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Gustav Hoehne
Lt Gener 1

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Index for MS # B 331.

Report on the employment of 157th Mountain Division,

8 September to 15 September 1944.

A certified copy:

(H. Reinhardt)

Signed in draft form:

(Gustav Hoehne)

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SCHRICKER, Paul

Generalleutnant

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Report on the employment of the 157 mountain division from Sept 8th to Sept 15th 1944

Report on the employment of the 157 mountain division from Sept 8th to Sept 15th 1944

I. Early history

A. On September 8th 1944 I took over the command of the 157 reserve division as divisional commander from 'Generalleutnant' Pflaum. At the same time its reorganization into a mountain division was ordered by the Army High Command.

The division originally quartered as a training division in and around Grenoble had moved, according to orders, Eastwards to the mountain crossings in the Western Alps.

The 157 Mountain division extended over a region bordered on the right: by the Italian-Swiss border. On the left by the Nevache-P. Clotesse - Oulx (Ulzio) - mountain ridge south of the Susa valley - Riveli (exclus. Chivasso (exclus)

The division was subordinated to the LXXV Corps. For the composition of the division September 8th 1944 see appendix 1.

B. The command post of the division was located at Rivarolo some 25 kilometer north of Turin. Command post of the LXXV corps was near Bra, 40 kilometers south of Turin. The location of the command posts of the subordinated units may be seen from appendix 3 and 4. The right wing of the division was resting right on the Italian-Swiss border. The 5 mountain division was on the left. I don't remember the location of the command post of this division.

C. It was the task of the division:

1. To prevent by any means the enemy's advance by way of the passes

and mountain crossings in their sector, especially, via the little St. Bernhard and the Mt. Cenis.

2. To block the Swiss border. Violation of neutrality however was strictly prohibited.

3. Besides these tactical tasks there was the organizational task of changing the division from a reserve division, composed of separate training units, into a mountain division with full fighting strength .

D. The individual units of the division had partly heavy fights, after their positions covering the passes in the mountainous terrain.

Tough fights with partisans, rendered even more difficult by terrain conditions, and to a lesser extent fighting with U.S troops, had considerably weakened the powers of resistance of the young troops who had been drafted only a few months ago. There was a fundamental difference between the fighting spirit and the combat strength of the individual battalions.

Whereas the mountain infantry battalions and the artillery composed mainly of Bavarians and Austrians could stand up to the strain of a war in the mountains, this was not the case with the reserve battalions 179 and 217. The reason was, that the battalions, composed mainly of Germans who had been citizens of the eastern territories (outside of Germany proper) were quartered for some inconceivable reason in a region mainly inhabited by Poles. Repeated proposals of the General, at that time in command of the division, to move these battalions into a region where they were not exposed to Polish propaganda, were not complied with. The result was that these battalions failed to a great extent when they had to be employed to fight the forces of the French underground movement.

We must also mention here the quality of the officers. The officers of the units were almost entirely composed of men either no longer or not yet fit for combat service. They had all stood the test of front-line combat during the campaigns of the past few years owing to wounds or sickness they were no longer fit for front-line employment. Being experienced in front-line fighting, however, they were expecially fit for training young replacement troops. When mobile warfare started they were strongly hindered by their physical defects. This was especially evident in the mountainous terrain with its high demands on physical efficiency. Despite all their endeavors they were consequently not able to be always there, where their personal example would have been particularly beneficial on the as yet inexperienced troops. Thus, at the beginning of September we had in the pass positions troops which had for the most part lost confidence in themselves on account of the preceding battles and strain. The fighting power of all the units had suffered severely. It was remarkable to note that especially the war against partisans effected the young unskilled soldiers disadvantageously in every respect.

When I took over the command of the division I had the impression that the striking powerof the individual units had suffered terribly. We had to figure on immense difficulties, should the enemy attack with the object of taking the Alpine passes of little St Bernhard and Mont-Cenis. This was to be feared all the more as the equipment of the men themselves was by no means adequate for the conditions of mountain warfare in an altitude of 2000 to 3000 meters. The armement was even more unfavorable.

As the division only consisted of training units the separate companies had all kinds of rifles and especially (all different types of) machine guns, for example besides German, there were French, Russian, Belgian, Dutch, English and Norwegian machine guns. Though proper ammunition was available for the first issue, increased consumption consequent to an enemy attack on a large scale would involve us in great difficulties with respect to the resupplying of ammunition, as the supplying of so many different types of ammunition had not up to now been prepared for by the ammunition depots of 'Heeresgruppe Suedwest'. Inorder to compensate for the disadvantage of having weapons of various types, I gave orders for the exchange of weapons in such a way that at least each company had the same types, if possible. The difficulty of resupplying ammunition was thus, it is true, only partly removed. The available Artillery consisted of just 2 sections of mountain artillery of two batteries each and one battery of light fieldhowitzer 18, as the heavy field howitzer 18, we had had, had been taken by the enemy. The artilleristic weakness of the division was partly compensated for by the stationary batteries of the Italian frontier fortifications. It was however impossible to make use of them at once for the defensive mission given to the division for the following reasons:

1. The guns lacked their fighting devices. These were in various undetermined ordnance - or equipment depots in Northern Italy and were found in the course of time after an earnest search had been made for them.

2. Fining data, especially ballistic tables could be found no where.

3. Officers, noncommissioned officers, and men of the reserve artillery regiment 7 had to be trained in handling the guns. The last pack animal driver was utilized as a cannoneer, noncommissioned officers had to be made battery commanders owing to lack of officers. By making every possible endeavor the artillery commander succeeded within about two weeks, in other words by the middle of September 44, to get those stationary batteries ready for action which were of greatest importance for the defense of the passes.

The artillery equipment of the fortifications extraordingly variable. Most batteries were composed of guns of medium caliber of the type manufactued shortly after the first world war. As far as I was able to ascertain there was actually only one modern rapid fire battery (7 5cm) south of Bardonnechia on the Pte de 4 Soeurs (height 2000m).

All troop units (companies and batteries) consisted of only young recruits, trained for only a few months or even a few weeks. All the crews, trained for more than 6 months, had been sent to troop units in the field at the beginning of the invasion.

There was a company for training sharp-shooters amongst the division. The cadre of this company was composed of excellent sharp-shooters who were able to transmit their skill to others. Able and combat experienced men were detached from all units of the field forces to be the pupils. This company represented a well trained combat unit. They had suffered considerable losses during recent fights. As especially the sharp-shooter acts a big part in mountain warfare. All efforts were made

by division headquarters to bring this company up to strength.

E. When I took over the division at the beginning of September the situation was the following:

The units of the 157 reserve/division had withdrawn eastwards to the alpine passes leading from Italy to France according to orders after heavy fighting with U.S. troops, which were pushing forward from the South towards the North, and especially heavy fighting with forces of the French underground movement (Maquis). In doing so the battallions, companies and batteries had become involved in numerous independent actions against armed bands, a type of fighting characteristic to, and particularly suited for the mountainous terrain. The units occupied the positions assigned to them for the defense of the passes, without considerable enemy pressure.

Both main passes - the Battle St. Bernhard and the Mont Cenis with the Mont Cenis tunnel - were firmly in the hands of the division.

The mountainous terrain had forced us to employ the division in two groups far apart from each other (approx 50 km) i.e.

a. A regimental group under the commander of the reserve mountain infantry regiment (later on called mountain infantry regiment 296) in the region of the little St. Bernhard. (Appendix3)

b. A regimental group under the commander of the reserve infantry regiment 157 (later on called mountain infantry regiment 297) on the Mont Cenis - Modane - Bardonnechia region (Appendix 4).

Whereas the main line of resistance ran a little to the west of the heights of both passes and included the Italian and some of the French fortifications in the region both regimental groups had advanced weaker forces into the valleys west of both passes. At Modane at the

west entrance of the Mont Cenis tunnel a reinforced mountain infantry battalion was placed to safeguard this important point. The engineers were preparing to blast the tunnel itself. As this task took quite some time yet, strong forces had to be stationed as security detachment in the Modane region.

The enemy consisting in the beginning of forces of the French underground movement started hesitatingly to pursue our troops with dranage towards the east, this being the case in the Isere valley as well as in the Arcvalley. There was no doubt that the enemy would try by all means to take possession of the heights of the two passes opening the way to Turin and therby into the back of the 'Heeresgruppe Suedwest'. About September 11th it could be ascertained from reports received by the division that

a. in the Isere valley strong forces of infantry were continuously being brought up to Bourg St. Maurice by trucks. The enemy was very careful in doing so as he was well aware of our favorable observation positions. Neverthless we were able to ascertain by exactly counting them, that during the course of one day approx. one battalion of infantry had reached Bourg St. Maurice. As during the night also heavy truck traffic could be observed on the roads leading from this village towards the west we could assume that the enemy would have moved approx one regiment to the assembly area Bourg St. Maurice during September 9th to 12th.

Though we were unable to ascertain whether the infantry was U.S. or French we could make out that one of the batteries going into position was a U.S. unit on account of excellent visibility.

b. In the Arc valley strong forces were marching towards the East according to our reconnaissance patrols. Evidently forces of the

French underground movement marched at the head, owing to their knowledge of terrain, and were followed by troops of the French colonial army.

As ascertained by our reconnaissance the artillery units were apparently units of the U.S. army. Messages sent to the division on the 9th 10th and 11th of September from the mountain infantry and mountain artillery as well as an increase in enemy fire did not allow any doubt that the enemy would try with considerable strength to take possession of the Alp passes. His strength in the Iscre-valley was estimated at approx one regiment with at least 4-5 batteries of medium caliber. In the Arc valley according to reports submitted, we had to figure at least on 4 battalions and an artillery force of 6-8 batteries of light and medium caliber. The division commander clearly recognized from the very beginning that the enemy would try first to take the village of Modane. Only after he had taken this village would it be possible for him to gain the region of Lanslebourg - Lanslevillard by pushing forward in the Arc valley towards north east. The possession of this region was absolutely essential for him before he could even start taking the Mont Cenis pass. As possession of Modane at the same time meant possession of the western entrance of the Mont Cenis tunnel the fact had to be taken into account that the enemy would try to take possession of Modane by surprise to prevent us from blasting the tunnel entrance.

II.

A. In order to be able to conduct the forthcoming battles with some hope of success it was necessary to reorganize the units which had become disorganized in the withdrawal to the Alpine passes and in previous fighting. This aim was pursued by Division Hq with all means at its command.

All the measures were rendered extremely difficult as great distances had to be covered to the two fronts one at the little St. Bernhard and the other in the region Mont Cenis - Modane - Bardonnechia. Moreover the activity of the partisans had increased to such an extent that the supply was seriously endangered both in the the Aosta valley, the only route available for the supply of the regimental group at the little St. Bernhard, and in the Susa valley, the supply line for Mont Cenis - Bardonnechia.

The railroad track from Ivrea to Aosta was interrupted at Settmo Tavagnasco where the bridge had been blown likewise the street Ivrea - Aosta, the only supply line for the troops on the little St. Bernhard became unusable for weeks by demolition operating carried out in a difficult spot.

In the Susa valley also the railroad track from Turin to Susa which was of special importance for supplying the Mont Cenis Bardonnechia region was blown night after night at several places. As all these attacks on the supply lines were observed to occur in the closest chronological connection with the preparations for the attack. It was obvious that all these measures were uniformly controlled.

In this connection it is necessary to enter into the supply problems of the division for making sure of a regular delivery of the supplies is of far greater importance in mountain warfare than it is for operations in the open country. The slightest ommission or an incorrect disposition must necessarily bring about a catastrophe for the troops fighting in an altitude of 2000 to 3000 meters who were already exposed to snow and cold at the beginning of September. The fact that the two regimental groups which had to do the fighting were approx. 50 km apart and that there was no way to connect these two places rendered things even more difficult for division hq.

In fact the 80 km long Aosta valley was the only supply line for the troops on the little St. Bernhard along which to bring up not only all the reserves, but also the food equipment and ammunition required.

Similar conditions were prevailing at the Mont Cenis group where the only supply line followed the 25 Km long Susa valley. The division was thus forced to divide up its rear services which were already not up to authorized strength. Ration distribution points were set-up in Pre St. Didier for the troops on the little St. Bernhard and in Susa for those on Mont Cenis - Bardonnechia. Both villages were situated on the railroad and although the partisans again and again destroyed the tracks, the railroad could be used at any rate part of the time for transportation. Infact we succeeded in securing the supply of ammunition and food for the entire period the division was in action, despite all troubles. In connection herewith it has to be born in mind that the bases, in an altitude of over 2000 m, had to be supplied at once for a period of at least three months with ammunition and food before the heavy snowstorms of winter, liable to set in any day, rendered supply impossible.

The combat mission of the division read as follows:

1. to defend the Alpine passes and crossings between the Swiss border of Nerache (15 km north of Briancon) against army enemy attack, making use of the Italian fortifications. To observe the Swiss border but carefully avoid all border incidents .

2. Speedy reorganization of the present reserve division into an active mountain division whilst simultaneously performing the mission indicated under #1 (Appendix 2)

The regimental group little St. Bernhard received the following orders:

a. Reconnaissance and forward protection by weaken forces, advanced as far up as the Isere valley, who were to withdraw to the mainline in case of strong enemy pressure.

b. The blocking of the road leading through the pass and winding down into the Isere valley, along the upper sections (of the road).

c. Construction of battle positions and shelters on both sides of the pass road approx at the height of the first serpentine bend.

d. Preventing the enemy from by passing or outflanking the defensive installations at the pass road by erecting battle positions at the Pte. du Clapey. Approximately 4km north of the passroad and at the French Fort de Traversette south of the road as well as at Mont Valaisan (2690m).

e. The artillery was allowed to fire at all worth while targets. The enemy was to be fought at as long a range as possible in order to enforce his early deployment.

The regimental unit at Mont Cenis-Bardonnechia - Modane had been alloted the missions of:

a. Reconnaissance against the enemy who was working his way forwards especially in the Arc-valley. An early deployement of the enemy must be enforced by weak advanced forces. In case at an attack by superior enemy forces a fighting withdrawal to be made to the positions at Modane.

b. Blocking the road across the pass at Mont Cenis.

c. Advancing security detachments into the Arc valley at Lanslevillard and Lanslebourg Reconnaissance at the Arc-valley in the direction of Bessans and maintenance of the connection with the combat team at Modane.

d. Installation of battle positions and shelters on both sides of the pass road approx at the height of the first serpentine bend.

e. Preventing the enemy from by passing or outflanking the defensive installations at the pass road by battle positions on the north west slope of 'La Tomba' (northeast of the passroad) and at the French fort on 'La Pte Turra' west of the pass road.

f. Blocking the crossings near (or on) the Cme dularo (2800m) Col de Mt. Froid (2500m), and the Col du Petit Mont Cenis (2200m) if possible.

g. The combat team Modane was to hold the village and the western entrance of the tunnel against all enemy attacks. Preparations to blast the western entrance of the tunnel were to be speeded up.

h. Combat team Bardonnechia was to block the crossings South of Pte de Frejus (2900m) and the ones from the Melezet valley to the Claresvalley. Any enemy units approaching the road through the pass, were to be engaged by the artillery from its positions northeast and south of the hac du Mont Cenis as wel from stationary batteries east of the lake. The stationary batteries at the Mt. Taffereau and at the Pte de 4 soeurs both south of Bardonnechia, were to give artillery support to the combat team Bardonnechia, defending the crossings south of Pnte de Frejus and at the southern end of the Melezet valley.

Reorganization of the 157 reserve division into a mountain division with full fighting power depended under the prevailing conditions on the following:

1. Organization of battalions, batteries and other units, as yet lacking.

2. Reorganization of the officer Staff.

3. Equipping the troops with uniform , small armes and automatic weapons as well as with modern guns.

4. Equipping all the units with high-mountain equipment, horses and pack animals, and vehicles.

At the time when the order was given for the transformation of the reserve division into a mountain division it was composed of the units mentioned on appendix 2. Thus we were short of:

a. Two battalions of mountain infantry,

b. Two mountain batteries, the 10.5 cm unit and the heavy (15cm) unit.

c. Of the signal battalion that was to have been set up only one company was available. In order to make a complete battalion with Staff, radio company, telephone-communications - company and signal-supply column, out of it, it had to be split up into numerous sections which each formed the cadre of one of the elements of the batalion, and which were brought up to strength with replacements detached from other units.

d. Of the engineer units, only one company strongly decimated by previous battles, was left. The prospect of bringing up a complete engineer company was held out to the division. The staff however as well as the especially important engineer equipment column had to be assembled from the existing forces.

e. The antitank batalion was formed by the bringing up of a complete antitank company. In order to make up the full batalion a mountain antiaircraft company was attached.

The staff of the antitank unit had to be formed by the division itself. The assault gun battalion was not established until December 1944.

f. The division had at its disposal the reconnaissance batalion of the regiment 'Brandenburg' However this was only attached to the division. We originally intented to incorporate it into the division. But as the regiment was to be organized into a division "Brandenburg" into which the

batalion was to be incorporated, this intention could not be realized. The division was to have had a complete reconnaissance unit assigned to it at a later date.

g. A training battalion did not exist owing to the former purpose of the division. It was the intention of the division to organize this battalion from its own forces.

h. During the month of October the present butchery & bakery platoon was brought up to company strength.

Aveterinary company and a supply company were assigned to the division during November. The present repair shop detachment was completed by our own forces to company strength. The quality of the official staff was of gtaff was of great importance for the future fighting power of the division as an active mountain division. The greater the number of officers at the regiment battalion and unit levels, experienced and proven in battle and physically entirely fit for combat in the high mountains from the youngest lieutenant to the commanders of the regiments, the greater the guarantee that the division would fulfill its fighting task in the mountainous terrain. The commanding staff clearly recognized right from the beginning that the task of reorganization into a mountain division could only be achieved given a highly qualified officer staff unusually active intellectually and physically, and well aware of their responsibility.

Therefore the task of exchanging and replacing officers was pushed forward by divisional hq. with all possible means. The assistance given hereby to the division by superior administrative offices, especially the

Army Personnel office was also a deciding factor for the actually successful execution of th[illegible] task.

A certain [illegible]arshness towards officers, who mentally met all requirements but did not fu[illegible]ill the physical conditions of a mountain war on account of being wou[illegible]nded or ill, could not be avoided. Finally it must be stated that the officer staff of the division, with a few exceptions, came up to all expectations in the tough fights which later took place. The units were not uniformly equipped with modern rapid-fire weapons especially as far as the machine guns and machine pistols were concerned. Actually machine guns of all European nations were at hand, whereas the MG 42 which on account of their lightness and great fire power were especially suitable, were present only in very small quantity according to the peculiarities of a mountain war the troops were extensively divided into platoons and squads requiring machine guns and plenty of ammunition at pretty near every smallest unit. Despite all endeavors of the division and despite all support of the superior officers as far up as the Heeresgruppe it was impossible for a long time to equip the units of the division uniformily with the MG 42 and the MG 34. It took months to do so even partially. Therefore it may all the more supprising that a "Luftwaffen-Taper bataillon on special assignment later subordinated to the division was amply equipped with machine guns 42 even had a 30 percent surplus of MG 42's above the authorized strength as material reserves at the baggage.

The equipment with submachine guns also was quite insufficient and not uniform. We only had American and English submachine guns which had been captured in fighting against the Maquis, and Italians submachine guns which were mostly obtained through personal connections with leading officers

of the ministry of armament in Italy.

The armament of the artillery with modern guns was entirely insufficient in September 1944. We had only 2 batteries of mountain guns 36 whereas the rest of the mountain batteries were equipped with old Skoda guns M15. The only heavy battery of the division (heavy field howitzer 18) had been lost in the tough battles in the Grenoble region.

As we could not figure on a uniform Supply of German material for the mountain batteries and heavy batteries we decided to equip the mountain batteries with the modern Italian mountain gun Ansaldo the ballistic output of which corresponded to the one of the mountain gun 36, and in which German ammunition could be used after a minor alteration at the powder chamber. The heavy batteries received the modern Italian heavy field howitzer. A great deal of detailed work had to be done by the mountain artillery regiment and also by the offices of the divisional staff responsible before these batteries could be fully made use of. Employment of the division in high Alpine terrain, not provided for until then, where, despite the most beautiful harvest weather, snow storms and terrible cold prevailed in an altitude over 2500 m, just as in deepest winter, rendered it necessary to equip the troops at once with winter clothing and alpine accessories. Arriving from south east France in August the troops wore summer clothing. The small stock of winter clothing there had been left behind in the quarters there and thus was lost.

The same had happened to the alpine equipment so far as there had ever been any as the units did not have enough transportation room for it. Besides it was pretty near impossible to transport the material by rail because

the tracks had been disrupted at an early date by the Maquis.

Only by disregard of the numerous bureaucratic regulations and by a complete lack of consideration necessitated by the emergency, was it possible to secure the absolutely necessary winter clothing.

We were also very worried about the conditions of the pack animals and horses of which we had only very few. In order to speed up the supply of the winter bases the animals had to be overworked while on the other hand it was very hard to procure the necessary food for them. It was only thanks to the endeavors of the veterinary officers under the active supervision of the veterinary officer of the division that the pack animals and horses remained fit fo r use the whole of the time, despite their being overstrained only thanks to the divisional veterinary officer could the considerable lack of pack animals and horses be made up for in a relatively short time .

The units were insufficiently equipped with motor vehicles. The trucks mostly consisted of wood-gas generator vehicles of the French type the drivers of which were conscripted French civilians. These drivers could not be kept any more after the division had been moved to the Italian region. There was no use of forcing them to stay as only a driver who worked voluntarily was able to keep the complicated machanism of a generator for running. It was necessary to replace them by German drivers. In the beginning however, many vehicles were dead hined because the drivers did not know how to handle them. In a short time we managed much by training courses and by rewards for extraordinarily good drivers. However we could only partly overcome the difficulties arising from the lack of spare parts for the French type cars which we were unable to obtain. Asgasoline became shorter and shorter it was of advantage for the division to have a relatively high number of wood gas generator vehicles

later on.

B. Though changing the division into a mountain division required the concentrated energy of all the staffs, conduct of battle was never neglected. Orders and instructions for the regimental groups, the execution of which was personally supervised the whole time in the battle positions made it impossible for the enemy to make a surprise attack. Things were rendered more difficult by the fact that it was impossible to employ native alpine guides because the population, if not taking an active part, as partisans, against the Germans, w was standing aside waiting to see how things would develop.

In the morning hours of September 12th the enemy started this attack east of the road through the little St. Bernhard pass, under cover of the fog prevailing at this altitude, after having strongly increased the artillery fire which started a few days before. (Appendix 3). There was no doubt that the objective of the enemy attack was to take possession of the French Fort De Traversette. This fort, at an altitude of 2400 m, completely dominates the little St. Bernhard pass and was the key position for the whole defense at the little St. Bernhard. The ridge carrying the fort on its north eastern part extends approx. 2000 m towards southwest to slope down rather steeply towards the west and southwest.

According to the importance of this part of the terrain, fort De Traversette and the ridge extending from there towards southwest had been occupied by a mountain infantry company, portions of a machine gun company and a h heavy company. The main line of resistance had been advanced from the fort so far southwards and southwestwards that it was located at the edge of the hill which have sloped down steeply towards the south and the southwest.

The whole ridge was built up into a defense system with distribution in depth making use of many flanking possibilities and using the fort as the key point of the position. Artillery protection was secured by 2 mountain batteries and one stationary heavy battery (Italian 15 cm guns).

Despite bad weather-fog and snowstorms-the positions on both sides of the pass road, especially the positions southwest of the fort were under heavy artillery fire all day long, on 11 Sep, from at least 5-6 batteries of medium caliber and numerous mortars, sometimes intensifying to a heavy barrage. During the fore noon it was not obvious to the division at staff on which spot the enemy would make his obviously intented attack, but in the afternoon, when the fire was mainly concentrated at the ridge east of the passroad and at the fort De Trarersette, the intentions of the enemy were evident. At dusk the enemy began to feel his way forward with separate patrols towards the German positions. They were easily repelled every where. Also during the night of September 11/12, the positions and approach roads were under heavy artillery fire while it was snowing violently.

Despite considerable artillery fire the losses were small on September 11th. There was no doubt at division hq that the enemy would try on September 12th to occupy the ridge east of the pass road and the fort De Traversette. Except for supplying the necessary ammunition no other preparations had to be made by the division as the commander of the regiment reported that his troops were expecting the attack, which was expected to take place for sure the next day, with confidence in every respect.

In the early morning hours of September 12th making use of the dim weather and without artillery preparation the attack was started against the positions on the ridge east of the pass road, while heavy artillery fire on

the positions west of the pass road was supposed to eliminate flanking of the attack. Though the French 'Alpenjaeger' succeeded, protected by the fog, to come close to the German positions, the defensive fire of the artillery and heavy infantry weapons, which was immediately opened beat back the attack without any close combat. The attack was repeated twice during this day after a fire for effect/several lasting hours davored by better visibility. In both cases the enemy did not succeed the well placed artillery fire asked for in time by the advanced observer, and the flanking effect of the heavy infantry weapons in both cases prevented the enemy from penetrating into the German positions. All three attacks, each time carried out by at least one battalion, had been successfully repelled. From ambulances which we observed continuously traveling from Bourg St. Maurice towards the West during September 13th we concluded that the enemy had suffered considerable losses. Our own losses were surprisingly lowdespite heavy artillery fire. The defensive success had reestablished much of the self confidence of the troops which had been lost in the previous fighting during the retreat. Likewise the confidence of the mountain infantry men in their artillery had increased, because it was mainly due to a well directed defensive fire that the enemy had been repelled.

On September 13th the French did not attack the positions on the ridge east of the pass road however were heavily shelled all day long. The enemy tried to continue the attack on September 14th and 15th. Apparently in connection with the action on September 13th at Modane in order to take possession of the ridge and the fort.

Despite employing considerable forces (at least 2 battalions)

and heavy artillery fire immediately preceding the attack, all attacks were repelled, with the infantry occasionally entering into close combat at a few places.

After the fighting had ceased at this place on September 16th the position was still entirely in our hands. Although employing considerable forces, and despite heavy bloody losses, the enemy was not successfull.

Above the tactical success accredited to the combat team 'little St. Bernhard', the moral success resulting from this battle was of even greater importance. The young mountain infantry, until then inexperienced in mountain warfare h d regained their self confidence and felt themselves equal to any enemy.

From the fighting the division command drew the conclusion that the enemy would now try to cross the Alp crest at another place in order to overthrow the positions at the little St. Bernhard from the rear. The enemy might consider in the first place the pass across the Col de la Seigne at the South west corner of the towering heights of the Mont Blanc and the Col due Mont which forms the entrance into the Valgrisanche - valley. The precautions taken by the division to take possession of these passes and to defend them will not be described in this essay as they only came into effect after September 15th.

The battle of Modane,
September 13th 1944

On September 13th the division received the message that the enemy advancing on the Arcvalley towards the East had pushed back our own weak forces as far as to the heights of the village Frency west of Modane. As was made out by our reconnaissance, continually hindered by fog and rain the enemy increased its strength continuously. (Appendix 4). The enemy advanced on a wide front in so far as the terrain would allow of this and under the protection of heavy artillery fire which however, had rather little effect on account of the bad observation conditions. The incessant fire on the railroad nation of Modane and the western entrance of the tunnel was unpleasantly noticeable. The reserve mountain infantry battalion I/98, supported by a platoon at mountain artillery, was the main defender at Modane. It had suffered heavy losses in the previous battles. This as well as the bad signal communication caused by the long distance to be covered, caused the division commander to visit the place himself. Dense fog delayed his arrival at Bardonnechia. When he finally got there during the noon hours of September 13th the situation was the following.

During the forenoon, despite very bad weather conditions the enemy had attacked the forward positions on both sides of the Arc on the level of Frency, with far superior forces. With his right wing the enemy had succeeded, by making use of the fog and guided by Maquis who were well aquainted with the locality, in gaining the rear of our advanced positions. Thus we had been forced to withdraw the advanced troops to the main position. A Moroccan taken prisoner in these battles, declared that his regiment had had orders to occupy Modane at any price that very day. He affirmed that the whole regiment consisting of 3 battalions was being employed to take Modane. Discussion with the commander

of the regiment, staying with the first battalion in Modane, proved that the enemy pressure was still extraordinarily strong. The fort located immediately northwest of Modane, and forming the key point of the whole Modane position had been attacked by the enemy in battalion strength around noon. The attack had been repelled by the garrison consisting of one company. Heavy artillery fire on the fort after the unsuccessful attack caused considerable losses amongst the garrison. It had to be expected that the attack would be repeated very soon. The enemy had like wise made an attack in the Arc valley, but had been repelled by our forces holding the defile west of Fourheaux. Preparations for blasting the western entrance of the Mont Cenis tunnel had been accomplished by evening of September 13th according to the message of the commander of the railway engineer company preparing the blasting. The intention of the division commander to visit Modane personally failed as neither a lokomotive nor a railroad velocipede was available to drive through the tunnel. A telephonic discussion with the commander of the regiment, who was in Modane and the commander of the I battalion showed that they were both very doubtful as to whether the battalion could stand the further heavy enemy attacks to be expected the next day, as it was already badly worn out. It was impossible to bring up new forces as all the troops the division could dispose of, were only just sufficient to block the most important passes lying within the extent of command of the division sector, Reserves which could have been employed in Modane up to the morning of September 14th, were not available. Under these circumstances the division commander proposed, in a conversation on the afternoon of September 13th with the commanding general

of the LXXV corps, to blast the western entrance of the tunnel and to evacuate Modane during the night of September 13th/14. The 'Heeresgruppe' had reserved for itself the permission to blast the tunnel and numerous, time-absorbing telephone calls were necessary before the commander in chief of the 'Heeresgruppe Suedwest agreed.

In the mean time the enemy had repeated his attacks on the fort northwest of Modane. While we succeeded in repelling the first two attacks the enemy was able to enter the fort at the third and could not be removed any more by our forces which were strongly weakened by previous battles. A costly close combat started, about the end of which there was no doubt considering the superiority of the enemy. As in the mean time the evacuation of Modane had been ordered in the night of September 13th, the commander of the regiment gave orders to evacuate the fort. The remnants of the company arrived at Modane under aggravating circumstances - the retreat had to be made via the pathless, steep slope on the eastside-as all other ways were in the hands of the enemy. The wounded were taken along. During the afternoon the artillery fire on the village of Modane and especially on the region of the western entrance of the tunnel was increased more and more. The western entrance of the tunnel could not be used any more for supplying ammunition and for removing the wounded. We were lucky still to have at our disposal the ventilation tunnel the entrance of which was 1200 m away. The artillery of the enemy apparently did not know of its existance.

The repeated attacks on our position near the Fourneaux defile, lasting all afternoon, proved that the enemy would try by all means to take possession of

Modane that very day. The mountain infantry company, committed these, was able, in conjunction with the effective fire of the two mountain guns, to repel all attacks of the enemy. Though these endeavors involved the enemy in heavy losses, our casualties also increased as time went on. It was a particular disadvantage that one of our mountain guns was rendered useless by artillery hits.

The enemy tried without success to destroy the eastern entrance of the tunnel at Bardonnechia as well as the railroad yard of the Bardonnechia station by artillery fire damage to the overhead power lines could be repaired.

After the consent of the 'Heeresgruppe' to evacuate Modane and to blast the west entrance of the tunnel had been obtained the commander of the regiment received the evacuation order from the division commander. The commander of the first battalion was responsible for its execution. All units stationed at Modane and in the tunnel were placed under his command. The tunnel entrance was to be blown at midnight. It was very difficult to prepare in time a train for removing the wounded and the material because no electric locomotive was at hand, either in Bardonnechia or in Susa. A steam locomotive could not be used as contamination by smoke might result from it because the tunnel would be badly ventilated after the blasting. An electric locomotive, brought from Turin to Susa after overcoming considerable difficulties, did not arrive at Bardonnechia before midnight as partisans had blown up the track between the two towns. Reconstruction of the destroyed tracks caused a delay of several hours.

At night fall the enemy ceased attacking Modane, however harassing fire of the enemy's artillery lay on Modane all night and especially on the railroad

station and the western entrance of the tunnel. Without considerable annoyance by the enemy the I battalion succeeded in evacuating Modane and in withdrawing through the ventilation tunnel into the main tunnel. The blasting took place according to plan, as far as I know at three different places at the western entrance, at the entrance of the ventilation tunnel and at the junction of the ventilation tunnel with the main tunnel in the early morning hours of September 14th. The first battalion arrived at Bardonnechia after marching through the tunnel on the morning of September 14th. The same day they had to occupy defensive positions on the border ridge south of Melezet.

The battles on September 12th, 14th and 15th near the fort De Traversette had brought a full defensive success and the self confidence of the fighting units had greatly increased, but the tough battles of Modane on the 13th were an extraordinary strain on the reserve mountain infantry battalion I 198. Holding out in Modane also on September 14th probably would have meant the destruction of all our forces fighting in and near Modane by a many times superior enemy, without gaining any advantage in the total situation in the western alps. The enemy it is true had the advantage of being in possession of the Arc valley. As the divisi n was badly in need of forces on account of the widely spread sector it was of importance that the battalion made available through the evacuation of Modane should be used to occupy and safeguard the border ridge south of Melezet. When the reserve mountain infantry battalion I 198 had occupied these positions, all important passes in the Bardonnechia region, which might enable the enemy to cross the border ridge by surprise, were blocked by our own troops. On September 15 the division reported to the LXXV corps that all important passes and crossings in the sector of the division had been occupied. All the efforts the enemy still made after September 15th to take

possession of the passes were repelled. Very soon we were able to start little offensive operations, which all were successful.

At the beginning of November 1944, when the winter rendered all large-scale offensive operations impossible, the division could be said to have full filled its task. Instead of fighting the enemy now we had to fight the powers of nature.

Signed Schricker.

Appendix I

Set up of the 157 reserve division on 8 Sept. 44 (datas given are incomplete, owing to fading of memory).

R 157

Combat team Mont Cenis - Modane - Bardonnechia

R 157

R 99 R I 198

Combat team Haug

R 100

R 7

R 7

Combat team Mont Blanc-Little St. Bernhard reserve mountain inf I

R 179

R 79

Stationary batteries

Appendix 2

Setup of the 157 mountain division from 10 September 44 onward

(datas given are incomplete, owing to failing of memory)

157

297

III II I

296

III II I

brought up after 15 September

1057

I

5 light - 3 heavy

II

3 light - 2 heavy

T (Supply battalion)

Attached: artillery training regiment Brandenburg.

Appendix 3

Sketch of the German positions and of the Italian and French frontier fortifications occupied by the Germans in the region Mont Blanc - little St. Bernhard

Scale: 1:100 000

Key to map signs:

German positions

French positions of readiness (assembly positions)

Attacks on 12 September 44

" " 14 and 15 September (AA training or reconnaissance Battalion)

Cour Mayeur

Col della Seigne

297

Col de Forde
Pte du Glapey
Bourg St. Maurice

Col du Pt St Bernhard
Col de Traversette
Fort " "
Col du Mont
Chappuis

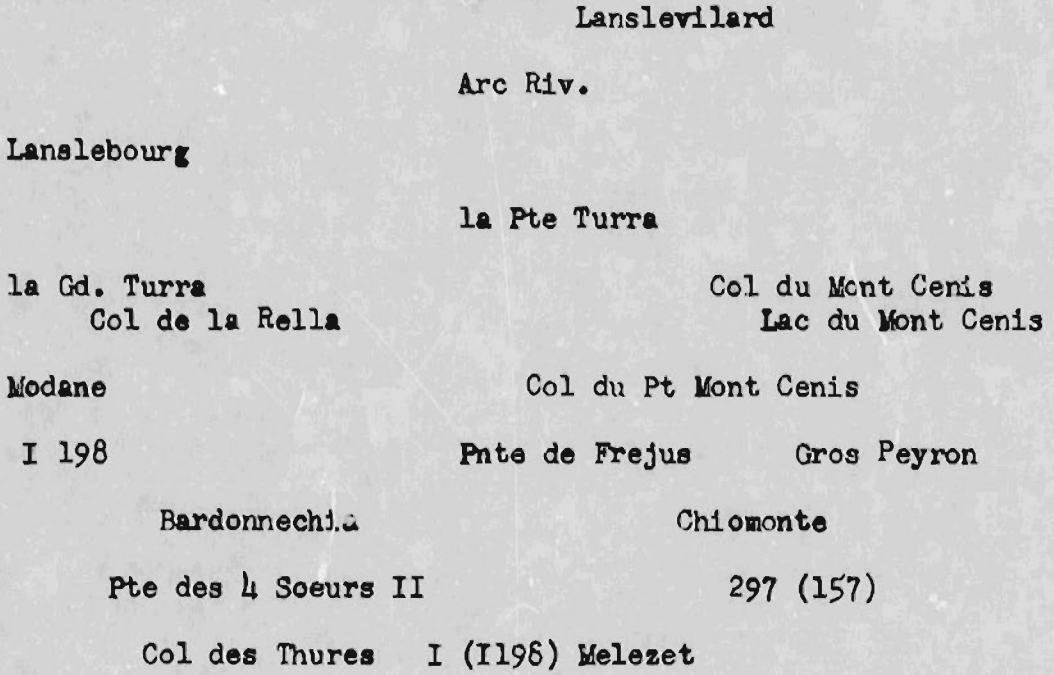
Appendix 4

Sketch of the German positions and of the Italian and French frontier fortifications occupied by the Germans in the region Mont Cenis - Bardonnechia - Melezet.

Scale: 1:100000

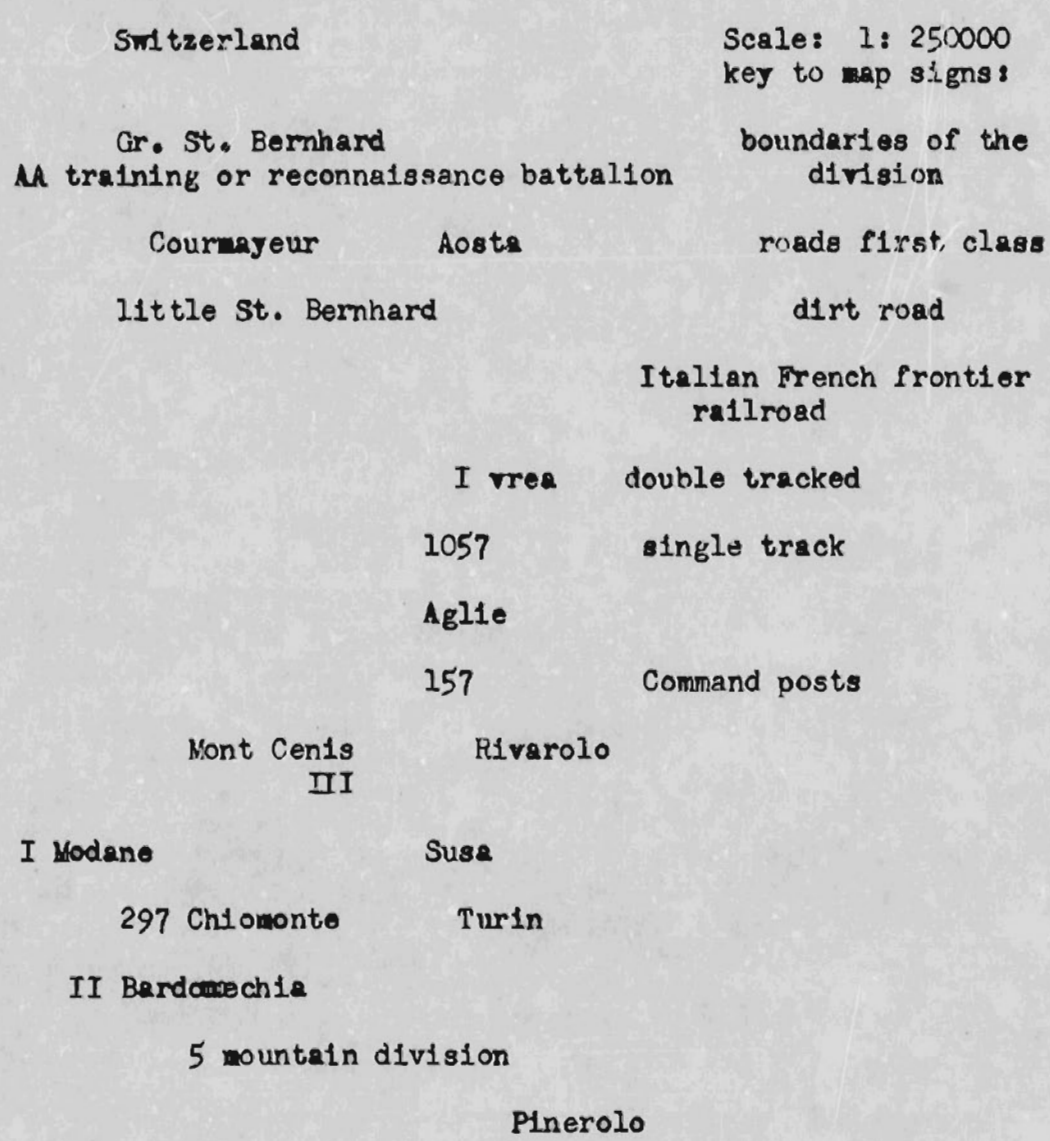
Key to map signs:
German positions
" " occupied after 14 Sept. 44

French attacks on 13 Sept 44



Appendix

Sketch of the sector of the 157 mountain division status of 13 September 44



FIB-331

ANLAGE 1

GLIEDERUNG DER 157. RES. DIV. AM 8.9.44

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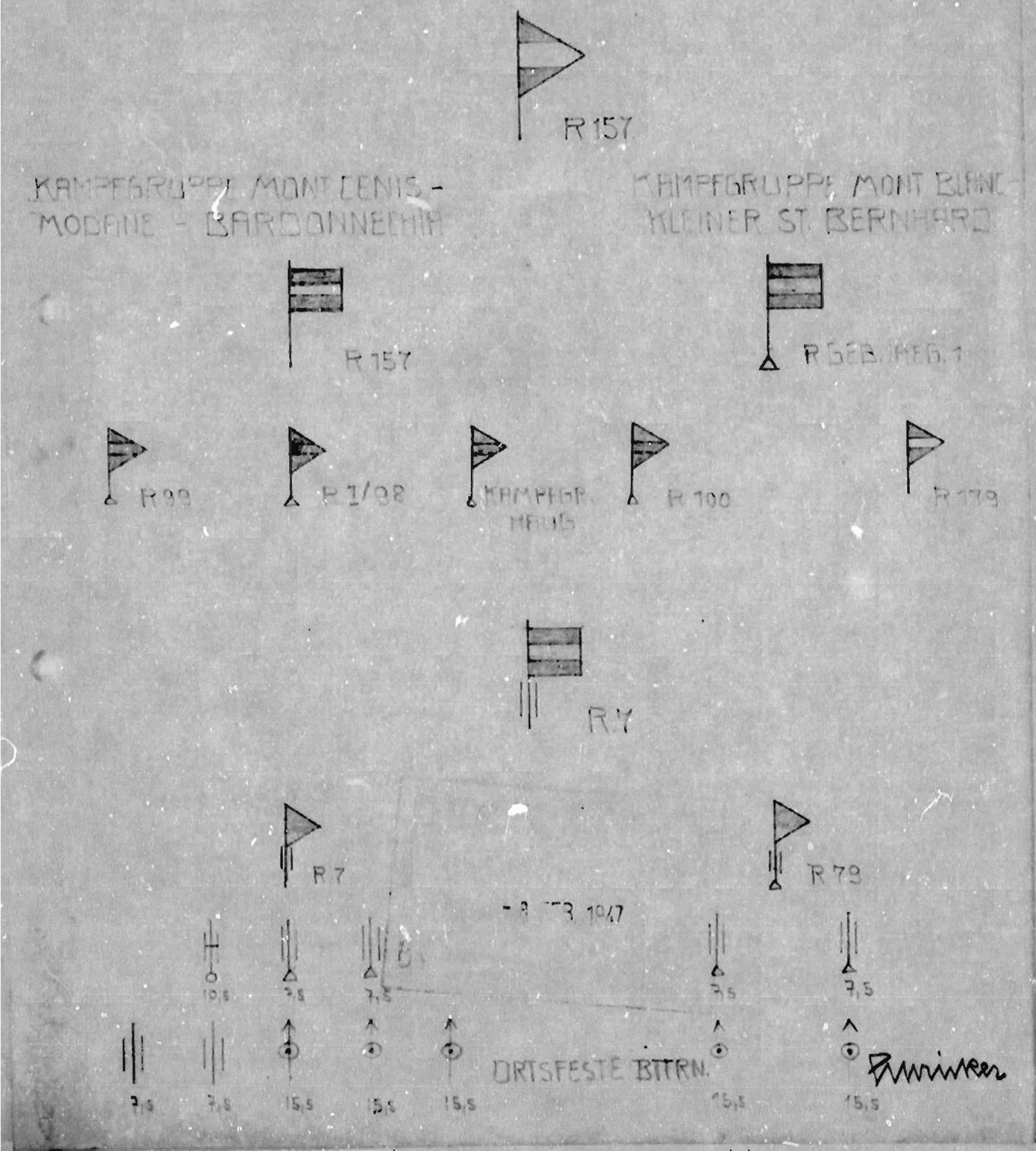
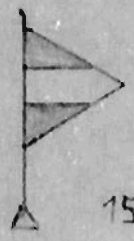


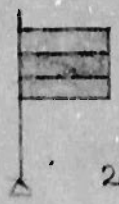
OB-331

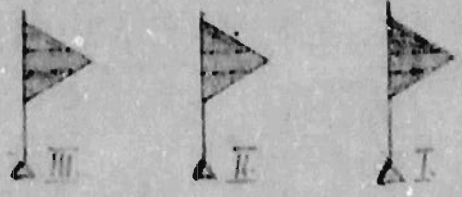
ANLAGE 2

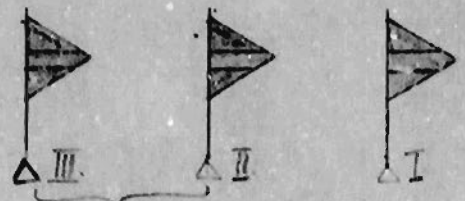
GLIEDERUNG DER 157. GEBIRGSDIVISION AB 10.9.14

[Angaben unvollständig, da nicht mehr erinnerlich.]

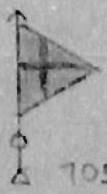


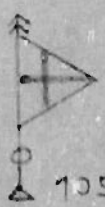






erst nach dem 15.9 zugeführt





zugeteilt: AA. Rgt. Brandenburg

Brandenburg

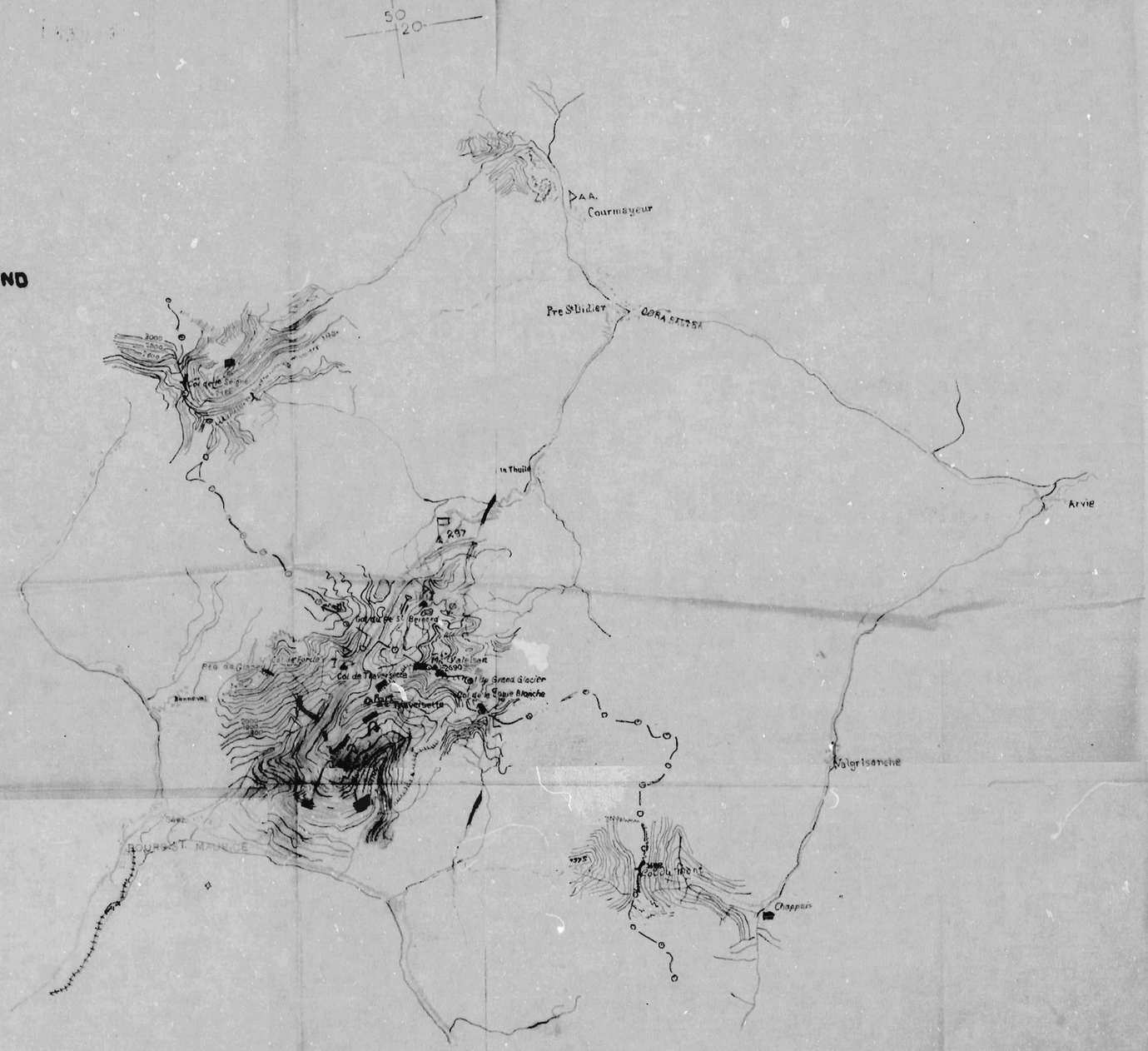
SKIZZE DER VON DEN DEUTSCHEN BESETZTEN STELLUNGEN UND ITALIENISCHEN UND FRANZÖSISCHEN GRENZBEFESTIGUNGEN

IM RAUME MONT-BLANC - KLEINER ST. BERNHARD.

MASSTAB: 1: 100 000.

ZEICHENERKLÄRUNG:

- Deutsche Stellungen
- Französ. Bereitstellungen
- Angriffsam 12.8.44
- Angriffe am 14. u. 15.8.



BB-331

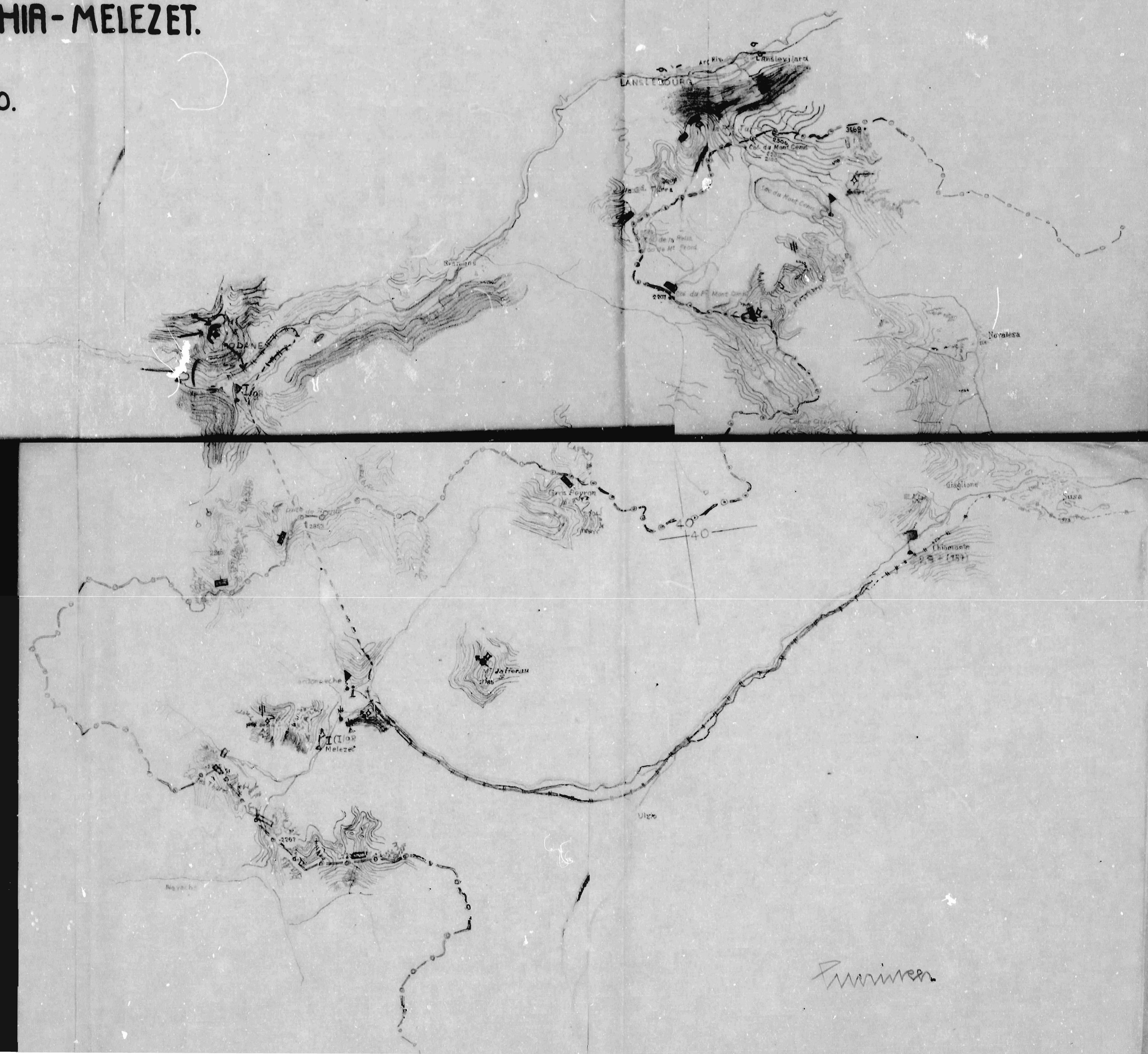
SKIZZE DER VON DEN DEUTSCHEN BESETZTEN ITALIENISCHEN UND FRANZÖSISCHEN GRENZBEFESTIGUNGEN IM RAUME MONT CENIS - BARDONNECHIA - MELEZET.

MASSTAB: 1:100 000.

ZEICHENERKLÄRUNG:

- Deutsche Stellungen
- " " " Nach dem 14.9.44. bezogen
- → Französ. Angriffe am 13.9.44.

- 8 FEB 1947



BY

Anlage

SKIZZE DES ABSCHNITTES DER 157. GEB. DIVISION

Stand vom 13.9.44

MASSTAB: 1:250 000.

Zeichenerklärung:

- Divisionsgrenzen
- Strassen I Kl.
- Fahrweg
- Ital.-Franz. Grenze
- Eisenbahn
- zweigleisig
- eingleisig
- Gefechtsstände

SCHWEIZ

Gr. St. Bernhard

A.A. Courmayeur

Aosta

296 Kl. St. Bernhard

Ivrea

1057 Aglie

957 Rivarolo

Mont Cenis

Modane

Susa

297 Chiomonte

Bardonnechia

TURN

5. GEB. DIVISION

Pinerolo

B-331