

2016/6/3: A BOLD STRIKE MISSED?

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Late summer 1944: Unless there had been a consensus between the Americans and British on the efficacy of a strategy which drove into the rear areas of the German forces in Italy, there could not be an attack over the French Alps into the Po River valley. The existence of a significant physical barrier with limited access through the French Alps and the weather conditions that could reasonably be expected to be encountered during the late summer of 1944 would not have supported a decision to attempt penetrating the mountain chain. Unlike in Hannibal's and Napoleon's time, a very long "logistic tail" would have been required. It is indeed possible that the vast resources of the Americans could have been brought to bear to supply Allied troops invading Italy over the mountains, but at what cost, considering the world-wide commitments of the United States at this point in the war? Ultimately, the availability of sufficient troops either American or French for such an operation was not there. The French in August 1944 may have been employed, but Eisenhower wanted as great a force as possible in northwest Europe and the French under his command wanted their main effort to be the complete liberation of France. Certainly the Germans would have been hard pressed to stop a sustained surprise attack over the mountains by a major force. But the American units entering combat through Marseille after the August invasion were not battle tested and there were no large combat experienced American formations on the French/Italian border to ease new units' transition into battle. Once across the French Alps, Italian partisans would have been welcome support, but it is still questionable how their impact would have affected an Allied effort. The reality, however, is that what Hannibal and Napoleon accomplished in a matter of days, would have been difficult to attain by the Allies even if they could have come to some agreement on a strategy encompassing a trans-Alpine attack in northern Italy. The requisite troops which might have included the U.S. 10th Mountain Division were not available. The start time of August was late if autumn's approaching inclement weather and closed routes through the Alps were to be avoided by motorized units. The logistics effort to support such an operation would have offered significant challenges. In the final analysis, however, neither American nor British leadership at the highest levels was innovative enough to see the possible advantages of a truly "indirect approach" of risking a bold strike to defeat the Germans in Italy by a major surprise attack over the French Alps. The preferred Allied course of action was to thrust straight ahead. In Italy it was to make a frontal attack up the Apennine Mountains' spine. In Northwest Europe it was to strike straight ahead on a wide front exploiting fissures in the German defence. When the Siegfried Line was reached it became essentially a matter of slamming directly into the fortifications until a breach was made through which the mobile Allies in operational envelopments could complete the destruction of Nazi Germany. A "bold strike" attempted by the Allies through the Maritime Alps in the mould of Hannibal and Napoleon was a challenge which the Germans never had to deal with.

