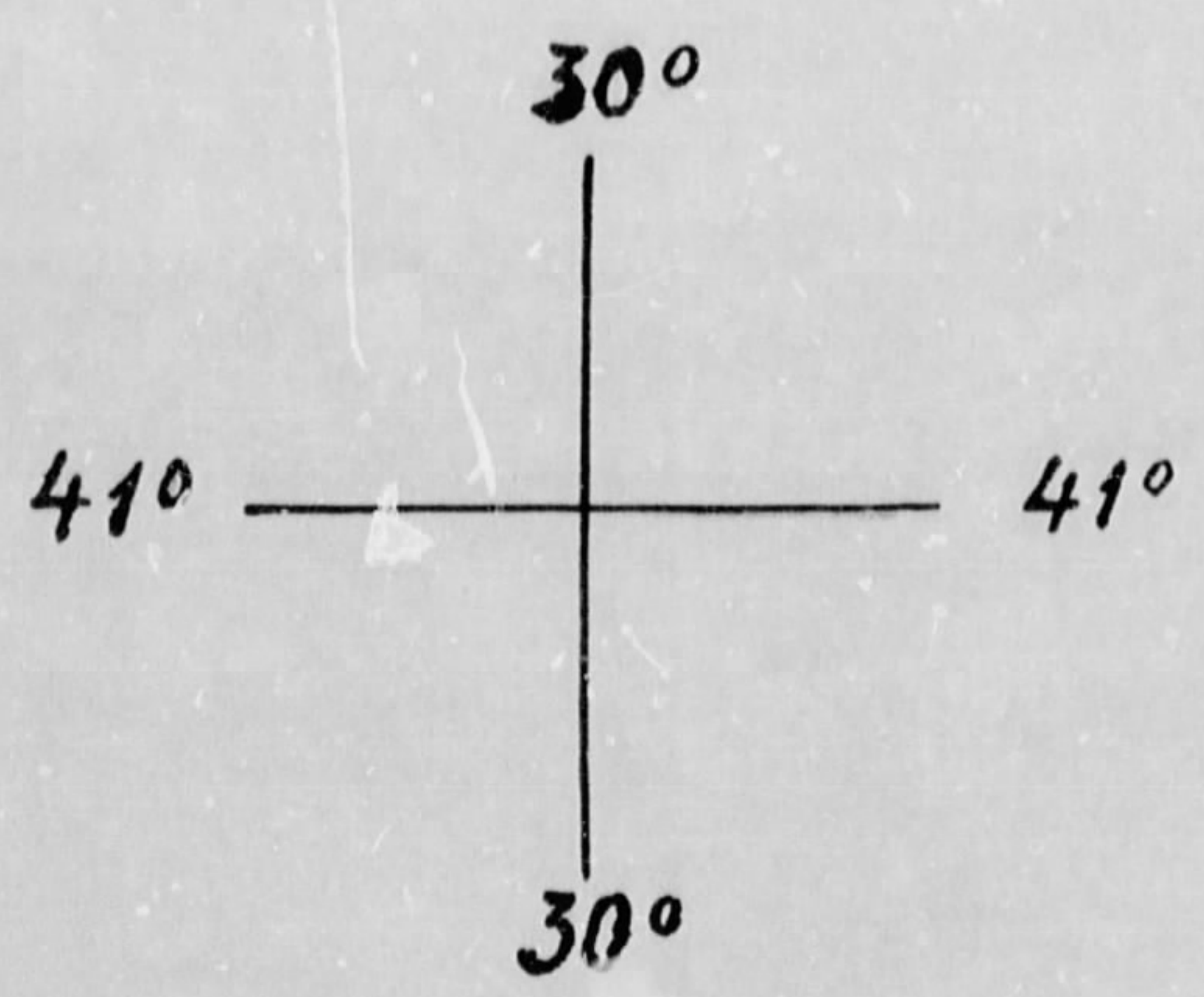
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CARTA AERONAUTICA D'ITALIA

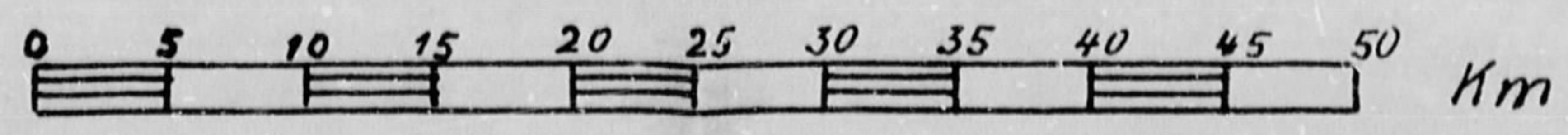
Scala 1: 500 000





GOLFO DI GAETA

Scala 1:500 000



Handwritten signature
(HANS BESSELL)
Generalmajor