

U.S. Army Military Police in Italy During World War II

By Mr. Thomas Christianson

The U.S. Army Military Police Corps was officially recognized as an active duty branch in September 1941, just a few short months before the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. World War II—the bloodiest and most bitter war of the 20th Century—required the “newborn” military police to support combat operations at many levels. By the end of the war, the Military Police Corps was comprised of more than 200,000 troops. Many of these military police served in the Italian area of operations from July 1943 until the end of the war in Europe in May 1945.

Army military police were tested in many ways during wartime operations in Italy. How did they do? According to noted war correspondent Ernie Pyle, “. . . from the MPs [military police] I saw, judging by their demeanor and their conduct, I believe that—next to rangers and paratroopers—they are really the pick of the Army.”¹ This positive impression was not necessarily shared by all American Soldiers, though—especially those on leave in rear areas like Naples, which many considered to be the “Wild West” of Italy. Performing military and police duties was often a challenge that stretched military police to their limits.

The war in Italy was characterized by assault landings in Sicily, Salerno, and Anzio. Military police units were usually onboard assault craft that landed in the second wave of attacks; in some cases, military police were part of the first wave. The ability of the troops to move off the beach as quickly as possible was considered essential to the success of the invasions. Military police units were specifically tasked to facilitate this movement. When the landings were stymied by fierce resistance, military police found themselves fighting alongside the infantry until a beachhead could be established. As they moved forward, helping to clear the beaches, they established traffic control points while follow-on units disembarked and continued to attack. During this critical period, they were subjected to extensive bombardment from enemy artillery. Casualties were often so crippling that it was necessary to hastily train infantry Soldiers to temporarily perform military police duties.

According to one military police standing operating procedure, “The maintenance of traffic control cannot be overemphasized during the campaign.”² To efficiently maintain traffic control, military police were tasked to confer with the division assistant chief of staff for operations and plans (G-3) and assistant chief of staff for logistics (G-4) and then “Reconnoiter along main traffic routes as

far forward as the assault infantry battalions. An early reconnaissance is necessary in order that information be received and planning be accomplished . . . in the wake of fast-moving operations.”³ During reconnaissance, military police were to note blown-out roads and bridges, narrow defiles, and potential bottlenecks. Even the degree of slope for a road was mandatory information for the military police report. Military police were also required to estimate traffic flow rates. All of these activities were to be accomplished within a matter of hours, while plans were being developed to support the forward movement of assault units.

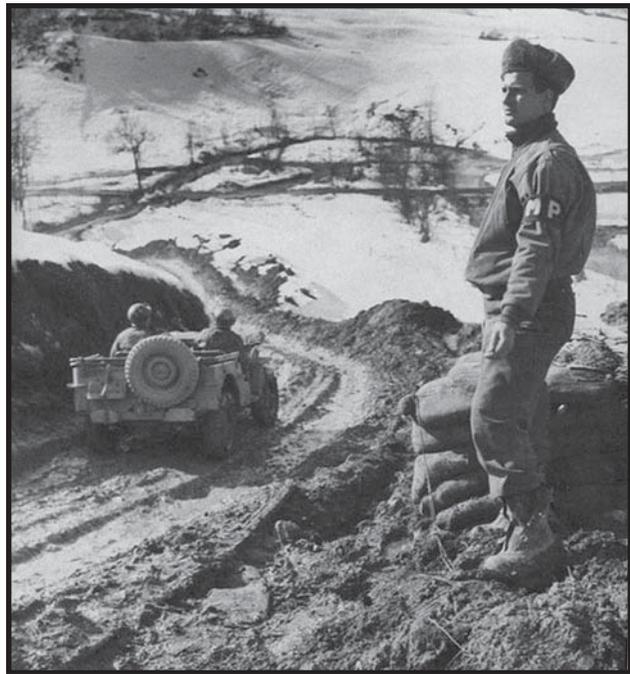
The operational plan contained details about how to handle road conditions, narrow defiles, and bottleneck bypasses. It also included annexes that outlined military police responsibilities in the areas of reconnaissance, sign posting, traffic checkpoints, and enforcement of traffic regulations.

Standing operating procedures were clear: There was no substitute for enforcement. Military police were required to enforce high standards in the interest of safety during U.S. troop movements and enforce efficiency during forward operations. However, the standing operating procedures also prescribed “selective enforcement” and contained statements indicating that each military policeman was responsible for “good judgment,” which eventually became a hallmark of the branch. Due to artillery bombardment and roadblocks resulting from contact with the enemy, certain routes were temporary and units were often at the mercy of military police decisions. Military police often encountered convoys that were filled with Soldiers who were headed to the front, but who did not know their final destination, convoys moving along a route without any coordination or authorization, infantry troops stopping their convoys in the midst of an artillery bombardment, and other basic situations that jeopardized the U.S. Army mission.

In addition to traffic control duties, military police also established prisoner of war collection stations. This proved to be an especially monumental task in Sicily in July 1943 when Italian soldiers, weary of their unwanted alliance with Germany, gave up by the thousands. Italy formally surrendered just weeks after the Allied invasion of Sicily, so the problem with the large number of Italian prisoners destined to be sent to Africa for processing and internment was solved, as most were allowed to go home or await the liberation of their portion of Italy. However, the 122,000 Italians who were released and sent home were also an enormous problem that the military police had not anticipated. Some Italian soldiers joined Italian units and fought the Germans. But maintaining order and discipline and providing for immediate subsistence for the rest of the former Italian foes was a difficult task that required a diplomatic approach. Military police became surprisingly efficient in coordinating activities and making use of local police authorities—particularly the Italian *Carabinieri*—an Italian military police force of sorts that was anxious to rid itself of its fascist past. Fortunately, there were numerous military police of Italian heritage in the U.S. Army and communication proved to be easier than first expected.

The evacuation and incarceration of German prisoners of war who were in the front area also became a significant military police unit activity. Supply trucks returning from the front were used for prisoner transport to the rear. Military police served as escort guards and operated prisoner of war processing detachments. Temporary “holding cages” were established until transportation could be arranged for evacuations to Africa, Great Britain, or the United States, where the prisoners were interned until the end of the war. Divisional military police guard companies were in charge of prisoner of war movement to the corps provost marshal; however, the military police chain of command was ill-prepared to handle the thousands of prisoners of war. Large-scale surrenders sometimes resulted in a ratio of 1 to 2 military police to 500 prisoners. Numerous complaints were made about the manning shortages experienced by military police. It was often necessary to augment military police resources with infantry troops.

The II Corps provost marshal recognized the effort and frustration of military police units. He could only offer encouragement, stating that “More effort should be exerted toward resourcefulness and ingenuity in the use of available personnel and equipment.”⁴ He went on to say that “Frankly, the provost marshal and his agents have constantly got to be on the alert so as to keep the situation in hand and not assume the attitude ‘it can’t be done’ or ‘we haven’t got the men or equipment.’”⁵ He recognized that military police were trying to do the impossible, adding, “Our job is never-ending and successfully accomplished only by the use of common sense, patience, sweat, and labor.”⁶ In his October 1943 report, he asserted that the Army, Military Police Corps, and divisions needed



A military jeep passes a traffic control point in the northern Apennine Mountains.



A U.S. military police Soldier directs traffic in Naples.

to consider reorganizing the military police to meet the demands placed on them, meaning that manning increases from 80 military police per each 12,000-man division would be necessary.⁷

During the invasion and occupation of Italy, military police were issued an official list of enforcements for selected offenses; however, the police were urged to use “good judgment” in enforcement. The list included such “offenses” as throwing candy, cigarettes, or food to children in the streets; looting; possessing souvenirs; wearing a mixed uniform; wearing no shirt or steel helmet

while driving; and shooting from vehicles traveling along roads. The latitude to use “good judgment” meant that military police could choose to ignore the enforcement of these rules and, depending upon the situation, often did.

Perhaps the most difficult mission of the military police in Italy was to organize the Italian police to carry out domestic police functions under the supervision of the Allied Military Government (AMG). This required the utmost skill and diplomacy. Military police, who were the forward element, were often at odds with the AMG regarding which of them had authority and what procedures should be followed. Military police traffic control, the enforcement of Army regulations and procedures, and local policing activities did not always match the AMG desires; and tensions between the two were inevitable. As John Hersey pointed out in *A Bell for Adano*—his Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the U.S. Army experience in Italy in 1944—the military police were required to coordinate their activities with the officers representing the AMG.⁸ And once AMG representatives arrived, the military police worked for and through them.

Their most difficult job was to immediately ascertain which of the population were fascists and which were “normal citizens.”

In an 11 July 1944 report, an AMG officer wrote the following comments about the military police with whom he had worked in Italy: “American MPs did a very poor job with Italian civilians. They apparently realized no limit to their authority, arresting Italian civilians on slight charges or no charges at all and keeping them in prison for as long as 2 months. They were hated worse than the Germans.”⁹ His obviously biased account continued, “The trouble lay with the training MPs received for their work and the poor quality of men assigned to AMG work. Virtually all of them were of limited service and intelligence.”¹⁰ He also complained about the selection of military police without any documentation: “The MPs assigned were of the type that had courts-martial on their record[s]—or should have.”¹¹ In spite of the AMG officer’s claims, military police were generally the highest-quality Soldiers of any branch in the United States based on background checks and intelligence testing. Their actions and procedures were carefully monitored and scrutinized throughout the war—particularly in areas in which they fell under AMG control. And although tension certainly existed between the agencies, the Italian people looked upon American military police with respect. Although the AMG officer’s negative report was filed, it was apparently not acted upon.¹²

The city of Naples provided the greatest challenge for U.S. Army military police throughout the war. The constant theft of Army supplies, coupled with black marketeering, were constant and, at times, overwhelming problems for the military police. U.S. Army trucks often left port laden with supplies—only to arrive at their destinations empty.

As the trucks proceeded up the hills of Naples, young boys would climb aboard and off-load the supplies. Things got so out of hand that the Army enlisted a former U.S. Mafia member to run things more efficiently. Military police did not have the manpower necessary to solve the various problems of a city of more than a million citizens and hundreds of thousands of Allied soldiers. Prostitution and venereal disease were rampant; commanders lost more men to venereal disease than to enemy bullets. However, military police continued to try to maintain law and order in the “Wild West” of Naples, enlisting and training former Italian policemen who were not tainted by the fascist experience. The task was daunting, but they received the greatest compliment of all from Italian citizens who demonstrated their admiration for military police, who “protected them from the wildness of soldiers on leave and their own dirty and corrupt countrymen.”¹³

Though certainly not appreciated by the AMG—or even other American Soldiers at times—military police in the Italian campaign gained a reputation for fairness, efficiency, and good judgment; and they were viewed as a much-needed force for all U.S. Army operations in Italy. They were continuously praised for their flexibility in performing the many different missions they were assigned, including traffic management, prisoner control, the guarding of key facilities, and the establishment of order in occupied areas. The fact that they always performed these duties under adverse conditions—and usually while understrength—highlights the professionalism that military police have brought to the U.S. Army since the birth of the branch in 1941.

Endnotes:

¹Ernie Pyle, *Here is Your War: Story of GI Joe*, The World Publishing Co., Cleveland/New York, 1943.

²“Duties of the Provost Marshal and Military Police Sicilian/Italian Campaign,” Office of the Provost Marshal, Headquarters, II Corps, 23 October 1943, p. 4.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid, p. 11.

⁵Ibid, p. 12.

⁶Paul R. Whitaker, *Military Police Training Bulletin*, Provost Marshal General’s School, Fort Custer, Michigan, October 1943, p. 14.

⁷Ibid, p. 15.

⁸John Hersey, *A Bell for Adano*, Random House, Inc., New York, 1944.

⁹Captain Francis Brooks, “Technical Intelligence,” Allied Military Government, Naples, Italy, 11 July 1944, p. 1.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid, p. 2.

¹³Personal interview with Sergeant Raffaele Migiarese of the *Carabinieri*, Verona, Italy, 1978.

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