

# Italian Operational Group,

**Mission:** Roanoke

## **Mission:**

To work with partisan units in the 6th zone (an area southwest of Piacenza) to extend the work of the PEEDEE Mission; arrange air supply to equip the partisans; train them in the use of the equipment; and to conduct guerrilla raids and ambushes; and assure their preparations for appropriate anti-scorch activities.

## **Partisan Forces:**

Oltra Po Pavise consisted of the divisions, brigades and other units under Thalo Pietra, battle name "Eduardo," Vice Commander of the 6th Zone. They totalled about 1800 men. The largest of these, the Alliota Division contained 600 men commanded by Dominico Messandra, battle name "Americano." It was to this division that Lt Taylor was assigned. It was a branch of this division that captured and shot Mussolini and 17 other fascists.

## **Background:**

In December 1944 and January 1945 the Germans, in an effort to wipe out the partisan forces there had made a push into the mountains, in the area where mission ROANOKE would be assigned. They occupied every little hamlet and the partisans were forced to disband and flee the area - losing any heavy equipment they had and much of their arms and ammunition. After the Germans felt they had wiped out the partisan movement and left the area, the partisans came back and reorganized themselves to be a much more efficient fighting force - but with needs for all tools of battle.

## **Summary:**

Following weeks of delay caused by poor weather, on 8 March 1945 the commanding officer of ROANOKE, Lt Rawleigh Taylor was flown from Rosignano to the 6th zone where he parachuted into the Pietra Neri drop zone (DZ) "Phyllis". His reception had been arranged by Capt Vanoncini, the commanding officer of the PEEDEE Mission. Lt Taylor spent the rest of that day at Vanoncini's headquarters, getting acquainted with that area and discussing plans to establish an operational base for ROANOKE and to locate a DZ in the ROANOKE area.

Meetings were then arranged withAmericano and Eduardo, leaders of the local partisan forces, to discuss their needs and to make future plans. With the provision of a partisan guide, Lt Taylor made reconnaissance of the area and met with senior officers of the Allied forces there while waiting for arrival of more members of his team. On 21 March with two men for the PEEDEE Mission, T/Sgt Fred Orbach, T/5 Alvin Brower, T/5 Herbert Oelschlager, and T/5 Robert Sander, radio operator, arrived to join Lt Taylor.

On 22 March the five men moved through the mountains on foot to Brallo where they set up operational headquarters and found a DZ nearby which was code-named "Lynn". While that DZ was soon used for a drop of clothing and ammunition, arrival of the men continued to be delayed because of bad weather. During this time on 1 April, Lt Taylor was accidentally shot through the left hand by a pistol bullet which also wounded T/5

Brower's right knee, and slightly wounding T/5 Sander in the hand. Sander and Brower recovered fairly quickly, however Taylor's wound required bed rest until 9 April when 1st Lt Robert Gallaher, S/Sgt Arnold Keller, S/Sgt Earl Bowers, T/4 Lintard Luke, T/5 Lucien Forget, T/5 Martial Bergeron, T/5 David Waggoner and T/5 Leo Francis, Medic. parachuted in. Although there were no injuries in the drop, S/Sgt Bowers landed in a tree.

With the full 13 man section now in the field, the next two days were spent house cleaning and getting settled in what would be ROANOKE'S operational headquarters, a farmhouse at Pietra Gavina, five kilometers north of Varsi. In addition to continued meetings with partisan leaders to plan with them for possible operations, the period 12 April to 20 April concentrated on the distribution of clothing, weapons and ammunition as supply drops arrived; and in training sessions with the partisan units on the use of the weapons, ammunition and demolitions. At the same time, with the assistance of partisan guides, reconnaissance missions for area familiarization and operational planning for ambush sites and demolition targets was accomplished. To do these varied tasks the section worked in two and three man teams. On some of the reconnaissance, they were joined by James Wilde, an escaped British POW.

25 April, section received an order of attack. There had been some initial confusion with orders received from the Fifteenth Army Group, which had directed the partisans to attack Tortona. However, communication from Capt Vanoncini led to the decision that ROANOKE units would attack Voghera - as part of a coordinated attack plan in which one of the Americano brigades with 50 Czech soldiers would mount an attack on the Varzi-Godiasco-Voghera road.

With apparent knowledge of the proposed attack, the Germans pulled back their outpost to Rivanazzano. On approaching Rivanazzano, Lt Taylor learned from an excited partisan that the Germans were in a defensive position 200 yards from the other side of town and they might possibly surrender to an American officer. Lt Taylor and T/Sgt Orbach put aside their arms and walked under a white flag to the German outpost where talks with the Germans lasted until 2230 hours. With an attack promised to start at 2400 hours unless they agreed to surrender, the Germans initially refused. But an hour later they agreed to surrender.

Two hours later at 0130 hours 26 April, the surrendering Germans marched in from Voghera. By 0500 hours their disarmament was completed and all captured arms and equipment were turned over to the partisans. The total number of prisoners was 340 men and 21 officers, including 1 colonel.

At 0700 hours 26 April, using captured German vehicles, the section departed Rivanazzano for Voghera. After taking cover for a period in nearby fields because of five American fighters flying overhead, the column proceeded to Voghera - to be the first of non German troops to enter the area.

At about 1500 hours partisan intelligence reported that several hundred Germans were located about 20 kilometers north of Voghera. After the partisans informed the Germans that an Allied force of 4000 had already by-passed them, they too agreed to unconditional surrender.

0730 hours 27 April, an excited partisan reported to Lt. Taylor that a German force of about one thousand was marching on Voghera. Lt. Taylor immediately formed the OGs with partisans on both sides of the street and moved to meet the Germans. When the OGs and partisans got to a point where they judged the Germans to be only a few blocks away, they stopped and took up defensive positions. T/Sgt Orbach then moved out to scout the enemy. Picking up about 200 partisans they continued to the city limits where they set up three lines of defense, setting up machine gun and Bren gun positions with good fields of fire.

With the defense set up, it was learned that the Germans were still about 5 kilometers away at Cassi Gerola, T/Sgt Orbach, with a white flag on a stick, rode a bicycle into the German position to try to negotiate their surrender. It was soon determined that the Germans had already become aware the tide of the war had turned against them and that they had destroyed or removed parts from their weapons so they could not be used by the partisans. T/Sgt Orbach then arranged for surrender to be made to Lt. Taylor.

While the surrender was being worked out, Lt Gallaher, with half the section, traveled to Piacenza, 50 kilometers east of Voghera to brief the 24th Division.

29 April, when Allied troops entered Voghera, all prisoners of the section were turned over to an advanced column of the 92nd Division.

The total turn-over:

36 officers

800 men

16 motor vehicles

40 horses and wagons

2 20mm machine guns

1 37mm anti tank gun

uncounted arms and ammunition

1 complete battalion radio unit

230 gallons gasoline

While waiting at Voghera for further orders, word was received that Lt Taylor had been promoted to Capt, Medic T/5 Francis had been promoted to T/3, Radioman T/5 Sanders promoted to T/4 and T/4 Luke to Sgt. Capt Taylor was ordered to return to his base to be hospitalized for treatment of infection in his hand. With Lt Gallaher in command, the section was kept busy assisting with matters concerning the rounding-up of Fascists, of then disarming the partisans and helping with other administrative matters of liaison with the local AMG. On May 15 Mission ROANOKE left Voghera in three captured vehicles for return to base.

Summary compiled from end-of-mission reports  
of Capt Taylor and 1st Lt Gallaher  
retrieved from NARA

**Personnel: with date of drope**

7 March 1945

Capt Rawleigh W.D. Taylor, Jr.

21 March 1945

T/Sgt Fred Orbach

T/4 Robert Sanders, Radio Operator

T/5 Alvin Brower

T/5 Herbert Oelschlager

9 April 1945

1st Lt Gallaher

S/Sgt Earl Bowers

S/Sgt Arnold Keller

Sgt Lintard Luke

T/3 Leo Francis, Medic

T/5 Lucien Forget

T/5 David Waggoner

T/5 Martial Bergeron

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