

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

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## *About the electronic version*

20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment

Author: Pringle, D. J. C.

Author: Glue, W. A.

Creation of machine-readable version: TechBooks, Inc.

Creation of digital images: TechBooks, Inc.

Conversion to TEI.2-conformant markup: TechBooks, Inc.

New Zealand Electronic Text Centre, 2004  
Wellington, New Zealand

Extent: ca. 2000 kilobytes

Illustrations have been included from the original source.

### ***About the print version***

20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment

Author: Pringle, D. J. C.

Author: Glue, W. A.

War History Branch, Department Of Internal Affairs, 1957

Wellington, New Zealand

Source copy consulted: Defence Force Library, New Zealand

Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–45

### ***Encoding***

Prepared for the New Zealand Electronic Text Centre as part of the Official War History project.

The digital edition of this book was sponsored by Mary Weston, daughter of General Sir Howard Kippenberger who served as one of the Editors-in-Chief of the Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War.

All unambiguous end-of-line hyphens have been removed, and the trailing part of a word has been joined to the preceding line. Every effort has been made to preserve the Māori macron using unicode.

Some keywords in the header are a local Electronic Text Centre scheme to aid in establishing analytical groupings.

### ***Revisions to the electronic version***

19 July 2005

Jamie Norrish

Removed unwanted linebreaks and associated markup, and corrected a few associated minor transcription errors.

27 October 2004

[Colin Doig](#)

Added name tags around names of people, places, and organisations.

31 August 2004

[Jamie Norrish](#)

Added link markup for project in TEI header.

25 August 2004

[Jamie Norrish](#)

Corrected date in note 44, page 78.

2 August 2004

[Jamie Norrish](#)

Added funding details to header.

28 June 2004

[Jamie Norrish](#)

Added missing text on page iv.

3 June 2004

[Jamie Norrish](#)

Added full TEI header.

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## Contents

[covers]

20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment p. i

[frontispiece] p. ii

[title page] p. iii

[extract] p. v

[dedication] p. vi

Foreword p. vii

Preface p. ix

Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger, — kbe, cb, dso, ed, — died  
Wellington, 5 May 1957 p. xi

Contents p. xiii

List of Illustrations p. xiv

List of Maps p. xvii

CHAPTER 1 — Formation and Training in New Zealand p. 1

CHAPTER 2 — Journey from New Zealand to Egypt p. 11

CHAPTER 3 — Training in Egypt p. 18

CHAPTER 4 — The Campaign in Greece p. 38

CHAPTER 5 — Crete p. 95

CHAPTER 6 — Rebuilding the Battalion p. 151

CHAPTER 7 — Campaign in Libya p. 168

CHAPTER 8 — Rebuilding after Battle p. 212

CHAPTER 9 — Syria p. 218

CHAPTER 10 — Return to the Desert p. 227

CHAPTER 11 — Ruweisat Ridge p. 244

CHAPTER 12 — Infantry to Armour p. 288

CHAPTER 13 — Farewell to Maadi p. 304

CHAPTER 14 — The Battle for Orsogna p. 323

CHAPTER 15 — Cassino p. 365

CHAPTER 16 — To Avezzano p. 418

CHAPTER 17 — To Florence p. 443

CHAPTER 18 — From Florence to the Savio p. 476

CHAPTER 19 — Winter on the Senio p. 521

CHAPTER 20 — The Last Lap p. 549

CHAPTER 21 — 'This is Yugoslavia' p. 595

Roll of Honour p. 603

Summary of Casualties p. 613

Honours and Awards p. 614

Appendix I — VICTORIA CROSS CITATIONS p. 617

[section] p. 617

8077 Second-Lieutenant Charles Hazlett Upham

Bar to Victoria Cross p. 618

7930 Sergeant John Daniel Hinton p. 620

Index p. 621

[backmatter] p. 633

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## *Contents*

[covers]

20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment p. i

[frontispiece] p. ii

[title page] p. iii

[extract] p. v

[dedication] p. vi

Foreword p. vii

Preface p. ix

Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger, — kbe, cb, dso, ed, — died Wellington,  
5 May 1957 p. xi

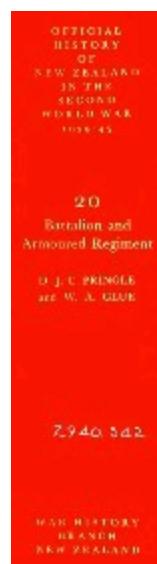
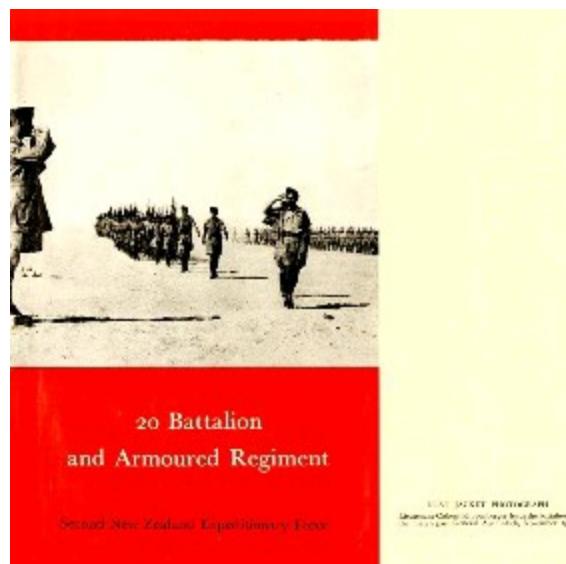
Contents p. xiii

List of Illustrations p. xiv

List of Maps p. xvii

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## [COVERS]



20 Battalion  
and Armoured Regiment

by  
D. J. C. PRINGLE  
and W. A. GILLETT

MAK HOLIDAY STAMPS  
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS  
RECOLLECTIVE, NEW ZEALAND  
1957

# **20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT**

## **20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT**

***20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment***

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## [FRONTISPIECE]



En route to the Western Desert

**En route to the Western Desert**

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## [TITLE PAGE]

Official History of New Zealand  
in the Second World War 1939–45  
20 Battalion  
and Armoured Regiment

D. J. C. PRINGLE  
W. A. GLUE

### WAR HISTORY BRANCH

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND 1957 printed and

distributed by

WHITCOMBE AND TOMBS LTD.

christchurch auckland wellington dunedin  
hamilton lower hutt timaru invercargill  
london melbourne sydney perth geelong

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## [EXTRACT]

'Men, we are going forward tonight to take Belhamed and open the way to Tobruk. This is the crisis of the battle. We have 6000 yards to go (there were some gasps) and after 4000 yards we will have to fight our way. We will go straight in with bayonet and bomb and nothing will stop us. I know you will keep high the name of the 20th. And men, I wish you all Good Luck, every man of you.'

— Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger, speaking to the battalion before the attack on Belhamed, night 25–26 November 1941.

'And from now on discipline is going to be tightened up, so there'll be no more "Groob", "Baldy", or "Grand-dad" out of you lot. It'll be "Sar'-Major" in future!'

'Christ, that shows how serious it is!' said the company runner.

—WO II H. L. Grooby, C Company, breaking the news of the evacuation of Greece to Company Headquarters, 22 April 1941.

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## [DEDICATION]

The authors of the volumes in this series of histories prepared under the supervision of the [War History Branch](#) of the Department of Internal Affairs have been given full access to official documents. They and the Editor-in-Chief are responsible for the statements made and the views expressed by them.

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## FOREWORD



WINDSOR CASTLE

WINDSOR CASTLE

### *Foreword*

By Lieutenant-General the Lord Freyberg,  
vc, gcmg, kcb, kbe, dso

I feel it is an honour as well as being a great pleasure to write a foreword to the History of this fine infantry battalion. The 20th Battalion was raised, trained, and commanded by Colonel, later General Sir Howard, Kippenberger; it came away from New Zealand with the First Echelon and went to Egypt, where it saw continuous active service from 1940 right through the war to the capture of Trieste in 1945. It took part in the campaign in Greece, and later in the disastrous battles to save the island of Crete.

Under the command of Colonel Burrows, the Battalion fought valiantly to recapture the Maleme airfield, in the dour fighting for Galatas, and in the counter-attack at 42nd Street, in each case with great distinction.

Its next campaign, after Crete, was fought in Libya in 'Operation crusader' when the Division marched to attack the Panzer Army and by its actions undoubtedly saved Tobruk. The Battalion fought at Menastir, Bir Chleta, and Belhamed, where it met disaster. After the Libyan campaign the Division moved to Syria. When Rommel captured Tobruk in June 1942, the New Zealand Division was moved back quickly to the Western Desert and took part in the heavy fighting right back to the Alamein line, including the disastrous Battle of Ruweisat.

At this stage the Battalion went back to Cairo, to be converted to an Armoured Regiment.

When the Division moved to [Italy](#) we took with us our Armoured Brigade, and in [Italy](#) 20 Regiment fought right through to the finish of the war, at [Trieste](#), in May 1945.

It is of interest to note that this Battalion turned out many first-class senior officers: men of the calibre of Jim Burrows, Fountaine, [Fairbrother](#), and of course Charlie Upham. This was undoubtedly due to the inspiration of their original commander. Colonels McKergow, Ferguson, Purcell, and Robinson commanded the Armoured Regiment with distinction.

The Battalion had the distinction of winning three VCs-- Charlie Upham, VC, in Crete, Bar at Ruweisat, and Hinton at [Kalamata](#).

This is the story of a fine unit, and I hope it will be widely read by many people, not only in New Zealand but also in the Old Country.

Bernard Fuyberg

Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor

[Windsor Castle](#)

7 November 1956

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## PREFACE

### *Preface*

This, and I quote [Dave Pringle](#), one of the joint authors, this is the history of the 20th, by men of the 20th, collected and collated by him and by [Bill Glue](#), 'both of whom had the privilege of serving in the 20th'.

The 20th, throughout its life, was known as a happy unit. It met, in the earlier days, more than its share of misfortunes, cruelly heavy losses in [Crete](#), black disasters on [Belhamed](#) and on [Ruweisat Ridge](#). But its spirit never changed or faltered, traditions grew, were fostered by the surviving 'old hands' and absorbed by those who took the places of the dead, the wounded and those enduring the years as prisoners of war. It lives now only in the hearts and memories of those who once were proud to be 20th.

This book has been prepared with care and pride. [Dave Pringle](#) worked on it for years, almost to a breakdown. When he was forced to admit that he could not go on, [Bill Glue](#), an 'original 20th', took it on (from [Orsogna](#)) in addition to his heavy duties as Sub-Editor of the War Histories. Each gave all he had to this work. It is, as [Pringle](#) remarks, characteristic of the enduring 20th spirit that almost every man who was asked for information, or for his recollections, gave his help freely and often at great personal inconvenience. From 1944 on George Robson took immense pains to gather information. Basil Borthwick has made a great contribution, as was to be expected. These two, with Pat Barton and Shirley Hodson, are the chief of 'a host of good fellows, most of whose contributions are acknowledged in the text' by quotations from their letters and diaries.

Thanks are also due to Miss Joan Williams, who prepared the index, arranged the illustrations and took on her shoulders much of the routine sub-editorial work of the [War History Branch](#) while [Bill Glue](#) 'was immersed in the history'. The maps were drawn by the Cartographic Branch of the Lands and Survey Department and done with care and accuracy.

Completion of this history, and now I am speaking as a 20th, in a way ends a chapter in our lives. The great days and the bitter days, the faithful comradeship, the humour and the tragedy, the high dedicated endeavour are all in the past. Something of them is here recorded.

H. K. Kippenberger

CO 20 Battalion (once)

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

MAJOR-GENERAL SIR HOWARD KIPPENBERGER, — KBE, CB, DSO, ED, —  
DIED WELLINGTON, 5 MAY 1957

*Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger,  
kbe, cb, dso, ed,  
died Wellington, 5 May 1957*

I have sometimes been asked by people who knew Kip only in Peace, knew only the military historian, the quietly-spoken, shy, retiring scholar, just what were the qualities he possessed that made him so beloved of the men he commanded in War.

Upon reflection I believe Kip's words in the Preface to this book partly answer the question. He speaks of 'high dedicated endeavour', and I think this phrase not only supplies the key to Kip's character, but helps to explain why men so completely believed in him.

In the first place we trusted Kip because we felt that here was one who had dedicated himself completely and absolutely to the task ahead. He was a true soldier, with the true soldier's regard for his men. I do not think he was ambitious in the sense that personal advancement meant everything. He was ambitious for the Battalion, the Brigade, the Division. He was so completely absorbed in the military picture that as an individual he counted for little.

Such absorption to the complete exclusion of his welfare, his own personal safety, made men realise that here was one who thought more of them than of himself. In action he would go wherever his presence was necessary, and when Kip arrived with time always for a friendly word for the men and encouraging advice for the officer, the effect on morale was immediate.

He loved his men. He knew them individually. He was proud of their reputation. Praise for the Battalion he passed on to others. Censure or criticism from above he kept to himself.

His standards were high, discipline good. He never resorted to loud shouting or

table thumping, nor were his punishments severe. Men in detention were of no use to the Battalion. Men who had been treated fairly but leniently became good soldiers. Kip believed that discipline would never be a problem in a unit where administration was sound and leadership good.

Kip's flair for soldiering took him to high commands, but he never lost the common touch, never lost contact with the men. His wounds and war experiences must have seared his soul, but his simplicity, his humour and his humanity remained unchanged.

In Kip's own words, this history records the high endeavour of the 20th; but his own high endeavour is recorded in our hearts.

J. T. Burrows

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CONTENTS

### *Contents*

	Page
foreword	<i>vii</i>
preface	<i>ix</i>
obituary: major-general sir howard kippenberger	<i>xi</i>
1 formation and training in new zealand	1
2 journey from new zealand to egypt	11
3 training in egypt	18
4 the campaign in greece	38
5 crete	95
6 rebuilding the battalion	151
7 campaign in libya	168
8 rebuilding after battle	212
9 syria	218
10 return to the desert	227
11 ruweisat ridge	244
12 infantry to armour	288
13 farewell to maadi	304
14 the battle for orsogna	323
15 cassino	365
16 to avezzano	418
17 to florence	443
18 from florence to the savio	476
19 winter on the senio	521
20 the last lap	549
21 'this is yugoslavia'	595
roll of honour	603
summary of casualties	613
honours and awards	614
commanding officers	615
victoria cross citations: capt c. h. upham and sgt j. d. hinton	617
index	621

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### *List of Illustrations*

En route to the <a href="#">Western Desert</a>	Frontispiece
Enlisting, <a href="#">Christchurch</a> , September 1939	F. J. Bain
Section post, <a href="#">Burnham</a>	Following page <a href="#">82</a>
Original officers of 20 Battalion	Green and Hahn,
Battalion lines, Cave	<a href="#">Christchurch</a>
C Company on route march at Cave, November 1939	Green and Hahn
Farewell parade, <a href="#">Christchurch</a> , January 1940	S. A. Bremford, <a href="#">Timaru</a>
On board the <a href="#">Dunera</a> at <a href="#">Lyttelton</a> , 5 January 1940	L. W. Jackson collection
On the <a href="#">Dunera</a>	B. J. Mathewson
Arrival at <a href="#">Maadi</a> , February 1940	collection
Wadi Tib, <a href="#">Maadi</a>	Green and Hahn
Meal time on a B Company exercise	Green and Hahn
Carrying Italian prisoners of war, December 1940	L. W. Jackson collection
River-crossing exercise, <a href="#">Helwan</a> , February 1941	G. Lawrence
Entraining for <a href="#">Greece</a> , <a href="#">Ikingi Maryut</a> , March 1941	20 Battalion Band
Reconnaissance group, <a href="#">Riakia</a>	NZ Army (G. R. Buli)
Katerini	J. T. Burrows collection
<a href="#">Riakia</a> village	J. T. Burrows collection
Pioneers at Lava	D. J. Fountaine
Lieutenant Upham at <a href="#">Kriekouki</a>	collection
Porto Rafti	J. T. Burrows collection
A group of 20 battalion officers in <a href="#">Crete</a>	Following page <a href="#">114</a>
	R. D. B. Paterson
	collection
	C. W. Hawkins
	E. J. Townley collection
	E. V. Gabites collection
	H. K. Kippenberger
	collection
	H. K. Kippenberger
	collection
	C. E. Thomas collection

The counter-attack on Maleme airfield	E. V. Gabites collection
Junkers 52s dropping paratroops, Galatas	E. K. S. Rowe
C Company platoons at Baggush	H. K. Kippenberger collection
Battalion area in the Baggush Box, November 1941	W. A. Hudson collection
Padre Spence conducts church parade	J. S. Harper
Sgt J. D. Hinton, VC	
Lt-Col Kippenberger and Lt Upham at Baggush	H. K. Kippenberger collection
Lt Upham's platoon, October 1941	NZ Army (M. D. Elias)
Awaiting orders on a desert exercise	E. R. Chesterman collection
German prisoners, Menastir, November 1941	A. Rawlings collection
Attack at Bir el Chleta	Following page 378
20 Battalion RAP, Bir el Chleta	J. S. Harper
Lunch on the way to Syria, 4 March 1942	H. K. Kippenberger collection
Pioneers in Syria	D. J. C. Pringle collection
Brigadier Kippenberger points out enemy positions near the Alamein line	J. A. T. Shand collection
C Company cookhouse during a move before the Ruweisat Ridge attack	J. T. Burrows collection
20 Armoured Regiment officers, 1943	E. J. Townley collection
C Squadron moves to Burg el Arab	J. F. Phillips collection
Orsogna	J. C. Denham collection
Tank positions, Orsogna	British Official
Cassino, the German view of the town and valley	G. N. Blatchford collection
C Squadron officers, Cassino, March 1944	J. F. Moodie
Albaneta House	J. F. Moodie
On the advance to Florence	NZ Army (G. F. Kaye)
Looking towards Florence	NZ Army (G. F. Kaye)
Tank crew 'boils up' during the advance to Florence	Following page 410
Tiger v. Sherman	NZ Army (G. F. Kaye)
T2 recovery tank freeing a Sherman	NZ Army
	V. C. Lea collection

By-passing a demolition north of <a href="#">Rimini</a>	J. C. Montgomery
<a href="#">Faenza</a> area, looking towards the <a href="#">Senio</a>	J. K. Burtt
Farmhouse occupied by tank troops and infantry	G. E. Taylor
Sherman gunline on the <a href="#">Senio</a>	NZ Army (G. F. Kaye)
20 Regiment officers at <a href="#">Maadi</a>	J. N. Overton collection
Maintenance, <a href="#">Faenza</a>	G. Baker collection
C Squadron conference before the attack on the <a href="#">Senio</a> , 9 April 1945	J. F. Moodie collection
25 Battalion infantry and tanks advance towards the <a href="#">Santerno</a>	G. E. Pritchard
Tanks waiting at the <a href="#">Adige</a>	NZ Army (G. F. Kaye)
A Squadron on the road to <a href="#">Trieste</a>	J. C. Denham collection
Tanks and Yugoslav infantry surround the Law Courts, <a href="#">Trieste</a>	V. C. Lea collection
Brig J. T. Burrows	NZ Army (G. R. Bull)
Lt-Col D. J. Fountaine	<a href="#">H. K. Kippenberger</a> collection
Lt-Col J. W. McKergow	NZ Army (G. R. Bull)
Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson	J. B. Ferguson collection
Lt-Col H. A. Purcell	J. F. Phillips collection
Lt-Col H. A. Robinson	NZ Army (G. F. Kaye)

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## LIST OF MAPS

### *List of Maps*

	Facing page
Egypt and Cyrenaica	15
Greece	49
Crete	115
Central and Eastern Mediterranean	181
El Alamein	247
Southern Italy	313
Northern Italy	443
In text	Page
Battalion positions, Riakia	45
4 Brigade positions at the Servia Pass, 10–17 April 1941	51
4 Brigade rearguard in the Kriekouki Pass	66
4 Brigade positions, Porto Rafti, 27 April 1941	70
The battle for Kalamata waterfront, 28–29 April 1941	78
10 Brigade positions, Galatas	99
Counter-attack on Maleme airfield, 22 May 1941	106
Galatas, 7 p.m., 25 May 1941	130
C Company action with enemy patrol, Sfakia	142
Cutting the Bardia- Tobruk road	169
Attack at Bir el Chleta, 24 November 1941	175
Night advance to Belhamed, 25–26 November 1941	180
Belhamed, 1 December 1941	196
Eastern Mediterranean	219
21 Panzer Division encircles Minqar Qaim, 27 June 1942	233
Ruweisat Ridge, dawn 15 July 1942	259
20 Battalion positions on Ruweisat, 15 July 1942	261
Roads and landmarks in Sangro River area	320
5 Brigade's attack, Orsogna, 15 December 1943	326
C Squadron's advance towards Orsogna, 15 December 1943	332
Attacks and counter-attacks, 16 December 1943	339
5 Brigade's attack, 24 December 1943	351

Cassino	375
The advance to <a href="#">Albaneta House</a> , 19 March 1944	378
Cassino to Avezzano	422
'Tiger Country' – San Casciano to <a href="#">Florence</a>	448
B Squadron's attack at <a href="#">Monaldini</a> , 14 September 1944	482
The advance to the Fontanaccia, 23–24 September 1944	488
From the Fontanaccia to the <a href="#">Uso</a> , 24–26 September 1944	494
4 Armoured Brigade's attack to the <a href="#">Savio</a> , 19–20 October 1944	512
6 Brigade's advance, 19 December 1944	530
The regiment's advance to the Sillaro, 10–14 April 1945	556
From the <a href="#">Senio</a> to the <a href="#">Adige</a> , 9–27 April 1945	570
The Brenta bridge action, 29 April 1945	584

The occupations given in the biographical footnotes are those on enlistment. The ranks are those held on discharge or at the date of death.

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

# CHAPTER 1 – FORMATION AND TRAINING IN NEW ZEALAND

## CHAPTER 1

### Formation and Training in New Zealand

On 5 October 1939 the [South Island](#) men of the [First Echelon](#) entered camp at [Burnham](#). For many it had been a strenuous day. A long train or bus journey with banging doors, popping crown-tops, rollicking songs, and boisterous laughter ended abruptly at a plantation of bluegum trees with the only attempt at marching that could be expected under the circumstances.

It is given to few men to be prophetic, and correct. It may have been intuition, pride, or his ability to judge men, but as the long column of train-weary volunteers, some of them dishevelled and far from sober, trudged past him into camp their future commanding officer remarked to a subaltern standing near him, 'This is going to be the best infantry in the world.' A bold prophecy, and one that would have to depend for proof of its truth on the most impartial judge of all—the future enemy in the field.

To arrive in camp was sufficient for the first day. After being given their regimental numbers, in many cases promptly forgotten, the men were fed and bedded down in stretchers which had been made, for the first and only time in their army lives, by those who were to be their future officers and non-commissioned officers.

Next day the eight hundred volunteers for the infantry were grouped to form what was known at the time as the 3rd Rifle Battalion, later to become the 20th Infantry Battalion. It was commanded by [Lieutenant-Colonel H. K. Kippenberger](#),<sup>1</sup> a veteran of the Great War of 1914-18, a Territorial officer in 'the years between', who had risen to command I Battalion, The Canterbury Regiment, and who had made a most intensive study of military history and tactics.

The organisation of the men into companies took up most of the first morning. Headquarters Company was a mixed collection of specialists of one sort or another—drivers, mechanics, clerks, signallers from the Post and Telegraph and Railways Departments, and some men with previous Territorial experience of mortars and Bren carriers. Towards midday an unexplained surplus of fourteen men still remained unclaimed on the parade ground. Reference to a chart showing the establishment of

an infantry battalion showed that an anti-aircraft platoon was required, to the number of fourteen. The survivors were promptly named and marched away. Headquarters Company, commanded by Major Peter Spiers, MC, <sup>2</sup> was complete.

The rifle companies were grouped on a geographical basis, the company commanders drawing lots to decide their alphabetical order. A Company, under Major MacDuff, <sup>3</sup> came from Canterbury; B Company, led by Captain Burrows, <sup>4</sup> from Southland; C Company, under Captain Mathewson, <sup>5</sup> from Nelson, Marlborough, and the West Coast; while in D Company, under Captain Paterson, <sup>6</sup> were the men from Otago.

The organisation of the battalion took the best part of three days, during which the men were initiated into the characteristic discomforts of army life: the tedious waiting in seemingly interminable queues for meals, kit issues, medical treatment and dental inspections; the strange experience of having commands barked at them on parade, and the even stranger rapidity of their quickly-learned responses; the complete cessation of any sense of privacy; and, as compensation, the rounding-off of awkward individuality, the gradual merging into a fellowship whose bond was the strangeness of the venture and the shared uncertainty of the future.

In view of the small forces held in New Zealand before the war the staffing of the First Echelon presented a serious problem. Senior officers, of necessity, were men with previous military training, either overseas or in the Territorials. Platoon commanders were usually junior Territorial officers. Four of the company sergeants-major came from the New Zealand Permanent Staff and the fifth was a former Territorial, as were also, at first, the majority of the platoon NCOs.

On 26 September the officers and NCOs of the First Echelon had entered camp to undergo special courses of instruction so that, by the time the majority of the Special Force, as it was then called, arrived, a skeleton training and administrative organisation was in working order. To build up a reserve of officers selected personnel were sent to Trentham to attend an officers' training course, and those who qualified rejoined the battalion shortly before final leave or were posted to later echelons.

The training during the first five or six weeks comprised chiefly squad drill, arms

drill and weapon training with the Lee-Enfield that had stood so well the test of the First World War, Lewis machine-gun training, and abundant instruction and practice in bayonet fighting. The equipment available was pitifully inadequate. Light-machine-gun training, for instance, was done solely with the Lewis gun which, despite its value in the Great War, had become obsolete as an infantry weapon. Rifles were plentiful but ammunition was handed out as if made of gold. The latest types of signal equipment were known only by name; everything was of last-war vintage; infantry wireless sets were unknown even to instructors. Each man had been issued with one suit of serge, a suit of denims and, later, one of khaki drill. Officers were equipped with revolvers, binoculars, prismatic compasses, water bottles and haversacks, and other ranks with 1908 pattern web equipment, rifles, and bayonets. Companies wore the hat and collar badges of their Territorial regiments.

Battalion parades began to assume an important part in training. In the moulding of a unit the discipline of the parade ground is a powerful factor in promoting the habit of prompt and unquestioning obedience. This is something quite apart from the spectacular effect of simultaneous response to an order and crispness of movement. As the purpose of all training should be to prepare men for battle, it is obvious that the habit of steadiness under strain is essential to a unit. The uncomplaining endurance of a long parade is some preparation for the discomforts of the field, while enforced habits of tidiness and cleanliness have obvious ultimate value. There have been some excellent soldiers who were not smart at rifle exercises and, conversely, some parade-ground soldiers who were of questionable value in action; but the fact remains that a unit that is smart on parade and efficient in guard mounting has a pride of achievement in one aspect of soldiering that can be transferred at the appropriate time to the more serious business of steadiness under fire, cheerfulness in the face of discomfort, perseverance against odds, and refusal to accept defeat.

It is universally accepted that the tone of the parade ground and the smartness of the guard are a direct reflection of the unit's Regimental Sergeant-Major. In this respect due credit should be given the early RSMs, Bert Steele<sup>7</sup> and J. D. Gibb,<sup>8</sup> for the standard reached in the battalion. The first guard mounted in Burnham from men of the Special Force was drawn from 20 Battalion.

The high standard set by the first two RSMs was maintained by the third, WO I 'Uke' Wilson,<sup>9</sup> who gave four very full years to the 20th, and whose loyalty to the battalion was such that he refused all chances of a commission.

With increased proficiency in their handling of the weapons available the men progressed to the stage where night manoeuvres were undertaken. At least here was something new and the opportunity for a number of humorous incidents. It was customary for the defending company to leave camp about midday for the scene of operations, which was usually three or four hours' march away in the vicinity of Tai Tapu. After a suitable interval the attackers sallied forth, the intervening time permitting the first party to organise its defence.

Many were the ruses employed to obtain information that might sway the action. In those early days fifth-column work was much more than a name. The people of Tai Tapu entered heartily into the spirit of the manoeuvres, though strangely enough their sympathies appeared usually to lie with the attackers. On one occasion the attacking force, C Company, illegally sent an advance party into the township before the arrival of the defenders. The party was secreted in a barn but failed to achieve its purpose as it was discovered, much to A Company's indignation, and made prisoner. Another time Captain Cliff Wilson,<sup>10</sup> the second-in-command of C Company, dressed as a civilian, rode through the defensive area at dusk on a horse and thoroughly reconnoitred the dispositions of the defenders under the pretext of looking for two stray cows.

Still another surprise movement was effected on the occasion when a river crossing was being opposed by troops who were guarding every existing bridge. The defence seemed impregnable until some attackers, led by Sergeant Charlie Upham,<sup>11</sup> crossed the river where no bridge existed by wading through it breast high. Equal initiative was shown one night by two signallers who converted a toll line to army use by attaching field telephones to the wires. This completely disorganised the toll system of Banks Peninsula and caused considerable consternation in the Post and Telegraph Department until the conversation overheard indicated the cause of the trouble to its engineers.

These night manoeuvres frequently led to incidents with civilians whose own nocturnal excursions sometimes had a most unexpected conclusion. On one occasion

a party of motorists, after driving several times up and down a road in a manoeuvre area, was halted by a patrol. Unable to obtain any clear information in reply to their queries, the troops promptly locked up the mixed party for two hours in one of the rooms of the church on suspicion of fifth-column activities.

Despite the inconvenience of having men tramping through their sections and over their farms, the people of Tai Tapu district extended unstinted hospitality to the troops, and many a man has pleasant memories of a cup of tea and hot scones in a warm farmhouse kitchen. From lack of information about the general plan, manoeuvres are often considered boring by the men in the ranks, but in those early days the keen inter-company rivalry in the exercises was mild compared with the spirited verbal battles that took place after the return to camp.

The weekly training programme made adequate provision for recreation. Tabloid sports were organised, as well as the ever-popular tug-of-war, but the enjoyment of one of these sports meetings held on Labour Day was dampened when the men had to parade after the last event to receive their first inoculation.

Off-parade activities were varied but the most popular was the enjoyment of a cup of tea and a pie at the [Salvation Army](#) tent. In the evenings sing-songs and concerts were held there, and in the early days in [Burnham](#) this large double-walled marquee was undoubtedly the hub of the social life of the battalion. A congenial atmosphere was created by the friendly Salvation Army workers, without a tribute to whom this history would not be complete. The informality of their church services appealed strongly to the troops, who attended in such increasing numbers that in time the marquee could scarcely accommodate those who made it their choice on Sunday morning parades. It was at these services that the men learned the well-known chorus, 'He Careth for Me', in later years to be sung in places and under circumstances little dreamed of by those who taught it.

Leave to [Christchurch](#) was granted on a quota basis. Trains were crowded with high-spirited troops, while many a motorist responded to the hitch-hiker's signal. At the [Christchurch](#) Welcome Club, established in the Art Gallery, dances and suppers were provided for the men. The YMCA also provided supper on Sunday nights and many civilian homes received soldier guests.

About this time it was realised that the troops had reached the stage where they required field training of a type not possible in the area around [Burnham Camp](#). Accordingly, on 23 November, the battalion moved by rail to Cave, where training was carried out until the return to [Burnham](#) on 3 December. This was the first time the men had made a move of any kind with all their gear. Everything was taken, even kitbags. After a fairly quick train journey the troops disembarked and carried their gear to the areas allotted them, ate their first meal cooked under field conditions, and erected lines of bell tents in green fields overlooking a pleasant stream.

At this stage, owing to the strong representations made to the Government by the Returned Soldiers' Association, wet canteens were opened in military camps. At Cave, where the canteen was opened in a large marquee, men were required to provide their own mugs and those of the largest sizes were naturally in popular demand. The day the battalion arrived at Cave the Prime Minister publicly announced that the Special Force would shortly go overseas. This news coincided with the opening of the wet canteen, thus providing both the excuse and the means for celebration.

The training at Cave consisted mainly of field firing and range practices, as well as day and night exercises. Aircraft from [Wigram](#) co-operated in several of these field exercises, in which the troops first learned the art of camouflage. At the close of one of them two officers and nine other ranks were withdrawn from the battalion to join the advance party of the [First Echelon](#); they returned immediately to [Burnham](#) and went on leave from 5 to 9 December. Twentieth Battalion members of the party were Lieutenant D. B. Cameron, Second-Lieutenant G. A. Murray, WO I A. J. Steele, CQMS G. L. Lawrence, Sergeants S. J. Green, T. H. Wilson, and C. H. Upham, Corporal L. L. Andrewes, and Privates R. J. Glubb, J. Robertson, and G G. P. Weenink.

12

On 11 December the advance party embarked at Wellington on TSS Awatea, sailing the same day for [Sydney](#). It went from [Sydney](#) to [Melbourne](#) by train and joined the 2 AIF advance party on 15 December on board RMS Strathallan, which also carried a number of civilian passengers. After a pleasant voyage, with leave at [Adelaide](#), Colombo, [Bombay](#), and [Aden](#), the New Zealanders disembarked at [Port Said](#) on 7 January 1940.

The date of the [First Echelon](#)'s move overseas was finally fixed at 6 January 1940, and the period at Cave, originally intended to last a fortnight, was curtailed by four days. While the battalion was away from [Burnham](#) a second draft of volunteers had marched in on 28 November, and to help train them four corporals were sent back from Cave.

At [Burnham](#) training was continued and preparations made for sending the troops on final leave. With the assistance, without charge, of members of the Canterbury Law Society, the men made their wills, and all ranks were blood-typed in preparation for the stamping of identity discs. A gratuity of £3 was paid to each man and, as from one minute past midnight on 14 December 1939, the [First Echelon](#) was placed on active service.

Arrangements made by the Defence Department with the New Zealand Railways permitted free travel only to soldiers' homes and back or to the place of enlistment. In the First World War soldiers on final leave had been given free rail passes without limitation, and this created some dissatisfaction among the troops. The outcome was a number of unauthorised telegrams to the Minister of Defence asking for free rail warrants 'anywhere' for the period of final leave. This procedure was considered by the Army to be most irregular, and the Officer Commanding the Southern Military District made a hurried trip to [Burnham](#), delivered a verbal blitz to the officers and NCOs, and departed in high dudgeon. No change in arrangements was made, except that individual passes allowed the men more freedom to travel.

On 14 December the exodus from camp took place. During the next fortnight the sight of khaki-clad figures brought home to the civilian population the fact that for the third time in forty years New Zealand troops were about to go overseas. Farewell functions were organised in every town and country district. The men spent Christmas at home and returned to [Burnham](#) on 28 December.

At once preparations were made for embarkation. The issuing of seakits, completion of embarkation rolls, alteration of allotments, and collection of unemployment levy books meant many tedious parades and queues, but leave was granted on most evenings. On the 30th the battalion was inspected by the GOC [2 NZEF](#), Major-General B. C. Freyberg, VC, and on 3 January, with other units from [Burnham](#), it marched through Christchurch for an official farewell in Cranmer Square.

It was a muster parade, of course, and it found the usual few somewhat at sea. The battalion was well turned out, everything was spick and span, but something of a sensation was caused when a well-known driver, after leaving his vehicle, marched across to take his place in his company with his rifle on the wrong shoulder, and crowned everything with a left-hand salute as he passed the CO. The rifle drill and general bearing of the battalion was of a sufficiently high standard to win the applause of the watching crowd before the troops marched off. One incident at the beginning of the parade reflected the training of the previous months. Before beginning his speech the Mayor of Christchurch told the men to sit down. All other units promptly did so but the 20th stood fast, rifles at the order, till the CO gave the commands, 'Ground arms! Sit down!'

That afternoon visitors were allowed into the camp. It was no ordinary occasion. Those who had relatives within visiting distance met them at the camp gates and quickly guided them to the limited privacy of hut or cubicle, and then, sensing the feelings of their less fortunate mates, included them in the family circle with that quiet insistence and compelling sincerity so typical of army friendships. Mothers and sisters, wives and sweethearts, delighted at being permitted a few last precious hours with 'their' soldier, masked sentiment with solicitude and in customary practical manner unpacked the afternoon tea. Fathers and other male relatives were lavish with tobacco and added their good-natured banter to the conversation. Everyone was determined to keep a brave face, but in occasional unguarded moments it was plain that some were already experiencing a foretaste of the agony of suspense that is many a woman's part in war.

After several practice entraining and embarkation parades the battalion, complete with full equipment and seakits, marched to Burnham station on Friday, 5 January 1940, and went by train to Lyttelton. A number of men also carried musical instruments, one of them, Private 'Sandy' Robertson,<sup>13</sup> taking with him a gramophone and an extensive collection of records.

The battalion's officers on leaving New Zealand were:

CO: Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger

Second-in-Command: Maj F. E. Dornwell

Adjutant: Capt F. L. H. Davis

Asst Adjutant: Lt J. H. Kempthorne

IO: 2 Lt T. E. Dawson

QM: Capt R. S. Orr

MO: Capt G. R. Kirk

Padre: Rev. G. A. D. Spence \*

Headquarters Company

OC: Maj P. W. G. Spiers

Lt G. A. Murray (Signals—advance party)

2 Lt G. A. T. Rhodes (Mortars)

Lt K. G. Manchester (Carriers)

2 Lt R. L. D. Powrie (Pioneers)

Lt D. B. Cameron (Transport—advance party)

Lt C. K. Fleming (Transport)

A Company

OC: Maj A. P. MacDuff

2 i/c: Capt T. H. Mitchell

2 Lt J. R. Coote

2 Lt P. G. Markham

2 Lt J. F. Phillips

B Company

OC: Maj J. T. Burrows

2 i/c: Capt M. C. Rice

2 Lt V. C. Poole

Lt J. P. Quilter

Lt W. Ayto

C Company

OC: Capt B. J. Mathewson

2 i/c: Capt H. O. Jefcoate

Lt D. J. Fountaine

2 Lt G. A. Brown

2 Lt F. J. Bain

D Company

OC: Capt R. D. B. Paterson

2 i/c: Lt M. C. Fairbrother

2 Lt J. F. Baker

2 Lt J. H. Beale

2 Lt J. D. Aiken

E Company

OC: Capt C. Wilson

2 i/c: Lt A. I. Garriock

Lt G. W. Washbourn

Lt H. J. Scoltock

Lt S. L. Wood

2 Lt M. G. O'Callaghan

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<sup>1</sup> Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Wellington; born Ladbrooks, 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; 1 NZEF 1916-17; CO 20 Bn Sep 1939–Apr 1941, Jun–Dec 1941; comd 10 Bde, Crete, May 1941; 5 Bde Jan 1942–Jun 1943, Nov 1943–Feb 1944; 2 NZ Div, 30 Apr–14 May 1943, 9 Feb–2 Mar 1944; 2 NZEF Prisoner-of-War Reception Group ( UK) 1944–45; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories; died Wellington, 5 May 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Maj P. W. G. Spiers, MBE, MC, VD; Dunedin; born NZ 28 Nov 1890; bank clerk; Otago Regt, 1915-19 (Maj), 2 i/c Reserve Bn.

<sup>3</sup> Maj A. P. MacDuff, ED, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Timaru, 29 Aug 1906; commercial traveller; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

<sup>4</sup> Brig J. T. Burrows, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Gk); Christchurch; born Christchurch, 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO 20 Bn May 1941, Dec 1941–Jul 1942; 20 Bn and Armd Regt Aug 1942–Jun 1943; comd 4 Bde 27-29 Jun 1942, 5 Jul–15 Aug 1942; 5 Bde Mar 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; 6 Bde Jul-Aug 1944; Commandant, Southern Military District, Nov 1951–Oct 1953; Commander K. Force, Nov 1953–Nov 1954; Commandant SMD, Jan 1955-.

<sup>5</sup> Maj B. J. Mathewson, ED; Westport; born Westport, 18 Apr 1905; company manager; 2 i/c 26 Battalion, 1941; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

<sup>6</sup> Maj R. D. B. Paterson, ED; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 20 Aug 1908; stock agent; 2 i/c 20 Bn May 1941, Sep 1941–Apr 1942; Commandant, Southern District School of Instruction, Burnham, Jun 1942–Dec 1944.

<sup>7</sup> Maj A. J. Steele, MBE; Burnham Camp; born England, 25 Jul 1907; Regular soldier; comd School of Instruction, Fiji Military Forces, Jun 1943-Mar 1945.

<sup>8</sup> Capt J. D. Gibb; Oamaru; born Blenheim, 9 Dec 1913; Regular soldier; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>9</sup> WO I T. H. Wilson, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Milton, 14 Mar 1918; bacon curer; RSM 20 Bn Nov 1940–Apr 1944.

<sup>10</sup> Maj C. Wilson, m.i.d., MC (Gk); born England, 25 Aug 1907; insurance clerk; killed in action 21 May 1941.

<sup>11</sup> Capt C. H. Upham, VC and bar, m.i.d.; Conway Flat, Hundalee; born Christchurch, 21 Sep 1908; Government land valuer; three times wounded; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>12</sup> The advance party, commanded by Major A. W. Greville, consisted of 2 officers and 50 other ranks, plus 18 officers and 41 other ranks who attended courses in the Middle East. The calibre of the battalion's representatives is shown by their records: Lieutenant Dave Cameron reached the rank of major, was mentioned in despatches and was twice wounded; George Murray became a major in 26 Battalion and was mentioned in despatches; Sergeant-Major Bert Steele became a captain and later served in Fiji, winning the MBE; CQMS George Lawrence served as a captain in 23 Battalion, came home on furlough, and returned to that battalion in Italy; Second-Lieutenant Stan Green was killed in action in Crete; WO I 'Uke' Wilson was RSM in the battalion and later in the armoured regiment for three and a half years and was mentioned in despatches; Captain Charlie Upham won the VC and bar and mention in despatches, was thrice wounded, was taken prisoner at Ruweisat and ended the war in Colditz after several attempts to escape; Corporal Len Andrewes was wounded and taken prisoner in Crete; Reg Glubb became sergeant cook and served the battalion well until he returned home with the first furlough draft; Jim Robertson became a captain in Base Pay Office and served as paymaster at Port Tewfik and in the hospital ship Oranje before returning home on furlough with a mention in despatches; George Weenink became a staff-sergeant, won the BEM, and was RQMS in the battalion and in the regiment until he came home on furlough after Cassino. Three have died since the war: Cameron was drowned at Maori-bank on 24 February 1951, Andrewes died on 20 November 1947 and Glubb on 22 December 1948.

<sup>13</sup> Tpr J. W. Robertson; Invercargill; born NZ 11 Nov 1904; journalist; wounded

\* Padre Spence joined the battalion in Egypt on 14 February and Lt H. C. Tremewan succeeded Capt Kirk as MO on 15 February.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 2 – JOURNEY FROM NEW ZEALAND TO EGYPT

## CHAPTER 2

### Journey from New Zealand to Egypt

The battalion soon reached Lyttelton where, in spite of precautions taken to keep the move secret, a large crowd had gathered at the wharf gates. The two trains drew up near the transports Dunera and Sobieski. Twentieth Battalion and some 4 Field Ambulance personnel embarked on the Dunera, which already had on board the Divisional Signals which had embarked at Wellington. The men were marshalled in alphabetical order on the wharf and their names checked as they went up the gangway in single file. The battalion left with exactly its establishment, 801, the last man, absent without leave, being dragged from his home and hurried to the wharf.<sup>1</sup> Once on board the men were shown to their quarters in the mess decks. The Dunera was a regular troop transport which before the war had carried troops and their families to and from India.

About 4.30 p.m., to the strains of 'Now is the Hour' and 'He Careth for Me', accompanied by a local band, His Majesty's Troopship Dunera pulled out to sea. It was the first transport to leave New Zealand in the Second World War and was followed, after a short interval, by the Sobieski. Some disappointment was felt that the public had not been allowed on to the wharf in time for final farewells. Out from port the naval escort, HMS Leander, was picked up. The troops paraded for boat drill, had a meal—a good one too—and then drew their hammocks. Many men took their hammocks up on deck and slung them in all kinds of unauthorised places: from pipes, rails, knobs—anything that would hold a knot. The bosun is reported to have commented: 'I've seen soldiers, I've seen sailors, I've seen Boy Scouts, but I have never seen b—s like these!'

The ship steamed slowly north that night and out of the haze next morning appeared the squat bulk of the battleship HMS Ramillies, leading the rest of the ships—Orion, Rangitata, Strathaird, and Empress of Canada—from Wellington. With HMAS Canberra guarding the rear, the convoy passed through Cook Strait and up the west coast of the North Island before turning west for Australia. Patrol planes, flying low over the ships, dipped their wings in salute as the first echelon of troops to leave the Dominion in the Second World War began the long voyage to its 'overseas destination'. All eyes were turned to the receding coastline and to snow-capped

Egmont, never more beautiful than when viewed from the sea.

The trip across the Tasman was uneventful, the weather remarkably good, and the troops in excellent spirits. Everyone gradually settled down to life aboard a troopship. For some it was their first experience of being at sea. Unlike the luxury liners that comprised the rest of the convoy, the [Dunera](#) was adapted to carry the greatest number of people in the smallest possible space. After the manner of a transport long used to carrying regular troops, her passage-ways and decks were liberally plastered with 'Out-of-Bounds' notices and other signs strongly emphasising the distinctions in rank between officers, NCOs, and men. It took some time for Dominion troops to appreciate their full significance. Deck space for other ranks was deplorably small, this being one of the worst features of the ship's organisation. The other was the stowing of hammocks before a quarter past six each morning in the hammock room some six decks below.

Physical training, games, concerts, and lectures helped to pass the time during the crossing of the Tasman, and on 9 January the Empress of [Canada](#) left the convoy to allow the GOC to catch a plane in [Sydney](#) for Egypt. Next day the ship, accompanied by six transports carrying Australian troops and their escort, HMAS [Australia](#) and HMAS [Canberra](#), rejoined the convoy.

Convoy manoeuvres, which had begun in the [Tasman Sea](#), were continued on 16 January when a mock attack by the two cruisers, [Australia](#) and [Canberra](#), was repulsed by the [Ramillies](#). Warning of the attack was given by the [Dunera](#) with two blasts of her siren. The convoy closed in and increased speed, but at another long blast the ships scattered in star formation. Under cover of a thick blanket of mist which hung low over the sea and a smoke screen laid by the protecting battleship, the other transports in the convoy quickly disappeared from view. The troops crowded to all vantage points to watch the battle. The only 'loss' was the [Dunera](#), the slowest of the convoy.

Issues of New Zealand hat and collar badges, field dressings, 'housewives', puttees, and unit sleeve patches (the last in short supply) were completed before arrival at [Fremantle](#), which, after a slow trip across the Australian Bight, was reached on the afternoon of 18 January. The ships anchored in the roadstead, pulling into the port as berths became available. The [Dunera](#) was one of the last to tie up, but the

period of waiting next morning was enlivened when the master of the ship allowed the troops to use the lifeboats for a row round the anchorage. The men enjoyed the exercise and, at the same time, took the opportunity to row across to other ships in the convoy. After being paid £1 Australian money, debited in paybooks as sixteen shillings sterling, the men were granted leave to visit [Perth](#) and enjoyed both there and in [Fremantle](#) the unlimited and unforgettable hospitality of [Western Australia](#).

There were the usual pranks that must be expected from high-spirited men who have been cooped up for some time in a troopship. As the result of one of these the stuffed, full-sized kangaroo from the 'First and Last Shop in [Australia](#)' found itself on board the [Dunera](#) and sailed all the way to [Tewfik](#), where it was left with the ship's crew with the hope that it would one day be returned to its rightful owners. Three men from the battalion had not returned to the ship by the time it sailed.

At 12.30 p.m. on 20 January the convoy left [Fremantle](#) and began the long voyage across the [Indian Ocean](#). The naval escort consisted of the battleship [Ramillies](#), the cruiser [Kent](#), and the French cruiser [Suffren](#). Three days out from [Fremantle](#) the OC Troops, [Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger](#), addressed all ranks and told them that they were going to Egypt, where they would undergo about two months' training with new equipment and modern weapons before being considered ready to go into action. He stressed the value of discipline and the necessity for co-operation between officers and men.

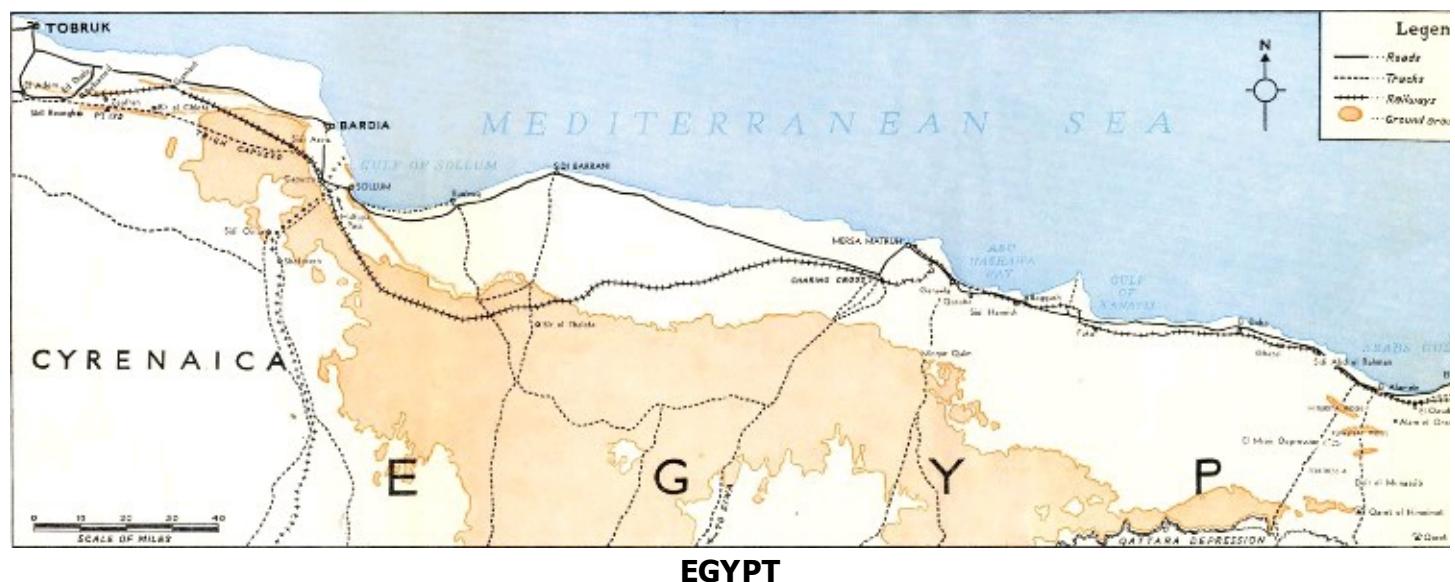
In its turn as duty unit in the [Dunera](#) the battalion was required to provide men for guards, pickets, and fatigues, the last including duties in the ship's galley and butcher's shop and as deck-scrubbers. There were twenty-four sentry posts, requiring seventy-two men to man them. It was difficult for men who had been on duty during the night to get sleep in the daytime as they had to sling their hammocks up on deck over a hatch. Military training was largely restricted through lack of space, but physical training, signalling instruction, and lectures on a wide variety of subjects relieved the monotony of crossing the [Indian Ocean](#). Recreational training was also hampered by cramped quarters but boxing and wrestling tournaments attracted large entries and created interest. Four footballs were popular for a time until they all went the same way—over the side. A less strenuous diversion was playing 'Housie' on the open decks, the caller perching on a hatch cover in the centre. Crown-and-Anchor had its usual followers until a few boards were confiscated. After

this boards were chalked on the deck where they could be rubbed out quickly at the approach of authority.

Because of blackout restrictions all portholes were closed after dark, and to help reduce the consequent discomfort in the tropics men were allowed in turn to sleep on deck at night. Canvas awnings were erected on the upper decks for protection against the fierce heat of the sun. Wind sails with canvas shutters leading through the holds to the decks below were hoisted to catch every breeze.

Messing arrangements called for much organisation. Officers, warrant officers, and sergeants messed in dining-rooms in peacetime comfort, attended by Indian waiters clad in a picturesque uniform of flowing blue coat over a spotless white gown, complete with a broad waist-sash and corded blue-and-white turban. The men were allotted set tables for the voyage, two men from each table acting as mess orderlies. The food, generally, was good, although inadequate cool-storage accommodation early in the voyage caused an epidemic of diarrhoea and vomiting among a section of the troops. As the result of an investigation which substantiated complaints that the butter was tainted by refrigeration, New Zealand butter was issued for the rest of the voyage.

In the ship's canteen prices were cheap, especially for cigarettes, tobacco, and chocolate. So brisk was the trade in these items, as well as in tinned fruit and stationery, that it was necessary to replenish stocks at each port of call. The method



of serving, however, from a single window with only one customer at a time, meant protracted waits in long queues that discouraged many from returning after the first visit.

On 30 January the convoy reached Colombo, where the transports entered a harbour thickly congested with shipping of every conceivable size and nationality. In contrast with the grey camouflage of the troopships, neutral ships in the harbour bore in conspicuous paint their distinctive colours and the names of their countries of origin. A Japanese luxury liner, the Brazil Maru, with all her lights on made a brilliant sight amid the blacked-out convoy at night. While the ships lay in harbour they were surrounded by Arab dhows and bumboats from which native vendors sold their wares—fruit, nuts, cheroots, and ebony elephants—and clamouring boys dived for coins.

Next day shore leave was granted. The men paraded at 8 a.m. and waited on the ship for three hours before going ashore in lighters and marching to the Galle Face hotel, where they were dismissed. During this brief visit the men made their first acquaintance with eastern shopkeepers, rickshaw men, jugglers, fortune-tellers, and beggars. They went sightseeing in taxis and explored the bazaars.

After returning from leave one man fell overboard but was fished out safely. A number of men, some sixty-odd, had been absent from the parade at the Galle Face before the return to the ship, and for this offence were either reprimanded or given two or three days' CB. Others absent without leave received from two to seven days' CB, with some forfeiture of pay by the worst offenders.

On 1 February the convoy began the last lap of the voyage and was joined by a French ship, Athos II, carrying French colonial troops. The naval escort now included the [Ramillies](#), the aircraft-carrier Eagle, and the cruisers [Sussex](#), Hobart, and Westcott. Some excitement was caused four days later when one of the Eagle's aircraft crashed into the sea, the pilot being rescued by one of the escort vessels.

The troops manned ship on 3 February as a salute to HMS Eagle as she steamed down the line of transports, and again two days later for the [Ramillies](#) when she left the convoy in the Gulf of Aden. With the approach of their destination the men were given lectures on tropical diseases and other pitfalls of Egypt. Web equipment was fitted and checked, identification discs completed, boots stamped with regimental

numbers, and water bottles disinfected. On 8 February some of the convoy called at Aden to refuel, but the [Dunera](#) carried on up the Red Sea. She berthed at Port Tewfik at 10.30 a.m. on 12 February after a voyage of thirty-eight days. During the morning the ship was visited by [General Freyberg](#), who introduced to the troops gathered on the decks the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, the Rt. Hon. Anthony Eden, General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East Forces, Lieutenant-General H. M. Wilson, GOC-in-C British Troops in Egypt, Sir Miles Lampson, British Ambassador to Egypt, and the Governor of the Canal Zone, representing the Egyptian Government. Mr Eden read to the troops a message from the King:

I know well that the splendid tradition established by the armed forces of New Zealand will be worthily upheld by you, who have left your homes to fight for the cause that the whole Empire has made its own.

Now that you have entered the field of active service, I send you a very warm welcome, together with my best wishes for your welfare.

(Signed) George R.I.

During the wait in port the troops were paid in Egyptian money. No leave was granted, but the unit was called upon to provide working and unloading parties, fatigue parties, and guards over dumps of stores and equipment on the wharf. The warnings given during medical lectures on the risks of disease in Egypt were borne out by the dirtiness of the Egyptian labourers and the filth on the wharf, which effectively deterred most of the men from buying any of the motley collection of oranges, cigarettes, wallets, Turkish delight, and toffee so importunately offered for sale. On the wharf small children begged for baksheesh with all the frenzy of the hungry and the greedy. 'Gulli-gulli' men performed on the quay, but their efforts soon palled on men who were weary of life on board ship and waited impatiently for orders to disembark.

Shortly after the [Dunera](#) had tied up at the wharf lighters were bringing ashore troops from the larger ships which had had to anchor in the stream. After reveille at 3.45 a.m., the battalion disembarked at 5.30 a.m. on 14 February, gave three cheers for the ship, and for an hour stood around in a cold, almost frosty atmosphere,

waiting to depart in the high, hard, uncomfortable third-class carriages of the Egyptian State Railways which were to become a very familiar mode of travel in the years ahead. The battalion entrained at 6.30 a.m. and, passing through Zagazig, Benha, and Cairo, reached Maadi, where it detrained and marched to Maadi Camp. The band of the Cameron Highlanders piped at the head of the column at the unaccustomedly slow pace of ninety to the minute. The men carried most of their equipment, the road was hot and dusty, and few were fit after six weeks at sea. Their entry to Maadi could hardly be said to have made an impression on the GOC, who took the salute on the march of about two miles to the unit lines.

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<sup>1</sup> The strength of the battalion on embarkation was 38 officers and 752 other ranks, a total of 790, this including 133 first reinforcements. The two officers and nine other ranks from the battalion in the advance party made up the full strength of 801.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 3 – TRAINING IN EGYPT

## CHAPTER 3

### Training in Egypt

The first day in [Maadi](#) was spent, naturally, in settling in. Tents erected by the King's Royal Rifles were located, gear dumped, and a meal eaten. During the afternoon the men took stock of their surroundings. As far as the eye could see stretched limitless, sandy wastes. To the north frowned the [Mokattam Hills](#); to the south rose terrace-like stony ridges surmounted by the circular stone structure of Napoleon's fort; to the east ran rolling sandhills; while in the west, beyond the silver ribbon of the [Nile](#), the pyramids of Giza stood out against the distant haze. The green trees of [Maadi](#) below the masts of the Marconi wireless station indicated the nearest township, while the tall, slender minarets of the Citadel, half-hidden by the shoulder of the hills, turned all minds to [Cairo](#)—and leave.

Training began the next day with the following routine:

Reveille	0600 hours
Sick parade	0615 hours
Breakfast	0700 hours
Battalion parade	0900 hours
Morning parades	0900–1200 hours
Lunch	1200–1300 hours
Afternoon parades	1315–1600 hours
Tea	1730 hours
Sergeants' mess	1800 hours
Officers' mess	1830 hours
First Post	2200 hours
Last Post	2215 hours
Tattoo	2230 hours

On 15 February some of the battalion's drivers went to Abbassia to collect transport and experienced for the first time the European practice of keeping to the right of the road and the art of dodging donkey carts, tram-cars, watermelon barrows, and cartloads of Egyptian women ('bint carts') along what was to be known thereafter as 'The Mad Mile'.

During the month individual training was supplemented by courses in all infantry

weapons—Bren, mortar, and anti-tank rifle. Many of these were new to the men and were issued only in training quantities. Companies also commenced shooting on the Egyptian range, and there was ample space in the desert behind the camp for platoon and company training.

For the first few weeks the troops were on the British Army ration scale which, not then being supplemented by parcels from home, they found rather light. General Freyberg, always anxious about the welfare of his troops, was made aware of the men's views on their rations during a visit to Abbassia, where C Company was doing its field firing practice. Coming up behind the party on the mound he asked the sergeant in charge, 'How are the men shooting?' The sergeant was the forcefully spoken Jack Hinton, <sup>1</sup> later to win the VC at Kalamata. 'How would you expect them to bloody well shoot,' he replied briskly, without stopping to think, '—not enough bloody rations, stinking heat and sand.'

'Repeat that,' said the General.

Hinton repeated it.

'What's your name, sergeant?'

'Hinton, sir.'

'Oh yes, Hinton,' replied the General. 'Carry on.'

The General then had a few words with the company commander, who in turn had a few words with his sergeant on how to speak to generals; but some time later it was announced that a grant of Id. per man per day to buy extra rations had been approved.

On 24 February the battalion marched to I 8 Battalion's parade ground for an inspection by General Sir Archibald Wavell. More important, in the opinion of the troops, was the arrival next day of the first mail from New Zealand. Soon night manoeuvres began and the men learned—often to the discomfiture of their officers—the amazing similarity which all desert features assume after dark. Route marches, which play such an important part in all infantry training, gradually increased in length. C Company's custom of singing on these marches such songs as 'Roll out the

Barrel', 'we'll hang out our washing on the Siegfried Line', and many more colourful shearing-shed ditties is still remembered.

March opened with two more ceremonial parades, one on the 2nd for General 'Jumbo' Wilson and the other on the 9th for Sir Miles Lampson, the British Ambassador, an equally impressive figure. The drivers received practice in driving in soft sand and in navigation by compass, while the rifle companies were being toughened by route marches over rough country. A never-failing phenomenon on these marches was the appearance at the first halt of native orange-sellers. Their wares were welcome, but as the prices at the outset were rather high the custom was to let 'George' carry his case full for a while until fatigue reduced his price.

Parade-ground standards were given due attention. An entry in Lance-Corporal Bretherton's <sup>2</sup> diary for 11 March reads: 'Coy and Bn parade. HQ Coy had to do half an hour's extra drill under RSM Steele. Enjoyed it.' A similar entry for the following day lacks the final laconic comment.

The weather during March was mainly cool with northerly breezes. Nights were surprisingly cold, with occasional rain. Although the battalion's war diary records that the general health of the troops was good, many suffered from chills when hot days were followed by treacherously cold nights. Cases of measles and influenza were reported. Towards the end of March temperatures rose and the flies became more numerous.

Recreational facilities were well patronised. Camp Naafis were the hub of life in the evenings. Through thickening clouds of smoke, and to the accompaniment of the clink of bottles of Stella beer, troops with an air of ever-hopeful concentration marked innumerable 'Housie' tickets in quest of the coveted but elusive 'snowball'. Leave in Cairo with its cafés and bars, cinemas and museums, was an experience to suit all tastes. Races at Gezira and Heliopolis had many New Zealand patrons, while the quaint trills and wails of cabaret singers and the shuffle of dancing feet invited the men to nights of entertainment and excitement that sometimes presented the proprietors with more problems than they could handle.

Lectures and concerts also helped to provide entertainment for the troops. Trips to Luxor and tours of the mosques of Cairo were advertised in routine orders—

among warnings against contracting chills, sunbathing, tattooing, or washing clothes in the shower houses. Repeated admonitions were given on such subjects as security of information and arms, Naafi breakages, the consumption of liquor on leave trains, and the production of paybooks when demanded by the military police.

April, a month of contrasts, opened with thunder, lightning, and heavy rain. Training now advanced beyond the company stage, and on the 4th, in preparation for brigade manoeuvres, the battalion moved in desert formation six miles from camp and bivouacked for the night. At a quarter to five the following morning a practice attack under an imaginary barrage was carried out. The return to camp took the form of an exercise in withdrawal. Three days later, on the 8th, the battalion began probably the most gruelling exercise of its training when, as part of a brigade manoeuvre, it marched twenty-one and a half miles to a bivouac area south of Helwan. Marching this distance on the tarsealed road was a severe ordeal after training over sand, but the war diary records: 'No march casualties evacuated to ADS.'

The following day the exercise was continued under extremely trying conditions. Most of those who took part would probably consider that the war diary entry—'Heat very trying during long halt on Sunstroke Plain'—puts the matter too mildly. A night march to a forming-up area began at 1.30 a.m. on 10 April. After an attack on the feature Husan Migalli, the troops spent the day at North Cone, gaining experience at least in erecting shelters from the sun with the aid of rifles and groundsheets. At 4.30 p.m. the battalion returned to the bivouac area of the previous night, and the following morning began to prepare a defensive position. The method recorded in the war diary reads: 'Actual digging, imaginary wire, etc.' The next day's exercise began at 1 a.m. with a withdrawal by night to a previously reconnoitred position where a defensive line was formed, this time without digging. The exercise ended at 5.30 a.m. The troops returned to camp and enjoyed a free afternoon, while for the officers there was the usual conference to discuss the week's training. The experience of the men is aptly summed up by Harry Bretherton in his diary: 'Learned the value of water and got used to the taste of sand.' As if the trials of desert manoeuvres were not enough, the khamsin added its little touch. During the evening of 13 April many tents were flattened in a gale and the end wall of the camp cinema was blown down. This month saw the first issue of summer clothing and also an

outbreak of 'Gippo tummy', the latter the result of the increasing number of flies.

From 22 to 25 April the battalion took part in another brigade exercise in a legendary war between Puttagonia (Brigadier Puttick)<sup>3</sup> and Milesia (under Brigadier Miles).<sup>4</sup> Despite difficulties with the Cypriot drivers of a Reserve Mechanical Transport company, the troops left on time for the El Saff area and by 4 p.m. took up a defensive position on El Saff ridge. An advance southward was followed by what was judged to be an unsuccessful attack across Wadi Nawimiya, and the battalion retired in the evening to take up a defensive position on El Tibn Knolls by eleven o'clock. During the night there was an extraordinary display of lightning. The troops spent 24 April digging and wiring their positions, using altogether 1700 yards of dannert wire. The exercise ended next day with an Anzac Day service in the desert, and the battalion returned to camp in lorries.

The growing dissatisfaction of the troops in Maadi with the programmes and plant of the camp cinema reached its climax on the night after the return to camp. For weeks past the inferior pictures shown and the frequent breakdowns had tried the men's patience: on the night of the 26th there were more than the usual number of stoppages, and when their demands that their money be returned were disregarded the men broke up chairs and pushed down the walls.

On the last day of April Colonel Kippenberger announced on battalion parade that he intended to hold a written examination that afternoon, but that those who failed 'would not be sent home'. In one question the men were asked to name the commander of 4 Brigade—then Brigadier Puttick. A large proportion of the men gave the appointment to the Colonel. On the same day the battalion suffered its first casualty when Private Frew<sup>5</sup> of B Company died at 2/10 General Hospital, Helmieh, of pneumococcal meningitis.

By May rumours of war with Italy were rife and precautions were taken against air attack. Sandbagged shelters for anti-aircraft guns were erected, respirators issued, and Passive Air Defence exercises begun. The battalion shared the digging of a defensive area near Red Mound in Wadi Tih, a task made difficult by the presence of 'liquid sand'. Inlying picket duties ('Stand-to') from 3.15 to 5.15 a.m. and from 6 to 8 p.m. each day were carried out, at first by companies in rotation and later by the battalion for duty. On the 28th B and D Companies gave a demonstration of street

fighting, and during the month several days were spent at [Helwan](#) pitching tents, amidst strong winds and much dust, for a British regiment.

On 10 June [Italy](#) declared war on Great Britain. The New Zealanders' reaction was one of keen delight. Troops at a concert by the Blue Pencil revue company in [Maadi](#) Tent broke into cheers on hearing the news and the audience sang the national anthem with a patriotic fervour that stirred and uplifted every man who was there. Units on night manoeuvres returned happily to camp. Tents were dispersed, dug in and sandbagged, slit trenches were dug, and the troops stood-to at dawn and dusk 'waiting hopefully for Italian parachutists'. Companies in turn went into [Cairo](#) on anti-paratroop duties at the [Gezira](#) racecourse, and later the whole battalion was quartered at Kasr-el-Nil barracks with the [Scots Guards](#) on a tour of duty. [Cairo](#) had its first air-raid alarm at two o'clock in the morning of 22 June when the city's sirens shrieked and searchlights and tracer shells from Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries lit the sky. A report that bombs had been dropped proved false, any damage done being caused by fragments from anti-aircraft shells fired at a British plane which had been sent up to intercept the raiders. After this raid the troops at the barracks were ordered to fill 5000 tins with sand for an air-raid shelter. Perhaps it was the work, perhaps it was the raid, perhaps it was the monotony of the tour of duty, but a barrel of beer disappeared from the canteen and remained one of the (officially) unsolved mysteries amongst a number of air-raid episodes.

During the summer the battalion cricket team played several matches at [Abbassia](#), Kasr-el-Nil, the Arsenal ground at Zamalek, and the Educational Institute. Leading players were Corporals Uttley<sup>6</sup> and Vincent.<sup>7</sup> The **CO** himself played on occasions. It was during a cricket match at Kasr-el-Nil barracks on 20 June that news was received of the arrival of the Second Echelon in England.

In July the battalion left [Maadi](#) for the [Western Desert](#) on its first tour of duty in the [Mersa Matruh](#) area. The convoy moved through Giza and thence by the [Cairo–Alexandria](#) road to a bivouac area at Bahig, where it spent the night. Next day the 20th and a composite battalion consisting of companies from [4 Field Regiment](#), the [Divisional Cavalry](#), and 4 Brigade reinforcements moved to [Garawla](#), occupying an area vacated by 18 Battalion. D Company was detailed for duty at a prisoner-of-war camp and B Company was placed in mobile reserve. A and C Companies commenced digging an anti-tank obstacle at Wadi Naghamish. This was a ditch fifteen feet wide

and five feet deep, and the section allotted to the battalion was 800 yards long. The work was hard and monotonous. Bathing in the refreshing Mediterranean helped to relieve the monotony but the unpleasant conditions were made worse by plagues of flies, choking dust-storms, and the inevitable bouts of dysentery. In three weeks ninety-eight men suffering from this complaint were sent to a British hospital in Alexandria.

A feature of the battalion's stay at Garawla was Private Norman Goffin's <sup>8</sup> cornet playing. As well as sounding Last Post from C Company's lines, he also played such tunes as 'The Stranger of Galilee', 'Danny Boy', 'Silent Night', or 'Abide with Me'; as one man recalls, 'we used to lie in bed and just listen'.

Company radio sets broadcast the BBC news each night. On 22 July at the end of the news it was stated that voluntary enlistment had ceased in New Zealand with a total of 58,000 volunteers, and that there had been a big last-minute rush to join up. Next day the Egyptian Mail, as reliable as ever, published the news that 58,000 men had joined up in a last-minute rush.

By the end of July the battalion had returned thankfully to Maadi, except for B Company which was on internal security tasks at Gezira.

August was fairly uneventful. C and D Companies under Major Burrows went to Suez on special duty for two days. It was intended that they should relieve a British regiment that was to be sent to Italian Somaliland, but plans were changed and the relief did not take place. The companies returned to Maadi on 16 August. While they were away members of the companies left at Maadi took part in a concert at Maadi Tent on 15 August, and about this date the entertainment at Shafto's cinema was improved by the appearance of a soprano whose items received a tremendous ovation. On 20 August the battalion manned a defensive position near the camp against an attack by AFVs of the Divisional Cavalry during which 'valuable lessons' were learned. 'Lay round in the sun from 9.30 to 2.30 and yarnd,' records one diarist. 'Sunburned as hell—like a piece of burnt toast.' Perhaps as a result of this experience, topees were issued on the return to camp.

All troops went through the gas chamber, with and without respirators, while A and B Companies enjoyed the more pleasant experience of a picnic to the grotto on

Gezira Island. B Company and No. 7 Platoon of A Company relieved companies of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion guarding the aerodromes at [Helwan](#) and [Heliopolis](#). In the last week of August 'latrino-grams' with more than usual foundation predicted another move from [Maadi](#) Camp.

On 1 September the battalion advance party under Major Dornwell <sup>9</sup> moved to [Amiriya](#) and was followed next day by the rest of the unit, which relieved a battalion of Rajputana Rifles of its duties on the line of communication to the Western Desert. Good accommodation and tentage were available in a rather dusty area, a disadvantage being that it was infested by hordes of fleas. The companies undertook security duties at [Ikingi Maryut](#) airfield, [Gharbaniyat](#), and [Burg el Arab](#), while C Company provided anti-aircraft protection on the trains running between [Ikingi Maryut](#) and [Mersa Matruh](#), with company headquarters at [El Daba](#).

While the battalion was at [Amiriya](#) the CO issued some notes for the guidance of section commanders, on whom fell a large share of responsibility for maintaining the morale of their men in the monotony of a garrison role. The memorandum read:

notes for section commanders

1. In the future the Bn will very frequently be distributed in section posts to a large extent, and the maintenance of its discipline, morale, and training will be largely your responsibility.
2. These are some general rules you must invariably follow:
  - (a) Start the day with the same routine as in camp, wash, shave, tidy up personal gear and bedding, clean rifles, brush clothes and equipment. Then carry out careful personal inspection at a set hour.
  - (b) Be strictly punctual with all reliefs.
  - (c) Don't allow grousing, set an example yourself of cheerfulness and briskness.
  - (d) Keep yourself and your men tidy, hair cut, clothes brushed, boots cleaned; the more difficult the conditions the more important this is.
  - (e) Don't allow your sentries to sit down or loll about. This only increases the danger of their falling asleep.
  - (f) When an inspecting officer appears, go yourself to meet him at the entrance to your post and see that all men not actually resting in the tent stand to attention.
  - (g) Make certain that every man in the section, including yourself, can quickly deal with any Bren gun stoppage and keep on practising. It is madness not to

be perfect in this respect.

- (h) Insist on scrupulous cleanliness in and around your post.
- (i) See that your men know the correct method of challenging and practise it.
- (j) Allow no unauthorised persons inside your post.

3. A soldier has to face monotony, discomfort and the enemy. We are already at grips with the first two and if we beat them will have no trouble with the third.

From [Amiriya](#) leave parties went by truck to [Alexandria](#), and from one of these trips Privates Tom Veitch <sup>10</sup> and Paddy Welsh <sup>11</sup> failed to return. There were rumours that the bodies of two soldiers had been found in the harbour and their friends began to wonder about their long absence. However, both returned a week later after having made an unauthorised trip round the [Mediterranean](#) in the cruiser [Gloucester](#). Their behaviour had been good and they had a letter from the ship testifying to this. On their return the RSM is said to have pored over 'King's Regs' a little longer than usual.

After a preliminary reconnaissance by the CO, company commanders on 10 September went to [Baggush](#) to lay out the defensive position to be taken up there by the battalion. A Company moved to [Baggush](#) on the 16th and was followed on the 27th by B, D, and HQ Companies, which bivouacked for a night at [Burg el Arab](#) on the way. Australian troops took over the area at [Amiriya](#) and in the opinion of most of the men were welcome to it. C Company, meanwhile, remained on railway duty at [Daba](#), rejoining the battalion at [Baggush](#) on the 29th.

The September war diary records several deaths. On the 19th a primus being used as a home-made forge exploded in the pioneer platoon's workshop, and two men, Privates [Lowe](#) <sup>12</sup> and [Orlowski](#), <sup>13</sup> were badly burned. Lowe died the same day at 2/5 General Hospital and was buried the next day at the British war memorial cemetery, [Alexandria](#), the funeral being attended by the Colonel, four officers, and thirty other ranks from Headquarters Company, who also supplied the firing party. Private Orlowski died a week later and was accorded similar honours. Two naval officers and two ratings were also killed on 23 September while removing for examination a strange torpedo which had been reported on the beach near [Burg el Arab](#) by D Company the previous evening.

During the last week of September work on the [Baggush Box](#) defences was begun. At this stage in North Africa it was expected that the Italians might attempt a

drive on [Alexandria](#) at any time. With the Rajputs on its left, the battalion began the laborious task of digging, concealing, and wiring its allotted area. Weapon pits, communication trenches, and dugouts were excavated, the digging varying from soft sand to rock too hard for picks and shovels. At night large quantities of sand would fall back into the diggings so that next morning some of the previous day's work had to be done again. 'Cut and cover' dugouts (usually spoken of by the men as 'cut and shivers') were revetted and covered over to make them invisible from the air. The work proceeded smoothly but with a new significance after the CO had told his men that they would probably fight in their positions some day.

During October the work continued, enlivened on the 5th by a celebration of the anniversary of the [First Echelon](#)'s entry into [Burnham Camp](#). Issues of beer had been saved for the occasion and many dugout parties marked the end of the first year in the army. In a special order, 'On this, the first anniversary of the formation of this unit', [Colonel Kippenberger](#) expressed to officers and men his thanks for 'their good and loyal service during the past year' and wished them good fortune in the future.

High-flying Italian planes began to pay evening calls when the moon was full and the troops made the acquaintance of their 'thermos' bombs, booby traps so called because of their resemblance to thermos flasks. After an air raid had caused casualties in an adjoining area, the order was given to dig tents down four feet and house trucks and lorries in pits. As part of the toughening-up process, and to make the battalion more mobile in the event of a hurried move, bedboards and palliasses were later dispensed with on the CO's orders, and everyone slept on ground-sheets on the sand or made beds, illegally, of sandbags filled with newspapers.

During the second week of October three [Royal Air Force Gladiators](#) co-operated to give the troops experience of a dive-bombing attack. The planes' performance was rather less spectacular than the men had been led to expect, but as a precaution against unauthorised retaliation from the ground magazines were removed from rifles before the demonstration began. On the same day, 10 October, Brigadier Puttick inspected the area and expressed his satisfaction at the siting of the positions, and on the 22nd the battalion sent representatives to an inspection by the Rt. Hon. Anthony Eden, then Secretary of State for War.

As changes from the monotony of digging, the battalion, by companies, carried

out field firing in a wadi a few miles away and, on 23–24 October, combined with the tanks of 7 Royal Tank Regiment in a two-day exercise—though it must be said here that the tanks were represented by lorries carrying a petrol tin on a pole. Harry Bretherton's diary for 26 October records, 'Sandstorm and flies. Worst day in Egypt.' Still another diversion was the training in tank hunting given by the RSM. This was based on methods taught to a 4 Brigade demonstration squad by an NCO whose knowledge had been gained with the International Brigade during the Spanish civil war. Sea bathing and inter-company football matches provided recreation.

About this time one D Company private, well known as the battalion barber, assiduously produced his own hand-written news-sheet, *The Muddle East Rumour*, which appeared regularly on the company notice-board.

November saw further routine training, including another brigade exercise. It is remembered for two incidents—the first when one of the battalion's Bren carriers, while refuelling, caught fire and a thousand rounds of .303 ammunition went up in the flames; and the second, shortly afterwards, when an Italian plane, attracted by the fire, dropped several bombs close to the bivouac area. The usual order to dig in, obeyed only perfunctorily until this raid, suddenly assumed a new importance, and through the darkness echoed the clinking tattoo of many shovels and picks as men deepened their trenches in expectation of another raid. On another manoeuvre the provosts became lost and suddenly found themselves back in camp.

The fourth death in the battalion occurred on 13 November when Private Wattie Jack,<sup>14</sup> a well-known boxer, was killed when the dugout in which he was working collapsed on top of him. Early the same evening a sole enemy plane made two machine-gunning runs over the nearby aerodrome, setting fire to a troop-carrier on the ground. A large column of smoke shot up and a lot of tracer began to fly about, some of it close over the battalion lines.

Further field firing, a month's interchange of appointments among subalterns, and an inspection of each company in turn by the CO completed the month, during which the weather had become much colder. Several showers were followed on the 27th by a heavy downpour which flooded dugouts and trenches and washed away part of their walls. Tents built in wadis were flooded and some of them collapsed. One tent and its occupant were washed down a wadi, the soldier having to return

next day to search for his teeth. Several days were spent in digging out weapon pits and dugouts and in drying wet clothes and bedding.

At one stage during the battalion's sojourn at [Baggush](#) several NCOs and men were detached to supervise the work of Sudanese natives who were employed in digging an anti-tank ditch. A corporal's life is never an easy one but this 'Wog driving' imposed more than usual strain. It seemed almost impossible either to make the natives understand what was wanted or to keep them at work once they had grasped the idea. The climax came when one of the labourers rushed up to Lance-Corporal Fred Mason <sup>15</sup> and placed in his arms his latest find —an unexploded 'thermos' bomb.

During December instructions were received from Brigade Headquarters that work on defensive positions was to be confined to maintenance. At this stage men might easily have become 'browned off' but for the CO's ingenuity in planning methods of training. A minimum of three days each week was to be spent in training; and it was during this period that company fought and manoeuvred against company outside the 'Box' in a manner reminiscent of the Tai Tapu manoeuvres. Companies fed themselves, marched, patrolled, evaded and surprised each other, and learned a great deal about handling themselves in the desert. There was plenty of movement in transport and on foot. Altogether it was a most useful training period.

Sandstorms and rain were the major discomforts of mid-winter at [Baggush](#), unless one includes the military and general knowledge tests given to the NCOs. Khaki-drill shorts and shirts were still being worn, and men on picket at night often wrapped blankets around them on top of greatcoats and pullovers. Battle dress was not issued until the middle of January, after the battalion had moved to [Helwan](#) Camp.

The battalion transport drivers, familiar by now with most of the hazards of driving in sand, left [Baggush](#) on 11 December for [Mersa Matruh](#). Under command of Major Burrows, they formed part of a convoy of New Zealand transport which was used in General Wavell's offensive which had begun on 9 December. On the outward journey, according to Harry Bretherton and Eric Taylor, <sup>16</sup> two of the drivers in this convoy, petrol was carried to a British supply dump near [Sidi Barrani](#). Navigating by

compass, the convoy then cut across the desert to prisoner-of-war cages in which thousands of miserable Libyans and Italians awaited transport to [Mersa Matruh](#). They were in a variety of uniforms, some even wearing the galabiehs and turbans recalling the streets of [Cairo](#). After unloading the prisoners the convoy camped for the night near [Charing Cross](#) and returned next morning to [Matruh](#) railway station to load rations. Camp cooks brought up a hot meal from [Baggush](#), a welcome change after dry rations, but a blinding sandstorm made chewing rather gritty. That night the drivers slept in slit trenches in a fruitless endeavour to avoid the driving sand, with which by next morning they and their blankets were liberally coated.

Next day the convoy took rations to a dump 18 miles south of [Sollum](#). Travelling slowly next day, the convoy made an unofficial stop near a recently captured Italian position at [Tummar West](#), where the drivers searched dugouts for souvenirs and emerged with new Italian rifles, the 'Red Devil' hand grenades, cases of sardines, clothing, abundant supplies of macaroni, bottles of mineral water, wines and liqueurs. The convoy halted again at 5 p.m. and the men were told to go to bed. Shortly afterwards, on fresh orders, the trucks were hurriedly packed and the convoy set off on a very cold and difficult all-night drive to a petrol dump, which was reached about eight o'clock next morning. After delivering its cases of petrol at the supply dump south of [Sollum](#) the convoy returned to [Baggush](#) on, 20 December. That night the drivers celebrated their return with a very fair fireworks display from the souvenirs brought back from the Italian fort.

For the rest of the battalion lingering at [Baggush](#), these were weeks of disappointment as the battle swept west to success after success without their help. Perhaps for this reason Christmas celebrations began some days before Christmas Day and continued as long as the money or the beer lasted. Officers waited on the men at Christmas dinner and there was a spirit of good-fellowship in the battalion lines.

The drivers began their second excursion into the Western Desert on 30 December when a convoy of 15-cwt trucks returned to [Burg el Arab](#) to pick up Australian infantry of the 2/7 and 2/11 Battalions who were going forward to take part in General Wavell's campaign. After staying the night at [Burg el Arab](#), the convoy journeyed past [Mersa Matruh](#) to a camp just outside [Charing Cross](#) where it spent the night. New Zealand drivers, accustomed to observing a strict blackout,

were mildly surprised when the easy-going Australians lit fires everywhere, quite unconcerned about enemy planes. Next morning the convoy moved through Sidi Barrani to Sollum and up over Halfaya Pass to an area between Fort Capuzzo and Bardia, where the infantry debussed, formed up, and went straight in to attack Bardia that night. The trucks were shelled while in this area, returned across the flat at top speed, and reached Baggush the following afternoon. An Italian radio broadcast extolling the bravery of their soldiers defending Bardia against '800 tanks and 400,000 men' gave the drivers 'a bigger laugh than usual'.

On 11 January preparations were made to move to Helwan as the first step towards the concentration of the Division. Next day, after striking tents, the men endured the worst dust-storm of their experience. Lying on the ground, they huddled into their equipment which had been rolled up ready to be taken to the station. A Company alone had not struck its tents and Captain Mitchell <sup>17</sup> allowed his men to shelter in them to the last possible minute. The transport moved to Helwan under Captain Orr <sup>18</sup> and the troops entrained at 6 p.m. on 13 January, most of them pleased to bid a noisy goodbye to 'Baggush by the sea'. The journey, which was expected to take fifteen hours, took twenty-four, and the battalion did not reach Helwan until about 6 p.m. on 14 January, passing on the way into the camp the floodlit prisoner-of-war compound.

Settling in took several days, a good part of which was spent in pitching tents and digging them in. The men were eager to renew acquaintance with Cairo; at the weekend they crowded into buses for a breakneck dash to Helwan station and thence by diesel train to Bab-el-Louk.

The battalion guard on 18 January brought a warm tribute from General Freyberg, who in a letter of congratulation to the CO added the postscript, 'It really was a very well mounted guard.' Not all the battalion's guards were as successful, the corporal of one of the early guards at Maadi achieving minor distinction during an inspection by General Wavell by prefacing the order to present arms with the order 'Right turn'. The result was that the General took the salute from a guard which faced away from him in file. The General was amused and is reported to have commented that he had been in the army a long while but that this was the first time he had seen a guard present arms in that fashion. Other senior officers who

saw the manoeuvre were more critical.

Training recommenced with route marches and practice in pontoon bridging, followed by river-crossing exercises on the [Nile](#) in small assault boats which were later used for races. Against the current it was hard work to row the clumsy craft across and some men got a wetting when their boats capsized. On the 23rd the battalion marched out for an exercise in advancing under a live-ammunition barrage. To men weary of training under imaginary conditions it was their best 'stunt' to date. To quote [Bill Glue's](#) <sup>19</sup> dairy, 'It was a realistic show—plenty of noise, dust, and smoke, and the shriek of shells overhead.' Five days later a practice in river crossing by night was successfully carried out, the whole battalion being ferried across the [Nile](#). This time no one fell in. On 31 January a route march of 12 miles was made in desert formation. [Royal Air Force](#) planes were expected to co-operate and dive-bomb the battalion, but interest faded as the planes failed to appear, although one flew quietly past, miles away.

During the first week of February companies in turn carried out rifle and Bren practices at the [Maadi](#) range. Coaches were appointed to raise the less-qualified to the necessary standard. On 10 February [Royal Engineers](#) demonstrated the use of anti-tank mines, Bangalore torpedoes to blow gaps in barbed-wire entanglements, and the neutralising of booby traps. The thrill of being within the danger area of large quantities of explosives was increased during a demonstration with a Bangalore torpedo when a large piece of the piping landed amongst the spectators.

A football match with 26 Battalion, won by the latter 26-nil, the divisional boxing championships and, on 14 February, a divisional regatta were the chief diversions from training. During the boat races there were quite a few capsizes, one of them caused when the chain of a passing felucca fouled one of the boats. Another craft was swamped and two of the occupants swam ashore complete with rifle, pack, and steel helmet.

On 16 February at church parade the recently formed 4 Brigade Band appeared. It had originally been formed from men of the battalion in the [Dunera](#) during the voyage to Egypt.

At various stages in their training the troops had been required to use their

imaginings in such matters as wire, tanks, and air cover; now for the next exercise, a practice in a beach landing, boats too were imaginary. Four Bren carriers, connected by ropes which enclosed a number of troops, represented landing craft. On 18 February New Zealand engineers gave a demonstration of how to haul a Bren carrier up a cliff. A mild sensation was caused when they ran out of rope, and a carrier containing Private Southon<sup>20</sup> was left temporarily suspended in mid-air. Next day selected personnel carried out shooting practice on the anti-aircraft range on the Suez road, firing tracer ammunition at balloon targets.

A medical inspection of all companies was completed by 25 February. This, and the issue next day of tommy guns, revived rumours of a move which had been inspired a month previously by an issue of sandshoes. Lectures by the Brigade Intelligence Officer on what to report to Intelligence from the front line, further instruction in anti-gas precautions, and the arrival of reinforcements on 28 February gave added weight to the rumours already current, and three days later (another rumour) Lord 'Haw-Haw' was reported to have confidently announced that 'General Freyberg's circus is on the move'.

Whatever the destination might be the men were keen to go. Training periods that are indefinitely prolonged have a soul-searing effect; even the attractions of Egypt were beginning to pall, while its disadvantages were endured with diminishing patience. Men felt that they had 'missed the bus' in Libya last December. The crowded Italian prisoner-of-war camp nearby made them envious of the accomplishments of the Australians. Preparations were over at last, and the words in the army paybook, 'On Active Service', were about to assume their real significance.

The battalion's commanding officer, writing to a friend in New Zealand on the eve of leaving Helwan, said: 'We have not wasted our time. We are ready. My men will do their whole duty.'

\* \* \* \* \*

During the battalion's first year in Egypt boredom and sickness had been its enemies. It had yet to fire a shot at the enemy against whom it had trained so assiduously; none of its four casualties had been killed in action. Some of the men had had anxious moments and close escapes from bombs dropped by high-flying

Italian planes, and a few on anti-aircraft sentry duty had relished the opportunity to hit back with their light machine guns but had scored no known successes. Most of the troops had had to be content to lie in their beds at night and listen to the surge of the motors of the three-engined Italian planes ('organ-grinders' they called them) as they circled overhead in the moonlight looking for a target. It was too passive a role for men keen to see action.

No unit is altogether free from crime, which is a harsh name under which to classify the misdemeanours of men intent often only on enjoying their leave; and the battalion was no exception. Out of an average strength of between 650 and 750, approximately 150 men appeared 'on the mat' during their first year in Egypt, most of them charged with absence without leave, drunkenness, absence from parade, or with that old favourite, 'conduct to the prejudice of good order and discipline'. A soldier who overstayed his leave for an hour or so and was unlucky enough to get caught could expect two or three days' CB; if his absence was longer his punishment might be seven days' CB or field punishment and the loss of one or more days' pay. If he was guilty of drunkenness the penalty was usually two or three days' CB or a fine of ios. or £I, according to the circumstances and the frequency of the offence; but if drunkenness was combined with a more serious charge, such as striking a superior officer, resisting an escort, or wilful defiance of authority, the punishment was usually detention for a period of from seven to twenty-eight days. A man who was found both drunk and out of bounds was given 10 days' detention; another who was drunk while driving an army vehicle received 17 days' detention.<sup>21</sup>

In the first year overseas only about twenty men of the battalion were sent to detention barracks at the Citadel or at *Abbassia*, but several of these men served two or three sentences at one or both of these places. A man who had been awarded 28 days' detention for defiant behaviour at Colombo had not completed this term when he received a further 21 days for 'offering violence to a superior officer' and resisting an escort. About two months later he faced charges of drunkenness, of using insubordinate language to a superior officer and resisting an escort, and received 28 days' detention. He was again in trouble in August when he was given 21 days' field punishment for disobeying a lawful command. Scarcely had he completed this sentence when a further seven days were added for 'disobedience, in such a manner as to show a wilful defiance of authority, of a lawful command given

personally by his superior officer'.

Another 'character', whose offences included drunkenness on at least four occasions—once when he had been warned for duty—as well as absence without leave, failure to parade, offering violence and using threatening language to a superior officer, was sent to the detention barracks for periods of 21 and 28 days and was also awarded 21 days' field punishment and two or three shorter terms of CB. Another man, well known in the battalion by his nickname, spent 14 days and then 10 days at the Citadel during the first few months in Egypt on charges of conduct to the prejudice of good order and discipline. On the second occasion he was punished for malingering; to avoid duty he had paraded sick with diarrhoea, but had failed to prove to the satisfaction of the Regimental Medical Officer that he was suffering from this complaint. In due course he came back from the Citadel a smarter soldier but unrepentant. He reported that he had spent most of the time in a cell scrubbing pots and pans with bath brick, that he had cleaned his brass, web, and boots about three times a day, that even finger-nails were inspected and that all drill was done at the double. The place was far too tough, he reported. The experience left him with a predilection never to double when ordered, a circumstance that was to cause him much trouble during his army career.

On 8 June 1940 the theft of the Headquarters Company payroll amounting to £102 was discovered. There was a muster parade and kit inspection for the whole battalion, and a man from this company was apprehended in Port Said and brought back next day in civilian clothes with £52 in his possession. In due course a field general court martial found him guilty of desertion and stealing public money, and he was sentenced to six months' detention.

A soldier who 'committed an offence against the person of an inhabitant of the country in which he is serving' (he assaulted an Egyptian) and resisted an escort received a court-martial sentence of 60 days' detention.<sup>22</sup> A corporal who impeded 'an NCO legally exercising authority on behalf of the Provost Marshal'—in other words, a red-cap—and who also resisted an escort, was reduced to the ranks and served 28 days' detention. Two men who broke out of camp, told a falsehood to an NCO, resisted escort, were not in possession of their paybooks and refused to give their particulars when asked were both given 21 days' detention. Two soldiers found sleeping at their posts while acting as anti-aircraft sentries at Gezira were both

sentenced to 60 days' detention, and a third who left his post before he was relieved was given 90 days' field punishment.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sgt J.D. Hinton, VC, m.i.d.; [Christchurch](#); born [Riverton](#), 17 Sep 1909; driver; wounded and p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

<sup>2</sup> Cpl D.H. Bretherton; Dunedin; born Cromwell, 7 May 1917; farmer; wounded

<sup>3</sup> Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); [Wellington](#); born [Timaru](#), 26 Jun 1890; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Bde 1914-19 (CO 3 Bn); comd [4 Bde](#) Jan 1940-Aug 1941; 2 NZ Div ([Crete](#)) 29 Apr-27 May 1941; CGS and GOC NZ Military Forces, Aug 1941-Dec 1945.

<sup>4</sup> Brig R. Miles, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d.; born Springston, 10 Dec 1892; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1914-19; CRA 2 NZ Div 1940-41; comd [2 NZEF \( UK\)](#) 1940; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; died [Spain](#), 20 Oct 1943.

<sup>5</sup> Pte W. Frew; born NZ 2 Jul 1915; surfaceman; died on active service 30 Apr 1940.

<sup>6</sup> Capt L.M. Uttley; [Whangarei](#); born [Melbourne](#), 18 Jan 1916; civil servant; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>7</sup> Sgt W.H. Vincent; Ahaura, [West Coast](#); born NZ 24 Sep 1910; clerk; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>8</sup> Hon 2 Lt N.G. Goffin; [Lower Hutt](#); born Rothesay, [Scotland](#), 1 Sep 1911; asst superintendent oil company; Conductor, [Burnham Camp Band](#), Dec 1943- Aug 1945.

<sup>9</sup> Maj F.E. Dornwell, ED, m.i.d.; born [Wellington](#), 24 Nov 1896; manager: Auckland Regt, 1918-19 (2 Lt); died [Christchurch](#), 11 Jun 1956.

<sup>10</sup> Sgt T.J. Veitch; born [Christchurch](#), 23 Jan 1918; hosiery operator;

wounded 29 Jun 1942; died Christchurch, 28 Jun 1950.

<sup>11</sup> Cpl P.L.G. Welsh; Invercargill; born Nightcaps, 24 Jul 1914; motor salesman; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; escaped Italy, Sep 1943.

<sup>12</sup> Pte O. Lowe; born Wellington, 5 Apr 1915; blacksmith; died on active service 19 Sep 1940.

<sup>13</sup> Pte W. J. Orlowski; born Oamaru, 14 Oct 1918; labourer; died on active service 26 Sep 1940.

<sup>14</sup> Pte W.H. Jack; born Mossburn, 30 Dec 1911; labourer; died on active service 13 Nov 1940.

<sup>15</sup> L-Cpl F.T. Mason; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 12 Feb 1917; brass polisher.

<sup>16</sup> Cpl E.C. Taylor, m.i.d.; Invercargill; born NZ 12 Feb 1902; motor mechanic.

<sup>17</sup> Maj T.H. Mitchell; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 9 Dec 1904; electrical engineer; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

<sup>18</sup> Maj R.S. Orr, ED; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 4 Sep 1903; electrical engineer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped Italy, Sep 1943; safe in Switzerland, Dec 1943.

<sup>19</sup> Capt W.A. Glue; Lower Hutt; born Timaru, 5 Feb 1916; journalist.

<sup>20</sup> Pte R. Southon; born Kaikoura, 3 Oct 1912; transport driver; died on active

<sup>21</sup> CB, confinement to barracks, meant that the soldier (usually referred to as a 'defaulter') was prohibited from leaving the unit's lines and was required to attend a number of extra parades, in varying orders of dress, 'at uncertain hours throughout the day'. Defaulters were summoned by bugle

to the battalion orderly room to answer the defaulters' call: 'You can be a defaulter as long as you like / As long as you answer the call' and were given extra fatigues, sometimes unpleasant, or drill. Field punishment was awarded for an offence committed on active service in the field; where possible, the sentence was served in a field punishment centre. The soldier under sentence was 'subject to the like labour, employment, and restraint ... as if he were under sentence of imprisonment with hard labour', and could be kept in irons. Detention was served in the military equivalent of a civil prison. Pay was forfeited by a soldier serving a sentence of field punishment or detention.

<sup>22</sup> Before he could serve his sentence the battalion left for [Greece](#) and the soldier went with it. He was wounded at [Markopoulon](#) and, on his return to Egypt, found a sixty-day pay stoppage in operation. When the CO himself got back from [Crete](#), however, he insisted that 'If a man fights for his country he must be paid'. He was.

<sup>23</sup> 'The great majority of these crimes were military crimes and the cases mentioned above include all those that would have involved penalties in civilian life,' says [General Kippenberger](#). 'I am emphatic that the great majority of the battalion were extremely well behaved and that the few who committed any serious offences and were punished for them were very much the exception, and in no case did they prove any use in action.'

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 4 – THE CAMPAIGN IN GREECE

## CHAPTER 4

### The Campaign in Greece

Preparations for departure and last-minute issues of weapons and equipment—mosquito cream, anti-gas ointment, tommy guns—made busy the last days of February and the first three days of March. It rained most of the time, endless working parties were required to load platoon trucks or help in the battalion store, men were hard to find and tempers sometimes frayed. There were scores of rumours and much speculation about the battalion's destination, covering all possible battlefronts from the [Far East](#) to the Dodecanese Islands; parades for this and parades for that; a final session in the gas chamber to test respirators; a final session in [Cairo](#) and some farewell parties in the [Naafi](#). On 3 March Major Burrows left [Helwan](#) with the transport for [Amiriya](#), a bleak and dusty desert transit camp about 12 miles from [Alexandria](#). Floods there delayed the departure of the rail party until the following morning, when, 'loaded up to the eyebrows', the troops clambered aboard 26 Battalion's transport and were taken in three flights to the [Helwan](#) railway siding and entrained, wearing topees, in drizzling rain. Several very disappointed officers and NCOs were left behind at 33 Infantry Training Depot to help train the recently arrived sections of the 4th Reinforcements.

The battalion detrained at [Ikingi Maryut](#) about half past six and was met by Major Burrows and company guides. As a climax to an uncomfortable day the men marched about two miles carrying all their gear. Some of the recent reinforcements who had not had the hardening training of the [First Echelon](#) men found this a severe ordeal.

The troops were housed in hastily erected tents. Although dust-storms made the following six days very unpleasant, company training was carried out. No leave was granted. The [Naafi](#) sold out of beer and Australians had burnt down the camp cinema. Rations were light and the nights were cold. No one was sorry to leave [Amiriya](#).

The transport party was first to go. At [Alexandria](#) it was divided into two sections, the first leaving on 8 March under Captain Garriock <sup>1</sup> in the [Thurland Castle](#) and the [Cingalese Prince](#); the last section—comprising eleven of the heavier lorries—

did not get away until the 13th when it left in the City of Norwich.

There were only twenty-one New Zealanders in the Thurland Castle, the rest of the passengers belonging to an English armoured unit with Daimler scout cars. Dry rations were provided, the men cooking with primuses and receiving only tea from the ship. The troops lived, cooked, and slept on the deck, so the fine weather was welcome, particularly as the transport was only a tramp steamer, with no canvas covers or shelter of any kind. In the Cingalese Prince was another English armoured unit with infantry tanks. Men slept anywhere, chiefly on the top deck, and rations were similar to those provided in the other ship. Drivers took turn on ack-ack picket, manning the two Bren guns which were the ship's sole protection.

Three days later the convoy arrived at [Piraeus](#) and disembarked without incident. Driving through [Athens](#) the men received a tumultuous welcome from the crowds in the streets, who threw flowers and handed up wine. In the midst of this demonstration the convoy was split up and some trucks went miles out of their course before locating the camp at [Hymettus](#), where they were to await the arrival of the infantry. Here a week was spent checking over trucks, sightseeing in [Athens](#), and making first acquaintance with Greek food and wines.

On 11 March the rest of the battalion moved from [Amiriya](#), again on foot with all gear. After a two-hours' wait at Ikingi Maryut they entrained for [Alexandria](#) and embarked on the Breconshire. The troops were housed in the holds without unreasonable crowding. Amenities were few and the men slept on steel decks. The ship, a modern cargo vessel, had been built in [Hong Kong](#) in 1939 and had been largely reconstructed and equipped as a Navy fuel-carrier. Some of the senior officers shared cabins with the ship's officers. The men were on hard rations during the crossing, receiving from the ship only soup at lunch-time and tea twice a day—at breakfast and at the evening meal.

The convoy—eight ships and two destroyers—sailed at 5 a.m. on 12 March. On the second day at sea a bad storm caused smaller vessels to seek shelter off [Crete](#) and visibility became so poor that the men felt comparatively safe from submarine attack, let alone danger from the air. Surprisingly few were sick.

In the evenings Crown-and-Anchor had its customary followers, while a few men

began to learn Greek with help from the Cypriot troops on board. During the first morning at sea the battalion's destination had been announced when the Colonel read a special order of the day from [General Freyberg](#). Unofficial information, of course, had come earlier from the ship's crew. In the best traditions of the sea the sailors were generous in their hospitality, and some men at least have pleasant recollections of a quiet rum in the seclusion of the ship's quarters or a fried egg in the galley.

During the voyage the Chief Officer explained the procedure to be adopted in the event of air attack or the order to abandon ship. The vessel was equipped with armour-plated decks and special bomb-proof hatches; the latter, incidentally, were on a level with the decks on which the men were sleeping and were calculated to deflect the force of an explosion upwards. The troops were not greatly encouraged by this information.

Apart from the storm the voyage was uneventful, and early on the morning of 15 March the convoy moved into [Piraeus](#) harbour. The men lined the decks for their first glimpse of [Greece](#) and of a landscape that reminded them of New Zealand. Treed-clad hills capped with snow rose gradually to rugged mountains from whose heights swept an icy wind.

Disembarkation was rapid and well organised. The troops marched a short distance and embussed in transport. Even before leaving [Piraeus](#) the men received an enthusiastic greeting from the wharf labourers and inhabitants in the vicinity of the docks, a marked contrast to that received by several hundred bearded Italian prisoners who simultaneously marched through the streets of [Athens](#) to the accompaniment of derisive hissing. At this time the peculiar Greek wave of welcome, palm upwards, was noticed and was at first thought to be a beckoning sign, especially when waved by the younger and prettier of [Athens](#)'s female population.

The route to the camp at [Hymettus](#) ran past the German Embassy in [Athens](#), where the men noticed with great interest and a certain amount of incredulity the two large swastika flags hanging from the balcony and the jack-booted storm troopers with swastika armbands standing in the doorway. It was hard to realise that as yet [Germany](#) and [Greece](#) were not at war. The camp was situated on pine-covered grassy slopes in a large park several miles beyond [Athens](#) and later proved

to be a most difficult place to find in a blackout.

On Sunday, 16 March, a crisp spring morning, the troops were awakened by the air-raid sirens in [Athens](#). At the battalion church parade Padre Spence <sup>2</sup> compared the battalion's stormy crossing with Paul's experience of the [Mediterranean](#) and the Colonel gave a talk on the history of [Greece](#) in which he impressed upon the men that they were not to treat the inhabitants as 'Wogs'. The same day orders were received that Major MacDuff was to command the reinforcement camp near [Athens](#) and Lieutenant Washbourn <sup>3</sup> assumed command of A Company.

Leave was granted to 20 per cent of the battalion at a time and most men saw [Athens](#). There they visited the [Acropolis](#), the Palace gardens, and various places of historical interest, or as a relaxation from sightseeing passed the time in one of the many small wineshops which sold mavrodaphne, konia, and even German beer. In the streets shabby Greek soldiers with the toes cut from their boots to ease the pain of frost-bitten feet provided a truer picture of their country at war than the striking looking Evzones in short kilt, tasselled slippers, and long white stockings.

Routine orders for this period stressed the danger of drinking contaminated water, warned all troops against the presence of fifth columnists, and stated the obligation to salute Greek officers. Great care was to be taken to conceal the camp from the air and a strict blackout was to be observed. Anti-aircraft LMGs were mounted and air-raid sentries posted.

On 17 March preparations were made for the move north to take up a defensive position in the [Aliakmon line](#). It was not a smooth operation. A guide from No. 80 Base Sub-Area did not turn up till 8.30 a.m. on the 18th, over an hour after the battalion transport had left under Major Burrows for [Katerini](#). Transport for the troops and their baggage had been arranged but word cancelling this was received at 11 a.m. In the end the baggage was loaded on to two ten-tonners found by the Adjutant. A, B, and C Companies marched to Rouf siding, while Headquarters and D Companies were carried in transport obtained from [19 Battalion](#), the Divisional Supply Column, and other units. During their march through [Athens](#), again past the German Embassy, the troops received a great ovation from the crowds gathered on the roadway. Six officers and eighty other ranks were left behind in an infantry reinforcement depot at [Hymettus](#).

The battalion's officers at this date, including those detached to remain behind as reinforcements, were:

CO	Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger
Second-in-Command	Maj J. T. Burrows
Adjutant	Capt D. B. Cameron
Intelligence Officer	Lt T. E. Dawson
Padre	Rev. G. A. D. Spence
Medical Officer	Lt W. L. M. Gilmour
HQ Company:	Capt R. S. Orr (OC)
Quartermaster	Capt H. O. Jefcoate
Transport Platoon	Capt A. I. Garriock
Mortars	Lt G. A. T. Rhodes
Carriers	2 Lt S. J. Green
Signals	Lt G. A. Murray
Anti-Aircraft	Lt F. J. Bain
Pioneers	Lt R. L. D. Powrie
A Company:	Lt G. W. Washbourn (OC)
	Lt S. L. Wood
	Lt P. G. Markham
	2 Lt J. W. Rolleston
	Lt H. J. Scoltock
B Company:	Capt M. C. Rice (OC)
	Capt W. Ayto
	2 Lt F. B. McLaren
	2 Lt N. J. McPhail
	Lt V. C. Poole
C Company:	Maj C. Wilson (OC)
	Lt D. J. Fountaine
	Lt G. A. Brown
	Lt J. D. Aiken
	2 Lt C. H. Upham
D Company:	Maj R. D. B. Paterson (OC)
	Lt M. G. O'Callaghan
	2 Lt P. V. H. Maxwell
	2 Lt W. R. Gutzewitz
	2 Lt A. R. Neilson

Reinforcements: Maj A. P. MacDuff (OC)  
Capt H. S. D. Yates  
Lt D. Curtis  
2 Lt P. K. Rhind  
Lt F. O'Rorke  
2 Lt J. G. Heasley

Second-Lieutenants Upham, [Neilson](#), Green, and Gutzewitz had rejoined the battalion after passing through OCTU.

The Greek train consisted of two or three third-class carriages of ancient pattern, these being reserved for officers, flat cars for the Bren carriers, and steel wagons ( Hommes 40, chevaux 8) each containing forty to fifty men. With such crowded conditions it was difficult to find room to lie down, and the lack of room for movement made the cold even more trying. To add to the discomforts of the train journey quite a number of the men suffered from acute diarrhoea, probably as a result of too good an acquaintance with the wine of [Athens](#).

The train left about 4 p.m. and people all along the line gave the troops a rousing farewell; the Greeks were naturally heartened by the knowledge that the long-promised assistance for their own valiant but sorely-tried troops had at last materialised. Until dark the men lined the doors of their box-cars, waving to the hardy peasants at work in their fields.

During the next morning the train passed through rocky gorges in mountainous country, reminding the men of parts of the Christchurch–Arthur's Pass line without, of course, the dense [West Coast](#) bush. Near [Larisa](#) was an aerodrome on which there were about a dozen [Wellington](#) bombers and a few Hurricane fighters. It was not realised that this was about the whole of the Royal Air Force in [Greece](#). After a breakfast of bully stew and tea, served by the RASC at Larisa, the train moved on towards [Katerini](#). A fortnight earlier [Larisa](#) had experienced a violent earthquake, and about three days later the destruction had been added to by Italian bombers.

About three o'clock in the afternoon the battalion arrived at [Katerini](#), detrained, and marched to billets in the town. Battalion Headquarters was located in the school, Headquarters Company was housed in the central barracks, C and D occupied various houses and sheds, while A and B found shelter in the local theatre.

The town's children, many in ragged clothes, watched the troops settling in; few went home unrewarded.

Katerini was a typical [Balkan](#) town with narrow, crooked streets, whitewashed stone buildings, a central market-place where fresh vegetables could be obtained, many little wineshops, bakers' shops where the troops could buy fresh bread, and little street stalls where thin fillets of steak grilling on skewers over charcoal braziers emitted an appetising smell. A tin of bully beef could buy a number of nips of cognac. Clothes were cheap; food dear. Fraternising with the inhabitants, the troops were told that the Greeks would not defend [Salonika](#) but 'a line of defence nearer us', presumably the [Aliakmon line](#) which ran from the mouth of the [Aliakmon River](#) to the Yugoslav frontier at [Mount Kaimakchalan](#). More heartening was the news that [Yugoslavia](#) had refused to join the Axis, while the information that the Greeks in [Albania](#) had captured Tepelene was the occasion for much celebration.

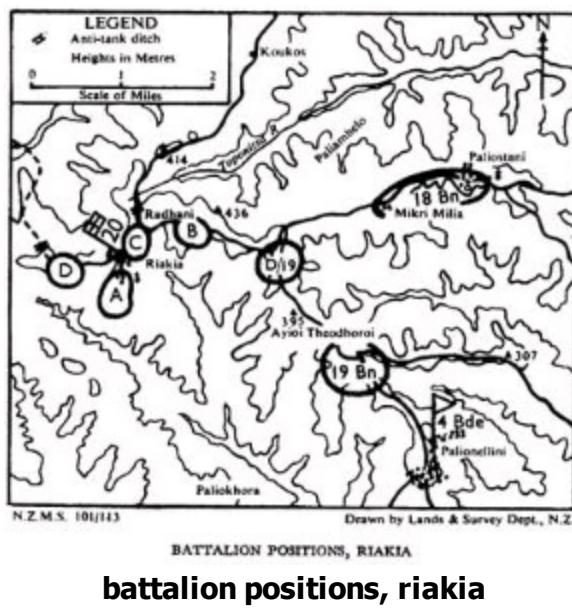
Next morning the CO left to reconnoitre the position the battalion was to occupy. The New Zealand Division was to take up a defensive position between 19 and 12 Greek Divisions in the [Aliakmon line](#) from the sea to [Riakia](#), with 4 Infantry Brigade on the left on the general line of the road from Paliostani to [Riakia](#), the main line of defence being along the ridge between those two villages. Dispositions within the brigade area placed the 20th on the left, with 12 Greek Division on its left flank, some miles away and out of sight and touch; the 18th on the right, with 19 Greek Division on its right flank; and [19 Battalion](#) in reserve. These Greek divisions contained only two or three thousand men each, had little equipment, and only horse- or donkey-drawn transport.

All crossings over the [Aliakmon River](#) from the sea to Varvares had been prepared for demolition and were to be blown by 1 Armoured Brigade, which was operating in front of the Allied line and had the role of delaying the enemy advance by fighting and demolitions. There were also four weak Greek divisions along the Greek–Bulgarian frontier. The Toponitsa River provided an anti-tank obstacle along the brigade front and ditches were cut across the roads.

Twentieth Battalion's area, to quote the CO, was 'very extensive, blinded by woods of stunted oak, and could be turned by the empty high ground on our left. It was vulnerable to infiltration tactics and I was very thankful that we never had to

fight on it.'

In the afternoon the company commanders received their orders from the CO. B, C, D, and HQ Companies were to be disposed on the ridge and in Riakia village, with A Company in reserve in Riakia in a defensive position. The battalion had one battery of 6 Field Regiment in support, three guns of 31 Anti-Tank Battery and one section of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion under command.



battalion positions, riakia

The brigade defensive policy laid down that there was to be no withdrawal without orders from Brigade Headquarters. Main positions were to be prepared for all-round defence and held against full-scale attack. Crossings over the anti-tank obstacle were to be defended by light outposts which would retire slowly in the face of enemy attacks, offering resistance at every suitable position until back in the main line. Patrolling was to be carried out between defended localities at night and, in bad visibility, by day, and constantly between defended localities along the outpost line, which extended along the brigade front from the Toponitsa River to the Krasopoulis. The country north of the outpost line was to be reconnoitred and suitable tracks blazed to facilitate patrol operations when contact with the enemy was likely.

In order that the positions of the defended localities might not be disclosed unnecessarily, anti-aircraft machine guns were not to open fire unless enemy aircraft were obviously making or about to make a direct attack.

The priority of the work was given in the order of fire trenches; anti-tank obstacles; wiring; clearing scrub to provide fields of fire; and clearing scrub to provide lanes for patrolling between defended localities and the outpost line.

The unit transport had reached [Katerini](#) from [Athens](#) on 20 March and on the 21st the battalion moved to [Riakia](#). It was a rough journey, the lorries bumping over bullock tracks and lurching through three fords. One vehicle overturned but there were no casualties beyond a few cuts and scratches. As compensation for the rough ride the cooks excelled themselves and provided an excellent meal.

Billets were arranged in the village for Battalion Headquarters, HQ, A and C Companies—the rent was 8s. 4d. per room per month—while B and D were given all available tents—there were not many—to bivouac in their company areas. [Riakia](#) was a rambling hillside village whose uneven cobbled streets wound through a cluster of stone cottages, poky wineshops, and smelly log corrals. A little apart stood the church and its bell-tower. Through the clear mountain air, as the men bedded down for the night, came the musical sound of goat bells as the herds were driven homewards.

During the ensuing seventeen days the battalion assiduously dug itself in and the village and most platoon positions were surrounded by a single-apron barbed-wire fence. The CO regularly inspected the work and with company commanders carried out reconnaissances of the area forward of the battalion's defences with the intention of going forward to engage the enemy should he come up the valley in front of the position. As a precaution, also, the CO tried to discover a way of retirement over the trackless foothills to the rear should the 20th have to get out. The greatest difficulty seemed to be the lack of a suitable route for the transport.

As a change from navvying the platoons, in turn, were granted a half-holiday. Usually the troops arranged picnics down a nearby valley at a pleasant spot beside a stream where small fish were caught and fried in mess tins. Already the first signs of spring had begun to appear. Oak trees were budding, while clusters of crocuses, primroses, and violets in the hedgerows reminded the men of spring at home. Near at hand was an old stone flour-mill at which the men daily watched the peasants arrive leading donkeys carrying heavy sacks of corn; the farmers waited while it was ground, and then, in time-honoured custom, paid the miller in kind.

After the initial strangeness had been overcome the troops billeted in houses soon became on friendly terms with their hosts and mastered the rudiments of the Greek language. To entertain the inhabitants a concert was arranged one evening in the churchyard by Padre Spence, who was assisted by Jack Ledgerwood <sup>4</sup> of the YMCA. The Greeks were obviously interested, but the highlight of the entertainment was the rendering by local performers of the Greek version of 'The Woodpecker's Song' satirising Mussolini.

A few days after the battalion's arrival in the area the inhabitants began to tag on at the rear of the sick parade. The RMO, Captain Gilmour, <sup>5</sup> gave them the same skilful treatment as he gave the troops. The first patient was a very frightened boy who had been badly scalded. He had literally to be dragged in by a parent on the first day. In three days he came by himself.

Friendly relations were still further improved by a distribution of chocolate to the local school children. The Padre had acquired sixty cakes, which obviously would not go very far amongst so many troops. At first some difficulty was experienced in arranging to assemble the children, partly because of the language difficulty—no one in the battalion spoke Greek and none of the villagers seemed to know English—and partly because the children were at that time on holiday. However, the second-in-command, Major Burrows, and the local school-mistress both had some knowledge of French, and arrangements were accordingly made to bring the children back to school.

It was rather a pathetic little ceremony. The children first sang several of their school songs and then sat in open-eyed wonder as the Colonel, the 2 i/c, and the Padre distributed the chocolate. Seldom, if ever, had such luxury been seen in Riakia, but not one child opened the wrapping. Clutching their gifts tightly in grubby fists, they ran off to take the unopened cake home.

The Greeks, though poor, were extremely hospitable and did not hesitate to give the troops fresh bread, even at sacrifice to themselves. Everywhere the absence of men on military service was noticeable. The work on the farms was done by the women who, besides packing supplies for the Greek forces on the frontier, provided most of the labour for work on the roads.

Through battalion wireless sets and also through addresses by the CO at church parades, the men were kept well informed of the general situation with its alternating hopes and fears about the position in Yugoslavia; and it was no surprise when, on 6 April, word was received that Germany had declared war on Greece and Yugoslavia and was already attacking. The day before, the New Zealand Division had become part of 1 Australian Corps with 6 Australian Division and other British troops under General Blamey's command.

Rain and Greek summer time commenced on 7 April, and on the same day it was officially announced that the 2 NZEF was in Greece. Next day rain hindered work on the battalion's positions and about 7.30 p.m. the men were told to pack and be ready to move. The Yugoslavs' efforts had proved little obstacle to the German drive south.



A report on the New Zealand Division's movements in Greece contains a summary of the events of the first days of the German attack. It reads:

- (a) At dawn on 6 Apr German tps in Bulgaria crossed the frontier into Greece moving down the river valleys of the four main routes from Bulgaria into Eastern Greece.
- (b) At the same time other German forces advanced into Southern Yugoslavia by three separate routes. Within two days these tps rapidly overcame all resistance and cut off communication with Greece. On the third day [8 April] this fast German mechanised force turned south and started to move towards Florina.
- (c) South of Florina there is a natural gap about 12 miles wide between the two

mountain ranges that form a natural mountain barrier across Northern Greece. This gap is the only place really suitable for the passage of fast tanks and arm'd vehicles. Once the Germans obtained possession of this gap and further down a crossing over the [Aliakmon River](#), mechanised vehicles could pour into Central Greece behind the posns of the Allied forces.

- (d) The speed of the German advance was so swift and the threat to the [Florina](#) gap so serious that the whole of the Allied front had to be reformed immediately.
- (e) The 4 Inf Bde together with att tps was moved at a few hours notice back over the Katerine Pass and up to [Servia](#) to meet this threat from the north....

It was a trying journey under miserable conditions. Rain fell, with intermittent snow, and the drivers were severely tested by the narrow roads. The unit transport left [Riakia](#) at 8.30 a.m., joining the column at the assembly area. A small rearguard was left in the village to destroy stores that could not be brought away. According to Private [Blunden](#)<sup>6</sup> of A Company, later an escaped prisoner of war in this area, this was a most unfortunate measure. In the ensuing months escaped prisoners were frequently fed on bully beef salvaged at this time by the Greeks. Impressions of the trip are quoted from two battalion diarists.

[Private Glue](#) of D Company writes:

8 April—About 7.30 p.m. we were told to pack and be ready to move. Waited around and tried to snatch a bit of sleep (no luck) under a tent fly until 1 a.m. Breakfast, then away at 2 o'clock—marched for two hours over hilly road with pack and overcoat. Lay round on the road for another hour and a half waiting for a guide. Slept a bit and woke up very cold.

9 April—.... On the way again from 5.40 till 8 a.m.—must have gone between 10–11 miles. Fairly hard going—everybody a bit tired. Stopped for three hours in a clearing. [Major Paterson] said we had to shave, which wasn't well received. Felt a lot better afterwards though. Another half-mile then into transport—20 in one truck is cramped for long journeys. More than the usual waiting about and stops—several because of blocked petrol feed. Most of the convoy passed us and it was 8 p.m. and raining like hell when we arrived. Dinner wasn't ready until after 10 o'clock and it was still raining hard so went to bed. Blankets, overcoat, feet, everything wet....

10 April—Most miserable night I've ever spent. Slept for a few hours then lay in wet blankets until morning—shivered so much I nearly rattled to bits. Was

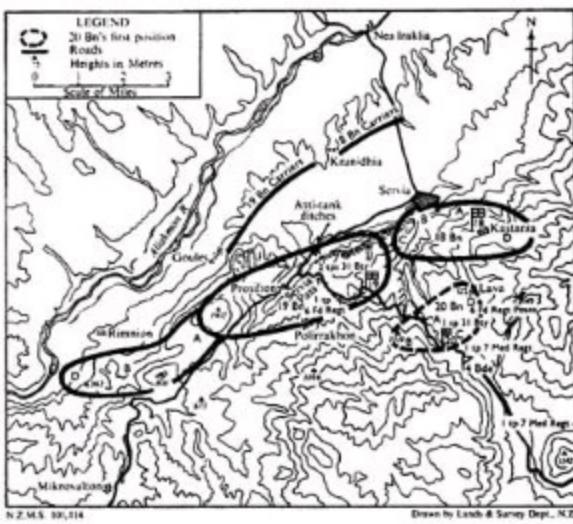
thoroughly fed up with the army. Bitter wind off the snow. Poor breakfast, but what a hunger. Dried some of the blankets in the wind, then away again at 10.30. Marched about a mile into a village [Lava] where we sleep in a straw barn....

Wally Kimber,<sup>7</sup> of the Bren-carrier platoon, recorded his impressions at the time:

9 April—Moved at 8.30 a.m. (supposed to move at 6.30) worst convoy ever been in—a lot of stops—carriers broke down or ran out of petrol. Lost convoy, camped in Greek police station. Shifted about sixty-four miles through a very pretty pass ([Olympus](#)) in mountains. Some roads were clay tracks through scrub, others good but steep and plenty of bends. Slept out in open—very wet and cold.

10 April—Rejoined convoy in morning. Some lorries had capsized. More rain. Dug in allotted area.

The destination had originally been given as Kato Filippaioi but on arrival there the convoy was directed by the Brigade Intelligence Officer to go another 22 miles to near a village called Lava. Next morning, 10 April, companies began to prepare defensive positions. Fourth Brigade's task was to occupy a defensive position on the general line [Kastania](#)– [Servia](#)– [Prosilio](#) to prevent enemy penetration from north and east; the position was to be held at all costs, with no question of withdrawal. Eighteenth and 19th Battalions were forward, holding positions south of [Servia](#) town, while the 20th, plus two Australian machine-gun platoons and a troop of anti-tank guns, was in reserve astride the road back through the pass. D Company occupied positions in Lava village, on the high ground right of the road. A and C Companies, the latter in reserve, occupied flattish ground in the centre, while B Company spread over a spur to the left of the road.



4 BRIGADE POSITIONS AT THE SERVIA PASS, 10-17 APRIL 1941

#### 4 brigade positions at the servia pass, 10-17 april 1941

A description of the area is quoted from the brigade report on its operations in Greece:

.... The country was mountainous, and very steep, [Kastania](#) being 3000 ft above sea level or 2100 ft above the valley of the [Aliakmon River](#) which lay 4 miles to the north of [Servia](#). [Servia](#) itself was at the 1500 ft level with very steep slopes rising to [Kastania](#) to the SE....

West of [Servia](#) a narrow precipitous rocky ridge 2600 ft high and almost unscaleable on the northern side, extended for 4500 yards towards [Proselion](#). This ridge was separated from [Servia](#) by a narrow precipitous gorge at its eastern end, and at its western end from a similar but higher ridge North of [Proselion](#) by a pass about 500 yds wide, through which ran the main road from [Servia](#) in a SE direction to [Elasson](#), and a minor road SW to [Mikrovalton](#).

The line of forward defended localities presented a complete tank obstacle except along these roads and at their junction, while a difficult route led via Point 675 to Polirrakhon. Four anti-tank ditches existed in the vicinity of [Prosilion](#), three to the north on either side of the road, and one to the south.

As reserve battalion the 20th was required to cover with machine-gun fire the gorge immediately west of [Servia](#) and to maintain one company (B) on Point 1019, with routes reconnoitred to Point 1096 in readiness to meet enemy movement over high ground to the left of the battalion.

The brigade report describes the position:

The Servia– Elasson rd from [Proselion](#) to the SE passed through a valley flanked by hills 4000 ft high for a distance of 8 miles, the valley narrowing from 2500 yds wide opposite Lava to a mere slit in its southern end. The road was well graded but exceedingly tortuous and steep in places, the width being just sufficient for two-way traffic. Owing to precipitous sides vehicles could be got off the rd at very few places and then only with difficulty. The valley generally was devoid of scrub or trees.... Enemy observation except over fwd slopes was nil, apart from very long range view through the two gaps near [Servia](#) and [Proselion](#).

Good Friday, 11 April, dawned fine but cold and rain followed with heavy fog. Next day snow fell again so that the digging of weapon pits continued under difficulties, but with greater zest when word was received that the enemy might be expected the following day. One section of D Company had to dig its posts in a cemetery and gained a very full knowledge of Greek burial customs. German bombing was observed down the gorge in front and Greeks in Lava took to sleeping in caves in the hill above the village. Old men with rifles patrolled the village.

On 12 April the name of [1 Australian Corps](#) was changed to that of [Anzac Corps](#). Large numbers of refugees began to stream back through the area and No. 15 Platoon C Company, under Lieutenant Upham, was sent to establish a check post behind [19 Battalion](#) at the crossroads, one of which led north from [Servia Pass](#) to [Servia](#). The platoon's orders were to stop unauthorised persons, refugees, and fifth columnists from streaming back and blocking the roads. The British and Greek troops holding the gap near [Florina](#) had been forced out of position. Remnants of an Australian brigade came back in good order in transport, but many Greeks struggled back on foot. A party of Yugoslavs, including some very senior officers, came back with four brand-new 88-millimetre Skoda ack-ack guns drawn by caterpillar tractors. This battery was later located near Battalion Headquarters but was very short of ammunition. During the next two days it engaged enemy planes until it ran out of ammunition, and on the afternoon of 14 April—'without by your leave or ask you', according to [6 Field Regiment](#)'s commander—pulled out for an unknown destination and was never heard of again.

The Greek interpreter with Upham's check post was of very little use as most of

the Greek soldiers coming through spoke only Turkish; and he was also very jittery. Enemy aircraft accurately bombed the road junction and machine-gunned some vehicles. It was later believed that a large number of fifth columnists, including Germans and Bulgarians in Greek uniform, passed through. The small section of Greek military police with the platoon shot out of hand some men and youths who they said were Bulgarians and German spies.

German artillery advanced right up to the river and began exchanging shots with our 25-pounders located near Brigade Headquarters at the top of the hill. Quite a number of Australians who had been cut off at [Kozani](#) infiltrated through the advancing Germans, crossed the Aliakmon, and rejoined our forces.

Greek soldiers presented a pathetic appearance as they straggled along the grassy sides of the road carrying their boots in one hand and rifle in the other. Almost every man had kept his rifle with him. It was believed that rifles were about the only arms their division possessed. The Greeks said there was a general order for every man in the Greek Army to go home as best he could. Numbers of Greek horsed transport also passed; some of the horses had been hit by shrapnel.

About this time a welcome addition to the battalion transport was a black Ford V8 car found abandoned on the side of the road and taken over by one of the drivers, Private 'Barney' Homann.<sup>8</sup> It was used by Major Burrows.

On Easter Sunday the war reached 20 Battalion. About 6.30 p.m. enemy aircraft dive-bombed 15 Platoon at the crossroads and three men, Lance-Corporal McKegney,<sup>9</sup> and Privates Casford<sup>10</sup> and Laird,<sup>11</sup> were wounded. The ack-ack platoon replied spiritedly with Bren fire.

On 14 April work on the defences continued. Enemy 'spotters' flew over several times to inspect the work and in the afternoon a flight of four yellow-nosed fighters machine-gunned platoon and gun positions. During the day the battalion, less one company, was ordered to move to a defensive position on the left of 19 Battalion. The purpose of the move was to link up with the right flank of 19 Australian Brigade across the river. The right battalion of this brigade was the attached 26 NZ Battalion which had passed through 4 Brigade's area the previous afternoon.

During a reconnaissance of the new area the CO, Adjutant, and company

commanders were machine-gunned by enemy aircraft. That night the battalion, less C Company left in reserve, moved out at short notice. The convoy was machine-gunned before the start and heavily shelled at 'Hellfire Corner' in the [Servia Pass](#), though without casualties. Much credit for the move must go to the unit drivers. There were vehicle collisions and traffic blocks, but someone always straightened things out and the convoy kept going. In this connection it is fitting to record the efforts of Corporal [Frank Scott](#), <sup>12</sup> transport NCO, who not only cleared traffic blocks and organised a transport group for movement after his own vehicle had been immobilised, but returned next day with a driver and, in spite of heavy shellfire and air attack, recovered and repaired his vehicle.

During a break in the convoy a D Company truck became the leader of a small section. Apparently the driver did not hear the shouted direction to turn left at the corner of [Servia](#) Pass and went straight on until the vehicles were stopped by some Australian engineers who were laying booby traps. Getting the trucks turned around was quite a job and the D Company cooks' truck got stuck. The crashing of gears and the noise appalled the Aussies, who were working in strict silence.

Cold, tired, and dirty, the troops moved into their new positions on the left of [19 Battalion](#) on a high, steep ridge overlooking the village of Rimnion. A Company was on the right, B in the centre, and D on the left on forward slopes. One troop of 31 Anti-Tank Battery and two platoons of Australian machine-gunners were under command, and artillery support was provided by ? Australian Field Regiment under Lieutenant-Colonel Strutt. Boundaries were clearly defined and, as the battalion's front was beyond the range of the field artillery covering the brigade front, the CRA arranged for 7 Medium Battery to provide fire on approaches to the battalion area.

The digging of the defences on 15 April was interrupted by periodic bombing and machine-gunning by enemy aircraft in spectacular dive attacks which were 'impressive without always being effective'. The battalion suffered one casualty, Private Pat Kelly <sup>13</sup> being killed, but the anti-tank troop had three killed and two wounded. The enemy had complete command of the air, none of our aircraft being sighted. Air sentries were posted and in between the raids work went steadily on.

During the day enemy transport could be seen advancing, and at 2 p.m. enemy infantry attempting to cross the river were shelled and dispersed by the artillery. At

one stage the battalion mortars fired without effect on what were believed to be troops crossing the river but which proved later to be refugees. It was obvious that the enemy was rapidly closing up on the brigade front and there were reports of an attack in [19 Battalion](#)'s area. Members of B Company observed activity on a landing field to the north-east and their OC called for artillery fire. No action was taken but the field was later bombed by a small force of Blenheims.

Next morning D Company patrols were unable to make contact with 26 Battalion on the left flank. Far below parties of infantry could be seen crossing the river, apparently in retreat. Brigade had no information. Major Burrows went out to ascertain the position and finally met an officer who had returned to look for some missing men. Nineteenth Australian Brigade and 26 Battalion had withdrawn south during the night and had not notified 20 Battalion. D Company was withdrawn from its now-exposed position and occupied Hill 808 to cover the left flank.

Shortly afterwards orders were received from Brigade to destroy all unnecessary gear and be prepared to move back that night to the previous position near Lava. The order to move arrived at nightfall. While bringing it the despatch rider took the wrong turning in the [Servia Pass](#) and rode right up to within reach of German patrols before being turned around by Australian engineers. With the complete plans for the withdrawal in his satchel, he would have been a valuable prize. These were hazardous times for those responsible for communications, but they stuck to their job through shelling and air activity. While carrying a message from the battalion to Brigade Headquarters on 15 April, Private Hopkins <sup>14</sup> of Headquarters Company was severely wounded in the head. Though in much pain, he rode a further three miles in the darkness and delivered his message.

Throughout the period at [Servia](#) members of the signal platoon maintained battalion communications most effectively. For three days and nights Privates Spilman <sup>15</sup> and Scott <sup>16</sup> repaired lines between Brigade Headquarters and 18 Battalion under shellfire and during air raids. Both men were awarded the Military Medal.

At 8 p.m. the move back to the Lava area began. Transport moved by the narrow, winding road, cut out of a steep cliff and with its corners cambered the wrong way. The night was pitch dark, no lights were used, and a man had to walk by

the running board of each vehicle where the driver could just see him. Towels were hung from the rear of trucks as marks for the drivers following. One 30-cwt truck went through a culvert and had to be abandoned, while a 15-cwt water cart, a Bren carrier, and two motor-cycles went over the bank and had to be left behind. At [Prosillon](#) an Australian 25-pounder blocked the corner and Major Burrows ordered it to be pushed over to allow the column to proceed. During this move, and also the one on 14 April, the provost detachment proved its efficiency. Private 'Pop' Lynch <sup>17</sup> was mentioned in despatches for his fine work in policing bad corners and for directing the convoy under heavy shellfire at 'Hellfire Corner'.

In some places there were shell or bomb craters in the road. One Headquarters Company truck became stuck in one of these and had a bad lean to one side. The vehicle following was a huge British lorry towing a field gun. There was no hope of passing, and in the rain and the dark the driver backed this difficult combination along the tortuous road to a place where the truck following him (and driven by the battalion LAD sergeant) could pass. The sergeant, Tom Drummond, <sup>18</sup> soon organised things and pulled out the stranded truck. During this 'schemozzle' a British officer in charge of the big lorry and gun caused something of a sensation by asking with typical sangfroid and in a most distinctive voice, 'Oh, Meadows, hand down my attache case and orange drink.'

The rifle companies experienced their toughest march to date. They were led by guides from the intelligence section who had partly reconnoitred a route across country in daylight, but it proved difficult to follow at night. Rain fell most of the time and the march across the hills to avoid 'Hellfire Corner' took over eight hours, the men wading through creeks and scrambling up slippery banks. Most of them arrived in the old area exhausted but there were no stragglers. In A Company big [Tom Dalton](#) <sup>19</sup> showed considerable determination and kept up in spite of a badly injured ankle.

As Battalion Headquarters had been shelled rather heavily it was shifted into Lava. While in the village the Colonel, MO, and Adjutant had a narrow escape when a shell came through the roof of their building and exploded weakly in the next room, slightly wounding a pig. The CO, while shaving, received a scratch on the face from a splinter of wood. About this time the troops saw the unusual spectacle of a flight of Blenheim bombers going northwards through the pass while German planes

passed them going south. Although within a few hundred yards of each other, neither group took any notice of the other.

About 11 a.m. the CO was summoned to Brigade to receive instructions regarding the withdrawal. The left flank of the Allied line was again in danger of being encircled owing to the German drive south and west from the gap at [Florina](#), so that it became necessary to withdraw to a shorter line—known as the [Thermopylae](#) line—which it was hoped to hold from coast to coast. Fourth Brigade Group would pull out that night, 17–18 April. Twentieth Battalion would take over the rearguard, [Colonel Kippenberger](#) was to control the demolitions which the sappers were preparing on the road, and everybody was to be out of the pass by 3 a.m.

During the afternoon the battalion transport was moved to the assembly area south of Point 1142. B Echelon moved under the command of Major Burrows and passed through [Larisa](#) and [Lamia](#) to [Molos](#). On the way progress was slow because of traffic jams which, however, were capably sorted out by Australian military police. The convoy was subjected to frequent bombing and aircraft spotters travelled on the roofs of all vehicles. No casualties were reported, although at sudden halts when the troops dived for ditches one or two who had gone too far afield were left behind but arrived later. After passing [Lamia](#) the troops saw it badly damaged in an air raid. On arrival at [Molos](#) the vehicles were dispersed and camouflaged.

The withdrawal of the brigade and attached troops began at 8 p.m. D Company went into position about Lava to check out 18 Battalion, while B Company set up a post astride the main road to check out the 19th. C Company, being the freshest, and one platoon of A Company were detailed to provide flank guards and posted along the spurs on the east of the road back through the pass. A Company, back in its old position, was to cover B and D Companies. It was to keep in close contact with D Company and was not to retire until D Company did so. All three companies were then to retire to the transport assembly position south of Point 1142. C Company would retire on the order of the CO, who had established on the road a Main Control Post consisting of a detachment of four Bren carriers, an RAP truck, an attached WT truck, the IO, the Intelligence Sergeant and the Provost Sergeant. This party joined Lieutenant Kelsall <sup>20</sup> of [6 Field Company](#) and a demolition party of

sappers at the first demolition site at 7 p.m.

During the day conditions had been wet and misty with poor visibility, enabling the artillery to withdraw in daylight. Towards 3 p.m., however, visibility suddenly improved and vehicle movement was almost certainly seen by the enemy, both from the ground and also from a reconnaissance aircraft. During the afternoon Lava village was quite heavily shelled, the track from the village to the main road receiving particular attention. Many of the shells were duds. The enemy had apparently guessed that a withdrawal was to take place. Throughout the whole night harassing fire was maintained on the village, on the track leading to the main road, and along the road itself. About midnight a very heavy concentration was put down on Lava village and on A Company's area, but there was no sign of an attack.

Nineteenth Battalion began to come through the forward control posts about 9 p.m. and the whole battalion was through in good order before midnight. Prior to this a section of Bren carriers, under Second-Lieutenant Green,<sup>21</sup> had been sent up to hold B Company's position astride the road with instructions for the company to withdraw as soon as [19 Battalion](#) was through. B Company came through in good order soon after midnight.

Owing to the difficulties of communication it was not known by which route 18 Battalion would retire, but it was expected that some companies would come through Lava and that the rest would withdraw along the high ground above the village.

The first of the 18th appeared about 2 a.m., but by 4 a.m. only two companies had passed through and these did not know the whereabouts of their battalion headquarters and the other two companies, or their line of withdrawal. Eighteenth Battalion's CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Gray,<sup>22</sup> arrived about this time and reported that two of his companies were still on the hill route but that he did not know where they were. It was decided to withdraw the remaining two 20 Battalion companies, A and D, which were still forward, and orders were sent to that effect. Actually Major Paterson, commanding D Company, had discovered that no more of 18 Battalion were to come through his position and was already withdrawing with his company and A Company. He passed through shortly after Colonel Gray and went on to the assembly point. Lieutenant Green's carrier section was then called in and posted on

the road some 300 yards to the north of the culvert which was to be blown. For some time small parties of the 18th continued to appear in the riverbed below the road and Colonel Kippenberger directed Captain Lyon <sup>23</sup> of that battalion to collect transport and bring it up to carry the exhausted stragglers to the assembly point. This was done.

There was a risk that enemy infantry following up the withdrawal might outflank the rear party and cut off its retreat, and a still further danger that demolition parties farther south, which were not under the control of Lieutenant Kelsall, might blow their charges too soon. Deciding to wait for the other 18th companies, Colonel Kippenberger sent the IO, Lieutenant Teddy Dawson, <sup>24</sup> down the road as far as Elasson to ensure that no charges were blown until the rear party had passed through. The RAP and wireless trucks were also sent off with the Provost Sergeant.

About 5 a.m. the other two 18 Battalion companies arrived in the creek bed below the first demolition, and when they reached the road they were sent on to the assembly area in Captain Lyon's transport. Their late arrival through exhaustion delayed the blowing of the first charge till 5.40 a.m., while further stragglers caused the second demolition to be held till 6.20 a.m. Finally, the rear party moved down the pass, the last of the charges being blown at 8 a.m. C Company, guarding the flank behind the rear party, had left a runner by the side of the road. He was sent back with a message to withdraw and the company arrived in notably good order and passed through the rearguard.

From then on the rear party was harassed by enemy aircraft which halted the column three times. Near the Elevtherokhorion crossroads, where the road from Mount Olympus joined that from Servia, the air attack was supplemented by fire from two German medium tanks sitting in the middle of the Olympus road. Carrier action was attempted with sappers acting as infantry, supported by fire from a two-pounder gun from 34 Anti-Tank Battery. The arrival of another enemy tank and the approach of many trucks of lorried infantry, 'all sitting upright like tin soldiers', made the odds too great. 'I counted seven, more in the distance, and rightly or wrongly decided that the odds were too heavy and we must run,' wrote Colonel Kippenberger. The rear party had already had several men killed. The head of Kelsall's party reached the crossroads safely, but the trucks farther back in the convoy were cut off and about forty sappers were captured.

The seven survivors ran across ploughed ground on which the carriers had stuck and climbed to shelter behind a steep bank. Led by the Colonel, they made a wide detour across country in an attempt to join up with the rearguard at Elasson. At various stages when the little party emerged from cover it was fired on by artillery from either side in turn and once by both sides simultaneously. Two men semaphored with handkerchiefs to Australian gunners, 'We are NZedders escaping', whereupon fire from that quarter ceased. When in view of their own guns the party moved in a solid clump, all waving their jackets furiously and trying to look as little like soldiers as possible. Under German eyes the group adopted a more soldierly formation, extending to forty paces apart and moving in bounds from cover to cover. About 4 p.m. the party, almost exhausted from its ten-mile cross-country tramp after two sleepless nights, passed through the forward posts of 25 Battalion, which was holding the rearguard position south of Elasson, and was picked up by 26 Battalion transport. The party rejoined 20 Battalion near Molos late in the afternoon of 19 April.

The convoy carrying the rifle companies had had quite a fair journey as far as Larisa. However, between this town and Molos the road was badly congested and the column was continually harassed from the air. Transport was bombed and troops running to cover were strafed. There were casualties, though surprisingly few, in vehicles and men.

The RAF—'Rare as Fairies' and other more pungent translations of these initials—received bitter criticism from the troops for its failure to protect the convoys from the air, but it could not fairly be asked to take all the blame. Road discipline was bad, unit convoys became broken up, and conflicting orders, 'by various authorities at various points', to disperse off the roads or to push on without stopping caused confusion.

The laconic notes of the diarists are better than a lengthy description of the journey. Private Bill Glue writes:

17–18 April—Good quick going at night—the Huns were keeping on our tail with their artillery. Early morning outside Larissa ... Hun spotter came over.... Hell of a jam. Hun planes bombed the road and when we dispersed they came down and

machine gunned and bombed us. Truck next to ours was set on fire. Was covered with flying earth from a near one—sheltered in the hole it made.... Lost all my gear when our truck moved out in a hurry without half of us. Bombed and strafed at intervals from 2 o'clock until dusk—not dark now until nearly 9 p.m. How slow it was coming. We did fairly well by pushing ahead and not stopping for the raids.... Some steep pinches over the pass.... Joined our own outfit and had a grouse breakfast of porridge and bully stew—first real meal for days. Borrowed the doings to shave off four-day-old beard—hard going. Short of lots of gear but managed to rummage about and make one from the left-overs. [Molos](#).

Trucks set alight and pushed over the bank all along the road. ... Some of [our drivers] had been driving continuously for 50 hours....

Wally Kimber of the Bren-carrier platoon writes:

17–18 April—Stand-to duties at brigade headquarters most of the day and then took up Bren gun covering positions around the embussing position and spent the night at this job in the rain. The Germans were shelling the main road below us and the side of a hill we were behind, not doing much harm as most of the shells landed in a stream below.

By 5 a.m. the MT had got away so we went too. Another carrier had gone over the bank in the darkness and had to be abandoned. We were the last to get round the junction of the road [Elevtherokhorion] before the German tanks put in an appearance. After [Larisa](#) we got the works good and properly—bombing and strafing until it was too dark for the pilots to see properly in the hilly country. After [Larisa](#) we ran into various other units, Tommies, RE, <sup>25</sup> Machine Gunners, [Royal Artillery](#), Medical, Australian, and the Armoured Div., all with the same idea—getting out as fast as possible. Once the Jerry air force put in an appearance it was just a mad rush—a lot of the time trucks were two or three abreast and tanks mixed up with them. The bombing of harmless villages was awful but the storks still stuck to their nests.

Camped for the night about 12 p.m.—our third night on end without sleep—worst day ever spent in my life.

19 April—Left camp area 6.30 a.m. Went through [Lamia](#) about 8 a.m. Arrived [Molos](#) 9.30 a.m. after running the gauntlet for twenty-seven hours. 127 miles by

Bren carrier.

During the withdrawal there were many individual actions worth recording. Lieutenant Dawson had been mortally wounded while gallantly engaging enemy aircraft with a Bren gun. Similarly, Lieutenant Poole,<sup>26</sup> who between Larisa and Molos was wounded in the knee and was unable to leave his truck during raids, engaged enemy aircraft with a Bren gun from the back of the truck, helped by some of his men of 12 Platoon. Private Strang,<sup>27</sup> also of B Company, performed a useful service in an emergency after the driver of his truck disappeared during an air raid near Larisa. Extricating his vehicle from a difficult position, Strang drove for sixteen hours through several more raids and by his coolness and courage set a valuable example.

The trucks continued to straggle in to the little village of Skarfia, two miles east of Molos, throughout the day and night of 19 April, and for the next two days the battalion rested in a beautiful spot, engaged in coastwatching, and was joined by the stragglers, some of whom arrived by road and others by boat across the Gulf of Lamia. At this stage the main task of the New Zealand Division was to defend the Thermopylae Pass.

Fifth Brigade, later joined by 6 Brigade, covered the front, while 4 Brigade was in reserve, two miles east of Molos. Fourth Brigade's duties included coastwatching as far east as Cape Knimis —allotted to 20 Battalion; the taking of a census of boats in readiness for use if required for evacuating troops from the north shore of the gulf, east of Lamia; the provision of carrier patrols and infantry detachments to attack paratroops or boat landings near the south shore.

At 3 p.m. on 20 April C Company under Major Cliff Wilson, with under command one section of 25-pounders, one section of anti-tank guns and three despatch riders, left for Stilis, ten miles east of Lamia, to prevent an enemy advance from the east until dumps in Stilis had been cleared and to secure the line of withdrawal of Lee Force from Dhomokos through Lamia. A detachment of the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry was to be east of Stilis holding a demolition. About 8.30 p.m. Major Wilson reported to Headquarters 4 Brigade that the CRE NZ Division ( Lieutenant-Colonel Clifton<sup>28</sup>) in Stilis had informed him that '... there was no Divisional Cavalry east of that village and that he should withdraw about 9.30 p.m. when he [CRE] would have

finished his task in Stylos; and that Lee Force had been reduced to a weak battalion.'

In accordance with this message Major Wilson placed a detachment of 25-pounders and two-pounders and some infantry in the vicinity of [Lamia](#) to secure his withdrawal, which was accomplished without incident.

While the battalion rested in the [Molos](#) area, considerable bombing and strafing of the coast road took place. The enemy bombers had no fighter escorts, apparently confident of their immunity from attack. On one occasion, however, Hurricane fighters were seen to shoot down several enemy aircraft. It was here that the majority of the troops first saw the vapour trails left by high-altitude fighters.

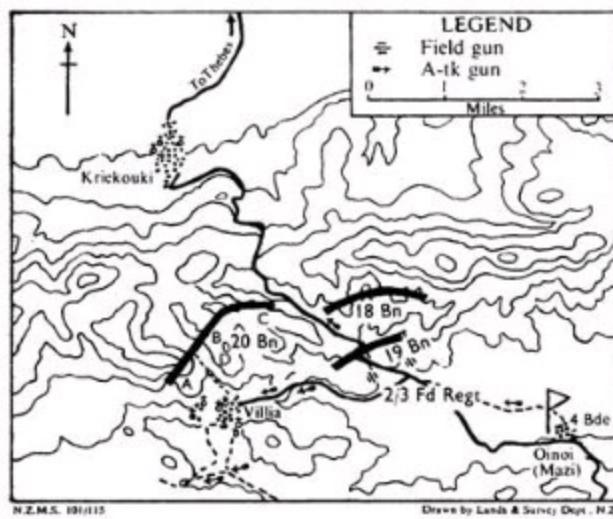
On 21 April the battalion was ordered to take up a defensive position from Karia village to [Cape Knimis](#). A and C Companies were allotted the higher ground round Karia, B Company was on the beach, and D in mobile reserve. The move began at dusk. Next morning A and C Companies had no sooner scaled their precipitous heights and expended considerable energy in hauling up ammunition than orders were received from Brigade that, owing to the capitulation of the Greeks, all British forces were to withdraw from [Greece](#).

The plan was that [4 Infantry Brigade](#) would move in transport during the night 22–23 April to occupy a position south of [Thebes](#), in the vicinity of [Kriekouki](#), to cover the withdrawal of the New Zealand and Australian divisions. No movement was to take place in daylight, and units unable to complete the journey in darkness would lie up on the way until the following night. After orders for the withdrawal were received all surplus gear was destroyed, including blankets, winter underclothing, cooking utensils, gas respirators, and bicycles. After dark the battalion moved to a bivouac area north of [Thebes](#) which had been reconnoitred by Major Burrows. Men and vehicles remained hidden in the olive groves during the day, 23 April, successfully avoiding observation by German aircraft. In the haste of the withdrawal Lance-Sergeant [Findlay](#),<sup>29</sup> accidentally left behind at [Thermopylae](#), remained at his post for a further twenty-four hours and then returned with 5 Brigade.

After reconnaissance of the defensive position by the CO and company commanders, the battalion moved at 8 p.m. in transport to the summit of [Kriekouki](#) Pass, where the troops debussed and took up their positions on the left of the road,

with 18 Battalion (less carriers) on the right, and 19 Battalion (less carriers) in reserve. In the 20 Battalion area C Company was allotted the right flank, with B in the centre and A on the left. D Company was in reserve. B Echelon was located south of the crossroads from Villia. The battalion had in support one battery from ? Australian Field Regiment and shared with 19 Battalion the support of three machine-gun platoons, an anti-tank battery, and one ack-ack battery.

Instructions from Brigade ordered the most careful concealment to prevent the enemy from discovering the presence of a large force in the area. Ack-ack fire was forbidden except in the event of serious air attack. There was to be complete wireless silence. Active patrolling was to be carried out at night. By day the majority of the troops were to be in rear of the forward slopes ready to move at short notice. False flanks of detached posts and snipers were to be used on the high ground on the flanks. The battalion's carriers were to patrol well out on the left flank.



4 brigade rearguard in the kriekouki pass

The battalion's forward defended localities were roughly from the main road two miles west along the 600-metre contour to its junction with a track leading round to Villia. The ground was too rocky to permit much digging, which in any case was undesirable owing to lack of camouflage and would have betrayed the defences, but where possible stone sangars were built. With the exception of one hill sparsely covered with bush the area was devoid of cover. Enemy planes passed frequently overhead firing bursts from their machine guns, but so good was the discipline of the men as a result of their experience further north that during these reconnaissance

flights each man remained motionless and planes searched in vain. Water was scarce and the only well was situated some distance from the road. This necessitated long treks, frequently interrupted by enemy aircraft, when the water carriers went smartly to ground.

Fourth Brigade was originally intended to hold the pass for two days, thus enabling other forces to reach their evacuation beaches, and it was then to follow to Theodhora, between Megara and Corinth. By 25 April, however, the complete lack of air cover had made it very difficult to carry out the evacuation by troopships, and the Navy had decided to embark troops on destroyers from the Peloponnese. The brigade was accordingly instructed to hold its position for a further twenty-four hours to allow the revised embarkation programme to be put into effect, and then, on 27 April, to withdraw to the Corinth Canal. Here a further rearguard covering the Peloponnese was to be formed. Thus the position at Kriekouki became known as 'Twenty-four Hour Pass'.

On 24 April a reconnaissance party under Captain Orr had left for the embarkation beach south of the Corinth Canal. On reaching Megara this party was instructed by the 4 Brigade IO to go to a point one mile north of the Corinth Canal. This point was changed later to an area just south of it. On the night of 25–26 April the party crossed the canal and passed round Corinth, which was blazing fiercely after an air raid. Next morning transport planes flew over very low and paratroops dropped between Orr's party and the canal. Leaving for Argos to link up with 6 Brigade, which was known to be in that area, the party met Major Petrie <sup>30</sup> of 18 Battalion and, with about thirty stragglers, decided to form a defensive line across the road, at the same time sending word of the position to the CO 26 Battalion.

Later, Captain Orr was directed by Colonel Stewart, <sup>31</sup> GSOI at Divisional Headquarters, to join Lee Force near Monemvasia and, with other units of this force, take up a position three miles from the beach to cover the withdrawal of 6 Brigade. This was done, and on the night of 28–29 April the party embarked with 26 Battalion on HMS Havock, arriving in Suda Bay in Crete next day. There the party was transferred to HMS Comliebank and returned to Egypt.

The remainder of the battalion heard nothing more of Captain Orr and his party until the survivors of the Crete battle returned to Helwan.

Meanwhile, at Kriekouki the rifle companies were engaged on their rearguard action. Between 7 and 10 a.m. on 26 April numerous explosions were heard in Thebes and columns of vehicles could be seen moving into the town and east and west of it. Shortly after 11 a.m. an enemy reconnaissance party of about a hundred vehicles, led by a light tank and some motor-cyclists, was observed approaching Kriekouki from Thebes.

'This exactly suited me,' the CO wrote later in Infantry Brigadier, 'a nice little ambush was ready for any such advanced guard. My idea was that it should be allowed to come up the road right into our position, when we would fall on it with two-pounders, mortars, anti-tank rifles, machine-guns, Bren guns, and rifles, while a party hidden in the village attacked the rear vehicles and put mines on the road. The column would have been very uncomfortable under the circumstances on the winding climb, and I fully expected a satisfactory butchery, but the plan got no trial. The gunners had been warned, but I had had no chance to see the Brigadier and get his approval. So the gunners opened fire under their instructions before the enemy column reached Kriekoukis. It was a pleasing but disappointing sight. The guns had not registered and their shells pitched everywhere but on the road. The Germans in the trucks scattered and there were some signs of panic; but very soon they pulled themselves together, embussed, turned their trucks and scuttled back ... out of range. At the end the guns got several hits and eight vehicles were left abandoned.'

Later, C Company's position was shelled by about a dozen guns but the company had no casualties. Our artillery shelled whatever targets presented themselves. In the afternoon enemy vehicles were observed leaving Thebes by a road running eastwards which led round the right of the brigade area and on to the coast road to Athens.

While this skirmish had been taking place at Kriekouki, the enemy had delivered a successful parachute attack at Corinth. The bridge itself had been destroyed, the defending force dispersed and the enemy troops, reinforced by air, were prepared to hold the isthmus. When word of the destruction of the bridge reached General Freyberg, then in the Peloponnese, he arranged for 4 Brigade to be embarked at Porto Rafti, east of Athens. Instructions to this effect reached Brigadier Puttick at 6.30 p.m. As plans had already been made for the withdrawal, all that was required

was that the destination should be changed from Corinth to Porto Rafti.

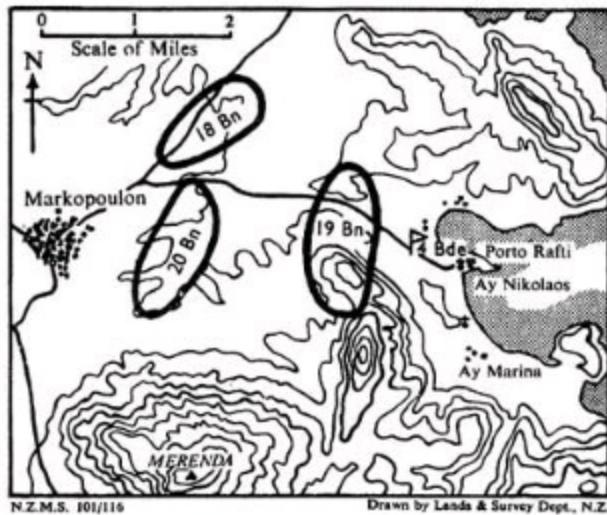
At 8.30 p.m., acting on instructions from Brigade, the battalion began to withdraw to the embarkation beach south-east of Athens. The Adjutant established a control post at Villia crossroads to check out the brigade and attached troops, while the CO, again in charge of the rear party, supervised the blowing of demolitions in the pass and as far as south of Mazi.

The companies marched about eight miles before embussing. It was an arduous tramp under cold conditions, and the stillness of the night was frequently broken by the explosions of the demolitions carried out by the engineers of 2/8 Australian Field Company, covered by C Company. On their arrival at the transport area rum was issued to some of the troops—the battalion's first ration. Seated in or on the lorries, the men watched other units depart in transport, impatiently awaiting their turn to follow. At last it came and, to waste no time, the leading trucks were told to move as fast as possible. Headlights were permitted and the drive to Athens is remembered by those who made the trip as the wildest they experienced.

The bivouac area about three miles beyond Athens was reached by the rear party about 5.30 a.m. on Sunday, 27 April. Shortly after his arrival the CO was awokened by Lieutenant-Colonel Strutt, who stated that 20 Battalion and his guns were the only British troops left in Greece, and added that he had come to put himself under Colonel Kippenberger's command. 'This neat little speech woke me up effectively,' the CO later recalled. 'We counted up our army, one battalion, seventeen guns, one machine-gun company, seven anti-tank guns, and some sappers. I pointed out that the force was inadequate to retake Athens and said that we would fall back to the high ground about the beach, lie low or fight as the case required, and hope to embark during the night.'

Leaving orders to move the battalion nearer the beach and having organised the artillery, the CO with the Adjutant left to reconnoitre the beach at Porto Rafti, or 'Porto Raferty' as the war diary spells it, some 12 miles away. At the beach there were no signs of any embarkation parties, but on the way back 4 Brigade trucks were found and it was discovered that both Brigade Headquarters and 18 and 19 Battalions were still in the area. Discarding the policy of concealment hitherto in force which prohibited movement by day, the Brigade Commander about 9 a.m.

ordered the immediate occupation of a defensive position east of [Markopoulon](#), with 18 and 20 Battalions forward and 19 Battalion in reserve near the beach. All guns were to be ready for an anti-tank role.



**4 brigade positions, porto rafti, 27 april 1941**

At the first alarm the men had been awakened and, after a hasty meal, moved several miles nearer the beach, where they once more dispersed in olive groves. To the ordinary soldier the position was very confused. About an hour after arriving in the dispersal area the drivers were ordered to destroy their transport, but this order was cancelled before it could be put fully into effect. With dramatic suddenness the troops were ordered away to their final defensive positions. Some marched, others moved in lorries, the 'runners' towing those with pick holes through their radiators.

Passing through the little village of [Markopoulon](#) the men had an unforgettable experience. The cordial reception given to the retreating troops by the inhabitants was touching. They seemed to realise that all possible assistance had been given to their unfortunate little country and bore the departing troops no ill will. Running alongside and carrying rifles as the thirsty troops drank, they pressed on them gifts of wine and water.

While the companies were moving independently to their positions a squadron of fighter-bombers made a sudden appearance and viciously machine-gunned and bombed the village and the marching column. There were numerous civilian casualties. B Company was particularly unfortunate, being caught on transport at the

beginning of the raid and suffering some twenty casualties.

Captain Rice's <sup>31</sup> 8-cwt truck led the little convoy through Markopoulon to B Company's positions. The company sergeant-major, WO II Shirley, <sup>32</sup> describes the attack:

On the outskirts of Marcopoulon our route branched off the main road to Porto Rafti and we proceeded about two miles along this dirt road. On the left was a gradually sloping ridge dotted with an occasional tree while on the right was fairly flat ground with some rocky formations. On one flat piece there was a grape orchard. Ahead and further out on the right were some trees.

We halted, and because of the towing the trucks were nose to tail. 12 Platoon under Lieutenant Fergus MacLaren <sup>33</sup> had failed to arrive and Captain Rice sent me down the road to look for them. At the same time he called a meeting of platoon commanders. We did not debus as soon as we stopped for the men were dead weary at this stage and very confused. In another two minutes Captain Rice would have finished his conference and the platoons would have been in their defensive positions.

I was only about a hundred yards down the road when a number of aeroplanes swooped very low over the ridge. The men were still on their trucks awaiting dispersal orders but immediately the attack began they scattered and took what cover they could on both sides of the road. The attack continued for some considerable time, the planes swooping very low up and down the road and strafing the road itself, the trucks and the men. All the vehicles except the OC's 8-cwt were 'brewed up' by incendiary bullets, which also set fire to crop in which some of the men were sheltering.

The Porto Rafti road was getting a doing over at the same time and it later transpired that 12 Platoon were on this road, having mistaken the turn off. It was here that Lieutenant Fergus MacLaren was killed. In the main group Captain Ayto <sup>34</sup> had been badly shot through both knees and was carried clear of the road to the side of a hill. He later died of wounds. Three of the men killed we buried in the grape vines and evacuated the other killed and wounded to the beach in the 'pick-up'. It was altogether a very nasty raid.

During this air attack very fine work in attending to the wounded was done by Lance-Corporal Smith,<sup>35</sup> one of the medical orderlies, and Private Cousins.<sup>36</sup> Lieutenant Rhodes<sup>37</sup> assisted the wounded during the raid and organised a group of Australians to help to form a carrying party. Captain Rice, the company commander, also showed great courage in assisting the wounded and in reorganising his company and moving it, with no signs of disorganisation, into the position assigned to it.

In the village the Greeks, as a final unselfish gesture, insisted that the wounded among the troops should be treated before their own casualties. At this stage an old Greek who spoke a little English said, 'Well, boys, you're going now, but we'll be waiting for you when you come back.' Quickly came the response, 'Too b—right, we'll be back', and it was through no fault of their own that those who gave the pledge were later unable to fulfil it.

From then on the men of 20 Battalion went through what probably felt the longest day in their lives. It seemed as though night would never fall. Their orders were to endeavour to hold their ground stubbornly in the event of attack, but if the front was irretrievably broken the troops south of the road would retire to the high ground south of the beach, Mount Merenda, and hold it as an infantry position until embarkation became possible.

Although dust columns moving south were observed some miles to the west, the enemy was strangely inactive. German motor-cyclists had entered Athens shortly after 8 a.m. and had been ordered to push on to Lavrion, a little port some 12 miles south of Porto Rafti. After the vicious noon attack enemy air activity was confined to occasional visits by one or two planes, although large numbers of fighters and bombers passed seawards south-east over the area and on returning attacked small craft on the beach.

About 4 p.m. Lieutenant John Rolleston<sup>38</sup> reported that an enemy force estimated at from sixty to one hundred vehicles, composed of trucks and either light tanks or motor-cycle combinations, was coming up a road and disappearing from view to the left of B Company's front. From other battalion positions enemy transport in groups of three or four was seen emerging from Markopoulon and passing across the front on the main road to Lavrion. The battalion mortars bombarded whatever

targets they could find in the village.

We now know from enemy records what was happening in [Markopoulon](#). Apparently the enemy had no knowledge of the presence of 4 Brigade around [Porto Rafti](#) other than a report received by the commander of 2 Motor Cycle Battalion on reaching [Markopoulon](#) that 'English troops ... were abandoning their vehicles and fleeing on foot towards the coast.' A motor-cycle company sent out to investigate came under the accurate fire of 'at least 6 guns, mortars and MGs' and the battalion commander decided to lay on a Stuka attack. He sent his adjutant back to [Athens](#) to make these arrangements and cleared the field east of [Markopoulon](#) ready for the bombers; but these preliminaries took time and it became too late for either air or ground attack. Fourth Brigade was allowed to slip through the enemy's none-too-eager fingers, and next day a fighting patrol found the New Zealanders gone.

For the troops holding the road to [Porto Rafti](#) the long day ended without further incident, and at 8.30 p.m. the battalion began to thin out and withdraw by detachments through the line held by [19 Battalion](#) to the evacuation beach. Here the men were sorted into company groups and settled down to wait for the embarkation officer to give the order to move.

The naval embarkation officer ordered packs, greatcoats, and all equipment except rifles and tommy guns to be destroyed. This instruction, intended to facilitate loading, was obeyed as to packs and greatcoats, and many prized possessions were thrown away or destroyed. Counter-orders from the CO reached most platoons and when the men went aboard they took with them all Bren guns and magazines, the signal equipment, less line, and the mortars—most fortunately as it proved.

Just before 2 a.m. the troops moved off to the small landing stage, where the majority embarked in tank landing craft and were taken out to the cruiser [Ajax](#) and the destroyer [Kingston](#). Considerable difficulty was experienced in getting one of the landing craft off the beach as it had grounded on a sandbank. After a long and wearisome delay it got under way. The men were hauled up the sides of the ships and guided by the sailors to their quarters, anywhere below decks. Once on board, they received the traditional hospitality of the Navy—gifts of cigarettes and matches, which were much appreciated, and a meal with mugs of piping hot cocoa, after which they settled down for a much-needed sleep.

One of the first reactions after the recent fortnight of continuous strain was the feeling of relief, the impression that all was now well, engendered no doubt by the traditional confidence that British people have in the Royal Navy. The troops' relief at their own escape, however, was tempered with a feeling of deep concern for those they were leaving behind. The high hopes with which they had set out for Greece had not been realised. Every time they had prepared to fight, the general situation had deteriorated and they had been ordered to withdraw. For most of the campaign the battalion had covered the retreat of the brigade without at any time relaxing its standard of discipline; and in military circles it is generally considered that the role of rearguard in a withdrawal is one of the greatest tests of a unit's discipline and morale.

Thus ended the battalion's part in the Greek campaign. The friendship with the Greek people that was formed on the first day ashore endured to the last, and their farewells, confident that the same troops would one day return, is for many the most touching memory of the war.

\* \* \* \* \*

To strike back when the enemy attacks and odds are more or less even is a perfectly normal measure. The fight at Kalamata, when little groups of New Zealanders and Australians, armed only with rifles and bayonets, grenades, a few machine guns and the pathetic Boys anti-tank rifles, recaptured the town from the advanced guard of a German panzer division equipped with machine guns, mortars, and two field guns ranks as an infantry action of the highest order.

After the departure of the battalion for Katerini on 18 March, its reinforcements—6 officers and 46 men—moved from Hymettus to the New Zealand Division's reinforcement camp at Voula and helped to provide detachments of fourteen different guards, of about twelve to twenty men each, scattered round Athens, Piraeus, and the docks. Later, two groups of fifty men each were always on call for anti-paratroop work. German aircraft raided the port frequently and one incident is described by Private Doug Patterson <sup>39</sup>:

While some of us were doing port guard at Piraeus the German air force made a heavy night raid and set seventeen or eighteen ships on fire as well as dropping

mines in the harbour. Next day another boat, French I think, while turning in to the wharf struck a mine, blew up, and sank in about twenty minutes. Some of the sailors were floating in the harbour. [Jack Coatsworth](#),<sup>40</sup> Captain Yates's<sup>41</sup> batman, who had come down to see the result of the raid saw these men and, although the surface of the water was on fire, he dived in and brought two sailors to land. He was a very strong swimmer but how he was not badly burned I do not know.

About 21 April the news was received that the evacuation of [Greece](#) was to begin, and next day orders came that the reinforcements were to be organised into a fighting battalion to act as a rearguard when 4 Brigade came through. With practically no equipment and no transport, this was a tall order. Thirty-one different units were represented in the camp, which was under the command of Major MacDuff.

Captain Yates, who organised the battalion into a headquarters company and three rifle companies, says:

23–24 April: Sent men out and found transport for ourselves—picked up trucks in ordnance parks. Found Lewis and Vickers guns in ordnance stores. Got some stores for Engineers such as compressor and explosives. It was just a case of help yourself in the [Athens](#) stores. Before this there had been nothing available. Now there was no check and no guards whatsoever.

Returning from a conference in [Athens](#) on 25 April, Major MacDuff issued orders for the battalion to move out that night. Leaving at 7.10 p.m., the convoy went through [Elevisis](#), [Megara](#), and [Corinth](#), reaching [Argos](#) about dawn. Here it was diverted to [Kalamata](#) because of an influx of Australian troops at Navplion and the loss of the transport [Ulster Prince](#) outside [Navplion](#) harbour.

The convoy was turned back and then sent forward again on a zigzag climb—and bombed. It spent 26 April on the road and in the late afternoon camped in olive groves several miles north of [Kalamata](#). Major MacDuff went to a conference with Brigadier Parrington, an English officer who was responsible for the embarkation plans, and returned with orders to report and be ready on the wharf the following evening, 27- 28 April.

During the evening of 26–27 April approximately 7000 troops, mainly Australian,

were taken off in destroyers which ferried them to two transports, making about seven trips to do so. Prospects for the evacuation of the New Zealanders the following evening looked extremely rosy. [Kalamata](#), however, was becoming congested with thousands of survivors of miscellaneous units—Base Details, [RASC](#), signallers, drivers, Lascars, Cypriot and Palestinian pioneers, and some Yugoslavs who claimed to have authority from Mr Anthony Eden for a high priority in embarkation. Brigadier Parrington's instructions emphasised the importance of getting all fighting troops away, but as the New Zealand Reinforcement Battalion was to cover the withdrawal it was to be the last to embark.

On 27 April Captain Yates met some officers of the 4th Hussars who said they had a screen 30 kilometres out from [Kalamata](#) which could give ample warning of the enemy's approach. In the early evening the battalion drove to the quayside at [Kalamata](#) and orders were given to destroy trucks and prepare for evacuation. Private Jones <sup>42</sup> describes what happened:

The night was spent waiting for ships which did not come in so in the early morning we drove out of the town in the 'destroyed' trucks. The drivers had either been too keen on catching the boat to carry out the order or else they doubted the wisdom of destroying the vehicles. We drove back to our dispersal area, concealed our trucks, and rested during the day.

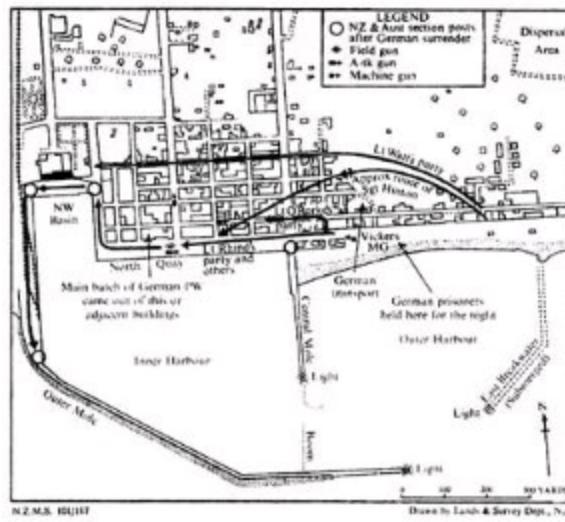
Some of the men, however, stayed under cover on the slopes near [Kalamata](#) and this breaking up of units no doubt affected their organisation as a fighting force. Enemy aircraft were active in the vicinity of [Kalamata](#) but casualties were surprisingly light.

About 4 p.m. on 28 April the battalion drove back through the town to the usual accompaniment of bombing and strafing, the transport moving in small groups at fifteen-minute intervals. Captains Yates and [Curtis](#) <sup>43</sup> were told to wait till 6 p.m. to pick up stragglers. Captain Yates describes their experiences:

At 5.43 p.m. five German armoured cars appeared. We tried to get away but bursts of machine-gun fire made us change our minds. The flying column which took us sent us back and continued on into [Kalamata](#). The road was thick with Huns and we were handed back from vehicle to vehicle. At the rear of the column was an

empty truck which picked us up. A few miles back we came upon the 4th Hussars, four or five officers and about 100 men. They had been captured intact. Later in the night we were piled into trucks and taken into Kalamata to the wharf area.

In the meantime the troops that were mobile had reached Kalamata and dispersed in the hills on the eastern side. Major



### the battle for kalamata waterfront, 28–29 april

MacDuff had established his headquarters east of the town at a corner on Beach road. Private Jones continues:

About 5 p.m. a German reconnaissance group entered the town and cut us off from the quay where embarkation was to take place. At dusk we started to move towards the town and about half a mile from the outskirts Major MacDuff met us and distributed grenades and small-arms ammunition. He was shouting to us to get into it and saying that unless the town was cleared the Navy would be unable to take us off. Nearing the town we encountered fire from a large calibre gun, a heavy mortar, armoured vehicles, and machine guns. Steady progress was made towards the centre of the town. An LMG which had given considerable trouble was cleaned out by means of grenades. At this point I lost my section. The officer was missing and the others seemed to follow suit. However I made contact with Jim Hesson,<sup>44</sup> Doug Patterson, and Jack Hinton, all of the 20th Battalion. Jack had just wiped out an MG post at the corner. There were dead Germans lying about. There was some mortar fire about this time. We took over the Jerry LMG and sort of meditated about the

position. The closeness of the mortar fire, the heavy gun firing on the beaches, together with the LMGs which were giving covering fire to the heavy weapons were giving us some worry. They just had to be put out of action. After discussing the problem for some minutes we received a rude shock when a very large German stepped out and let fly with a tommy gun, severely wounding Jim Hesson in the arm, and disappeared.

Hinton decided the enemy position must be cleaned out and told me to give him covering fire while he worked his way along the street using doorways for cover as far as possible. I consider any man who was prepared to accept my covering fire should have been awarded the VC for that act alone. We tried to use the Jerry LMG as we had tons of ammunition for it but as it wouldn't function I had to use the bren.

Jack started for his objective some two hundred yards distant keeping to the left, while I endeavoured to keep a line of fire a few feet out from the buildings on the same side of the street. About fifty yards from his objective Hinton struck two blokes in a doorway. He nearly bayoneted them, discovering just in time that they were two of ours, one a Tommy Lieutenant-Colonel and the other Major ('Two-Pill') Thomson<sup>45</sup> of Palmerston North, at one time RMO to the 4th Field Artillery. Major Thomson was at this stage endeavouring to contact Major MacDuff to inform him of the location of the RAP as he was somewhat afraid our chaps might throw grenades first and ask questions later. The RAP had been set up in the town prior to the German occupation.

Hinton started off again and in a very short time cleaned out the two LMGs and the mortar with grenades. Simultaneously a 3-tonner driven by an Aussie and carrying a load of Kiwis rushed the heavy gun from the south. I cannot say whether Hinton or the chaps on the truck cleaned up the big gun. A few minutes after this episode, which was really the turning point of the whole show, Jack was severely wounded in the stomach.

From here to the quay, a distance of about 200 yards, there was much bitter fighting. Round one corner I met my mate, Doug Patterson.

Private Patterson had come by a different route but had had just as much action. His account and that of Private Jones are quoted practically in full as they

give a good picture of the type of fighting that took place. Patterson states:

I came down out of the olive grove to MacDuff's corner where he was giving out grenades and ammunition and shouting to us to get into it. I had my own rifle and ammunition. We went along the street nearest the water front—I remember there were buildings on my right but none on my left. MGs were firing down the streets from the west. About half way between the jetty and the quay one German stepped out of a shop with a tommy gun. He sort of hesitated and was shot.

We moved on till about a block before the quay where we met some Jerries who came out of a building and tried to make over to an armoured car or half-tracked vehicle. We got three of them. After we passed one of them he fired at us from under the car. When I was opposite the first vehicle a truck without a canopy and full of Kiwis whizzed past me. I saw one chap, a Maori I think, with a tommy gun and one chap with a bren gun leaning over the hood. The truck rushed the big gun, the chaps firing as they closed in. I didn't see what the chaps on the truck did next as the Jerries rushing out of the building occupied our attention. After we had finished with the Jerries I saw the chaps milling round the gun. I did not go over to them as at that moment Jones and others came round the corner and I joined up with them. Jones seemed to be enjoying it. I remember him saying that it was the best night he had had since he left New Zealand. He had always been my mate so I went along with him. About five German armoured vehicles were parked in the street. The crews were upstairs and seemed to be firing from the upper storeys. I remember thinking it looked as if they had left their vehicles to go looting. We got some and Jones got those that made for the other armoured vehicles.

Just up from the water front there were some Jerries in a building. They were firing mostly from the ground floor with at least two machine guns. They kept up a continuous fire with them, first one and then the other. I couldn't help thinking what a perfect MG post it was. Some Jerries on the balcony were firing with tommy guns. We took up position on the steps of a jetty. A soldier whom I heard the boys say afterwards was an officer, Australian I thought by the way he spoke, walked across from the steps, stopped, and called on the Jerries to surrender. He yelled, 'You are surrounded. Will you surrender?' They replied with fire and he fell in the street. Some of the boys said, 'He's dead.' Another said, 'we'll go out and pull him back.' Hearing this the officer, who was lying with his head on his arms yelled, 'I've been hit. I'm all

right, but if someone comes I won't be.'

Jones and Patterson nevertheless made a rush across to a telegraph pole in the middle of the street. While the latter lay and sheltered behind the concrete kerb surrounding the pole, Jones stood up and fired with the Bren at the German machine guns which were firing through the bottom windows. While he was doing this a German on the balcony was shooting at him with a tommy gun. Patterson says:

Bullets were hitting the post and I remember thinking what a rotten shot Jonah was until I saw it was the Jerry on the balcony firing at him. Afterwards I found that flakes of concrete chipped off the post had cut him around the throat and eyes. Jonah kept firing at the LMGs until he was hit in the shoulder and fell across my feet. I looked up and got the Jerry on the balcony. He fell down on to the footpath and those on the ground floor seemed to stop firing. There seemed to be a fire round the corner to the left. Sergeant Charlie West <sup>46</sup> told me afterwards that they started a fire with petrol at the back of the building.

After the MGs firing through the windows had stopped the boys came across the road from behind the steps and went up to the windows where someone threw in grenades. I went across firing at where I thought the MGs had been. A few minutes later about sixty Jerries came out through the door in the left hand corner of the building with their hands up. At the same time some other Kiwis came round the corner from the other street. One of the Jerries spoke English and said, 'You'd better look after us because our main party will be here in an hour.'

After this Patterson took Jones to the RAP. Most of the troops there were Australians and they gave the two Kiwis some brandy. Jones now wanted a Mauser as he could no longer carry his Bren gun and yet still wanted to carry on with his mates. Patterson went back to where he had seen a motor-cycle and side-chair tipped over and fifteen brand-new rifles lying on the road, but when he arrived there were no weapons left. He continues:

In looking round for one I passed some armoured vehicles up a side street where I saw Major MacDuff. I heard him say he thought the Naval Officer had been killed and they were going to try to signal the navy. An officer said we were to go up the Corinth road, turn trucks sideways to block the road, and set them alight. We

went up the [Corinth](#) road about a mile and parked the trucks across the highway but I don't remember anyone setting them alight.

The men then returned to [Kalamata](#).

Further information on the fighting along the waterfront is given by Lieutenant Rhind <sup>47</sup>

About 6 p.m. Lieutenant O'Rourke [O'Rorke] <sup>48</sup> and I were called to Brigadier Parrington's conference which took place just off Motor Road in the rear of the dispersal area. We were ordered to carry out a reconnaissance and see that A and B Companies were placed in the positions they were allotted, the former covering the entrance of the [Tripolis– Corinth](#) road to the town at the western end, and the latter where the road from [Sparta](#) entered [Kalamata](#). The companies were to withdraw at 10 p.m. for embarkation if conditions permitted.

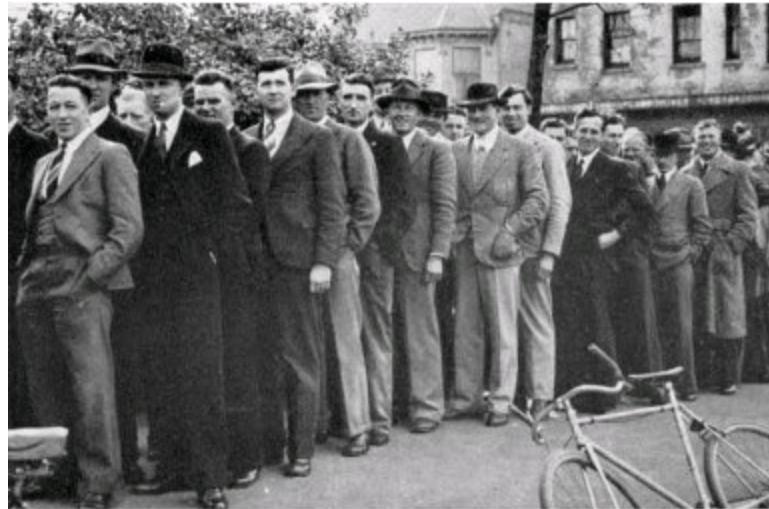
We set out for the centre of the town and met some Greeks running towards us. They told us that the Germans were in the town and at the same time we heard small arms fire. We pushed on to have a look and saw some Germans in the area where A Company were supposed to be but saw no sign of A Company. We sent a runner back to advise MacDuff and decided to make our way back to the waterfront to pick up any troops we could find in the dispersal area. Picked up about twenty Australians and New Zealanders and set out towards the waterfront.

As we started towards the quay three or four shells from a fairly heavy gun landed in the area about twenty yards behind us and machine-gun fire came from the direction of the [Corinth](#) end of the waterfront road. By this time it was getting fairly dark and there seemed to be utter confusion in the waterfront area and shots were coming from all directions. O'Rourke and I split up at this stage, he taking about ten men and advancing up the road next to the waterfront and I took the remainder and made my way from house to house up the waterfront road. There was somebody giving covering fire from the left hand side of this road but I have no idea who it was.

Some time later a runner came from Lieutenant O'Rorke to say that he was pinned down by fire from the top of a certain house. Lieutenant Rhind broke into an adjoining house and from the roof-top his party could see Germans on the roof of a

nearby house. They gave them a burst of tommy-gun fire and the enemy firing ceased. About this stage they met Lieutenant Fay <sup>49</sup> of 25 Battalion.

The little party fought its way up the waterfront to the second-last block where it was joined by many more troops. While they were re-forming a truck loaded with New Zealand and Australian troops went up the road towards the German positions.



Enlisting, Christchurch, September 1939

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Section post, Burnham



Section post, Burnham



Original officers of 20 Battalion

Back row: Lt D. J. Fountaine, 2 Lts L. S. Leslie, V. C. Poole, and P. G. Markham, Lt C. K. Fleming, 2 Lts G. A. T. Rhodes and J. H. Beale, Lt A. I. Garriock, 2 Lts F. J. Bain, G. A. Brown, J. F. Phillips, M. G. O'Callaghan, and J. D. Aiken. Second row: Capt R. S. Orr, Lt W. Ayto, Rev. H. I. Hopkins, Lt H. J. Scoltock, Capt G. R. Kirk, 2 Lt J. R. Coote, Lts D. B. Cameron, M. C. Fairbrother, and G. W. Washbourn, 2 Lts J. F. Baker and J. H. Kempthorne, Capt H. O. Jefcoate. Front row: Capts M. C. Rice, R. D. B. Paterson, and J. T. Burrows, Majs P. W. G. Spiers and F. E. Dornwell, Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger, Capt F. L. H. Davis, Maj A. P. MacDuff, Capts B. J. Mathewson, T. H. Mitchell, and C. Wilson. In front: 2 Lts G. A. Murray, T. E. Dawson, and R. L. Powrie, Lt J. P. Quilter. (Absent, Lts S. L. Wood and K. G. Manchester)

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Battalion lines, Cave



Battalion lines, Cave



C Company on route march at Cave, November 1939. *From right:* WO II J. D. Gibb  
Capt B. J. Mathewson, and 2 Lt G. A. Brown. Cpl J. D. Hinton, centre, front rank

C Company on route march at Cave, November 1939. From right: WO II J. D. Gibb  
Capt B. J. Mathewson, and 2 Lt G. A. Brown. Cpl J. D. Hinton, center, front rank

Farewell parade, Christchurch, January 1940



**Farewell parade, Christchurch, January 1940**



On board the *Dunera* at Lyttelton, 5 January 1940



On the *Dunera*. L-Cpl N. Sutherland (D Company barber) at work

### On the **Dunera**. L-Cpl N. Sutherland (D Company barber) at work

Arrival at Maadi, February 1940



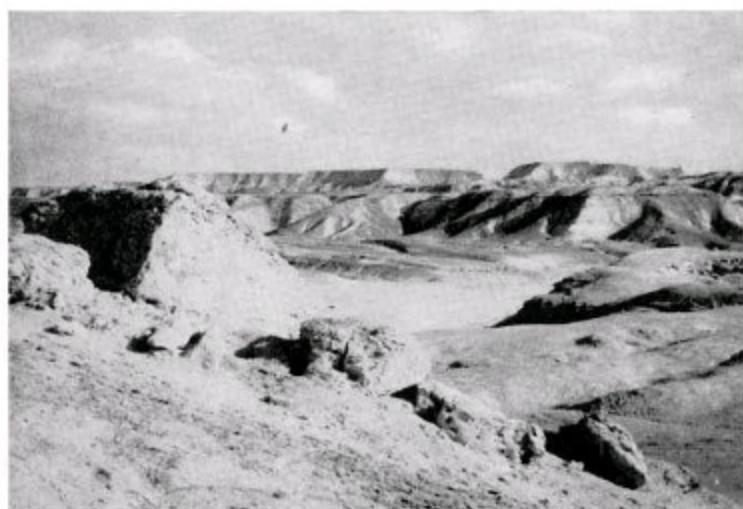
Arrival at Maadi, February 1940



20 Battalion Band

## 20 Battalion Band

Wadi Tih, Maadi



Wadi Tih, Maadi



Meal time on a B Company exercise

## Meal time on a B Company exercise

Carrying Italian prisoners of war, December 1940



**Carrying Italian prisoners of war, December 1940**



River-crossing exercise, Helwan, February 1941

**River-crossing exercise, Helwan, February 1941**

Entraining for Greece, Ikingi Maryut, March 1941



**Entraining for Greece, Ikingi Maryut, March 1941**

'They were fired on,' says Lieutenant Rhind, 'and I think the driver was wounded because the truck stopped and the troops took cover on both sides of the road. It was dark by this time and the only way we could keep contact was by shouting "Aussie" and "Kiwi" so that we could recognise friend and foe. We advanced a bit further up the road when we were joined by Lieutenant-Colonel Geddes who took control of proceedings from there on. There was an interpreter with him and he was calling on the Germans to surrender. In a few minutes the Germans gave themselves up, about eighty or ninety as far as I could see.'

'The prisoners were sent back to the beach under escort and we proceeded to put the troops into a defensive position. An attempt was made to tip the heavy gun into the sea but it got jammed against a tree. We turned a truck round to face out to sea and with the headlamps signalled to the Navy that the waterfront had been cleared and that we were ready to embark. We also told them that the Naval Officer in charge of the port had been taken prisoner, but received no reply. We used the German trucks as road blocks and organised parties to carry the wounded to the RAP set up by Major Thomson. I remained on the job till 2 a.m. when we were informed that Brigadier Parrington was going to surrender at 5.30 a.m. so decided to make a break for it. About five of us got on to a caique and for about an hour and a half tried to get the engine going but without success. It was getting fairly light by this time so our only hope was to make for the hills in the direction of Kalamiri but before we got far we were rounded up by a German motor cycle patrol.'

Meanwhile, Captain Yates had had the exasperating experience of being in the town but of not being able to assist in the fight. He continues:

We had just debussed on the wharf when the fighting began. The Jerries took us behind some buildings. Wisely we sat down on the road. At 7.45 p.m. the Jerries piled off and moved forward. 20-mm guns were firing and the place was rather unpleasant. The New Zealanders were attacking so the 150 of us were moved from place to place as our own people attacked. The Germans withdrew through the town taking us with them and we were run out with bayonets and tommy guns pointed at us, over the bridge and along the road to above the cutting in the first rise. The Germans had two heavy guns drawn by half-tracked vehicles, several companies of motorised infantry, and some anti-tank guns of small calibre. They must have been

well ahead of the main body. Next morning we were amazed to hear the sound of marching men. It was the long column of prisoners of war passing by. Later we joined them in a large field 300 yards past a knoll and were taken into Kalamata again and put into old Greek barracks.

The decision to surrender was made by Brigadier Parrington to save needless waste of life when nothing could be gained. The factors leading up to this decision are outlined in his diary. Describing the situation in Kalamata at 1 a.m. on 29 April, Parrington said that his force had had undisputed possession of the quay since 11 p.m. German prisoners had stated that their unit was the advanced guard of a panzer division which had landed at Patrai. The British force had no rations and had used up nearly all its ammunition. The vast majority of the 10,000 troops in Kalamata were without arms; they had 250 wounded and no medical supplies. The majority of their transport was now destroyed. A naval officer who had come ashore from the destroyer Hero had informed him that orders had been received to rejoin the Fleet forthwith. It was reported that the Italian fleet was at sea, and the naval officer had explained that if it got across the end of Kalamata Bay the squadron would never get out. 'Intensive [enemy] air action would commence at daybreak,' Parrington wrote, 'and no action of ours could prevent the enemy from placing his heavy artillery where they could bring fire to bear on the port ... which would effectively prevent any further attempts at embarkation. In these circumstances it seemed to me that no useful military purpose could be served by offering further resistance. I therefore called a conference of senior officers and put the position before them. None had any alternative suggestions to make. I therefore said that I proposed to inform the enemy that no further resistance would be offered after 0530 hrs; that ... any officer or man was free to make his own escape if he could, and that present positions would be maintained till 0530 hrs to allow this to be done.'

It is interesting to read the account produced by a German Propagandakompanie of the action at Kalamata, parts of which are quoted here:

We had torn through the Peloponnesus at the double.... Everywhere on the road southward the attacking unit of a panzer division, thrusting with lightning speed, was receiving the surrender of little groups of stranded Tommies.... In Kalamata too it appeared at first that the Britishers meant to surrender.... But in the course of the late afternoon things changed.... [When] the spearhead of the attacking unit reached

the port of Kalamata .... things were quiet, so the company commander felt safe in giving the order to push on down to the water's edge. Still there was no movement. Then rifle fire began to crackle in the harbour; isolated shots at first, so that nobody bothered, but then suddenly it swelled to a hurricane.... On the uneven concrete of the quay street lie two German MGs without cover. Nearby the crews of three PAK <sup>50</sup> guns are working as coolly as if on the parade-ground. And now the mass of the Britishers comes on to the attack.... They come out of the side streets, jump from house to house, shoot from the windows, and threaten to overwhelm the handful of Germans by sheer weight of numbers....

The motorized battery.... fires its 15 cm. shells into the enemy over open sights. Twelve gunners work the two guns ... [getting] shot after shot away. Eight of them fall.... The fire-power of the company can no longer hold the British out....

Now the Britishers are simply welling up out of every garden and lane. There is hissing and spitting. Ricochets moan over the heads of the German marksmen.... The company commander collects what men he still has.... The runners go through the heaviest fire with which they have ever been tested, but they re-assemble the remnants of the terribly shrunken company. Now there is only a tiny group of low-built houses to defend. The Britishers have long been in the company's rear and have shut them in from all sides. Ammunition is already short.

Only two MGs are still firing.... Hand grenades explode. The Britishers try to break in. They get in within three metres. We cannot shoot until the enemy can be plainly seen through the darkness. ... Like cats the Australians jump from walls and windows on to the German marksmen....

Now it is 22 hours [10 p.m.]. The-house-to-house struggle has become in part a wild hand-to-hand struggle....

Then towards 23 hours [11 p.m.] one of the wounded Britishers shouts with his last strength: 'Fire stopping!' He shouts it after a German bullet has brought him down at point-blank range. 'Fire stopping — finished!' calls the [German] first lieutenant too, in English.

According to this German account, a young officer then felt his way in the

darkness to the British lines to parley and gain time but was promptly convinced of the necessity of advising his comrades to surrender. The company, eighty strong, then surrendered. At the beach the German officer prisoners met the British officers.

.... There is conversation. The brain of the captured commander works on mechanically.... He is quite aware that he cannot long remain a prisoner, for up at the entry to [Kalamata](#) are sitting the 450 men of the attacking unit and the battalion commander, waiting with unspeakable impatience for the dawn that will enable him to bring relief to his spearhead company; and behind him is the threatening fist of a whole panzer division, raised and ready to strike. Looking at the British officers ... the first lieutenant adopts new tactics. 'You are completely encircled. My company is only a small advance guard. At dawn the large-scale Stuka attack on [Kalamata](#) will proceed as planned.' <sup>51</sup>

The capture of the naval liaison officer and his signaller in the first rush of the German force through [Kalamata](#) had been singularly unfortunate. Out to sea, the Navy could see the fight on shore but there was considerable delay before the ships could learn who had won it. At 8.45 p.m. Brigadier Parrington signalled to the commander of the destroyer Hero that an attack to recapture the quay was already in hand. The Hero's first lieutenant came ashore and later signalled to the senior officer of the naval squadron in [HMAS Perth](#) that the beach was suitable for evacuation, but by then the operation had been abandoned and all ships ordered to rejoin the Fleet. A separate group of three destroyers from [Suda](#) arrived later and embarked some three or four hundred men, many of them wounded. They sailed about 3 a.m.

Brigadier Parrington then made his decision to surrender. The captured German company commander was informed of the decision and went back to notify his battalion headquarters north of [Kalamata](#). If the Propaganda Company's account is any guide, his report on the action and his part in the surrender negotiations lost nothing in the telling.

Not all the wounded managed to get away in the destroyers' boats from the beach. Private Jones was one of those taken prisoner. He was in one of two truckloads of walking wounded from the RAP who were stopped on the outskirts of the town by Brigadier Parrington and told that boats were waiting for them at the

beach.

'We moved off again,' says Jones, 'and eventually arrived at the beach where, to our amazement, we discovered a tremendous crowd of men, later estimated at 10,000. We had expected a few hundred. The Embarkation Officer asked where we had been, saying he had been waiting hours for us. At the beach there was one boat with some fifty men in it, and according to the E.O. another boat was due back in a few minutes. He was prepared to empty the boat alongside if the wounded wished but as he guaranteed we would go in the next boat we said "Let them go". Of course the other boat never came.'

Private Patterson managed to get away in a dinghy just before dawn. Most of the dinghies along the waterfront had been riddled by bullets but here and there a good one was found. Patterson and another New Zealander, a Maori who had been wounded about the face, found one floating upside down, righted it, and climbed in. They had no oars and had to paddle with bits of wood, and they took off their boots in case they had to swim for it. 'We rowed about four miles,' says Patterson, 'heading in what we thought was the direction of Crete. We thought the Navy had gone but found two destroyers cruising westwards. The first one nearly ran us down. It signalled and the second one threw over a rope ladder. We climbed up. The destroyer stopped soon after and then sailed for Crete. They said afterwards they had picked up quite a lot of troops that night. From Crete we went to Egypt.'

So died the last fire of Allied resistance in [Greece](#). The Germans counted [Kalamata](#) a victory and no doubt it was; but of the many thousands taken there only a small group was equipped to fight. There had been plans for two companies to defend the road entrances to the town, but there seems to have been a hitch somewhere and the brunt of the fighting fell on little assorted groups who hurtled into the fray as they came down from the hills in response to the sound of firing that so irresistibly called them.

Whatever the final result may have been, 20 Battalion is proud of those who fought at [Kalamata](#), and glad that the defiant heroism of Jack Hinton, fittingly rewarded with a Victoria Cross, the reckless courage of men like Alan Jones, and the fighting spirit of quiet chaps like Doug Patterson, Pat Rhind, Jim Hesson, and Bob O'Rorke so ably upheld its honour in the field.

The battalion's casualties in killed and wounded for the whole of this ill-fated campaign had not been heavy. Four officers—Captain Ayto, Lieutenants Dawson, O'Rorke, and McLaren—and 20 men had been killed or had died of wounds; 2 officers and 43 men had been wounded. As prisoners it had lost 4 officers—Major MacDuff, Captain Yates, Lieutenants Curtis and Rhind, all from its reinforcements—and 76 men, of whom 11 had been wounded. All but three of these prisoners survived the war. Some later escaped, one of these, Corporal Jack Denvir <sup>52</sup> of A Company, fighting for two years in Yugoslavia with the partisans, being wounded three times, and rising to command a partisan battalion.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Greek villages which the battalion knew in 1941 suffered heavily during the German occupation and the civil war that followed the withdrawal of the Germans at the end of 1944. Memories of these villages and of the men who fought in Greece are revived by Sergeant E. S. ('Fox') Allison, of the battalion's 'I' section, in letters written to Sergeant Basil Borthwick, of Christchurch. Sergeant Allison was taken prisoner at Belhamed on 1 December 1941. He visited the battlefields of North Africa, Greece, and Crete in 1954 and is at present writing a book on his experiences.

Mr Allison's letters have had a wide circulation among former members of the battalion. His permission to publish the extracts which follow this and later chapters is gratefully acknowledged.

On Way to Porto Rafti Near Marcopoli 8 Oct 1954 12.50 pm.

.... At the moment I am in the fields into which we dispersed after leaving Marcopoli—the last village thro' which we passed where people were giving us wine and advice. This is where we were caught in the air-raid in which B. Coy. were badly mauled, Geo. Fowler, Bill Ayto, the Cunningham boys, \* Scottie Wheeler, Hunter Buchanan and many others being killed. As far as I can judge this is the very spot our section was in — or at least very close to it. There were some young olive trees — can pick them now — because altho' they have grown much, they are not so large as the older trees which were quite few — the area being fairly open.... It's odd what sticks in one's memory but I recall, as I lay, face down, alive with fear, two beetles

working away in the earth, taking no notice of the blitz — and I agog with fear lest the pilots would spot a white mug tied to my haversack. Just across the dip up on a hill is a tiny church with a stone wall. I think we went up there for water — but I can't recall if the water was from a well or from an over—turned water truck(?). There is no well there now — but it might have been filled in. I remember Jackie Sullivan setting free a poor helpless donkey which had fallen over with its cart — and was abandoned by its master. About midday Tom Jackson and I decided to open a tin of M & V — the contents were bad. — This is really odd Basil — I can hardly believe it myself — there's the drone of an "approaching" plane — I can't see it — I can now, 2 minutes since I wrote "approaching". It looks like a 3-engine fighter — and here's another — just like old times — but no black crosses or yellow noses on these. Man, it's just almost too much. At Marcopoli an old (Eng. speakg.) fellow said to me "You want to go to [Porto Rafti](#)? But why walk — there'll be a bus in one or two hours." He just didn't understand. He continued, "You know the way?" "No, not clearly — but if you show me where the ammo. truck exploded — then I'll find my way thro' the fields." "The big truck — oh yes I know the place — do you remember the ditch by the road? Well we found 26 of your boys near there — and some in the ditch." I recalled to myself that Geo. Fowler and some others had been in it. "What did you do with them?" "We buried them here by that little church. Later I think they took them to [Athens](#)." He was silent some time then burst forth: "The bloody b— Germans — but the Italians were bitches — real bitches they were." I bought a small slice of cheese and some brown bread, and took the road, as he directed, leading left from Marcopoli. After ten minutes I saw the hills — two in particular ... and knew I was on right track. I'm sitting under one of the little trees beside which we flopped. I didn't notice till now — and this is dead true, there's a wreath hanging on this tree — probably from some kids at play, or some festival etc — it's well withered. There's a chill, strong breeze blowing. Away down on a metal road near the bitumen one some lorries go by in clouds of dust — just like those artillery guns dashing by that day. A black raven is circling about 50 yds. away — might be the Jackdaw of Rheims. Somebody has just fired a shot (not at the raven) over in the higher cliffs — and now there goes another. I often see Greeks looking for rabbits — but never see a Greek with a rabbit.

3.30 pm: Just arrived at [Porto Rafti](#): a battered sign in Greek & Eng. tells me so. Porto Rafti means this whole vast bay (really two) and not only the tiny village — all

apparently asleep, except for a woman screaming at a child. I'm eating my bread and cheese — and some tomatoes a man gave me as I went thro' a field. Groups of peasant girls have laden me with grapes as I've gone along — grape harvest is later here than in Crete. 4 pm. This is the beach — and what a flood of memories. Near here I tasted rum for the first time. Here I first heard the word "claustrophobia" from the Maestro himself 8320. As you'll recall Basil the barge was very crowded; the barge would not move for a while and there was some tension. Spicer muttered to me. "This is a b— so many people give me a queer feeling — 'claustrophobia' is the name—" he spoke with a professional air. "Hell, what's that Jack?" I asked. ... Yet they were all good men — with all their faults they were all individuals — and most likeable — would like to see them all again....

The Hills,  
Kreikouki – Vilya,  
10th Nov. 1954.

There's a very cold blast raging here, and the clouds are hanging darkly, but memories are clear and vivid. Am up here alone, looking down from these very rocky heights onto the plain below where the road leads out of [Thebes](#). For some reason the plain is bright with Autumn sunlight — wish there was some up here. Did I say "alone" — well hardly — the place is alive with the shades of good men, and the weather is even a little the same as it was in April '41. I'm trying to find a certain well where I remember talking to Uke as we went for water, and I think we ate some ration chocolate. Also quite a way from here I hope to locate a little cottage where Kip and I rested, and where a woman gave us some eggs and bread. It was a long day, that day, because we walked around all the positions and even further. We later met Colonel(?) Rudd of the Engineers and Jerry Skinner, M.P. — they had a car but they did not offer us a lift. As Kip talked to them a Greek soldier with a bandaged leg and bare feet limped out of some bushes — but I don't think the others saw him....

4 pm. Vilya in the sunlight of this Autumn afternoon is as beautiful as can be. Have been unable to find the tiny cottage, which I remember stood alone where we had the eggs and bread. The greatest delay to walking around the hills in [Greece](#) is shepherds. They are terribly curious and suspicious; and if they're not that, they are most talkative — and they are always wanting cigarettes — and all think that a

stranger must understand Greek.

Some people who were clearing out a house talked to me and when I said that I came from N.Z. the fellow immediately dropped his shovel and said "Are you Dick?" Strangely enough that was one of the first questions asked me in Kreikouki. However I'm not Dick, but the fellow hustled me inside; and his large and buxom wife soon prepared for me a meal of chips and cold tomatoes, bread and cheese and a jug of wine. Wish Jim Burrows was here with his transport — hell I'm tired and I have to walk all the way back again and night will soon be coming on apace....

Ryakia,  
Greece,

17th Nov. 1954.

At 4.30 pm I came to Ryakia. Light was already fading and the long shadows darkening. The village was as silent as a tomb; there was neither sight nor sound of humans. The first place I recognised of course was the church and its bell tower a little way apart, and behind the church the sloping hill of green grass where Kip held Battalion parade, and from where we first heard the news of Germany's attack on [Greece](#) — I think Padre Spence announced it. I recall quite a group on that hill watching some billowing piles of smoke in the distance and everybody talking knowingly — "[Salonika](#) bombed and burning etc" — and Spicer — the old Maestro — quoting his memorable "How little is known by so many about so much." The mud increases as the "street" descends into the village. I saw a policeman picking his steps through a quagmire to my right, but I did not speak for I knew a conversation would develop. A rooster crowed, and three little boys playing at mud pies looked up as I passed with something of utter astonishment. Three old women at a doorway took little notice and when I nodded and said "'Spera" (for Kalispera) they returned the greeting and went on knitting.

In the first few minutes I could recognise no other part of the village, but at last I came to a tall picket fence and there was the house — the two-storey one which Kip and his staff occupied. Jackie Sullivan and Johnny Johnston lived there too — and I think your quarters were there. We had a tent at the rear of that house — and many a good night of boisterous fun we had. I noticed that the house appeared a little altered, but tobacco leaves still hung out of an upstairs window. What

memories. And there in almost exactly the same location — a long pile of thin logs which I'm sure Speed and Dildo Davy will remember. I recall Bill Millin lying here the night of our big party just a few hours 'ere we set forth for Lava. The deep silence of the village was most remarkable. Ryakia wore as do all or most Greek villages at this season an air of utter dreariness and depression.... Well I've tried to collect some of the story since our departure. The Germans burned down the village in 1943 — almost the entire village. What little the Germans left and what was reconstructed the Communists utterly destroyed (so they say) in the Civil War, which apparently was much more dreadful than we imagine — so Ryakia, again newly built, is not quite the same as we knew it, but it looks as though it were erected in the Middle Ages — the people merely built over the ruins in most cases with no thought to improvement or modern conditions. Oddly enough the high picket fence at the rear of Kip's house remains as it was except for minor changes. The old school has gone — and a new one is on the opposite side of the road — the church is still the same, but with an added ugly portion — the bell tower almost in a state of collapse.... The people tell me that the first Germans came to Ryakia on 8th April '41 but this might not be accurate. The Germans did not live in the village, but at Katerine. During the Civil War the villagers fled, and for a long time life see-sawed greatly. The people, especially the children, look cold and pinched and miserable....

Some of the villagers remember a N.Zer called George who had "aspro" hair (white hair) and he was a sergeant or about that mark — the only person I can think of is George Weenink. Gradually the memories of our stay are coming back to them, and today they keep stopping me, and asking in detail about what happened to us from here — and what was the name of so and so with such a mark, or with two stripes, or was a stratio (private soldier) or wore a star on his shoulder — and he slept in such and such a house — I'm afraid I wasn't much help to them. I have some very vivid pictures, however, one in particular of Teddy Dawson going to arrest the local cop because he took a photo of some trenches, etc — and that brings to mind another incident at Lava where Teddy, revolver in hand, was going to ask every fleeing Greek for his pass. Must to bed. Will write more from [Servia](#) — if I ever get there.

20.11.54. 1 pm. The Hills at [Servia Pass](#): The Aliakmon twisting below looks much the same, and do you know, Basil I feel that I've not been away from this place

which I don't particularly like. There are still slit trenches here — I think that they are in either A or B Coys' areas. A shepherd going by a few minutes ago pointed at them and said without my asking, "English, English Sarenda eina (41)" — but he could be wrong — might be from civil war, yet they appear very old, and I'm writing from the shelter of one now: the cold being almost unbearable esp. when I stop walking. Just across the way is the hill where Melville Rice, Tom Jackson and I watched thro' a telescope the German trucks going into Kozani and coming from there towards the river. We kept reporting this back to Brigade? (I forget where to where exactly) — but the artillery sent over some good shells and the trucks dispersed — only there were not enough shells. There is the low, green, flat-topped hill behind which the German 'planes landed and took off for their attacks against these hills. Tom Jackson will remember it, and so will Speed and Spice. Bertie Thompson, B. Coy cook was killed here, and I think Ritchie Kidd met his death further down the Pass Road. The same shepherd as mentioned before pointed to a part of a hill, and said "Tri English Kaput." Everywhere the air is filled with the sound of bells, and this sound brings to my mind somebody telling Tom and I to keep a good eye on the sheep and goats because the Germans were very cunning and would probably be hiding amongst them. This could no doubt be true, but I could not avoid an inward chuckle for I had visions of the Jerries tying themselves to the bellies of the sheep as Ulysses and his lads did when they escaped from the blind Cyclops. Today as in the past I marvel at the toughness of those infantry fellows in the companies lugging ammunition, rifles, Brens, valises, shovels (?) etc., up these slopes which are no mean height. The journey to here from Ryakia has been the devil's own job — and at one stage I thought I would have to give up and meekly return to Katerine....

4.30 pm. LAVA. Home again — The local School and Teacher's House. To write is difficult with a crowd clustering around, and some young bloods from the army demanding my pass and papers, but they are very decent about it. This village, like Ryakia, was destroyed by the Germans in 1943 — but has been rebuilt, and looks just much the same: a collection of barns and ramshackle houses. The weather today is typical of the times when we were here — dull, cold and wet, but I remember we occupied a barn for a day, and it was dry and warm. Little Pat Kelly was killed here - I mean not in the village. He was the first friend I had in the 20th and he taught me to fix bayonets and put on web gear.... The snow on the hills

reminds me of an evening when ... [a company commander] stormed at Aussie Deans and me for leaving footprints in the snow near his H.Q. I've not long walked by the part of the road where Aussie Deans persisted to brew tea on his primus as the shelling increased. I have not yet located the house or its site where the shell burst into the room where Kip and Teddy Dawson had set up H.Q. just before we finally pulled out of Lava - but I remember it well. At that spot on the road just mentioned I remember Kip saying "Lieut. Dawson and Sjt. Sullivan stay with me — the others with Cpl. Deans go down the road." (which we did with some haste). The little hillock on and near which Pete McGhie and his Pioneers made their trenches and a dugout looks so very familiar and strange to say a dugout with concrete lining is there in that exact spot now. I remember Spice and Lofty Wills (the legal man) taking shelter in there. Do you remember our seven planes going out each day, the German raids increasing and the Jugoslav Battery? Did not Freddie Mason return one evening after one of these raids with some scratches on his gloves and handlebars — and was something of a hero? Tell Uke the ravine where he had his ammunition store is now much larger. Tom Jackson and I made attempts at digging a dugout near there, but the rain soon flooded us out — I recall our mosquito nets lying in the mud....

Well man I think this brings my tour of the old battlefields of our day to an end — and so from Lava where we were all so young and fit and fresh some fourteen years ago I would like you to pass on to Kip. and all the 20th all sincere good wishes for a Merry Xmas and a Happy New Year....

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<sup>1</sup> Capt A.I. Garriock; [Nelson](#); born Helensburgh, [Scotland](#), 15 Apr 1911; traffic officer; wounded 23 May 1941.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. G. A. D. Spence, OBE, MC, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Feilding, 8 Feb 1901; Presbyterian minister; SCF 2 [NZEF](#), Apr 1944-Oct 1945; wounded 17 Jul 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Maj G.W. Washbourn; [Wellington](#); born [Timaru](#), 13 Jul 1916; bank clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; now Regular Force.

<sup>4</sup> Mr J. H. Ledgerwood, MBE, m.i.d.; [Hamilton](#); born Dunedin, 14 Apr 1908;

YMCA secretary; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

<sup>5</sup> Capt W. L. M. Gilmour; born Scotland, 19 Dec 1914; medical practitioner; killed in action 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>6</sup> Cpl P. R. Blunden, MM; Port Levy; born Christchurch, 15 Dec 1913; farmer; wounded and p.w. 22 May 1941; escaped Greece, Sep 1941; safe in Egypt, Nov 1942.

<sup>7</sup> Sgt H. W. Kimber; Killinchy; born Christchurch, 31 Mar 1908; farmer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped Italy, Sep 1943; served with Yugoslav partisans; safe in Egypt, Apr 1944.

<sup>8</sup> Pte G.S.S. Homann; born England, 27 Apr 1917; farmhand; died of wounds 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>9</sup> L-Cpl K.J. McKegney, m.i.d.; Wakatu, Nelson; born NZ 30 Jun 1908; butcher; twice wounded.

<sup>10</sup> Pte A. Casford; Aria, Te Kuiti; born Wanganui, 15 Jun 1918; shepherd; wounded 13 Apr 1941.

<sup>11</sup> Pte F.J. Laird; Blenheim; born Nelson, 29 Mar 1920; musterer; wounded 13 Apr 1941; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped through Yugoslavia, Dec 1943.

<sup>12</sup> Cpl F. Scott, m.i.d.; born NZ 29 May 1908; transport driver; wounded May 1941.

<sup>13</sup> Pte F.P. Kelly; born NZ 13 Oct 1916; clerk; killed in action 15 Apr 1941.

<sup>14</sup> Pte J.J. Hopkins, m.i.d.; Hawera; born Ireland, 6 May 1920; butcher; wounded 15 Apr 1941.

<sup>15</sup> Capt A.K. Spilman, MM; Marton; born Stratford, 7 Aug 1912; stock inspector; QM 20 Regt, Apr 1944–May 1945; wounded 24 Nov 1941.

<sup>16</sup> L-Cpl A.G. Scott, MM; [Auckland](#); born England, 22 Sep 1918; bank officer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>17</sup> Sgt J.R. Lynch, m.i.d.; born NZ 22 Feb 1908; PWD overseer; accidentally injured 25 Jan 1943; died [Invercargill](#), 26 Jul 1946.

<sup>18</sup> Sgt T.M. Drummond; born NZ 6 Sep 1914; motor mechanic; killed in action 27 Apr 1941.

<sup>19</sup> Sgt T. Dalton; Dunsandel; born NZ 10 Apr 1916; labourer; twice wounded. c2

<sup>20</sup> Capt D.V.C. Kelsall, m.i.d.; [London](#); born [Taihape](#), 13 Dec 1913; civil engineering student; p.w. 9 May 1941.

<sup>21</sup> 2 Lt S.J. Green; born [Invercargill](#), 6 Jan 1910; commercial traveller; killed in action 25 May 1941.

<sup>22</sup> Brig J.R. Gray, ED, m.i.d.; born [Wellington](#), 7 Aug 1900; barrister and solicitor; CO [18 Bn](#) Sep 1939–Nov 1941, Mar–Jun 1942; comd [4 Bde](#) 29 Jun–5 Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

<sup>23</sup> Capt W.J. Lyon; born [London](#), 15 Feb 1898; MP ([Waitemata](#)) 1935–41; served in 1914–18 war; killed in action 26 May 1941.

<sup>24</sup> Lt T.E. Dawson; born [India](#), 26 May 1913; clerk; died of wounds 19 Apr 1941.

<sup>25</sup> Royal Engineers.

<sup>26</sup> Maj V. C. Poole; [Invercargill](#); born [Invercargill](#), 31 Jan 1911; traveller; wounded 20 Apr 1941.

<sup>27</sup> Pte W. J. Strang, m.i.d.; [Oamaru](#); born NZ 12 Nov 1910; commercial

traveller; wounded 27 Apr 1941.

<sup>28</sup> Brig G. H. Clifton, DSO and 2 bars, MC, m.i.d.; Porangahau; born Greenmeadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1919–21 (MC, Waziristan); CRE 2 NZ Div 1940–41; Chief Engineer 30 Corps, 1941–42; comd 6 Bde Feb–Sep 1942; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; escaped Germany, Mar 1945; NZ Military Liaison Officer, London, 1949–52; Commandant, Northern Military District, Mar 1952–Sep 1953.

<sup>29</sup> Capt C. Findlay; Invercargill; born Dunedin, 8 Mar 1917; clerk.

<sup>30</sup> Major M. De R. Petrie; Wellington; born Christchurch, 9 Aug 1895; company secretary; 2 i/c 18 Bn 1940–41.

<sup>31</sup> Maj-Gen K. L. Stewart, CB, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); Kerikeri; born Timaru, 30 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; 1 NZEF 1917–19; GSO 1 2 NZ Div 1940–41; Deputy Chief of General Staff Dec 1941–Jul 1943; comd 5 Bde Aug–Nov 1943, 4 Armd Bde Nov 1943–Mar 1944, 5 Bde Mar–Aug 1944; p.w. 1 Aug 1944; comd 9 Bde ( 2 NZEF, Japan) Nov 1945–Jul 1946; Chief of General Staff Apr 1949–Mar 1952.

<sup>31</sup> Capt M. C. Rice, MBE; born Invercargill, 8 Jul 1904; company secretary; killed in action 22 May 1941.

<sup>32</sup> Lt C. V. Shirley; Invercargill; born Edievale, 22 Mar 1917; clerk.

<sup>33</sup> 2 Lt F. B. McLaren; born NZ 10 Apr 1914; Presbyterian minister; killed in action 27 Apr 1941.

<sup>34</sup> Capt W. Ayto; born Invercargill, 25 Jan 1916; butcher; died of wounds 27 Apr 1941.

<sup>35</sup> S-Sgt L. G. Smith, m.i.d.; Ashburton; born Christchurch, 21 Jan 1916; grocer; p.w. I Dec 1941.

<sup>36</sup> Pte C. J. Cousins, m.i.d.; Otautau, Southland; born NZ 4 May 1907;

labourer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; repatriated 26 Apr 1943.

<sup>37</sup> Maj G. A. T. Rhodes, m.i.d.; Taiko, Timaru; born Timaru, 20 Oct 1914; farm cadet; wounded Nov 1941.

<sup>38</sup> Maj J. W. Rolleston; Timaru; born NZ 15 Apr 1912; solicitor.

<sup>39</sup> Pte D. D. Patterson; Invercargill; born Glencoe, 24 Nov 1916; machinist; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>40</sup> Pte F. J. C. Coatsworth; born NZ 5 Sep 1918; plumber; p.w. Apr 1941; died while p.w. 10 Aug 1942.

<sup>41</sup> Capt H. S. D. Yates, ED; Christchurch; born Invercargill, 23 Apr 1911; clerk; p.w. 28 Apr 1941.

<sup>42</sup> Pte A. M. Jones; Invercargill; born Greymouth, 13 Jul 1917; bricklayer; wounded and p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

<sup>43</sup> Capt D. Curtis; Te Puke; born Christchurch, 12 May 1917; Regular soldier; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

<sup>44</sup> Sgt J. Hesson; born NZ 18 Nov 1918; farmer; wounded and p.w. 29 Apr 1941; repatriated Nov 1943; died Alexandria, 10 Jul 1948.

<sup>45</sup> Maj G. H. Thomson, OBE, ED; New Plymouth; born Dunedin, 5 Mar 1892; obstetrician; gunner, 4 How Bty, Egypt and Gallipoli, 1914–16; RMO 4 Fd Regt Sep 1939–Apr 1941; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; repatriated Oct 1943.

<sup>46</sup> L-Sgt C. J. West; Bluff; born NZ 13 Aug 1907; oysterman; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>47</sup> Capt P. K. Rhind; Christchurch; born Lyttelton, 20 Jun 1915; clerk; p.w. 29 Apr 1941; ex-Regular Force; Area Commander, Christchurch, 1952–55.

<sup>48</sup> Lt F. O'Rorke; born England, 31 Jul 1906; sheep-farmer; killed in action 28 Apr 1941.

<sup>49</sup> Capt J. A. O'L. Fay; [Auckland](#); born [Wellington](#), 29 Jun 1912; insurance inspector; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

<sup>50</sup> Panzerabwehrkanone: anti-tank gun.

<sup>51</sup> From Serbia to [Crete](#), translation by War History Branch.

<sup>52</sup> 2 Lt J. Denvir, DCM, Soviet Medal for Valour; [Greymouth](#); born [Scotland](#), 5 May 1913; storehand; p.w. 23 Apr 1941; escaped 23 Dec 1941; served with Yugoslav partisans; three times wounded; safe with [2 NZEF](#), Feb 1944.

\* \* \* Pte H. T. Cunningham was killed in this raid.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 5 – CRETE

## CHAPTER 5

### Crete

After a sound sleep everyone was awakened at 8.30 a.m. (28 April) and told to be ready to disembark in half an hour. As the cruiser steamed slowly into [Suda Bay](#) the men crowded on to the decks for their first view of the island of Crete. The port contained the usual warehouse and administrative buildings, and its single quay appeared to be littered with military stores of every description. Beyond the town stretched rolling farmlands rising southwards to the snow-crested [White Mountains](#). Many ships clustered in the bay, some afloat, others resting on the shallow bottom—further evidence of enemy air activity with which the men were already too familiar. However, there was a general feeling of relief at having eluded the enemy in [Greece](#), and in the fresh morning sunshine the troops, though very weary, were in good spirits.

A tug drew alongside, moved HMS [Ajax](#) over to a tanker, and the troops disembarked by crossing over the tanker to the wharf. During this move air-raid sirens sounded and ack-ack guns opened fire, but none of the men seemed very concerned and, except for a short pause when the [Ajax](#) yawed away from the tanker, disembarkation proceeded smoothly: British and Aussies to the left, New Zealanders to the right. Counted through a gate, the troops were directed along a dusty road for an 'army mile' to an area in olive groves where each man could rest and take off his boots. From a British field kitchen the men received a welcome mug of tea, bread, cheese, an orange, chocolate, and a few cigarettes. The assembly points and bivouac area were about seven miles farther on, and the men went at their own speed ('everyone had a holiday feeling') and employed various ways of travelling, from staff trucks to Cretan donkeys. Sergeant [Johnston](#)<sup>1</sup> of Battalion Headquarters and the RSM, WO I Wilson, engaged a Cretan boy with a bicycle to carry the typewriter, duplicator, and a kit containing the battalion secret documents, money, and pay records. The RSM had brought the Manual of Military Law, but whoever had been entrusted with King's Regulations either failed to arrive or thought them a non-essential.

Arriving at the battalion bivouac area, most of the troops found their company areas and then went to sleep. Waking greatly refreshed, they were able to wash in

the deep pool of a nearby stream. After a light issue of rations in the evening everyone bedded down and most men slept well despite the lack of blankets. About 2 a.m. the MO, Captain Gilmour, was seen moving about among the olive trees. When asked by the CO what was wrong he replied, 'I'm trying to find a warmer tree.'

The next day was spent quietly, resting, cleaning weapons, and taking cover from the [Luftwaffe](#). Seven dive-bombers appeared in the afternoon but did not trouble the area. Later the CO held a parade in the trees and inspected the battalion with his usual care. Every man was armed, except one who paraded holding a hand grenade and with no other equipment or arms. Otherwise personal equipment was very nearly complete. Both 3-inch mortars, complete with base plates, had arrived, but there was very little signalling gear, and thirteen Bren guns had been left at [Suda](#) in response to orders from senior officers from other units. During the inspection of Headquarters Company Private [Brennan](#) <sup>2</sup> was asked where his bayonet was. 'Sir,' he replied, 'my bayonet is an axe in the officers' mess.'

Shortly after the inspection orders were received for [Colonel Kippenberger](#) to assume command of 4 Brigade. Major Burrows then became CO with the acting rank of lieutenant-colonel. Major Paterson became second-in-command of the battalion, Captain [Jefcoate](#) <sup>3</sup> took command of D Company, and Captain Garriock of Headquarters Company.

The Commander-in-Chief Middle East, General Wavell, had been instructed that the retention of [Crete](#) was of vital importance to British operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. [Major-General Freyberg](#) was appointed commander of all forces on the island and Brigadier Puttick, in consequence, assumed command of the New Zealand Division, less 6 Brigade and other troops evacuated to Egypt. Fifth Brigade, with 1 Greek Regiment, was responsible for the defence of [Maleme](#) aerodrome and the area from there to [Platanias](#), while 4 Brigade was to cover Canea from attack from the west and destroy any hostile troops who landed in the Prison valley. On 30 April the brigade received orders to move to an area about [Galatas](#) with an anti-paratroop and coastwatching role. The troops were to take special care to conceal their positions from air observation and were to dig weapon pits for protection from dive-bombing attacks. Should paratroops land near these positions the battalions were to be prepared to counter-attack immediately.

Twentieth Battalion moved on the 30th to positions in olive groves south-east of Galatas, with Battalion Headquarters on Cemetery Hill, also called Searchlight Hill, and rifle companies on either side of the Prison valley road. The intelligence section had an OP on the hill and worked with the English crew manning the searchlight which gave the feature its name. B Company's signallers, on rising ground to the south, used the heliograph to communicate with Battalion Headquarters. As Divisional Reserve the battalion was on an hour's notice to move. Stand-to was observed from 5.30 a.m. to 7 a.m. and from 7 to 8.45 p.m. Shorts, shirts, and boots of the long, narrow, Indian pattern were issued, and by this time there was one blanket for each man. The greatest shortage was in entrenching tools. Most men, as ordered, had left their picks and shovels in Greece, and they found that digging trenches in the stiff clay was slow, hard work with bayonets, steel helmets, and clumsy Cretan implements. To make matters worse, a ship bringing tools was sunk in Suda Bay.

On 3 May officers and NCOs were addressed by General Freyberg, who indicated the probable nature of the expected attack on the island. His advice for dealing with paratroops was characteristic of him: 'Just fix bayonets and go at them as hard as you can.'

There was no unit transport, the only truck in the brigade being used by battalions in turn. Rations had to be carried by companies to their areas, and as some of these areas were a considerable distance from the quartermaster's store it was not long before carrying parties from B and A Companies, the latter near the Turkish fort at Pиргос, had commandeered donkeys to assist them.

In these days men lived in section groups, cooking in improvised utensils over fires of olive twigs or of furniture from deserted houses. Local supplies contributed little to the menu although oranges, eggs, a little bread, potatoes, and dried fruits could be bought. Wine was plentiful and fairly cheap; it had a characteristic resinous flavour for which a taste had to be cultivated, in most cases successfully. One of the greatest deprivations was the shortage of tobacco. In Galatas a branch of the YMCA opened in a building near the church, but its stocks were limited. In one wineshop the proprietor owned a radio set on which the troops could listen to the news. Most interest was taken in the German broadcasts, and Lord 'Haw-Haw's' sneer that 'The

Kiwis are now beneath the olive groves of Crete and beneath those trees will meet their doom' was received with derision.

On Sunday, 4 May, the battalion, always particular in these matters, held a church parade. The following day a syllabus of training covering a period from 9 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. was begun. Bayonet practice and arms maintenance were the chief activities. Stand-to night and morning was strictly observed, and the area was patrolled at night, two men from each section being on picket. About this time Major Wilson marched out, attached to 8 Greek Regiment, and Lieutenant Fountaine took command of C Company. On 5 May the battalion came under direct command of Headquarters New Zealand Division, while the rest of 4 Brigade came under Creforce command as force reserve.

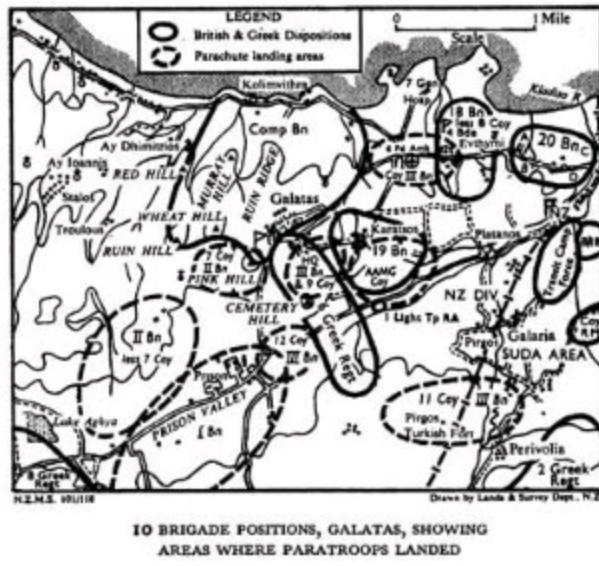
Evidence of the German intention to reduce the island was provided by the number of bombing attacks on the harbour and shipping at Suda Bay. Unloading was confined to night-time, and even then working parties were seldom able to operate without interruption.

On 14 May a Composite Brigade was formed consisting of 20 Battalion, 6 and 8 Greek Regiments, a Composite Battalion of ASC and gunners acting as infantry, and a Divisional Cavalry detachment of three squadrons armed with rifles and Bren guns; in addition, the brigade commanded a platoon and a half of machine-gunners from 27 Battalion and a battery of 5 Field Regiment armed with three Italian 75-millimetre guns without sights and with little ammunition. Colonel Kippenberger assumed command of this formation, to be called 10 Infantry Brigade, and Brigadier A. S. Falconer temporarily took command of 4 Brigade.

Tenth Brigade's task was to defend Galatas. Twentieth Battalion was not to be employed without the sanction of Divisional Headquarters. The Composite Battalion took up positions from Wheat Hill, west of Galatas, to the beach. The Divisional Cavalry detachment was on the slopes north-west of Lake Aghya, 8 Greek Regiment on the slopes south of the lake, and 6 Greek Regiment south of Galatas and astride the Prison valley road.

On 13 May the battalion, acting on instructions received from Divisional Headquarters, handed over to 6 Greek Regiment its area south-east of Galatas and

moved to an area west



### 10 brigade positions, galatas, showing areas where paratroops landed

of Canea to take over from 1 Battalion, The Welch Regiment. The battalion's new task included the defence of Divisional Headquarters near the Prison valley road and the keeping of a lookout on the coast as a precaution against an enemy seaborne landing. Companies occupied bivouac areas under the olive trees and manned positions along a ridge east of 7 General Hospital. Battalion Headquarters was situated in an olive grove on the north side of the Canea- Maleme road. A Company took up positions to the north of Battalion Headquarters on the land running down to the beach and at night patrolled the beach as far west as 7 General Hospital's area. B, C, and D Companies occupied positions to the south and east, manned listening posts by night and posted lookouts by day.

Battle positions dug by the Welch Regiment were occupied during stand-to periods and one post in each company area was manned during the day. The intelligence section's OP was on a flat-topped hill overlooking A Company and commanded an excellent view of the sea to the north, of Canea and Suda Bay to the east, and of the road leading to Galatas. The battalion was in communication with Divisional Headquarters on a 'two-party' line system, but other communications were by runner.

Just prior to the move back from Galatas, air raids increased in frequency and daring German pilots attacked calmly in broad daylight, diving through the ack-ack

barrage. On 13 May there was a particularly heavy raid on Searchlight Hill. In a determined attempt to destroy the searchlight enemy fighters flew right down the beam with guns blazing, but damage and casualties were nil. Raids on Maleme aerodrome and the port of Suda at least gave food for thought, but one during a church parade on 18 May inspired prompt action. As Padre Spence and his congregation wisely took cover someone called out, 'What about your faith now, Padre?' As he joined in the general dispersal the Padre replied with customary calm, 'As strong as ever, but it's just as well to take precautions.'

On 14 May the Kiwi Concert Party and 4 Brigade Band arrived to entertain the troops, and with them came a huge letter and parcel mail which had accumulated in Egypt during the Division's absence in Greece. As rations were still light, the distribution of parcels to the delighted troops was particularly opportune. On 18 May Brigadier Inglis arrived to assume command of 4 Brigade and Brigadier Falconer returned to Egypt.

For several days a composite company drawn from C, D, and Headquarters Companies had carried out wiring for 6 Greek Regiment. For a time the news of Hess's flight to England supplanted the latest intelligence on the probable date of the German landing, but heavier raids on Maleme aerodrome, Canea, and Suda indicated that that event—'Der Tag' the troops called it—was drawing closer.

On the evening of the 19th an extremely heavy air attack was launched against Suda Bay and Maleme. Several British fighters took off in a vain attempt to intercept but were shot down. Ack-ack defences were ruthlessly silenced and not a ship was left afloat in Suda Bay.

Next morning at 7.50 a.m. the blitz began again with a thoroughness that seemed a preliminary to the expected invasion. From Maleme to Suda Bay flights of planes attacked with deliberate precision. For almost an hour all life and communication was paralysed by the roar of aircraft engines and the blast of bombs, cannon, and machine-gun fire. In C Company's area bombs dropped by a lone enemy plane fatally wounded Sergeant Selwyn Musson<sup>4</sup> and wounded three others.

With dramatic suddenness the blitz ceased and in the uncanny silence that followed heads peeped out from slit trenches to see the result of this vicious attack.

Suddenly a sonorous drone, gradually increasing in volume, was heard to the west. Into the vision of the spellbound troops, coming in increasing numbers from beyond the sea, swept a tremendous air armada, hundreds of planes steadily approaching through the clear morning sky. The invasion had begun. As the watchers realised the significance of this amazing sight the aircraft began to disgorge hundreds of paratroops, their olive-green, white, brown, and red parachutes swaying to earth in a gradually descending shower. At the same time groups of short-bodied, broad-winged planes of a different type were noticed moving noiselessly through the air. These were the gliders, towed in batches of six by three-engined Junkers which turned back at the coast.

The first paratroops seen were about nine miles away at [Maleme](#) airfield. For a short period the sky in that area was full of them; no one who saw it is ever likely to forget the sight. Others were dropped south-west of [Galatas](#). Some landed close to [7 General Hospital](#), which they captured, and advanced towards [Galatas](#). Most of the landings were made outside the battalion perimeter although some supplies, including bicycles, landed towards the beach. A few enemy troops landed near [Divisional Headquarters](#) and holed up in an old Turkish fort. They were dealt with by engineers, and 15 Platoon under Lieutenant Upham was sent over to protect [Divisional Headquarters](#). One German officer landed away from the rest near battalion battle headquarters and was shot by the brigade signals corporal. Some of the gliders swept low over the section posts and were engaged with small-arms fire. Private [Paul Amos](#) <sup>5</sup> of D Company fired at one with an anti-tank rifle and it disappeared over the ridge to crash-land further on. About this time it was rumoured that Germans were wearing British battle dress and messages were sent by runner to each company to order the men to change into shorts. This rumour was later found to be incorrect, but one D Company man wearing battle dress was fired on by an English soldier about 400 yards away and had a hole drilled in his small pack.

The events of the day are well summarised in the diary of Sergeant [Basil Borthwick](#) <sup>6</sup> of Battalion Headquarters staff:

- 0750 Blitz starts, bombing and machine-gunning.  
hrs.  
0845 Action stations. Paratroops have landed....  
hrs.

0915 More paratroops, brown and white 'chutes, 8 or 10 troop carriers.  
hrs.

0945 More paratroops land near our old position [Searchlight Hill].  
hrs.

1000 News that paratroops landing in NZ battledress. My own shorts being  
hrs. washed; borrowed a pair ... and changed smartly.

1015 No planes about at the moment.  
hrs.

1040 Pop Lynch made a brew of tea.  
hrs.

1045 10 more troop carriers dropping paratroops.  
hrs.

1145 Had some tinned pears and Mavrodaphne wine.  
hrs.

1200 Bombing and a lot of smoke on hills right of [Suda Bay](#).  
hrs.

1400 Been a bit quiet.  
hrs.

1500 More air activity, the Stukas whining and bombing [Canea](#)....  
hrs.

1630 Brewed up and had some bully.  
hrs.

1700 More troop carriers dropping supplies.  
hrs.

1830 Dorniers flying round and round, about 10 of them. Big smoke from [Suda Bay](#).  
hrs.

1903 6 Dorniers bomb [Canea](#) viciously.  
hrs.

1910 Same again.  
hrs.

1917 Same again.  
hrs.

1925 Yellow-nosed Messerschmitts machine-gunning.  
hrs.

1930- Constant bombing and machine-gunning.  
45 hrs.

Thus ended the first day. The paratroops who had landed in the New Zealand sector had suffered heavy casualties, but 22 Battalion had been forced off [Maleme](#) aerodrome and the enemy now had a field where he could land reinforcements.

Months later it was learned that one of the first battalion casualties was Major Cliff Wilson, attached to 8 Greek Regiment. When their area had been surrounded by paratroops Major Wilson and the other New Zealanders had assembled at a pumping station on a hill south of the reservoir. The station consisted of a small concrete compartment dug into the hillside. It was locked by a narrow steel door, in front of which the clay excavated from the hole had been heaped on either side of the entrance, making a sort of alley leading up to the door—‘a slit trench with one end open’. The party took shelter inside the tanks, standing thigh deep in water in the darkness while Germans moved around in the vicinity. Unable to break out, the party was forced to remain in hiding. The next afternoon Major Wilson went out to investigate the position. He moved along, looking over the left-hand parapet, and had just called to the others to follow him—‘Come down and have a go; there are about five of them down here’—when he was killed instantly. Shortly afterwards the rest of the party was captured.

On 21 May a severe blitz began at 6.25 a.m. and lasted for half an hour, after which a steady stream of enemy troop-carrying planes landed on Maleme aerodrome, disgorged their troops, and disappeared out to sea. Others dropped stores and equipment, including armed carriers and motor-cycles. Private Allison<sup>7</sup> meticulously noted each arrival in the ‘I’ section log-book; it was estimated that at one stage a troop-carrier landed every two and a half minutes. As a reserve unit 20 Battalion could do nothing but watch. Patients from 7 General Hospital, who had arrived the previous night, were still in the lines and were in an unhappy plight. They had already spent a night in the open; many had dysentery, there were no rations for them, and the extra numbers soon attracted enemy aircraft which gave the area a drubbing.

About 5.30 p.m. warning orders were received from 4 Brigade that the 20th was to come under 5 Brigade's command and be used to counter-attack the Maleme aerodrome. It was stressed that, as the enemy was expected to make a sea landing this night, no troops were to leave their positions until they had been relieved by 2/7 Australian Battalion. It was expected that the Australians would arrive about 8 p.m.; and after the relief had been carried out the 20th would use the Australian battalion's trucks to go on to 5 Brigade Headquarters near Platanias and about four miles from Maleme. About 6 p.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Walker of 2/7 Australian

Battalion arrived from [Georgeoupolis](#) with his advance party.

At dusk guides from each platoon area assembled at Battalion Headquarters and at 8.45 companies were ordered to pack and be ready to move at 10 p.m. Information was rather sketchy, but at the orders group conference Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows stated that the battalion was going forward that night to take [Maleme](#) aerodrome. First the Navy would shell the 'drome; then the [RAF](#) would bomb it. After that the infantry would go in. The battalion would get its final orders from 5 Brigade at [Platanias](#). There had been no time for reconnaissance. During the evening [Colonel Kippenberger](#) rang Colonel Burrows and wished him luck. He says: 'The 20th was my Battalion, going into action seriously for the first time, and I felt heartbroken.'

As the hours passed and no relief arrived Colonel Burrows kept ringing 4 Brigade; each time he was told by [Brigadier Inglis](#) that the 20th must not go until relieved. In the meantime, starting about midnight, gunfire flickered out to sea north of [Canea](#). Then came the long, far-reaching sweep of a searchlight and again quick flashes, followed by the slow glare of burning ships. The Navy was engaged in repulsing the German seaborne invasion.

By about 1 a.m. on 22 May, at which time the 20th was supposed to begin the attack with the Maoris, the leading elements of the Australian battalion had arrived, and half an hour later Colonel Burrows was told by [Brigadier Inglis](#) to get away to 5 Brigade Headquarters, send on the first two companies that were relieved, and get the others up as soon as he could.

C and D Companies, the first to be relieved, hurriedly embussed and followed the CO's party to [Platanias](#). The Cypriot drivers had not been told that they were to take 20 Battalion forward and had to be restrained from attempting to return. Various reasons were given by the Australians for their late arrival. They had been unable to leave their positions till relieved, their relief was late, they ran into heavy air attack on the way and some vehicles lost contact with the guide who was to direct them through [Suda](#).

At 5 Brigade Colonel Burrows received his orders from Brigadier Hargest. The battalion was to attack the aerodrome between the road and the coast from the east

and was to capture it and the guns which had been doing so much damage to 5 Brigade. This done, the 20th was to move to the high ground south of the aerodrome (Point 107), which was the objective of the Maori Battalion attacking simultaneously with the 20th but on the south side of the road. There the 20th was to remain, overlooking the aerodrome, and prevent further enemy aircraft from landing; the Maoris were to return to Platanias by first light.

By 3.30 a.m. C and D Companies were on the start line just across the bridge over the Platanias River. The position was so desperate, in view of the time factor which required the troops to be on their objective before first light, that the CO, after waiting half an hour, began the advance with only these two companies. The promised air support had not bombed the aerodrome and the Navy had been fully occupied with the seaborne expedition.

Company commanders had been given verbal orders to drive through the aerodrome to the Tavronitis River beyond it, then to move to the high ground south of the aerodrome and take up positions to cover it with fire. Guides from 5 Brigade took the companies to the start line and were to show them where mines had been laid as part of the aerodrome defences; but they



counter-attack on maleme airfield, 22 may 1941

were not seen after moving off the start line. C Company's area extended from the road half-way to the sea, and D Company extended from C Company's right flank to the beach. Battalion Headquarters moved along beside the road behind C

Company so that it could be found easily. Captain Rice, OC B Company, had come on with the leading companies and the CO left instructions with him to be passed on to A, B, and HQ Companies when they arrived. They were to be guided to the start line and were to follow the two leading companies in a mopping-up role. The men fixed bayonets and the 20th moved off to its first attack.

Three light tanks from 3 Hussars under Lieutenant Roy Farran <sup>8</sup> took part in the early stages of the advance, moving one behind the other along the road. At first the tanks were shooting over C Company towards the beach. Just before dawn they were engaged by a Bofors gun firing down the road. The leading tank, while turning, was hit, the guns of the second tank jammed, and the third had orders not to go on alone. Its commander, however, assured Colonel Burrows that he would follow as soon as he could. 'We didn't see the tanks again,' said the Colonel. Their absence was felt later when dawn broke.

C Company worked at first through olive groves and vineyards with short, low-growing vines and a few houses. D Company's advance was made through more open country, fairly level, but with some ditches and steep-banked stream beds. There were no olive trees but plenty of scrub and clumps of bamboo like shelter belts run wild, and more open country near the gravel beach.

Before long the leading companies were in among the German posts. From in front, on either side, and sometimes from behind came streaks of fire, but the tracer gave the enemy's positions away, enabling men to pick their way between the lines of fire and get close enough to throw grenades. It was a strange sensation for the attackers: the machine-gun fire seemed terrific, and tommy guns, pistols, grenades, and the shouts and screams of men combined in an unearthly din like nothing they had ever heard before. Through the darkness the troops pressed resolutely on, meeting resistance in depth—in ditches, behind hedges, in the top and bottom stories of houses, in fields and gardens along the road. In some cases the Germans had bored holes through the walls of houses and used bales of hay as protection.

An eye-witness account by Private Melville Hill-Rennie <sup>9</sup> gives a picture of the fighting encountered by C Company:

As extreme [left] flank man I walked in the ditch along the road and it was my

responsibility to see that no Huns got through on the road behind us. Suddenly we ran into our first opposition. A Jerry machine-gun nest opened fire on us at a range of 50 yards and they got four of our boys before we could drop to the ground. The man just on my right gave a sharp yelp and I crawled over to see what was the matter. Two fingers of his right hand had been blown off by an explosive bullet. Jerry was using tracer and it was strange to lie there under the olive trees and see the bullets coming. I could see the explosive ones go off in a shower of flame and smoke as they hit the trees. We waited on the ground and finally the order came for my section to advance and wipe out the nest.

We edged forward on our stomachs until we were within 20 yards of the Nazis, who were tucked away behind a large tree, and then opened fire with our one Tommy gun, one Bren gun and eight rifles. As we kept up the fire the platoon officer [Lt Upham] cautiously crawled round to the side and slightly to the rear of the tree. Although it was still dark, we could tell by the way the Jerries were shouting to each other that they didn't like the look of the situation. When he got round behind the tree the platoon officer jumped to his feet and hurled three Mills bombs, one right after another, into the nest and then jumped forward with his revolver blazing. Single-handed he wiped out seven Jerries with their Tommy guns and another with a machine gun.... Two machine-gunners managed to hobble away in the darkness, but we got them later.

We reformed our lines and as we did so I could hear shouting from down along the beach, where the boys were dealing with more nests. We pushed on slowly for another 50 yards or so. By this time it was getting light and I could make out the shape of a house on the edge of the road just ahead. Just then Jerry opened up with machine guns from the windows of the house and from a small outhouse at the rear. We fell to the ground again and took cover.

I got a bead on one of the windows and as soon as one of the Nazis poked his head above the sill with his machine gun I let fly.... Our platoon officer dashed ahead again and came around from the back towards the door of the outhouse.

'Come on out,' he shouted. Jerry's answer was a burst of fire.... Taking a Mills bomb from his pocket he [Upham] calmly pulled the catch then carefully placed it into the hand of a dead Jerry whose arm was stretched out through the outhouse

door.

'Take that, you b—s,' I heard him say; then he stepped back and waited for the explosion. As soon as the bomb went off he shouted, 'Come on, boys, they're finished' and we rushed forward.

There were about eight German wounded inside. Half a dozen more came running out of the house ... with their hands held high and ... yelling 'Kamerad, kamerad'. The majority of them were well-built, strapping fellows who looked like picked men. Most of them knew a smattering of English. In neither nest had I seen any officers: those in charge were either corporals or sergeants.

We dumped their guns down the well and left their wounded under guard to wait for the upcoming stretcher bearers, and then moved on. Over on my left I could hear wild shouts coming from the Maori lines as they forged ahead. All along the line to the beach we ran into Jerry fire as the enemy retreated back on to the aerodrome .... at one point I saw a long bamboo fence neatly whittled down as the Germans raked their machine guns across the fields and groves.

It was broad daylight by this time. Our lines had strung out in a semicircle, on my right the boys on the beach strip had managed to fight their way through to the aerodrome ... but we in the middle sector came up against [Maleme](#) village,<sup>10</sup> where Jerry had taken up vantage points in the houses. We slowly blasted our way from house to house, wiping out one nest after another, while the snipers kept up a constant, deadly fire....

At one house the Nazis had mounted a captured British Bofors gun from the aerodrome behind a well and were turning it on our men with devastating results. We just had to wipe out that gun crew. With two Bren gunners I sneaked forward until I was in a position to cover my platoon officer who .... crawled forward on his stomach for 30 yards; then he tossed his Mills bomb smack on to a gunner crouched behind the wall. We rushed forward and carelessly stood up behind the battered gun and the dead Jerry. At that moment a Hun sniper opened up from the houses. The New Zealander on my right died instantly with a bullet in his head. The Maori on my other side fell to the ground with a bad wound in his stomach.

I flopped behind the well and waited for a chance to dash for cover.... A minute

later I scrambled to my feet and dashed across the rough road. Right in the middle I ... tripped and fell sprawling on my face. Instantly the sniper opened up on me. I decided the only thing to do was to lie doggo and make believe he had killed me.

For five agonizing minutes I lay still as a corpse. Then, for some reason, he took another shot at me. The bullet pinged into the road just under my knee.... for 20 more horrible minutes I lay dead still. Then, gathering myself for a spring, I jumped and ran for the ditch on the far side of the road where his bullets couldn't reach me. I wiggled back down the ditch and rejoined my outfit....

The troops in Pиргос village were under fire from snipers and several men were wounded. Upham and Lieutenant Bain <sup>11</sup> of Headquarters Company rallied the men to carry out the casualties when the battalion was ordered to withdraw left into the hills. While Bain and Hill-Rennie gave covering fire, Upham and a private carried Lieutenant George Brown, <sup>12</sup> badly wounded in a leg, out on a door. 'While we waited by the roadside I ran through the special kit carried by all the Nazi parachutists,' said Hill-Rennie. 'It contained, among other things, some energine tablets and six bars of Cadbury's (English) chocolate. I ate one of the bars and I remember thinking that it was the best thing I had tasted in my life.... I managed to make my way up to the hilltop overlooking Maleme where my outfit was reforming some sort of line. By this time the German air activity was terrific.'

Meanwhile, on the right flank, D Company engaged enemy posts both in scattered houses and in clumps of canes. Half an hour after the start of the attack, while the men were awaiting the signal to attack a farmhouse and outbuildings, a deep-throated German officer broke the silence only a few yards ahead by shouting 'Kompanie! kompanie!' and rattling on with other orders. Enemy troops began to move about quickly and then opened fire. The men rushed the house and, after grenades had been thrown, the enemy surrendered. The company pushed on, houses on the way up to the aerodrome being taken in turn and machine-gun nests in the bushes being dealt with as they were discovered. Private Amos fired his anti-tank rifle at one of these posts, silencing the post and deafening those of his section in front of him. Towards daylight Lieutenant Maxwell, <sup>13</sup> who appeared to be the only officer left in the company, handed over to Sergeant Sutherland <sup>14</sup> and went over to the road to contact Battalion Headquarters. The Adjutant, Captain Cameron,

<sup>15</sup> instructed him to continue the advance and Maxwell rejoined the company, which had kept going, near the edge of the aerodrome. Here 5 Brigade mines and barbed wire were encountered, which hindered progress. Groups of D Company reached the clear part of the aerodrome by the beach and saw scores of aircraft on the ground. Private Amos again used his anti-tank rifle with effect, this time on one of the aircraft.

By this time it was broad daylight and the forward troops had come under most intense mortar and machine-gun fire, with the clear ground of the aerodrome still to be crossed. Casualties were heavy: some sections had only one man left. Lieutenant Maxwell then pulled the survivors back about 100 yards to the cover of some bamboos where sections of B Company were found.

Half an hour after the leading companies had set off the supporting companies, A, B, and HQ, had reached [Platanias](#) and received brief directions from Captain Rice, who exhorted his men to the task ahead of them. The companies marched straight off to the sea, deployed, turned left and, at the signal blast of Rice's whistle, advanced. A Company extended from the road, inclusive, half-way to the coast, and B Company from there to the sea. Headquarters Company platoons moved as a second supporting line. After about 800 yards had been covered firing began in front, and some distance ahead A Company caught up with the rear of C Company, which was recognised by the voice of Lieutenant Upham. There were a few isolated shots at first and the odd German missed by the leading company had to be dealt with until the platoons reached [Pirgos](#) village just before first light. Here tracer became more common. Because of the rough ground, the patches of canes and low-growing vineyards, contact was not easily kept and sections went forward to a large extent on their own. No. 8 Platoon, spiritedly led by Lieutenant Markham,<sup>16</sup> caught up with D Company in front of the aerodrome and had some severe fighting. The platoon was almost cut off when the Germans later advanced on the right flank.

B Company, in extended formation 'like a hare drive', had had a busy time mopping up. A strongpoint in one house was engaged by throwing grenades through a window. There was a rush and a stream of Germans dashed out like sheep in a panic. Corporal [Lockie](#)<sup>17</sup> got seven in a row with his tommy gun. Machine-gun fire was intense and there was a Bofors firing at the same time. At one stage the

company was held up by fire that seemed to come from a burnt-out plane on the beach. After all Bren guns had been turned on it there was no more trouble from that quarter. In places enemy machine-gun positions were not deeply dug in and some gun crews surrendered when approached. Others hid by their guns, hoping not to be seen, and when stumbled upon came up like rabbits; but more often there was grenade and bayonet work as Germans hung on till the bitter end.

At first light B Company found itself close to D Company, which was a short distance ahead. The enemy appeared to have withdrawn to the far edge of the aerodrome and was covering the level ground with heavy machine-gun fire. Planes were now coming over at tree-top height, strafing up and down the lines, and the troops were fairly well pinned down.

When B Company went to ground near the airfield Lieutenant [McPhail](#)<sup>18</sup> went back for orders to Captain Rice, who was well forward and moving about 'as if he was on a parade ground', completely ignoring the small-arms fire. The company's position, however, was not pleasant. There was no shelter under the olive trees and the scrub and vines were too low to permit anyone to stand up unobserved. The bamboo was close but too obvious a choice of cover, and some of the tracks through it were wired and booby-trapped. Rice decided to ask the CO for instructions. The next few minutes are well described by [Private Clarke](#),<sup>19</sup> one of three brothers in the battalion:

By this time it was daylight and I could see Captain Rice ahead of me walking about. He called for a runner and as I was attached to B Company in that capacity I went over. He told me to go to Bn HQ and ask Col. Burrows what we should do. [Earle Cuttriss](#),<sup>20</sup> the other runner, went with me. Captain Rice had said, 'Two of you better go.' We were shot at all the way as we cut straight across through the grape vines, the tops of which were being shot off. Reaching a house I was directed to a bridge near the road where I reported to Col. Burrows and gave him the message. He replied that B Company were to stay where they were. Cuttriss and I returned. The fire was worse than before. I delivered the message to Captain Rice who asked me to go back to say that things were a bit too hot and to ask whether we could withdraw. Cuttriss and I started off again but I lost him on the way. Later I found that he had been wounded in the back of the neck.

Reaching Bn HQ I gave Col. Burrows the message and he seemed rather upset.... The C.O. said 'Yes. Withdraw and come up here.' I ran back with this message to Captain Rice who was standing behind some canes. He called to McPhail, 'Come on you chaps, you've got to get out of here.' I was standing near him when an MG opened up, firing through the canes. I dropped down beside some Headquarters chaps who were already lying there and was about to suggest that Captain Rice do the same when he was hit and fell [About this time, also, Lieutenant Scoltock<sup>21</sup> was mortally wounded as he shepherded the men across to the shelter of some trees.]

By this time McPhail and the rest had gone so I called to the others to follow me and set off for the road.... At the road I met Charlie Upham who asked me where B Company were. I pointed to the beach and said, 'What's left of them are down there.' I asked him where Bn HQ was and he said, 'Up on that hill,' pointing to a hill on the left of the road. I went up the creek bed and .... reported to Bn HQ and told the Adjutant that Captain Rice was killed.

By this time Colonel Burrows had appreciated that it would be impossible to carry the first stage of the original plan any further since it would mean crossing the open ground of the airfield in broad daylight under heavy fire from the ground and attack from the air. He decided to carry out a modified form of the second stage of the plan and try to get what remained of his battalion in behind the Maoris and eventually, if the Maoris had taken their objective, on to the high ground overlooking the aerodrome. Runners were sent out to the companies with these orders, but by this time they were well scattered and the message did not reach them all. Part of D Company received the order to withdraw to the high ground, but Maxwell's group nearer the coast withdrew through B Company to the start line, accompanied by 8 Platoon of A Company.

On getting back to [Platanias](#) D Company was sent forward in the afternoon to a point 300 yards past a church situated beyond the bridge and on the right-hand side of the road leading to [Maleme](#). The company was to hold a line until relieved. The advance met intense machine-gun and mortar fire and halted at a creek near the church, where the men took shelter under trees and in some canes. At dusk the advance was resumed but again the men could make little progress against small-

arms and Bofors fire. The night was spent in a creek bed, and next morning 5 Brigade withdrew the party to [Platanias](#) as there was every likelihood of its being cut off.

In the meantime platoons of Headquarters Company had had a wide variety of experiences as third line in the attack. The anti-aircraft platoon was led with determination by Lieutenant Bain and actually caught up with C Company in [Pirgos](#) village, sharing in the heavy fighting there. The mortar platoon, which had arrived in Crete with all its weapons except the anti-tank rifle, had been halted at the [Platanias](#) bridge by machine-gun fire. Unable to move forward, Lieutenant Rhodes reported to 5 Brigade Headquarters and was ordered to come under command of the [Maori Battalion](#). Rhodes then took command of the [Maori Battalion](#) mortar platoon—seven men, two mortars, and their ammunition.

On debussing and deploying on foot the carrier platoon, under Lieutenant Green, came under fire from a German machine gun firing across the road from the direction of the beach. After temporarily taking cover the platoon pushed on. At daylight it came under the heavy ground and aircraft fire that had halted the leading companies. Elements of D

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Reconnaissance group, Riakia. From left: Capt D. B. Cameron (sitting), Pte F. G. Ross (driver), Lt-Col Kippenberger, 2 Lt S. J. Green, Maj J. T. Burrows, Maj R. D. B. Paterson

Reconnaissance group, [Riakia](#). From left: Capt D. B. Cameron (sitting), [Pte F. G. Ross](#) (driver), [Lt-Col Kippenberger](#), [2 Lt S. J. Green](#), [Maj J. T. Burrows](#), [Maj R. D. B. Paterson](#)

Katerini



[Katerini](#)



Riakia village

### Riakia village

Pioneers at Lava. *From left:* Jack Lloyd, Harry Reid, Sgt Peter McGhie, Don McLean, Harry Cain, and Stan Weir



**Pioneers at Lava. From left: Jack Lloyd, Harry Reid, Sgt Peter McGhie, Don McLean, Harry Cain, and Stan Weir**



Lieutenant Upham at Kriekouki

### **Lieutenant Upham at Kriekouki**

Porto Rafti. The battalion's last day in Greece



**Porto Rafti. The battalion's last day in Greece**



A group of 20 Battalion officers on the day of arrival in Crete  
*Front left:* Lt M. G. O'Callaghan, Maj C. Wilson (back to camera), Lt J. D. Aiken, Lt G. A. Brown, Maj J. T. Burrows (back to camera), Lt D. J. Fountaine, Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger, Capt D. B. Cameron, Capt M. G. Rice (standing), 2 Lt N. J. McPhail (standing), 2 Lt C. H. Upham (holding mug), Lt R. L. D. Powrie.

### A group of 20 Battalion officers on the day of arrival in Crete

From left: Lt M. G. O'Callaghan, **Maj C. Wilson** (back to camera), Lt J. D. Aiken, Lt G. A. Brown, Maj J. T. Burrows (back to camera), Lt D. J. Fountaine, **Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger**, Capt D. B. Cameron, **Capt M. C. Rice** (standing), 2 Lt N. J. McPhail (standing), 2 Lt C. H. Upham (holding mug), Lt R. L. D. Powrie.

The counter-attack on Maleme airfield



**The counter-attack on Maleme airfield**

Junkers 52s dropping paratroops, Galatas



**Junkers 52S dropping paratroops, Galatas**

C Company platoons at Baggush

*From left:* A. T. Shaw, R. C. Bellis, A. G. Pepper, J. H. Breeze, J. U. Vaughan, V. Horgan,  
Sgt B. N. Beechey, H. W. Johnson, 2 Lt C. H. Upham, F. J. G. Lidgett, and R. B. E. Matthews



**C Company platoons at Baggush**

From left: A. T. Shaw, R. C. Bellis, A. G. Pepper, J. H. Breeze, J. U. Vaughan, V. Horgan, Sgt B. N. Beechey, H. W. Johnson, 2 Lt C. H. Upham, F. J. G. Lidgett, and R. B. E. Matthews



Battalion area in the Baggush Box, November 1941

### **Battalion area in the Baggush Box, November 1941**

Padre Spence conducts church parade



**Padre Spence conducts church parade**



Sgt J. D. Hinton, VC

### **Sgt J. D. Hinton, VC**



Lt-Col Kippenberger and  
Lt Upham at Baggush

### **Lt-Col Kippenberger and Lt Upham at Baggush**

Upham's platoon, October 1941. Playing cards are (from left) Percy Port, Bob May, Alan Pepper and Bob McBrydie; Lt Upham, with pipe, looks on



**Upham's platoon, October 1941. Playing cards are (from left) Percy Port, Bob May, Alan Pepper and Bob McBrydie; Lt Upham, with pipe, looks on**



Awaiting orders on a desert exercise

**Awaiting orders on a desert exercise**

German prisoners, Menastir, November 1941. Sgt I. Lang, facing camera, was mortally wounded a few days later



**German prisoners, Menastir, November 1941. Sgt I. Lang, facing camera, was mortally wounded a few days later**

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and 8 Platoon of A Company were met as they were withdrawing, and at the same time the platoon was fired at from the rear and from the hills south of the road. To deal with this fire Lieutenant Green and a section crossed the road and mopped up one enemy post, losing three men wounded. It rejoined D Company near 5 Brigade Headquarters. Later the platoon advanced again towards Maleme with D Company but was pinned down by strafing and by machine-gun and mortar fire. Progress across patches of open ground was practically impossible. Towards evening when the blitz eased, Captain Garriock led the platoon, together with men from the

transport and pioneer platoons and the sanitary squad, forward with D Company to the creek bed, where positions were taken up and pickets posted. When dawn came it was seen that the area was open to attack from the air and the platoon was withdrawn by Lieutenant Coop <sup>22</sup> of 23 Battalion to Plataniás village.

In the meantime, far ahead on the Maleme road, the situation was critical. After receiving the second message from Captain Rice, Colonel Burrows realised that the attack could not be pushed any further. In fact, it was surprising that the forward companies had been able to advance as far as they did in the time. The only supporting arms were a few Italian 75-millimetre guns fired by the New Zealand gunners from the Plataniás area at dawn. The range was too great and the shells fell near the attacking troops. Contact had been kept with the Maoris, on one or two occasions by the CO himself, but communication with the companies was by runner and most difficult to maintain. The Battalion Headquarters group had itself been forced to take cover near a bridge. Colonel Burrows had had a narrow escape when a burst of enemy fire ripped his pistol holster and tore his trousers on either side, disintegrating harmlessly a hand grenade which was in his pocket.

After B Company had been ordered to move up the gully near Pírgos village and take up position behind the Maoris, Private Sheppard <sup>23</sup> of A Company was sent towards the canes to collect any troops in that area. He returned later to say that he had been shot at on all sides by Germans but could find no trace of 20th troops. When Lieutenant Upham was asked for two men to bring back D Company from the right flank, he went himself with Lance-Sergeant Kirk <sup>24</sup> and brought back some B Company men from round the aerodrome. The mortar and machine-gun fire on the open ground was heavy and they were lucky to get back alive. Planes were landing on the 'drome and troops were jumping out and getting straight into the battle, for the Germans were following up the withdrawal. To protect B Company's move up the creek bed the CO put A Company under Captain Washbourn to line the bank of a ravine, while Lieutenant Bain and the ack-ack platoon cheerfully held up the enemy as the wounded were carried away.

Gradually what remained of A, B, and C Companies and elements of D Company moved into the area on the hill behind the Maoris. They were actually in 23 Battalion's area, and Colonel Burrows at once got in touch with Lieutenant-Colonel Leckie, <sup>25</sup> CO of that unit, and Colonel Dittmer <sup>26</sup> of the Maori Battalion. All agreed

that the best use that could be made of the 20th was to use it to strengthen weaknesses in the line.

By about midday the companies were in a defensive position with a distant view of Maleme aerodrome but unable to reach it with fire. They had no tools and could not dig in. Soon the German mortars began to shell them, inflicting casualties, and a captured Bofors gun added to their troubles. A Company, on a hill, could see enemy reinforcements arriving by air all day, well out of reach of the Brens. Battalion Headquarters saw an enemy gun section in operation beside a house near the aerodrome. Men loaded the gun, fired, and ran for cover again under the trees. B Company, in 23 Battalion's Headquarters Company area, was located in and about a small group of houses like a country estate and had good slit trenches dug by 23 Battalion. The company overlooked the flat down which Germans were infiltrating, their helmets occasionally bobbing up above the scrub. The fire of four Bren guns was used with effect. Later in the morning 'about twenty Germans as bold as brass' came down the road from the aerodrome, apparently confident that they had air cover. They were pulling a gun that looked like a Bofors. Lieutenant McPhail directed the Bren-gunners to sight on the position into which the Germans were pulling the gun, and when they were in a close group a concentration of fire ended their activity.

C Company was well forward, and as the Germans pushed out patrols feeling for a gap in the line, Lieutenant Upham and his men repulsed them, on one occasion capturing a machine gun. Their area had three heavy mortar bombardments.

About dusk, after heavy strafing, the enemy attacked a ridge held by the Maoris slightly to the left of 20 Battalion. Colonel Burrows describes the action:

They [the Germans] gave the ridge all they had with MG and mortar fire and then attacked with rifle and bayonet. I was across a valley just behind the ridge attacked and had sent me by Col. Leckie a group of oddments from his HQ and any other soldier he could collect. These, in addition to any I could gather up were waiting ready to counter-attack if the Germans were successful.... The Maori doesn't believe in waiting to be attacked if he is not dug in. When the Germans got to within 20 or 30 yards there came the usual Maori yelling and shouting and down the hill they all went to meet the Hun. I couldn't see but just had to wait after things had quietened to decide from speaking voices whether we'd won or lost. Not long

afterwards I heard, 'Don't waste any more bullets on the b—s,' so I dispersed my group and we prepared to spend a long night where we were.

The position when night fell on 22 May was, therefore, that the survivors of A, B, and C Companies, less 8 Platoon, were in position on the high ground south of the road, while most of D Company, 8 Platoon, and elements of Headquarters Company were in the [Platanias](#) area near 5 Brigade Headquarters or in the muddy watercourse about half-way between [Platanias](#) and [Pirgos](#).

The supplying of the forward troops presented a serious problem for the quartering staff. A convoy of three 7-ton lorries driven by [Royal Marines](#) and carrying Battalion Headquarters personnel, the 'I' section, rations, and mortar ammunition set out for [Maleme](#) early on the morning of the 22nd. The convoy was led by the battalion second-in-command, Major Paterson, in a 15-cwt Fordson, but became separated from its leader, lost its way, and eventually arrived back at the [Canea](#) bridge at daylight. The ammunition had to be off-loaded and the 15-cwt took over the job of taking supplies forward. During the day Private [Don Caley](#) <sup>27</sup> made several trips in the 15-cwt truck, and in the evening he set off again in advance of the 7-ton lorry which was to try to get through with ammunition. This small convoy encountered the famous 'ambush', here described by Private [Morris](#) <sup>28</sup>:

The first part of the trip as far as the road block ... [at the Composite Battalion] was uneventful, except that we passed a fairly large crowd of prisoners, under guard, moving down in the general direction of [Canea](#).... From the road block on, the road continued round one or two bluffs and then the escarpment eased off to the left (the sea was on our right and not far away) so that we went out on to a narrow plain covered by either bushes or flax or cactus and long grass. We ... passed several burning houses and then ... [just before [Ay Marina](#)] the fireworks commenced with ... a man jumping from behind cactus and shouting 'Surrender' several times. Following this, a stream of bullets ... commenced to go past with tracer interspersed. On the 15-cwt, which took it all, there were I think, five, with Dvr Caley driving, RQMS [Bolwell](#) <sup>29</sup> passenger, myself on the toolbox in the centre and Corporal [Spriggs](#) <sup>30</sup> behind the RQMS.... At the cry of 'Surrender' I can remember pulling my trigger in the general direction of the shouter, unfortunately missing. This shot, it appears, caused the RQMS temporary stunning as it was only an inch or so away from his ear, and

that will explain his late departure from the truck, ... several seconds or minutes after us. Cpl Spriggs, I remember, went off the truck like a sack of spuds.... [He pitched forward over the bonnet (there was no windscreen) on to the road, falling at the feet of one of the enemy, who was forced to step aside to avoid him. Unhurt by his fall except for abrasions, Spriggs lay 'doggo' and awaited developments.] Apparently the rest had also decamped by different routes when I took off via the driver's seat, rifle and all. On clearing the truck I acquired the prone position with much greater speed and skill than in [Burnham](#) or [Maadi](#) days and was in rather a dilemma as to whether to put my bayonet on or not. I eventually did, but it rattled so much (I must have been either very nervous or it was a badly fitting bayonet) I took it off again. My water bottle also caused me worry as I had to sling it on the kicking straps and it dragged and rattled.

Meanwhile the RQMS had come to, to find that a German officer standing within a few feet of him was again ordering him to surrender. Instead of complying he stared at the German for a moment and then quickly stepped down on to the road on the far side, hearing as he did so a fire order given in German. He slipped round the side of the truck and, according to Morris, 'went past me like a Catherine wheel', to the accompaniment of much tracer.

As it happened [Morris continues] I think that I was the only one with a hand grenade, they being scarce on the island (except for certain people who seemed to have boxes of them), so after a little thought to discern the Jerries' movements, I finally let them have it.... I must have got their GOC troops as the loudest voice closed down and .... except for some moaning, quiet reigned, and during that time I worked my way backwards through the odd undergrowth to a house that stood about 20 yards or so away from the truck. Here ... I wondered what to do and, thinking that perhaps another crowd ... might come through and get caught as we had, I decided to try and circumnavigate the 'wily' Jerry.... I finally decided to swim off from the beach and try and get ashore opposite the village.... I planned to watch the headland ... and try to come ashore opposite it and get to 5 Bde HQ or 20 Bn HQ.

I worked my way to the beach past the house. One had to be careful as it was fairly open and they had a big searchlight playing up the coast from near [Canea](#).... Stripping, except for [Bombay](#) bloomers and wrist watch and burying all, plus rifle, in

the sand, I worked my way down and into the water and took off for ports indefinite. It was here that the RQMS told me afterwards that he had seen me and nearly let me have it, placing me as one of the Jerries.

Just how long that swim took I don't know but it was for at least 1 ½ hours, but as I was about done by the time I got ashore, it was probably more. The main trouble was that the water was so phosphorescent that overarm could not be used, only dog-paddle, as even breast-stroke caused sparks.... That [Ay Marina](#) bluff seemed to go backwards at times as there must have been a current. However, I finally made a spot opposite it and came in to land ... nearly opposite the village. Being very cold I tried to run along the beach ... to get warm, and seeing a point of vegetation I decided to work my way across to it by degrees. This I started to do and immediately came under ... fire, immediately going to earth. On quietness descending, forgetting our password 'Salmon Trout', I endeavoured to call 'Friend', only to find my throat out of action. However, I cleared a 'No. I stoppage' and managed to get the message away. This brought 'Salmon Trout' to which I gave '[Blenheim](#)' and was told to come forward and be recognised, which I did with hands up and fingers well spread!

My captors told me that they were a 5 Brigade HQ patrol who, it appears, heard the noise of our ambush but did not move far enough down the road to recover the truck. I told my story and, not having glasses or boots, caused some noise on the way in over the thorny rough ground to deliver my message to those higher up and, under Padre Spence, to be shown a place to have a rest.... The following morning I recovered what clothing and equipment I had left in both the truck and under the sand and continued on back to our old area at [Canea](#) bridge. <sup>31</sup>

Battalion Headquarters, also, had had its problems. After its false start the night before the 'I' section went forward about 1 p.m. on 22 May with the RSM, who organised small parties near [Platanias](#) village while the section established a check post near a small white house on the road. German tommy-gun fire came from unpredictable directions and odd buildings, indicating that the enemy was infiltrating steadily. At dusk shots and tracer came closer and at one stage a wounded Bren-carrier driver from another unit staggered in, saying that he had been ambushed.

This ambush and that experienced by the quartering staff formed part of an

enemy movement from south to north-west of [Galatas](#) in an attempt to cut the [Canea-Maleme](#) road behind 5 Brigade. The brigade had been severely attacked; its men were considerably exhausted and were not considered fit to make a further attack.

With the approval of [General Freyberg](#), General Puttick decided that the [Maori Battalion](#) would withdraw on the night of 22–23 May to its former area which it had held when in brigade reserve; 23 and 21 Battalions were to occupy areas to the east of the Maoris, and the 20th was to return to its former position near [Canea](#) in divisional reserve. Engineer detachments were to move to an area north of [Galatas](#) where they would come under command of 4 Brigade. Artillery and machine-gun personnel were to accompany the battalion in whose area they were then situated.

A warning order was accordingly despatched by wireless to Brigadier [Hargest](#),<sup>32</sup> Commander 5 Brigade, at 10.30 p.m. telling him to be prepared to withdraw during the night of 22–23 May. All other forms of communication with 5 Brigade Headquarters had been interrupted and it was necessary to send the written message—which followed three hours later—by Bren carrier because of enemy detachments threatening the road leading to Brigade Headquarters.

Meanwhile, the battalions on the hill were in a precarious position. As Colonel Burrows says:

I honestly didn't see how we could last another day. The Hun was sure to try another attack perhaps in a different position, and if he broke through anywhere we were for it. My HQ got an hour or two of sleep.... At 4.30 a.m. word came through to go to a conference with Col. Leckie and the other 5th Bde COs. I reached the spot in the dark after ten minutes and learned we were to withdraw at once to ... [Platanias](#).... The message should have been delivered at 10 p.m. the night before. We were lucky to get it at all. Here was a case where we suffered through lack of modern equipment. A battalion fully equipped should carry portable wireless sets. We had none. The Germans had swags of them.

Withdrawal began immediately.... As we knew we'd be caught in the light it was decided to keep to the high ground. This made the journey much longer and more difficult, but there was cover for the troops, especially from the air. The orders for

the 20th Battalion were to go right through to Galatos and come again under 4th Bde command. Owing to lack of time I sent word to platoon commanders to move back with the 5th Bde units to which they were attached as far as [Platanias](#) where I intended to reform and send the companies independently to Galatos. In the event of any soldier being lost he was to go straight back to the Battalion's old bivvy area near [Div HQ](#).

We moved to [Platanias](#) in small groups. Nothing much happened to my group and we arrived without casualties. Some groups were caught by MG fire and some by planes. We had to cross a deepish river and our group got safely across a swing bridge. Jack Bain and his men, however, had to wade as a machine gun had ranged on to the bridge. They came in wet to the neck.

At [Platanias](#) I reported to Brigadier Hargest and learned from him that the mixed groups that had withdrawn the previous day had been sent forward again to hold a position on the coast strip, had been withdrawn from that, and were now put into positions to guard the bridge.

Lieutenant Markham of 8 Platoon A Company describes this action:

On the morning of 23 May 1941 ... some 60 members of the 20th Battalion under the command of Capt Garriock were assembled at 5th Bde HQ after being withdrawn from a forward position between the road and the sea.... We remained in Bde HQ area at least an hour waiting for orders—during this time some rations were obtained and issued.

After this, a Capt [Baker](#)<sup>33</sup> [28 (Maori) Battalion] arrived who apparently had orders to put us in positions covering the road at the bridge some 400 yards from Bde HQ. We were told that we might have to stay there as long as twenty-four hours. We immediately set about organising into two platoons for there were representatives from three different companies there. However, we had to conceal the men owing to intense air activity overhead. About as soon as this was over—it lasted about 15 minutes—someone at Bde shouted that the enemy were already at the bridge.

Capt Baker assumed command and placed one platoon [under Captain Garriock] about half way between Bde and the bridge. He directed that the other platoon, of

which I was put in command, should attack through the first platoon and establish itself in the dug positions about the bridge—with one section on the seaward side of the road and two on the other side. Capt Baker would lead these two sections—I was to lead the one on the seaward side.

Once having crossed the road I could not see what was happening on the other side, but pressed on to within 100 yards of the bridge where the enemy had a gun in the middle of the road and was holding our positions beside the bridge. The enemy had mortars and machine guns and made full use of them on both sides of the road.

My section had no dug positions and they brought very heavy mortar fire to bear on us. We were able to put the gun temporarily out of action by killing or disposing of the crew—and it was then that a runner crossed the road with a message from Capt Baker to cover his withdrawal. This I did to the best of my ability.

My section thinned out and withdrew by bounds to behind a burning house—we sustained two casualties. When I got there I found that practically everyone from the other side of the road had proceeded on down the road. I and the two other officers waited for a while but no one else came out. I could not find out whether Capt Baker had gone on ahead—at all events I did not see him again.

Captain Garriock was wounded in this attack and Lieutenant Maxwell took over. His platoon went to ground and fired on the enemy gun crew but was engaged by enemy machine guns from a hillside which overlooked its positions. '... Jerry turned all his fury loose at us,' said the carrier platoon's sergeant, Wally Kimber. 'Mortars and MG, the Mortar fire was terrific. I think it was the hottest hour I had during the war. We were simply being blasted out of the place.' Then the Stukas took a hand, and while the platoon lay low the enemy opened fire from the beach flank. Casualties increased and the platoon was withdrawn, subsequently holding a line to cover the withdrawal of the Maori Battalion before it itself withdrew farther back to the 'old Welch positions'.

The counter-attack at the Plataniás bridge had been a short sharp affair but it had held up the enemy long enough to allow the troops around Plataniás to take up positions. The rearguard was reinforced at short notice by two companies of the 20th, who manned a hastily formed line between the road and the sea. Colonel

Burrows describes their part in the day's fighting:

Platanias was to be held by 5th Bde. The difficulty was to get ... into position before the place was attacked. The Germans are very quick at following up any opportunity and it's a bad lookout if there is confusion in a withdrawal.

However, the 20th had orders to get back to beyond Galatos, about another 7 miles. A Coy had left. D Coy with most of HQ Coy had already gone after a bit of scrapping along the beach. Then came a deuce of a blitz by German planes and I was waiting with what remained of C and B Coys, with some of HQ Coy, for the blitz to finish so that we could get away. Next I received a message from Brig Hargest to say a German attack was developing and I was to take charge of all troops in the sector where I was and organise them for defence. This was a hectic task to have thrown at one at short notice. I belted B and C Coys into position forming a line thin as tissue paper.... I had a platoon of Maoris on the beach and, I learned later, two tanks.... Our Intelligence Sergeant, Jack Sullivan,<sup>34</sup> went to the OP we decided on and stuck there till dark with a wound in his shoulder.

During heavy mortaring of 15 Platoon's position, Lieutenant Upham was wounded in the shoulder by a piece of shrapnel. His platoon sergeant, Dave Kirk, tells how Upham '... handed me his pocket knife and insisted that I extract the offending shrapnel. After carrying out what I thought was rather a neat bit of surgery, though it must have been rather painful for the patient, I tried to persuade him to go and have it dressed at the RAP. As he refused to go I went and reported it to Captain Den Fountaine<sup>35</sup> who then came down to us and ordered Charlie to the RAP for treatment.'

Lieutenant McPhail of B Company commanded his platoon in this rearguard:

We took up a defensive position ... on the beach under Tui Love<sup>36</sup> of the Maori Battalion. While there Guy Rhodes used his mortars very effectively.... The Germans were seen coming up between the road and the beach with something that looked like a Bofors gun and obviously digging in. One of our tanks was ... in the courtyard of a house or blacksmith's shop but was very dubious about attacking the position, so Tui Love got a Bren carrier, called for two or three Maoris, and rushed the Huns. They had a heavy MG but Love mopped them up and then returned—a good show.

While there we were given great treatment by the Maoris. They must have found a dump ... for when I said we were hungry they gave us pineapple and tinned milk. When the men needed clothes they were given socks and greatcoats.

The mixed mortar platoon—two [Maori Battalion](#) mortars and two from the 20th—under Lieutenant Rhodes was in action all day. The platoon was divided into four detachments. Nos. 1 and 2 had as their target the cane brake on the left flank, No. 3 engaged the stone bridge, and No. 4 was sited mainly to thicken up fire on the bridge. Their fire inflicted heavy casualties and put out of action an armoured vehicle and five motorcycles.

The day wore on [Colonel Burrows continues], but apart from trying to push patrols along the beach the Germans made no further serious attempt to crack the line. We were mortared all day long, though, and I was glad when night fell. All the wounded were taken away in trucks during the day ... [to [7 General Hospital](#)]. That night the whole of the 5th Bde withdrew behind the 4th Bde and Col. Kipp's 10th Bde. B and C Cos of the 20th remained in their positions until about 9 p.m. and [we] then made our way unmolested by infantry patrols to our former bivouac positions east of Galatos. It was a longish tramp but we kept to the roads, passing through burning villages. Dawn was not far off by the time I visited Div. and returned to the battalion. We had to take up a defensive position.

Sergeant Basil Borthwick's description of the return of the [Maori Battalion](#) is worth recording:

Moved out on road and waited on the side while the Maori Bn came back through us. We could not help but be impressed by these Maori boys. There seemed a never ending column of them and they marched without a sound apart from the creak of their equipment and tramp of feet. We felt better after seeing them.

The treatment and evacuation of casualties during the attack on [Maleme](#) was carried out by the battalion RAP section under extremely difficult conditions. Wounded who assembled at a white house on the [Canea- Maleme](#) road were sent away on trucks flying [Red Cross](#) flags. Many enemy planes flew up and down the line of trucks but did not attack. Some of the drivers were from 6 Platoon of 20 Battalion who had volunteered to drive the [Red Cross](#) trucks.

When the attack began the RAP section moved forward with Battalion Headquarters at the side of the road. Captain Gilmour, the RMO, went ahead with one of the rifle companies towards Maleme, where he set up an RAP under a little culvert on the road. Seriously wounded cases had to be carried on improvised stretchers some distance up the riverbed which, in its upper reaches, narrowed considerably and contained huge boulders which made progress extremely slow and difficult. Leaving the riverbed, stretcher-bearers had to scramble up a slippery track over a hilltop and down into a deep gully on the other side where the casualties were left at 5 Brigade ADS.

A second RAP was set up farther back in a combined stable and house about 100 yards on the Canea side of the bridge over the Platanias River. Corporal Lyn Sutherland<sup>37</sup> describes its work:

Here Sgt Bruce Mark,<sup>38</sup> Private Ernie Boyce,<sup>39</sup> the MO's batman, and I gave first aid to the walking wounded and sent them back to a 5th Bde ADS on the side of a hill. Serious cases were kept till dark and evacuated by passing trucks. The Maori Battalion supplied two trucks and swastika flags were placed over their roofs to protect them from German aircraft. While attending a wounded man Sgt Mark was himself wounded in the back when enemy aircraft strafed the house and he later died of wounds.

About 200–250 casualties were treated here. We had few supplies as we had brought from Greece only what we could carry in our haversacks. The men's field dressings were used and a jar of cognac in the shed provided effective treatment for shock. Captain Rhodes of the Mortar Platoon did good work directing the wounded to our RAP and later assisted them on their way to the ADS....

The RAP was actually in a very bad position. It was on a corner only 100 yards from an ammunition dump which received a direct hit ... [next morning] and enemy planes returned at intervals to strafe the area. In addition, an Australian gun was sited nearby and attracted enemy fire. There were no Red Cross flags available, these having been lost in Greece. We had no stretchers and very bad cases had to be carried away on doors taken from the building.

There were some German paratroopers amongst the wounded and also some

PW's who had been sent back by the forward troops. When their own planes came over these Germans dived into a ditch and were in no hurry to come out. Finally, under threat from one of their own Luger's they were made to hold up swastika flags or put them on their shoulders and stand out in the open. This measure successfully protected the RAP post.

With Private Boyce I maintained the RAP throughout the night of 22–23 May and until late in the following afternoon. Wounded were coming in all the time from not only the 20th but also from the [Maori Battalion](#) and other 5th Bde units. After the forward troops had withdrawn the 5th Bde officer advised me to go back and try to locate my own unit. We waited till we saw Bruce Mark away on an Aussie truck and then Ernie Boyce and I made our way back under cover towards [Canea](#). A few stragglers joined us and on the way we were badly strafed, Ernie Boyce being severely wounded. I patched him up and also some of the others, hailed a passing truck, and asked the driver to take the wounded back to 42nd Street where there was a hospital.

Arriving back at the Battalion I reported to the RSM who shouted for me out of a bottle of rum. In the unit [area] there were some light casualties requiring treatment and many cases of dysentery, probably caused by the bad water, tinned food, and lack of fresh vegetables. The grapes were finished and there were only a few oranges to be had. No First Aid stores had been received in [Crete](#) and after [Maleme](#) there was not much left. We had severe air raids but casualties were surprisingly light.

Members of the signals platoon, in the absence of equipment, helped to maintain communications by runner. When 10 Brigade was formed under [Colonel Kippenberger](#)'s command, some of the platoon were attached to the new unit. As wire and 'phones were in short supply, most messages had to be sent by motorcyclists or runners. On 20 May the signallers maintained the exchange although all lines had received a thorough pounding from the air. About 4 p.m. a Greek officer with an interpreter came in with the news that their battalion, which had been holding the line in front of the exchange, had been forced to withdraw. Shortly afterwards two enemy fight machine guns opened up but about 5 p.m. the [Divisional Cavalry](#) came up and drove the enemy back. Maintaining the exchange at this stage was of vital importance, and for his coolness in doing so and for repeatedly repairing

lines under fire Private Poole <sup>40</sup> was awarded the Military Medal.

There were many acts of personal gallantry on the night of 21-22 May but only a few typical cases can be quoted. WO II Grooby <sup>41</sup> of C Company commanded a platoon throughout the attack with conspicuous gallantry and leadership. At one stage near Maleme he personally commanded the withdrawal of a stretcher party and when attacked by four Germans killed two; the others fled. Lance-Sergeant Kirk in the leading C Company platoon fought his way forward resolutely, repeatedly rushing and destroying machine-gun posts. In the same company Corporals McKegney and Vincent led their sections with coolness and determination to capture buildings and machine-gun posts, while Corporal Grattan, <sup>42</sup> acting as platoon sergeant, led his men to the edge of the aerodrome and, after being wounded, walked to rejoin his unit at Sfakia. WO II Goodall <sup>43</sup> of D Company dragged a wounded man to cover off the open ground on the right flank near the aerodrome, and at the withdrawal carried him out. Sergeant Ian Lang <sup>44</sup> of the same company, whose feet had been badly burned in a tent fire in Greece, went into the attack wearing sandshoes and later commanded a platoon. It was a purely infantry affair, another Inkerman, where the momentum of the advance was maintained as much by the initiative and fighting spirit of the men in the ranks as by the leadership of commanders.

Next day the survivors had time to reflect. The battalion had suffered heavy casualties but the Germans' losses had been much heavier. Many of the enemy encountered in the houses were unprepared for a night attack. Some were without trousers; others had no boots on; one paratrooper captured by a C Company runner was wearing only his identity discs. The enemy troops were nonplussed in the dark, but in daylight and under officers and NCOs it was a different matter. With the coming of dawn the whole situation changed rapidly for the worse. Darkness had at least given the attackers the advantage of an unobserved approach before contact with the enemy was made. Enemy fire was wild and the element of surprise was a powerful factor in the success of the advance. After daybreak the attackers not only lost the valuable cover of darkness and the advantage of surprise but, both on the right flank where they were emerging on to clear ground and in the centre where they were encountering strongly defended posts in houses, their casualties rapidly mounted as enemy fire became heavier and better directed. In addition, whenever

the troops attempted to move they were mercilessly strafed by the [Luftwaffe](#), which had complete command of the air, so that the attack gradually lost momentum and the troops went to ground.

In the words of Captain Upham: 'With another hour we could have reached the far side of the 'drome.' But the precious hour, and more, had been lost before the attack began, and the grim fighting throughout the approach to the aerodrome imposed further delays that sealed the fate of the battle.

The position on 23 May is quoted from 4 Brigade's report on the operations in Crete:

During the afternoon of 23 May, NZ Div issued instructions that the Bde was to take up a defensive posn running north and south through galatos and joining up on the left with 19 Aust Bde. 5 Inf Bde was to withdraw through this posn during the early hours of 24 May.

10 Inf Bde ... was placed under command 4 Inf Bde.... Shortly after midnight 23-24 May, 20 Bn reverted to command 4 Inf Bde ... and were placed in reserve ... with the primary task of CA [counter-attack] in the [19 Bn](#) area....

5 Inf Bde withdrew through [18 Bn](#) FDLs [forward defended localities] after midnight 23-24 May and went into Div res[erve] in area about aptera ... [just west of the junction of the coast and Prison valley roads].

By 0500 hrs 24 May units were in posn. [18 Bn](#) took over Comp Bn front from the sea to wheat hill [coming under command of 10 Brigade], while the Div Cav and det[achment] Div Pet Coy ... and the [19 Bn](#) remained in their original posns.

The Comp Bn (less det Div Pet Coy) took up supporting posn on the ridge running north from galatos. A detachment of 6/ Greeks, some 370 strong under command 10 Inf Bde, were held in reserve at galatos.

Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows again takes up the story:

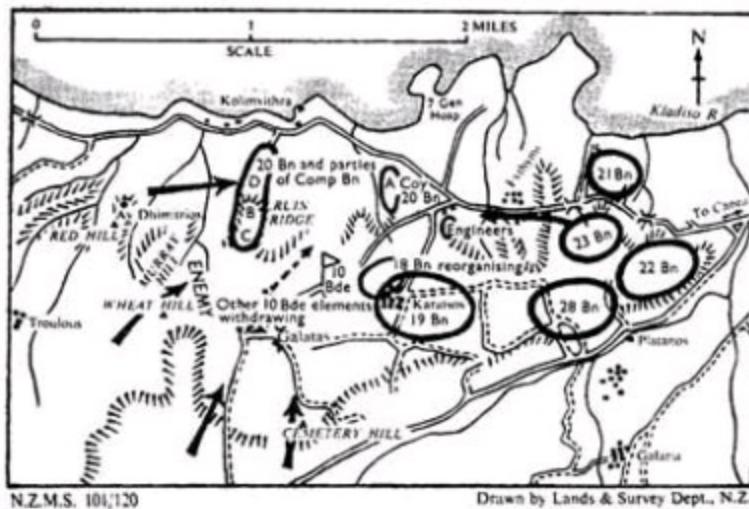
Bde HQ were in our area and we again became reserve battalion. [The positions were just east of the [Karatsos](#) road: Headquarters Company across the coast road overlooked the beach, A Company held the [Galatas](#) turn-off, and C, B, and D

Companies formed a semi-circle to the south.] We had no tools to dig in of course and the men had to take advantage of any natural cover.... Nothing much happened to us that day. Col. Kipp's bde was getting most of the fighting at Galatos. We had a nasty plane blitz in the morning. They dropped one of their really heavy bombs in our area which made a hole like a volcanic crater.... I saw Col. Kipp during the day and learned from him what he wanted the Bn to do in case we were sent up to him to help in a counter-attack.... His brigade had done a lot of fighting with the Germans who had originally landed in the area SW of Galatos but now this force was able to combine with the Germans coming East from [Maleme](#).

Sunday, 25 May, was critical. All morning there were constant air attacks and steadily increasing machine-gun and mortar fire. When enemy troops were seen massing in front of 18 Battalion's positions B, C, and D Companies of the 20th, organised into two companies under Captain Fountaine and Lieutenant O'Callaghan,  
[45](#) were sent up to 10 Brigade by [Brigadier Inglis](#) and placed in a reserve position in the olive trees north of [Galatas](#). The enemy was coming along the beach and, if 18 Battalion was beaten back, it might be possible to attack north and drive the enemy into the sea. Early in the afternoon these companies were very heavily bombed and machine-gunned in a four-hour blitz. At one stage there was an alarm that paratroops had landed in the hospital area. Colonel Burrows, with an Italian camouflaged groundsheet flapping behind him, ran over with Sergeant Sullivan to investigate. Later, the Bren platoon under Lieutenant Green was sent out on a patrol of the area but no paratroops were discovered.

Between 4 and 6 p.m. the Germans dive-bombed the 18 Battalion positions and put in a heavy infantry attack. That battalion's right-hand company was overwhelmed and a counter-attack by its Headquarters Company failed to restore the situation. By 5 p.m. [Colonel Kippenberger](#) decided he could not wait to counter-attack but must use the 20 Battalion companies to try to hold the line.

[Kippenberger](#) ordered Fountaine and O'Callaghan to take their companies and occupy positions along [Ruin Ridge](#), a support position that could be seen from his headquarters in the EFI building, sometimes called 'The Blockhouse'. This ridge had previously been held by the Composite Battalion, which was beginning to withdraw.



GALATAS, 7 P.M., 25 MAY 1941

**galatas, 7 p.m., 25 may 1941**

The companies moved off and within a quarter of an hour a steady crackle of rifle and Bren-gun fire broke out and continued till an hour before dark. By this time casualties were heavy and the position looked grave. C, B, and D Companies lay in that order north from Galatas. When the enemy broke through between the town and Ruin Ridge, C Company at one stage was fired on from behind. Lieutenant Upham's platoon was heavily engaged from the outset. While his men stopped under a ridge, Upham crawled forward, observed the enemy, and brought his platoon forward as the Germans advanced. The platoon killed over forty with fire and grenades and forced the remainder to fall back. Just at dusk the enemy attacked determinedly in an attempt to capture Galatas. There was a danger of the 20th being cut off, and Colonel Kippenberger sent four runners to find the two company commanders with orders to withdraw towards A Company, which had come up during the afternoon and was manning the line of a ravine a little to the east.

Private Cliff Ewing<sup>46</sup> of D Company describes his work as company runner in this action:

We went forward through grape vines to our position on the crest of a hill behind a stone wall. When in position Lt O'Callaghan sent me back to Col Kippenberger to tell him he had taken over the position and everything was in hand. The Germans' fire by now was terrific; I sprinted the whole distance, taking advantage of any cover. Colonel Kippenberger was calmly standing on the hill crest smoking his pipe, talking to some officers. By this time the Germans had broken

through on our left and were charging through a crop of oats, yelling 'Hock Heil', etc. I gave Col Kippenberger my order from Lt O'Callaghan to which he replied, 'Go back as quickly as you can and tell Lt O'Callaghan to watch the position very carefully and to withdraw to the road and back to a burning house.' He warned me to be careful as the enemy had broken through.

I ran as fast as my legs would carry me. On my left a crowd of Germans were squatting in the oats, spraying bullets about. Others were setting machine guns on tripods. I hugged a stone wall and when level with them I sprinted on. When I reached the bottom of the gully enemy were poking about among the trees and some by a wall on my left. I could hear them talking. I dashed across the track, hurdled a stone wall, and raced up a grape-vine slope to meet Lt O'Callaghan a short distance below the Coy. I gave him the orders. He said, 'Go up and tell Lt Maxwell to withdraw at once down the valley.' He turned and started to trot down the slope where I had come from. I called to him, 'Mike, don't go down there; there was a crowd of Huns there when I came through.' He said, 'I'm going down to have a look and will collect the left flank Coys.' I again warned him. Machine-gun fire was intense. I gave Lt Maxwell the orders. When withdrawing down the slope a C Coy boy said to me, 'Your officer got it just after you left him. I saw it.'

Captain Fountaine commanded C Company in a cool and skilful manner. Many of his company, including sections commanded by Corporals Vincent and McKegney, had to fight their way out. McKegney, though already severely wounded in a hand and leg, later took part in the counter-attack that night. When ordered to withdraw Upham sent his platoon back under Lance-Sergeant Kirk and went back to warn other troops that they were being cut off. When he came out himself he was fired on by two Germans. He fell and shammed dead, then, crawling into a position and having the use of only one arm, he rested his rifle in the fork of a tree and killed both Germans as they came forward. The second actually hit the muzzle of the rifle as he fell. When his company was outflanked Sergeant Kirk organised a party and led a counter-attack which was completely successful, forty-four Germans being accounted for. Being then separated from the company, he and his party later joined in the counter-attack into Galatas, disposed of a large number of the enemy, and remained on the outskirts of the village until 5.30 next morning. Finding that all other troops had withdrawn some hours before, he skilfully led out his party and

rejoined his unit.

For his part in this action and in the counter-attack at [Maleme](#) Kirk was awarded the DCM. No higher praise could be given him than that of his platoon officer, Lieutenant Upham:

During the whole of the fighting on [Crete](#) concerning C Company ... Lance-Sergeant Kirk behaved as I have never seen a soldier behave since. He was the really superb fighting man because of his wonderful bodily strength and fitness and he certainly did the work of many men. A crack shot, he always carried a Bren gun and used it with deadly effect, and was one of the few who could fire it accurately at close range like a tommy gun. I personally saw him kill a number of Germans at long range and at close quarters. His reputation in the platoon was such that everyone carried ammunition especially for Dave. He really enjoyed the whole fight.

While the 20th was fighting on [Ruin Ridge](#) there was a constant stream of stragglers from various units passing back along the road from [Galatas](#). Colonel [Kippenberger](#), the RSM of the 18th, Sergeant Sullivan and Captain Washbourn attempted to stem the tide with varying success. Those who responded were ordered to line a ridge west of [Karatsos](#) north of a white church to cover the right flank of [19 Battalion](#). The Greeks attempted a charge while the 18th were being rallied but wilted in the face of a withering fire.

Sergeant Johnston, 20 Battalion's orderly-room sergeant, and a platoon of B Company assisted the Greeks in this attack. The sergeant had led his platoon determinedly at [Maleme](#) and did so again on this occasion. At one stage he was wounded in the foot when attacking a group of enemy in a gully. The leading German had advanced with his hands up and the second had thrown a stick bomb. Though in considerable pain, Johnston led his men to the attack and remained with the platoon until he was evacuated by hospital truck that evening.

[Brigadier Inglis](#) in the meantime had sent up all available reinforcements to the commander of 10 Brigade, who set to work to build a new line. The first to arrive was 4 Brigade Band, which was put to line a stone wall 100 yards in front of 10 Brigade Headquarters. The pioneer platoon of the 20th and the [Kiwi Concert Party](#) prolonged the band's right. Twenty-third Battalion had taken the place of the 20th as

divisional reserve, and its A Company extended the line towards the sea. The two companies of the 20th withdrawn from [Ruin Ridge](#) prolonged the 23 Battalion company's right. A Company of the 20th was in behind the other two. Parts of the line were thinly held. Privates [Ross](#)<sup>47</sup> and [Cousins](#), Colonel Kippenberger's driver and batman, manned a wall thirty yards long between two companies and kept up a steady fire. Cousins was later sent on a message and Ross continued to man the wall alone.

Headquarters Company of the 20th under Lieutenants Bain and Green had been told to join 18 Battalion on [Karatsos](#) ridge. Tremendously heavy rifle fire came from both sides and there was a continual roar from the enemy's mortars. Evidently the enemy was making a supreme effort to take [Galatas](#) before nightfall. Two tanks from [3 Hussars](#) under Lieutenant Farran were sent to investigate and on returning reported that the town was 'stiff with Jerries'. Two companies of 23 Battalion had arrived and, led by the two tanks and with Headquarters Company of the 20th and a small group of 18 Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel Gray, were ordered by [Colonel Kippenberger](#) to counter-attack and retake [Galatas](#) in a last desperate throw to retrieve the situation.

Sergeant Kimber of the Bren platoon relates his experiences in the counter-attack:

A bit further along near the fork in the road we met Kip, armed with a German tommy gun.... He did not say much to us, but one knew by the expression on his face that the situation was very grim. Soon after this we left the road and made our way across country ... [to the CO 18 Battalion, Colonel Gray] personally directing operations and undaunted by all the enemy fire ... going on around him. Col Gray told us smartly that the Jerries had occupied the village and that we were to go in with a bayonet attack and clear the village.... Owing to enemy action while we crossed the open ground our party had been well and truly scattered. By the time we reached the starting point ... we only had a dozen or so men left. One or two had been wounded I know.

As Lt Bain was senior officer he assumed charge of us, and I would like to pay tribute ... to the determined and gallant manner in which he led that bayonet charge and pressed it home. Nothing short of a 25-pounder would have stopped him....

At the church we were held up by MG fire, so Lt Bain and about half a dozen men went one side [while] Lt Green and six of us went to the other side. We were just turning the corner into a narrow lane [when] an MG opened up at about 20 yards' range ... [killing Lt Green and a machine-gunner, wounding Private [Dave Whitteker](#)<sup>48</sup> and a man from 18 Battalion] leaving a Maori boy from the 18th Bn and myself untouched. We tried desperately to get the Bren gun into action but ... it simply refused to fire so we smartly dumped it into a burning bomb crater.... the MG post was quietened and ... we eventually got into the village square. Here there was some very sharp action and it was not long before we could see by the glow from burning bomb craters and buildings the figures of Germans going out the back of the village in all directions. The German is a good soldier when he has his tanks and planes in unlimited numbers with him in the daylight, but he does not relish bayonet warfare in the dark, especially with Aussies or New Zealanders.

We gradually worked our way through the village and up a road- way. Near the end of this road Lt Bain was seriously wounded in the leg and could not carry on. Very shortly after this happened the village seemed to be ours.... [Then] men were coming back from all directions, all saying that we were to withdraw the way we had come....

We got Jack Bain down to the main road where a truck could reach him... and I returned to see what could be done for Dave Whitteker. I found him ... seriously wounded ... but with the help of an [18 Bn](#) chap ... tied him up as well as we could (it was very dark by this time) and started to carry him to the [18 Bn](#) RAP. ... The going was rough, up hill and down, over stone walls. It was a very slow job. We tried all ways of carrying him without much success, and to add to our difficulties, as we were trying to get him over the last wall the Germans put up a flare which threw all its light on to us. We expected to get a burst any minute.... As a last resort we wrenched the door off a house and converted it into a stretcher.... It took us over two hours to reach the RAP....

[Galatas](#) had been retaken and the 23 Battalion companies were in position, but the task of regaining the ground lost north and south of the village required at least two fresh battalions. Only the [Maori Battalion](#) was left, but if it had been used it would have been impossible to hold a line next day. At a conference at 4 Brigade

Headquarters orders were received from Division that a new line was to be held east of [Karatsos](#), running north and south, with 5 Brigade on the right and 19 Australian Infantry Brigade on the left. A Company of 20 Battalion was attached to 21 Battalion and the rest of the 20th withdrew along the [Canea](#) highway over the bridge and moved through a 'hole in the wall' to an area in olive groves south-west of [Canea](#). Prior to the withdrawal Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows had sent Lieutenant McPhail with a platoon of B Company down to the beach to stop any Germans from pushing along there and getting behind the 20th. When word came to withdraw, two runners sent to find the patrol failed to contact it, so vigorously had it pushed forward along the beach. One runner volunteered to stay till dawn and the platoon returned the next day.

During 26 May the 20th rested in a ditch under the olive trees with the usual machine-gunning from planes 'which buzzed about like bees all day'. Although the men were very weary not many could sleep when they tried and few had the energy even to smoke. On this day the Germans systematically bombed [Canea](#), almost razing the town. Fresh enemy forces penetrated 5 Brigade's right flank and [19 Australian Brigade](#) reported Germans moving round its left flank. Fourth Brigade's units were worn out and could scarcely be called an effective reserve.

Unable to make contact with General Weston of the Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation who was nominally in command of the area, Brigadier Puttick decided to shorten the line by withdrawing his troops to a defensive position at the head of [Suda Bay](#) on a general north and south line running through Khristos and Tsikalaria to [Ay Marina](#). This line, called 42nd Street, was named after a British engineer unit which had worked there before the invasion.

Twentieth Battalion, less A Company, marched all night, passed through battered [Suda](#) and reached [Stilos](#) at dawn. Though hidden again in olive groves, the troops were spotted by planes and heavily attacked late in the afternoon—'the most intense and systematic blitzing that I saw anywhere', one observer describes it. The attack, directed mainly against an Australian supply dump from which the men had replenished their rations, lasted about an hour. Incendiary bullets set fire to the dry grass and olive trees, and several trucks and a petrol dump went up in flames. Miraculously, 4 Brigade had only one casualty.

Meanwhile, 5 Brigade had established a line along 42nd Street, about a mile west of Suda township. A composite force of 1 Welch Regiment, Northumberland Hussars, and 1 Rangers went forward to cover the withdrawal. It came into action about 5.30 a.m. on 27 May and two hours later had been driven back with heavy casualties. Throughout the day various parties of enemy troops were observed moving up on the left flank out of range. It soon became apparent that there were not enough troops to hold the German advance on the Canea front and that withdrawal to the south coast was inevitable. Sufficient reinforcements and supplies could not be transported from Egypt, and, after full consideration of the situation on Crete, General Wavell decided that the island would have to be abandoned. On the same day preparations were made to evacuate the garrison and instructions were issued to the New Zealand Division to provide an anti-paratroop force on the plain of Askifou and a flank guard on the Georgeoupolis road.

In the evening Colonel Kippenberger, who had returned to the 20th after the disintegration of 10 Brigade, assembled the men and told them of the intention to evacuate the forces on Crete. There was a hard march ahead but they would halt ten minutes to every clock hour. He would lead the march, and he stressed the need for rigid march discipline and the absolute necessity for seeing that each man was wakened after the hourly halts.

Many of the men were almost physically exhausted. Apart from the fighting at Maleme and Galatas, the troops had been so harassed by day by enemy planes that they had had little rest. By night they had usually been on the move. This lack of sleep was particularly hard on commanders, who often covered huge extra distances on foot, inspecting troops and attending conferences.

The need for regular rests had been shown during the previous night's continuous trek to Stilos when men had been forced to drop out, some arriving the next day. In many cases unsuitable footwear was the cause of the trouble. New Zealand boots were un procurable on Crete and replacements, which were of a narrower type originally intended for Indian troops, caused many sore and blistered feet.

Sergeant Borthwick's diary describes the next four days:

Tuesday 27 May: On the move at 2030 hrs with a good step. A lot of stragglers with no arms and good to see the 4th Bde in formation and all with a rifle. Congestion on the road and we seemed to be held up by the same truck time and again.... Some chaps had no water bottles and some begged water from those that had bottles. At one stage our column was overtaken and passed by three hatless Australians who were singing in great heart as they passed us ... 'When there isn't a girl about you do feel lonely.' Can safely say our spirits improved after this incident. A feature of the night march was the stout-hearted singing of Cpl L. G. Smith of the RAP.... Col Burrows also sang....

Private George Robson <sup>49</sup> of the signals platoon relates how 'Men of C Company sang for an hour on end and gave vent to their irrepressible humour by mimicking a Cockney Marine who called repeatedly and plaintively for an elusive "Major 'Oont."

At this stage Sergeant Kimber, who had linked up with 18 Battalion after the withdrawal from Galatas, found his mates again. 'About 10 p.m.,' he says, 'we were halting on the side of the road for a spell when along came the 20 Bn with Kip marching under extreme difficulties at the head of them [he had sprained his ankle badly on the morning of 20 May]. It was really good to see a unit still under perfect control, retiring in an orderly and well organised manner, thanks to Kip's good discipline ( no rabble or rafferty rules about this outfit). For days past one had become used to seeing a rabble of panic stricken men making their way to the beach.... I might say that I smartly paid my respects to the CO 18 Bn and rejoined the 20 Bn. It was good to be home again.'

But let Sergeant Borthwick continue the story of the march:

Wednesday 28 May: As the night wore on we seemed to strike a lot of uphill going. More congestion. Everybody short of water. ... When we halted chaps just slept in their tracks and once I think we all slept for about half an hour. Marched till daylight.... All utterly exhausted and just pulled off the road and slept. Took our boots off. No sooner asleep than it seemed we came awake again. I could not swallow biscuits but ate some tinned beetroot. Harold Roberts <sup>50</sup> went off with our water bottles.... Filled them at a well where might was right.

On the move at 1000 hrs. To go to Askifou Plain in an anti-parachutist role. Left

the road to avoid strafing and taken [by a 'short cut'] over a mountain pass. Hard going, especially up the last ridge. One or two dropped out with exhaustion. After the stiff pull up everybody thirsty and the sight of a well in the plain below very welcome. A very steep face to descend to the plain and took one and a half hours to get down. After a good drink went well on flat ground.... Moved into a village and slept outside on some concrete with no blanket.... Other chaps left behind on the mountain with bad feet, etc., straggled in.

Thursday 29 May: Up at daylight and moved two miles nearer the coast to a defensive position.... Halted in a narrow gully where some trucks had been wrecked.... lay low under cover of trees all day.... Everybody short of water. Thirty enemy planes over about 1900 hrs.

While the battalion was disposed about the Askifou Plain A Company, which had been attached to 21 Battalion in the line at Suda, caught up. Captain Washbourn describes the company's experiences:

When we withdrew from the crossroads [north-east of Galatas] the company was sent on attachment to 21 Bn and strengthened with the Transport Platoon of 23 Bn. The withdrawal was only a short one to the old positions held by the Battalion prior to the invasion, this time, however, on the other side of the road. A quiet day and at night the company acted as rear guard for the Div Cav and 21 Bn. I kept a section back to check all through, but owing to a hold-up in the Div Cav who were looking for one of their sections we were late getting to the rendezvous point at the POW cage. There was no map and after marching speedily to the stream behind the original Bn HQ area outside Canea I met two tanks, also lost. As I had no idea of the way out to Suda Bay by [way of] Canea I decided to make our way back by the track used when we first arrived in Crete. This was no use to the tanks as they could not cross the river. However, they followed with us for a while and were left at the ford.

Then came the long and hasty march to Suda Bay. At one stage we ran into the B Echelon of the Welch Regiment and they directed us on our way. The rest of the company was finally contacted again at 42nd Street.

We dug slitties under the olive trees and were ready in a defensive position ... just after dawn [27 May]—the left flank being the Maoris. About 0930 some enemy

were seen at a dump of Marine equipment among the olive groves, approximately 200 yards to the west of the sunken road. The Maoris immediately went into the road and commenced a haka and then went off to the attack, together with 7 and 8 Platoons of A Company.

According to Private Jack Sheppard, whose section was alongside a Maori platoon when the Germans advanced, the Maoris began muttering and shouting and jumping with excitement. One, according to Sheppard, jumped a bit higher than the rest, right on to the bank, and, as if this was a signal, all the Maoris did likewise. Down the hill they went, followed, without orders from their officers, by some of A Company. In this attack Private 'Mac' West,<sup>51</sup> although seriously wounded, carried on with a pistol until the attack was completed.

The men eventually returned about an hour later [Washbourn continues]. The rest of the day was quiet except for long range machine-gun fire, apparently on fixed lines as it all hit the west side of the road. Columns were noticed going up the steep hill well to the left flank, but owing to the distance could not be identified.... That night another withdrawal through the Maori rearguard to Stylos and at 0800 hrs [28 May] we were sent up the hill to the west of the village to a position on the left of 19 Battalion. About 1000 hrs an attack was made on 19 Bn—who were assisted by fire from the company.... At 1030 hrs the 19th began retiring and for a long quarter of an hour I awaited orders which came by runner. We then returned to the village and followed the [19th] Bn along the road covered by two tanks.... Our next stop was at dawn the following day at a village just over the top of the hill in Askifou Plain where we rested until 1630 hrs. Just as we left mortars opened up on the top of the hill but no enemy was seen. On the other side of the plain I was called by Col Burrows ... and I then rejoined the Bn, moving with them to the wadi near the beach.

Private West, whose part in the bayonet charge at 42nd Street has already been briefly mentioned, tells how he was carried away by the excitement of the charge. He writes:

On arriving at a sunken roadway I was busily peering ahead trying to see what chaps on all sides of me seemed to be able to see, namely, Germans lying tucked in behind most of the olive trees. In fact alongside me on our right a Maori was terrifically eager to be up and at 'em and brandished his rifle in an endeavour to

keep from rushing forward. The excitement was intense and I spotted Germans thirty yards away.

Some semblance of control was being attempted, but someone kept shouting 'Charge! Let 'em have it!' etc. and we all leaped out of the sunken roadway and blazed our way straight through, leaving dead Germans lying everywhere.

I distinctly heard Peter Markham's voice shouting 'All back A Coy!' but I'm afraid I just had to keep going. I had grabbed up a Bren gun from a wounded Maori, but the thing would only fire single rounds. As I was shooting from the hip I was very annoyed and chucked it down and hurried on shooting at various Germans with a luger.

It was then I was hit in the thigh, nothing much, but the sight of blood made me curious, and as the others seemed to be getting ahead of me I decided to cut off my trouser leg and put on a bandage. I carried on a little further. Dead Germans seemed to be the order of the day. Soon I came across a wounded New Zealand officer lying propped up and with him was a fat Maori sergeant bleeding from a gunshot wound right through his buttock. I took his first aid package from his pocket and bandaged him up. The officer told me to walk back as he was sure the attack had been successful. On the way back I was amused to meet some Kiwis whose job it appeared was to count the dead Germans. Most of these, they stated, had been shot in the head. I distinctly remember Germans jumping up and running away, forgetting to surrender, and being shot as they ran.

On returning to A Coy I discovered that they had been held back and had missed out on the assault. Here I discovered some raw eggs and a tin of beetroot. The others couldn't understand how I could relish such a mixture. I was then told I would have to make my way to an RAP.

Meanwhile the battalion spent the day under cover and the troops rested in readiness for a further move after dark.

Orders to move at 1945 hrs [Sergeant Borthwick's diary for 29 May continues]. Moved off and ran into bad road blocks.... During a prolonged hold-up a curious incident occurred. Most of our troops were asleep on the road when something happened at the head of the column. What it was nobody seems to know; some

thought a Bren [carrier] had run amok or we were being run over by tanks. Anyway this sort of panic spread right through our column and everybody just flung themselves off the road in great haste.... At last we got under way again and passed a good number of troops lined up on the side of the road. Some abusive remarks from them. Did some uphill work and pretty rocky. Climbed up off the road and ended up in a position on a mountain brow overlooking the beach.

By this time the effort to keep going was perhaps greater than that needed when in actual contact with the enemy. The excitement of a battle can rouse tired men to superhuman efforts for a short time, but the ability to hang on and march night after night with little chance of sleep by day and less food and water requires a different quality of stamina. *Esprit de corps* is a cliché but it counted at this stage.

Illustrating this, [Colonel Kippenberger](#) relates an incident regarding the battalion chaplain, Padre Spence. The CO had been standing by the side of the road watching the men trudge wearily to their dispersal areas at a halt. As the Padre came along the Colonel noticed that he was carrying several water bottles, which at the time were scarce.

The Colonel remarked, 'I see you are well equipped with water bottles, Padre.'

'Oh, yes,' came the reply, 'I just carry one or two in case any of the boys are short.'

It was then that the CO noticed that the Padre's lips were parched and cracked. He had evidently not had a drink for a long time. In the Colonel's words, 'It was the most Christ-like thing I think I ever saw.'

Another far-sighted soldier had also anticipated the importance of water when the CO explained the nature of the march that lay ahead when the battalion formed up at [Stilos](#). 'Pop' Lynch promptly obtained a valise into which he packed a full two-gallon tin of water. Many a man had reason to be thankful to him.



C COMPANY ACTION WITH ENEMY PATROL,  
‘RHODODENDRON VALLEY’, SFAKIA

### c company action with enemy patrol, ‘rhododendron valley’, sfakia

After a few hours' rest the battalion left the formed road and moved down a very steep and winding track to a ravine in which rhododendrons were growing—Rhododendron valley— halting close to a cave which housed Force Headquarters. Here the CO learned that the embarkation plan allowed for only 230 men from each of the 4 Brigade battalions and the Maori Battalion to be embarked that night. Not counting the Kiwi Concert Party and 4 Brigade Band, that still left forty of the 20th to stay. While he was considering the position firing broke out in the ravine. Fifth Brigade's rearguard was six miles away and these shots, 'right at our back door', were strange. Evidently a large enemy patrol had pushed through or round the covering force almost to the beach, where it began to shoot at everything, hoping to create panic. [Brigadier Inglis](#) placed B Company of the 18th on the eastern side of the ravine, while [Colonel Kippenberger](#) called to Captain Washbourn to take his company up the bed of the ravine and to Captain Fountaine to send C Company up the cliffs to the western side. The account of the final sortie is given by Corporal Vincent of C Company:

The going was hard and the men were very tired, but, led by Lt Upham, they toiled up the steep slope until they observed Germans running between rhododendron bushes in the bed of the ravine which was otherwise devoid of cover. A party under Sergeant-Major Grooby were disposed along the side of the ravine while the leading group climbed about  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile to head off the enemy who were soon accounted for. The sides of the ravine were so steep that one man ... had to be held by the legs so that he could lean over far enough to fire with his Bren. When all the

enemy to be seen had been dealt with the men returned to the mouth of the ravine where they were told that some of the company would not be taken off that night. <sup>52</sup>

Volunteers were then called for to stay with the rear party. In C Company the NCOs insisted on remaining and the rest, 'after much argument', were chosen by ballot. The other companies made their selections from their volunteers or drew lots. Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows, who had been detailed to command the rear party, which was to be known as [4 Battalion](#), began to organise the three platoons of which it was composed. Those who were to go gave ammunition, food, water, and any tobacco they had to those who were to remain.

At this stage [Borthwick's diary records] several fellows who had not been with us in the march over the island (they had preferred independent movement rather than stick to the unit) now presented themselves with as good a face as possible when they heard that some of us were being taken off. They just had no show.

We said cheerio to the chaps staying behind and moved down nearer the beach in darkness. We had strict instructions not to let anybody break into our formation. Finally we formed a single file and Pop Lynch and myself were detailed to scrutinise every man's face as they filed past to make sure there were no strangers among us. After what seemed an interminable period of waiting [we were] taken off in small boats to two destroyers, HMAS [Napier](#) and HMAS [Nizam](#). A great feeling of relief and chaps on the outside seat of the small boat were dangling their hands in the water just like kids. It did all seem rather miraculous....

Saturday 31 May: .... Once aboard [the [Napier](#)] about a dozen of us were looking for a place to go and someone says, 'Come up here boys.' It was the stoker P.O's mess and they looked after us ... right royally. Laid on stew, tea with milk and sugar, bread, butter and jam, and cigarettes in abundance. We heard the [BBC](#) news at 3 a.m. ship's time, and although we were all badly in need of sleep not one of us in that Mess went to sleep. We just talked and talked.

At 9.5 a.m. came a bombing attack by nine Dorniers. The [Nizam](#) disappeared completely from view behind huge columns of spray as bombs fell around her, and the [Napier](#) had seven near misses forward and to starboard, some of them very close indeed. The lights and the ammunition hoist failed and the men helped to handle the

ammunition up to the guns. The CO had commenced to shave, but, taking in the situation quickly, joined the line and incidentally added a touch of colour in his borrowed blue dressing gown and with flakes of dried soap blowing off his face.

Men washed and shaved in the washrooms all day. Their clothes were filthy. Air support arrived but the Navy, taking no chances, fired on the planes until they dropped the correct flares. There was an anxious moment later in the day when one of the boiler valves exploded with a loud bang and the ship slowed down, but she carried on at reduced speed. [Alexandria](#) was sighted about 4 p.m. and the [Napier](#) docked two hours later. The battalion manned ship and saluted as Admiral Cunningham passed in his pinnace.

The final act of the main party is quoted from General Kippenberger's account in [Infantry Brigadier](#):

We tied up and I went up to the bridge to thank the Captain. While there I was very distressed to see R.S.M. Wilson hurrying down the gangway. Then he called loudly for markers from Twentieth Battalion and I watched with pride while he collected, dressed, and placed them, all as correctly and smartly as if at [Maadi](#). The men filed down and it was good to see that every one was armed and every one was shaved. The R.S.M. fell them in, handed over to the Adjutant with full routine, the Adjutant handed over to me—and we marched off, I stumping hatless and very proudly at the head and everyone on the wharf saluting.

South African transport took the battalion to [Amiriya](#), where the men were issued with a blanket, a razor, and toilet gear. 'Good meal and a blanket and slept in a tent,' writes one diarist. 'It seemed like heaven.'

Many of the battalion's walking wounded were already in Egypt, having been taken off in [HMAS Perth](#) on the night of 29-30 May. After leaving [Crete](#) the cruiser had been attacked by enemy aircraft. The captain had skilfully avoided all the bombs except one, which glanced off the funnel and exploded in the galley, the only part of the ship not crowded with soldiers. Four of the crew and nine soldiers were killed.

Meanwhile on [Crete](#) the rear party, organised into three platoons under Colonel Burrows and Lieutenant Rolleston, had taken up defensive positions to block the ravine against infiltrating German troops. Corporal Vincent describes the events of 31

May:

At midnight, under Sergeant-Major Grooby, the rear party went back up the ravine, beyond the point reached in the morning, to where the crest flattened out giving a field of fire to the north. The party was in position by 2 a.m. and every man had an automatic and as much ammunition as he could carry.

About 10 a.m. next day ... [Private Bob Doig <sup>53</sup> and I] went down to Lt-Col Burrows to report that no enemy had been seen, that the men were still on duty but suffering badly from thirst, and to ask if water could be sent up to them. On the way down we searched the ravine and counted twenty-two dead German (Austrian?) Alpine troops, seven of whom, below a bend in the gulch, had been accounted for by two Australian machine guns, not previously known to be there. It appeared that the enemy had been guided by a Greek dressed in civilian clothes and carrying a rifle. At Headquarters water was duly promised but the carrying party failed to reach the forward troops who finally had to go down for it themselves.

About 4.30 p.m. word was received from the CO to withdraw to Force Headquarters in the caves. There was seldom time for written orders on Crete, but that sent to the 20 Battalion rear party has been preserved. It is copied from the original retained by C Company's Quartermaster-Sergeant, Gordon Fraser. <sup>54</sup>

To:} C and D Pls.

H.Q.PI.

From: Lt-Col Burrows

You will assemble your pls. in the valley and not in the olive groves. Time of assembly 2000 hrs.

C and D. Pl. should therefore commence withdrawing at about 1900 hrs.

Withdrawal must be orderly, controlled and silent.

A. R. Fitchett, Lieut.

At night the rear party moved to the beach, passing through cordons provided

by 22 Battalion and the Maori Battalion. As on the previous night, each man placed a hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him to keep contact and to prevent stragglers from breaking in. On board HMS Phoebe and the destroyer Jackal the sailors were generous with food and tobacco, and it seemed a just reward for the rear party that its ship enjoyed freedom from enemy air attack. At Alexandria, as on the previous night, the men were swamped with hospitality by the YMCA and taken to Amiriya, where they slept the night in the familiar EPIP tents. Next day the rear party rejoined the battalion at Helwan.

The battalion's most costly action in Crete was the counter-attack on Maleme airfield. In this attack, and in the subsequent fighting around Pirgos and Plataniás, it lost two officers (Captain Rice and Lieutenant Scoltock) and over fifty men killed in action or died of wounds.<sup>55</sup> Its losses in the fighting in the Galatas area between 20 and 26 May were three officers killed (Major Wilson, Lieutenants Green and O'Callaghan) and nineteen men. No record exists of the number killed by air attack or in the other smaller actions of the battle, but there were not many. The serious toll taken of the battalion by the campaigns in Greece and Crete is shown in the following table:

	Greece		Crete	
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs
Killed or Died of Wounds	4	20	5	75
Wounded	2	43	5	124
Wounded and prisoner of war—		11	* 2	54 †
Prisoners of war	4	65	—	32
TOTAL	10	139	12	285

Total casualties: 22 officers, 424 other ranks.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sergeant Allison describes his visit to Crete in September-October 1954:

Searchlight Hill,  
Galatos,  
Crete,  
10th Sept., 1954

An hour has passed since sunrise and the valleys and hills with their cottages and churches dotted here and there make a picture you'll recall quite vividly.... Below lie the very familiar landmarks of the gaol and the little cemetery. Last night I slept under the olive trees again, near our old positions just below this hill. A little shack of a very poor type is new on this rise. I cannot get things in their right directions, because for some reason I always recalled the gaol in the opposite direction and there appears to be so many roads and tracks which all look alike. The weather is still sunny and very warm in the daytime, but the nights are beginning to cool off. I would like to spend a whole year here, it's so peaceful and beautiful....

14th Sept.... The news had gone round the village and its environs that a New Zealander was in Galatos. I can honestly tell you that to walk through Galatos if you are an NZ-er is the most difficult thing yet, for you are besieged, not by one or two, but by dozens of people, old and young. I made 4 attempts to go from one side of Galatos to the other but did not succeed at all. There is a wine shop every few chains. In the end I had to by-pass the village by taking to the fields and going with determination to the spots I want to see.

Last night I slept in a little cottage close to the spot where Harry Gilchrist, Billy Horn, Jock Hoffman and Jack Friend were killed. I've heard many stories about the deaths of NZ-ers and of the escape of some. I am writing now amongst some olive trees between Galatos and Daratsos, but again I'm interrupted by three small boys - one eating a handful of grapes and very ragged in dress. There's such a great deal to tell you....

20th Sept. In the positions we occupied the night of the last fight at Galatos - near Galatos turn-off.... You might recall a fairly severe morning and afternoon (?) bombing (Uke's leather coat hanging on a tree). At that time I was with Spicer visiting Charlie Macdonald [McDonald] on the other side of road. There was one terrific bomb (aerial torpedo or parachute I think somebody said). It made a grand hole and for some reason I always remembered it. Well, I'm writing now exactly on the edge of it. It's much - very much smaller, grass covered, and has been filled in quite a bit, but still large. A girl is singing as she gathers olives nearby and I can hear a goat bell tinkling - birds are chortling and some distance off I can hear children playing. I had quite a few conversations with the locals who all wanted to

direct me - but to different places. At last I went off on my own - a little confused and [un]certain if memory was correct, but a sudden flash of the past reminded me that Charlie Macdonald's [ sic] position was in a slightly open space and then I saw a ditch and a stone wall along which I was told to direct Jim Burrows and the fellows from [Maleme](#) - and in less than ten minutes from there I walked right to the exact spot. I recall walking over to it with Spicer and Charlie Mac and finding Hugh Drawbridge (and George Weenink) looking stunned and somewhat bewildered.... It was in this area that I remember last seeing Mike O'Callaghan. The other bomb holes, too are quite plain.

You'll wonder at the lapse of days between writings. I've been up to [Platanias](#) and [Santa Maria](#) and [Maleme](#) a couple of times. The Greeks have dealt savagely with the German cemeteries: wheat and vines, olive trees and orange trees send their roots to tangle with the German dead. In a way I don't blame the Greeks. Leaving a margin for exaggeration they yet must have suffered badly. Yet I find them very truthful; they all say the Germans did not molest their women, except in odd circumstances perhaps, nor did they shoot any women en masse (in this area) and they wouldn't need to either - they made such a bl—mess of them during the actual battle and in the little battles of resistance which followed our departure....

In New Zealand I was told that the Germans had built a large monument near Galatos on the [Maleme](#) road to the memory of ... [their] dead and ours. Well, the monument is there all right with a huge eagle on top swooping down like a Stuka but this monument commemorates German dead only. The Greeks call it the "Bad Bird" - some say "Smash it Down", others say "Leave it as a souvenir, a reminder of their defeat." Near Furnes there is a grave yard containing the bodies of 20 "Deutch Kammarden" (Paratroopers who fell at that spot). The plot is overgrown and a notice in Greek says "They are here because they were defeated by a people whose only weapon is their love of liberty." At [Maleme](#) above the 'drome overlooking the sea is a huge German burial ground set in tiers - now growing wheat and vines. I counted 15 tiers some 50 yards each in length, there might be more....

... in Galatos all is quiet in the afternoon sun and the men (some men) sit at the tables sipping coffee oozoo(?) - a wine, and playing at cards or "tric-trac" - or just sit and talk. The village priest sits there too - the same priest as our day - talking with his flock. He told me he buried 179 New Zealanders from in and just around Galatos

behind his church. He showed me the list of their names and numbers - some without identification, however. Hanging on the wall of his house is a photo of Kip taken at a table on his return here after the Krieg. He is a very modest fellow, this priest.

I like him....

The Caves,  
Sphakia,  
Crete,  
24-9-54

The day is perfect, and from these caves [Sphakia](#) has all the charm of a Mediterranean village, but once you approach it and live in it the charm very rapidly vanishes and you find yourself amid the ruins of Stuka days and the utter filth of to-day, for which there is no excuse whatsoever. These caves, as you will know, were old "Frey's" headquarters. It was here that Tom Jackson and I were sent to act as runners on our last day here. From here Tom and I went to fill water bottles at a well about  $\frac{1}{2}$  a mile away. I tried to find the well this morning but no luck. I found two other wells, and probably they are the ones and my memory has failed me. I thought they were in a slightly different position.

I came here at 4 p.m. yesterday. I walked from [Canea](#) to [Suda](#) and about another 4 or 5 miles past [Suda](#). On the way I took a swim in the sea and then waited on the bus. It had been my plan to walk the distance to [Sphakia](#) but the curiosity of the villagers and the police made this not easy. To be perfectly honest the days are still hot, my legs lazy, and the haversack heavy....

Last night I had to stay at the police station - there's no other place. You just want to see it to believe it. I've not seen dirt and filth like it. Uke would go mad if he saw it. I can stand and have stood a fair amount of sad surroundings but last night I had had enough. This morning I arose very early, bought some dry bread at a smelly wine shop and set off alone. I had been gone an hour when my policeman appeared down the slope shouting furiously. Hell, man, I was mad - he keeps up such a babble of yap - not one word of which I understand.

However, he has just left after spending 1 ½ hrs up here watching every move I make. There are ten "cops" in this village, the main street of which is not quite 4 chains long. Now, do you know what some of the villagers thought with great suspicion - that in 1941 I had buried some treasure here in the form of English money and I had come back for it and wanted nobody to know. There are also the two old suspicions, spy or commo. I get quite angry when they keep telling me I am rich - little do they realize.

Generally speaking they are all very good people, very friendly and always wanting to help, especially a New Zealander, but I'm a bit disgusted with the attitude of thinking they are the only poor people in the world and that anybody who is British is rich - that is the attitude of some, especially in this area and around Heraklion....

Galatos- Canea Road,  
Crete,  
4th Oct., 1954.

I'm writing this note in our old positions near Canea overlooking the sea, and the island to which Berry led us on one of his wildgoose chases. I'm down on the flat near the road where if my memory serves me correctly I recall you, paper or book in hand, checking numbers of personnel as the sections came back from Maleme. This is the area we were in [on] the morning of the invasion. You will remember Pop Lynch attempting a shave. Now I'm about to be interrupted by an old Greek - he gave me a meal the first day (this time, 1954) I passed by. The little boy from across the road who would collect our "dobie", and sell us bread, Vasseli by name, now lives in Athens. Two bomb holes are still visible here. I am now complete with bicycle, one borrowed from Emmanuel Tapinaki (Anna's father). Now, believe it or not, my friend, but this bicycle is none other than one of ours, perhaps not belonging to our Battalion - but one of the ones on issue. Emmanuel, finding it after our escape, took it to pieces, bit by bit, carefully hiding the parts in various places, and assembling it after the German defeat. Yesterday I made a "flying" visit on it to Platanias, Gerani and Maleme, coming across another derelict German grave-yard on the way. It has been smashed to pieces and is growing clover. It would, on my estimation, contain about 600–800 bodies. The German monument with (Stuka)

eagle atop is just about ½ mile from here, where B Coy had its HQ just prior to the Maleme affair....

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<sup>1</sup> Capt J. A. Johnston, MM, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Rangiora, 29 Apr 1904; solicitor; wounded 25 May 1941; Adjutant 20 Bn and Armd Regt Jul 1942-Jul 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Pte A. J. Brennan; Invercargill; born Gore, 14 Apr 1902; garage attendant; wounded and p.w. 23 May 1941; repatriated May 1944.

<sup>3</sup> Capt H. O. Jefcoate; Greymouth; born Invercargill, 6 Aug 1900; schoolmaster; wounded 22 May 1941.

<sup>4</sup> Sgt S. A. Musson; born Christchurch, 27 Apr 1916; clerk; died of wounds 25 May 1941.

<sup>5</sup> Pte P. Amos; Dunedin; born England, 19 Jul 1916; NZR employee; wounded and p.w. 24 May 1941; repatriated Oct 1943.

<sup>6</sup> Sgt B. C. Borthwick; Christchurch; born Clinton, South Otago, 7 Sep 1913; bank officer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>7</sup> Sgt E. S. Allison; England; born Scotland, 16 May 1918; student teacher; p.w. 1 Dec. 1941.

<sup>8</sup> Farran later served in 7 Armoured Division and 2 Special Air Service Regiment, reaching the rank of lieutenant-colonel and winning the DSO and MC.

<sup>9</sup> Pte M. C. Hill-Rennie; born Patea, 1 Feb 1918; advertising salesman; killed in action 22 Nov 1941.

<sup>10</sup> This village was Pиргос. It is on the road east of the airfield and at the time was often confused with Maleme village, farther inland.

<sup>11</sup> Capt F. J. Bain; Waipara; born NZ 16 Mar 1916; warehouse assistant; wounded and p.w. 26 May 1941.

<sup>12</sup> Capt G. A. Brown, ED; Westport; born Wellington, 16 Jan 1911; accountant; wounded and p.w. 22 May 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

<sup>13</sup> Capt P. V. H. Maxwell, DSO; born Londonderry, 14 Feb 1906; manufacturer's representative; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>14</sup> Sgt N. Sutherland; Christchurch; born Australia, 22 Aug 1906; barman-porter; wounded and p.w. May 1941.

<sup>15</sup> Maj D. B. Cameron, m.i.d.; born NZ 30 Sep 1908; clerk; twice wounded; drowned Maoribank, 24 Feb 1951.

<sup>16</sup> Maj P. G. Markham; Little River; born England, 8 Sep 1908; farm manager.

<sup>17</sup> Lt J. P. Lockie; Invercargill; born Greenock, Scotland, 2 Sep 1918; civil servant; wounded 22 May 1941.

<sup>18</sup> Capt N. J. McPhail, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 24 Sep 1913; leather merchant; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>19</sup> L-Cpl G. F. Clarke; Invercargill; born Dunedin, 29 Aug 1911; traveller; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

<sup>20</sup> Pte E. D. Cuttriss; Christchurch; born Gore, 24 Jun 1916; shop assistant; wounded 22 May 1941.

<sup>21</sup> Lt H. J. Scoltock; born NZ 27 Mar 1909; company director; died of wounds 22 May 1941.

<sup>22</sup> Capt M. J. Coop; Rugby, England; born Christchurch, 21 Jul 1911; shepherd; three times wounded.

<sup>23</sup> L-Cpl J. C. Sheppard; Christchurch; born Wellington, 8 Feb 1918; farmhand; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>24</sup> Capt V. D. Kirk, DCM; Blackball; born Blackball, 17 Sep 1915; winchman; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

<sup>25</sup> Col D. F. Leckie, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Invercargill; born Dunedin, 9 Jun 1897; school-teacher; served in Canterbury Mounted Rifles Regt, Anzac Mounted Division, 1916–19; CO 23 Bn Aug 1940-Mar 1941, May 1941-Jun 1942; comd 75 Sub-Area, Middle East, Aug 1942-Mar 1944; wounded 25 May 1941.

<sup>26</sup> Brig G. Dittmer CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Maharahara, 4 Jun 1893; Regular soldier; Auckland Regt 1914–19 (OC 1 NZ Entrenching Bn); CO 28 (Maori) Bn Jan 1940-Feb 1942; comd 1 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) Apr 1942-Aug 1943; 1 Div, Aug 1942-Jan 1943; Fiji Military Forces and Fiji Inf Bde Gp, Sep 1943-Nov 1945; Camp Commandant, Papakura Military Camp, 1946; Commandant, Central Military District, 1946–48.

<sup>27</sup> Sgt D. L. Caley; born Huntly, 20 Nov 1916; service mechanic.

<sup>28</sup> L-Cpl R. H. Morris; Trentham; born NZ 12 Sep 1914; clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>29</sup> Lt E. W. Bolwell, MBE, m.i.d.; Timaru; born Dunedin, 13 Sep 1900; butcher.

<sup>30</sup> Cpl E. D. Spriggs; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 18 Oct 1917; canvas worker.

<sup>31</sup> RQMS Bolwell also swam out to sea and escaped, while the others returned by various routes. The 7-tonner was able to turn round and return.

<sup>32</sup> Brig J. Hargest, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; born Gore, 4 Sep 1891; farmer; MP, 1931–44; Otago Mounted Rifles, 1914–20 (CO 2 Bn Otago

Regt); comd 5 Bde May 1940-Nov 1941; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; escaped Italy, Mar 1943; killed in action, France, 12 Aug 1944.

<sup>33</sup> Lt-Col F. Baker, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Kohukohu, Hokianga, 19 Jun 1908; civil servant; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Jul-Nov 1942; twice wounded; Director of Rehabilitation, 1943–54; Public Service Commission, 1954–.

<sup>34</sup> Capt J. G. Sullivan, DSO, m.i.d.; Cobb Valley, Nelson; born Greymouth, 1 Aug 1913; survey assistant; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>35</sup> Col D. J. Fountaine, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Westport; born Westport, 4 Jul 1914; company secretary; CO 20 Bn 21 Jul-16 Aug 1942; 26 Bn Sep 1942-Dec 1943, Jun-Oct 1944; comd NZ Adv Base Oct 1944-Sep 1945; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

<sup>36</sup> Lt-Col E. Te W. Love, m.i.d.; born Picton, 18 May 1905; interpreter; CO 28 (Maori) Bn May-Jul 1942; died of wounds 12 Jul 1942.

<sup>37</sup> Sgt L. R. B. Sutherland, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 20 Jun 1913; canister maker; wounded May 1941; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942; repatriated Sep 1944.

<sup>38</sup> Sgt B. Mark; born Dunedin, 11 Dec 1917; clerk; died of wounds while p.w. 7 Jul 1941.

<sup>39</sup> L-Cpl E. E. E. Boyce; born NZ 4 Aug 1916; labourer; died of wounds 23 May 1941.

<sup>40</sup> 2 Lt H. C. Poole, MM; Ripponvale, Cromwell; born Invercargill, 16 Dec 1917; grocer; p.w. May 1941; escaped; safe in Egypt, Aug 1941.

<sup>41</sup> WO II H. L. Grooby, m.i.d.; born Westport, 23 May 1907; hardware merchant; killed in action 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>42</sup> 2 Lt O. T. Grattan; Napier; born Taumarunui, 27 Jul 1912; civil servant; wounded 22 May 1941.

<sup>43</sup> WO II R. W. Goodall; Christchurch; born Motueka, 23 Feb 1910; labourer.

<sup>44</sup> Sgt I. Lang; born NZ 1 Mar 1910; storekeeper; wounded May 1941; died of wounds 30 Nov 1941.

<sup>45</sup> Lt M. G. O'Callaghan; born Hamilton, 31 Jan 1917; law student; killed in action 25 May 1941.

<sup>46</sup> Pte C. J. Ewing; Borton's, Oamaru; born Wanaka, 10 Apr 1916; farmer; wounded and p.w. 28 Nov 1941.

<sup>47</sup> Pte F. G. Ross; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 15 Jun 1904; caretaker. Ross, cut off with Colonel Kippenberger's rear party in Greece, had made his way on foot in civilian clothes, and later in Greek uniform, down through German-occupied Greece and across by boat to Crete.

<sup>48</sup> Pte D. N. Whitteker; born Oamaru, 14 Oct 1919; painter; died of wounds 26 May 1941.

<sup>49</sup> WO II G. D. Robson; Invercargill; born Christchurch, 4 Oct 1907; postman.

<sup>50</sup> Cpl H. D. Roberts; Fairlie; born Sheffield, 21 Oct 1907; agricultural contractor.

<sup>51</sup> Sgt A. McM. West, MM; Wanaka; born Christchurch, 17 Dec 1914; bushman; wounded May 1941.

<sup>52</sup> About twenty Germans were killed by Upham's party. For this exploit, and for his part in the battles of the last few days, Upham was awarded his first VC.

<sup>53</sup> Cpl R. W. Doig; born Ashburton, 19 Aug 1917; farm labourer; wounded 26 Nov 1941; died of wounds 28 Jun 1942.

<sup>54</sup> S-Sgt G. M. Fraser; Westport; born [Wellington](#), 17 Mar 1912; stores clerk

<sup>55</sup> This figure is approximate. It is arrived at by subtracting the known losses at [Galatas](#) from the total for the whole campaign. A number of men posted as missing at the end of the campaign have since been reclassified as killed.

\* One man died of wounds while a prisoner of war.

† Six men died of wounds while prisoners of war.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 6 – REBUILDING THE BATTALION

## CHAPTER 6

### *Rebuilding the Battalion*

To the 230-odd men evacuated from Crete to Egypt by the [Napier](#) and [Nizam](#) on 31 May the hot meal and a good night's sleep at [Amiriya](#) seemed luxury indeed. The YMCA and other organisations offered a welcome and hospitality; there was pay to spend and free issues to replace lost gear. But, despite material comforts, many of the men were restless and the events of the last few weeks dominated their thoughts and filled all conversation: the lack of air support, the Navy's heavy losses in ships and men, the two [Mediterranean](#) 'Dunkirks', the party left behind on Crete. The Division's war had begun badly, but there were few who did not believe that its time would come.

In the evening of 1 June the survivors gathered their scanty belongings and entrained for [Cairo](#). Most men were still short of sleep and a good number preferred to travel on the floor under the seats, where they slept soundly to awake at dawn when passing through the Dead City. At [Helwan](#) the troops were given a welcome cup of tea and then taken in trucks to [Garawi](#) for breakfast, and from there to their old lines in [Helwan](#) Camp, the area occupied before leaving for [Greece](#)—but with a difference. The battalion had lived in tents at that time but was now to be accommodated in huts.

On arrival the men were checked in, issued with clean clothes, paid, given a leave pass to [Cairo](#). For some it was enough just to be back, but for those who did go to [Cairo](#) there were shocks in store. The first of these came when their high-speed diesel train passed one coming the other way. After their experiences with dive-bombers in [Crete](#) the screaming crescendo of these passing trains took a bit of getting used to. Former members of the battalion came out to [Helwan](#) in search of friends or to ask for news of friends who had not returned; among them was [Julian Tryon](#),<sup>1</sup> a member of the 'I' section who had been posted to OCTU, who sped around on a bicycle with a word of welcome for everybody.

On 3 June Major Burrows and his rear party rejoined the battalion, some of the men being admitted straight to the field ambulance for treatment.

On battalion parade next day [Colonel Kippenberger](#) addressed the men. He

explained points in the recent campaign that had hitherto been obscure, dealt fully with the difficulties of the command and made an appreciation of the value of the battle in Crete. The Germans were reported to have allowed three days for the capture of the island before moving on to [Cyprus](#) and thence to [Syria](#), and the twelve days' resistance had irremediably upset their programme. The New Zealanders had never been beaten by the Hun infantry; they had pushed them back at night but had been chased back in daylight by the enemy's planes.

At the close of the lecture the general feeling was, 'Well, we didn't do so badly after all.' It was something to be alive and to have come through the battle. Resentment faded. Why worry, anyhow? Some day they would catch up with the enemy and the Kiwi was as good as ever he was.

On Friday, 6 June, all the men who had been in [Crete](#) paraded at 6.45 a.m. for an inspection by the Prime Minister of New Zealand, the Rt. Hon. Peter Fraser. Although the attitude of troops at inspections is usually patiently tolerant, if not apathetic, the Prime Minister, after paying tribute to the work of the Division, struck a responsive chord when he expressed his admiration and the gratitude of the people of New Zealand for the splendid work of the British Navy in twice rescuing New Zealand troops from almost certain capture or annihilation. In the afternoon a garden party in the Prime Minister's honour was held at the [Maadi](#) Club.

During this time many men visited the 2 NZ General Hospital at [Helwan](#) in search of friends. Leave was general and generous. Everybody was granted a week's 'survivors' leave' and most men who were fit took it immediately. With accumulated credits in their paybooks, men were soon scattered far and wide. Some made for [Alexandria](#), Palestine, or Upper Egypt, while others stayed at pensions in [Cairo](#). A favourite [Cairo](#) pension for men of the 20th was the Pension Moderne, located in a narrow street just behind the fashionable Metropolitan Hotel. To any gharry or taxi driver it was much easier to say 'Metropolitan Hotel' than to try to describe where the Pension Moderne was, and naturally enough the drivers would pull up with a flourish right in front of the Metropolitan. They could never make out why their passengers wanted to be taken 'just round the corner, George'.

Reorganisation of the unit was difficult with men coming and going on leave, but new promotions were authorised and things made as ready as they could be for the

reception of reinforcements. Letter and parcel mail arrived regularly. The unit had no transport, all vehicles being requisitioned from the transport pool, and they were not easy to get.

About this time the battalion lost its Greek interpreter, Nicko Jacovides. Nicko was a Cypriot who had joined up with the battalion in [Greece](#); in those days an interpreter who could speak Greek was a useful adjunct to any unit. He went with the battalion to [Crete](#) and apparently did his part there. On 23 May he was seen coming down the [Galatas- Canea](#) road with some yards of German parachute cord round his neck, two Luger in his belt and a smile on his face. When asked where he had been he said he had just killed two Germans—'Just boys.' From Crete he returned with the battalion to Egypt. He was not highly paid, about two shillings a day it is said, and was always pestering somebody about an increase. Persuaded by two leg-pulling friends that he should be at least a WO I, Nicko promptly went off and bought a pair of brown boots. He then had the choice of two batmen as soon as his rank should become substantive. The prospect of a transfer from the battalion did not appeal very strongly to him and on being posted to a Cypriot unit at [Qassassin](#) he took three weeks to get there.

The strength of the battalion at this stage was approximately 400 and on 14 June 15 officers and 365 other ranks under Major B. J. Mathewson marched in. These men came from a composite battalion formed by the Southern Infantry Training Depot during the dark days of [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) to guard [Wadi Natrun](#) in the [Western Desert](#). On 17 June a further draft marched in from the depot. With them came Captains Mitchell and [Manchester](#)<sup>2</sup> and a number of senior NCOs who had been on instructional duties at Base. The reinforcements quickly became part of the battalion, which benefited greatly from the insurge of new blood. At first some of the old hands were perhaps inclined to think that they alone knew all about soldiering, but this phase soon passed and old and new alike trained together strenuously as they prepared for 'another crack at Jerry'.

On 18 June the battalion was reorganised and companies brought up to strength again. The senior appointments about this time were:

CO	Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger
Second-in-Command	Maj J. T. Burrows

Adjutant Capt D. B. Cameron <sup>3</sup>

IO 2 Lt A. P. Boyle

MO Capt W. L. M. Gilmour

HQ Company	Capt R. S. Orr
A Company	Capt T. H. Mitchell
B Company	Capt R. E. Agar <sup>4</sup>
C Company	Capt D. J. Fountaine
D Company	Capt K. G. Manchester

The arrival of the replacement officers and reinforcements was most welcome, and after the slack days of the past two weeks it was a pleasant change to be busy and purposefully occupied. Equipment was scarce but the days passed quickly with instruction in Bren and rifle, range practices, training with anti-tank mines and booby traps, and lectures on the [Crete](#) campaign, the chief of them by [General Freyberg](#) and the Colonel. The RSM held drill and duties courses for NCOs, and these, together with regular company inspections and battalion parades, soon welded all members of the battalion into a disciplined unit. In the campaigns in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) something had been learned of the enemy and his tactics. Major Burrows was sent to [Cyprus](#) to lecture on paratroop landings and [Brigadier Inglis](#) was sent to England on the same mission.

After their safe return to Egypt it had been decided that New Zealand troops should make some tangible recognition of the great work of the Navy in the evacuations from Greece and Crete. A collection for naval charities made throughout the Division raised almost £900. This was handed over at a ceremony on board HMS *Phoebe*, which had brought many of the 20th away from Crete, in the presence of General Freyberg, Brigadiers Puttick and Hargest, and other officers and a detachment of other ranks. In his autobiography, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, Admiral Cunningham says: '... I was handed a cheque after a moving and pleasant speech by a New Zealand private soldier, to which of course I replied. Afterwards the troops were entertained to the midday meal by the *Phoebe*'s ship's company, while the officers lunched with my wife and myself at the Residency. I think it is true to say that much as the naval sailor liked and admired all the Dominion troops, he had a very special place in his heart for the New Zealanders with whom he was thrown in such very close contact in the Mediterranean.'

In July both Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger and Major Burrows entered hospital, the former with a recurrence of malaria, and the latter with jaundice. Major Davis, who had been the battalion's original adjutant before being posted to the staff of [Divisional Headquarters](#), had returned to the battalion in June and he assumed temporary command. At the end of the month, and in very hot weather, battalion practices in ceremonial drill with a pipe band were held, and on 29 July there was an evening parade for a ceremonial retreat.

After the platoon and company training of the past six weeks the battalion was ready for manoeuvres. One of the earliest of these, and perhaps the stiffest test of all, was the dawn attack carried out in the [El Saff](#) area on 30-31 July. The companies marched out from [Helwan](#) late in the afternoon by way of the [Sweetwater Canal](#) on the [El Saff](#) plain to bivouac for the night. Some companies under junior officers did not arrive until the early hours of the morning, very weary, and they had little time to rest before moving off to the start line to begin the long advance to the enemy gunline by dawn. No transport being available, the troops had to march back to camp at the close of the exercise in terrific heat and with little water in their water bottles.

The worst part of the march came at the finish. The men left the formed road to cross the flat to the dhobi area, and although it did not look far, to walk the distance was a different matter. One party of five took a short cut and finished the journey by taxi. Finally, all hands arrived home very weary and hot and appreciated the efforts made to have showers turned on during a period of strict water rationing. Next day over 200 men were on sick parade, mostly with sore feet. The distance covered on foot in this exercise was roughly 25 miles and many men found the roads hard going after training and marching over sand.

On 6 August the battalion took part in a parade of 4 Brigade at which Brigadier Puttick handed over command to [Brigadier Inglis](#). The former was returning to New Zealand as Chief of the General Staff. [Brigadier Inglis](#) was no stranger to the 20th. He had commanded 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion in [Burnham](#) and in Egypt, and in Crete had taken over command of 4 Brigade while Brigadier Puttick commanded the Division.

During the following week [Brigadier Inglis](#) inspected each battalion in the

brigade, commencing with 18 Battalion on II August. A certain amount of smartening up was done for this parade—web was blanccoed, rifles meticulously cleaned, and all other equipment brought up to inspection order. After 18 Battalion had been inspected word got about that the new brigadier was extremely thorough and demanded a high standard, and smartening-up operations were renewed by the 20th with feverish zeal until arms and equipment were really sparkling. Nineteenth Battalion was inspected on 12 August and the 20th the following day. The previous night, just before turning in, one of the battalion's sergeants who prided himself on his rifle was giving it a last loving pull through when the cord broke. He could not get it out and had to make an early morning dash to Brigade Headquarters to borrow a rifle from a member of his platoon who was on duty there at the time. The inspection was thorough but not as long as had been expected. The men were on their toes, stood the test well, and the parade was dismissed at lunch-time. The next day, 14 August, all sergeants attended a lecture by the Brigadier.

On 17 August the battalion moved to the Canal Zone by train. The move took all night, and a departure from the usual quartering arrangements for train trips was the issue of a water melon to each nine men and a bottle of lemonade for each man. The troops detrained at [Geneifa](#) at daylight and were taken to the Combined Operations Training Centre at [Kabrit](#) by lorry. The CO had returned from hospital early in August, but on arrival at [Kabrit](#) the Adjutant, Captain Rhodes, was evacuated to hospital with jaundice and Captain [Chesterman](#) <sup>5</sup> replaced him. Captain Rhodes resumed the appointment at the end of September.

Practice in combined operations included boat drill, rowing, scaling ladders, etc., with good swimming in between training periods. All companies in turn carried out attack exercises with tank co-operation, the infantry moving forward in lorries until forced by enemy fire to debus. The battalion also conducted an exercise in a counter-attack role. In addition, Battalion Headquarters personnel practised the layout of their headquarters in defence.

At [Kabrit](#) the officers and men of a shore naval establishment, HMS Stag, were entertained in the battalion lines. Water polo and soccer matches were played against them and cricket matches were also played against [19 Battalion](#).

Early in the morning of 25 August the whole battalion moved out from camp for

assault landing exercises. The Navy ferried the troops to HMS Glenroy, the parent ship of the Combined Operations Centre, where they received special instruction on the landings to be made. Two hours before dawn next day the landing craft stole away from the ship's side and made for their respective beaches on the [Sinai](#) side of the Canal. The objective was an area marked out as an airfield.

Early in September the air raids on the [Suez Canal](#) increased and considerable damage was done to ships unloading there. The climax came on the night of 8-9 September when an air-raid warning 'Black' indicated that parachute landings might be expected. A Company had been detailed for the ground defence of [Kabrit](#) aerodrome and a remarkable sight greeted the troops as they turned out of their beds and scrambled into their trucks for a cross-country dash to the airfield. The whole sky was lit up with parachute flares of soft pastel colours, and these continued to fall for some considerable time. In the unit the men stood to, ready for any emergency.

On 12 September the advance party of 4 Brigade, under Major Mitchell, left [Kabrit](#). The brigade was to move again into the [Western Desert](#) to take over the western end of the [Baggush Box](#). The transport moved by road and the troops by train, arriving on the 15th and 16th respectively. The advance party took over from the [Essex Regiment](#) and the 20 Battalion companies were allotted to the areas occupied by the corresponding companies of that regiment. The brigade was to carry out maintenance of the forward defences and train as much as possible. The area was 158 miles west of [Alexandria](#) and about 30 miles east of [Mersa Matruh](#). Eighteenth and 19th Battalions took over all positions south of the road, leaving the 20th an area from the sea to the road.

The first tasks were the digging, maintenance, and camouflaging of the existing fortified positions. To avoid enemy observation from the air the battalion became a race of underground dwellers. There were days of sunshine and days less pleasant when sandstorms penetrated every nook and cranny of the sandbagged dugouts, coating everything with fine dust. Noses and throats would be choked with sand and every break in the skin seemed to develop into a desert sore. Fortunately the Mediterranean was not far away. Companies were a considerable distance apart and lived as separate groups with their own officers', sergeants', and men's messes. Each company maintained its own canteen, which could be replenished from [Naafi](#) stores

at [Mersa Matruh](#), [El Daba](#), and Abu Haggag. Demand invariably exceeded supply and canteen trucks roamed far and wide, the drivers employing many ruses to augment their stores. British quartermasters were justifiably suspicious but were successfully impressed by such fictitious names as the 'Stewart Island Fusiliers' and the 'Great Barrier Buffs'. On one occasion a dusky-skinned member of the battalion assisted his thirsty mates by uplifting an issue in the name of a Cypriot unit.

On 19 September all men who had been in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) were paid ten shillings in compensation for lost belongings. The same day [Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger](#) returned from leave and the news was announced that he had been awarded the DSO. The battalion was delighted.

Desert manoeuvres took place on 25 September. The battalion turned off east of [Garawla](#) and moved about 20 miles south into the desert over some rough ground. Troop movements were carried out with the artillery, the gunners using their radios. Reveille was at 4 a.m. next day and the troops pressed on to [Bir Shineina](#), the objective of an attack exercise on an enemy laager. The manoeuvre was not completely successful. The mortars were too far forward, the CO got a puncture, the attack was twenty minutes late, and it was too light to effect surprise. After breakfast at 8 a.m. the battalion returned to camp by 10.30. The wind blew all day.

During this period swimming was popular but at times dangerous. Breakers were strong and tricky rips got several men into difficulties. Private [Hopkins](#)<sup>6</sup> of Headquarters Company lost his life on 1 October. His body was recovered two days later and buried at Maaten [Baggush](#).

Saturday, 4 October, was the battalion's second birthday, and every man was 'shouted' a bottle of beer out of regimental funds. Celebrations were general. The following week the companies did range firing and an officer from I Army Tank Brigade gave a lecture on I tanks. The lecture was very interesting and the men were most attentive, although the lecturer did seem to harp on the things a tank could not do.

There had been more training than maintenance during the four weeks at [Baggush](#) and all ranks realised that a tremendous amount of work would have to be done if the Box was to be defended, a job few would have relished.

On 14 October the battalion took part in a divisional exercise based on a role the Division might have to undertake in the coming offensive—an attack on a heavily defended fortress covered by wire and mines. Two dummy fortresses, Sidi Clif and Bir Stella, based on air photographs of the Sidi and Libyan Omars, were prepared, wired, and covered by live minefields.

The 20th carried out an attack on Sidi Clif. An approach march of about 30 miles was made without vehicle lights and the brigade deployed under cover of darkness ready to attack at dawn. Under command of a tank officer who had a radio in his vehicle, tank drivers drove trucks which represented the tanks that would operate with the battalion in action. Three minutes before zero, at 6.57 a.m., a battery of 25-pounders opened fire on the marked position, firing smoke for ten minutes. The first wave of 'tanks' advanced from the start line at seven minutes before zero hour and arrived at the wire at 7.8 a.m. The first wave of infantry, A Company, went forward in trucks at zero hour, 7 a.m., and passed through the tanks just before reaching the enemy wire. The artillery failed to lift the smoke screen and smoke canisters were soon bouncing amongst the infantry, fortunately without causing casualties. The infantry debussed and hurled themselves over the dannert barbed wire with great spirit. Meanwhile the artillery had changed to high-explosive shells, firing on three 200-yard lifts, and the tanks engaged the defences from the outside. As soon as a section of engineers had made gaps for them through the wire and had cleared a path through the mines, the tanks entered and attacked. Mortars moved forward after A Company and took up positions to cover the advance. At timed intervals B and C Companies with a second echelon of tanks, and D Company with a third echelon, continued the attack. After the capture of the position the mortars, a platoon of machine guns, and a troop of anti-tank guns entered to consolidate and prepare for a counter-attack.

The attack was watched by perhaps the greatest number of brigadiers and generals ever seen by our troops. In the words of one soldier: 'There seemed to be every brass hat in the Middle East there.' The spectators were impressed with the accurate co-ordination of the various arms and the dash of the infantry. After the exercise all officers and sergeants were addressed by [General Freyberg](#), who introduced the new Army Commander, General Cunningham. At the conclusion of the exercise a very convincing demonstration was given by the CRE, [Colonel Clifton](#), and

a party of sappers on the method of blowing up a minefield and the use of Bangalore torpedoes to blow holes in barbed-wire entanglements.

In the early stages of this exercise a divisional order-of-the-day had notified the award of the Victoria Cross to Lieutenant Upham and to Sergeant Hulme <sup>7</sup> of 23 Battalion. Every man felt pleased that 'Charlie' Upham had received his just reward for his gallantry in Crete, and all were proud to belong to the same unit as this grand soldier.

For the next week or so parties of officers made trips up the desert to the forward areas to familiarise themselves with routes and to get some idea of conditions. These trips were to prove of value later during the approach march round the enemy's flank. It was during the first of these excursions that the BBC broadcast news of the award of the Victoria Cross to Sergeant Jack Hinton of C Company for his courageous action in the fighting at Kalamata. <sup>8</sup> A notice appeared in the unit lines: 'Join the 20th and get a V.C.'

Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows, who had left the battalion in September to command the Southern Infantry Training Depot at Maadi Camp, at once sent his unit's congratulations. The correspondence is worth quoting:

Headquarters,  
Southern NZ Inf Trg Depot,  
15 Oct 41

The Officer Commanding,  
20 Battalion.  
Dear Sir,

This Unit wishes to convey to you its sincere congratulations on the great honour won by the 20 Bn. 2/Lieut Upham's exploits are known now to every soldier in the NZ Forces and you and your Battalion may well feel proud of producing one of New Zealand's finest Officers.

As a South Island Unit we feel we may also be proud of him, and his actions in Crete will always be an example to Officers who hope to do the right thing when their test comes.

Yours faithfully,  
( Sgd) J. T. Burrows,  
Lieut-Colonel,  
Commanding S Inf Trg Depot

Headquarters,  
Southern Inf Trg Depot. 18 Oct 41

Memorandum for:

HQ  
20 Bn  
2 N.Z.E.F.

#### Honours & awards

Reference our communication ... dated 15 Oct 41; for 2/Lieut Upham read  
2/Lieut Upham and Sgt Hinton.

It would be a convenience to this Headquarters if in future the names of members of the 20th Bn who win Victoria Crosses be published in one list and not on different days as appears to be the present practice.

( Sgd) J. T. Burrows,  
Lieut-Colonel,  
Officer Commanding,  
S NZ Inf Trg Depot

This was certainly something to live up to, and after the realistic field exercises it might have been difficult to stimulate interest in training had not the Colonel conceived the idea of platoon competitions, judged by officers of the battalion. All forms of infantry training were tested: tactical exercise — [Colonel Kippenberger](#), Captain J. F. Phillips, and Second-Lieutenant A. P. Boyle; platoon inspection—Major Mitchell; platoon weapons, tools and stores—Captain Fountaine; platoon drill—Major J. W. McKergow (he had succeeded Major Burrows as second-in-command), RSM Wilson, CSMs A. Brookes, R. W. Goodall, and H. Krogh; assault course—Captain Manchester and CSM Grooby; military knowledge—Second-Lieutenant C. O. D. Roberts; grenade throwing—Second-Lieutenant L. M. Uttley; alarm post—Major Orr,

Second-Lieutenant R. W. A. Beauchamp, and CSM R. E. O. Anderson.

The competitions culminated in a platoon attack. Each platoon paraded in battle order and was told to be the advanced guard of the battalion in an attack on [Garawla](#). The platoon commander disposed his men and decided on his starting time in order to pass a stated point at the time laid down. At different points en route officers were posted to give verbal situations —air attack from the sea, platoon under fire, etc.—and points were awarded according to the platoon and section commanders' reactions and their orders.

The winning platoon was No. 15 (Second-Lieutenant Upham), with No. 8 ([Second-Lieutenant Ormond](#)) <sup>9</sup> second, and No. 16 ([Second-Lieutenant Abbott](#)) <sup>10</sup> third. Each man in the winning platoon received six ounces of New Zealand tobacco, with lesser quantities for the men of the second and third platoons.

With the approach of winter many of the men had taken to wearing woollen balaclavas, usually rolled up and worn like a skull cap. It was a practice that the Colonel did not approve of, and on the battalion's return to camp after the field exercise in mid-October a sharp notice in his routine orders left no doubt of his views. The order ran:

Balaclavas: The balaclava is an unhealthy, unsightly and unsoldierly headgear. It is suitable for wear when sleeping outside, or driving or riding when exposed to very cold weather. It will be worn under these conditions only and the childish practice of wearing a balaclava whenever there is any 'nip' in the air will cease forthwith. It is better not worn at all.

By 6 October plans for the second Libyan offensive had been made. Briefly, [Eighth Army](#) was to take [Cyrenaica](#), the immediate objectives being the destruction of the enemy armoured forces by our own and the relief of [Tobruk](#). It was estimated that the Axis forces in [Cyrenaica](#) numbered 110,000 men, with approximately 300 medium tanks and 1140 field and anti-tank guns. Apart from a force of Stuka dive-bombers, the enemy air force was mainly Italian and slightly inferior to the [RAF](#) in numbers. The newly-formed [Eighth Army](#) with its 500-odd cruiser tanks, 200 infantry tanks, and 100 or more light tanks, supported by about 500 aircraft, was expected to outnumber the enemy in tanks and at least match him in the air.

[Eighth Army](#) was divided into three groups. Thirtieth Corps (the armour) was to seek out and destroy the enemy armour and then relieve [Tobruk](#). Thirteenth Corps, which included 4 Indian Division, the New Zealand Division and I Armoured Brigade, was to advance north, isolate the enemy's frontier forces and later mop up to the west. Far to the south the [Oasis Group](#) force was to deceive the enemy by moving from Giarabub the day before the main battle began. In addition the [Tobruk](#) garrison — [70 Division](#) with various supporting units, including the Polish Carpathian Brigade and 32 Army Tank Brigade— would come under command of [30 Corps](#) when the breakout operation became feasible.

On 4 November a brigade ceremonial parade was held on the [19 Battalion](#) football ground at which the Commander-in-Chief, [Middle East](#), General Sir Claude Auchinleck, presented decorations won in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#). After a brief inspection the General pinned ribbons on the tunics of Lieutenant-Colonel [Kippenberger](#), DSO, and Lieutenant [Upham](#), VC.

Time was now running out and many officers and men went away on leave, returning to the unit just in time to make final preparations for the impending battle, although they were not then aware of the situation. Some of the men in the later leave drafts got an inkling that something was afoot and returned before they were due. Sergeant-Major [Grooby](#) and Sergeant [Vincent](#) of C Company, at Base Depot after spells in hospital, returned with the CO in his car.

One of the last events to take place before the Division moved west was the long-awaited rugby match between South Africa and New Zealand. This was an excellent game and resulted in a win for New Zealand by 8 points to nil. No 20 Battalion representatives were in the team.

On 11 November the great move forward began, 5 Brigade being the first to leave [Baggush](#). The Division's training had been hard, thorough and complete, and morale was high. 'We felt like runners, tense for the pistol,' the Colonel later wrote.

The battalion moved out next day from [Baggush](#) with all ranks not normally on tactical vehicles aboard 3-ton lorries of 4 RMT Company. The route was along the main road, bypassing [Mersa Matruh](#), and down the [Siwa](#) road for approximately 30 miles before turning west into the desert. For another ten miles or so the battalion

moved with ease in its now familiar desert formation of nine vehicles abreast with 100 to 150 yards between them. The five company commanders with the CO in the centre were in line abreast across the front. A halt was made during the late afternoon for the remainder of the brigade group to form up. No further move was made until the morning of the 15th, when the troops again embussed and moved forward 50 miles. The Division, moving as one force for the first time in the war, was now approaching the frontier wire; greater caution would now have to be taken and all future moves were to be made by night.

The first of these was made on the night of 16-17 November and the second the following night when a little over 25 miles was covered. The procedure followed was for the provost section and the intelligence officers to move out during the day and leave two men with a petrol tin and lamp every half-mile along the route. These lamps would be lit just before the transport was due to arrive. The guide officer would then move along these lights during the night move, a feat not quite as simple as it sounds. It was during the move of 18-19 November, soon after passing through the gap in the frontier wire, that the line of lights was lost and the IO, Lieutenant 'Paddy' Boyle,<sup>11</sup> gave his now famous order to his driver, Harry Bretherton: '270 degrees, Green Light or Colonel Glasgow, head for the open, Harry.' However, the battalion veered more and more to the right until the head of the column was almost facing back to Egypt. Brigadier Inglis moved up to find out why. After a brief reconnaissance the CO led the whole brigade to complete the loop and came back on to the line of lights again. Very few realised next morning that anything untoward had happened during the night.

The difficulties of night-time moves in the desert are described by the Colonel in Infantry Brigadier:

Apart from these difficulties the night moves were not easy. We used no lights and most desert is bumpy and uneven. Leading vehicles travelled at two and a half miles in the hour but there was unavoidable concertinaing, and the tail of a long column usually had to move in fits and starts at anything up to twenty miles an hour. Twenty miles was a long night march under normal conditions. The drivers could see nothing of the ground in front, those back in the column could only follow their leaders. One was constantly slithering down over steep banks, bumping against hummocks, falling heavily into abandoned slit trenches, or getting stuck in soft sand.

But every difficulty would be surmounted, the lights were always found in the end, and a few minutes after daylight we halted and dispersed and every truck brewed up for breakfast. During the day the stragglers and cripples were brought in by the indefatigable L.A.D., <sup>12</sup> and next night the performance would start again. The men could sleep during the day, but there were conferences and affairs of various kinds for commanders, and I was very short of sleep before the battle opened.

After covering the required distance in such moves the convoy would halt for the night in close order. Companies posted sentries and all others settled down to sleep until dawn, when the companies would move forward to their dispersal areas, dig in, have breakfast, shave, and rest until evening again.

The 19th November was spent quietly in 'enemy country' a few miles south of the Libyan Sheferzen and a move north of about ten miles in the afternoon brought the Division close to the Trigh el Abd. Defensive positions for the night had to be prepared and dusk had fallen before the company commanders could complete their reconnaissance. The following morning preparations were being made for another move when a warning was received to prepare to meet an armoured attack from the north-west. The [Divisional Cavalry](#), which had been moving in front but out of sight of the Division, sent back its second echelon transport, which halted immediately in front of the 20th's defensive positions. Two enemy planes flew over during the morning and were greeted with a great deal of fire from the Bofors guns distributed throughout the Division.

The enemy armoured attack did not develop and shortly after 10 a.m. next day (the 21st) orders were received for each brigade group to move to its respective task. It was the last time during the campaign that the Division was to be concentrated.

The officers on the battalion strength when it moved into Libya were:

CO	<a href="#">Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger</a>
Second-in-Command	<a href="#">Maj J. W. McKergow *</a>
Adjutant	<a href="#">Capt G. A. T. Rhodes</a>
RMO	<a href="#">Capt W. L. M. Gilmour</a>
Padre	<a href="#">Rev. G. A. D. Spence</a>

## Company commanders:

HQ Company	Maj R. S. Orr
A Company	Maj T. H. Mitchell
B Company	Capt R. E. Agar
C Company	Capt D. J. Fountaine
D Company	Capt K. G. Manchester
	Capt J. F. Baker
	Capt J. F. Phillips
	Capt E. R. Chesterman
	Lt G. Baker (Anti-Aircraft Platoon)
	Lt E. W. Bolwell (QM)
	2 Lt C. H. Upham *
	2 Lt P. V. H. Maxwell *
	2 Lt N. J. McPhail
	2 Lt R. J. Abbott
	2 Lt J. A. T. Shand *
	2 Lt J. S. Harper
	2 Lt E. A. Shand *
	2 Lt A. R. Guthrey (Carrier Platoon)
	2 Lt E. M. Wilson
	2 Lt M. Heenan
	2 Lt T. D. White
	2 Lt G. F. Dunne
	2 Lt G. Mills (Pioneer Platoon)
	2 Lt R. W. A. Beauchamp (Transport Platoon)
	2 Lt A. P. Boyle (IO)
	2 Lt A. R. Ormond
	2 Lt L. M. Uttley (Mortar Platoon)
	2 Lt J. D. Gibb *
	2 Lt C. O. D. Roberts (Signals Platoon)

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<sup>1</sup> Capt J. G. Tryon; North Wales; born France, 5 Nov 1907; sheep-farmer.

<sup>2</sup> Capt K. G. Manchester; Waimate; born Waimate 5 Jul 1910; secretary; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>3</sup> Captain Cameron was succeeded almost immediately by Captain G. A. T. Rhodes.

<sup>4</sup> Captain Agar did not join the battalion until 7 July.

<sup>5</sup> Maj E. R. Chesterman, m.i.d.; born NZ 21 Aug 1914; school-teacher; killed in action 5 July 1942.

<sup>6</sup> Pte D. H. Hopkins; born East Taieri, 30 Jan 1919; labourer; died on active service I Oct 1941.

<sup>7</sup> WO II A. C. Hulme, VC; Te Puke; born Dunedin, 24 Jan 1911; farmer; wounded 28 May 1941.

<sup>8</sup> The citations for the VCs awarded to Lt Upham and Sgt Hinton are printed as [Appendix I](#).

<sup>9</sup> Capt A. R. Ormond; Culverden, North Canterbury; born Mahia, 29 Nov 1907; farmer; p.w. I Dec 1941.

<sup>10</sup> Maj R. J. Abbott; Christchurch; born England, 16 Oct 1915; commercial traveller; wounded 27 Nov 1941; now Regular Force.

<sup>11</sup> Maj A. P. Boyle, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 7 Jan 1905; stock agent; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

<sup>12</sup> Light Aid Detachment, a section specially equipped for the recovery and repair of vehicles.

\* These six officers and about 60 other ranks were left behind at Baggush as reserves or to form the nucleus of a new unit in the event of heavy casualties.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 7 – CAMPAIGN IN LIBYA

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **Campaign in Libya**

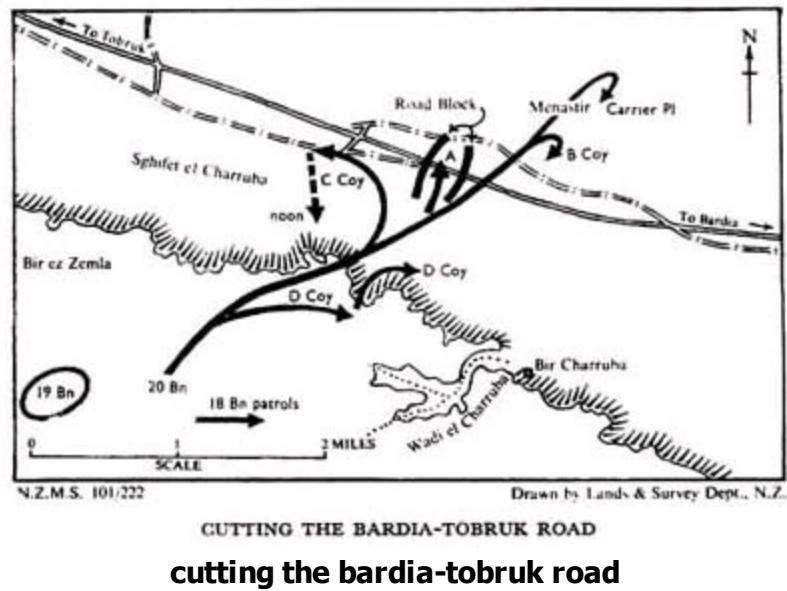
At 1.30 p.m. on 21 November the battalion began a long move northwards at the head of 4 Brigade, which had been given the task of cutting the road between [Bardia](#) and [Tobruk](#). Light rain fell about 5.30 p.m., making the going very heavy. The country had become waterlogged after a storm a few nights earlier and many trucks bogged and had to be pulled out by the Bren carriers. Near [Sidi Azeiz](#) about midnight a deep trench—most probably an anti-tank ditch—hindered progress. After a desperate struggle most of the convoy crossed, but when 240 vehicles were found to be missing the brigade halted till 1.30 a.m. Pushing northwards again, the convoy at 5 a.m. reached a point within half a mile of Bir ez Zemla and a mile west of [Menastir](#). The brigade halted and shook out into its daytime formation.

The CO ordered A Company to go down the escarpment on foot to cut the road and break communication between [Bardia](#) and [Tobruk](#) but not to damage the surface of the road. B Company was to patrol the area on top of the escarpment, which at this point was some 150 to 200 feet high.

A Company moved up to and almost over the escarpment in trucks; Major Mitchell's truck actually put two wheels over and had to be towed back. The company at once debussed and moved down—7 Platoon first in extended order under [Lieutenant Dunne](#),<sup>1</sup> followed by 8 and 9 Platoons. Reaching the bottom the company formed up, 7 Platoon extended in front, 8 and 9 Platoons in section files in the rear. A Company was completely out on its own. There was wireless silence till dawn, no telephone communication, and no support could be expected before daylight.

At the bottom of the escarpment the company found tents and trucks from a German divisional workshops. The platoons passed through and moved on about 1000 yards to the road, wheeled right, and advanced about 500 yards until they found a crossroads and cut the telephone wires. Company Headquarters was sited in camouflaged positions already prepared by the enemy. No. 7 Platoon was astride the road and facing [Bardia](#), 8 Platoon facing north astride the crossroads, and 9 Platoon facing west towards [Tobruk](#). The company was on the outskirts of a field hospital

which had been evacuated, and from which valuable equipment was obtained and later handed to the MO.



Platoons were in position by daylight, and soon afterwards an enemy truck which approached from Bardia was engaged by 7 Platoon. During the day eight or nine trucks from Bardia and two or three from Tobruk were shot up. The last truck captured in the afternoon was A6 which had been left in Greece. It had been repaired and used by the Germans; Captain Washbourn's respirator was found to be still hanging in the cab. One shot had damaged the steering gear but it was repaired by the carrier platoon. The truck was used by the battalion throughout the campaign and returned afterwards to Baggush. All captured trucks were hidden in a depression.

At 10 a.m. Major Mitchell, with one section from each platoon, moved off to the west to clear out any pockets of enemy along the escarpment. Two sections of carriers had gone down to the road to support the company and to sweep between the road and the sea, three miles away. One carrier ran over a mine, the driver being wounded, and another capsized while going down the escarpment but was later righted without damage. Several Italian trucks, destroyed by A Company, were dragged off the road by the carriers. From some of these the men obtained food, liquor, and tobacco. It was obvious that the enemy had been completely surprised —‘the stretch of country we overlooked resembled a disturbed ant’s nest,’ wrote the Brigade Commander—but there was still a good deal to do.

B Company soon after first light was ordered to move down the escarpment and mop up between it and the road, where there were groups of enemy and trucks dug into pens. The company moved off quickly and the enemy appeared to be too surprised to offer much resistance. In a wadi below the escarpment were three small lorries, used as German officers' quarters. Before the attack all companies had been informed of the types of enemy equipment likely to be of use to the intelligence section and great stress had been laid on the value of maps, particularly of the [Agedabia](#) area. One of the trucks contained maps and air photographs which were duly handed over to the 'I' section. Another, which had evidently been abandoned in great haste, contained a large payroll and mail from [Germany](#).

Half a mile to the east on the edge of the escarpment was a group of tents, more transport, and some flurried enemy troops. While B Company was busy below the escarpment, D Company was ordered to go right up to the camp in its lorries and go in with the bayonet. This was done and the men debussed and moved in extended order through the tented area, but the occupants had decamped 500 yards ahead of the attackers, just as it was growing light enough to see them. The company then turned left, moved down the escarpment, and engaged enemy across the flat to the north, firing as targets appeared. Approximately forty prisoners were captured; some of them were forced to part with their braces, partly to hinder any attempts to escape and partly to meet the needs of some of our own men who had recently been issued with new battledress but with no braces.

C Company, meanwhile, had been held in reserve. The area towards [Bardia](#) appeared to be clear but there were still some enemy troops west of A Company—a hastily-formed battle group under a Captain Briel charged with covering the evacuation of [21 Panzer Division](#)'s supply dumps. The CO then ordered C Company to go down and mop up these parties and warned the gunners to be ready to give support. C Company moved down the escarpment and was crossing the flat when heavy rain fell, turning the surface into a clay bog. Suddenly six armoured half-track carriers appeared from the direction of [Tobruk](#) and the company was pinned down by the fire of their 20-millimetre cannon and by machine-gun fire. Platoons continued to advance by fire and movement, crossing the fireswept road towards the camp west of A Company. [Sergeant Bob May](#),<sup>2</sup> commanding 15 Platoon, reported AFVs approaching along tracks north of the road. It was obviously impossible to go further

over the flat ground in front without incurring heavy casualties. In addition, most of the Brens were out of action through being clogged with mud as the men went to ground, and even rifles jammed. Captain Fountaine sent a runner to Colonel Kippenberger to ask for artillery support as the anti-tank troop was under A Company's command. There was some delay before the guns opened up, and as the enemy was closing in fast the company commander skilfully side-stepped the platoons up the tank-proof escarpment, where they re-formed. A Company was now in danger, but the artillery came into action and the enemy at once withdrew.

On going back to Brigade Headquarters Colonel Kippenberger was told to take a squadron of Valentine tanks (A Squadron 8 Royal Tanks) and counter-attack as he thought fit. About 3 p.m. the attack was repeated. The tanks moved down the steep track, faced westwards astride the road and advanced steadily, supported by fire from two field batteries. C Company followed the tanks and the enemy infantry surrendered as they were overrun. D Company mopped up the wadis along the face of the escarpment, encountering groups of enemy who surrendered readily.

B Company had embussed and, with four mortars, was waiting to move west along the escarpment to cut off the enemy on the flat. The men had a grandstand view of C Company's attack and it was, to quote Lieutenant McPhail, 'such a pretty sight that we stood up on our trucks and cheered.' Suddenly several explosions were heard. It was then discovered that the battalion had laagered the previous night in an Italian minefield. The move westwards was made cautiously after a lane had been cleared. Apparently the tank commanders did not know the whole story, for when B Company appeared on the escarpment ready to plunge down on the enemy at the appropriate time it was engaged by the tanks' gunners and driven to cover. Finally, B, C, and D Companies, with the tank squadron, assembled on top of the escarpment. The day's 'bag' of prisoners totalled 1 German officer and 17 other ranks, 6 Italian officers and about 300 other ranks; the battalion's losses were one man (Private Hill-Rennie) killed and not more than five wounded. Rations were low but nearly all the men gave some to feed the prisoners. A Company, with some two-pounders, was left in position that night on the road.

During this action the rest of 4 Brigade had begun to move westwards to [Gambut](#). The battalion was to be relieved next day by the 22nd and rejoin the brigade.

On the morning of 23 November advance parties of 22 Battalion arrived and were shown the 20th dispositions. Some time before 11 a.m. a truck was seen approaching A Company at high speed from the west. It proved to be driven by the commander of the tank squadron attached to the 20th. He reported that while searching the German camp he and his sergeant-major had been made prisoner. He had escaped in his truck, but three boxes of codes and squadron records had been lost. Major Mitchell sent ten Bren carriers under Lieutenant [Guthrey](#)<sup>3</sup> to search westwards but on no account to become engaged. The boxes were found and security preserved.

While this was happening the CO wirelessed for the carrier platoon and the attached anti-tank two-pounder section to return as the battalion was moving off immediately. A Company was to move off when relieved by a company of 22 Battalion. Two men were left on the escarpment with instructions for the company.

When the carrier platoon returned just before 11 a.m. it came under long-range tank fire. The carriers moved up the escarpment but the anti-tank guns, under severe fire, were unable to do so; they took up defensive positions at the foot of the escarpment, firing at 1500 yards at German tanks<sup>4</sup> and lorried infantry which were approaching A Company and held them at bay. Everyone in the company was pleased when the 25-pounders began ranging on the enemy. The guns had been ready to move but, seeing the threat to A Company, they dropped their trails where they stood and opened rapid and accurate fire. C and D Companies were ordered to debus and move down the escarpment to support A Company, but were not to advance too far. The men were fired on as they dropped over the escarpment but were not bothered any further. When the tank squadron made its way down about a quarter past eleven the enemy hastily withdrew.

At 1.30 p.m. the battalion was ordered to move 15 miles to the south-west to meet [Divisional Headquarters](#) at Point 213 (by Bir el Hariga) on the [Trigh Capuzzo](#), the road from [Capuzzo](#) to [Tobruk](#). By now 22 Battalion had arrived and A Company and the tanks were hurriedly recalled. The battalion formed up in desert formation and moved off.

After a detour to avoid a camel train—in the distance it appeared a much more

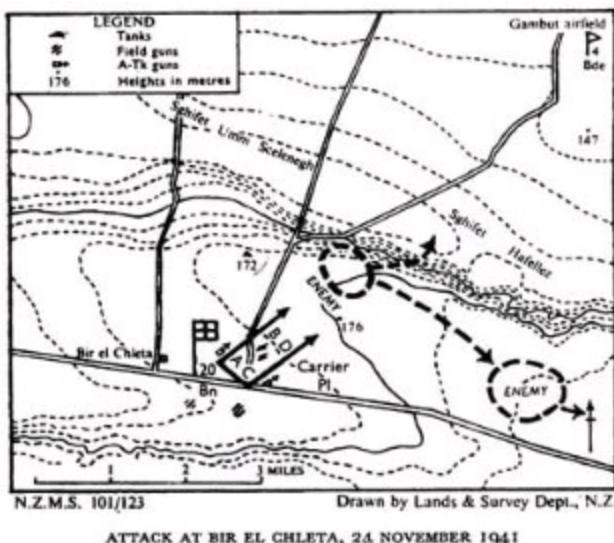
formidable convoy — the battalion reached Point 213 about 4 p.m. and joined Divisional Headquarters and 21 Battalion. Here General Freyberg informed the CO that 6 Brigade was heavily engaged on Sidi Rezegh, 5 Brigade was staying to contain Bardia and Sollum, and 4 Brigade, less the 20th, was by then at Gambut airfield. Divisional Headquarters with 20 and 21 Battalions was to move by night for about 30 miles and join 4 and 6 Brigades. An enemy force to the west at Gasr el Arid would have to be by-passed. This move proved to be a difficult piece of navigation. Fireworks were seen to the south-west and enemy flares of all colours were going up in all directions. The column moved warily in close desert formation. Orders were that if opposition was encountered the troops were to debus and go in with the bayonet. Some men carried their bayonets fixed in the trucks, a practice not without its dangers in crowded vehicles bumping over the uneven desert on a dark night, but no enemy was met. Halting every half-hour to check distances and bearings, Colonel Kippenberger led the convoy on a wide detour and successfully arrived at Bir el Chleta about midnight. Twenty-first Battalion took up positions on the escarpment overlooking Bir el Chleta while the rest of the group dug in and had several hours' sleep.

Soon after daylight next day, 24 November, the battalion was ordered to move to Point 172, a mile or so to the north, and link up with 4 Brigade, which was then at Gambut and preparing to move westwards, parallel with 6 Brigade's advance on the Sidi Rezegh escarpment. Carriers sent out to reconnoitre a track suitable for lorries down the escarpment above Gambut encountered seven enemy armoured cars, engaged them, but were outgunned and forced to withdraw. By this time the enemy group by-passed during the night had followed up and was shelling the laager from the north-east. General Freyberg ordered the 20th to drive it away.

The battalion carriers moved a mile to the east to form a screen. The CO went out to reconnoitre and decided to make a frontal attack with tanks leading, the infantry following in their trucks, and machine guns, anti-tank guns, and carriers giving covering fire from the right flank. As this type of attack had been well practised before the campaign, though not with those particular tanks, orders were simple. The battalion was to form up in trucks with its right flank on the road, D and B Companies leading on a front of 1000 yards. C and A Companies would line up 600 yards behind them, with Battalion Headquarters and the mortar platoon immediately

behind again. When the forming up was completed the tanks were to pass through in line abreast and advance at ten miles an hour on a bearing of 40 degrees, the infantry following. If the tanks were checked the infantry would debus, pass through and assault. Fourth Field Regiment would support with observed fire. In the favourite phrase of the CO, 'speed and violence' were the essence of the attack.

While the battalion was forming up the CO went in a carrier to Point 172, on the edge of the escarpment above Gambut. Returning to Bir el Chleta he found the tanks moving off. Unfortunately they came under fire from another enemy group to the east and, advancing on a bearing 'more like seventy degrees than the prescribed forty', observed the carrier platoon moving to its support position on the right flank and fired on it, knocking out two carriers.



**attack at bir el chleta, 24 november 1941**

The attack began promptly at 11.20 a.m. but the guns opened on the wrong target, the larger enemy group farther to the east. The machine-gun platoon, mortars, and the carriers had by this time got well forward and came into action, the mortars putting down an 'area shoot' lasting about twenty minutes. The enemy replied with guns, mortars, and automatics, whereupon the tanks swung on to their correct course, slackened speed and opened fire. Several were hit and blazed up. Others stopped but were ordered into the attack again. Meanwhile the RMT drivers, keen to 'have a go', were obviously enjoying themselves and drove with great dash over the stony going, disregarding the enemy fire until ordered to halt. The rifle platoons then debussed, deployed, and moved through to assault as the tanks

slowed down.

Second-Lieutenant Evan Wilson <sup>5</sup> describes D Company's part in the attack:

When fired on the Company debussed and advanced in extended order by fire and movement. The tanks, when fired on, fanned out and slowed down, seven being hit.

Enemy fire was heavy but high, coming from armoured cars dug in and supported by machine guns. There was little cover and had the enemy range been correct their fire would have stopped the company. We proceeded to within 500 yards of the enemy when the Company Commander ordered us to halt. At this stage I called forward two mortar men, Privates W. Hanna <sup>6</sup> and W. Jamieson. <sup>7</sup> Estimating the range at 500 yards [the maximum for the 2-inch mortar] I told them to engage the German positions.... Considering that there was no cover whatsoever the Company's position was rather critical. However, a string of mortar bombs was laid along the enemy positions, two machine gun positions being silenced and one gun crew wounded. It was a most amazing performance for the 2-inch mortar.

At this stage the Bren carriers, which were some 400 yards to our rear advanced. Before they reached us the AFV's were retreating and the gun crews were walking forward to surrender. We did not proceed further and the Bren carriers combed the enemy position. A section of our Machine Gun Company then arrived, but, uncertain as to the identity of several retreating vehicles, could not be induced to engage them until too late. I doubt if the surrender and retreat of this enemy force could have been hoped for had they not had a clear view of a very large group of our transport to our rear, that is, on the rising ground to the south. Our casualties were none killed and only a few wounded. Receiving orders from the Company Commander to withdraw, we returned to our vehicles.

B Company was similarly engaged on the left flank, where anti-tank shells fired at our tanks were falling short and bouncing past its ranks. As the company neared the objective the enemy broke and ran. After most of the opposition had been silenced one gun was still firing and Colonel Kippenberger said he wanted it stopped. Lieutenant McPhail jumped into a Bren carrier, which advanced on a zigzag course firing bursts from the Bren gun. The mortar platoon also gave support. The crew of

the gun, a German 88-millimetre, were finally all wounded or killed. A grenade was exploded in the barrel but had little effect. The tyres were slashed, sights, handles and wheels smashed, but the gun and its platform were difficult to destroy. Two staff cars were discovered, but when the carrier crew tried to drive one away it was found that the tyres had been punctured by Bren fire.

C and A Companies also debussed and moved through the stationary tanks, coming under small-arms and anti-tank fire at the western end of the enemy position. The forward platoons attacked but the engagement was over before they got to close quarters. Sergeant May, commanding 15 Platoon, was wounded and was evacuated under protest after being hit three times. Sergeant Vincent of C Company noticed that the German machine-gun crews wore overalls that blended perfectly with the landscape. In his opinion the attack went off just like the exercises the battalion had often practised for an attack by lorried infantry.

The enemy was routed and heading fast eastwards. The battalion marched back to the lorries and embussed. Its total casualties for the action were 2 killed and 17 wounded. Enemy weapons captured included one 88-millimetre gun and two anti-tank guns. Seven of the fifteen Valentines were casualties, but their recovery vehicles came up and several were soon runners again. A detail of Bren carriers was sent to mop up and, though fired on by our own artillery and mortars, luckily had no casualties. They reported enemy and asked for assistance but were recalled. Two hundred prisoners were rounded up by the tanks; left without transport, they were waiting to surrender. An additional sixty who had withdrawn over the escarpment were captured by Captain Quilter,<sup>8</sup> who was coming from Brigade Headquarters in a Bren carrier up the track east of Point 172.

Once more the battalion formed up in desert formation and moved west to link up with 4 Brigade, halting about dusk astride the Trigh Capuzzo approximately 4000 yards east of Point 175. Defensive positions were taken up for the night with three companies forward. A Company on the left was to make contact with 6 Brigade on the escarpment. No enemy was seen, but the Divisional Headquarters defence platoon which had moved forward of the battalion positions just before dusk was driven back by enemy fire.

Next morning, 25 November, the advance was continued until the battalion was

nearly level with a prominent square stone building, subsequently known as the Blockhouse, near the edge of Sidi Rezegh escarpment on Point 167. The Bren carriers with the CO were advancing a mile ahead of the trucks. A herd of gazelles sprang out of the bushes and raced nimbly ahead. Suddenly the carriers were fired on at short range by a well-concealed anti-tank gun, probably sited in the mouth of Rugbet en Nbeidat. Other fire from the right was at first thought to have come from 18 Battalion's area. Corporal Tom Veitch put his steel helmet on his rifle, the recognition signal, but this was promptly knocked out of his hand by the next shell. Two of the Bren carriers, those commanded by Sergeant Kimber and Corporal Veitch, were hit and both drivers and a gunner wounded. The survivors jumped out and endeavoured to reply with Bren-gun fire from the ground but were forced by enemy machine-gun fire to withdraw. When a lull came they tried to rescue the wounded men and were immediately engaged. Corporals Scott<sup>9</sup> and Lumsden<sup>10</sup> coolly manoeuvred their carriers alongside the knocked-out vehicles under heavy anti-tank and machine-gun fire. Two of the wounded were transferred but the third was killed when his carrier was hit by two more shells. The carrier platoon's commander, Lieutenant Guthrey, won the MC for his part in this and earlier actions.

The rifle companies, with A Company on the left and B and C Companies on its right, had also come under fire and debussed on the order of the CO. Nos. 7 and 8 Platoons went forward in extended order, but after 1000 yards had been covered they came under heavy machine-gun fire from the front and from the escarpment and were halted. They remained in these positions till dusk. No. 9 Platoon, which was following 500 yards in the rear, moved up Rugbet en Nbeidat on to the escarpment to attack the Blockhouse but was checked by machine-gun fire. The mortar platoon meanwhile shelled the Blockhouse.

The other companies had taken up positions on the flat when a further advance of 1000 yards was ordered. Heavy fire was encountered, and when B Company prepared to dig in it was found impossible to bring up the company transport with the entrenching tools closer than some 400 yards. Sergeant Lochhead,<sup>11</sup> of one of the forward platoons, returned to the trucks and collected the tools and distributed them to his platoon. He was in full view of the enemy and under fire the whole time.

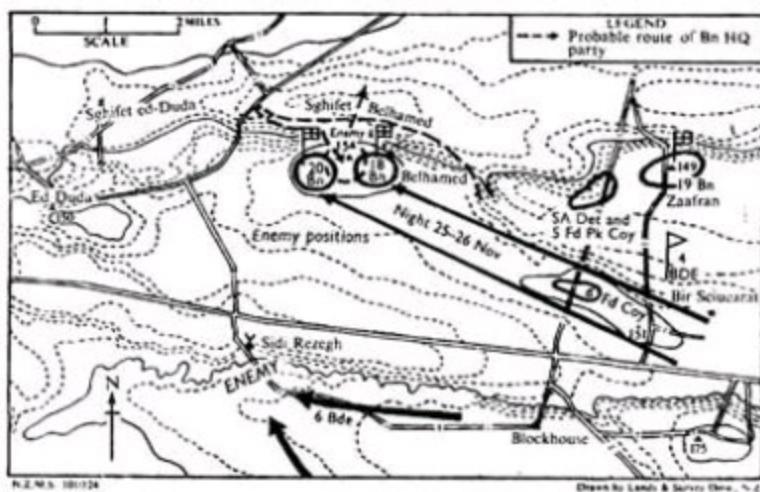
The Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant Boyle, went up the escarpment to discover the position to the left of the battalion where 6 Brigade had had some hard fighting

at Point 175 and at the Blockhouse. Point 175 had been captured the day before but a dawn attack on the Blockhouse by 24 Battalion had been halted on the western slopes of Rugbet en Nbeidat. A combined attack from the south by elements of 24 and 26 Battalions succeeded in capturing it later in the morning.

Boyle returned from his reconnaissance with the news that 24 and 25 Battalions were now under joint command. Later, Sergeant Allison of the 'I' section while taking a message to 26 Battalion was impressed with the numbers of dead Germans in their trenches and the large groups coming in to surrender. Padre Spence went over to 6 Brigade and came sadly back after burying eighty of its dead.

The battalion was on a dead flat plain overlooked by the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment to the south and its orders were not to press on against opposition. Firing continued throughout the day and about 4 p.m. enemy dive-bombers attacked Divisional Headquarters and A Company. There were no casualties in A Company but [Divisional Headquarters](#) lost vehicles and men.

Lieutenants Wilson and [Heenan](#)<sup>12</sup> were ordered to search the country on either side of the road and for over half a mile ahead of the forward companies in order to locate enemy mortars against which they could lead fighting patrols after dark. This was a dangerous reconnaissance and for that reason was given to officers. They reconnoitred, planned the route to be taken by their patrols, and returned through the forward companies, who were withdrawing to less exposed positions under heavy fire. During this withdrawal Sergeant Lochhead acted as rearguard for B Company. When checking his platoon he found that one of his men was missing. Without hesitation he returned to the forward lines, advancing over ground still swept by machine-gun and mortar fire, located the soldier, who was wounded, and carried him back to safety.



NIGHT ADVANCE TO BELHAMED, 25-26 NOVEMBER 1941

### night advance to belhamed, 25-26 november 1941

At dusk a warning order was received from Brigade for a night attack and the night's patrols were cancelled. Companies closed in to a battalion laager and were given a hot meal. Colonel Kippenberger reached Brigade Headquarters at six, and his own account <sup>13</sup> gives the best picture:

Inglis's orders were short and to the point. 18 and 20 Battalions were to seize and hold Belhamed, I was to be in command, make



the arrangements, and continue to command on the hill after its capture. 6 Brigade was attacking along Sidi Rezegh and we were to advance simultaneously with them at 9 o'clock. There was no question of artillery support; it had to be a straightforward night attack with the bayonet. The guns would, however, fire small concentrations at intervals to help us keep direction.

Belhamed was another escarpment, very steep on the northern side and then falling away very gently for four miles to the foot of Sidi Rezegh. On our approach we

would have to cross a wadi running at an angle to our line of advance and then ascend a moderate slope. I expected difficulty in keeping direction for the 6,000 yards of the advance.

Inglis gave me precise objectives and then rather soberly wished me luck. Jan Peart<sup>14</sup> was commanding the Eighteenth, and he and I discussed the plan of attack. We settled on a start-line and Paddy Boyle went off to lay it and guiding tape for the battalions to move up on, no easy task. We decided to attack with the two battalions side by side, Eighteenth on the right, each with two companies forward extended to four paces, the other companies following similarly extended 400 yards behind.

It was nearly 8 o'clock when I got back to the Twentieth. The companies had come in from their positions, had a meal, and were assembling. I gave my orders to the company commanders, A and D Companies<sup>15</sup> to lead, Mitchell to take command if I was hit... When all the companies were assembled, sitting quietly together in the brilliant moonlight, I spoke to them. It was a tense moment. We all knew that desperate fighting was very close ahead. I told the men what the objective was and the plan, that our success would mean the relief of Tobruk, and that we would go through at all costs and then hold the hill against all comers. I ended by saying: 'And now I want only to wish you good luck, every man of you.' It was a very wonderful thing to hear the response: 'Good luck to you, Sir.'

The companies moved off along the guiding tape and formed up on the start line. Eighteenth Battalion arrived, the commanders checked up, and at 10 p.m. the CO gave the forward companies the order to move. The long lines moved resolutely forward, bayonets fixed and rifles at the port, and quickly disappeared into the darkness. The supporting companies approached, crunched past, well-spaced, steady, and very determined looking. Battalion Headquarters with the anti-aircraft platoon and two trucks of mines followed.

The actual attack is described by Second-Lieutenant Wilson of D Company:

The going was comparatively flat except for a wadi running across the line of the advance at an angle. After about 600 yards the forward posts of the enemy were encountered. As we advanced we came upon row after row of machine guns but we just went through everything. At the first bursts of tracer men halted, crouched for a

second, but without going to ground, and then ran in under the tracer with the bayonet. Some Germans surrendered when approached, dropping their guns just when they would have been effective at close quarters, some ran, but others drew pistols or picked up rifles and tried to club with them. It was a wild night. My platoon went forward with cries of 'Otago!' and giving no quarter. Numbers of the enemy were without boots and had obviously not expected to be attacked.... Casualties had been comparatively light.

During the impetuous advance in the darkness contact with the 18th had been lost. When Battalion Headquarters did not appear Major Mitchell took command, moved the forward companies on, and finally halted the battalion on the south-west slope of [Belhamed](#). The companies were disposed with C on the right and half of D on the left, both facing west, B Company and half of D faced south, and A Company on the right of B was in reserve. The digging was hard and little depth had been achieved by daylight. In most cases men could manage only a shallow trench with a built-up perimeter of rocks, forming a 'sangar'. The absence of Battalion Headquarters, and especially of the CO, was disturbing.

[Colonel Kippenberger](#) describes how his party became separated from the battalion:

.... after travelling 2000 yards we reached the wadi. It was shallow and not very wide, but the trucks had to pick their way and, without my noticing it, they and my whole party emerged on the other side some hundreds of yards north of the original course. A few flares were going up ahead but there was still no firing and we pressed on. A few hundred yards on Allison, my young Intelligence sergeant, told me that he had lost touch with the companies. He was on the correct bearing, 282 degrees. Neither of us realized what had happened at the wadi crossing and we hurried on. Soon the loom of high ground appeared to our left—how far away it was impossible to tell—and a moment later the flash and sparkle of tracer. In an instant the top of the hill was sizzling with tracer criss-crossing in all directions—and faint and clear and distant we could hear the high-pitched yell of charging infantry. Still quite unsuspecting of what we had done, I said, 'That's 6th Brigade going in on [Sidi Rezegh](#)', and we hurried on more anxiously than ever, momentarily expecting the roar of battle to break out ahead. The clamour to our left swelled and sank and swelled again. We heard the incessant hammering chatter of many automatics, the

'whang' of grenades, yells and screams, but all seemed far away. We were fired on from our right but took no notice and hurried on, almost running. Then I was startled by bursts of tracer over our heads from the high ground and at the same moment found myself on a bitumen road.

I instantly realized what had happened. In crossing the wadi we had swung to the right and had thenceforward moved parallel with the assaulting battalions and outside their right flank. We had gone through a gap in the enemy line, the high ground was [Belhamed](#), not [Sidi Rezegh](#), and it was our own fight we could hear and partly see, still raging furiously on our left rear. Crouching under a great-coat I examined the map with a pocket torch. Thinking very carefully indeed, I decided that if we went back for 1200 yards and then climbed the escarpment we should be behind the Eighteenth.

We had just turned the trucks, all keeping very quiet as the situation seemed delicate, when there was suddenly the sound of many men running over stones down the escarpment only fifty yards away [Baker](#) <sup>16</sup> and his platoon rushed across. For a minute there was a terrific noise, everyone shouting and firing at once. I went over and savagely ordered silence. To my surprise there was. We had eighty German prisoners. They had been running from the fight and had scrambled down the hill to get on their trucks, and were very surprised by our appearance. <sup>17</sup> Our situation was still insecure, however, deep in the enemy position and ahead of our own troops. ... After a few minutes I got everyone quiet and we formed up for the return march, the prisoners moving in threes between the two trucks. [Belhamed](#) was silent and dark again.

We moved off gingerly and slowly, counting the paces. At 1200 we stopped and Rhodes and Allison came with me up the escarpment.

Sergeant Allison takes up the story:

With [Col. Kippenberger](#) I climbed to the top of the hill. I stumbled near a wounded German who was at his last gasp (couldn't help feeling sorry for him—think [Spicer](#) <sup>18</sup> gave him a drink of water). Somebody was digging in just ahead of us. Difficult to say who they were. I think we heard somebody say 'What?' in a New Zealand voice. [Col. Kippenberger](#) went towards them and he was immediately

challenged.... the Kiwis were very hesitant about believing him; they were openly suspicious and took no chances. They were members of the 18th Bn and soon one of their officers came along and recognised the Colonel.... The companies had apparently pushed well west into a kind of salient. We went on and rested in a hollow, the German prisoners still with us and also two trucks of the NZ Engineers....

Allison then guided a 4 Brigade liaison officer (Captain Copeland)<sup>19</sup> back to his headquarters with a message from the CO and from there went to the battalion B Echelon, where he was told to guide some ambulances up to Belhamed to collect wounded. The wounded were assembled in a wadi on the steep northern side of that feature, the southern slopes of which fell gently for nearly three miles, then rose steeply to form an escarpment above the mosque of Sidi Rezegh, which was still in enemy hands.

Meanwhile, 20 Battalion was in a very difficult position. Battalion Headquarters' radio set was missing and company radios were unable to contact 4 Brigade. The carrier platoon and the tanks had been left with B Echelon with instructions to come up at dawn. The area was overlooked by the Sidi Rezegh position to the south and was under heavy artillery, mortar, and small-arms fire from a strong enemy pocket between Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh. Casualties mounted steadily.

In the meantime, having spent some hours trying to find the battalion, Colonel Kippenberger, Captain Rhodes, and Second-Lieutenant Roberts<sup>20</sup> had all been wounded just after dawn as they were about to move over to the battalion area. Lieutenant Boyle had also been wounded about the same time while looking for Battalion Headquarters. Later in the morning Major Mitchell was wounded when moving back towards Brigade Headquarters to try to establish contact and get artillery support. Captain Fountaine, whose gallantry in the last few days' fighting was to win him the MC, then took over the battalion and CSM Grooby commanded C Company, which dealt effectively with an enemy counter-attack. Light German AFVs brought in infantry who advanced south-east across the flat but retired when fired upon. Shortly afterwards Captain Fountaine was wounded. Captain Agar<sup>21</sup> took over the battalion and Lieutenant McPhail became OC B Company. On the way to the Advanced Dressing Station the lorry carrying the wounded had halted by Brigade Headquarters and Colonel Kippenberger had asked that Captain Quilter, then liaison officer with Brigade Headquarters, be sent up to the battalion as Adjutant.

Shelling and mortaring continued through the day and life on Belhamed was 'most uncomfortable'. The men had been told to keep under cover and not disclose their numbers or positions, but as they had still been digging in after first light they must have been seen by the enemy on the higher ground to the south. A Fieseler-Storch reconnaissance plane flew low over the area at intervals during the afternoon. As practically every weapon was fired at it without apparent effect, it was no wonder the enemy machine guns and mortars were able to range on the battalion's positions. Men of D Company used over a hundred rounds from a Boys anti-tank rifle trying to hit the plane each time it landed in the German area about a mile away. One D Company man was killed in his slit trench as the German observer replied to his fire through a window of his aircraft with his tommy gun. The honours rested with the New Zealanders, however, as the plane was shot down at dusk and a valuable situation map obtained from it. The Germans across the flat were very hard to locate but they were there all right, well dug in and quick to reply to fire.

During the day an Italian map with German dispositions marked on it was found in D Company's area. The finder gave it to the OC, Captain Manchester, who sent it to Battalion Headquarters. Captain Quilter endorsed it with the date, time, and place, and sent it by runner to 18 Battalion, which had a carrier service to 4 Brigade. The map showed sixteen machine-gun positions in the area to the south.

With 6 Brigade held up south-east of Sidi Rezegh the task of joining up with the Tobruk garrison on Ed Duda now fell to 4 Brigade, and during the night 19 Battalion made a remarkably uneventful advance of nearly six miles behind a screen of Matildas from 44 Royal Tanks. The battalion, 'breathless and almost unbelieving', reached Ed Duda about 1 a.m. During the night 6 Brigade finally succeeded, after some of the bloodiest fighting of the desert war, in capturing the rest of the Sidi Rezegh escarpment.

Back on Belhamed the 20 Battalion men manning their positions spent a cold night and the Adjutant got one blanket or greatcoat for each man sent up from B Echelon. While coming up through B Company's lines after dark with ammunition Lieutenant Uttley's mortar truck was hit by tracer bullets and the ammunition exploded for hours. During the night the battalion's position was strengthened by the arrival of anti-tank guns which had not been able to come forward in daylight.

Next morning, 27 November, two German stretcher-bearers carrying a white flag came forward to pick up a wounded officer and were halted by 18 Battalion and taken to its headquarters. Major Snadden,<sup>22</sup> OC 46 Battery 4 Field Regiment, who was attached to the 18th, has said that the Germans were told they were heavily outnumbered and were asked to surrender. They laughed, refused, and countered by asking 18 Battalion to surrender. That battalion's IO went back with the Germans to their position south of Belhamed in a Bren carrier, but his proposal that the enemy pocket should surrender was rejected.

Early in the morning Captain Quilter received a warning order from 4 Brigade, through Colonel Peart of the 18th, that 20 Battalion was to attack the German pocket to the south with two companies. The attack was to begin at 9 a.m. but was later postponed until 11 a.m. A battery of field guns and a platoon of machine-gunners would support it.

At this stage 20 Battalion had no line communication direct to Brigade. Colonel Peart, as the senior commander on the ridge, had taken command of both battalions when Colonel Kippenberger was wounded, and the brigade order for the attack was sent through his headquarters. Captain Quilter objected to the proposed operation and asked Colonel Peart to use his own troops as he felt the 20th was being used too much and had had heavy casualties, particularly in senior officers. Colonel Peart demanded to know who was the battalion's senior officer, and on learning it was Captain Agar ordered him to report to him immediately. Agar did so and protested vainly on the telephone to Brigade that there was inadequate support for an attack 'with two weak companies' across flat ground in daylight against a dug-in machine-gun position 'of at least a battalion strength'.

After about twenty minutes Captain Agar ran down the exposed forward slope to 20 Battalion headquarters and ordered the Adjutant to get B and D Companies' commanders. The conference is described by Lieutenant McPhail, OC B Company:

Some time after 9 a.m. I received a message to go to Bn HQ. At a conference there the previous day we had been shelled so we kept as far apart as possible and yet within comfortable speaking voice. We were under enemy observation at all times and the conference must have been very obvious to any astute German officer.

Orders were very brief and Capt. Agar was obviously unhappy about the attack that had been ordered. We were to attack the German position to the south in the depression between Bel Hamed and [Sidi Rezegh](#). The attack was to begin in ten minutes. We were to have artillery support and tanks would come in from the east.

I ran back to my Coy HQ and gave the story to the platoon commanders. We attacked with two platoons forward and one back, and came under fire as soon as we moved out. The company advanced steadily but when our artillery stopped the enemy fire increased. We had advanced by bounds but half way to the objective were pinned down by heavy fire. I sent three runners including CSM [Anderson](#)<sup>23</sup> back to ask for artillery support. Casualties were becoming heavy. I saw Sjt. [Hayward](#)<sup>24</sup> killed as he rose and waved his platoon forward.

We hugged the ground for the rest of the day, and after last light I put a protective screen of the few able bodied men left between ourselves and the enemy and began the collection of the wounded. The men afterwards told me they were so close to enemy positions that they could hear the Germans talking.

I ordered all the wounded who could walk to return to our lines and take their weapons with them. I also asked them to send out any stretcher bearers they could find. We could just see the blurred outline of the Bel Hamed feature against the sky. We then gathered the wounded into a group. Sergeant Lochhead<sup>25</sup> and [Corporal] West, platoon commanders, were still on their feet but Lt. [Mills](#)<sup>26</sup> was badly wounded. We improvised stretchers from battle dress tunics and rifles and carried the wounded in. A check up revealed that there were 32 left in the company. Captain Agar was waiting for us and visibly upset.

From a platoon commander's point of view the attack was equally disastrous. Second-Lieutenant Evan Wilson of D Company describes his experiences thus:

Between 9.30 and 10 a.m.<sup>27</sup> with the other two platoon cmdrs, Lt Abbott and Sjt 'Ro' [Wilson](#),<sup>28</sup> I went to Company HQ where Captain Manchester said we had to carry out an attack with B Coy on German positions to the south, that is, between Bel Hamed and [Sidi Rezegh](#). We were told, 'The Germans are anxious to surrender. There will be no fighting but we have to put up a bit of a show and go out and bring them in.'<sup>29</sup>

The boundaries were then pointed out. B Coy were to advance on the left, their right boundary being a line passing through a burnt out British tank. D Coy were to move through the area to the right of the tank.... Our attack was to begin in three minutes. We ran forward from Coy HQ to our platoons. There was just time to put my pack on and get away.... the Company then moved out with 16 and 17 Platoons leading in extended order and 18 Platoon in reserve.

The country was practically flat with scarcely any cover either in the form of undulations or low camel thorn scrub. We came under heavy machine-gun fire almost at once, actually while 17 Platoon was passing through 18, Corporal Rex Miller <sup>30</sup> being the first casualty.

We deployed and for a time advanced in rushes.... It puzzled me that there should be so much shooting. We continued the attack for about 800 yards, suffering heavy casualties which did not seem apparent at the time as we were watching our front for targets.

After about 1000 yards I realised that something was wrong. It seemed plain that we could never hope to take the position over open country without very considerable support. In view of our orders before the attack the enemy certainly seemed to be overdoing his 'gesture' before surrendering. Finally the uncomfortable realisation came that there was no intention of the enemy to surrender.

It was at this stage that I was wounded. The number of other wounded and killed together with the increasing intensity of enemy fire now completely checked the advance. The leading elements were by this time between 300 and 400 yards from the enemy. It was then that we received a small amount of artillery support. It sounded like the fire of a battery and fell in the dead ground between ourselves and the enemy.

The attack having been checked the enemy concentrated on us with machine guns and mortars, causing further casualties. This lasted fairly consistently till dusk, about seven hours later. Right throughout the day fire was kept up by the company....

During the rest of the day contact was several times made with Battalion,

asking for assistance. Runners and Red Cross personnel suffered heavy casualties and contact with Battalion finally could not be maintained. In any case our position was obvious; no support was forthcoming, and finally orders came up to withdraw after dark.

As soon as darkness permitted the wounded were evacuated, mostly by their mates, there being only one RAP man left out in the field. Due to the number of wounded on the ground, the considerable area over which they were spread, the darkness and the absence of assistance, this was a lengthy and laborious undertaking. It sometimes took six men to carry a badly wounded man the 1200 yards to the battalion area. Several times I sent back word requesting assistance up to even company strength. Enemy fire, including tracer, continued all night.

During this period the men in the field did remarkably unselfish work. Outstanding was Corporal Ken Pratt,<sup>31</sup> who though wounded in the neck and almost delirious, walked about the battlefield in search of wounded. On one occasion, after returning to me, he fainted, but, recovering a few minutes later, went out again.... [Second-Lieutenant Dunne of A Company] with a considerable party, made three accurate compass journeys to our area and it was through his efforts that we were able to take in the last of the company wounded at approximately 1.30 a.m. Some of them had been nearly fourteen hours without medical attention.

Many died of wounds, only twenty-eight men being left in the company. It had been a gallant attack and individual bravery was universal. At one stage Private Jack Hogg<sup>32</sup> carried on the attack with his platoon of seven survivors who had appointed him their leader. It was some satisfaction next day to find that we had inflicted considerable casualties on the enemy.

Meanwhile Battalion Headquarters had not been idle. The attack was watched with increasing dismay as the predicament of the infantry became apparent. Captain Quilter appealed several times for artillery support but apparently the scarcity of ammunition would not permit it. About midday Colonel Peart rang the 20th and urged the Adjutant to have the attack pressed home. Quilter asked for a supporting attack from the left flank and this was agreed to. An hour later a company of infantry from 18 Battalion and three tanks appeared from the east on the crest of the wadi. The leading tank was knocked out and the remainder, including the infantry, later

withdrew.

The mortar platoon had not been given any task at the outset but after the failure of the supporting attack from the east Lieutenant Uttley tried to help. He states:

I thought it was time I did something in a hurry. It was obvious that if the companies had tried to go forward they would have been killed to a man without even reaching the German lines. I hoped that if we could quieten the fire they might pull out without any orders. The enemy position was just out of our range but to save time we ripped some bombs down and put extra charges on others and a couple of ranging shots showed we could hit them. Then we put a smoke screen across the German front and pumped in HE. ... Our ammunition soon ran out and the only people who did any firing for the rest of the day were the Germans.

During the afternoon Captain Quilter made another attempt to obtain tank support. Some time after 5 p.m. the tanks which had made the sortie to [Ed Duda](#) with [19 Battalion](#) returned to [Zaafran](#). On the way back they mopped up a German position on the west end of [Belhamed](#), losing two tanks on a minefield. While coming in the tanks had fired on the battalion in spite of recognition signals, steel helmet on rifle, and green flares, but they stopped firing when Captain Agar, waving his tin hat on a rifle, went out to meet them. The tanks were asked to help B and D Companies marooned out on the flat, but by this time it was too late for the squadron to replenish its ammunition and attack before dark. Finally, Captain Agar sent out orders by runner for the companies to withdraw as soon as the light permitted.

Captain Quilter says:

I asked A Company to send out stretcher parties at dusk and C Company, then under Sergeant-Major Grooby, to put a protective screen in front of B and D Companies to cover their withdrawal. Grooby and I took a bearing in daylight and agreed on it. At dusk C Company personnel went out in line before the stretcher bearers went out. Grooby told me next morning that at one stage in the advance someone told him he could hear Germans talking. Grooby stopped the advance and found he had infiltrated right through the German forward posts and that the Germans were actually talking behind him. Realising his critical position he decided

to push ahead till he reached the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment where he was out of trouble. There he collected his men and circled back, coming into the [18th Battalion](#) area. They were not even fired at. Perhaps, after the night attack on [Belhamed](#), the Germans were reluctant to start a show after dark.

I had arranged to have 3-tonners sent up to collect our wounded and take them to the 4th Field Ambulance in [4th Brigade](#) laager area. Dr. Gilmour treated the wounded that night on the face of the hill near Battalion Headquarters and they were loaded on to trucks and sent away. B and D Companies were reorganized by Lt. McPhail and Lt. Wilson after a hot meal.

The day's fighting cost the battalion 35 killed and died of wounds and 62 wounded. The wounded had had no choice but to lie out in the open on that barren, fire-swept field waiting for darkness to give them cover and bring relief. Many were hit again as they lay, some once, some twice and more, and were in a bad way when at last they were brought in to the RAP. Back on [Belhamed](#) the two companies' sixty survivors spread themselves thinly over the defences they had formerly occupied and sought what rest the night would bring.

The exposed nature of the battalion area and the difficulties of communication due to constant trouble with the No. 11 wireless sets made it difficult to supply the forward troops on Belhamed. Captain [Baker](#),<sup>33</sup> D Company's second-in-command, describes his experiences:

On the night 26-27 Nov I went up in a Bren carrier, taking a hot meal in the hot boxes. We moved along the north side of the escarpment and turned up a narrow, steep-sided re-entrant, stopping about half way up at the last suitable turning place. Nearby, on the side of the escarpment, and in a subsidiary wadi, I found a telephone exchange and tried to get a message through to D Coy to ask for a guide and carrying party. The signallers could not get through to the 20th. I waited three hours and then had to return with the carrier, leaving the hot boxes there and instructing the signallers to contact 20 Bn as soon as possible and get a carrying party across.

Next morning, 27 Nov, about 8.30 a.m. I went up again with a hot meal by carrier and found that the containers were still there but the food was cold. Leaving the carrier in the wadi we went a short way across the escarpment past a burnt out

truck. Things were quiet. A carrying party came back and collected the meal. On our way back to B Ech ... [we had] some fairly brisk shelling....

That night I came up again with more rations.... I gave those who were in a hot meal. The men looked exhausted and under severe mental strain, but grim and certainly not demoralised. I got the impression that they were not happy about the daylight attack they had been engaged in, but if they had been called on would have readily gone in at night to get their own back.

I reported to Capt Agar who told me to stay with D Coy that night. Next morning he told me to take over A Coy.

On 27 November a party from the carrier platoon went back to examine the two carriers which had been shot up on the flat two days earlier. Sergeant Kimber describes their recovery:

Veitch's carrier had had it. Several shell holes had wrecked the steering gear and the whole machine was in a mess. Mine was not so bad; two shell holes but the vital parts had been missed. Apart from being very shaky and full of vibrations it was still serviceable. We brought it back again. Some of our engineers had picqueted this area the day before. They had made a thorough job of ransacking all our reserve food.... But a bottle two-thirds full of Johnnie Walker whiskey missed their search. I must have hidden it well. The three of us had a conference and smartly decided to drink it in case somebody else found it—very good too.... We returned to B Echelon where I got myself another driver and gunner and that night the carriers took a relief of sigs up the front, bringing back hot boxes, etc. It had rained off and on all day making things miserable....

When taking supplies up the front we would travel up a wadi most of the way, climb up over a ridge, and go down into another wadi, finally dropping our supplies in a small wadi near an old aré the enemy had used for a cook shop, etc. As soon as we left on our trip our progress could have been seen for miles by the dust we stirred up, and as soon as we crossed the ridge the Jerry MG would open up. We must have been just out of effective range for we could hear the bullets hitting the carriers but none ever came through. They just made slight dents in the sides.

During the afternoon of 28 November the attack against the German position

between Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh was repeated from another direction and in a more carefully prepared and strongly supported operation. First there was a ten-minute artillery preparation by 4 and 6 Field Regiments and other concentrations covering the advance of a squadron of Matildas from the 44 Royal Tanks. The tanks, in turn, were supported by the Bren carriers of 18 Battalion and some from the Divisional Cavalry, followed by one company of the 18th. Two platoons of machine-gunners fired from Belhamed feature in front of the tanks and the mortar platoons of 18 and 20 Battalions gave support, using auxiliary charges.

It was a well-planned attack and the artillery softening up brought many of the enemy out before the tanks arrived. The tanks went through in two small waves and the Germans surrendered quickly. There were only two or three infantry casualties and about six hundred prisoners were taken. Unfortunately some of these prisoners were released when the prisoner-of-war cage fell into enemy hands later in the day and within a matter of hours were back in action.

While the attack was in progress Colonel Peart gave orders for 18 and 20 Battalions to change places. This was done, company by company, and sappers lifted the minefield to the west of Belhamed. No reason for the changeover was given, but it is probable that as the 20th had been seriously weakened by casualties, particularly in senior officers, and was then occupying what seemed to be the exposed flank—the western end of Belhamed—Colonel Peart decided to assume for his own battalion, which had had fewer casualties, the responsibility for what appeared to be the more difficult position.

During the afternoon there were sounds of an action to the north. Going 200 yards over to the escarpment, Captain Baker saw enemy tanks milling around, apparently under fire from our artillery on Sidi Rezegh. No hits were observed but the tanks moved off to the west. There was little news of the Rezegh– Tobruk battle and the situation was confused. German shell and mortar fire seemed to come from unpredictable quarters, at times from the north-east.

At night the Bren carriers took up more blankets and food and remained with the rifle companies, their crews dismounting their Brens and being allotted an area between B and D Companies. The pioneer platoon was also used to thicken up the rather thin line. During the night a column of transport—Rear Division and

Headquarters 13 Corps: 2000 vehicles in all—went through the battalion lines to Tobruk. It was no time to be lying in a slit trench. Anyone in the way jumped up hastily and watched the trucks jolting and lurching across the sangars.

The 29th November was uneventful, with occasional shelling from heavy-calibre guns but few casualties. Brigade Headquarters, to which the battalion now had a direct line, sent a warning message to expect an attack from the north. A burial party with Bren carriers acting as a screen went out to bury the dead from the two-company attack and also the German dead from the night attack on Belhamed. Sergeant Allison and Private Speedy <sup>34</sup> of the intelligence section marked the position of the graves on a map, while Padre Spence coolly conducted the burial service during the shelling.

The carrier crews examined the German position with great interest as it was from this direction that their vehicles had been shot up on 25 November. The machine-gun positions were well made and perfectly camouflaged. Nearly every machine gun had an anti-tank gun mounted beside it and a network of booby traps laid about it. Another observer describes machine-gun nests 'only about twenty yards apart' and containing 'nearly every mortal thing to kill a man with'.

During the morning Brigadier Inglis had sent up Major Orr to take over the battalion and Captain Agar went back to command B Echelon. Orr reported to Colonel Peart, who told him that their job was to hold Belhamed and that he (Peart) was in charge. When he returned to the battalion Orr went around each company. The men seemed very tired and strained. He sent for their personal gear so that they could have a shave and clean up.

The men were hungry for news. On Sunday morning, 30 November, as they had had no up-to-date situation reports for some days, Captain Quilter asked Brigade for information. Captain Beale, <sup>35</sup> Brigade Intelligence Officer, made a trip to Divisional Headquarters and returned with a map board and situation report showing the positions of the reorganised 7 Armoured Division and 1 South African Brigade, which were stated to be seven miles south-west of Sidi Rezegh and 20 miles east respectively and coming up towards Belhamed. A green flare was to be the indication that the South Africans were coming to assist. There was no mention of German tanks in the area but fifty of our tanks and '1000 Australians' were said to be

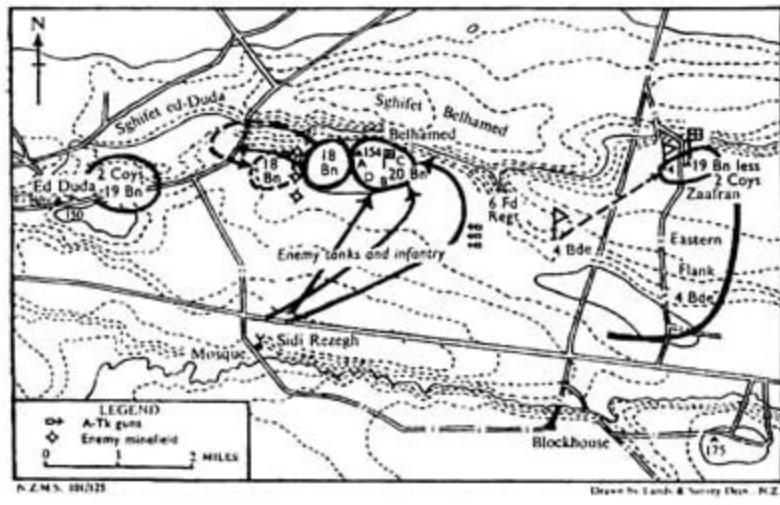
'in support' in the vicinity of Ed Duda.<sup>36</sup> The Intelligence Sergeant was sent round the companies with a copy of this map and gave each group the gist of the information. The men were considerably heartened by this news. Captain Quilter and the battalion sergeant clerk, Sergeant Borthwick, made a complete check-up on personnel and casualties and brought the war diary up to date.

Early in the evening there was a warning from Brigade that there might be an attack from the north. Companies were warned but nothing happened. About 5 p.m. a lively battle began on the Sidi Rezegh escarpment and the fires of burning trucks lit the whole skyline. Enemy armoured vehicles and trucks moved along the escarpment from the west to the mosque area. While a scuffle was going on about the mosque, tanks came over from the south side of the ridge. Captain Quilter immediately rang Brigade Headquarters, which seemed to doubt the information. As darkness fell trucks could be seen escaping north-east and along the top of the escarpment. Later, Quilter again rang Brigade to say that he could see fires burning and that he considered 6 Brigade had been overrun. About 9 p.m. Brigade Headquarters rang confirming this. Meanwhile, the battalion could hear the rattle and clank of tanks and a patrol got near enough to see the Germans doing maintenance work, refuelling, and 'having a boil-up' with petrol fires in the sand.

About 10 p.m. the Brigade Major rang to say that Sidi Rezegh would be attacked by daylight. Presuming, at first, that 20 Battalion would be mounting the attack, Captain Quilter pointed out that it would require ammunition and was told that the South African brigade was expected and that the 20th would be withdrawn next day about 10 a.m.

Companies maintained listening posts and sent out patrols throughout the night. B Company's posts at one stage thought enemy tanks were going to come through the area. One patrol, led by Sergeant Vincent of C Company, patrolled eastwards down the Belhamed escarpment. There were 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion positions in the area and some posts which had not been warned challenged sharply. The patrol investigated noises to the north-east previously reported by a listening post but no enemy was encountered. During the night the machine-gunners were withdrawn to strengthen the eastern flank, but the real danger lay to the south and south-west. Unfortunately this was not fully realised at the time, nor was the battalion informed

of the departure of the machine-gunners.



**belhamed, 1 december 1941**

The 1st December was a disastrous day for the battalion. Battle-weary and sadly reduced in numbers, strained almost to the limit of endurance by constant shelling and mortaring, crouching for almost six days and nights in damp slit trenches, cold, hungry, and damp, the men had stuck it out in a grim endeavour to 'hold Belhamed against all comers' as their share towards the relief of Tobruk. The latest rumour was heartening indeed: the '1000 Australians and fifty tanks' would come out of Tobruk to relieve the battalions on Belhamed, who would be taken into Tobruk for a much-needed rest. The relief was timed for 10 a.m. There would just be time to eat the hot meal the cooks had promised and clean up.

For some time in the early morning there was complete calm. Then the silence was broken by one shell or mortar bomb landing near the battalion area. This was followed quickly by more shelling and mortaring. When this ceased the men could hear the thud of tank guns and the rapid fire of heavy machine guns. In their sangars the men listened and wondered. Something was brewing. Whose guns? Whose tanks?

None at the time could answer as the historian now can; for none on Belhamed knew that it was 15 Panzer Division which had taken the high ground to the south the previous evening. No one suspected that in the early hours of the morning German infantry were creeping northwards, paving the way for the tanks, and that

behind them heavy guns were preparing supporting fire.

The tanks started up and made for [Belhamed](#) and then veered eastwards, disappearing in the smoke and dust of the shellfire. For perhaps an hour the defenders got only occasional glimpses through the murky haze of a tank here or a gun flash there. They were conscious that gunners somewhere to their left were answering the fire and that after a time the answers grew weaker. That was all they knew of a fierce action in which a dozen tanks were disabled and twice that number of 25-pounders from [6 Field Regiment](#) put out of action, their crews dead or wounded about them, their lorries and limbers ablaze. With the defeat of the guns the way for the tanks to [Belhamed](#) was as clear as the billowing smoke would allow. But the smoke itself was a menace; for with the steep escarpment to the north the tanks had to make their way gingerly north of the guns, where the escarpment was less abrupt, and then westwards along the top, halting when smoke obscured the steep drop to their right.

Thus the tanks came on the battalion chiefly from the east and south-east, meeting B Company first and C Company to its north, then Battalion Headquarters in the centre and A Company (north-west of B), and D Company last of all—though D, to the south-west of the unit area, was nearest to the tanks when they first approached. It was a curious roundabout way, dictated by the fierce resistance of the field guns in the early stages of the attack, and then by the smoke which hid the treacherous escarpment. Once the anti-tank guns were knocked out—a matter of minutes so far as the battalion was concerned—there was no other obstacle and nothing the infantry could do to avert capture, unless they took to their heels, which was unthinkable.

The overwhelming enemy attack on [Belhamed](#) has been the subject of many discussions by men of the 20th since that sad day. The following accounts by eye-witnesses give a more complete—if at times conflicting—picture of what happened than the limited knowledge gained by any one man from his immediate surroundings.

First, Captain Quilter describes the action:

At first light B and D Companies both reported activity around [Sidi Rezegh](#); it

was possible to see vehicles coming off the escarpment. At daylight Jerry started to shell **Belhamed** heavily and the tanks and lorried infantry moved off across the low ground towards us, and raised a great deal of dust as if they were dragging something behind their vehicles. I counted 45-48 tanks but Neil McPhail made it 50. At about 2000 yards from our positions the enemy advance split up, part moving east towards 6 Brigade B Echelon and part towards us. By this time our Field Regiments were engaging them and the dust practically obscured them from our view. When they were about 500 yards from us both B and D Companies and Headquarters Company Brens engaged them. Most of the lorried infantry turned about smartly and moved back but one or two loads debussed. The tanks then sat out at about 1000 yards and I could see one tank commander looking us over. Suddenly about ten tanks in a row started shooting at our three 2-pounders, the first of which was between my headquarters and D Company. The fire was concentrated on the guns one at a time from west to east and the three were wiped out very smartly. Just about this time a German shell hit our own mortar bombs and from then on both B and C Company were hidden from my view. B Company reported that it was under heavy fire and the air around Battalion Headquarters was pretty thick too. About this time the telephone line to B Company went out and I had no further communication with them.

During this time I had been talking to Brigade Headquarters by telephone, the No. 11 set being useless. Some time about 7.30 I think the Brigade Major had told me to hold on as our tanks would be attacking through our area, that is, moving west along **Belhamed** and turning south through us. I passed this message on to the companies. Shortly afterwards—about fifteen or twenty minutes I should say—Corporal Scott of Battalion Signals Platoon, attached to C Company reported that B Company had been cleaned up and were being marched off by the Germans. B Company's area was still obscured by smoke. At the same time Scott told me tanks were advancing on them from the east. I told him they must be our 'I' tanks coming in but he told me they were firing on C Company. While he was talking to me CSM Grooby, the Company Commander, was mortally wounded near Scott. At this time we were being heavily mortared from the south and I saw German infantry advancing towards D Company across the area that had been occupied by the **18th Battalion** on our right.<sup>37</sup> Within a few minutes, while I was watching D Company's area my signaller drew my attention to a tank about thirty or forty yards away to the

rear of Battalion headquarters. The commander was waving us out of our slitties. At the same time there were at least two tanks in A Company's area getting them out. There seemed to be four or five infantrymen with each tank. One I remember carried a Spandau while another had a tommy gun and at least three belts for the Spandau. At this time D Company were still firing from their slitties. We [Bn HQ] were shepherded fairly smartly with A Company out to join C Company and D Company were brought along behind us a few minutes afterwards.

We were then marched about 2000 yards towards Sidi Rezegh where a German doctor and assistants met us and took away the walking wounded. We joined here with a hundred or so prisoners from 6th Brigade's and had an unpleasant time for half an hour or so from 6th Brigade's 25 and 2-pounders.

The line to Brigade had gone dead about 8 a.m. but I was in communication with the 18th Battalion until a few minutes of the finish when I was forced out. Their adjutant did not tell me they were withdrawing to the escarpment to the north. Their Mortar Platoon was next our D Company, and, unable to get away with the rest of their battalion, was taken with us.

Major Orr, acting CO, saw the battle thus:

About 7 a.m. we noticed movement on Sidi Rezegh escarpment and our arty was shelled. From the information received the previous day we expected the vehicles to be our own tanks and the South African Bde.

Then a column of tanks left Sidi Rezegh and moved east across our front, apparently making for the arty area, and at that stage appearing to take no notice of us whatsoever. As soon as we realised they were Huns Captain Quilter rang Bde and .... asked for arty support and for tanks to be sent to our assistance. We were ordered to hang on.

During this stage an English major came along dressed in a khaki sweater and flat cap, coolly sat on the edge of a slit trench, and asked us where Div. HQ was. We told him where Bde HQ was and he stood up and started to walk in that direction. Suddenly the tanks swung across at B Coy and also came round them and up through the centre of our area. We had no sticky bombs or Molotov cocktails on Bel Hamed and none, as far as I know, at B Ech.

I looked to my right and saw A Coy coming out. Shortly afterwards we were ordered out by a Hun tank commander who was waving his pistol out of the turret and calling through a slit in the tank. He was waving us in the direction of B Coy.

The tanks changed direction so quickly that they were in amongst us almost before we realized it. Our orders were plainly to stay where we were and that tanks were coming to our assistance, so we stayed. There was no suggestion of withdrawal or surrender. I remember Jack Quilter saying that the last words the BM [Brigade Major] said were 'We must be going now.' With that the line became dead.

While the tanks were changing direction and swinging round us we were under shell fire and also under MG fire from the German lorried infantry out on the flat. Had any attempt been made at that stage to retire back over the Bel Hamed escarpment to the north casualties would have been very heavy both from this fire and from the MGs of the tanks which by this time were no more than 150 yards away.... Furthermore we could not have covered Bel Hamed with fire from the north if we had gone over the escarpment. ... If we had cleared out against orders to hold on, as given by Bde, the tanks would have proceeded straight through to [4 Bde](#) and B Ech areas. Our only hope was artillery or tank support. The latter was promised but neither materialised.... <sup>38</sup>

When we were being formed up on the flat I spoke to some men who were strangers to me. They proved to be men of the 18th Bn Mortar Platoon who had been placed between their Bn area and our D Coy and were taken with us. They told me the 18th had gone over the escarpment, but they had been too far away to go with them. This was the first I knew of the move of the 18th Bn.

Sergeant Allison adds his account:

I saw a British tank appear on the ridge behind me, i.e. to our west where the 18th Bn lay. I optimistically imagined this was the first of the 50 tanks coming to our relief from [Tobruk](#). The tank commander was looking from the turret. The tank waited a few seconds then turned away westwards again.

Later an English officer walking from the west came up to me. He appeared casual and very calm. He asked the direction to Bde or [Div HQ](#), (can't recall which),

then walked placidly on. (Sjt. Peter McGhie <sup>39</sup> told me later that an English officer was badly wounded near him and did not have much chance of living. He gave Peter this verbal message: 'Tell General Freyberg that we are sorry, but we could not get through.')

An 18th Bn truck to the rear of where Basil Borthwick and I had our trenches burst into flame, but the next minute we looked it had completely disappeared.

My maps, messages and code I managed to destroy by fire before the tanks came right close. The Jerry was waving a revolver from the turret. Then he showed his head and said, 'Come, come up, up.' Bob Orr said, 'You Deutchland b—' but I guess the Panzer soldier did not understand. We now experienced the wearying and humiliating exercise of jogging along with raised arms. A little later we were greeted into our captivity by our own artillery's shells.

Lieutenant Uttley, mortar platoon officer, was taken prisoner in the early stages. He says:

I had five mortars left in my platoon and I told them to open fire at full range in the hope that we might damage the lorried infantry and perhaps give the effect of a bit of strength.

The poor anti-tank guns which could be seen for miles fired four and one shots respectively before they were blown out. The tanks appeared to me to advance like draughtsmen in short staggered moves.

At one stage when we were being heavily machine-gunned a gentleman with a cheese-cutter hat, an MC, and a strong Oxford accent appeared beside my slit trench. ... in the midst of quite a hot fire he stood calmly and said, 'Where's Brigade, old boy?' I didn't know and told him so but sent him on to Lt. Neil McPhail a few yards in my rear.... Meanwhile it was becoming more and more obvious that there was to be only one end to the affair. I cannot remember how information was passed along the line, it may have been by shouting or by runner, but the story was, 'Hang on at all costs, help is coming.' This word came several times and was not believed. We had numerous opportunities of clearing out when fire was concentrated on other places but it was not easy to disobey a direct order although one knew it

was a stupid one.

The centre mortar of my five seemed to have some luck. Corporal S. S. Lowe,<sup>40</sup> who had his eyes glued to the sights, dropped something and bent down to pick it up. When he straightened up the sights had been shot away.

When ammunition ran out we used our rifles, more to have something to do than in the hope of doing much damage.

We had been unable to bury all our ammunition and some smoke ... [shells were] camouflaged behind desert growth. These were hit. ... A heavy pall of smoke drifted eastward and I ordered the centre gun crew out as they were unable to breathe properly. They came out with their rifles and I distributed them around in other trenches....

Neil McPhail took me in, he was only a few yards away. Neil's trench was one foot deep and built for one only. I lay on top of Neil and gave him a running commentary on the dying stages. I could see ... forty-five tanks. Of course, a few were out of action and they were attacking various points but there were several right in front of us. I had been telling Neil they were coming closer and closer, then I said, 'Ron Guthrie [Guthrey] and the Brens are walking out'; they were slightly on our right. About five minutes later I said, 'If you care to look now, you will see a large German tank with a large gun pointing straight at us, estimated range fifteen yards.' 'Don't be silly,' says Neil. 'Take a look,' says I. He did and saw a German with head out of the tank and inviting us to come out or else—. We were not asked to put our hands up but had to take our helmets off and walk through the tanks. As I did this I saw Brig Miles coming out on my left. Even at this stage I did not think of being a P.O.W. as I expected to be shot.

The custom of asking prisoners of war to remove their steel helmets was quite usual with the Germans and led to an unfortunate incident. Captain Quilter says:

Our Regimental Aid Post was in a very good wadi on the north side of Belhamed. One Hun tank drove through the area and the Hun officer told Doc Gilmour to take off his tin hat and be among the wounded and they would be all right. Gilmour did so, but after the, tank passed through there was some shelling and shrapnel fell in the RAP area. Gilmour put on his tin hat again and continued working

among the wounded. The next tank shot him. The first tank officer came back, apologised for the incident, and explained they regarded a man wearing a tin hat as still armed.

Lieutenant McPhail gives his impressions:

Enemy tanks were heading for 4th, 5th, and 6th Field Ambulances who were on our left and slightly behind us. This area had a fringe of 18-pounders in front and these guns opened up and knocked out two tanks. They opened up late due to the difficulty of identifying tanks in the poor light, made worse by dust and smoke. In addition the code for the pennant system of identification had finished on Nov. 30th and we had not been given the code for the new month.

When the guns opened up the tanks swung immediately in their direction. This movement made us think they would miss us but some turned towards us and advanced by bounds, one moving and the others spraying the ground with machine-gun fire. Lt. Uttley was with me and at one stage the side of our slit trench, a one-man affair, was drilled away. The tanks that had passed through the hospital area swung round in a circle behind us, firing steadily all the time. We had no option but to surrender when the tank commanders said 'Aus!'.

Lance-Corporal McConchie <sup>41</sup> of the pioneer platoon was in position near B Company and gives some idea of the way in which the tank attack was opposed:

Shortly after dawn ... word went round to stand by for an AFV attack. We had had several warnings of this nature on previous days with negative results and this time did not really expect anything to eventuate. In about twenty minutes' time, I spotted a column of about a dozen tanks advancing up a wide wadi about 800 yds distant, but I thought they were our own tanks, as I could see the artillery preparing breakfast over in the Bde area about 500 yds away, and they did not appear to be disturbed at the appearance of the column. It was very hazy and dusty and my P1 remained watching these tanks unable to decide whether they were friendly or otherwise.

The first indication we received that they were enemy tanks was flashes from their guns firing in the direction of the Bde area. At this stage the tanks were three

hundred yds slightly to our right and something like seven hundred yds from the Bde area. By this time the artillery started to get moving and four quads came tearing over to the left flank of B Coy's position, but only three guns actually went into action. Coming across from Bde one of these guns was hit when about half-way across and remained there with the quad burning. The first column of tanks advanced on to the Bde area setting afire several trucks and another column following close behind comprising round about fifteen tanks turned and commenced a zig-zag attack on our positions, their apparent objectives being two 2 pdr A Tk guns a hundred yds to my rear and the 25 pdrs to my left flank. The German tanks advanced in threes, each tank supplying protection for the other two. When about 150 yds distant the tanks stopped and threw over several smoke bombs which exploded round about the Arty guns making direct shooting for them very difficult. The 2 pdr at my rear opened fire but was soon put out of action.... Through the haze and smoke we could see enemy mortar and machine-gun units coming up in the rear. A/Sjt. Lockhead [Lochhead] ordered us to open fire on these units, and at once we could see that this fire was having very good effect as the enemy quickly went to ground. My particular target was three m/c combinations and I had great satisfaction at seeing two of these careering round out of control with the seats empty. All this time we were expecting to see our own tanks put in an appearance, as shortly before the enemy opened fire a British Tank Officer informed us our tanks were coming in on the right flank. This English Captain was making a great joke of it all, and told us to make sure and fire at the slits of the enemy tanks; he walked away but had only gone a few yards when one of the forward enemy tanks opened fire with its heavy machine-gun—I heard a groan and I looked round and saw this Officer lying on the ground. I waited a few moments and then crawled over and dragged him into a hole close by.... Three enemy tanks directly out in front started to advance once again and I had visions of being run over and squashed. However they came to a halt sixty yds in front. A/Sjt. Lockhead ordered us to fire at the slits and we opened fire. I fired half a magazine but received such a hail of bullets in return I decided it was useless firing at a tank once he had spotted you. Private 'Gun' Leckie  
<sup>42</sup> in a trench a few yards to my right was firing steadily with a Boyes [ sic] A Tk Rifle. Apparently he was annoying the tanks as twice I saw the turret swing round and send a hail of bullets in his direction. He bobbed down each time the turret swung round and up again and continued firing when the tank was concentrating on other objects. He ran out of ammunition, yelled out for more, which we threw over

to him. 'Gun' Leckie then continued firing and we could actually see the bullets bouncing off the tank, it was so close. Suddenly, and very quickly the turret swung round, and the tank opened fire with its 75 mm, 'Gun' Leckie receiving a direct hit from the shell, which also destroyed the Boyes A Tk Rifle and blew away part of the parapet. The tank could not have been more than fifty yards away from him at the time.

The German tank formation ... gave ... full protection to each supporting tank from any attack with infantry A Tk bombs....

I glanced over to my left and saw one 25 pdr still firing, but the remainder were going up in smoke. After the tanks had knocked out this remaining gun, three or four tanks moved round to the left flank of C Coy completely surrounding our particular area. I concentrated on my front, firing at the Germans in the rear, and when I happened to glance over to my left received a big surprise to see C Coy coming out with their hands up. This was roughly an hour after the commencement of the action. I looked over to my right, and there was A Coy coming out with their hands up, and we stopped firing, and lay down in our holes, as low as we could, thinking we might be missed. However, one of the heavy tanks came rumbling up, turret opened; a German appeared with a Tommy-gun, pointed it at us, and in a very guttural voice said 'Op, op'. We got out.

A Bty of 25 pdrs a fair way away were still firing and the Germans herded us back towards the Mosque very quickly. On the way we passed several German tanks, and I took particular notice of them as on the majority of the bogey-wheels the rubber was completely worn off which explained the peculiar creaking noise these tanks made when on the move. Also, behind each tank was a huge pile of firewood attached with a chain, apparently with the object of raising dust. We passed close to a Hun mortar unit in action and had a good view of their methods, which did not appear to differ very much from our own, except the crews seemed to have more rythm [ sic], all moving at exactly the same time. The Germans, in, our own captured ambulances (about six of them), were driving round the battlefield collecting their wounded, and as they passed on their return journeys I could see that our fire must have had very good effect, as each ambulance was crowded—so crowded that the slightly wounded were even standing on the running boards. The

Germans had an ADS alongside the Mosque, and we carried our own wounded there.

Because of heavy casualties in the rifle companies the carrier platoon had been given a static role in the centre of the battalion front. The platoon's story is told by Sergeant McDonald: <sup>43</sup>

Our platoon had a front of 200 yards with a depth of about 40 yards. There were four Bren guns in the forward positions and three in the rear, with two men to each gun. The Carriers were dispersed to the rear of the gun positions. The drivers had dug slit trenches near their Carriers....

The troops were all in good spirits. In conversation with men from the Coys on our right and left [D and B Companies] the previous day they all expressed pleasure at the fact that our platoon was there with seven extra Bren guns and I heard some say they hoped the Germans would make an attack and that we would chop them to pieces.

McDonald's description of the early stages of the attack is the same as Lance-Corporal McConchie's. He continues:

I heard from my right and to the front shouts of 'Don't shoot' and I knew that they were Germans adopting their usual tactics.

There was at this time nothing for our Bren guns to engage, but then more tanks came into view with anti-tank guns towed by motor vehicles. I immediately opened fire, range about 500 yards. Motor cycle machine gun units followed and there were quite a number of Germans running about from vehicles to guns, etc. They were engaged by us with good results. Two large calibre guns mounted on four wheeled carriages then moved up. Neither of these got into action.

For the first part of the attack the tanks did not engage us, that is, of course, those 9 I could see from my position, but with the arrival of their supporting weapons, two tanks turned and directed their fire at us, although they did not approach closer than 300 yards. We had been firing almost continuously for some time and I was beginning to consider the advisability of conserving ammunition, not knowing how long we would have to hold out and expecting infantry to follow up the AFV attack. During a pause at this stage I had a look over to my left and was

surprised to see men with their hands up about 250 yards away. At first I thought they were Germans and wondered how they had got there but then noticed the flat steel helmets of our own troops. I could not understand what had happened. In the meantime there was still plenty of enemy movement to the front and we carried on shooting and were getting heavy fire in return. The tanks in addition to their MGs were firing anti-tank at us. They had also closed in to closer range. About this time which I think would be fifteen minutes after I had noticed the others with their hands up, Mr Guthrey shouted my name and told me to put my hands up, which my gunner and I did. ... I confess that for about the next half hour I was in a daze. Surrendering was something that I had never considered possible and yet there it was. I do know that when I got up I could see three tanks a short distance away to the left.

A Company was the third to be overrun. Its OC, Captain Baker, records his experiences thus:

About daylight German artillery shelled 4 Bde ... with air bursts and HE. ... I took a bearing on the enemy gun flashes from my Coy HQ and went over to inform Bn, leaving them to work out the position of the guns as I had no maps. While I was there enemy tanks appeared round the west end of the mosque and Captain Quilter told me to go round the coy and warn them to prepare for a tank attack. I went to each Platoon HQ and pointed out the tanks. At this stage the Bn area was shelled.

The tanks moved eastwards across our front in the direction of the arty area. About this time the officer in charge of the 2-pr fifty yards behind my HQ came forward and we .... debated whether we should engage them as the range was rather far for a 2-pr to be effective. He returned to his gun which fired only about six rounds before it was silenced by a direct hit from a Mark IV tank 75-mm gun. Soon afterwards the 18-pr behind C Coy was also silenced.

From then on the situation was confused. I had no telephone to Bn HQ, and had had no orders since those of the previous night to stay where we were. We certainly had no orders to withdraw.

The tanks moving east seemed to be making for 4th Bde where I hoped they would be engaged by our own. They had engaged our own arty and our area was under spasmodic MG fire. I was personally fired on four times as I raised my head to

see what was going on. There were infantry with the tanks, although I could not see exactly where the fire came from, and from where we were, in the second line of defence, we could not see much to fire at.

About this time an incendiary shell struck the pit of mortar bombs and a pall of smoke drifted across B and C Coys. Shortly afterwards I could see C Coy going forward with their hands up. We still could not see any enemy. Then four Mark IV's came through the smoke and sat about fifty yards from my slit trench....

The Hun tank commanders were very businesslike, and stood up through the turrets with tommy guns, waving us out on to the flat. There were dismounted troops with them. They made us take off our tin hats and throw them on the ground.... There was no chance of escape after the tanks appeared out of the smoke, but when I looked towards the 18th Bn there was no one in their positions. In the early stages the tanks appeared to be going past our area but after they swung towards us anyone who had tried to escape back over the escarpment would have had very little chance.

D Company was the last to be encircled and resisted all-comers to the bitter end. Second-Lieutenant Wilson had suffered a painful shoulder wound in the two-company attack on 27 November but had returned after treatment, though still far from well. He describes the last stages of the disaster:

Although we had such reduced numbers the men were in good fettle. We fired all we had at the motor cycles and lorried infantry —rifles, Bren guns and mortars. We were raked by machine-gun and mortar fire as the tanks came in. Our orders were to hang on and we did so. Each company was overrun in turn as the tanks came round and up through our area. I saw a tank nearly running over Jack Quilter who was burning his maps and papers. I was on the extreme right flank, linking with the 18th and witnessed the break up of the 20th Battalion. There was no battalion order given to surrender. As the first platoons were overrun by the tanks the others carried on. We were finally overrun and, like others, just stood up and dropped our weapons. I wish it had been an infantry attack. They would never have reached us with similar arms to ourselves, or if they had they would have been met with the bayonet. There would have been no budging of an inch. However, riflemen can't overcome tanks.

Surrender was inevitable. There was no hope of continuing to fight or of escaping. To make it an honourable surrender for my men I gave them the order to do so. There were so few of them left and all had fought so well that I did not wish to see them killed at that stage.

Our orders had been to stay where we were. Not one of us had ever thought that we would surrender. It never entered our heads that we would or should. The realisation was instantaneous. Amongst our men who were captured I saw only one water bottle. We were days with little water. The 20th Battalion, by standing to, saved the rest. If we had pulled out nothing would have stopped the tanks before Brigade.

From these statements it is apparent that both before and during the attack the 20th had orders from Brigade Headquarters to stay in position and was promised tank support. At first it looked as if the battalion was going to be missed as the German tanks were making for the artillery. This is the only stage of the action at which the troops could have escaped but at that stage they were not being closely attacked, and to run away before they were attacked, against orders to stay in position, was not the way of the 20th. When the tanks swept round and in amongst them out of the dust and smoke it was too late to go; they would have been mown down by tank machine-gun fire.

That 18 Battalion escaped a similar fate was a stroke of good fortune. After overrunning D Company the tanks halted and regrouped, swinging round southwards and then advancing northwards towards the 18th. Peart executed a timely withdrawal, and a few hours later his battalion was firmly re-established behind the minefield half a mile to the west.

So ended the unequal fight. The unwounded walked away, the wounded were grouped for attention, and on bitter Belhamed lay only scattered scraps of personal equipment and the dead who had fought to the end.

About eight miles away, a prisoner in the captured New Zealand medical centre in the Wadi esc Sciomar, [Colonel Kippenberger](#) watched anxiously the swirl of dust and smoke around [Belhamed](#) and tried unhappily to piece together the story of his battalion's last stand. In a letter home a few weeks later he wrote:

Really, we don't know much of it. I was hit on the 26th and succeeded in turn by Mitchell, Fountaine, Agar and Orr, the last mentioned taking over on ... [29 November]. At that time, the Bn. was still at [Belhamed](#), a feature near [Tobruk](#) which we took on the night of the 25th and the Coy. strengths (130) were reported as A. Coy. 60, B 38, C 80, D 32, H.Q. and H.Q. Coy. (Mortars), Bren Carriers, A.A.Ptn, Signallers 76, a total of 286. There were 9 Officers left. The men were tired after 10 days' fighting but the Padre says they were in great spirits. [Belhamed](#) is very rocky and trenches could not be got below 18". 128 Men, the Tpt. Off. and Q.M. were not on the hill, Drivers, Cooks, Company Q. Staff, storemen, etc.

Just after first light, about 6.15, a powerful tank (55) and infantry attack developed and we know hardly any more.... The 18th, next door, were not attacked seriously and sidestepped out of the way with 50 casualties. The whole brunt of the blow fell on the 20th, 2 Batteries (16 guns) of the 6th Field Regt. (3rd Ech), a troop of Bofors A.A. guns, used for Anti-tank. The gunners died at their guns, layer replacing layer, till the tanks crushed them. The corps C.R.A., who has been over the field, says that every gun had 3 to 6 dead gunners. There was much dust and smoke from burning transport and tanks, for many were hit. The tank tactics were to approach to 800–1000 yds., stop hull down—just turret and gun showing, pound hell out of everything they could see with quick-firing 2 pdrs, 6 pdrs and M.G's, then the infantry would come through to mop-up. The 18th say that my Companies, fighting magnificently, beat them back three times, but gradually the return fire weakened and the tanks edged closer and closer. Then at 7.45 came a R/T message from Quilter, the Adjutant, to Brigade. 'The tanks have broken through B. Coy. and are within 50 yds. The end'—and no more was heard.... prisoners were seen being marched away, but so far there is no word of who was hit except that the body of Gilmour, our M.O., gallant, debonaire ... was found some days later. But most of our dead were buried by the Huns and the wounded removed. It is the end of as good a battalion as was ever in the King's service. Jim Burrows has taken over and is building anew with on foundation our 'B' team, including Charlie Upham, returned wounded from [Crete](#) and [Greece](#), odds and ends from Base jobs and a proud tradition.

From 8000 yards away, <sup>44</sup> wounded and a prisoner, I watched through my glasses, swirl of smoke and dust [of] explosions, tanks moving about; may I never

pass through such an hour again. <sup>45</sup>

The battalion's casualties in this campaign were:

	Offrs	ORs	Total
Killed in action	1	42 *	43
Died of wounds	1	15	16
Wounded	13	113	126
Wounded and prisoner of war	1	24	25
Prisoner of war	8	330 †	338
	—	—	—
	24	524	548
	* * * * *		

[Belhamed- Sidi Rezegh, Libya, 24 August, 1954](#)

Back 'home' — very still and a quiet breeze blowing.... I am writing this just above the wadi which divides [Belhamed](#) from Sidi Rezegh, the wadi of the B and D Coys' battle of 27 November. Actually I'm nearer to the old mosque.

The place is full of thoughts and ghosts of the past — and the litter of battle(s) is still around. There on [Belhamed](#) are those slabs of white rock into which we tried to put pick and shovel on that night we arrived there.... I've tried for three days to reach here from [Tobruk](#) and this morning I succeeded and I've wandered around at my leisure and with my thoughts. It's a risky journey and parts of [Belhamed](#) are mined still.

I recall so vividly the night of the assault here and the damn compass bearing I was given and Kip saying 'Go on, you're on the right bearing.' Then our hectic trip with Chas Macdonald [McDonald] — the attack by our own tanks — you with a handful of red paybooks and your making of long, detailed lists. I think you went back for a blanket and then returned (?) — and then Harry Beale with his news of '1000 Australians and 50 tanks will come here from [Tobruk](#) — go around — tell each platoon and each section.' I recall how happy the chaps were to get this news and on each time around each platoon offered food and tea — and the burning truck (no sign) — and ... Orr saying 'You Deutchland bastard'.... Then there was Spicer with his field glasses and his true forecast, 'These are not our tanks, they're bloody Huns.'

Tell Tom Jackson (the Bishop of York) that it's too hot to count his 1,068 (?) steps from the starting line — the steps which Paddy Boyle went on counting after the Jerries opened up fire.

As I write now I'm right beside the mosque — the one to which we marched during the first few hours of captivity. To me it seems slightly different but it's very battered and all about lie heaps of twisted wire, some broken iron beds, washing bowls, pieces of tattered cloth, and boots, green in colour and shrunk to almost child's size by the sun. Do you recall the German doctor coming forth and saying 'Are there any wounded among you?' There were some German graves, you might remember, just near by.... All morning I've been a little scared of mines — and a little superstitious — perhaps I'm tempting Fate too much. To me this land has more 'pull' and interest than all the grand places of the world and I think you would agree. I don't mean as a place to live. I mean that this spot holds more interest for me than for example, the tombs of the Mamelukes.

It's so quiet here ..., just the slight breeze. A Bedouin is tending a flock of goats about a mile away. Some minutes ago, when crossing the B and D Coy battle flat I stopped and spoke to two [Senussi](#) tribesmen who came from two tents. Now, 14 years ago two tents were pitched very close to where these ones are — it all seems so odd.... On and around [Belhamed](#) and [Sidi Rezegh](#) I can still see old trenches and old stone sangars — perhaps not ours as other battles raged over here since our day. I've been up and down the [Trigh Capuzzo](#), now in a shocking state, and I've wandered towards Bir el Chleta, but not the full distance, and about half an hour ago I passed by [Ed Duda](#) and thought of the [Essex Regiment](#) there in '41 — and of the Essex lads who visited our dugout in the weeks previous to the attack. My map is an old army one — how familiar it all seems now — it's a '1: 250,000 Egypt & [Cyrenaica-Salum-Tobruk](#)' — revised 1942 — and how familiar do these names read and sound now — [Gambut](#) — Point 172 — and at the other end [El Adem](#) to where I went this morning and from where I came along the escarpment to [Belhamed](#) and [Sidi Rezegh](#). I came to a well with a battered concrete post on which was written 'Bir Sidi Rezegh'. I tried to photograph it but the sun was against me.

.... Getting out here has been most difficult. I've no rank, no standing, no strings to pull — a complete stranger — a tramp who has come to [Tobruk](#). I'm very tired mentally. Everybody, or rather most people told me I am mad. One official said, 'You

haven't a chance old man — you're just wasting your time — besides, it's very dangerous.' (20,000 Arabs have been killed since the end of the war with mines and unexploded shells, I was told.)

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<sup>1</sup> Capt G. F. Dunne; Christchurch; born Dunedin, 10 Dec 1906; warehouseman; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>2</sup> WO II R. May, MBE; Hawarden; born Christchurch, 21 Jan 1918; sawmill worker; wounded 24 Nov 1941; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; escaped Italy, Sep 1943; safe in Base, 1 Nov 1943.

<sup>3</sup> Lt A. R. Guthrey, MC; Christchurch; born Rawene, 15 Jan 1916; clerk; wounded Nov 1941.

<sup>4</sup> These were probably Captain Briel's armoured half-track carriers, frequently mistaken for tanks.

<sup>5</sup> Capt E. M. Wilson; Christchurch; born Shetland, 18 Sep 1910; clerk; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>6</sup> Pte W. H. Hanna; Christchurch; born NZ 29 May 1908; wounded 27 Nov 1941; p.w. 28 Jun 1942.

<sup>7</sup> Pte W. C. Jamieson; Purakanui, Port Chalmers; born England, 15 Jan 1913; hardware assistant; wounded 25 Nov 1941; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; escaped ItalySep 1943; recaptured Oct 1943.

<sup>8</sup> Capt J. P. Quilter, ED; Mataura; born Mataura, 10 May 1910; cordial manufacturer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>9</sup> L-Cpl J. B. Scott; Alexandra; born Invercargill, 17 Jun 1913; farmhand; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>10</sup> Sgt R. Lumsden; Waitara; born Scotland, 11 Sep 1913; contractor; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped Benghazi, 21 Dec 1941.

<sup>11</sup> Sgt G. L. Lochhead, DCM; Timaru; born Ashburton, 1 Sep 1916; grocer's assistant; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>12</sup> Maj M. Heenan, m.i.d.; Hong Kong; born NZ 10 Oct 1912; solicitor; wounded 18 Nov 1941.

<sup>13</sup> Infantry Brigadier, pp. 94-5.

<sup>14</sup> Lt-Col J. N. Peart, DSO, m.i.d.; born Collingwood, 12 Feb 1900; schoolmaster; CO 18 Bn Nov 1941-Mar 1942; CO 26 Bn 1 May-20 Jun 1942, 29 Jun-4 Sep 1942; died of wounds 4 Sep 1942.

<sup>15</sup> This was a slip of the pen—C and D were the leading companies.

<sup>16</sup> Maj G. Baker; Gore; born Hastings, 21 May 1919; stock agent; wounded 18 Nov 1941.

<sup>17</sup> This incident was reported in Africa Division's war diary as an attempt to capture 'Strongpoint 903'.

<sup>18</sup> Pte J. L. Spicer; born Auckland, 4 Apr 1911; labourer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; deceased.

<sup>19</sup> Lt-Col A. D. Copeland, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 3 Feb 1912; civil servant; wounded 29 May 1944.

<sup>20</sup> Capt C. O. D. Roberts; Runanga, Westland; born Feilding, 14 Dec 1905; school-teacher; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

<sup>21</sup> Maj R. E. Agar, ED; Wellington; born Belfast, 4 Dec 1903; company secretary OC Maadi Camp Transit Depot Oct 1944-Dec 1945.

<sup>22</sup> Maj J. P. Snadden, MC; Wellington; born Te Kuiti, 24 May 1913; salesman; 2 i/c 5 Fd Regt Mar-Oct 1944; twice wounded.

<sup>23</sup> WO II R. E. O. Anderson; Timaru; born Port Chalmers, 12 Jan 1912; foreman roof-tiler; wounded Apr 1941; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>24</sup> L-Sgt J. R. Hayward; born Matata, 29 Sep 1912; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.

<sup>25</sup> After the war, on the testimony of repatriated prisoners of war, Lochhead was awarded the DCM, mainly for his part in this attack.

<sup>26</sup> 2 Lt G. Mills; born NZ 31 Jul 1913; bank officer; died of wounds 11 Dec 1941.

<sup>27</sup> The times given by McPhail and Wilson are difficult to reconcile with the starting time of the attack (11 a.m.) as given in the battalion diary.

<sup>28</sup> Sgt M. J. Wilson; born Oamaru, 18 Mar 1917; clerk; died of wounds 27 Nov 1941.

<sup>29</sup> The belief that the German pocket was ready to surrender arose as a result of the 'parleying' with the two stretcher-bearers. The subsequent fighting was to show that the assumption was far from the truth, and for the two companies concerned, a costly misjudgment.

<sup>30</sup> Sgt R. McL. Miller, m.i.d.; Oamaru; born Carterton, 4 Dec 1917; journalist; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

<sup>31</sup> Cpl K. L. Pratt; born Wanganui, 7 Sep 1906; farmer; wounded and p.w. 27 Nov 1941; died while p.w. 8 Sep 1944.

<sup>32</sup> Sgt J. Hogg, MM; Auckland; born Nightcaps, Southland, 25 May 1915; wicker worker; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>33</sup> Capt J. F. Baker; Wellington; born Dunedin, 18 Dec 1915; warehouseman; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>34</sup> Pte P. G. T. Speedy; Palmerston North; born Auckland, 31 Jan 1912; bank clerk; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>35</sup> Maj J. H. Beale, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born England, 3 Apr 1912; salesman; DAAG 2 NZ Div Sep-Dec 1944.

<sup>36</sup> Two companies of Australians and eleven tanks had made a counter-attack at Ed Duda on the night of 29-30 November. A report by an 18 Battalion patrol gave the number of tanks as fifty.

<sup>37</sup> 18 Battalion stayed where it was for some time after the 20th had been overrun, then withdrew some 700 yards westwards behind a minefield previously laid by the Germans.

<sup>38</sup> Seven Matilda tanks, seven two-pounders, and a company of the Buffs were used to reinforce the eastern front.

<sup>39</sup> Sgt P. M. McGhie; Christchurch; born Mokihinui, 8 Oct 1906; labourer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>40</sup> Cpl S. S. Lowe; Westport; born NZ 11 Jun 1907; farmhand; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>41</sup> 2 Lt P. A. McConchie, DCM; Nelson; born NZ 21 Aug 1916; carpenter; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped Benghazi, Dec 1941; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>42</sup> Pte G. Leckie; born Seacliff, 3 Oct 1907; farmhand; wounded May 1941; killed in action 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>43</sup> 2 Lt C. C. McDonald; born NZ 3 Feb 1908; stock agent; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped Benghazi, 21 Dec 1941; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

<sup>44</sup> The MDS was about eight miles from Belhamed.

<sup>45</sup> The Colonel escaped from the dressing station in a lorry with a party of twenty (including Captain Rhodes and Second-Lieutenant Boyle) on the morning of 4 December. Arriving safely at [Baggush](#) a few days later, he was greeted by [General Freyberg](#) with the words, 'You're a Brigadier!' and on recovering from his wound took command of 5 Brigade.

\* Two men, Privates J. T. Darling and J. H. W. Gale, both wounded, were drowned when the Chakdina was sunk off [Tobruk](#) on 5 December 1941.

† Sergeant I. D. McBain and Private W. E. Eason, previously classified missing, were drowned when the Jantzen, carrying prisoners of war to [Italy](#), was torpedoed off the [Peloponnese](#) on 9 December 1941.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 8 – REBUILDING AFTER BATTLE

## CHAPTER 8

### Rebuilding after Battle

During the week that followed the disaster on [Belhamed](#) scattered elements of the battalion gradually reunited at [Baggush](#), each with its own story to tell.

Throughout 30 November the Battalion B Echelon group near [Zaafran](#) had experienced heavy shelling and mortaring. At 3 a.m. on 1 December Captain Agar, with the padre and transport officer, led a convoy consisting of all the B Echelon vehicles except the battalion's tactical transport on a slow and difficult move to [Tobruk](#). Passing through the perimeter defences, the convoy drove to a bivouac area on the other side of the town. During the day news filtered through that the rifle companies on [Belhamed](#) had been overrun by tanks. Only one man, Lance-Corporal [Glover](#),<sup>1</sup> a signaller, had escaped. During the attack it had seemed clear to him that the battalion had little chance of beating off the tanks, and just before the unit was overrun he took a chance and dashed back over the escarpment. He made his way north-west, ultimately joining a vehicle at the tail of a convoy and travelling to [Tobruk](#).

On the night of 2-3 December Captain Agar and all available men, including cooks and quartermaster's staff, were sent as reinforcements to 18 Battalion on the escarpment west of [Belhamed](#). They were put in a forward position facing the mosque. No action was experienced, but at 2.50 p.m. on 4 December the men watched the Border Regiment make a bayonet attack that closely resembled the unfortunate action fought by B and D Companies only a week before. At 6.30 p.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Peart was asked to repeat the attempt with his unit, but to everyone's relief wiser counsels prevailed. Several days later, when a patrol found no enemy out in front, all 20 Battalion men were sent back to [Tobruk](#), where enemy air raids made life much less safe than on the escarpment.

Padre Spence had accompanied the men out to the 18 Battalion area and during the week spent in [Tobruk](#) he visited soldiers of the [Eighth Army](#) in hospital. On 7 December he held a church service for 4 Brigade Group.

Next day, the battle having moved westward, the convoy left on the return journey to Egypt. In a short time it became widely scattered and soon resolved itself

into a number of small groups, each making its way to the border with all speed. Passing through the Wire, the convoy lagged for the night near a South African unit and two days later reached [Baggush](#).

Meanwhile the remaining battalion vehicles left near [Zaafran](#) under the Quartermaster, Lieutenant Bolwell, had also been forced to withdraw rather hastily eastwards. Sergeant [Lloyd Borthwick](#) <sup>2</sup> of the transport platoon describes their experiences:

On 1st December enemy shells landed in the area in increasing numbers. During the early afternoon [RAF](#) bombers flew over and dropped their bombs so close that we fired at them. Actually they were bombing the enemy but at the time we did not know that he was so close. Captain Bolwell drove off to Brigade and on his return told us to move over the plateau in ones and twos to avoid dust and prevent Jerry from knowing that we were evacuating. However, he had come closer and lead was flying in all directions. The whole show moved out at high speed, which wasn't a bad idea as he couldn't aim at us properly for the dust. The water truck broke down but was towed out by the Battalion Orderly Room 3-tonner and all our transport escaped without damage. Many trucks from other units joined in the stampede but the 20th drivers kept in two groups. This was fortunate for me as during a halt we brought our vehicles together and reported to the Brigade Major at the head of the column. Discipline was excellent, and even at the beginning drivers kept in line.

We went forty odd miles east. After two hours' sleep all units formed up correctly and at 2.40 p.m. passed through the 'wire' into Egypt.

The move back to [Baggush](#) was completed at noon on 5 December when Lieutenant Bolwell and his convoy of 37 vehicles and 77 men rejoined the officers and men of the battalion who had been left out of battle at their camp near Sidi Haneish station. Next day the battalion moved into the area occupied by B Company prior to the campaign.

Company areas were re-established on 8 December and when Captain Agar, Second-Lieutenant Beauchamp, Padre Spence and twenty-six men reported in from [Tobruk](#) later in the day the strength of the unit stood at 10 officers and 127 men.

Sergeant [Monteath](#), <sup>3</sup> of the intelligence section, describes the feelings of those

who welcomed back the survivors:

The LOB<sup>4</sup> personnel consisted of a few officers from Headquarters and the rifle companies plus NCO's and men unfit through injury, or on courses or leave. Several small parties of these were despatched to join the unit but got no further than Corps Headquarters by 1 December, and consequently rejoined what was left of the 20th when it pulled back across the wire.

To those who were still in the unit the realisation of the disaster was felt most forcibly during the parades which were held in the reorganisation period at Baggush. Faces one had got to know so well were just not where they should have been. The uncertainty as to what had happened to one's friends added to the sense of loss. It was a sad period, but helped by the vitality of the new blood among the reinforcements. This, and the spirit of the 20th which existed among the LOB's gradually helped the new unit to take shape.

On 9 December Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows took command of the battalion, replacing Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger. During the next few days the battalion received reinforcements to the number of 23 officers and 291 other ranks. Many of them were ex-20th men who came hastily back from courses and training depots when they heard of the disastrous depletion of their unit. On 14 December a sergeant and thirty men, previously attached to 18 Battalion, arrived from Tobruk, bringing the number of 'original' officers and men—those in the battalion before the last campaign—to 10 officers and 183 other ranks.

By 15 December the battalion officers were up to strength. Their leader, as previously stated, was Colonel Burrows, whose quiet mien and force of character made him a worthy successor to 'Kip'. The second-in-command was Major Paterson, D Company's original commander, who had commanded Headquarters Company in Crete. Second-Lieutenant Gibb became Adjutant and Second-Lieutenant Sullivan, who had proved himself so thoroughly in Greece and Crete, was the Intelligence Officer. The Quartermaster was Lieutenant Bolwell. At that stage he and Padre Spence were two of the most battle-experienced officers in the unit. Major McKergow commanded Headquarters Company, Captain Washbourn, A Company, and Captain Agar, B Company. Lieutenant Upham took over C Company. Men recalled how, when told that he would be LOB for the Libyan campaign, Upham had

thrown his equipment on the sand and wanted to know what he was doing in Egypt anyway. Lieutenant Maxwell, who had been through [Greece](#) and [Crete](#), took over D Company. The subalterns included a leavening of original 20th men, with others of the 5th and 6th Reinforcements keen to prove their worth. Lieutenant [Feltham](#)<sup>5</sup> was the new RMO.

The NCOs also included quite a number of old hands. RSM 'Uke' Wilson's parade-ground manner was such that reinforcements soon knew that they had become a part of the 20th. 'Gus' [Gray](#)<sup>6</sup> became CSM of A Company, 'Wally' Johnson<sup>7</sup> of B, Bob May returned from hospital to carry on the spirit of Grooby in C, and 'Algy' [Hayes](#)<sup>8</sup> rose to senior NCO in D Company. Many of the large number of platoon NCOs required were drawn from the LOBs and well-tried 'originals'. Promotions were rapid; in fact, promotion in a fighting battalion seemed to be mostly a matter of survival.

The period at [Baggush](#) was very wet but it was no time to sit about brooding. Training began with equipment lent by 18 and [19](#) Battalions and soon successive drafts of reinforcements brought Headquarters and the rifle companies up to strength. The training syllabus for 15–21 December included platoon drill and weapon training, an hour's bayonet training each day, platoon exercises in attack and defence, route marches, exercises in desert formation and the use of scouts, and night marches and patrols on two nights a week.

Over the signature of the new Adjutant appeared a significant footnote to the training syllabus:

During the afternoon periods Coys will ensure that personnel who appear backward in Weapon Training receive extra instruction under the supervision of the Coy Weapon Training Officer.

The reputation of the battalion was obviously in safe hands.

On Christmas Day [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) visited the unit, receiving a warm welcome, especially from the 'old hands'. It was a sad visit for him, with so few of his old friends still with the battalion and the fate of so many uncertain. Christmas dinner, however, was an immediate success, with turkey the star item on the menu.

The war diary for 31 December records briefly, 'General New Year celebrations.'

Sergeant Monteath expands this a little:

By the time the festive season arrived there was a certain amount of resemblance to the old 20th in that those old hands present, in order to let off steam, turned on one of the best fireworks displays ever seen during its history. It was just not safe to be above ground on New Year's Eve. Everyone was firing anything he had, 25- pounders were in action, as well as enemy weapons and flares. At one stage a signal from rear units wanted to know if a coast landing had been made in the area. No doubt the beer issue helped.

After a short period of training the battalion moved by train on 6 January to Maadi, where on the 8th there arrived six doughty men who had escaped from Benghazi. They were Sergeant C. C. McDonald, Corporals E. Karst<sup>9</sup> and R. Lumsden, Lance-Corporal P. A. McConchie, and Privates J. Nixon<sup>10</sup> and T. Kidd.<sup>11</sup> They wore impressive-looking beards and were duly photographed before shaving them off. The heartiness of their welcome was equalled only by their delight at being back in the battalion.

On 14 January all who had been members of the unit before the Libyan campaign assembled at afternoon tea to bid farewell to Brigadier Kippenberger, who was relinquishing command of the Training Group at Maadi to take command of 5 Brigade. Regulations forgotten for the occasion, he was presented with a set of decanters and a shooting stick, suitably inscribed, as a token of esteem.<sup>12</sup> The inscription read: 'To Brigadier H. K. Kippenberger, from those members of the 20th Battalion who were privileged to serve under him.'

Training continued and included live practices at the battle range at Abbassia and on the ranges at Wadi Tih. At the latter, unofficial practice shoots with a captured spandau machine gun added considerable interest. At a brigade group shooting competition a team from B Company won the Bren-gun teams' shoot.

During the last week in January the battalion moved to Kabrit to undergo training in combined operations. Companies practised pulling boats, did exercises in assault landing craft, learnt to handle the special equipment and scaling ladders. Choppy water on the Great Bitter Lake had the usual effect on indifferent sailors, who found manoeuvres on the Sinai shore welcome after a rough twenty-minute

crossing.

As a contrast, on 3 February the battalion moved out in transport for four days' field exercises in which the troops carried out attacks from lorries and practised moves in desert formation. Further field training began on the 16th with a three-day exercise which culminated in an attack using live ammunition and with artillery and machine-gun support. Further training included the laying and lifting of mines and the use of explosives.

On 23 February warning was received of a move to Syria. A German invasion southwards through Turkey to the Middle East oilfields and the Suez Canal was possible, and the defensive scheme included tasks for the New Zealand Division.

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<sup>1</sup> Sgt R. G. Glover; Koromiko, Marlborough; born NZ 5 Aug 1916; labourer.

<sup>2</sup> Sgt L. A. Borthwick; Upper Hutt; born Clinton, 12 Sep 1918; commercial traveller.

<sup>3</sup> WO II J. M. Monteath; Roxburgh; born Christchurch, 13 May 1911; bank officer.

<sup>4</sup> LOB: left out of battle.

<sup>5</sup> Maj R. J. Feltham; Hunterville; born Ohakune, 5 Jul 1914; medical practitioner; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>6</sup> WO II A. C. Gray; born Kaikoura, 14 Aug 1914; clerk; killed in action 13 Jul 1942.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Lt W. F. Johnson; Invercargill; born NZ 23 Sep 1917; typewriter mechanic; twice wounded.

<sup>8</sup> WO II A. E. Hayes; Dunedin; born Invercargill, 24 May 1919; brass polisher; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>9</sup> Sgt E. O. C. Karst; Coalgate, Canterbury; born Christchurch, 22 Feb 1916; labourer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped Benghazi, 23 Dec 1941.

<sup>10</sup> Lt J. M. S. Nixon; Oamaru; born Pukekohe, 19 Sep 1918; student; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped Benghazi, Dec 1941; wounded 23 Mar 1944.

<sup>11</sup> Pte T. E. Kidd; Christchurch; born NZ 10 Feb 1907; upholsterer; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped Benghazi, Dec 1941; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>12</sup> Still in his possession and treasured as priceless mementoes.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 9 – SYRIA

## CHAPTER 9

### Syria

By the end of February reinforcements had brought the battalion up to strength, and on 1 March the move to [Syria](#) began. The road party and the carriers preceded the rest of the battalion and late on the Sunday evening the troops entrained, reaching [Kantara](#) some time after midnight and crossing the canal, where a hot meal was served. Despite the late hour the inevitable money-changers were there with the usual eye to business, patrolling the train, rattling bags of change, their quavering voices wailing 'Palestine mone-e-e. Any 'Gyptian no-o-o-tes'.

Entrainning once more, the battalion traversed the dreary [Sinai Desert](#) and entered Palestine. One unscheduled halt on the journey proved to be on account of a railway smash the previous day. A detour line had been built, and as the train full of troops steamed slowly past the men gazed speculatively at the battered engine and telescoped carriages.

Leaving the train a few miles south of [Haifa](#) on the evening of 2 March, the troops marched two miles to a transit camp at At Tira in the olive groves, where tented accommodation and a hot meal were appreciated after a long day spent in the train. Next day some men took the opportunity to climb Mount Carmel, while others rested, laundered, or wrote letters. The following morning all troops loaded their gear on observation buses requisitioned by the Army but driven by their Jewish civilian drivers. These conveyances were a great improvement on the third-class Egyptian railway carriages, and their comfortable seats and ample window space enhanced the enjoyment of a journey through the hills and valleys of this historic country.

After a halt for lunch in the hills the convoy traversed the plain of Esdraelon, skirted [Nazareth](#), and coasted down to [Tiberias](#) on the shores of placid Galilee, whose waters, like the future, were shrouded in misty obscurity. After replenishing petrol supplies the convoy skirted the lake and continued on to Rosh Pinna, a border check-post, passing the well-known 'Sea Level' sign on the way.

Across the border signs of French administration were apparent, and interest was aroused in an aerodrome near which one of the chief battles of the Syrian

campaign had been fought. Skirting the snow-streaked slopes of Mount Hermon, the convoy continued through hilly country towards [Damascus](#). Here and there the Arabs endeavoured to wring a meagre living from the inhospitable soil and by labour on the roads, at which work many of both sexes seemed to find occupation.



**eastern mediterranean**

[Damascus](#) was reached in the evening and, after a brief halt, the battalion motored to a staging area in the old French barracks at Kaboun, several kilometres away. The ground was very rough and intersected by deep wheel-ruts. There was no moon and, after stumbling about the area to find the mess and a cup of tea, most of the men had difficulty in finding their way back to their huts.

Next morning the troops breakfasted at half past five and paraded at 7 a.m. Because of the rain overcoats were worn, and, once more festooning themselves with web, packs and other incidentals of necessary equipment, the men marched at 9.30 a.m. down to the [RASC](#) trucks in which they were to complete the last lap of this move. The Jewish drivers of the day before had been rather unorthodox. Racing, cutting in, speeding downhill on Syrian roads at well over fifty miles an hour, their driving gave little guarantee of safe arrival. The RASC convoys were more sedate. The road wound through mountainous country once more, with reddish clay soil that provided at times unusual colour effects.

On the foothills at one stage were noticed the tiny huts of an Armenian refugee village. Rain fell, making the surface very slippery. Passing through [Baalbek](#) the

troops gazed admiringly at ruins which are world famous as examples of ancient Roman architecture. Some 20 miles farther on the convoy halted at its destination, a camp near the village of El Aine, on the foothills of the Anti- Lebanon range. In a dense fog the men scrambled round the slippery, stony hillside in an endeavour to find their allotted huts. These were of the Nissen variety with stone slab floors. Until the arrival of the baggage party, the last section of which did not complete the journey until three days later, sleeping on these hard surfaces was rather cold. Huts without flagstones were provided with bedboards.

The baggage party, under Lieutenant Carlyle,<sup>1</sup> moved by rail to Haifa, where everything was loaded on to requisitioned Jewish trucks whose drivers were blissfully ignorant of the orthodox movement of army convoys. An RASC officer acted as guide, he and the OC convoy travelling in a taxi. With the aid of an interpreter the drivers were given an order of march, but at the signal to advance all vehicles made a concerted rush for the gate leading out of the railway yard. The ensuing confusion was only a foretaste of what lay ahead.

About half a mile out of Haifa some of the trucks began to run out of petrol. This was hard to understand as the convoy had filled up at a petrol point before leaving. The explanation, for once, was simple: the drivers had 'hocked' their supply of army petrol to motorists in Haifa. The convoy commander sent back to Haifa for a petrol truck, instructing the convoy to wait until all were replenished once more. When the petrol truck arrived, however, the rest of the convoy was nowhere to be seen, and some of the trucks were finally located in Tiberias and some at the Palestine check-post at Rosh Pinna.

Between this place and the Syrian check-post across the Jordan the road forked, and, in spite of the assurance of the RASC officer that none of the vehicles could possibly go astray, eight or ten trucks took the wrong turning and wandered back and forth across the frontier, at times forging through snow, before they finally reached their destination. Those trucks which did reach the second check-post were instructed to wait two kilometres farther on till the straying vehicles returned. When half an hour had elapsed without any sign of the stragglers, the convoy leader returned from his search to find once more an empty road.

The next stop was Damascus, where the missing trucks were found to be

sightseeing at rather more than the usual sedate tourist pace. To collect them together in some semblance of a convoy Lieutenant Carlyle sought the assistance of the CMPs, but on emerging from the police post was rather aghast to find that this time the taxi in which he had been travelling had disappeared—on the perfectly legitimate errand of changing a tyre at the nearest garage. In the end the convoy was reassembled and completed the journey to [El Aine](#) without further misadventure.

The Division's chief task in Syria was to prepare a defensive position covering the northern entrance to the [Bekaa](#) valley between the [Lebanon](#) and Anti- [Lebanon](#) ranges. The centre of the 'fortress' was the village of [Djedeide](#)—about 20 miles north of [Baalbek](#)—which gave its name to the defences. Twentieth Battalion's sector was on high ground east of the valley and south of the village of [Fakehe](#). It was to be manned by three companies in self-contained forward positions, with the fourth in reserve.

Heavy rain and hail followed the battalion's arrival, but on the Anti- [Lebanon](#) hills above, where [19 Battalion](#) perched on windswept heights, driving snow made conditions even more unpleasant. When the weather cleared, however, it was seen that the 20th's camp was really in one of the best situations available. The hillside was stony but well drained, and in contrast to the valley and the camps on the foothills beyond it at [Zabboud](#), would have a minimum of dust.

Training commenced with platoon route marches which gradually made the men familiar with the topography of the country. Daily they marched along the road that led through the village of [El Aine](#) and past 18 Battalion at [Djedeide](#). Other routes lay across the valley from [Fakehe](#) and along the anti-tank ditch past the [Divisional Cavalry](#), or wound up tortuous goat tracks to the hills and spurs that were soon to ring with the sound of swinging picks.

As soon as company areas were allotted and defensive positions sited the battalion settled down to the strenuous work of digging weapon pits, building sangars, and camouflaging. In places the hard rock required the assistance of compressors from the engineers. Water in camel tanks was carried up by mules from a Cypriot unit near [Djedeide](#). The endurance and agility of these slender-legged beasts was amazing, but equally so was the callousness of their drivers. On one

occasion a mule laden with two 'fantasias' of water scrambled up the steep slope to Lieutenant Cottrell's <sup>2</sup> platoon headquarters. On reaching the narrow ledge on top the mule collapsed and one tank landed on the foot of the Cypriot driver, evoking more amusement than sympathy from the troops.

The tracks to the mortar positions could not be negotiated by the compressor and blasting was carried out after boring holes with hand drills. The explosives were improvised from captured Italian mortar bombs. But this did not constitute the sum total of the mortar platoon's problems. When supplies of curved iron arrived for the roofing of dugouts, these were off-loaded from the trucks half-way up the hill and then tied on to a mule for transport up the steep tracks to the mortar positions. The beast stood motionless while the iron was firmly tied on its arching back, but at the first few steps it seemed to take a marked dislike to this type of load and went into its customary dance. The load shifted round under its belly, forming a sort of iron cradle. The mule slipped to its knees, then mule and iron slid slowly but surely down the slippery slope.

In April three officers and eleven NCOs were sent to 7 Anti-Tank Regiment for a six-weeks' course on the two-pounder anti-tank gun. Battalion establishments had been expanded to include an anti-tank platoon of two troops of four guns each which was to replace the pioneer platoon, shortly to be disbanded. The chief change among the officers took place in the last week of April when Major Manson, <sup>3</sup> OC B Company, succeeded Major Paterson as second-in-command, the latter returning to New Zealand on duty.

Incidental battalion duties consisted of supplying personnel for train guards, Baalbek pickets, bomb- and petrol-dump guards, and on one occasion A and C Companies formed the cordon for a dawn raid on the village of Britel, whose inhabitants were suspected, with reason, of having stolen military stores. Four lorry-loads of army material—mostly engineer stores—were recovered.

The sole evidence of enemy activity was provided when parachutists were reported to have dropped in the Ras Baalbek area. These were later apprehended and their identity as enemy agents established. A ski school was opened at 'The Cedars' and was attended by both experienced personnel and learners, who completed an enjoyable if rather strenuous course.

When the defensive position was completed platoon manoeuvres in the hills were carried out to give platoon commanders and their men experience in the operations that would be required in the event of a campaign in this country. Supplies were carried by truck and mule teams to various rendezvous, and in the four days spent by each platoon on these exercises many valuable lessons were learned.

Recreation was provided in the form of leave to [Baalbek](#)— where the ruined temples were visited—weekends at the pretty little mountain tourist resort of [Zahle](#), excursions to [Beirut](#), fishing expeditions, and picnics to the mouth of the [Orontes](#) River, whose ice-cold waters made swimmers gasp when emerging after the first dive. Team games were seldom possible, but a hockey team played a friendly game with a neighbouring unit.

Company concerts and an occasional picture show enlivened the long evenings. Shortly after the arrival of the battalion the [YMCA](#) cinema was set up on the slopes at the foot of the camp. The main film was preceded by a travelogue in technicolour — its commentator the well-known Fitzpatrick. The troops sat expectantly through the usual prologue, but when the title flashed on the screen read ' [Cairo](#), City of Contrasts', the words of the commentator were drowned in a spontaneous derisive roar. The YMCA hut with its seven o'clock evening cup of tea and radio news was the natural meeting centre for men of D and Headquarters Companies. The favourite item of the evening programme was the Anzac Tattoo, 'From the Enemy to the Enemy', from Radio Berlin. On the night that this station announced the fall of [Singapore](#) the news was preceded by a recording of the song, 'Come you back to [Mandalay](#)'.

The local Arab population was very friendly and 'Saaeda, Johnny' replaced the inevitable 'Saaeda, George' of [Cairo](#). The children were delightful urchins. Happiest of all were the cheery goatherds whose long-haired flocks grazed all day on the stony hillsides and passed at dawn through the diggings with a scuffling of nimble hoofs and a tinkling of tiny bells. Often could be heard far up on the mountainside the shrill, clear note of a reed pipe played by one of these carefree urchins, seated on a grassy knoll beneath the towering crags.

Spring came, warmly reminiscent of New Zealand. The brown squares of the

ploughed fields in the valley assumed a deepening tinge of green as the spears of young wheat rose to the beckoning sun. Poplars burst into leaf, orchard trees were beautiful once more in a mantle of pink-and-white blossom, while grape-vines, sprawled over the landscape like huge spiders, hid their ugly contours beneath a foliage of green. No greater contrast to the searing Egyptian desert could have been imagined.

In any occupied country the health of the inhabitants is one of the chief concerns of the medical officers in order to avoid impairing the fitness of the troops through disease, epidemics, or bad sanitation. The villagers of El Aine, while not particularly sanitary in some of their street habits, were in fairly good health, but once the presence of a doctor was made known in the neighbourhood there was no lack of clients for free medical attention. So it came about that 'Doc' Feltham required to hold two sick parades each morning, one for the troops and another for the locals. Chief among the latter were young women with ailing babies, old men with toothache, and expectant mothers. Their gratitude for his unfailing attention and alleviation of their complaints was expressed simply in gifts of fruit, eggs and poultry. Accordingly, by virtue of their profession, the RAP staff lived on a menu considerably more palatable than that of their fellows.

In the course of his treatment of these native patients the RMO acquired a museum of unique medical specimens, preserved in bottles of spirits. Chief among them was an auxiliary thumb amputated from the hand of a boy who appeared one morning on sick parade. This was nothing, however, to the surprise received by a visitor to the RAP one day when he discovered the 'Doc' sitting on the chest of a woman on the floor and wrenching grimly at a stubborn tooth, while an assistant held her head firmly to the flagstones. It appeared that the MO had experienced great difficulty in obtaining the necessary leverage in the early stages of the operation and during the struggle the woman had slipped off the chair on to the floor, the doctor meanwhile maintaining his grip and successfully completing the extraction.

Extremely hot weather was experienced during this month, the thermometer on the 5th registering 101 degrees in the shade. On 8 May a mobile gas unit visited the area and 651 men of the battalion experienced the usual uncomfortable instruction.

Throughout the month the companies continued to dig and camouflage their positions, with a break on 20 May for an inspection by HRH the Duke of Gloucester. Next day the battalion commenced a gruelling week's manoeuvres in the Forqloss area east of [Homs](#), practising attacks by day and night in desert formation as part of a brigade group exercise. Hot weather made conditions very trying and after an all-night march the weary troops were ready to return to camp. In the past a brigade manoeuvre had often been the preliminary to a campaign. More prophetic than he knew was the staff-sergeant of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment who told his pupils that his NCOs had given three different courses on their guns and immediately afterwards had gone into action with the men they had trained. The pleasant recess in [Syria](#) was rapidly drawing to a close.

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<sup>1</sup> [Maj L. I. Carlyle](#); [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 29 Oct 1907; sales organiser.

<sup>2</sup> [Capt A. I. Cottrell](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Westport](#), 10 Feb 1907; solicitor; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>3</sup> [Maj I. O. Manson](#); [Invercargill](#); born [Otautau](#), 9 Jul 1905; clerk; 2 i/c 20 Bn Apr-Jul 1942; CO 20 Bn 5–21 Jul 1942.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 10 – RETURN TO THE DESERT

## CHAPTER 10

### Return to the Desert

On 27 May Rommel, largely reinforced, attacked the Eighth Army in Libya and a great battle commenced whose varying fortunes were watched with interest by the New Zealand Division then in Syria. About 4 June the battle began to turn strongly against the Eighth Army and on 14 June the Division was ordered to move to the Western Desert with the utmost speed.

Movement orders quickly passed down from Division to battalion, and by 7 a.m. on the 16th the Bren-carrier platoon under Captain Phillips<sup>1</sup> had been loaded on to the train at Rayak. At the same time Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows, with the Intelligence Officer, Second-Lieutenant Sullivan, and the company commanders, left for Maadi to receive instructions. Major McKergow, OC Headquarters Company, left the battalion for a tour of duty with the Greek Brigade in Palestine.

In the meantime rubbish fires burned sluggishly, disconsolate Arabs poked about on the fringe of the camp, and quartermasters were unusually lavish with changes of clothing and the much-prized pocket-knives. Even so, due to an acute shortage of transport, a certain amount of stores had to be sent back to Egypt by rail.

By 6.25 a.m. on 17 June the battalion was ready to move, and after waiting for another unit the convoy moved off at 6.42. The battalion convoy numbered 32 officers and 775 other ranks in 57 lorries and 11 motor-cycles.

Passing through Tiberias, the convoy reached the staging camp at Tulkarm at 8.15 p.m. after a journey of 205 miles on a very hot day. At 6.45 a.m. next day the journey was resumed through Lydda to Asluj. Water was limited to one bottle a man a day, and in the open lorries, without canopies, the heat was very trying. At one hourly halt cases of tomatoes were noticed stacked under some trees at the corner of the road. Most trucks in the vicinity benefited from the discovery.

On 19 June the battalion moved out at 3.30 a.m. and arrived at Ismailia eleven hours later. Here news was received that the Eighth Army was in full retreat. Several vehicles had tyres blown out on the journey through being overloaded. Most men were able to have a refreshing swim in the Canal.

Next day the convoy passed through Cairo. Badges and titles were down, fernleaves blacked out, and the lorries kept moving, but wily George Wog soon knew to whom he had sold yesterday's paper. After a trying journey of thirteen hours the battalion reached Amiriya, where instructions were received to proceed next day to Mersa Matruh. At 6.30 p.m. on 21 June the convoy halted at the end of its 900-mile journey, and later in the evening the battalion moved out to its area on the outskirts of the town and bedded down in the unoccupied huts of the Egyptian Army barracks, in the flea-infested dugouts, or once again on the accommodating sand outside. Native troops from a South African unit woke up and put on an impromptu concert with commendable harmony.

During the day orders had been received from 30 Corps for the New Zealand Division to occupy Matruh fortress and also to man an outpost position at Charing Cross. This message stressed that time and immediate action were of vital importance. Fourth Brigade was ordered to take over the defence of the fortress perimeter from the Sidi Barrani road to the coast until the arrival of other units. Accordingly, early on 22 June 4 Brigade Headquarters moved into the Egyptian barracks, 18 Battalion took up a position on the coast to the north-west of the lagoon, 19 Battalion covered the area between the barracks and the Sidi Barrani road, while 28 (Maori) Battalion, still under command of 4 Brigade since the move to Syria, moved first to the airfield south of the road and later to a position between the other two battalions.

At 5 p.m. the 20th, with 48 Battery of 6 Field Regiment and a troop from 31 Anti-Tank Battery under command, moved out to an outpost position at Charing Cross on the junction of the roads from Siwa and Sidi Barrani, about ten miles south of Mersa Matruh. Next day a platoon of Bren carriers from 6 Brigade joined this group.

On its way to Charing Cross the battalion had great difficulty in moving against the solid stream of Eighth Army trans- port in retreat—'a weird mixture of vehicles that were being driven, towed or pushed, nose to tail and four abreast'. Containing surprisingly few troops and converging from the Siwa and Sidi Barrani roads, they created a confusion that was increased when enemy bombers appeared over the crossroads. In the circumstances the Tommy driver's laconic greeting, 'You're goin'

the wrong way, choom,' was understandable.

The battalion's area at Charing Cross had been mined some years before with Egyptian-pattern mines of doubtful quality. Mines were stacked at the side of the road and the whole area needed cleaning up. This, and the checking of all traffic, comprised the battalion's duties.

At half past five on the afternoon of 23 June a message was received that the battalion would be relieved in a day or two by 6 Brigade and would move back as reserve battalion in Matruh fortress. Next day, however, the CO was informed that a brigade of 10 Indian Division would relieve the battalion at first light next morning.

About 1 a.m. on the 25th enemy aircraft strafed the road from the railway to the road junction for about half an hour. A small patrol from A Company was on the road and had an interesting time. Bombs were dropped at the intersection but caused no casualties. At 8 a.m. the relief of the position at Charing Cross began and an hour and a half later the battalion had returned to Matruh.

In the meantime the general situation was changing rapidly. The New Zealand Division had passed to the command of 10 Corps, 30 Corps Headquarters then retiring to prepare the Alamein line. After handing over the defence of Matruh to 10 Indian Division the New Zealanders were to move to the south, where they were to be organised into battle groups and operate in a mobile role, this time under 13 Corps. As there were not enough guns to protect the infantry and their vehicles it was decided to send back to Amiriya one company, less all weapons except rifles, from each of the seven infantry battalions of 4 and 5 Brigades and to hold 6 Brigade at Daba as reinforcements. The CO decided to send back B Company, under Captain Fountaine.

Half an hour after returning to Matruh the battalion was ordered to move to the Minqar Qaim area, but a change in orders a couple of hours later sent it back to Charing Cross with two troops of two-pounder anti-tank guns, one troop of six-pounders, and 25 Field Battery to protect parties of engineers who were to lay mines on the Siwa road in an attempt to close the gap in the western belt of minefields. By 2 p.m. the battalion was on the move. The rest of the Division was moving south to Minqar Qaim, where the 20th would join it later.

Transport was so short that, when Headquarters Company came to move, the anti-tank platoon had to be left behind so that the cooks and their gear could be carried. The Indians were already in the fortress, blandly 'salvaging' Headquarters Company's cookhouse gear and the tools of the pioneer platoon. The anti-tank platoon had now neither guns nor transport. Twenty-five of its men had been sent the previous day to an anti-tank school run by 95 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA, to the east of Smugglers' Cove, but owing to the changing situation they had been recalled. Only the platoon's officers and NCOs were trained and many of the men were to go into their first action without having previously sat in the layer's seat of their two-pounders. With mixed feelings the men watched the battalion depart and settled down to wait for the trucks that the CO had promised to send back if possible. One of the drivers salvaged an Italian Lancia truck from a vehicle dump, but that evening two 6 Brigade lorries picked up the platoon, which caught up with the battalion at Charing Cross just as the last mines were laid across the road.

The minefield was old and there were no plans to work from. It was mainly through Colonel Burrows's drive that the mine-laying was finally done, as the South African and Indian troops engaged on the work seemed to have conflicting orders. The Germans were rapidly approaching, making extensive use of flares during the night, but they did not attack. During the work four field company trucks were severely damaged or destroyed by mines, luckily without casualties, but just after the laying had been completed a truck carrying 350 mines blew up, killing two engineers and wounding five. The flames from the burning truck must have been visible for miles.

Its work completed, the battalion then moved off in four lines of trucks to join 4 Brigade. At a narrow gap in the minefield vehicles converged to form a single line and everyone was relieved when this stage was over and night formation resumed. By eight o'clock next morning, 26 June, the weary troops moved into the brigade area, dug in and rested.

It is now necessary to pause and consider the general situation. During 25 June, when the 20th was being relieved at Charing Cross, the enemy forces, having bypassed Sidi Barrani, halted for the day less than 20 miles from Matruh and resumed their advance in the evening. This pause enabled Eighth Army to straighten out

some of the disorganisation caused by the retreat. The plan laid down by General Auchinleck was that [30 Corps](#) should prepare defences for a final stand between El Alamein and the [Qattara Depression](#), leaving 10 and [13 Corps](#), including the New Zealand Division, fully mobile with the task of attacking the enemy at every opportunity without permitting themselves to be encircled or overwhelmed.

In its mobile role under [13 Corps](#) the Division was to take up a position in the [Minqar Qaim](#) area with the object of denying the escarpment to the enemy and commanding with fire the approaches from the west both north and south of the escarpment. It was also to maintain a mobile reserve of columns with the task of delaying the enemy advance from the west or up the [Khalda](#) track from the south, and of attacking any enemy within striking distance. One task had been declined. Owing to the rapid approach of the enemy the commander of [10 Corps](#) had asked, just after noon on 25 June, that the Division take up a position in Wadi Naghamish—the upper end of the famous 'Kiwi Ditch' tank-trap dug by 4 Brigade in 1940. As the wadi had only one entrance and one exit and, in [General Freyberg's](#) view, was 'an impossible position', this proposal was ruled out.

At 5 p.m. on 26 June the New Zealand Division passed from the command of [10 Corps](#) to [13 Corps](#), and 4 Brigade in desert formation with [19 Battalion](#) leading, 20 Battalion on the left, and 28 (Maori) Battalion on the right, left the dispersal area at Bir el Sarahna and, after travelling about eight miles roughly south-east, arrived at the escarpment east of the telephone line and the track to [Bir Khalda](#). No sooner had the companies taken up position and commenced to dig in than information was received from Brigade that the enemy had broken through the minefield south of [Charing Cross](#) and the battalion was ordered to embus immediately and move northwards to meet him.

It was about 8 p.m. and there was already a bright moon in the midsummer sky. The CO had just gone to a conference at 4 Brigade Headquarters and the rifle companies were embussing when a steady drone turned all eyes skywards. Circling around like great black bats were over a score of enemy bombers. The first one peeled off, dived with sirens screaming, and the rest followed. Some men managed to jump down and disperse to the sandhills but many were caught on their trucks. A Company lost four men killed and twelve wounded, mainly NCOs and 'old hands'. As each bomber pulled out of its dive the rear-gunner sprayed the area and the planes

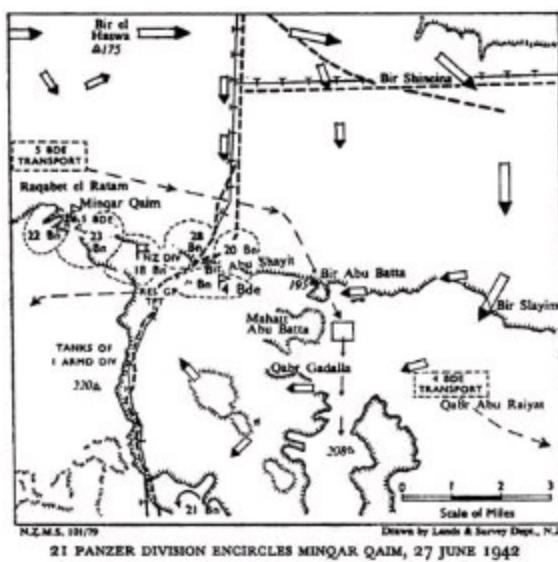
returned to strafe. It was a nasty introduction to action for the reinforcements.

The gunners of 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment showed their mettle. At the beginning of the raid their guns were on wheels, but as the first bombs hit the ground they got into action and claimed one plane shot down.

A Company had lost two of its three troop-carrying lorries and was therefore not mobile, but the rest of the battalion re-formed and, with one battery of 25-pounders, two troops of two-pounders and one of six-pounder anti-tank guns, moved out about four miles north along the [Khaldha](#) track with instructions to make contact with the enemy, take up a defensive position, and gain time for the Division to deploy. On the way the battalion met many odd units—some from the ASC—quite defenceless and unaware of their danger. At one stage the head of the column met a convoy of new six-pounder guns looking for the Division. They were given the correct map reference and sent on to [Minqar Qaim](#).

About 11 p.m. the battalion stopped and shook out to defensive positions for the night. While this was being done a strange truck approached. With the driver was a slightly wounded man. Both claimed to be from 22 Armoured Brigade, which had been shelled by an enemy mobile column while in night laager about 12 miles away. They were guided back to Brigade for interrogation.

By 4.30 a.m. on 27 June sounds of firing were heard and a platoon of C Company fired on what appeared to be an enemy column, which retired after returning the fire. With the growing light large concentrations of enemy vehicles were seen on the escarpment a few miles away, and a column of tanks and lorried infantry approached the battalion but withdrew after an exchange of fire. At this stage [Divisional Headquarters](#) ordered the battalion to withdraw and rejoin 4 Brigade, now in the vicinity of Bir Abu Batta.



**21 panzer division encircles minqar qaim, 27 june 1942**

The battalion returned and took up a position below the Minqar Qaim escarpment near [Bir Abu Shayit](#). Digging in was often a hard task where outcrops of rock had to be attacked with pick and shovel, and it was not until well after daylight that weapon pits were completed and minefields laid by the field companies on the north-east and north-west approaches.

About 11 a.m. the battalion received a quota of two-pounder anti-tank guns from 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, which had taken over the six-pounders from the convoy rescued the previous night. They were placed in position, some on the flat with the rifle companies, and others on top of the escarpment and in front of [19 Battalion](#). NCOs promptly began to instruct their untrained crews as the area was already under enemy shellfire. By midday Battalion Headquarters on top of the escarpment was under heavy shell and mortar fire. Most spectacular were what seemed to be duds, or heavy armour-piercing shells, that landed with a prodigious thump and then ricocheted through the vehicle area, causing amazingly few casualties. The enemy appeared to be searching for our artillery, and once he had ranged with airburst shells the next two hours were very warm for the 25-pounders. The infantry positions and Brigade Headquarters also received plenty of attention as enemy forces collected to the north of [Minqar Qaim](#).

At 3.40 p.m. the Intelligence Officer, Second-Lieutenant Sullivan, who was at the observation post on the escarpment, warned Brigade that he had seen a large column of vehicles led by fourteen tanks approaching from the west, and about eight

miles north. The column swung past Minqar Qaim and, continuing the curve, approached the Division's position from the north-east and south-east. Three heavy tanks had passed south when suddenly the column divided, and one group approached the 20th while the other continued south-east. Brigade warned the battalion not to fire until certain identification was possible as the column might be an ASC one. However, swastikas were soon observed on the approaching vehicles and action commenced.

Its crew flushed with victory, a captured two-pounder en portée led a group of other vehicles at high speed down the Khalda track towards the gap in the minefield. Lieutenant Cottrell of 9 Platoon A Company describes its reception:

We were well dug in and the portee (a captured one of ours with a swastika across the front) came straight through at full speed towards my platoon. My front section was in charge of an old soldier, Corporal Bob Doig from Ashburton, who was killed that night. In a clear voice he said, 'Hold your fire till I tell you.' Every man in the platoon had his weapon trained on that portee. On and on it came and still Doig's calm voice said, 'Hold it—hold it—hold it—Fire!' Every gun hit its mark and the portee stopped immediately. Most of its crew were dead—we sent the wounded ones back as prisoners and kept the swastika.

At the same time the newly-formed anti-tank platoon went into action. Nonchalantly smoking his pipe, Sergeant McConchie, with three campaigns as an infantryman behind him, directed the fire of a gun which, with the unit armourer as gunner, stopped the leading enemy portée with its first shot. Lieutenant Moodie <sup>2</sup> directed another crew which destroyed two troop-carriers before the gun was damaged and he was slightly wounded in the knee. He then directed the crew to the safety of slit trenches and retrieved the portée. Collecting his crew, he drove back up the escarpment to get the gun repaired and then took it forward for further action.

Meanwhile McConchie's gun and crew had accounted for a light tank, a troop-carrier and two lorries. These actions had been very encouraging for the men of the rifle companies, who by now were firing steadily. Mines which had been laid on top of the ground caused the enemy to turn either right or left, where they were engaged by the guns and small arms. One command vehicle got a direct hit at close range and disintegrated. Enemy infantry had debussed at close small-arms range to

pick up the mines, but they soon ran back into the scrub, where they were hard to locate. Captain Upham daringly stood up on the cab of a truck to draw their fire and mortars were used to flush them. Upham, with characteristic coolness, moved round his company on foot, crossing open ground swept by small-arms and mortar fire, steadying one platoon which was under shellfire and encouraging his men; he set an example appreciated by all who saw it, except perhaps the field gunners, whose 25-pounders were firing over C Company's positions over open sights.

A Company's commander, Captain Washbourn, endeavoured to have the field guns directed on to a re-entrant to the right into which a steady stream of enemy vehicles was disappearing. A few shells went over but shortage of ammunition curtailed the effort. The artillery at this time was reduced to thirty-five rounds a gun, which included armour-piercing and smoke shells.

During the day when fire from enemy in the scrub wounded Sergeant McConchie's gunner and damaged the firing mechanism of the gun, he coolly walked out to the enemy portée, salvaged the firing mechanism, and fitted it to his own gun. Later, with Lieutenant Moodie, he drove out to the portée and towed it back to the battalion's lines. For their courage and resource in this action McConchie received the DCM and Moodie the MC.

Enemy transport seemed to be running a shuttle service eastward and the battalion two-pounders on the escarpment engaged soft-skinned targets at almost maximum range. Even the enemy seemed to be confused as to the situation, for first a motor-cycle and then a staff car approached rapidly from the east. Fire was opened much too soon, however, and in both cases the quarry escaped. As the guns were withdrawing inside the infantry positions at dusk a German Mark IV tank moving at speed to the west suddenly stopped and, from a hull-down position in the wadi, shelled the congested vehicle area, again strangely without success. The excitement of watching high-velocity shells describing parabolas of fire in the half light as they approached was abruptly ended as one troop commander loudly claimed a hit, and sure enough the tank withdrew. A few moments later a strange truck, moving slowly across the front, was challenged, fired on and captured.

As soon as it became dark Lieutenant Cottrell sent a section out to repair the gap in the minefield and to patrol it. Patrols from C and D Companies were also sent

out.

So closed the first day of battle which had been mainly between our artillery and the enemy's guns and tanks. The battalion's casualties for the day were two men killed and one officer and twenty men wounded. Most of the enemy shelling had been directed at the gun positions and the transport, apparently with a view to silencing the 25-pounders and immobilising the infantry, after which the Division would have been at the mercy of the tanks.

On other sectors the story was much the same. About 5.30 p.m. the [Maori Battalion](#) beat off an infantry attack and replied with a bayonet charge. Over twenty of the enemy were killed and ten prisoners taken. (As an interesting sequel to this attack Corporal P. R. Blunden, who had been wounded and taken prisoner in [Crete](#) and who escaped while being transferred from [Greece](#) to [Germany](#), relates an experience he had while being sheltered by a Greek family in [Salonika](#). Shortly after this action at [Minqar Qaim](#) he was sitting in a picture theatre watching an official German film depicting the drive along the North African coast. The commentator explained: 'We have been temporarily halted in our victorious march on [Suez](#) by the unexpected appearance of the New Zealand Division in the desert.' The announcer then went on to pay a compliment to the fighting qualities of the Division, especially the Maoris.)

Late in the day there was a change in command. About 5 p.m. [General Freyberg](#) had been wounded in the neck by a shell splinter and [Brigadier Inglis](#) had taken over command of the Division; Colonel Burrows succeeded to the command of 4 Brigade and Major Manson took over 20 Battalion.

The role of the Division was to gain time and inflict as much damage as possible on the enemy, but to remain intact and fall back on receipt of the code-word. By evening when the message to withdraw east was received, enemy flares were going up in all directions and the Division appeared to be surrounded. With no tanks and with 25-pounder ammunition nearly exhausted, prospects at dawn would be grim. The occasion required a prompt, bold decision, which was duly made.

Brigade Headquarters advised that the Division was to fight its way clear. Fourth Brigade, moving on foot, was to attack the neck of high ground south of Bir Abu

Batta, make a break through the enemy line, and lead the whole column east. Divisional Headquarters, with 18 Battalion attached, and 5 Brigade Group would follow closely the 4 Brigade transport; 5 Brigade would act as rearguard. At six o'clock next morning, 28 June, 4 Brigade was to halt and take over the rearguard from 5 Brigade, which would pass through to Fortress A in the Alamein line while 4 Brigade remained at Fuka.

A reconnaissance by a carrier section from 19 Battalion confirmed that there was an enemy concentration in the wadi south of Bir Abu Batta. It was fully appreciated that the move would meet with considerable opposition. On the right flank, in the area south of Bir Abu Shayit, were enemy tanks.

The brigade orders group met at 9.30 p.m. and Brigadier Burrows gave his plan: the whole brigade would make a bayonet attack on a narrow front to break through the surrounding enemy. Nineteenth Battalion, with one company of the Essex Regiment which had come in during the morning, would lead, with the 20th on the left rear and the Maoris on the right. It was considered that the narrow neck of high ground to the east had to be cleared to allow the transport to come straight through, and this was a one-battalion task. The 20th and the Maoris had tasks of moving to the flanks when the necessity arose. After passing through, 19 Battalion would protect the east flank, 20 Battalion the north, and 28 Battalion the south. There would be no artillery support, partly because it was felt that this would destroy the surprise effect but mainly because of the shortage of ammunition. The attack would start from 19 Battalion's lines at 12.30 a.m. and a flare signal would bring up the transport. A section of engineers behind the infantry would search for mines in the area through which the transport would pass.

Transport would travel in the usual brigade night formation and it was hoped that, when the vehicles halted in the 'box' made by the infantry, the latter would find their own trucks nearest them. Anti-tank and artillery units were placed on the flanks and across the rear. In the bright moonlight it was considered that the guns could shoot over open sights if necessary.

Companies were withdrawn from their defences and marshalled in position ready to attack. Twentieth Battalion formed up on the left of Brigade Headquarters behind 19 Battalion with the companies in column on a front of 200 yards. A

Company was in front, followed by C and part of Headquarters Company, with D Company in the rear. Two platoons in each company were posted on the left flank and one on the right. Despite lack of sleep and a hard day's fighting under a broiling sun, the men were in high spirits and keen to get to grips with the enemy.

Brigadier Burrows describes the attack in his report:

Zero was 0030 hrs. The [19 NZ Bn](#) were on time but the 20 NZ Bn arrived at 0045 hrs and the 28 NZ (Maori) Bn not until 0145 hrs. Both Bns had some difficulty in withdrawing troops from the forward lines and the 28 NZ (Maori)Bn lost their way when moving to the Start Line. This delay was extremely unfortunate. It meant there was danger that the rear parties of the 5 NZ Inf Bde Gp would not be far through the gap before daylight came. On the other hand had I ordered the attack to start without the 28 NZ (Maori) Bn it might have meant losing them altogether. I waited until they had arrived and the advance began as soon as they were on the Start Line. The Bns moved quietly for about 1000 yds, keeping good tight formation. There was no sign that the enemy had any knowledge of our advance until we were right on his FDLs. Then the most intense firing began. It included rifle fire, automatics of all types and A Tk. Lines of tracer bullets crossed and re-crossed and it was obvious that fire had been deliberately held in these forward posts until we were very close. It seemed almost impossible that troops should ever be able to get to the guns without suffering heavy casualties. Any delay at this stage must have been fatal, but a most amazing and thrilling thing happened. To a man the whole Bde charged forward. No orders were given; no urging forward by Officers and NCOs. With shouting, cheering and war cries every man broke into a run as if he knew exactly what was expected of him. The Maoris swung to the right and made short work of gun nests in their area. The [19 NZ Bn](#) went forward [and] cleared the high ground and the 20 NZ Bn dropped down into the Wadi on the left. It was here the fiercest fighting took place and the [19 NZ Bn](#) were soon down lending a helping hand. Vehicles were parked quite close together. Many of them were set alight by our hand grenades and men carrying Brens and Tommy guns fired a burst into the engines of all vehicles they passed. Unfortunately these made fires which gave the enemy light to see us and probably caused us more casualties than we otherwise would have suffered. I saw no evidence that the Germans left their trenches to fight. When their fire power failed them they made no effort to meet our men with the

bayonet. Most of them were killed in their trenches or around gun posts. One German had a tin of benzine which he poured along the ground and finally lit making a line of flame about 20 yds in length. In the Wadi on the North flank there was great confusion with the night full of the sound of trucks in low gear moving North to try to escape. Many of these were destroyed. Some were full of Germans. One truck full of the enemy was making slow progress in heavy sand when it was overtaken by two of our soldiers who destroyed it and its occupants by hand grenades.

As soon as it was obvious that the break was made and that the neck was clear of mines, I ordered the Verey flares to be fired. In a very short time the transport, under the Staff Captain, arrived. There was now considerable fire from the flanks, but from a distance and most of it was high and ineffective. There was some wild mortar and A Tk fire also from wide out. The troops in the meantime had re-organised, and with very little difficulty or confusion, embussed. Wounded were loaded in any available space. At this stage I was informed by the Staff Captain that Divisional HQ and the 5 NZ Inf Bde Gp had decided to make their break through another sector and were not following our transport. The column therefore moved East in tight night formation. After about 1 ½ miles we encountered enemy transport in a Wadi. We swung South to avoid this. An hour or so later we had to repeat the performance, and were now well South of the Grid which was to have been the axis of our advance. As soon as it was daylight the Gp moved into desert square formation with all round protection. Contact was made with Divisional HQ during the morning. Later in the day we were instructed to proceed directly to Fortress A area in the El Alamein line, and arrived at about 2100 hrs.

Each man had his own particular impressions of the night attack and breakthrough. Second-Lieutenant Sullivan says:

.... No shots [were] to be fired until contact [was made].

When forward tps reached the enemy area terrific fire was encountered but the Bde surged forward like a great scrum—very congested affair. 20 Bn caught up with 19 Bn, in fact the men were running forward to get into the free-for-all.... The trucks did not follow through directly behind the inf and the Bde had to move south to contact the vehicles. There were hy cas [heavy casualties] during this move but the men marched on in coy gps—100% battle control—embussed in excellent order

though not always in their own trucks—and so East.

Captain Washbourn of A Company states:

The Bn formed up and after a long wait moved off ... the only noise was boots on the stones. After a while an enemy MG opened up on the front. It seemed to be the signal for all hell to be let loose —mortars and MGs—as usual a lot of tracer from the enemy. All our LMGs and automatics were on the left flank and as a morale effect were firing outwards.

Lieutenant Cottrell says:

I remember well the yells of the Maoris—a grim noise.... As we caught up with the 19th men seemed to be hesitating at the edge of the gully. Down in the gully itself, full of transport, etc., trucks were beginning to burn and the noise was indescribable. As the men hesitated I remember a young soldier leaping to his feet, waving his arm and yelling 'Come on chaps' and moving down the slope. Two battalions followed him and all hesitation was forgotten.

Captain Washbourn describes his impressions:

An awe inspiring sight.... Shadowy forms running between the trucks and shooting at anything that moved in a slitte or near a truck, dropping grenades in cars and lorries, and bayonetting Huns, truck tyres, and jerricans of petrol. Mortar shells were coming down in the area just for good measure. Definitely not a spot for lingering. The coy went up the other side on to the flat with less enemy reaction there—a few MGs on fixed lines only. One was firing tracer about 6 feet above ground so the troops bent double or crawled under the fire. The coy reformed to the best of its ability and then the transport arrived and embussing didn't take long.

Captain Upham of C Company adds:

At dusk I wanted to go out and smash up the abandoned trucks but I was held back by the CO. The Maoris did go out.... The Maoris were late on the SL and I remember having a sleep until they got back.... In the advance the enemy were completely taken by surprise and many were killed at point blank range without their trousers or boots on. I have never seen trained soldiers so bewildered or 'flap' so

much. Lance-Serjeant Brown [Browne]<sup>3</sup> of C Coy was especially good in this advance and did not come out of it. CSM May was very good and kept the men together.

According to Sergeant-Major May:

The break-out ... was much too hurried an affair to notice anything other than enemy tracer. The forming up after we were clear of enemy lines was very much disorganised by a party of Germans passing on our left flank, shouting 'Don't shoot, New Zealand here!' They set up a Spandau on a small ridge and sprayed us with lead. This firing was largely responsible for the men rushing the trucks.

Some of Captain Upham's work on this night is quoted from the citation for a bar to his Victoria Cross:

During the night when the NZ Div broke through the Germans at Minquar Quaim [ sic], Capt Upham led his men in inspiring fashion and his Coy overcame several enemy posts. The attack took place in very bright moonlight and at one stage a truck full of German soldiers was seen moving slowly through the soft sand. Capt Upham and a Corporal ran forward together, and in spite of heavy Tommy Gun fire from the Germans they reached the side of the truck and with hand grenades wiped out the entire truck load and left the truck in flames. Not one German left the burning vehicle. Capt Upham was slightly wounded in both arms from the explosions of his own grenades. He did not report to get his wounds treated until the following night when the Div was back in new positions, and he then rejoined his Coy.

It was a hectic night for the transport following behind the attack. One of the anti-tank platoon saw it thus:

It was a gripping sight, the dark lines of the infantry melting silently away into the night. There was a long silence as we sat huddled in our closely packed lines of vehicles, wondering how our mates would fare. Planes droned overhead and night bombing took place near by but fortunately no flares were dropped. A tank battle was in progress to the north-west and ricochets cut red arcs in the sky. All at once the splutter of automatics told us the show had started. Tracer criss-crossed in the sky and we could see fires burning. At last the flare signal went up and off we set

with a grinding of gears and in a choking cloud of dust. Suddenly round a bend we saw them. Some were standing, others lying on the ground, casualties obviously. There were cries of 'D Company over here,' 'This way C Company' and then the enemy machine gunning started. Men jumped on the nearest vehicle and the convoy lurched on. Mortars were bursting over the ambulances and one 2-pr swung its barrel left, levelled off and fired two angry shots with spectacular sheets of flame. One portee had a tyre badly ripped and the sergeant yelled for a spare. When one was tossed off to him he found he had no tyre removers and wasn't hard to follow after that with the smell of chafed rubber to guide us. A Bren carrier in the second lane was hit and the driver and commander badly scalded. Sgt. Lumsden came running back yelling anxiously 'Where's Tom Veitch? Where's Tom Veitch?' just as Tom and his driver clambered out of the clouds of steam. The Bren Carrier Platoon commander, Captain Phillips, slipped down off his carrier to take on an enemy machine gun that was giving trouble but at the first step he took from behind his carrier he was hit in the foot. Tracer was skimming just over the gun shield so we kept well down. I thought at one halt that I had lost my driver but when I hopped down to look for him he was crouched behind a front wheel. At the first sign of a move he was back in position and on we drove.

During the move up Private [Turner](#)<sup>4</sup> recaptured a British truck, put it in working order, and picked up five wounded men whom he brought out safely and later left at an ADS.

In the first few miles two parties of enemy were met, one of which fired on the column, some of the shells falling close to the ambulances. To avoid an engagement the brigade swung south each time and then moved eastward again, halting at 6.30 a.m. for breakfast.

At 7 a.m. the move was resumed, at first north-east towards the rendezvous on the escarpment south of [Fuka](#), and later, on instructions from [Divisional Headquarters](#), towards El Alamein.

During the morning the brigade passed a formidable looking column on the left flank and, as the enemy appeared to be following, no halt was made for lunch. At 9.30 p.m. the brigade laagered near Deir el Qatani, south-east of [Daba](#), after a journey of 108 miles in eighteen hours. The wounded were evacuated after a trying

day spent jolting over the stony desert in intense heat and choking dust. The battalion's casualties in the breakthrough were surprisingly light: 7 men were killed or died of wounds, 3 officers and 15 men were wounded and brought out safely, 8 men were wounded and left behind to become prisoners, and 1 officer and 15 men were taken prisoner of war. A further six men had been killed or had died of wounds on the two days before the breakout, making the battalion's casualties for the whole action 13 killed and 51 wounded. In the whole battle the Division lost fewer than 150 men killed.

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<sup>1</sup> Maj J. F. Phillips, m.i.d.; Lower Hutt; born Perth, Aust., 25 May 1913; company manager; Sqn Comd 20 Regt Oct 1942–Dec 1943; three times wounded.

<sup>2</sup> Maj J. F. Moodie, MC, ED; Burnham Military Camp; born Dunedin, 13 Jan 1917; student; Sqn Comd 20 Regt Mar-Sep 1945; twice wounded.

<sup>3</sup> Sgt E. S. Browne; born NZ 22 Mar 1917; apprentice engineer; wounded 27 Nov 1941; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

<sup>4</sup> L-Sgt R. Turner, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Port Chalmers, 17 Aug 1916; tractor driver.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 11 – RUWEISAT RIDGE

## CHAPTER 11

### Ruweisat Ridge

After breakfast on 29 June artillery fire was heard in the direction of Fuka, but as far as 20 Battalion was concerned the day was quiet. Sentries kept constant watch. The 'lame ducks' which had been left behind after collisions with other vehicles in the drive back from Minqar Qaim came limping in, their drivers and the mechanics having worked near-miracles repairing radiators that had been damaged when the crowded convoy stopped and started convulsively during the night move. During the morning there was time for a clean-up and much-needed rest before the brigade moved two and a half miles south in the afternoon and halted in harbour at 5 p.m. near Deir el Qatani. Many groups of strange vehicles were about and, as on the long move on the previous day, valuable reconnaissance work was done by the carrier platoon. From 11 p.m. enemy aircraft were heard overhead, and although the brigade area escaped bombs were dropped nearby.

In the Eighth Army plan 13 and 30 Corps were now organising the defences of the Alamein line extending from the coast some 38 miles south to the Qattara Depression. The latter was an area of soft sand impassable for any large body of transport. At intervals in the line were 'boxes'—areas prepared for all-round defence. First South African Division occupied the Alamein Box in the north and the New Zealand Division was to hold the Qattara Box, about 20 miles to the south-south-west at Bab el Qattara, at the junction of the track from Fuka and the pipeline from El Alamein. Actually this was the old 'Kaponga Box'—now called Fortress A—prepared by 5 Brigade in 1941. Fifteen miles farther south was Fortress B, allotted to 5 Indian Division, now reduced to about one brigade in strength. Short of water and having hardly any artillery, the Indians did not expect to stay long in the fortress.

The gap between the South Africans in the Alamein Box and the New Zealand Division in Fortress A was the responsibility of I Armoured Division and 50 Division, both weakened by losses in the withdrawal. Eighteenth Indian Infantry Brigade, newly arrived from Iraq, was sent to hold Deir el Shein, a depression some eight miles north of Fortress A. A long ridge called El Ruweisat, rising just to the south of Deir el Shein and running ten miles to the east, was an obviously important tactical feature in this area. A composite force from 5 Indian Brigade with artillery support

was ordered to hold the western edge of this ridge. The gap between Fortress A and Fortress B was the responsibility of mobile columns of 7 Armoured Division.

At first 6 Brigade occupied Fortress A while 4 and 5 Brigades were to remain outside and support it with mobile columns operating from [Deir el Munassib](#), about nine miles to the south-east.

Throughout 29 June many reports were received that the enemy was advancing rapidly eastwards both in the coastal region and further south in the desert. At half past six next morning the battalion received a warning order to move at short notice as the enemy was reported to be only a few miles away. Nineteenth Battalion, with artillery and anti-tank support, moved out at 7 a.m. to delay his advance. At 10 a.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows returned to command the battalion and half an hour later, with the rest of 4 Brigade, the 20th moved south-east some 14 miles to the [Deir el Munassib](#) area. As the brigade was preparing to move firing was heard to the north and the 20th, originally directed to act as rearguard to the convoy, was sent out to cover the northern flank. No enemy was met on the move back.

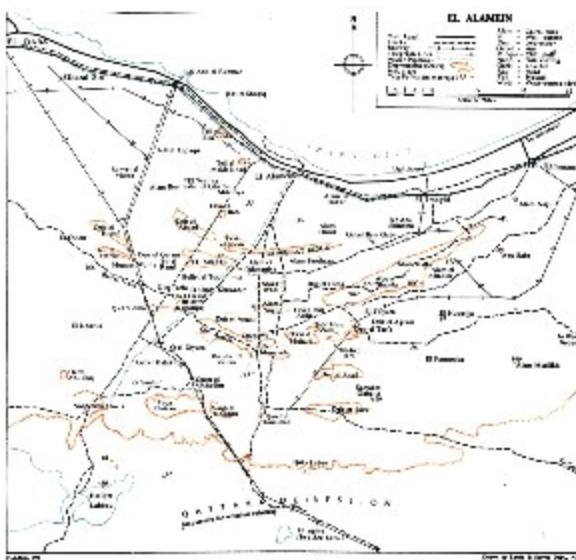
At [Deir el Munassib](#) the 20th had 5 Brigade on its left flank and [19 Battalion](#) on its right, but as the latter unit had not returned by dusk from its mobile column task the right flank was exposed. However, neither the exposed flank nor a report from [Divisional Headquarters](#) that the enemy might make his main attack that night about 12 miles to the north-east prevented the men from having a good night's rest.

On 1 July the battle for the [Alamein](#) line began. The South Africans repulsed a light attack at the El [Alamein](#) railway station, but [18 Indian Brigade](#) at Deir el Shein, after holding the first enemy assault, was overrun at dusk by a tank attack mounted under cover of a dust-storm. The enemy had thus penetrated the centre of the line. During the afternoon eighteen or twenty enemy tanks and a convoy of several hundred motor vehicles were engaged by the New Zealand artillery and shelled until dusk. In the 20th's area the day was uneventful. At 9 a.m. came the comforting news that the 19th had moved into position on the right flank. Then at 6.15 p.m. Brigade Headquarters advised that enemy tanks were approaching, but by 7 p.m. word was received that the tanks had sheered off. During the night our bombers attacked the enemy concentrations.

By 2 July the plans for the defence of the Alamein line were changed. Except for the semi-permanent fortifications round El Alamein the Eighth Army's positions were still weak, disconnected, and lacked depth and men to hold them. As General Auchinleck explains in his report, the defence of the all-important Ruweisat Ridge had to be entrusted to battle groups weak in infantry, backed by what remained of our armour. 'Consequently I decided not to attempt to hold the prepared positions round Bab el Qattara in the centre and at Naqb Abu Dweiss in the extreme south on the edge of the Qattara Depression. In the absence of sufficient armoured troops to support them I was not prepared to risk their garrisons being isolated and eventually destroyed.'

Accordingly, the New Zealand Division was directed by 13 Corps to thin out the troops in the Qattara Box and warned that the brigade of 5 Indian Division holding Fortress B at Naqb Abu Dweis was being withdrawn. Thus the New Zealand Division, instead of being in the centre of the line, became the most southerly formation in Eighth Army's front. The defeat of 18 Indian Brigade at Deir el Shein left the Division open to attack from the north and west, while its southern flank was covered only by a number of relatively weak mobile columns.

Before 6 Brigade could evacuate Fortress A, however, word was received that the enemy appeared to be massing for a frontal assault on the Alamein Box held by the South Africans. To divert this concentration it was decided that 13 Corps should wheel north, pivoting on the Qattara Box, against the enemy's southern flank, while 30 Corps dealt with the frontal attack. As part of 13 Corps the New Zealand Division was instructed to attack to the north and north-west with all available mobile



EL ALAMEIN

columns against enemy groups which, from shortly after daylight, had been passing across the north of the Box.

Some time after 7 a.m. on 2 July the battalion's three rifle companies as escort for [4 Field Regiment](#), one battery of six-pounder anti-tank guns, and one platoon of machine guns moved out under Colonel Burrows with orders to occupy the high ground east of [Alam Nayil](#). The column halted at Alam Nayil and was shelled. It moved on to various positions, being shelled out of each one, and finally went back south-east of [Alam Nayil](#). In the meantime a second mobile column drawn from 5 Brigade had followed in the wake of the 20th. About 9 a.m., after seven tanks had been observed on the horizon, [Divisional Headquarters](#) ordered that both columns be amalgamated under the command of the CRA, Brigadier Weir.<sup>1</sup>

At 1.30 p.m. the CRA was directed by Divisional Headquarters to engage enemy tanks approaching from the north. The column moved to attack but the tanks withdrew before they could be fired on. Two hours later the column received new orders to move westwards into the [Alam Nayil](#) area to support British armoured units which were to come down from the north, turn west past the [Qattara Box](#), and swing north through the [El Mreir Depression](#) against the enemy's rear. However, in the early stages of this move the British tanks encountered an enemy armoured force in the vicinity of Ruweisat Ridge and apparently intending to attack the New Zealand Division. The British armour attacked from the east and south-east and, after an indecisive action, the enemy tanks withdrew to the south-west of [Ruweisat Ridge](#).

During this action the CRA's guns supported the tanks, and after last light the column was ordered to stay where it was—slightly to the north-east of [Alam Nayil](#)—ready to support the continuation of the counter-attack next morning.

Next day, 3 July, the CRA's column saw enemy vehicles moving in a southerly direction across the column's north-eastern and eastern fronts and opened fire at 7.15 a.m. The enemy halted and returned the fire but, seeing that he had the upper hand, the CRA asked [Divisional Headquarters](#) for infantry support to attack the enemy at close quarters. Leaving 18 Battalion to protect [Divisional Headquarters](#), 4 Brigade with [19 Battalion](#) leading left the [Deir el Munassib](#) area and moved north along a track for three miles. Observing the enemy four miles due north, the brigade halted in the wide wadi while the artillery neutralised the opposition and [19 Battalion](#) mopped up most successfully. This action resulted in the capture of forty-four artillery pieces and some 350 Italian prisoners of the [Ariete Division](#). Twentieth Battalion's task had been the passive one of protecting the 25-pounders. At 1.30 p.m. 4 Brigade Group joined the mobile column.

A map captured during this action showed that the enemy's intentions were to drive through the recently overrun central sector, turning north to outflank the El [Alamein](#) positions and also south to turn the southern end of the line. As a counter to this plan the New Zealand Division was ordered to move west to harry the enemy's rear. At 9.30 p.m. 4 Brigade moved nine miles westwards to a position just east of Fortress A, bedding down for the night about 11 p.m.

Next morning, 4 July, the brigade took up a defensive position. A patrol consisting of an artillery pick-up and two two-pounder portées went out at dawn in search of the Divisional Cavalry but, coming under heavy fire, withdrew hastily and without losses. The battalion area was shelled at 8.30 a.m. but there were no casualties. There had been sounds of a tank battle to the north since daybreak. During the day enemy bombers attacked four times, the heaviest raid being made at dusk by twenty-seven planes. Ten men in all were wounded, most of them in a mid-afternoon raid, and seven vehicles—including a two-pounder portée—were destroyed and others damaged. During one raid an ammunition truck containing sticky bombs and mortars was hit and set on fire. The RSM, WO I Wilson, coolly mounted the truck, removed the burning materials, and extinguished the fire.

At this stage it was considered at Army Headquarters that the leading enemy elements were on the point of overreaching themselves and that their tired troops might withdraw in the face of determined opposition. Thirtieth Corps was to hold the enemy on the coast, ready to attack if the opportunity came, while [13 Corps](#), advancing north-west, was to attempt to roll up the enemy from the southern flank. To commence this attack the New Zealand Division was to advance north from the area west of the [Qattara Box](#) towards the railway station at Sidi Abd el Rahman, while [5 Indian Division](#) moved towards [Ghazal](#) station on a line further west.

In readiness for this attack 4 Brigade, which now included 28 (Maori) Battalion, on 5 July prepared to move from its area east of the Box round the south of it to take up positions to the north of Qaret el Yidma. The brigade was to move five miles south, seven and a half miles west, and six miles north. As it was to be a daylight move the risk of attack by enemy aircraft was recognised and instructions were given that, if attacked during the move, the transport was to halt and the troops were to debus and lie on their backs to engage hostile aircraft. Trucks were to keep 120 yards apart. The instruction to engage enemy aircraft was evidently taken to heart, for just as the 20th had formed up, with a line of artillery vehicles waiting at right angles to draw into position, an air-raid alarm was given and some men jumped down from their vehicles and engaged with small-arms fire an aeroplane that was skimming very low over the assembling convoy. There was some doubt as to its identity, but before many shots had been fired an artillery officer shouted that it was friendly and sharply ordered the men to cease firing. Still flying very low, the aeroplane disappeared over the sandhills to the west. This incident added to the tenseness of waiting in 'target' formation and it was with some relief that at 10.30 a.m. the convoy, led by the 20th, began to move.

The desert at first was much broken by wadis and escarpments. Anti-tank guns moving on the flanks were frequently out of sight of the rest of the convoy for several minutes at a time. After turning west about Raqabet el Retem the convoy had negotiated an escarpment on to more even going over a stony stretch of open desert when a formation of Stukas bombed the columns of vehicles. As soon as the raid began the convoy halted and men jumped down and lay on their backs to engage the planes. However, the recoil of a rifle on a lightly-clad collar-bone in this unusual type of prone position was sharply felt and after their first shot most men

quickly assumed a sort of squatting posture before taking further action. No enemy planes were destroyed but the men felt much better after a few angry if doubtfully aimed shots, which definitely helped to boost morale. The battalion's casualties were one man killed and six wounded. Brigade Headquarters' losses were serious, those killed including the new Brigade Commander, Brigadier John Gray of 18 Battalion, and the Brigade Major, [Major Brian Bassett](#), <sup>2</sup> while a [Maori Battalion](#) liaison officer later died of wounds. In the Maori Battalion Captain E. R. Chesterman, an ex-20th officer, was amongst those killed. Altogether the brigade group lost 24 killed and 41 wounded in this raid. Colonel Burrows and the others in his staff car had had a narrow escape when the bombs fell, one passenger, Private [Paterson](#) <sup>3</sup> of the intelligence section, being killed.

Turning to the shaken survivors the CO rallied them quietly with the remark, 'Your luck has been good, now grasp it with both hands, and don't let this get you down.' Then he sent a message to [Divisional Headquarters](#) apprising them of what had happened, took over command of the brigade, and after the dead had been buried and the wounded attended to ordered the move to continue.

No sooner had the convoy reached its destination about 3 p.m. than a further formation of enemy aircraft appeared and bombed the area but without causing casualties. Major Manson now again commanded the battalion, which took up a position to the north of Qaret el Yidma with the Maori Battalion on the right and the 19th on the left. A 500-pound bomb which had landed near the 19th without exploding was blown up by the engineers. During the afternoon a number of reconnaissance planes flew overhead and the usual sunset raid followed, two men being wounded and Padre Spence's car destroyed. Sergeant-Major Wilson, who had mounted a captured Italian Breda machine gun on a truck, once again fired tenaciously throughout the raid. A rather trying day closed with an issue of mail, an ideal tonic.

After a comparatively peaceful night with sleep broken only by the inevitable but necessary picket duties, the battalion stood-to as usual from 4.30 to 5.30 a.m. From the north-east came the sound of gunfire and from the west the noise of heavy bombing as our aircraft attacked the enemy. Large formations of our planes were a heartening sight as the troops relaxed in the midday heat after laboriously digging defensive positions in stony ground. At 5.55 p.m. sixteen enemy bombers raided the

brigade area but no bombs were dropped on the 20th. Half an hour later a call for the brigade orders group foretold a fresh move.

In accordance with the plan for the [Eighth Army](#) to take the initiative, 1 Armoured Division had been ordered to come under command of [13 Corps](#) and attempt a night advance along [Ruweisat Ridge](#) to Point 63. At the same time 4 Brigade was to move northwards to positions in the vicinity of Mungar Wahla, level with those of 5 Brigade along the El Mreir Depression, so that the Division would be able to support 1 Armoured Division with its guns and be ready to exploit any success gained by the tanks. Fourth Field Regiment was left free to support 4 Brigade's advance.

After last light patrols from 5 Brigade harassed the enemy while 4 Brigade prepared for the attack. At 1 a.m. on 7 July the 20th moved to the start line. At 3 a.m., with the Maori Battalion on the right, 20 Battalion on the left, and the 19th in reserve, the brigade moved approximately 3200 yards north, from which direction enemy flares could be seen. On reaching the high ground on the eastern end of [Mungar Wahla](#) the 20th dug in. Nineteenth Battalion passed rapidly through the leading troops, crossed the depression and reached the higher ground on the far side an hour before first light, still without making contact with the enemy.

Just before dawn on 7 July the unit transport came forward with [4 Field Regiment](#), whose 25-pounders shelled enemy transport and tanks which daylight revealed to the north and dispersed infantry who appeared to be forming up to attack. The battalion received orders about 8 a.m. to be prepared to move at short notice, and twice during the day was warned of the likelihood of an enemy tank attack from the west. At 3 p.m., on orders from Division, the brigade withdrew to its former area at Qaret el Yidma. As the group was forming up enemy aircraft bombed the area, the battalion's casualties being three men wounded. Shortly afterwards the convoy was again bombed while on the move. At 4.40 p.m. the unit reached and occupied its old positions, but by 6.25 p.m. had received orders for a further move.

In the north plans for a general attack westwards by [30 Corps](#) had been postponed, the enemy had therefore not withdrawn, and the advance by 4 Brigade and the artillery to Mungar Wahla had not served the purpose of opening the way to Daba. Columns of [7 Armoured Division](#) reported groups of the enemy south of

Ruweisat Ridge in the Alam el Dihmaniya area, while 5 Indian Division columns and South African armoured car patrols operating to the south-west of the Qattara Box reported the movement of German troops towards the south, indicating an attempt to turn the southern flank of the line. As the enemy still held the ground from Ruweisat Ridge westward over which 1 Armoured Division was to have attacked, the New Zealand Division was left in a very exposed position, liable to be cut off if the enemy forces at Ruweisat should thrust south-east towards Deir el Munassib. Thirteenth Corps' orders to alter dispositions and shorten the Corps' front directed the New Zealand Division to retire eastwards behind the Qattara Box to positions from which fire could be brought to bear on the area north of the Box and eastwards across Ruweisat Ridge. The Box itself was to be evacuated by 6 Brigade. After conferring with the Corps Commander, General Inglis ordered the Division to move back to Deir el Munassib during the night.

At 9.30 p.m. 4 Brigade moved off in night formation with 19 Battalion across the front, the 20th on the left, and the Maoris on the right. An enemy column of fourteen tanks and other vehicles moving down the telephone line was expected to give trouble. If attacked, the infantry were to debus and go in with the bayonet. The trip of 26 miles south and east was uneventful but it was a trying journey for the drivers, some of whom took off their overcoats so that the cold would keep them awake. The battalion arrived at the Munassib area at 7.15 a.m. on 8 July and reoccupied its old positions. All the troops were very tired after two nights without sleep and were glad of an extremely quiet day, free from enemy air activity.

Further deployment within 13 Corps now took place. The New Zealand Division was ordered to take over the duties of the 7 Armoured Division columns which had been providing a protective screen across the north of the New Zealanders' area. The Armoured Division was to cover the north and west of the Qattara Box and be responsible for the Box itself. As part of this plan 4 Brigade sent out one mobile column at 9 a.m. on 8 July to occupy Alam Nayil ridge and another to the south-east of this feature. The 20th at 8.15 p.m. carried out a short night move of two miles north-east to Deir el Muhafid, involving little inconvenience other than rather tough digging. In this new area the Maoris were on the right flank, 20th in the centre, and the 19th on the left. The gap between 4 Brigade and the left flank of 30 Corps was to be covered by one of the brigade's mobile columns.

At this stage the weather became extremely hot and between noon and 4 p.m. a heat haze greatly restricted visibility. Flies became very troublesome. The 9th July was again quiet until the evening meal, when the battalion area was heavily bombed. One man was killed and five wounded, two lorries destroyed and three damaged.

During the afternoon at a unit commanders' conference Brigadier Burrows had outlined the plan for the projected Eighth Army offensive. In the north two brigades each from 1 South African Division and 9 Australian Division, recently arrived from Palestine, were to attack west and south of the [Alamein Box](#) to make a path for the armour. The whole Army was to be ready to exploit any advantage gained, but if the assault was held up [13 Corps](#) was to stage its own attack, in which the [El Mreir Depression](#) would be the New Zealanders' objective.

At 4.30 p.m. Lieutenant [Ian Smith](#)<sup>4</sup> and six men left the 20th area on a reconnaissance to the north. Three hundred yards beyond Point 71 the patrol made contact with  $\frac{1}{4}$  Essex Regiment, which reported that six enemy tanks were harboured 3500 yards to the west. The patrol carried on towards a low ridge, from which a short reconnaissance disclosed no enemy activity. One of our minefields was located at a burnt-out tank a mile and three-quarters north of the [Essex Regiment](#) and its location noted. The patrol returned at 7 a.m.

Meanwhile the enemy was preparing to renew his advance by probing for weak spots in the defence. By midday small parties of his lorries and infantry had been observed moving across the Division's northern flank. At the same time the British armour there withdrew to the east. By 2 p.m. the troops on [Alam Nayil](#) were threatened, but [4 Field Regiment](#) forced the enemy tanks to retire. To the southwest of [Alam Nayil](#) enemy parties probed into Deir el Angar and forced a Divisional Cavalry patrol to retire. A small enemy force had approached the [Qattara Box](#) from the north on the evening of 8 July and had been engaged by the 6 Brigade rear party. Next day the enemy laid on a full-scale attack and entered the empty Box.

Soon after daylight on 10 July thirty-two enemy tanks and lorried infantry were reported to be either consolidating on the [Alam Nayil](#) ridge or preparing to attack. After being heavily shelled by our artillery, however, and bombed by the [RAF](#), the enemy withdrew north-west in the early afternoon. Enemy groups were reported to

the south and south-west, but more cheering news was the announcement that the Australians had captured their first objective. The afternoon was fairly quiet and the extra water ration, after the allowance of one bottle a man a day, was a great boon. An order to shave, clean boots, etc., was interpreted as equivalent to a warning order for an attack.

In the late afternoon British tanks attacked the enemy at [Alam Nayil](#) and by dusk had cleared the ridge. In the meantime an attack had been expected on 5 Brigade, in position to the west of 4 Brigade, and it had been decided to move the former to less exposed positions east of the Deir el [Muhamid](#) area. It was a broken night for the 20th, with convoys passing through its positions most of the time. Fourth Brigade now regrouped to cover the western approaches left open by the removal of 5 Brigade. While the 20th held the right flank, the Maori Battalion moved to the left and the 19th closed the back door of the box.

During the morning of 11 July the enemy moved up to the positions vacated by 5 Brigade. The tank battle at [Alam Nayil](#), which had died down at last light the previous evening, flared up again. The battalion's observers reported that our troops appeared to be still holding the feature, with enemy to the west and north-west. At 11.30 a.m. the battalion dispositions were altered to form a two-company front, with C Company on the right, D on the left, and A in reserve. Nineteenth Battalion held the left flank, while the 23rd was in contact on the right and the 28th in the southern sector. During the day the unit was visited by the [YMCA](#) truck. Tinned fruit and sausages and a mug of lukewarm water were the items most appreciated.

Information concerning the enemy up till 11 July had indicated that his formations were in as constant a state of movement as the British. Between 7 and 10 July 90 Light Division had been observed withdrawing from the central sector and moving west and south. By 11 July elements of this formation had been identified to the south and south-west of the New Zealand Division.

Now came a fresh, and as far as the 20th was concerned, a final plan to assist [30 Corps](#). It indicated that the latter was preparing to attack in a southerly direction towards Deir el Abyad. Thirteenth Corps, offering 'maximum co-operation', was to attack in a north-westerly direction towards this depression. The New Zealand Division had the responsibility of securing a bridgehead around the area of Point 63

—on some maps shown as Point 64—half a mile south of Deir el Shein and near the western end of Ruweisat Ridge, with the full fire support and flank protection of 1 Armoured Division on the right. The latter division was to make use of the bridgehead and send an armoured brigade to join 30 Corps. During the operation 7 Armoured Division was to protect the southern flank of 13 Corps.

The New Zealand Division was ordered to advance in three stages: to the Alam Nayil ridge, to a line some 600 yards in front of this feature, and finally to the western end of Ruweisat Ridge. Code-words to be sent to Divisional Headquarters on the completion of each stage were: Stage 1, greens; stage 2, eggs; and stage 3, bacon.

Ruweisat Ridge was a long, low feature ranging from 150 to 200 feet in height. Rising gradually from the surrounding desert, it ran east and west, parallel with the coast. South of Ruweisat the country stepped up in a series of low ridges to a plateau south of Alam Nayil, the surface being broken by large 'deirs', steep-sided depressions with rocky outcrops, used by both sides as tank harbours or infantry assembly areas. Whoever held Ruweisat Ridge could dominate the northern front with artillery fire by direct observation, and behind this and other ridges could operate against the exposed plateau of the southern sector. Possession of Ruweisat Ridge was therefore vitally important to the success of the campaign. Its assault required a superlative effort from men already wearied by several weeks of exposure to intense heat and constant digging in stony ground, tired out with unremitting picket duties, frequent moves by day and night and lack of sleep. It had been a difficult campaign for the man in the ranks to understand. Moves seemed to be made to all points of the compass and information was scarce. Since the breakthrough at Minqar Qaim there had been little actual infantry fighting to do. There was no doubt as to who had won on that occasion and the advance to Ruweisat Ridge was faced with quiet determination.

As the battalions assembled at the start line an alteration was received eliminating the first bound. At 5 p.m. 5 Brigade on the right and 4 Brigade on the left advanced north-west in transport. With 20 Battalion leading, the 19th on the left and the Maoris on the right, 4 Brigade moved to within 600 yards of Alam Nayil ridge. The enemy began to shell and mortar the leading vehicles, the Maoris and the adjoining 5 Brigade vehicles catching most of the trouble.

The transport halted in a shallow depression and the troops debussed. Enemy shelling became heavier, but the companies formed up unconcernedly and the anti-tank portées assembled along each flank. At the signal the infantry moved resolutely and with perfect discipline over the lip of the depression into heavy shell and mortar fire, some nonchalantly smoking cigarettes. All were showing the strain of the campaign. Boots and web gear were streaked with white salt from many days of sweating toil. Shirts and shorts in which men had worked and slept for several weeks without being able to change were hard and wrinkled with perspiration. Everyone looked much thinner, some near the point of exhaustion, others drawn but tough-looking with that sun-brown hardness that comes with life in the desert. Quite a number wore bandages over desert sores, some were limping, but all had a sort of Agincourt grimness that boded ill for somebody out in front.

The shelling took its toll, of course, but the advance continued up to and beyond [Alam Nayil](#) without other opposition. At one stage the infantry passed some British Grant tanks which put smoke down on the left forward flank. After covering about 1500 yards on the same bearing as previously, the battalion was ordered to halt and dig in. Heavy shelling continued till dusk, seeming to come from heavy guns situated in the area of the [Qattara Box](#). The code-word eggs was sent to Divisional Headquarters at 7.35 p.m.

Twenty-third Battalion and the Maoris had become 'boxed' at the debussing point and this had caused some of the units to deviate from their correct line of march to the left. At 9.30 p.m. the Brigade Commander advised that the brigade was too far forward and to the west. Accordingly, at 1 a.m. on 12 July the brigade formed up in close formation and moved 800 yards east, taking up a position with the 20th in front, 19th on the left, and the Maoris in the rear. From 5.30 till 9.30 a.m. the enemy shelled and mortared the positions heavily and our artillery replied with counter fire. After the four-hours' blitz firing continued spasmodically till 2.30 p.m., when things became comparatively quiet. A check-up on casualties showed that the 20th had not fared so badly: one officer slightly wounded, one man killed and twenty wounded.

During the morning of 12 July word was received that the final stage in the attack on [Ruheisat Ridge](#) would almost certainly take place that night, but after a

conference at Divisional Headquarters at which the Corps Commander and the commander of 1 Armoured Division were present it was decided that bacon would be off the menu for the day. Apparently 30 Corps' attack had not synchronised with that of 13 Corps and the Division was ordered to consolidate in its positions in expectation of a stay of two or three days. The armoured brigades were withdrawing overnight into reserve on the New Zealand Division's right, with mobile columns forward to protect their fronts. Infantry units were instructed to send out fighting patrols after dark to harass the enemy and gain information.

It was extremely hot out in the open during the day, but the nights were very cold and the forward troops were glad when greatcoats and one blanket a man were sent up that night.

Fifth Brigade patrols brought in the information that Italians were laying a minefield to the north, and one patrol which picked up two sections of 23 Battalion which had been marooned out in front of the Division for a day learned from them that the enemy held the ground to the north with a considerable number of machine guns sited in depth. Parties of enemy troops in transport had also approached the Division's south-west flank, debussed, and dug in.

The 13th July began with a heavy mist which hampered observation during the early morning stand-to. There was spasmodic enemy shelling when visibility improved but no battalion casualties. General Inglis inspected the layout of units and ordered alterations to give greater depth to the position. As the 20 Battalion front of 800 yards caused the troops to be too cramped, however, A Company moved to new positions after dark to extend the frontage by 400 yards and dug in. When word was received that the battalion might remain in position for several days, transport was sent back to the area from which the advance had started.

Situation reports at nightfall showed that both armies were preparing for large-scale operations. In the northern sector tanks and infantry of 21 Panzer Division driving north-east to cut off the coast defences had been halted by minefields and artillery fire. South of this area, in the central sector, German infantry had been brought in to stiffen the Italians. In the sector opposite 13 Corps the enemy had been on the defensive all day, apparently to cover the preparation of weapon pits, gun positions, and minefields. By the end of the day a strong line of infantry

defences covered by an anti-tank screen stretched from Ruweisat Ridge forward of the pipeline to the Qattara Box.

Between the ridge and the Qattara Box the enemy seemed to be preparing for defence, but south of the Box enemy columns increasing in strength were engaging the columns of 7 Armoured Division. At last light on 13 July an enemy formation of 12 tanks and 40 trucks of infantry advanced eastwards in the southern sector and captured Qaret el Himeimat, a feature ten miles south of Alam Nayil. Apparently by pushing in the north and the south the enemy hoped to force another British withdrawal.

That night Second-Lieutenant Sullivan and the IO of 23 Battalion selected and marked the start line for the divisional attack. A patrol from D Company went out 4000 yards and encountered enemy wiring parties.

The 14th July was another intensely hot day and the infantry, lying in the open in shallow slit trenches, were severely tried by the heat and the flies. Shelling continued, some of it being airbursts. During this period of improving positions and waiting for the final attack, meals were brought up before dawn and after dusk by carrier as the area to the south was under enemy observation and any movement by trucks brought shelling. Amongst the battalion's casualties over the last two days were A Company's second-in-command, Lieutenant Galbraith,<sup>5</sup> and the CSM, WO II Gus Gray, both of whom were killed. At 3 p.m. on the 14th B Echelon was attacked by enemy bombers. Its casualties were one man killed and four wounded.



RUWEISAT RIDGE, DAWN 15 JULY 1942  
ruweisat ridge, dawn 15 july 1942

There had been considerable movement of enemy tanks and transport throughout the day, and in the afternoon Brigadier Burrows had reconnoitred an area to which the brigade group could retire if necessary. The battalion had received about eighty reinforcements, half of whom were allotted to A Company. They included one ASC driver with his arm still in plaster and others untrained in infantry work. Those obviously unsuitable were sent back to B Echelon.

At 6.55 p.m. word was received that the attack on Ruweisat Ridge would take place that night. By 8 p.m. final preparations for the advance had been made and companies assembled.

Orders from [Divisional Headquarters](#) required the Division to attack and capture the western end of [Ruweisat Ridge](#), 4 Brigade's objective being Point 63 and westwards, 5 Brigade being responsible for the area east of the trig point. It was understood that an armoured brigade would protect the open left flank. Zero hour was 11 p.m.

Twentieth Battalion intelligence section personnel guided the troops to the start line, which was protected by a platoon of A Company. The leading battalion was the 18th, which was responsible for guiding and for maintaining contact with 5 Brigade. The 19th in echelon took the left flank and 20 Battalion moved in reserve. The distance to the final objective was six miles. Brigade Headquarters travelled with the reserve battalion. The artillery was to be in position on the objective at first light. Three troops of anti-tank six-pounders moved with Brigade Headquarters and three remained with [4 Field Regiment](#), as did the ack-ack battery. Two platoons of machine-gunners, two sections of [6 Field Company](#), and some battalion two-pounders moved behind the 20th.

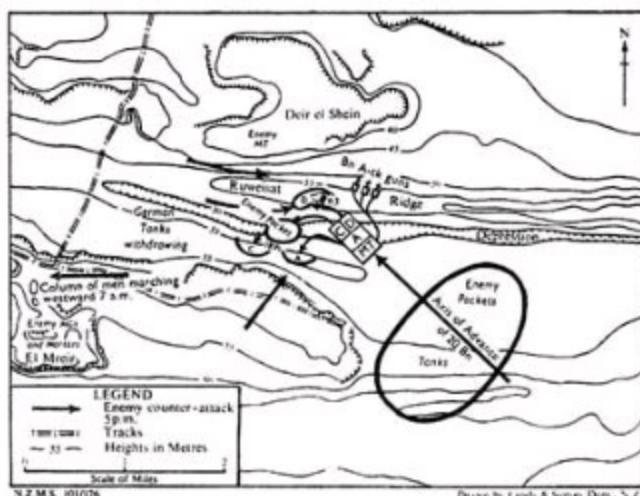
Brigadier Burrows has recorded his impressions of the attack and eye-witness accounts by various men of the battalion give detail to the general picture. The Brigadier wrote:

Our final objective, the Ridge, was exactly six miles from the start line. Information available showed we would encounter outpost positions about two and a half miles from our start line. It was considered that enemy opposition here would not be strong, but that the main task of taking the Ridge would be difficult. It was

further considered we would be on our final objective some reasonable time before dawn, and at first light our Artillery, under the protection of the Armd Bde, would come up and get into position. Our Bren Carriers, 3-inch mortars, and other heavier fighting weapons such as 2-inch mortars, A Tk Boyes rifles, would also come up and join us at first light.

I decided to take three tps of the 6-pr A Tk guns and some of the Bn 2-prs in case we were counter-attacked by tanks before our Artillery was in position. The noise of the advance of these A Tk vehicles was likely to give us away, but I kept the reserve Bn back about half an hour after the other two had gone and brought the vehicles up with them.

About an hour after zero a most infernal din broke out ahead, and the leading Bns I knew were engaged. Further to the right I shortly afterwards heard the 5 Bde likewise employed. Our group kept moving forward and I had to stop the reserve Bn (20 Bn) from breaking into a run and joining up with the others. A reserve Bn was no use to me if it became mixed in the scrapping on the way



20 BATTALION POSITIONS ON RUWEISAT, 15 JULY 1942  
20 battalion positions on ruweisat, 15 july 1942

to the objective. I wanted to employ it at a later stage as circumstances demanded. Shortly we were caught in heavy mortar and artillery fire. I imagine it was the enemy's defensive fire called down upon the area in which we found ourselves. We lost about fifteen or so killed and wounded and one vehicle was knocked out. The intensity of the fire surprised me. It was much heavier than was

expected of an outpost position. We were held here for about half to three-quarters of an hour. In the front the fighting was getting further away. The night was very dark and gun flashes, tracer bullets from MGs and heavier tracer from A Tk guns had the sky well lit up. There were sounds, too, of the guns the tanks use. The Bde wireless set was trying all the time to get into touch with the forward battalions, but without success. I was worried and didn't know whether they were being carved up. However the firing continued and shortly the artillery fire that had kept us pinned was lifted and we were able to move forward.

At this stage I decided I had to have some news of what was going on in front and asked the 20 Bn to send forward an officer in the small car that was with my headquarters. Charlie Upham would not send an officer from his Coy but went forward himself. He returned in about an hour's time, having had various encounters with pockets of the enemy and with the disturbing news that he had not been able to contact the [19 Bn](#), but that he had met Major [Playle](#)<sup>6</sup> with a company of the [18 Bn](#) who were lost.

Captain Upham says:

I could not find [19 Bn](#) when going forward and 18 and 21 Bns were in confusion. So were the Germans. They were getting trucks out and pulling guns back by hand and ropes. All this went on under cover of fire from tanks which, in groups of three, were covering the withdrawal. It was a very colourful show with flares going up, tanks firing, and red tracer bullets from MGs.

Two German tanks were put out by [18 Bn](#) with sticky bombs: they went up quite close to us. Captain Playle's [18 Bn](#) Coy came under heavy fire from a tank, as another tank set on fire by his Coy had a deck cargo of flares which lit up the whole battlefield. The German troops were being badly cut up while the Italians were surrendering in hundreds. They were out of all proportion to our people and really broke up the attack with their crowds. There was some barbed wire that gave trouble, and some trenches, too. We had to stop and lift the jeep out of shallow trenches and often had to disentangle poor efforts at wiring. The enemy helped, thinking we were some of them.

All the time this was going on and even before it there was a rumble of tanks on

our exposed left flank. We thought it came from our tanks which were supposed to be there. C Coy was the left hand Coy of the left hand Bn of the left hand Bde, so we naturally kept a strong lookout to the left as it was an open front.

I returned to Brig. Burrows and reported that there appeared to be confusion on our right flank, [19 Bn](#) had gone through to its objective, and [18 Bn](#) was not so far forward. The enemy line appeared to have collapsed but there were a lot of tanks holding out in groups of three.

Brigadier Burrows continues:

We had been pushing on all the while, disturbed occasionally by artillery fire and bursts of enemy MG fire from our flanks. Soon we came on a burning German tank. There was a distressing little group of our wounded and dead lying near by. I spoke with one wounded soldier who said the tank had opened fire on them suddenly from the dark. One of our men had climbed on board before it could move away and had somehow managed to get a hand grenade through the turret. There were many Italians wandering about now, and some Germans. We sent back a group of about one hundred and fifty or so, but couldn't stop to collect many. We hoped our tanks, which were coming up at first light, would be able to shepherd the prisoners and destroy the astonishing amount of enemy equipment we were passing. It had become obvious by now that what we had taken for an outpost position was something more. We found that the last three miles of our advance had been occupied in depth by the enemy.

It was now showing some signs of growing light. The Ridge ahead was obviously our objective. Then we ran into a real pocket of resistance. Four enemy MG posts and possibly three tanks all opened fire together. I had gone forward to the head of the 20 Bn to consult with the intelligence officer, John Sullivan, about our exact location, and felt somewhat dismayed at the new development. Our A Tk vehicles looked an easy mark for tanks. I shouted to the 20 Bn to go straight in with the bayonet and heard Charlie Upham leading C Coy forward in grand style. His Coy must have dealt immediately with two posts. The tanks were hard to see, but were moving away. A Tk vehicles were now moving over the crest of the Ridge. Still being fired on by two enemy machine guns, the infantry unfortunately tried to get over in another spot and were faced with wire. However our MG officer [Major Johansen <sup>7</sup>]

saved the day. He dismounted two of our MGs and took on the remaining two German guns, one of which was about 400 yds away and the other about 700 yds. In very short time he quietened them both and had set fire to a couple of vehicles. The tanks could not be seen anywhere.

A six-mile advance at night at an angle to the physical features of the ground and with the last four miles obstructed by contact with the enemy required unusual skill in keeping direction. Second-Lieutenant Sullivan, who led the 20th, says:

Navigation was by compass and pacing. I myself led the way and had two of the Intelligence Section checking me.... My method of counting, by the way, was to record the hundreds on my Rosary Beads which I always carried and which gave me a count to 5000.

When we reached the spot according to my reckoning I stopped the unit. We were still on comparatively low ground, whereas we should have landed on ... Pt 63 and I wanted to do a quick check up. I think it was completely dark up to that stage. I asked the others to stay put for a few minutes while I had a look around. Pt 63 was a trig and I was looking for a knob complete with cairn. There were signs of dawn breaking at this stage. I found that the high ground was to our right.... before I rejoined the unit the area came under heavy MG fire....

The battalion reacted immediately to this opposition. A Company, in reserve, went to ground, D Company with a lost platoon of 18 Battalion attacked forward to the high ground, and C Company, led by Captain Upham, swung left, south-west, towards the enemy fire. He describes the action:

When we got to the objective the MGs went into action. I remember Johansen saying to his men, 'Fire at the flashes'. When first light came they found that they had been firing at tanks. Our objective was on a forward slope and it was full of slit trenches. It was broad daylight by now. The Hun tanks kept firing hull down, moving all the time from behind one mound to another. Their infantry were running back and their casualties were heavy.

In the valley the Huns were making a stand. It was broken ground with a small rise or pimple in it and beyond that the rise on the far side of the valley. On the floor of the hollow were guns, trucks, and Huns in confusion. So we went into it with a

bayonet charge for half a mile past the slit trenches on the forward slope .... and consolidated on the far side under intense fire. We captured a German Intelligence truck full of maps. While I was prowling round a German officer raced up on a motor cycle. It was a suicide job and I am certain he was sent up to fire the truck. We took him PW and he was with me most of the day. Some of the maps I sent back to Major Manson....

I remember saying to someone this was the greatest victory yet. There was everything a soldier wanted lying about—an enormous heap of rifles, another big heap of unopened mail, stores galore and loaded trucks, several half-tracked vehicles and six field guns (two of them 88s), and a group of German wounded.

In this attack C Company had heavy casualties, particularly in officers. Two platoon commanders—Lieutenants [Edwin Shand](#)<sup>8</sup> and Ian Smith—were killed, the third, Lieutenant [Wilkinson](#),<sup>9</sup> shell-shocked, and Captain Upham himself was shot in the elbow and had his left arm smashed. A call for reinforcements was passed back to Headquarters. A Company and a platoon of D followed C Company while the rest of D held Point 63 for all-round defence.

Second-Lieutenant Cottrell of No. 9 Platoon describes their experiences:

We could hear Charlie Upham yelling for assistance at the top of his voice.... [and I obtained permission] to move my No. 9 Platoon round on Upham's left. This was on slightly higher open ground and we were to go straight in the direction of where the fire was coming from. I sent one section to the left and moved forward with another section, the third section (which comprised mostly what was left of No. 7 Platoon) bringing up the rear. I remember it felt like walking towards lots of coloured tennis balls—tracer always appeared like that to me. My section lost 4 men killed but we went forward to some Italian sangars which we occupied and opened fire with our Brens—apart from odd sniper fire this seemed to quieten the enemy machine guns.

Second-Lieutenant Sullivan, after confirming that the high ground to his right was the objective, followed up C Company's attack to see what was doing and found that it had captured an enemy laager to the south-west of [Ruwaisat Ridge](#). Captain Upham was by this time wounded and Sullivan led C Company up the side of the

ridge to the higher ground which he felt should be occupied. Captain Washbourn then took command of the two companies and Sullivan returned to Point 63 to report to the CO and Brigadier Burrows. D Company, under Captain Maxwell, was by this time disposed on Point 63, which was the highest knob in the area and was marked by a barrel and a cairn.

Brigadier Burrows continues his report:

It was now nearly light. We were on the Ridge. Our 6-prs quickly got into hull down positions facing the direction in which the tanks had disappeared. They had an angry battle when it was properly light, and the officer in charge claimed three tanks knocked out.

On the northern side of the ridge I found the 19 Bn in posn, with odd bits and pieces of the 18 Bn. Further along to the East were small groups of men belonging to the 5th Bde. I contacted an officer as soon as I could, told him to organise all the fighting men he could from this Bn of the 5 Bde, tack themselves on to us, and with our A Tk guns we would give them protection.

To the north was a scene of the utmost confusion. There was transport as far as one could see. Wandering aimlessly everywhere without arms were enemy troops—chiefly Italians. They were utterly disorganised and in complete panic. We had no Bren Carriers to round them up, and I felt it a pity the tanks were so long in coming to exploit our success as they were supposed to do. We had a big party of prisoners, including four generals. My intelligence officer reported that General Lombardi was amongst the captured. From further east along the Ridge, what appeared to be easily a Bn of troops were walking North. At first I thought they were our own, but soon realised they were not carrying arms and were Italians walking away. Our MGs could have shot them down, but I couldn't bring myself to order that. There were enough wounded and dead about as it was. On the other hand it was reported to me that very nearly a Bn of what looked like our own troops were seen marching away guarded by German tanks. It turned out later to be a Bn of the 5 Bde who were surrounded by tanks just at daylight and did not have their A Tk guns with them.

Our people were by now consolidating on the ground where they found themselves at daylight. On the southern side and the western end of the Ridge no

movement was possible. About seven German tanks were hull down not so far away and fired at everything. The posn on the northern side was easier for about two hours. There was, however, a stratum of rock about four inches down and men could not dig. They occupied as far as possible rock sangars which had been built up by the Italians. I found for my Headquarters a trench which was dug considerably deeper and with the sides built up with sand bags.

I had realized by now that our advance had carried us right through the enemy lines, into what was probably their army headquarters. The staff car and office trucks confirmed this, and of course the capture of the four generals in this area meant it was no ordinary defensive position. It meant that what we had thought were outpost posns nearer our lines were in reality the main defences....

Returning across the valley under heavy fire to Point 63, Lieutenant Sullivan reported the column of prisoners he had seen south of C Company, marching west, to the CO and also to Brigade Headquarters. He also contacted [19 Battalion](#) to the right of the 20th and located the 18th, enabling its platoon to rejoin.

On Point 63 Captain Maxwell was far from happy about the position of A and C Companies, who had No. 18 Platoon with them on the ridge to the south-west. Going out in a captured 8-cwt truck, he found Captain Upham wounded and brought him back to the RAP. After discussion with the CO he returned to 18 Platoon and ordered it to withdraw under the command of Captain Washbourn. Major Manson was by now convinced of the advisability of withdrawing what was left of A and C Companies and this dangerous move is described by Lieutenant Cottrell:

We stayed there [on the high ground facing south-south-west] some time and then Johnny Sullivan bravely came out and said Gordon Washbourn had gone to fix our positions on the other side of the ridge—a runner also came from Gordon to tell me this. I arranged for the remnants of C Coy and A Coy to move round the ridge. I left two Bren gunners to cover us and ordered my men to move towards the gap in the minefield. It was a fairly hot move back over the open ground ... [but] the men were magnificent, some even lighting their pipes as they went. We moved quickly through the gap ... in small parties as the enemy fire was concentrated on this point. As I went through with the last party one of my men ... was hit in the leg. I saw he was all right and promised to come back for him. I then reported to Gordon

Washbourn who gave us a rough area. I then left the Platoon to Sgt. Maurice Shand<sup>10</sup> and was on my way back to get ... [the wounded man] when I was hit. The Artillery fire was intense with a large number of air bursts.

CSM Bob May describes a typical incident:

I was on a ridge south-west of Pt 63 when I noticed Capt Upham walking towards an 88. I went over to him and found him trying to remove some part of the breech from the 88 with his one hand. He was badly wounded in his left arm. Three wounded Germans were lying close by. They had been attended to by our stretcher bearers. While moving back [to the north side of the ridge] we were heavily machine gunned by two tanks at the western end of the Ridge and several men were hit. Frank Dougherty [Doherty]<sup>11</sup> of C Coy went back in a pick up and, under heavy fire, brought in the wounded.

Meanwhile the Brigadier was becoming anxious. The tide seemed to be turning in favour of the enemy. He continues:

Two hours or so passed and I began to worry because the Armour had not arrived nor had our Arty. There were wonderful plums waiting for the picking had the Armour been there. Time passed and nothing turned up. Our wireless was in touch with Div who reported that the Armour was coming. Until it came I knew our Arty could not get through. Then artillery shells started to land from the North. The enemy soon realised we were without our guns and brought his own up. For the rest of the day we had one of the toughest times I have experienced. The enemy used a shell with an overhead shrapnel burst—a deadly thing which came down on you whether you were below ground or not. There was much mortaring and I think he was using some of our own 25-prs too. It went on almost without a break. Our 6-prs and 2-prs were targets that could not be disguised or hidden and gun teams suffered heavily. The infantry losses, too, were distressing. Reports kept coming in of people I knew killed or wounded and during the afternoon the 20 Bn reported that fifty per cent of their personnel were battle casualties.

Shelling and mortaring went on steadily all day and the mounting casualties placed great strain on the battalion Medical Officer, 'Doc' Feltham, and his staff. Lance-Corporal Dickson<sup>12</sup> of the signals platoon describes their valiant efforts:

On the side of the Ridge the RAP staff under Captain Feltham and Sjt. L. R. Sutherland worked heroically to cope with the casualties. Men passing through the area looking for their sections or helping wounded comrades back to the post attracted fire to this concentrated area and some of the men were hit a second time. Sjt. Sutherland, who was himself later wounded, called to the men to keep away or to leave their rifles behind when they brought in wounded. An RAP flag was improvised from a white towel on which a red cross was marked with the only medium available— blood. This desperate measure seemed to have the desired result, however, as no further shelling came from enemy areas that could see this pathetic signal. Men from the Intelligence section did splendid work as stretcher bearers, bringing in wounded under heavy fire, and two of them obtained a drum of water some distance away and gamely rolled it down the shell and bullet swept slope to the RAP.

Captain Maxwell at one stage went to Brigade Headquarters to try to get an ambulance through to evacuate the wounded, but communication with [Divisional Headquarters](#) seemed to have broken down. To his suggestion that he withdraw the 20th, Brigadier Burrows replied that the position must be held as tank support had been promised.

During the afternoon, however, there were signs that the enemy was collecting for an attack. Tanks and infantry were assembling in the wadis to the west and south-west, from which they could have easily been dispersed had the artillery been able to get forward. This had proved impossible because of the presence until late in the afternoon of a big enemy pocket in the area between Rear Brigade Headquarters and Ruweisat Ridge. During the day the carrier platoon officers of 18, 19, and 20 Battalions tried to find alternative routes for the guns but were unsuccessful. After 2 p.m. some [19 Battalion](#) carriers managed to get through to their unit with supplies, but the 18th's carriers were too late to be of use and the 20th's carriers with the battalion mortars and the machine-gunners were turned back by a tank battle astride the track.

About 3 p.m. Lieutenant Sullivan had gone to Brigade Headquarters to report that the enemy appeared to be forming up. While he was there a liaison officer from 22 Armoured Brigade arrived with the information that the armour was about two

and a half miles away to the east and was proceeding westwards along the southern slope of the ridge. Sullivan dashed back with this news, which the Brigadier also sent to the other battalions, adding all the encouragement he knew.

Brigadier Burrows adds:

About 4 p.m. 20 Bn reported that the enemy attack had been launched. I immediately sent away an officer to try to contact the Armour. The attack was preceded by intensive arty fire. Their tanks came in with a slight wind behind them. They set fire to what vehicles they could find in their path, and soon there was an excellent smoke screen across everything. All we could do was sit and wait in our HQ trenches.

In about three quarters of an hour the same officer as previously arrived back to say that the armour was about half a mile away and that three light tanks were coming forward to see me and get information. I suggested that the Liaison Officer himself had all the information necessary and told him to contact his Commander immediately, and ask him to send his tanks on as the situation was critical. He departed under heavy shelling and machine-gun fire.

In the meantime the battalion's CO, Major Manson, had gone back himself to try to obtain armoured support. Captain Maxwell moved round the battalion area, setting a fine example of coolness and courage to the men on the ridge.

About 5 p.m. [writes Lieutenant Sullivan] enemy shelling became even heavier than before and tanks and armoured cars approached. The situation was very grim at this stage.... I was at Battalion Headquarters with Captain Gibb. We tried in vain to contact Bde HQ but neither phone nor wireless would work.

As the attack approached the six-pounders opened up and after firing a few shots one—perhaps both—prepared to move. I went across to make sure that they were not vacating the area and was told that they were shifting a short distance only to avoid being pin-pointed.... There was heavy fire, both AT shells and MG fire, from the enemy who also appeared to be shelling us from further back....

When the tanks and armoured cars actually reached our lines I was in D Coy area with Capt Maxwell. It was obvious at that stage that unless our own tanks

arrived we would be overrun. Incidentally, the ground was very rocky and trenches were very shallow. I believe that many of our men fired away all their ammunition at the gun flashes but when the tanks and armoured cars came in and circled the area, sweeping the ground with small arms fire, it was a case of stand up or be killed. Once the forward troops had been prised out of their holes and were above ground resistance definitely slackened and those in the rear could do little shooting. In any case the cloud of dust and smoke obscured the scene and when the tanks appeared they were close enough to command surrender. Enemy infantry in small parties followed the tanks and took over the prisoners. An anti-tank gun still on its portée below Point 63 but with its crew knocked out by machine-gun fire was taken over and used by the enemy.

Captain Maxwell says:

I realised that we were in a hopeless position as there were tanks all round us. The shelling was still going on and here I decided that rather than lose the remaining men I had no alternative but to surrender. The Germans let Lt. Sullivan and I go over to bury ... [some of our dead] and give water to the wounded. We joined up with the men and got the Huns to send back a car for Captain Upham who refused to stay with the RAP.

For their courage and leadership on this disastrous day both Captain Maxwell and Lieutenant Sullivan received the DSO.

The three battalion two-pounders had been separated from the unit during the final rush for the ridge and each had its own separate action. [Captain Barton](#),<sup>13</sup> commanding the anti-tank platoon, describes his guns' part in the battle:

... we arrived over the ridge under a hail of fire and AP shells, not even knowing if it was Ruweisat or not. It was a hull down position, which was all we craved at the moment.... The guns were put into the only positions which offered any protection [on the north side of the ridge] and then the task was to find the 20 Bn. ... I had a lot of trouble (and a lot of diving behind rocks and sangars) before I found the Battalion, and nearly wept with relief when I finally found Jim Gibb, Gordon Washbourn and Jackie Sullivan.

When I got back to the guns Major [Nicholson](#)<sup>14</sup> of the Anti-Tank Regiment came

around ... and co-ordinated the whole show. He told us that the anti-tank guns were brigaded and to stay where we were. In actual fact the siting of our guns with the exception of one portée which I had pushed forward of the Ridge a bit was not altered materially.

I was desperately worried over this siting as I felt that we should be with the Bn even if we were only two little 2-pdrs.... [one of the three had been knocked out almost immediately]. Actually we were well north of the 20th and directly behind them were the 6-pdrs. There appeared to be nowhere to site a gun as it was just a solid rock ledge and no gun would have lasted five minutes. In any case any movement of gun or vehicle drew instant fire from Jerry and naturally the infantry did not appreciate portées sculling around in their vicinity. God knows they had had enough for one night.

Lieutenant Denis Wood,<sup>15</sup> who had taken over Lieutenant Moodie's portée, describes their action:

Soft sand in the depression before Ruweisat Ridge gave difficulty. As we came out we saw two blazing enemy tanks, turned, and ran west parallel to the ridge for a while. As dawn broke we saw in front and to the west six or seven enemy tanks which started to fire at the column. The range was about 50-60 yds and two of our trucks were soon on fire. It was surprising that there were not more casualties. Everybody scattered and I drove our portee over a low undulation which was Ruweisat Ridge and stopped in among some infantry. There seemed to be a fair bit of confusion. I met Pat Barton and Brig Burrows. There was a fair bit of shelling from the west and south-west. Capt Barton sited our portee....

Fire came from every angle and a lot of it was AP. My portee was hit by one of these and the front differential damaged. However we moved it to our allotted position and were trying to dig a hole when a second AP wrecked the engine. Other hits later completed the job. We were put in a forward position along the west end of the ridge as the 6-pdrs had the ridge positions.... Due to the rocky nature of the ground it was hopeless to dig in the gun as we would normally have done. Even the German dead were only thinly covered on top of the ground. Our position was obvious to the Huns who shelled us directly. We could see no targets within range and felt ineffective. The Machine Gunners were the only ones who seemed able,

from their positions on top of the ridge, to fire effectively. They engaged some armoured cars to the west and south-west. For a fruitless hour we tried to dig in, being shelled all the time. The infantry in the early stages brought in many prisoners from forward and north-west of the ridge. There were also some captured British trucks which we had retaken and from which the men got supplies of food and clothing. Under the circumstances it was rather humorous to see the infantry changing their underwear though they were no doubt glad of the opportunity to do so.... Finally it was decided as the ground made it impossible to take up the normal ground positions to keep the remaining two portees mobile. There were no targets within range. We spent the rest of the day just sitting there being shelled. There were few trenches and these were used for HQ positions. Some of the men were in sangars and actually we just sat on top of the ground behind a few sandbags. The 20th were forward of us....

Later in the afternoon the shelling intensified so much that dust was raised all round us and we had practically no visibility. The troops down in front of us to the north-west were in a cloud of dust. Neither could see the other. The only things visible were the AP shells shooting through the dust.

Our crew had been distributed round the other two portees. At this stage I got on to Sgt. Robinson's <sup>16</sup> portee. The gun was facing north-west and we and Sgt. Thompson's <sup>17</sup> portee fired a considerable number of rounds at the enemy gun flashes through the haze. The driver, Pte. Joe Wesley, <sup>18</sup> was hit in the foot so I took over driving the portee. Things were pretty warm. At one stage Sgt. Robinson, who was directing the fire of the gun, bent down for another shell and as he did so an AP round brushed his hip. One of the crew on the left of the gun was shot by AP small arms fire which penetrated the shield so I withdrew the portee eastwards about 100 yds, picking up two wounded infantrymen on the way. We then halted, turned the gun round, and again fired at the gun flashes we saw through the dust.

We then advanced westwards again, hoping to find Captain Barton. We could not see much but knew there was some form of enemy attack on because the gun flashes kept changing position and approaching.

I got off the portee and looked for Capt. Barton north of our old position. We couldn't see any sign of him and there seemed to be nobody in authority in the

vicinity. Men in the area were moving east. We moved back a short distance till we came to where troops of the 4th Bde (I think) were attempting to stabilise the position on a North to South line. Men were lying in a sort of shallow depression and facing west. We were told to go and site ourselves into the ridge again. We did so. Shortly afterwards one of the infantry company commanders told us to withdraw further east.

Lance-Corporal [Howorth](#), <sup>19</sup> who was on Sergeant Thompson's portée, gives his gun's story:

When we arrived at what I thought was our objective there were a lot of people milling about and then suddenly we were fired upon. ... Our portee dashed off and went over the edge of the ridge. Close by was a 6-pdr portee which opened fire over the ridge. Sgt. Thompson looked over the ridge and told us that the enemy vehicles were out of range of our gun so we did no shooting. One vivid impression of mine was of a lone machine-gunner firing his Vickers. He was really annoyed and was firing very long bursts almost of belt length.... Behind us ... to the north there was a lot of abandoned transport, mostly British, which had been captured by the enemy. Later in the day we picked up some supplies from these vehicles—water, which was more than welcome, and funnily enough some V cigarettes and Hudson biscuits....

Later on our portee was shifted by Capt. Barton some small distance to the West and round a corner.... not far from Lt. Wood's portee which had at this stage been knocked out. Later our portee was shifted back to more or less its original position. I cannot recall our having done any shooting from this position. There was nothing to see.... we were heavily shelled periodically during the day. We tried to dig slit trenches but this was impossible. The ground was just solid rock. We also tried to build sangars but with the amount of loose rock available these were practically useless. It was utterly impossible to dig the guns in. At this stage one of our gun crew had been wounded....

Later in the afternoon enemy shelling was intensified and they knocked out several of the abandoned vehicles.... our gun would have been out of sight during the early part of the attack as it was behind the Northern edge of the ridge.... One or two of the guns or vehicles along the Northern edge of the ridge were knocked out by solid shot and some of the shot came perilously close to our own gun.... I had no

idea where the 20th Rifle Companies were....

I noticed a 6-pdr. to the West which I will call the first 6-pdr. An artillery Staff Sgt ran past us calling to another of his guns which was to our east. Both these 6-pdrs were on their portees. As the second 6-pdr. went past us to join the first 6-pdr. Sgt. Thompson called to the Staff Sgt and said 'Do you want us too?' He said 'Yes'. Sgt. Thompson then ordered us on to the portee.... We then moved off to join the two 6-pdrs. The second 6-pdr. by this time was firing. Our portee went up to the 6-pdrs., turned round, and Sgt. Thompson directed the fire of the gun. I was acting as loader. As we were being machine-gunned I kept down behind the shield and did not see anything. We got away a couple of shots when the second 6-pdr. which was right beside us went on fire. There was an Artillery Major on foot in charge. It then became apparent that the first 6-pdr. portee could not move under its own power because the Major ordered the two 6-pdr. portees to be joined by a tow rope. I do not know whether the first 6-pdr. gun itself was out of action. He then ordered us to move back. The second 6-pdr. still on fire towed the first 6-pdr. and we drove alongside them. Just as we moved off I felt a crack under my right foot and later discovered a bullet hole in the portee.... one of the crew of Lt. Wood's portee [who] was now on our portee.... [was killed] by an AP shot of at least .5 calibre [which] had come through the gun shield....

When we were driving back I thought we were looking for a better position to fight from. When we stopped however, a fire extinguisher was obtained and the fire on the second 6-pdr. was put out. At this stage I noticed that an officer who was sitting beside the driver of the first 6-pdr. was seriously wounded. The portee seemed to have a full crew but it turned out that every man ... was a casualty. The Artillery Major then ordered Sgt. Thompson to tow the first 6-pdr. out and told his second 6-pdr. to stay and fight. We passed through some Indian 25-pdrs. to an ADS where we unhitched the tow and left ... [the casualties]. We then rejoined the 20th.

Captain Barton had an anxious time when the attack reached his area. He says:

... we were north of the infantry by quite some way—the attack came in I think from the south-west, with the result that in actual fact the Battalion had been overrun and the affair was practically over by the time the attack reached us.... the first real indication we had that an attack was coming in was a yell from a 6-pdr

crew on our left. They then fired a few rounds into the smoke—we could still not see what was going on.... The smoke, dust and shelling were terrific, and then small arms started spattering along the ridge above us—it seemed that the fire was coming straight down the ridge. I remember the sudden spasm of fear I had that they had come around the back of the ridge and were going to catch us between two fires so decided I would have to make a dash up the ridge (not very far but it looked a long way with the bullets whistling!) to a small sangar and have a look.... When I got there I had a look to the south but could see nothing. I then turned to the west and at that moment a tank appeared out of the smoke—at that moment a mortar landed 'fair bang' on the edge of the sangar. When I had recovered and collected my wits again I was just in time to see the portées pull out and move down the ridge....

The Ridge was very 'hot' at that stage—small arms, shells, and even AP bouncing from rock to rock. It was obviously suicidal to go over the northern side of the Ridge and I knew the portées would be not far off, so I dived down the southern side, ran along for a way, and crawled up to the top again to see if I could spot anyone or anything. I did this several times—liking it less each time!—and had no luck.... it was then that to my utter amazement and joy I beheld a squadron of Grant tanks on the flat ground to the south-east. They moved forward to within 400 yards of the Ridge and then stopped. They fired a few rounds and then one troop came right up to the Ridge and fired a few rounds over the top. By then I really thought we were going to get everything back. I ran over to one of the tanks and climbed on board. The commander appeared—an NCO. I told him the story and asked if they were going in and he said he didn't know. I tried to impress on him the urgency and to get on to his commander—I probably wasn't very tactful I'm afraid—but just then he whipped his headphones on and said they had orders to retire and move somewhere else—and they did! I don't know quite what I did—I was so speechless with rage, impotence, and disappointment.... I have often thought afterwards that if I had stayed on the tank and contacted the squadron commander I may have got something done, but I don't suppose so as I have no doubt it was not as easy for them as we used to imagine.

Lieutenant Wood had also attempted to obtain armoured assistance:

On the way [to his second position in the shallow depression] we met an AFV (I think it was a 'Honey' tank). The officer in charge told me he was Col. Woods (I

forget his unit). I told him what had happened and that we had been waiting for the tanks all day. (Before the enemy attack started I had noticed a movement of vehicles and dust to the east, which I had thought must be our promised tank support.) .... During the day we had had wireless communication with B Echelon through a Bren carrier and I told the Colonel that we had been sending back messages for help all day. He said he had picked them up through his own radio but could do nothing about it as he had received no orders from his own headquarters.

Col. Woods advised us to link up with the Indians whom he said were further east. We did so and were allotted to an Infantry Company commander who gave us our position. We grounded our gun and were fitted into a definite defensive scheme with our tanks behind us. They were shelled, advanced and fired a few rounds and withdrew, this happening several times.

We remained there the rest of that day (15th July) and the next day. We were out on our own—no sign of Capt. Barton or Sgt. Thompson. I asked permission to rejoin our Unit and was told we could do so. Next morning (17th) we were directed to 5th Bde, picking our way through minefields, recognizable by disabled vehicles. We passed one (or two) 20th Bn portees. From one that had been blown up we salvaged some gear. We reported to 5th Bde just as a bombing raid took place.... From here we were directed to the 20th Bn, arriving there about midday.

At 4 Brigade Headquarters Brigadier Burrows had had an unenviable experience. He writes:

I hoped our people might be able to hang on long enough for our tanks to arrive. Our A Tk guns fought as well as they could but with no arty, and with the heavy casualties amongst our gun teams I knew we could not last long. Soon MG bullets from armd cars were whistling about and I knew the enemy was in amongst us. I shortly saw tanks moving past our flank and along the Ridge. Two armd cars and an enemy A Tk gun stopped about 100 yds away. The noise, confusion and smoke made it difficult to know what was happening. A group of our chaps near us ... were keeping up a merry fire, but Bren and rifle fire against Armour doesn't count for much. They were getting heavy stuff back in return.

Then an armd car came straight for us. It came right alongside my trench and

someone inside threw three hand grenades at us. They exploded on either side of the trench or someone else would have to be writing about all this.... I learned later that ... [an officer] about 15 yards away ... threw two Italian hand grenades at the armd car, presumably driving it off. We were deafened and somewhat dazed, but the three officers with me in the trench were unhurt....

There wasn't much forward movement now from the enemy tanks.... and about 7.20 p.m.... [they] began to withdraw. I was hopeful we would be left alone. I felt perhaps many of the troops had stayed in their sangars and shallow trenches and would come to light if the enemy withdrew. It was this thought that prevented me from moving back to safety when we had a chance earlier on. Our Headquarters had been sorted out however for special attention. Three armd cars and one tank were still on the spot. Three of the vehicles came up to us and took us out. There were very few soldiers left with us—perhaps eight.... Before getting out of the trench I tied a pair of short pants around my neck to hide my rank. I thought I was discovered when a business-like German called me from the top of his tank. I went up to it and found he wanted my glasses. To get them off I had to undo the pants around my neck. The strap was mixed up with the lanyard of my revolver which the German also took from me.

The Germans I saw on the tanks were good types. They were wearing short pants and no shirt or singlet, and were short in stature but well built. They shepherded our little party in front of them and from time to time fired across the Ridge. Tank shells were being fired back and I was certain we could escape. I called out to the other officers with me that I intended to fall shortly into a sangar and advised them to do the same. Before long I was able to do this and lay very still for perhaps half an hour.... [Major Johansen of the [Machine Gun Company](#) and Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell <sup>20</sup> of [19 Battalion](#) did the same.] The German tanks were hull down behind another ridge, perhaps 500 yards behind us, while on our front more of our own tanks were arriving and were hull down behind the main [El Ruweisat Ridge](#). Both parties began increasing their fire and for peace and quiet in future I definitely don't recommend the ground between two tank groups when they decide to give battle.

It was growing darker and our own tanks started to withdraw. It was obviously time we were to move or we would find the Germans back with us. We went back to

HQ and found a few stragglers about. Two trucks were in working order and these were loaded up with the wounded by the small party and two drivers appointed.... It was now nearly dark. We moved off together to get over the Ridge when we intended to move east and try to contact the Indian Div. We had gone perhaps 400 yards when four light tanks and two Bren carriers came from the east. We started to run but slowed up when one of our party called out they were our own. I heard someone else call, 'Boys, are we glad to see you'. The tanks however kept moving and in no time we were surrounded. A voice called out, 'Hands up, come in'.

The old heart sank very low, but something made me try again the trick which had succeeded before. I dropped straight down among the stones. I think the small pack on my back may have helped as it must have resembled a big stone in the semi-darkness. The others were collected and loaded on the tanks and carriers. I thought for a time the tank crews were having a game with me and could see me all the time. A vehicle of some sort nearly passed over my legs and it required some effort not to draw them up under me. In time everything moved away again to the east, but on the northern slope of the Ridge. I got up eventually and keeping on the southern slope began very cautiously to move east. My hobnailed boots rang on every stone in the area it seemed to me and the breeze was in the wrong direction if the enemy were in front. Flares occasionally shot up from behind the Ridge and I stood very still or dropped on my face. After three miles or so I heard a truck start up 100 yds or so ahead. I moved south and round it and found there were many vehicles of some sort parked. I passed some, standing still for long periods. I heard voices on my left and moved as quietly as I could up to the small group of men I could see now in front of me. Finally I heard part of their conversation in English, went forward and found myself among an A Tk group of the Indian Div.

So the disaster at [Belhamed](#) on 1 December 1941 had been repeated. The infantry in a most successful night attack had gained their objective, had hung on despite heavy casualties, and finally had been overrun by an enemy armoured attack.

The battalion B Echelon and transport had had a difficult day. At 11 a.m. they were bombed by ten enemy planes. Three lorries were destroyed, one man killed, and ten wounded. According to a member of the RAP, one enemy pilot held his

bombs and swung away when he saw the red cross on its truck. At 3 p.m. twenty-four planes bombed the area again and three more trucks were hit. The worst raid took place at 7.40 p.m. when twenty-four bombers with fighter escort heavily bombed the area. The bombers returned westwards but the fighters remained and a further eighteen bombers attacked, one dropping twelve bombs in a row. However, no casualties were reported. After dusk Sergeant Thompson's portée came in and the fate of the rifle companies was learned.

At 8.30 p.m. orders were received for all transport to report to Brigade Headquarters. On doing so the vehicles were formed up in three lines and everyone rested.

At 4 a.m. on 16 July the brigade group moved south for 12 miles, changing direction at midday and travelling east for another 24 miles. By this time the unit's vehicles were showing signs of wear and the fitters did splendid work maintaining them. Corporal Eric Taylor was later mentioned in despatches for salvaging parts from burning trucks, often under fire. Next day transport was handed over to 6 Brigade units. The two- pounder anti-tank guns en portée were handed over to 25 Battalion, but one towed gun from a wrecked portée was left out on the flank. At 11.30 a.m. twelve enemy aircraft came in very low and bombed the area, straddling the gun without damaging it. The battalion's casualties were one killed and four wounded.

By now 5 Brigade had taken up a line south of Ruweisat Ridge. It had been decided to replace 4 Brigade by 6 Brigade and relieve the three worst-hit battalions—the 19th, 20th, and 22nd—which were to be withdrawn to reorganise.

At 6.30 p.m. the remnants of the battalion moved east, stopping at 1 a.m. on 18 July near the wireless station at [Amiriya](#). That night the sweat and grime of the past weeks were washed away for the first time possible since the start of the campaign. Rupert Brooke has written of the 'benison of hot water', but the power of a cold shower to banish fatigue is known best to those who have come back from the desert.

Next morning a roll call, very sobering, was held in the battalion area. The parade formed a hollow square. At its base stood Headquarters Company; on the left

was B, the LOB company, and on the right was a short single rank of the survivors of the three rifle companies. The 'old hands', some of them veterans of Greece, Crete, Libya, and now Egypt, were noticeably serious. The long list of unanswered names intensified the feeling of disaster, so that when someone straightened to attention and responded it came as a mild shock and the speaker almost felt it unnatural to be there.

From this roll call the battalion's casualties in killed, wounded, and missing were at first thought to be 23 officers and 384 men. These figures were reduced as men who had become separated from the battalion during the battle or through being evacuated as casualties returned to the unit.

It is difficult to discover how many men were lost on Ruweisat. Because of uncertainty as to the exact time a casualty occurred, the lists compiled from unit returns often give only 'blanket' dates with a tolerance ranging from a few days to five weeks. It is possible only to give the battalion's casualties for the whole period from the move to Minqar Qaim on 26 June to the withdrawal from the Alamein line on 17 July. These figures are:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed in action	3	42
Died of wounds	2	22
Wounded	6	111
Wounded and prisoners of war	1	33
Prisoners of war	11	162
	<hr/>	<hr/>
TOTAL	23	370

The sense of loss was overwhelming. The three rifle company commanders were prisoners of war: quiet-spoken, kindly and popular Gordon Washbourn of A Company; indomitable Charlie Upham, the hero of C Company, of every man in every company in fact, twice wounded—the only way the enemy would ever take him; Peter Maxwell of D Company, the relentless driver, yet driving himself to duty harder than anyone else, somewhere 'up in the blue'. Battalion Headquarters had lost as prisoners cheerful Jack Sullivan, that modest, brave, and meticulously efficient IO, and Jim Gibb, the Adjutant, model of correct military procedure in camp or in the field. Phillips, Hanan,<sup>20</sup> and Moodie were wounded and in hospital; 'Doc'

Feltham and Waterhouse,<sup>21</sup> the new signals officer, were also 'in the bag'.

The greatest tragedy was the number of young officers who had not come out of their first action after doing so well. Not a single subaltern of the three rifle companies that had attacked at Ruweisat Ridge had come back. In A Company Alan Galbraith, the second-in-command, had been killed while taking rations forward in a Bren carrier. MacMillan<sup>22</sup> had been captured at Minqar Qaim, stalwart Sergeant Jack Sanders,<sup>23</sup> acting platoon commander, was wounded and prisoner of war, and 'Beau' Cottrell, sturdy-framed ex-All Black, who combined keenness of perception with courage for action, had been wounded on the ridge when going to bring in a wounded man of his platoon and had been taken prisoner. In C Company Ian Smith and Edwin Shand were dead, Sandy Wilkinson a prisoner. D Company had lost cheery, keen little Lloyd Thomson,<sup>24</sup> killed while being evacuated, wounded, to the RAP at Ruweisat. 'Sonny' Moloney's<sup>25</sup> last innings for New Zealand had closed as darkness fell on the battlefield. Hazledine<sup>26</sup> of A Company and Rendall<sup>27</sup> of D, after only a month in the 20th, were prisoners; Dave Murray,<sup>28</sup> platoon commander in D Company, had been wounded on the night of the breakthrough.

The NCOs were sadly depleted. Popular little Gus Gray, CSM of A Company, lay somewhere beyond Alam Nayil, and his mate, Jock Aburn,<sup>29</sup> was feeling the effect of wounds received in Crete. Two other CSMs, unassuming Algie Hayes of D and Bob May of C, that tough understudy of Upham, were both prisoners. A much-loved member of the RAP staff, Sergeant Lyn Sutherland, twice mentioned in despatches for his magnificent work among the wounded, had been taken prisoner while engaged in his work of mercy and had himself been wounded. Altogether, there were seventy NCO casualties, many of them original members of the battalion. There was not a man but had lost friends.

With his customarily fitting words Padre Spence, himself limping from a painful leg wound, conducted the simple memorial service. It was a very poignant occasion.

At the close of the parade the ringing tones of RSM 'Uke' Wilson brought everyone back to earth. What if response to orders was automatic and thoughts were far away, doing something was better than brooding. In war a man must steel his spirit against every blow and learn to shrug off every shock. After all, it was good to be alive. Dangers shared make for deeper friendships, and there were still many

good fellows about.

B Company was there, strong and fit looking. At its head stood Captain 'Spout' Fountaine, whose record and personality at once inspired confidence. Company seconds-in-command 'Pat' Abbott and John Rolleston, both experienced campaigners, were on the job, while the survivors of the anti-tank platoon had welcomed their grand leader, Pat Barton, back from Ruweisat Ridge with undisguised relief and affection. Other Headquarters Company officers, Murray,<sup>30</sup> Boot,<sup>31</sup> Carlyle and Walton,<sup>32</sup> Julian Tryon, the linguist, Eric Bolwell, RQM, and several more were there, or at Maadi with Wilson,<sup>33</sup> Fletcher,<sup>34</sup> and Shand<sup>35</sup> to build up the companies. Best of all came the news that Brigadier Burrows, previously reported killed, was safe at 4 Brigade. 'Gentleman Jim', as he was known to all hands, law-abiding and hard cases alike, was very much alive after twice escaping from the enemy. Morale was lifting.

There was a useful nucleus of NCOs led by 'Uke' Wilson which would soon have the battalion back on its feet. Every CQMS was present. Gruff but kindly George Weenink<sup>36</sup> of Headquarters Company, soon to receive the BEM for his service in the field, had completed his fourth campaign. Memory pictures of George at work included one as he was about to dispense an evening meal in the desert. The usual nuisance air raid took place. While the mess queue dived for cover George stood erect, ladle in hand and oblivious of shrapnel, his shock of fair hair almost standing on end with rage as he glared at the sky and cursed the raiders whose dust had defiled his dixies. Jack Collins,<sup>37</sup> the boxing enthusiast of A Company, Gordon Fraser of C, and Eric Elder<sup>38</sup> of D were looking after their men as usual.

Headquarters Company NCOs included burly Keith Given<sup>39</sup> of the mortars and Tim Clews,<sup>40</sup> the irrepressible wag and weapons expert. Handsome, quiet-voiced Cyril Kennard,<sup>41</sup> that shrewd, cool, battle-trained soldier, who always seemed to do the right thing by instinct, was the senior veteran of the Bren-carrier platoon, and with him were Dick Lumsden and Ed Karst, the 'iron man'. In the anti-tank platoon tall, spare Allan Thomas,<sup>42</sup> rejoicing in the nickname of 'Bakelite Bill' from his skill with hand grenades, was still 'nattering' to anyone who would listen about football giants of long ago or on how to get a portée with a punctured tyre out of a wadi. Murray Vernon<sup>43</sup> was thinking of cricket, 'Buck' Needham<sup>44</sup> of leave, and Bill Robinson, 'Robbie' or 'Shotgun' to his friends, was describing a near miss at Ruweisat

or once more entertaining his mates with his uncensored reminiscences. Lloyd Borthwick and 'Blue' [Scarlett](#)<sup>45</sup> of transport shared the mess radio, the one a swing fan and the other fond of light opera. Sergeants [Steve Fleming](#)<sup>46</sup> of A Company and [Bruce Beechey](#)<sup>47</sup> of C had escaped from the ridge and were still rather grim about it. B Company sergeants [Thwaites](#)<sup>48</sup> and [Nicol](#)<sup>49</sup> were veterans of Crete. Their cure for the 'campaign blues' was the same for everyone and hurt nothing but the paybook.

For two days the destination of the battalion was undecided and there was leave to [Alexandria](#). Finally, at 9.45 a.m. on 20 July the battalion moved off, arriving in [Maadi](#) at 5 p.m. and settling in at the foot of the escarpment beyond the Engineers and the [Lowry Hut](#).

There followed unlimited leave to [Cairo](#), picnics to the Delta Barrage, and excursions to the Agricultural Museum. At a parade of [19](#) and 20 Battalions near the Lowry Hut Brigadier Burrows briefly explained the purpose of the campaign of the previous weeks, and at lectures in the messrooms shortly afterwards Sergeant J. Monteath of the intelligence section, with the aid of blackboard maps, traced and explained the maze of day and night moves.

On 24 July the New Zealand Broadcasting Unit visited the battalion and fifty members of the unit sent personal messages home to New Zealand. Several NCOs recorded their impressions of the recent campaign, of which two accounts are quoted.

Staff-Sergeant Eric Elder said:

One of my main impressions of the whole show was the amazing numbers of rumours which could be produced, and were produced each day and every day. Being the Quartermaster for an infantry company I used to see the ration people and the water man daily and was generally about among the transport and the other cooks in B Echelon. Three words said jokingly at 9 o'clock became the truth, probably certified by a Brigadier's batman, by IO o'clock.

Our job in the campaign resolved itself into cooking a meal as soon as possible in the morning and delivering it to the companies— putting on a cup of 'shay' at lunch and another meal in the evening, but the trouble lay in the fact that owing to

the constant movement we spent a considerable time trying to find the boys, sometimes even feeding them during the 10-minute halts when they were moving by transport. This movement caused us our main worry. You know as far as transport is concerned the main thing is dispersion. The further you are away the less likelihood of being bombed. So our first job after a move was to get off any skyline, be as far away as possible from anyone else, and try to get some soft digging, which reminds me that I think it should be taught in schools that a desert is a large area of very awkward and heavy stones covered by about half an inch of sand. If by chance the sand has accumulated to any thickness you can guarantee it to be already occupied....

You have probably heard quite a lot about our charge through when we were surrounded. It was a great show, but, you know, try everything once, like climbing the pyramids. The way the drivers kept all our trucks going during the charge was magnificent and the row was indescribable, no wonder the Jerry was frightened, it nearly scared me to death. After the charge we went south and moved out in mobile column for a while and just to disprove my definition of a desert we found soft digging for a change and naturally we all parked rather close and I suppose just as naturally we got a couple of air raids. They dropped two lines of bombs right across the camp area. I saw the first few fall—they looked like great big black shiny barrels of beer. Just one quick glance is enough for me and then I do my imitation of a frightened ostrich. Bombs have a rotten habit of appearing to fall closer and closer and the row from Ack-Ack, machine guns, captured Bredas, etc., plus some strafing from the air and the screaming of the Stukas and JUs 57 quickly convinces me that the minute the raid is over I am going to dig a hole at least 20 ft deep, but having a bad memory I am generally found only wishing. During one raid I opened one eye slightly and found the whole side of my slit trench popping up little clouds of dust about a foot high so I immediately closed it again and prayed that the rear gunner would miss me. However, after the raid we found that a cannon shell or a piece of shrapnel had gone through the side of the truck and blown up two 16-gallon tanks of water and pierced a large container of boiled potatoes (we served them up mashed later) and altered the appearance of our truck. It also gave the cooks a very welcome if light shower bath. During one of the raids our Bofors got a Stuka fair and square and he never came out of his dive.... bombs or no bombs our boys were out of their slit trenches to see this one and what a cheer they sent up. The Ack-Ack

people have our greatest admiration for their shooting and outright bravery in standing to their guns even when the planes were diving right at them....

Next spoke the Provost Sergeant, 'Pop' Lynch:

Desert warfare is essentially a war of mobility; a high-sounding phrase often seen in newspapers and probably coined by a war correspondent sitting in Shepheard's Hotel, but believe me, I can now agree with it. It's true. Anyone who had the misfortune to be astride a motor cycle on the ride from [Mersa Matruh](#) after the break through will agree with me that it was the 'ride of rides' for Don Rs. The feeling of thankfulness one had after getting through the German ring was quickly replaced by a nightmarish feeling that the ride was never going to end. The ground we passed over practically all the way to the [Alamein](#) line was that type of desert which consists of boulders, slabs of stone, alternating with gullies of loose sand. There was no question of keeping my correct place to relay the CO's orders. It was just a case of keep plugging along, praying for a puncture or a break-down, as an excuse to put the bike on a break-down lorry. As usual fate was perverse and along one went. All the next day we kept going and by late afternoon I was so muscle sore that an air raid would have been a welcome rest. 'All's well that ends well' however, and we eventually reached our appointed 'bivvy' area.

A day's rest soon revived one and we began to wonder what was next on the programme. We soon found out. A mobile column to hop out and have a good smack at the Hun was organised and my unit provided the infantry protection. After we got going, I and one of my chaps were kept pretty busy dashing about the column with orders and didn't get much of a 'shufti'<sup>50</sup> at what was doing. We soon did, however, as word was received of a strong mixed force on our flank....

After a highly successful 'bash' at a lot of ... [Italian] artillery in which over forty guns of all calibres were captured and destroyed, our column was withdrawn without losing a man. That sounds fantastic, I know, especially as quite a lot of shells landed in our area, but it's true. I only wish that all shows were as successful. From this time until we were pulled out of action, motor cycles were practically a thing of the past, as our subsequent attacks were made with the bayonet without transport. That just suited me as we then had only two bikes left, a captured Itie one and what we term a 'klefti', that is, one we found when the owner wasn't around. ... I have

reached one conclusion, possibly a biased one, because it concerns me, motor cycles are very suitable for base camps and road convoys but are positively a menace in the real desert. Give me four wheels every day, especially if driven by N.Z. drivers who are just tops.

'Pop' was one of the battalion 'characters'. At his best in action, he had done particularly good work in [Greece](#), where traffic control on the roads required coolness and a strong personality. The time between campaigns imposed greater strain on his restless nature.

In [Syria](#) there was a 9 p.m. curfew for troops in the village of [El Aine](#) and it was the provost section's duty to clear all cafés. This it dutifully did, and then was suitably rewarded by the proprietors. Arriving back late at the hut one night after a long session with the Muktar,<sup>51</sup> Pop crawled groaning into bed. 'What's the matter, Pop? Are you ill?' asked his colleague, Lance-Corporal Mason. 'Oh!' groaned Pop, 'I've got such a headache, (pause) but I'm enjoying it, (pause) I'm enjoying it, (pause) because I know it's nothing to the headache I'm going to have in the morning.'

The provost section was privileged: its men did not go on battalion parade. The intelligence section who shared the hut did. The late arrival of the provosts at night and the early departure of the intelligence section in the mornings sometimes made for asperity in greetings. As he walked past the recumbent form of Sergeant Lynch one morning, the Intelligence

Sergeant remarked rather tartly, 'And how's the old head today, Pop? Lynch opened one red-rimmed eye, took in the newly-issued topee with a glance, retorted 'Dr. Livingstone, I presume!' and returned to his blankets.

It was this unfailing sense of humour, coupled with the responsibility felt by all survivors to retain the identity of the battalion, that helped everyone to settle down again. Captain Fountaine was promoted to command the battalion, Lieutenant 'Johnny' Johnston, commissioned after [Crete](#), came in as Adjutant, and many 'old hands' flocked back from hospital and training depots as they always had done after a campaign. Reinforcements swelled the ranks. Training recommenced.

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<sup>1</sup> Maj-Gen C. E. Weir, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born NZ 5

Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO [6 Fd Regt](#) Sep 1939-Dec 1941; CRA 2 NZ Div Dec 1941-Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div 4 Sep-17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944- Sep 1946; Commandant, Southern Military District, 1948-49; QMG, Army HQ, Nov 1951-Aug 1955; Chief of General Staff Aug 1955-.

<sup>2</sup> Maj [B. I. Bassett](#), m.i.d.; born NZ 12 Sep 1911; barrister and solicitor; BM [10 Bde](#) May 1941; BM [4 Bde](#) Aug 1941-Jan 1942, Jun-Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Pte [D. B. G. Paterson](#); born NZ 29 Nov 1918; clerk; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

<sup>4</sup> Lt [I. D. Smith](#); born NZ 4 Sep 1915; clerk; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>5</sup> Lt [A. S. Galbraith](#); born [Invercargill](#), 20 Feb 1916; clerk; killed in action 12 Jul 1942.

<sup>6</sup> Lt-Col [A. S. Playle](#), OBE, ED; [Tauwhare, Waikato](#); born [Palmerston North](#), 12 Jan 1909; farmer; [18 Bn](#) and Armd Regt Sep 1939-Dec 1945; CO [18 Regt](#) May-Dec 1945.

<sup>7</sup> Maj [C. C. Johansen](#), m.i.d.; Plimmerton; born Norsewood, 2 Oct 1910; civil servant; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>8</sup> Lt [E. A. Shand](#); born Ngapara, 22 Sep 1914; shepherd; died of wounds 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>9</sup> Capt [A. E. Wilkinson](#); Auckland; born [Gisborne](#), 28 Feb 1912; mechanic; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>10</sup> Sgt [M. L. Shand](#); Christchurch; born Ngapara, 1 Oct 1910; stock buyer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>11</sup> Pte [F. A. Doherty](#); Christchurch; born [Napier](#), 7 Aug 1917; labourer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; escaped [Italy](#), Sep 1943; safe Base, 19 Dec 1943.

<sup>12</sup> L-Cpl G. A. Dickson; Auckland; born Timaru, 10 Jan 1914; labourer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; escaped Italy, 4 Nov 1943.

<sup>13</sup> Maj P. A. Barton; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 29 Nov 1912; bank clerk; 2 i/c 20 Regt Oct 1944-Feb 1945; CO 20 Regt 19 Dec 1944-9 Jan 1945.

<sup>14</sup> Lt-Col S. W. Nicholson, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 22 Feb 1914; customs agent; CO 5 Fd Regt Oct-Nov 1944; 7 A-Tk Regt Dec 1944-Mar 1945; 6 Fd Regt 1945.

<sup>15</sup> Maj D. L. Wood, MC, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 15 Aug 1915; barrister and solicitor; BM 9 Bde 1945; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>16</sup> Sgt W. J. Robinson; Christchurch; born Winton, 29 Sep 1915; labourer; now Regular Force.

<sup>17</sup> Sgt J. H. Thompson; born NZ 27 Jul 1903; public accountant; died on active service 2 Nov 1943.

<sup>18</sup> Tpr J. Wesley; Waikuku Beach, Canterbury; born NZ 18 May 1908; labourer; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>19</sup> Lt J. W. Howorth; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 26 Jun 1907; solicitor; wounded 3 Jun 1944.

<sup>20</sup> Brig S. F. Hartnell, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Palmerston North; born NZ 18 Jul 1910; carpenter; CO 19 Bn Oct 1941-Apr 1943; comd 4 Armd Bde Jun-Jul 1943; 5 Bde 9-29 Feb 1944.

<sup>20</sup> Capt J. R. Hanan; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 13 Jun 1909; barrister and solicitor; twice wounded; MP ( Invercargill) 1946-.

<sup>21</sup> Capt K. S. M. Waterhouse; born Tasmania, 22 Jun 1909; radio announcer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>22</sup> Capt A. B. MacMillan; Pahiatua; born NZ 10 Apr 1917; clerk; p.w. 28 Jun 1942.

<sup>23</sup> WO II J. R. A. Saunders; Gisborne; born Victoria, Aust., 4 Jul 1906; Lands and Survey Department foreman; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>24</sup> Lt L. J. Thomson; born Dunedin, 20 Jan 1919; shipping clerk; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>25</sup> Lt D. A. R. Moloney; born NZ 11 Aug 1910; insurance clerk; died of wounds 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>26</sup> Capt P. E. Hazledine; Dunedin; born NZ 8 Apr 1916; civil servant; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>27</sup> Capt A. C. Rendall; Timaru; born Canada, 30 Dec 1917; clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>28</sup> Lt D. E. Murray; born NZ 8 Jul 1913; school-teacher; wounded 28 Jun 1942; killed in action 16 Dec 1943.

<sup>29</sup> Sgt J. W. Aburn; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 26 Sep 1909; storeman; wounded 25 May 1941.

<sup>30</sup> Maj G. A. Murray, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Gore, 3 Feb 1915; shop assistant.

<sup>31</sup> Capt V. P. Boot; born Ashburton, 22 Oct 1914; agricultural instructor; died 15 Jan 1947.

<sup>32</sup> Lt I. M. Walton; born NZ 10 Dec 1911; solicitor; died of wounds while p.w. 17 Dec 1943.

<sup>33</sup> Capt S. Wilson, ED, m.i.d.; born NZ 23 Dec 1903; french polisher; twice wounded; died Palmerston North, 4 Jun 1949.

<sup>34</sup> Maj A. L. Fletcher; Palmerston North; born Palmerston North, 26 Oct 1914; school-teacher; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

<sup>35</sup> Capt J. A. T. Shand; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 26 Feb 1909; shepherd; wounded 16 Dec 1943.

<sup>36</sup> S-Sgt G. G. P. Weenink, BEM; Lamplough; born Greymouth, 1 Jan 1907; carpenter.

<sup>37</sup> S-Sgt R. J. Collins; Christchurch; born Dannevirke, 11 Jan 1914; bacon factory foreman; wounded 27 Apr 1941.

<sup>38</sup> S-Sgt E. N. Elder; Dunedin; born NZ 29 Aug 1909; salesman.

<sup>39</sup> WO II K. D. J. Given; Dinton, Southland; born Dunedin, 3 May 1910; farm labourer; wounded 16 Dec 1943.

<sup>40</sup> WO I T. H. Clews, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Auckland, 1 Jan 1919; Regular soldier.

<sup>41</sup> WO II C. P. Kennard; Invercargill; born NZ 9 Nov 1913; farm labourer.

<sup>42</sup> WO II A. W. Thomas; Inangahua Junction; born Akaroa, 9 Jan 1907; clerk.

<sup>43</sup> 2 Lt H. M. R. Vernon; Greymouth; born Dunedin, 16 Nov 1912; upholsterer.

<sup>44</sup> Sgt H. N. K. Needham, MM; Christchurch; born Chritchchurch, 7 Nov 1918; traveller; wounded 29 Mar 1944.

<sup>45</sup> WO II F. J. Scarlett; Westport; born Reefton, 28 Jan 1905; service-car driver.

<sup>46</sup> Lt J. H. Fleming; born Waimate, 7 Apr 1916; Regular soldier.

<sup>47</sup> WO II B. N. Beechey; born Utiku, 12 Nov 1915; labourer.

<sup>48</sup> Sgt J. A. Thwaites; born Wyndham, 4 Jul 1917; sawmiller; drowned Queens-town, 4 Nov 1947.

<sup>49</sup> Sgt J. A. Nicol; Invercargill; born Dunedin, 21 May 1918; boot repairer; wounded 27 Apr 1941.

<sup>50</sup> Look.

<sup>51</sup> Village headman.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 12 – INFANTRY TO ARMOUR

## CHAPTER 12

### Infantry to Armour

Once again the disappointment of defeat had to be surmounted. Both to the rapidly diminishing number of old hands and to the rawest reinforcement, the complete collapse of the Ruweisat operation after a most successful night attack was a blow that would last long in the memories of the survivors. Twice now, after gaining its objective, the battalion had been practically annihilated as the result of an enemy counter-attack with tanks. Again the failure of our armour to give support at a critical time caused harsh criticisms to be levelled by some of the more resentful against those mysterious, anonymous, invidious muddlers, 'the heads'. But not at our own; there was no criticism of the leaders of the Division, whose bold planning and intrepid leadership had extricated the brigade from the collapse of [Greece](#), the nightmare of [Crete](#), from the [Belhamed](#) disaster, and the encirclement of [Minqar Qaim](#).

The men in the tanks were immune from blame. Their smoking derelicts, strewn across the desert, were sufficient proof of their willingness whenever the order was given to engage an enemy who invariably enjoyed the advantage of superior equipment. The rings painted round the barrels of German 88-millimetre anti-tank guns indicated heavy losses sustained by British tank units in support of other arms.

The frank admiration of such tank crews for the infantry they supported had been expressed on the morning of 12 July by an English Grant tank sergeant who, describing the advance of 4 New Zealand Brigade on [Alam Nayil](#) ridge the previous evening under heavy shell and mortar fire, said: 'I never saw anything like it. They just walked over that ridge through a perfect hell of fire as calmly as if they were going to a picnic. I take off my hat to your infantry.' And, pulling off his oil-stained beret, he suited the action to the word. Resentment against such men was unthinkable.

It is interesting to analyse the factors in its make-up that enable a unit after each serious reverse to return once more to the fight. Undoubtedly it was the high standard of discipline and morale in the battalion, coupled with the responsibility felt by all survivors to maintain its identity in spite of such heavy casualties, that assisted

everyone to settle down again.

The ability to carry on after four successive reverses, still with confidence in the ultimate victory, goes further back. It is a part of our national life. In a country where there is a healthy climate and a high standard of living, the type of the nation's youth is good. In addition, few men in New Zealand have not at some stage in their lives engaged in team sport. The sense of comradeship thus developed, the necessity for mutual support, the knowledge that co-operation and co-ordination are the chief factors in success were lessons early learned and never forgotten. Qualities of leadership, fortitude in the face of tough opposition, the undaunted return to the attack after each reverse, modesty in victory, courage in defeat—all were developed on playing fields that stretched from [Auckland](#) to Bluff. The ability of teams to fulfil their fixtures Saturday after Saturday, season after season, had no doubt some connection with the recovery of the battalion after reverses on the field of battle. The time-honoured method, also, of drowning the afternoon's disappointment in the boisterous conviviality of a Saturday night found an echo in the canteens and Naafis of Egypt.

Encouragement to return to the job was drawn from the knowledge that they were not alone in adversity. The stout-heartedness of Londoners during the fury of the Blitz, the suicidal heroism of the sailors of Sebastopol, the dogged defenders of [Stalingrad](#) and the tenacious Aussies of [Tobruk](#), all portrayed the spirit necessary to tide over the dark days after 15 July. Unlimited time for reflection when thoughts are not pleasant is not a good thing for men. The war still continued, another brigade had taken their place in the field, some day it would have to be supported or relieved, and then it would be necessary to return to the task of evicting the Axis forces from the desert.

Under Major Fountaine, promoted temporary lieutenant-colonel, the battalion's survivors settled down to a modified training syllabus while awaiting issues of equipment.

During this period life became a series of fairly monotonous days of training, enlivened occasionally by a few outstanding incidents. When news is scarce rumours are at a premium, and at this time there was no shortage. In early September late arrivals from the 'blue' brought back tall tales of 60-ton tanks and 'Yanks' parked

behind the lines. News of the Japanese advance in [New Guinea](#) to within 40 miles of [Port Moresby](#), received through squadron and mess radios, kept attention focused on the [Pacific](#).

To the pests of Egypt the sorely-tried troops now added that of yet another insect. The ladybird, harmless subject of many childish lispings at home, was found to be an even greater nuisance than the much-cursed fly. Swarms of them nested in the eaves of the tents and bit sharply and impartially, enjoying maximum opportunity during shower periods, battalion parades, and the very desirable sessions of 'Maori PT'.

By September sweeping changes were afoot. After beating off Rommel's determined drive at the end of August—his flanking attack in the south at [Alamein](#)—5 and 6 Brigades were in urgent need of reinforcements. For reasons that were not hard to guess it had been decided that the New Zealand Division should have its own tank brigade. For this purpose 4 Infantry Brigade was to be trained in armour and reinforced from the tank brigade already in training in New Zealand; those men who had not been with the battalion for six months were posted to 5 and 6 Infantry Brigades and began training for the epoch-making battle of [Alamein](#). At this stage some incomprehensible transfers were put through which were later rectified.

Sunday, 13 September, was an eventful day in the history of the battalion. Orderly-room clerks worked feverishly all day, and right up till midnight lists of surplus personnel fluttered back and forth through the lines to Battalion Headquarters. The following day those who were to leave the battalion paraded early in the morning. The unfit were sent to 33 Battalion training depot, or to other base units, and their places filled by others taken off fatigues at the last moment to pack hurriedly and catch trucks already lined up at the midan. As the convoy pulled out there was quite a ceremony, unique in the nature of its farewells, characteristic in its humour and last-minute messages to friends in other units.

On 16 August Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows had resumed command of the battalion with Major Fountaine as his second- in-command. A fortnight later he was evacuated sick; then Major Fountaine was posted to command 26 Battalion and the battalion had a succession of temporary commanders— [Major J. B. Gray](#),<sup>1</sup> Major G. A. Murray, and [Lieutenant-Colonel J. W. McKergow](#)<sup>2</sup>—until Colonel Burrows rejoined

the unit on 10 October.

Periodically, trucks left to take reinforcements to the Division, on one occasion under orders to tour round the units and bring back as many original members of the battalion as possible. They returned with a full load, including many men who had been away from the battalion for over a year. Of those who had marched out on 14 September one was already a casualty —by drowning.

On 17 September the battalion forsook the flat beyond the [Lowry Hut](#) road terminus for a new area on the escarpment east of the engineers' lines. A tour of the area revealed many unaccustomed luxuries—clean messrooms with thick, cool walls and tables and seats for everyone, enabling the men to sit down comfortably at meal-times for the first time in months. There were three good cold showers, walled round with stone, with concrete floors and wooden seats. While the camp was well away from the bitumen roads, it was handy to the Pall Mall cinema and the Church Army hut on the one side and to the [Lowry Hut](#) below the escarpment on the other. The cooks had roomy, well-built kitchens and good ovens. It was little wonder that the new home was voted the best the 20th had ever had. As in previous camps swarms of 'Wog' workmen were either fooling around the messrooms or dozing in the shade—mostly dozing.

Headquarters Company took over the area nearest [Cairo](#), officers and sergeants spread over the central hill, B and C Companies grouped round the messrooms, and A Company went out into the suburbs nearest Brigade Headquarters. Most of the tents were in a shallow hollow shut in by hillocks, but from the edge of the escarpment splendid views of tree-fringed [Maadi](#) and of the minarets and mosques below the Citadel could be obtained.

Spasmodic air raids over [Cairo](#) and the suburbs enlivened the nights from time to time, and on 26 September, a Saturday, large fragments of anti-aircraft shells fell in the camp area, while the most spectacular sight was provided by German planes diving on and machine-gunning searchlights.

On 30 September the newly-formed unit discussion group was given a good start by Lieutenant-Colonel McKergow, who gave an entertaining talk on his experiences with the Royal Greek Army in Palestine. The lecture concluded with

some curious information about the summary punishment of Greek officers with fines and CB (spent in real cells). Finally, Colonel McKergow confided to his hearers how, after preaching and insisting on a rigid transport discipline, he had had his own car 'pinched' in Haifa.

Besides the multitude of courses at Abbassia, Almaza, and at brigade schools, training now progressed in camp to the stage of desert navigation. Preliminary lectures in messrooms, followed by outdoor exercises in or near the camp, were succeeded by traverses on a larger scale in the area between Sunstroke Plain and El Saff, which, to the older hands, brought back memories of the gruelling march of April 1940. The process of going from point to point in the desert with the aid of trucks, compasses, and maps, so simple as explained in a messroom, developed in the sandy vastness between North Cone and Stromboli such complications as impassable escarpments, soft sand, deep wadis, and uncertain mathematics. Admiration increased for the exploits of the redoubtable LRDG whose raids on Derna, Bardia, Barce, Benghazi, and Jalo were topics of camp gossip.

On 5 October the unit was officially designated 20 NZ Armoured Regiment, the date coinciding with the third anniversary of the entry of the First Echelon into camp. It was an occasion for celebration. The 'originals' of No. 6 Platoon and guests from far and wide held an elaborate and successful party just below the transport lines. Trucks formed walls with a canopy of canvas overhead. There were tables and seats, a real bar, and efficient barmen. Guests included the CO, Jim Robertson (a captain in Base Pay), Jack Jones (LRDG), Gray Scott, and some Americans. A supper of oyster patties interrupted a programme of speeches, songs, and music that included masterpieces in verse from the chairman, Ray Lynch.<sup>3</sup>

Nature is merciful. Time smoothes the mind of its scars. After an action one finds the memory blurred, and few can recount the full happenings of a battle from day to day, hour to hour, completely and with accuracy. Perhaps this is due to the fatigue suffered, but it is well for a man's mental peace that such is the case. So it came about that, when glasses were raised to the memory of the battalion, most men's thoughts were of the happier days: the exploits of the battalion's 'hard-cases' and their various reactions to the mavrodaphne of Greece, the arak of Syria, the zibbib of Cairo, and tales of the days when beer flowed freely in the bars of Egypt. But just as in the fog of memory there are clear patches where certain incidents

stand out clearly in every detail, so in nights of noisy celebration there are brief periods of silence when the tide of conversation ebbs and groups are lost in momentary reverie, and each man is deep in his own thoughts, incommunicable and solemn, reminiscent and remote.

Then he remembers his first glimpse of the coast of [Greece](#), a girl with the face of a Madonna in a cottage in the hills near [Katerini](#); the first fluttering paratroops in the skies over Galatas, and the last quick hand-grip before the bayonet attack on the aerodrome; the scream of the diving Stuka, and the leaves, bullet-whipped, dropping from the olive trees in a swiftly approaching swathe; men falling like just such leaves; the jolting mad career of a desert convoy at night, the far-stretching expanse of trucks of the Division in desert formation; blue days at sea, brown, gleaming bodies in the surf; the trilling from a reed pipe, wafted down from a grassy spur in the rock-crowned Syrian hills, the soothing murmur of rippling water in the beer gardens of [Zahle](#); the cruel heat and parching thirst of a day's action in the desert; the menacing, black snout of a Mark IV hull-down on the escarpment; the irresistible, mad rush of the breakthrough at night; the cool peace that comes with an African sunset, pickets beneath the stars, and the chill whispering of the errant, wandering breeze before the desert dawn; the lonely grave beside the track, the friend long since left beneath wind-drifted sand, where now tread above him none but the wandering bedouin, the padding camel, the scampering jackal, or the pattering, delicate-limbed gazelle. From such thoughts his mind recoils to remembered noisy nights in the canteen, the raucous voice of the 'housie' man, the 'Pound he tails 'em' outside the window, and the impromptu concerts where singing contests reached a climax with the appearance of a burly cook in 'scanties'; yes, that's better, another drink, his shout, and here's to the old days in the 20th.

So, three years after its inception, 20 Infantry Battalion, with its veterans of [Greece](#), [Crete](#), [Libya](#), and the [Western Desert](#), quietly set about preparing for the new and very important role it was to play as an armoured unit in support of the other two infantry brigades.

The canteen, as usual, was the hub of the regiment's life in the evenings. A large building, with two fireplaces, it was crowded each night with thirsty patrons, to satisfy whose wants the canteen staff had often to use considerable initiative. The

canteen truck toured far and wide in search of supplies, and the news that beer was to be found in a certain [Naafi](#) was sufficient to set the wheels a-turning. Distance was no obstacle— time was vital. As a result of these excursions in search of supplies a varied collection of labels was accumulated, including Egyptian, Australian, New Zealand, Greek, German, [Shanghai](#), [Hong Kong](#), Canadian, Indian, Syrian, Palestinian, British and South African. In spite of all these sources the supply during September and October grew steadily less, until, on 17 October, it is recorded that the unit canteen had its first beerless night. Even the [New Zealand Club](#) bar failed to secure supplies on this occasion and had to close down.

It was at this stage that permission was given to sell zibbib in the canteen. The 'Wog session' will always be remembered by those who were in the regiment at this time. The transport platoon provided the setting. The radio was tuned in to [Cairo](#), and, to the melancholy strains of a cabaret singer, men squatted round the hubbly-bubbly and paid two 'ackers' for a smoke. Nearby, on a primus, the charcoal was heating, zibbib was drunk, Egyptian style, in tiny glasses, and at a suitable stage 'George' performed the 'can-can'.

It was no doubt the friendly atmosphere of the unit canteen that made it so popular with visitors. From time to time the regiment played host to visiting American instructors from [Almaza](#), who were always eager to obtain Axis souvenirs.

As always, the canteen had its sidelines. 'Housie' inside and 'two-up' outside were the chief additional pastimes, although in the latter game chief interest was centred at the Pall Mall 'school', particularly after the return of the Division from [Tunisia](#). This 'school', it was said, became the subject of much debate between 4 Brigade and 'The Hill', in which responsibility was tossed lightly back and forth. Finally, Brigade struck swiftly in a pincers movement when two regiments on a planned manoeuvre converged upon the school and two lorry-loads of men were carried off for orderly-room investigation.

Some excitement was caused on 12 October when burning rubbish set fire to the mud walls of the canteen, but as soon as it became apparent that there was no need to rescue the beer the crowd melted away, leaving the fire to be put out by a more energetic teetotaller.

Perhaps the most outstanding event in the canteen's history took place in September 1943, when it was used as a polling booth for the parliamentary general election; unless, perhaps, the famous after-hours trading case could be considered equally historic. For selling a bottle of beer a few minutes after closing time the canteen salesman received a sentence of seven days' CB. Extensive research in legal and drinking circles was undertaken by the historian of that time, 'Sandy' Robertson, but he could not find any previous convictions on this charge. It was the first, and probably the only case of its kind, in the Division.

In later years it was the lack of such an institution during the rest periods in Italy, and the unavoidable disintegration of the unit into squadron areas, that caused a narrowing of the regimental life, so that as time went on a visitor from one squadron to another found an increasing number of unfamiliar faces whose acquaintance there was little chance of making. The social opportunities of the canteen were never adequately replaced.

Intensive training began again in October. Wireless courses were attended at the New Zealand Signals School and at Brigade, where future operators were initiated into the mysteries of codex, sheetex, and the No. 19 set. At the Signals School extensive training on the No. 19 set was given through manoeuvres by day and by night along the desert road to Helwan and back by way of Maadi township. Messages over the 'A' set were occasionally correctly formal, if seldom formally correct, but on the 'B' set, out of range of control, vocal items, abuse, and 'bint-spotting' constituted the main traffic. The Homestead and the Maadi Tent experienced a sharp rise in sales on such occasions.

Courses on the six-pounder and 25-pounder were held at the anti-tank and artillery training depots as an introduction to gunnery. Shortly afterwards personnel from the regiment attended driving and maintenance and gunnery courses at the American school at Almaza and at the Middle East Royal Armoured Corps School at Abbassia, where wireless courses were also attended. At various times there were over two hundred officers and men away from the unit on such courses. Parades during this period were decidedly sketchy affairs. Headquarters Squadron, for example, could muster only one WO II, two sergeants, a corporal, and one private for one morning parade—a pretty problem when it came to manoeuvres.

At Almaza the men made their first acquaintance with American instructors. No greater contrast in methods of instruction could be found than those of Abbassia and Almaza. The Tommy is from habit and training strictly formal, word perfect, and the slave of the book. Reasons why are neither given nor considered important—'the book says so' is sufficient. But the really good Tommy instructor has no superior. The American is chatty and informal, eager for discussions, welcomes questions, is apt to be side-tracked because of this, but will go to no end of trouble and spend any amount of his spare time to explain a knotty point. He is an enthusiast. English instructors avoid personal peculiarities, Americans abound in them. Many will remember the 37-millimetre tank-gun instructor who chewed Bears' tobacco incessantly, spat unerringly into the tin that he hooked out from under the table with his foot and returned as deftly, or the Thompson sub-machine gun instructor—"You hold this baby in yo' arms, pull the trigger, and she jes' mows' em down."

The Maleesh attitude of the New Zealanders puzzled the Almaza cadre, who were keen for their classes to do well and rather apprehensive of the examinations, which were held at the end of the six-weeks' course. The consistency with which the easygoing Kiwis collected 'P.1 plus' passes surprised the instructors no less. Leg-pulling found expression in a game of baseball. During the 'smoke-oh' blarneys the class had convinced their instructors that they were experts and challenged them to a game. The Americans took them up in all seriousness and picked a strong team. When, after the first five minutes, it became apparent that the New Zealanders knew absolutely nothing about the game, the Americans relaxed and entered enthusiastically into the spirit of the burlesque.

As the regiment was originally intended to consist of one light squadron of Crusader tanks and two heavy squadrons of Shermans, it was necessary for men to learn no fewer than ten guns—75-millimetre, 37-millimetre, .30 inch Browning, .50 inch Browning, Thompson sub-machine gun, two-pounder, six-pounder, 7.92 Besa, 15-millimetre Besa, and later, the 17- pounder.

From those first sent on such courses were chosen instructors for the brigade schools in driving and maintenance, gunnery, and wireless which opened on 16 November. Tents, later replaced by huts, and a large hangar were erected near the Church Army hut. In these, officers and men from the three armoured regiments

received extensive and intensive training during courses which lasted from six weeks to three months.

In an address on training on 20 October Brigadier Inglis explained that the brigade was unlikely to receive much in the way of armoured equipment for at least two and a half months, but six tanks, including the latest British and United States makes, were to be used for initial training. Shortly afterwards Crusader and Grant tanks began to arrive, and much practical experience, particularly in maintenance, was gained during driving periods near Flat Hill.

During this period a brigade parade for Brigadier P. J. Hurley, former American representative in New Zealand, was held on the football ground north of Lowry Hut. The Brigadier was a fine soldierly man and a splendid speaker. His address was one of the best heard on such an occasion.

The coming of cooler weather brought a revival of winter sports. Football found its customary large following, and in December Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows took over the training of the regimental team. Squadron competitions had aroused considerable interest and brought to light several promising players, some of whom—Bruce Beechey, 'Dad' Shaw, Lance Iles, George Hart, and Martin Donnelly—played at times for the 4 Brigade team.

It was the unofficial fixtures, however, that aroused chief interest in the regiment. About a week before Christmas it was noticed that at odd moments during the day the cooks broke off from their normal tasks of preparing stews, etc., shooed away hungry visitors, and proceeded to kick footballs around and practise passing. Thus it was learned that the match of the season was shortly to take place—Cooks v. Transport. The trophy, the 'Maadi Dixie', was an aluminium painted utensil mounted on a handsome home-made stand and rumoured to contain zibbib.

The cooks, who could muster only fourteen men, decided to add weight to their scrum by including Bill Brass (temporarily attached to Brigade School). Both teams trained more or less seriously for the big event. The cooks were favourites in betting circles, their keen work having impressed the spectators.

On 20 December, at 1.30 p.m. sharp, the cooks marched smartly on to the field, being played into position by the pipes (the rumoured secret weapon) and followed

by the stalwarts from Transport. Each team was accompanied by its cat mascot, 'Wallad' and 'Tiger' of Cooks and Transport respectively. A fair crowd gathered on field and escarpment to watch this battle between weight and youth. Betting odds, however, were rudely upset, both sides having celebrated the night before, but the cooks the more so. First blood went to Transport when 'Doc' Ellison retired winded. The pace was slower in the second half, both sides suffering from lack of wind, and no one managed to carry through to the goal line. A hard-fought struggle ended without score and with both teams exhausted. The CO refereed.

Christmas parcels had continued to arrive since early in the month, and, to add to the enjoyment of the season, mail up to 12 November was received on Christmas Eve. Parties were held in most tents and canteen sales broke all records. German flares and a few bombs went off in all directions. Those who went on leave to Cairo found most bars and restaurants closed early, leaving the remainder hopelessly overcrowded.

Christmas morning produced more than the usual number of strange sights and strange guests at breakfast. Americans, Scotties, RAF, Aussies, and a South African, many of them wondering where in Egypt Santa Claus had dropped them, appeared for breakfast with spare dixies and friends to guide them. For Christmas dinner there was turkey, pork, peas, potatoes, etc., Christmas pudding and fruit salad—all generous helpings—plus cigarettes and beer. Colonel Burrows, Padre Spence, and other officers went up and down the mess exchanging greetings, and the whole atmosphere showed that the 20th had not lost that fellowship and friendly understanding which was an enduring part of its character. The climax came with the lusty bellowing of a well-known nickname as the Brigadier arrived and was shepherded round by Sergeant 'Robbie'.

The following morning—Boxing Day—a large crowd gathered at Maadi Club grounds to watch the officers play the sergeants. The officers had two ex-All Blacks, Colonel Burrows and Lieutenant Hart, but the hero of the match was Allen Shand at fullback. At half-time his admirers crowded round with oranges and big jars and cans, and at the close of play he had to sprint away from their attentions.

A penalty goal by Tom O'Connor, a splendid kick from the sideline, put the sergeants in the lead 3—0 at half-time, and in the second half Captain Baker kicked

a penalty for the officers, making the score 3-all. Play finished at a brisk pace but neither side could score. It was a bright beginning to another day of good fellowship.

These were, perhaps, the most orderly of the Christmas celebrations. The most noteworthy exploit was probably that of a well-known original member of the regiment, Sergeant Ted Karst, who for a long time had wanted to fire the two-pounder anti-tank gun. Finally, his long-cherished desire was put into effect. Saying nothing to anybody, he left the roistering scene at the mess, selected two rounds from the ammunition dump, and, one under each arm, trudged purposefully across the undulating sandhills to the only two-pounder in the vicinity, that on a stand outside the Gunnery School. Loading presented no difficulty and, pointing the gun in the general direction of 'Bludger's Hill', he sighted along the barrel and fired. Away sped the projectile into the night and a blinding sheet of flame shot from the muzzle. This, and a whack on the jaw as the piece recoiled, somewhat sobered this midnight gunner. With the gun merely resting on trestles it was a miracle that he was not seriously injured; still, the jolt was nothing to the satisfaction of having gratified a long-cherished wish, and back he trudged to the mess, content.

At the end of December the last of the field service caps were traded in with no regrets for the much more comfortable and smarter-looking black berets—to be worn with badges above the left eye and half an inch above the brim, etc., etc. As a link with the infantry days a red flash was worn behind the badge. Individualists in styles came in for the usual attention on parades, but the chief sequel to the change was probably a fresh wave of customers for [Cairo](#) photographers.

On 31 December all available personnel paraded before [Brigadier Inglis](#) in their new berets. The Brigadier spoke of reinforcements from New Zealand, hoped for an issue of training tanks, and outlined a fairly long programme of training. Referring to an episode at Saturday's football match, he said that brigadiers could not accept rum rations in public, even at Christmas.

New Year's Eve was brightened with the usual bonfire. The transport platoon had made extensive preparations down below the escarpment, and at one minute past midnight a well-soaked pile of rubbish went up in a glorious blaze, accompanied by showers of flares, Very lights, and Jerry screamers. It was easily the brightest show in camp.

Eight officers and 139 other ranks of 3 Battalion, 1 New Zealand Army Tank Brigade, which had left New Zealand with the 8th Reinforcements, were absorbed into the regiment on 5 January and immediately began courses of training at the brigade schools and at [Almaza](#) and [Abbassia](#). At the foot of the nearby escarpment a miniature sub-calibre range had been constructed to scale, a two-pounder anti-tank gun with a Bren mounted on the barrel affording excellent practice in the giving of fire orders. The 'puff range' which members of the regiment had constructed at the brigade gunnery school was also popular. Later, training films were shown at the Pall Mall theatre. At the tank range at Bir Gindali regiments in turn supplied tanks and men for practice shoots, and in this way most valuable training was given.

C Squadron at this time possessed most tanks. Unfortunately, the reconditioned Crusaders proved unreliable mechanically, and the route on squadron manoeuvres could frequently be traced with ease by the trail of pools of oil and derelict, over-heated tanks. However, it was on these exercises, and later during A and B Squadrons' three-day manoeuvre on the [Mena– Fayoum](#) road, that the real lessons were learned.

On 4 February the first parade of 4 New Zealand Armoured Brigade was held on the football ground near the [Lowry Hut](#). The occasion was a visit and inspection by the officer in charge of AFV equipment and its distribution in the [Middle East](#), General C. W. Norman.

At this stage a revival of sports swept through the regiment, an order by the CO stating that on Wednesday afternoons every man would play some sort of game, no leave being granted before 4 p.m. In no time, in the clear spaces between the tents, appeared baseball pitches and basketball and tenniquoit courts, where inter-squadron games were played, not only on sports afternoons, but throughout the long summer evenings. A good cricket pitch was laid down in Headquarters Squadron area, where inter-unit games and matches with British and South African teams were played. Athletic sports found many competitors. At the New Zealand Base championships the regimental team won the relay. A Squadron was premier squadron at the regimental championships, and the regiment won the major honours at the brigade sports.

On 19 February a ceremonial parade was held at which the GOC presented

decorations won in the recent campaigns. The regiment's recipients were: Lieutenant-Colonel J. T. Burrows, DSO; Rev. G. A. D. Spence, MC; Captain J. A. Johnston, MM (won in [Crete](#)); Staff-Sergeant G. G. P. Weenink, BEM; Sergeant P. A. McConchie, DCM; Trooper P. R. Blunden, MM.

By this time the weather had indicated that another issue of summer clothing was due. Very strange is the mind of a Quartermaster-General, and on this occasion the troops were introduced to the latest atrocity in army clothing, surpassing in absurdity of appearance even the ludicrous 'Bombay Bloomers' of two years previously—the bush-shirt, Mark I, whose voluminous folds would flap round a man's ribs like a felucca sail in a [Nile](#) breeze. Making necessary alterations to summer equipment at the soldier's expense afforded numerous Egyptian tailors a very lucrative trade. Each season growing piles of khaki cloth scraps beside the feverishly driven sewing machines testified to the patience of the long-suffering 'askari' in a desperate effort not to look ridiculous as he passed members of other and better-clad units on the sidewalks of Fuad el Awal and Soliman Pasha. Many men went on leave in the summer in clothing that they themselves had bought from Egyptian drapers, and not out of any clothing allowance. Shirts, KD, had at least been presentable; bush-shirts, as issued, were impossible. At an order from Brigade, regimental funds were used to have alterations made and a belt, minus buckle, supplied. The result was a definite improvement, both in the dress of the trooper and to the coffers of Ali Ditt.<sup>4</sup>

On 22 March the brigade once more paraded, this time for the Minister of Defence, the [Hon. F. Jones](#). His tour of the Division had not been without incident, but a word of caution by the Brigadier prior to the parade put the occasion in its correct perspective.

On 24 May the brigade supplied 600 men for the Empire Day parade in Cairo, and on 14 June at the [United Nations](#) Day parade, making their first public appearance, the brigade's new Sherman tanks rumbled through the densely-lined streets. During this period successive leave drafts left each fortnight for the [Eighth Army](#) rest camp at Nathaniya in Palestine. The camp provided troops with a cheap, restful holiday under ideal conditions. Organised sightseeing bus trips, a fun fair, open-air concerts, an excellent library, and ample sea and sun bathing were the chief pastimes.

Towards the end of May, parties began to erect tents for the return of the Division from [Tunisia](#). The sense of unreality in being left behind at [Maadi](#) while the rest of the Division trounced and routed the old enemy, [Afrika Korps](#), had to a certain extent been forgotten in the whirl of new training and equipment as an armoured unit. But from time to time rumours had swept the messrooms: 'The Div. was in again'—El [Alamein](#), El [Agheila](#), [Medenine](#), [Gabes](#), [Wadi Akarit](#), [Enfidaville](#), and the grim heroism of [Takrouna](#).

And now they were coming back, all who were left of the men who had gone to join infantry units in September 1942. First came the engineers. Some of the regiment went by scout car and truck to [Maadi](#) to meet them, others lined the escarpment to look down on the long lines of sturdy three-tonners, now with thousands of fresh miles on their speedometers, lurching over the uneven sand and bearing aloft flags of every description— swastikas, Free French, Italian, and banners of more obscure origin. With the arrival of 5 and 6 Brigades the regiment played host to hundreds of thirsty campaigners and tales of action and long pursuit were told far into the night.

On 23 May [Brigadier Inglis](#) announced that married men serving in the first three echelons and a proportion of single men selected by ballot would return to New Zealand on furlough. These men, the Ruapehu draft, left the regiment on 3 June and sailed from Egypt in the Nieuw Amsterdam on the 15th. The draft was commanded by [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) and included from the regiment Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows, who was succeeded in command on 4 June by Lieutenant-Colonel McKergow, Major J. B. Gray, and the Regimental Quartermaster, Lieutenant Bolwell.

The next few months can be covered briefly. The men lost to the furlough draft were replaced by reinforcements from New Zealand, many of them from 1 Battalion of the New Zealand [Army Tank Brigade](#), who went overseas with the 9th and 10th Reinforcements. To the great relief of the technical staff, new Shermans were received from time to time to replace C Squadron's Crusaders. Tanks and men trained for battle on squadron and regimental exercises, the new tanks giving the regiment's fitters the usual running-in troubles. There was plenty of sport: the regiment did well in the divisional athletic championships, sharing the Freyberg Cup with 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment; its cricketers won the [2 NZEF](#) championship; its

swimmers were represented in the brigade and divisional championships and its non-swimmers—nearly 100 in one party and 78 in another—were taken on two-day trips to the Red Sea with parties of instructors. Off-duty there were school, club, and office reunions to renew civilian friendships — even high-country musterers organised a reunion of their own. Then rumours of a move began to stir the lines, late issues of equipment were received and base kits packed and stored. On 2 September another batch of the unit's 'old hands' marched out to join the second furlough draft and a week later an advance party under Captain Abbott left Maadi for Burg el Arab. The regiment's days in the desert were fast drawing to a close.

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<sup>1</sup> Maj J. B. Gray; Milton; born Milton, 12 Jul 1907; draper; 2 i/c 20 Regt Sep 1942.

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Col J. W. McKergow; Rangiora; born England, 26 May 1902; farmer; CO 20 Regt 4 Jun-22 Dec 1943; wounded 22 Dec 1943.

<sup>3</sup> Cpl R. J. Lynch; Dunedin; born NZ 22 Sep 1911; grocer; wounded May 1941.

<sup>4</sup> Maadi Camp tailor.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 13 – FAREWELL TO MAADI

## CHAPTER 13

### Farewell to Maadi

Having said goodbye to the Wakatipu furlough draft and brought its tanks numerically almost up to strength, the regiment, with the rest of the Division, prepared to say farewell to [Maadi](#), which for nearly four years had been its base and army 'home'. From a few tents scattered over the undulating sandhills the 'thirty-niners' had seen this camp grow to a phenomenal size, with clay-brick, stone-walled huts extending northwards almost to the foot of the escarpment of the Mokattam Hills, southwards to the edge of [Wadi Digla](#), on the east to the vicinity of Flat Hill in Wadi Tih, and westwards almost to [Maadi](#) township itself. To this continually expanding base they had periodically returned to rest and refit and to find diversion and relaxation in leave to [Cairo](#), [Alexandria](#), and Palestine.

Now the desert as a field of campaign was finished with, it was hoped, for ever. Future activities lay across the Mediterranean—but where? Would the Division camp again beneath the olive groves of [Greece](#) or travel once more those tortuous mountain roads? Would it make a landing in [Crete](#) perhaps, or in the south of [France](#), or would 'Monty' want them again, this time in [Italy](#)?

While Captain Abbott's advance party erected tents at Burg el Arab the rest of the regiment busied itself with discarding surplus gear and building up ration boxes. The salvage heap that collected beyond the cricket pitch was a source of infinite amazement to the new arrivals at the [Training Depot](#), who, clambering over this colossus in the hope of retrieving beds, tables, chairs and other accessories of a base-camp tent, never ceased to wonder at its continually increasing size and variety. After the departure of the main convoy on 20 September a rear party under Major Poole accomplished the arduous task of restoring the area to its original state of empty desert waste.

With the exception of B Squadron, which went on transporters with RHQ tanks, the Shermans and their crews went by rail, the rest of the regiment, to its great relief on learning that the infantry were marching all the way, moving by lorries. This was the tank drivers' first experience of loading on to transporters, and they did it, under Major Phillips's supervision, in the creditable time of seven minutes. (The

infantry's 100- mile march took seven days.)

At Burg el Arab the regiment was concentrated east of the station, having as neighbours the Essex Regiment on the right and 4 Field Regiment on the left. In between the inevitable maintenance and occasional games of 'put and take' with ammunition, excursions to the beach six miles away relieved the monotony of life amongst the dust-storms and flies.

While in this area Padre Spence, who had served with the 20th through all its campaigns, conducted his last unit service before becoming Senior Chaplain to the Division. The Padre was in reminiscent mood and recalled services in Greece, Crete, and during the campaigns in North Africa. He welcomed his successor, Padre Dawson.<sup>1</sup> At the conclusion of the service Lieutenant-Colonel McKergow paid a warm tribute to Padre Spence's work with the unit.

Training concluded with a divisional exercise in the desert to the south of the station to prepare units for movement in close country. All traffic was confined to 'roads' marked out by coloured lights and tail-lights only were permitted on vehicles. Clouds of dust reduced visibility almost to zero, placing a great strain on drivers and tank commanders. There were a few minor collisions, including one between B Squadron's jeep and a tank, but no one was injured. Wireless silence was an additional handicap. At the close of the exercise units heard a talk by the GOC, who discussed the manoeuvre and announced that the brigade would shortly proceed overseas, destination not stated.

A regimental exercise concluded the training, and shortly after returning to camp on 2 October Major Purcell,<sup>2</sup> the regiment's second-in-command, and Staff-Sergeant Weenink prepared to leave as advance party for the unit.

On 5 October Colonel McKergow lectured the squadrons on the recent manoeuvres, using large maps and diagrams to illustrate his remarks. He explained how all communications within the Division and between echelons in each unit had been tested. The CO was noted for his dry humour on such occasions and his audience did not wait in vain. Describing his visit to 5 Brigade Headquarters during the 'battle', he said: 'I found everyone in a state of confusion as all signals communication had been cut off. I was told to wait. When I asked what was wrong I

was told, "Some b— in a Bren carrier has just pulled up all our wires." So I maintained a discreet silence—and waited—in my Bren carrier.'

Next day crews began preparing their tanks for the voyage. Guns were greased and extra ammunition stored. All vehicles were marked with the unit's serial number, a special five-figure War Office serial number, destination letter, ship's code, and priority of discharge. Camouflage paint was freely used and all canopies removed to reduce the height of vehicles.

On 10 October the first vehicle party of seventeen scout cars under Captain Shacklock<sup>3</sup> left for Suez via Mena, and two days later all personnel, less skeleton tank crews, moved to Ikingi Maryut. Here about a week was passed, with route marches in the mornings and swimming excursions to the beach in the afternoons. The Mobile Cinema and concert parties provided entertainment in the evenings, but undoubtedly the item with greatest appeal was provided one night by the Maoris as they squatted on the sand waiting for an ENSA show to begin.

The move was to be secret. All badges and titles were removed, bush-nets were distributed, and all ranks began taking atebrin tablets. In his best professional manner the RMO, Captain Dawson,<sup>4</sup> gave lectures on the newly distributed anti-malaria equipment, warning the men of the terrible toll taken by the disease in Sicily. When told that each man would get an atebrin tablet at meal-time, Trooper Jones<sup>5</sup> interjected, 'Do we still get our two slices of bread for lunch as well?'

Tents were struck at 4 a.m. on 17 October and, split up with other units of the Division, the regiment embussed on ten-tonners and left for Alexandria, where, after several hours' wait on lighters, the troops finally embarked, some on the Letitia, others on the Llangibby Castle, and a third group on the Nieuw Holland. Members of the main party, which excluded the priority vehicles and the tanks, were required to carry all their gear. The sight of troops staggering up the steep gangway laden with packs containing all winter and summer clothing, haversacks, rifles, bedrolls, bivvy tents, bush-nets—all army issue equipment in fact—and last, but not least, a two-gallon water tin, full, brought many sailors to the rail, their expressions varying from amusement to wonder. The infantry were even worse off as they had to carry picks and shovels as well.

As soon as the men in the [Letitia](#) were settled the broad Scottish accents of the ship's captain were heard through the sound system. He complimented them on their patience, stating that in all his long experience of convoying troops this was the slowest embarkation he had had, with the exception of one dark night up in [Iceland](#). The captain had carried New Zealand troops during the 1914–18 War and expressed a desire to hear the Maoris sing their own songs. Next day the regiment said goodbye to Egypt.

Throughout the voyage air cover was provided by planes based on [Africa](#) and on one ship the troops viewed with interest a demonstration of the anti-aircraft rocket guns. Surface protection was provided by destroyers and submarine chasers.

The voyage was uneventful but regular boat-drill took place and a strict blackout was enforced. In the early stages danger from enemy aircraft based on [Crete](#) was possible and one evening a chair floating in the sea gave food for thought. During the voyage the Division's destination was revealed and men listened to lectures on [Italy](#) over the ship's loudspeaker system. Most ships were 'dry' but life on board was far from dull. Apart from the inevitable physical training, tug-of-war contests were arranged, and in the [Letitia](#) the Maoris, led by their padre, gave two concerts on one of the forward hatches, winning immediate appreciation from troops and crew and special thanks from the captain. A series of quiz sessions, arranged by the ship's OC Troops, aroused considerable interest, and on the final night amusement was provided by the attempts of the various teams to complete poetry quotations.

The men in the Llangibby Castle settled down well despite cramped sleeping accommodation. [Lance-Corporal Hugh Milner](#)<sup>6</sup> records:

Canteens and barber shops did a great trade with Kiwis building up tobacco stocks and toilet accessories. 'Housie' and good old 'Crown and Anchor' held the floor in the canteen lounges night after night and the Maoris were a great source of great amusement everywhere aboard ship.... They joined in with gusto at some excellent sing-songs.... [at which] a Tahitian soldier of the Div. gave some splendid hula-hula exhibitions.... Boxing bouts were organised after a ring had been erected alongside the ... orderly room and Troopers L. Falconer<sup>7</sup> and [Alf Pedder](#)<sup>8</sup> of C Sqn put up a good show and mixed things well. In the afternoon [19 October] some of the Regiment's most highly endowed and highly trained 'chefs' including the famous

Middle Eastern stew expert, Corporal Bill Brass<sup>9</sup> of C Sqn, hard-working Squadron Quartermaster-Sergeant Bob Newlands,<sup>10</sup> and Trooper Jack Krause<sup>11</sup> were conducted on a tour of inspection of the ship's cookhouses. There was also a conducted tour of the ship's engine rooms arranged for the troops.

The convoy's route lay along the North African coast, skirting the Gulf of Sirte, and at 6 a.m. on 22 October the Sicilian port of Syracuse was observed at the foot of coastal cliffs. The same day the transports steamed north off Sicily and entered the port of Taranto. Men crowded the decks for their first glimpse of an Italian town and to bargain with the vendors of grapes, nuts, and wine who had rowed out to meet the convoy. The medieval fort at the water's edge was an impressive landmark and ships of the surrendered Italian navy were eagerly scanned.

Lance-Corporal Milner continues:

The disembarkation ... that afternoon provided another comedy. The Maoris caused more amusement by tobogganing down gangplanks like a patrol of the camel corps packed high in the hump for a long campaign. Whooping with joy, grinning dark faces appeared and popped out like turtle heads underneath a sea of gear. Every second Maori clutched a ukelele or a fragile guitar in one hand.... During the inevitable delay after disembarking a gang of naval 'experts' headed by Second-Lieutenant Jack Dawkins<sup>12</sup> and Squadron Sergeant-Major Keith Given ... inspected three Itie midget submarines and also a large sub carrying a 100-mm gun. The gunlayer aboard the latter was very eager to demonstrate his facility at stripping and loading, but was restrained from placing both projectile and full charge up the greasy underwater spout. However, he finally compromised by firing off several detonators stuck in empty cases.

Packs, bedrolls, and water tins were dumped on the wharf to be picked up by transport, and the regiment marched through the town to the bivouac area about ten miles away. Taranto had obviously received considerable attention from the RAF, and the ruined buildings and rubble-strewn streets forced the troops to march in single file until the town was left behind.

Here the road wound between low stone walls and leafy olive groves. At the first halt the CO ordered the men to fall in by troops and the old infantry march

discipline was resumed. From time to time the column passed through infantry units resting by the way, and the gibes at the 'dehorsed' tank crews gave way to remarks more complimentary as it became apparent that the steady step set by the Colonel was having the desired effect. In the early evening the regiment arrived at the bivouac area near Galese and the men pitched their tents beneath spreading olive trees that brought back memories of [Greece](#).

Training took the form of route marches, the afternoons being free. The country was mainly rocky hillsides covered with coarse bracken and prickly scrub. Stone buildings, dotted at intervals over the landscape, housed the inhabitants, whose work consisted chiefly in tending the numerous olive trees and struggling orchards of fruit and almonds and herding a few miserable sheep.

At the road entrance to the bivouac area Italian merchants appeared daily and many a man began the morning with a bunch of delicious grapes. Gradually the language problem was solved and Buon giorno replaced Saaeda as a greeting. The supplies of grapes, nuts, and almonds were fairly adequate but the 'vino' scarcely came up to standard. Not far up the road, however, was a wine factory in a castle owned by an Italian ex-admiral of the First World War. With characteristic wisdom Colonel McKergow decided that the men would be better to celebrate their arrival in [Italy](#) within the bounds of the camp. A vino parade was called in the afternoon. Carrying two-gallon water tins and under command of an officer, representatives of each troop marched to the wine factory, drew their quota from the fourteen-feet-high oaken vats and returned jubilantly, if less steadily. Dusk fell, and round the brazier fires in the olive groves the camp rocked to the sound of roistering far into the night. The red wine flowed freely, pine logs crackled cheerfully, and happy voices lifted in unison in the old, old way of soldiers between campaigns.

On Sunday, 24 October, church parade was held in a sylvan setting, with diminutive Padre Dawson perched on one of the many old stone walls in the area. His sermon was appropriately based on the text, 'Consider the moth in thine own eye'. He exhorted the officers and men of the regiment not to consider themselves as New Zealanders to be superior to everyone else, but to be tolerant and understanding in their attitude to the Italian population.

Roman Catholics attended Mass in a stone quarry in the brigade area. Father

Fletcher<sup>13</sup> preached on the theme of life and death. Some Italian civilians stood respectfully on the outer circle of soldiers with bared heads. This was the first of many occasions throughout the Italian campaign when civilians attended a unit church service. Old men, women, and wide-eyed children knelt reverently in inches-deep mud or on the rain-soaked straw of sodden haystacks. After Mass on this occasion a small party of troops attended a village service.

The absence of transport did not hinder the troops from enjoying a measure of leave. Many caught trucks part of the way to Taranto, while others hitch-hiked to Martina Franca and Crispiano or covered the distance on foot. On the way to the former town the troops were amused at the sight of the beehive-roofed houses peculiar to this area. The lack of transport at this time, however, was a serious problem for the Quartermaster and his staff. The bread, for instance, had to be carried from Brigade in blankets. The climax came when three men, detailed to collect a new 'three-holer', returned triumphantly with it on their shoulders and with their heads through the holes.

While at Galese the regiment experienced the first of many thunderstorms. Vivid flashes of lightning lit up the olive groves and deafening peals of thunder rolled and echoed across the storm-tossed clouds. Rain fell in torrents and next morning the camp presented a bedraggled scene. Many tents had been flooded, blankets and gear soaked, and drenched, woebegone figures stumbled about the waterlogged camp from 4 a.m. till daylight. Supplies of equipment were too scarce to provide changes and a few homeless wanderers sought refuge in caves, where wood fires in time dried out their blankets.

The evenings were short—dusk fell soon after 7 p.m.—but several concerts were held in the adjoining quarry. One of the most popular performers was an Italian boy about twelve years old with a clear soprano voice of delightful quality.

At this camp the old hands received a pleasant surprise when they were visited by several members of the battalion who had escaped from prisoner-of-war camps in Italy after the Italian armistice. The news soon spread through the camp and in no time an ever-growing group of men had collected at the most natural spot for such a reunion, George Weenink's cookhouse. In the centre was the well-known figure of Bob May, former Company Sergeant-Major of C Company, erect and grim as ever,

but, as was to be expected, a little thinner and showing the strain of his recent adventures and the privations endured in passing through the enemy's lines. With him was 'Aussie' Austin,<sup>14</sup> who there and then wanted to raise a band of volunteers to slip back through enemy-held territory and blow up bridges behind his lines. His listeners agreed that it was a good idea but that their lack of knowledge of the language, customs, and topography of the country rather weighted the scales against their taking part in this scheme. Next day in came Paddy Welsh, the lone wolf, imperturbable as ever, looking exceptionally well and, like his fellow escapees, smiling quietly at the prospect of indefinite leave in Cairo and the untouched pay of fifteen months.

After about a fortnight in the Galese area the regiment moved by two stages to the vicinity of San Bartolommeo in Galdo, dispersing in squadron areas in what was known as Trotta Farm. All vehicles and tents were camouflaged, a measure that was facilitated by the presence of numerous oak trees and scrub. 'Gerry' Skinner,<sup>15</sup> ex-signals platoon and prisoner of war in Libya, spent a week with the unit after escaping from a prison camp. Regimental Headquarters was opened in a farmhouse. Later, a large L-shaped building, formerly stables and an implement shed, was cleaned out, whitewashed, and used as a men's canteen. A fireplace was rebuilt, radio installed, makeshift seating and tables erected, a YMCA branch opened, controlled vino sales inaugurated, and the large room served a useful purpose as a centre where troops could collect and fraternise as had been their custom in the canteens and Naafis of Egypt. A bivvy tent shared by two men and their gear did not permit much movement on a wet night, and already the weather was showing signs that winter was approaching.

Rations were supplemented by individual purchases of turkeys, prices ranging from five shillings upwards. Sheep, pigs, and poultry were also 'acquired'. Several orderly-room inquiries were held as a result of complaints from some of the new civilian allies, but language difficulties prolonged proceedings. On 13 November an identification parade was held of suspected livestock 'rustlers' but owing to the number of moustaches among the suspects the Italian farmer was baffled.

As usual, sports were soon under way. A working party cleared and marked out a football ground in a stubble field, where later squadron games were played. The ground was sticky and considerable amusement was caused as more and more mud

and straw stuck to the boots of the players. At times the ball could scarcely be distinguished from the huge clods that flew through the air off the kicker's boot.

At this stage the vehicle and tank parties rejoined the regiment, and each group had its own story of the crossing to tell. The first flight, under Captain Shacklock, comprised seventeen scout cars and vehicles from the Light Aid Detachment. At [Tewfik](#), where some of the party did picket duty on the wharf during the three days' wait, the cars were slung over the side of the Newburgh and stored in the hold. Difficulty was experienced in getting 'Axis', the regimental dog mascot, on board.



ITALY MAP No.1

The OC Troops objected when 'Axis' appeared on the gangway, and an attempt to smuggle him on board in a valise was unsuccessful for he would not stay hidden. Finally he was dragged up on to the deck by a rope fastened to his collar. The OC Troops' threat to throw him overboard was forgotten when Trooper [Jack Anderson](#)<sup>16</sup> hinted that he himself might suffer the same fate. 'Axis' completed the voyage without further interference. The crew soon fell under the spell of this comical little waif, often bringing him food, and even the ship's captain took a friendly interest in his unofficial passenger. But with unerring instinct 'Axis' always growled at the approach of his first and only enemy in the ship.

No troops had been expected in the Newburgh and makeshift accommodation for some was found in the hold; others slept up on deck, experiencing a most unpleasant time when it rained. The cook in the party worked on deck under

difficulties, building sandbags round the blower to keep off the wind. Rations were confined to biscuits, bully, etc., and no bread was supplied during the voyage of approximately a fortnight.

On arrival at [Bari](#) the cars were unloaded, refuelled at the stadium, and parked on the roadside five miles farther on for two days until the unloading at the port was completed. From there the convoy moved to Trotta by way of [Foggia](#), in every town and village passing through curious crowds whose cries for 'cigarettas' and 'biscottas', 'chocolata' and 'caramella', were to echo and re-echo in the ears of New Zealand troops for the ensuing months.

The rear party was composed of the tanks, the Light Aid Detachment, some three-tonners and several transporters. The tanks went by train to [Alexandria](#), where they were transhipped without incident, although a tank from another regiment sheared the ropes and caused a sensation by dropping back on to the wharf. The tanks were stored in the bottom hold, crews being allowed access to them from time to time.

The convoy lay off [Sicily](#) for three days. With typical Kiwi initiative several of the troops swam ashore, towing their clothes on a lifebelt. Another ingenious trooper made the trip in a folding boat. Shortly after leaving [Sicily](#) the convoy experienced a rough sea with a strong swell. Prodigious bumps below deck revealed that the Egyptian labourers had not lashed the tanks securely. One broke loose and battered first against the side of the ship and next against an ASC truck, fortunately without damage to the former.

After a few days at sea one ship near the front of the convoy struck a mine amidships. The shock of the explosion wrenched her plates and pumps were used to cope with the water, necessitating severe restrictions in the ship's water supply. The only casualties were a member of the crew, who sustained a head injury, and a member of A Squadron who sprained an ankle when rushing below to get his lifebelt. One of the escort was quickly on the scene, and the ship, cramming on all possible speed, left the convoy and, with its escort, made for the nearest port. Permission to berth was refused lest the ship should sink and obstruct port operations. After an inspection by a diver the vessel was allowed to proceed to [Bari](#). Here it lay off the port for several days until the tanks were off-loaded on to lighters and driven ashore.

The tanks were driven round to [Bari](#) stadium, where they were loaded on transporters to rejoin the regiment. After [Foggia](#) the route presented some difficulty and several vehicles became separated from the convoy; a few tanks fell off the transporters but all ultimately arrived at Trotta Farm. With the arrival of its tanks and vehicles it was obvious that the regiment would soon be on the move once again.

By the beginning of November the [Eighth Army](#) under General Montgomery had reached the area of the [Sangro](#) River, north of which the Germans had established a strong winter line across the Italian peninsula. Facing this line on the Adriatic flank was [5 Corps](#), on the right, with 78 British Division moving up the coast and [8 Indian Division](#) next to it. In the hills farther inland was [13 Corps](#), with [1 Canadian Division](#) on its right and 5 British Division linking up with the Fifth Army.

With German resistance stiffening and cold, wet weather setting in, Montgomery decided that he needed more troops forward to press the Army's advance towards [Pescara](#), Avezzano, and thence to [Rome](#). His plan for breaking the [Sangro](#) line was for [5 Corps](#) to make a narrow bridgehead over the river near the coast and spread outwards from there. The New Zealand Division was ordered up to a concentration area between [Furci](#) and [Gissi](#), ready to relieve [8 Indian Division](#) west and north-west of [Atessa](#) and thus allow [5 Corps](#) to concentrate near the coast. The New Zealanders were to come in between 5 and [13 Corps](#), under [Eighth Army](#) command, to increase the weight of the attack by a threat along a road running north from [Atessa](#) to the [Sangro](#).

If [5 Corps'](#) attack went well the New Zealanders were to push northwards to Chieti and then drive south-west through Popoli to [Avezzano](#) while [5 Corps](#) advanced up the coast to [Pescara](#).

To conceal the relief complete wireless silence within the Division was to continue, 4 Brigade's tanks were to be thoroughly camouflaged in the forward areas and, where possible, units were to move up by night.

On 14 November the Division assumed command of the sector of the line formerly held by [8 Indian Division](#) but still manned, for security reasons, by 19 Indian Brigade, in whose support the Divisional Artillery fired the first New Zealand shots in

[Italy](#). On the same day Colonel McKergow and the regiment's advance party left Trotta Farm for [Furci](#).

As far as 20 Regiment was concerned, the first shots in [Italy](#) had been fired three weeks earlier by Maoris in the olive grove camp at Galese, when bursts of tracer from Bren guns mounted on a stone wall guided their officers home from leave in [Taranto](#), and incidentally kept most heads well down in the regiment's reconnaissance troop.

At 8.45 a.m. on 16 November the regiment's vehicles under Captain Bay <sup>17</sup> left for [Furci](#), followed by the tanks under Major Purcell. The move was uneventful, although two tanks which went over banks had to be hauled out by others in the convoy. Regimental Headquarters was in position just north of [Furci](#) by 1.30 a.m. on the 17th and the tanks arrived in groups throughout the day. After a short three-days' halt wheels and tracks were turning once more. At 4.25 p.m. on 20 November forty-six tanks, followed by supply vehicles of A and B1 Echelons, left [Furci](#) for [Gissi](#) and [Atessa](#). Rain had fallen every day and the tanks lined up nose to tail on the road in the unit area for fear of being bogged. The fifth vehicle flight had not arrived from Egypt and the regiment, although seventeen vehicles short, was carrying eight days' rations and POL <sup>18</sup> for 200 miles. Some tanks had difficulty in leaving the area, but the road surface to [Gissi](#) was fairly good and the column arrived at 5.30 p.m. Next day, on the journey from [Gissi](#) to Quercianera, three miles north of [Atessa](#), wheeled vehicles preceded the tanks in case the latter made road deviations impassable.

Leaving [Gissi](#) at 8.30 a.m., the regiment moved down a tortuous road with very sharp corners, crossed the valley, and thundered uphill to reach [Casalanguida](#) at 1 p.m. Every few miles demolitions slowed up the traffic and streams of refugees added to the congestion on the roads. Bailey bridges became as familiar a sight as the British 'red-caps' who so ably controlled the traffic. At one place in the gorge between [Gissi](#) and Casalanguida a winch had to be used to help lorries to climb out of a depression.

Traffic through [Casalanguida](#) was one-way only, so tank crews had lunch while waiting their turn. To the old hands the sight of long lanes of traffic jammed nose to tail on narrow roads recalled the merciless strafings of [Greece](#) and the desert campaigns, but not a single Stuka appeared.

By 3 p.m. the leading vehicles had reached their destination. All forty-six tanks finally arrived but four required attention. The tank state showed that forty-two of the regiment's quota of fifty-two Shermans were fit for action, two were under unit repair, two in the LAD, and six in 4 Brigade workshops, a position which, considering the terrain and the weather, reflected great credit on the unit's drivers.

It was at [Atessa](#) that one of the best-known members of the regiment, and formerly of the battalion, came to an untimely end. 'Tiger', the cat mascot of the former transport platoon, and particularly of Corporal [Hamilton](#), <sup>19</sup> was run over in the street after one of those unusual journeys that only 'Hammy' could make—and get away with. Fed-up with unaccustomed duties and fatigues while waiting in the Armoured Training Depot at [Maadi](#) for the Wakatipu furlough draft to leave for New Zealand, Corporal Hamilton had tagged on to the vehicle flight without even so much as a leave pass and had bluffed his way to [Italy](#), taking 'Tiger' with him. Rejoining the 20th, he was welcomed by his mates of the [First Echelon](#) and the old transport platoon and made the journey north with their assistance and with the kind co-operation of the Quartermaster. The petty restrictions of a base camp had been unbearable to the Corporal's restless spirit. Back behind the wheel of a truck he was happy, and to one who had driven his lorry from [Servia Pass](#) to [Porto Rafti](#), [Maadi](#) to [Zaafran](#), [Baggush](#) to [Kabrit](#), [El Aine](#) to [Matruh](#), [Minqar Qaim](#) to [Alamein](#), [Helwan](#) to [Suez](#), the winding mountain roads of [Italy](#) presented no problems.

'Tiger's' origin goes back to the desert. His mother, 'Mrs Rommel', was caught during the 1941 Libyan campaign and was cared for by C Company. After the battalion returned to [Baggush](#) she produced two kittens, selecting for their maternity couch the bed of Lieutenant Charlie Upham, VC. When he came into his tent and saw what had taken place, Charlie, with true courtesy and consideration for a lady in distress, slept that night on the sand.

Of the two kittens one, christened 'Tankie', was acquired by Tom O'Connor <sup>20</sup> of the quartering staff. Most army cats are pretty hardy as regards diet but a few meals of bully beef made 'Tankie' very unwell. However, he lived to accompany the battalion to [Syria](#). While riding in the cab of the Quartermaster's truck one day he made it plain that he thought it high time for a wayside stop. This was not possible in convoy and 'Tankie' became desperate. Finally, escaping from the cab, he

scampered over the top of the engine (the bonnet covers being open) and, miraculously avoiding injury from the whirling fan blades, gained his urgently desired temporary freedom. 'Tankie' was finally lost in June 1942 when the battalion came through the minefield after leaving [Mersa Matruh](#).

'Tiger' enjoyed a lordly life under the protection of the transport platoon. He had a special bed and a handsome collar bearing an Egyptian coin on which his name and unit were inscribed. After being smuggled across the [Mediterranean](#) it was bad luck that he should become one of the first casualties in [Italy](#). After the death of his pet 'Hammy' seemed to lose interest in [Italy](#) and returned to Egypt in much the same manner as he had left.

'Wallad', a handsome cat with beautiful markings, was the property of George McAllister <sup>21</sup> and a native of [Syria](#). 'Wallad' was a dandy and incurably lazy, disdaining to hunt. It is on record that on 12 October 1942, with the help and encouragement of a noisy mob of troopers, he caught his first mouse. At moments during the chase 'Wallad' was markedly reluctant to come to grips with his prey, and as soon as the exhausted victim was within his paws he promptly went to sleep.

Perhaps the mascot best known to both battalion and regiment was a little whiskered tan-and-white dog that crept in beside Bill Douglas <sup>22</sup> of the anti-tank platoon in his slit trench during an air raid in the [Western Desert](#) early in July 1942. He was probably an Italian dog, but any problems of his previous ownership were solved by giving him the name of 'Axis'.

It was amazing how quickly he could detect approaching planes and his pitiful whining frequently gave timely warning of an air raid. His distress ended only when Bill took him into his arms and they sheltered in the slit trench together. From then on he was No. 7 passenger on the portée. Returning with survivors of the battalion to [Maadi](#), 'Axis' became a general favourite. He had been through action with his adopted unit and a collar with a New Zealand badge was soon procured.

He was a perky little chap but absolutely a one-man dog. People who fussed over him were completely ignored, and if they persisted with their attentions received a hostile reply. Battalion parades always interested him, especially the drill and the beginning of the march past, when he would scamper out in front, barking

doggy orders enthusiastically. However, although he was a registered mascot and appeared on the leave lists his privileges did not extend so far, and after one or two 'reviews' of the battalion he was tied up during morning parades. Had he attended alone no doubt all would have been well, but the presence of others of his kind, particularly of the opposite sex, led to 'conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline'.

Rifle shooting at the Egyptian range in Wadi Tih made him very excited. Dashing out in front of the mound, he held up the practice until he was called in and tied up in the rear. When Bill became the Padre's driver, however, 'Axis' followed Ron Jones<sup>23</sup> and Jack Anderson, his other tent mates, with whom he made the voyage to Italy in the first vehicle flight as described earlier. Perched on top of a scout car, taking in the world at a glance, he had that superior, old-soldier look that seemed to say, 'Leave me alone. I know what I'm doing', and most people generally did.

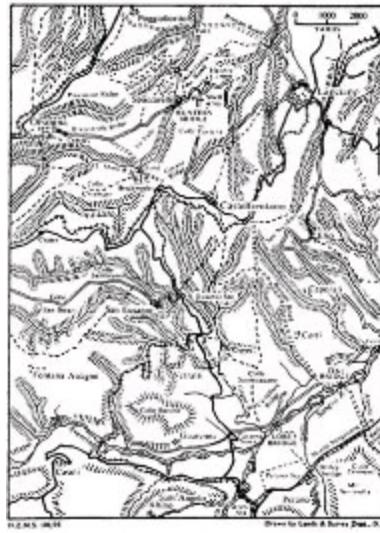
During the Sangro campaign 'Axis' again became excitable at the sound of firing and had to be left with 'Snow' Secord<sup>24</sup> and Len Small<sup>25</sup> on the armourers' truck. Although no doubt intelligent, he never demonstrated his ability in the usual type of dog tricks. He was an individualist, mostly just pleasing himself, and his sole feat consisted of climbing up and down the short ladder at the back of the truck, a trick learned purely of necessity and performed only as often as he had to, and usually without mishap, although a missing rung one morning nearly trapped him.

He was usually remarkably unemotional, but in Egypt flapping galabiehs excited a fury that was amazing (and amusing) in such a small dog. Generally speaking, Italians were received with equal hostility. Even friends of his masters were dismissed with a sniff of indifference. In diet his likes and dislikes were few, but at the sound of a primus in the truck at night he was immediately alert. Oyster patties were irresistible.

While waiting near Atessa the regiment heard with envy that the New Zealand armour had been in action. On 18 November tanks from 19 Regiment had combined with Punjab infantry of 19 Indian Brigade in a successful attack on Perano. Sixth Brigade then moved forward to share the line with the Indian brigade, and on the 23rd 18 Regiment in its turn assisted the Indians by defensive fire on Altino. Next day 5 Brigade went into the line on the right of 6 Brigade. Gradually units of th

Division were taking up position along the [Sangro](#) for the attack, and it was some satisfaction to the 20th to be with them again after an absence of nearly sixteen months.

A crossing of the [Sangro](#) had been planned for the night of 20–21 November, but heavy rain had caused the river to rise so much that the attack was postponed. Bad weather continued and on 25 November snow fell on the heights across the river.



**roads and landmarks in new zealand division's area**

The Majella mountains to the west had a gradually lowering mantle of white on which moving black specks were faintly visible through field-glasses.

During the night of 27–28 November New Zealand infantry, using ropes fixed to posts on either bank, waded and hauled themselves through the bitterly cold waters of the [Sangro](#), which in places was up to their armpits. Engineers built two bridges under fire, and armour as well as supporting arms crossed under difficulties. Nineteenth Regiment had eleven tanks bogged in the ploughlands north of the river, and finally the bulldozer that was towing them out became bogged itself.

On the 29th 18 Regiment's tanks moved to an area handier to the river and on 30 November the 20th did likewise. The 18th crossed successfully on TIKI bridge and linked up with 22 Battalion to take part in a diversionary attack along Route 84 westwards towards [San Eusonio](#) while 6 Brigade attacked [Castelfrentano](#).

On 3 December the 20th squadrons successfully crossed the river with A and B1

Echelons and took up laager positions in reserve in the foothills. The ground was mined and in C Squadron's area two men from adjoining units, one of them an ex-20th man, were killed. Two days later the tanks moved through San Eusonio and took up positions north of the lower of the two lateral roads running to the west towards [Guardiagrele](#). C Squadron went ahead to the north of the lateral road to [Salarola](#). The recent rains had made the hill slopes very soft and tanks frequently struck trouble when they left the narrow roads. Tracks were shed if tanks were parked across the slope of the land and tired crews worked late into the night to effect repairs. There were few houses in this area and men usually stretched a tarpaulin as an awning, placed bedrolls on the freezing mud, and tried to catch what sleep they could. The lucky ones obtained straw from nearby stacks, but even the worst off probably had better conditions than the infantry in the line.

On the eve of their first campaign as an armoured unit the men of the 20th were a useful blend of youth and experience. Their CO, Lieutenant-Colonel McKergow, had with him as second-in-command Major Purcell, ex-27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, who had seen German tanks in [Greece](#), had taken part in the battle for [Crete](#), and had later commanded a squadron of the [Army Tank Brigade](#) formed in New Zealand. Leading C Squadron was Major Barton, well-known for 'the punctilious performance of his less spectacular duties', as Peniakoff said of one of his staff in 'Popski's Private Army'. 'Pat', as he was affectionately called in the 20th, never left anything to chance, and his thoroughness, high sense of duty and consideration for others inspired a high standard of loyalty in his squadron. B Squadron was under Major Poole, an original member of the 20th who had been wounded in [Greece](#) and had afterwards been an instructor in the Middle East Training School in Palestine. A Squadron's OC was at first Major Guy Baker, who had been wounded in [Libya](#), but just before the first action Major John Phillips, formerly the Bren-carrier platoon's officer and twice wounded in the desert, replaced him.

The troop commanders included links with the old 20th in Captains Abbott, Johnston, [Rolleston](#), Moodie and Shand, Lieutenants Carson, Murray, Shirley, Bradley and Walton, while newly-joined subalterns like Lieutenants Martin Donnelly, Jack Hazlett and George Hart, all famous New Zealand sportsmen, were soon to prove their worth.

Leading the NCOs was the one and only 'Uke' Wilson, while every squadron included a few 'thirty-niners' or 4th Reinforcements soldiering on and making no fuss about it, links with another and an older 20th, with 'old, unhappy, far-off things and battles long ago'. To their battle experience was added the enthusiasm of the younger reinforcements, some with two years' training in armour in New Zealand, many with considerable driving and mechanical skill and keen to make good.

The whole aim of a soldier's training is to defeat the enemy in the field. His instructors can estimate his proficiency in arms and manoeuvres but the most important factor, his reactions in the presence of the enemy, they can never forecast. Every campaign brings its surprises and that just beginning in [Italy](#) was to be a stern test for all ranks.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. F. O. Dawson, MC, m.i.d.; [Morrinsville](#); born [London](#), 23 Feb 1909; Anglican minister; SCF 2 NZ Div Mar 1944-Sep 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Col H. A. Purcell, DSO, m.i.d.; [Singapore](#); born Dunedin, 18 Jan 1915; seed salesman; CO [20 Regt](#) 22 Dec 1943–27 Jan 1944, 29 May–19 Dec 1944, 9 Jan–17 Mar 1945; wounded 19 Dec 1944; now Regular Force.

<sup>3</sup> Capt J. T. Shacklock; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 19 Aug 1913; mechanical engineer.

<sup>4</sup> Maj E. O. Dawson; Dunedin; born [Australia](#), 2 Feb 1917; medical practitioner; RMO [20 Regt](#) Jul 1942-Jun 1944.

<sup>5</sup> Tpr K. J. Jones; born NZ 27 Jul 1918; labourer; killed in action 16 Dec 1943.

<sup>6</sup> L-Cpl H. W. C. Milner; born [Oamaru](#), 13 Jul 1913; journalist; wounded 16 Apr 1944.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Lt J. L. Falconer; Patearoa, Otago Central; born Dunedin, 10 Aug 1921; shepherd; wounded 30 Mar 1944.

<sup>8</sup> Capt A. H. J. Pedder; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 7 Jun 1909; sales manager.

<sup>9</sup> Cpl W. W. Brass; born NZ 10 May 1906; labourer.

<sup>10</sup> S-Sgt R. M. Newlands, m.i.d.; born NZ 6 Jun 1901; tram motorman; died Dunedin, 24 Oct 1948.

<sup>11</sup> Cpl J. P. Krause; born NZ 1 Jul 1908; labourer.

<sup>12</sup> Lt J. A. Dawkins, Blenheim; born Picton, 27 Jun 1916; stock and station agent; wounded 22 Sep 1944.

<sup>13</sup> Rev. Fr. J. J. Fletcher; Lower Hutt; born Dannevirke, 28 Nov 1906; RC priest.

<sup>14</sup> Sgt J. L. Austin; Albury; born Temuka, 27 Jun 1918; stock agent; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped Italy, Sep 1943; safe with Allied forces, 17 Oct 1943.

<sup>15</sup> Pte W. G. Skinner, m.i.d.; Lawrence; born Dunedin, 17 Sep 1914; grocer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped Italy, Sep 1943; safe with Allied forces, 17 Nov 1943.

<sup>16</sup> Tpr J. D. Anderson; born NZ 17 Jun 1917; labourer.

<sup>17</sup> Maj R. A. Bay; Christchurch; born Auckland, 17 Oct 1918; Regular soldier.

<sup>18</sup> Petrol, oil and lubricant.

<sup>19</sup> Cpl H. J. Hamilton; Milton; born Milton, 18 Feb 1918; carpenter.

<sup>20</sup> WO II T. O'Connor; Christchurch; born Greymouth, 17 Feb 1909; bus driver.

<sup>21</sup> Pte G. M. McAllister; Dunedin; born Cobden, 21 Sep 1911; tile-maker.

<sup>22</sup> Tpr W. H. Douglas; Hokitika; born Hokitika, 4 Aug 1917; labourer.

<sup>23</sup> Sgt R. Jones; Westport; born Hokitika, 21 Oct 1918; farm labourer.

<sup>24</sup> S-Sgt L. P. Secord; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 29 Mar 1920; engineer.

<sup>25</sup> Cpl L. H. Small; Paerau, Otago Central; born Lumsden, 3 May 1917; labourer; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 14 – THE BATTLE FOR ORSOGNA

## CHAPTER 14

### The Battle for Orsogna

After taking Castelfrentano early on 2 December 6 Brigade was ordered to push on to Orsogna. At the same time 4 Brigade's task was to take Guardiagrele and San Martino. The New Zealand axis of advance was to be via San Martino to Chieti. Circumstances required that the attacks be simultaneous; both were equally important to the Division's drive to Chieti and each depended on the other for its own success. Orsogna overlooked the lateral road to Guardiagrele and the latter village commanded the only good road from Orsogna to San Martino.

Two platoons of 25 Battalion actually got into Orsogna but were driven out by German tanks and infantry. Twenty-second Battalion and 18 Regiment, however, could progress no further than Salarola on the Castelfrentano- Guardiagrele road, being held up by strong German defences at the road junction further west. A full-scale attack was obviously required.

Brigadier Kippenberger, who had by this time returned from furlough in New Zealand to resume command of 5 Brigade, sums up the situation in Infantry Brigadier:

The task looked formidable. The little Moro stream was just big enough to be an obstacle and it ran at the bottom of a huge cleft. Only one road ran to Orsogna and it approached the town along a causeway. There was no possible approach through the precipitous country west of the town unless Guardiagrele was taken, and there, with perfect observation, the Germans were very firmly placed. East of Orsogna several parallel spurs ran down to the bottom of the valley. These were the only possible lines of approach, but to get on to one we should have to cut and metal a road down our side of the valley in full view of the enemy, throw a bridge, and then build another road close behind any advance up the spur. There had been much rain, movement of wheels or tracks off the metalled roads was already almost impossible, and snow was to be expected.

On 7 December a two-brigade attack was launched with the aim of capturing Orsogna and the ridge running north-east from the town. A stretch of about 2000 yards of the Orsogna- Ortona road was included in the objectives. The plan was for

18 Regiment's tanks to advance along the Lanciano- Orsogna road and break into the town frontally while 24 Battalion moved along the valley below the causeway and the Maoris attacked along the Pascuccio spur to get astride the Orsogna- Ortona road. This the Maoris managed to do but their anti-tank guns could not be got up to help them against tank attacks. Twenty-fourth Battalion fought its way into Orsogna but was counter-attacked after dark by German tanks and flame-throwers. The tanks, valiantly assisted round demolitions by bulldozers, also reached Orsogna but were halted by a German tank firing down a side road. Enemy fire was so heavy that no further progress could be made, the troops were in a precarious position, and it was decided to withdraw. The Maoris, overlooked by enemy positions on Sfasciata spur, were also in an untenable position and were ordered to withdraw. The only territory gained was the footing on Sfasciata spur obtained by 23 Battalion. This fact directed attention to the possibility of an approach from the north-east, using Sfasciata ridge to reach the Orsogna- Ortona road.

To enable supporting weapons to be taken forward to 23 Battalion two bulldozers worked all night on 8–9 December improving a cart track from Spaccarelli down to the ford over the Moro, made tracks for tanks up Sfasciata ridge almost as far as the infantry, and afterwards towed up the vital six-pounders. Engineers also bridged the Moro at the foot of the spur out of sight of Orsogna.

In preparation for the next attack the Division's armour was regrouped. Eighteenth Regiment came under 5 Brigade's command and, after nightfall on 9 December, crossed the ford and climbed the narrow track to Sfasciata, a difficult manoeuvre in the pitch darkness. By dawn twenty-eight tanks were in 23 Battalion's area and well camouflaged.

Meanwhile, on the right flank, the Canadians had attacked across the Moro on the Adriatic coast and the Indians had established a bridgehead across the river north of Frisa. The attack planned for the New Zealand Division was intended to conform with that of the Canadians, but in view of the resistance they had met it was cancelled. A policy of active patrolling was substituted and the 23rd gained sufficient ground to give a good start line for an attack.

In the meantime the New Zealand armour had been disposed tactically. After it had become certain that the projected attack on the night of 10–11 December would

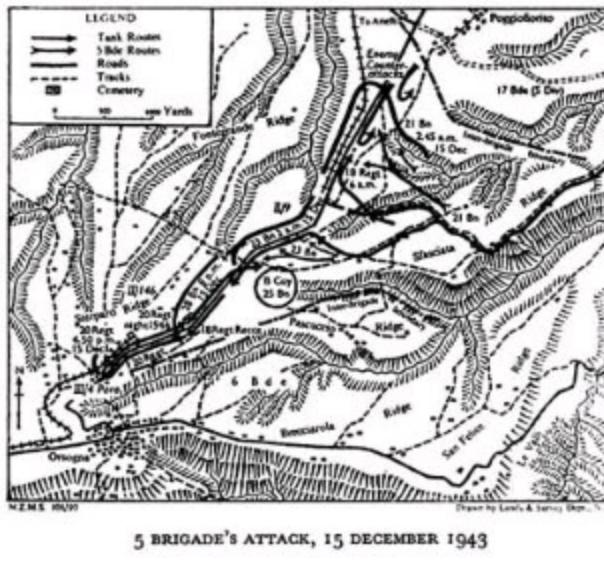
not take place, 4 Brigade had decided to move 18 Regiment back to Castelfrentano on the 12th, to replace it on Sfasciata spur with the 20th, and to transfer the 19th, which had had more than a week's rest and refitting at Castellata, to the area vacated by the 20th in support of 2 Parachute Battalion. On the night of 10–11 December the 20th moved from the left flank via Castelfrentano and Lanciano to a position about two miles east of Spaccarelli and laagered there with two Bren-carrier platoons from 22 Battalion under its command for transporting ammunition. Heavy rain on the night of 11–12 December prevented 18 Regiment's tanks from moving on the 12th and they stayed in position till the night of 14–15 December. At 5 p.m. on the 12th, 4 Brigade attached a tractor to 20 Regiment to tow bogged tanks and to help them across the ford. This tractor and one of 22 Battalion's carrier platoons on loan to the 20th were transferred to the command of the 18th on 14 December as soon as it was decided that that regiment would be the first armoured unit to advance when 5 Brigade attacked the Orsogna-Ortona road. The engineers worked continually on the track from Spaccarelli to Sfasciata and on the night of 13–14 December built a wooden bridge over the ford.

On the evening of 14 December a reconnaissance patrol consisting of Lieutenant Familton,<sup>1</sup> an engineer sergeant, and a guide inspected the craters in the nearer demolition on the Brecciarola road and decided that tracked vehicles could pass, with difficulty.

As soon as the position on 5 Corps' front was stable the New Zealand attack was to take place. On the New Zealand front the enemy had four battalions of 26 Panzer Division in the line between Poggiofiorito and Orsogna. Twenty-third Battalion and the 21st would make the assault, with the Maori Battalion in reserve.

The plan was for 5 Brigade to push forward from Sfasciata ridge in two directions, one due west to capture a mile of the Orsogna-Ortona road, including the cemetery, and the other north-west across a gully north of Sfasciata. Zero hour was 1 a.m. on 15 December. After reaching its objectives 5 Brigade, assisted by tanks of 18 Regiment, was to reorganise to meet counter-attacks and be prepared to exploit to the west with the tanks if conditions were favourable. Simultaneously with this main assault, the left battalion of 5 British Division was to advance south of Poggiofiorito and establish contact with 5 Brigade. The left flank was to be guarded by 6 Brigade occupying Pascuccio ridge and meeting 5 Brigade at the cemetery.

There was to be no frontal attack on [Orsogna](#) but the tanks were to shell the town during the attack to keep the defenders quiet. After 21 and 23 Battalions were firmly across the road, the Maoris and the 20th were to move south-west down it to seize some high ground behind [Orsogna](#) and isolate the town.



**5 brigade's attack, 15 december 1943**

The attack began on time. Twenty-first Battalion reached the road and swung right towards [Poggiofiorito](#), finally linking with 17 British Brigade. The 23rd had many casualties but crossed the road and reached the railway. On the right it was in contact with the 21st but there was a gap of several hundred yards between its left flank and the cemetery. Twenty-fifth Battalion had made contact with the 23rd's left flank but had not crossed the road.

Eighteenth Regiment, twenty-eight tanks strong, advanced up the Sfasciata ridge, a party of sappers moving in front to clear mines between the start line and the road. This, and the softness of the track after the rain, limited the speed of the advance. In the heavy going eight tanks became casualties. One troop went to assist the 21st and another moved down the [Orsogna-Ortona](#) road to the cemetery, which owing to its losses, the 23rd had not been able to reach. The troop therefore returned north-east along the road to support A Company of the 23rd, leaving two tanks at the cemetery. The area was full of pockets of Germans and it was doubtful whether the tanks could hold the cemetery unless the infantry was thickened up.

Meanwhile the infantry battalions had had a gruelling time. At 5 a.m. 21

Battalion was counter-attacked by five German Mark IV tanks which came along the road from the north-east, cutting off several platoons and causing the others to withdraw 300 yards behind the road. The tanks carried on along the road and halted behind B and D Companies of the 23rd. At the time of the enemy tank attack the first of 18 Regiment's tanks were just struggling through to the road. There had been no opportunity to bring up anti-tank weapons and the enemy tanks were too close to the New Zealand infantry to be engaged by artillery; they swept 5 Brigade's forward area with fire until 5.50 a.m., when they withdrew at leisure, still firing. When the first of 18 Regiment's tanks appeared the 21st companies, much reduced in strength, reoccupied their positions. Three hours later enemy tanks again approached, this time down a lane from [Poggiofiorito](#) east of the road, and in spite of artillery concentrations again forced D Company of the 21st to retire. Eighteenth Regiment's tanks knocked out one tank and drove the others back towards [Poggiofiorito](#).

On the left flank an armoured demonstration against [Orsogna](#) was carried out by 5 Troop of B Squadron 20 Regiment, which went forward to the outskirts of the town under Lieutenant Familton. Each tank fired about a hundred rounds, both high-explosive and armour-piercing, into the town. The troop withdrew at 2 a.m. when the position from which it had been firing was heavily shelled.

The original orders for the operation had directed 18 Regiment to be prepared to exploit after dawn on 15 December. That morning the strained situation on 23 Battalion's left flank and the lack of infantry near the cemetery made it inadvisable to do so. With the strengthening of the line by C Company of the 23rd and B Company of the 25th, however, the position improved and at 11 a.m. [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) ordered 18 Regiment to begin the exploitation past the cemetery to the western exit from [Orsogna](#). The tanks were to avoid any heavy fighting but were to watch the road leading westwards out of [Orsogna](#) and were to return to their regiment at nightfall. Except for these reconnoitring tanks the 18th was to stay where it was, hull-down on the reverse slope of the hill leading up to the cemetery.

On arrival at the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road 20 Regiment, supported by two companies of the Maoris, was to pass through the 18th and carry out the main exploitation with the object of blocking the western exit from [Orsogna](#) and then advancing south-west towards the road leading to [Guardiagrele](#). Sixth Brigade was to be ready to occupy [Orsogna](#) from the east when 20 Regiment entered it from the

west, and farther south 19 Regiment and 22 Battalion were put on an hour's notice to push forward to [Guardiagrele](#) and [San Martino](#) when the way was clear. [Orsogna](#) was not to be assaulted directly unless the German opposition there weakened, and if the New Zealand infantry could not make its way forward in the wake of 20 Regiment the tanks were not to stay out alone but were to return to the infantry at night. If the tanks by themselves could not gain the high ridge due north of [Orsogna](#), [28 Battalion](#) would go through them and attack at 2 a.m. on 16 December, and at dawn the 20th would advance again.

Orders were sent to the 20th at 8.30 a.m. to send a squadron to 5 Brigade and the New Zealand artillery was requested to fire a smoke screen round [Orsogna](#) and [Poggiofiorito](#) to hide the tanks' movement past 'Hellfire Corner'. The smoke could not be brought down before 10 a.m. and Headquarters 4 Brigade therefore instructed the 20th to delay the move until arrangements with the artillery were completed. At the same time 5 Brigade requested the tanks to move forward immediately. These conflicting orders were due to the fact that 4 Brigade was expecting an artillery liaison and observation officer to come up to 20 Regiment, while 5 Brigade was acting on the assumption that the smoke screen would be arranged by telephone and observed by artillery officers already forward with 23 Battalion. Finally the latter arrangement was used. The 20th requested the smoke to begin at 10.50 a.m. and at 10.30 C Squadron, fourteen tanks strong, moved off under command of Major Barton towards the ford.

The cover given by the smoke screen was completely successful. The tanks moved over the open section of the road without being molested, and at 11.45 a.m. the artillery was requested to stop firing smoke. Ten minutes later, however, when the first tanks of the squadron were appearing on the crest of Sfasciata, the smoke was renewed until 12.50 p.m. at the request of 5 Brigade.

Eighteenth Regiment's reconnaissance commenced at 1 p.m. Six tanks set out along the road towards the cemetery, followed by some infantry. They drew artillery fire before reaching the cemetery but advanced to a slight bend in the road about 100 yards past it, where the leading tank was hit by anti-tank fire and burst into flames. From there forward the road was directly exposed to fire from [Orsogna](#), with only a deep valley in between, and also from guns in the olive trees on the right.

The remainder of the tanks halted round the cemetery, which gave the only cover available. Here they were under fire from German machine guns and engaged them with their own.

At 12.30 p.m. C Squadron of the 20th was moving up Sfasciata ridge through 21 Battalion's rear area, and soon after 1 p.m. two troops were on the road with 23 Battalion's forward companies ready to pass through 18 Regiment. Impressions of the move are given by Major Barton:

Before we moved up the Ridge at all we had spent a number of days just waiting around, which we found rather nerve racking as we knew we were liable to go at any moment.... —a very trying wait it had been for all concerned....

The next morning, 15 December, a sudden call came for me to get the Squadron ready to move at a moment's notice and to report to 5 Bde HQ. I duly reported—having first ditched a scout car in my haste—and was given instructions from 5 Bde BM ( Denis Blundell) <sup>2</sup> to report to 18 Regt and to go under command of them and to get further instructions from Lt-Col Ferguson. <sup>3</sup> The 18th Regt were on the ridge before Orsogna. We moved off eventually about 1100 hrs. I should say we felt very conspicuous going round 'Hellfire Corner' which had a most unpleasant reputation. We crossed the stream below and were faced with what appeared to be a perpendicular slide of mud. I must confess my heart missed several beats and I really never thought we had a chance of getting up. However, Ian Carson <sup>4</sup> who was leading tackled it in his usual calm way and to my amazement and relief we all made the grade, except, I think, one of Lieutenant Walford's <sup>5</sup> troop. It was a foul track, feet deep in mud, and very narrow. We eventually reached the 18th's headquarters, dispersed under some bedraggled looking olive trees, and I reported to Col. Ferguson.

In the meantime the rest of the 20th, less B Squadron which was to stay behind the Moro with 6 Brigade, was ordered up Sfasciata to the road under the command of 5 Brigade to reinforce the exploitation along the road to Orsogna. The area was so thickly covered with smoke that it was unnecessary to fire any more to mask the move, and at 1.30 p.m. nineteen tanks, comprising Regimental Headquarters and A Squadron under Major Phillips, left the regimental area near Lanciano and crossed the Moro to support C Squadron. The tanks reached the ford at 1.54 p.m. and came

under 5 Brigade's command. During the move the RSM's tank and the Adjutant's became bogged—the latter was rear link in the communication system. A Squadron lost one tank bogged, one damaged on a mine, and another with mechanical trouble, leaving a total for the action of twenty-eight effective tanks.

Major Barton continues:

One squadron of the 18th was up at the cemetery and was waiting there for us to come up. We were to probe forward a little, more or less to feel out the ground, but mainly to hold the cemetery and ground around it. After the usual delay of getting the wireless tuned into the 18th we set off. We found the 18th squadron with one tank burning on the road just by the cemetery. We were just about to pass them when Col. McKergow came up on the air and informed me that we had reverted to command of the 20th and were to carry out our original plan. So, without any infantry, off we set for [Orsogna](#).

General Kippenberger explains the change of plan:

We had about 100 prisoners and there were reports of unusually numerous enemy dead. The Twentieth was up on the spur but there had not been room for the Maoris and it would take some hours to bring them up. Still we had dealt a heavy blow, there were signs that the enemy were confused and shaken, and I decided to try for the second phase with the Twentieth alone.

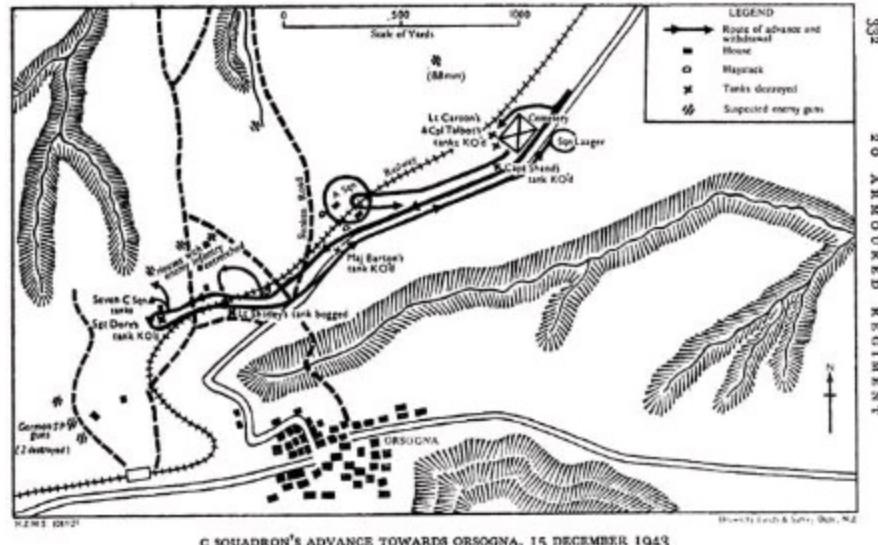
The attempt did not succeed.... There was considerable delay in proceedings owing to the mud. When I heard that the leading squadron was at length moving down the road late in the afternoon, I thought that the opportunity had gone and should have stopped it. But we could overhear the squadron commander ... talking cheerfully of knocked-out anti-tank guns, so I called for artillery concentrations on either side of the road and let them go on. <sup>6</sup>

Major Barton again:

Ian Carson's troop was leading and he went around the back of the cemetery with the idea of making it easier for us to spread out and comb more ground.... Ian and his troop disappeared behind the cemetery and it was the last we heard of him—he must have run bang into the 88 which had got the 18th tank.... [ [Corporal](#)

[Logan Talbot's](#) <sup>7]</sup> tank was brewed up there too.... The remainder of the squadron then followed up the road and our only casualty there was Alan Shand—2nd Captain—who had a bogey shot off and was immobilised—also by the same 88 but was not fired on again, which was amazing. I can still remember Alan's flow of good high country language as he stood helplessly by his tank. If ever anyone wanted to get at the Germans it was Alan.

Corporal [Denham](#), <sup>8]</sup> a tank commander of No. 3 Troop, describes his impression:



**C SQUADRON'S ADVANCE TOWARDS ORSOGNA, 15 DECEMBER 1943**

On reaching the cemetery I can well remember the squadron milling around on receipt of the change of plans ... during which valuable daylight was lost.... I think the most lasting impression ... was the dismal atmosphere of the day.... and the stench and effect of considerable shelling. The noise was not noticeable with earphones on....

I then followed [Jock \[Laidlaw\]](#) <sup>9]</sup> on to the main road to the left of the cemetery and from conversation on the air gathered that a danger spot existed just past the cemetery. Jock was going too slowly for me so I waited by the cemetery to let him get on a bit and 'enjoyed' the sight of Jock's bounteous collection of stores and cans being blown off the back of his tank by the Jerry gun. Jock was very sore later when he discovered his loss.

The squadron soon warmed to its work.

By this time things had started to hum [says Major Barton] and Jerry was taking more than passing interest in us and threw most things at us. However, we made good progress and got a lot of shooting in—casas, haystacks, which were usually hiding an MG post and full of jittery Germans, and there were also a lot of Jerries just running around aimlessly—we must have collected quite a few. At this stage Lt Percy Brookes<sup>10</sup> was leading with his troop and was going with great dash. He left the road and cut across country to the high ground which we were making for. The remainder of the Squadron followed, leaving a trail of smoking haystacks and casas—it really was a most amazing sight.

The ground was soft after rain, making tricky going for tanks off the formed roads. Major Barton was only too keenly aware of this danger:

I was very worried about the 'going' which was very soft and treacherous and it was not long before Cliff Shirley came up on the air and said he was '—well stuck!' At the time I'm afraid he did not get very much sympathy as our hands were more than full! He was in a very nasty position—bogged down and completely surrounded by Jerries. I told him he would just have to stay put in the meantime—Cliff appeared to think that very cold comfort! By this time we had crossed the soft going with no further mishaps and came out on to the high ground. Lieutenant Brookes had moved up to the ridge and was immediately engaged by Jerry tanks. Theo Dore's<sup>11</sup> tank was brewed up and it was only some fine shooting by Lt Brookes' troop and Jock Laidlaw's which restored the situation.

Split-second reaction has a high value in battle and one loader-operator in C Squadron certainly had this gift. Whether he was playing a piano-accordion or assembling a complicated gun mechanism, 'Shorty' Shorrock's<sup>12</sup> twinkling fingers seemed to be twice as quick and skilful as those of anyone else. During the advance he had been loading as fast as his gunner could fire. High-explosive shells for casas seemed to be the rule and 'Shorty' was sitting with one ready on his knees when he suddenly heard his gunner, peering through the periscope, yell that he had spotted a German tank. Realising in a flash what was needed 'Shorty' dropped the HE shell unceremoniously on the steel floor of the turret and slammed an armour-piercing round into the breech. The gunner did a good job, and some time later the turret crew realised that the fused HE shell, usually treated with extreme care, had been

dropped on its nose without blowing them all to glory.

Sergeant Laidlaw says:

German infantry were running everywhere like rabbits and our co-axial guns were working hard, but we had to keep going and, although some of them put up their hands, we could not stop to take prisoners. After we passed some of them got back into their holes again. We had been fired at and shelled all the way. Lieutenant Shirley's tank was bogged and the crew had to stay in it till we returned.

Lieutenant Shirley describes their ordeal:

We were ... 'bellied' in trying to get out and you couldn't have put a tissue paper between the mud and our bottom plates. We could hear Germans in the casa about 30 yds away and after the other tanks had gone on we were left on our own.... we primed our grenades, had rifles and Tommy guns ready, and then spent the most uncomfortable two hours or so that I never wish to go through again.

We heard a Jerry patrol move along the railway line in the dark but decided that discretion was the better part of valour.

Sergeant Laidlaw continues:

By this time we had got round to one side of [Orsogna](#) where we could cover the road north of the town. Lieutenant Brookes' tank shot up a German tank which had brewed up one of ours and in turn he was fired on by two anti-tank guns. My gunner, [Lou Jones](#), <sup>13</sup> fired at the flash of these guns and silenced one with his first shot. It went spinning over like a catherine wheel. It took several more shots to put out the second gun. Lieutenant Brookes' tank then knocked out the second enemy tank. These two German tanks had been concealed inside a haystack.

Corporal Denham says:

Being nearly last in the Squadron [we found] most of the better casas seemed to have had it, and apart from some dazed looking Jerries targets were becoming short.... I then took my tank to the right flank and found the going better with some high class casas to poop at. From there I made for the objective—a low mound with two or three casas on it directly behind [Orsogna](#). The rest of the crowd gathered

there eventually. Theo Dore's tank had been shot up.... three members of ... [the crew] killed, he and [Claude Hodges](#)<sup>14</sup> being badly burned. Theo valiantly tried to get one of the others out of the burning turret with showers of tracer hitting the turret alongside him.

In the meantime A Squadron had also advanced up the road, going into position just near the second bend past the cemetery in some olive trees to the right of the road, from where it could support C Squadron with fire. A member of this squadron, Trooper [Russell](#),<sup>15</sup> says:

... we were severely stonked all day, but kept moving and shooting and getting tanks brewed up. This must have been to the right of the cemetery quite some distance and in an area where 88s were thick. I remember these 88s all camouflaged and [they] looked just like oak trees which were all in autumn tints.... We withdrew in the evening and returned to the cemetery where we had to rearrange ourselves.

C Squadron's losses had been heavy and, with only eight tanks now in action, it could not deal effectively with the German anti-tank guns without the support of infantry, which it urgently needed. It was also under close-range fire from German infantry in buildings. The companies of the 28th, however, had not left [Castelfrentano](#) until 2.30 p.m. and were not expected on Sfasciata before dark. The leading companies left their trucks at [Spaccarelli](#) and the second convoy at 'Hellfire Corner' and walked from there via the ford to Sfasciata, an exhausting trudge of two or three miles through mud often knee-deep. The two leading companies did not arrive at the cemetery till 9 p.m.

At 5.20 p.m. [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) instructed the tanks to stay forward if possible until the infantry came up, but about the same time, as the light was failing so rapidly that C Squadron's position was becoming precarious, Colonel McKergow asked for permission to withdraw to the cemetery. This was given and the squadron withdrew under cover of artillery fire.

The squadron commander sums up the situation:

By now it was almost dark and the Colonel informed me that no infantry could possibly reach us. There was only one thing to do— to fight our way back and that

while there was some light left.... there were only two wirelesses still working in the Squadron by this time so we had a hurried conference on the ground (quite unmolested by the Jerries!) and decided our order of march to get back to the road. Lieutenant 'Rusty' Walford was to lead (he was the nearest to the road and had struck fair going coming across) and we were all to follow him, to go as fast as we could, and at all costs to keep moving as we just dare not stop or we would most certainly have got bogged down. I think it was the most anxious twenty minutes of my life. I pictured us all being bogged down in the dark surrounded by Germans and being systematically mopped up. The relief when we all reached the road was beyond words.

In the meantime I had told Cliff Shirley and his crew to leave their tank and make a dash for the road on foot and pick us up as best they could. By the time we reached the road it was completely dark and our only guides were burning haystacks which shed a ghostly light over everything and as we passed one would make us feel very conspicuous. By this time we had quite a number of wounded on board plus Lt Shirley's crew, and then to make matters worse my own tank was put out of action. I have never discovered what it was that hit us but think Jerry must have put some mines on the road after we had passed. The Germans were starting to react again and the journey was not entirely peaceful and we were very lucky to get back with so few casualties considering how many we had perched all round the tanks.... a very fine soldier, Beckett, <sup>16</sup> was killed while riding on the back of Keith Given's tank.

According to Sergeant Laidlaw:

We had to run the gauntlet through groups of houses on both sides of the road. They were full of Germans and Barton's tank was knocked out. His crew had to transfer to the other tanks. This meant that, with ... eleven extra men in the remaining tanks the turrets were too crowded for us to use the guns if we had needed to.

Corporal Denham says:

From here we retraced our tracks.... Cliff Shirley and crew caught up with us as we gained the road and three of them scrambled on to my tank.... It was about this time that Major Barton must have lost his tank and I had an 'egg' [sticky bomb]

planted on mine. I can well remember Alan Shand counting heads as we pulled into a very exposed area by the cemetery.... I am sure we were in view of the Jerry anti-tank gun before mentioned although he may have been hampered by olive trees and we were in full view of Jerry OP's in [Orsogna](#). During the night a section of 23 Bn came up to us to help picket the area prior to the Maoris arriving.... The night seemed to be spent brewing up in the turret. As some of Cliff's crew were still with me I decided to spend the night on the engine grill where I found the aforementioned bomb in the morning. A number of Jerries were dug out of slitties and haystacks by the Maoris in the morning in this area.

The results of the brigade action were plain, but prospects of further gains were uncertain. The infantry had successfully cut the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road and its bridgehead across it formed a mile-wide salient into the enemy's positions. Both flanks were now firm and the danger spot round the cemetery was solidly held. In support 18 Regiment had thirteen tanks ready to exploit towards [Poggiofiorito](#) and [Arielli](#) while the 20th had twenty-three at or near the cemetery. The New Zealand positions were further secured against counter-attacks by a complete semicircle of artillery defensive tasks ahead of them.

Losses in men and tanks, however, had been heavy. The infantry had had 33 men killed and 109 wounded. Fifteen of the 18th's tanks had been put out of action and ten of the 20th's, either by the enemy or by the hazards of the Sfasciata track. Both regiments had lost six killed, while six had been wounded in the 18th and nine in the 20th.

It was some consolation to the 20th to know that, in its first engagement as armour, C Squadron had gained its objective against stiff opposition and had been forced to withdraw as night fell only because the infantry had been unable to get up to it in time. The squadron's commanding officer sums it up:

On looking back now the whole thing rather puts me in mind of an old time cavalry charge. We just raced ahead gaily, firing like mad, and after our long wait for a chance to have a go in our tanks it really was a most satisfying and thrilling experience. Unfortunately, like all military operations our elation was sadly tempered by the knowledge that we had lost so many of our gallant friends. I always feel particularly sad for those who 'go west' in their first action—one feels that somehow

they have not had a run for their money.

One of C Squadron's casualties was Trooper Ken Jones. When Captain Coote's <sup>17</sup> tank became bogged, Jones got out to have a look and was caught by the stray round that kills so many. He was one of the regiment's 'hard cases' and is remembered for his original remarks, one of which comes readily to mind.

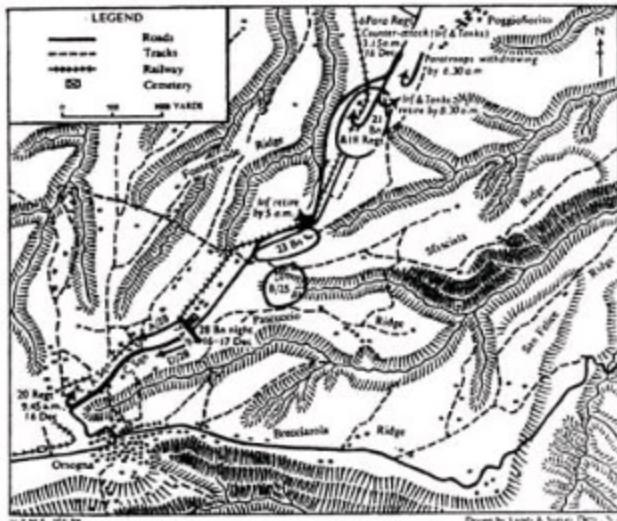
His troop commander, Allen Shand, was one day lecturing his tank crews on the recently received range tables whereby gunners were required to estimate a range as so many turns of the elevating hand-wheel. The lecture closed with the customary query, 'Any questions?' There was a momentary silence and then Jones spoke up. 'Sir,' he said, 'I understand how to change turns into yards, but what I would like to know is how to convert turns into lira.'

In accordance with the plan to repeat the attack on the morning of 16 December, the commanders of 20 Regiment and 28 Battalion conferred at 10.30 p.m. at the cemetery: Lieutenant-Colonel Fairbrother <sup>18</sup> of the Maori Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel McKergow, Major Barton and Major Phillips of the 20th, and an artillery OP officer from 4 Field Regiment. The last reported his tank stuck on a ridge behind 23 Battalion's FDLs.

Major Barton describes the night:

The conference was held in very uncomfortable surroundings in a broken down house alongside the cemetery.... it was decided to try again the next morning with the Maori Battalion. All I can remember of what little remained of the night was getting back to the tank and being received by Jackie Groufsky <sup>19</sup> with a hot mug of cocoa and bully beef sandwiches. No meal at the 'Waterloo' ever tasted so good. We spent the rest of the night before dawn came discussing the day and what was to come. Little did either of us realise how little time Jackie had left.

The plan for the attack required C Squadron to advance on the left of the road, with D Company of the Maoris 400 yards behind. A Squadron was to follow on the right of the road supported by A Company of the Maoris 300 yards behind. Working together, the two squadrons would try to get into Orsogna. The other two Maori companies and the artillery observation officer were to bring down fire on the enemy whenever he appeared.



ATTACKS AND COUNTER-ATTACKS, 16 DECEMBER 1943

### attacks and counter-attacks, 16 december 1943

About half past three on the morning of the 16th the Germans counter-attacked the 23rd and 21st vigorously from the direction of Poggiofiorito and Arielli. Infantry, tanks, and flame-throwers were used, mainly against the New Zealanders' right flank, but all attacks were beaten off. Twentieth Regiment assisted the 23rd by sweeping the ground with machine-gun fire.

The regiment's tanks were on soft ground at the cemetery and it was feared that some of them would become bogged when they tried to move. Normally tank movement was unpopular with the infantry as it usually called down enemy fire. During the enemy counter-attack the tanks took advantage of the noise to move on to firmer ground and by 6 a.m. were ready to begin the advance.

By 6.30 a.m. the infantry company commanders had reported and wireless communication on the No. 38 set had been arranged. A quarter of an hour later it was decided to postpone the attack owing to the poor light. At this stage A Squadron had ten effective tanks, C Squadron seven, and RHQ two. At 7.5 a.m. the tanks dispersed slightly and the advance started.

Major Barton once more takes up the story:

Another point which I remember very vividly was the shelling we experienced at the cemetery for about an hour on the morning of the second attack. It was terrific

and was made worse by the tall cedar trees which were causing most unpleasant airbursts. It was quite fascinating to listen to the German OP's giving their fire orders over the air.

... C Squadron's leading troop moved off with the idea of paving the way for A Squadron. I was just about to move off when we had a direct hit in the turret from an AP. Jackie Groufsky was killed and the gunner 'Slim' Sinclair <sup>20</sup> eventually died of his wounds. I was about to transfer to Lt Stan Morris's <sup>21</sup> tank when he had a bogey shot off—it was not my day. By then it was obvious that we were getting nowhere—the infantry had been held up and the tanks had got too far ahead of them. The Germans, after their experience of the day before, were well prepared this time and the attack was called off. The gun which had done so much damage was still firing and no amount of 'stonking' or patrolling would dislodge him.

Corporal Denham saw the attack begin:

C Squadron with A following moved off up the road again as it was breaking day and our Jerry anti-tank gun started up again. I went to help Alan Shand and his crew who were trying to do something with their tank when Major Barton's second tank came up. As he was about to pass I can plainly remember the flash of the AP shell hitting his turret.... Although shocked slightly and singed he was unhurt and went off for stretchers.... Shelling had been concentrated on this area very heavily during this time ... [but] he walked down the road for a stretcher as if it was only an April shower. Alan Shand got a nasty wound shortly after while trying to extinguish a fire in his tank started by the same gun that had disabled him earlier.

A Squadron continued the advance, Lieutenant Walton's troop leading, followed by Lieutenant Hart's <sup>22</sup> and Lieutenant Dougall's. <sup>23</sup>

... we set off about 7 a.m. [says Major Phillips]. There were no infantry in sight. Lieutenant Walton led the way as he had done so the previous day and knew the way and the going. I followed with Squadron Headquarters. The leading troop took up positions as previously arranged and began to shoot up haystacks and houses near the sunken road.

Sergeant Russell begins the story of this troop's advance:

We left the Maoris behind at daylight ... and, not having any communication with the ground troops it was impossible to know what was holding the infantry up. No. 1 Troop had a lead on the rest of the squadron and ... got within a few hundred yards of our objective when the 88s got on to us. We took the only shelter offering—houses. We no sooner stopped than the Jerries came from haystacks and houses and we dealt with them very successfully by quick shooting. Ivan Walton was the troop officer but could not get complete cover from an 88 and was hit repeatedly through the engines, but stayed at his post until all his ammo was gone and then decided to get back this mile or so on foot with his crew.

Trooper Percasky <sup>24</sup> was one of Walton's crew. He has recorded that when Walton evacuated his tank he was 'all for continuing the fight' from a tank nearby that had been immobilised the previous day. However, after some discussion it was decided to get back as best they could. During this move a shell wounded Lieutenant Walton and his gunner, Trooper Herbison. <sup>25</sup> Lance-Corporal Coleman <sup>26</sup> carried Herbison into a house close by, outside of which Sergeant Dalton's <sup>27</sup> tank was burning. Percasky then made his way to the house also. There he found the crew of Dalton's tank, three of them badly wounded.

Sergeant Russell describes the action:

The Jerries let the tanks through his infantry and lay low until we tried to get back and then came to light. The Hun infantry also pinned the Maoris down we found out later. Gib Dalton was troop sergeant and a grand soldier. He took shelter behind a two-storeyed house to the right of the road.... Gib's tank was hit and went up in smoke in a matter of seconds. Flames were pouring out of the two drivers' hatches and the turret as well. Gib came out through them ... with the ear phones still on. I saw both drivers get out also through flames.

Trooper Thomas <sup>28</sup> of Sergeant Dalton's tank gives their story:

We proceeded until [Lieutenant Walton's] tank stopped and engaged targets. My tank ... engaged targets to the left of the road. We were halted between three houses when I thought I saw a haystack move and was reporting same to the sergeant when we were hit. Immediately we went up in flames. Being wireless operator I was last out the turret. I ran back about 15 yds to where Sgt Dalton and

Trooper Kneebone <sup>29</sup> [the gunner] were lying badly wounded and burnt. They asked if I had seen ... our two drivers, but ... [I could only presume] that they had both been hit.... I crawled over to a house on our right about 10 yds away, had a quick look inside and went back and helped Eric Kneebone inside. Then I went back for Sgt Dalton who unaided covered that distance although he had almost lost a leg by the AP shell. We were all very badly burnt.... I rolled smokes for the three of us and [had] lit up when there was a terrific explosion outside bringing in part of the roof and smothering us in dust. Outside we could hear our tank brewing up, our ammo, etc. exploding.

By now Eric and Gib were in serious pain so I crawled out into the front passage to see if any of our squadron tanks had come up as far as we were. The first thing I saw was a Kiwi crawling back up the road. I called several times. He looked over and said 'What the hell are you Maoris doing up here?' It was L/Cpl A. Coleman, Lieut Walton's driver. He came back carrying his cobber Tom Herbison, their gunner, ... [whom we carried] into one of the back rooms.... By this time we were beginning to go blind. L/Cpl Coleman, Troopers Percasky and Perrin <sup>30</sup> refused to leave us in our condition although it meant certain captivity or death. ... Jerry troops were around our tank 10 yds away. Escape was impossible. A Jerry doctor came out of Orsogna and gave us drugs and a drink of vino. Then they carried us away on stretchers into Orsogna, where I was immediately operated on.

Trooper Herbison died in the house but Lieutenant Walton rallied later and, with Sergeant Dalton, was carried back to a German rear headquarters where they were separated from the other prisoners, who did not see them again.

Corporal de Lautour's <sup>31</sup> tank was now the only one mobile in the troop.  
Sergeant Russell continues:

Well, there we were, one tank left and a mile away from the others. We waited for those on foot to get back, believing that our presence on the road would help them make it, and then our only chance was speed. I got Bill de Lautour, our tank commander, to back the tank as far as possible in the shelter of the house so that we would have as much speed on as possible when we came out into the open. I also fired all my smoke rounds to cover our move and away we went. We passed some of Ivan Walton's crew pinned down alongside the road but saw them too late

to stop, which I think would have been finis.

We got back to Major Phillips' tank and pulled off the road alongside it. George Hart told us that at least five red hot ones brushed over us when we were coming back. We were also told that we were at first thought to be a Jerry tank and were lucky not to have stopped one from our own side. I noticed after this an order that tanks returning would always reverse their turret. Ours was being traversed and shooting during the earlier part of the journey.

We were very worried about our other crews getting back on foot and waited some time for them. I then saw some men on foot who, I surmised, were not ours. Bill de Lautour got permission over the air and went to investigate, thinking they might be ours. He went only about 400 yards and fell as if dead, a cunning move. I got going with the co-axial Browning and he was not long in getting back into the turret. So ended the day's work.

Major Phillips made two reconnaissances on foot to try to find the crews of the two knocked-out tanks of Lieutenant Walton's troop but each time was stopped by machine-gun fire. He says:

After the troop leader had told me over the air that his tank had been hit I offered to bring my tank up to rescue his crew but he said they would be better on foot. As he was on the spot I accepted his decision. When his crew did not return I went forward on foot to look for them. I met so much LMG fire that I decided there was no hope of getting any nearer them that way and returned to get my tank. Most of our crews were out of their tanks, sitting about wondering what had happened to C Squadron and waiting for them to come up. Just then the third tank of my leading troop came back under fire. As it arrived Lieutenant Dougall's tank was hit, apparently by a needle gun, and began to burn slowly. His crew evacuated and I called to the men to take fire extinguishers and put out the fire. By the time I had got ours and gone forward there was no hope of saving it.

By this time Lieutenants Shirley and Walford, with some C Squadron tanks, had come up. There was plenty of shelling.... C Squadron had had casualties, there was no sign of any supporting infantry, and the attack just petered out.

Attempts to communicate with the forward infantry having proved unsuccessful,

Colonel McKergow finally got in touch with [Colonel Fairbrother](#), who was still in contact with his leading troops. A Company was ordered to try to work round to the right to locate the enemy anti-tank guns but, as the [Maori Battalion's](#) war diary says, '... [the guns] being so well camouflaged and sited ... presented great difficulties to our Infantry.'

The tanks were finding things difficult, too. By 10 a.m. nine tanks had been knocked out and [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) ordered the remainder to withdraw to the best possible position to form a bridgehead. The CO ordered A Squadron to withdraw slightly to more favourable positions and C Squadron to remain where it was. [Colonel Fairbrother](#) was told that the tanks would withdraw to the cemetery at last light.

Major Phillips continues:

On orders from the CO we withdrew slightly to near a church where we took some paratroop prisoners from haystacks and told them to go back along the road to the infantry, saying we would keep them covered with our tank machine guns.

At 11.5 a.m. another of A Squadron's Shermans brewed up. As the tanks could neither neutralise the fire of the concealed enemy guns nor hold their ground without further losses, the CO at 11.30 ordered the remainder of A Squadron to withdraw as soon as possible behind the cemetery, followed by C Squadron, the commanders to arrange mutual support. Major Phillips describes the withdrawal:

I spoke on the air to Lieutenant Shirley and told him we would withdraw to the cemetery, A Squadron leading, followed by C Squadron. I would fire smoke at the north-west corner of the cemetery, to blind the anti-tank gun that had done so much damage, and our tanks were to go at top speed. Mine was the last tank out and I saw one tank drilled through the rear of the engine compartment and the bogey of another shot through.

Enemy shelling of the cemetery area was incessant and heavy and four of the wounded, including Lieutenant Walford, were killed. The IO, Lieutenant Dave Murray, went to look for stretcher-bearers and was not seen alive again. Later his body was found amongst the dead at the cemetery, where he must have been killed

while assisting the wounded. He was sadly missed in the regiment. A popular, cheery officer, he had been wounded in the breakthrough at [Minqar Qaim](#) in June 1942 and is remembered for his interesting and witty talks on the intelligence summaries.

Shortly after noon A Squadron reported a house with a camouflage net at one side. The CO ordered his tanks east of the cemetery to demolish the building but its destruction did nothing to reduce the enemy's fire. [Colonel Fairbrother](#) was informed that the regiment's position was untenable and that the tanks would withdraw behind his FDLs, leaving his two forward companies to withdraw as soon as possible. Arrangements were made to evacuate the casualties by bearer parties and the regiment withdrew at 3 p.m. under heavy shellfire. The tank state of the regiment, less B Squadron, at the end of the day was C Squadron 5, A Squadron 7, RHQ 2—a total of 14.

At first light on 17 December the squadrons withdrew to turret-down positions on Sfasciata ridge and the CO established his headquarters at the [Maori Battalion](#) headquarters, the two functioning conjointly. Spasmodic enemy shelling caused a further fatal casualty during the day and at last light five tanks of A Squadron moved down the [Ortona- Orsogna](#) road to the 21 Battalion area to relieve tanks of 18 Regiment, while C Squadron and the remaining two tanks of A Squadron moved to a covering position in the Maoris' area.

During the day (17 December) two troops of B Squadron had been engaged in a reconnaissance in force of [Orsogna](#). An artillery OP had reported after dawn that there was no movement round [Orsogna](#) and 26 Battalion was ordered at 8.45 a.m. to send two platoons forward with two troops of the 20th to test the strength of the enemy.

At 9.30 a.m. the leading platoon from D Company of the 26th advanced along the [Lanciano- Orsogna](#) road. At the same time 7 Troop of B Squadron under Lieutenant [McKerchar](#)<sup>32</sup> pulled in behind D Company's positions, waited till the infantry had gone about 500 yards ahead, and then followed. The first part of the advance was made without opposition and the first platoon reached a demolition about 1000 yards from the start line at 10 a.m. Wireless communication between the tanks was perfect, but the infantry lost touch through their No. 38 sets being

jammed. However, keeping the infantry in sight, the tanks moved up behind the platoon to the demolition, while the infantry advanced again towards the outskirts of [Orsogna](#). A second platoon of D Company moved up to support the first and was accompanied by 6 Troop under Lieutenant Dawkins, which deployed some distance east of the demolition to assist with fire. The detour round the demolition was still passable for tanks, but McKerchar, who was leading his troop, was unwilling to proceed until a search had been made for mines. The infantry, moving along north of the road, had been hidden by a high bank and there was some delay before they could be located. Finally, just as a mine-searching party of infantry reported a track clear round the demolition, they were fired on and disappeared.

McKerchar suspected mines on the road and asked for instructions before rejoining the infantry, who were once more in trouble and out of touch. They had run into a minefield when moving north of and below the road and the mines were so thick that two or three had to be lifted before the men could dig in.

Communications were difficult from the outset. It had been arranged that the infantry were to call on the supporting tanks by runner or visual signal, the pace of the advance being governed by the speed of the men on foot. However, visual contact with the ground troops could not be maintained and finally control was effected by runner from the infantry to their headquarters, by telephone from there to B Squadron headquarters, and thence by radio to 6 and 7 Troops.

The infantry's headquarters was calling for the tanks to move up and 7 Troop was ordered forward. The leading tank at 11.50 a.m. by-passed the demolition and it had gone some 400 yards past the filled crater when one of its tracks was blown off by either a mine or a shell, which also blew off the complete bogey assembly. There were no casualties to the crew. No. 6 Troop was ordered to fire on suspected enemy mortar positions and did so until the artillery opened up a few moments later.

Sergeant McClelland <sup>33</sup> took his tank forward but was ordered to pull back slightly owing to the danger of more mines. Both tanks came under shell, mortar, and small-arms fire. Likely enemy positions were shelled by the artillery and 6 Troop at 1.15 p.m., but a quarter of an hour later the Germans laid a smoke screen across [Orsogna](#).

At 2.33 p.m. 26 Battalion reported that the infantry were held up by fire from four spandaus, but 7 Troop was unable to observe where this fire came from. Both troops were mortared from north of Orsogna and the leading tank shot the top off a building about fifty yards away from which green flashes had appeared.

Just before 3 p.m. Lieutenant McKerchar's tank was hit a second time and he ordered the crew to bale out. While doing so the operator was wounded in the back by a grenade which landed on the back of the tank. The troop commander and the gunner baled out and McKerchar moved round to the front of the tank to evacuate the drivers, who could not get out by way of the emergency hatch as the tank was down on one side. While doing so he was killed by machine-gun fire. The gunner, Trooper Sutherland,<sup>34</sup> tried to drag the commander round to the back of the tank but was himself wounded. He says:

The wireless operator, Trooper Rees,<sup>35</sup> and I then took shelter under the tank and the drivers remained inside, pinned down by machine-gun fire. Sergeant McClelland's tank came up but it became bogged in a crater. A member of his crew crawled up a ditch to investigate and I called to him, telling him our casualties and that I could hear the enemy talking. This was reported to Squadron Headquarters. When things quietened down I tried to move back. I was machine gunned but managed to escape.

Corporal Lomas,<sup>36</sup> the third tank commander, then took his tank forward at 4 p.m. to tow out the sergeant's tank. Enemy small-arms fire interrupted the work, but with 6 Troop's support by fire it was completed successfully a quarter of an hour later.

There was now no hope of advancing into Orsogna and the infantry advised that they had decided to withdraw after nightfall. The tanks stayed forward to rescue their wounded. Sergeant McClelland and Trooper Burland<sup>37</sup> went forward under fire to bring back the remaining men from McKerchar's tank. Shortly after 5 p.m. the sergeant's tank was set on fire by a mortar bomb and the remaining tank was recalled by Major Poole. It duly returned, bringing back all the wounded. No. 6 Troop covered the withdrawal before returning itself. During the night the enemy blew up the knocked-out tanks.

On 18 December the Regiment had a static role. A and C Squadrons experienced mortar fire and shelling and engaged machine-gun posts which were firing on the infantry. The Adjutant's tank was still bogged and, in order to maintain communications with 4 Brigade, he transferred to the RSM's tank and moved down to the [Maori Battalion](#) headquarters to join Colonel McKergow.

At first light on 21 December some C Squadron tanks returned to A Echelon area for rest and maintenance and were joined in the late afternoon by the CO and the Adjutant. Meanwhile, one troop of A Squadron remained with 21 Battalion, a mixed troop of A and C Squadrons with the Maoris, and another A Squadron troop in reserve at [Maori Battalion](#) headquarters, all under Major Phillips.

Lieutenant [Caldwell](#)<sup>38</sup> describes the situation just before Christmas:

About the 19th December the position at [Orsogna](#) had become rather static—the Maoris were in and around the cemetery. Three tanks from A Squadron were situated about 100 yds on the [Moro](#) side of the cemetery road. I had just recently come back from hospital and was sent up with three crews ... to relieve the crews in these tanks. We left after dark with a mule train across the [Moro](#) and up what had been the road. It now consisted of two wide ruts made by the tanks and a slippery level patch in between. The only way to stop floundering into the ruts was to hold on to a mule and it seemed as if it could see its way in the dark the way it kept to the middle.

We duly relieved these crews and stayed there for three or four days in absolute inactivity with only an occasional reminder from the Germans that they had some interest in the area. We could by looking back to our left see 'Hellfire Corner' and we could watch the various vehicles running the gauntlet, often pursued by a few shells from the town.

Bill Russell's troop of A Squadron was farther to the north-east with 21 Battalion, which was holding a bridgehead over the railway line under heavy shellfire. 'We had the role of shooting up fox holes which covered this bridgehead and successfully cleared the fox holes and shifted a few Jerry O pips.'

The period in a static role was brief. [Eighth Army](#)'s intention was to continue the

offensive and to reach the [Arielli](#) stream by 24 December. On the right 5 British Division was to capture [Arielli](#) and the high ground on either side of it on the afternoon of 23 December. The New Zealand Division was to advance to a ridge beyond the [Fontegrande spur](#), thus practically turning [Orsogna's](#) flank and gaining space to deploy its guns across the [Moro](#). Fifth Brigade was to carry out the attack with the assistance of 26 Battalion. It was not an easy task. The men were tired, numbers were low, and the mud seriously restricted tank movement. Patrols from the 21st and the Maoris had found the [Fontegrande spur](#) strongly held by German paratroops.

On the afternoon of 22 December Colonel McKergow was wounded in the arm while returning from 4 Brigade Headquarters after receiving orders to move his headquarters and B Squadron back to Sfasciata that afternoon and to come under command of 5 Brigade. Major Purcell took over the regiment and went to 5 Brigade Headquarters for orders. The 20th was to allot one squadron to [28 Battalion](#), to support and exploit if possible, and another squadron to the 21st and 26th, mainly for their defence but also with the possibility of exploiting. Its strength for this action was 29 tanks—16 in B Squadron, 9 in A Squadron, and 4 with RHQ.

At 4.30 p.m. B Squadron reverted to the command of the 20th and at 5 p.m. Regimental Headquarters moved from its rest area to [Spaccarelli](#), where it was joined by B Squadron. The tanks crossed the [Moro](#) by HONGI bridge and laagered for the night on the lower end of [Sfasciata spur](#). At dawn they moved further up and dispersed round 21 Battalion headquarters on the ridge.

The regiment's next action continued the pattern which had begun with C Squadron's foray on 15 December. In the old infantry days the battalion had attacked with perhaps two rifle companies forward and two in support, and with mortars, Bren carriers and, later, two-pounder anti-tank guns in mobile supporting roles. Now the regiment split up into squadrons, half-squadrons and, at times of heavy tank casualties, into troops in support of the men on the ground.

The attack by [5 Division](#) was successful but its 15 Brigade could not extend far enough to the left to link up with 21 Battalion. The New Zealand attack began with an artillery barrage at 4 a.m. on 24 December. Twenty-first Battalion gained its objective and one company advanced to the second ridge. The 26th had a similar

success against tough opposition but the lodgment on the second ridge was most insecure. It was small in numbers, was overlooked by enemy posts, and could not be supplied in daylight. The Maoris advanced westwards and gained the neck of land which gave the tanks access to Fontegrande ridge, but they were then held up by stubborn German paratroops and lost heavily.

At 5 a.m. on 24 December the 20th tanks moved to support the infantry. Lieutenant Caldwell begins A Squadron's story:

It was on the morning of the 23rd that a conference was called by Lt-Col Purcell to put us in the picture as regards an attack planned by [Brig Kippenberger](#). A Squadron, led by Major Phillips, was ... to move along the road past the cemetery towards the town and, about 600 yards past, [was] to turn at right angles across the fields to contact the Maori Bn by daylight.... We set out in the early hours of the morning and with no visibility I started by putting my tank off the road and throwing a track. I then stopped my sergeant's tank and took it over. We proceeded along the road nose to tail. There was a lot of stuff going and coming across our heads but on the road everything was comparatively quiet.

The tanks moved in line ahead along the road with Major Phillips leading. He says:

At first we had some Engineers, protected by a section of Maoris, sweeping for mines in front of us. Near the cross roads they encountered small arms fire, the Maoris withdrew, and the Engineers took cover. They were willing to go on but as they would obviously have suffered casualties I decided to try to push on without their assistance.



5 BRIGADE'S ATTACK, 24 DECEMBER 1943

### 5 brigade's attack, 24 December 1943

As dawn was approaching the tanks had to try to get hull-down positions near the crossroads and the sunken track running north. The two earlier tank attacks had confirmed that there were no other suitable positions between the start line and the crossroads. A few hundred yards short of the crossroads Major Phillips's tank was stopped when mines blew off both tracks. While its crew were evacuating, Lance-Corporal Kidd,<sup>39</sup> the operator, and Trooper Newton,<sup>40</sup> the gunner, were killed. The sappers, who deserve special mention, soon appeared and under heavy fire swept a turn off the road to allow the tanks to deploy to the right.

Lieutenant Caldwell continues:

George Hart and I after a short consultation swung right off the road and moved through the olive trees to find the Maoris. George was on the left and I on the right. It was just getting light now and George's troop came under fire....

Bill Russell describes their contact with the enemy:

Our tank ran slap bang into an anti-tank gun and tractor sheltered in a haystack and he got the first shot in and blew our track off. But I got him before he got the second shot and Sergeant Needham's tank also got some shots into the gun position and the haystack and tractor burnt. We shot up houses and it was amazing to see so many prisoners waiting to be taken but we could not deal with them except a few from fox holes around our positions. Needham's tank ran on a mine and George Hart withdrew behind us to support us if necessary. Tony McKay,<sup>41</sup> a gunner, took some

prisoners for a walk with his revolver in hand but no ammo for it, but they went quietly. We sat in tanks all day shooting and being sniped at if we ventured out.

Lieutenant Caldwell soon linked up with B Company of [28 Battalion](#). 'I carried on to the right and contacted my Maori company commander and gave them some help by shooting up with the troop various houses across the gully in front from which a few spandaus were still firing. By this time the Maoris had dug slit trenches and were well established.... The day passed reasonably well. Tubby [Hamilton](#), <sup>42</sup> one of the tank commanders, did some good shooting at Jerry positions, notably a haystack, and Jerries came out of it like rabbits from a warren.'

B Squadron had advanced as soon as the artillery barrage opened at 4 a.m. The tanks moved up [Sfasciata spur](#) along the track known as 'Duncan's Road' to come under command of 26 Battalion. Some 300 yards short of the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road the track was blocked by burnt-out tanks from previous actions and the squadron commander, Major Poole, having made contact with 26 Battalion, led the squadron on foot across some fields to the road.

While moving up the ridge in the darkness Captain Abbott's tank went over the edge but luckily landed upside down on its turret on a small ledge ten feet below. He and his crew escaped by climbing out of the escape hatch in the floor. Captain Rolleston's tank went half-way over before anyone realised what was happening and it remained precariously balanced there until rescued by a Scammel, one of the unit's recovery vehicles, next day.

A Squadron having secured the turn-off at the crossroads, 5 Troop of B Squadron was ordered up at 7.20 a.m. to the first objective, Fontegrande ridge, situated between the eastern and central tributaries of the [Arielli stream](#). At the same time 6 Troop, under Lieutenant Dawkins, was ordered up to the cemetery area to assist 5 Troop forward and give all possible support.

Moving down the road, 5 Troop reached the turn-off at 7.43 a.m., but one tank was disabled on the minefield that had immobilised Major Phillips's tank. The troop commander, Lieutenant Familton, describes their progress:

I saw no use in going further, turned north ..., took the lead myself, and headed across country. Going soft and visibility poor —trees and fog. About ... [a quarter of a

mile from the road] we were heavily shelled. Direct hit on the rear of my tank wiped off all our Christmas dinner, in ammo tins welded on the back, and all our water. Luckily [we were] carrying no tarpaulins—a lesson learned earlier at the Sangro.... Although all were shaken no one was hurt.

At 8.25 a.m. the troop made contact with 26 Battalion, left one tank to assist it, and pushed on to the right flank. Hamilton's account continues *inter alia*:

We sighted houses ... and turned north-east looking for 21 Bn. We had to keep moving [as I was] frightened that if we stopped we would bog.... We reached Fontegrande, [though it was] hard to tell where we were ... contacted 21 Bn—Major Tanner.<sup>43</sup> The Infantry were done—so was the rum.... [The troops were] very thin on the ground.... We immediately engaged MG posts on the far side of the creek—good shooting—first shot almost fatal to 21 Bn. It was HE and burst on a twig just in front of the FDLs. We had to bore sight from this on.

The infantry had met heavy resistance; the 21st was worried about its exposed right flank and, like the 26th, could get only one depleted company on to the far bank of the Arielli stream. The second objective, the ridge beyond Fontegrande and between the central and western tributaries of the Arielli, was beyond reach.

There were so many ridges and spurs in the area that for some time the information sent back to infantry and armoured headquarters was rather obscure. Colonel Purcell's report of the operation states:

At 0750 hrs CO was ordered to carry on with original plan for second objective, [to exploit south-west and west towards Filetto] and as Inf did not appear to be certain of final objective Capt Abbott, with the remainder of half sqn, was ordered up to thicken up on first objective, i.e. three tks with 21 NZ Inf Bn and three tks with 26 NZ Inf Bn.

At 0900 hrs CO was advised that second objective seemed OK, and OC B Sqn and other half sqn was ordered to stand by for time being, ready to bring original plan into operation.

At 0907 hrs OC B Sqn advised that information from CO 26 NZ Inf Bn was that inf were dug in on first objective but had not proceeded to second objective.

No. 6 Tp (Lt Dawkins) was withdrawn from cemetery as visibility was too poor for him to be of assistance.

Captain Abbott's troop moved down past the cemetery just before 10 a.m. and was heavily shelled. Visibility was very bad and the tanks had considerable difficulty in finding the route, but about noon reported that they were in position. Meanwhile 5 Troop's tanks were carrying out fire tasks in support of the infantry.

Lieutenant Familton continues:

Mist made observation poor—watched for smoke and flash of MGs in mist. [Our] tanks were right on the crest of the ridge in amongst the infantry slit trenches. Absolutely no hope of the infan- try moving forward. Not only done in but terrain was very difficult and a good deal of opposition. My second tank was on the boundary [between] 21 Bn and 26 Bn assisting 26 Bn in same way.

At 11.55 a.m. RHQ moved near the [Orsogna](#) road, visibility being still very bad, and the artillery forward observation officer was taken up to the 21 Battalion FDLs in RSM Wilson's tank to try to find better observation. The tank remained in the area to thicken up the armoured support. Lieutenant Familton with two tanks took over the right flank with the 21st, one troop of three stayed about the boundary between the two battalions, and another three tanks supported the 26th. Owing to the difficulty of getting infantry support weapons up to Fonte grande the tanks remained in the FDLs, engaging numerous enemy machine-gun and mortar positions.

The Brigade Commander later paid this tribute to the regiment's work this day:

Before daylight a squadron of the Twentieth tanks ... got round the neck on to the [Fonte grande Ridge](#) and very soon completed the mopping-up. They had a busy day and before it ended had outshot and thoroughly quietened the Germans on the second ridge, who started off by sniping in a most aggressive fashion. They were handled in a bold and skilful way that provided one of the few bright features in this unsatisfactory affair.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile it was discovered that Lieutenant Hart's troop of A Squadron had got ahead of A Company of the Maoris, who had met intense enemy fire. The crews remained in their four disabled tanks and during the day fought them from their

exposed positions. The work of Major Phillips in contacting the infantry on foot and guiding his tanks is worthy of mention. Later in the day, having obtained another tank, he went back to his old tank on the road to get some gear but was disturbed by an 88-millimetre gun firing from [Orsogna](#) which chased him through the olive trees. While attending a conference called by the Maoris, Major Phillips was wounded when the house in which the meeting was being held suffered some direct hits and part of the roof collapsed. After he was evacuated Lieutenant Caldwell took command of the squadron, with Lieutenants Hart and Morris as troop commanders. Despite frequent attempts by Lieutenant Hart on the ground and by the CO over the air to get in touch with the infantry, dusk came with the disabled tanks still forward of the FDLs. The CO of [28 Battalion](#) was asked to send a standing patrol forward to protect the tanks but this patrol did not find them. About 10.30 p.m. the tanks were attacked by enemy infantry with anti-tank grenades.

Sergeant Russell continues his account:

Christmas Eve and raining steadily, getting dark and no infantry with us. About 9 o'clock we were eating biscuits, good hard ones, and all one could hear was the crunching of biscuits. I had my head out looking for any action and a driver also was on watch, but the night was so dark we could not see any patrol. Anyway Jerry came in and sticky-bombed our tank and rocked us severely. The concussion was enough to bust our fuel tanks. I started defending ourselves with the revolver until we got organized and Bill de Lautour fired the big gun with the guard down—somewhat dangerous in itself. Yes, we fired all we had at the darkness and saw no results. Dave Black, our wireless operator called up on the air—his words—'We are being heavily engaged.'

Lieutenant Caldwell describes the difficulties of communication:

Then ... we started to have trouble with our batteries. We were too green to realise that we could not keep the wireless running all the time without running the batteries down. If we started the charger going or the engines the infantry complained bitterly as it drew fire on them all around us, and furthermore they could not hear anything coming. So by evening our wireless work was almost useless but we just managed to arrange for George [Hart] to bring out what tanks he could with the other crews carried on the back.

Russell describes their withdrawal:

A stonk was called down to help us get out and we had to delay it four minutes to get enough time to get out and on to George Hart's tank—two crews riding on the outside of one slippery and muddy tank in the rain. I reached the mobile tank as Tony McKay was just leaving it. I asked where he was going and to my amazement he said, 'Back to dismantle the guns, as we have been told.' It was bad enough getting back this far without having to do it again and we all climbed on and started for the railway line which was steep and slippery going to cross, Sgt Needham [walking out in front] waving a white handkerchief in the dark to try and show us the route, and feeling quite conspicuous to the Jerry.

Colonel Purcell writes:

The withdrawal of A Sqn tanks that night was a very iffy business. Lt. Hart was leading but could not read his map in the dark and was therefore directed from my tank. I had an air photograph, and, with George identifying certain points that I described as he moved we finally located the crossing over the railway, and so back to leaguer.

A Squadron was now left with five 'runners', four being in the Maori FDLs and one in RHQ area, the last subsequently requiring attention from the unit fitters.

In the northern sector of the front 25 Battalion relieved the 21st that night. An account by Lieutenant Familton states inter alia:

Rather a sticky position arose for a short time before 2 a.m. when we were left holding the line with two tanks and with no contact with the British Division on the right flank. The Corporal on ground watch heard a Jerry patrol out front and we called for Arty protection and had the Div. Arty covering our front in about four minutes....

We pulled back off the ridge and took up position by the company commander's headquarters, a battered old house. On 26 December we did a shoot from FDLs for the Infantry and got both tanks bogged. It had been raining and we had to get one of Pat Abbott's tanks to pull us out.... Jerry had a sitting target on the skyline but strangely hardly fired anything at us. He must have been waiting for his self-

propelled Arty because he just had us bracketed when we were pulled off.

During Christmas and the two succeeding days the tanks remained in position, being subjected to harassing fire by enemy artillery and mortars and engaging them in return. The regiment's war diary entry for 28 December, 'engage houses near enemy FDLs and enemy seen to evacuate', is amplified by Lieutenant Familton:

On the 27th I had a visit from Major Williams<sup>45</sup> of 25 Bn who wanted us to shoot up some houses for his forward sections. I said we would need an OP with his forward section and he immediately offered to do the job himself. We ran through the procedure and ... netted him in on a 38 set. He set out and at the required time we moved into FDLs again and made contact with Major Williams. We fired a good number of rounds and scored some direct hits on houses. Major Williams in his excitement jammed the air giving us a description of the Jerries running.

On 29 December 5 Troop was to be relieved by the reserve troop. While moving up to the Fontegrande ridge from the Orsogna road the leading tank slid off the track while trying to avoid a dead mule. The next tank blew up on what the engineers later believed to have been a triple Teller mine on a ratchet. The belly was blown out of the tank, the turret lifted, and the gun jammed over the driver's hatch. The turret was immovable, the tank on fire. Two of the turret crew were wounded and the driver, Trooper Carmichael,<sup>46</sup> and spare driver, Trooper Dawson,<sup>47</sup> were both killed.

This tank now blocked the only swept track through the minefield to the main road and it was not possible to relieve 5 Troop until dark, when crews were changed. Lieutenant Familton concludes:

Rain had soaked the ground. We had tried to dig dugouts by the tanks but were flooded out and had to sleep in relays curled round the turret floor. Steel is a cold, hard mattress. At last light we came out to a well-earned rest and sleep.

For three days a section of 22 Battalion's Bren carriers was put under 20 Regiment's command to carry ammunition supplies forward, but mules were the only means of bringing up food, fuel and ammunition from Sfasciata ridge. Splendid work was done by Lieutenant 'Stuffy' Hazlett<sup>48</sup> in getting these mule trains up to the forward tanks night after night. Sergeant Russell describes the reactions of Italian

muleteers as they drew near the front line:

... Jim Easterbrook <sup>49</sup> and I took a badly organised mule team up to Chas Caldwell's position. I think we left about 10 p.m. on Christmas night so as to be on the road before the cemetery about 2 a.m. as it was shelled regularly. We had Italians with the mules and my impressions of them were very poor. They said they were not supposed to be in the forward areas and if I had not threatened to be rough with them would have certainly got lost in some safe place on purpose. The drums of petrol and dieseline were tied on to these mules by a strap or cord through a handle on top of the tin which often used to pull out and off would come the load. I think we only arrived there with half the supplies we started with. We turned ... to the right about 800 yards before the cemetery and took a track which led to the tanks and got within a couple of chains of them and dumped the gear, as the Ities were really sticking their toes in and it was a job to hold them there while we unloaded. Jim told Chas of our arrival and I had to keep the Ities from clearing out. The journey was pretty quiet except for a few shells on the opposite side of the ridge.

The difficulties to be overcome in supplying the forward tanks during a Sangro winter brought out the best in the quartering staff. Major Barton pays tribute to two of his men, who had their counterparts in the other squadrons:

I can remember so vividly meeting Bob Newlands [C Squadron's QMS] and old Bill Brass, our cook, on the mud track on the way to Orsogna. It was pitch dark and very muddy. Bob was supposed to be miles away. He and old Bill had carried for miles a huge pile of new socks and clothing of every description—I believe he had been ordered back by the CO but conveniently 'forgot' the order—and to top it all off he opened up a blanket and it was full of freshly baked scones! Bob was always the first on the scene after any action and we never lacked anything.

Lieutenant Caldwell describes the close of the year on A Squadron's front:

This was the only show I remember when the tanks were within 20 yards of the front slit trenches. The first shot fired from my tank at a house about 300 yards away was nearly unfortunate for a Maori in front of me. The tank was a replacement sent up without the gun T and A'd [tested and aimed] and my first shot skimmed the top of a slit trench on a slight rise to our front, but fortunately the soldier had his head

down. We had to adjust things roughly on the spot.

Christmas Day passed uneventfully. That night Steve Fleming ... came up with Christmas cheer in the form of turkeys and extra rum, plus much needed fuel for the charger. The Maoris were relieved by the 24th Bn and ... we stayed in the area for a couple more days ... and were relieved [by B Squadron]. The change over took place during the day and we had to move back over soft going right under the nose of [Orsogna](#) to the road. Two of the tanks were bogged and had to be towed out and when finally we reached the road the remnants of A Squadron went down past the cemetery flat out.... We pulled back right over the [Moro](#) and that evening it snowed hard and we were pleased to be out of it.

The static period dragged on, each side waiting for the other to make a move. The infantry, after heavy casualties, were reaching the limit of their endurance, and winter was definitely the wrong season for tank manoeuvres. The war diary for the first days of the new year reads:

- 1 Heavy snow. RHQ Office at blue house above HELLFIRE Village with Adjt, Sigs Jan: Offr, and IO. B Sqn under comd 6 Bde. RHQ tks, A and C Sqns with A Ech in valley below [LANCIANO](#).
- 2 RHQ Office area shelled. Intercomm difficult on account of weather.  
Jan:
- 3 RHQ Office shelled again. Cas—1 Ital woman killed. Office veh slight cas.  
Jan:
- 4 Maintenance of vehs and tks.... All RHQ, A and C Sqns tks and A Ech proceed Jan: via [LANCIANO](#) and CASTELFRENTANO to area near [SAN EUSANIO](#) for refitting, B Sqn remains under comd 5 NZ Inf Bde on ORSOGNA RIDGE.
- 5 Enemy patrol attacks house occupied by 28 NZ Maori Bn on ORSOGNA RIDGE  
Jan: and B Sqn called [on] for protecting fire.

A report by Captain Rolleston, commander of B Squadron's tanks on Fontegrande ridge, gives a clear idea of the difficulties of a winter campaign in mountainous country:

I was offr in charge of three of our tks which are in the FDLs at present held by the MAORI Battalion. These tks are at present unable to move owing to the snow and heavy going but [are] otherwise 'runners'. They are situated on a reverse slope ... about 150 yds from the top of the ridge which form the FDL. There is one platoon of inf whose HQ and residence is a house on the crest immediately in front and they

are responsible for the ridge from the house almost to the ORSOGNA Rd. It is a wide front but the company on the left was forward along the ORSOGNA Rd and so could give covering fire along the fwd slope of this pl ridge. (This was the posn when the 24 NZ Bn held the posn.)

The pl puts out listening posts at night along this ridge while the balance live in the house. The tks have three men in each and during the night one man in each tk is always awake and there is always a man with his head out of the turret of one tk.

During the early morning of 5 Jan it was snowing and blowing hard from the direction of the enemy and visibility was limited as well as very difficult. About 0530 hrs there was a shout from the pl's house followed by a burst of firing, then a stream of MAORIS poured down the slope shouting to us to open fire on the house. This we did with our Brownings directed by the pl comd. A certain amount of SA fire was returned but it was spasmodic and brief. A MAORI patrol was then sent fwd and found the house clear of enemy except for one dead GERMAN who had been killed by Browning fire and a wounded GERMAN who could be heard shouting 'Kamerad' fwd of the FDLs. I recovered the paybook and papers of the dead GERMAN and forwarded them to Coy Comd.

In my opinion ... the GERMAN patrol would have had no difficulty in getting through and destroying the tks. Tks at night are helpless against patrols and their only protection is by inf on the ground. Owing to the snow, inf weapon pits are NOT manned by night and the fact of there being only three men in each tk makes a ground picquet by tk members impracticable.

With a foot of snow everywhere there was no question of continuing the offensive, although both sides shelled, mortared, sniped and patrolled aggressively. The troops lived in houses where possible, the days began to drag, and there was too much time to think over recent losses.

On 7 January B Squadron returned to regimental command on being relieved by a 19 Regiment squadron and there were welcome rumours of a move. Major Elliott,  
<sup>50</sup> now the regiment's second-in-command, left on the 10th to chart the road for the projected move and, with no regrets, the regiment prepared to leave the Orsogna battlefield.

As was to be expected, the Sangro campaign brought out many lessons, some of them self-evident but requiring the hard proof of experience, others the fruits of initiative and of the knowledge that grows with the encountering of new difficulties, for the overcoming of which no training can do more than partially prepare.

It had become obvious early in the battle that an attack with armour could not be mounted at short notice. The assembly of tanks, refuelling, and reconnaissance by commanders were factors which could not be skimped if success was to be assured. In the event of inadequate time for reconnaissance, careful study of air photographs was necessary.

Co-operation with infantry, of course, depended largely on communications, whether by radio or, as often happened, by visual means. Under the muddy conditions tanks were forced to keep mainly to the roads, with the result that infantry going to ground or deploying to avoid enemy fire were soon out of sight and lost touch. In country such as that round Orsogna obvious lines of approach were always mined or blocked by demolitions. Tanks held up in this manner were soon out-distanced by the attacking infantry, and once more communications broke down. Minefields created a major problem, and invariably the going required to be cleared by sappers or infantry minesweeping parties, otherwise tanks were disabled in a futile attempt to get forward. Movement in support of infantry in FDLs was likewise hampered, being restricted by minefields and also by the infantry themselves. The starting and running of tank engines or the Homelite charger close to the enemy FDLs inevitably brought down shelling and mortaring.

As a means of communication the No. 19 set had performed well, but considerable difficulty was experienced in keeping batteries charged in forward areas. The No. 38 set did not always operate satisfactorily and, in fact, communication with the infantry was never good. Part of the fault lay in the use of the horizontal aerial and communication improved when the tank aerials were kept upright.

The tank fighting in the advances to Orsogna was grim. Well practised in the art of close-country fighting and with his customary efficient use of camouflage, the enemy had prepared some particularly unpleasant surprises. Tanks and anti-tank guns were concealed in houses, tanks and self-propelled guns in haystacks, snipers

abounded in the excellent cover of the olive groves, and tank movement without covering fire, against an enemy dug in and well concealed, was fatal. On occasions enemy anti-tank gunners held their fire until after the leading tanks had pushed on and then took heavy toll. Some anti-tank guns were never discovered, so difficult was observation in the excellent cover afforded by the countryside.

A tank attack without infantry was no more successful than infantry operations without armour. The enemy simply remained underground, making only brief appearances to snipe at tank commanders. Prisoners who had surrendered could not be handled by advancing tank crews, who could only indicate to their captives the direction in which they were to go and push on. Scores of these jumped back into their slit trenches or gunpits after the tanks had passed and fought again.

All likely tank approaches were mined and covered with shell and mortar fire, forcing tank commanders to use periscopes early in the attack. Where the going was uneven the shortness of the periscope head caused increased 'dead ground' round the tank. Exploitation was hazardous and costly. The cross-country capabilities of tanks in winter time were limited, and the only reliable method of choosing a route was reconnaissance by tank personnel on foot.

In spite of these difficulties there was no cause for lack of confidence in the Sherman. It had proved itself reliable and manoeuvrable, even if handicapped by the soft ground as was every other type of tank, gun, or vehicle. When moving over soft, hilly country it was found that the Sherman could go up or down steep slopes but not around steep hillsides. After a number of tanks had cast tracks a general tightening-up of tracks took place, as well as a changeover to tracks of the steel or rubber chevron type.

All tank weapons were found to be highly satisfactory, although it was found necessary while shooting from stationary tanks to keep motors running to dissipate gases from the turret.

Of the other regimental vehicles, motor-cycles proved quite useless off the roads and scout cars had likewise only a limited usefulness. Bren carriers were used successfully and did not cut up tracks as badly as did the tanks. Their work in carrying supplies forward and in evacuating wounded was invaluable. Jeeps were the

most useful all-purpose vehicles. Three-ton trucks with four-wheel drives were the only ones that could operate off the roads, and very seldom at that, while two-wheel-drive water trucks were about as 'happy' as they had been in soft sand in the desert.

The recovery of bogged or disabled tanks was done by two D-8 tractors from the armoured brigade workshops. These did sterling work, but the delay caused by the regiment's having to wait its turn proved costly when stranded tanks under enemy observation were fired on until they 'brewed up', sometimes the day after they had been disabled. Scammels, the unit recovery vehicles, were unable to operate off formed roads, and the need for an armoured tracked recovery vehicle became more and more obvious as the operations proceeded.

Taken all round, the campaign was a severe baptism of fire for men—perhaps three-quarters of the unit—in their first action, and an equally trying ordeal for those to whom the style, though not the fighting, was new. It was felt that while the regiment, in common with other units, had suffered a reverse—[Orsogna](#) was still in enemy hands—the hilly country, soft going, lack of opportunities for manoeuvre, and the difficulties of a winter campaign were factors just as important in causing that reverse as was the fighting ability of the enemy. The odds were undoubtedly in favour of the defence. Even so, C Squadron tanks in their bold advance on 15 December had proved that tanks could reach their objective, and only fading light and the absence of ground support had compelled them to withdraw.

The restriction of movement to the roads was the cause of most of the tank casualties and at one stage the regiment had no fewer than thirty-three immobilised, of which twenty-five were the result of enemy action; the rest had either bogged or had suffered mechanical trouble. Casualties in men, too, had been heavy. Five officers and 19 men had been killed or had died of wounds, 3 officers and 28 men had been wounded, two men were wounded and prisoners of war, and two others also were prisoners. In spite of these losses—most of them highly-trained members of tank crews—all squadrons continued to operate with efficiency till the end of the campaign.

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup> Maj R. T. Familton, ED; Dunedin; born Hampden, 28 Aug 1913; school-

teacher.

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Col E. D. Blundell, OBE; Wellington; born Wellington, 29 May 1907; barrister and solicitor.

<sup>3</sup> Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson, DSO, MC, ED; Auckland; born Auckland, 27 Apr 1912; warehouseman; OC 7 Fd Coy May 1941; CO 18 Armd Regt Dec 1943-Jan 1944; 20 Regt Jan-May 1944; 18 Regt Jul 1944-Feb 1945; wounded 6 Dec 1943.

<sup>4</sup> Lt L. I. Carson; born NZ 4 Jun 1914; storeman; killed in action 15 Dec 1943.

<sup>5</sup> Lt R. F. Walford; born Waihi, 21 Nov 1914; farmer; killed in action 16 Dec 1943.

<sup>6</sup> Infantry Brigadier, pp. 334–5.

<sup>7</sup> Cpl G. L. Talbot; born Christchurch, 3 Apr 1907; stores clerk; killed in action 15 Dec 1943.

<sup>8</sup> Capt J. C. Denham, m.i.d.; Hawarden; born Christchurch, 21 Dec 1910; station manager; wounded 16 Dec 1943.

<sup>9</sup> WO II J. R. Laidlaw, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born NZ 24 Nov 1906; sharebroker.

<sup>10</sup> Lt P. H. Brooks, m.i.d.; born England, 1 Jun 1917; commercial traveller; killed in action 16 Mar 1944.

<sup>11</sup> Sgt T. C. Dore; Christchurch; born NZ 18 Oct 1914; upholsterer; three times wounded.

<sup>12</sup> Sgt H. Shorrock; Lower Hutt; born Granity, 30 Dec 1917; box-factory hand.

<sup>13</sup> L-Cpl L. T. Jones; Otekaike, Oamaru; born Oamaru, 31 Aug 1915; farmhand.

<sup>14</sup> Cpl C. W. Hodges; New Plymouth; born NZ 25 Jan 1909; contractor; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

<sup>15</sup> Sgt W. Russell, m.i.d.; Lees Valley, Oxford; born Oxford, 14 May 1910; musterer; twice wounded.

<sup>16</sup> Tpr F. E. Beckett; born Wanganui, 31 Jul 1916; farmer; killed in action 15 Dec 1943.

<sup>17</sup> Maj J. R. Coote; Nelson; born NZ 29 Jan 1916; clerk.

<sup>18</sup> Brig M. C. Fairbrother, CBE, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Carterton, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; BM 5 Bde Jun 1942-Apr 1943; comd in turn 21, 23, and 28 (Maori) Bns, Apr-Dec 1943; GSO II 2 NZ Div Jun-Oct 1944; CO 26 Bn Oct 1944-Sep 1945; comd Adv Base 2 NZEF Sep 1945-Feb 1946; Associate Editor, NZ War Histories.

<sup>19</sup> Sgt J. T. Groufsky; born NZ 30 May 1919; linesman; wounded May 1941; died of wounds 16 Dec 1943.

<sup>20</sup> Tpr W. R. Sinclair; born NZ 23 Aug 1912; labourer; died of wounds 16 Dec 1943.

<sup>21</sup> Capt S. A. Morris; born NZ 24 Oct 1908; company director.

<sup>22</sup> Capt G. F. Hart; born NZ 10 Feb 1908; estate agent; died of wounds 3 Jun 1944.

<sup>23</sup> Capt W. K. L. Dougall; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 22 Feb 1917; law student.

<sup>24</sup> Tpr A. J. Percasky; born Christchurch, 15 Jun 1920; truck driver; p.w. 16 Dec 1943.

<sup>25</sup> Tpr T. B. Herbison; born Dunedin, 18 Aug 1918; car painter; died of wounds 16 Dec 1943.

<sup>26</sup> L-Cpl A. T. K. Coleman; Westport; born NZ 12 Jan 1919; labourer; wounded and p.w. 16 Dec 1943.

<sup>27</sup> Sgt G. T. Dalton; born NZ 12 Jul 1904; farmer; wounded 26 Jun 1942; died of wounds while p.w. 17 Dec 1943.

<sup>28</sup> Tpr K. C. Thomas; Nelson; born Kaitangata, 30 Aug 1920; confectionery maker; wounded and p.w. 16 Dec 1943.

<sup>29</sup> Tpr E. L. Kneebone; born NZ 29 Apr 1918; traveller; died of wounds while p.w. 18 Dec 1943.

<sup>30</sup> Tpr J. A. Perrin; Greymouth; born Greymouth, 7 Dec 1917; storeman; p.w. 16 Dec 1943.

<sup>31</sup> Capt H. M. B. de Lautour, m.i.d.; Wairoa; born NZ 27 Feb 1911; sheep-farmer.

<sup>32</sup> Lt F. J. McKerchar, m.i.d.; born NZ 3 Jul 1917; grocer's assistant; killed in action 17 Dec 1943.

<sup>33</sup> 2 Lt B. J. McClelland, m.i.d.; born Wellington, 23 Oct 1912; clerk.

<sup>34</sup> Sgt J. M. Sutherland; Waikouaiti; born NZ 26 Jan 1917; school-teacher; wounded 17 Dec 1943.

<sup>35</sup> Tpr G. J. Rees; Rotongaro, Huntly; born Waikaka, 21 May 1918; farm labourer; wounded 17 Dec 1943.

<sup>36</sup> S-Sgt H. R. Lomas; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 12 Jan 1917; canister maker.

<sup>37</sup> 2 Lt J. D. Burland; born NZ 13 Oct 1921; survey chainman; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

<sup>38</sup> Maj C. F. S. Caldwell; Inglewood; born Auckland, 4 Oct 1916; school-teacher.

<sup>39</sup> L-Cpl C. W. Kidd; born NZ 27 Nov 1919; fireman, NZR; killed in action 24 Dec 1943.

<sup>40</sup> Tpr G. H. I. Newton; born Bluff, 17 Apr 1920; killed in action 24 Dec 1943.

<sup>41</sup> Tpr A. D. McKay; Hawarden; born Christchurch, 13 Jun 1917; farmer; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

<sup>42</sup> WO II R. G. Hamilton, m.i.d.; Greymouth; born Southbrook, 5 Sep 1918; commercial traveller.

<sup>43</sup> Lt-Col V. J. Tanner, DSO, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Wellington, 6 Jan 1916; sales manager; CO Div Cav Apr-Aug 1945; three times wounded.

<sup>44</sup> Infantry Brigadier, pp. 343–4.

<sup>45</sup> Maj J. L. Williams, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 25 Jun 1908; school-teacher.

<sup>46</sup> Tpr J. D. Carmichael; born Thornbury, 14 Aug 1916; labourer; killed in action 29 Dec 1943.

<sup>47</sup> Tpr C. M. Dawson; born Nelson, 7 Aug 1916; storeman; killed in action 29 Dec 1943.

<sup>48</sup> Lt J. S. Hazlett; born Invercargill, 20 Dec 1899; sheep-farmer; killed in action 19 Mar 1944.

<sup>49</sup> Tpr J. R. Easterbrook; born Christchurch, 30 May 1918; labourer; killed in action 26 Sep 1944.

<sup>50</sup> Lt-Col J. M. Elliott, m.i.d.; Malaya; born Wellington, 28 Aug 1912; bank officer; Adjt 19 Bn 1940; BM 4 Armd Bde 1943–44; 2 i/c 20 Regt 1944; CO 18 Regt Feb-Mar 1945.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 15 – CASSINO

## CHAPTER 15

### Cassino

The blizzard that brought in the fifth New Year of the war made it obvious at once that stalemate had been reached on the Adriatic front, and on 2 January General Alexander decided to switch his offensive to the western side of the Apennines. Five divisions were transferred from the Eighth Army to the Fifth, the New Zealand Division moving between 13 and 25 January on being relieved by 4 Indian Division, newly arrived in Italy.

The secret of the move was well kept. A warning order on 11 January gave San Severo as the Division's destination and four weeks' training as its future. At midnight on the 15th—it was raining again and there was no moon—the regiment left for Vasto, at least 50 miles short of San Severo, arriving there about 8 a.m. To hide 4 Armoured Brigade's departure a Royal Armoured Corps camouflage unit placed dummy tanks in position at San Eusonio and a patrol of Spitfires kept the sky clear of enemy while the tanks withdrew.

The tanks, reinforced by fifty-two Shermans taken over from 5 Corps, were taken by rail from Vasto to Caserta and thence by road to the Piedimonte d' Alife area, 20 Regiment going to Benevento. The move took the regiment almost a week. The railway across the Apennines had been reopened by American engineers only seven or eight days before and only one train ran each day. Because rolling stock was short, the regiment's tanks left Vasto in daily batches of about a dozen at a time; the rest were hidden in a sunken road to wait their turn.

The motor transport (B1 and B2 Echelons) travelled by road. The 'wheels' began their journey from the Sangro area on the 19th and staged near Vasto late that night before going on in the morning to Lucera. Here minor repairs had to be made before the convoy left next morning, heading inland through green, gently rolling country whose hills gradually got higher and steeper and craggier until they became mountains. The trip across the mountains was made on a very hot day over melting bitumen roads, and the steep grades caused blowouts, over-heated engines, and burnt out brakes. The journey, made in four stages, ended at Alife at 5 a.m. on the 22nd and the transport settled in at Benevento that morning.

The code-name Spadger Force behind which the Division hid for the move fitted the New Zealanders about as well as the first khaki serge uniforms had fitted the men of the first 20th in October 1939. A spadger, a few men recognised, was Tommy slang for sparrow, but the idiom was British and not New Zealand. The spadgers now nested in olive and oak groves in the [Volturno](#) valley around [Alife](#), a grubby walled village set in pleasant surroundings 20 miles or more behind the line. The regiment was dispersed just over a mile from the town, the tanks in squadron areas, the wheeled vehicles in echelons. The blizzards of the [Orsogna](#) front gave place to crisp spring days; the men relaxed, serviced their tanks, did a little training and played a great deal of sport. The 20th received two more Shermans (bringing its strength to 45 tanks) and a large parcel mail; the men had leave to [Pompeii](#) and practised river crossings on the [Volturno](#) in assault boats borrowed from the engineers.

One rest area is much like another. Squadron commanders have perpetual conferences, the men train half-heartedly, thinking of leave; tanks arrive from Workshops to replace those lost in action and occasionally a new batch of reinforcements arrives from Advanced Base or wounded and sick return to duty. It is pleasant enough in this green valley at the foot of rugged mountains, but everyone wants leave to [Naples](#); and [Naples](#), dirty and diseased—‘streets and streets of slums, seven and eight storeys high’—is out of bounds because of the risk of typhus. The ruins of [Pompeii](#)—‘as ruins go, the R.A.F. can turn on a much neater and more effective job any time’—come in the category of places the soldier tourist must see ‘because then you can say you've seen it’; and [Piedimonte d' Alife](#), although its people are friendly and its children attractive, is a small town (about 6000 inhabitants) that can be ‘done’ thoroughly in an afternoon. The men go there for showers at the New Zealand Mobile Bath Unit and on foraging excursions for eggs, oranges, and ‘vino’. Women from neighbouring villages do the soldiers' washing and mending.

On 27 January the regiment got a new CO when Lieutenant-Colonel J. B. Ferguson, from [18 Armoured Regiment](#), replaced Lieutenant-Colonel Purcell, who left for Egypt on 3 February to take command of the Armoured Corps training depot. As an engineer captain in [Crete](#), the new Colonel had won the MC; at [Orsogna](#), where he was twice wounded, he had twice commanded 18 Regiment in hard-fought actions for which he was later to receive the DSO.

On the same day officers, warrant officers, and sergeants at a lecture in the Piedimonte d' Alife theatre after a ceremonial brigade parade heard General Freyberg speak of fresh tasks for the Division. Five days before, at dawn on the 22nd, 6 United States Corps had landed at Anzio, 30 miles south of Rome and 60 miles behind the German Gustav line at Cassino. It had been hoped that the landing would cause the enemy to withdraw from this line, just as the Division's desert left hooks had forced him more than once to withdraw in North Africa; but although the seaborne left hook at Anzio surprised the enemy, it did not drive him from the field. Reinforced from northern Italy, he pinned the Americans and British down to a small beach-head and strengthened his hold on Cassino.

Here the Gustav line lay along the Rapido River, backed by steep, rocky hills furrowed by deep gullies. From the mountains north of Cassino the Rapido flows south past the town through marshy plains and across the throat of the Liri valley, through which the main highway (Route 6) passes on its way to Rome. Here, confusingly, the Rapido joins and becomes the Gari and then joins the Liri to become the Garigliano, now much bigger in girth, and winds through an alluvial plain to its mouth on the Gulf of Gaeta, north of Naples. The name Rapido, of course, means swift-flowing. Between three and four feet deep, it flows fast between stopbanks eight to ten feet high.

The town of Cassino, as an old edition of Baedeker confirms, 'presents few objects of interest'. Its ten thousand inhabitants (more or less: estimates made in 1944 range from seven to twenty thousand) lived mostly in old, thick-walled stone houses on narrow streets, nestled under the foot of what has come to be known as Monastery Hill. This hill, 1700 feet high and precipitous, is crowned by Montecassino Abbey: Baedeker is now enthusiastic but his details of the church's furniture and its archives don't concern the regiment's story. Rugged hills surround the town to north and west, the Liri and Rapido valleys to south and east.

While the New Zealanders were arriving in the Alife area British, United States, and French corps of Fifth Army assaulted the enemy line. They gained a little ground but no real success, and Lieutenant-General Mark Clark's plans to use the Division as a corps de chasse to exploit a breakthrough had to be recast. The Division was strengthened with guns, tanks, engineers and transport and on 3 February, joined by

4 Indian Division, became the New Zealand Corps under General Freyberg's command. The main armoured reinforcement, transferred to the New Zealand Corps in February as an exploiting force, was the American Combat Command 'B' (part of I US Armoured Division) comprising four tank battalions, two tank-destroyer battalions, engineers and artillery. The tank destroyer was a high-velocity 75-millimetre gun on a Sherman chassis. Another division, 78 British, was added to the corps on 17 February as an exploiting force.

General Freyberg, true to form, again favoured a heavyweight punch, using 'all available artillery and air power to blast through' along Route 6 after the Monte Cairo massif, five miles to the north-west, had been cleared so that the Rapido could be crossed. Fourth Indian Division, whose Gurkhas, Punjabis, and Rajputs were hill-men trained on the North-West Frontier and tested in mountain warfare in East Africa and Tunisia, would operate north of Route 6 in the hills and the New Zealand Division in the Liri valley.

The plan adopted on 2 February was that 2 United States Corps would attack again in the hills north-west of Cassino across the hilltops towards the rear of Montecassino; all the artillery that could be brought to bear would hammer the enemy's defences, and 4 Armoured Brigade would then crash over the Rapido with the help of all the available air support. The Indians were to wait to see how the Americans fared before being committed.

Early in February 5 Brigade relieved 36 United States Division in the line facing the Rapido south of Route 6, the Americans going to support their 34th Division in its push through the hills. The rest of the New Zealand Division also moved up from Piedimonte d' Alife, 4 Armoured Brigade going to Mignano, still ten miles or more from Cassino. The 20th pulled out on the night of 6 February, but before it left Alife companies from some of the neighbouring infantry battalions came to look over its tanks. The visits were planned to establish closer relations between armour and infantry, and at least they were a change from the 'General maintenance' and 'General refitting and reorganisation' entries which make the regiment's war diary for this period so uncommunicative. The Maoris especially were keenly interested in the Shermans. According to one of their NCOs some of them had already tried out the Sherman's 75-millimetre gun when they had investigated some derelict tanks in front of Orsogna. Some of them, perhaps with thoughts of other derelicts in future

battles, were reported to be even more interested in the tanks' eight-day clocks.

The regiment's convoys from [Alife](#) travelled all night in 'weather changing to wet', but by 4 a.m. on the 7th all were in their new areas, a mile or more south of the ruined town of [Mignano](#). The tank crews had one of their coldest trips in [Italy](#) and before the journey ended feet and hands were numb and sore. Heavy rain on 4 February had soaked the countryside, the water in many places lying in pools, especially in the low-lying fields near the Rapido in 5 Brigade's area. Except for this brigade, the New Zealand units were spread out for several miles along Route 6 behind [Monte Trocchio](#). The area was crowded with troops, and naturally the best sites had been taken by the American units already there. There was little flat ground left for guns, trucks and tanks, and often new areas had to be cleared of mines, tracks made, and drains dug.

The 20th does not seem to have fared badly. Its tanks were dispersed through olive groves, while bi Echelon clustered round a large villa in which, according to local Italians, Marshal Goering had stayed in September 1943 when he had reviewed the Hermann Goering Division. The Americans had fought over this area some months before and mines still lay on Monte Camino ('Million Dollar Hill') and on neighbouring hills, on one of which ('Dead Man's Hill') Trooper [Petrie](#) <sup>1</sup> was killed on 9 February when he trod on a mine. Some miles ahead American guns were pounding away at [Cassino](#), the echoes rising and falling as they crashed round the mountainsides.

The main appointments in the regiment at the beginning of February were:

CO: Lieutenant-Colonel J. B. Ferguson

Sccond-in-Command: Major J. M. Elliott

Adjutant: Captain J. A. Johnston

Technical Adjutant: Lieutenant G. E. Taylor

IO: Lieutenant L. W. Colmore-Williams

Squadron commanders:

- HQ Squadron Captain J. R. Coote
- A Squadron Captain R. A. Bay
- B Squadron Major V. C. Poole <sup>2</sup>
- C Squadron Major P. A. Barton

Quartermaster: Lieutenant J. T. K. Bradley

RSM: WO I T. H. Wilson

At 9 a.m. on 6 February the New Zealand Corps took over command of the Rapido line south of Cassino; but although the New Zealanders now commanded the line, in no sense could they be said to control it. The nearest outposts on the east bank were between 200 and 400 yards from the river. The enemy positions on Montecassino spur and the village strong-point of Sant' Angelo on a bluff above the river commanded almost the whole of 5 Brigade's 8000-yard front. Facing the New Zealanders was 15 Panzer Grenadier Division, well equipped and confident.

On the 8th, the day after its arrival at Mignano, 20 Regiment was placed on two hours' notice to move. On the hilltops above Cassino the Americans on Point 445 were only about 300 yards from the monastery walls, but repeated attacks and counter-attacks had caused them heavy losses. It was intended that they should clear the monastery headland by the 9th, when 20 Regiment would cross the Rapido and clear its west bank, enabling 5 Brigade to bridge the river and cross on the night of 10–11 February. For this proposed operation the regiment took under its command 3 Company of 22 Battalion and a platoon of 7 Field Company engineers. The tired American troops tried twice more to cover those last few hundred yards but failed; tried again on 11 February but failed once more. On the same day 20 Regiment's two hours' notice was withdrawn and replaced by six hours' notice, 'while awaiting better weather conditions'. On the night of 12–13 February 2 US Corps handed over its sector to the New Zealand Corps. The exploiting force now had to clear a way for itself.

The New Zealanders were still spadgers, mud-spattered and bedraggled, forced it seemed to bear their sufferings incognito. But a German raiding party took three

prisoners on the night of 6–7 February and the arrival of the Division on the Fifth Army front was no longer a secret. On the 10th the Division dropped the pseudonym with relief and resumed its badges, titles and signs, and on the 11th its command passed to [Brigadier Kippenberger](#), the 20th's first CO, who took over when [General Freyberg](#) assumed command of the [New Zealand Corps](#).

Fourth Indian Division was then sent north to relieve the Americans and clear the enemy from the hills above [Cassino](#) while the New Zealanders established a bridgehead across the Rapido. The Indians' forward posts were only a few yards from the enemy ('within hand-grenade range', a German report describes them) and by day the front-line troops were confined to their slit trenches and rock sangars.

Before the [New Zealand Corps](#)' attacks were launched it was decided to bomb the [Montecassino](#) abbey. Its commanding position made it a perfect observation post; its walls, loop-holed by many small windows, were 5 feet thick and 15 feet high. For four hours on the morning of 15 February wave after wave of bombers attacked it. They left it a smoking ruin.

The Germans said that they had strictly respected the abbey's neutrality before it was bombed and afterwards loudly declaimed their story of Allied vandalism. But whether or not it had been manned before the bombing, after it there was little room for doubt. Mortars were posted in its ruins and made it a strongpoint from which two miles or more of flat country in an arc from north-east to south-east could be swept by fire. Fourth Indian Division, which had not by 15 February completed its relief of the Americans, could not take immediate advantage of the bombing and was unable to mount its main attack before the night of 17–18 February. The attack failed, with heavy losses.

Meanwhile, on the Rapido 5 Brigade patrols were probing the enemy's defences and surveying the ground between the river and [Cassino](#) station. The station, about 600 yards west of the river, was the New Zealanders' main objective. The fields west of the river and south of the station were covered with an inch or more of water, and the only road forward was along the railway embankment. But first twelve demolitions, mostly blown culverts and bridges, had to be repaired before the station could be reached. The engineers began work at once, and artillery and machine-gun fire drowned the noise of their bulldozers.

Under mortar and machine-gun fire from the slopes of Montecassino, two companies of the [Maori Battalion](#) attacked on the night of 17–18 February. The Maoris had to flounder through water and heavy mud across fields sown with anti-personnel mines. About midnight, after a grim fight with panzer grenadiers, the station buildings and the Round House at the western end of the railway yards were occupied, but the hummock—a black mound of earth about 300 yards south of the station—was still in German hands. The Maoris held off enemy attempts to infiltrate their positions until three o'clock in the afternoon, when a German counter-attack supported by two tanks forced the survivors out of the station yards and back across the Rapido. 'I am very pleased that the New Zealanders have had a smack in the nose,' Kesselring told the German commander.

The New Zealand and American tanks took no part in the battle. No vehicles could move on the waterlogged ground off the embankment and the engineers could not repair all the demolitions that blocked the way along it. By morning, in spite of difficulties, both arms of the Rapido had been bridged, but further demolitions to the west still blocked the route to the station.

In the meantime the regiment waited at [Mignano](#). 'General maintenance—position static,' recorded the war diary, wasting not a word. The weather was wet and bitterly cold, with occasional skiffs of snow. The enforced idleness was not good for anyone, but the promise of an assignment if the Maoris' attack succeeded in establishing a bridgehead across the river at least gave the tank commanders something to study and prepare for. The troop commanders studied the ground through glasses from the shoulder ridge of [Monte Trocchio](#) and discussed plans for the exploiting role that had so long been denied them and was to be denied them once again.

A C Squadron officer's most vivid recollections of this period are of 'the bitter cold and the enormous fire we had going all night.' The men were even colder; and some of them had their boots stolen. There were not enough houses to go round and many of the men were quartered in bivvy tents and lorries, where living conditions were cheerless. At night the wind flapped and tore at the canvas and draughts found entrance to even the most carefully made bed. Some of the men made ingenious charcoal stoves from ammunition boxes and shell cases; others

spent their spare time making olive-wood pipes with perspex stems in a variety of sizes and shapes; some limited their handicraft to making shanghais and filled in time improving their marksmanship to the discomfiture of some of the local population and their stock. Home-made oil-drip diesel stoves warmed the bivvies efficiently but had to be treated with respect. The stove's oil tank was usually an old margarine tin, its explosion chamber a two-gallon water tin, its chimney a string of food tins wedged one inside the other with the ends cut out; but its worst fault was a tendency to go out and relight itself a few seconds later with a nerve-shattering explosion and a shower of soot. When 'revved up' it glowed red hot and threw out a terrific heat, but most men preferred to warm themselves from a respectful distance.

The fourth anniversary of 20 Battalion's arrival at Port [Tewfik](#) passed on 12 February without recorded comment or celebration; besides, there were few of the original battalion left to remember it. The YMCA mobile cinema unit gave an occasional screening and Corporal [Leary](#)<sup>3</sup> organised a concert party from amongst the men of bi Echelon to relieve the monotony. C Squadron's officers bought a piano in the neighbouring village of Conca and installed it in their villa, but after various adventures it had to be retrieved by a 'reconnaissance in force', led by Captain Pat Abbott, from an English unit which had commandeered it. It was later restored to the squadron at [San Michele](#).

On the evening of 24 February ('I can't remember a blacker night,' one NCO recalls) C Squadron moved to [San Michele](#) to support 5 Indian Brigade. Sixteen tanks set out, one got bogged on the way, and another was involved in a road accident. 'I can well remember the fright we got when passing practically under the barrels of a troop of Yank "widow-makers" when they all opened fire,' says the squadron commander, Major Barton. 'When we had recovered from the shock the language was lurid in the extreme.'

Although in full view of the monastery the squadron settled in comfortably at [San Michele](#), each troop with a house to itself. There was plenty of shelling, but most of it was directed at the artillery just beyond the tanks and the squadron had no casualties. 'The shells used to whine uncomfortably close over our very flimsy house,' says the squadron commander, 'and we prayed that no half-witted Jerry gunner would drop one short.'

Already the Cassino fortress had been attacked three times. Each attack had failed and now the job had to be done again. The New Zealand Corps, being on the spot and assembled ready to attack, was ordered to do it.

The men who gave these orders wanted the job done straight away, as men who give orders are in the habit of doing. Churchill wanted Rome: it would be the first of the Axis capitals to fall and its possession would be of considerable strategic and moral value to the Allies. Stalin wanted a Second Front and he wanted it soon: the best the Allies could do was to keep up pressure on the enemy in Italy and prevent the Germans withdrawing forces to reinforce their troops in Russia. The Allies were planning to land in Normandy in a few months' time and wanted the enemy kept busy in Italy. Clark wanted relief for his hard-pressed troops at Anzio. Alexander, short of troops, wanted the New Zealanders to attack to avoid being attacked himself.

Most of the previous attacks had been made in the mountains and across the Rapido to the south. General Freyberg now decided to take Cassino town. He planned to clear the Germans out of it house by house, first demolishing it with bombers and then sending in tanks and infantry immediately afterwards under an artillery barrage. The assault would be made in daylight and would come from the north.

Between 20 and 22 February 6 Brigade units relieved American troops still in the line in the northern outskirts of Cassino and north of Route 6. Some of these posts were within a few yards of the enemy, who commanded all the forward positions



**cassino**

with machine-gun and sniper fire from [Castle Hill](#) (Point 193), a steep, rocky bluff at the north-western corner of the town with the ruin of an old castle on its summit, 615 feet high. Most of these positions, however, were under cover in buildings.

Cassino's narrow streets, stone buildings, and deep cellars had been converted easily into a fortress, with strongpoints in the steep hills behind it from which the defenders could watch almost every move made by the besiegers and sweep all approaches with fire. On these approaches bridges had been demolished and craters blown; flooding, barbed wire, and mines girdled the town; and in the town itself hidden self-propelled guns and tanks, snipers with spandaus, machine-gun posts and concrete bunkers challenged the attacker.

The orders for the attack were issued on 23 February. They were of impressive length and full of the vital details of air support and artillery tasks, map references and code-words, that are so important at the time but now so dull in retrospect. The attack was to be made by 6 Brigade after the heaviest possible air bombardment in which 338 heavy bombers and 176 medium bombers, carrying over 1100 tons of bombs, would concentrate largely on the town, a target about a mile long and half a mile wide. (Someone worked it out as three 1000-pound bombs for every German in the area.) Before dawn on the day of the attack the forward New Zealand and Indian troops would withdraw to a safety line 1000 yards from [Cassino](#) and stay there till zero hour. Zero hour was noon, but the day depended on the weather. The ground

troops were ready on 24 February; but first the ground had to be dry enough locally to allow the tanks to advance up the [Liri](#) valley, and dry also in south-east [Italy](#) so that the bombers and their heavy loads could take off from their airfields. The attack required a clear day for the bombers, a few days of fine weather before it to dry the ground, and a forecast of more fine weather afterwards. The code-name for the operation was Dickens, a reminder that the author had once travelled the winding road by mule to visit the monastery and had marvelled at its lofty situation.

Dickens had made his pilgrimage on a morning of mist and the operation which had borrowed his name was blessed also by bad weather. It rained, almost continuously, from 23 February till 5 March; from the 5th to the 10th it was fine except for two light afternoon showers and the ground began to dry, but in south-east [Italy](#) it was still raining and the airfields at [Foggia](#) could not be used by the bombers. Rain began again on 11 March and in the hills above [Cassino](#) it snowed. There was more rain on the 12th. It blew a gale that night but the 13th was fine and warm. On the 14th (still fine, but keep your fingers crossed) word was received in the evening from Fifth Army that the attack was on next morning.

The decision rested with [12 Air Support Command](#) and was made on a day-to-day basis. An interesting point in their deliberations with [General Freyberg](#) is that the [Air Force](#) representatives at a conference on 21 February warned that the craters in [Cassino](#) after the bombing would make perfect tank traps to hinder the corps' advance. [General Freyberg](#) accepted this risk, replying that if the New Zealand tanks could not go forward the Germans would not be able to use theirs either.

For everyone it was a miserable three weeks. As day followed day the forward troops in [Cassino](#) whiled away the hours waiting wretchedly in cramped, insanitary buildings and cellars, suffering besides the cold and wet the strain of ceaseless watch in close contact with the enemy. At night strained sentries saw a target in every shadow. Whenever they could hear the enemy working on his positions they called down artillery fire; the enemy retaliated or shelled the supply points and roads over which carrying parties from the reserve companies each night humped food and ammunition to the forward posts, a carry of about half a mile.

Each day reduced the brigade's strength. With little to do but wait for the attack to begin, officers and men became pessimistic about its chances: there didn't seem

much point in butting head-on a fortress as tough as Cassino. It soon became obvious that the enemy had correctly anticipated where the main attack was to be made and was using the time gained to strengthen his defences and relieve units needing a rest. His best formation, I Parachute Division, was made responsible for the defence of Cassino and Montecassino. It was supported by tanks and by about 180 guns.

In this period of waiting the Division suffered an average of ten battle casualties a day, more of them on the roads and in the reserve company areas than in the forward posts, where the



**the advance to albaneta house**

1. Cpl Miller's tank loses track.
2. Col Gray's tank loses track.
3. Lt Hazlett's tank bogged.
4. Cpl Lennie's tank bogged.
5. Lt Hazlett killed.
6. Lt Renall killed.



Bir el Chleta. 10 Platoon B Company passing through the tanks

**Bir el Chleta. 10 Platoon B Company passing through the tanks**

20 Battalion RAP, Bir el Chleta. Capt W. L. M. Gilmour, in braces, tends the wounded; Capt E. R. Chesterman, in tin hat and with an arm in a sling, stands in the background



20 Battalion RAP, Bir el Chleta. [Capt W. L. M. Gilmour](#), in braces, tends the wounded; Capt E. R. Chesterman, in tin hat and with an arm in a sling, stands in the background



Lunch on the way to Syria, 4 March 1942.  
WO I 'Uke' Wilson is in the foreground

**Lunch on the way to Syria, 4 March 1942. WO I 'Uke' Wilson is in the foreground**

Pioneers in Syria



**Pioneers in Syria**

Brigadier Kippenberger points out enemy positions near the Alamein line. With him is Brigadier Burrows and, on ground, Capt P. V. H. Maxwell



**Brigadier Kippenberger points out enemy positions near the Alamein line. With him is Brigadier Burrows and, on ground, Capt P. V. H. Maxwell**

15 Platoon, C Company, has a meal at the company cookhouse during a move before the Ruweisat Ridge attack



**15 Platoon, C Company, has a meal at the company cookhouse during a move before the Ruweisat Ridge attack**



20 Armoured Regiment officers, September 1943  
Back row: Lts J. A. T. Shand, L. I. Carson, C. V. Shirley, R. B. F. Eastgate, J. T. K. Bradley, I. M. Walton, P. H. Brooks, C. F. S. Caldwell, G. F. Hart, M. P. Donnelly, G. C. Ferguson.  
Second row: Lts R. T. Hamilton, R. F. Walford, D. E. Murray, C. A. Low, L. W. Colmore-Williams, F. J. McKerchar, G. E. Taylor, S. A. Morris, Capts E. O. Dawson and R. J. Abbott, Lt F. E. M. Tuck.  
Sitting: Capts W. R. Gutzevitz and J. W. Rolleston, Majs V. C. Poole and P. A. Barton, Rev. G. A. D. Spence, Lt-Col J. W. McKergow, Majs H. A. Purcell, J. F. Phillips, and G. Baker, Capts J. A. Johnston, H. R. C. Wild, J. T. Shacklock  
In front: Lts J. S. Hazlett, J. F. Moodie, W. Heptinstall, 2 Lt J. A. Dawkins.

**20 Armoured Regiment** officers, September 1943 Back row: Lts J. A. T. Shand, L. I. Carson, C. V. Shirley, R. B. F. Eastgate, J. T. K. Bradley, I. M. Walton, P. H. Brooks, C. F. S. Caldwell, G. F. Hart, M. P. Donnelly, G. C. Ferguson. Second row: Lts R. T. Hamilton, R. F. Walford, D. E. Murray, C. A. Low, L. W. Colmore-Williams, F. J. McKerchar, G. E. Taylor, S. A. Morris, Capts E. O. Dawson and R. J. Abbott, Lt F. E. M. Tuck. Sitting: Capts W. R. Gutzevitz and J. W. Rolleston, Majs V. C. Poole and P. A. Barton, Rev. G. A. D. Spence, Lt-Col J. W. McKergow, Majs H. A. Purcell, J. F. Phillips, and G. Baker, Capts J. A. Johnston, H. R. C. Wild, J. T. Shacklock In front: Lts J. S. Hazlett, J. F. Moodie, W. Heptinstall, 2 Lt J. A. Dawkins.

Bound for Italy. C Squadron moves to Burg el Arab



**Bound for Italy. C Squadron moves to Burg el Arab**



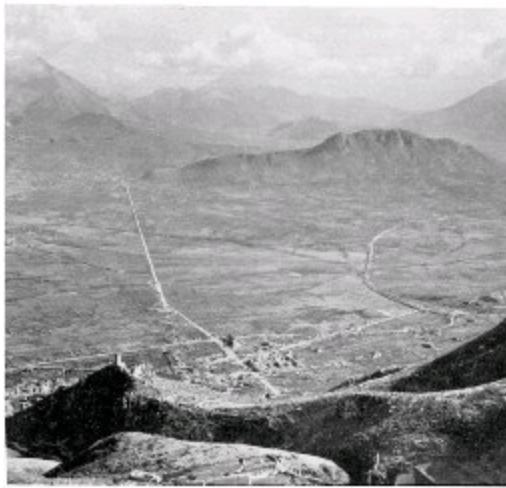
Orsogna

## Orsogna

Tank positions, Orsogna, about New Year's Day 1944



**Tank positions, Orsogna, about New Year's Day 1944**



Cassino, the German view of the town and valley. Castle Hill is in the left foreground, Route 6 and the Nunnery in the centre, the railway station and the Hummock on the right, and Monte Trocchio in the middle distance

**Cassino, the German view of the town and valley. Castle Hill is in the left foreground, Route 6 and the Nunnery in the centre, the railway station and the Hummock on the right, and Monte Trocchio in the middle distance**



C Squadron officers, Cassino, March 1944. From left: Bill de Lautour, Jim Moodie, Pat Barton, Percy Brooks, 'Stuffy' Hazlett, 'Buck' Renall. The three last named were killed in this battle

**C Squadron officers, Cassino, March 1944** From left: Bill de Lautour, Jim Moodie, Pat Barton, Percy Brooks, 'Stuffy' Hazlett, 'Buck' Renall. The three last named were killed in this battle

Albaneta House from the road leading to the monastery. Hazlett's grave is in the foreground, Point 593 on the right, and Monte Cairo behind

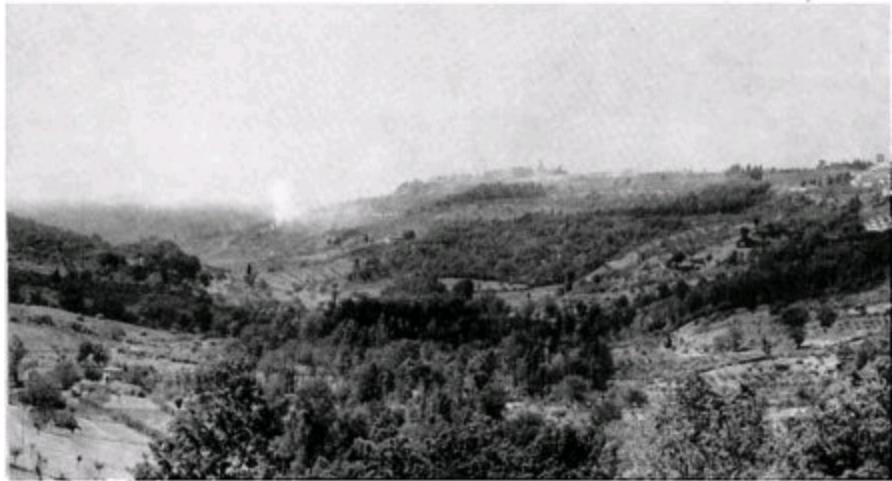


**Albaneta House from the road leading to the monastery. Hazlett's grave is in the foreground, Point 593 on the right, and Monte Cairo behind**



Cpl W. H. Archdall, 11 Troop C Squadron, on the advance to Florence

**Cpl W. H. Archdall, 11 Troop C Squadron, on the advance to Florence**



Looking towards Florence

men lived more or less underground and came out in the open only at night. Many more men were evacuated sick. The most notable casualty was the Division's commander, Major-General Kippenberger, who trod on a Schu mine while returning from a reconnaissance on Monte Trocchio on 2 March and suffered severe injuries to his legs: one foot was blown off and the other had to be amputated. Many of the 20th's tank commanders had tramped over the same area unscathed while studying the approaches to Cassino and this somehow made the shock of the news all the greater. Brigadier Parkinson <sup>4</sup> now took command of the Division.

In the hills the Indians prepared for their part in the battle. Fifth Indian Brigade had been allotted the task in operation DICKENS of relieving 25 Battalion on Castle Hill after its capture and then pushing on to the abbey. C Squadron on 2 March was put under the brigade's command for this operation, which involved no less than a direct dash by the tanks up the five-mile zigzag road to the monastery. The brigade was withdrawn from its forward positions to the neighbourhood of Cairo village to rest and reorganise for this operation.

The main supply track to the Indians' positions in the hills was the Cavendish road, built in February by 4 Indian Division's engineers. From Cairo village the track ran round the lower slopes of Monte Castellone and up a series of almost precipitous spurs to the north side of Colle Maiola. At this spot, known as 'Madras Circus', the track came out on to comparatively level ground, and from there a track led round Point 593 and past Masseria Albaneta (in the German lines) to Montecassino abbey.

The Indian sappers and miners had hewed the track out of the rocky hillsides almost entirely with picks and crowbars.

Towards the end of February while rain and mud on the flat postponed again and again the attack on Cassino, the idea was born of sending a force of tanks up Cavendish road to capture Albaneta Farm and exploit to Montecassino. C Squadron was to be part of this force. But first the road had to be made wide enough for Shermans as far as Madras Circus. On 1 March the hard-worked Indian engineers were ordered to widen it; for a week from the 3rd they were helped by a party from 5 Field Park Company's mechanical equipment platoon with compressors and two bulldozers and by part of a platoon from 6 Field Company. The job was urgent and the engineers worked until dark, stopping only when rain compelled a halt. Part of the road could be seen from the German positions but the drilling and blasting went on under camouflage nets over a framework of poles. As part of his routine of 'dusting up' supply tracks the enemy occasionally harassed the road with shell and mortar fire, killing on 6 March the New Zealand engineer officer in charge of the work. Although the engineers' camp was also shelled one evening, the enemy does not seem to have been aware of what was going on and Captain Hornig<sup>5</sup> was the New Zealand engineers' only casualty. By the night of 10–11 March the road was fit for tanks as far as Madras Circus; it was about a mile and a half long and in that distance rose 800 feet. The attack would begin when operation DICKENS had made some headway.

Meanwhile, back at Mignano, the rest of the regiment sat around cursing the weather. By now its squadron areas were deep in mud, and in the few spells when it wasn't raining working parties were chased out into the cold to repair roads. The enemy seldom interfered, although early on the morning of 6 March he mortared the nearby crossroads and the cemetery area. When the ground dried, footballs came out and several inter-squadron matches were played. There was a squadron race meeting on the afternoon of the 14th. Next day, of course, was D (for DICKENS) day; it was also the date of the unhappy ides of March. The attack was on.

On the night of 14–15 March the forward troops of 24 and 25 Battalions withdrew behind the safety line. The bombing began at 8.30 a.m. on the 15th and ceased at noon. Some of it was accurate, some of it miles off the target—Venafro, 12 miles to the east, was bombed in error by about thirty of the heavy bombers—but

the attack laid [Cassino](#) in ruins and is believed to have killed about one battalion of 3 Parachute Regiment. Then at midday 600-odd guns, the heaviest concentration of artillery the New Zealanders had ever had—they included American and French guns and even three Italian railway guns manned by Italians—began to bombard every known German gun position and to blind by smoke the German OPs north-east of Monte [Cairo](#) and their positions on [Montecassino](#). The shock attack had bowled its opening overs and there was a test-match tenseness in the air.

Under a two-hour barrage fired by eighty-eight guns, 25 Battalion was to advance into [Cassino](#) at midday as far as Route 6 with a squadron of [19 Armoured Regiment](#). It was to be followed into the town by a second squadron of 19 Regiment and by 26 Battalion, which was to clear the rest of the town and take the railway station. Seventh Field Company, with two bulldozers, would clear routes for the tanks, and 24 Battalion was to move into the town after it was captured. Two companies of American engineers were to bridge the Rapido at Route 6 and clear that route through the town; the tanks would then round the corner of [Monastery Hill](#) and enter the [Liri](#) valley. Except for C Squadron with the Indians, 20 Regiment was again to fill its now almost habitual role as reserve, holding itself ready to come under 6 Brigade's command when required. There were plenty of tanks—the Corps had 400 New Zealand and American Shermans at its disposal—so the regiment had to sit back and taihoa once more.

But these were paper plans, and first the men on foot had to win their way through the town. Twenty-fifth Battalion's advance was vigorously opposed by snipers and machine-gunners, who climbed out of the cellars where they had sheltered during the bombing and fought back fiercely. After a stiff fight one company captured Point 165 and [Castle Hill](#), but the other companies could make little progress on the flat. About half past five 26 Battalion was sent in to help; it was already too late. Too much reliance had been placed on the bombing to neutralise the defences and the stunned enemy had been given time to recover. Now the town would have to be cleared house by house.

Nineteenth Regiment's tanks had taken little part so far in the attack and were well behind the infantry. It had been difficult enough even for men on foot to advance over the rubble and craters (some of the latter forty to fifty feet wide)

blocking the narrow streets. Some of the tank crews had had to dig their way forward through the rubble with picks and shovels, the men working under a smoke screen to hide them from the snipers on Castle Hill.

But it was the weather that struck the worst blow: at dusk rain began to fall and throughout the night it came down in torrents. Without moonlight to help them, the troops in the town could make no headway. The rain filled the bomb craters and packed the rubble into a solid mass which defied the engineers' efforts to clear a path. Hot food could not be brought forward that night and the infantry were wet through, cold and hungry. Wireless sets were soaked and useless.

With his local knowledge to help him, the enemy made good use of the darkness and by dawn on the 16th had reoccupied a number of strongpoints in the town. For the attackers it had been a miserable night, and dawn brought further miseries. So far our casualties had been light in spite of snipers and nebelwerfers, and although by morning the American engineers had bridged the Rapido on Route 6 our own engineers had been forced to abandon their attempts to clear a path for the tanks. In daylight every move brought down fire at close range from snipers, mortars and machine guns, and the troops in the town could do little but keep under cover and fight back when the opportunity offered. During the day the infantry was joined by a troop of tanks from 19 Regiment, which had used scissors bridge-laying tanks<sup>6</sup> to cross craters on Route 6 on the way in to the town.

By nightfall on the 15th C Squadron and 5 Indian Brigade had taken no part in the battle. From San Michele the squadron had had a grandstand view of the bombing, a view spoiled only when one American bomb-aimer released his bombs too early on the ridge above and 'dribbled them down through our area.' 'I have never seen such a scatter,' the squadron commander writes, 'and from then on we watched with a wary eye on the Yank planes.' A few men recalled the days when the planes were Stukas and came from the opposite direction.

The squadron's task, it will be remembered, was to tackle the zigzag road from Cassino to the monastery. Two of its officers, Lieutenants Percy Brooks and 'Buck' Renall,<sup>7</sup> had been flown over the route they were to take and had returned impressed with its difficulties. The Indians' plan was that their battalions would exploit southwards from Castle Hill along the eastern slopes of Montecassino,

capturing in turn the hairpin bends of the hill road and climbing until they reached the flat crest of Point 435, Hangman's Hill. This hill took its name from the gibbet-like pylon carrying the cable of an old aerial ropeway between the Monastery and the town. From Hangman's Hill, which was less than 300 yards from the monastery, 1/4 Essex Regiment would make the crucial last stage of the attack.

To support the Indians one C Squadron troop was to try to make its way up to below Hangman's Hill via Point 202. Major Barton thought the task impossible. 'I was very much against this part of the plan as it appeared quite obvious that it would entail far too much engineering work to make a track,' he says. 'However, the Indians were very insistent and I agreed to send Sergeant Morris<sup>8</sup> with their engineer officer to make a recce the night of the attack and decide. Tragically Alan Morris was killed on this recce and the officer, after a number of escapes, got back and reported the route hopeless. I was very upset over this as Alan Morris was an outstanding NCO and we could ill afford to lose him....'

The story of Sergeant Morris's reconnaissance is well worth a longer telling. With Lieutenant A. Murray, a Royal Engineers officer attached to 5 Indian Brigade, and a party of four sappers, Morris moved forward on the night of 15–16 March with 1/4 Essex Regiment. The battalion had a difficult climb up Castle Hill in heavy rain and it was after 1 a.m. by the time it had completed the relief of 25 Battalion. Here again the party was delayed while Point 165 was recaptured and during the wait Morris shot a sniper at close range.

The party's task was to reconnoitre a route for tanks from Cassino to the monastery via Point 165. Leaving the sappers behind, Morris and Murray set off alone about 4 a.m., each armed with a revolver and with a tommy gun between them. They passed through the Indian companies trying to advance towards the monastery but ran into our own artillery concentrations on the road near Point 165. The leading Indian troops suffered many casualties and pulled back towards Castle Hill, but Morris and Murray waited for the concentrations to lift and pushed ahead again about 5 a.m. The road was in good repair round the corner to the edge of Hangman's Hill spur (Point 435), but farther along it several craters made it impassable to tanks. About this time a company of Gurkhas captured Hangman's Hill.

According to Lieutenant Murray, on whose report to the commander of 4 Indian

Division this account is based, Morris gave it as his opinion that the country was not 'tankable' except on the road, on which several craters would have to be filled before it could be used.

From Point 202 Morris and Murray struck downhill to explore the routes between that point and Route 6. They went down the road past the amphitheatre and turned north towards the town. Daylight overtook them and Germans could be seen emerging from their holes among the ruined houses. They were washing, shaving, cooking; but all carried arms. About a hundred were counted in the southern outskirts of the town.

Morris then decided that it was time to get back up to the road they had come down, but when a shell landed near them they dashed into a house being used by the Germans as a store and took shelter in a dugout. After taking a prisoner, Morris ran into a German with a sub-machine gun while investigating a passage leading from the dugout and was killed. Murray then had to shoot his way out of the dugout, exchanged shots with a German in another building, killed him, and ran out on to the road and up the hill with twenty or thirty confused Germans shooting at him. He reached [Castle Hill](#) safely and ended his lively reconnaissance with an equally lively dash back to the Indian brigade headquarters with his report, dodging from rock to rock and going to ground every few yards to elude enemy snipers. For this exploit Murray won the MC. He and Morris got farther behind the German lines than anyone else at [Cassino](#).

The rest of the squadron had moved up from San Michele about four o'clock on the afternoon of the 15th and waited near the barracks just short of the town. It had an uneventful journey across the valley and moved into position ready to move through the town at dawn on the 16th behind 19 Regiment. 'I had a lot of trouble contacting the Indians as it was pitch dark,' says Major Barton, 'and to add to the joy of the occasion it started to rain. It was obvious that things were going very slowly—the darkness and very rough going was making it terribly difficult for the Indians. We had a certain amount of shelling from a big gun right up on the heights beyond [Cairo](#) but suffered no damage that day. When dawn eventually came I moved forward and contacted the 19th Troop who were just in front of us. I went forward with an engineer officer to have a look at the road and, as we had feared, it was just hopeless—collapsed craters and a sea of mud! I sent most of the squadron back over

the causeway as we were getting shelled fairly heavily and reported to Bde HQ that it appeared hopeless to expect to get through.'

With its tanks strung out at 100-yard intervals hugging the side of the road, the squadron spent the day of the 16th lying up on the approach route into the north of Cassino waiting orders to enter the town and advance up the road to the monastery. Any movement on the road brought down a few ranging rounds of pink smoke followed by a sharp 'stonk' placed with nice accuracy. Just before dusk the squadron's quartermaster-sergeant, Bob Newlands, had come up to a corner of the road in his 15-cwt 'Mungar truck' to distribute rations when a sudden concentration landed amongst the tank crews who had left their tanks to collect them. One of the troop commanders, Lieutenant Brooks, and two men, Corporal Laurie Brenton <sup>9</sup> and Trooper Tollison <sup>10</sup> (the RAP man), were killed and two men wounded. Second-Lieutenant Jack Denham, last mentioned as a corporal in the fighting around Orsogna, took over command of the troop next day.

Major Barton was in Cassino keeping in touch with the forward troops and the waiting squadron was under its second-captain, Jim Moodie. The day's fighting showed that there was no chance of the tanks getting through the town to support the Indians holding precarious tenancy of isolated positions on Monastery Hill, and Barton ordered the squadron to withdraw for the night to safer positions in an olive grove a mile or so back from the town.

The end of the first phase of the operation was an extreme disappointment to the squadron. It had been given the chance to prove its worth in the most important, but perhaps impossible, role of fighting its way up the road to the monastery with 5 Indian Brigade. 'We thought at last our chance had come,' says Major Barton, 'and our tails were well up and morale was soaring. It was a terrible anti-climax to us.' But at nightfall on 16 March the enemy garrison still controlled the town, and the only New Zealand tanks in Cassino were three from 19 Regiment which had struggled through to the convent on Route 6 and joined 26 Battalion.

With the failure of operation DICKENS to clear Cassino, the proposed tank thrust up Cavendish road to the rear of the abbey assumed a new importance. It was thought that a tank thrust towards the monastery from the rear would create a diversion while Indian infantry attacked from Hangman's Hill. The tank attack was a

7 Indian Brigade 'show', and on 17 March C Squadron passed under its command.

Major Barton reconnoitred the area on foot next day (the 18th) with Captain Moodie. They set off at daybreak and were guided up a precipitous track to 7 Indian Brigade's headquarters, where they arrived puffed and blowing and were presented with breakfast bacon and eggs by the Brigadier. The headquarters was in an old farmhouse from which there was a magnificent view of the whole of the Rapido valley.

We crawled on our stomachs to OPs all day and had a most interesting if strenuous day [writes the squadron commander]. We had a good view of the ground but, of course, could not tell just what the 'going' was like. We finished by visiting the French Brigade HQ and several of their OPs. The Free French [French-Moroccan Goums] were most bloodthirsty gentlemen and had a most endearing habit of pointing to the Jerry lines and slowly drawing a hand across their throats. We were thankful they were on our side. We finished by walking down the road where the Yank and British tanks already were—met the OC, Col. Gray, and the Tommy commander, Maj. Cruickshank. They had been there for several days under enormous camouflage nets. We finally arrived at the spot where we had left 'Slim' Somerville <sup>11</sup> with the jeep, about 6 p.m. Slim was most irate as he had been subjected to three air raids which had not pleased him at all. When we got back the squadron was quite convinced we had been either captured or killed, or both.

The general plan was that the tanks would capture Masseria Albaneta <sup>12</sup> and then exploit south-east towards the monastery, linking up if possible with the Gurkhas and Essex troops from Hangman's Hill. No infantry could be spared by the Indians to accompany the tanks: it seemed that the lessons of the Western Desert had already been forgotten.

The exact composition of the tank force is difficult to determine but it seems that it consisted of 15 C Squadron Shermans, 12 open-topped Honey tanks (Stuarts) manned by a company of 760 United States Tank Battalion, a troop of five Honeys from 7 Indian Brigade's reconnaissance squadron under Major M. L. Cruickshank, and three American 105-millimetre self-propelled guns on Sherman chassis. A British artillery liaison officer accompanied the column in an open-topped Honey.

Major Barton returned from his reconnaissance not very impressed: the objective was rather vague, the force would have no infantry support, the liaison arrangements with the French and Indians were not thought adequate, the force's commander —Colonel Gray was an artilleryman—had had no experience with tanks. Barton reported his doubts to Brigadier Stewart at 4 Armoured Brigade's headquarters. The Brigadier did not like the plan any better than Barton did and rang Corps. 'You can imagine my astonishment when they said the show was starting at 0600 the next morning,' Barton later wrote. 'Here was I 15 miles from the squadron, who were all blissfully asleep.'

They were not left to sleep long. The squadron had received no orders to move, but a telephone call to the Indian brigade confirmed that the attack was on. A hurried conference was held by candlelight and troop commanders were given what meagre information was available. About 1.30 a.m. on 19 March Colonel Gray arrived with more explicit orders, but it was then found that he had no communication direct with 4 Indian Division and that before the attack could start another No. 19 set would have to be installed in the tank carrying him. Two of the crew were taken out of Sergeant Owen Hughes's <sup>13</sup> tank and the wireless and the Colonel installed in the turret, Hughes commanding the tank from the spare-driver's seat. Installing the extra wireless was not easy, 'but Ray Hodge <sup>14</sup> of EME and his offsider ... ( 'Ash' Hogan <sup>15</sup>) did a really wonderful job,' said Barton. 'No lights could be shown and it is a very tricky job [even] in broad daylight.' Hodge was the wireless expert attached from Divisional Signals: 'I was still rigging the wire for the aerial when they moved off,' he says.

The squadron got away between 3 and 4 a.m., Colonel Gray's tank in the lead. A heavy mist had come down and the tanks had to travel more or less nose to tail over 'one of the toughest bits of ground I ever saw tanks asked to tackle'—to quote one of the troop commanders. One tank (Corporal Rex Miller's) slipped off the narrow track up Cavendish road and threw one of its tracks; it stayed there 'at an angle of nearly 45 degrees' for several very uncomfortable days. Fortunately it was the last in the line; had it been the first the chaos can only be conjectured.

The rendezvous with the rest of the force was at Madras Circus, at the head of Cavendish road. It took about three hours to complete the journey. On the first

stretch, by devious muddy tracks to Cairo village, mule trains blocked the way; on Cavendish road the camouflage nets erected to hide the road from enemy guns were not high enough in places and became entangled with the tanks' turrets. It was daylight before the rendezvous was reached.

With Second-Lieutenant Hazlett's troop in the lead, the squadron moved off about half past seven up a grassy valley between rough, bush-covered hills. The gradient was gentle and the track fairly good, although sown with S-mines ('One could see them going off like crackers under the tracks') and broken up with patches of very soft going between outcrops of rock. Within a few minutes Hazlett's tank was bogged in one of these patches or in a shell hole, and two others, including that carrying the Colonel, had lost tracks—they had moved only about 300 yards from Madras Circus. Hazlett transferred to his sergeant's tank. Off the track large boulders and shell craters made the going very bad, and Second-Lieutenant Bill de Lautour's tank shed a track trying to climb a rocky spur on Phantom Ridge, from which he was to give covering fire. Following Hazlett's example, he took his corporal's tank.

So far the leading tanks had met opposition only from infantry as the self-propelled guns had knocked out most effectively an enemy blockhouse OP opposite the French lines. Enemy mortars now opened fire and the gear strapped on Captain Moodie's tank was set alight. At this stage the hills converged on the track and the tanks had to pass one at a time through a bottleneck where the path narrowed to only a few yards between bushy slopes. Second-Lieutenant 'Buck' Renall forced a way through after blasting out a machine-gun post. About this point the advance came under heavy artillery fire.

With Renall at the head of the squadron was Corporal Dick Jones,<sup>16</sup> a tank commander in Renall's troop. He and his troop commander had given each other covering fire as they alternated in the lead, their advance being covered in turn by the tanks behind them. Jones had trouble from enemy snipers. 'It was getting very uncomfortable with the head out,' he reports. 'I tried commanding with the turret closed, using the periscope, but between fumes from the guns and the rough going found it impossible.' He continues:

Buck called (on the wireless) to say that we would advance to Albaneta House in two-up formation, covering the left scrubby hillside while Jack Hazlett looked after

our right with his troop. Our 'Two-up' formation consisted of Buck and myself forward with covering fire from our Sergeant's tank. We decided to advance, 'leap-frogging' each other with approximately 300 yard bounds, each giving covering fire in turn. Here we found for the first time how vulnerable a tank is on the move in rough going. I tried at first to secure hull-down positions at the end of each advance, but soon gave up this idea as we nearly got stuck twice, and anyway our advance was much quicker than we anticipated.

Just as Buck gave the word to move a German crawled out of the scrub waving a white flag. Here I think that if we had had Infantry we could have captured many prisoners as they were starting to appear everywhere, but just then our covering tanks were through and opened up.

As we leap-frogged our way forward it became obvious that we had caught Jerry napping. Just through the gap Buck wiped out a machine-gun nest, the Germans bravely firing away at us until the end. All the way we pounded the hillside and I think we must have inflicted heavy casualties as we could pick up a good few Germans moving about.

As we advanced up the plateau we were all conscious of a narrow part, and my crew knew as well as I that if Jerry had anything heavy in the 'Nunnery' ([Albaneta House](#)) we would be a sitting shot. With the way our advance had gone it was our tank's turn to advance first, through the 'bottle neck', as Buck and I had been calling it.

As we prepared to advance through I told our driver, [Jack Hodge](#), <sup>17</sup> to drive as fast as possible, swerving from side to side. Buck opened up on [Albaneta House](#) and Jack Hazlett's troop was also concentrating on it. When it was practically obscured by dust we moved. In the turret we tossed about as the tank swerved and bucked. I am sure we all held our breath in spite of this. When we stopped [Steve Lewis](#), <sup>18</sup> our gunner, opened up on the 'Nunnery' with A.P. and H.E., while [Joe Costello](#), <sup>19</sup> our spare driver, raked it with his .30 Browning, much to his delight. Buck moved through while we kept up the bombardment.

Meanwhile, on C Squadron's right flank the Indian reconnaissance squadron and some of 760 US Tank Battalion's Honeys tried to clear the [Phantom Ridge](#) area.

Their objective was Point 575, 700 yards west-north-west of [Albaneta House](#). They struck bad going and were heavily shelled. Most of the reconnaissance squadron's tanks lost tracks and the squadron ended a short, sharp action with only one tank intact. One American tank crew was taken prisoner. The attempt was given up and the American Honeys followed C Squadron towards Albaneta.

Having safely passed through the second bottleneck the tanks opened fire on [Albaneta House](#), which lay a little below them on a flat plateau overlooking a steep gully to the west. A big, square, stone building with thick walls built of 'something very like [Oamaru stone](#)', the farmhouse had already taken a pounding from our artillery and from bombs. Renall's three tanks and Hazlett's two dusted it over again without much visible effect and then searched the hillside of Point 593 for enemy weapon pits, but the Indians' lines were so close to the Germans' that the tanks' fire was restricted.

Major Barton reported back that [Albaneta House](#) 'appeared to be under control' and moved Renall's troop down to the flat ground in front of it—a treacherously soft boggy area. Hazlett's troop followed Renall. Barton continues their story:

We had orders to try and see what the chances were of getting around the corner to the Monastery. We knew from the aerial photos that a track of some kind was in existence but it did not look very promising. From our position it was not possible to see the track. I ordered Buck Renall to have a try and see what the reaction was. Jack Hazlett's two tanks were to cover [Albaneta House](#) as we were certain some Jerries must be there—we had seen four pop up from behind a wall some time earlier. It was not possible to get around the rear of the house as it was perched on the edge of a gully and the going was too tough.

All this time we had been shelled with varying degrees of intensity, some of it very heavy stuff which fortunately had little effect except to make sightseeing out of the turret undesirable. Renall's troop (I'm not sure whether he had three or two tanks at this stage) disappeared around the corner and we waited anxiously to hear from him. All went well for a while and then silence. I cannot remember now whether we ever heard any more over the air from Buck Renall. I think not as it must have been one of his crew called up and obviously something serious was wrong. The next moment his tank appeared and came out—holed several times with

bazookas. Buck was killed.... [He was shot through the head by a sniper.] His other tanks had a further attempt with equally disastrous results—a ... [wireless operator, Tom Middleton<sup>20</sup>] killed and one or two of the crew badly wounded. Jones lost an arm in one of these tanks. Bazookas and snipers did the damage. I am hazy about the third tank but I know that one pulled out and reported it was holed badly and I think casualties in the crew. To complicate matters this tank got badly stuck on the track up from the flat by Albaneta. We tried to get smoke down to let the crew make a dash for it as the sniping was severe. I was very reluctant to send down another tank (we only had about three genuine runners left anyway) as its chances of being stuck were obvious—the few tanks had churned up the soft going very badly. I had just decided that they would have to make a dash for it when a Yank Honey dashed up alongside and took all the crew off—it was a gallant effort as they were very likely to have become bogged alongside.... Throughout the day they displayed great dash and calmness, especially as they had 'open' Honeys. Their casualties were very heavy as a consequence. We greatly admired them.

The tank crew rescued by the Americans was commanded by Corporal Reg Lennie.<sup>21</sup> He had taken his tank close up to [Albaneta House](#), where a shot had disabled one of its motors, and on the way back it had bellied on the edge of a bomb crater in the boggy ground. Enemy mortars quickly concentrated on this sitting target and accurate spandau fire smashed both periscopes and kept the crew sealed under their hatches. Smoke was put down but was dispersed by the wind. All the remaining tanks then opened fire on the farmhouse and the surrounding enemy positions while two American Honeys dashed in and picked up the crew. The rain of shells on the soft stone walls of the house quickly raised a dense pall of dust, 'which soon enveloped the tank and allowed the crew to bale out into the straddling open-topped Honeys.' Before they could get out the crew had to 'bash open' the turret hatch with empty shell cases as a hit from a mortar bomb had jammed it, but the four men escaped unharmed.<sup>22</sup>

It was about this time—or probably a little earlier—that Lieutenant Hazlett was killed. Major Barton tells what happened:

During these attempts to get around the corner a most distressing incident occurred. Jack Hazlett was very close to [Albaneta House](#) covering Renall and keeping an eye on Albaneta when his camouflage net which he was carrying on the back of

his tank caught fire. Jack jumped out of his turret to pull it away and was shot dead from Albaneta. His wireless operator and gunner ( Sorich <sup>23</sup> and Dasler <sup>24</sup>) also got out—I have never understood why they did—and dived into a huge bombhole alongside and both perished either from shelling or snipers from Albaneta—I think shelling as we were having a nasty strafing at the time. <sup>25</sup> Shorty Gallagher <sup>26</sup> and Bill Welch <sup>27</sup> were the drivers and eventually brought the tank out, much holed by bazookas. They put up a magnificent show and Gallagher received the MM.... It was a tragic affair. Dasler and Sorich if they had remained would have come out.... The death of Stuffy Hazlett was a severe blow to the Squadron. His never failing good humour and commonsense, as well as his renowned unorthodox methods, had endeared him to us all—he was sadly missed.

At the risk of a little repetition, the story of the advance by Renall's troop, now two tanks strong, is well worth hearing at first hand. It is told by Corporal Jones, commander of the surviving tank, who did not escape from the action unscathed. He writes:

Buck came on the air to say our other tank was bogged and that we were to recce for an advance route to the Monastery. It was a wonderful experience being so close after weeks of cowering under its domination, and to think we could actually fire at it directly.

It was at this time I realized that our ammunition was running low. Our Browning tins were nearly empty and our 75mm racks were getting bare. Every shot had to count now.

We turned left and went forward a hundred yards or so and somebody on the air said to 'put out that fire on that tank'. While I was looking round to see if it was ours I saw the camouflage net on Jack's burning and Jack [Hazlett] climbing out to extinguish it. Seconds later he fell off the tank.

We advanced another stage to the left but shortage of ammunition didn't allow us to do the hill (Point 593) on our left over as thoroughly as we had on our advance, and I am positive that this was the reason for our downfall. I moved forward a bit further to get a better view of the track to the monastery and the shelling was terrific. We nearly got stuck, only superb driving by Jack Hodge getting

us out.

Word came that Buck was killed. I realized that our reconnaissance would have to be quick as we couldn't fire our 75mm much and our Browning (co-ax.) was terribly hot and wasting ammunition by 'running away', in spite of the oil which Steve threw over it.

It was while looking at the possible route that we were hit.

Regaining consciousness I saw that my arm was bleeding badly and must have a tourniquet quickly. I looked up to see Joe Costello gazing through the turret at me. How he wasn't hit is a mystery. Steve was slumped over his 75mm, bleeding badly from his back and head. Tom Middleton was lying on the floor, having fallen off his seat by his wireless. With difficulty I managed to traverse the turret by hand to allow Jack to scramble through to apply the tourniquet.

This applied, I told Jack to try the motors. It was with a prayer on our lips he pressed the starter. The left engine roared into life to be followed by the right immediately afterwards. With his head out of the driver's hatch, the better to see and get maximum speed, Jack drove out through our own tanks, which were still pounding away at the enemy, to the forward CCS.

The vital area was now Point 593—it was obvious that the attack could not succeed until the hill had been cleared. Dug in on its shaggy western slopes in positions hidden in dense scrub, the enemy's riflemen in their spotted camouflage suits were hard to pick up and harder still to hit. Their persistent and accurate sniping forced the tank commanders to keep their heads inside their turrets or permitted them only an occasional quick glance. Half-blinded, several tanks ran into difficulties. Giving each other cover against bazooka attack, the tanks strafed the enemy weapon pits but without infantry help could not clear them. Before the squadron could continue its dash to the monastery, infantry would have to come up to consolidate the ground gained.

At this point an attempt was made by Second-Lieutenant de Lautour to get his remaining tank towards the monastery, about 1400 yards away along a paved stone track, but the shelling was too heavy and the enemy's bazookas and snipers too persistent. With great dash and determination the American Honeys also tried in the

late afternoon to advance round the southern shoulder of Point 593, but they suffered heavy casualties—seven tanks were lost—and had to pull out.

Major Barton was recalled to Madras Circus for a conference and the five surviving tanks under Captain Moodie took up a position on the track north of [Albaneta House](#) where they were hidden from enemy OPs. They stayed there the rest of the day waiting for infantry support and further orders. Except for sniping and a little shelling, the enemy held his fire, apparently waiting to see whether infantry would join the tanks. A few paratroopers who tried to stalk the tanks from the scrub on Point 593 were driven off by machine-gun fire. Moodie also called up three or four of the American Honeys and sent them to a crest above the track to harass enemy infantry to the west.

With only five runners left in the squadron and with daylight going fast, the chances of advancing to the monastery were now very slight indeed. The Gurkhas and Essex men on Hangman's Hill had more than enough troubles of their own and could make no attempt to link up with the tanks from the east. Without such support and with no infantry to back them, the tanks could make no headway and were ordered by wireless from Madras Circus to return there. They began to withdraw about dusk. Had they stayed later they would have become an easy prey to German infantry with bazookas or to counter-attacks already brewing on [Phantom Ridge](#). In the failing light some of the enemy followed the tanks back part of the way while the flashes of their small-arms fire lit up the bushy slopes on both sides of the valley.

We spent the night licking our wounds and trying to get some much-needed sleep [Major Barton continues]. We were shelled fairly frequently and Jim Moodie was wounded and sent down next day. The Germans did not react in any other way. The Tommies and Yanks left us the following night. Shelling was heavy at times and we had the bad luck to have [George Hanrahan](#) <sup>28</sup>—my driver—very badly wounded, and also [Bell](#), <sup>29</sup> my spare driver. Bell died of wounds in an Indian CCS. We got up supplies by jeep—Bob Newlands being his usual grand self and we lacked nothing. [Bill Dalrymple](#) <sup>30</sup> and his staff did what they could in the way of repairs....

The attack was the squadron's second disappointment within a week. It had lost nine tanks in the action (five were later recovered and brought back) and had had two officers and three other ranks killed and one officer and eight men wounded.

What had it accomplished in return? It had taken the enemy by surprise and had penetrated well behind his lines in difficult country which he had apparently believed impassable to tanks for he had laid no anti-tank mines.<sup>31</sup> It had helped to take some of the pressure off the sorely-tried troops isolated on Hangman's Hill.

Lieutenant Renall is credited by an eye-witness as having got to within 1000 yards of the monastery; had there been any prospect of consolidation the dash to the abbey might have been 'on', although it is doubtful whether the track was wide enough for Shermans all the way. Sapper help would probably have been needed to open the road and under the heavy fire their employment was not possible.

The enemy had reacted nervously: he had retaliated with a hail of mortar and artillery fire, and although he scored hits with what is believed to have been an 88-millimetre gun, his snipers and bazookas caused most of C Squadron's casualties. Very few Germans were seen but they fought courageously: at one time paratroopers came as close as 30 yards and engaged the tanks with hand grenades and rifles. Most of the tank casualties, however, were caused by mechanical failure, broken tracks or bogging, rather than by the enemy's fire—an indication that he had been caught unawares and was badly flustered. An intercepted wireless message reported 'Enemy tanks broken through our centre, inf attack imminent'; another agitated message claimed that the attacking force was 'using new tank with rubber tracks that can climb rocks'.

The attack had little effect on the main battle for Cassino. It was primarily a raid—a 'side show' General Freyberg called it—one arm of a pair of pincers that could accomplish nothing without the other. But to get tanks behind Point 593 into the heart of the enemy defences was a feat of skill and determination which, if it had small result, was at least an achievement that provided one bright spot in a week of troubles and frustrations.

In a letter of appreciation to the squadron commander on the tanks' part in 'the cavalry ride to Albaneta House', General Galloway, the commander of 4 Indian Division, described the attack as 'a very valuable diversion and a great effort on your part'. The squadron, he said, had made a real contribution to the battle both in the casualties it had inflicted on the enemy and in the fact that the possibility of the operation being repeated would 'undoubtedly prevent the enemy from thinning out

and so finding reserves for the main battles.'

Apart from the shelling mentioned by Major Barton the enemy left the tanks at Madras Circus alone. The Americans and British withdrew on the night of 20–21 March but the New Zealanders stayed there until the 22nd, when it was decided to leave one troop behind to support the Essex infantry and withdraw the rest to the squadron's old laager area at San Michele, where it would reorganise. Second-Lieutenant Jack Denham, on whose sound recollection much of this account is based, was left there in charge of a troop of three tanks until the night of 26–27 March. Reliefs continued to man these tanks until about 2 April, the crews being changed every four days. Apart from mortaring and sniping and a fall of snow, the crews had little excitement, although Second-Lieutenant Laurie Falconer was wounded by spandau fire on the night of the 30th and lost an arm.

'One of our squadron's tanks knocked out in the earlier show was sitting abandoned some distance in front of the Tommy positions,' says Corporal Miller, later mentioned in despatches for his part in this incident. 'Laurie decided to endeavour to disable the gun in case the Jerries manned it, and I agreed to go out with him. We were joined by a Tommy officer and a fighting patrol of about eight men and proceeded in single file up the valley. Laurie first, myself second, and the patrol following. I had just sighted the form of the tank a few yards ahead in the darkness when a spandau opened up from beside it with a stream of tracer that seemed to go everywhere but through me. Jerry had got there first. I rolled well to one side and heard the rest getting back, so followed suit. On catching up with some of them I was told that Laurie had been hit, so I went back and found him. I got him back till we had nearly regained the FDLs and there met the Tommy officer who was on his way back alone to find what had become of us. We heard movements in the gully, which we suspected to be a Jerry patrol, so he returned and brought up men to give us cover defence while we got Laurie back further. I then went and collected a stretcher party from the tank crews to finish the job.'

Stores, ammunition, and water were brought up to Madras Circus at night by jeep and in the squadron quartermaster's 15-cwt. By now the activities of its quartermaster-sergeant, Bob Newlands, in various actions had become almost a squadron legend. 'Bob was always the first on the scene after any action and we never lacked anything,' writes Major Barton. 'Bob and Bill Brass had been taking

supplies up to Mount Cairo after the [Albaneta House](#) show and on their way back got a puncture in a very exposed part of the road. Bob sprang out and started rummaging round for the jack, and Bill, who had been equally quick to get out, said: "We've no time to worry about the bloody jack, Bob, I'll lift the b— while you change the wheel." And lift it he did! I was very sad to hear that Bob has since died. A grander chap never lived.'

So far C Squadron had struck the regiment's only blows in the battle. At [Mignano](#) Regimental Headquarters and A and B Squadrons still waited for word to move. They had been there since 7 February and had found the wait interminable. Occasionally an enemy fighter would streak up the valley strafing the road, and on 19 March a spectacular fire in the Division's ammunition point nearby provided a lively and expensive display. Next day, the 20th, the wait ended for A Squadron, which moved that night up Route 6 and over a rough track to an area above the road and a mile or more north of Monte Trocchio. The night was pitch dark and the move took several hours. It brought the squadron almost due east of [Cassino](#), still two miles or more away, and under command of [19 Armoured Regiment](#) as reserve squadron.

Regimental Headquarters and B Squadron followed A Squadron north on the 22nd with the role of relieving 19 Regiment in [Cassino](#) under 5 Brigade's command. One tank was lost over a bank near Trocchio on the way up, but the regiment had received four new ones the day before. The tanks arrived in the new area about 8 p.m. and were hidden from enemy view under olive trees on a steep hillside near [San Michele](#), sharing the narrow roads with 78 British Division, under whose command two troops of B Squadron were temporarily placed.

A Squadron was first into the town. It made a false start on the afternoon of the 22nd when 1 Troop moved up Route 6 under a smoke screen but was stopped at a bridge by an engineer officer and told that the bridges farther ahead had been damaged by shelling: they couldn't be repaired in daylight but the engineers would fix them that night. The troop returned to its lying-up area behind a house which sheltered it from the scrutiny of the battered abbey across the valley. Only two tanks had made the trip: at the start of the journey the troop commander's tank had lost a track and Sergeant Bill Russell was evicted, most unwillingly, from his.

At 5.30 a.m. next day Lieutenant Charlie Low <sup>31</sup> and Sergeant Doig <sup>32</sup> of 1 Troop

followed the squadron commander, Captain Bay, up Route 6 and over the Rapido into Cassino. With them also was 2 Troop under Second-Lieutenant 'Snow' Nixon. Route 6 was still covered by the enemy in the Hotel des Roses and from gun and tank positions in houses at the foot of the hill. No. 1 Troop sheltered for a while behind what was left of a wall of the convent on Route 6, and then edged round the lip of a shell hole blocking the road into the town and crossed an empty section to the left. About 100 or 150 yards from the convent the two tanks took up positions in a partly demolished building near the road leading to the railway station, which had been captured by 26 Battalion and a 19 Regiment squadron on the 17th. Reports were received that three German tanks were sheltering behind the Hotel Continental at the end of the street and the troop opened fire. Again Low had bad luck: after firing only two rounds his gun gave trouble and he pulled back into shelter. Doig spent the day sniping and at close range fired over fifty rounds into the Hotel des Roses and other buildings. When enemy retaliation became too heavy or too close, he moved his tank behind the building until the fire quietened.

No. 2 Troop went to the railway station and almost immediately ran into trouble. Lieutenant Nixon's tank was holed by an anti-tank gun and Nixon and Corporal Cliff Watson,<sup>33</sup> the wireless operator, and Lance-Corporal Brassey,<sup>34</sup> the gunner, were wounded, the last the most seriously. The tank caught fire and its crew left it in a hurry, but Brassey had to be rescued by the troop sergeant, 'Buck' Needham. Needham left his own tank, climbed through the driver's hatch of the now furiously burning tank, and with help lifted out the gunner. The tank was still in full view of the enemy gun, which put another armour-piercing shell into the driver's compartment just as Needham climbed out. Brassey died from his wounds later in the morning; Needham, miraculously unhurt, was awarded the MM.

With the troop commander wounded, Needham took over command. His troop was relieved at dawn next day (the 24th) when B Squadron assumed responsibility for the station area, but it was daylight before the relief was completed. Needham's two tanks again had to run the gauntlet of the anti-tank gun. His own tank sped past; the second, more cautious, moved behind cover. As Needham had now lost communication with the second tank, he walked back some 200 yards along the road from where his own tank was halted to see if all was well. It was a clear day and the road was right under the enemy's eye; his machine guns and mortars lashed the

ground with their fire. When one of the tank commanders in the relieving troop was wounded, Needham helped to evacuate him. The sergeant's coolness and disregard for his own safety was an example of gallant leadership far greater than the bare words convey. He was himself wounded a few nights later while coming back on foot from the railway station. Trooper Jack Ward,<sup>35</sup> only a yard or so away, was killed by the same mortar bomb.

After a wretched week of difficulties and deadlock New Zealand Corps' policy was now to hold what it had won. Both sides had virtually fought themselves out. Successive days of bitter fighting to clear a way along Route 6 had achieved no notable successes. Because of the obstacles that blocked their path, the tanks could not close on the enemy strongpoints that defied the assaults of the infantry and were forced to engage them from a distance, sometimes of only 200 yards or so. At a conference on the morning of 23 March General Freyberg had reported that the Division had 'come to the end of its tether'.

The time had come to reorganise. Indian and New Zealand outposts isolated on Monastery Hill were withdrawn into the town on the night of 24–25 March and Cassino became a garrison. The tanks became pillboxes and 19 and 20 Regiments rearranged their boundaries and supporting tasks so that the 20th became responsible for the greater part of the town and the area of the station while the 19th worked in the northern end of the town. As far as the tanks were concerned, this reorganisation took place on the morning of the 24th when B Squadron of the 20th took over the station area from 19 Regiment.

B Squadron's task was to support the infantry around the station and along the western bank of the Rapido. One troop of tanks was sited in the station area in close support and a second troop was in reserve near the railway embankment about a mile away, ready to relieve the troop on duty and to move up to the station in an emergency if required. No. 6 Troop took over the station position about half past five on the morning of the 24th and was originally to be followed there by 8 Troop, but when it reached the station it wirelessed back that there was not enough cover there for more than one troop and advised 8 Troop not to come in without smoke protection.

Moving in line ahead along Route 6, Squadron Headquarters and 5 and 7 Troops

came to a stop at a damaged bridge. As there was little chance of getting farther forward, Captain Clapham <sup>36</sup> exchanged tanks with the officer he was to relieve and took command of the A Squadron tanks already in the town. The rest of the squadron then took up supporting positions near the cemetery north of Route 6.

No. 8 Troop had no better fortune than the others. On the way in to the station under a smoke screen, Sergeant McClelland's tank ran off the railway embankment just after crossing the bridge over the Rapido and lost a track. Captain Shacklock and Sergeant Hiscock <sup>37</sup> reached the station but were recalled that night to the squadron area, where they were joined by McClelland's crew. A party then went out to remove the breech block from the damaged tank and to 'cannibalise' any of its equipment. Mortars opened fire and Hiscock was wounded in a leg; it was later amputated.

No. 1 Troop had spent the night of 23–24 March giving the encouragement and protection of its guns to a company of 21 Battalion, and had returned just before daylight to the protection of its building near the convent ready for another day's sniping. The crews had quickly learned that any movement of tanks by day at once drew enemy shells and mortar bombs. At night the tanks could move a little provided they did it quietly, as any noise brought a sharp enemy reprimand.

At night the tanks in Cassino acted as a sort of welfare centre for the infantry in the town: the crews would brew tea for them, hand out any food they had to spare, or help to bury their dead. All the time the tanks were on call should the enemy attack. The troop commander's post was with the infantry headquarters in the crypt at the rear of the convent. A wireless operator with him was in contact with the tanks in the town and with RHQ, which was on continuous wireless watch ready to call up the squadron's reserve troop near the cemetery, just over a mile away.

That, briefly, was the pattern of most of A Squadron's tank work in Cassino. No. 1 Troop took its tanks back out of the town about 6 a.m. on 25 March and Squadron Headquarters and 3 Troop took over. Sergeant Russell made his postponed entry into Cassino with this relief. He describes the experience:

I went in with the first relief, Martin Donnelly <sup>38</sup> and Ces Brown <sup>39</sup> showing us the way in. This trip we still had bridges over the Rapido and took the jeeps over. Later we had to walk this mad mile, or more or less. This first trip we were shelled

or mortared quite a bit—at least I remember flattening out on the road a few times and was carrying a 4-gallon tin of petrol for our Homelite charger to keep the batteries up so that our wireless would still be of use to us. That's the heaviest tin I hope I ever carry.

Our first refuge was to get down on our hands and knees and enter the Crypt, which was our main dressing station or RAP. From here we scrambled out the other side and proceeded 100, perhaps 200, yards to the tank positions in the buildings. We also had infantry in these positions with us, and as far as I know there was nothing ahead of us except the enemy. Jerry was able to shell the yard between the church and the tanks but seemed unable to get short enough to hit the tank building. All the same we were close enough to Jerry to receive a rifle grenade with pamphlets.

We had dug trenches under our tanks and took our turns on sentry with the tommy guns ready for action, but we were never really called on to patrol or defend ourselves this way. But I'll always remember those positions, with the shells and mortars falling close behind us, and Jerry talking and screaming, and worst of all the croaking of frogs when listening and peering for forms in the darkness.

The crews of the tanks in the town—but not the tanks themselves—were changed every two or three days. The main reason for this was the difficulty the engineers had in keeping the bridges over the Rapido in repair: as regularly as they fixed them by night the enemy blew them apart by day or, as a variation, shelled them at night while the engineers were working on them, causing heavy casualties. 'I've walked over our dead on those splintered planks more than once in haste,' said one man. Crews usually travelled by jeep up Route 6 as far as the Bailey bridge, the jeep drivers doing 'a great job' under fire. The reliefs walked or ran or crawled the rest of the way according to individual preference and enemy viciousness at the time. 'Spandau Joe', a German machine-gunner who became one of the characters of the [Cassino](#) battle, gave the tank crews some anxious moments and close escapes on Route 6, but although his fire forced the jeeps to stop farther along the road and gave the crews a longer walk, sometimes raising the dust at their feet, it caused the squadron no casualties.

The tanks couldn't move about inside the town for Route 6 was still badly

cratered and was covered by enemy guns. One of these was a long-barrelled 75-millimetre which was sited in a building near the Hotel des Roses. Perhaps the range was a bit short, or perhaps the gun could not be depressed enough to reach the squadron's position, for most (but not all) of the shelling passed overhead. On the 25th the fire was especially heavy and a 3 Troop tank was hit, Corporal Lovelock<sup>40</sup> and Trooper Fowler<sup>41</sup> being killed. The enemy seemed to have plenty of ammunition and the hours of relief had to be changed almost every day. One of the crews' main worries was the recharging of batteries to keep the wireless working and to start the tanks' engines. Carrying parties had to bring in petrol, often under fire, and the noise of the Homelite charger was almost certain to bring down fire. A near miss one day put the electrical system of one tank out of action but it was repaired in the town.

But not all the shells in Cassino were travelling east. By 25 March the Allied guns had fired over half a million shells, and mortars and tanks added their not inconsiderable quotas to the bombardment being rained on the enemy. The regiment's tanks in the centre of the town and at the railway station found targets on Route 6, along which the movement of enemy tanks was several times reported, and engaged strongpoints at the foot of Monastery Hill. And when all else was quiet there was bound to be sooner or later a report from the infantry of tanks 'popping in and out of cover' from behind the Continental or the Hotel des Roses.

No. 6 Troop at the railway station fired smoke on the 25th to help screen the tanks in Cassino, but in the days that followed the troop at the station had troubles of its own. Although the position there was rather open and the whole area commanded by enemy guns, it had been decided to post a troop of tanks up with the infantry rather than run the risk of the bridge on the railway embankment being blown and the ground troops cut off from support. Should the enemy attack, the tanks were already in the front line and their commanders familiar with the area. The wisdom (and the dangers) of this plan were soon to be clearly shown.

On the night of 30–31 March German paratroops from a machine-gun company attacked 26 Battalion at the station and at the hummock. About nine o'clock, after heavy mortar concentrations, two parties crossed the Gari River to the west and made straight for the tanks. The infantry opened fire on the attackers and the tank crews could hear shouts in German, but in the dark the tanks were almost helpless

and had to rely on the infantry for protection. Sergeant Bill Watson's <sup>42</sup> tank was bazookaed. The German patrol then climbed on to it and fired through the open hatch, killing Sergeant Watson, Corporal W. A. Brown, <sup>43</sup> and Troopers Vince Graffin <sup>44</sup> and Alf Ball. <sup>45</sup> The driver, Trooper Jim Hayward, <sup>46</sup> was taken prisoner.

Twenty-sixth Battalion's historian records that one of his unit's pickets first noticed something amiss when he saw several paratroopers trying to lift the hatch of a nearby tank, whose crew were revolving the turret in an effort to dislodge them. This tank was Corporal Jim Boniface's. <sup>47</sup>

At approx 2200 hours [says B Squadron's commander] the enemy tps infiltrated the fwd inf positions apparently with the idea of KO-ing the tks, the tks at this stage being at separate positions with the inf, the sentry of which was to guard the tks as well as his own mates. Unfortunately on the night of the attack the sentry was a bit inexperienced. On hearing movement he challenged, 'Who's that?' and received the answer in English, 'Only us', and instead of challenging with the password relaxed and let the Germans move by on to the Sgt's tank, which they bazookaed.

The same trick was worked where the Cpl's tk was. But instead of bazookaing it the Germans climbed up on the tk probably with the intention of dropping a grenade in the turret. Fortunately one of the inf noticed them and fired, warning the crew, who came into action by traversing the gun, knocking the Germans off.

The troop at the station that night (No. 5) was due to be relieved at midnight and its commander (Lieutenant Rod Eastgate <sup>48</sup>) radioed Colonel Ferguson asking whether he thought the relief advisable in view of the enemy activity. It was decided that the troop should stay put for the night. It was a wise decision for the skirmish flared up again about midnight when the Germans made another probe towards the tanks. After a while the attack was beaten off and Eastgate set off to find his sergeant, with whom he had lost touch. 'I set off to see what was wrong,' he says, 'but the infantry asked me not to move about, as they were fairly trigger-happy from straining their eyes into the darkness.... Shortly before dawn ... the paratroops again came down the railway line from the direction of the "Baron's Palace". This time they brought their blankets with them but they had a warm reception. As it grew light, Corporal Boniface and I were able to move our tanks over to the engine roundhouse, from which we overlooked the Hummocks, and were in a position to bring fire to

bear on some of the troublesome spots. It was all over in an hour or so, and by that time the Arty had covered the whole forward area with smoke shells, so that Sergeant Reid <sup>49</sup> was able to come roaring up in his tank in broad daylight to reinforce us.' 'My driver "Parkie" (later killed at [Sora](#)) ... gave the old tank all she had,' says Reid. 'We had such a fast trip we could not tell whether anything was fired at us or not.'

No. 6 Troop had moved up in support during this skirmish but smoke obscured its view of the station yards and it took no part in it. No. 5 Troop spent the rest of the day improving its positions in anticipation of a further attack. Twenty-three enemy dead were counted in the station area and five prisoners were taken.

Eastgate's troop was relieved by Second-Lieutenant Jack Dawkins's troop that night. The three tanks of this troop were grouped together in a house at night to form a strongpoint protected by sandbags and ack-ack Brownings on ground mountings. The tank crews, armed with tommy guns, were made responsible for their own protection, but there were no further raids before the squadron was relieved.

The 'flying fitters' under Sergeant Charlie Lilley <sup>50</sup> did particularly good work in the station area at this time. While manoeuvring into position behind a house, one 8 Troop tank struck a wall and damaged a sprocket and hub. A new one had to be fitted but, for obvious reasons, the work could not be done by daylight. For four nights the fitters worked in pitch darkness, sometimes using a torch under a tarpaulin. Each blow of the sledge-hammer rang like a bell, and after every few blows the fitters had to dive for cover for about a quarter of an hour while enemy guns and mortars briskly 'stonked' the area. Even muffling with sandbags failed to reduce the noise; the enemy mortars never failed to protest, and the work had to be carried out in short bursts of a few hectic minutes at a time.

Enemy patrols, no doubt trying to find out what the noise was all about, were an additional hazard. One wet, pitch-dark night when 'Spandau Joe' was venting his evening hate on the railway yards, the fitters took shelter in the turret of the tank on which they were working. To pass the time they called up the three other tanks on the high-frequency 'B' set. Through the earphones a hoarse voice whispered in reply:

'Are you in the tank?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Be very quiet, there's a Jerry patrol in the area.'

Noiselessly the tank's hatches were closed and latched. All its guns had been either salvaged or made ineffective, and the fitters' only pistol was lying outside on the front of the driver's compartment. Suddenly there came the sound of running feet and a scurrying at the back of the tank. The fitters sat in silence, waiting tensely for the crash of the bazooka. Outside, a Tommy from a listening post, returning for his gas cape, had paused to take cover from the machine-gun fire.

In this area troops relieved each other every two days. A troop would do two days at the station and then two days in the reserve area (or vice versa) before going back along the railway to the dispersal area at [San Michele](#), where Squadron Headquarters occupied a position on a hill behind a little red schoolhouse. Occasionally tanks were shelled while moving along the railway track. One night the relief was delayed because the railway bridge had been damaged by shellfire: the incoming troop left its tanks behind and went in on foot, taking over the tanks already in position at the station. On 15 April it was decided to leave troops in the station area for three days rather than risk casualties in changing over.

After a month in the line under various commands, B Squadron was relieved in the early hours of 25 April. On the way out a No. 8 Troop tank fouled a loose railway line at the bridge and broke a track, and as it was nearly daylight the tank was abandoned and the crew evacuated. At dusk that evening the Technical Adjutant, Captain [George Taylor](#),<sup>51</sup> went back for it with the American T2 recovery tank which he had retrieved from the muddy fields below the railway embankment but found that it had been blown to bits by a heavy gun.

Meanwhile, in the centre of the town, the routine that inevitably settles on the shoulders of any garrison in peace or war, making day to day incidents difficult to remember and duller to record, weighed heavily on the regiment's crews. At noon on 26 March [New Zealand Corps](#) was disbanded and [Cassino](#) became [13 Corps'](#) responsibility and all the troops in the town passed to its command. For a few days A

and B Squadrons took turns on duty, three tanks in the centre of the town and three in the station area. From time to time reports of the inevitable problem tank at the Hotel Continental drew down a hail of fire to which the tanks contributed their share. By night tired infantrymen and tank crews crawled out of their ruined houses and cellars and crossed the river for a brief rest while their reliefs struggled forward with heavy loads of supplies and ammunition—sandbags, kerosene for the primus, water tins, bully beef, bread.

The enemy was quick to anger and a 'stonk' would follow the slightest provocation. What provoked him on the 29th is not recorded but the tanks in the station area were chided with the heaviest shelling they had so far experienced in that position, and those in the town were bombed as well as shelled. One A Squadron tank had its radiator holed—amazingly slight damage for the fury expended—but one man was killed and another wounded. The regiment retaliated that night and next morning with concentrations against an anti-tank gun south of the Baron's Palace; in return, a tank at the convent was hit by shellfire and its crew evacuated.

On 29 March squadron responsibilities in the town were defined by the CO after a visit to 6 Brigade Headquarters. Nine tanks were to be kept there: three in the station area (the responsibility of B Squadron) with two tanks in reserve just north of the railway and about three-quarters of a mile to the east; three in the central area near the convent (A Squadron's responsibility) with a troop standing by in the squadron area; and three C Squadron tanks in the north of the town. The last squadron, with a troop still at Madras Circus in the hills, had taken over the northern sector from C Squadron 19 Regiment on the night of 25–26 March.

Because of the lack of cover the number of tanks in the centre of the town was later reduced from three to two. Both were sited in one building near the convent—the only suitable one left in that area—while the troop commander and a wireless operator with a No. 22 set were stationed with the infantry's headquarters in the crypt. A composite troop of four tanks was allotted a counter-penetration role and was sited two miles east of the town. Squadron Headquarters and the rest of the tanks, nine in all, were south of [San Michele](#). Should the enemy dislodge the troops in the town, the squadron was to support the infantry east of the Rapido and prevent the enemy from crossing the river.

Early in April the New Zealand infantry in Cassino were relieved by regiments of the Guards Brigade (Grenadier, Coldstream and Welsh Guards), whose soldierliness made an impression on the tank crews. They learnt, for instance, to give the answer to the password quickly when challenged and to halt when ordered while entering their tank positions. The New Zealand soldier is often rather casual about such regimental niceties, but in Cassino, with the enemy often only a few yards away and sentries in no mood to dally, it did not take him long to learn to respond smartly and with precision to a challenge.

As the days went by and the little cover that was left was whittled away by the enemy's fire, the difficulties of keeping tanks in Cassino, especially at the railway station, began to cause anxiety. A tank's engines are no less a weapon than its gun, and without room to manoeuvre to improve its field of fire a tank loses much of its value. As the cover became less, more smoke had to be used to screen the tanks' positions from the enemy's guns; but smoke also allowed the enemy to bring up reinforcements under its cover and in turn made it more difficult for the tanks to register their own targets. It also made the enemy suspect that mischief was afoot and order an artillery drubbing for the area under the screen.

Reliefs were usually carried out before midnight, but not always at the same time lest the enemy should come to know when troops were on the roads. The method is described by Captain Caldwell, A Squadron's second-captain, who rejoined the regiment early in April after a spell in hospital. He writes:

When I arrived back from hospital two tanks were in the town and the remainder of the Sqn had pulled back and a group (I think the rest of the tanks) were in a nasty position in trees on the flat just a short distance from the beginning of the last clear run into the town. Crews were being relieved from there. There was no protection from anything, even the weather, and the blokes slept (if possible) out in the open and there was mud for miles. Shortly afterwards we moved the whole crowd back three or four miles on the right of the road (east) and then east about two miles, coming out on a nice (?) forward slope sparsely covered with olive trees. We moved in at night, put in our tanks, dispersed, with tarpaulins stretched out for cover as usual. When we woke in the morning, to our disgust we looked straight across the flat straight into the town, and the Monastery seemed very close. There

was quite a bit of immediate moving and within a short time all the bivvies were on the friendly side of the tanks. It was a bad spot, as I am sure we were in full view, and although daylight movement was reduced to a minimum and lights at night had to be well covered, we were only stonked once or twice, and then I think Jerry was going either for the road immediately at our rear or some guns in the fields behind. Some shells landed at the corner of one of the bivvies, but we were all dug down a little so only the tarpaulin was ruined for this crew, plus a few headaches.

During this period we brought the cooks up and lived well. Regimental HQ was immediately east of us about 100 yds away. Crews were being relieved in town also during this time and the method was something like this:

The next change moved from the area to a house about 400 yds back down the road, where they had slightly better conditions than we had. The group consisted of an officer and wireless bloke to go into the crypt of the church ... while the Sgt with two crews went to the tanks. The relief went by jeep as soon as dark down to the main road and along as far as possible, past where was (or had been) the Regt. MO's blokes in a house by the road. They then unloaded as quietly as possible and then stumbled along the 'Mad Mile' in pitch darkness through bust bridges, under and over girders, etc., till they struck the corner of the town where the church had been....

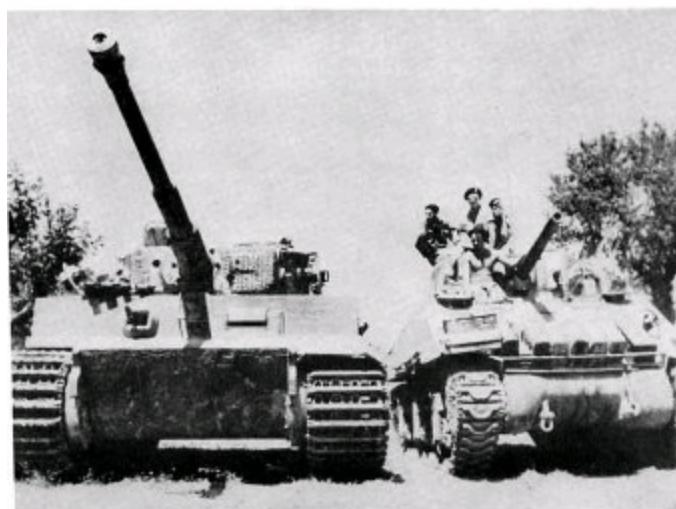
I took one of these relief parties in one night, or rather they took me. I hadn't the foggiest idea where I was going but the blokes had done it before and knew the way. The stench of decay was rather bad, with bodies, human as well as donkeys and cattle. The entrance into the crypt we used was only possible at night as a sniper covered it during the day. In the crypt the Coldstream and Grenadier Guards were in joint possession and ran their two HQs together.... When we changed over the crews and saw the old



Tank crew 'boils up' during the advance to Florence

### Tank crew 'boils up' during the advance to Florence

Tiger v. Sherman

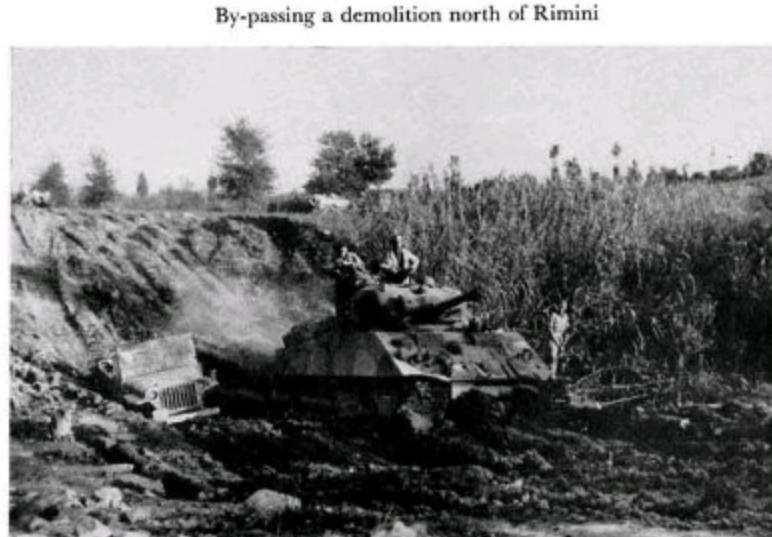


Tiger v. Sherman



T2 recovery tank freeing a Sherman which broke its track when attempting to burst through this building. B Squadron's 'flying fitters' armoured car in the foreground

T2 recovery tank freeing a Sherman which broke its track when attempting to burst through this building. B Squadron's 'flying fitters' armoured car in the foreground



By-passing a demolition north of Rimini



Faenza area, looking towards the Senio. Route 9 is in the foreground

**Faenza area, looking towards the Senio. Route 9 is in the foreground**

Farmhouse occupied by tank troops and infantry



**Farmhouse occupied by tank troops and infantry**



Sherman gunline on the Senio. 2 Lt A. C. Cunningham, with pipe

**Sherman gunline on the Senio. 2 Lt A. C. Cunningham, with pipe**

20 Regiment officers at Maadi, March 1945  
*Back row: Walter Dougall, Jack Austad, Nigel Overton, Guy Baker. Centre: Rae Hamilton, Allan Hadfield, Pat Barton, John Howorth. Front row: Alf Pedder, Barney Clapham, Merv Cross, Robin Coote.*



20 Regiment officers at Maadi, March 1945 Back row: Walter Dougall, Jack Austad, Nigel Overton, Guy Baker. Centre: Rae Hamilton, Allan Hadfield, Pat Barton, John Howorth. Front row: Alf Pedder, Barney Clapham, Merv Cross, Robin Coote.



Maintenance, Faenza

**Maintenance, Faenza**

C Squadron conference before the attack on the Senio, 9 April 1945.  
*From left:* Bill de Lautour, Jim Moodie (squadron commander),  
Owen Hughes, WO II Jock Laidlaw, Bill Guest, Jack Denham,  
Noel Jenkins, Charlie Low



C Squadron conference before the attack on the [Senio](#), 9 April 1945. From left:  
Bill de Lautour, Jim Moodie (squadron commander), Owen Hughes, WO II Jock  
Laidlaw, Bill Guest, Jack Denham, Noel Jenkins, Charlie Low



25 Battalion infantry and tanks advance towards the Santerno

## 25 Battalion infantry and tanks advance towards the Santerno

Tanks waiting to be ferried across the Adige



**Tanks waiting to be ferried across the Adige**

A Squadron on the road to Trieste. Maj C. F. S. Caldwell is sitting on the leading tank's hatch; Lt Denham is in the right-hand tank



**A Squadron on the road to Trieste. Maj C. F. S. Caldwell is sitting on the leading tank's hatch; Lt Denham is in the right-hand tank**

Tanks and Yugoslav infantry surround the Law Courts, Trieste



**Tanks and Yugoslav infantry surround the Law Courts, Trieste**



Brig J. T. Burrows

**Brig J. T. Burrows**



Lt-Col D. J. Fountaine

**Lt-Col D. J. Fountaine**



Lt-Col J. W. McKergow

**Lt-Col J. W. McKergow**



Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson

**Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson**



Lt-Col H. A. Purcell

**Lt-Col H. A. Purcell**



Lt-Col H. A. Robinson

**Lt-Col H. A. Robinson**

crew on its way home we settled down to two days of boredom. The wireless bloke sent calls back to Regt. at certain set times and for the rest, apart from a visit to the tanks at night, we ate and slept. No daylight could enter the crypt of course, and little air, so we lived in perpetual 'Coleman lamp' light.... The chaps had a rotten place with no comforts, only the food and water they could carry in and the punk tank primuses to cook on. If anything had happened, all I am sure they could have done was to join up with the nearest infantry and go on foot.

None were sorry when the squadron's tour of duty in the town ended. On the night of 24–25 April its two tanks and the wireless set in the crypt were handed over to a squadron of 12 Royal Canadian Tank Regiment. Squadron guides led the Canadian crews into the town. The regiment's crews were pleased to see them.

C Squadron's three tanks were stationed on the road between the jail and Route 6 in the north-east corner of the town. Although in full view of the enemy, they suffered no damage during their stay. Sniping in the daytime kept the crews inside the tanks or under cover and occasionally a bazooka rocket fired at long range whistled harmlessly overhead. On the second night one tank in Lieutenant de Lautour's troop ran over a bank some 400 yards out of the town, and on another night Lieutenant Denham's tank was showered with incendiary bullets which set fire to the sandbags surrounding it but did tank or crew no harm.

The squadron was short of officers and men after its losses at Albaneta and until early in April also manned three tanks at Madras Circus. As a rule the crews in

[Cassino](#) worked on a roster of two days on duty and four off, when they were quartered at [San Pasquale](#) village, about a mile away. The tanks themselves were replaced only when fuel or ammunition were required, the longest period without relief being ten days. They had to be guided in and out of the area on foot.

One night the relieving troop towed in two six-pounder anti-tank guns for 25 Battalion but the relief was delayed when a tank went over a bank near the jail. For most of the period the squadron supported a battalion of the [Welsh Guards](#) whose headquarters was in the jail. During this time its crews experienced in full measure the wretchedness and monotony of static warfare in the ruined town but suffered no casualties. The tanks did little shooting. The men who shared this duty recall the incessant whistle of smoke shells being 'pumped' into the town or on to the hill above, the noise of frogs at night in the marshes and stagnant bomb holes, the swallows and pigeons, the smell. The squadron had had its moment of adventure in the hills at [Albaneta House](#), but among the bomb craters of [Cassino](#) it could find little but mud and mortars. It was relieved on the night of 24–25 April by a Canadian squadron, which began its new task inauspiciously by losing a troop commander killed on arriving at the jail and by blocking the road out and delaying the relief of the forward troop when one of its tanks was ditched.

There is little to add to the story of the three squadrons in [Cassino](#) except to mention briefly the work of Regimental Headquarters near [San Michele](#) and of B Echelon back at Mignano. It took the resources of the whole regiment to maintain eight or nine tanks inside the town, some of the crews being reinforced by B Echelon drivers whose vehicles were grounded. For the whole period Headquarters was on continuous wireless watch ready to support its outposts should the enemy attack. Enemy tank movement in the town in the early period caused an occasional 'flap' and the Colonel seems to have been more than usually anxious over his isolated tanks, but for RHQ it was a worrying period rather than an exciting one.

The Colonel's anxiety was justified: need the tanks have crossed the river into the town at all? Tanks should be placed where they can both move and shoot, and in [Cassino](#) they could often do neither. Because of the difficulties of charging batteries, three of the tanks in the town at one stage could not be started (and, therefore, could not be moved) nor could they use their wirelesses. In other words, they were

deaf, dumb, and crippled as well as almost blind. On the east bank of the river the reserve troops had better fire positions and fields of fire than the tanks in the town and could move from one position to another. The answer might have been to replace the tanks in Cassino with anti-tank guns and keep them in reserve as a counter-attack force.

However, the tanks were put into the town to support the infantry and to repel the enemy's tanks should they attack. Their guns were useful for knocking down the stone walls of enemy strongpoints, although the lighter self-propelled gun would have done the job just as well. They made good pillboxes from which to snipe with machine gun or 'seventy-five', but because of their restricted fields of fire their usefulness was limited. Their limited vision, especially at night, made them vulnerable to infantry assault, as the paratroopers' raid at the railway station on 30 March showed only too clearly. But the enemy had tanks in the town and our infantry felt unprotected without tanks too. Their chief value, then, was to the infantry's morale.

But if the presence of tanks in Cassino improved infantry morale, what was its effect on that of the tank crews living under nervous strain—as one man puts it—'on a diet of cigarettes and fingernails'? It is as easy for a crew to become 'tank-minded' as it is for an infantryman to become 'slit-trench minded'. The tanks' role was purely defensive and targets rare; their crews had little chance to hit back and enemy retaliation was severe. In daylight most crews were forced to 'stay put' inside their tanks, waiting until darkness brought their reliefs or the opportunity to stretch cramped limbs. The squadron in the centre of the town especially had little to do but sit and wait, 'with no chance of a smack back at the enemy in return for what we were putting up with'. One man comments: 'At no time have I seen our men so depressed.'

The fighting in the narrow, cratered streets of the town and on the stony hill track to Albaneta House and the monastery demonstrated the need for an armoured recovery vehicle in the regiment. Should a tank get hit or throw a track or become bogged in a shell hole, it inevitably blocked the route until the engineers could do something about it or the brigade workshops recovery section could bring up a tractor to clear the way. It was sheer good fortune on Cavendish road that the C Squadron tank which broke down was the last in the line. The workshops recovery

section could not be on call in the forward areas to all regiments at once, and in the end the regiment had to find its own solution.

Captain Taylor, the Technical Adjutant, explains how this was done:

On one occasion when making my way towards the railway line south of the Rapido en route to the station area, I spotted a strange-looking object that looked like a hay stack. Curiosity got the better of me and accompanied by the TSM [Technical Sergeant-Major] <sup>52</sup> we made our way across the boggy ground to find our hay stack was an American T2 tank camouflaged. I thought if only we could recover this machine it would be a wonderful asset to the regiment. On my return to R.H.Q. I reported our find to Col. Ferguson. He was most interested in the T2 and wanted to see it next day. To move over that area in daylight was to run a big risk as our opposition had the low country well and truly covered. However, by dodging from tree to shell hole we managed to get there safely and made a further inspection. All I was concerned about was that should we be able to recover this T2, which was badly bogged, would we be able to hang on to it seeing that it belonged to the Americans. Having got the Col's assurance that he would do his best to retain our find, arrangements were immediately put in hand to recover the much coveted tank....

The first night the T.S.M. and I made temporary repairs to the engine and installed new batteries. The next night with the aid of the L.A.D. scammel anchored to a bridge by a long wire rope and the T2 motors going we attempted to remove the monster from the bog. All we achieved was to attract a mortar stonk and to suspend the scammel between the tank and the bridge so that the scammel could almost be spun between the two ropes. At daylight work was abandoned. The following night heavy timbers were brought up ... and one of the recovery section's tractors. For hours in the pitch darkness and heavy rain we jacked up and tugged at the tank, attracting much attention from the Germans. With about two hours to go before daylight we had the tractor bogged as well. George— [the recovery section's lieutenant] couldn't afford to leave his tractor there so had to hurry back with the transporter for another D8. Just before daylight with two tractors and the tank engine roaring we had it on solid ground. Driver Jack Lay, <sup>53</sup> who had taken over the T2, was happy and when unhitched from the two tractors I told him to keep his foot

hard down, which he did until he reached R.H.Q. The following day the White Star was painted out and the regimental sign appeared. It was ours.

I might add it wasn't long before Div. H.Q. knew of our acquisition, which was lucky for us because in no time the Americans were enquiring the whereabouts of their T2 which was bogged at map reference so and so, and for some reason or other Div. H.Q. didn't know anything about it. From here on the T2 never stopped until we reached [Trieste](#), and during that period must have salvaged dozens and dozens of tanks that would have otherwise been shot up in daylight. With the exception of Jack Lay, to whom I give much praise for his skill in handling this machine, the rest of the crew changed from time to time.

Supply caused no problems in [Cassino](#) but often meant long carries and hard work for tank crews. Where tanks could be relieved the incoming tanks carried in their crews' own food and ammunition and occasionally had some rations to spare for their infantry neighbours; otherwise jeeps carried supplies as far forward as they could get and carrying parties from the crews humped them forward to the tanks, sometimes a mile or more away, and often under fire. Tanks were also used to bring up rations and wire for the infantry, carrying their loads as far as the bridges, where carrying parties would pick them up. In spite of these difficulties the crews in the town were never short of food, although one report says that thermos flasks would have been a boon.

Back at squadron headquarters, their tour of duty completed, the tired crews were well looked after. 'No matter what hour of the night or morning the troops from the forward area arrived back in the squadron area there was always a hot meal,' one officer records. When some of C Squadron's 'dehorsed' tank crews after the [Albaneta House](#) action arrived back at B Echelon at [Mignano](#) about 2 a.m., RQMS George Weenink at once roused the cooks and provided a hot meal.

The 'Q' truck taking supplies forward from [Mignano](#) had to run the gauntlet of the enemy's guns on the long straight in front of Trocchio. 'We used to go like blazes up that straight where we were in full view of the monastery, turn right, where we were not so much exposed to view, and soon were with our tanks,' says the RQMS. Returning to the turn-off one day after delivering the rations the RQMS found that the enemy had been shelling the corner, and he had just begun to clap on speed

past some burning haystacks when an American ran out of a nearby cottage and stopped the truck to thumb a ride.

Inevitably in the circumstances of this battle communications were bad, but the static period provided the opportunity to improve them. The difficulties of charging batteries and the state of the roads and bridges have already been mentioned; telephone lines were constantly cut by the heavy shelling and the signallers lost men trying to maintain them; the tanks going out on relief sometimes minced the infantry's lines with their tracks. Although the use of wireless had to be cut to the barest minimum to conserve batteries, both the No. 19 and No. 38 sets were operated successfully; in the early period the tanks' No. 38 sets were the main channel of communication between battalion headquarters and their forward companies in the town. Extension cords about thirty feet long allowed tank crews to keep wireless watch from outside their tanks and were a useful alternative means of communication with the infantry.

The [Albaneta House](#) attack emphasised once more the old, old lesson that tanks must have infantry support and are practically helpless without it.<sup>54</sup> Seventh Indian Brigade had suffered severe losses and had no infantry to spare, but perhaps 22 (Motor) Battalion, trained for this role and in reserve near [Mignano](#) at the time, could have been used to support the tanks. Reluctance to use reserves in a diversionary attack such as this is easily understood, but in the event this battalion was not called on to join the battle until the night of 25–26 March, ten days after it had begun. The [Albaneta House](#) attack also brought home to C Squadron in tragic fashion, through the death of one of its most experienced troop commanders, that tanks, like men-of-war, should be stripped for action and all blankets, camouflage nets, personal gear and anything inflammable left behind.<sup>55</sup>

Cassino, to quote a German propaganda leaflet, was 'a damned hard nut' to crack. The New Zealand Corps had won some ground—firm bridgeheads over the Rapido on Route 6 and along the railway line and perhaps nine-tenths of the town—but the battle was a defensive victory for the Germans. In the period from 15 to 26 March the Division had lost 115 killed, 70 missing, and 696 wounded—heavy losses for what were in reality small territorial gains. Compared with those of the infantry battalions, the regiment's casualties were not heavy. Two officers (Lieutenants Brooks and Hazlett) and sixteen men had been killed in action; one officer (Second-

Lieutenant Renall) and two men had died of wounds; three officers and twenty-nine men had been wounded; one man had been taken prisoner. Its tank losses are not so easy to arrive at, but at least twelve (excluding those recovered) of its pre-battle establishment of fifty-three tanks were lost through enemy action. Others lost tracks in difficult going or tumbled over banks on narrow tracks, but most of these were recovered and fought again.

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<sup>1</sup> Tpr A. Petrie; born NZ 22 Apr 1922; grocer; killed in action 9 Feb 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Major Poole left the regiment in mid-February and was succeeded by Captain J. W. Rolleston, who was later sent to England on a course at the Royal Armoured Corps tactical school and was in turn succeeded, on 8 March, by Captain L. B. Clapham.

<sup>3</sup> Sgt W. M. Leary; born NZ 19 Jul 1918; labourer; wounded 3 Jun 1944.

<sup>4</sup> Maj-Gen G. B. Parkinson, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Christchurch; born Wellington, 5 Nov 1896; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1917-19; CO 4 Fd Regt Jan 1940-Aug 1941; comd I NZ Army Tank Bde and 7 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1941-42; 6 Bde Apr 1943-Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div (Cassino) 3-27 Mar 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div Jun-Aug 1944; comd 6 Bde Aug 1944-Jun 1945; Quartermaster-General, Army HQ, Jan-Sep 1946; NZ Military Liaison Officer, London, 1946-49; Commandant, Southern Military District, 1949-51.

<sup>5</sup> Capt C. B. Hornig; born NZ 22 Nov 1913; civil engineer; wounded 28 Mar 1942; killed in action 6 Mar 1944.

<sup>6</sup> Valentine tank chassis carrying a 30ft folding bridge; first used by 4 Armoured Brigade north of the Sangro.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Lt H. L. Renall; born Carterton, 5 Oct 1920; farmer; died of wounds 19 Mar 1944.

<sup>8</sup> Sgt A. F. Morris; born NZ 20 Feb 1914; labourer; killed in action 15 Mar

1944.

<sup>9</sup> Cpl L. G. Brenton; born Milton, 13 Mar 1921; civil servant; killed in action 16 Mar 1944.

<sup>10</sup> Tpr R. J. Tollison; born Petone, 20 Sep 1918; labourer; killed in action 16 Mar 1944.

<sup>11</sup> Tpr J. J. Somerville; Mawheraiti, West Coast; born Reefton, 25 Dec 1914; lorry driver.

<sup>12</sup> Albaneta Farm, but more generally referred to as Albaneta House or—for some reason not explained—the ‘Nunnery’.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Lt O. W. Hughes; Milton; born Milton, 5 Sep 1921; woollen-mill employee; wounded 2 Aug 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Sigm R. Y. Hodge; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 25 Dec 1916; draper.

<sup>15</sup> L-Cpl A. J. Hogan; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 18 Nov 1917; car electrician.

<sup>16</sup> Cpl R. D. Jones, m.i.d.; Beaumont; born Milton, 1 Jul 1922; farm labourer; wounded 19 Mar 1944.

<sup>17</sup> Dvr J. L. Hodge; Dunedin; born Masterton, 21 Mar 1914; carpenter.

<sup>18</sup> Tpr R. J. Lewis; Port Chalmers; born NZ 27 Oct 1914; waterside worker; wounded 19 Mar 1944.

<sup>19</sup> Cpl F. E. Costello; Auckland; born NZ 19 Nov 1921; butcher.

<sup>20</sup> Tpr T. H. Middleton; born NZ 24 Apr 1920; farmer; killed in action 19 Mar 1944.

<sup>21</sup> Sgt R. J. Lennie; Christchurch; born Invercargill, 10 Jun 1910; seedsman; twice wounded.

<sup>22</sup> One of the American tank commanders (Lieutenant Chester M. Wright) was awarded the MC.

<sup>23</sup> L-Cpl G. Sorich; born Dargaville, 25 Oct 1915; dairy farmer; killed in action 19 Mar 1944.

<sup>24</sup> Tpr A. R. J. Dasler; born NZ 3 Jun 1915; labourer; killed in action 19 Mar 1944.

<sup>25</sup> Another eye-witness (Lt de Lautour) says that Sorich and Dasler did not leave the turret when Hazlett was killed but took the tank down near to the house. Here they probably received a bazooka shot in the turret—'we saw a Jerry in a window at this stage who had probably fired before we spotted him'—for they suddenly left the turret and ran to a nearby shell hole. The two drivers—Gallagher and Welch—also baled out through their escape hatch. While the other tanks were 'doing over' the building the drivers remounted and, finding the tank could still run, Gallagher drove it out.

<sup>26</sup> L-Sgt L. P. Gallagher, MM; Upper Hutt; born Dunedin, 2 Oct 1914; chainman.

<sup>27</sup> Tpr W. T. Welch; born Oamaru, 16 Aug 1917; farmhand.

<sup>28</sup> Tpr G. L. Hanrahan; Dunedin; born NZ 5 Oct 1915; truck driver; wounded 21 Mar 1944.

<sup>29</sup> Tpr T. W. Bell; born NZ 8 Sep 1909; shepherd; died of wounds 25 Apr 1944.

<sup>30</sup> Sgt W. T. Dalrymple; Arrowtown; born Arrowtown, 14 Aug 1915; butcher. On the way up to San Michele on the night of 24–25 February Sergeant Dalrymple had taken over C Squadron fitters' scout car while the driver

walked ahead with a screened torch. In pitch-black darkness on a narrow, sunken road, the Sergeant could barely see through his windscreen, and thinking that a tank closing up on him from behind might run him down he smashed the screen with his pistol. Back through the darkness came the driver's comment: 'Dalrymple has done his scone— look out [Cassino](#).'

<sup>31</sup> Anti-personnel, but not anti-tank, mines were encountered north of Albaneta, but some of the American Honey tanks struck anti-tank mines on the track from [Albaneta House](#) to the monastery. When the Poles advanced over this route two months later mines blocked their way to [Albaneta House](#).

<sup>31</sup> [Capt C. A. Low](#); Auckland; born [Wanganui](#), 26 Feb 1909; company director.

<sup>32</sup> [Sgt A. D. Doig](#); Chertsey; born NZ 19 Oct 1911; labourer; twice wounded.

<sup>33</sup> [Cpl C. S. Watson](#); Southbridge; born [Sheffield](#), 12 Jun 1915; grocer's assistant; three times wounded.

<sup>34</sup> [L-Cpl L. W. Brassey](#); born NZ 1 Feb 1919; poultry farmer; died of wounds 23 Mar 1944.

<sup>35</sup> [Tpr J. C. Ward](#); born NZ 19 Jun 1919; carpenter; killed in action 29 Mar 1944.

<sup>36</sup> [Maj L. B. Clapham](#); Opunake; born Tokomaru, 10 Jul 1917; motor mechanic; Sqn Comd [20 Regt](#) Mar 1944-Feb 1945; wounded May 1941.

<sup>37</sup> [Sgt M. Hiscock](#); Clyde; born Roxburgh, 21 Jul 1914; timber worker; wounded 25 Mar 1944.

<sup>38</sup> [Maj M. P. Donnelly](#); Sydney; born NZ 17 Oct 1917; student; Sqn Comd [20 Regt](#) Apr-May 1945.

<sup>39</sup> [Capt C. G. Brown](#); Te Karaka, Gisborne; born NZ 17 Sep 1917; labourer;

wounded 11 Jul 1942.

<sup>40</sup> Cpl N. J. Lovelock; born NZ 28 Nov 1907; civil servant; killed in action 25 Mar 1944.

<sup>41</sup> Tpr L. J. Fowler; born NZ 27 May 1922; labourer; killed in action 25 Mar 1944.

<sup>42</sup> Sgt W. F. Watson; born Port Chalmers, 20 Jan 1921; shop assistant; killed in action 30 Mar 1944.

<sup>43</sup> Cpl W. A. Brown; born Belfast, 21 Apr 1915; farmhand; killed in action 30 Mar 1944.

<sup>44</sup> Tpr H. V. Graffin; born Milton, 24 Jun 1912; labourer; killed in action 30 Mar 1944.

<sup>45</sup> Tpr A. L. Ball; born Invercargill, 24 Apr 1920; engineer; killed in action 30 Mar 1944.

<sup>46</sup> Tpr A. J. Hayward; Gore; born England, 24 Aug 1917; teamster; p.w. 30 Mar 1944.

<sup>47</sup> Sgt J. G. T. Boniface; born Wyndham, 11 Aug 1918; labourer; accidentally killed 27 May 1944.

<sup>48</sup> Maj R. B. F. Eastgate; Christchurch; born Melbourne, 18 Mar 1916; accountant; Sqn Comd 20 Regt Oct 1944-Aug 1945.

<sup>49</sup> WO II J. G. Reid, m.i.d.; Queenstown; born Dunedin, 14 Jun 1917; shepherd.

<sup>50</sup> WO II C. Lilley, MM; Christchurch; born Ashburton, 23 Dec 1914; motor mechanic.

<sup>51</sup> Maj G. E. Taylor, m.i.d.; Mount Maunganui; born Rangiora, 17 Dec 1910; garage proprietor.

<sup>52</sup> Acting TSM at this time was Sergeant J. A. Brown. He had taken over from WO II Jack Lapthorne when the latter was wounded on 22 March.

<sup>53</sup> L-Cpl O. J. Lay; Dunedin; born Kelso, 9 Jan 1919; labourer.

<sup>54</sup> The Germans were not slow to point out the lesson. 'Many tanks of the 760th US Tank Bn advanced without infantry support,' said a propaganda leaflet. 'Obviously, they thought they could smash these Jerries single-handed. One out of ten has come back from the Monte Cassino, the others still lie up there knocked to pieces!'

<sup>55</sup> C Squadron's major part in this attack received no recognition other than the award of MM to Trooper L. P. Gallagher for recovering Lieutenant Hazlett's tank in front of [Albaneta House](#). Major Cruickshank, commander of 7 Indian Infantry Brigade's reconnaissance squadron, received a bar to his MC, three officers of 760 US Tank Battalion and a Royal Artillery OP officer won MCs, and an American staff-sergeant and two NCOs attached to 17 Indian Field Ambulance won MMs. Major Barton was recommended for the DSO but the award was not made—to the keen disappointment of the regiment.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 16 – TO AVEZZANO

## CHAPTER 16

### To Avezzano

Back in the Volturno valley the regiment hid its tanks in a sunken road between Riardo and Pietramelara, relaxed, washed the smoke and grime of Cassino from body and throat, talked the battle out of troubled minds in endless discussion and argument, went on leave. So well were the tanks hidden in this pleasant countryside that a German intelligence summary is reported to have deduced that the New Zealand Division had been withdrawn to a rest area and had lost all its tanks.

New Zealanders are durable troops: a few days' leave, a few pounds in the paybook, good food, a football match or two, not too much parading and red tape, quite a lot of beer, and most men are ready to back themselves against panzer grenadiers, paratroops, provosts—anything. For the 20th at Pietramelara the YMCA provided a recreation tent, the mobile cinema and ENSA gave shows on the grassy stretch in Headquarters' area, and C Squadron established a large canteen and equipped it with piano, bar, and footrail. In B Squadron some of the men had saved up their beer issue for the five weeks they were in action, pooled it when they came out, augmented it by 'flogging' a battledress to the Naafi sergeant, and had what one of them describes as 'a good do' when they got back to Pietramelara. Concerts were given in the canteen by unit and co-opted talent. Dave Maharey's <sup>1</sup> parody 'When they send the last Yank home', a bawdy commentary on the role of United States forces in New Zealand, most of whom had already fulfilled the wish of the song by May 1944, was as popular as ever. There was also football (rugby and soccer: the regiment won most of its games in the former code, its most notable victory being against a team of South African engineers, but had little success at soccer), an athletic meeting, and hockey. Away from the unit there was leave to the island of Ischia in the big, blue sweeping Bay of Naples, where parties of fifty spent three days at a time in a unit rest camp. Squadrons also made trips to the beach at Mondragone, to Caserta, to the Volturno for a swim, although uncleared mines in the riverbed in one stretch prevented bathing; and in addition there was daily leave to Naples, where New Zealanders whose only previous ventures in song had been inspired by incautious familiarity with Italian wines or in beer sessions at the Naafi were enthralled by grand opera and returned to the San Carlo opera house for more. Later, when some of the other attractions of Naples had begun to prove too popular,

leave to visit the city was given less freely and was later cancelled. One squadron lost all its leave for a few days and manned extra guards after a disciplinary brush with the CO, and promptly christened the camp 'Stalag 52'. Fifty-two was the regiment's serial number.

Before the regiment left Cassino the first of the Ruapehu furlough men, who had been away for almost a year, rejoined the unit. Their return had allowed others whose leave was long overdue to go, among them men who had been the core of the unit since September 1939; to some extent they were the unit and it was hard to imagine the 20th without them. Among those who left in mid-April were the RSM, WO I 'Uke' Wilson, and RQMS George Weenink of the first advance party, WO II Cyril Kennard, Lieutenant J. T. K. Bradley,<sup>2</sup> and Second-Lieutenant P. A. McConchie, DCM. Second-Lieutenant 'Lu' Hazlett,<sup>3</sup> who for the attack on Cassino had been detached as liaison officer with the American Task Force B, and Sergeant Scott<sup>4</sup> who had filled a similar appointment with 4 Indian Division, had also rejoined the regiment at Cassino.

The weeks passed, and then someone mentioned that dreaded word 'training'. During May there were two changes in the unit. On the 28th Lieutenant-Colonel Purcell, who had temporarily commanded the regiment at Orsogna, arrived from Egypt to replace Lieutenant-Colonel Ferguson, who left next day to take command of the New Zealand Armoured Corps training depot for six weeks before returning to his old unit, 18 Armoured Regiment, as commanding officer. A few weeks before Colonel Ferguson had been presented by General Freyberg with the DSO he had won at Orsogna in 18 Armoured Regiment, and at the same parade Trooper L. P. Gallagher had received the MM he had won at Albaneta House. The second change was the replacement of Padre Dawson by Padre Gunn,<sup>5</sup> who naturally enough was promptly nicknamed 'Spandau'. Padre Dawson succeeded Padre 'Gad' Spence, an old 20th favourite, as Senior Chaplain at Divisional Headquarters, Padre Spence becoming Senior Chaplain 2 NZEF. The regiment was fortunate in its padres, both for their work in battle and out of the line. Padre Gunn soon won the men's esteem.

Most prominence in the regiment's training at Pietramelara was given to shooting practice with the tanks' 75-millimetre gun and Browning machine gun and to exercises in co-operation with infantry. One of these shoots was followed by a protest that shells had cleared the hills at the back of the range and landed among

American troops. The regiment expressed its surprise and apologies and agreed to fire at lower targets. Squadrons in turn went to a training area at [Piedimonte d' Alife](#) to carry out field exercises with 22 (Motor) Battalion, some of which were watched by [General Freyberg](#) and [Brigadier Inglis](#). Directed from an infantry OP with the tanks, the squadrons' guns fired shots in co-operation with 22 Battalion's mortars. Most of the men had been through all this before and knew that action was not far off.

Well, the month's rest was up and the regiment was refreshed, reinforced, and ready. Nineteenth Regiment was already in action across the Gari River and on 18 May the Germans withdrew from [Cassino](#) and the monastery, pressed closely by the Poles. C Squadron got a new commander, Captain [Jordan](#),<sup>6</sup> to replace Major Barton, away sick. Then the moves forward began.

On the 26th A Squadron moved up to [Filignano](#) to support 6 Brigade and B Squadron joined 5 Brigade near Sant' Elia, in the Rapido valley, about four miles north-north-east of [Cassino](#). Both squadrons left on transporters and moved by night, each with two open-topped Honey reconnaissance tanks and an inter-communication jeep. A Squadron left its transporters at [Venafro](#), and then went forward on its own tracks.

Half the squadron—Nos. 1 and 2 Troops under Captain George Hart, the squadron's second-captain—went to an area near Cerre Grosso ready to support 25 Battalion's advance along the road from [San Biagio](#) to [Atina](#), which was occupied by 23 Battalion. The rest of the squadron waited at [Filignano](#). The Germans were now withdrawing behind a screen of demolitions and mines and at last we were moving forward.

It would be a dull story if the war diary details of troops being detached to support this or that unit, halted at this or that six-figure map reference by demolition or anti-tank gun, or fired at from such and such a road junction were recounted in full. Fortunately some of the men who took part in these actions have been persuaded to tell their stories, and although memories of the same action differ, dates are hazy and the names of Italian villages hard to recall and harder still to spell, there is atmosphere and pace and colour in their accounts that it is impossible to wring from the official records.

Hart's group advanced along the road to Atina during the last four days of May, drawing up the rest of the squadron and its A Echelon in bounds behind it like a caterpillar's tail, its pace, set by the engineers' bulldozers, being almost as slow. There were many halts while blown bridges and road demolitions were repaired and road and laager areas swept for mines, but no enemy was encountered.

The leisurely advance gave the tank crews a chance to have a close look at the defences of the [Winter Line](#). The enemy had planned to stay there as long as possible and had riddled the hillsides 'like a rabbit warren' with trenches, tunnels, and dugouts. One man remembers one position on the hillside 'with a hinged long pole, which was supposed to be used for catapulting a round sort of mines or bombs downhill to explode midst the attackers', and adds the comment: 'Appears an old method, but the evidence was there.'

[San Biagio](#) was on a rocky hilltop from which a steep and winding road snarled down towards [Atina](#). Some of the corners were too sharp for a tank to take in one sweep, and drivers had to back once and sometimes twice before they could make the turn. On roads like this the journey was not without its exciting moments. Bill Russell recalls one tank in creeper gear which



**cassino to avezzano**

could not be stopped on a steep bend. 'There was a hurried exit by everybody and the tank went over the side, but kept its balance much to our surprise and soon got onto a better grade and came to halt against a parked Bren carrier undamaged.'

Nearer Atina the road flattened and straightened and progress was faster.

B Squadron, with 5 Brigade, made faster progress than A but was not so fortunate. It lost one tank over a steep bank on the way up to Sant' Elia, the tank commander (Sergeant Jim Boniface) being killed and two of his crew injured, but not seriously. In the dark neither the tank in front nor the one behind Boniface saw him go over the bank, and it was not until his wireless operator broke radio silence next morning from the damaged tank that the accident was reported. Captain Eastgate led the tanks into the laager area along a narrow track with the light from a bottle which he had filled with fireflies.

After a wait of two days among the olive trees and poppies at Sant' Elia the squadron moved up the narrow defile through the hills to Atina. Mines and narrow bottlenecks delayed the move and not many miles were covered before the tanks laagered for the night near a road junction just past Atina. Here the squadron was broken up, Captain Eastgate taking half of it on a left hook through Fontechiari and the rest continuing straight on towards Sora.

The first tanks over the pass at Atina into the valley were from 5 Troop, part of a half-squadron under the second-in-command, Captain Familton. The first thing that impressed him was the view: 'One of the most beautiful sights I have seen,' he writes, 'especially after the dismal aspect of Cassino and Mignano for so long. The valley was bright green, cut by the silver ribbon of the river weaving its way through a carpet of blood-red poppies.'

Eastgate's left hook on the 30th had been planned as an attempt to cut off the enemy's withdrawal, but the tanks reached the road junction north of Fontechiari only to find the enemy gone and a blown bridge over the Fibreno blocking the way. The tanks had encountered no opposition, and for the first time the crews were hailed as 'liberators' and regaled with ample information (most of it probably inaccurate) about the enemy's movements. At the junction the two troops were rejoined by 5 Troop and spent the night there waiting for the bridge to be repaired. An engineer sergeant attached to the squadron did particularly good work lifting mines in the dark on the road up to the river.

No. 5 Troop, moving by the main road, had had a less peaceful day than

Eastgate's group. The road had been shelled by self-propelled guns from the hills around [Brocco](#) and as the tanks approached the river they came within range of the enemy's mortars. Then the fighter-bombers took a hand:

We moved forward to the demolished bridge [writes Hamilton] and there, for the first time, we were dive bombed by our own fighter bombers of the [Desert Air Force](#). The advance was so quick for a few miles that the information to change the bomb line was late in arriving at the airfield. Arising out of this was an amusing incident which happened to Brig. Stewart. He came up to see the Engineers and find out when the bridge would be through and was to report back to the General immediately. The Air Force, however, put a stop to this by making another run at us and setting alight one of the Engineers' trucks between us and our Inf. and leaving the Brig. stranded with us until the excitement died down. I believe Brig. Stewart picked up a marking on one of the planes and when he got back to Div. rang the airfield and told them in no uncertain terms what he thought of them and one pilot in particular. The pilot was put on the mat and we did hear he was grounded and given office duty for 7 days.

On the way forward 8 Troop was detached from the squadron on the afternoon of 29 May and sent to assist 21 Battalion in the hills to the east. A company from that battalion had chased the enemy rearguard from [Alvito](#) that morning and the tanks' role was to prevent the enemy infiltrating back into it from the Sant' Onofrio area higher up the ridge. The troop took up positions covering the ridge and the valley to the right, the sergeant's tank going back to the village to act as a link with the infantry. About 8 p.m. a small party of enemy was seen on the ridge. The two tanks shelled some nearby houses in which it was thought the enemy might be sheltering, but no further movement was seen and they were withdrawn to [Alvito](#), where they laagered for the night.

There was no further incident, and early next afternoon the troop was ordered to go to [San Donato](#), in the skirts of the hills on the eastern side of the valley, with a force from 21 Battalion, the [Divisional Cavalry](#), and some machine-gunners. Over the last mile of the winding road to the village they were heavily shelled but suffered no losses. The villagers reported that the enemy had left three days before, leaving observation posts on several prominent features from which they could bring down fire on the village. The tanks fired on these points and on buildings where movement

was seen. Preparations made to consolidate in [San Donato](#) for the night were cancelled when orders arrived about eight o'clock instructing the force to withdraw. The troop took up positions back down the road near [Vicalvi](#), spent an uneventful night and day there, and rejoined the squadron at [Sora](#) on 1 June.

In the meantime the Maoris had crossed the river and had captured the hilltop village of [Brocco](#) after some sharp fighting. B Squadron, chafing at the delay, had to wait while a second blown bridge over the Fibreno was repaired, but about 11 a.m. on the 31st the job was completed and the tanks and the Maoris moved forward down the long straight road into [Sora](#). The hills rose steeply behind the town and from them the enemy could see clearly what was going on in the valley. The crews expected trouble, listening with one ear cocked for the crash of shells or the screech of a mortar 'stonk', but the tanks rolled forward steadily until a demolished culvert at the entrance to the town brought them to a halt.

[Corporal Jim Bell's](#)<sup>7</sup> tank of 5 Troop was in the lead. He and his driver got out, 'in some slight trepidation', to look over the demolition, and a wireless message was sent back reporting the halt. [General Freyberg](#) then arrived in a jeep and 'smartly sent back for a bulldozer'. However, the tanks managed to creep round the demolition and moved into the town.

Corporal Bell describes this entrance:

I remember the doors and windows had been removed from all the buildings and as we seemed to be moving abreast if not a little in advance of the infantry I had the uneasy feeling we might suffer the indignity of a bazooka or some such diabolical weapon firing at us from some of the dark, gaping holes staring at us. Just as we entered the first piazza a Maori on a bicycle who had probably woven in and out down the line of tanks flew past us and attracted spandau fire, so he swung gracefully and speedily into what appeared to be a large open garage on the right of the piazza. We put a few HE shells into likely spots near a church on a small rocky hilltop where the MG fire seemed to come from, and then, as a bridge across a river leading into a second piazza was blown, we moved up the [Sora- Balsorano](#) road, thankful to be in tanks and protected from mortar fire.

It was ten past one when the leading tanks drove into [Sora](#) and by then the

enemy had left, blowing down and looting houses and even shaking the ripe fruit off the trees before he withdrew. But his machine guns and mortars on Point 539 to the north still drubbed the town. C Squadron, which had followed B Squadron north from Sant' Elia with RHQ, was detailed to stay in Sora while B Squadron, which now reverted to the regiment's command, was sent on to capture Campoli, a small hilltop village up a winding road to the north-east.

The squadron turned east at the 'Teardrop' road junction and moved up Route 82, keeping to the left of the road and using the buildings as cover against fire from the hills to the left. Bell's tank had just turned a corner on to a straight stretch of about 800 yards to the Campoli turn-off when armour-piercing shots bounced past him. A line of poplars on the right of the road blocked the tank's view and the gun could not be seen. It fired again, lopped the top off a poplar and holed the wall of a house—a very near miss. Bell decided to cross to the right-hand side of the road to escape the fire and asked for infantry to investigate.

This position was no safer. Movement could be seen at the end of the straight where the main road swung left, and an AP shot whistled past a foot or so away, raising a long line of dust. Fortunately all the tanks were in line too and the shot did no damage. The flash and the trail of dust gave the tank's gunner, Trevor Holt,<sup>8</sup> something to sight on and his quick riposte was later found to have knocked out a self-propelled gun sited in a clump of trees just past the Campoli turn-off.

Holt was to do some more good shooting that afternoon. Called up by Lieutenant Carlyle, the troop commander, a patrol of Maoris advanced up the road, 5 Troop abreast of them and No. 7 in support. 'As we came within about 200 yards of the Campoli road junction we could see a German ambulance just pulling away from the side of the road in front of a house, presumably with casualties from the SP gun,' writes Bell. 'As it pulled away a chap jumped out from the back and disappeared in the trees. We gave the ambulance a few seconds to get clear and then Trevor loosed off a few HE. His first knocked over a small tree and the second set some small heap on fire for a few moments. Later we found that an anti-tank gun had been pulled round behind the house in the direct line of our fire so it may be Trevor's shots frightened the crew away.'

'When we were just short of the corner where the Campoli road turns off to the

right, and could see some distance down the main road as it curved to the left, the Maori officer [Second-Lieutenant Rogers<sup>9</sup>] pointed to a house about 150 yards down the Campoli road from the junction. We stopped, received his indication that the SP gun near him at which we had fired previously was KO'ed, and then Trevor traversed the turret to fire into the house. Just as he was about to fire we were hit by an AP shot on the left side near the driver. Apparently thinking it was our gun which had fired, the Maori officer set off on a 6 seconds per hundred yards sprint towards the house, so I yelled to Trevor to fire smartly to avoid damaging him. Trevor put a shot clean through a small window and as he heard later rather staggered three of the enemy whom the Maoris smartly took PW's.'

The shot that hit Bell's tank had apparently struck it at an angle, punched a hole in the side near the driver's head, and bounced off. Red-hot splinters from it cut the wiring of the instrument panel, the shirt on the driver's back, and nicked the spare driver also in the back. The crew was having an afternoon of close shaves, and now that the tank's engine could not go they seemed likely to have even more. A second shot hit the tank's left front sprocket and 'euchered it', according to Bell, and a third bounced off the left side. The gun was never found but it was later thought to have been sited on lower ground close to the left of the road, where its crew could see the tanks from the cover of some willow growth and scrub without being seen themselves.

The crew decided not to test their luck any further and evacuated their tank. Under cover of smoke laid by the next tank in the line ('Plonk' Reid's<sup>10</sup>) they crawled into the ditch on the side of the road with the Maoris' prisoners.

Bell's damaged tank now partly blocked the road and a hidden anti-tank gun covered it. Second-Lieutenant Norman Loisel,<sup>11</sup> the commander of No. 6 Troop, was sent out on foot to reconnoitre a track up a spur through the trees to see if the Campoli corner could be by-passed. Trooper Park,<sup>12</sup> armed with a tommy gun, went with him as escort. They set out about half past two, questioned some Italians to discover whether there were any Germans around, and when told they had moved out pushed on faster. Perhaps their haste drew the enemy's attention to them for a mortar opened fire and wounded them both, Loisel in the back and Park in a leg. Loisel tried to carry Park back but was again hit and had to give up. He managed to make his own way back to his troop and a section of Maoris was sent forward on a

tank to bring Park in. They found him dead. From the powder burns it was obvious that he had been shot through the heart at close range; his paybook and all his belongings were missing.

While the tanks waited for the road to be cleared, horse-drawn limbers were seen moving back down the road a few hundred yards away.<sup>13</sup> Although the tanks opened fire the limbers got away, their retreat being followed by three rousing explosions as the last demolitions on the road were blown. One of these explosions was badly timed, eye-witnesses reporting 'a terrific demolition in which mules appeared to be flying skywards, along with flame, black smoke, and lumber.' This could have been the anti-tank gun which had given Bell's crew so many anxious moments; at any rate, the crew hoped that one of the two guns later found destroyed was that which had made their tank a target.

No. 7 Troop now took over the [Campoli](#) task from No. 5, whose commander's No. 19 set had failed, and completed the advance up the road. Sergeant 'Mac' West, one of the tank commanders and an original 20th infantryman, describes it:

'Plonk' Reid in the 5 Troop tank was detailed to lead us in a risky break for the [Campoli](#) turn-off.<sup>14</sup> Speed, an essential factor, was quickly gained, and we rumbled up 'skittle alley'.

I felt like a duck sitting on a pond waiting to be shot at and had Cliff Cochran,<sup>15</sup> my gunner, and [Charlie McCarthy](#),<sup>16</sup> my wireless operator, fire American smoke and 2" mortar smoke into the trees on our left. One American smoke shell burst in branches close by and seemed to drift at our speed, affording a large coverage of beautiful smoke.

We had two tanks in front going flat out and one behind. 'Plonk's' tank rounded the corner with a flourish, [Charlie Innes](#),<sup>17</sup> our officer, was next. Then came my turn, hand on pistol grip of Ac-ac .30 calibre Browning, peeking over the cupola ring trying to be ready for anything. With a grinding lurch and much flying gravel we made it and the tension dropped immediately. Parts of the advance to [Campoli](#) after that were quite enjoyable, trundling along in warm sunshine, keeping a reasonable distance from one another across the general front of the assault.

Peace and quiet was shattered when retreating Germans appeared over a brow about 600 yards on our right. It was practically a case of target practice and we opened up with air burst and .30 Browning. The Germans quickly threw themselves down in whatever cover they could find. I remember concentrating with .30 Browning on one particular gent who seemed determined to snipe someone. Two ambulance men surrendered to us but I'm afraid the others suffered terribly.

Moving on again the corporal behind noticed a German near a house and as he had the two ambulance men up on the tank behind him we took this one prisoner and, not without some misgivings, I had him standing behind my turret. I pointed to my tommy gun, pistol, etc., and he spoke in excellent English, said he was an Austrian conscript and very tired of it all. He insisted that I share some cherries he had in his mess dixie. Not to be taken in I drew my finger across my throat and plainly showed him what would befall him if he tried anything and I got in first.

Shortly afterwards the tanks were engaged by small-arms fire coming from a scrubby bank slightly above the road, but the opposition quickly disappeared when the tanks' machine-guns set fire to the scrub. A section of the road farther along was covered by some of the enemy's heavy guns, whose first shells fell close to the leading tanks. The troop drew back into cover and, 'after a little deliberation', decided 'to dart across the gap at irregular intervals'.

No contact had yet been made with the infantry and, with darkness approaching, the crews had expectations of an anxious night. Just on dusk the tanks halted. Tank commanders took stock of their position, arranged pickets for the night, and drew up a plan should they be attacked.

Sergeant West describes the night's activities:

Judging by sounds heard on the slope above on our right at about 8 o'clock we estimated that a large party with mules was pulling out. Rumour had it that this party was equipped with mountain guns. Not wishing to bring a hornets' nest about our ears we stood to quietly and waited, knowing full well that our tanks must have showed up very plainly on the road below the enemy.

A great hush descended on the countryside till about midnight when faint

sounds very much like those made by picks and shovels were heard back down the road we had come. Thoughts of mine-laying parties or road blocks flashed through my head and I received permission to take a reconnaissance party and find out what was happening. Several hundred yards down the road our small party encountered two German sentries. The moonlight showed them plainly a few yards above us. Recognition was mutual and as they were holding Schmeisser automatics we opened up with our Thompson sub-machine-guns. I ducked behind a boulder, tripping as I did so, and wondered if the others thought I was hit. In the rumpus the sentries disappeared and we made our way back to the tanks. There it was decided that I should take a tank and investigate further. No. 11 tank was used and, with the gun traversed and pointing over the rear so that we could make a quick get-away if necessary, it was carefully and faultlessly reversed round several bends by Driver George Leggoe.<sup>18</sup> Some grenades were tossed up the bank where the sentries had been observed. After going a little further I decided to stop and engage the estimated area from which the sounds had been coming. The Ac-ac and co-ax. Brownings were both used and I also used the bottom half of the 2" mortar by hand and lobbed several HE's up the road ahead. This was done simply by tilting the gun to the approximate angle and holding it with the butt firmly wedged against the cupola ring. No opposition was encountered and we withdrew. No further sounds were heard that night.

The following morning all tanks withdrew to find the Squadron Commander's tank blocking the road with a track off.<sup>19</sup> Here it was that a large group of Germans was seen making south in the direction of our front. Remembering that one of our prisoners spoke English I instructed him to call them over to surrender. As they appeared reluctant to do so I endorsed the command with a shot from my .30 Browning, ploughing up the dirt in front of them. My spokesman shouted again and they straggled over and up to the road. It was then I noticed a New Zealand soldier bringing up the rear. He claimed to be escorting them back. An infantry officer arrived shortly afterwards and the prisoners, plus our little lot, were marched down the road.

Later that morning the rest of B Squadron took up fire positions on San Pancrazio feature, south of Campoli. Innes's troop and the 5 Troop tank entered the town about half past ten without opposition and then withdrew to positions behind

it. In the afternoon 8 Troop advanced across difficult country to Pescosolido only to find that the Germans had withdrawn during the night. The squadron returned to a laager area near the Campoli turn-off that evening, complete save for 8 Troop at Pescosolido and 5 Troop forward with the Maori Battalion on Point 351, both of which rejoined the squadron next day.

By the 1st June A Squadron's crews had had little fighting but all had had more than their share of being 'messed around'. Operations were cancelled, plans were changed, troops were switched from one battalion's command to another with almost bewildering speed, and commanders and crews began to get very browned-off indeed. On 31 May, for instance, Hart's force was switched from 25 to 24 to 26 Battalion, with whom it was held up just short of the Fibreno River while the blown bridges were being repaired. The rest of the squadron was then some way behind on the road to Atina.

On 1 June Hart's force was switched back again to support 24 Battalion. Its role was to cross the Liri and move up the west bank, but it had to wait until next morning while the engineers put a Bailey bridge across the river, the old bridge naturally having been blown. The tanks crossed shortly after dawn and moved along a narrow road at the river's edge in single file: they found difficult going but no enemy. Second-Lieutenant Howorth's tank was bellied over a bank when the edge of the track gave way. All attempts to move it failed and Howorth took over his corporal's tank.

The tanks reached an open piece of ground and did some long-range shooting across the river, not seeing any enemy but hoping that their fire would be of some help to the infantry attacking along the eastern bank. Their fire drew more attention than they had bargained for, forcing the tank commanders to 'pull their heads in' and slam down the turret hatches. It was just as well they did, for on Howorth's tank the ack-ack Browning was shot to pieces and all water cans punctured.

The track the tanks were using followed the line of a railway, which crossed the river about a mile north of Sora and skirted its western bank before crossing it again and disappearing into a tunnel just below Balsorano. The flat ground ended where the valley narrowed, and here the railway climbed a saddle and the going became too rough for tanks. Captain Hart, leading on foot, took one tank up the side of the

hill to try to get a better position from which to do some shooting. The hillside here was terraced and the climb difficult; it was a fine piece of driving. The tank fired a few rounds and drew heavy fire in return, forcing it (and the men on foot with it) to withdraw downhill.

The tanks withdrew a little way on to a small flat area where they had a good view of the road along the escarpment on the other side of the river. They had left the infantry well behind. But here the lack of infantry support was not as important as it had been at Albaneta, for the enemy was retreating —slowly and methodically and as doggedly as usual—and was fighting back with guns and mines and demolitions while his infantry were hurried north. In fact his shelling and mortaring was so heavy at times that it was probably a good thing the infantry were not up with the tanks for their losses could have been severe. But at night the lack of protection worried the tank commanders and crews. The gunners were left in the tanks and the rest of the crews, in pairs, provided pickets and listening posts. All was well, although one officer confesses, 'I myself stayed wide awake the whole night.'

The enemy had artillery OPs in the hills on both sides of the valley and the tanks down by the river were severely 'stonked', possibly, one eye-witness believes, because the enemy 'had seen some of our chaps having a wash down at the river.'

At dawn next day (3 June) some of the tanks moved up to fire positions and engaged targets across the river, 'pumping away the shells fairly smartly so that we had to go back to meet the ammo truck which had brought forward replenishments,' records Sergeant Basil Simmons <sup>20</sup> in his diary. Simmons was a member of the reconnaissance troop, two tanks of which (Honeys) were attached to Hart's half-squadron.

Quick thinking and good shooting by Sergeant Bill Russell and his crew later in the day disposed of a German bazooka crew before they could fire their weapon. The Germans were seen coming through the bushes and the tank's gunner took a hurried shot with the seventy-five at the leader of the party as he was getting the bazooka into position. 'I will never forget the look on his face before he fell,' writes Russell. 'His mate disappeared over a ridge in a burst of Browning.... Infantry told us later that one was a Jerry officer with a good watch.' <sup>21</sup> Russell's troop commander, Lieutenant Howorth, confirms the incident and adds: 'A good example of fine team

work by a well trained crew under an absolutely first class commander.' The tribute is well deserved.

At dusk the tanks withdrew a little way to replenish and laager for the night. Hart's tank pulled up alongside a house, the only building there, sheltering close to the wall; others found positions beside a stone fence where they laagered and waited orders to move. 'I had just finished having a shave and wash and was the only member of my crew outside my tank,' says Howorth. 'A shell arrived. It must have been high velocity stuff because I did not hear it coming. Exactly where it landed I do not know but I think it was nearer to George's tank than mine. The next thing I remember was being on my hands and knees with blood streaming into my left eye. I was really very lucky, being just nicked in the forehead by a passing splinter. Poor George got it badly.'

Captain Hart died of his wounds that night at the main dressing station at [Sora](#). Well known in New Zealand as one of our best All Black wing-threequarters before the war, he had proved in battle a gallant officer. The isolated building had probably been ranged and pinpointed by the enemy gun beforehand in anticipation of such a target, for although there was only about three feet of space between the tank and the wall behind which it was sheltering, the men standing there were all hit. Howorth's tank was about fifty yards away. Four men were wounded besides the two officers, one of them fairly severely, the rest lightly.

The wounded were evacuated by Simmons's section and after dark the tanks withdrew a few hundred yards. They still had no infantry with them and their crews spent another tense and sleepless night. Lieutenant Low, the only officer left in the two troops, kept continuous wireless watch all night. It passed quietly but slowly.

The two troops stayed in this area until 5 June. Their tanks carried out fire tasks against mortar and machine-gun posts on the escarpment at [Balsorano](#)—a sheer bluff of black stone above the road—and shot up any vehicles using the road. Two tracked vehicles just below the ridge were set on fire on 4 June. As usual when he was retreating, the enemy seemed to have plenty of ammunition for his guns and mortars and did not take kindly to being shot up, but it was mostly war at long range. A Squadron on the 5th became part of [Wilder Force](#), a column consisting of the [Divisional Cavalry](#), A Squadron of the 20th, two infantry companies, two

machine-gun platoons, two sections of mortars, and one battery. It was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Wilder,<sup>22</sup> CO of the Divisional Cavalry.

We left C Squadron on 31 May waiting in Sora while the enemy on Point 539 and other observation posts in the hills called down mortar and gun fire on the town. The tanks shot up likely positions and destroyed at least one OP. It was not an exciting or a rewarding task, although the supporting infantry claimed that the tanks' fire caused the crews of four machine-gun posts to come down from the hill to surrender. Except for 10 Troop, which moved up Route 82 east of the river behind B Squadron and the Maoris, the squadron spent the next day in much the same way, engaging targets farther afield on Colle Sant' Angelo as the enemy withdrew.

On the morning of the 2nd C Squadron joined the Maori Battalion advancing along Route 82 towards Balsorano. No. 9 was point troop. After a wait of an hour and a half at a demolished bridge, this troop moved ahead to Colle Castagno, on the right flank, and 'for the next three days pooped at any possible targets and also acted as OP for the mediums—quite good fun.' No. 12 Troop, keeping to the road, encountered one demolition after another and made plodding progress until it handed over the lead to 10 Troop that night. 'Our troops are making a hell of a mess of the Balsorano valley,' an enemy staff officer reported on 2 June.

'We crawled up the road at a snail's pace,' writes Lieutenant Nigel Overton,<sup>23</sup> then a corporal in 10 Troop, 'and about midnight came to a large demolition and it took a bulldozer some time to make a track to let us through. The demolition was heavily mortared most of the time the dozer was working. He did a great job! We eventually crossed and pushed on another quarter of a mile, when the Engineers reported trouble ahead. At this stage we were ... passing along a road with green bush right down to the edge on both sides.'

The tanks were ordered to stay put until first light, when 21 Battalion was to pass through the Maoris and try to push on towards Balsorano. The company advancing up the road ran into trouble and pulled back behind the demolition. 'We stayed along the road till they were back,' says Overton, 'then we had to back our tanks along about a quarter of a mile as the road was too narrow to turn on. As soon as it was light the enemy who were in the bush on the hillside above the road tried shooting down into our turrets and we had to close down completely. We backed

right back to the demolition before we could turn and I popped my head out to get a better view to direct the driver and crack, a sniper's bullet hit the blanket box just behind my head. I kept in after that.'

The tanks moved back across the demolition and spent the day in a holding position trying to pinpoint the snipers still needling the tanks and infantry and holding up the advance. In the middle of the afternoon (3 June) the troop was relieved by half the squadron (Nos. 11 and 12 Troops) under Lieutenant Hazlett, whose arrival a sniper welcomed with a bullet through the slack of his beret. That evening a despatch rider going forward apparently decided to take a risk and push on. Rounding the bend in the road where the tanks were holding their position, he was 'bagged' by a sniper and lay wounded on the road and covered by the enemy's fire. Directed by radio from Corporal 'Shorty' Shorrock's tank, Sergeant Rex Miller backed his tank over the wounded man, who was then lifted up through the escape hatch into the spare driver's seat. Miller's tank was later hit by a heavy shell, the concussion disrupting the electrical equipment. The engines could not be started, but fortunately the wireless still worked. The recovery section was called up and the tank towed back out of danger by Captain Taylor and Sergeant-Major Lilley, 'a very neat piece of work in this exposed position'. In two hours' time the tank was again in running order.

On the 5th C Squadron handed over to half of A Squadron under Lieutenant Donnelly and returned to the regiment's concentration area near [Brocco](#).

In the meantime B Squadron had been engaged chiefly in support of the Maoris and 21 Battalion on the eastern side of the [Liri](#), clearing the high ground overlooking Route 82. Its tanks had acted as observation posts for the artillery, with good results, and had done some shooting themselves against mortar and machine-gun positions.

It was now time to reorganise some of the scattered troops, and with this in mind the regiment planned to concentrate south-east of [Sora](#). On the afternoon of 5 June A Squadron was given control of both sectors, right and left of the river, while the rest of the regiment withdrew to the concentration area. No. 6 Troop of B Squadron was relieved by Captain Caldwell's half of A Squadron during the afternoon and supported 21 Battalion companies closing on [Balsorano](#), but withdrew that night

with the infantry.

June the 6th was an eventful day in history but a quiet one at [Balsorano](#). A Squadron, now part of [Wilder Force](#), opened it noisily with a shoot on the escarpment as it was thought that the enemy might have withdrawn during the night. No fire was returned and the squadron's suspicions were confirmed. Caldwell's tanks fired further testing shots along Route 82, but again there was no answer. A [Divisional Cavalry](#) squadron moved up to take a look and was stopped just short of [Balsorano](#) by a large demolition: the road round the cliff face had been blown and had brought down a large landslide into the river. The engineers were called up to clear a way and 4 Troop and A Squadron of the [Divisional Cavalry](#) drove into the town. They spent the night there while the rest of the regiment regrouped and discussed the news—the long-awaited news of the Allied landing in [Normandy](#) and the opening of the Second Front. <sup>24</sup> [Rome](#), one of the greatest of the milestones on the long road to the end of the war, had been entered by the Americans two days before.

[Wilder Force](#) had had its brief moment in the lead and on the 7th it was disbanded. Now that the Germans had gained time to strengthen their line in the hills before [Florence](#), the advance was measured by demolitions rather than by battles. Out in front were the infantry of 6 Brigade, and behind them came the [Divisional Cavalry](#) and A Squadron. A bridge-layer tank was brought up from Headquarters 4 Armoured Brigade to help tanks and bulldozers over minor demolitions. No. 4 Troop stayed in the lead, now well ahead of the rest of the squadron, which on 8 June moved into San Vincenzo, a pretty little town surrounded by hills on the eastern bank of the upper [Liri](#).

San Vincenzo was a beautiful spot, nestled among terraced hillsides which rose to bare, rocky heights. The Germans may have admired the countryside but they had also used most of the buildings in the town as stables for their horses and mules. The people were busy cleaning up the litter and filth in their homes, the women still managing to walk gracefully while carrying on their heads huge loads of furniture which they had hidden in the hills during the German occupation.

The enemy evacuated [Avezzano](#) on the 9th and on the 10th the squadron received word not to make any further moves. The rest of the regiment was

concentrated at [Brocco](#), where A Squadron was to rejoin it on the 12th. No. 4 Troop under Second-Lieutenant Pedder went ahead with the Divisional Cavalry, 26 Battalion infantry, and engineers to [Avezzano](#). One man from this troop ( [Ben Bertrand](#) <sup>25</sup>) had been killed on the 7th while helping the engineers to lift mines (some of which were booby-trapped), but the enemy was now well ahead of the chase and the troop had no other casualties.

Once again the engineers set the pace for the road 'was blown to blazes and we had never seen so many mines'; near Capistrello the cliff face had been blown completely away into the river, leaving 'the father of all demolitions', a sheer drop of a couple of hundred feet. Lieutenant Pedder and Sergeant [Neil Dudfield](#) <sup>26</sup> climbed the saddle with the engineers and decided to give it a go in their tanks. 'The main trouble was likely to be met coming down the other side, where the steep grade of the hill finished with only the width of the road between the hill and a sheer drop into the river over the edge of the road,' says Pedder. 'My tank negotiated it safely and we parked it on the outside of the road to act as a stop in case one of the other tanks went into a slide coming down.'

The rest of the troop also negotiated the hazard safely and reached Capistrello. The tanks had now caught up with the infantry and the flat going encouraged them to push ahead. Progress was still slow as one man had to sit out on the front of each tank and keep a lookout for mines. Half-way up the last saddle before [Avezzano](#) the tanks were held up overnight by yet another demolition and it was late on the morning of 10 June before the engineers had repaired it. In the meantime 26 Battalion patrols had entered the town earlier that morning, one party crossing the hills from le Cese and another taking a short-cut through a railway tunnel.

To compensate them for their wait the tank crews, once over the demolition and at the top of the hill, could look down on a view which seems to have impressed all who saw it. [Avezzano](#) is on the edge of a large plain, roughly nine miles by six, that was originally a mountain lake 1800 feet above sea level. About seventy years ago it was drained by a French engineer and is now arable farm land, its green fields bordered by trees and small canals. When 4 Troop saw it 'wild flowers of every colour grew in profusion and the squares and rectangles of cultivated land gave the appearance of being painted on a canvas.'

An English-speaking Italian invited the troop to visit some of the villages. Sergeant-Major Dudfield describes the tour: 'Plenty of vino, speeches, etc., and a good time had by all, and they would have us go on to the next village, and away we went with guides on the leading tank. Here things were jacked up properly. Had to break the white ribbon across the road before we entered and the band was there to lead us in. The last place was crowded but this [Trasacco] was just overflowing. Into the town hall (I presume) and up on the balcony we went for the speeches. What was said I don't know but it was plenty.'

While the 'liberators' were being welcomed some of the more canny Italians in the crowd below the balcony reassured themselves about the strength of Allied arms. Dudfield was amused when he saw a couple of them rapping the side of his tank, and he asked one of the 'Yank Ities' (in any Italian village there was inevitably at least one who had lived in the [United States](#) and who was anxious to win brief prestige as the interpreter and confidant of the Allies) what they were doing. The Germans had told them that the Allies' tanks were made of cardboard was the reply.

The doubters convinced and the speech-making over, the procession moved on. 'The band mounted the tanks ... , some acting traffic cops cleared the crowd back, and we headed out followed by most of them,' says Dudfield. 'On the outskirts we dropped the band, waved the last goodbyes, and hiked off —a day those of us who were there will never forget.... Next morning we cleared the dead flowers, confetti, streamers, etc., out of and off the tanks and with orders to rejoin the 20th set off the way we had come for [Sora](#), picking up A Squadron there.'

The advance from [Cassino](#) to [Avezzano](#) cost the regiment one officer (Captain Hart) and two men killed, two officers and six men wounded. Another NCO, Sergeant Boniface, had died from injuries when his tank turned turtle over a bank on the way up to Sant' Elia before the advance really began. Two NCOs, Jim Bell and 'Mac' West, won MMs. No tanks were lost and all casualties were recovered.

The credit for the last must be shared between the regiment's drivers and the recovery section; but for their skill its casualties in men and tanks would have been much heavier. Even without the additional hazards of demolitions and enemy mines, the difficulties of driving tanks over Italian mountain roads were considerable. Heavy rain at times had not made the drivers' task easier and wet periscopes had also

added to the difficulties of the gunners. Like the rest of the tank crews, the drivers were in action for long periods without rest. One troop commander reports how he literally went to sleep on his feet while talking to some infantrymen, 'having been without sleep for some 60 hours', and thus excuses adequately his hazy recollection of the events of the next few days.

On such roads and on cross-country moves it was inevitable that there should be accidents as tanks slipped into ditches, capsized over banks, or became bogged in demolitions. A damaged tank blocking a narrow road or a mountain cutting could hold up the advance for hours while enemy guns and mortars ranged on working parties trying to clear a way. In this advance the work of the recovery section under Captain Taylor was particularly valuable, the newly acquired American T2 proving its worth in salvaging tanks and in clearing road blocks and bringing up bridging materials. The section helped to keep the squadrons at full fighting strength, and the courage of its men in recovering damaged tanks from exposed positions under fire won the admiration of the whole regiment.

Another specialist section which proved its worth in this advance was the regiment's reconnaissance troop. The troop had arrived in [Italy](#) in scout cars, its role being to reconnoitre routes for the tanks and lead them forward. In action it was used for inter-communication tasks between squadrons and Regimental Headquarters and between forward elements of the squadrons and their B echelons. But plans made in Egypt had not fully provided for a winter campaign in hilly country in which any vehicle which moved off the roads at once became bogged in a sea of mud; and in these conditions scout cars were practically useless. At [Cassino](#) the troop was given some jeeps, which it used to carry forward supplies and relieving tank crews and for carrying messages from RHQ to the squadrons' harbour areas around [San Michele](#).

At Pietramelara the troop traded in most of its scout cars without regrets and was issued with light Stuart tanks. The turrets were removed from these 'Honeys' and a .50 inch Browning mounted on the cupola ring and a .30 in the hull. The crew of each tank consisted of a commander, who fired the .50, a driver, and a wireless operator-gunner. The Honeys were mobile and light, excellent across country, had a good turn of speed and a reputation for mechanical soundness. At last the troop could fulfil its proper role.

Sections were attached to each squadron and they were kept constantly busy: pushing ahead to reconnoitre routes for the tanks, going back to take out wounded or bringing up ammunition and supplies and replacements, moving out to protect an exposed flank. The removal of the turrets allowed the Honeys to carry extra men and bigger loads without inconvenience.

The troop's comings and goings did not often pass without notice from the German gunners: 'During one load we had to stop for about half an hour to let Jerry have his bit of fun,' Sergeant Simmons records. Nor did its crews have to rely solely on their own eyes to find the enemy. 'At one stage I stopped two Ities and asked them where Tedeschi was,' writes Simmons, recording the events of 2 June. 'One told us that Jerries had been there the previous afternoon but last night "tutti scapare via".<sup>27</sup> ... During the advance I felt quite at ease as the Ities were moving about quite openly and freely.'

The advance to [Avezzano](#) fully tested the co-operation between tanks and infantry, and if at times they worked together well, at other times there was room for improvement. 'It was my first experience of being in a tank which had radio communication with the infantry through a 38 set mounted in the tank and tied in with the 19 set,' writes one officer. 'I did not find it a success, first because the infantry filled the air with their own chatter and secondly because I could not cut it out of my own I.C.'<sup>28</sup> It took some time before there was mutual understanding between infantry and armour of each other's problems in battle, and at first each blamed the other for getting out of touch. One troop leader who set out on foot to investigate the reason for his difficulties in raising a Maori platoon over the air at length located the cause of the trouble when he heard dance music and found the operator tuned to the [BBC](#).

On the tactical side of tank fighting the retreating enemy posed a few new problems. The orchards, trees, and fields of crops that fringed the road forward provided grand cover for small enemy rearguards armed with anti-tank guns and *ofenröhr* (bazookas). Houses and farms were also strongly held by groups of a few men until the last possible moment, when they would slip away and take up another position farther back. In these conditions tanks had to be careful to give each other mutual support as they advanced, the leading tanks nosing forward in bounds while

the others waited ready to blast any enemy post which might show itself. As Corporal Bell's experiences at the Campoli turn-off showed, the enemy selected his positions well and did as much damage as possible before he slipped away.

The enemy was careful, too, not to take post in the most likely positions, and tanks and infantry often had to search before they could find the core of an enemy strongpoint. In holding a farmhouse he would dispose his troops in outlying buildings, in haystacks, or in vantage points up to fifty yards in front or on the flanks, leaving the main building for living quarters and holding it only lightly. Even should the tanks' guns wreck the most obvious target, they would not greatly affect the strength of the post. The new delayed-action fuse of the Shermans' 75-millimetre high-explosive shells proved effective in these conditions, especially if the gunners could bounce their shells off the cobbled farmyards and explode them in the air.



<sup>1</sup> Pte D. S. Maharey; Dunedin; born Scotland, 6 Jan 1917; timber machinist.

<sup>2</sup> Lt J. T. K. Bradley; Christchurch; born Salisbury, England, 1 Jan 1918; store-man; QM 20 Regt Jun 1943-Apr 1944.

<sup>3</sup> Capt J. L. Hazlett; Winton, Southland; born Invercargill, 24 Apr 1909; farmer; Adjt 20 Regt Jul 1944-Sep 1945.

<sup>4</sup> Sgt P. J. Scott; Dunedin; born England, 1 Jan 1903; sheep-farmer.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. L. F. F. Gunn, MBE; Melbourne; born NZ 19 Oct 1909; Presbyterian minister.

<sup>6</sup> Maj A. M. Jordan; born Tauranga, 31 Jan 1910; Regular soldier; OC NZ Graves Concentration Unit 1944-45.

<sup>7</sup> Sgt J. A. Bell, MM; Blenheim; born Waimauku, 8 Jul 1909; accountant; wounded 28 Jul 1944.

<sup>8</sup> Tpr T. N. Holt; Auckland; born NZ 5 May 1922; sheetmetal worker.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Lt Te W. Rogers; born Rotorua, 24 Jun 1914; civil servant; wounded 8 Dec 1943; died of wounds 8 Jun 1944.

<sup>10</sup> Sergeant-Major Reid had taken over this tank on 30 May when 5 Troop's sergeant, 'Dad' Shaw, was hit by a stone thrown up by a bomb in the raid by our own aircraft at the bridge over the Fibreno.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Lt N. E. H. Loisel; Waihau, Tolaga Bay; born NZ 21 Jun 1905; sheep-farmer; wounded 31 May 1944.

<sup>12</sup> Tpr J. E. Park; born Dunedin, 15 Nov 1913; teamster; killed in action 31 May 1944.

<sup>13</sup> These were probably mountains guns which had come down from positions on the road to Pescosolido.

<sup>14</sup> According to the squadron commander (Major Clapham) Reid was not 'detailed' for this task: 'I ordered 7 Tp to take over,' he says. "Plonk", not wishing to be left behind, said over the air in his slow drawl, "I'm giving it a go" and went, with all guns firing.'

<sup>15</sup> Sgt J. C. Cochran; Tuatapere, Southland; born Clifden, 14 Jan 1911; farmer.

<sup>16</sup> Tpr A. C. McCarthy; Linden; born London, 24 Sep 1918; costing clerk.

<sup>17</sup> Lt J. I. Innes, m.i.d.; Fairlie; born NZ 11 Feb 1920; shepherd.

<sup>18</sup> Tpr A. G. E. Leggoe; Hukarere, West Coast; born Reefton, 27 Aug 1912; truck driver; wounded 17 Dec 1943.

<sup>19</sup> Major Clapham had tried to get forward that night to visit 7 Troop, but when his tank shed a track and he found enemy blocking the way he made his way back on foot to RHQ. He returned to his squadron in a Honey tank.

<sup>20</sup> Sgt B. F. Simmons; Christchurch; born NZ 5 Dec 1918; school-teacher.

<sup>21</sup> The officer and one man were killed; the other two men escaped.

<sup>22</sup> Lt-Col N. P. Wilder, DSO; Waipukurau; born NZ 29 Mar 1914; farmer; patrol commander LRDG; CO 2 NZ Div Cav, 1944; wounded 14 Sep 1942.

<sup>23</sup> Lt J. N. Overton, Otapiri, Winton; born Dunedin, 29 Sep 1914; shepherd; wounded 19 Oct 1944.

<sup>24</sup> C Squadron heard the D Day news over a radio set which Ray Hodge had converted to pick up the BBC. 'The boys used to drive me crazy at times running the wireless all night when in laager tuned to the BBC—ear-phone in gun breech and spout of gun in tent,' he says. 'It didn't matter for an hour or two but they often went off to sleep and left it on, to find in the morning half the battery down and out of balance, making it difficult to recharge.'

<sup>25</sup> Tpr B. L. Bertrand; born NZ 23 Aug 1920; farmhand; killed in action 7 Jun 1944.

<sup>26</sup> WO II N. M. Dudfield, m.i.d.; Riverton, Tuatapere; born Pahia, 3 Nov 1913; farmer.

<sup>27</sup> 'Last night they shoved off up the road' would be an idiomatic translation.

<sup>28</sup> Internal communication.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 17 – TO FLORENCE

## **CHAPTER 17**

### **To Florence**

It was time again to rest and prepare for the next assault. On 13 June the regiment moved back about 12 miles along Route 82 to orchard country between [Isola del Liri](#) and [Fontana Liri](#), near the road to Arpino from the west. None are big towns but all are easy to find on the map. [Isola del Liri](#), on an island as its name indicates, is literally in the middle of the river, whose waterfalls drive its paper-mills. [Fontana Liri](#), east of the river a mile or so and up a zigzag road, is a picturesque little town surmounted by a medieval castle which reminds you of the pictures in old children's books. Arpino has a more war-like history than either of the others: as the ancient mountain town of Arpinum, it was seized by the Romans as long ago as 305 bc and, over two thousand years later, was used as a German headquarters during the [Cassino campaign](#).

The regiment's new area was on a side road just off Route 82 and near the junction of the winding hill road to Arpino. The men were bivouacked in orchards and wheatfields—fields sown by the Italians with German seed on German orders and whose crops were intended to feed German horses. The enemy had had to retreat before the grain was ready to reap and it was still too green to burn; but the satisfaction of the Italians at this happy state did not last long when the tanks of the liberatori crowded into their fields. There were loud protests and even tears, but space was limited and the roads congested and the tanks had to be stabled wherever room could be found.

But in spite of their disappointment the people were friendly, their wine good, and their homes hospitable. In the fertile valley there were plenty of streams in which the men swam on the warm summer days or rested in the shade of the willows on their banks when the sun became too hot. The banks of the [Liri](#) had first to be cleared of mines and booby traps, but otherwise the area was 'rustic and peaceful'. Sappers built an ideal pool in an old spillway and furnished it with a springboard. At times the heat was oppressive, but then a sudden thunderstorm would clear the air and give a rest from training. There was also leave by unit parties to [Rome](#): day leave only for other ranks, unfortunately, although a limited number of officers could stay overnight.

It was a tiring day. Parties left the unit at 4 a.m. and got back about midnight. Baedeker gives the city and its monuments, churches, galleries, and museums a hundred-odd pages, a special appendix, and a detailed plan for a fortnight's tour 'to obtain even a hasty glimpse', but most men on their first sightseeing visit found the pavements hard and their guides' string of facts and figures bewildering. Some were content to 'do the city' in that first thirsty trip, limiting most of their future sightseeing to the New Zealand club and the bars and bistros. Most men liked [Rome](#) for its dignity, its spacious tree-lined streets and stately buildings—'the largest, cleanest, most slumless city I have ever seen'. Descriptions of its monuments, paintings, ruins, and churches helped to fill many a letter home; but the club in the Hotel Quirinale was cool and friendly and central and it was good to sit down for a while to listen to the Italian orchestra and try the beer. There was also leave farther afield to [Ischia](#) and [Salerno](#) and some excursions to [Cassino](#), but many men were content to do their sightseeing in the local towns and villages.

To complete a brief picture of this period of relaxation mention must be made of the armoured brigade sports meeting on 28 June on the outskirts of [Isola del Liri](#). The area of flat ground was not very large and the stony track had to be levelled by bulldozers. The meeting began on the 24th but was postponed that afternoon because of heavy rain. Points were allotted for each event and the regiment did well, taking second place to 22 (Motor) Battalion. Brigade swimming sports were held a fortnight later at [Fontana Liri](#) after an earlier meeting to select the regiment's best.

But life was not all play and no work. There were route marches, shoots, squadron commanders' conferences, and that old war diary favourite 'General maintenance'. The pattern was the same whenever the regiment had some time on its hands: the men marched and shot while commanders conferred and planned next week's exercises. Co-operation with infantry was the theme of these exercises and 26 Battalion the men on foot. Later, men from the battalion visited the regiment to look over the tanks, and tank officers were sent to infantry battalions for a week's attachment.

A Squadron repeated the exercises early in July, first with 22 (Motor) Battalion and then with the Maoris. Four tanks from RHQ troop also took part in the latter exercise. In the words of the brigade diary, 'many small points were cleared up and

a sound basis of understanding ... achieved' in this tank and infantry training.

On 6 July Captain Johnston relinquished the appointment of Adjutant which he had held for almost exactly two years. He was the last of the 'originals' to go on furlough, and if any man deserved it it was he. He had joined the battalion in October 1939 and had come overseas in battalion headquarters' orderly room as sergeant clerk. In Crete he had relinquished his orderly-room job for that of platoon sergeant in B Company. At [Maleme](#) and [Galatas](#) his courage and leadership had won him the MM; he had been wounded at [Galatas](#) on 25 May but had rallied some men who were withdrawing and led them back into action. Commissioned in November 1941, he rejoined the battalion in July 1942 as its Adjutant. His successor in that appointment was Second-Lieutenant 'Lu' Hazlett.

A move was imminent and those in the know took their last look at [Rome](#). On 12 July Corporal 'Snow' [Millard](#),<sup>1</sup> Lance-Corporal Fred Mason, and Troopers [Gibb](#),<sup>2</sup> [Stewart](#),<sup>3</sup> and [Fitzgibbon](#)<sup>4</sup> of the Ruapehu furlough draft arrived suddenly and unofficially from Advanced Base at [Bari](#) to rejoin the regiment, just as preparations for departure were being completed. On the 13th the regiment moved north, the wheeled vehicles travelling by night (or rather, the very early morning) and the tanks on transporters following late that afternoon and travelling by night. The 'wheels' travelled via [Rome](#) and staged at Civita Castellana. They pushed on next day (again an early-morning move) over rough and dusty roads to just above Panicale, between three and four miles directly below [Lake Trasimene](#) and about 200 from [Fontana Liri](#). The tanks took a couple of days longer to arrive, travelling part of the way on their own tracks, but by the 17th the regiment was complete and had settled in.

At the regimental parade that morning, the first in the new area, Lieutenant-Colonel Purcell told the unit's 4th Reinforcements the news they had been waiting so long to hear. The married men among them and some single men chosen by ballot were to go home in a few days in the Taupo furlough draft, and at 'sparrow chirp' on the 20th after the inevitable, strenuous farewell parties they left for Advanced Base.

The rest of the unit stayed only a few days longer, time enough for a swim or two in the lake to wash off the dust of the journey north and for some visits to neighbouring villages. It was cooler here than in the [Liri](#) valley but the water in the

lake was pleasantly warm. Some men found time to go farther afield, hitchhiking some 30 miles to [Assisi](#), on a spur of the hills beyond [Perugia](#). Then on the afternoon and evening of the 22nd the regiment headed north, wheeled and tracked vehicles in separate convoys as usual, in a move of about 70 miles.

The new area was near [Siena](#) on an oak-covered knoll some five miles north of the city. The last fortnight's moves had eaten up a lot of ground and brought the war much closer, and a succession of short moves in the next few days was to bring it closer still. First there was talk of camouflage precautions and dispersal; next routine orders became shorter then stopped altogether; then surplus equipment was handed in and extra rations drawn from the QM; and, almost before the regiment realised it, it was in action once again.

A short move early in the morning on 26 July—the day the King visited the Division—brought 20 Regiment to [Tavarnelle](#), and in the afternoon it reorganised in echelon groups in readiness for action. The main appointments in the unit were then:

Commanding Officer: Lt-Col H. A. Purcell

Second-in-Command: Maj J. M. Elliott <sup>5</sup>

Adjutant: 2 Lt J. L. Hazlett

Intelligence Officer: 2 Lt A. H. Pedder

Squadron commanders:

HQ Squadron Maj J. R. Coote

A Squadron Maj R. A. Bay

B Squadron Maj L. B. Clapham

C Squadron Maj P. A. Barton <sup>6</sup>

From Tavarnelle B Squadron was the first to move north. Under the command of 22 (Motor) Battalion, it headed along Route 2 on the morning of 27 July to Bargino, 'an area of ripe peaches, water melons and tomatoes' on the Pesa River. At noon 5 Troop (Lieutenant Cross <sup>7</sup>), accompanied by two reconnaissance Honeys and a section of carriers from 22 Battalion, left to reconnoitre a route up the east bank of the [Pesa](#). A sharp lookout for mines was kept, and although signs of disturbed earth were seen the tanks drove safely between these spots. No enemy was met, but the reconnaissance was halted at a blown bridge where a secondary road off Route 2

crossed the river.

Returning from the bridge, Cross's tank slipped sideways off the narrow track—the tanks were keeping closely to the tracks they made on the way up—and struck a mine. There may have been more than one for the damage was extensive. A track and front bogey were blown off and the right-hand side of the hull blown in; the lap-gunner (the spare driver) took the full blast and was severely shaken. Cross, head and shoulders out of the turret, was enveloped in a sheet of flame, but apart from a few singed hairs and a headache suffered no injury.

The absence of enemy opposition seemed to indicate that the road through [San Casciano](#) might be clear. The squadron set off at good speed to find out, eight infantrymen perched on each tank. The enemy had apparently been waiting for such a target as he opened fire on the tanks when they slowed down at a U bend. Caught unawares and unable to hear the shells coming above the noise made by the tanks, four infantrymen were wounded by splinters. No tanks were hit, although two in 8 Troop suffered mechanical trouble (one a fuel blockage and the other a wireless fault) and had to be left behind. Honey tanks replaced them.

The infantry lost no time in getting back on foot. They then searched the area while the tanks supported them or fanned out to seize the nearby crossroads. The drill was working perfectly. No. 7 Troop relieved a troop from [19 Armoured Regiment](#) and moved up to the crossroads north-west of [San Casciano](#) to reconnoitre the routes to [Cerbaia](#) and [Cigliano](#). No. 6 Troop linked up with 19 Regiment on the left flank and a composite



**'tiger country'—san casciano to florence**

troop waited in reserve. Everything went smoothly, but the day ended with still no sight of the enemy. That night B Squadron reverted to the regiment's command.

Plans were at once laid for an attack. It was to be made by 22 Battalion with armoured support, B Squadron of the 20th on the left flank and A Squadron of the 19th on the right, the latter also under 20 Regiment's command. A line through the villages of [Talente](#), [Cigliano](#) and [Casa Vecchia](#), running from left to right, was the first objective. Supporting B Squadron was 3 Company of 22 (Motor) Battalion, a platoon of engineers and a bulldozer, a [4 Field Regiment](#) and a [Royal Artillery](#) forward observation officer, the latter for self-propelled guns. B Squadron's orders were to advance through [Pisignano](#), a ridge-top village on one of the middle roads of the four which fan north from the crossroads above [San Casciano](#) roughly like the outstretched fingers of a hand.

The move began at 1 a.m. on the 28th. The night was inky black; the road, which looked promising enough on the map, little better than a goat path. The advance was slow and tiring. Every three-quarters of an hour or so mines or demolitions or difficulty in seeing the track would bring the convoy to a halt. In the dark drivers had to rely wholly on the tank commanders. Demolitions caused several detours.

At 4.30 a.m. the tanks reached [Pisignano](#). About this time the infantry at last made contact with the enemy and reported enemy vehicles moving east on the south fork of the [Cerbaia– Giogoli](#) road. The FOOs called down a 'stonk'; apparently

it was not fired, for an hour later Colonel Purcell arrived at Pisignano, with the information (later proved false) that the vehicles heard on the road were thought to be 6 Brigade's.

By this time it was growing light. The enemy held the high ground across a deep valley from the ridge on which sat Pisignano, and it was decided to consolidate round the village. On the top of the enemy's ridge was the village of la Romola.

After a six-hour advance in which it had covered about one mile each hour, the squadron reached the reverse slope of the Pisignano ridge, dispersed, unloaded its surplus gear and began to prepare breakfast. Some crews were half-way through the meal, others had not started it, when orders came through to push on at once. While the rest of the troop had been making preparations for the meal, 8 Troop's commander ( Second-Lieutenant John Ritchie <sup>8</sup>) had moved over the ridge with a section of infantry to reconnoitre the road down into the valley, reported to have been evacuated by the enemy. He reached the flat safely but was sniped at when he left his tank to reconnoitre a route across a demolition into la Romola. He then called up the rest of his troop.

In a country of narrow roads and rugged hills cut by steep river valleys it is easiest sometimes to see an action through a driver's eyes. Trooper Bob Middleton <sup>9</sup> was the driver of the corporal's tank in 8 Troop, now ordered to follow its leader on to the flat below la Romola. He says:

The Troop Sergeant moved off as we started to stow away our breakfast utensils. This done we followed in his wake, up on to the ridge. On reaching the top I looked down. To say I was amazed is to but put it mildly. How on earth was I to take a tank down into the valley floor? It was a good three hundred yards to the bottom; very steep; while the track was as wide as the tank and no more and zig-zagged all the way to the bottom, each little zig—of which there seemed to be an infinite number—being at right angles to the following zag. On the valley floor and to my right I could see the other two tanks which appeared to be sitting about twenty yards apart.

Off I set, and down this goat track we went. At each corner, as the track was so steep, it was necessary for me to hold back hard on the sticks, and push out the

clutch, while the spare driver changed gear. What a place to manoeuvre such a thundering big vehicle....

About half-way down there was a large casa, behind which was a fair-sized back-yard. Just as I neared this place, I noticed away to my right a large demolition go skywards. My thoughts began to run riot; there was apparently more than MG posts left, and I remember thinking at the time how inviting was that back-yard, from which I could have placed the tank in a good covering fire position. As events later proved, it would have been an excellent position, as one could see the whole of the surrounding countryside and yet be hidden from view.

As Middleton indicates, there was more in la Romola than 'the odd MG post' which the troop had been led to believe. During the move down the hillside the tank attracted some light mortaring, to which the two tanks already in the valley replied with their 75-millimetre guns.

La Romola was now directly above the troop, which was being sniped at by spandau posts. The three tanks then opened up with their Brownings and gave the town ten minutes' 'hurry-up' —'I was having a grand old time shooting up everything in sight,' says one gunner. There was no reply. After five minutes of 'deathlike quietness' Corporal Stan Harrison,<sup>10</sup> the commander of Middleton's tank, was ordered to have a look at the demolition on the road to the left to see if a path across it could be found. Again Middleton's story is worth hearing at first hand:

As I had pulled the tank up on the edge of a four feet vertical drop, it was necessary to move in between the other two tanks in order to cross. This we did, and just as we reached the position I remember saying to the spare driver, 'What the Hell is the drop like in front of us?' I stopped the tank momentarily and pulled myself up out of my seat, by the expedient of hooking my elbows over the edge of the manhole, to have a look myself before proceeding any further.

As I completed this operation I seemed to be surrounded by a sheet of flame. There flashed through my mind the vision of a flashlight photographer operating at a dance back home. For a couple of seconds after this my brain failed to function, and then my one overpowering thought was to get away as far as I could. I bailed out, jumped on to the road in front and down into a small depression in front of me

where I lay still and flat. I was shivering. I must have lain there for a couple of minutes, while running through my mind was, 'What had happened to the remainder of the crew?' Curiosity got the better of me; I raised myself ever so slightly and had a look at the tank. The whole three tanks were on fire; smoke was everywhere and dust surrounded them. Not a soul in sight. I lay there for another few seconds, scared stiff, wondering whether to make a bid for safety or whether to stay where I was in the meantime. Whether it was the fear of being alone, or what, I just cannot say, but I know that I jumped up and ran towards my tank in the direction of safety. I paused beside the old tank—the radiated heat was stifling—and on again as fast as I could go.

In less than five minutes B Squadron had lost the whole of one troop, a quarter of its fighting strength. Harrison's tank was hit at seven o'clock, an HE shell exploding on the turret ring and killing the turret crew. Before the troop could disperse the second tank was hit by an AP shell and the following shot put the third tank out of action. All three were set on fire.

The damage was done by either a self-propelled gun or a Tiger tank (probably the latter) firing from a hidden position in a copse on the right flank covering the demolition on the road. Corporal Harrison and two men were killed and Sergeant Bell wounded.

Bell was standing in his turret when his tank was hit. 'The shot punched metal on to the grenade box. There was an explosion and I knew my right foot was gone,' he says. 'Expecting a brew up, I ordered my crew out, struggled through the turret hatch and jumped down.' Captain Familton, B Squadron's second-in-command, is less matter-of-fact: 'He knew his turret crew could not get out while he was there and at any moment another 88-mm might arrive so he jumped from the top of the turret, 9 ft. 6 ins., to the ground. Mortars and machine guns were engaging the area and Jim Bell ordered his crew to get out to safety and leave him there. They refused and picked him up and ran with him towards cover. A Spandau opened up on them and they had to throw Jim into a ditch and take cover themselves. A Bren carrier under a Red Cross flag was sent down the hill under Lt. Jack Shacklock to try to recover the wounded. Jerry honoured the flag and Jim Bell was picked up. When they reached the top of the hill I went over to see Jim and with a wan smile he handed me his pistol and binoculars and asked me to see that the QM, Don Cameron,<sup>11</sup> marked

them off on his card. Jim lost his leg.'

Behind the tanks was an open field about forty yards wide, and behind that a field of corn. The survivors of the three crews and the wounded found shelter at first among the tall stalks and then in the large house about 200 yards away up the hill track. Spandaus had opened fire again, and a short but heavy storm of mortar fire splattered round the house just as the men got inside. By now our own artillery had opened fire on la [Romola](#) and 'all hell was let loose'. The Italians in the house gave the crews a meal and some wine, and in twos and threes at ten-minute intervals, for the route was under observation for part of the way, they headed back down a lane behind the house and returned to the rest of the squadron.

B Squadron spent the rest of the day in its positions behind [Pisignano](#), 6 Troop on the ridge and the others on the road behind it. During the morning their positions were heavily mortared and shelled but the squadron had no further losses. At 8.30 p.m. it was relieved by C Squadron and returned to Bargino to reorganise. During the next few days troops were borrowed from it to support A Squadron's advance on Faltignano.

A and C Squadrons of the 20th, left behind at [Tavarnelle](#) when B Squadron moved north on the morning of the 27th, followed it later that morning to Bargino. Next day they moved forward again to [San Casciano](#) to support A Squadron 19 Regiment's thrust, directed by 20 Regiment's tactical headquarters from a house near [San Casciano](#). The 20th's A Squadron, the first of the reserve to be employed, waited at the town's southern entrance, but the advance did not make as much ground as planned and the whole squadron was not required. Half the squadron, however—Nos. I and 2 Troops under Captain Caldwell—was called forward at 6 a.m. to the centre of the sector. They moved up with a platoon of infantry with each troop. One troop took the road to [Spedaletto](#) and the other the road through [Cigliano](#); neither at first met enemy opposition. But when I Troop tried to push on to the Villa al Leccio its tanks came under the eye of the enemy in la [Romola](#) when about to cross the 'wadi' [Borro Suganella](#) and were heavily mortared and shelled. The plan was then abandoned: the going was too difficult, the ground too exposed, the enemy opposition too aggressive. The troop then took up positions on the escarpment north of [Cigliano](#), with 2 Troop farther back covering Route 2. Behind

them the other two troops formed the reserve.

There was no change in these positions next day except that 4 Troop moved up Route 2 at dawn into a reserve position a little way past [San Casciano](#) and that evening relieved 3 Troop which had two unfit tanks, one with a punctured radiator, the other with an unserviceable gun. The relieving troop commander, Lieutenant [Colmore-Williams](#), <sup>12</sup> found the enemy very sensitive and he returned from his reconnaissance in the afternoon with all the tyres of his scout car punctured and its water tanks holed by mortar fire. An infantry patrol which moved forward that night under the cover of a 'stonk' fired by two of the troop's tanks also found the enemy aggressive.

At dawn on 30 July 4 Troop set off with a company of 23 Battalion to attack Sant' Andrea, along the road a bit from [Spedaletto](#). As the night patrol had found, the enemy position was strongly held and a blown culvert blocked the road. No. 4 Troop moved down into the gully under mortar fire to try to find a crossing, its tanks silhouetted in the light from burning haystacks. A likely crossing was found and the tank crews, later helped by infantrymen, used their shovels to improve it. Some prisoners were taken on the crest of the gully and a wounded infantryman of the previous night's patrol rescued. Under covering fire from another troop, two of the tanks and infantry moved up to the outskirts of the village, leaving the third tank behind to improve the crossing.

While the infantry began to clear out the houses, Colmore-Williams's two tanks took up anti-tank positions and shot up enemy snipers and spandau posts in the village. These posts harassed the attackers with their waspish fire, causing them much anxiety and many casualties. A Tiger tank—the squat, powerful, 65-ton German Mark VI Tiger, a name that never failed to stir the blood of Sherman crews in [Italy](#)—supported as usual by a self-propelled or anti-tank gun, also took a hand, the gun concentrating on the tanks, the Tiger shooting up the infantry. The third tank back at the crossing was ordered up and led in, and with its help a counter-attack was repulsed. The guns were called up, too, to shell the Tiger but their fire could not shift it.

No. 4 Troop's fight at Sant' Andrea is one of the regiment's best troop actions of the war and it won for Lieutenant Colmore-Williams an immediate MC. Although

wounded in the head by a sniper early in the day, he stayed with his troop until ordered back late in the evening by Colonel Purcell. Several times during the day he left his tank and went forward on foot to keep contact with the infantry or to post the other tanks of his troop. His courage, determination, and sound tactics against a stronger enemy prevented the village from being recaptured and our infantry overrun.

The enemy made at least three counter-attacks to retake Sant' Andrea, first on the left flank and later on the right. One of the Shermans received a direct hit from an HE shell and its commander, Lance-Sergeant Cook,<sup>13</sup> was wounded. The enemy infantry could approach through corn and olive trees to within a few yards of the tanks, but foolishly disclosed their position when one of them threw a grenade at the troop commander, then returning on foot to his tank after placing Cook's tank, now commanded by Trooper Greenall,<sup>14</sup> in position. The tanks raked the olives with machine guns and shellfire, firing into the trees for airburst effect.

Supported by a bazooka team, the Tiger then moved down the street through the village and our infantry called for support. As Colmore-Williams moved his tank round the church into a firing position a 'bazooka man' rose up and rested his bazooka against an olive tree to aim. The tank's gunner 'gave him a 75-mm HE all to himself' and Dave Coppin,<sup>15</sup> the spare driver, sprayed the area with the bow gun. The other tanks also opened fire, causing many casualties: the bazooka team was wiped out and fifteen enemy dead were afterwards counted close by. Although some very accurate mortar fire troubled the troop for some time, the enemy infantry left the tanks alone.

The Tiger still had to be kept at bay. A bend in the road allowed it to come within about 100 yards of the troop commander's tank before it came into view. When it ventured round the bend it was blinded by a round or two of smoke and chased back into cover, tail first, with six or seven armour-piercing and high-explosive shells buzzing around its ears.

Colmore-Williams then withdrew his tank behind the church and Greenall's tank was placed in position to fire on the Tiger should it come farther down the road. Later it withdrew altogether. Discouraged, the enemy pockets in the village then became less troublesome. Colmore-Williams was ordered to report to the CO and on

the way back was wounded again when his tank received a direct hit.

That night Major Bay with 3 and 4 Troops advanced with a company from 23 Battalion along the road from [Spedaletto](#), took their road junction objectives, and occupied [Villa Mazzei](#) and Palastra. They flushed two Tigers but met only light opposition. The Tigers fired their machine guns, scoring hits on the squadron commander's turret, but for some reason or other—including the obvious one that they may have run out of ammunition—did not follow up their tracer with armour-piercing shells. The other two troops, Nos. I and 2, advanced at the same time with the [Maori Battalion](#) to [Faltignano](#), but although the infantry reached the village the tanks were again unable to cross the gully below [la Romola](#). They withdrew at dawn on the 31st to [San Casciano](#) and came forward again that evening with the [Maori Battalion](#), pushing ahead through II Pino to the Villa al Leccio. The other half squadron (3 and 4 Troops) was relieved late that night by a South African squadron.

Sergeant Bill Russell, advancing with the Maoris, can be relied on always to give a soldier's view of the battle. After a busy night he wanted sleep and perhaps thought the Maoris unnecessarily aggressive. Of the first night's advance he says: 'The Maoris were all keyed up at the sight of the enemy and before settling in and summing up the position got going with mortars and Brens. In a few minutes we got the expected reply and I wondered if our casa would really stand the shelling. I know I left the shelter of one wall just before it caved in. I was trying to catch a sleep on a billiard table before the Maoris opened up but their mortars disturbed my sleep. We had had little time for sleep before that.'

Italians living in the house had prepared a meal, but they left hurriedly during the heaviest part of the shelling and the tank crews and infantry finished it. One Maori soldier also tried on the household wardrobe and, when the shelling ceased, cycled off down the road wearing a new suit and a bowler hat.

In the next night's advance with the Maoris (a pitch-black night, 31 July–1 August) Russell's troop was held up once more at the 'wadi' between [Cigliano](#) and [la Romola](#) and at daylight had to withdraw to [Cigliano](#), where, says Russell, 'sleep was again my problem. I strolled across a clearing to another tank crew to say we would park there, have a feed and a sleep if time permitted. I was standing alongside the driver when a shell came over and landed on a heap of mortar shells and badly

wounded the driver—I wish I could remember his name. ... Fright drove us both under the tank and what an ordeal to get a big legless man in pain out of this position. Luckily there was an RAP in a building alongside and we were both attended to. I was operated on and flown to No. 2 G.H. so missed the highlights of Florence.'

No. 5 Troop of B Squadron also turned tail a Tiger in a daring little action near II Pino on 31 July. The troop had been sent forward the day before to relieve A Squadron's No. 4 Troop and give close support to the Maori infantry. The Maoris' attack gained only about fifty yards, for the enemy laid his guns and mortars on them and had an SP gun and Tiger in support. The corporal's tank was hit by the Tiger's fire, its driver (Trooper Hampton<sup>16</sup>), being killed and one of the crew wounded. The rest of the troop pulled back over the crest.

Cross laid some smoke in front of the corporal's tank and 'hopped over to have a dekko'. He could see where the Tiger was lying, 'beautifully camouflaged', and brought his own tank round the side of the slope behind the knocked-out tank. Below the crest he lined up the turret on the Tiger's hideout and then moved quickly over the top into a firing position. The gunner immediately spotted his target and loosed off two rounds of American smoke, followed by five or six armour-piercing shells. Caught by surprise, the Tiger withdrew hurriedly, 'much to our relief. Our last view was of an A.P. ricochetting off his turret so we felt we had at least given him a jar.'

The attack pushed forward to the next group of houses where two spandaus firing from a top-story window held it up. The enemy was soon winkled out, although 'winkled' hardly describes an operation in which the tanks had to blow the top corner off the house before the enemy machine-gunners surrendered.

Cross's next objective was the target of a lifetime. Five hundred yards away from the tank's position in support of the right-hand platoon, a large house stood in a clear patch at least a hundred yards away from its nearest clump of olive trees. Enemy troops were running from the olives to the house. The tank lay quiet until all were inside and then shot to a prearranged plan. Eight shells were fired into the bottom story, one immediately below each window, then eight into the top story. The troops inside then began to run back to the olive trees. All three Brownings opened up—the co-axial gun, lap-gunner's, and the commander's ack-ack—and each

fired four belts of ammunition. The Maoris later reported many enemy killed.

Cross had begun this adventurous day with a narrow escape. Taking his sergeant (Noel Jenkins<sup>17</sup>) with him, he had gone forward at dawn to look for the Maoris, sometimes elusive people to find. In a clump of olive trees two figures could be seen in the dim light. Cross went forward alone while Jenkins stayed put—'just in case!' 'Closer inspection revealed them to be wearing camouflage suits, but the Maoris often did that—you know the blotchy green suits the Hun wore. They separated, both covering me with rifles, no doubt suspicious also, so I walked up to one. I got close enough to see the "Gott mit Uns" on his web belt and realised my mistake. (I well remember that he had not had a shave.) Said the first thing that came into my head—"Saida – Yalla – Iggery"—turned about and walked back to Noel, with a very funny feeling in the seat of my pants. I was thankful to get behind the stone fence.'

C Squadron had moved up from San Casciano on the night of 28-29 July to relieve B Squadron in the area Pisignano-Cigliano. From their positions in houses on the ridge the crews had a grand OP view of la Romola, just over a mile away across the valley. They spent the 29th observing enemy movement in the town, taking note for the artillery of any likely strongpoints. From time to time the tanks' positions were shelled, one shell wounding Corporal L. E. Clarke,<sup>18</sup> a 9 Troop tank commander, in a leg.

On the night of 30-31 July (start time 1 a.m.) the squadron supported 22 Battalion's attack on la Romola, one troop with each infantry company and No. 10 (Second-Lieutenant de Lau tour) in reserve. With each troop was a detachment of engineers, and 11 Troop (Second-Lieutenant 'Snow' Nixon) had a bulldozer to clear its track down from Cigliano. Driver Middleton has already described the state of the track down from Pisignano; that from Cigliano was no better and in the dark the infantry very soon left the tanks behind. 'We had to move down a very steep track with the tanks,' writes Corporal Nigel Overton of 11 Troop, 'and it was an "extra dark" night. Some of the bends in the track were too sharp to get round and the tanks had to back to get room to turn. Everything seemed to let loose from La Romola. The air seemed to be full of flying tracer and every one seemed to be heading straight at you.'

Inevitably on such a night and over such country, the infantry lost wireless touch with their battalion headquarters and got too far ahead of the tanks. No. 11 Troop, in particular, had to wait for several hours while its bulldozer made a deviation and was then put on the wrong track by the engineers. That was the last the troop saw of its infantry. The corporal's tank in 12 Troop got mechanical trouble and soon dropped out. Sergeant Owen Hughes's tank became stuck when a road gave way. Jack Denham's No. 9 Troop had a better run and got forward into la Romola after dawn. Denham found that the best way to make progress was to lead the tanks on foot, but he lost one tank to 12 Troop to replace its casualties and had only two tanks (his own and Sergeant McMinn's <sup>19</sup>) in la Romola with the forward company of 22 Battalion.

Taken all round, it was a most confused night. One of the infantry companies was caught in our own barrage, and it was some time after dawn before tanks and infantry were properly grouped in the town. The enemy did not give up easily and his shelling was heavy, especially so at 22 Battalion's head quarters. An infantry patrol captured a Tiger tank, its crew asleep and the wireless still on; it was possibly this tank's gun that had made such short work of Ritchie's troop a few days before. <sup>20</sup> De Lautour's troop, in reserve but in a position to give covering fire, did one good shoot on likely enemy OPs and got back 'a proper plaster'. The crew of an 11 Troop tank that had shed a track near the bottom of the hill also had rather a lively time when daylight came and had to lie low until about ten o'clock before all was clear. The 'flying fitters' again demonstrated their efficiency. First thing in the morning, with Captain Taylor and his T 2, they were up working on the cripples and by afternoon had three of them on the road again. The reserve troop also moved across the valley early in the afternoon into la Romola to reinforce the tanks in the town.

The troops in la Romola soon made themselves fairly comfortable in houses, but they spent a disturbed and uneasy night. In many of the houses and buildings, particularly in one four or five-storied building near the square, the enemy had left behind large quantities of explosives. This building was taken over by gun crews of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment. 'About midnight I was doing a watch from my tank a short distance away when I heard a shell coming,' says Corporal Overton. 'I ducked into the turret and the shell hit this building and there was a terrific explosion and half the place came down. Twelve lives were lost there.' <sup>21</sup>

It was thought by many at the time that the enemy had left behind a delayed-action bomb, and those men who shared quarters with large stocks of enemy ammunition and demolition charges had some uneasy second thoughts about their lodgings. Others were too busy helping to rescue the wounded or recover buried guns to have time to worry, de Lautour's troop in particular giving valuable assistance.

While 3 and 4 Troops rested and refitted on 1 August at San Casciano, 1 and 2 Troops with the Maoris had an exciting day. The excitement began shortly after 8 a.m., the starting time of the attack, when shells from a heavy gun landed close by and a Tiger tank, with enemy infantry in position near it, was reported. By twenty to nine half a mile had been covered and an anti-tank gun dealt with. Half an hour later the Tiger and its infantry were reported to be withdrawing, hurried on by our artillery. A little way past Massanera demolitions and trees blocked the road, and behind them enemy infantry were making a stand. The tanks were called up to drive them back.

Nearing the attack's objective—a line from Poggio delle Monache (right) to the ridge of la Poggiona—the tanks were held up by anti-tank-gun fire and 'things became rather hectic.' It was now nearly noon. Farther back up the road a Tiger was sitting, but the infantry were too close to call down a 'stonk' on it. No. 2 Troop commander's tank was hit, its tracks damaged and the commander lightly wounded. Thinking the damage had been done by the Tiger, Lieutenant French <sup>22</sup> ordered his crew out. However, the tank had been hit by a high-explosive shell and, finding that its engines still ran, its crew reboarded it and brought it back to safety.

'We turned round and bolted back behind a house,' says Corporal George Innes, <sup>23</sup> commander of one of the 2 Troop tanks, 'the dust we created saving us from further hits. We stayed behind this building for a few minutes but the Tigers were moving round to get a shot at us so we had to pull back a bit further. We had to go back on to the road in full view and I was last tank out, which wasn't good.'

On the way out Innes's tank stalled on the crown of the road, and with a Tiger lumbering along the road towards him not more than 200 yards away the tank's commander had some anxious moments. 'Turn the b—round and get cracking up the — strada,' he ordered. In the 'flap' he had forgotten to switch over to 'inter-com' and

his orders, 'perfectly clear and direct but not quite the King's English', were received clearly at the Maori Battalion's headquarters. The crew had just time to bale out before a shot struck the Sherman and set it on fire. The crew then took shelter with some Maori infantry in a house near the Villa Treggiaia.

The advancing enemy surrounded the house, the besieging force comprising two tanks and a party of infantry. The other A Squadron tanks came to the rescue, calling down an artillery concentration round the house and following it with a smoke screen, under whose cover the infantry and tank crew escaped. French's gunner (Trooper Des Hargraves <sup>24</sup>), who was left for dead when his tank was hit, shared a house unseen for almost two days and nights with a party of enemy. He spent the time hidden under some straw until an attack by the Maoris on the morning of 3 August put the building in New Zealand hands once more.

Hargraves had a lucky escape when a Maori tommy-gunner let fly at a window from which he was helping to speed the enemy's retreat. On returning to his squadron he was able to give a useful report on the enemy's strength and on other activities which he had noticed while in hiding.

During the night of 1-2 August 1 and 2 Troops moved back from Massanera to San Casciano, where the squadron regrouped before moving forward again early on the morning of the 3rd. B Squadron now took its turn in the lead, half a squadron (7 and 8 Troops) with two Mios (3-inch American naval-type guns mounted on Sherman chassis) giving support to an attack on 2 August by two companies of 21 Battalion over the same ground that the Maoris had covered the day before. The enemy had dug in his toes and the attack made little progress. Early in the afternoon a direct hit by our medium guns drove the crew from a Tiger tank spotted on Point 243, but unfortunately did not knock out the tank for the crew returned and drove it away behind the ridge. The enemy infantry withdrew with it, or shortly afterwards, and that night the two reserve companies of 21 Battalion passed through with 8 Troop and took the objective, the features Poggio delle Monache and Point 243. Especially good work was done during the day and again in the night attack by the two Honey tanks under Sergeant Gahan, <sup>25</sup> one of which had been attached to each forward company. Keeping close behind the infantry, they kept 21 Battalion headquarters informed throughout the day of the attack's progress.

In the night advance there was another brief brush with a Tiger shortly after midnight near the [Villa Treggiaia](#). The enemy tank was flushed by the infantry and chased off by one of the Mios, both of which stayed forward in support when the objective was taken about half an hour later. One Honey tank was put out of action on a mine on the way up and one of its crew injured. No. 5 Troop then joined No. 8 on the objective.

The forward troops could hear an enemy tank (or tanks) withdrawing and at dawn on the 3rd, in the approved leap frogging style, two companies of Maoris and the rest of the squadron passed through 21 Battalion. The rest of the squadron comprised 6 and 7 Troops and a scratch troop of two RHQ Troop tanks under the squadron sergeant-major, 'Plonk' Reid. The two Mios went with them. Their task was to capture the high features north-east of [Giogoli](#) and the village itself.

The first opposition came from spandau nests which the tanks took care of without much trouble, and by half past eight 6 Troop was in [Giogoli](#) (but out of touch by 38 set) and 7 Troop on its hill to the north-east. By 9 a.m. the infantry had moved about half a mile ahead of [Giogoli](#) and into Tiger country once more, and were calling for support to drive the enemy from a key hill feature, Point 199, on which a rearguard party held a strong position in the [Villa Capponi](#).

No. 6 Troop under Lieutenant Bill [Heptinstall](#)<sup>26</sup> had captured its first objective—a crest line of cyprus trees leading up to a large stone casa—without much difficulty and it then moved across country up a slight incline through a dense grove of olive trees. Low branches blocked the view and smashed at wireless aerials and hatch covers, one of which, its catch sheared off by a branch, fell heavily on the troop sergeant's hand, cutting it badly. (Sergeant [Johnson](#)<sup>27</sup> lost part of his hand and was evacuated.) Here the troop lost contact with the infantry.

Back on the road after a quick downhill run, Heptinstall's tank surprised a German bazooka gunner lying on the bank by the side of the road. Quick work by the tank's lap-gunner, Clive [Lane](#),<sup>28</sup> disposed of him, but it was obvious that the troop's difficulties were just beginning.

The road ahead climbed through a steep cutting for about two-thirds of its length then ran downhill, disappearing from sight. It was an obvious place for a Tiger

to wait. Covered by his other two tanks, Heptinstall tried to outflank the feature by moving up a narrow track to the left, but the track ended at a house and the going beyond it was impossible. With some difficulty he turned his tank and returned to the main road. There was still no sign of the infantry. Regiment said they were ahead and under fire and needed help. There was nothing for it but to try to dash through the cutting.

The other two tanks gave covering fire and Heptinstall charged through the cutting 'at fastest tank speed'. He had planned to turn sharp left up a side road at the far end, but the tank was going so fast that it reached the turn-off sooner than expected and nearly overshot it. Before the tank could turn it was hit by an 88-millimetre shell, probably fired by a Tiger tank lying in wait beside a house in the side road. The driver, Harold Chatterton,<sup>29</sup> was killed instantly; the rest of the crew baled out on to the road but were mown down by a hail of machine-gun fire. Heptinstall, the only survivor, landed on the right-hand side of the road and dived into a ditch.

After a moment the firing died down when the enemy's attention was engaged by the other two tanks advancing along the road. Because of the rise in the road their commanders could not see what had happened to their leader. Heptinstall made a run for it and warned his corporal, 'Lofty' Newman,<sup>30</sup> before he got too far forward. The two tanks then gave Heptinstall covering fire while he tried to return to his tank to see if he could rescue any of the crew. Armed with a borrowed tommy gun, he got close enough to see that they had all been killed, but was stopped from going farther by enemy infantry tossing grenades down into the road from their weapon pits on the top of the bank. On the way back to the tanks he took prisoner a couple of enemy soldiers who were manning, 'without enthusiasm', a light machine gun in a weapon pit by the side of the road. He had already passed these men a couple of times on foot without noticing them, and they had apparently preferred to let him go by rather than attract the notice of the tanks. 'I am sure that Heppy would have dealt with them with his bare hands had they shown any resistance,' says Newman.

From its hull-down position Newman's tank especially got in some murderous fire against the infantry in their weapon pits. 'Tiger' Lyons<sup>31</sup> was the gunner and he was not likely to miss a German trench at such short range—some were only about

ten yards away. 'I can still see an enemy tin hat flying about 20 ft in the air after he attempted to dig some German infantry out of a slit trench,' Corporal Newman recalls.

Soon the troop was joined by Reid's composite troop—a more than welcome reinforcement—which, according to Sergeant George Robson, one of the troop's tank commanders, had been having 'a great time blazing away at a large white casa about 700 or 800 yards away trying to put shells through the lower windows.' Fire was 'poured on' the enemy positions on Point 199, the gunners using small-arms, high-explosive, armour-piercing, and even smoke shells as ammunition became short. The enemy retaliated.

Reid's arrival forward when he was most needed is described by Corporal Newman. The squadron sergeant-major preferred to wear in action a broad-brimmed stetson rather than the less colourful steel helmet, but on this occasion he had been ordered by Major Clapham to wear his helmet. 'The sight that met my eyes when I looked to see who had come to my assistance was "Plonk" standing well up in his tank wearing his old stetson but also with the tin hat jammed down on top. So I dare say both he and the Major must have been satisfied....'

'We called for artillery fire on to the Tiger and in the mean time remained in the sunken road and decided to "brew up",' says Robson. 'I stayed in my tank looking after the radio and had just received a cup of tea when all hell broke loose, shells bursting all over the place. Nobody was hurt but those who were out of the tanks got back very smartly. I'm not quite sure, but I think our bloke called for a stonk on Janet. [The features were known by girls' names.] However, the story goes that we were on Janet ourselves and, of course, we were plastered by German, South African and New Zealand guns. The wind from the shells sailing overhead just about dragged us out of the tanks.'

This was the enemy's last real stand before the Arno, and when the advance was resumed next morning (4 August) two burnt-out Tiger tanks, still smouldering, were found just past the end of the sunken road. The more optimistic in the regiment claimed that their HE fire had knocked them out, a claim which greatly heartened 6 Troop at the time but which now seems hardly likely. The squadron commander, Major Clapham, thinks that they were probably brewed up by the

artillery, the most likely possibility; Heptinstall himself, who was given some credit for the success at the time and has most to lose, says that 'it is my personal belief that the Jerries brewed them up as they probably did not have enough petrol to move them back beyond the Arno.'

These tanks had been the core of the enemy's opposition during the fighting of the last three days and their elimination, no matter who was responsible, virtually meant the end of the battle south of the Arno. Heptinstall won the MC for his 'outstanding ability and courage' in this action, and others shared the credit with him: Sergeant-Major Reid, as aggressive as ever ('if there was anything Jack Reid liked more than a scrap it was another scrap'); Corporal Newman ('the magnificent, aggressive cool soldier he always was'); the four men killed—Harold Chatterton, Frank Mathias,<sup>32</sup> Clive Lane, and John Kevern.<sup>33</sup>

When Reid's troop moved up to support Heptinstall's troop at the sunken road, the two Mios 'tank-destroyers' followed him. The orders given the Mios at the start of the attack were to follow the Sergeant-Major's troop, and when Reid was ordered forward the officer in charge of the guns unfortunately assumed that he was to follow too. The troops had been issued with their weapons only a few days before and had had little time to get to know them. The tanks were firing on Point 199 when 'all of a sudden the ground started to plough up around us,' says Sergeant Robson. '88 AP stuff was pelting right and left so we moved very smartly and it was then I noticed that one of the M. ios was "brewing up". The other bloke reversed out of sight.'

Two of the Mio's crew were killed and two wounded. The other was sent to the rear.

While B Squadron's three troops advanced up the centre with two of the Maori companies, A Squadron took the left flank with a third company whose first objective was a bridge about half a mile south-west of Scandicci. The squadron followed up the road behind B Squadron to the road junction below Giogoli, where the tanks turned left and by narrow tracks and winding roads and a short stretch across country reached the Villa Franceschi, an attractive country house surrounded by privet hedges. It was a difficult ride by moonlight for the tanks but no opposition was met.

The villa was just over half a mile south-west of [Scandicci](#) and, unknown to the squadron at the time, was surrounded by mines. The tanks harboured in a covered garden at the back of the house, close to the shelter of its walls. They were nearly all in position when one tank ran over a mine, which blew off the front bogey assembly and broke a track. It was decided to stay there until morning. Colonel Purcell, anxious that his regiment should be first into [Florence](#), was perturbed at the delay, but the engineers later found many mines round the house, some of them only a few inches from the tanks' track marks. Seen in daylight, the garden was 'festooned with booby traps'.

Back on the right flank B Squadron and the Maoris found themselves in the middle of a slogging match between our own guns and the enemy's guns and mortars. The sound of bridges being blown over the Greve just before noon on the 3rd indicated that the enemy had decided to go back over the [Arno](#), and it seemed as usual that he had ammunition to use up before he left. Two or more enemy tanks were known to be in the squadron's area, one of them—as a prisoner confirmed—in the village of San Cristofano. But when tanks and infantry later entered the village the Tiger had gone.

The enemy force on the ridge behind [Giogoli](#) was still there when night fell and it was decided that B Squadron should support A at [Scandicci](#) rather than lose more men trying to crack a difficult position, which in any case would fall when the positions on its flanks fell back. At 8 a.m. next day A Squadron moved straight across country to [Scandicci](#) with a company of Maoris. As they half-expected, they found the enemy gone and the bridge over the Greve north-east of the village blown. A bulldozer made a crossing and the tanks, each carrying a section of Maoris eager to be first into [Florence](#), headed up the road towards the city. About ten o'clock, when still about 300 yards from the [Arno](#) and in the outskirts of the city, the leading tank of 4 Troop came under spandau fire from the rooftops of the buildings along the river's north bank. Nos. 1 and 4 Troops then moved up to the south bank and engaged the enemy posts and snipers.

Under Captain Familton the reserve troops of B Squadron (Nos. 5 and 8) set off some time about ten o'clock to join A Squadron at [Scandicci](#) but were held up for about half an hour while engineers cleared a track at a mined demolition on the

road. By noon the head of the column had reached a road junction with Route 67, the main road south of the Arno, on the outskirts of Florence and were sent ahead to reconnoitre possible crossings over the river. They reported two (Cross, 'as cool as a cucumber', making a reconnaissance on foot in the bed of the river) and some spandau nests on the far bank.

The rest of the squadron came forward early in the afternoon. Enemy patrols were still south of the river, one of them reported to be trying to blow the bridge over the Greve near Mantignano. Sergeant-Major Reid's troop was sent to stop them. They found the bridge still intact and chased away a small patrol, but they lost one man, Trooper Irvine,<sup>34</sup> taken prisoner of war. Irvine, spare driver in Robson's crew, had volunteered to go forward on foot to identify a party of infantry away to the right. He crawled along a field drain for about 200 yards and, in his own concise phrase, 'Then I found out they were not our infantry'.

Shortly before 5 p.m. the troop was relieved by a Divisional Cavalry patrol which had arrived at the bridge about the same time as the Sergeant-Major's troop. Both squadrons were then relieved by 19 Armoured Regiment and returned to the regiment's concentration area at Giogoli.

To complete the story of the battle the doings of C Squadron must be followed from la Romola on, where the morning of 1 August found them after a sleepless night. Major Barton and Lieutenant-Colonel Donald,<sup>35</sup> CO 22 (Motor) Battalion, began the day with a reconnaissance of the town and made plans for an attack on Point 305, one of the attack's objectives which had not yet fallen. After delay—the attack was originally planned for the morning—tanks and infantry moved up the road about three o'clock. Firing on la Querciola, a mile and a bit to the north, 10 Troop (in the words of the squadron report) 'did some rare shooting on three houses which were known to have Germans in—they were ultimately found to have very German-bespattered walls.' The point of the attack was a section of carriers, its shaft the two tanks of 9 Troop and a platoon of infantry. Heavy machine-gun fire and shelling caused the platoon some casualties, and first the carriers and later the tanks were withdrawn.

It was then decided to 'make a proper attack' that night on Point 305 and Point 361, the la Poggiona feature, using two 22 Battalion companies, a troop of tanks

with each. The going was easy, and with a screen of engineers to clear the way the tanks made good progress. Bill de Lautour's 10 Troop again did some useful shooting. The ground was thickly wooded and it was difficult for the tanks to 'marry up' with the infantry, one company of which was put off its stride, suffered casualties, and went astray when it ran into its own artillery barrage.

No. 3 Company took la Poggiona ridge, was pushed off it, got back again, and was pushed off it once more when it ran out of ammunition. As in the la Romola action a few nights before, the forward companies lost touch with their battalion headquarters and most of the news of the battle came over Squadron Headquarters' wireless link with the tanks.

About half past eight on the morning of the 2nd Major Barton went forward in his tank with Colonel Donald, taking up ammunition and supplies for 3 Company. 'By this time things were pretty secure,' he records in his report. 'M. io and A. tk guns were up. Jerry was reacting violently and shelled heavily. There was a big scare by persistent report of two Tigers moving along wadi within 400 yards of fwd tps. Changes were made to meet the possibility—a few scones were baked in the OC's tank as first report stated that they were moving up the road which we were just going down back to Bn HQ! After some delay things were straightened up and the Tigers ultimately must have gone or were Shermans.'

However, there was a German tank roaming abroad that morning. Captain Eastgate, then second-captain of the squadron, who was waiting in some scrub with a troop of tanks and the reserve company of 22 Battalion, says that the men in the tanks 'clearly saw' a German Mark IV tank come down the road to the west of the area (the road through Poggio Cigoli) and pass through the infantry positions until it was 'brewed up'. This tank was knocked out in 25 Battalion's sector by a 17- pounder gun.

During the morning 9 Troop rested and replenished in la Romola and moved up early in the afternoon to relieve 10 Troop. A further attack on la Poggiona, this time by 2 Company of the 22nd, was planned for six o'clock that evening. The tanks' role was to 'soften up' the enemy, a job for which artillery, mortars, and medium machine guns had been called on for help. Once again the artillery barrage went wrong. Part of the 'stonk', plus the German defensive fire in return, landed on the infantry's start

line, breaking up the company and causing casualties. The company commander rallied his men, those of them who were left unscathed, and with two officers and twenty-four men took the hill. Enemy machine guns and artillery opposed them. At one stage when it appeared that they were being forced off the hill, Eastgate sent a message to that effect to Colonel Donald. No. 3 Company was rushed up from reserve to hold the line and later advanced and took the hill.

No. 10 Troop was also caught by our own artillery on the start line but suffered no damage or casualties. The experience is described by Corporal Overton:

At zero hour ... the 25-pounders were to open up and we were sitting waiting expecting to see the shells land on the ridge in front of us. But no! Down they came and we were right in the middle of it. It was good to know one had 3 ins of steel around him at that moment.

The Inf suffered a few casualties and the 25-pounders set fire to the dry grass and scrub in which we were lined up. We had quite a busy time dodging fires and trying to do some shooting, and eventually the fires drove us out and we had to pull back behind them.

The enemy had good observation from higher ground and his shelling was the heaviest and most concentrated C Squadron had experienced. Sergeant Hughes was slightly wounded by shrapnel and was being helped to the RAP by Trooper Pierce <sup>36</sup> when a mortar bomb landed a few feet away. Pierce was killed, Hughes wounded again. The tanks had amazing luck— not even a radiator holed. Twenty-second Battalion had no luck at all, and about ten o'clock one of its forward platoons again collected what is described as a 'friendly stonk' from our own guns, the battalion's fourth such misfortune in the last few days. Its positions on the ridge were topped by pines, and these probably caused airbursts and made casualties heavier. <sup>37</sup>

At dawn (it was now 3 August) 9 Troop found a way up to the top of the hill, a climb that it had been thought wiser not to try by night. It found targets for its guns on the road from San Paolo to Scandicci, claiming hits on two trucks, and got a grand view of the River Arno, with Florence in the background. The troop spent the morning on the hill and at half past twelve was relieved by No. 10. The rest of the squadron pulled back with 22 Battalion early in the afternoon to a concentration area

about half a mile south-west of la Romola, 10 Troop rejoining them later. Here the 'flying fitters' and instrument mechanics worked till after midnight to get the tanks into battle order—the squadron had been warned to be ready to move by 6 a.m.—while the squadron sergeant-major with a squad of spare men and reconnaissance crews replenished them. By 2 a.m. on 4 August all the squadron's sixteen runners were ready for action once more, but in the morning the move was cancelled and the squadron stood down.

The crews welcomed the rest. Ignoring for the moment the heavy shelling and mortaring from la Poggiona, the squadron had not had much hard fighting in the last few days: no victories over Tigers or spectacular advances to drive fatigue from tired limbs. Day and night attacks had given the crews little chance to rest, and they were on call most of the time. The gunners had done some excellent shooting and the tanks and infantry had worked well together. Major Barton has special praise for 22 Battalion in his report of the operation: ... the co-operation with the inf has been far and away better than anything we have struck yet. We have found the CO ... extremely helpful and the officers and men have a real understanding of tanks and what they can do. Our chaps have now got a very genuine admiration for this Bn.'

Co-operation with the infantry had long been a contentious point and it seems a good note on which to end this chapter of the regiment's history, which has taken it from a picturesque resting place in the Liri valley to be among the first New Zealanders into Florence—the South Africans, on the right flank, had entered the city only a few hours before.<sup>38</sup> Most of the city lay on the far side of the Arno and was still in German hands, but the inhabitants of the southern suburbs across the river were friendly and generous in their welcome. They clambered on top of the tanks, threw flowers, clapped and cheered, kissed all and sundry, and pressed gifts of wine and fruit on the tank crews. It was good wine—the liberators of Florence deserved better than vino rosso and 'plonk' that day—and victory was toasted and healths drunk in cognac, cognac in large quantities: 'I remember getting slightly umbriago that day,' one officer recalls. 'The boys were very sorry that we were withdrawn at 1900 hours just when things looked as though they would build into a really good party.'

From across the river German gunners and spandau crews could see the welcome from their rooftops but refused to enter into the spirit of the occasion. Their

fire quickly cleared the streets.

There was a thunderstorm late in the afternoon and by 7 p.m. [19 Armoured Regiment](#) had relieved A and B Squadrons. A flooded ford across the Greve delayed the move back, most of A Echelon's lorries having to be hauled up the slippery bank by Captain Taylor's T2. <sup>39</sup> Traffic coming the other way added to the congestion at the ford, but fortunately the enemy guns were busy shelling the town. Part of the regiment's convoy was delayed for some hours.

Next morning (5 August) the regiment moved back from [Giogoli](#), through [la Romola](#) and [Cerbaia](#), and on the afternoon of the 6th moved north-west about three miles or so to its new concentration area. [Geppetto](#) was the nearest village.

The fighting since 27 July had cost the regiment nine killed and thirteen wounded (two of the latter officers) and six tanks destroyed. Two troopers were missing, believed (and later confirmed) prisoners of war. Two men of the 7 Anti-Tank Regiment Mio crews attached to the 20th had also been killed and two others wounded.

In the last nine days crews from the regiment had fought no fewer than nine actions against Tiger tanks, and the area between [San Casciano](#) and [Florence](#) where these battles took place came to be known in the regiment as the 'Tiger country'. It is a pleasant, undulating countryside, fertile with orchards and vineyards, and even the military eye, quick only to recognise whether the 'cover' was good or the 'going' passable, could hardly fail to be impressed by its beauty. Wooded hills, sunken roads, and steep river valleys help the defender rather than the attacker, who is forced by the lack of broad horizons to probe blindly forward, his tanks behind a screen of infantry. As was only to be expected, the Germans made good use of the terrain's natural advantages.

With the choice of ground, the enemy took the hills and ridges. When he was forced off one he retired to the next, leaving behind a sniper or two or an artillery OP, a Tiger tank or a self-propelled gun. As he withdrew he blocked the roads by demolitions or felled trees across them. Camouflaged in hull-down positions in the shelter of orchard or narrow village side-street, the Tigers lay in wait. At short range they would make a quick kill with their deadly 88-millimetre gun before withdrawing

to an alternative and equally well-chosen position; or else they would form the spearhead of a local counter-attack, making a brief sortie behind a screen of infantry before going back into cover. Almost invariably, a Tiger would have another tank or a self-propelled gun to support it, the supporting weapon keeping silent until its fire was most needed.

In spite of the Tiger's advantages of position, of heavier armour and guns, the Sherman fought back with credit in the regiment's nine encounters of the battle. As in any fight between welter and heavyweight, tactics, speed and aggression were the lighter opponent's weapons. The Tiger's front and rear armour was too heavy to be battered by a straight punch but its flanks could be pierced by an anti-tank shell. If it could be blinded by smoke—the American 75-millimetre smoke shell was especially effective as its burning phosphorus could set the enemy tank on fire if drawn into its engines—a few rounds of armour-piercing and high-explosive fired from the flank were usually sufficient to drive the Tiger back into cover.

One of the chief lessons of the battle—not a new lesson by any means—was the need for reconnaissance. To blunder blindly on to a hull-down enemy was to court death. In a set-piece attack by night over difficult going the only reliable way to get the tanks forward was first to make a reconnaissance on foot to find the best line of approach. Seldom were the troop commanders allowed sufficient time to make a thorough reconnaissance. Sometimes a special road party of infantry, a platoon or section strong, was detailed as a screen behind which the tanks moved forward to join the infantry on its objectives. This party was separate from the assaulting troops, its role being to protect the tanks at night against stray parties of enemy who had been missed in the infantry's advance or who had slipped back into their positions again when the attackers had passed through.

In this close country the Honey tanks of the reconnaissance troop again proved their value. Because they were more manoeuvrable they could get forward where Shermans could not, and up with the infantry companies they gave valuable service as a channel of communication with rear headquarters. Usually a Honey tank was attached to the headquarters of each attacking company and a scout car to the battalion commander's headquarters; a battalion commander often received through the tanks' wireless net his only news of the progress of his forward platoons. The Honeys were useful, too, for towing anti-tank guns forward, since their open tops

allowed the gun crew to be carried inside the tank, comparatively safe from small-arms fire. On the way back they sometimes carried prisoners.

After the battle there was some criticism by squadron commanders of the use of tanks by half-squadrons, which occasionally were placed under the command of the infantry commander whose troops the tanks were supporting. By breaking up the armour into 'penny packets'—to use a popular desert term—the weight of the tanks' gun-power was largely lost and the mutual support that troops could give each other in an attack through the regiment's wireless net was much less effective. Perhaps the only advantage gained from the employment of half-squadrons was that a squadron could be kept in action longer without relief, the two troops not employed being able to rest and replenish until called forward to relieve the two troops in action.

And lastly, there was the question of command. When one arm has to fight in close support of another, the arrangements most suitable for one do not always suit the other. To take one detail: the location of Regimental Headquarters was not always satisfactory to the regiment. For convenience, it was usually with or close to the brigade headquarters under whose command the regiment was operating, but sometimes this site was too far from the forward tanks for the range of their wirelesses—not the best place from which to serve the fighting squadrons.

However, these are points of detail, technical points of command and administration, irritating at the time in the midst of battle when communications have broken down and contact has been lost. But, on the whole, the man in the tank and the infantryman on foot were more than satisfied with the regiment's part in the battle for [Florence](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Sgt E. Millard; Otautau; born NZ II Sep 1916; baker.

<sup>2</sup> Tpr A. W. Gibb; born Scotland, 2 Jun 1918; shepherd.

<sup>3</sup> Cpl J. R. Stewart; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 17 Jan 1919; printing machinist; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

<sup>4</sup> Tpr E. T. Fitzgibbon; Christchurch; born Rangiora, 27 Jul 1918; labourer.

<sup>5</sup> Major Coote acted as second-in-command for a period while Major Elliott temporarily filled the appointment of Brigade Major at Headquarters 4 Brigade.

<sup>6</sup> Major Barton, back from hospital and rest camp, took over from Captain Jordan, who was given command of the reconnaissance troop.

<sup>7</sup> Capt M. W. Cross, MM; Massey College, Palmerston North; born Balclutha, 16 Apr 1917; farmer.

<sup>8</sup> Capt J. A. H. Ritchie; Wellington; born Christchurch, 14 Feb 1917; school-teacher.

<sup>9</sup> Tpr R. B. Middleton; Christchurch; born NZ 11 Apr 1920; shoe salesman.

<sup>10</sup> Cpl S. P. Harrison; born Blackball, 10 Jun 1920; civil servant; wounded 26 Mar 1944; killed in action 28 Jul 1944.

<sup>11</sup> S-Sgt D. K. Cameron; born Rakaia, 4 May 1915; labourer.

<sup>12</sup> Maj L. W. Colmore-Williams, MC; Auckland; born Dargaville, 15 Nov 1917; school-teacher; GSO II (Air) 2 NZ Div, 1945; BM 5 Bde Jun-Sep 1945; wounded 30 Jul 1944.

<sup>13</sup> Sgt L. G. Cook; Christchurch; born NZ 16 Oct 1917; carpenter; wounded 30 July 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Lt W. Greenall; Auckland; born Edinburgh, 7 Oct 1910; storeman; wounded 25 Sep 1944.

<sup>15</sup> Tpr D. C. Coppin; born Dunedin, 28 Jan 1922; labourer; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

<sup>16</sup> Tpr J. M. Hampton; born NZ 27 May 1920; carpenter; killed in action 31 Jul 1944.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Lt N. L. Jenkins; born Hastings, 7 Oct 1916; carpenter; died of wounds 14 Apr 1945.

<sup>18</sup> Sgt L. E. Clarke; Helensville; born England, 27 Feb 1916; farmer; twice wounded.

<sup>19</sup> Sgt D. McI. McMinn; Napier; born Palmerston North, 16 Sep 1920; clerk; wounded 1 Aug 1944.

<sup>20</sup> The sight of this tank being driven back caused momentary consternation in the reconnaissance troop, which was relieved to see a New Zealander's head and shoulders emerge from the turret.

<sup>21</sup> The Anti-Tank Regiment's war diary says ten men were killed and two evacuated suffering from shock.

<sup>22</sup> Lt W. A. French, m.i.d.; Patearoa, Central Otago; born Ravensbourne, 10 Dec 1922; farm labourer; twice wounded.

<sup>23</sup> 2 Lt G. R. Innes; Dunstan Downs, Omarama; born Timaru, 4 Aug 1921; shepherd.

<sup>24</sup> Tpr D. L. Hargraves, m.i.d.; born NZ 20 Jan 1922; clerk; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

<sup>25</sup> Sgt J. H. Gahan, m.i.d.; born Taihape, 16 Feb 1911; sawmill hand; wounded 27 May 1944.

<sup>26</sup> Capt W. Heptinstall, MC; Victoria, B.C.; born Canada, 14 Aug 1910; Regular soldier.

<sup>27</sup> Sgt G. H. Johnson; Half Moon Bay, Stewart Island; born Half Moon Bay, 17 Apr 1914; labourer.

<sup>28</sup> Tpr C. G. P. Lane; born Gisborne, 19 Dec 1921; baker's carter; killed in action 3 Aug 1944.

<sup>29</sup> Tpr H. O. Chatterton; born NZ 11 Aug 1917; truck driver; killed in action 3 Aug 1944.

<sup>30</sup> 2 Lt R. M. Newman; Hyde, Central Otago; born Middlemarch, 2 Nov 1918; farm labourer; wounded 13 Apr 1945.

<sup>31</sup> Sgt F. R. Lyons, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Dannevirke, 20 Apr 1920; public servant.

<sup>32</sup> Tpr F. A. Mathias; born NZ 30 Jul 1913; runholder; killed in action 3 Aug 1944.

<sup>33</sup> Tpr J. Kevern; born NZ 1 Mar 1912; flourmiller; killed in action 3 Aug 1944.

<sup>34</sup> Tpr G. B. Irvine; Lower Hutt; born Scotland, 27 Nov 1919; warehouseman; p.w. 4 Aug 1944.

<sup>35</sup> Lt-Col H. V. Donald, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Masterton; born Masterton, 20 Mar 1917; manufacturer; CO 22 Bn May-Nov 1944, Mar-Aug 1945; four times wounded.

<sup>36</sup> Tpr R. C. Pierce; born Christchurch, 28 Apr 1922; farmhand; killed in action 2 Aug 1944.

<sup>37</sup> Trooper J. R. Blunden was mentioned in orders for his gallantry in rescuing a wounded infantryman under fire. 'The GOC 2 NZEF congratulates Tpr Blunden on his courage and directs that this act of gallantry be recorded on his conduct sheet and personal records,' the citation ran.

<sup>38</sup> With units passing through each other to take the lead in turn, there was considerable speculation as to which would be first into [Florence](#). The doubtful honour of being 'the first Kiwi to enter [Florence](#)' was won by Brigadier Stewart, 5 Brigade's commander. Driving forward early on 1 August to find the [Maori Battalion](#)'s headquarters, he went too far and was taken prisoner. The Brigadier's driver was Trooper S. W. Dickie of the reconnaissance troop, who the night before had been sent back to Brigade Headquarters with one of the troop's scout cars. He was taken prisoner with the Brigadier—'and we hadn't even had breakfast either'

<sup>39</sup> On one day in this advance the T2 salvaged no fewer than five tanks, some of them being recovered under fire. Its heaviest lift was a burnt-out 65-ton Tiger which blocked the road north-east of [Giogoli](#).

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 18 – FROM FLORENCE TO THE SAVIO

## CHAPTER 18

### From Florence to the Savio

North-east of [Gepetto](#) the regiment waited in reserve while to the west New Zealand infantry closed on [Empoli](#). The tanks were likely to be called on at short notice and the RMO at once began a medical check of all tank crews, C Squadron first, so that any exhausted or battle-weary man could be rested or replaced before the next action. Reorganisation and maintenance began at once and some scout cars were handed in in return for some more Honeys, of which there were now eleven in the regiment. The officers had a conference on cooperation between tanks and infantry, and twelve of them, including Colonel Purcell and the Adjutant, went off to see a demonstration of the new petrol-engined Cromwell. In the event the new tank was not used in [Italy](#), the chief objections to it being that its fuel was thought to be more inflammable than that of the diesel-burning Shermans and the possibility of difficulties in supplying both petrol and diesel oil for tanks of both types in the same regiment. In any case, the tank crews were more than satisfied with their reliable Shermans.

While the RMO took blood pressures and the regiment's audit board examined its accounts, crews and fitters worked on their vehicles. The IO and the Signals Officer attended instruction on the new slidex signals procedure, which from 1 September was to take the place of the doubtfully secure codex. This instruction was in turn passed on to officers and NCOs from each squadron.

The week's rest (if being in reserve ready to go into action at the drop of a staff officer's pencil can be called rest) ended on the 14th when 4 Armoured Brigade was relieved by an American infantry battalion. [Gepetto](#) and [Ginestra](#) were too close to the front line for comfort and a nervy enemy still had shells to spare for an erratic search of the neighbourhood or to rebuke any speeding driver whose vehicle raised too large a cloud from the dusty roads. This was the reason why tents and vehicles were camouflaged, and at night there was a strict blackout. The regiment, fortunately, had no casualties, but no one was really sorry when on the afternoon of the 14th it moved farther back to an area about five miles north of [Siena](#), the same place among the oaks where the tanks had laagered on 22 July on the way north into battle. One B Squadron man (Trooper Bob [Gray](#)<sup>1</sup>) was killed and three men

injured on the back way when their tank got out of control on the twisty road and went over a bank.

At [Siena](#) the rest really began, with trips to see the art treasures and historic churches and buildings of this famous town, perhaps the most beautiful and most charming of Italian hill cities; trips to [Rome](#) for a six-day spell on leave; and daily trips and overnight leave to the beach near [Follonica](#), where the men spent the time lazing in the warm, glassy water or lolling about in the shade of the pines while the sun baked the sand from a cloudless sky. On some days, though, the clouds would begin to gather and turn black, and suddenly the rain would come pelting down in huge drops or freeze as it fell into hailstones bigger than most New Zealanders had ever seen before. The thunder would growl among the hills for a while and then the storm would be over, almost as suddenly as it had begun. Within a few minutes the hot sun would have removed all trace of it.

When there is leave to be had and money to spend, most New Zealand soldiers can amuse themselves, but an official effort by the regiment on the 17th to entertain them at a 'tin horse' race meeting proved a great success. (Part of the fun was in the naming of the horses, with their broad references to unit doings, rumours, and the Division's personalities: Bambino by Kiwi out of Mepacrime, First In by Springbok out of Courtesy, Cross's Conternation by Tedeschi out of Trees, Merrie England by Footballers out of Div.). Ten per cent of the 'tote', over £40, went to the regimental fund.

Disguised as 'Colonel Kent' in topee, sun glasses, and a khaki drill uniform 'splashed with orders', Mr Churchill made a hurried visit to the Division on 24 August, when he was driven in an open yellow tourer through troops lining the road to [Castellina](#). Units were told only that a 'very important personage' would be passing through and were advised that 'troops are requested to cheer'; had the men been told the name of their visitor this unhappy official request would not have been necessary. Among the troops lining the road were four hundred members of the regiment.

Churchill's visit, Operation TOHEROA the Division's staff labelled it, marked the end of the rest. Next day the leave parties returned from [Rome](#) and [Siena](#), an advanced reconnaissance party under Captain Jordan left for [Iesi](#), and the tanks set

out in the afternoon on their own tracks for Foligno on the first stage of a move of 220 miles or more across the backbone of the Apennines to the Adriatic. The crews of the Honey tanks and carriers set off after the tanks on the afternoon of the 27th, but the rest of the regiment had time to pack and to see a performance by the Kiwi Concert Party before beginning their journey about nine o'clock next morning.

The war diary says nothing about the journey except that it was done by the wheeled vehicles in two long stages on the 28th and 29th, with a halt the first night at Foligno. The tanks took two days to reach Foligno, doing hops of about 60 miles a day and staging the second night at Sant' Eraclio, a couple of miles down Route 3 from Foligno, and 'writing off' about fifty bogies on the way. Tank moves began at 4 a.m. and had to be finished by half past ten each night at the latest so as not to hold up the wheeled convoys. Between Foligno and Iesi there were many wearying stops on the narrow mountain roads, in parts of which the dust lay in drifts a foot thick. It was not at all unusual to spend four hours going 20 miles.

Apart from the bogey changes at the staging areas and a new set of tracks for the T2 at Foligno, the regiment's tanks completed the journey without major mishap. It wasn't an easy journey, especially over the mountains, where the road climbed through rocky gorges and looped down steep hillsides, but the drivers were skilled and the technical staff efficient. From Foligno on the regiment's Shermans were carried on transporters, except for a section of about seven miles over the steepest part of the road.

If some found the journey tiring, others in the wheeled convoy found plenty to interest them. It was autumn. Tobacco crops were being harvested and in almost every farmyard the farmers and their families were busy husking corn. Maize cobs, drying in the sun, hung in clusters from farmhouse walls and clothes lines and from the branches of trees. Orchards and olive groves and belts of oak trees climbed right to the crests of the hills. Here and there a tiny village huddled in a steep valley high in the hills or perched recklessly on a narrow plateau.

The last stage of the journey ran from Macerata through Filottrano to Iesi, a dusty, undistinguished town on the Esino River. Some miles beyond the town the regiment bivouacked in an orchard. The nearest beach, near Falconara, was soon found, and trucks each day took parties for a swim. (On 31 August the temperature

in the shade reached 100 degrees.) A nearby airfield filled the day with noise as our bombers ground away at enemy bases and communications. At night there were the usual concerts and picture shows and 'vino parties' to pass the time before bed—'last night three of us drank four litres and am I bad this morning!'

A surprise assault against the eastern end of the Gothic line was being planned by [Eighth Army](#) and everywhere there was a feeling in the air that this was the last lap. The Division was in army reserve, with 3 Greek Mountain Brigade under its command. The Army's plan was to break through into the [Lombardy](#) plain, north of the Marecchia River, before the autumn rains began in October. The enemy still had twenty-seven divisions left in [Italy](#); some of ours had been taken for the landing in Southern France.

After some preliminary skirmishing by the Poles on the Metauro River, the main attack opened an hour before midnight on 25 August. The Division expected to be free until the end of the first week in September, but on 29 August the three field regiments were called on to strengthen the guns pounding the Gothic line across the Foglia River, and next day moved forward under the command of [1 Canadian Corps](#).

The regiment was not disturbed until 4 September and had little incident to record. After the long move some of the tanks required attention and maintenance, but they were soon put in fighting trim. Those men concerned with signals and communication practised the new slidex code; on the 2nd, a very hot day, the CO held a regimental parade and inspection; on the 3rd, a national day of prayer and the fifth anniversary of the outbreak of war, the regiment got a wetting in a thunderstorm and a new RSM, WO I 'Hobby' Hobson, <sup>2</sup> ex-Coldstream Guards, to replace Sergeant-Major Tim Clews, who had left early in August to take up an appointment with the Prisoner-of-War Repatriation Unit in England.

Before breakfast on the 4th the tanks packed up and headed back to [Iesi](#), where they were loaded on transporters and taken north to [Fano](#). The carriers followed that night in convoy with 22 and 24 Battalions—the regiment was now under the command of 6 Brigade—and had a rough and dusty four-hour ride over side roads. The 'wheels' followed last on 6 September in greater comfort by the main highways, Routes 76 and 16, an early morning move of about 30 miles. The new area was just south of [Fano](#) and close to an excellent beach.

A few days earlier [Fano](#) had been enemy territory, an outpost of the Gothic line just north of the Metauro River. It was a busy road junction, and its battered houses and streets were still being cleared of mines. Streams of vehicles were pressing forward to support the battle, and crowds of Italian refugees who had found more peaceful lodgings and hiding places while the battle flowed past their homes were now returning in force to claim them. Some of the crews found accommodation in houses; others were less comfortable in bivvy tents right beside a fighter airfield.

On the evening of the 6th the regiment paraded for [Brigadier Inglis](#) who was relinquishing the appointment of Commander 4 Brigade to the recently appointed second - in - command, Colonel [Pleasants](#).<sup>3</sup> The Brigadier was in a reminiscent mood, his eye less critical and his tongue less sharp than other parades had known them. Looking forward, he spoke about the armistice, about rehabilitation when the men returned home. It is recorded that in the middle of his speech he discovered that his pipe had set the pocket of his trousers on fire, but he continued without interruption, nonchalantly beating out the fire as he spoke. [Brigadier Inglis](#) was one of the most colourful of the senior officers of the Division, a fine soldier and a grand leader. He had commanded the Division at various times, notably in the critical days of Ruweisat and El Mreir in the summer of 1942, and had commanded 4 Brigade almost continuously since August 1941.

And now the weather took a hand again. On the 7th, after a thunder shower or two earlier in the month, it rained hard, postponing a small-arms shoot in the regiment and, much more important, giving the enemy a chance to stabilise on the [Coriano](#) ridge and bring the [Eighth Army](#)'s advance to a stop. In some hard fighting, mostly by the Poles and Canadians, the army had cracked the coastal sector of the Gothic line around [Pesaro](#) and had won a bridgehead over the River Conca, but by the end of the first week in September the enemy had recovered from the shock of the Allies' first punch and was fighting back. Now the rivers rose, airfields were bogged and planes grounded, and the ground quickly became muddy, making vehicle movement difficult, especially off the main roads. The three field regiments, having had disappointingly little to do in the assault on the Gothic line, were now back with the Division, which although still in reserve was making plans to thrust its 6 Brigade forward in pursuit should the Canadians succeed in breaking through.

At midnight on 10 September the Division passed to 1 Canadian Corps' command. The Division was now under the command of Major-General Weir, temporarily replacing General Freyberg who, on 3 September, had added to his battle scars yet another wound when the reconnaissance plane in which he was being flown tipped over in a gust of wind and crashed while landing on the airstrip at Eighth Army's tactical headquarters.<sup>4</sup>

At 6 a.m. on the 12th the regiment's wheeled vehicles left Fano and headed north-west along Route 16, 'Munich Road', following the coast. The convoy passed through Pesaro about half past six, turned right along 'Hat' route, then continued over low foothills past anti-tank ditches and concrete pillboxes recently held by the enemy until it reached 6 Brigade's area about a mile south of Gradara. The tanks followed north in the afternoon, and last—an unusual place for them—came the scout cars and Honeys of the reconnaissance troop. A Squadron was attached to 25 Battalion, C to the 24th, and B was in reserve.

As usual, the men looked for the nearest beach and explored the village of Gradara and its romantic castle. Not all of B Squadron—in reserve remember—had time to hear the story of the romance of the beautiful Francesca or to inspect the castle's torture chamber before the squadron was whisked into action to support the Greek Brigade. Officially it was to support 22 (Motor) Battalion, under the Greek Brigade's command,



**b squadron's attack with greek brigade and 22 battalion, 14 september 1944**

in an attack on [Monaldini](#) and [Monticelli](#), but in the subsequent action some of the troops were attached direct to Greek infantry platoons. The Greeks, now under Canadian command, were in the line between [Riccione](#) and the Marano River and 22 Battalion was the brigade's reserve.

[Monaldini](#) and [Monticelli](#) were small farm settlements on the [Marano](#) lateral road between a quarter and half a mile south-west of [San Lorenzo](#). The Greeks had partly captured them in an attack made early on the morning of 14 September but had been beaten back after severe losses. A task force from 22 Battalion was then called forward to give the Greeks 'moral and physical support' when the attack was made again that night. This time, too, they would have tanks to help them.

B Squadron received its orders at noon on 14 September, had a hurried lunch, and at one o'clock left [Gradara](#) for 22 Battalion's headquarters, just south of [Riccione](#). Half the squadron —5 and 6 Troops under Captain Hamilton—was posted to the left flank to support the Greeks' attack on [Monaldini](#), while the other half—7 and 8 Troops under Major Clapham—was to support a 22 Battalion platoon's attack on [Monticelli](#) after [Monaldini](#) had been captured. Hamilton's troops were each attached to a platoon of Greeks, and an interpreter took Lieutenant Cross (5 Troop) forward to reconnoitre routes and positions. Cross was intrigued by the Greeks' 'Jack-in-the-box' trick with a little anti-tank gun: they would rush it outside the house in which they were sheltering, fire a few rounds, and then drag it back inside before the enemy's mortars caught them in the open.

At 5.45 p.m. Lieutenant Shacklock's troop (No. 6) moved across the creek (the Rio Melo) west of Casa Fagnoni with the Greeks. While Shacklock reconnoitred fire positions for his tanks, 7 Troop (Second-Lieutenant Innes) was switched to Hamilton's half-squadron to give supporting fire on [Monticelli](#), its own objective, while [Monaldini](#) was attacked. This troop had difficulty in crossing the creek and the bombardment began at 7.25 without its help.

The attack on the first settlement was over in half an hour. At half past seven Cross's troop and his Greeks moved off the start line through the rows of vines and shrubs; at eight he reported [Monaldini](#) in our hands after little opposition. Shacklock's guns were by now turned on [Monticelli](#), 500 yards north-east of [Monaldini](#), until Innes's troop arrived to take over. At a quarter past eight Shacklock

and his platoon of Greeks moved forward to [Monaldini](#) and consolidated on the road north-east of the settlement; half an hour later Innes came through these positions, picked up the 22 Battalion platoon, and moved into [Monticelli](#). The enemy cleared out as the attackers approached.

It wasn't a difficult attack and there had been no casualties in the regiment <sup>5</sup> and little heavy fighting; but it was a good exercise in tank tactics in close support of infantry. There were only about eight buildings and a handful of Germans in Monaldini. 'About six dead Germans and their two spandaus were all we captured,' says Cross. 'The rest (if any) had fled.' The Greek infantry were not impressive: 'I had a hard job to get them to keep up with the tanks during the approach and a harder job to get them to pass the tanks and occupy the houses —they seemed to expect us to drive into each house in front of them.'

Captain Familton confirms this opinion ('The Greek infantry did not seem to have many clues and merely followed the tanks'), but there was no doubt of their appreciation of the tanks' help. 'About 0200 hours next morning,' says Familton, 'a deputation of Greek officers waited on me and through the interpreter made very happy little speeches about this further example of co-operation between the Greeks and their old allies and friends the New Zealanders.'

Protected by a platoon from 22 Battalion, the tanks remained in support during the night and at dawn the Greeks pushed on to the Marano River. B Squadron was then relieved shortly after midday by a squadron from 18 Regiment and returned to [Gradara](#).

Meanwhile the rest of the regiment was enjoying its stay at [Gradara](#). The weather was fine, the swimming good, and there were football matches to play in or to watch. (There had been talk of an NZEF team to tour the [United Kingdom](#) and competition for a place in the regiment's team was keen.) The beach at [Cattolica](#), a typical Adriatic seaside resort that had once swarmed with brightly painted bathing sheds and gay beach umbrellas, was now ringed by barbed wire and forbidding pillboxes, some of them camouflaged to resemble ice-cream booths. At dusk men climbed the castle hill to watch the tiny flickering of the guns away to the north.

While the Canadians advanced slowly north-west behind a wall of shellfire,

'ploughing up the whole countryside and carpeting us with bombs'—the phrase of an enemy commander—the regiment made preparations to follow north with 6 Brigade. There was some reorganisation when the commander of B Squadron, Major Clapham, was sent to hospital. He was succeeded by Major Barton, C Squadron's old commander. The main appointments in the regiment on 17 September were:

CO	Lieutenant-Colonel Purcell
Second-in-Command	Major Elliott
Adjutant	Lieutenant Hazlett

Squadron commanders:

HQ Squadron	Major Coote
A Squadron	Major Bay
B Squadron	Major Barton
C Squadron	Major Rolleston

After an earlier postponement, which at least gave tank commanders time to sort their maps and aerial photographs, the move north took place on the 18th. The new laager area was a dusty, noisy one near [Riccione](#), ringed by batteries of 25-pounders and medium guns which kept banging away at the enemy positions on [San Fortunato](#) ridge and around [Rimini](#). There was always the prospect, too, that the enemy might hit back and the orders demanded '100 per cent camouflage'. Farther north, destroyers lying off shore behind a smoke screen shelled enemy positions near the coast. Three days were spent there, much of the time in endless conferences making preparations for the coming battle; and of course it rained, heavily, the dust turned to mud, and the move was postponed for twenty-four hours. Two MMs, Corporal Jim Bell's and Sergeant Mac West's, both immediate awards, came to the regiment on the same day, both to B Squadron. Both were won on the same day (it will be remembered) in the squadron's advance to Campoli on 1 June.

But these were medals won in old battles and now the time had come to win new ones. ('Oh well, it won't be long now,' everyone said.) So far the Division had only been 'represented' in the offensive—by artillery, by tank squadrons, by a company of 22 Battalion, and by its latest attachment, the Greeks. Since the battle began on 25 August [Eighth Army](#) had advanced some 30 miles in 26 days, just over a mile a day, and had had over 14,000 casualties, say 500 for every mile won. And the miles had had to be won too: against paratroopers as determined as German paratroopers anywhere can be; against dug-in Panther turrets showing above ground

only the top of a heavily armoured skull and a 75-millimetre gun; against the dominating ridge of [San Fortunato](#). One village had changed hands ten times in attack and counter-attack.

By 21 September, helped on the last night by the heavy rain, the enemy had withdrawn across the [Marecchia](#), a wide, sprawling river with many channels which enters the sea at [Rimini](#). Field-Marshal Kesselring had misgivings about this withdrawal, feared the dangers of fighting in open country, and confessed—in a telephone conversation with General Vietinghoff—to ‘a horrible feeling that the whole show will crack’. ‘Every single man in the area must go into the front line, even the clerks,’ he ordered, ‘—every man that can be scraped up.’

A Squadron was the first to move. With 25 Battalion, three Honey tanks, a bridgelayer tank and a troop of Mios, and known as ‘Greenforce’, it left at half past eight on the morning of the 22nd for an area near [San Fortunato](#), about a mile and a half south-west of [Rimini](#). A quarter of an hour later C Squadron, with 24 Battalion and the same attachments ('Redforce') followed, going farther north to a point west of [Rimini](#). Regimental Headquarters, B Squadron, and the echelons brought up the rear a couple of hours later.

The tanks laagered in open orchard country. A low ridge less than a mile ahead was still being shelled and from time to time enemy shells in retaliation fell in or near [Rimini](#). This should have been sufficient warning that the enemy was still close enough to hit back, but in any unit there are always some fearless men too brave or too tired or too lazy to dig a place to sleep. During the night enemy shells landing in C Squadron's area caught some infantrymen sleeping above ground. Two men from the reconnaissance troop, Corporal Bradley<sup>6</sup> and Trooper Ian Gilmore,<sup>7</sup> were fatally wounded while helping with the casualties. One of the shells hit Lieutenant Jack Dawkins's tank and set fire to a box of phosphorus grenades. Lieutenant Dawkins and Corporal Allan Donald<sup>8</sup> were badly burned while trying to put out the fire. A second C Squadron tank had its front sprocket blown off and had to be replaced.

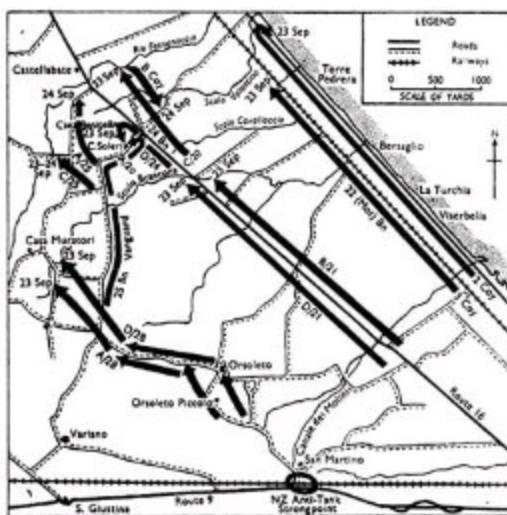
North of [Rimini](#) the Po valley, ‘flat, endless, featureless, half-hidden in a fine drizzle’, stretched away to a horizon that promised new sights and cities—the end of the war, perhaps, and home.<sup>9</sup> At first glance it was the sort of country that made a tank crew thrill with the prospect of swift advances and the exhilaration of the chase.

In the air could be felt something of the 'breakthrough' spirit of North Africa—a feeling that great events were imminent. In the [Divisional Cavalry](#), for instance, a padre had eager listeners to his lectures on what to see in [Venice](#). By the end of September the last of these illusions had been driven far away. Rain, a dogged defence, the marshy plain of the [Romagna](#)—low-lying, thick with villages and small farms, quartered by canalised rivers flowing between high stop-banks—casualties and sickness: these were the Division's fortune in the weeks to come. Instead of a breathless rush from city to city, the advance became a tiring slog from village to village—from casa to casa.

The nights and days of 21 and 22 September had brought the Division into the front line. On the tactics of the boxer's double left to set the range for a crashing right, 5 Brigade attacked through the Canadians' [Marecchia](#) bridgehead to, first, the Canale dei [Molini](#) and then to the [Scolo Branconia](#) before 6 Brigade passed through at dawn on the 23rd. Against lighter opposition from Turcoman troops in the coastal strip, 22 (Motor) Battalion of 4 Armoured Brigade, its planned role more or less that of keeping the front straight and tidy, set the pace almost to the Rio Fontanaccia, 6 Brigade's first objective.

It is now time again to tell each squadron's story separately, starting with A Squadron and the 25 Battalion group. In a sense this force was a revival of the battle group of Western Desert days, and besides 25 Battalion and A Squadron's sixteen Shermans and three Honeys consisted of a troop of four M10s from 7 Anti-Tank Regiment's 31 Battery, one bridge-layer tank, one section of 17-pounders, a section of a British battery of 105-millimetre self-propelled guns, and a section of engineers with two bulldozers and equipment to build a 100-foot Bailey bridge.

On 6 Brigade's left the 25 Battalion group vanguard, A Squadron in the lead, crossed the [Marecchia](#) early on the morning of 23 September and headed north-west, across Route 9



THE ADVANCE TO THE FONTANACCIA, 23-24 SEPTEMBER 1944

### **the advance to the fontanaccia, 23–24 september 1944**

and the railway embankment, through [Orsoleto](#) and the Maori Battalion positions, then north to the Brancona. Against sporadic small-arms and spandau fire, 2 Troop's tanks under Second-Lieutenant Doug Burland forged ahead of the rest of

the force. Too far ahead perhaps, for across the Brancona the troop mistook the route, turning right towards Route 16 instead of left towards the Fontanaccia. It was a most unlucky mistake for it took the tanks right into the midst of the German defences on Route 16, well ahead of their own infantry on the Brancona. The leading tank, Burland's, had just turned on to the main highway when it ran slap into an AP shell fired at point-blank range. Burland and two of his crew—Dave Coppin and Des Hargraves, driver and gunner respectively—were killed.<sup>10</sup> Sergeant Neil Fergus,<sup>11</sup> following close behind, tried to reverse his tank out of danger, but communication with his driver, 'Bull' [Anderton](#),<sup>12</sup> broke down and the tank ran back into a bomb crater, stopped a direct hit, and caught fire. The crew got out safely.

The third tank of the troop was far enough back to escape the trap and it withdrew to a house, the Casa Soleri, about 150 yards from the corner. Here it joined up with the battalion's Bren and mortar carriers and consolidated. No. 3 Troop came forward about nine o'clock to strengthen the position.

No. 1 Troop under Lieutenant Morris brought up the rear of the squadron. After a long wait near [Orsoleto](#) the troop came forward in the afternoon. Morris picked up two of the infantry company commanders and reconnoitred ahead to the Route 16 junction, 'where it was obvious all was not well'. The reconnaissance party sheltered

for a while at the school, made contact with Lieutenant Howorth of C Squadron supporting 24 Battalion, and decided in the meantime to consolidate rather than try to advance further. About 5 p.m. Morris took his troop along the squadron's correct route towards the Fontanaccia and, with the infantry, later occupied houses covering the road leading to the river. Small pockets of enemy were still in the area, but apart from small-arms and spandau fire from the direction of the river no resistance was met.

Over at the Casa Soleri 'there were Germans everywhere' and the infantry mortars and Brens had some excellent shooting at short range. The enemy covered the road leading forward to this strongpoint and held up the infantry advanced guard, which was forced to take up positions in houses by the Scolo Brancona crossing. Patrols were sent out and a platoon managed to reach the house. In the middle of the afternoon a company of 24 Battalion advancing on the left of Route 16 got through and 3 Troop and the remaining tank of No. 2 were relieved. The tanks then moved forward with A and C Companies of 25 Battalion towards the Fontanaccia, consolidating in houses about 200 yards east of the river about 9 p.m.

Here the tank crews spent a confused and worrying night. The infantry were being troubled by snipers who were 'all around the place'. Early in the night considerable enemy movement, including the noise of tanks was heard, and an attack to dislodge the New Zealanders from their houses was expected. Artillery concentrations, one of them close enough to blow Lieutenant Morris back into his own turret while he was sitting on the cupola of his tank, quietened the enemy. During the night Sergeant Dave Clark <sup>13</sup> and Trooper Rae <sup>14</sup> of 1 Troop were wounded when a shell fell in the doorway of their farmhouse.

Sergeant Fergus from 2 Troop replaced Clark as 1 Troop's sergeant, a move which took him from the frying pan into the fire. Fergus, it will be remembered, had lost his tank in the crater at the Route 16 junction, and next morning he had another shot up under him. Corporal Jim Becker <sup>15</sup> had taken over Sergeant Clark's position at the farmhouse on the road leading to the Fontanaccia when Clark was wounded, and in the morning he found that his tank was ditched. Fergus moved up to pull him out but was fired on from the river crossing. A direct hit set his tank on fire. Becker was wounded.

The other troop in this area, No. 3, and the corporal's tank of 2 Troop were relieved by 4 Troop before dawn on the 24th and withdrew to squadron reserve. The troop commander's tank, however, was left behind, bogged. It was recovered by the T2 next day.

A Company of 25 Battalion continued its probes towards the river during the morning and also made some progress along the road towards Route 16. Spandaus covered the open ground between its positions and the river, about 200 yards away, and were engaged by the tanks of 1 and 4 Troops. The enemy paratroopers maintained an aggressive defence, on one occasion holding their fire until one of our infantry patrols was only six yards away. One of the 4 Troop tanks sent forward to clean up this strongpoint was hit by a bazooka and set on fire. Later in the morning C Company commander's Honey tank was also knocked out and set on fire, Major Handyside<sup>16</sup> being wounded.

In the early afternoon enemy self-propelled guns and tanks —nine tanks were reported in one area about 1000 yards west of the Fontanaccia—firing from the leafy cover of grape-vines across the river inflicted losses in both troops. No. 4 Troop in C Company's area had a second tank knocked out. Both companies and the surviving tanks withdrew at 7 p.m. to clear the ground for the barrage which was to open that night's attack and to form up ready to follow it in.

Advancing on either side of Route 16 on the morning of 23 September, C Squadron's 11 Troop (Second-Lieutenant John Howorth) took the left of the highway and 10 Troop (Second-Lieutenant de Lautour) the right, each with a company of 24 Battalion. After a slow but uneventful move up, the tanks and their infantry passed through the 21 Battalion positions on the Brancona about half past eleven. Opposing them were enemy machine-gun posts in houses about 300 yards north of the river. Their objective, the Rio Fontanaccia, was about 1500 yards away.

The advance began under a screen of artillery fire, with the enemy guns and mortars hitting back. The enemy had already blown the Route 16 crossing on the Brancona and the tanks of both troops had to wait until the stream had been bridged by a Valentine. It was nearly three o'clock before they rejoined their companies.

B Company, on the right, had made the faster progress, but by the time 10

Troop reached it was pinned down on the Scolo Valentina, a ditch about 400 yards from the Fontanaccia. The troop was heavily mortared, fortunately without loss. It gave supporting fire to the company's right-hand platoon, which later in the afternoon was able to push ahead, one section reaching the Fontanaccia. When darkness fell the forward platoons withdrew a little way and the company consolidated. The troop withdrew across the Branconca and harboured for the night.

Howorth's troop, on the left, had a more eventful day. It is described by Trooper Bob Peebles,<sup>17</sup> one of the crew of the leading tank in the move forward beyond the Branconca:

We were right up with D Coy just in front of a casa. The Jerries opened up on the infantry, who went to ground, and then we saw the ugly snout of the Tiger poke its nose around a corner. We didn't stand a chance. I am not sure but I think there was only one shot fired by the Tiger. Our tank went up in flames straight away.

I shall never forget the agony of dragging myself from that burning tank with a busted leg while Jerry used me as a target. As you know, Tprs Burgess,<sup>18</sup> Forde,<sup>19</sup> and myself were the only ones who got out of that tank, but Tpr Burgess was killed immediately. Later that night there was a tank moving around the area and I was scared that it would run me over as I wasn't able to move.

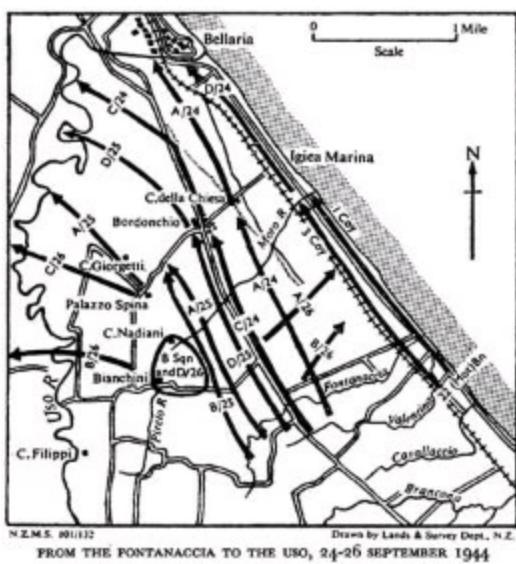
This happened, according to Peebles's memory, about half past four. The tank commander, Sergeant Bill Craig,<sup>20</sup> and Troopers Burgess and Mann<sup>21</sup> were killed and the other two of the crew wounded. The house where the shooting took place, one of the group which formed the Case Benicelli, was about 600 yards from the Fontanaccia and marked the limit of D Company's advance. The company later withdrew to the Casa Soleri for the night. With Germans all around him, Peebles 'played possum' until he was evacuated next night by the infantry.

At dawn on the 24th B Company of 24 Battalion pushed on to the Fontanaccia. It was supported by Second-Lieutenant Allan Hadfield's<sup>22</sup> troop (No. 12) which had come forward just before dawn, losing one tank over a bank on the way up. Two platoons reached the Fontanaccia without opposition. Some of their sections crossed the river and pushed on through grapevines to a house about 100 yards beyond it. The enemy's machine-gunners found the intrusion unwelcome, snipers began to look

for targets, and soon his guns and mortars began to take a hand to wipe out the salient. Covered by fire from the two 12 Troop tanks and screened by smoke laid by the artillery, an attempt was made to withdraw the forward platoons. However, the enemy's fire was so heavy that it was decided they should hold their positions rather than suffer casualties in withdrawing. Under covering fire from the tanks, the platoons managed to move back early in the afternoon to the lateral road south of the Scolo Valentina, the men wading waist deep along the canal for part of the way. The sections isolated in the house across the Fontanaccia could not be warned of the withdrawal but returned safely at dusk just in time for the fittest of the party to be sent back across the river again in the brigade attack.

C Squadron's fourth troop, No. 9, commanded by Sergeant Owen Hughes, also made a sortie forward that morning but was not committed to action. It had been planned that 24 Battalion should relieve a company of 22 (Motor) Battalion and a 19 Regiment squadron on the coastal sector, and at 11 a.m. 9 Troop and a company of the 24th moved up the coast road. This plan was changed later in the day and at 5 p.m. 9 Troop returned to its old area.

Apart from the 24 Battalion platoons which had reached and crossed the Fontanaccia early that morning, the New Zealanders were still no nearer the river when the day ended. The fight had been stubborn, the defence dogged, the attack determined. 'During the last 36 hours the division has beaten off 27 attacks in battalion strength,' said 1 Parachute Division's report on the day's fighting. It added that all attacks had been beaten back with heavy loss to both sides. The New Zealanders were to make another attempt that night.



**from the fontanaccia to the uso, 24–26 september 1944**

The barrage began on the Fontanaccia at twenty minutes to eight, and at eight the two 6 Brigade battalions—24 Battalion on the right, two companies up, and 25 Battalion on the left, on a three-company front—moved up to the river. With each company was a troop of 20 Regiment tanks, in most cases a troop in name only and well below strength. A Squadron, supporting 25 Battalion, had only six tanks; C with 24 Battalion had a few more but gives no details in its report. East of the railway line in the coastal sector the Motor Battalion, with two companies forward, had its usual conforming role.

Designated a 'road' party, 9 and 10 Troops of C Squadron under the command of Second-Lieutenant Jack Austad <sup>23</sup> moved across country behind 24 Battalion. With them were two OP tanks of a Royal Artillery regiment of self-propelled guns, a South African armoured bulldozer, a sapper platoon in an armoured car, and a platoon of infantry. With help from the bulldozer the tanks crossed the Fontanaccia east of Route 16 and made slow but steady progress towards the Rio del Moro, about a mile past the Fontanaccia. When the Bofors fire marking the units' lanes of advance stopped, the party found it difficult to keep direction and to make contact with the infantry edging their way forward through grape-vines, across ditches, and in places through heavy undergrowth. About half past two the tanks joined the infantry just south of the Moro but were ordered not to cross until first light. The bulldozer made a crossing for them, and about six o'clock 10 Troop moved up to link up with the forward companies.

A Company on the right flank had had a lot of fighting and when the tanks arrived was held up by strong pockets of enemy troops about 200 yards short of the road which crossed the main highway at [Bordonchio](#). One of these positions was a small walled cemetery held by a platoon of Germans with four spandaus. This strongpoint was 'done over' by the tanks and rushed by a platoon from a flank. Other posts were also destroyed.

Out to the left 25 Battalion's three companies had widely varying fortune in their advance to the [Bordonchio](#) road, D Company on the right going ahead 'with considerable speed' on the left of the main highway, while B Company on the open left flank had heavier losses and made slow progress. The tanks' progress was slower still. Led by an engineer officer in a Honey tank reconnoitring the track, and with a platoon of sappers to clear the way, the party took an hour to cover 300 yards and three hours to reach the Fontanaccia. Before the tanks could cross here they had to send back for a bulldozer, and while they waited for it to come up the engineer reconnaissance party pushed on.

The tanks rejoined the engineers at the Rio Pircio, crossed it with the aid of a bridgelayer, and joined the infantry companies about 2 a.m. The two tanks left in 3 Troop helped B Company to reach its objective about two hours later, while the other two troops—there were two tanks in 1 Troop and one in 4 Troop—consolidated in houses on the road. Three of the M10 tank-destroyers helped to strengthen these positions and the wounded were evacuated by the regiment's stretcher-carrying Bren carrier.

Dawn showed that the Division's attack had not gone as well as had been expected, if any attack ever really does go as well as those who plan it confidently hope. In the centre the infantry had reached, or virtually reached, their objectives, but on the right flank a determined defence had halted 22 Battalion's advance up the coast. Farther inland to the south-west the Canadians' attack had been halted east of the Uso River.

The flank that most concerned 20 Regiment, the left, between the Fontanaccia and the Pircio—it is flattery to call them rivers and both are labelled Rio (stream) on the map—was potentially the more dangerous. To strengthen it during 6 Brigade's attack B Squadron of the regiment and a company of 26 Battalion formed a

protecting force with the task of covering the brigade's open flank. The plan was for each troop of tanks to work with a platoon of infantry as an independent unit, each group moving separately to prearranged positions.

B Squadron, previously in reserve, had to come up from behind Route 9 to the west of Rimini. The tanks joined the infantry behind the Fontanaccia and the first group moved off about 1 a.m. (25 September). Batteries of searchlights behind our lines threw their beams on the clouds above the enemy positions to light the way, but where the winding track ran through vineyards the visibility was limited to about ten yards and the troops had to move in single file. No. 5 Troop (Lieutenant Cross) and 8 Troop (Second-Lieutenant Overton) were in the lead, with the other two troops in reserve.

The first two groups moved to their positions without opposition, Cross going to a house north of the Pircio (Casa Nadiani) and Overton to Casa Bianchini, on the road that runs west towards the Uso. Overton describes the move forward and the morning's alarms:

Nearing our objective 8 Tp branched further left and 5 Tp carried on. When about  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile from the casa where we were to take up our position we heard the clank of tracks and the sound of tank motors not far ahead of us on the same road. We stopped and debated whether they sounded like Shermans which the Canadians had or whether they were enemy ones. We decided they weren't Shermans and that they were enemy ones moving towards us on the same road. Luckily the Jerry ones decided to stop. We pulled into the yard behind the casa and spent the rest of the night. Next morning soon after daybreak a shufti plane of ours came over and we noticed a stream of tracer shooting up at it. Climbing up into the house I spotted 4 Jerry tanks about 400 [yards] away blazing away with their MGs. I reported their position to the Arty and within 5 mins they had changed their minds and they moved off out of sight. We were unable to see them from the ground as there was too much cover.

Although it moved over ground already covered by the leading tanks, the reserve party in the third group to go forward came under spandau fire and had three men wounded. The tanks' machine guns fired a few bursts into the night in the general direction of the enemy machine-gunners, quietening them for a time.

B Squadron's peaceful entry of the two houses across the Pircio during the night was succeeded next morning by a disturbed and noisy tenancy. During the night the Canadians' advance to the south had been halted, and there was only the squadron and its company of infantry to protect 6 Brigade's open flank. The Canadians attacked again in the morning, but there were still plenty of enemy left between the Pircio and the [Uso](#) and many more west of the larger river. Shortly after dawn some 25 Battalion carriers which came down the track from their forward positions to link up with the squadron were welcomed at a range of about ten yards by a bazooka firing from a trench at the side of the road. Even at that distance the first shot missed, but a carrier following behind was knocked out. One of our tanks shelled the house suspected of hiding the bazooka team and a section of infantry investigated but found the place deserted.

About a quarter to seven Cross's troop in Casa Nadiani saw three enemy tanks—one of them a Tiger—moving in an area to the south-west, probably with the intention of attacking or outflanking the New Zealand positions. Our guns were called on to lay on an SOS task and the troop went into action against the enemy from positions behind farm buildings and haystacks. An attack by enemy infantry was broken up by the tanks' fire and German Red Cross parties were later seen picking up casualties. Later in the morning Cross's tank was hit and set on fire.

He had parked it behind a haystack, and by standing on top of the turret the crew could get a good view of the countryside over the top of the grape-vines but could see no sign of the enemy. When Cross left to join the infantry company commander observing from the top story of the farmhouse someone in the crew decided it was time to boil the billy. He rotated the turret so that he could get at the rations, and evidently the movement gave away the tank's position.

I heard a 'crack' [says Cross] and thinking the gunner had fired the Browning, hopped back to the tank. As I clambered up the crew piled out P.D.Q. to find out where we had been hit. An 88 had gone through the turret about half-way up. No one hurt and no apparent damage except for the hole. Within 20 seconds a second shot hit the edge of the haystack and then our hull, setting both stack and tank on fire. This second shot messed up the inside so no chance of saving the tank. While the smoke was billowing up, Cab Rank, apparently under the impression that the

smoke was from our Arty to show them the locality of Tigers, came down at us and went for my other two tanks. After the leader's bombs had landed—and missed luckily—I grabbed a Very pistol and fired red signals at the others as they dived. This had the desired effect as the next two pulled out of their dives without dropping their bombs and after circling us for a few minutes, went off to the correct area, which was also smoking from Arty smoke shells, about a mile away. We were thankful.

The Tiger that got Cross's tank was about 1200 yards away, tucked in beside a house and behind a heavy screen of vines. Cross's crew heard it trundle off. Luckily they had had no casualties, but for the rest of the day the other crews kept very still.

Cross withdrew the remaining tanks in his troop to a position nearer Route 16 and the cab-rank fighter-bombers continued to search for the enemy tanks. The cab-rank was a group of fast planes—usually three to six Kittyhawks—operating from a forward airfield and on call to give immediate support to the ground troops when required. Although heavily mortared and shelled, the infantry platoon was able to hold its position after the tanks had been withdrawn. Cross's troop returned to its old position after dark.

Overton's 8 Troop and the infantry platoon at the Casa Bianchini also had some enemy to occupy them that day. When daylight came it was seen that a house not far in front of the troop's position was occupied by the enemy, who withdrew when the house was shelled and machine-gunned. Tanks could be heard about 400 yards away. Later in the morning two sections of infantry were seen moving through the vines. Were they ours or Canadians? A patrol went out to meet them and found they were Germans. One surrendered but the rest took cover in a ditch. Our tanks and infantry pinned them down with their fire but they were later able to withdraw under a smoke screen.

According to Overton, the German who surrendered did not get a very heartening welcome. 'My Cpl's tank was covering one side of the house we occupied, and late in the afternoon after we had been shooting up Jerry a fair bit a miserable looking Jerry came round the corner of the house with his hands up to give himself up, walking round right in front of the Cpl's tank, and the gunner who happened to be looking through the telescope saw him and must have thought that the whole

German army was following for he let off a burst from the .30 Browning right in the Jerry's ear, missed him completely at 12 ft. I don't know who got the biggest fright.'

The other two squadrons spent the day more quietly, although the positions of the forward companies were shelled, at times heavily, and shot up by spandaus. The 25th Battalion infantry with A Squadron used the tanks' Brownings on the ground mounting to good effect against machine-gun posts. On the coast 22 Battalion attacked again in the morning to make amends for its setback in the night attack and by midday had reached the Moro.

To close the gap between 24 and 22 Battalions two companies of 26 Battalion were brought forward on the morning of the 25th. Tank support was given by two tanks of C Squadron's 12 Troop. It was a bloodless advance. The sound of demolitions to the north and the reports of Italian refugees indicated that the enemy near the coast was withdrawing over the Uso into Bellaria. Taking advantage of the weather, our fighter-bombers sought targets ahead of the infantry and in Bellaria as the enemy rearguards fell back. Two of these targets were Tiger tanks on 6 Brigade's front, and although not hit they were reported to have been 'scared off very effectively'.

Pushing on to Igia Marina in the afternoon, the 26 Battalion companies and 12 Troop's tanks relieved 22 Battalion and its supporting 19 Regiment tanks. The day's advances had straightened the line and dusk was the time to tidy the front. Sixth Brigade took over the whole line, 24 Battalion spreading east to relieve 26 Battalion. No. 12 Troop's tanks stayed forward. Patrols and prisoners reported that there were still enemy outposts south and east of the Uso; others of the enemy who had not been able to get away in time were reported to be in civilian clothes.

The regiment saw little fighting on 26 September but, paradoxically, had one of its worst days of the battle. It lost six men killed and one wounded to one unfortunate shell. The infantry had spent part of the night and the morning probing ahead to the river, pushing troops forward where they found gaps between the outpost positions. The tanks went forward later.

The men killed were from 1 Troop of A Squadron. The troop's two remaining tanks had gone forward in the afternoon with a company of 25 Battalion and two

M10 tank-destroyers to reconnoitre the river and look for possible crossings. Joined by some [Divisional Cavalry](#) armoured cars, the tanks took up a position behind a hedge a short distance from the river. Occasionally a stray shell came over from the enemy side of the river, none close enough to cause alarm, apparently, for a group of about twelve troopers and infantrymen had collected near the riverbank when a shell landed in their midst, killing eight of them. Among the regiment's killed were Sergeant [Black](#) <sup>24</sup> and Corporal [Nordbye](#). <sup>25</sup> Without crews to man them, 1 Troop's tanks were later withdrawn.

A Squadron had the heaviest casualties for the day but B Squadron probably did the most shooting. It had spent the day before resisting enemy attempts to drive its tanks and their supporting 26 Battalion infantry from the two houses across the Rio Pircio, and it was now its turn to attack. The battalion's orders were to advance across the [Uso](#) to the next river objective, the [Fiumicino](#). There were still enemy machine-gun posts east of the Uso.

Nos. 6 and 7 Troops went forward with the infantry when the attack began early in the afternoon, the tanks—according to the company commander's report—adopting the principle 'of beating up anything that looked suspicious', firing all their guns. The enemy made no serious attempt to halt the attack, his machine-gunners firing a few rounds and then falling back as the tanks approached. They reached the [Uso](#) at half past three but were not able to follow the infantry across. The tanks shot up the far bank while the infantry waded over and then looked for a crossing place for themselves.

They found one a little way to the north where, with the help of a bulldozer, it looked possible to ford the river. A bulldozer was sent for but it was midnight before it arrived. The noise it made working on the crossing brought down mortar fire, 'luckily all about fifty yards upstream', and later an enemy patrol came up the far bank and engaged the sappers. An infantry section had to be brought up to protect the party and the bulldozer finished its track. By 4 a.m. on the 27th both troops were across the river and soon in contact with 26 Battalion.

Farther north in 25 Battalion's area, three troops of A Squadron and the infantry were across the river well before dawn. Here the river was about eight yards wide and two feet deep but its sloping stopbanks rose 30 feet above the water. A

bulldozer made an approach up the stopbank and the engineers put a Churchill Ark bridge across, the guns drowning the noise made by the bulldozer.

Dug in along the Fosso Vena, a shallow ditch about 1000 yards west of the [Uso](#) and roughly parallel with it, the 25 Battalion companies and A Squadron's three troops spent a quiet morning. As ordered, they rested in their positions until relieved by 24 Battalion early in the afternoon. The latter battalion itself had been relieved the night before by a Greek battalion from [3 Mountain Brigade](#). Refreshed by a hot meal at Bordonchio and part of a night's rest—the relief by the Greeks had not been completed until after midnight—and supported by A Squadron's tanks, 24 Battalion passed through the 25th and began its attack about half past one.

Spandau posts in houses and snipers firing from the tops of haystacks contested the ground, and when their positions were pressed they called for defensive fire from the guns and mortars behind them. Smoke shells fired by our tanks soon dispersed the snipers by setting alight to their hiding places, but the spandau posts were harder to crack. Guns, carriers, and tanks fired concentrations on these strongpoints and the platoons rushed them, but in close ground with plenty of cover an enemy as skilled in delaying actions as a German paratrooper seldom had little trouble in slipping away. In one house there were a hundred civilians, many hysterical with relief at their survival, but of course no Germans. But the enemy did not always get away, and in one house captured with the help of 2 Troop's two tanks nine Germans were taken prisoner.

The attack's objective was a road about 700 yards from the Fiumicino River, the outpost screen for the enemy's next line of defence along the Scolo Rigossa, a ditch much less impressive than its name. Only the right-hand company had reached this objective when the battalion was relieved before midnight by 21 Battalion. It then withdrew to [Bordonchio](#).

A Squadron also withdrew at the same time, going back across the [Uso](#) to the vicinity of the Palazzo Spina, about half a mile south-west of [Bordonchio](#). In the battles of the last five days it had had four tanks 'brewed up' and one knocked out. The unlucky shell that had ended the unofficial conference on the banks of the [Uso](#) the day before had made the squadron's casualties the heaviest in the regiment. One officer (Second-Lieutenant Burland) and seven men had been killed, one man

had died of wounds, one had been accidentally injured, and nine had been wounded. Five tanks survived the action.

B Squadron, to the south with 26 Battalion, also had plenty of action on its last day in the line. Some of the tanks across the river began the day by cleaning out a spandau post which an infantry platoon had skirted the night before in its advance to the Fosso Vena ditch. Then 7 Troop had some bad luck when the corporal's tank broke a track and Lance-Sergeant Alex Cunningham's <sup>26</sup> tank struck a mine. Cunningham, on the right flank, had been sent off by the infantry commander to shoot up a couple of houses near a crossroads and, 'like a fathead'—his own description—decided to leave the road and advance across a ploughed paddock. Half-way across the tank went over a box mine, 'and bang went a track and one bogey.' It was too open and conspicuous a spot in which to linger and the enemy fire was heavy; the infantry platoon declined to complete the task without tank support, 'so there was nothing for it but for us to bale out and slink back to the schoolhouse' at the crossroads. The field was then swept of mines, nearly thirty being found between the corner of the paddock and the damaged tank. Cunningham had been lucky to get as far as he did, and luckier still to get out again with a whole skin.

To avoid further damage 5 and 8 Troops were ordered to cross the river farther north by 25 Battalion's bridge and go forward with C and A Companies of 26 Battalion. The battalion's objective was a stretch of the same road east of the Fiumicino that 25 Battalion was trying to reach. It began its attack about three o'clock, later than its northern neighbour, with whom its boundary was a line of power pylons which ran almost due north-west from the junction of Routes 9 and 16 near Rimini. The battalion had a hard row to hoe almost all the way. One company struck a tough spandau post in a house almost as soon as it started to move; another was heavily 'stonked' on its start line and had six casualties. The enemy's accuracy with his mortar and shell fire was explained when it was found that he was using one of the power pylons as an OP.

The tanks' job was to shoot up enemy positions. In country latticed by lanes of vines these were hard to find, and the many ditches which drained the fields made the job harder still. Once again the enemy's plan was to engage the advancing infantry with his machine guns and then fall back to prearranged fire positions where ammunition had been dumped.

Lack of contact and communication between tanks and infantry caused some confusion and the platoons could make only slow progress. The centre company reached the road, the foremost section going forward part of the way on Second-Lieutenant Tressider's <sup>27</sup> tank, which left it in a farmhouse near the road and came back to take up position for the night. During the afternoon Sergeant Birch's <sup>28</sup> tank in 8 Troop was disabled by a mine. Late in the afternoon the companies received orders to consolidate their positions, and that night the battalion was relieved by 23 Battalion. B Squadron handed over to 18 Regiment's C Squadron and went back across the [Uso](#) early next morning. Two damaged tanks and their crews had to wait behind until the fitters got them moving; one came out later in the morning, but several days of hard work in pouring rain were needed before the second was freed from its minefield.

While A and B Squadrons under 6 Brigade's command had been skirmishing through grape-vines and across rivers and ditches, C Squadron had been engaged in the more open coastal sector between Route 16 and the sea. When the Greeks relieved 24 Battalion on the evening of the 26th the squadron was relieved by a squadron from 19 Regiment. It was given a day to rest and reorganise and, at 5.30 a.m. on 28 September, moved forward to support 1 Greek Battalion and relieve the 19th squadron. It was a miserable day, with torrential rain in the afternoon and the wind blowing in hard from the sea.

The enemy positions facing the Greeks at the mouth of the [Fiumicino](#) were formidable. Behind a screen of anti-tank rails and wire extending from the railway to the sea, the enemy manned at least four concrete pillboxes armed with anti-tank guns and had spandau teams posted in houses along the south bank. With the support of two [Divisional Cavalry](#) troops, the Greeks held the road from Villa Semprini on the coast to the main highway. The river was less than half a mile away.

C Squadron's 10 and 11 Troops moved up behind the Greeks on the morning of the 28th, leaving 9 and 12 Troops back in reserve. No. 10 Troop's tanks immediately attracted the notice of enemy mortars, but artillery concentrations on the mortars' probable positions made them more respectful. Fourth Field Regiment sent the squadron a forward observation officer to ensure that direct artillery support was

readily at hand, but because of the rain and the gale and the poor visibility neither tanks nor guns nor infantry could do much for the rest of the day. Because its tanks might get bogged in the mud, 10 Troop was ordered back to spend the night on the more solid ground of Route 16. On the Greeks' left 5 Brigade, undeterred by the rain and the enemy's defensive gunfire, reached the Fiumicino in the afternoon; farther left still, the Canadians also reached the river that night.

After a quiet night—5 Brigade's attack across the river was postponed because of the weather—10 Troop moved up to its old position before dawn. Yesterday's rain had left the rivers and streams angry with flood; a bridge or two had been washed away, tanks had become bogged, telephones had failed, and the artillery's gunpits were knee-deep in water. The Fiumicino, a shallow stream the day before, was now a torrent 30 to 40 feet wide, even wider in places, and more useful to the enemy than ever. Slit trenches filled with water as they were being dug and the infantrymen not under shelter were drenched and cold.

On the Greeks' front the quiet night was followed by an equally quiet day, if a bit of mortaring can be treated as a natural phenomenon not worthy of comment. C Squadron disregards it with the uninformative entry: 'NTR [nothing to report] covers the activities of this day.' A German report described the ground on the Adriatic front as 'a sea of mud' and forecast that no attack on a large scale need be expected before 1 October even if the weather improved. Fourth Brigade's commander, Brigadier Pleasants, made a similar appreciation.

Nothing to report again on the 30th except that the reserve troops took over before dawn 'without incident', 10 and 11 Troops going back. The weather was fine again, the rivers lower, but the ground was still very heavy. Visibility was better and there was some mutual shelling and mortaring. The fighter-bombers were in action again and towards the end of the afternoon bombed the strongpoint near the Route 16 crossing. The night, for a change, was noisy. Enemy planes were over but dropped their bombs well behind the line near Orsoleto and were chased off by a 'terrific' ack-ack barrage—'Bofors flat out,' says one diarist. Enemy guns and mortars added to the din.

Behind the squadrons — not very far behind — in the last week's fighting were the regiment's tactical headquarters and its A Echelon. Most of the time they were

well within range of the enemy's artillery. The signal section had been the first to suffer, losing all its three vehicles to enemy shells on the first night of the attack. One man was wounded.

On the 26th A Echelon moved forward to Castella Benelli, an elaborate shell-scarred country house near Palazzo Spina, south-west of [Bordonchio](#). Here it joined Tactical Headquarters —the CO's and the Adjutant's tanks—but had to resist infiltration attempts by English and Polish units seeking quarters and shelter from the rain. The best way to stake the regiment's claim was to occupy all the available accommodation, and soon its men were quartered in stables and alley-ways and in outbuildings around the estate, which apparently had once been a prosperous stud farm. Enemy troops, not very fastidious, had been the last tenants, and there was a lot of housekeeping and cleaning to be done before some of the rooms were fit to live in or made free from flies.

A and B Squadrons joined RHQ when they came back into reserve on 28 September. The crews wanted sleep but the castle (as the troops called it) was not the place to find it. A battery of five-point-fives was sited about 100 yards away and the deafening noise and the blast as each round was fired shook tiles off the roofs and made sleep almost impossible. The enemy's guns in their turn sought out this battery and some nearby self-propelled guns, their shelling being especially heavy at night. After a couple of sleepless nights A Squadron and B1 Echelon moved back to a factory near [Viserba](#) and B Squadron went to an area near the beach. The factory was a big ferro-concrete building with offices at one end and was large enough to house everybody under one roof.

Early on the morning of the 30th the signal section at the castle again lost a truck, and that night during another bombardment the Signals Officer, Second-Lieutenant John [Phillips](#), <sup>29</sup> was killed by a shell splinter which cut through the window shutters of the first-floor room in which he was quartered. Lieutenant Phillips had received word the day before that he was to go home with the next replacement draft and had asked to be allowed to stay behind for a farewell party with his signallers.

This latest casualty brought the regiment's total of killed for the week's action up to 15, two of them officers. One officer and 18 men had been wounded. <sup>30</sup> Up to

the end of the month seven tanks had been 'brewed up' and two knocked out, one of which was recovered. Also recovered were the two tanks which had been damaged by mines and five classified as 'ditched'. After the rain in the last few days of the month the work of recovering bogged vehicles had kept the regiment's recovery section very busy, the T2 again proving itself invaluable.

Before dawn on 1 October C Squadron's No. 9 Troop and the forward Greek infantry withdrew a little way back along Route 16 to clear the front line for attacks by our bombers. Bad weather cancelled the bombing and the Greeks returned to their positions early in the evening. About eight o'clock 12 Troop heard the movement of tracked vehicles, and shortly afterwards Greek infantry reported that there were three enemy tanks south of the river. Shells began to fall in the area and it is possible that the enemy, having noticed during the day that the Greeks' forward positions were empty, was planning to occupy them.<sup>31</sup> No. 10 Troop, which had been warned during the afternoon that it was to go with 2 Greek Battalion to take over the Maori Battalion's sector on the left of Route 16 that night, was called forward to support 9 and 12 Troops. Artillery support was on hand, too, and when one tank was hit the enemy tanks withdrew across the river.

More rain next day delayed plans then being made for an attack to the west and changes were made to rest units in the front line. C Squadron's associate, 1 Greek Battalion, was relieved on the night of 2–3 October by the Greeks' 3rd Battalion, but the squadron had to wait for a few days longer for its turn to rest. It filled in the time without incident, troop relieving troop in turn, and had only two casualties although the area was at times heavily shelled and mortared. On the evening of the 4th two Regimental Headquarters tanks and a third tank from 12 Troop under Lieutenant Hadfield's command relieved 9 Troop. Half an hour later a shell hit the roof of 11 Troop's house, wounding Corporal Merv Stringer<sup>32</sup> and Trooper Chaney,<sup>33</sup> both of whom were immediately evacuated by the reconnaissance troop's tank then delivering supplies.

Before the next battle begins this seems a convenient place to review the results of the last. Thanks to the break in the weather, the enemy was now firmly on his feet again. And as if there had not been enough rain already, he had flooded the coastal area behind him from Ravenna south to Cesenatico and was watching warily for a seaborne landing. The rain gave him the chance to reinforce his divisions and

to deepen their positions.

However, in the last few weeks he had been given 'something to go on with' and could expect more. He correctly appreciated that because of the flooding on the Adriatic coast the next attack would be aimed north-west along the Rimini- Bologna highway, Route 9. This attack, too, depended on the weather and the condition of the ground; neither improved, and the plans were several times postponed. In the meantime both sides filled in the time with night and day patrols. Artillery and mortars enjoyed themselves by exchanging harassing fire, in which Eighth Army's artillery patiently set out to teach the enemy that it had met its master. For every round fired from across the Fiumicino three or four rounds from three or four times as many guns were fired back.

While this was going on the regiment had little to amuse it. The war diary faithfully records the weather, which had all the cheer of a wet Wellington July. C Squadron on the right continued to support the Greeks but because of the mud its tanks were more or less fixtures; the Sherman's tracks are not very wide, and the tank quickly bogs down in sodden ground. Tanks could not move across country and relieving troops had to keep to the roads. One of the regiment's jobs was to test the 'going' each day and the reports hardly make cheerful reading: for instance, that for the morning of 8 October records that the tanks could move forward in a straight line in second gear but could not turn or manoeuvre—and that was one of the best days! Later in the day, however, there was heavy rain and the Fiumicino again became 'a raging torrent'. A limited attack planned for that night, to be made 'regardless of the weather', had to be postponed once again. A Squadron was to have taken part in a shoot that night in support of the attack but that, too, was called off.

B Squadron in its beach area had some casualties on 3 October when Captain Stan Wright <sup>34</sup> was wounded in the neck by shell splinters and five other ranks also were wounded. Next night the squadron moved up to support 6 Brigade, which took over from 5 Brigade on the evening of 5 October the left of the divisional sector. The squadron's role is described as 'purely defensive'.

Regimental Headquarters left its picturesque but too prominent castella on the 7th and went back to Viserba. Tactical Headquarters also had a beach site near the mouth of the Uso. There are few places more drear than a seaside resort in wet

weather, and although in Viserba RHQ and A Echelon found dry billets in some of the two- and three-storied pensions on the waterfront, the presence in the town of some 8000 refugees seeking food and shelter did not increase its attractiveness. The refugees were evacuated during the next few days to a camp near Ancona.

Although now less crowded, Viserba had little to offer. Naturally the Germans got the blame for the lack of goods in the shops—‘Tedesci tutto rubato’ became a familiar cry <sup>35</sup>—and many shops did not even bother to open. Two of the town's tailors, however, did well: no soldier ever seems to get a battle dress which he thinks fits him and those issued to the regiment the week before required the usual attentions before they satisfied their wearers. When the weather cleared some men went swimming, but light outrigger canoes were even more popular. At night the YMCA screened pictures in two battered cinemas.

The squadrons in the line—C with the Greeks on the coast, B farther inland with 6 Brigade—lived less comfortably but found the weather more nuisance than was the enemy, although B Squadron's 7 Troop attracted more than its share of mortar fire. A Squadron made a sortie from reserve on 8 October to take part in a shoot. The squadron set off from its billets in the factory in pouring rain and returned that evening, drenched and unhappy, without having fired a shot. The crews' comments on the operation were soldierly and to the point.

On the afternoon of 10 October and again next morning, A and C Squadrons fired harassing tasks on targets north and west of Cesenatico. Shooting at intervals throughout the day for half an hour at a time, the tanks fired 500 rounds on the first day and a hundred more than that on the second. Their shooting was soon proved to have been effective, for as soon as the third shoot began on the first day the enemy laid a heavy smoke screen about 400 yards in front of the gunline. Later he replied more aggressively with gun and mortar concentrations as well as smoke, but the two rounds which landed in the tanks' area on the 11th caused neither damage nor casualties. Until the regiment was relieved on 13 October any movement by its tanks in the forward area, however small, was the signal for enemy counter-measures.

In the meantime there was some juggling of units on the Fiumicino front and units in the line were relieved and formations regrouped in preparation for the next attack. As part of a policy to ‘side slip’ the Division to the left to support the main

thrust along Route 9, the 6 Brigade battalions were relieved on the night of 9–10 October by Royal Canadian dragoons. Next night 5 Brigade relieved Canadian units north of the Rimini– Cesena railway, its role that of flank guard to the Canadians advancing along Route 9.

B Squadron supporting Cumberland Force<sup>36</sup> in the centre, and C Squadron supporting the Greek Brigade (part of Cumberland Force) on the coast, had to stay where they were in the mud in the meantime. Their turn for relief came on the 13th when a Canadian tank squadron took over. Before leaving No. 6 Troop of B Squadron fired a farewell salvo of 200 rounds on houses across the river. The enemy made his usual reply and the incoming units took over under fire. C Squadron and Tactical Headquarters went back to Viserba, but there were no billets available there for B Squadron which had to stay at the orphanage just south of the mouth of the Uso. A Squadron was still living in its factory.

Although officially Viserba was a rest area, the regiment's short stay there was not altogether peaceful. An enemy sabotage party, believed to have been landed by sea south of Rimini on the night of 13–14 October, set time fuses in mine dumps, laid mines in areas where vehicles were concentrated, and 'booby-trapped' some trucks. For the next few nights pickets were trebled and a strong beach patrol maintained. No enemy was seen. A later crop of mines, many of which did not explode, was thought to have been sown by civilian fifth columnists, and on the 20th a grenade thrown into the Via Littoraneo—probably by some fifth columnist seeking self-expression—lightly wounded a passing Tommy.

During the last fortnight there had been several changes in senior appointments in the regiment. With the departure of Major Elliott for the Armoured Corps Training Depot on 12 October Major Barton became second-in-command, Major Clapham succeeding him once more in command of B Squadron. C Squadron also got a new commander to replace Major Rolleston, who left for Advanced Base on his way back to New Zealand. The main appointments on 17 October were:

CO	Lieutenant-Colonel Purcell
Second-in-Command	Major Barton
Adjutant	Lieutenant Hazlett
Squadron commanders:	

HQ Squadron	Major Bay
A Squadron	Major Caldwell
B Squadron	Major Clapham
C Squadron	Major Eastgate

There were a few days of fine weather before orders came to move forward on the afternoon of the 17th. The move and the rain began about the same time. The regiment had only a few miles to go to a concentration area just east of the [Uso](#), the first stage of a move to [Gambettola](#), but it made the journey in heavy rain. The ground soon became waterlogged and, rather than leave the crews to spend a miserable night in the open, it was decided to picket the tanks and return the crews by truck to the orphanage for the night. The crews returned to their tanks early next morning and moved up to a concentration area north-east of [Gambettola](#).

The last week's fighting had carried the front from the Fiumicino to the [Pisciatello](#), a move which needs some explanation. On the coast, where the two rivers and the Scolo Rigossa (between them) become one, the advance was measured in yards, but inland near the railway it covered about six miles or more. The enemy had been outflanked rather than driven



**4 armoured brigade's attack to the savio, 19–20 october 1944**

back, first by British and Indian advances in the foothills south of Route 9 across the upper reaches of the [Fiumicino](#) and the [Rigossa](#) and, nearer at hand, by the Canadians along Route 9. He had left behind his usual demolitions and rearguard outposts, the worst of these a paratroop stronghold in the village of Sant' Angelo

which had taken the Maoris some hard fighting

to clear. Flat, featureless country waterlogged after rain was not suitable going for tanks, and it had been an infantry war with the tanks in support on the roads. At night patrols would probe forward to find whether the enemy had gone or where he was weakest; if he had gone a company would be called up to follow close behind the withdrawal, hoping to crowd him out of his rearguard positions before he had settled in.

During the week General Freyberg had returned to the Division. He took command again from General Weir on 14 October, urged his brigadiers to get a bridgehead across the [Pisciatello](#), and made plans for a big tank attack. The tanks—18 Regiment on the right, the 20th on the left—were to push through the bridgehead on a front of 2000 yards and were not to worry about their flanks. The brigade's main objectives were the [Rio Granarolo](#), half-way between the [Pisciatello](#) and the [Savio](#), and the [Savio](#) itself.

Sixth Brigade relieved 5 Brigade at the Scolo Olca in the late afternoon and early evening of the 17th with about a quarter of a mile to go (less in places) to reach the [Pisciatello](#). But the heavy rain made it no night to attack, although the Canadians decided to do so and got across the river. Next night, 18–19 October, under a barrage described by the General as 'quite impressive', 24 and 25 Battalions crossed the river. By morning—an hour or two later than planned—the tanks were up with them.

Outflanked on their [Pisciatello](#) positions by the Canadians and by 5 British Corps farther south, the Germans had already decided to fall back to the [Cesena-Cervia](#) road on the first stage of a withdrawal across the [Savio](#). Some units made their move a little late and were caught by our shellfire.

Fourth Brigade's attack, 'a swift advance at tank speed' over a course of four miles and a few furlongs—it was called afterwards the [Gambettola-Savio](#) gallop—was the most ambitious it had so far undertaken. In a way, it was an anniversary celebration marking the end of the brigade's first year in [Italy](#)—its first year in action. For the first time since it had been formed it was to fight as a brigade, two regiments up, its Motor Battalion in support.

In the past the tanks had gone into action supporting the infantry and usually under their command, sometimes ahead of them but more often just behind. For this action the tanks were in front and it was the infantry's job for a change to protect them. The country was flat farmland, dotted with houses and trees and criss-crossed with ditches and narrow lanes.

The regiment began to cross the river at [Casone](#) about half past six and by half past seven was deployed ready to attack, A Squadron on the left and B on the right, C Squadron behind them in reserve. The attack began at ten minutes to ten. The tanks moved through 25 Battalion's positions, with the reconnaissance troop behind the leading squadrons giving covering fire and a 22 Battalion company bringing up the rear on the reserve squadron's tanks. The usual retinue of engineer and artillery attachments ensured co-operation with the supporting arms.

There was little opposition until the tanks reached the road running east from [Osteriaccia](#) and came within range of the enemy positions on the [Cesena- Cervia](#) road. As usual, the enemy had chosen his ground well, holding strongpoints in the villages of [Osteriaccia](#) and [Calabrina](#) behind a screen of ditches and casa outposts. Bordered by deep ditches on either side, the secondary roads across the tanks' line of advance blocked the way forward until a crossing was found and also gave the enemy guns on the flank a lane down which to fire. A Sherman and a Honey reconnaissance tank were hit and set on fire near the crossroads east of [Osteriaccia](#). Other tanks ditched or bogged on the way up were hauled out by bulldozers or helped out of trouble by sappers or the regiment's recovery team.

The first stage of the advance is described by Captain Familton, temporarily in command of B Squadron for this attack:

We started off across country and found it slow going in the mud. The two leading troops crossed the [Cesena- Cervia](#) road while Jerry was busy with A Sqn and then, just as my SHQ [Squadron Headquarters] tank and the Reserve Tp reached the road, Jerry spotted us and used an 88 mm. straight down the road. My driver swears the shell which hit Cpl. [McLeod](#) <sup>37</sup> in the next tank passed between his head and the 75 mm. Cpl McLeod lost his leg from this wound.

Just after I had crossed the road, I heard a fusillade of 30-cal MG in front,

followed by another beltful, then another. The country was very difficult, soft, many ditches, trees and large clumps of bamboo 15 to 20 ft. high. The leading tanks reported movement and I pushed forward to see what I could when another belt of 30 cal went through and I turned the corner of a casa to see Lt. Crespin's <sup>38</sup> troop in perfect formation machine-gunning a large clump of bamboo. Out from the bamboo raced a large rooster and half a dozen hens, without a casualty for our pots. No. 5 Tp heard a great deal about movement in the bamboo after that.

While 18 Regiment to the right was having its own troubles with ditches and anti-tank guns, the 20th spent the afternoon trying to subdue the [Calabrina](#) and [Osteriaccia](#) strongpoints. Without knowing it, the tanks had driven right up to the enemy's front door. At Calabrina they got close enough to shoot up sniper and spandau posts in some of the houses, but an attack from the north-east against [Osteriaccia](#) could get no closer than 300 yards before it was forced back by gun and mortar fire. Two more Shermans were knocked out by the enemy's field guns, one of them Second-Lieutenant Overton's of 8 Troop. Two 25 Battalion companies and 19 Regiment tanks attacking [Osteriaccia](#) from the south-east were no more successful.

As it was impossible to occupy [Calabrina](#) in sufficient strength before dark the tanks withdrew for the night to positions dug by the infantry. The enemy made no attempt to counter-attack but during the night shelled the tank harbours, at times heavily. Our own tanks did no shooting but several times called on the artillery to shell enemy movement and suspected anti-tank gun and mortar positions. When the enemy shelling eased off in the early hours and the noise of demolitions was heard, it became clear that the enemy was withdrawing. Infantry patrols at dawn confirmed that the two village strongpoints were clear.

The tanks wasted no time in pushing on. The night's demolitions delayed them for a time and difficult going over swampy fields made the advance to the [Granarolo](#) very slow. At one stage eight A Squadron tanks were 'bellied' in the mud but all were successfully extricated. A few mines located with civilian help were lifted by the sappers and did no damage. Both regiments used Valentine bridge-laying tanks to cross the Granarolo stream, the two 20th squadrons by the same bridge, and after a short move north-west across country to [San Giorgio](#) both squadrons headed west towards the [Savio](#).

B Squadron's first objective for the day was a crossroads about 400 yards ahead of the position where it had laagered for the night. 'I sent Lt. Crespin out to do this,' says Fiamilton, 'and he did a perfect advance with one tank up, but when he reached the roads imagine his surprise to see a jeep and be greeted, "Good morning, what are your plans for today?" Yes, it was Tiny out looking for himself. On the second day we stuck more to the roads and struck no opposition until we swung west towards the Savio.'

General Freyberg has described the country east of the river as 'difficult—small fields and big hedges and no fields of fire.' After turning west the tanks kept to the roads, A Squadron following a track beside the Scolo Cervaro and B using the road leading west to Ronta. On reaching the lateral road running north beside the river early in the afternoon, A Squadron's leading tanks were fired on by machine guns and snipers and themselves fired on enemy minelaying parties still working east of the river. B Squadron also ran into machine-gun fire near Ronta.

Both the armoured regiments had some good shooting on both sides of the river during the afternoon, 'some of it under the friendly auspices of civilians who obliged by pinpointing spandau posts.' Having caught up with the enemy rearguard, the advance ended for the day. Tanks and infantry formed strongpoints for the night from which patrols tried to push forward to the river. The reconnaissance troop brought up supplies and ammunition and the day ended (like many other days on the Adriatic front) with the guns and mortars of both sides pounding each other's forward positions spasmodically in endless argument. Not a single tank had been lost by either of the two regiments in the day's advance and the infantry's casualties had been very light. <sup>39</sup>

First thing in the morning, the 21st, infantry patrols checked the tracks running west to the river, found them clear, and called up the tanks. A and B Squadrons took up positions close to the riverbank while behind them the sappers and their bulldozers cleared away demolitions. Fourth Brigade's main job for the day was to extend the Division's front north, handing over its positions facing the Savio to 6 Brigade. Eighteenth Regiment, supported by 22 Battalion and the Divisional Cavalry, had what it describes as 'an acrimonious little battle' with paratroopers, but 20 Regiment saw no fighting this day. It handed over its positions to 24 Battalion and

19 Regiment tanks in the afternoon and went back to form a gunline along the road near Botteghina, facing west.

The gunline's job was to support a Canadian attack across the river on the night of the 21st–22nd. All day a Canadian company had held a precarious bridgehead on the west bank north of Cesena and that night in a full set-piece attack the Canadians extended and strengthened their hold. To the north of 6 Brigade's front seventy-one tanks from 20 and 18 Regiments shot away about 9000 rounds in an hour and a half to simulate another crossing. If not deceived, the enemy must at least have been disconcerted.

'It was a magnificent sight, the two Regts along the one road line,' says one eye-witness. 'We levelled guns, then fired a barrage with all our HE going up by one turn of the hand wheel to almost maximum elevation. Then each Sqn concentrated as near as possible on some prominent object on Jerry's side of the river, e.g., crossroads, groups of houses, and sent away all our APHE and AP. I have often wondered what Jerry thought of that bombardment.'

The morning of the 22nd was spent in discussing the usual rumours that precede a relief. It had rained heavily the night before and the day was cold and the sky threatening, but apart from the inevitable noisy enemy gun and mortar the day passed quietly on the New Zealand front. In the afternoon the Canadians arrived to take over. The wheeled convoy had already left just after noon for Fabriano and at 4 p.m. the tanks followed south.

The relief ended one of the regiment's most successful operations. At a cost of one man killed, four Shermans and one Stuart tank knocked out, it had made an advance of between five and seven miles in two day's fighting. It could be said in all truth that the enemy was withdrawing and that the ground won meant little, but it had to be won against panzer grenadiers and paratroopers making what their records describe as 'a fighting withdrawal behind the Savio'. As usual, they stayed till they had to go; few prisoners were taken.

It was no country for tanks; in fact, the timing of the whole operation was dependent on whether they could move across country at all. Because of the recent rains they had to keep largely to the roads, which on the map look firm and straight

and broad but on the ground were seldom better than narrow lanes. A Divisional Cavalry diarist, Bob Pinney,<sup>40</sup> an original 20 Battalion infantryman of Burnham days, describes driving along them 'with a wheel touching a ditch on either side', and General Freyberg is recorded as having told the Canadian Corps commander, Lieutenant-General E. L. M. Burns, that the 'dotted red roads on the map were just mud tracks'.

A feature of the operation was the co-operation between tanks and infantry—especially good when working with 22 (Motor) Battalion—and between tanks and engineers. One of the simplest ways to improve this co-operation was for the tanks to carry the infantry's lunch rations, a method which is reported to have secured close liaison 'up till lunch time at least'. The sappers were invaluable: they worked willingly and hard at any task they were required to do, often under heavy fire. Bulldozer and bridge-laying tank were always on call close to Tactical Headquarters through the engineer reconnaissance officer's Honey tank and were usually in operation within about a quarter of an hour.

This was the first time the regiment as a whole had worked with 22 Battalion and 'everything went like clockwork'. One of the best examples of this co-operation was shown on the evening of 19 October, when it was decided at short notice to laager for the night near Calabrina. The manoeuvre was carried out in less than an hour, the tanks covering the infantry while they dug their positions and then withdrawing about 300 yards to harbour inside these strongpoints.

Unlike the battles before Florence, little was seen of the enemy's Tiger tanks in the last month's fighting. Well camouflaged and well sited, they preferred usually to wait in hiding until our tanks came forward to them rather than to sally out into the open. On the first day of the advance on 23 September all the regiment's tank casualties were caused in the same way and in the same area when tanks stumbled blindly on to waiting enemy tanks or anti-tank guns.

While the enemy used his tanks as anti-tank guns, we were inclined to think of ours as reconnaissance vehicles and it cost men and tanks to learn the lesson. Among the hedges and grape-vines (still thickly leafed) a tank commander could often see only a few yards from his turret; at night, of course, he could see even less. The tank's most useful role in this type of country was as a close-support

weapon, guided forward by infantry to consolidate an objective—in support of the infantry rather than under its command. To use the tank as a scout car or Bren carrier was to expect too much.

Of the regiment's specialists, the recovery section again came in for a large share of praise in squadron commanders' reports of the actions. At any hour of the day or night it was called out to extricate tanks, and sometimes guns, that had been stranded in ditches or bogged in muddy fields. On one of the most exciting of these expeditions the section was posted missing for some two hours before it returned to Tactical Headquarters towing a derelict Sherman and followed by a rescued Stuart.

The Sherman had come to grief well forward, fairly close to the enemy positions and under his spandau and mortar fire; close enough, too, to be shelled by our own artillery. Tracer from spandaus firing on fixed lines flickered over the heads of the fitters working to free the tank. From time to time they were forced to dive for shelter underneath it as nebelwerfer rockets fell unpleasantly close. Noticing some dim figures moving past in the darkness, one of the fitters called out: 'Better keep your head down mate, there's a bit of spandau round here.' The patrol stopped, looked at him for a moment, then passed on without speaking. Were they Germans? No one can tell.

The tank's crew in the meantime had left the fitters at their work and had gone back to better cover. After waiting some time without seeing any sign of the tank or of the section's T<sub>2</sub>, the crew returned to Squadron Headquarters and reported that the recovery section had probably been taken prisoner as enemy patrols were in the area. No one could raise the T<sub>2</sub> by radio and Colonel Purcell ordered the squadron to send out a patrol to find it.

By this time the section was on its way back, towing behind it the crippled tank which at last, after much roaring of motors, had been pulled from the ditch. A few hundred yards back the T<sub>2</sub> stopped in the middle of a field to look for the missing tank crew, but hardly had it stopped before the moaning crescendo of nebelwerfer rockets was heard again. A nearby haystack caught fire, silhouetting the 'Pursuit Ship' and its tow; another 'stonk' fell nearby and the procession lost no time heading back.

On the way the section also recovered Sergeant Noel O'Dwyer's <sup>41</sup> Stuart tank which had had part of its suspension shot away. Believing his tank to be immobile, O'Dwyer had evacuated his crew and stayed behind. Stopping to investigate, the recovery section managed to get the tank going and added it to its convoy.

But hardest worked of all was the reconnaissance troop. As maid-of-all-work—reconnoitring, message running, delivering supplies—the troop was required to cover the whole front, taking its tanks over country in which the heavier Sherman would have sunk to its belly. The troop's tanks and crews were often under strain for long hours and had thoroughly earned a rest. But so, too, had the whole of the regiment.

Its casualties in the advance from [Rimini](#) to the [Savio](#) were the highest of any of the regiments of 4 Armoured Brigade. Two officers and 15 men had been killed or had died of wounds, 3 officers and 34 men had been wounded, none had been taken prisoner. The brigade's casualties totalled 263 (57 of whom were killed or had died of wounds), nearly half of these being men from 22 (Motor) Battalion. In the same period—25 August to 26 October are the blanket dates—the Division had suffered just over 1100 casualties, of whom 228 had been killed or had died of wounds. Once again the brunt of the losses had been borne by the infantry battalions.

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<sup>1</sup> Tpr R. M. Gray; born NZ 4 Apr 1922; station hand; accidentally killed 14 Aug 1944

<sup>2</sup> Capt J. E. Hobson, MBE, m.i.d.; Paekakariki; born England, 22 Oct 1905; Regular soldier.

<sup>3</sup> Brig C. L. Pleasants, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Halcombe, 26 Jul 1910; schoolmaster; CO [18 Bn](#) Jul-Oct 1942; [18 Armd Regt](#) Oct 1942- Mar 1944; comd [4 Armd Bde](#) Sep-Nov 1944; [5 Bde](#) 1–22 Aug 1944, Nov 1944- Jan 1945, May 1945-Jan 1946; twice wounded; Commander, [Fiji Military Forces](#), 1949–53; Commandant, Northern Military District, 1953–57; Commandant, Central Military District, Mar 1957-.

<sup>4</sup> General Freyberg resumed command on 14 October.

<sup>5</sup> 22 Battalion had one NCO killed and eleven men wounded when a mortar bomb landed in the riverbed in which they had taken position.

<sup>6</sup> Cpl R. A. Bradley; born Waimate, 14 Feb 1923; clerk; died of wounds 23 Sep 1944.

<sup>7</sup> Tpr I. W. Gilmore; born NZ 3 Oct 1920; mechanic; died of wounds 23 Sep 1944.

<sup>8</sup> Cpl A. J. C. Donald; Otahuti, Invercargill; born Invercargill, 23 Mar 1920; farmhand; wounded 22 Sep 1944.

<sup>9</sup> One Canadian regimental historian has described the country north of the Marecchia as 'The Promised Land'.

<sup>10</sup> The crew managed to escape from the tank. Hargraves who took shelter beneath it, was shot by a sniper, and Coppin was killed by machine-gun fire while trying to lift Burland from his turret. The wireless operator (Neil Macdonald) and the spare driver managed to get away.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Lt N. E. Fergus, m.i.d.; Waihi Beach; born Ashburton, 4 Mar 1915; sheep-farmer.

<sup>12</sup> L-Sgt C. H. Anderton, MM; Otane; born Hastings, 15 Feb 1920; shepherd; wounded Apr 1945.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Lt D. J. Clark, m.i.d.; Wright's Bush, Invercargill; born Otautau, 5 May 1920; farm labourer; wounded 23 Sep 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Tpr J. Rae; Runanga; born NZ 11 Dec 1916; bus driver; wounded 23 Sep 1944.

<sup>15</sup> Lt J. A. Becker; Waipiata, Central Otago; born Oturehua, Central Otago, 22 Jun 1915; tractor driver; wounded 24 Sep 1944; Lt 22 Bn (J Force) 1945–46.

<sup>16</sup> Maj M. Handyside, DSO; Hundalee, North Canterbury; born Invercargill, 20 Dec 1918; shepherd; Coy Comd 25 Bn; three times wounded.

<sup>17</sup> Tpr R. J. Peebles; Clifton, Invercargill; born Ake Ake, 7 Jan 1922; freezing works employee; twice wounded.

<sup>18</sup> Tpr G. G. Burgess; born NZ 16 Sep 1919; nurseryman; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

<sup>19</sup> Tpr M. J. Forde; Wright's Bush, Southland; born Isla Bank, Southland, 15 Dec 1919; lorry driver; wounded 23 Sep 1944.

<sup>20</sup> Sgt W. N. C. Craig; born Bulls, 9 Oct 1915; driver; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

<sup>21</sup> Tpr R. C. Mann; born NZ 19 Mar 1921; market gardener; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

<sup>22</sup> Lt F. A. Hadfield; Wellington; born Auckland, 24 Jul 1916; salesman; twice wounded.

<sup>23</sup> 2 Lt J. K. Austad; Lyttelton; born Lyttelton, 30 Apr 1914; clerk; wounded 28 Jun 1942.

<sup>24</sup> Sgt D. L. Black; born NZ 8 Jun 1914; farmer and contractor; killed in action 26 Sep 1944.

<sup>25</sup> Cpl C. T. Nordbye; born NZ 5 May 1919; truck driver; killed in action 26 Sep 1944.

<sup>26</sup> Lt A. C. Cunningham; Tauranga; born Napier, 31 Mar 1908; solicitor.

<sup>27</sup> Lt E. J. Tressider; Blenheim; born NZ 12 Aug 1911; P & T Dept exchange clerk.

<sup>28</sup> WO I D. P. Birch; Auckland; born Christchurch, 5 Jun 1913; Regular soldier.

<sup>29</sup> 2 Lt J. M. Phillips; born Te Awamutu, 8 Jun 1917; shepherd; killed in action 30 Sep 1944.

<sup>30</sup> Some of the most serious wounds were phosphorus burns caused when smoke grenades caught fire.

<sup>31</sup> An alternative explanation is that the enemy interpreted the move forward of 1 Greek Battalion and the relief of the Maoris by 2 Greek Battalion as the preliminaries for an attack and sent his tanks across the river to oppose it.

<sup>32</sup> Sgt M. L. Stringer; Sefton; born NZ 23 Nov 1920; messenger; wounded 4 Oct 1944.

<sup>33</sup> Tpr A. G. Chaney; Opua, Bay of Islands; born Dunedin, 22 Dec 1912; bar steward; wounded 4 Oct 1944.

<sup>34</sup> Maj S. J. Wright, ED; born NZ 11 Apr 1905; farmer; twice wounded; died Karaka, Mar 1950.

<sup>35</sup> 'The Germans stole everything.'

<sup>36</sup> Named after the Canadian brigadier who commanded it.

<sup>37</sup> Cpl A. F. McLeod; Manurewa; born NZ 29 Sep 1915; farmhand; wounded 19 Oct 1944.

<sup>38</sup> Capt C. P. Crespin; Auckland; born Melbourne, 27 Oct 1913; woolbuyer.

<sup>39</sup> A maxim of armoured warfare—'the more tanks you use the less you lose'—here receives strong support.

<sup>40</sup> Tpr R. Pinney; Mihiwaka, Otago; born Rathmines, Ireland, 20 Apr 1907; sheep-farmer.

<sup>41</sup> Sgt N. P. O'Dwyer, m.i.d.; born Blenheim, 15 Nov 1920; hairdresser.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 19 – WINTER ON THE SENIO

## CHAPTER 19

### Winter on the Senio

Like most of the regiment's moves, this one was made on a Sunday and in rain. The roads were busy and there were frequent halts, especially at the one-way Bailey bridges. The regiment's destination, [Fabriano](#), was some ninety-odd miles south-east of [Viserba](#), and the last 26 miles of the journey, covered in darkness, took the wheeled convoy three hours. It reached [Fabriano](#) about 9 p.m. (although it was nearly midnight before some of the later vehicles arrived) and staged the night in a large field outside the town. The tanks, which had been loaded on transporters at [Gambettola](#), and the A Echelon transport joined the rest of the regiment at eight o'clock next morning. After a busy morning 'messing about' all the troops were billeted in houses in the town.

The weather was still showery and cold but the men, pleased to be away from the noise of gunfire again after nearly six weeks of it, made themselves comfortable and caught up on some lost sleep. The rest of the brigade joined the regiment in a couple of days' time, and the troops, now refreshed, occupied themselves in discussing the usual rumours—the future of the Division, furlough for the earlier reinforcements, leave. Colonel Purcell and the squadron commanders went off to conferences and learnt that there was some reorganisation to be done. The recent battles had shown that the Division badly needed more infantry; most of its fighting since it had arrived in [Italy](#) a year before had been done by two instead of the normal three infantry brigades and reliefs had been difficult to arrange and casualties heavy. The brigades were now increased in strength from three battalions each to four, 22 (Motor) Battalion and the [Divisional Cavalry](#) becoming infantry, at first not very happily. There were other changes, too, in which the Division reduced its defensive armament of anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns; and arrangements were also made for a large replacement scheme in which some ten thousand long-service officers and men were to be sent home—later. There had been truth in the rumours after all.

The people of [Fabriano](#) and the surrounding mountain villages and towns had by now overcome their early shyness. Generous, friendly and sincere, they welcomed the men into their homes, and they were kind and courteous hosts. The men shared

with them their cigarettes, chocolate and food, respected their poultry and possessions, played with the children. Soon children and troopers were calling each other by their Christian names. Poppa liked the New Zealander to share his wine; Momma would find him a warm place by the fire; the children liked to sing and dance and, in all, some pleasant evenings were spent, as one diarist describes it, 'nattering with the EYES'.

First thing in the morning the windows of the billets were blind with frost and on one night early in November there was an unexpected fall of snow. It was football weather. That first nip in the air that makes the New Zealand schoolboy start searching for his football boots—thrown mud-caked into a washhouse corner at the end of last season—had reinfected the Division with the football fever. On fields of varying sizes and varying depths of mud, squadron played squadron, regiment played battalion, brigade played brigade. And if you weren't keen on rugby there were the divisional boxing championships to see in the Opera House at [Matelica](#), concert parties (including the regiment's own stars in '4 Brigade Revue' in [Fabriano's](#) Teatro Gentile), the cinema, the [YMCA](#), some dancing with the local signorinas—usually well chaperoned—and official leave to [Rome](#), [Florence](#), and [Riccione](#). There was unofficial leave, too, on individually planned tours to the south to renew acquaintances made in earlier rest areas. The people of Arpino, particularly, gave these tourists a special welcome.

Other diversions are recorded. Just as at [Mignano](#) almost everyone tried his hand at making olive-wood pipes or in experimenting with variations of the oil-drip stove, in [Fabriano](#) on a wet day the thing to do was to learn to play the piano-accordion. Many men bought handsome models from local makers.

The local wine was tried, of course, and the connoisseur would discuss it learnedly and at length, pointing out how it varied in taste and colour and bouquet from that of other districts in which the regiment had been quartered. To the less discriminating throat it was all 'plonk' or 'purple death'. But not all of it was good. Routine orders reported that two soldiers—not from the regiment—had been poisoned through drinking wine brought from a hawker, and gave a general warning against the dangers of drinking an Italian anti-fly solution by mistake. No, not all soldiers were connoisseurs by any means.

There was also work to do. Fourth Brigade had been issued with some new Shermans armed with a 17-pounder gun—it got them the day it left the Savio sector on the way back to its rest area. Twelve were received, of which the regiment got two. Two Royal Armoured Corps instructors were attached to teach the crews all about them; they were primarily an anti-Tiger weapon. The new gun was fired on the brigade tank range by squadrons in turn; on the regiment's own range the men fired small-arms practices. Maintenance work on the tanks filled in some time, and later most of the vehicles were painted at the brigade workshops. Parties of officers and NCOs were attached for short periods to 23 Battalion and parties from that battalion were attached to the regiment. Captain Miles,<sup>1</sup> the RMO, was evacuated sick and was succeeded by Lieutenant Patterson;<sup>2</sup> six of the NCOs—Owen Hughes, Owen Boyd,<sup>3</sup> Alex Cunningham, Arthur McLay,<sup>4</sup> T. J. Minhinnick,<sup>5</sup> and Bill Archdall<sup>6</sup>—were commissioned early in November as second-lieutenants.

Early in November there were some changes of command in the brigade. Brigadier Pleasants, who had not long before succeeded Brigadier Inglis, went to 5 Brigade to succeed Brigadier Jim Burrows, a 20th 'old boy', who was going back to New Zealand as Rector of Waitaki Boys' High School. Brigadier Pleasants's message to all ranks on his departure was more than a formal goodbye. He had been with the brigade since it was first formed and had fought with it in infantry and in armour. 'One of the greatest moments of my life,' his message ran, 'was the order to the Bde to attack in this last battle. The way in which that order was carried out more than justified my confidence. I sincerely hope that I shall be able to give that order again if the need for it is still there.... I hope to be back before long.' Colonel Campbell,<sup>7</sup> a former commander of 22 Battalion, was appointed second-in-command of the brigade on 6 November and commanded it temporarily until February, when his appointment was confirmed.

Then, on 20 November, the conferences began once again and warning came from 4 Brigade of a probable move. Next day—it had been decided to get them away before going back into battle—a party of twenty-four men (Echelon men and early reinforcements) left the regiment for a tour of duty at the armoured corps training depot at Maadi and were replaced by a similar number from that depot. This was the first stage of the replacement scheme that had been discussed so fully in the last few weeks. On the 23rd, while the rest of the unit made preparations for the move

back into the line, the Bren carriers clattered away from [Fabriano](#) and headed north. The advance party followed them next day, and on the afternoon of the 26th —again a Sunday—the tanks were loaded on transporters and driven north over familiar roads to [Cesena](#), stopping overnight on the way at [Pesaro](#).

The tanks had hardly left [Fabriano](#) when the rain set in. Roads were greasy, and in some places flooded, when the wheeled convoy followed the tanks, setting out in heavy rain at 4 a.m. on the 27th. In spite of these conditions the 'wheels' made good progress and by noon had reached the regiment's new area on the outskirts of [Cesena](#). The tanks, still on their transporters, went through to [Forli](#) that night.

With the coming of winter, [Eighth Army](#) planned to rest and regroup its formations in turn. The New Zealand Division's spell had ended all too quickly. During its five weeks out of the line the enemy had been forced back from the Savio River to the [Lamone](#), a distance of roughly 20 miles. He had made successive stands on the [Ronco](#) and Montone rivers on the way back, and at one stage had had to withdraw three divisions from [Eighth Army](#)'s front to hold [Bologna](#) against attacks by Fifth Army. The recent battles had shown that big advances during the winter were out of the question: tanks could not move off the roads, aircraft could not take off from sodden airfields or fly in the rain, and even the infantry weapons became clogged with mud. [Eighth Army](#) planned a 'fortnight's all-out effort' to capture [Ravenna](#), using three fresh divisions—the two divisions of [1 Canadian Corps](#) and the New Zealand Division. At the same time, Fifth Army would have another crack at [Bologna](#).

Preceded by the field regiments, a week earlier than the rest, the Division returned to the line on 26 November when it relieved [4 British Division](#) on the Lamone River, north-east of [Faenza](#). The troops most concerned, the infantry, found that the war had not changed for the better during their absence. A chilling rain driven by biting winds had soaked the flat countryside. The Lamone was the usually muddy river—perhaps a bit wider than some, waist-deep, and getting deeper with the rain—with the usual muddy stopbanks; and across the river the enemy lay concealed in the usual rows of vines or manned machine-gun posts in houses and used the steeples and tall buildings of [Faenza](#) to spot for his guns and mortars. (On our side we had no tall buildings left to spy from and couldn't see very far.) At night there were the usual patrols to the river to find out where it could be crossed and to

see what the Hun was doing on his stopbank. Strong swimmers in some of the battalions had some hazardous nights trying to find crossing places. The enemy was nervy and watchful and quick to open fire.

Away from all this in divisional reserve in [Forli](#)—eight miles down Route 9 from [Faenza](#)—the regiment's tanks and A Echelon had good billets in a partly-built block of flats near the bridge in the north of the town and in neighbouring houses. The town was congested and a target for occasional quick raids by enemy aircraft. A large bomb which fell about fifty yards from the house in which the recovery section was billeted gave its men a shaking but caused no casualties and did no harm to its vehicles. By good luck the bomb fell in the only open space in the neighbourhood.

Captain Familton describes one of these early raids:

I will never forget the Messerschmitts coming in over [Forli](#) at roof-level and doing over first the airfield and then strafing Route 9. Our truck had just arrived, and as we were dodging round the thick stone casa enjoying the fun, being about 50 yards from the road line, we saw the driver, I forgot his name, take a beautiful header into a ditch with about 4 ft. of ice-cold muddy water. We found out after that one cannon shell had hit his truck without much damage.

The regiment's method of cleaning out the local sewers caused almost as much consternation as one of these raids. Several gallons of petrol was poured down the street gratings and was followed, after an interval of several minutes, by a lighted match. The same drastic method was used on household septic tanks, often with spectacular explosions.

Back still further at [Cesena](#), B2 Echelon had settled into the 'Mud Flats', not the most comfortable of billets but certainly airy—most rooms had neither doors nor windows. B1 Echelon was dotted around in squadron groups on either side of Route 9 near 'Pip' and 'Squeak' Bailey bridges, two miles out of [Forli](#). There was no room for them in the town. B Echelon's ration trucks had to go forward from [Cesena](#) to [Forli](#) to draw supplies, take them back to [Cesena](#) to be 'broken down', then carry them back to [Forli](#) again to issue them to the squadrons.

[Cesena](#), too, had its air alarms. After the peace of recent months of air

superiority, the supply people were not used to them; sometimes their vehicles were not widely enough dispersed, and in the early days when the alarm sounded men would rush outside to gape or stand around in groups discussing it all. The Italians were less phlegmatic, sometimes hysterical. Bombs were dropped and there were some spectacular low-strafing attacks along Route 9. Some units had casualties, but the regiment in both [Forli](#) and [Cesena](#) seems to have been lucky. It fired its first shots in return for these enemy pleasantries on 29 November. The day before, half of A Squadron had moved up nearer [Faenza](#) to form a gunline in support of 5 and 6 Brigades. On its first day in the line it shot away 500 rounds against roads and other general targets across the [Lamone](#); on the second day 900 rounds 'harassing fire' were shot off in the rain against mortar positions and other targets nominated by the brigades. Sixth Brigade reported that the mortars which had been troubling it had been damaged and silenced by the tanks' fire.

December opened with the regiment on twenty-four hours' notice to move forward to take part in [Eighth Army's](#) 'all-out effort', but the weather was taking care of that. A Squadron's gunline, relieved on the 3rd by its other half and fairly comfortably installed in houses, was still harassing the enemy's mortars and crossroads north of [Faenza](#); B and C Squadrons, in the northern outskirts of [Forli](#), had no duties but had a role to prepare for as part of Parkinson task force <sup>8</sup> in the attack being planned against [Faenza](#) and advance up Route 9 to the [Senio](#). For this attack B Squadron was to support 25 Battalion, C 24 Battalion, and A was in reserve. In each squadron's retinue was a battery of [Royal Horse Artillery](#) self-propelled guns and an engineer reconnaissance unit.

This is not an exciting period in the regiment's war diary. Captain Hazlett faithfully records the weather: 'Weather—Hy fog turning to rain in afternoon. Cold.'—that was for 6 December; 'Fog and drizzle continue'—the 7th; then the more routine 'Weather cold and wet' for several days in succession. A Squadron continued to chew up ammunition in its gunline and on the 11th was replaced by C Squadron. From all reports, everyone seems to have been pleased with the tanks' shooting, especially the forward infantry, men not always easy to please. The Shermans' guns were especially severe on enemy mortars, which they engaged sometimes—when the weather was fine—in co-operation with an air OP; there are few better ways to win infantry friendship. In the first fortnight, up to 13 December, A and C Squadrons'

tanks in the gunlines fired a total of 8763 rounds.

'We were first on the left of the road and later moved over to the right near a big house,' says Major Caldwell, A Squadron's commander. 'The tanks were laid out in a line and fired quite a large number of rounds. The conditions were extremely wet and muddy and I can remember even Bren carriers had a difficult time getting ammunition in to the tanks. The few days passed with very little excitement; only once did the Germans ever get near our position with counter-battery fire and the only other notable feature was that one of our returning fighters crashed in our area and the pilot, baling out very low, landed amongst us.'

The Lamone had been crossed south-west of Faenza, where it was shallower, in a night attack on 3 December by 46 British Division. After some reshuffling of units, 5 Brigade crossed the river by 46 Division's bridgehead on the night of 10–11 December, while 6 Brigade side-stepped from north to south of the railway above Route 9. A Squadron crossed on 13 December following 18 Regiment, under whose command it was temporarily placed, and by dusk had concentrated round a farmhouse in the bridgehead about two miles south-west of Faenza. Part of the road up—the Lamone road, built by the engineers from the bricks and rubble of shattered farmhouses—was in direct view of Faenza, but the tanks moved up and crossed the river without incident, although the bridge did a fair amount of swaying under the weight of the Shermans.

A Squadron's immediate job was to send Second-Lieutenant Bill Archdall's troop to relieve a troop of 9 Lancers which was near some houses closer to Faenza on a road leading into the town from the south-west. The approach was under a railway viaduct which was covered by the enemy's self-propelled guns in Faenza—and the shell scars on the viaduct were proof of the accuracy of their shooting. One of the British tanks in some trees west of the viaduct had been hit no fewer than sixteen times by mortar and shell fire. A daylight approach would have been suicidal, and even at night the Germans fired bursts of armour-piercing shell at intervals to discourage any attempt to close on the town. It was decided to postpone the relief until the night of 14–15 December so that the tanks could move up unheard under cover of a barrage supporting an attack by 5 Brigade west of Faenza.

No. 2 Troop covered Archdall's advance, the viaduct hazard being negotiated

safely, and after some delay the Lancers were relieved about 5 a.m. Archdall's 17-pounder had its muzzle shot away later in the morning by a direct hit, which fired the round in the breech, blew open the tank's hatches, and left its crew wondering dazedly what had hit them. That night two more A Squadron troops moved up to take up positions supporting 25 Battalion, which had relieved the Maoris. A Bren carrier moving up the road to link with the forward troop struck a mine which the earlier users of the road had had luck enough to avoid, and Trooper Vic Smale <sup>9</sup> was killed and Trooper Bob Morgan <sup>10</sup> fatally wounded. Tactical Headquarters and B Squadron from [Forli](#) also joined the bridgehead on the 15th and A Squadron returned to the regiment's command.

Fifth Brigade's advance from its bridgehead west of the [Lamone](#) towards Route 9 and the [Senio](#) on the night of 14– 15 December was a set-piece 'job'—battlefield lit by artificial moonlight, a barrage by 420 guns, three battalions up, and fighter-bombers and the 'cab-rank' on call to break up any counter-attacks next day. There was some heavy fighting round [Celle](#) in which 18 Regiment and the Maoris clashed with a Tiger tank or two and the fighter-bombers did some effective strafing. The enemy was reported to have been surprised because the attack came sooner than he expected, nor had he expected quite so heavy a barrage. By late in the afternoon he had had enough and was seen to be withdrawing, and when [Divisional Cavalry](#) patrols crossed the [Lamone](#) into [Faenza](#) by the ruins of the old Route 9 bridge on the morning of 16 December they found only snipers and rearguard spandau posts.

The advance was continued at dawn on the 16th, with 25 Battalion from 6 Brigade—supported by A Squadron—making the fourth battalion forward. Twenty-fifth Battalion soon had a platoon in the western outskirts of [Faenza](#), in which the [Gurkhas](#) later joined the [Divisional Cavalry](#). At first the opposition was light—A Squadron's tanks reached Route 9 without incident—then the resistance stiffened; counter-attacks had to be beaten back, and concentrations by guns, mortars, and spandaus pinned down our infantry. A panzer-grenadier regiment, resting after fighting around [Bologna](#), had been rushed to the front to form a line north-west of [Faenza](#) with orders to carry out an aggressive defence.

While the infantry companies edged forward against this determined opposition, the tanks supporting them covered little ground. They did most of their fighting in the area between Route 9 and the railway, although one B Squadron troop fought

with the Gurkhas for three days in the outskirts of Faenza. The rest of B Squadron was attached to 24 Battalion,



## **faenza sector: 6 brigade's advance, 19 december 1944**

which crossed the Lamone on the afternoon of the 16th and had some sharp exchanges along the railway embankment on 25 Battalion's right and in attacks against enemy machine-gun posts in houses north of the railway. C Squadron still served its more static but busy gunline role of harassing roads and mortars in enemy country north of the railway, firing 3285 rounds in eight days. It made its first main move on the morning of the 19th when it passed through Faenza and took up positions in preparation for the attack being planned for that night.

The enemy, expecting the attack, was still aggressive. Throughout the morning shells fell on Tactical Headquarters, which the afternoon before had moved up to a site in a silk-stocking factory about half a mile north-west of Faenza. Shortly after midday Colonel Purcell was hit on the temple by a shell splinter and evacuated to the main dressing station in Faenza. The command passed to Major Barton.

Major Caldwell represented the CO at the brigade conference to complete plans for the night's attack while the second-in-command came forward. Liaison officer at 6 Brigade Headquarters at this time was Lieutenant Bill de Lautour, very solidly built and an inch or two under six feet; and when Major Barton, '6 ft 3 ins of skin and bone' (his own description), began to attend the brigade conferences Brigadier Parkinson christened the pair 'Big Armour' and 'Little Armour' respectively.

The regiment's arrangements for the night's attack— inherited at short notice by its second-in-command—were that C Squadron should support 26 Battalion on the left flank along the riverbank, and that A and B Squadrons should remain with 25 and 24 Battalions, the last-named on 6 Brigade's right flank. Each squadron had with it an engineer reconnaissance party, carried in Honeys. On the brigade's right, extending the front to the Naviglio canal, was 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade. Eight regiments of field guns began their barrage at 9 p.m. and the enemy was quick to reply with heavy shell and mortar concentrations on the infantry's start line, causing casualties. Following close behind the barrage on that pitch-black night, the infantry passed through lightly held outposts in farmhouses and buildings and were among the startled headquarters almost as soon as the fire lifted. The panzer grenadiers' bridgehead was held by about 200 men; to shift them our guns fired 100,000 shells which at that time they could ill spare. The outposts withdrew across the river, leaving behind surprisingly few dead and 180 prisoners, 86 of them panzer grenadiers and the rest from the German infantry division facing the Gurkhas.

The regiment's tanks supporting 6 Brigade had little part in the night's fighting, their role being to join the infantry at daybreak when the engineers had cleared the roads of mines. Twenty-sixth Battalion left its supporting arms behind in [Faenza](#) with orders not to come forward until the road to [La Palazza](#) which formed its right-hand boundary had been cleared. A bad demolition on Route 9 delayed C Squadron, which did not move up until 5.30 a.m., by which time the attack had been over for some hours and the companies were consolidating in platoon positions just short of the eastern stop-bank, parts of which were still held by the enemy. By 7 a.m. the tanks were up with the companies.

Twenty-fourth Battalion struck its hardest opposition at the Casa Busa, well on the way towards its objective at [San Pietro](#) in Laguna. B Squadron, too, had been ordered not to move until the infantry was on its objective, but by 6 a.m. the tanks were up with their companies after having been held up by mines. A Squadron, with 25 Battalion, lost its bulldozer on the way forward and was held up by demolitions, but was on its objective at 4.30 a.m., well before daybreak.

For his work in organising stretcher parties and help in evacuating the wounded in this attack, the regiment's chaplain, Padre Gunn, won a well-deserved MBE. To

evacuate some 24 Battalion wounded he crossed a minefield in an RAP carrier and stayed with them under continuous mortar and shell fire for over two hours while dressing their wounds: '... it is the desire of every offr and man in the Regt that his services be recognised,' states the citation to his award. Always cheerful, always in the thick of the fray, Padre Gunn had a reputation in the regiment for his apparent genius in picking as his casa the most conspicuous and most shelled house in the district.

The brigade's objective—the road running south-east from the [Senio](#) from [La Palazza](#) through [San Pietro](#) — had been gained with relatively light casualties, the worst of them suffered on the start line from enemy mortaring. The attack had cleared a troublesome bridgehead and won about 3000 yards of ground north of the railway, but patrols at dawn showed that the enemy was determined to keep the positions he still held east of the river and was in no mood to be trifled with. About midday 24 Battalion's reserve company and Lieutenant Shacklock's troop passed through the forward positions to find out whether the enemy was still there in strength. They were sharply reproached by self-propelled guns and mortars and had to retire to their old positions. Later in the afternoon 26 Battalion, in its turn, had to call on our artillery and mortars to repulse enemy patrols which had crossed the river. The enemy showed that he had no intention of going back without a fight; and in fact his line on the [Senio](#) was to remain secure until the [Eighth Army](#)'s final offensive in April 1945.

Being closest to the river, C Squadron and 26 Battalion had probably the liveliest time, especially at night. About midnight on 20–21 December a bazooka party tried to knock out one of 9 Troop's tanks commanded by Lieutenant Frank Childs.<sup>11</sup> Infantry pickets posted at upstairs windows gave warning of the enemy's approach and the party was driven off, leaving behind two prisoners; one source says they were deserters with some valuable information about enemy dispositions.

The enemy also set fire to haystacks with spandau incendiaries, an old trick which served the double purpose of silhouetting our patrols and positions and lighting the field for his machine-gunners; to counter it the tanks set alight to the rest of the haystacks by day. Enemy working parties across the river were harassed by the infantry's mortars and the tanks' guns, but retaliation was stern and there were some brisk exchanges. A nebelwerfer concentration shook up Tactical

Headquarters—it had moved a little way north of the silk-stocking factory—on the night of the 20th but caused no casualties, and next day B Squadron's shooting destroyed a building and a tower, both suspected of being used as OPs. During the morning of the 21st Corporal Jack Blunden,<sup>12</sup> commanding C Squadron's new 17-pounder tank, was fatally wounded by fire from an SP gun only a few hours after he had come forward to join 10 Troop. 'Mum' Blunden, one of the old hands and a good soldier and comrade, lingered in hospital for seventeen days before he died.

Behind the lines there was some shelling and an occasional air raid to cheer the rear echelons. As one account puts it: 'Downstairs rooms were at a premium, but there was no shortage of upper storey accommodation.' No one wanted to spend the winter in a bivvy tent. The morning frosts were hard and the days often raw and grey. It was riskier perhaps to live in a house but far more comfortable. In the centre of the room the diesel stove roared and spluttered, throwing strange shadows on the bare stone walls. Outside was a winter's night of rain and snow; inside it was cosy and warm, with a good fire, a plentiful supply of vino, old songs to sing, comradeship, and a feeling of mellow ness and good will.

As the squadrons had moved forward during the last fortnight, the rear echelons had followed forward in bounds from Cesena to Forli and on towards Faenza; the caterpillar simile has been used too often before but it describes the process adequately. Because of the number of units trying to crowd into these towns, good accommodation—especially in battered Faenza—was sometimes hard to find, but Faenza had one advantage over Forli in that coal and firewood were plentiful there.

'When the Sqn settled in on the gunline at Faenza I settled in B Ech in good billets in a quiet corner of Forli,' says Captain Hamilton. 'All we had to do was keep up the food and amm supplies we thought. We were soon disillusioned. As the weather became colder the 25-pdr box, drip-feed diesel stove came into its own. My returns showed a greater diesel consumption than when the Sqn was in action. We supplied infantry and other arms right up to the front line.'

Contact between the B echelons in Forli and the squadron headquarters and A Echelon in Faenza was maintained largely by jeep train and despatch rider. Six jeeps and trailers from a British armoured unit were attached to the regiment, but later in the month the job was handed over to drivers from 4 RMT Company. Route 9 was

flat and straight and easy driving, although liable to be strafed without notice by enemy fighters or shelled by his long-range guns; but when it had been snowing—and snow on the morning of 23 December gave promise of another 'white Christmas'—the slush was flung up into the drivers' faces and against windscreens by the churning wheels and the icy air bit deep.

Meanwhile, in the battered farmhouses and muddy fields below the [Senio](#) stopbank—the river, of course, had two stop-banks but the eastern one concerns us most at the moment—the tanks and their infantry improved their positions and kept a suspicious eye on the enemy's doings. A Squadron, which had been longest in the line, was withdrawn on 22 December with 24 Battalion when that unit handed over its front to 25 Battalion. The latter battalion, and B Squadron with it, now had much more ground to cover and an enemy to face on two fronts: to the north-east, where his positions were screened a little by some trees, and to the north-west, along the [Senio](#). B Squadron's troops were concentrated mainly around [La Palazza](#) and [San Pietro](#) in Laguna, along the road leading to [San Silvestro](#). They made no spectacular advances and fought no stirring actions but were content to fire when ordered and to harass the enemy when the chance came. In return they had to endure enemy shelling and mortaring; two of the squadron's men were wounded in a heavy mortar 'stonk' on the 23rd.

Behind B Squadron, A Squadron got a little rest and then, on 24 December, formed a gunline with two troops behind Route 9. Its headquarters had acquired in the advance a large house, the Villa le Sirene, just south of Route 9 and a good mile from [Faenza](#).

C Squadron, still with 26 Battalion nearest the stopbank, shot at enemy houses across the river while the infantry reconnoitred hither and thither looking for gaps in the minefield along the stopbank or tried to find out how strongly it was held. No. 10 Troop took part in a noisy little platoon attack at dawn on 24 December against the most prominent bend of the river near [La Palazza](#). Its object was to capture a section of the bank and test the depth and speed of the river; and although two New Zealand field regiments fired over 2000 shells in support and the troop lent a hand with both smoke and high explosive, their fire was not sufficient to drive the enemy from his deep defences. After a sharp fight at close range the platoon gained the

ascendancy and won a large slice of the bank. But it could not hold its gains under the Germans' enfilading fire and had to withdraw later in the morning under smoke cover given by the tanks, which had had to cease their fire on the stopbank because of poor visibility. During the morning the tanks were heavily 'stonked' but had no casualties.

This sharp little action brought the war to Christmas Eve, when everyone agreed that the battle could wait an hour or two while healths were toasted and 'next Christmas' predictions adequately discussed. The squadrons in the line postponed their Christmas dinner for a day or two, but few of their crews found it necessary to refuse the 'odd glass' of vermouth. With a provident eye, crews sent back pigs or poultry to the cooks at B Echelon and had them returned by jeep train, cooked, garnished, done to a turn—sometimes a same-day service. (One sergeant's tank went over a mine and when taken back for repairs was found to have in its turret sufficient supplies of poultry and pork to last several days.) Stray hens were at first thought to be setting off the trip flares laid around front-line houses to give warning of the approach of enemy patrols, but few survived Christmas to share the blame. Good food, bright sunshine, Christmas mail and parcels kept the men in high spirits.

A Squadron and 24 Battalion, the latter fresh from Christmas in [Forli](#), relieved B Squadron and 25 Battalion on the 29th. B Squadron took over A Squadron's house and set up a two-troop gunline, but returned to the line on the last day of the year with 25 Battalion, two troops supporting a forward company three-quarters of a mile north of [San Silvestro](#).

The year ended full of hope. Platoon patrols from 24 Battalion, testing the strength of the enemy to the north-east, found that some ground was theirs for the taking and took it, advancing in some places more than half a mile without being fired on. One of their peaceful acquisitions was the Casa Nova, half a mile due north of [San Pietro](#) in Laguna, and on the way forward to this house A Squadron's 17-pounder Sherman had its track blown off by a mine. With the better going, most of the tanks were able to avoid minefields on the roads by going round them across country.

It seemed possible that the enemy had withdrawn his guns and tanks behind the [Senio](#), leaving an infantry screen to the north-east. The infantry was ordered to

attack that night to see if this was so, A Squadron supporting 24 Battalion on the left and B helping 25 Battalion, which was to send a platoon to Casa Nuova, on the right.

The attack was planned to thrust north-east and then north-west towards the river and was to begin at half an hour past midnight on New Year's Eve. The streams of tracer bullets and coloured flares going up along the enemy front showed that the Germans were welcoming in the New Year with a light heart; how would they welcome their first-footing visitors? The infantry advancing in the bright moonlight were not left long in doubt, and soon ran into heavy fire.

A New Year party in [Casa Galanuna](#) was broken up with tank support and nine prisoners taken, but the vino factory garrison near the [Villa Pasolini](#) was more determined—a vino factory is a major objective or perhaps theirs was a better party—and beat off their attackers. The heaviest fighting took place round a group of houses known as the [Palazzo Toli](#), one of which a D Company platoon rushed and took and then found itself in serious difficulties.

The Germans were dug in in a semi-circle round the group of houses, which were roughly in the form of a triangle with its base facing the attackers. In its attack the platoon by-passed the two buildings at the foot of the triangle, from which no fire was coming, and took the third at its top. The Germans in the other two houses then opened fire and the platoon's position became critical: mortars crashed all around the house and bazooka rockets began to come through the walls. The platoon wirelessed back for help.

About 3 a.m. Second-Lieutenant Bill French's troop, back at D Company's headquarters, received orders to go to the platoon's help.

The C.O. [24 Bn](#) asked if we would have a crack at getting them out [says French]. I said I would have a go if given an infantry screen. This request was made because the country was of the typical close Italian type with grapevines, hedgerows, trees, etc., and provided good cover for any Hun bazooka. Maj MacDonald, <sup>13</sup> the Coy Comd, agreed on this and the reserve Pl commanded by Lt John [Williams](#) <sup>14</sup> was detailed for the job. He and I then did a quick recce and decided the best plan was to move down the road —actually the Inf start line—for a distance of approx 300 yds, then turn half right and move in line abreast—myself in

the centre, Sgt on left, Cpl on right—to within 150 yds of the house; when in position we would open up with everything we had—including the spare driver's lap-gun—and saturate the area of the house, including the house itself if necessary. This was to continue for about 15 minutes, after which we would switch to the left of the house and carry on with the same procedure while the PI in the house made a dash for it. The PI was informed by wireless to get well under cover and stand by. We left Coy HQs round about 0300 hrs from memory and moved in and gave the PI in the house full details of the plan.

During the initial stages I had contact with them on the 38 set; however, when the fireworks started I lost contact. John Williams, however, was close to my tank and maintained contact over his set. Everything went according to plan for once and they eventually made it back to Coy HQs. We then retraced our tracks, arriving back at Coy some time after 0430 hrs. The night was clear with considerable moon, which contributed greatly to the success of the show because it enabled us to direct our fire reasonably well. This was most important when it came to covering the Platoon's dash from the house.... From memory we expended within the troop something like 100 75 [millimetre] rounds and 60 boxes of Browning and ruined two Browning barrels.

During this sharp little barrage the enemy made no attempt to retaliate; he either withdrew, was killed, or elected to lie low for a while. Two wounded men were brought back from the house on improvised stretchers. The attack was then abandoned, the platoon in [Casa Galanuna](#) withdrawn, and by dawn the battalion was back again in its former positions, leaving the Germans, if they felt so inclined, to continue their interrupted New Year parties.

Back nearer Route 9, B Squadron formed a two-troop gunline to engage Casa Nuova, 25 Battalion's objective, and sent the other troops forward to give their support. However, the attack was abandoned before the tanks took any part in the fighting.

What 24 Battalion had been unable to achieve on New Year's Eve by force it accomplished next night by reconnaissance patrols. A platoon found [Palazzo Toli](#) unoccupied except for a solitary German, took him prisoner, and sent a message back for the rest of the company and the tanks to join it. Other patrols found the

wine factory—now battered by dive-bombers —also unoccupied, and A Squadron tanks joined them in new positions around the [Villa Pasolini](#). B Squadron and 25 Battalion infantry, farther to the right, occupied Casa Nuova and other houses, and by the evening of 3 January the squadron had a troop in Palazzo in Laguna. Fifty-sixth ([London](#)) Division then passed through 6 Brigade's front, [7 Armoured Division](#) made a successful attack north-east, and a reshuffling of boundaries left 6 Brigade looking across the [Senio](#) towards Gaiano, with A Squadron on its own to provide tank support. B Squadron came back into reserve on 5 January, while A Squadron formed a half-squadron gunline under its second-captain to support 25 Battalion and kept the other two troops under Major Caldwell's command at Casa Busa in support of 24 Battalion.

Colonel Purcell made a quick recovery from his head wound, endured Hogmanay in a Scottish hospital near [Rimini](#), and returned to his command early in January. He found the front quiet and little of importance happening on either side. C Squadron had been relieved on the morning of the 2nd by 19 Regiment and was back in the gunline at the Villa le Sirene, then more widely known as 'the Colonel's casa' after the peppery Italian colonel who, with his family, occupied some of the downstairs rooms. Under Divisional Artillery orders, the squadron shot indirect harassing fire tasks against mortar positions and other targets across the [Senio](#); it also had the role of covering the withdrawal of the forward infantry should the enemy make an attack to cut Route 9.

On the 7th the squadron relinquished its harassing fire tasks and concentrated on a counter-mortar role, its guns firing 1266 rounds in six days against no fewer than twenty-five different targets—nebelwerfers, mortars, self-propelled guns, transport, a church at [Felisio](#) suspected of being used as an OP, and enemy working parties—to the satisfaction of the infantry and the counter-mortar officer at Brigade Headquarters. Since Christmas the squadron had been under the command of Captain Stan Wright while Major Eastgate was away on a course. The latter returned to the squadron on 24 January.

Memories of the next few weeks are difficult to stir. A tank crew in a static role learns very little of what goes on outside the walls of its own casa, and little of interest is remembered or recorded except that it was 'a dull period'. War diary entries favour 'Locations unchanged', but 'A and B Sqns NTR' runs it a close second.

The dates of squadron reliefs are recorded and also the evacuation sick of Colonel Purcell on 11 January, leaving Major Barton once again in command for a few days. Tactical Headquarters continued to draw more than its share of enemy mortar bombs and shells, especially at night, but recorded no casualties.

In spite of the terseness of his war diary entries—if, indeed, he kept the diary—the regiment's adjutant, Captain 'Lu' Hazlett, was one of its most colourful characters, with a fluent (but quite unprintable) turn of speech when roused; some of his telephone conversations with the squadrons are still remembered by those who heard them at RHQ. His driving is also remembered: 'I can see him now at the wheel of his jeep,' one officer recalls, 'his scarf flying from around his neck, pipe stuck in mouth, no hood, and pouring with rain, heading for [Fabriano](#) at an enormous speed and putting the fear of death into all MPs on traffic duty.'

To the monotony of a static role the regiment's forward crews could add the nervous strain of being within reach of enemy patrols and shelling. For the long-service men especially, for whom this was the last action and their return home imminent, the days dragged interminably. Usually the forward tanks were sited beside or behind houses in which their crews and the infantry platoons they supported were quartered. The infantry battalions took turns as custodians of the front, and the regiment's troops took turns at manning their tanks, on call at instant notice to drive off an aggressive patrol or silence an enemy working party improving its positions on the stopbank on the far side of the river. Another side of their work was flash-spotting for the enemy's guns and nebelwerfers, whose positions would be meticulously plotted and recorded for future attention by the regiment's gunline or the artillery.

One story is recorded which shows how the system worked. C Squadron was manning the gunline just below Route 9 when a British OP officer visited its headquarters' casa. While he was there a message from the regiment's tactical headquarters gave the position of an enemy mortar. A map was produced, the position found and, with the margin of a recent issue of Eighth Army News, the distance from gunline to target was measured on the map scale. After a little discussion the range was given to the troop on duty and ten rounds gunfire ordered. Half an hour later word came back through the infantry's forward patrols that all ten

shots had fallen in the target area. The artilleryman, amused and mildly surprised at such casual methods of gunnery, was impressed nevertheless.

B Squadron also gets its share of praise in another incident in which it took action against an enemy working party whose activities had been reported by the infantry. The tanks' fire caused the party to seek shelter in a house, which in its turn was made untenable with armour-piercing shells and high-explosive rounds on delayed fuse. Finally, when the party left the house to go back by truck, the truck itself was hit. In spite of the low trajectory of the Sherman's guns the gunline was able to engage targets within 200 yards of the forward troops.

But the enemy, too, could show his teeth. His self-propelled guns tried to knock down our houses while his nebelwerfers and heavy guns, assisted sometimes, it was suspected, by agents on our side of the river, could bring down an accurate concentration when provoked. Any movement by the tanks in the forward positions was a certain way of provoking him. The noise would give away their positions and bring down a heavy 'stonk'. No details have been kept of the results of these 'stonks', but it is recorded that six A Squadron tanks received direct hits during the squadron's period in the line. The lesson was soon learned and the forward tanks were called on to fire only in an emergency.

Besides being a priority target for the enemy's guns, the tanks also attracted notice from enemy patrols. At night the Germans had the great advantage that they had themselves laid the minefields on the stopbanks and knew their way through them. On the night of 15–16 January a German patrol slipped through the trip-wires and had a crack at Sergeant Frank O'Connell's <sup>15</sup> tank (12 Troop) with a bazooka. The enemy gunner's aim was high and the shot went through the wall beside the upstairs window of the house from which the picket (Trooper 'Custer' Mains <sup>16</sup>) was keeping watch.

One of the tank's Brownings was mounted at the window and Mains immediately opened fire. Awakened by the deafening roar of the bazooka at close range and the hammering of the Browning, the rest of the troop and the 26 Battalion infantry stood-to and manned their weapons. Unfortunately the Browning jammed when the feed belt became snagged and the enemy party of three escaped unscathed but in considerable haste, as their tracks in the snow next morning

confirmed. The engagement came to be widely known as 'Custer's Last Stand'.

A few days before, C Squadron had relinquished its gunline role to B Squadron and had relieved A Squadron with 26 Battalion and the [Divisional Cavalry](#) Battalion. On the 17th 26 Battalion handed over to the 24th, but the squadron stayed in position. On the night after it took over 24 Battalion sent out working parties to arrange trip-wires and improve its defences. One party of nine men, all dressed in snow suits, was still out when, at half past five on the morning of the 18th, the trip flares went up and the alarm was given. Three Germans, also dressed in snow suits, were fired on but managed to get away. The working party came back up the road into the lines, gave the correct answer to the challenge, and passed through, but when they reached the company's casa the last three men in the line slipped behind a haystack and disappeared. The enemy patrol had tagged on to the end of the working party and followed it in. The patrol entered the yard of a house where one of the regiment's tanks was posted, ducked round the house, and 'got clean away' under cover of hedges and trees. To counter further such excursions trip flares and booby traps were placed around the houses and an infantry standing patrol covered the approaches. The tanks' Brownings were set up to fire on fixed lines and all tracer ammunition was removed from their belts so that the guns' positions would not be given away to the enemy.

A Squadron returned to the Colonel's casa near [Faenza](#) on 23 January, taking it over from B Squadron, which went forward to relieve C Squadron. It manned the gunline with the main task of putting down fire on the banks of the [Senio](#), where the Germans were still burrowing and mining and were suspected to be building footbridges. Major Caldwell describes this as 'a rather interesting piece of work'. The squadron was assisted by a 'shufti' aircraft which spotted for the guns and wirelessly back corrections to its headquarters, which then passed them on to the squadron by telephone. 'The Artillery officer doing the spotting could not quite make out our methods of correction for elevation and direction, which were of course very crude, depending on wide-spaced markings on the two wheels,' writes the squadron commander. 'So he gave up the usual artillery corrections and on each fall of shot gave us the distance from the last shot and we guessed the corrections required. He was so pleased with the results that he made a special trip up after the show was finished to see actually how we had done it and was quite amazed that we had been

able to be as accurate as we had.'

In war of this sort, the side which annoys the other the most is the happier; should the enemy produce some means of irritation, however minor, you must knock it out at once or do better yourself. Naturally, the regiment took its share in this game, one of its best successes being a duel with a self-propelled gun which used to run up to the stopbank near [Felisio](#) and fire directly into the infantry's positions. The regiment's counter was to mount a tank on an Ark bridge and set it up in the snow near the [Casa Claretta](#), camouflaged under a white muslin cloth, with its gun trained on the place where the enemy last appeared. It was some days—1 February to be exact—before the enemy gun reappeared, and when B Squadron's tank opened up it withdrew — smartly. No hits were observed, but from then on the enemy gun was content to do its shooting from a safer distance.

C Squadron's 17-pounder also had a success, with more destructive result, against a mystery target on the stopbank below [Felisio](#). The object (mineral and vegetable) was a tower made from three poles and a lot of wire and caused a lot of speculation (to quote the brigade report) 'whether it had been erected for any sinister purpose or was a new line in Hun humour.' Three shots from the 17-pounder collapsed the contrivance and it was not seen again.

Another target which received a lot of attention was the church tower at [Felisio](#), B Squadron being close enough to shoot it up with its Brownings to deter any German artillery officer thought to be using it as an OP.

Unlike the actions of the autumn months, the 'going' in this winter battle presented few problems. To start with, little ground was covered by the tanks in any attack, and their main role was to come forward in support when positions had been won and the roads cleared of mines. All the mines encountered were on the roads or around houses and were often poorly laid; and when the weather improved they could be avoided by moving across country. When the engineers were busy the tank crews sometimes had to clear a path for themselves, probing the ground with bayonets until mines were found and then lifting them as they had been taught by the engineers. For this purpose the tanks carried a 50-foot length of cable, which was looped round a mine and then pulled from the tank or from a nearby ditch until the mine was freed; when it was clear that no booby traps were attached the mine

was lifted.

The use of tanks again caused a few problems but most of these were ironed out with experience. Infantry companies still liked to have tanks right up in their forward positions for 'morale' reasons, and they can hardly be blamed for that; but often these positions were not suitable for tanks. Tucked in behind the front-line houses, they seldom had good fields of fire and were practically immobile should their positions be suddenly attacked. If they moved about they gave away their positions to the enemy's guns and paid the penalty. Experience taught that the best site for tanks was back near company headquarters in positions where they could move anywhere they were required.

Frosty mornings and falls of snow also brought their problems for the tanks in a static role. Where they could be parked on a firm surface in a cobbled farmyard or on concrete, snow and rain gave little trouble, but on soft ground their tracks soon became buried in the mud. After a series of heavy frosts tracks were found to be frozen to the ground and had to be freed with picks and shovels, and sometimes the oil froze in the tanks' machine guns, causing stoppages at critical times. The traversing of turrets was also affected, sometimes as a result of frost and also because of water in the traversing gearbox.

In spite of the cold and occasional heavy falls of snow ('Hell, what a cold, bleak, miserable place this [Italy](#) is in winter,' wrote one C Squadron trooper) the crews themselves fared fairly well. Frosty mornings were sometimes followed by fine days in which the men busied themselves with the soldier's housekeeping tasks of salvaging wood for the fires, foraging for food, bartering, washing and mending, or boiling water for a bath in a wine cask. <sup>17</sup> In the evening the jeep train would come up with a load of mail and supplies in sandbags for the squadron on duty and the reconnaissance troop's Honeys would take it forward to the front-line positions. With engines throttled down, the reconnaissance tank would creep carefully up the lane to the house where the troop was waiting, its crew expecting any moment that the noise of the tank's engines would bring a 'stonk' down around their ears. On one night trip up to the stopbank in January with supplies for one of the infantry companies, the crew of Corporal Jim Taylor's <sup>18</sup> tank were noiselessly unloading their supplies from hand to hand when the silence was shattered by the scream of the tank's siren—the driver's foot had slipped on to it while he was getting out of the

tank. Taylor's burst of laughter a few minutes later when he could no longer restrain his amusement at the situation was equally unpopular, but fortunately the enemy either did not hear or decided to take no action. Later, because of the noise made by the tanks, jeeps took over the job of delivering supplies to the forward positions.

At night the inevitable picket duty could sometimes be exciting, especially when the trip flares went up, causing a general alert and stand-to. The forward troops lost a lot of sleep, but the regiment's casualties for these two months were light. Twenty-one, including Colonel Purcell, were wounded, most of them in December and some from mines before the area could be properly cleared. Colonel Purcell's work in reconnoitring routes forward for the tanks under fire and in maintaining close support of the infantry won him the DSO.

Another feature of life in this area was the number of civilians who stayed in their houses, chiefly, it must be recorded, to look after what few of their stock had survived the battle and the Christmas table. No. 10 Troop for a time shared a house with the noisiest of these. Known, perhaps unkindly, as 'the mad woman', she had found the strain of the recent battles too severe for her nerves to bear but refused to be evacuated. Her performances at the start of each nightly 'stonk' were something to remember and in the end she had to go.

No sooner had a battle freed a few cottages or a few more yards of ground from enemy hands than the people began to return to their homes. The troops, of course, were reluctant to part with their quarters, especially when they were solidly built and comfortable; and the Italians too were reluctant to leave their own roofs—where roofs still existed—and what remained of their possessions for the comparative safety of a refugee centre farther south. Provost Sergeant Hugh Beattie's <sup>19</sup> fluent Italian was often called on to help untangle these domestic differences between tank crew and house owner, but on the whole the men got on splendidly with their Italian hosts. The risk to security of having Italian civilians sharing front-line quarters with the troops could also not be neglected, and most were later evacuated.

One member of a B Squadron tank crew was arrested in Faenza as a German spy but had only himself to blame. He had gone into the town on an exploring trip, looking for odds and ends to make his billets more comfortable, but had become lost in a maze of backyards and shell-torn houses and could not find his way out. He

decided that the quickest way to the main street was straight across the rooftops, but was accosted by some Italians while taking this unorthodox route. The Italians, thinking him a German, asked him in Italian if he spoke German. 'Si, si,' he answered—one of the few words of Italian he knew—and continued on his way.

Unfortunately, the trooper was wearing neither beret nor shoulder titles, and the Italians, convinced that they had discovered a German spy, rushed off to the nearest red-cap. The military police arrived smartly, noted his path, and were there to arrest him when he descended to earth at his destination. To welcome him also was a crowd of hundreds of excited Italians, most of them vieing with each other in the loudness of their invective and the ferocity of their gestures. 'Why all the fuss?' asked the trooper. On being told why he had been apprehended he declared his identity, proof of which was subsequently supplied by his squadron sergeant-major when he was returned to his squadron.

The escapade could have had more serious results. Hearing that a German had been seen escaping across the rooftops, one of the regiment's provosts decided he would have a shot at him to see if he could bring him down. He drew his pistol, cocked the hammer, and was on the point of firing when the escaper disappeared from view.

As the battle edged slowly north, the refugees flocked back into [Forli](#). Pushing hand-barrows or riding on horse or donkey-drawn farm carts, all piled high with mattresses, furniture, and firewood, the last perhaps the most precious, they trudged slowly back along the rutted roads. Irritable, black-whiskered men snarled angrily at every stoppage or belaboured spindle-legged donkeys with strange cries, urging them to impossible efforts, heavily laden as they were, at every incline; grey-haired, wrinkled old women struggled doggedly with rickety handcarts; sturdy girls carried colossal loads on their heads or pushed vigorously behind overladen carts, while tiny children, rosy-cheeked from the whipping wind, snuggled down in their mattresses or watched the commotion wide-eyed.

After a year in [Italy](#) the men had grown used to the sight of refugees, and there were indications that they might soon be moving back themselves. In the last week of January and the first week of February there were a number of comings and goings in the regiment. Thirty reinforcements arrived from Advanced Base on the

26th and parties of long-service men due for replacement left the regiment a few days later in the Tongariro draft.<sup>20</sup> Leave parties for Florence, Rome, and Riccione had a brief rest from the line, and on 27 January a party of other ranks left for the newly-established YMCA rest hostel in Forli. Four men represented the regiment on the 30th at a dinner and social evening given by the GOC Eighth Army (General McCreery) to representatives from units of different nations. And last, the regiment shed some of its attachments, among them some Royal Tank Regiment personnel who left on the 26th for their own unit, and a Royal Armoured Corps officer and his Crocodile flame-throwing tanks.

The regiment's tour of duty ended on 9 February when B Squadron, after some noisy nights in the front line, was relieved by a squadron from 18 Armoured Regiment. The other squadrons—A manning the gunline and C in reserve at San Silvestro—were relieved by 18 Regiment in turn and had moved back to Forli by 11 February. The last of the attachments from the Royal Horse Artillery, the Royal Tank Regiment, and 1 Assault Regiment transferred their allegiance to the newcomers and the regiment wiped its hands of the front.

During its seventy-three days in the line—from 29 November to 9 February—the regiment from its gunlines had fired 18,254 rounds of 75-millimetre shell, an average of 250 rounds a day, although in January the daily quota was limited to approximately 100 rounds.<sup>21</sup> The tanks' Browning machine guns are recorded to have fired some 100,000 rounds, both from the tanks and from ground mounts, 'much to the delight of our infantry friends'. The crews coming out of the line may have had no stories of tank battles or of Tigers routed to entertain their Italian friends, but all could take pride in the satisfaction that they had done all that had been asked of them and had done it well.

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<sup>1</sup> Capt T. J. Miles; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 31 Mar 1914; medical practitioner; RMO 20 Regt Jun-Nov 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Capt K. H. Patterson; Blenheim; born Oamaru, 1 Oct 1919; medical student; RMO 20 Regt Nov 1944-Dec 1945.

<sup>3</sup> Lt O. A. Boyd; Rotorua; born Dunedin, 5 Oct 1920; salesman.

<sup>4</sup> Lt A. R. McLay, MC; Ashburton; born NZ 16 Jan 1915; farmer.

<sup>5</sup> Capt T. J. Minhinnick; Whangarei; born England, 20 Jul 1911; reporter.

<sup>6</sup> Lt W. H. Archdall; Ashburton; born Rangiora, 23 Oct 1920; clerk.

<sup>7</sup> Col T. C. Campbell, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Waiouru Camp; born Colombo, 20 Dec 1911; farm appraiser; CO 22 Bn Sep 1942-Apr 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Jan-Dec 1945; Commander of Army Schools, 1951–53; Commander, Fiji Military Forces, 1953–56; Commandant, Waiouru Military Camp, Sep 1956–.

<sup>8</sup> Brigadier G. B. Parkinson was 6 Brigade's commander.

<sup>9</sup> Tpr V. E. Smale; born NZ 6 Feb 1922; telegraph cadet; killed in action 15 Dec 1944.

<sup>10</sup> Tpr R. C. Morgan; born NZ 24 Jul 1909; service-station manager; died of wounds 18 Dec 1944.

<sup>11</sup> Capt F. H. Childs; Levin; born NZ 5 Apr 1923; Regular soldier.

<sup>12</sup> Cpl J. R. Blunden; born NZ 8 Nov 1910; labourer; wounded 21 Dec 1944; died of wounds 7 Jan 1945.

<sup>13</sup> Lt-Col K. H. Macdonald, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 25 Nov 1916; 2 i/c 24 Bn Feb-May 1945; CO 24 Bn May-Jul 1945; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

<sup>14</sup> Capt J. R. Williams, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Gisborne, 13 May 1922; shipping clerk.

<sup>15</sup> Sgt F. A. O'Connell; Christchurch; born Akaroa, 4 Feb 1921; school-teacher; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

<sup>16</sup> Tpr G. D. Mains; Auckland; born NZ 6 Sep 1910; truck driver.

<sup>17</sup> Two RAP men found some hives and made 25 pounds of honey.

<sup>18</sup> Cpl J. H. Taylor; Invercargill; born Scotland, 8 Dec 1904; storeman; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; released, Derna hospital, c. 23 Dec 1941.

<sup>19</sup> WO II H. Beattie; Christchurch; born Wellington, 8 Dec 1915; accountant.

<sup>20</sup> Among the regiment's reinforcements about this time were two men named Woofe and Wham. They were made gunners.

<sup>21</sup> A Squadron fired 11,679 rounds, B Squadron 1848, and C Squadron 4727.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 20 – THE LAST LAP

## CHAPTER 20

### The Last Lap

Life in the rest area at [Forli](#) followed the pattern that we have seen before, but there were some departures from the usual that seem worth recording. To start with, A Squadron had not yet had its Christmas dinner, and on 12 February it had a sit-down dinner in the [YMCA](#). 'Much conviviality in all squadron areas,' records a unit diarist; 'The boys are sure having one large party now,' adds another. But there were one or two more serious things on hand. In [Forli](#) the regiment was not really far enough away from the line to regard the war with that air of detachment that usually settles over a rest area. C Squadron, for instance, had a job to do should the enemy launch a sudden attack and drive the New Zealanders back across the [Lamone](#). In that event—an unlikely possibility but one for which preparations had to be made for all that—the squadron was to post a troop of tanks at each of five bridges over the river and defend them against saboteurs or enemy forces until the order to demolish them was given. The order further carried the 'death or glory' instruction that should the demolitions fail the squadron would be responsible for blocking or damaging the bridges with its tanks. Fortunately, the enemy had more pressing things to occupy him.

A further departure from the usual was that the regiment was broken up by detachments. From 21 February B Squadron (much envied) was away at [Fabriano](#), attached to 9 Infantry Brigade, which had recently been formed from 22 Battalion, the [Divisional Cavalry](#) Battalion, and 27 Battalion to give the Division a third infantry brigade. Since November, in addition to the Armoured Brigade, the Division had had two infantry brigades of four battalions each, but the reorganisation now gave it three infantry brigades of three battalions.

The last major change was internal. Long-service officers due for relief were whisked away to Advanced Base as others came to replace them. There were great changes in the regiment. Its second-in-command, Major Barton, left on 11 February in the Tongariro draft; B Squadron's commander, Major Clapham, followed him on the 19th; Major Bay left Headquarters Squadron early in March to take up an appointment with DAAG 2 NZEF; Captain Jim Moodie, one of the 'thirty-niners', rejoined the regiment after furlough and on 21 March was given command of C

Squadron; Major Eastgate left C Squadron on that date to command Headquarters Squadron. And last, Colonel Purcell relinquished command of the regiment on 17 March, made a round of farewells, and left on the 20th for Advanced Base and return to New Zealand.

The new commander was Lieutenant-Colonel Robinson,<sup>1</sup> also a 'thirty-niner' from the [Divisional Cavalry](#) and soon to be known by most of the regiment as 'Big Robbie—he is 6 ft 3 ins in height and built in proportion. As a lieutenant he had won the MC in [Greece](#), and in the last couple of years had been second-in-command of the [Divisional Cavalry](#), second-in-command and for a period temporarily CO of 18 Regiment, and a squadron commander and second-in-command of 19 Regiment. From 18 Regiment came Major Pyatt<sup>2</sup> to become the regiment's new second-in-command.

As for junior officers, NCOs and men, many of the old hands had gone too, most of them with replacement drafts. Others had come back to the regiment from other jobs—Lieutenant Heptinstall was one—and a few were commissioned or marched out to OCTU. The NCOs who were left shared the doubtful joys of drill and duties courses and ceremonial guards.

Near [Ravenna](#) on 2 March one of C Squadron's troops took part in an [Eighth Army](#) demonstration of the effectiveness of 'grousers', steel extensions fitted to the tanks' tracks to make them wider and prevent them sinking so far into the mud. Each tank—there were ten in all, the last a German Panther—was equipped with a different type, and naturally Headquarters Squadron operated a totalisator on the result.

The demonstration was divided into five parts: the 'mud patch—an area approximately 100 yards square into which water had been pumped for the last three days—a race over a course of about a mile, and three canal crossings. The mud patch, now very soggy indeed, quickly eliminated the tanks without grousers; the Panther, once a hot favourite, did well but managed to lock itself in reverse gear and had to be towed out by a tractor. Four of the six participants left stuck hard and fast in the next canal and it was decided to call it 'no race'. The tote was kept busy refunding the investments.

On 6 March the Division handed over the [Senio](#) front to the Poles and—except for 4 Armoured Brigade—went back to the [Fabriano](#) area. The armour went to [Cesenatico](#), not such a long journey for tanks, those from the regiment making the move from [Forli](#) on 4 and 5 March. [Cesenatico](#) was a battered seaside resort on the coast below [Cervia](#), and the regiment's new billets —dirty, doorless and windowless—needed a lot of hard work to make them comfortable. A cold wind straight off the Adriatic smothered everything in sand.

A further move took place on the 16th when C Squadron, in its turn, left the regiment, two troops going to [San Severino](#) to be adopted by 6 Brigade and two going to [Camerino](#) with 5 Brigade.

To entertain those who were left behind, Padre Gunn formed an enthusiastic committee which arranged dances, card evenings, discussions and quiz sessions, and he was possibly the busiest man in the regiment. At [Forli](#) B and C Squadrons held successful 'race meetings', it being recorded of the former that 'a bar was operated selling three types of local anaesthetic', and of the latter that the 'tote and vino bar did excellent business for sqn funds'. Another race meeting, this one with live horses, as the regiment's war diary is careful to point out, was held at [Cesena](#) under [Eighth Army](#) auspices on 10 March, parties from the regiment going there by truck. From [Cesenatico](#) Padre Gunn organised a series of trips to [Ravenna](#) and [San Marino](#). 'Picture trucks' also took parties to the [RAF](#) cinema at [Cervia](#) and the YMCA cinema screened its films in a courtyard behind RHQ, one of its programmes being preceded by a recital by 4 Armoured Brigade's band. A big Australian 'two-up' school also had its patrons.

Two Headquarters Squadron NCOs, Sergeant-Major Arthur Brown <sup>3</sup> and Sergeant Morrie [Heath](#), <sup>4</sup> had a lucky escape on 24 March when a Thunderbolt carrying two 1000-pound bombs hit the tower of the Brigade Workshops building at [Cesenatico](#) while taking off from the airfield. The Sergeant-Major had just backed his truck into the workshops to pick up some tank batteries when one of the bombs came through the roof of the building, hit the cab roof, bounced on the floor just in front of the truck, rolled a few yards ahead and failed to explode. Both men had just alighted from their truck when the bomb landed between them. The plane itself careered on for another 150 yards before it hit the ground behind a line of Ordnance Field Park

trucks, two of which it carried into the canal with it. The pilot, a storeman sitting in one of the trucks writing a letter, and an Italian fishing from a boat in the canal were killed. 'Workshops had moved from that building within about half an hour,' says one eye-witness.

In the last week of March the conferences began again, and anyone with an ear to the ground or eyes to see knew at once that his rest had come to an end. On the 23rd, the harbinger of many a battle, came a brigade parade—all webbing scrubbed—and on the last day of the month another at which General Freyberg presented awards won by the tank men and took the salute at the march past. Major Moodie was presented with the MC which he had won over two and a half years before as an infantry lieutenant at [Minqar Qaim](#); Major Colmore-Williams's MC was won in his battle with a Tiger tank at Sant' Andrea on the way to [Florence](#); while Sergeant-Major Lilley had earned his MM for his courage and technical skill in repairing damaged tanks under fire during the fighting at [Orsogna](#) and in [Cassino](#).

In keeping with the increased tempo of the regiment's preparations for battle, A Squadron had a false alarm on the evening of 28 March when reports that enemy E-boats were suspected to be travelling south down the coast brought orders to stand-to. The tanks took up positions on the barbed-wire-entangled beach for a few hours, but were stood down at 10.30 p.m. when a report was received that our air force had located the enemy ships and dispersed them.

The order to move came on 30 March. It was kept a secret, but the preparations for an attack are hard to conceal. One of the clues was the arrival of six new Chrysler-engined, petrol-driven Shermans with 105-millimetre guns, and of two 17-pounder radial-engine Shermans. The technical staff hardly had time to tune-up the new tanks or their crews to admire them before they were away. At 8 p.m. on the 31st the tanks roared away from [Cesenatico](#) on their new chevron rubber tracks. The 'wheels' gave them an hour and a half's start before they in their turn headed towards the battle.

Meanwhile, at [Fabriano](#) B Squadron had had a busy month with 9 Brigade, which was doing some concentrated training with the tanks for the next battle. The manoeuvre being practised was the advance with armoured support. In turn, two troops from the squadron would support the attacking infantry, sometimes from 22

Battalion, sometimes machine-gunners, sometimes from the [Divisional Cavalry](#). The battles were fought over a huge valley floor, surrounded on either side by high hills and ending in a steep mountainside—an ideal battle range. From vantage points in the hills the controllers, in touch by wireless with the units spread out below them, could watch every move; loudspeakers set up on the right flank on 'Grandstand Hill' relayed all the wireless messages to the spectators, who could follow the whole of the battle from the first orders to open fire to the capture of the last objective.

First the mortars would lay a screen of smoke on the first objective; then the infantry—how tiny and toy-like they looked —would suddenly appear from a sunken creek-bed and advance up the valley, firing tommy guns or throwing smoke grenades as they closed on their objectives. Then the tanks would be called up to consolidate or to shoot up targets given them by the infantry platoons; objective 'Orange' would be firmly secured and the attack would move on to 'Peach' or 'Lemon'. The squadron's two 17-pounders had no ammunition to spare and fired token shots only, but the shooting of the other tanks was very accurate and little time elapsed from when the infantry first indicated a target until it was brought under fire. Each battle generally lasted about three and a half hours.

C Squadron's training with 5 and 6 Brigade battalions at [Camerino](#) and [San Severino](#) followed much the same lines. The tanks did exercises in co-operation with infantry from the various battalions and the infantry in their turn visited the squadron and got to know the tanks and their crews. Spring rains spoiled some of the exercises, but by now the ground was hard enough for tanks to move across country. The troops who a few weeks earlier had come back out of the line grey and weary and covered with mud were now fit and keen. Spring was the time for big offensives, and no one in the Division doubted that that time had now come.

The regiment's night move from [Cesenatico](#) had been secret, with signs blacked out and badges and titles hidden away, and at [Villafranca](#), its new area some five miles north of [Forli](#), its vehicles were 'frozen' and camouflaged and no one was allowed to leave the area. The sun was hot and the roads dusty; convoys streamed past all day on their way to the front; and just before midnight on 1 April A Squadron sent two troops forward to relieve troops of [4 Hussars](#) with 24 and 25 Battalions, one tank from No. 1 Troop later going up to the stopbank at the request of the infantry. This tank moved up on to the bank near [San Severo](#) before dawn on the 3rd and

opened fire on enemy sniper posts and dugouts, this sortie once again giving A Squadron the honour of being first into action. Wooden supports and sandbags scattered around after the shooting confirmed the accuracy of this crew's gunnery.

B Squadron's transport arrived at [Villafranca](#) from [Fabriano](#) in the early morning of 2 April and its tanks early on the 4th. C Squadron rejoined the regiment on the 3rd after an uneventful move from [San Severino](#), the tank crews waking from an uneasy sleep on the floors of their goods vans and 'flatties' to a lovely spring morning—'even the [Forli](#) railway siding ... looked cheerful'. For the first time that year the crews bivvied in the open. '[Villafranca](#),' says one man, 'was a typical collection of Italian farmhouses, each with an odorous manure heap in close proximity to the kitchen.'

The first job was to fit the B and C Squadron tanks with chevron rubber tracks in place of the steel ones 'to facilitate the pursuit of the beaten foe'. The quotation is from a C Squadron correspondent, who adds the cynical comment that the tank crews had heard 'that particular line of bull before'. More 17-pounders and 105-millimetre Shermans arrived for these two squadrons.

Meanwhile, No. 1 Troop of A Squadron was engaged on the evening of the 3rd in supporting an attack on the [Senio](#)'s eastern stopbank by two companies of 24 Battalion. After a bitter battle in which the opposing troops showered each other with hand grenades at a range of only a few yards, the tanks took a hand by firing delayed-action shells into the enemy's positions, literally blasting the enemy from them. The enemy replied with harassing fire from the opposite stopbank through a 'blow' in the eastern bank, and although canvas screens were strung across the gap to block his vision the annoyance did not cease until one of A Squadron's tanks was called forward to retaliate. The tank came up during the night and at first light 'went to town' on machine-gun pits and OPs on the opposite bank, firing about sixty rounds before the bank collapsed.

While crews and fitters sweated and swore as they changed over their tracks, the regiment's officers were busy with reconnaissances and conferences. By the 5th all preparations were completed, and next morning Tactical Headquarters and A Echelon moved up close to [Granarolo](#) while the rest of the tanks moved to their assembly areas. The squadrons' dispositions for the coming attack were that A was to support 24 Battalion, B the 25th, and C the 26th. The regiment was under 6

Brigade's command on the left of the Division's 4500-yard front. Fifth Brigade was to the right and 9 Brigade behind in reserve. Sixteen hundred and forty aircraft, 800 tanks, and some 350 guns on the Division's sector alone made a heavy bludgeon in Eighth Army's hands. 'Ted is sure going to get some hurry up,' noted one diarist.

But 'Ted' could also hit back, and on the night of 6–7 April his medium guns 'thoroughly did over' the Division's area about midnight. Two 105-millimetre shells landed in the backyard of the house occupied by RHQ, completely wrecking the Adjutant's jeep and doing some damage to the CO's. Signalman Muir,<sup>5</sup> attached to Headquarters Squadron, was wounded in a leg. The shelling lasted a couple of hours. 'A number of personnel

very scared,' reports the war diary, but an eye-witness, Sergeant Ron Lloyd,<sup>6</sup> has supplied a more vivid picture. 'Everyone, with the exception of RHQ tank crews, raced into the casa for safety,' he writes. 'There were some queer sights—soldiers in shirts and underpants only, others bare-footed; others with one sock on and one off. One recce crew had a lucky escape. A



**the regiment's advance to the sillaro, 10–14 april 1945**

large shell passed through their camouflage net, missed their tank by about a foot and ploughed into the ground about six yards from their sleeping quarters, and failed to explode.'

The regiment's dispositions on 7 April, so that the stage may be set for the

attack, were that A Squadron was nearest the river with 24 Battalion in the area of San Severo, from which it sent one tank forward each night to support the infantry on the eastern stopbank. B Squadron was at Granarolo with 25 Battalion, about 1500 yards from the nearest bend in the river, and C Squadron was about a mile farther back, taking up positions and getting its ammunition ready to take part in the D-day barrage. Over the front our fighter-bombers were busy harassing the enemy, while on our side of the river the guns crowded forward, including those of a self-propelled battery of Royal Devonshire Yeomanry which was attached to the regiment. Noting that they were now surrounded by artillery, and with memories of the last enemy outburst still fresh in their minds, the men of A Echelon dug themselves in or made up shakedowns in the basements of their casas.

The main appointments in the regiment before the attack began were as follows:

CO	Lt-Col H. A. Robinson
Second-in-Command	Maj W. A. Pyatt
Adjutant	Capt J. L. Hazlett

#### Squadron commanders:

HQ Squadron	Maj R. B. F. Eastgate
A Squadron	Maj C. F. S. Caldwell
B Squadron	Maj S. J. Wright <sup>7</sup>
C Squadron	Maj J. F. Moodie

A C Squadron correspondent sets the scene:

0100 hrs on Sunday 8th April found the crews in the mood of men woken from a well earned rest, some 'bitchy' and others aggressively cheerful. No lights were allowed, so while some struggled to boil up on the floor of the turret their mates endeavoured to jam the last of their blankets into 4.5 boxes and at last the cold approach march began in pitch dark and amidst clouds of dust.

'D' Day, Monday 9th April, dawned clear and warm and found the troop in the middle of an open paddock 4000 yds south of the Senio, putting the finishing touches to their camouflage nets. In front of them, hidden by trees and a sugar beet factory somewhat battered but still standing, was the Senio, to their left and in their rear were Arty batteries also hidden by trees that had been almost chopped through

ready to be knocked over at zero hour, to their right were a troop of tanks of another Sqn, also camouflaged.

Nothing served to distinguish the morning from any other morning of the past four months, an occasional burst of Spandau, an occasional stonk by mortars or 'Moaning Minnie' with an odd Spitfire on patrol. In the middle of the morning a convoy of ammo trucks arrived bringing with them 400 rounds for each tank....

Colonel Robinson began D-day with a flight over the [Senio](#) area in an Air OP plane about 10 a.m. The forward tanks had been withdrawn behind [Granarolo](#) to clear the field for the bombers, and just before two o'clock the first waves of Fortresses and Liberators arrived, their wings flashing in the sunlight. Hundreds of small fragmentation bombs rained down on the enemy's side of the river, the rumble of the explosions ('like an underground train passing through a tunnel') and the drone of hundreds of aircraft engines drowning the front with sound. Wave followed wave for over an hour; then at twenty minutes past three the guns took over the bombardment for about half an hour, their shells sketching the line of the river in a ragged scarf of yellow smoke. Then suddenly the sky became black with fighter-bombers and the air screamed as they darted and dived into the pall of smoke and dust. Then back came the guns again, then more fighters, and at twenty minutes past seven the smoke line of the river leapt into flame as the flame-throwers arched their slim jets across to the enemy positions on the far bank. The flames died as suddenly as they had sprung to life and a thick pall of black smoke rose over the river. It was now twenty-two minutes past seven—the last hour of daylight. The guns opened their barrage, the infantry launched their kapok bridges, and we were across the [Senio](#).

Except for C Squadron, which for the last three hours from 4 p.m. had been sweating over its guns in the first phases of the barrage, the regiment took no part in this turmoil. It could do nothing until the sappers got a Bailey bridge over the river. All the men were impressed, perhaps awed would be a better word, with the opening of the offensive. One C Squadron man describes it:

At 1.50 the first of the Forts appeared flying in from the SE along a radio beam with the ground troops burning yellow markers and the heavy AA firing warning bursts ahead to mark the position of the fwd troops. In they came flying in

formations of three groups of nine and the roar of the 25-pdr fragmentation bombs echoed like thunder over the plain.... Later, with the last of their bombs unloaded and with the enemy positions hidden by clouds of brown dust rising high in the air, the last of the bombers turned for home. Down came the masking trees and the arty began their 140,000 round 4-hour preliminary softening-up barrage. The tank crews climbed into their turrets and began their task of pounding a hundred-yard length of stopbank with 400 shells per tank. Soon, in spite of having the motors running, the inside of the turret became almost unbearable with burnt powder fumes. 10 secs between shots isn't very long when a fresh supply of shells has to be kept up and the empty cases slung overboard. Soon the guns began to slam back and fwd as the oil in their recoil systems heated and the crew were glad of ¼ hr spells every hour while the fighter-bombers bombed and strafed suspected enemy strongpoints along the stopbank.

By dark the tanks' task was finished and they moved, their guns still hot enough to fry eggs on, to a Sqn concentration area where the crews, somewhat tired, refueled and re-ammoed. Sleep was impossible, the crescendo of the guns seemed to grow louder and the air to vibrate so that the men felt crushed and tired. Still the guns roared and the night was as bright as day with the glare of the flamethrowers 'doing over' the stopbank as a final preliminary to the infantry putting in the bridgehead. The tank crews crouched over primuses cooking up their M & V stew and shouting remarks to each other above the roar of the guns. About midnight the barrage died down and reports began to come back telling how the infantry were well across against practically no resistance, which was hardly surprising after the fury of the preliminary.

As the men dosed down for the night the guns were still firing—in front, behind, all around them. B Squadron began to cross the river shortly after 3 a.m. on 10 April and by half past five had joined up with 25 Battalion. A Squadron followed and was well clear of the river by six o'clock, when C Squadron in its turn went across. The tanks jolted over the hastily constructed Bailey bridges, their crews eager to get a close view of the enemy stopbank. Far higher than that on the [Faenza](#) side of the river and honeycombed with deep dugouts, tunnels, and machine-gun posts, the stopbank had taken a terrific pounding. 'Not a square yard had escaped the pounding of the bombing and shelling and everything burnable had been charred by the flame

throwers ...,' writes one man. 'A few prisoners, pale, dirty, unshaven and dazed, were being escorted to the rear by a nonchalant Kiwi infantryman.'

The squadrons moved steadily forward with their battalions at walking pace, 24 Battalion on the left, 25 Battalion on the right. The tanks were in touch with the infantry over their 38 sets, but canals and demolitions kept down the speed of the advance. A Squadron had one tank damaged on a mine fairly early, but it was not a complete loss and its crew had no casualties. Our bombers were over again in strength in the morning to pound the enemy, and when one stick of bombs fell short B Squadron had one man killed (Trooper Doug Pringle <sup>8</sup>) and Lance-Sergeant Letts <sup>9</sup> and Trooper Phil Smith <sup>10</sup> wounded.

The bombing also caught 2 Troop's commander, Captain Bill Foley, <sup>11</sup> while he was returning from a reconnaissance of the Lugo Canal. He had gone forward in his tank to the point where the Lugo joins the Scolo Tratturo and had been heavily engaged by spandaus and mortars. When he returned to his tank he found that an enemy gunner was firing bursts across the top of the turret so that he could not get back into it. He came back on foot, screened by the tank, and had just climbed back into the turret when he heard Major Caldwell's voice over the radio: 'Come out! Come out! For Christ's sake look up!'

As the bombs began to fall Foley realised that the canal was the aircraft's bomb line. Fortunately the tank was then on the edge of the area, although a number of bombs fell close by.

The bombing lasted about an hour, and then the fighter-bombers and artillery again pounded the enemy before the advance was resumed early in the afternoon. A and B Squadrons struck opposition at the Scolo Tratturo, roughly three miles west of the Senio, where the enemy had built a strong covering position; but with help from the engineers' assault squadron they managed to cross and by dusk had reached a line about 1000 yards from the next river, the Santerno. East of the river the enemy had cut off the vines at ground level, leaving a clear belt about 300 yards wide as a field of fire for his positions on the stopbank.

On the left with 26 Battalion, C Squadron's crews had a flank-protection role. After crossing the Senio the tanks had moved forward through a minefield for about

a mile before they joined the infantry, one tank going to each platoon. At that time there was a gap of half a mile or more between the Division and the Poles on its left, and the battalion's job was to sew up the flank ('hemstitch' it) and make it secure. The tanks moved forward leisurely, meeting no opposition except occasional mortar fire, while the crews followed the battle from the reports of the forward troops received over the regimental net.

After halting for a time the troops moved up the road to continue their 'hemstitching'. They came to a house, 'not so badly damaged as the last,' writes C Squadron's correspondent, '—at least the ground floor was habitable.... Behind the house were Ted mortar pits with the aiming sticks still in place and the names of the targets scribbled in German on them. One of the men had a Ted army boot at the pump and was busy washing the mangled remains of a foot out of it. "Buona scarpa," he said as he stood in a puddle of water stained with blood. "Bloody Dago," said one of the boys, but he was interrupted by the trooper on wireless watch. The fwd troops reported running into heavy opposition so the boys piled into their tanks and, accompanied by a 17-pdr, they left the infantry they were with and set off up the road. They went through what had once been a village, passed two abandoned field guns whose horses had been killed by RAF strafing, over canal bridges still intact until they saw one of our tanks firing 75 [millimetre] shells into a house. It was really all over before they got there, the "heavy opposition" proved to be nothing more than a platoon of demoralized Teds, lost and bewildered, only too glad to chuck it in after a token resistance.' <sup>12</sup>

During the night tanks and infantry pushed on towards the Santerno, burning houses and protesting Italians leaving no doubt that the enemy had left. The hustled enemy had had no time to get his breath on the Santerno and man its stopbanks, and 24 and 25 Battalions were across the river at dawn. C Squadron struck trouble during the morning (11 April) when an 88-millimetre 'stonk' landed right by the house where one of its troops had pulled up, three men in Lieutenant Denham's crew being killed and one wounded. Those killed were Troopers F. E. Pringle <sup>13</sup> and 'Snow' Stevens, <sup>14</sup> both of whom had tried to find shelter under their tank, and Lance-Corporal Bill Wilhelm, <sup>15</sup> who was caught in the open. Three men from another crew who had taken shelter under their tank were covered with dirt from another shell but escaped injury.

From the amount of mortar ammunition left lying about and the stores in some of the houses, it was obvious that the enemy had plenty, and C Squadron had to call on help from the Air OP during the day to quieten some of the mortar posts across the [Santerno](#). A Squadron tanks moved up to the stopbank and gave their support to the infantry bridgehead across the river, one tank being mounted on a ramp to give it a better field of fire. The ramp was made from rolls of wire, and from its position on top of it the tank 'bounced' delayed-action shells off the far stopbank. They exploded as airbursts a hundred yards or so ahead, scattering fragments over a wide area. This tank also directed an attack by RAF Spitfires against two enemy OPs, one of them in the church tower at Mordano.

After dark some B Squadron tanks were able to get across the river by an Ark bridge, over which the rest of the squadron and A Squadron followed before dawn on the 12th. During the night the engineers bridged the river.

C Squadron crossed by this bridge just after daylight and relieved B Squadron. A quick attack in the afternoon by 24 and 26 Battalions to capture [Massa Lombarda](#) and push beyond it towards the next river, the Sillaro, met more determined opposition, against which C Squadron, 9 Troop in particular, distinguished itself.

'Dad' [Armstrong](#)<sup>16</sup> was 9 Troop's sergeant and his crew were Lance-Corporal [Hodson](#),<sup>17</sup> the gunner, 'Bogie' [James](#),<sup>18</sup> the driver, Rex [Pepperell](#),<sup>19</sup> wireless operator, and Lindsay [McCully](#),<sup>20</sup> spare driver. Armstrong began the attack by pinning down a spandau post with his Brownings and taking some prisoners, an encounter which Hodson has graphically recorded:<sup>21</sup>

Started spraying area in front with co-ax. Couldn't use 75 because twigs and branches would set off M48 shell close to tank. Inf. still yelling 'Spandau' through 38, asked them somewhat peeishly if they knew where it was—'No', so continued firing till Dad yelled 'Stop firing' and I saw our Inf. Our Browning fire had shut spandau up, i.e., pinned them down.

I saw Inf firing from hip with their Brens and one Hun with hand up and blood pouring out shoulder blade—was absolutely grey, pants falling off. Other Teds standing fast with hands up not attempting to bolt. The bag was 18.

Armstrong's tank then crashed its way through some trees between the old course of the [Santerno](#)—the Santerno Morto—and the lateral road south-east of [Massa Lombarda](#) which had been given the code-name [Greyhound](#). The driver accelerated to cross this open road, two heavy bumps jarring the crew as the tank crossed the ditches on either side. It then crashed through a hedge, with the infantry close behind, and made for a cart track leading to a two-storied house.

'While I was shooting the house up,' says Hodson, 'Dad yelled "God Almighty! Traverse right, there's a Tiger!" I didn't see it. But Bogie said he fired a shot and moved off. He was nearly 100 yds away. Bogie saw flash. The thud of 88 AP landing shook the ground. Morale bloody low. Pulled behind house to recover from fright.'

The infantry then joined Armstrong's tank, then suddenly they shouted a warning as another Tiger was seen coming down the road. 'Owing to trees couldn't see him until about 75 yds away,' Hodson continues. 'Wopped her onto power traverse .... engine running. Bogie put her into gear and speeded her up. Things got a bit confused. My chief thought was to knock his gun or blind the gunner. Knew bloody well our gun wouldn't penetrate. Pep's periscope smashed by Spandau bullet and no time to replace it. He was blind.'

Although it was now late afternoon, the light was still good. The enemy tank was completely shut down. The Sherman's first shot of 'Yank smoke' burst on the front of the Tiger in an intense white ball; the second, armour-piercing high explosive, aimed at the driver's hatch, struck his periscope, ricocheted and exploded inside the tank, wounding the driver and smashing up the transmission. The Tiger, which had been going 'flat out'—about 17 miles an hour—then stopped. It was about fifty yards away.

Hodson had emptied his ammunition rack ring—it held 15 rounds, six of them American smoke shells, two AP, and seven APHE—before the first of the German crew, the driver, baled out. The rest of its crew—there were nine men in the Tiger: its normal crew of five and four spandau gunners—then baled out through the back hatch or jumped out through the cupola hatch and took shelter in a nearby ditch. Sergeant Armstrong has recorded his 'happy relief' at the sight.

After a few more rounds from the Sherman's gun there was no sign of

movement and the infantry rushed up to the enemy tank. Three men lying in the ditch, two of them panzer grenadiers, then 'chucked it in' and came towards Armstrong's tank with their hands up. The enemy tank was then looted by the infantry, much to the chagrin of the Sherman crew.<sup>22</sup>

Of the Tiger's crew and passengers the wounded driver, who had taken shelter under the tank and was again hit, died of his wounds, three were wounded by shell splinters—one of these men later dying—one ran off up the road and got clean away in spite of an infantry Tommy-gunner's attempts to bring him down, and the rest were made prisoner. The tank commander, a young panzer grenadier lieutenant, was a truculent prisoner: he emptied the magazine of his Luger at the platoon's sergeant while the latter's tommy gun was not loaded and later attacked him with his fists when it was and was shot.

It was then decided to consolidate on the [Greyhound](#) objective, the road which Armstrong and his infantry platoon had just crossed, as it was thought that the other Tiger would come back 'to look for his cobber'. To meet this contingency, 'Bull' Dowrick<sup>23</sup> and his 17-pounder Sherman were called up. 'We moved up and there she was sitting in the middle of a crossroads,' says Dowrick. 'Sergeant [Cranston](#)<sup>24</sup> led us forward on foot. We had plenty of cover and got into a position where, fortunately for us, she was facing the right way, with her rear to us.' From a range of just over 400 yards, one round of 'Sabot' was sufficient. Dowrick added another for good measure, and 'that was all that was required'. One of the Tiger's crew was killed and the rest baled out and were taken prisoner. Denham's troop was then called back to conform with 9 Troop on [Greyhound](#).

The attack had obviously run into a strong enemy pocket, now weakened by the loss of two Tiger tanks and a 75-millimetre anti-tank gun which Denham's tank had 'shooed off' before it was ready to fire—'the Jerries were so pressed they had not had time to take the brown paper off'. The infantry, fearing a counter-attack in this thick orchard country, dug in along the road under heavy mortar fire. [Massa Lombarda](#) was less than half a mile away, and it was thought that the enemy was using a church tower in the town as an OP. Armstrong put five shells on delayed fuse into the tower. 'She came down with a crash and hell of a clatter with bells ringing. Mortaring stopped,' records our observer without wasting a word. Then a spandau opened up and was in its turn silenced by an artillery 'stonk'.

It was now dark, very quiet and cold. The wounded from the Tiger's crew were given morphia, another platoon of infantry went through to the next objective, and Armstrong and his crew returned to Squadron Headquarters for fuel and ammunition. Armstrong's crew's score for the day, as recorded by Corporal Milner, was 'One Tiger plus one platoon enemy infantry, 18 Huns; one church tower—for no wickets.'

The other squadrons' parts in the day's advances have not been recorded so graphically but their tanks were far from idle. Shortly after 9 a.m. B Squadron reported three enemy tanks about 200 yards ahead of its positions in the old watercourse—no doubt those engaged later by C Squadron with such success—but it had not managed to dislodge them before it handed over to C Squadron. A Squadron had its tanks across the river and up with their infantry shortly after 6 a.m. and gave the platoons covering fire against spandau posts as they pressed forward through the vines. Then the squadron ran into one of the enemy tanks later in the morning and asked for smoke while it tried to dislodge it. During the afternoon the squadron engaged enemy troops seen to be withdrawing. Second-Lieutenant 'Lofty' Newman had a knee badly injured when it was struck by the recoil of his gun and he was replaced in command of 3 Troop by Second-Lieutenant Wally Sisam.<sup>25</sup> When the advance was resumed after dark the squadron moved forward with its 'little friends' against light opposition and by 8.20 p.m. was firmly on its objective.

Partisans welcomed the tanks into Massa Lombarda at dawn on the 13th, and at 6.30 a.m. the advance was continued, at first against lightly held positions and then later against tanks. C Squadron with 26 Battalion, at first on the right flank of 6 Brigade and later on its left after a double shuffle to allow 9 Brigade to relieve 5 Brigade, once more had the hardest day. During the morning the squadron had had no real contact with the enemy and it was decided to speed up the advance by loading the infantry—one section to a tank—on the back of the tanks. 'We were bowling up the road at about 15 mph,' writes C Squadron's on-the-spot reporter. 'First thing we saw Hun, white flag in one hand and surrender safe conduct leaflet in the other. Maj Moodie interrogated him and revealed Huns going to stand 3 kms up.' This position was along the Scolo Correcchio, a canal which ran in a straight line across the front, roughly parallel with the Sillaro River.

The squadron pressed on. Spandaus and mortars began to find the range and

the infantry opened out into battle formation and carried on on foot across the open paddocks. The tanks opened fire on two barns which, being stacked with mortar ammunition, blew up. At noon the squadron laagered behind some trees. A report from Air OP stated that ten enemy tanks were moving in the area ahead. Several of them had taken up positions inside houses after battering an entry through a wall; others were elaborately camouflaged under bundles of hay, and one had a tree tied on top of it. Their tactics were to fire a few shots and then withdraw, at speed, down the road to the Correcchio.

Early in the afternoon 9 Troop's commander, Second-Lieutenant Noel Jenkins, was fatally wounded by mortar fire just as he left Squadron Headquarters' casa after a conference. Sergeant Armstrong then took command of the troop.

Fighter-bomber attacks were directed against the enemy tanks and the squadron tried once again to press forward. The approach was by a single road which ran through flat, green fields in which were a few isolated houses; a few hundred yards ahead of the start line, a culvert bridging a small stream had been partly blown, but the bridge over the next canal, half-way to the objective, was still intact as enemy tanks had just been seen withdrawing across it.

It was decided that the tanks should advance up the road in column at high speed, cross the bridge over the canal, and then fan out into line abreast to attack the final objective. The infantry, A Company of 26 Battalion, were to catch up as quickly as possible. No. 10 Troop was given the lead, each tank 'flat out' one behind the other, billowing long clouds of dust behind them. On the Correcchio stopbank clouds of dust from the muzzle blast of the guns of Panther tanks and anti-tank weapons marked the positions held by the enemy's rearguard along a wide front. Anything that looked like a target was engaged by the Shermans' guns.

Through a misunderstanding the first tank in the line turned left off the road after crossing the first culvert instead of continuing on to the bridge. The others followed and the troop formed up into line abreast. No. 12 Troop and Sergeant 'Bull' Dowrick's 17-pounder joined Denham's troop and the tanks moved up across a paddock of lucerne towards the objective. A double ditch full of mud brought them to a halt. There was a hot exchange of fire and Dowrick's tank was hit, the second shot killing the driver, 'Chum' Taylor,<sup>26</sup> and wounding the wireless operator, Ray Davis,<sup>27</sup>

in the head. The shell skidded up under the gun mantlet, making the gun useless. The rest of the crew managed to bale out before the tank was hit twice more.

No. 12 Troop's commander, Second-Lieutenant Bill Guest,<sup>28</sup> indicated a Panther by a direct hit with a round of smoke and all guns concentrated on it and quickly silenced it. As it was now obviously suicidal to try to push on in daylight, the tanks withdrew under a smoke screen to the shelter of the nearest houses and consolidated their positions with the infantry. The three survivors of Dowrick's tank managed to crawl back part of the way along a ditch and were later brought in 'in fine style' by the RAP Bren carrier, Mick Morrison<sup>29</sup> driving and 'old Charlie Kirk'<sup>30</sup> standing in front waving the Red Cross flag'.

A Squadron with 24 Battalion, although not so closely engaged on the brigade's right flank, found demolitions and ditches to make its progress difficult. Like 26 Battalion, some of 24 Battalion's companies were carried forward part of the way on tanks. 'We careered happily down the road past the flabbergasted 26th to be halted suddenly by enemy tank fire,' says one of the company commanders. 'AP shells soon caused a quick dismount and hasty scatter for cover.' The infantry came back on foot and, after a short rest near Massa Lombarda, moved forward on foot again in the afternoon.

During the night the enemy withdrew across the Sillaro but left a strong rearguard along the Correcchio. At 2.30 a.m. on 14 April the barrage on the river line began. C Squadron's correspondent describes it succinctly as 'Barrage a beaut.... 100 rds for every Hun on ground.' The enemy rearguard was quickly overrun and by dawn our infantry were across the Sillaro and digging in. The tanks of A and C Squadrons—B was still in reserve—waited for dawn before moving up to the river, and both squadrons were on their objectives shortly after 7 a.m. Second-Lieutenant Crawford<sup>31</sup> made a reconnaissance on foot and found a ford, but failed 'miserably' in attempts to get his tank up the steep bank on the far side. The tank spent some time in the middle of the river under desultory fire until another could come down the bank to tow it out backwards. The experience earned for Crawford's crew the nickname 'the fishermen'.

Throughout the day the enemy shelled and mortared the bridgehead, and in C Squadron Troopers Percy Chatterton<sup>32</sup> and 'Snow' Longman<sup>33</sup> were wounded by a

shell which burst just outside the doorway of the house in which they were sheltering. B Squadron's commander, Major Wright, whose colourful but unprintable nickname was a friendly tribute to his energy and enthusiasm, was wounded by an airburst while out on a reconnaissance and his second-in-command, Captain Heptinstall, took over after the squadron came up that night to relieve A Squadron, which went back into reserve near [Massa Lombarda](#).

Many of the tank crews had had only one night's sleep since the start of the attack, and on 15 April showers were set up at [Massa Lombarda](#) and 'opportunity was taken by all tps to have a wash and brush up.' The partisans in the town were still busy paying off old Fascist scores. [Massa Lombarda](#) had been knocked about by our bombers and the district's horses and cattle had suffered heavy casualties from strafing fighters on the roads.

Another 'beaut' barrage on the night of 15–16 April extended the bridgehead over the Sillaro, 25 and 26 Battalions from 6 Brigade taking the right and 22 and 27 Battalions from 9 Brigade the left of the front. By now it was evident that the enemy had had more than enough of barrages and big attacks over the last week. 'The prisoners coming in all have our safe conduct pass on their person. Many of them very young and all are dog tired,' records Sergeant Lloyd. The attack began at 9 p.m., the infantry reached their objectives—a good mile beyond the river—by midnight, the engineers had a bridge across by 1.30 a.m., and by 7 a.m., in thick fog, B and C Squadrons were up with their battalions and pressing slowly but steadily on.

When the fog lifted, C Squadron on the right flank ran into enemy tanks and bazooka teams, while B Squadron lost a tank just before midday when an AP shot set it alight but caused its crew no injury. During the afternoon Trooper Jock Pearce,  
<sup>34</sup> a driver in 9 Troop, was wounded in the head by a sniper.



**from the senio to the adige, 9–27 april 1945**

Across the Sillaro the country was flat, with patches of cover for rearguards and snipers and far too many ditches and canals to suit the tanks. The open ground was far too exposed for an infantry advance without gun support, and the tanks usually softened up likely danger spots before making a dash forward to the next lot of cover. Among the hedges and vines troops often lost visual contact with each other and with the infantry, but the radio link with the infantry and with the spotter aircraft overhead more than made up for this loss of sight. However, crews sometimes had some anxious moments as their Shermans poked their noses through a hedge on to a road, especially when the spotting plane had reported enemy tanks or anti-tank guns in their neighbourhood. Several enemy AFVs were seen but none stayed to contest the way.

At midnight on 16 April 21 Battalion and an 18 Regiment squadron passed through the regiment's positions on the canal east of [Ganzanigo](#) ('Never heard them. Too bloody tired,' records one diarist). Sixth Brigade was then withdrawn for a short rest ('Just about time too,' says another) and the regiment moved back to Castellino on the morning of the 17th. During the move back Trooper Rex [Rogers](#),<sup>35</sup> who was riding on the back of his tank, was wounded in an arm when the tank ran over a grenade.

At Castellino the regiment's official programme was to reorganise and rest for a couple of days. Reinforcements arrived— one officer and twenty-four other ranks—and tanks, guns, and vehicles were given a quick overhaul. 'Had first decent clean up

and B Ech food since the 10th—a week,’ says Lance-Corporal Hodson. Next day Sergeant Armstrong’s crew went back to [Massa Lombarda](#) to look at its Tiger and have their photos taken: ‘Felt like big game hunters with foot on trophy.’ The [YMCA](#) came up with its canteen and cinema and provided supper. The break behind the line gave the crews the opportunity to see how much equipment the enemy had lost and, after rest and good food, spirits were high.

On the afternoon of the 19th, refreshed, the regiment moved up to near [Medicina](#), about ten miles west of [Massa Lombarda](#). The squadrons were still with the same battalions: A and C forward with 24 and 26 Battalions respectively and B in reserve with 25 Battalion. B Squadron was now under Major ‘Squib’ Donnelly’s command, with Captain Heptinstall as its second-in-command. With the regiment in support was a battery of 1 [Royal Horse Artillery](#), which had relieved the Royal Devonshire Yeomanry.

[Medicina](#) had been captured after a hard fight on 17 April by 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade, which the night before had come under the Division’s command. The Gurkhas and 9 Brigade had then met stronger opposition from paratroops on the [Gaiana River](#), but artillery and flame-throwers—the mixture as before—had once again proved successful on the night of 18–19 April and the enemy had been forced back across the [Quaderna Canal](#). Fifth and 6th Brigades then took over.

C Squadron joined 26 Battalion on the afternoon of the 19th about two miles north of [Medicina](#). There were still enemy rearguards around and the infantry were dug in. ‘Got out of tank to get brew going,’ records C Squadron’s diarist. ‘Sniper had a go. Heard crack overhead. Spasmodic mortars. Soon as dark up road.’ And that is exactly what happened. The infantry moved up the road in column with the tanks towards [Budrio](#) and took over from the [Gurkhas](#) some time after midnight. An Indian heavy mortar battery ridding itself of its surplus ammunition before it pulled out in the morning caused 26 Battalion and the tanks some discomfort, until a forceful complaint from C Squadron’s battle captain (Bill de Lautour) made the position clear to the battery commander. About a quarter to one the squadron opened fire on hearing the noise of enemy tanks on the move, but the advance was not opposed. On the left in a flank-protection role were B Squadron and 25 Battalion.

The advance continued steadily all that night and the following day. There was

some opposition, but not much and mostly from mortars or snipers, and about midday C Squadron and 26 Battalion, encroaching on Polish territory on the brigade's left flank, reached the Idice. Twelfth Lancers in Staghound armoured cars ('Very huntin', fishin', shootin' types') dashed about up and down side roads looking for the enemy, their appearances being welcomed by the New Zealanders with cries of 'Tally-ho the fox!' A Squadron and 24 Battalion also reached the river early in the afternoon.

Twenty-sixth Battalion's left forward company had reached a long railway cutting that ran parallel with the river, at this point about 200 yards away. A solitary two-storied house about 100 yards ahead was expertly flushed by a couple of infantrymen and produced an elderly Italian couple. 'Papa, a fine old gentleman, told us the Tedesci were across the river and took us to an upstairs window where he pointed out exactly and carefully some forward posts on the opposite bank,' says Major Moodie. 'Bill Guest and his troop (No. 12) then proceeded to deal with these, using HE at point-blank range. On the right 2/Lieut Rex Burland <sup>36</sup> with No. 11 Troop was at the river. Rex had already found a crossing so we walked down to the water's edge—a small shallow river with a shingle bottom, good gentle approaches on both sides, and no sign of mines.'

By mid-afternoon the first tank was across. It had no sooner climbed the far bank than a handful of Germans jumped up out of their positions and, waving white flags, endeavoured to surrender. They could not catch up with the briskly moving Sherman and were left behind in the exhaust fumes. These enemy troops had been content to watch peacefully while the squadron commander and Burland stood at the water's edge marking the position of the ford on their maps. Nos. 11 and 12 Troops were first over, but enemy mortar and small-arms fire delayed the infantry crossing. The squadron formed a bridgehead about 600 yards deep, but it was dark before the infantry companies had joined the tanks and consolidated. <sup>37</sup>

In the darkness there was some confusion and the platoon assigned to 9 Troop stopped after crossing the river and left the tanks forward on their own. The troop had an unenviable wait in the dark. Tracer bullets were whipping about the area and every house for miles around seemed to be burning. Silhouetted against the flames, enemy troops running about were fired on by the tanks' Brownings and seventy-fives, one gunner sighting his gun by opening the breech and looking through the

barrel until he could pick up a target. An artillery 'stonk' was brought down and the missing platoon located and guided forward to the tanks.

The ford used by the tanks was in Polish territory, outside 6 Brigade's left-hand boundary. At 4 a.m. on the 21st the Poles used this same crossing and moved through the bridgehead on their way to [Bologna](#), 'adding to the confusion somewhat during the evening.'

On the right of the brigade front 24 Battalion suffered casualties from enemy strongpoints before it had a firm hold on the far bank of the [Idice](#). One of these strongpoints was a sanatorium which the tanks' gunners cleared systematically from top to bottom, one floor at a time, with delayed-action shells. In this sector A Squadron had its tanks across the river shortly after 8 p.m., and by midnight the bridgehead was firmly established.

On the right flank B Squadron had seen little incident during the day's advance and by night was concentrated south of the [Idice](#) in the outskirts of [Budrio](#). The rear echelons also moved forward during the day over roads choked with traffic.

Rumours on the morning of the 21st that [Bologna](#) had fallen were later confirmed by the [BBC](#), while across the [Idice](#) the infantry and tanks sorted themselves out and began to move forward about 8 a.m. Nothing much happened during the morning on the regiment's front, C Squadron describing the opposition as 'very light' and A Squadron as 'moderate'. Eighteenth Regiment on the right, however, lost six tanks during the morning, mostly to fire from the enemy's self-propelled guns, and the news kept the regiment's crews on their toes. A halt was taken about midday to allow the 18th to catch up, and no sooner had the advance resumed than one of the reconnaissance troop's Honeys went up on a mine, fortunately without casualty to its crew.

About three o'clock A Squadron caught up with the enemy on the right flank and for a time things were 'a little sticky', with armour-piercing shells whizzing around but causing no hurt. The suspected enemy position in some houses near San Brigida was shot up by one of the 17-pounder Shermans and the area became more peaceful; a Mark IV tank,brewed up and with its crew dead, was later found in one of these houses. During the day one A Squadron tank floundered into a bomb crater

and had to be pulled out and its engine and gearbox drained of mud.

Route 64 was crossed late on the evening of the 21st and the advance then swung north towards the Reno. A general move forward began again at midnight and went smoothly in spite of the crowded roads until 6 a.m., when A Squadron struck a canal whose banks had been mined. A bulldozer from the engineer assault squadron made a crossing and the canal was bridged; and as it was obvious that the enemy was pulling back, the advance was speeded up, the infantry being carried on the tanks. Road blocks at San Giorgio di Piano, which was reached about noon, held things up for a while. Excited Italians reported that the enemy had left 'flat out' thirty minutes before.

San Giorgio, which was about ten miles north of Bologna on a good bitumen road, had evidently been an enemy headquarters of some importance. Many of the buildings carried swastikas. Apparently the enemy had told the townspeople that the New Zealanders were starving, and amid scenes of terrific enthusiasm wine and bread (the former reported good, the latter stale) were heaped on the tank crews. According to C Squadron's diarist the people 'kept asking us, "Aren't you afraid of the Tigers?".... We being liars said we were not. Other Ites would come rapping on the side of the tank. Ted had told them our tanks were made of cardboard or three-ply. All much impressed by rubber tracks.'

The partisans were busy and there were sounds of rifle fire coming from the north of the town when the tanks moved north about two hours later. Two miles out of San Giorgio there was another delay and quite a lot of mortaring and small-arms fire from pockets of paratroops on C Squadron's open left flank. Some 9 Brigade infantry were sent out to deal with them. Artillery help was called on to silence these outposts and a few prisoners were taken. During the afternoon Sergeant Neil Wright<sup>38</sup> was killed and Trooper Tom Quickenden,<sup>39</sup> both from A Squadron, wounded when a mortar bomb landed near their tank.

As the position on the flank was still somewhat obscure, the tanks and infantry stayed put for the night. C Squadron with 26 Battalion was on the left of the road running roughly north from San Giorgio, with A Squadron and 24 Battalion to the right. B Squadron and 25 Battalion were posted to guard the left flank. Corporal Barriball<sup>40</sup> of Headquarters Squadron had a foot blown off when his Honey tank ran

on to a mine while he was delivering petrol to C Squadron's forward troops. About midnight a lone plane circling the area caused little concern—it was thought to be one of ours—until it began to drop butterfly bombs and fire its machine guns. A light under a truck canopy in the [Supply Company](#) point at [Bagnarola](#) drew most of the bombs, eleven men—one of whom died—being wounded. The regiment had no casualties.

The enemy withdrew during the night, and in the morning the tanks loaded the infantry aboard and headed north-east through [San Pietro](#) towards the next river, the [Reno](#), about six miles away. 'Put 'em in the long cogs and roar down bitumen road at 30 mph'—Lance-Corporal Hodson pictures the move. 'Roar through two villages without even stopping. Pass two burnt-out Tigers, well camouflaged. Didn't know they were there till right on top of them. By 9 a.m. Sqn HQ yelling on radio for our position. Couldn't say as long ago we had run off maps and out of maps.... Halt for breakfast. Two miles south of Reno River which branches out into many tributaries. After mung [ mungaree] advance more cautiously. Infs extend and wade river while we ford.'

After long advances on foot with little sleep, the infantry liked the roar and pace and exhilaration of these tank rides over open country but were always quick to get closer to the ground when mortars or spandaus opened fire. On this day no opposition was met, but half a mile north of the river a string of obviously British trucks 'right across our front' brought anticlimax. They were from 6 British Armoured Division, the formation on the New Zealanders' right, which had swung left on crossing the [Reno](#) while the New Zealanders had edged to the right. By 10 a.m.—it was 23 April, although by now most had lost track of the date in the bustle of the last few days—the troops north of the [Reno](#) had formed a bridgehead. C Squadron had two troops over the river and A Squadron one when orders were received that no more tanks were to cross until the river had been bridged.

The tank crews spent a quiet afternoon. The enemy had gone back to the Po, about 12 miles to the north. So much had been heard of this river in the last few months that, like the capture of [Rome](#), it had become one of the great milestones of the war in [Italy](#). On tarpaulin-covered transporters in the convoys heading north were amphibious tanks whose job was to cross the 300-yard stretch of water; a special unit had been training for some months to make the crossing. 'The Po is

waiting for you,' the attractive pastoral cover of a German propaganda leaflet announced, its inside sketch portraying with a wealth of gruesome detail a welter of destruction as assault boats disintegrated under the fire of German guns.

The tank crews and the infantry discussed the Po as the engineers bridged the Reno. How wide was it? How deep? How high were its stopbanks? The Germans' leaflets obligingly supplied the answers: 'At its shallowest part (between Adda and Mincio) it is 7 ft. deep. At the deepest part (near Pavia) it is 20 ft. deep. The width varies from 208 to 1040 yds. The banks are mostly sheer and between 18 and 30 ft. high. The speed of the Po exceeds 20 m.p.h.'<sup>41</sup>

Across the Reno the tanks and the two 26 Battalion companies which had waded over during the morning of the 23rd waited for the bridges to reach them. Fifth Brigade's bridge was finished by mid-afternoon and 6 Brigade's a few hours later. At eight o'clock that night the rest of 6 Brigade and its tanks began to cross, B Squadron and 25 Battalion now first in order and followed by the rest of C and A Squadrons. They moved ahead next morning (24 April) with the infantry on the tanks until a demolished bridge over the Panaro, a tributary of the Po, held them up. The whole of the Eighth Army seemed to be on the move for the river, and as they all converged on the Po the hold-ups became worse and worse. Burned vehicles on the sides of the road and abandoned weapons and equipment showed how badly the enemy's retreat had been harried by our fighter-bombers in this open, dead-flat countryside. Dozens of slit trenches lined the sides of the road, a bundle of straw tied to a stick marking their positions so that they could readily be seen by harassed enemy drivers.

At the Panaro the regiment was diverted from the 6 Brigade axis to 5 Brigade's. The latter brigade had reached the Po by midday, and early in the afternoon B Squadron went forward to within about half a mile of the river while A and C Squadrons and their battalions concentrated in the area between Bondeno and the Po. The enemy had threatened to cover the Po with 'a blanket of death', but he had taken a pounding in the last two weeks and was sorely pressed on all sides. All was quiet on the far bank and there were rumours that 'Ted' had gone back still farther to the Adige.

On the south bank of the river the tanks sat unconcernedly waiting for a ferry to

be established, while their crews explored the abandoned enemy dumps or made a few lire on the side by selling captured enemy horses to Italian farmers. Trooper Les McCarthy<sup>42</sup> of B Squadron was killed and Corporal Jack Higgs<sup>43</sup> and three others wounded late in the afternoon when a mortar bomb landed on the roof of the barn which they had made their quarters for the night. The mortaring stopped when Captain de Lautour's 105-millimetre Sherman pumped twenty shells into a tower at Ficarola which seemed a likely OP, and just after midnight 5 Brigade infantry quietly crossed the river in their assault boats and the Po was ours.

On the south bank there was a carnival air. 'That night we had a horse gymkhana,' C Squadron's faithful diarist records. 'Horses well looked after, first-class order. If you couldn't ride a horse or drive a cart you could get a Ted truck and drive around in that. Bare-back gallops with half draughts wearing blinkers. Never out of a canter before in their spring-cart lives. But Kiwis belted hell out of them. Plenty of grass so when fed up just let the horses go. Must have been 50 in one paddock. Chaps driving all round countryside in carts and buggies.'

B1 and B2 Echelons celebrated the day by capturing some prisoners, six in all, in a village between the Reno and the Po. The rear echelons had followed closely on the heels of the squadrons over the last few days, often occupying an area within twelve hours of the Germans leaving it. 'It often happened that when we had orders to move from A to B we would be met at B by a Don R with a note from Major Pyatt saying "Come straight on to C" (or even D),' says Major Eastgate, Headquarters Squadron's commander. 'It was a recurring surprise after a long move to find Captain Phil Crespin with his large and unwieldy group only a mile or two behind us.'

Padre Gunn remembered that the 25th was Anzac Day and held a short service, but A and B Squadrons were itching to join their infantry now on the far side of the river. During the morning B Squadron found two damaged German rafts and, urged on by Colonel Robinson's vigorous presence, used these to ferry some of its tanks over; but it was a slow and cumbersome crossing, one tank only at a time. Five tanks and a bulldozer managed to cross by this waterlogged ferry before it sank in shallow water. A and C Squadrons moved hopefully towards the river but were out of luck, although two A Squadron tanks managed to get passage over. Later in the afternoon B Squadron got some more tanks across by raft at 5 Brigade's crossing

place and raced ahead to rejoin 25 Battalion at [Trecinta](#), where they at once set to and cleaned out several spandau posts that were troubling the infantry.

Feeling cheated, the tank crews south of the Po watched their infantry cross in their assault boats while they waited their turn at the ferry or filled in time while the engineers built a pontoon bridge. A Squadron got two troops across on the morning of the 26th and C Squadron and Tactical Headquarters moved up in the queue closer to the river; but it was midday on 27 April before Tactical Headquarters crossed and 30 April before C Squadron eventually got over. The bridge was controlled by an English brigadier who, 'in spite of personal interviews and coaxings three times daily,' according to Major Moodie, would not hear of a tank using it in case it was damaged.

The engineers, of course, had their difficulties. On the 27th a mine floating downstream with the current damaged one of the pontoons. 'Went off with a hell of a thud,' describes C Squadron's eye-witness, 'frightening seven bells out of the driver of a 15 cwt on the pontoon when hit. Number of high ranking Pongo officers do scone, shouting at everybody to get off bridge which [had been] hit amidships.' To protect the bridge against further hazard, Bofors and searchlights were set up on the south bank and 'banged away at anything that came floating down stream.... Chief targets tree trunks and dead Huns.' Meanwhile, tanks and transport piled up at the river and the roads were jammed for miles, while corps staff officers sorted out priorities and decided who should go over first. A 1000-foot Bailey bridge is alleged to have gone astray in transit from [Cesenatico](#) and, needless to say, there was quite a 'flap' on.

Far ahead of this peaceful scene, B Squadron's tanks and 25 Battalion had reached the next river, the [Adige](#), fast-flowing and wide. They had been joined on the 26th by some A Squadron tanks and had pushed ahead in heavy rain through Pissatola to [Badia](#). By now the forward troops were so far ahead of RHQ's tanks that they were out of wireless range. They were the only armour with the Division north of the Po.

The forward battalions of 5 and 6 Brigades took their assault boats across the [Adige](#) on the night of 26–27 April, formed a bridgehead, and handed over to 9 Brigade later in the day, B Squadron tanks supporting the crossing—but not being

required to fire their guns—from positions on the stopbank at [Badia](#). Here the forward troops—half of A Squadron and half of B—were joined on the afternoon of the 27th by Tactical Headquarters' tanks and came under 9 Brigade's command, A with [27 Battalion](#) and B with the [Divisional Cavalry](#) Battalion. The rest of the regiment passed to 4 Brigade's command. Tactical Headquarters, consisting of four scout cars and two jeeps, then took the lead and was first over the [Adige](#). It crossed about 4 p.m. and was followed later during the night by the two half-squadrons.

The next day's advances were to take the regiment's forward troops from [Masi](#), on the [Adige](#), to [Padua](#), another milestone in the long journey up the Italian peninsula. At first there was some light opposition, and at [Ospedaletto](#) an enemy rearguard disputed the road (Route 10) until driven from their houses. Then straight ahead up the road at 24 miles an hour, through [Este](#) and [Monselice](#) and up Route 16 to Battaglia, where the leading B Squadron tank ran into a road block and was hit by a bazooka—not badly enough to do any real damage—and one of its crew was shot through the legs when he got out to see what had happened. It was 7 p.m. before a path was cleared and the column able to move on its way again, at first very slowly. Then a B Squadron troop replaced [12 Lancers](#) in the lead and the advance speeded up. By 10.30 p.m. the tanks had reached [Padua](#), which the partisans had liberated for themselves at some cost, and were then fuelled and made ready to move on to [Venice](#), but the move was cancelled.

Near Battaglia just at dusk B Squadron had overtaken an enemy column of horse-drawn transport, estimated at 300 strong, which, wisely enough, made no attempt to interfere with the tanks' passage north. 'We did not shoot and neither did they and we drove past them as they plodded along,' says one troop commander. 'I will always remember a very excited infantryman who was riding on the back of my tank, hammering me on the back and pointing at the waggons moving along beside us and shouting, "Those are Jerries!"' The tanks pushed on past the Germans and at [Padua](#) were guided by partisans into a large square, where they took up positions covering the autostrada.

The tanks' motors stopped and the square was deserted and still. Then from behind one of the high, shuttered windows an Italian voice called: 'Inglesi?' 'Tedesci?' 'New Zealanders,' came the reply, and the whole square sprang to life. Windows were thrown open noisily in every direction, 'women were running around

in their nighties', partisans fired their weapons, and shouts of greeting and cheers came from all sides. 'Some kind person even handed around bottles of beer.'

During the night the tanks were joined by Tactical Headquarters and A Echelon. B Echelon, which had been on the road all night since 5 p.m. the evening before, reached [Padua](#) at 11 a.m. on the 29th.

The B echelons had crossed the Po on the afternoon of the 27th and the 28th, ahead of most of the tanks, as B Echelon men were later frequently to remind the crews. They had reached [Masi](#) and had begun to settle in when orders came to push on. The convoy got away from [Masi](#) just after dark, lost its way, ended up among South Africans, and arrived at San Margherita just after midnight, having taken three and a half hours to cover 23 miles. Here the men 'brewed up' and, told not to go to bed, waited around until 1.45 a.m., when the convoy set off once again for a destination whispered to be [Venice](#).

Sergeant Lloyd has left for the unit records a full account of the night's journey:

The journey was long and tiring, interspersed with bursts of speed when on the main highway.... Some of the halts were exceptionally long. While on one of these, many of the drivers fell asleep and had to be awakened in no light manner. While waiting thus, sporadic bursts of machine gun fire, Tommy gun fire, could be heard far to the rear of the convoy. A bitterly cold wind sprang up but made hardly an impression on those who were so tired. After an hour and a half's halt the convoy once more moved on for a further few miles where once again it halted until dawn....

After breakfast all transport refuelled and away we set again. We had gone but three miles up the road when the convoy was halted, while the Indian Div and some Artillery were rushed past us, the reason being that two German PG regiments were travelling on the road parallel to us, and were slightly ahead of us. Reports were then heard that the Germans had shelled very heavily the town of Padova. This was later confirmed. After waiting for a while the convoy took a round about route and at 1100 hrs we entered Padova. Here we received a great welcome. All the city was out to welcome us and everywhere were Partisans, mounted on horseback, driving German carts, all of them with the red, white and green colours up. German prisoners were everywhere, while in the city itself Partisans were rounding up the

Fascists that had unwarily remained behind. One or two members of the Regt even witnessed the shooting of a few of these Fascists. The whole town was wildly excited.

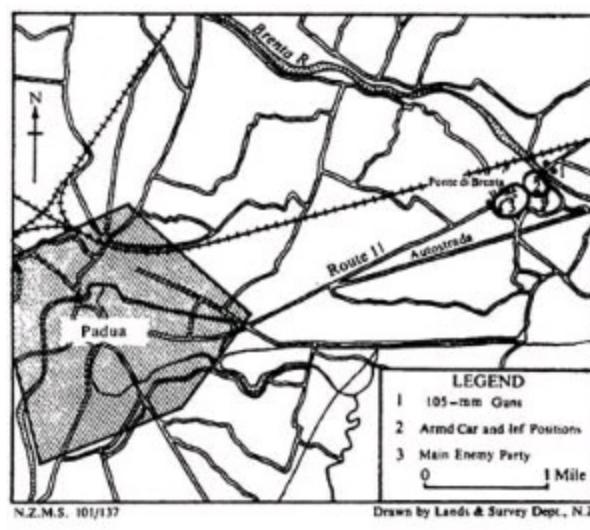
With B Echelon's arrival late in the morning of 29 April, we have got some of the regiment to Padua (or Padova if you prefer it), leaving C Squadron, half A Squadron, half B Squadron, and RHQ, less its Tactical Headquarters, still fretting on the south bank of the Po. Corps had ordered them to stay there and nothing could be done about it; or almost nothing. Captain Foley bluffed his way across about 8 p.m. on the 29th by sending his gunner over with a fake message from the CO ordering him to get his tanks over 'at all costs'. Trooper [Theyers](#),<sup>44</sup> Foley's gunner, 'hitched' a ride over and then reported to the provost at the far end of the bridge with his message. The provost reported the message to the post at the southern end and, on Foley's representations as to its urgency, agreed to hold traffic for five minutes while A Squadron's two troops 'piled over'. Foley then wirelessed back to C Squadron's commander that his ruse had been successful.

C Squadron, RHQ's four 17-pounders, and the rest of B Squadron followed across just after midnight on 29–30 April. Major Moodie's methods were less subtle but equally as effective as Foley's. 'By the 29th,' he says, 'even sanitary vehicles were streaming over. This was too much. At midnight C Squadron lined up nose to tail and, with headlights full on, we kept rolling. Various figures danced around as we approached the bridge but we just kept moving and never looked back.' The squadron caught up with Foley's group at the [Adige](#) and at breakfast time the tanks were queueing up at the ferry waiting their turn to cross.

The 29th was another big day for the troops from A and B Squadrons and their [27 Battalion](#) and [Divisional Cavalry](#) infantry. The A half-squadron began it at 4 a.m., after only about two hours' sleep, with orders to seize two bridges over the Brenta River, roughly three miles north-east of [Padua](#). The bridge on the autostrada—Second-Lieutenant Frank Brice's<sup>45</sup> objective—was blown up before 4 Troop could reach it, but that on Route 11 to the north was held by armoured cars, with two 105-millimetre guns sited on the north bank and a screen of machine-gunners and riflemen on the south bank.<sup>46</sup> A German battalion had just reached the bridge on the last stage of its night's march to the rear when out of the darkness roared Second-Lieutenant Sisam's troop carrying a platoon of 27 Battalion. The tanks

dashed past horse-drawn transport and its escort and debussed their infantry right in the middle of the surprised Germans. The platoon quickly rounded up many of the enemy before they had recovered from their surprise, and a few raps on the outside of one of the armoured cars 'brought forth its crew with hands held high'; but, regardless of the safety of their comrades, the enemy troops holding the bridge opened fire.

The forward tank then leapt into action. With a stream of tracer from its Brownings, it engaged the other armoured car, firing at the flashes of its guns. A lucky shot jammed the magazine of the armoured car's gun and a round of AP put one of the field guns out of action, the crews of both guns fleeing to a safer place. A motor-cycle combination and a volkswagen which were leading the German column across the bridge when the tanks arrived were also put out of action, and by the light of the blazing cycle the first section of infantry, covered by fire from the tanks, crossed the bridge and seized positions on the far bank. By this time most of the enemy rearguard had decided that their war had lasted long enough, and fire from the tanks helped to put an end to the posts that still resisted. The knocked-out vehicles blocking the bridge were then cleared away and the tanks crossed later in the morning. In all, about



**the brenta bridge action, 29 april 1945**

300 prisoners were taken in this brisk little action; the figures are approximate, but as some hundreds more were to be taken that day the round figures will have to

suffice. <sup>47</sup>

As part of Thodey force, Sisam's troop then pushed ahead along the autostrada to [Mestre](#) with orders to take [Venice](#), the Hotel Danieli in particular— [General Freyberg](#) had stayed there before the war and wanted to reserve it for a New Zealand club. The tanks fired a few shots at pockets of Germans on the way up and at one point 'saw the Jerry travelling flat out under one of the overbridges while NZ Div poured across above him. ... We then went flat out for [Venice](#), and as we went down the Littorio I was racing neck and neck with the commander of an artillery unit (this was Lt-Col [Sawyers](#) <sup>48</sup> I think) in his comd vehicle, trying to head him off and be the first there. He was lucky I didn't shove him off the road.'

[Venice](#) was in partisan hands and there was a lot of stray shooting as the fascisti paid for their sins. The Danieli was annexed and the troop, desperately tired, 'didn't much care for twenty-four hours' while it caught up on some of the sleep it had lost since the start of the battle. On Route 11 Brice's troop and Squadron Headquarters took almost 200 prisoners from enemy pockets at Mira and Oriago and then pushed on through cheering crowds almost to San Dona di [Piave](#), where the crews billeted in some barns for the night.

B Squadron's role once the bridge over the Brenta had been seized was to push through to [Mestre](#), north of the [Venice](#) causeway, and up Route 14 to the [Piave](#). The two troops left [Padua](#) at 7 a.m. and gave their infantry passengers a 45-mile ride 'at full tank speed' through [Mestre](#) and Trepalade and over the River Sile, where barges carrying enemy troops were sighted moving along a canal. At first sight the cabins were thought to be the turrets of German tanks moving hull-down behind a stopbank, and the Shermans at once opened fire. Captain Heptinstall's gunner scored a direct hit on one of these 'turrets', and the Germans 'promptly put up white flags' and were collected by the infantry. There were approximately two hundred of them. Another three hundred were collected by one troop and a company of infantry at the Capo d'Argine on a tip from Italian civilians that enemy troops there were willing to surrender. The rest of the column continued on to San Dona di [Piave](#), where it halted for the night.

The tank crews were too early on the road to get the full welcome from the people of [Padua](#), but the rear echelons, following along the road to [Venice](#) in the late

afternoon, drove for nearly three miles through streets packed tightly on both sides with wildly cheering Italians. The windows of the buildings along the route were crowded with people waving, throwing flowers and kisses; the people in the streets exchanged hand-slaps—the convoy was going too fast to allow time for handshakes—with the men on the trucks. Every village on the way echoed this greeting.

A demolished bridge over the [Piave](#) held up the advance and most of the tank crews had a good night's sleep while the engineers built a pontoon bridge. Here the flat countryside is scored with canals which drain the low-lying fields into rivers or coastal lagoons. South-east of San Dona the mouth of the [Piave](#) has been diverted from its old entrance flanking the Venetian lagoon and given a new one into the Adriatic. The old [Piave](#) (the Piave Vecchia) and the new have been joined by the Canale Cavetta, the rivers and canals making an island roughly seven miles long by three wide at the north-eastern end of the lagoon. Enemy troops driven back from the south had collected in this pocket and, supported by coast-defence and flak batteries, seemed determined to stay. <sup>49</sup>

B Squadron's two troops were sent off on the morning of the 30th to mop up the enemy pocket and, in the words of the regiment's diary, 'had a very sticky time'. On the tanks' approach the coastal guns opened fire and both troops and the [27 Battalion](#) companies they supported were heavily shelled. Second-Lieutenant McLay's troop ran into a battery of 88- millimetre guns, but by skilful manoeuvring managed to knock out two of them and take prisoner the crews of the other two. <sup>50</sup> Second-Lieutenant Turner's <sup>51</sup> troop found targets 'too good to be true' when it encountered a large convoy of horse-drawn vehicles on the stopbank near the mouth of the river, and eager gunners spent their shells lavishly. During the day the tanks had to repel several counter-attacks and drive off aggressive bazooka parties, and at length in the late afternoon were forced to withdraw to San Dona di [Piave](#) when they had used up their ammunition. In addition to the battery of 'eighty-eights', the tanks knocked out one self-propelled gun and inflicted severe casualties on barge-loads of enemy crossing the river and on others trying to escape down river by launch.

By contrast with B Squadron's strenuous day, A Squadron headquarters and Brice's troop saw no fighting when they crossed the river early in the afternoon by a ford at Ponte di [Piave](#), about eight miles north-west of San Dona on the same river, and joined up with the [Divisional Cavalry](#) Battalion. Although neither New Zealanders

nor Germans were aware of it, the German command in Italy had signed terms of surrender at noon that day. Hostilities were to end officially at noon on 2 May.

Leaving, with some relief, the aggressive enemy pocket at the mouth of the Piave, B Squadron's two troops crossed the river by the ford at Ponte di Piave about 4 a.m. on 1 May. They then rejoined Route 14, picked up 22 Battalion at Portogruaro, and roared ahead at speeds up to 30 miles an hour through Fossalta, Palazzolo, Cervignano, and across the Isonzo to Monfalcone. The route lay through many small villages and towns, where the church bells were rung and the people lined the streets. Partisan flags were everywhere; but across the Isonzo, where contact was made with Yugoslav troops, a red star on the flag proclaimed allegiance to Marshal Tito. Near Monfalcone, which the tanks reached about four o'clock, their crews having carefully removed all flags, partisan scarves, and other emblems collected on the route up so as not to give offence, contact was made with Tito's Yugoslav forces. After a short exchange 22 Battalion and some of the tanks took the surrender of 150 prisoners from coastal and ack-ack batteries in the naval shipyards area; and near Duino, on the coast a few miles past Monfalcone, troops from the two half-squadrons joined forces to round up another fifty who had offered brief resistance. A lone German cyclist pedalling along a road on the bank of a canal elected to dive 'bike and all', still pedalling, into the canal when one of the tanks fired a warning burst from its machine gun.

By the evening of 1 May, in heavy rain, the rear echelons had also reached Monfalcone. C Squadron and the rearward halves of A and B Squadrons, across the Po at last, were doing their best to catch up. Tactical Headquarters found itself accommodation in the Albergo Roma, the B echelons took the railway station, while the forward troops laagered for the night a few miles past Monfalcone on the coast road to Trieste.

At half past eight on the morning of 2 May, B Squadron's two troops headed south-east from Monfalcone with 22 Battalion, A Squadron's No. 4 Troop and the Divisional Cavalry being close behind them. At Sistiana, five miles along the road to Trieste, there was token opposition and some shooting, the 105-millimetre tanks engaging three enemy boats about five miles off shore—one was set on fire, one was abandoned, the third got away. The opposition on shore was soon cleared and

the force split up, B Squadron and its 22 Battalion infantry taking the right-hand fork at [Sistiana](#) and gaining the better road along the coast, and A Squadron and the Divisional Cavalry taking the longer, more winding inland route. At [Miramare](#), another six miles along the coast road, several hundred more enemy were waiting to surrender after a brisk lunch-hour bombing raid; and there [12 Lancers](#) and the tanks got orders to push on to [Trieste](#) 'with all speed and a show of force'.

With only a few miles to go to reach [Trieste](#), A Squadron's No. 2 Troop caught up with the leaders on the coast road. Foley's five tanks—four Shermans and one 17-pounder—had made good time after crossing the [Adige](#) on the morning of 30 April. To avoid the crowded divisional axis north-east from [Padua](#), the troop had made a detour to the north-west which took it across the Brenta River and through [Treviso](#) to San Dona di [Piave](#). Americans had generously provided the fuel for this triumphal progress through towns and cities liberated only a few hours before by the partisans; and the 'liberated' in their turn had supplied eggs and wine. A similar detour on the [Piave](#) when the ford at Ponte di [Piave](#) was missed on a wet, pitch-black night took the troop through San Vito, where thirty or more Germans from a corps headquarters and its marked maps were captured about midnight on 1–2 May. Next day contact was made by radio with Squadron Headquarters at [Sistiana](#) and the troop pushed ahead through 22 Battalion on the coast road until it caught up with Colonel Robinson, in a scout car armed only with a Bren gun, just past the [Miramare](#) tunnel.

The Colonel warned the tanks that there were road blocks just ahead. The first of these was defended by two pillboxes, with an old cart and a tangle of barbed wire blocking the road. The tanks sprayed the pillboxes with their Brownings and then charged straight through. At the second block a gap was found in the concertina wire. A party of Germans waving surrender leaflets came out of a house and gave themselves up to Lieutenant Turner's troop, but the tanks were ordered to push on and leave their prisoners to be collected later. The drivers then accelerated, the last few miles were covered at a grand pace, and at three o'clock on that sunny and momentous afternoon the regiment's first tanks, the spearhead of the Division, entered [Trieste](#).

A Squadron's headquarters and Brice's troop found some enemy to deal with on the inland route at [Prosecco](#) and some barge targets well out to sea. Squadron Headquarters tried out its 105-millimetre guns on some enemy-held houses, cleared

away a road block, and pushed on to Trieste. The cliff road leading down from the hills behind the city was mined ready for blowing, but with help from a local partisan the fuses were found and the road made safe. The squadron was still in plenty of time to be welcomed with flowers and to take some surrenders. The latter was not always as easy as it sounds, one of B Squadron's troops having spent some time trying to effect the surrender of the German garrison of the castle in the centre of Trieste, whose commander had declared himself willing to surrender to the Allies but not to the Yugoslavs. The Yugoslavs, for their part, would not accept that condition and for some time continued to fire on any enemy movement. The tanks and a 22 Battalion company entered the castle and took the surrender of 12 officers and 170 men, but because of the Yugoslavs' hostile attitude and indiscriminate shooting the garrison could not be evacuated until next morning. Some of the New Zealand troops were the garrison's guests at a late supper, New Zealander and German lining up in the same mess queue.

In Trieste there were still some enemy with less discretion who refused to surrender either to New Zealanders or to Yugoslavs. A party of these diehards, about 300 strong, held on in the Tribunale (the Law Courts) near the San Marco shipyard and refused to give themselves up: their commander was reported to be drunk and to be 'humbugging undecidedly'. At dusk, the enemy's time limit having expired, all the available tanks from the regiment, including some from 19 Armoured Regiment and 7 Hussars—18 tanks in all—surrounded the building and gave it a 15-minute pounding with guns and Brownings at a range of about 30 yards. The enemy was well entrenched in the cellars and suffered few casualties, but was driven out when the Yugoslavs poured in petrol and set it on fire. Yugoslav troops and partisans spent the night clearing out the enemy and by morning had collected some 200 prisoners; others were rounded up from their hiding places in the city over the next few days.

The B Echelon convoy joined the tanks in Trieste at dusk on 2 May, and at 9 a.m. on the 3rd C Squadron and the rear troops of A and B Squadrons also caught up with the regiment's spearhead.<sup>52</sup> Just before they arrived Captain Foley's troop went off with a 22 Battalion company to negotiate the surrender of a German force, 1200 strong, at Villa Opicina, a few miles to the north-east above Trieste. One tank was ditched on the way up and the infantry three-tonners could not pass a demolition on the hill north of Trieste. A platoon was mounted on the two remaining tanks and

carried up the road until they came abreast of a small house amongst the trees from which a large party of Germans waved a greeting. This cheerful welcome surprised the troop commander, but he was even more surprised to see how many guns the Germans had, 'almost enough to blast us out of [Trieste](#)'.

The Germans were willing to surrender to the New Zealanders but not to the Yugoslavs; once again the Yugoslavs objected, claiming that the surrender should be made to them. 'Little did we realise that our "half-hour job" was to turn into an all-day affair,' says Foley. When Yugoslav fire fell amongst them, it was soon brought home to the party that the war was still on in earnest. A 22 Battalion NCO was killed and another man wounded.

'Eventually I decided to go and stop the war myself,' says Foley. 'Little did I realise what I was letting myself in for.' With a German colonel and a captain on board, 'both very scared', he took his tank down the road to the German lines, where he found bitter fighting raging and was again amazed at the strength of the enemy's positions. His proposal that he was going over to the partisans' lines to speak to them was considered 'verr dangerous' by the colonel, but after some parleying in no-man's-land with 'some Tito men', carried out in Italian with his gunner's assistance, 'we got them to understand that if they stopped firing the war would be over.'

Foley then adopted the role of referee, dashing between the two parties, who had again resumed the fight, 'and by much frantic waving, with my heart in my mouth, got them to stop. ... Then proceeded further along the line and the same performance went on. Villa Opicina was taking an awful pasting so decided to go and stop that too.' Negotiations with first a lieutenant, then a major, a brigadier ('a real pirate'), and, last of all, a general only confirmed that the Yugoslavs were determined not to let the Germans—and all their equipment—be surrendered to the New Zealanders. [General Freyberg](#), contacted by radio, directed that no New Zealand lives were to be lost and ordered the party to return to their units. By this time another troop under Captain Heptinstall had come up to find out what was causing the delay and the Germans were lined up ready to leave for [Trieste](#). The tank crews and their infantry returned to [Trieste](#) about 7 p.m. after a very difficult day; and, as Foley reports with some bitterness, 'Tito just walked in and took over.' Two Austrian soldiers on a motor-cycle followed the tanks back to [Trieste](#) and were the party's only prisoners. Foley claims for his crews the experience of being the last

of the Division to be under fire in Europe.

Back in Trieste the regiment's tanks and transport were parked about the streets near the centre of the city, while most of the men were billeted in a five-storied block of flats that had formerly been the headquarters of the SS troops in Italy. The last of the enemy was rounded up, but truculent Yugoslav troops poured into the city, plastered the walls with their slogans, foraged for fascists and loot, organised processions, counter-processions, demonstrations and counter-demonstrations. The regiment's tanks were replenished and rearmed and troops were on call to meet any emergency; but although for some time the situation was tense and the troops of both sides carried all their arms, a precarious peace was kept. The people of Trieste, the Italians especially, had good reason to be grateful for the New Zealand occupation.

On 4 May squadrons reverted to the regiment's command and 19 Regiment relieved them of their duties with 9 Brigade. The regiment then came under 6 Brigade's command and moved back that day and the next to Monfalcone, 17 miles away, for a rest. Before they left on the morning of the 5th the tanks paraded through the main streets of Trieste in a final show of strength. By this time the Navy had arrived off Trieste and Americans and British troops had joined the occupation force.

From the point of view of the tank crews at least, the attack from the Senio onwards was the most successful of the regiment's battles. The enemy had been well and truly beaten south of the Po; and although some of the tanks had some sharp skirmishes north of that river in the last days of April, the days of the big battles and 'set-piece' attacks were over. The experience gained in the earlier battles in Italy and the training with the infantry before the final offensive had given the tank crews and their infantry platoons the close personal contact essential to smooth co-operation on the battlefield. They worked together splendidly and morale was high. Each platoon had a tank attached to it; each tank's gunner was linked direct with the platoon wireless set and the infantry got the tank fire when and where they wanted it.<sup>53</sup> Each troop worked as a team and every man in a crew felt that he was on top of his job.

Throughout the long advance ammunition and fuel never failed to come up from

the rear echelons, and the amount used by the tanks was tremendous. Their Browning machine guns shot away 117,000 rounds—one gunner claims to have fired 10,000 rounds alone on the day his troop crossed the [Santerno](#) —and the ‘seventy-fives’ fired 8123 rounds of high-explosive, 103 of smoke, and 42 of armour-piercing shells. In addition, the 17-pounder and the 105-millimetre Shermans added their quotas to this total. No fewer than 27,310 gallons of petrol and 12,820 gallons of diesel fuel were used by the regiment during the battle. Besides meeting these demands, the regiment's supply system had to stand the test of speedy moves from place to place. Headquarters Squadron, for instance, stopped for the night at twenty different places in twenty-three days, ‘including the night when we didn't stop at all.’

The regiment's casualties in the final offensive were surprisingly few, especially if they are considered in relation to the casualties inflicted on the enemy. One officer (Second-Lieutenant Jenkins) died of wounds and seven men were killed, three officers and seventeen men wounded. Its losses in tanks were also light: two Shermans were knocked out and three damaged, one Stuart tank was knocked out and another damaged. In return, four enemy tanks were knocked out—two Tigers, a Panther, and a Mark IV—and another Tiger brewed up by its crew south of [Massa Lombarda](#) was also claimed by the regiment. The two armoured cars taken at the Brenta bridge north-east of [Padua](#) completed the regiment's bag of AFVs for the campaign.

Two of the enemy tanks were knocked out by the regiment's 17-pounders, which proved effective in their specialist role of anti-tank weapon. The 105-millimetre Sherman was not as successful, its lack of power traverse making it unsuitable for forward troops and limiting its use to squadron headquarters. C Squadron used one of its two 105-millimetre guns with good effect against a church tower at Ficarola, but the greater ‘drift’ of its hollow-charge, high-explosive anti-tank shell in flight made it less accurate than the 17-pounder.

In the matter of awards, the regiment's part in the last battle was recognised by the award of a DSO to Colonel Robinson and of MCs to three junior officers, Second-Lieutenants McLay, Sisam, and Crawford. The only other award to which the regiment can make a claim was the MM won by Corporal ‘Bull’ Anderton, a Sherman-dozer operator who had been posted to 28 Assault Squadron from the regiment.

Corporal Anderton distinguished himself by carrying on calmly under fire his job of helping to make crossings for the tanks. At the [Senio](#) during the first night of the attack, he was blown up by a tier of mines; although suffering from blast and shock, he carried on his work throughout the next day and night on another 'dozer'. At the [Gaiana](#) and [Quaderna](#) crossings he again worked for long hours under fire without rest or sleep. This award acknowledged the help given to the tanks by the assault squadron, whose troops followed the advance close behind the infantry and were ready at hand to bridge any obstacle or bulldoze a path for the armour.

The tanks had also been given invaluable help from the Air OP in locating enemy tanks and self-propelled guns, reconnoitring crossings, reporting enemy movements, and observing the tanks' shooting against targets they couldn't see themselves.<sup>54</sup> But without fitters and mechanics to keep the tanks' tracks in order and their engines running sweetly, the swift advances of the last few weeks would not have been possible. While the regiment was under 6 Brigade's command from the [Senio](#) to the [Adige](#), 85 miles were covered and eight rivers crossed without the loss of a single tank through mechanical defect. Fitters and mechanics win few laurels in regimental histories, but the high standard of maintenance in the regiment needs no better tribute. In fact, when the regiment reached [Trieste](#) it still had with it a few of the tanks with which it had been issued at [Maadi](#) over two years before.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lt-Col [H. A. Robinson](#), DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; [Waipukurau](#); born New Plymouth, 29 Sep 1912; farmhand; troop leader, later 2 i/c, Div Cav 1939–44; CO [18 Armd Regt](#) Mar-Jul 1944; [20 Armd Regt](#) 17 Mar–16 Oct 1945; twice wounded.

<sup>2</sup> Maj [W. A. Pyatt](#); [Hawera](#); born [Gisborne](#), 4 Nov 1916; theological student; [18 Bn](#), 1939–41; [18 Armd Regt](#), 1944; 2 i/c [20 Regt](#) Mar-May 1945; wounded 18 Apr 1941; Vicar of [Hawera](#).

<sup>3</sup> WO II [J. A. Brown](#), m.i.d.; [Wakefield](#), [Nelson](#); born [Oxford](#), 1 Nov 1916; labourer.

<sup>4</sup> Sgt [M. W. Heath](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 27 Mar 1913; storeman.

<sup>5</sup> Sigm I. D. Muir; Hastings; born Hastings, 27 Jun 1914; lorry driver; wounded 6 Apr 1945.

<sup>6</sup> Sgt R. C. Lloyd; Great Barrier Island; born Wanganui, 3 May 1920; student teacher; wounded 3 Oct 1944.

<sup>7</sup> When Major Wright was wounded on 14 April his second-in-command, Captain Heptinstall, commanded the squadron for a few days before handing over on 19 April to Major M. P. Donnelly, formerly second-in-command of A Squadron, star batsman of the regiment's cricket team and a New Zealand representative cricketer.

<sup>8</sup> Tpr S. D. Pringle; born Cromwell, 30 May 1923; porter; wounded 19 Oct 1944; killed in action 10 Apr 1945.

<sup>9</sup> Sgt B. Letts; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 1 Mar 1916; miller; wounded 10 Apr 1945.

<sup>10</sup> Tpr P. J. Smith; Greenmeadows; born England, 26 Dec 1918; carpenter; wounded 10 Apr 1945.

<sup>11</sup> Maj W. C. T. Foley; Wellington; born Stratford, 7 Jul 1916; Regular soldier; 26 Bn, 1940-41; Sqn Comd 2 Tank Bn (in NZ) 1942-43; LO, Special Tank Sqn, 2 NZEF (IP) 1943; 20 Armd Regt, 1945; 2 NZEF (Japan) 1945-46.

<sup>12</sup> This engagement took place on the Lugo Canal. Fourteen prisoners were taken.

<sup>13</sup> Tpr F. E. Pringle; born NZ 8 Mar 1920; metal worker; killed in action 11 Apr 1945.

<sup>14</sup> Tpr L. C. Stevens; born Masterton, 27 Mar 1919; farmhand; killed in action 11 Apr 1945.

<sup>15</sup> L-Cpl V. H. Wilhelm; born NZ 26 Aug 1922; farmhand; killed in action 11 Apr 1945.

<sup>16</sup> Sgt W. J. C. Armstrong, m.i.d.; Opotiki; born Opotiki, 25 Sep 1915; farmer.

<sup>17</sup> Cpl A. S. Hodson; Gladstone, Masterton; born Wellington, 9 Feb 1915; farmer.

<sup>18</sup> Tpr I. G. James; Sefton; born Sefton, 1 Apr 1922; farmhand.

<sup>19</sup> Cpl R. J. Pepperell; Waitara; born New Plymouth, 4 Sep 1922; farmhand.

<sup>20</sup> Tpr L. G. McCully; Christchurch; born Dunroon, 9 Aug 1923; tractor driver.

<sup>21</sup> Hodson later dictated this account at Maadi to the regiment's historian, Lance-Corporal Hugh Milner. It was taken down on a typewriter, much of it in note form. The original text is followed here.

<sup>22</sup> Back at Massa Lombarda a few days later, the 26 Battalion platoon presented Sergeant Armstrong with a Luger taken from one of the Tiger's crew, a gesture much appreciated. It is also of interest that the C Squadron-26 Battalion 'team' had as senior officers four 20 Battalion 'originals'— Lt-Col M. C. Fairbrother, Majors G. A. Murray and B. Boyd, and the squadron commander, Major Moodie.

<sup>23</sup> L-Sgt F. W. D. Dowrick; Napier; born Petane, 1 Apr 1914; main layer.

<sup>24</sup> Sgt R. J. Cranston, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born Tamahere, 12 Nov 1918; farmhand.

<sup>25</sup> Lt W. J. Sisam, MC; born NZ 3 Jul 1919; bank clerk.

<sup>26</sup> Tpr L. G. Taylor; born NZ 25 May 1922; shop assistant; killed in action 13 Apr 1945.

<sup>27</sup> Cpl R. B. Davis; Lower Hutt; born Featherston, 25 Jul 1912; publisher; wounded 13 Apr 1945.

<sup>28</sup> 2 Lt J. L. Guest; Balclutha; born Balclutha, 6 Dec 1915; retailer; wounded 26 Jun 1942.

<sup>29</sup> Tpr M. O. Morrison; Rai Valley, Marlborough; born NZ 29 Aug 1922; dairy factory assistant.

<sup>30</sup> Tpr C. Kirk; Christchurch; born Rangiora, 31 Aug 1911; flourmill hand.

<sup>31</sup> 2 Lt J. G. Crawford, MC; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 25 Mar 1918; buyer's assistant.

<sup>32</sup> Tpr P. R. J. Chatterton; Christchurch; born Rangiora, 11 Apr 1922; farmhand; wounded 14 Apr 1945.

<sup>33</sup> Tpr E. J. Longman; Woodville; born NZ 15 Oct 1916; carpenter; wounded 14 Apr 1945.

<sup>34</sup> Tpr R. J. Pearce; Otautau, Southland; born NZ 20 Jun 1922; farmhand; wounded 16 Apr 1945.

<sup>35</sup> Tpr R. H. D. Rogers; born New Plymouth, 18 Sep 1919; sharemilker; wounded 17 Apr 1945.

<sup>36</sup> 2 Lt R. B. Burland; Waikari, North Canterbury; born Kaikoura, 23 Apr 1922; telegraphist.

<sup>37</sup> A suggestion made at the divisional conference that the troops across the river should be withdrawn and the enemy 'smashed' with another set-piece

attack was opposed by Brigadier Parkinson, 6 Brigade's commander, who is reported to have said: 'The Hindenburg Line was broken because one man hopped over the barbed wire; the Idice has been crossed by a troop of tanks and we had better carry on.'

<sup>38</sup> Sgt W. N. Wright; born Timaru, 30 Jul 1922; farm labourer; killed in action 22 Apr 1945.

<sup>39</sup> Tpr T. W. Quickenden; Patea; born NZ 25 Dec 1922; cordial manufacturer; wounded 22 Apr 1945.

<sup>40</sup> Cpl R. C. Barriball; New Plymouth; born NZ 2 Nov 1914; farmhand; wounded 22 Apr 1945.

<sup>41</sup> Except for the speed of the current, which was greatly exaggerated, the New Zealanders found these figures to be roughly correct. The first New Zealand patrol across the river at noon on 24 April estimated the current at 3 to 4 knots.

<sup>42</sup> Tpr L. J. McCarthy; born Te Awamutu, 20 Sep 1916; farmhand; killed in action 24 Apr 1945.

<sup>43</sup> Cpl J. W. Higgs; born NZ 13 Jul 1915; lorry driver; wounded 24 Apr 1945.

<sup>44</sup> Tpr K. Theyers; Alexandra; born Alexandra, 22 Apr 1920; orchard hand.

<sup>45</sup> 2 Lt F. Brice; Culverden; born NZ 19 Apr 1912; tractor driver.

<sup>46</sup> Italian partisans had earlier tried to hold the bridge against the retreating enemy but had been driven off.

<sup>47</sup> The capture of this bridge opened the road north for the rest of the Division and won for Lieutenant Sisam an immediate MC. The bridge was later declared unsafe for tanks.

<sup>48</sup> Lt-Col C. H. Sawyers, DSO, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Australia, 17 Feb 1905; sales manager; CO 14 Lt AA Regt Dec 1943; CO 5 Fd Regt 15 Aug-12 Oct 1944, 30 Nov 1944-1 May 1945.

<sup>49</sup> Another large enemy party—one report says there were 500 of them—raided 5 Field Park Company and other engineer units during the night, setting fire to several trucks and causing a number of casualties before making off in stolen transport. A truckload of them (35 according to one count) was taken prisoner next morning by the regiment's signals officer, Second-Lieutenant Ted Tressider, and his driver. Tressider came across the party a few miles north-west of San Dona di Piave. Their truck had run off the road into a ditch and they were trying to lift it back, but unfortunately for them had left their weapons—rifles, machine-guns, and an anti-tank gun—in the back. Tressider and his driver, armed with a pistol and a tommy gun, took the party prisoner and drove them back to B Echelon.

<sup>50</sup> McLay won the immediate MC for his action against this strongpoint and for other successful engagements that day.

<sup>51</sup> 2 Lt N. J. Turner; New Plymouth; born Dunedin, 12 May 1913; civil servant.

<sup>52</sup> C Squadron had spent the night of 1 May in a 'stinking' Italian farmhouse near Venice. Late next afternoon 'the Ites told us "Guerra finito" but we were too tired to do much by way of celebration and pushed on to reach Monfalcone at 2 a.m.' Here some crews blithely arranged with the partisans to guard their tanks.

<sup>53</sup> Each tank also had a telephone outside it at its rear so that the infantry could speak to the crew to indicate targets, etc.

<sup>54</sup> A former 20th officer, Major L. W. Colmore-Williams, serving as GSO II (Air) at Divisional Headquarters, had a big part in the success of the air support in this battle.

<sup>55</sup> One of these, Lieutenant Denham's, with the serial number 5-2-6, was known as 'Time gentlemen, please!'



# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## CHAPTER 21 – ‘THIS IS YUGOSLAVIA’

## CHAPTER 21

### 'This is Yugoslavia'

'Tukay je Jugoslavia' proclaimed the slogans on the walls of Trieste and Monfalcone, 'This is Yugoslavia'. The claim embraced all Italian territory east of the Isonzo, proclaiming it Yugoslav by right of conquest and adding the warning—a threat, perhaps, or bluff—that the Yugoslav Army 'would not be responsible for anything that might happen' if the New Zealand Division was not withdrawn at once behind the Isonzo. This was how Marshal Tito proposed to keep the agreement made earlier with Field-Marshal Alexander at Belgrade. The New Zealanders, said General Freyberg, were going to stay.

For the next six weeks 'the Jugs' were the Division's main preoccupation. The New Zealander is not notably a diplomat, but common sense, a rough tact, cheerful friendliness and an impression of quiet strength helped to smooth over many a difficult situation. Twentieth Regiment's tanks were chiefly concerned with the last of these virtues, and throughout May and for the first two weeks of June its crews manned gunlines in support of the infantry battalions to which they were attached or 'showed the flag' in parades of strength, both in their tanks and on foot. Even church parades provided the opportunity for propaganda, and for a thanksgiving service on 13 May the regiment marched through Monfalcone 'for the benefit of Tito's clan'. 'There are too many of his men around to suit me,' says the same diarist. 'They could cause a lot of bother.' It is to the Division's credit that none of the many incidents where provocation was given developed into serious friction.

For the fortnight it was at Monfalcone the regiment was on three hours' notice. Two troops in turn patrolled the three-mile stretch of road from Monfalcone to Ronchi 'as a reminder to Tito that troops were on the job.' On the afternoon of the 5th the regiment lost B Squadron to 25 Battalion, with whom it went to give support near San Pelagio, but as reinforcement it welcomed back from Venice Lieutenant Sisam's troop, which returned with apparent reluctance on the 9th after ten days in that fascinating city.

As for the men themselves, first there was VE Day to celebrate with parties and a monster fireworks display; official duties were few, the weather beautiful, the

Isonzo and the Grado lagoon not far away. This was a time of swimming parties, picnics, and squadron dances in the open air, at some of which 'Tito's chaps' appeared uninvited and had to be firmly persuaded to look elsewhere for their entertainment, or else caused trouble afterwards by accosting guests on their way home. Leave parties left frequently for three days in Venice or on 'swanning' trips to Udine or across the Alps to Austria, journeys which, with unofficial extensions, often covered several hundred miles. In spite of the 'Jugs', the men were in holiday mood and determined to enjoy themselves before other battles or other fronts claimed their attention.

Meanwhile, a watchful eye had been kept on the situation in Trieste and Venezia Giulia. By 20 May things looked no better and it was decided to move up the armour into forward positions in a policy of 'peaceful infiltration' of Yugoslav positions. Accordingly, at 4.30 a.m. next day the regiment moved to the Sistiana area to support 6 Brigade. The tanks took up defensive positions among pine trees and scrub oaks on a rocky hill overlooking a bay, in which at least twenty two-man German submarines lay with their backs broken and hulls blown apart. It was a pleasant spot, but most of the crews were not destined to stay there long. Next morning reconnaissance parties from the squadrons went out to reconnoitre suitable areas for their next infiltrating move, and in one squadron 'Some fool fired a Very light and set the scrub on fire. Took half an hour to put out.' By half past two in the afternoon the squadrons were on their way again, closing the Allies' grip on Trieste by taking up gunline positions supporting their infantry battalions, 'should hostilities commence', on the inland road from Prepotto to Sgonico. As in some of the earlier battles, A Squadron was again with 24 Battalion, B with the 25th, and C with 26 Battalion. Two troops of 28 Assault Squadron moved with the regiment and came under its command.

The grip tightened still further on the afternoon of the 23rd when A Squadron and 24 Battalion moved up to a crossroads north-east of Prosecco. As one of the regiment's diarists saw the move: 'Tanks moved up the road as Tito has been told to get out or get pushed out.' Road blocks were set up and Trieste buzzed like an angry hive.

On the 25th the 6th Reinforcements of the Hawea draft left the regiment on the first stage of their journey home. As always, they were suitably farewelled ('They

'sure poured some booze into me,' one man records feelingly); the Colonel said goodbye at 7 a.m., the General at 8.30, and for the farewell parade at [Monfalcone](#) the regiment supplied three Honey tanks to discourage Yugoslav participation. For those left behind the [Grado](#) and [Venice](#) leave schemes still operated, there was swimming at [Barcola](#), inter-squadron cricket matches, and a baseball match against 28 Assault Squadron. By this time the regiment's star cricketer, Major Martin Donnelly, had left B Squadron for the [United Kingdom](#), where he had been posted to the Prisoner-of-War Repatriation Unit. On his way to the United Kingdom also was Major Pyatt, who was succeeded on 20 May as second-in-command by Major [Ryan](#)<sup>1</sup> from the 18 Regiment.

On the evening of 31 May and in the early morning of 1 June the regiment moved into [Trieste](#) with 6 Brigade to relieve 19 Regiment and 9 Brigade. Regimental Headquarters took over the Littoria seaplane base, A Squadron occupied the [Savoia](#) hotel on the waterfront, B Squadron found quarters in a block of flats near the Tribunale building, and C occupied the Castello San Giusto, with a fine view over the city and of a muscular group of statuary in the square below. One B Squadron troop stayed back near [Sistiana](#) to protect B Echelon. Infantry companies and tank troops manned strategic positions guarding vital points in the city, while RHQ and the reconnaissance troop patrolled the docks and the railway yards.

At this period there were constant reports of 'incidents', of Yugoslav troops looting warehouses and factories, of demonstrations and arrests. In [Trieste](#) the Yugoslav Army imposed a curfew on the civilian population and maintained armed patrols in the streets by day and night; at each alarm tank crews and infantry would stand-to ready to take up their battle positions. In the evening of 8 June a big demonstration by Yugoslav troops and local Communists threatened trouble, but 'blocking' tactics by Allied troops in the town confined it skilfully to parades and processions through the streets and at no time did the situation get out of hand.

After some high-level diplomatic exchanges the Yugoslavs were at last brought to reason and on the 11th began to withdraw from [Trieste](#). No incidents were reported, and apart from the inevitable processions and parades the city's streets were orderly. The withdrawal was frenziedly celebrated next day by the Italians as the last of the Yugoslav Army departed: 'The big square not far away is just packed

with cheering people and from every window there flutters the Italian flag where yesterday fluttered Tito's,' wrote Sergeant-Major Hamilton. Reports that armed Slovenian peasants proposed to stage a counter-demonstration caused all leave to be stopped and kept the troops at their posts. Trouble threatened later in the day when partisans and local Communists tore down or set fire to Italian flags, but Allied provosts with their usual brisk efficiency quelled all disturbances and the troops' services were not required. Among the list of vital points—docks, broadcasting and power stations, etc.—which the troops were called on to guard after the Yugoslavs' departure was a brewery, which units were charged with safeguarding 'for future military use' and to prevent looting.

The men then settled down to enjoy themselves in earnest. Earlier in the month the regiment had borrowed two large yachts and two motor launches which it used for sightseeing and swimming trips round the harbour, and other parties went on minesweeping trips with the [Royal Navy](#). A roof-garden bar and lounge at the Littoria seaplane base was another pleasant spot in which to pass the time between alarms. Leave was generous: even during 'the trouble' only half the troops were kept on duty, and of the rest half had daily leave in the city on one hour's notice to return to their posts and the rest were on unrestricted leave. For a divisional race meeting in the [Trieste](#) trotting club grounds on the 9th all men carried arms —as they did even at the opera—and awaited the summons of Very light signals to return instantly to their posts in the event of trouble. In the evenings they went to the pictures or played crib, and went to bed on huge suppers of oyster fritters from Patriotic parcels.

Beautiful weather, attractive female companions (a 'say-it-with-flowers' service operated in [Trieste](#)), good food (Italian cooks in some of the messes excelled themselves in creating tempting meals from bully beef or from a few tins of fish), dances, swimming, farewell parties, four-day motor tours of north [Italy](#): the idyll could not last for ever, and in fact some men record that they were bored with nothing to do. Work was found for many of them at Villa Opicina, whence the regiment, less A Squadron, moved on 17 June into a large and dirty barracks on the outskirts of that hilltop village overlooking [Trieste](#). A Squadron, left behind in [Trieste](#) under 6 Brigade's command, moved from the [Savoia](#) hotel area to the Littoria seaplane base. At Opicina, after three days of cleaning, the barracks were at last considered habitable; and then followed a period of 'one-stop-two' with squadron

and regimental parades, ceremonial guards, route marches twice a week, NCOs' classes, and gunnery and wireless classes for the later reinforcements. All the while the Division boiled with rumours about its future: would it go home or would it find further battlefields in [Burma](#) or in the Pacific?

On 24 June the partisan forces in [Venezia Giulia](#), the Difesa Popolare, were paraded and thanked for their past services; their arms were then collected and the organisation disbanded. While the partisans paraded their buildings and headquarters in [Trieste](#) were searched, with some success, for hidden arms, an action that provoked protests from local trade union organisations which reached as far abroad as the New Zealand Government. In a form of direct protest not unknown in New Zealand, the watersiders and 'public services' of [Trieste](#) went on strike. On 25 June a party of fifty men from the regiment took their places loading and unloading ships, and all leave to [Trieste](#) was cancelled. The strike lasted only one day. When B Squadron relieved A in [Trieste](#) on 30 June, a troop of tanks was stationed at the entrance to the docks to check the entry of all personnel and vehicles.

And this was about the regiment's last official duty, for B Squadron handed over to 18 Regiment a week later and joined the rest of the regiment in the Villa Opicina barracks. A guard of 1 officer and 18 men went to [Prosecco](#) on a six-day tour of duty at the corps petrol dump and a smaller party manned patrols in Villa Opicina, week about with the other regiments, later in the month; but apart from a ceremonial parade and march past for Colonel Campbell, 4 Armoured Brigade's commander, on 19 July and an informal visit by [General Freyberg](#) a few days earlier, the month's occasions were domestic and social rather than military. Chief of these were Headquarters Squadron's dinner on the 14th and a regimental race meeting and smoke concert on the 21st. A memorial service by Padre Gunn for those of the regiment who lost their lives in [Italy](#) will also be long remembered by all who took part in it. A printed order of service containing the names of the regiment's dead was sent to their next-of-kin.

On 22 July the Division began to move back to a concentration area near [Lake Trasimene](#), and when the other 4 Armoured Brigade units left on the 31st the regiment was left behind as rear party for the Division. Attached to it were some thirty-odd men from each of 18 and 19 Regiments and 16 from 28 Assault Squadron, as well as the brigade workshops, the armoured section of Ordnance Field Park, and

a small section of the Divisional Postal Unit. Five officers and 123 other ranks of the Tekapo draft also left with the brigade convoy after the usual exhausting farewells.

August was a social month and the regiment's daily record of events reads like a debutante's diary: dances, launch and yacht trips, cricket and tennis matches, visits to the opera at Gradisca, visits exchanged with the Royal Navy. Its rear-party duties of handing in tanks and equipment and cleaning up took some time too. Ammunition was handed in in the last week of July and taken by truck to a dump at Udine, and a lot of maintenance work was done on the tanks before they, too, began to move back to Bologna in the last week of August. Leave parties had their last looks at Venice's handsome club, their last rides in the city's graceful black gondolas, or went farther afield to the New Zealand alpine leave centre in the Dolomites.

And then on 31 August the rear party left Trieste. "A rivederci, New Zealand Brothers"—we love you and you know it, and for this reason we are happy that you return to your healthy country and leave this old patient we call Europe ....', said La Voce Libera in a fond but premature farewell on 7 August. The regiment's destination was Bastia, a village of no special note in a hot, dry valley below its better-known neighbour, Assisi.

The move back took the regiment through towns and villages it had known in other days and other circumstances: Mestre, Ferrara, Padua, to Bologna, which few men knew before at first hand but now had opportunity to discover during a stay of four days while the last of the brigade's tanks, ninety-nine in all, were being handed in. Some men preferred to go farther afield to renew old friendships in Forli and Faenza and were welcomed enthusiastically and farewelled with tears. Then, on the 6th, an aching twelve-hour drive continued the journey back through Forli and Iesi to Fabriano, and a four-hour trip next morning ended it at Bastia—a move of 500 miles in three and a half days' motoring. Tents were put up and a unit ERS officer at once appointed. The appointment was symbolic of the times.

This was not a happy period in the Division's history. Among the men there was a general feeling of restlessness at the apparent slowness of repatriation and at delays in Government decisions on the composition of the force to go to Japan. Most men were bored, many 'broke', and official efforts to amuse and entertain were often uncooperatively received. Discipline was relaxed, the mercato nero a temptation to

the unscrupulous; absence without leave and the 'flogging' of army stores and equipment were regrettably common. Ample leave, conducted tours, and later the provision of leave in the United Kingdom for men awaiting repatriation helped to pass the time during this barren wait, but those without the money to go farther afield killed time in the bars and cafés of Bastia and Petrignano and sometimes got into trouble.

In mid-September it was announced that single men of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Reinforcements would form the New Zealand component of the occupation force for Japan, and that the earlier reinforcements would return home in turn as shipping became available. The first to leave the regiment were the 9th Reinforcements, and with them (or about the same time) went two of the squadron commanders, Majors Jim Moodie and Charlie Caldwell, and the Adjutant, Captain Hazlett. With the reduction in strength the regiment was reorganised for a time into two squadrons, Headquarters Squadron and No. 1, but with the arrival on 19 October of 199 other ranks from 27 Battalion a third squadron was formed, No. 2 Squadron containing all 10th Reinforcement men, the next to go home. The 27 Battalion men with the regiment were those not eligible for service in J Force.

By now the regiment had moved from Bastia to winter quarters at Arno camp, near Florence, but from the record of comings and goings few seem to have spent much time there. Colonel Robinson and some of the few 'old hands' who were left took part in memorial services in Crete, at the Sangro, and in Cassino before making their departure for Advanced Base and return home. At regular intervals, beginning on 14 October, parties left by lorry on the long overland journey to Calais and Folkestone and leave in 'the old Dart', and some of those who didn't or couldn't go to the United Kingdom got jobs helping to run the staging camps that were dotted across France as overnight halts for the leave convoys.

On 20 October Major Ryan returned to the regiment, after a month's absence as second-in-command of 18 Regiment, to take command and preside over its dissolution. General Freyberg took the salute at the last parade of 4 Armoured Brigade in mid-November, Padre Spence conducted his last service in the regiment, snow fell on the hills round Florence, the leave parties from England began to return. The time had come to make an end. On 2 December 1945, 20 New Zealand

Armoured Regiment was officially disbanded.

It is now time to end, too, a narrative that has taken the 20th through six long years of war. In various capacities and with varied skills, men served the trade of war in countries thousands of miles from their homes; they suffered hardships and cruel losses, shared victories and defeats, and those who survived returned to their homes happy to bring this interlude in their lives to an end. This is the story of the men who served the 20th in infantry and in armour throughout those years, and of the comradeship which binds together those with whom dangers and hardships have been shared.

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<sup>1</sup> Maj W. H. Ryan, OBE, m.i.d., Order of King George I and Silver Cross (Gk); Mangaia, Cook Is; born Auckland, 1 Jun 1911; civil engineer; 18 Bn and Armd Regt; CO 20 Armd Regt 18 Oct-18 Dec 1945.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## *Contents*

Roll of Honour p. 603

Summary of Casualties p. 613

Honours and Awards p. 614

Appendix I — VICTORIA CROSS CITATIONS p. 617

[section] p. 617

8077 Second-Lieutenant Charles Hazlett Upham

Bar to Victoria Cross p. 618

7930 Sergeant John Daniel Hinton p. 620

Index p. 621

[backmatter] p. 633

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## ROLL OF HONOUR

### *Roll of Honour*

killed in action

Maj C. Wilson, MC (Gk), m.i.d.	21 May 1941
Capt W. L. M. Gilmour ( NZMC, attached)	1 December 1941
Capt M. C. Rice, MBE	22 May 1941
Lt P. H. Brooks, m.i.d.	16 March 1944
Lt L. I. Carson	15 December 1943
Lt A. S. Galbraith	12 July 1942
Lt J. S. Hazlett	19 March 1944
Lt F. J. McKerchar, m.i.d.	17 December 1943
Lt D. E. Murray	16 December 1943
Lt M. G. O'Callaghan	25 May 1941
Lt F. O'Rorke	28 April 1941
Lt I. D. Smith	15 July 1942
Lt L. J. Thomson	15 July 1942
Lt R. F. Walford	16 December 1943
2 Lt J. D. Burland	23 September 1944
2 Lt S. J. Green	25 May 1941
2 Lt F. B. McLaren	27 April 1941
2 Lt J. M. Phillips	30 September 1944
WO II A. C. Gray	13 July 1942
WO II H. L. Grooby, m.i.d.	1 December 1941
Sgt D. L. Black	26 September 1944
Sgt E. S. Browne	28 June 1942
Sgt W. N. C. Craig	23 September 1944
Sgt T. M. Drummond (Ordnance attached)	27 April 1941
Sgt A. F. Morris	15 March 1944
Sgt F. T. Scott	22 May 1941
Sgt J. H. Wallis	22 May 1941
Sgt W. F. Watson	30 March 1944
Sgt W. N. Wright	22 April 1945
L-Sgt J. R. Hayward	27 November 1941

Cpl L. G. Brenton	16 March 1944
Cpl W. A. Brown	30 March 1944
Cpl B. F. Drogemuller	22 May 1941
Cpl H. Gilchrist	25 May 1941
Cpl P. J. J. Grogan	15 July 1942
Cpl S. P. Harrison	28 July 1944
Cpl S. Lawson	27 November 1941
Cpl N. J. Lovelock	25 March 1944
Cpl A. R. McCallum	22 May 1941
Cpl C. T. Nordbye	26 September 1944
Cpl N. M. Perrott	2 June 1941
Cpl A. R. Sherlock	27 November 1941
Cpl K. A. Skinner	15 July 1942
Cpl E. Sutherland	14 July 1942
Cpl G. L. Talbot	15 December 1943
Cpl W. B. Ward	28 June 1942
L-Cpl F. T. Ball	27 April 1941
L-Cpl L. C. Herbert	22 May 1941
L-Cpl J. A. Jordan	22 May 1941
L-Cpl C. W. Kidd	24 December 1943
L-Cpl J. Livingstone	15 July 1942
L-Cpl T. M. Savage	27 November 1941
L-Cpl P. G. Scott	27 November 1941
L-Cpl G. Sorich	19 March 1944
L-Cpl J. M. Thompson	15 July 1942
L-Cpl J. U. Vaughan	15 July 1942
L-Cpl G. W. Wheeler	27 April 1941
L-Cpl V. H. Wilhelm	11 April 1945
L-Cpl S. S. F. Wilson	26 November 1941
Pte N. F. D. A'Court (Ordnance attached)	27 April 1941
Pte A. Aitchison	27 November 1941
Tpr R. J. D. Aitchison	15 December 1943
Pte P. J. Alderton	27 November 1941
Pte G. A. Allan	22 May 1941
Pte R. Andrews	26 November 1941
Pte A. B. Atkins	25 May 1941
Tpr A. L. Ball	30 March 1944

Pte J. N. Barrar	26 June 1942
Pte J. M. Bassett	15 July 1942
Tpr F. E. Beckett	15 December 1943
Pte L. Beechey	28 June 1942
Tpr W. J. A. Bennett	16 December 1943
Tpr B. L. Bertrand	7 June 1944
Pte W. W. Bishop	25 November 1941
Pte G. H. Blunden	25 May 1941
Pte G. T. Boyd	27 November 1941
Pte P. H. A. Boyd	23 May 1941
Pte A. R. Bremer	27 November 1941
Pte R. B. Brown-Pryde	22 May 1941
Pte A. H. A. Bryant	27 April 1941
Pte H. H. Buchanan	27 April 1941
Tpr G. G. Burgess	23 September 1944
Pte J. D. Burns	25 May 1941
Tpr J. D. Carmichael	29 December 1943
Tpr H. O. Chatterton	3 August 1944
Pte D. C. Clark	22 May 1941
Pte H. R. Cooper	15 July 1942
Pte B. T. P. Coote	3 December 1941
Tpr D. C. Coppin	23 September 1944
Pte J. Cowman	15 July 1942
Pte H. T. Cunningham	27 April 1941
Pte T. P. Daly	11 July 1942
Pte J. T. Darling	5 December 1941
Tpr A. R. J. Dasler	19 March 1944
Pte J. A. Davis	27 November 1941
Tpr C. M. Dawson	29 December 1943
Pte L. G. Dick	15 July 1942
Pte A. Duncan	22 May 1941
Tpr J. R. Easterbrook	26 September 1944
Pte J. A. Erridge	26 November 1941
Pte W. J. Finlay	14 July 1942
Pte C. C. Foster	26 November 1941
Pte G. Fowler	27 April 1941
Tpr L. J. Fowler	25 March 1944

Pte T. I. Frater	22 May 1941
Pte J. W. H. Gale	5 December 1941
Tpr I. R. Galvin	28 March 1944
Tpr A. R. J. Garthwaite	28 July 1944
Pte L. C. Giles	25 May 1941
Pte J. C. Gillan	15 July 1942
Pte W. F. Gilligan	22 May 1941
Pte T. R. Glover	28 June 1942
Pte C. F. Gracia	15 July 1942
Tpr H. V. Graffin	30 March 1944
Tpr J. McC. Graffin	15 December 1943
Pte J. Hamilton	27 November 1941
Tpr J. M. Hampton	31 July 1944
Pte W. Harawira	17 July 1942
Pte C. Harvey	15 July 1942
Pte E. G. Harvey	25 May 1941
Tpr D. L. Hargraves, m.i.d.	23 September 1944
Tpr R. J. Henderson	26 September 1944
Pte G. A. Herd	28 June 1942
Pte M. C. Hill-Rennie	22 November 1941
Pte D. W. Hislop	22 May 1941
Pte J. H. Hoare	26 November 1941
Pte G. L. Hogg	26 November 1941
Pte W. L. C. Horn	22 May 1941
Pte M. Hughes	15 July 1942
Tpr G. McC. Inglis	26 September 1944
Pte J. A. Jackson	15 July 1942
Pte W. H. Jackson	27 April 1941
Pte G. W. Joiner	28 June 1942
Tpr K. J. Jones	16 December 1943
Pte S. B. Jones	22 May 1941
Pte F. P. Kelly	15 April 1941
Pte J. S. Kennedy	15 July 1942
Tpr E. J. Kennington	19 October 1944
Tpr J. Kevern	3 August 1944
Tpr C. G. P. Lane	3 August 1944
Pte G. Leckie	1 December 1941

Pte G. H. Low	1 December 1941
Pte N. D. Low	22 May 1941
Pte A. M. Lynch	24 May 1941
Tpr L. J. McCarthy	24 April 1945
Pte E. F. McCauley	27 November 1941
Pte L. C. McCrystal	29 May 1941
Pte R. A. R. McDowell	24 November 1941
Pte H. McEwan	2 June 1941
Pte C. S. McEwen	18 May 1941
Pte W. R. McKerchar	2 June 1941
Pte E. Mackie	22 May 1941
Pte E. D. Maginness	15 July 1942
Tpr R. C. Mann	23 September 1944
Pte T. F. Markham	22 May 1941
Pte W. Martin	21 May 1941
Pte W. E. J. Massie	1 December 1941
Pte M. G. Matheson	27 November 1941
Tpr F. A. Mathias	3 August 1944
Tpr L. J. D. Mercer	15 December 1943
Tpr T. H. Middleton	19 March 1944
Pte A. P. Monteath	27 June 1942
Pte J. Morgan	23 May 1941
Pte F. W. Morrison	26 November 1941
Pte W. Muirhead	22 May 1941
Tpr G. H. I. Newton	24 December 1943
Tpr A. G. Nicholls	28 July 1944
Pte G. O. Nisbett	15 July 1942
Pte B. O'Brien	26 June 1942
Pte J. V. O'Brien	27 June 1942
Pte T. E. O'Brien	25 May 1941
Pte J. C. O'Malley	25 November 1941
Tpr J. E. Park	31 May 1944
Pte C. L. Parker	24 November 1941
Pte R. D. Parsons	13 December 1941
Pte D. B. G. Paterson	5 July 1942
Tpr A. Petrie	9 February 1944
Tpr R. C. Pierce	2 August 1944

Tpr D. T. R. Pilbow	16 December 1943
Pte D. R. Pope	15 July 1942
Pte R. Prendergast	25 May 1941
Pte E. W. Prettejohns	22 May 1941
Tpr F. E. Pringle	11 April 1945
Tpr S. D. Pringle	10 April 1945
Pte E. C. Raeburn	15 July 1942
Pte H. J. Raxworthy	9 July 1942
Pte S. C. Reid	2 June 1941
Pte D. G. Roberts	18 April 1941
Pte F. J. Roberts	15 July 1942
Pte E. C. Robertson	22 May 1941
Pte I. B. Roderique	27 November 1941
Pte A. McC. Ross	25 May 1941
Pte G. H. Rutherford	3 July 1942
Pte D. Shaw	2 June 1941
Pte J. Shields	27 November 1941
Pte F. S. Sim	27 November 1941
Pte L. V. Simmonds	27 November 1941
Pte F. B. Sloan	22 May 1941
Tpr V. E. Smale	15 December 1944
Pte A. V. Soper	27 November 1941
Tpr L. C. Stevens	11 April 1945
Pte E. G. Stokes	15 July 1942
Pte F. J. Sutherland	22 May 1941
Pte E. W. Swain	27 April 1941
Tpr L. G. Taylor	13 April 1945
Pte J. Thompson	27 April 1941
Pte C. I. A. Thomson	27 April 1941
Pte T. A. Todd	18 April 1941
Tpr R. J. Tollison	16 March 1944
Pte S. W. Underhay	25 May 1941
Pte O. W. Ures	27 November 1941
Pte C. L. Wallace	1 December 1941
Pte J. P. Walsh	15 July 1942
Pte E. L. Ward	18 April 1941
Tpr J. C. Ward	29 March 1944

Pte R. W. Watson	25 May 1941
Pte A. E. Wells	27 April 1941
Pte W. Weston	15 July 1942
Sigm S. White (Divisional Signals attached)	16 September 1944
Pte G. D. Williams	27 November 1941
Pte J. C. Wilson	22 May 1941
Pte C. L. Winter	22 May 1941
Pte T. C. H. Winters	26 June 1942
Pte W. J. Woodrow	27 November 1941
Pte W. H. Yerrington	22 May 1941

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\* Lt Walton, Sgt Dalton, and Tpr Kneebone died while prisoners of war after having been picked up by enemy stretcher-bearers.

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#### died of wounds

Capt W. Ayto	27 April 1941
Capt G. F. Hart	3 June 1944
Lt T. E. Dawson	19 April 1941
Lt D. A. R. Moloney	15 July 1942
Lt H. J. Scoltock	22 May 1941
Lt E. A. Shand	15 July 1942
Lt I. M. Walton	17 December 1943 *
2 Lt N. L. Jenkins	14 April 1945
2 Lt G. Mills	11 December 1941
2 Lt H. L. Renall	19 March 1944
Sgt G. T. Dalton	17 December 1943 *
Sgt H. P. Donnelly	23 May 1941
Sgt J. T. Groufsky	16 December 1943

Sgt I. Lang	30 November 1941
Sgt S. A. Musson	25 May 1941
Sgt M. J. Wilson	27 November 1941
L-Sgt N. B. Smith	25 May 1941
Cpl I. D. Armstrong	11 December 1941
Cpl J. R. Blunden	7 January 1945
Cpl R. A. Bradley	23 September 1944
Cpl M. C. Clarke	25 October 1944
Cpl R. W. Doig	28 June 1942
Cpl L. M. Mackie	24 May 1941
Cpl F. G. Malloch	22 May 1941
Cpl K. B. Ross	3 December 1941
L-Cpl E. E. E. Boyce	23 May 1941
L-Cpl L. W. Brassey	23 March 1944
L-Cpl A. Holt	26 June 1942
L-Cpl C. K. Jenkins	6 December 1941
L-Cpl J. H. O'Loughlin	2 July 1942
L-Cpl J. J. Skilton	23 May 1941
Tpr M. A. Aitcheson	16 December 1943
Pte J. E. Aitken	2 June 1941
Pte A. H. Alloway	15 July 1942
Pte W. Anderson	6 December 1941
Pte R. M. Baker	22 May 1941
Tpr T. W. Bell	25 April 1944
Pte R. M. Blay	30 May 1941
Pte D. Borrie	2 December 1941
Pte B. J. Burke	2 June 1941
Pte W. A. Burnett	30 November 1941
Pte A. R. J. Campbell	17 July 1942
Pte G. J. Carr	25 May 1941
Pte W. T. McL. Chapman	15 July 1942
Pte J. D. A. Chettleburgh	15 July 1942
Pte W. O. Chirnside	30 November 1941
Pte W. Clarke	7 May 1941
Tpr S. J. Coffey	26 September 1944
Pte C. Creagh	1 July 1942
Pte W. E. Dove	22 May 1941

Pte R. E. Drewery	24 May 1941
Pte E. W. Ealam	22 May 1941
Pte A. D. Fraser	22 May 1941
Pte J. L. Friend	25 May 1941
Pte N. C. Gardiner	24 May 1941
Tpr I. W. Gilmore	23 September 1944
Pte H. A. Gould	8 July 1942
Pte R. J. Graham	16 July 1942
Pte M. H. Gray	19 July 1942
Pte G. B. Harneiss	20 July 1942
Tpr T. B. Herbison	16 December 1943
Pte A. J. Hoffman	25 May 1941
Pte H. H. Holder	16 July 1942
Pte G. S. S. Homann	15 July 1942
Pte J. R. Kidd	18 April 1941
Tpr E. L. Kneebone	18 December 1943 *
Pte F. E. Lester	11 July 1942
Pte D. D. McBride	22 May 1941
Pte T. E. J. McCarten	10 December 1941
Pte C. W. McDonagh	24 May 1941
Pte R. McDonald	8 June 1941
Pte P. MacD. McGrath	6 December 1941
Pte I. M. McKay	30 November 1941
Pte R. B. McLaren	12 July 1942
Pte R. W. Mitchell	24 May 1941
Pte W. T. Moore	11 July 1942
Pte J. M. de B. Morgan	11 June 1941
Tpr R. C. Morgan	18 December 1944
Pte W. D. Morrison	7 December 1941
Pte D. M. Murray	26 May 1941
Pte P. C. Patterson	25 May 1941
Pte R. Rankin	2 June 1941
Tpr V. J. Rhodes	18 December 1943
Pte J. E. Robertson	15 July 1942
Tpr H. S. Robinson	30 March 1944
Pte D. R. Rollo	2 June 1941
Pte S. J. P. Ryan	16 December 1941

Pte H. Scherp	30 November 1941
Pte L. F. Siddells	12 July 1942
Pte G. H. Sim	2 June 1941
Tpr W. R. Sinclair	16 December 1943
Pte S. G. Taylor	15 July 1942
Pte A. W. Tomlinson	19 May 1941
Pte B. E. J. Walker	22 May 1941
Pte A. White	15 July 1942
Pte D. N. Whitteker	26 May 1941
Pte G. D. Winter	16 July 1942
Pte H. V. G. Wood	22 May 1941
killed or died as prisoners of war	
Sgt B. Mark	7 July 1941
Sgt W. L. George	26 May 1941
Sgt I. D. McBain	9 December 1941
L-Sgt A. L. Burns	18 July 1942
L-Sgt M. Silke	18 September 1942
Cpl W. R. Akuira	31 May 1943
Cpl J. W. Henderson	26 October 1942
Cpl K. L. Pratt	8 September 1944
L-Cpl F. Sutherland	16 June 1943
Pte H. M. W. Adams	8 November 1943
Pte W. L. Alcock	2 October 1941
Pte T. W. Baxter	29 September 1942
Pte A. E. Billsborough	29 August 1944
Pte P. F. Canning	4 June 1941
Pte F. J. C. Coatsworth	10 August 1942
Pte G. M. F. Devenney	27 May 1944
Pte W. E. Eason	9 December 1941
Pte H. Forbes	2 June 1942
Pte J. S. Miller	[Date unknown]
Pte A. B. McArthur	29 August 1944
Pte M. Monopoli	16 April 1945
Pte D. R. Nolan	9 July 1942
Pte R. E. Park	24 September 1944
Pte J. O. Potts	17 August 1942
Pte N. H. Reid	17 August 1942

Pte A. J. Robertson	26 November 1942
Pte J. E. Robinson	16 April 1945
Pte A. L. Ross	7 June 1942
Pte D. R. Wells	17 August 1942
Pte J. L. Wilkins	13 January 1942
	killed or died on active service
Sgt J. G. T. Boniface	27 May 1944
Sgt J. H. Thompson	2 November 1943
Cpl D. Crawford	4 July 1944
L-Cpl J. C. Mansell	6 November 1943
Pte F. G. Bristed	21 May 1941
Pte L. E. Christie	29 October 1941
Pte M. J. Dunn	18 November 1942
Pte C. H. Fraser	19 July 1942
Pte W. Frew	30 April 1940
Tpr R. M. Gray	14 August 1944
Pte R. H. Heath	7 February 1942
Tpr E. R. Honeyfield	24 May 1944
Pte D. H. Hopkins	1 October 1941
Pte W. H. Jack	13 November 1940
Tpr T. Leitch	16 November 1944
Pte O. Lowe	19 September 1940
Pte W. J. Orlowski	26 September 1940
Tpr E. W. Phipps	14 September 1945
Pte R. Southon	7 July 1941

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

### *Summary of Casualties*

	Killed or Died of Wounds		Wounded		Prisoners of War		Died on Active Service		Total
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	
Greece	4		20 2		43 4		76		149
Crete	5		75 5		124 2		86		297
Libya, 1941	2		57 13		113 9		354		548
Egypt, 1942	5		64 6		111 12		195		393
Italy	12		73 17		146 -		7		255
								19	19
	28		289 43		537 27		718 19		1661

Included in the prisoners of war are 4 officers and 124 other ranks who were wounded when captured. Thirty other ranks lost their lives while prisoners.

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## HONOURS AND AWARDS

### *Honours and Awards*

bar to victoria cross

Capt C. H. Upham, VC

victoria cross

2 Lt C. H. Upham

Sgt J. D. Hinton

distinguished service order

Lt-Col J. T. Burrows

Lt-Col H. A. Robinson, MC

Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger

Capt P. V. H. Maxwell

Lt-Col H. A. Purcell

Capt J. G. Sullivan

member of the order of the british empire

Capt M. C. Rice

Rev. L. F. F. Gunn (Chaplain, attached)

Lt E. W. Bolwell

WO II R. May

military cross

Capt D. J. Fountaine

2 Lt A. R. Guthrey

Lt L. W. Colmore-Williams

2 Lt A. R. McLay

Lt W. Heptinstall

2 Lt W. J. Sisam

Lt J. F. Moodie

Rev. G. A. D. Spence

2 Lt J. G. Crawford

(Chaplain, attached)

distinguished conduct medal

Sgt G. L. Lochhead

L-Sgt V. D. Kirk

Sgt P. A. McConchie

Cpl J. Denvir

military medal

Sgt J. A. Johnston

Cpl J. Hogg

Sgt C. Lilley

L-Cpl A. G. Scott

Sgt H. N. K. Needham

Pte H. E. Aberhart

Sgt A. McM. West

Pte P. R. Blunden

Cpl C. H. Anderton

Tpr L. P. Gallagher

(28 Assault Squadron)

Pte H. C. Poole

Cpl J. A. Bell

Pte A. K. Spilman

british empire medal

S-Sgt G. G. P. Weenink

greek military cross

Maj C. Wilson

soviet medal for valour

Cpl J. Denvir, DCM

#### Commanding Officers

Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger 26 Sep 1939 – 29 Apr 1941

Lt-Col J. T. Burrows 30 Apr 1941 – 31 May 1941

Lt-Col H. K. Kippenberger 1 Jun 1941 – 8 Dec 1941

Lt-Col J. T. Burrows 8 Dec 1941 – 5 Jul 1942

Maj I. O. Manson 5 Jul 1942 – 21 Jul 1942

Lt-Col D. J. Fountaine 21 Jul 1942 – 16 Aug 1942

Lt-Col J. T. Burrows 16 Aug 1942 – 4 Jun 1943 \*

Lt-Col J. W. McKergow	4 Jun 1943 – 22 Dec 1943
Maj H. A. Purcell	22 Dec 1943 – 27 Jan 1944
Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson	27 Jan 1944 – 29 May 1944
Lt-Col H. A. Purcell	29 May 1944 – 19 Dec 1944
Maj P. A. Barton	19 Dec 1944 – 9 Jan 1945
Lt-Col H. A. Purcell	9 Jan 1945 – 17 Mar 1945
Lt-Col H. A. Robinson	17 Mar 1945 – 16 Oct 1945
Maj W. H. Ryan	18 Oct 1945 – 18 Dec 1945

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\* Maj J. W. McKergow temporarily commanded the unit for two short periods in September-November 1942.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## APPENDIX I – VICTORIA CROSS CITATIONS

### Appendix I

#### VICTORIA CROSS CITATIONS

The official citations for the Victoria Crosses won by Captain C. H. Upham and Sergeant J. D. Hinton are as follows:

#### *8077 Second-Lieutenant Charles Hazlett Upham*

During the operations in [Crete](#) this officer performed a series of remarkable exploits, showing outstanding leadership, tactical skill and utter indifference to danger.

He commanded a forward platoon in the attack on maleme on May 22 and fought his way forward for over 3000 yards unsupported by any other arms and against a defence strongly organised in depth. During this operation his platoon destroyed numerous enemy posts but on three occasions sections were temporarily held up.

In the first case, under a heavy fire from an MG nest he advanced to close quarters with pistol and grenades, so demoralizing the occupants that his section was able to 'mop up' with ease.

Another of his sections was then held up by two MGs in a house. He went in and placed a grenade through a window, destroying the crew of one MG and several others, the other MG being silenced by the fire of his sections.

In the third case he crawled to within 15 yards of an MG post and killed the gunners with a grenade.

When his Company withdrew from maleme he helped to carry a wounded man out under fire, and together with another officer rallied more men together to carry other wounded men out.

He was then sent to bring in a company which had become isolated. With a corporal he went through enemy territory over 600 yards, killing two Germans on the way, found the company, and brought it back to the Battalion's new position. But for this action it would have been completely cut off.

During the following two days his platoon occupied an exposed position on forward slopes and was continuously under fire. 2/Lieut. Upham was blown over by one mortar shell and painfully wounded by a piece of shrapnel behind the left shoulder by another. He disregarded this wound and remained on duty. He also received a bullet in the foot which he later removed in Egypt.

At Galatos on May 25 his platoon was heavily engaged when troops in front gave way and came under severe Mortar and MG fire. While his platoon stopped under cover of a ridge 2/Lieut. Upham went forward, observed the enemy and brought the platoon forward when the Germans advanced. They killed over 40 with fire and grenades and forced the remainder to fall back.

When his platoon was ordered to retire he sent it back under the platoon Sjt and he went back to warn other troops that they were being cut off. When he came out himself he was fired on by two Germans. He fell and shamed dead, then crawled into a position and having the use of only one arm he rested his rifle in the fork of a tree and as the Germans came forward he killed them both. The second to fall actually hit the muzzle of the rifle as he fell.

On 30th May at sphakia his platoon was ordered to deal with a party of the enemy which had advanced down a ravine to near Force Headquarters. Though in an exhausted condition he climbed the steep hill to the west of the ravine, placed his men in positions on the slope overlooking the ravine and himself went to the top with a Bren Gun and two riflemen. By clever tactics he induced the enemy party to expose itself and then at a range of 500 yards shot 22 and caused the remainder to disperse in panic.

During the whole of the operations he suffered from diarrhoea and was able to eat very little, in addition to being wounded and bruised.

He showed superb coolness, great skill and dash and complete disregard of

danger. His conduct and leadership inspired his whole platoon to fight magnificently throughout, and in fact was an inspiration to the battalion.

## **Bar to Victoria Cross**

From Jun 27 to Jul 15 Capt Upham performed five acts of conspicuous gallantry. He was with his Company during all the fighting that took place during this period though he was wounded on three different occasions—on the night Jun 27/28; on the night Jul 14/15 and again on the afternoon Jul 15. On the first two occasions he rejoined his Company as soon as his wounds were dressed and after the third occasion, when he could no longer walk, he was taken prisoner of war. He showed fine leadership at all times and under his command his Company earned a remarkable reputation in attack. Capt Upham's complete indifference to danger and his personal bravery has become a byword in the whole of the NZEF.

Jun 27th: During the afternoon, when the Germans attacked the NZ positions at Minquar Quaim, the enemy made several attempts to clear a path for their tanks through our minefield. One forward section post of Capt Upham's Coy was occupying an important position on the edge of the minefield, and it was very heavily shelled and machine-gunned. Capt Upham walked forward over the ground that had no cover of any sort and which was swept by enemy fire, stayed with this section for a short period and came away only when he had assured himself that it could carry on and hold its ground.

Night Jun 27/28: During the night when the NZ Div broke through the Germans at Minquar Quaim, Capt Upham led his men in inspiring fashion and his Coy overcame several enemy posts. The attack took place in very bright moonlight and at one stage a truck full of German soldiers was seen moving slowly through the soft sand. Capt Upham and a Corporal ran forward together, and in spite of heavy Tommy Gun fire from the Germans they reached the side of the truck and with hand grenades wiped out the entire truck load and left the truck in flames. Not one German left the burning vehicle. Capt Upham was slightly wounded in both arms from the explosions of his own grenades. He did not report to get his wounds treated until the following night when the Div was back in new positions, and he then rejoined his Coy.

Night Jul 14/15: During the attack on el ruweisat ridge Capt Upham's Coy was part of the reserve battalion which, during the six miles advance, was about two miles behind the leading battalions. Wireless communication had broken down and Capt Upham was instructed to send forward an officer in a 'jeep' to contact the forward battalions and bring back information. He went himself instead and after being fired on by an enemy post, procured a Spandau gun and set it up in the car. He had several further encounters with enemy posts but by operating the gun himself while the driver of the 'jeep' drove through anything in their path, he contacted the forward troops and brought back the necessary information.

Just before dawn, when the reserve battalions and the anti-tank guns were almost on to their objective, very heavy fire was encountered from a strongly defended enemy locality. There were four machine-gun posts and about five tanks. Capt Upham's Coy was the leading Coy and he quickly directed the attack on the two nearest MG's, which were using tracer bullets. He personally led the attack on one post which was silenced and the enemy bayoneted. During the attack Capt Upham was shot in the elbow by a machine-gun bullet and his arm broken. He stayed with his men until the objective was captured and until positions were consolidated. He then reported to the RAP and then, with his arm in splints, went back to his Coy and stayed with it all day under the most trying conditions of heavy enemy artillery and mortar fire. The enemy made a strong counter-attack late in the afternoon, and Capt Upham was again wounded by mortar fire. He was no longer able to walk.

Capt Upham was taken prisoner of war on 15 Jul 42.

### **7930 Sergeant John Daniel Hinton**

On the night of 28/29 April 41 during fighting in greece column of German Armoured Forces entered kalamai. This column which contained several armoured cars 2-inch guns and 3-inch mortars and 2 6-inch guns rapidly converged on large force of British and NZ troops awaiting embarkation on beach. When order to retreat to cover was given Sjt. Hinton shouted, 'To Hell with this who will come with me', ran to within several yards of nearest guns. The guns fired missing him and he hurled 2 grenades which completely wiped out the crews. He then came on with bayonet followed by a crowd of N.Zers. German troops abandoned first 6-inch gun and retreated into 2

houses. Sjt. Hinton smashed the window and then the door of the first house and dealt with the garrison with bayonet. He repeated the performance in the second house and as a result until overwhelming German forces arrived N.Zers held the guns. Sjt. Hinton then fell with a bullet wound through lower abdomen and was taken prisoner.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hinton was in Stalag IX C, Badsulza, when the news of his VC came through. All prisoners in the camp were paraded and the announcement was formally made by the German Kommandant.

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## [SECTION]

The official citations for the Victoria Crosses won by Captain C. H. Upham and Sergeant J. D. Hinton are as follows:

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## 8077 SECOND-LIEUTENANT CHARLES HAZLETT UPHAM

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## BAR TO VICTORIA CROSS

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## 7930 SERGEANT JOHN DANIEL HINTON

### *7930 Sergeant John Daniel Hinton*

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# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## INDEX

### *Index*

Abbott, Maj R. J., 162, 167, 188, 282, 303, 304, 322, 353– 4, 357, 373

Aburn, Sgt J. W., 281

Adige R., 578, 580, 583, 588, 594

Agar, Maj R. E., 154, 166, 185, 187– 8, 190, 192, 194, 208, 212, 213, 215

Aiken, 2 Lt J. D., 10, 42

Ajax, HMS, 74, 95

Alamein, 229, 231, 237, 240, 242, 244– 6, 248, 279, 285, 290

Alamein Box, 244, 253

Alam Nayil, 247, 253– 6, 258, 281, 288

Alexander, Fd Mshl Earl, 365, 374, 595

Alexandria, 24, 26, 27, 38– 9, 144, 146, 158, 283, 306, 313

Aliakmon line, 41, 44

Aliakmon R., 44, 49, 51, 53, 92

Allison, Sgt E. S., 103, 179, 182– 4, 194, 200

- Letters quoted: 88– 94, 147– 50

Amiriya, 25, 26– 7, 38, 39, 145– 6, 151, 228– 9, 279

Amos, Pte P., 102, 110– 11

Anderson, Tpr J. D., 313, 319

Anderson, WO II R. E. O., 162, 187

Anderton, L-Sgt C. H., 489, 594

Andrewes, Cpl L. L., 7

Anzac Corps: See Australian Forces

Anzio, 367, 374

Archdall, Lt W. H., 523, 528

Arielli, 337, 339, 349

Arielli stream, 353– 4

Armstrong, Sgt W. J. C., 563– 5, 567, 571

Arno R., 465– 8, 471– 2

Askifou Plain, 136, 138, 140

Atessa, 315– 16, 319

Athens, 39, 40– 3, 46, 69– 70, 73, 75– 6, 89

Athos II, 15

Atina, 421, 423, 431

Auchinleck, Fd Mshl Sir C., 163– 4, 231, 246

Austad, 2 Lt J. K., 495

Austin, Sgt J. L., 311

Australia, HMAS, 12

Australian Forces—

- Anzac Corps, 52
- 2/7 Bn, 32, 104
- 2/11 Bn, 32
- 19 Bde, 54, 56, 129, 135– 6
- 1 Corps, 48, 52
- 6 Division, 48
- 9 Division, 253
- 2/ 8 Fd Coy, 69
- ? Fd Regt, 55, 65

Avezzano, 314– 15, 438– 41

Awatea, 8

Ay Marina, 118– 19, 136

Ayto, Capt W., 10, 42, 72, 87– 8

Baggush, 27, 30– 2, 164, 167, 169, 209, 212– 15

Baggush Box, 27, 158– 9

Bain, Capt F. J., 10, 42, 110, 114, 116, 122, 133– 5

Baker, Lt-Col F., 122– 3

Baker, Maj G., 166, 183, 299, 322

Baker, Capt J. F., 10, 166, 191, 193, 206

Ball, Tpr A. L., 405

Balsorano, 426, 432, 434– 7

Bardia, 32, 168– 9, 171, 173

Bari, 313– 14

Barriball, Cpl R. C., 576

Barton, Maj P. A., 271, 273– 6, 282, 322, 329, 331, 336– 8, 340, 359, 370, 374, 383, 385– 8, 391– 2, 394– 5, 397– 8, 420, 446, 468– 9, 471– 2, 485, 511, 531, 540, 549

Bassett, Maj B. I., 250

Bay, Maj R. A., 315, 370, 399, 446, 455, 485, 511, 550

Beale, Maj J. H., 10, 194, 210

Beattie, Sgt H., 546

Beauchamp, 2 Lt R. W. A., 162, 167, 213

Becker, Lt J. A., 490

Beckett, Tpr F. E., 336

Beechey, WO II B. N., 283, 298

Belhamed, 88, 180– 8, 190– 9, 202, 208– 9, 210– 12, 278, 288

Bell, Sgt J. A., 425– 8, 440, 442, 452, 485

Bell, Tpr T. W., 395

Benghazi, 216

Bertrand, Tpr B. L., 438

Birch, WO I D. P., 504

Black, Sgt D. L., 356, 500

Blamey, Fd Mshl Sir T., 48

Blundell, Lt-Col E. D., 330

Blunden, Cpl J. R., 471, 533– 4

Blunden, Cpl P. R., 49, 236– 7, 301

Bologna, 525, 529, 574– 5, 600– 1

Bolwell, Lt E. W., 118– 19, 166, 213– 14, 282, 303

Boniface, Sgt J. G. T., 405– 6, 423, 440

Boot, Capt V. P., 282

Borthwick, Sgt B. C., 88, 102, 125, 137– 8, 141, 143, 195, 201

Borthwick, Sgt L. A., 213, 283

Boyce, L-Cpl E. E. E., 126

Boyd, Lt O. A., 523

Boyle, Maj A. P., 154, 162, 165, 167, 179, 181, 184, 209, 210

Bradley, Lt J. T. K., 322, 370, 419

Bradley, Cpl R. A., 486

Brass, Cpl W. W., 298, 308, 359, 398

Brassey, L-Cpl L. W., 399– 400

Brazil Maru, 15

Breconshire, 39

Brennan, Pte A. J., 96

Brenta R., 583, 585, 588, 593

Brenton, Cpl L. G., 385, 397

Bretherton, Cpl D. H., 20, 21, 28, 31, 165

Brice, 2 Lt F., 583, 585, 587, 589

British Forces

- 12 Air Support Command, 377
- 95 Anti-Tank Regt, 230
- 8 Army, 163, 213, 227– 8, 231, 244, 246, 251, 253, 302, 314– 15, 349, 365, 479, 481, 485– 6, 508, 524– 5, 527, 533, 550– 1, 555, 577
- 1 Army Tank Bde, 159
- 32 Army Tank Bde, 163
- 1 Armoured Bde, 44, 163
- 22 Armoured Bde, 232, 269
- 1 Armoured Division, 244, 251– 2, 255 257
- 6 Armoured Division, 576
- 7 Armoured Division, 194, 245, 252– 3, 255, 258, 539
- 15 Bde, 350
- 17 Bde, 327
- 5 Corps, 314– 15, 325, 365, 513
- 10 Corps, 229, 231
- 13 Corps, 163, 194, 229, 231, 244, 246, 249, 251– 3, 255, 278– 8, 314– 15, 408
- 30 Corps, 163, 228– 9, 231, 244, 248, 252– 3, 255, 257
- 4 Division, 525

- 5 Division, 314, 326, 349– 50
- 46 Division, 528
- 50 Division, 244
- 56 ( London) Division, 539
- 70 Division, 163
- 78 Division, 314, 368, 398
- Essex Regt, 158, 211, 238, 253, 305
- ¼ Essex Regt, 253, 383
- 2/ 5 Gen Hosp, 27
- 2/10 Gen Hosp, 22
- 7 Gen Hosp, 100, 102, 104, 125
- 3 Hussars, 107, 133
- 4 Hussars, 554
- 7 Hussars, 590
- King's Royal Rifles, 18
- 9 Lancers, 528
- 12 Lancers, 572, 581, 588
- Northumberland Hussars, 136
- 2 Parachute Bn, 325
- 1 Rangers, 136
- Royal Devonshire Yeomanry, 557, 572

- Royal Horse Artillery, 548, 572
- Royal Tank Regt, 28, 171, 186, 193, 548
- Welch Regt, 100, 136, 139

Brookes, CSM A., 162

Brooks, Lt P. H., 333– 5, 383, 385, 417

Brown, Capt C. G., 402

Brown, Capt G. A., 10, 42, 110

Brown, WO II J. A., 414, 552

Brown, Cpl W. A., 405

Browne, Sgt E. S., 241

Buchanan, H., 88

Burg el Arab, 25, 27, 32, 304– 5

Burgess, Tpr G. G., 492

Burland, 2 Lt J. D., 348, 488– 9, 502

Burland, 2 Lt R. B., 573

Burnham, 1– 10, 28, 119, 156

Burns, Lt-Gen E. L. M., 518

Burrows, Brig J. T., 2, 10, 25, 30, 38, 42, 48, 54, 56– 8, 65, 91, 96, 104– 5, 113, 115– 17, 121, 123– 4, 129– 30, 135, 137, 140, 143, 145– 6, 148, 152, 154– 5, 161– 2, 209, 214, 227, 229– 30, 232, 237– 8, 240, 245, 247, 250, 253, 260, 263, 265, 268– 9, 271, 276, 282, 284, 290– 1, 297– 9, 301, 303, 523

Cairo, 151

Cairo, Monte, 368, 381, 398

◦ village, 379, 388

Caldwell, Maj C. F. S., 348– 50, 352, 355– 6, 359, 409– 11, 436– 7, 453, 511, 527, 531, 539, 542, 557, 560, 601

Caley, Sgt D. L., 118

Cameron, Maj D. B., 7, 10, 42, 54, 58, 69– 70, 111, 113, 145, 154

Cameron, S-Sgt D. K., 452

Campbell, Col T. C., 524, 600

Campoli, 426– 9, 431, 485

1 Canadian Corps, 479, 481, 525

1 Canadian Division, 314

Canberra, HMAS, 12

Canea, 97, 100– 1, 103– 4, 118– 21, 125– 6, 135– 6, 139, 149– 50, 153

Capuzzo, 32, 173

Capuzzo, Trigh, 173, 178, 211

Carlyle, Maj L. I., 220– 1, 282, 426

Carmichael, Tpr J. D., 358

Carson, Lt L. I., 322, 330– 1

Casalanguida, 316

Casford, Pte A., 54

Cassino, 367– 71, 374– 7, 379, 381, 383– 6, 396, 398– 9, 401– 2, 404, 408– 9, 411– 13, 415– 16, 418, 420, 423, 440– 1

- Albaneta House, 379, 387, 389– 92, 411– 13, 415– 16, 419
- Castle Hill, 376, 379, 381– 4
- Cavendish road, 379, 386, 388, 413, 432
- Railway station, 372, 401, 404, 406– 9, 414

Castelfrentano, 321, 323, 325, 335, 360

Casualties, 613

Cave, 6– 8

Celle, 529

Cesenatico, 551– 4, 580

Chakdina, 210

Chaney, Tpr A. G., 508

Chatterton, Tpr H. O., 464, 466

Chatterton, Tpr P. R. J., 569

Chesterman, Maj E. R., 157, 166, 250

Childs, Capt F. H., 533

Churchill, Sir W., 374, 477– 8

Cingalese Prince, 39

City of Norwich, 39

Clapham, Maj L. B., 370, 401, 446, 465– 6, 483, 485, 511, 550

Clark, 2 Lt D. J., 490

Clark, Lt-Gen Mark, 368, 374

Clarke, L-Cpl G. F., 113

Clarke, Sgt L. E., 458

Clews, WO I T. H., 283, 480

Clifton, Brig G. H., 64, 160

Coatsworth, Pte J. C., 75

Cochran, Cpl J. C., 429

Coleman, L-Cpl A. T. K., 341– 2

Collins, S-Sgt R. J., 282

Colmore-Williams, Maj L. W., 370, 453– 5, 552, 594

Comliebank, HMS, 68

Cook, Sgt L. G., 455

Coop, Capt M. J., 115

Coote, Maj J. R., 10, 338, 370, 446, 485

Copeland, Maj A. D., 184

Coppin, Tpr D. C., 455, 489

Corinth, 67, 69, 76, 82

Costello, Cpl F. E., 390, 394

Cottrell, Capt A. I., 222, 234, 236, 240, 265, 267, 280

Cousins, Pte C. J., 72, 133

Craig, Sgt W. N. C., 492

Cranston, Sgt R. J., 565

Crawford, 2 Lt J. G., 569, 594

Crespin, Capt C. P., 515– 16, 579

Cross, Capt M. W., 447, 457– 8, 468, 483– 4, 496– 9

Cruickshank, Maj M. L., 387

Cunningham, Admiral of the Fleet Viscount, 144, 155

Cunningham, Lt-Gen Sir A., 160

Cunningham, Lt A. C., 503, 523

Cunningham, Pte H. T., 88

Curtis, Capt D., 43, 77, 88

Cuttriss, Pte E. D., 113

Dalrymple, Sgt W. T., 395

Dalton, Sgt G. T., 341– 3

Dalton, Sgt T., 57

Darling, Pte J. T., 210

Dasler, Tpr A. R. J., 392– 3

Davis, Lt-Col F. L. H., 10, 155

Davis, Tpr R. B., 568

Davy, Pte H. A., 91

Dawkins, Lt J. A., 309, 346, 353– 4, 406, 487

Dawson, Tpr C. M., 358

Dawson, Maj E. O., 306

Dawson, Rev. F. O., 305, 310, 319, 419– 20

Dawson, Lt T. E., 10, 42, 60, 63, 87, 92, 93

Deans, L-Cpl A. A., 93

Deir el Munassib, 245, 248, 252

de Lautour, Capt H. M. B., 343, 356, 389, 393– 4, 411, 458– 60, 469, 491, 531, 572, 578

Denham, Capt J. C., 331, 333, 335, 337, 340, 385, 397, 411, 459, 562, 565, 567, 594

Denvir, 2 Lt J., 88

Dickie, Tpr S. W., 472

Dickson, L-Cpl G. A., 268

Dittmer, Brig G., 116

Doherty, Pte F. A., 267

Doig, Sgt A. D., 399

Doig, Cpl R. W., 145, 234

Donald, Cpl A. J. C., 487

Donald, Lt-Col H. V., 468– 70

Donnelly, Maj M. P., 298, 322, 402, 436, 557, 572, 597

Dore, Sgt T. C., 333, 335

Dornwell, Maj F. E., 10, 25

Dougall, Capt W. K. L., 341, 344

Douglas, Tpr W. H., 318– 19

Dowrick, Cpl F. W. D., 565, 567– 8

Drawbridge, Pte H. W. H., 148

Drummond, Sgt T. M., 57

Dudfield, WO II N. M., 438– 9

Dunera, 11– 13, 16– 17, 34

Dunne, Capt G. F., 167, 168, 189

Eagle, HMS, 15

Eason, Pte W. E., 210

Easterbrook, Tpr J. R., 358

Eastgate, Maj R. B. F., 405– 6, 423– 4, 470, 511, 539, 550, 557, 579

Ed Duda, 185– 6, 190, 195, 211

Eden, Sir A., 16, 28, 76

El Daba, 25, 27

Elder, S-Sgt E. N., 282, 284

Elliott, Maj J. M., 361, 370, 446, 485, 511

El Mreir Depression, 247, 251, 253

Empress of Canada, 12

Ewing, Pte C. J., 131– 2

Fabriano, 517, 521– 2, 524, 540, 549, 551, 553– 4, 601

Faenza, 525– 9, 531– 2, 534– 5, 542, 546, 559, 601

Fairbrother, Brig M. C., 10, 338, 344– 5, 356

Falconer, Brig A. S., 99, 101

Falconer, 2 Lt J. L., 308, 397

Familton, Maj R. T., 325, 328, 353– 5, 357– 8, 423– 4, 452, 468, 483– 4, 514– 16, 525– 6, 534

Fano, 480

Farran, Lt R., 107, 133

Fay, Capt J. A. O'L., 82

Feltham, Maj R. J., 215, 225, 268, 280

Fergus, 2 Lt N. E., 489– 90

Ferguson, Lt-Col J. B., 330, 367, 370, 405, 408, 412, 414, 419

Fibreno R., 423, 425, 428, 431

Findlay, Capt C., 65

Fitchett, Lt A. R., 146

Fitzgibbon, Tpr E. T., 445

Fiumicino R., 501– 5, 508– 11

Fleming, Lt C. K., 10

Fleming, Lt J. H., 283, 359

Fletcher, Capt A. L., 282

Fletcher, Rev. Fr. J. J., 310

Florence, 437, 467– 8, 471– 3, 475, 518, 602

Foggia, 377

Foley, Maj W. C. T., 560, 582– 3, 588, 590– 2

Fontanaccia, R., 487– 96

Fontegrande spur, 349– 50, 353– 5, 358, 360

Forde, Tpr M. J., 492

Forli, 524– 7, 529, 534, 536, 547– 8, 549, 551, 554, 601

Fountaine, Lt-Col D. J., 10, 42, 98, 124, 129– 30, 132, 143, 154, 162, 166, 171, 184– 5, 208, 229, 282, 287, 289, 290– 1

Fowler, Pte G., 88– 9

Fowler, Tpr L. J., 403

Fraser, S-Sgt G. M., 146, 282

Fraser, Rt Hon. P., 152

French, Lt W. A., 461, 537

Frew, Pte W., 22

Freyberg, Lt-Gen Lord, 9, 12, 16– 17, 19, 33– 4, 40, 69, 96– 7, 120, 149, 154– 5, 160, 173– 4, 201, 209, 231, 237, 301, 305, 367– 8, 371, 374, 377, 396, 400, 419– 20, 424– 5, 481, 513, 516, 518, 552, 585, 591, 595, 597, 600, 602

Friend, Pte J. L., 147

Fuka, 237, 242, 244

Furci, 315

Gahan, Sgt J. H., 462

Galatas, 97– 100, 102, 120– 1, 123, 125, 129– 35, 137– 9, 146– 9, 153

Galbraith, Lt A. S., 259, 280

Gale, Pte J. H. W., 210

Gallagher, Tpr L. P., 393, 419

Galloway, Gen A., 396– 7

Gambut, 172– 4

Garawi, 151

Garawla, 24, 158, 162

Gari R., 367, 404, 420

Garigliano R., 367

Garriock, Capt A. I., 10, 39, 42, 96, 115, 122– 3

Geddes, Lt-Col H. H. E., 83

George VI, HM King, 16, 446

German Forces

- Afrika Korps, 302
- Hermann Goering Division, 369
- 90 Light Division, 255
- 2 Motor Cycle Battalion, 73
- 15 Panzer Division, 197
- 21 Panzer Division, 171, 258
- 26 Panzer Division, 325
- 15 Panzer Grenadier Division, 370
- 1 Parachute Division, 377, 494

◦ 3 Parachute Regiment, 381

Gibb, Tpr A. W., 445

Gibb, Capt J. D., 4, 167, 214, 270– 1, 280

Gilchrist, Cpl H., 147

Gilmore, Tpr I. W., 486

Gilmour, Capt W. L. M., 42, 47, 58, 96, 125– 6, 154, 166, 169, 191, 202, 209

Gissi, 315– 16

Given, WO II K. D. J., 283, 309, 336

Glasgow, Col K. W. R., 165

Glenroy, HMS, 157

Gloucester, 26

Gloucester, HRH Duke of, 225

Glover, Sgt R. G., 212

Glubb, Pte R. J., 7

Glue, Capt W. A., 33, 49, 62

Goering, Mshl H., 369

Goffin, Hon 2 Lt N. G., 24

Goodall, WO II R. W., 127, 162

Gothic Line, 479– 81

Graffin, Tpr H. V., 405

Granarolo, 555, 557– 8

Grattan, 2 Lt O. T., 127

Gray, WO II A. C., 215, 259, 281

Gray, Maj J. B., 291, 303

Gray, Brig J. R., 60, 134, 250

Gray, Tpr R. M., 477

Gray, Col (7 Ind Bde), 386– 9

Greece

- Germany declares war on, 48

Greek Forces

- 1 Bn, 504, 507
- 2 Bn, 507
- 3 Mountain Bde, 479, 482, 501, 507
- 12 Division, 44
- 19 Division, 44
- 1 Regt, 97
- 6 Regt, 98– 9, 101, 129
- 8 Regt, 98– 9, 103

Green, 2 Lt S. J., 42– 3, 59– 60, 114– 15, 130, 133– 4, 146

Greenall, Lt W., 455

Greve R., 467– 8, 472

Greville, Lt-Col A. W., 7

Grooby, WO II H. L., 127, 143, 145, 162, 164, 184, 190– 1, 199, 215

Groufsky, L-Sgt J. T., 338, 340

Guardiagrele, 321, 323, 328

Guest, 2 Lt J. L., 568, 573

Gunn, Rev. L. F. F., 419– 20, 532, 551, 579, 600

Gustav Line, 367

Guthrey, Lt A. R., 167, 172, 178, 202, 206

Gutzewitz, Capt W. R., 43

Hadfield, Lt F. A., 493, 507

Hamilton, Cpl H. J., 316– 17

Hamilton, WO II R. G., 352, 598

Hampton, Tpr J. M., 457

Hanan, Capt J. R., 280

Handyside, Maj M., 491

Hanna, Pte W. H., 176

Hanrahan, Tpr G. L., 395

Hargest, Brig J., 105, 121– 3, 155

Hargraves, Tpr D. L., 461– 2, 489

Harper, 2 Lt J. S., 167

Harrison, Cpl S. P., 451– 2

Hart, Capt G. F., 298– 9, 322, 341, 343, 352, 355– 7, 421, 431– 4, 440

Hartnell, Lt-Col S. F., 277

Havock, HMS, 68

Hayes, WO II A. E., 215, 281

Hayward, Tpr A. J., 405

Hayward, L-Sgt J. R., 187

Hazledine, Capt P. E., 281

Hazlett, Capt J. L., 420, 436, 445– 6, 476, 485, 506, 511, 527, 540, 555, 557, 601

Hazlett, Lt J. S., 322, 358, 388– 9, 390– 4, 417

Heasley, 2 Lt J. G., 43

Heath, Sgt M. W., 552

Heenan, Maj M., 167, 179

Helmieh, 22

Helwan, 21, 23, 25, 30, 32, 35, 38, 68, 146, 151, 152, 155, 295

Heptinstall, Capt W., 463– 4, 466, 550, 557, 569, 572, 585, 591

Herbison, Tpr T. B., 341– 3

Hero, HMS, 84, 86

Hesson, Sgt J., 78– 9, 87

Higgs, Cpl J. W., 578

Hill-Rennie, Pte M. C., 108, 110, 172

Hinton, Sgt J. D., 19, 78– 9, 87, 161, 620

Hiscock, Sgt M., 401– 2

Hobart, HMAS, 15

Hobson, Capt J. E., 480

Hodge, Dvr J. L., 390, 393

Hodge, Sigm R. Y., 386, 437

Hodges, Cpl C. W., 335

Hodson, Cpl A. S., 563– 4, 571, 576

Hoffman, Pte A. J., 147

Hogan, L-Cpl A. J., 388

Hogg, Sgt J., 189

Holt, Tpr T. N., 426– 7

Homann, Pte G. S. S., 54

Hopkins, Pte D. H., 159

Hopkins, Pte J. J., 56

Horn, Pte W. L. C., 147

Hornig, Capt C. B., 380

Howorth, Lt J. W., 273, 432– 4, 489, 491– 2

Hughes, 2 Lt O.W., 388, 459, 470– 1, 493, 523

Hulme, Sgt A. C., 160

Hurley, Brig P. J., 297

Hymettus, 39– 40, 42, 75

Idice R., 572, 574

Ikingi Maryut, 25, 38– 9, 306

Iles, L., 298

Indian Forces

- 5 Bde, 245, 374, 379, 382– 3, 386
- 7 Bde, 386– 7, 416
- 18 Bde, 245– 6
- 19 Bde, 315, 319
- 4 Division, 163, 365, 368, 371– 2, 379, 384, 388, 396, 420
- 5 Division, 244, 246, 249, 252
- 8 Division, 314– 15
- 10 Division, 229– 30
- 43 Gurka Lorried Infantry Bde, 531– 2, 572
- Rajputana Rifles, 25, 27

Inglis, Brig L. M., 101, 104– 5, 129, 133, 143, 154, 156, 165, 170, 180– 1, 194, 237, 252, 258, 297, 300, 302– 3, 420, 480– 1, 523

Innes, 2 Lt G. R., 461

Innes, Lt J. I., 429, 431, 483– 4

Irvine, Tpr G. B., 468

Italian Forces

- Ariete Division, 248

**Italy:** Declares war, 23, German surrender in, 587, 590– 1

Jack, Pte W. H., 29

Jackal, HMS, 146

Jackson, Pte T., 89, 92– 3, 149, 210

Jacovides, N., 153

James, Tpr I. G., 563

Jamieson, Pte W. C., 176

Jantzen, 210

Jefcoate, Capt H. O., 10, 42, 96

Jenkins, 2 Lt N. L., 458, 567, 593

Johansen, Maj C. C., 263

Johnson, Sgt G. H., 463

Johnson, 2 Lt W. F., 215

Johnston, Capt J. A., 91, 95, 133, 287, 301, 322, 370, 445

Jones, Pte A. M., 77– 81, 86– 7

Jones, Hon. F., 302

Jones, J., 292

Jones, Tpr K. J., 306, 338

Jones, L-Cpl L. T., 334

Jones, Cpl R. D., 389– 91, 393– 4

Jones, Sgt R., 319

Jordan, Maj A. M., 420, 446, 478

Kabrit, 157– 8, 217

Kalamata, 75– 7, 81– 7, 161

Kaponga Box, 244

Karatsos, 133, 135

Karst, Sgt E. O. C., 216, 283, 299– 300

Katerini, 42– 4, 46, 49, 75, 92– 3

Kelly, Pte F. P., 55, 93

Kelsall, Capt D. V. C., 59– 61

Kempthorne, Capt J. H., 10

Kennard, WO II C. P., 283, 419

Kent, HMS, 13

Kesselring, Fd Mshl A., 372, 486

Kevern, Tpr J., 466

Kidd, L-Cpl C. W., 352

Kidd, Pte J. R., 92

Kidd, Pte T. E., 216

Kimber, Sgt H. W., 50, 62, 123, 134, 138, 178, 192

Kingston, HMS, 74

Kippenberger, Maj-Gen Sir H., 1, 9, 10, 13, 22– 3, 25, 27, 30, 33, 40– 2, 44– 5, 47– 8, 54, 58– 61, 65, 69– 70, 74, 90– 4, 96, 99, 104, 125, 127, 129– 31, 133– 4, 137– 8, 141– 5, 149, 152, 154– 5, 157– 9, 162– 6, 168, 171– 4, 176– 8, 180–

6, 208, 210, 214, 216, 303, 336, 344, 350, 371, 379

- Quoted: 68, 144– 5, 165, 180, 182– 3, 323, 331, 355

Kirk, Tpr C., 568

Kirk, Lt-Col G. R., 10

Kirk, Capt V. D., 116, 124, 127, 132

Kneebone, Tpr E. L., 342

Krause, Cpl J. P., 308

Kriekouki, 65, 67– 9, 90

Krogh, WO II H., 162

Laidlaw, WO II J. R., 333– 6

Laird, Pte F. J., 54

Lamone R., 524– 5, 528– 9, 531, 549

Lampson, Sir M., 16, 19

Lanciano, 324– 5, 330, 346, 360

Lane, Tpr C. G. P., 463, 466

Lang, Sgt I., 128

Lapthorne, WO II J., 414

Larisa, 43, 58, 62– 3

Lawrence, Capt G. L., 7

Lay, L-Cpl O. J., 414– 15

Leander, HMS, 11

Leary, Sgt W. M., 373

Leckie, Col D. F., 116– 17, 121

Leckie, Pte G., 204

Ledgerwood, J. ( YMCA), 47

Leggoe, Tpr A. G. E., 430

Lennie, Cpl R. J., 392

Letitia, 307

Letts, Sgt B., 560

Lewis, Tpr R. J., 390, 393– 4

Lilley, WO II C., 406, 436, 552

Liri R., 367, 431– 2, 436– 7, 443

◦ Valley, 367– 8, 376, 381, 446, 472

Llangibby Castle, 307

Lloyd, Sgt R. C., 556, 569, 582

Lochhead, Sgt G. L., 179– 80, 187, 203– 4

Lockie, Lt J. P., 112

Loisel, 2 Lt N. E. H., 428

Lomas, S-Sgt H. R., 348

Longman, Tpr E. J., 569

Love, Lt-Col E. Te W., 124

Lovelock, Cpl N. J., 403

Low, Capt C. A., 399, 434

Lowe, Pte O., 27

Lowe, Cpl S. S., 201

Lucera, 365

Lumsden, Sgt R., 178, 216, 242, 283

Lynch, Sgt J. R., 57, 102, 142, 144, 150, 285– 7

Lynch, Cpl R. J., 292

Lyon, Capt W. J., 60

Lyons, Sgt F. R., 465

McAllister, Pte G. M., 318

McBain, Sgt I. D., 210

McCarthy, Tpr A. C., 429

McCarthy, Tpr L. J., 578

McClelland, 2 Lt B. J., 347– 8, 401

McConchie, 2 Lt P. A., 203, 205, 216, 235– 6, 301, 419

McCreery, Gen Sir R., 547

McCully, Tpr L. G., 563

Macdonald, Tpr A. N., 489

Macdonald, Lt-Col K. H., 537

McDonald, 2 Lt C. C., 148, 205, 210, 216

MacDuff, Maj A. P., 2, 10, 41, 43, 76, 78– 82, 88

McGhie, Sgt P. M., 93, 200– 1

McKay, Tpr A. D., 352, 356

McKegney, L-Cpl K. J., 54, 127, 132

McKerchar, Lt F. J., 346– 8

McKergow, Lt-Col J. W., 162, 166, 215, 227, 291– 2, 303, 305– 6, 309– 10, 315, 321, 331, 336, 338, 344– 5, 348– 9

McLaren, 2 Lt F. B., 42, 71– 2, 88

McLay, Lt A. R., 523, 587, 594

McLeod, Cpl A. F., 514

MacMillan, Capt A. B., 280

McMinn, Cpl D. McI., 459

McPhail, Capt N. J., 42, 112– 13, 117, 124, 135, 167, 172, 177, 185, 187, 191, 198, 201– 2

Maadi, 17, 18, 22, 24– 5, 33, 119, 161, 216, 227, 282– 3, 302– 3, 304

Maharey, Pte D. S., 418

Mains, Tpr G. D., 541– 2

Majella Mts, 321

Maleme, 97, 100– 4, 109– 10, 114– 16, 118, 120, 125, 127, 129, 132– 3, 137, 146, 148– 50

Manchester, Capt K. G., 10, 153– 4, 162, 166, 185, 188

Mann, Tpr R. C., 492

Manson, Maj I. O., 223, 237, 250, 264– 5, 266– 7, 269– 70, 285

Mark, Sgt B., 126

Markham, Maj P. G., 10, 42, 112, 122, 140

Markopoulon, 71, 73

Mason, L-Cpl F. T., 30, 93, 286, 445

Mathewson, Maj B. J., 2, 10, 153

Massa Lombarda, 562– 3, 565– 6, 568– 9, 571, 593

Mathias, Tpr F. A., 466

Maxwell, Capt P. V. H., 43, 111, 114, 123, 132, 166, 215, 265, 267– 8, 270, 280

May, WO II R., 171, 177, 215, 241, 267, 281, 311

Medicina, 571– 2

Menastir, 168

Mersa Matruh, 24– 5, 30– 2, 158, 164, 228– 9, 231, 285

Metauro R., 480

Middleton, Tpr R. B., 450– 1, 459

Middleton, Tpr T. H., 391, 394

Mignano, 369– 70, 372, 380, 398, 412, 415– 16, 423, 522

Miles, Capt T. J., 523

Miles, Brig R., 22, 202

Millard, Sgt E., 445

Miller, Sgt R. McL., 188, 388, 397, 436

Mills, 2 Lt G., 167, 188

Milner, L-Cpl H. W. C., 308, 565

Minhinnick, Capt T. J., 523

Minqar Qaim, 229– 34, 237, 241, 244, 256, 279– 80, 288, 345

Mitchell, Maj T. H., 10, 32, 153– 4, 158, 162, 166, 168, 170, 172, 181– 2, 184, 208

Moloney, Lt D. A. R., 281

Molos, 58, 62– 4

Monteath, WO II J. M., 214, 216, 284

Monastery Hill, 367, 381, 386, 401, 404

Monfalcone, 588, 590, 592, 595, 597

Montecassino Abbey, 367– 8, 371, 379, 381, 383

◦ spur, 370, 372, 377

Montgomery, Fd Mshl Viscount, 314

Moodie, Maj J. F., 235– 6, 271, 280, 322, 386, 389, 394– 5, 550, 552, 557, 566, 573, 579, 583, 601

Morgan, Tpr R. C., 529

Moro R., 324, 330, 348– 50, 359, 495, 499

Morris, Sgt A. F., 383– 4

Morris, L-Cpl R. H., 118– 19

Morris, Capt S. A., 340, 355, 489– 90

Morrison, Tpr M. O., 568

Muir, Sigmn I. D., 555

Murray, Lt A., 383– 4

Murray, Lt D. E., 281, 322, 345

Murray, Maj G. A., 7, 10, 42, 282, 291

Musson, Sgt S. A., 101

Napier, HMAS, 144, 151

Needham, Sgt H. N. K., 283, 352, 356, 400

Neilson, 2 Lt A. R., 43

Newburgh, 312– 13

Newlands, S-Sgt R. M., 308, 359, 385, 395, 398

Newman, 2 Lt R. M., 464– 6, 566

Newton, Tpr G. H. I., 352

NZ Forces

- NZ Corps, 368, 370– 1, 374, 400, 408, 416
- 2 NZ Division, 32, 44, 48– 9, 63, 97, 100, 129, 136, 159, 163– 4, 166, 217, 221, 227– 32, 234, 236– 7, 243, 244, 246– 9, 251– 2, 254– 5, 257– 8, 260, 288, 290– 1, 302, 304, 306– 7, 315, 323– 4, 349, 365– 9, 371, 377, 379, 400, 416, 418, 446, 477, 479, 481, 487, 496, 510– 11, 516, 521, 525, 551, 554– 5, 561, 572, 589, 595, 599– 601
- Armoured Units
- 4 Armd Bde, 290, 295, 298, 301, 315– 16, 323, 325, 329, 348, 349, 365, 368– 9, 387, 437, 476, 480– 1, 487, 505, 513, 516, 520, 523– 4, 551, 580, 600, 602
- 18 Regt, 319, 321, 323– 31, 337, 345, 367, 419, 484, 504, 513, 515– 17, 528– 9, 548, 550, 571, 574, 597, 599– 600, 602

- 19 Regt, 319, 321, 328, 361, 381– 2, 385– 6, 398, 401, 409, 420, 449, 453, 468, 472, 493, 500, 504, 515, 517, 539, 550, 590, 592, 597, 600
- Army Service Corps
  - Petrol Coy, 129
  - RMT, 22, 164, 175, 534
  - Div Supply Column, 42
  - Supply Company, 576
- Artillery
  - 31 Anti-Tank Bty, 45, 55, 228
  - 34 Anti-Tank Bty, 61
  - 7 Anti-Tank Regt, 223, 226, 234, 271, 460, 473, 488
  - 25 Fd Bty, 230
  - 4 Fd Regt, 24, 174, 186, 193, 247, 251, 254, 260, 305, 338, 449, 504
  - 5 Fd Regt, 99
  - 6 Fd Regt, 45, 53, 193, 197– 8, 209, 228
  - 14 Light AA Regt, 232, 303
  - 7 Med Bty, 55
- Divisional Cavalry, 24– 5, 64, 98– 9, 127, 129, 139, 166, 193, 222, 248, 254, 425, 434, 437– 8, 468, 487, 500, 504, 516, 518, 521, 529, 542, 549– 50, 553, 580, 583, 587– 8
- Divisional Signals, II
- Engineers

- 28 Assault Sqn, 594, 596– 8, 600
  - 7 Fd Coy, 371, 381
  - 5 Fd Pk Coy, 380, 586
  - 6 Fd Coy, 59, 260, 380
- Infantry
    - 4 Bde, 24, 29, 44, 49– 50, 54, 64– 5, 67, 69, 70, 73– 4, 76, 96– 9, 101, 104, 121, 125, 128– 9, 133, 135– 7, 142, 156, 158, 172– 4, 177, 184– 6, 191, 200, 228– 30, 231– 3, 237, 245, 248– 9, 251– 4, 256, 260, 273, 279, 282, 288
    - 5 Bde, 64– 5, 97, 104– 5, 111, 114– 15, 117, 119– 22, 125– 6, 129, 135– 6, 143, 164, 173, 209, 216, 229, 237, 244– 5, 247, 251, 254, 256– 7, 260– 1, 266, 276, 279, 290, 303, 306, 319, 323– 30, 349, 368– 70, 372, 398, 420, 423, 472, 487, 505, 509– 11, 523, 526, 528– 9, 551, 553, 555, 566, 572, 577– 80
    - 6 Bde, 64, 67– 8, 97, 173– 4, 179, 181, 183, 185– 6, 195, 198– 9, 228– 9, 230, 245– 6, 252, 254, 278– 9, 290, 303, 319, 321, 323, 326, 328, 330, 375– 6, 381, 420, 437, 449, 480– 1, 485, 487– 8, 494, 496– 7, 500, 504, 509– 11, 516– 17, 526– 9, 531– 2, 539, 551– 3, 555, 566, 569, 571– 4, 577– 8, 580, 592, 594, 596– 7, 599
    - 9 Bde, 549, 553, 566, 569, 572, 575, 580, 592, 597
    - 10 Bde, 99, 125, 127, 129, 133, 137
    - 18 Bn, 19, 44, 50, 56, 58– 60, 65, 67, 70, 129– 30, 133– 5, 138, 156, 158, 178, 180– 1, 183– 6, 190– 1, 193, 199– 201, 207– 9, 212, 214– 15, 222, 228, 237, 248, 250, 260, 262– 4, 266– 7, 269
    - 19 Bn, 42, 44, 50, 52, 54, 55, 58, 59, 65, 70, 74, 129, 133, 140, 156– 7, 158, 163, 185, 190, 215, 222, 228, 231, 234, 237– 40, 245, 251– 2, 255, 260, 262– 3, 266– 7, 269, 277, 279, 284, 447

- 21 Bn, 120, 135, 138– 9, 173– 4, 262, 325– 7, 329, 345, 348– 50, 353– 5, 357, 402, 424– 5, 435– 6, 462– 3, 491, 502, 571
- 22 Bn, 103, 146, 172– 3, 279, 323, 325, 328, 358, 371, 416, 420, 444– 5, 447, 449, 458– 9, 468– 72, 480, 482– 5, 487, 493, 495– 6, 499– 500, 514, 516, 518, 520– 1, 524, 549, 553, 569, 587– 91
- 23 Bn, 115– 17, 120, 133– 5, 139, 160, 257– 8, 324– 9, 337– 9, 421, 454, 456, 504, 523
- 24 Bn, 179, 324, 359– 60, 380– 1, 431, 480, 482, 486, 489– 91, 493– 5, 499– 502, 504, 513, 517, 527, 529, 531– 3, 535– 9, 542, 554– 5, 557, 560, 562, 568, 572, 574, 576, 596
- 25 Bn, 61, 82, 179, 279, 323, 327, 357, 379– 81, 383, 411, 421, 431, 470, 482, 486– 8, 490– 1, 494– 5, 497, 499– 503, 513– 15, 527– 9, 531– 2, 535– 9, 554– 5, 557, 559– 60, 562, 569, 572, 576– 7, 579– 80, 595– 6
- 26 Bn, 34, 38, 54, 56, 62, 67– 8, 179, 291, 345, 347, 349– 50, 353– 5, 381, 386, 399, 404– 5, 431, 438, 444, 496, 499– 503, 531– 3, 535, 542, 555, 561– 2, 566– 9, 572– 3, 576– 7, 596
- 27 (MG) Bn, 25, 45, 99, 156, 196, 272, 277, 321, 549, 569, 580, 583, 586, 602
- 28 (Maori) Bn, 105, 114– 17, 120, 122– 6, 135, 139, 142– 3, 146, 228, 231, 236, 238– 40, 249– 54, 256– 7, 325, 328, 331, 337– 9, 341– 2, 344– 5, 348– 52, 355– 6, 359– 60, 369, 372– 3, 425– 8, 431, 435– 6, 445, 456– 8, 460– 3, 467– 8, 472, 488, 507, 512, 528– 9
- Composite Bn, 98– 9, 118, 129, 130
- NZ Reinforcement Bn, 77
  - Medical
    - 4 Fd Amb, 11, 191, 202,

■ 5 Fd Amb, 202

■ 6 Fd Amb, 202

○ PW Repatriation Unit, 480, 597

Nicholson, Lt-Col S. W., 271

Nicol, Sgt J. A., 283

Nieuw Amsterdam, 303

Nieuw Holland, 307

Nixon, Lt J. M. S., 216, 399, 458

Nizam, HMAS, 144, 151

Nordbye, Cpl C. T., 500

Norman, Gen C. W., 301

O' Callaghan, Lt M. G., 10, 43, 129– 31, 146, 148

O'Connell, Sgt F. A., 541

O'Connor, WO II T., 299, 317

O'Dwyer, Sgt N. P., 520

Olympus, Mount, 61

Orion, 12

Orlowski, Pte W. J., 27

Ormond, Capt A. R., 162, 167

O'Rorke, Lt F., 43, 82, 87

Orr, Maj R. S., 10, 32, 42, 67– 8, 154, 162, 166, 194, 199, 201, 208

Orsogna, 323– 31, 334– 5, 337, 339, 342, 345– 9, 353, 355, 358– 62, 364, 367, 369, 385, 419

Ortona, 324– 8, 337, 345, 353

Overton, Lt J. N., 435, 459– 60, 470, 496– 7, 499, 515

Park, Tpr J. E., 428

Parkinson, Brig G. B., 379, 527, 531, 573

Parrington, Brig L. P., 76, 82, 83– 4, 86

Pascuccio spur, 324, 326

Paterson, Pte D. B. G., 250

Paterson, Maj R. D. B., 2, 10, 43, 50, 60, 96, 118, 214, 223

Patterson, Pte D. D., 75, 78– 81, 87

Patterson, Capt K. H., 523

Pearce, Tpr R. J., 570

Peart, Lt-Col J. N., 181, 186– 7, 190, 193– 4, 208, 212

Pedder, Capt A. H. J., 308, 438, 446

Peebles, Tpr R. J., 492– 3

Pepperell, Cpl R. J., 563– 4

Perano, 319

Percasky, Tpr A. J., 341– 2

Perrin, Tpr J. A., 342

Perth, HMAS, 86, 145

Pesa R., 447

Pescara, 314– 15

Petrie, Tpr A., 369– 70

Petrie, Maj M. De R., 67

Phillips, Maj J. F., 10, 162, 166, 227, 242, 280, 305, 322, 330, 338, 341, 343– 5, 348, 350– 3, 355

Phillips, 2 Lt J. M., 506

Phoebe, HMS, 146, 155

Piedimonte d' Alife, 365– 8, 369, 420

Pierce, Tpr R. C., 471

Pinney, Tpr R., 518

Piraeus, 39– 40, 75

Pirgos, 109– 11, 114– 15, 117, 146

Platanias, 97, 104– 5, 111, 114– 15, 117, 120– 3, 146, 148, 150

Platanias R., 105, 125

Playle, Lt-Col A. S., 262

Pleasants, Brig C. L., 480, 505, 523– 4

Po R., 577– 9, 581– 2, 588, 592

- Valley, 487

Poggiofiorito, 325– 7, 329, 337, 339

Polish Carpathian Bde, 163

Poole, 2 Lt H. C., 127

Poole, Maj V. C., 10, 42, 63, 304, 322, 348, 353, 370

Porto Rafti, 69– 70, 71– 4, 89

Powrie, 2 Lt R. L. D., 10, 42

Pratt, Cpl K. L., 189

Pringle, Tpr F. E., 562

Pringle, Tpr S. D., 560

Prosilion, 52, 57

Purcell, Lt-Col H. A., 305, 315, 321, 349– 50, 354, 356– 7, 359, 367, 419, 446, 449, 454– 5, 467, 476, 479, 485, 506, 511, 519, 521, 531, 539– 40, 542, 545, 550

Puttick, Lt-Gen Sir E., 22, 28, 69, 97, 120, 136, 155– 6

Pyatt, Maj W. A., 550, 557, 579, 597

Qattara Box, 244, 246– 7, 249, 252– 4, 257– 8

Qattara Depression, 231, 244, 246

Quickenden, Tpr T. W., 575

Quilter, Capt J. P., 10, 177, 185– 6, 190, 194– 5, 198– 200, 202, 206– 7, 209

Rae, Tpr J., 490

Ramillies, HMS, 12– 13, 15

Rangitata, 12

Rapido R., 367– 72, 374, 381– 2, 399, 401– 3, 409, 414, 416,

◦ Valley, 368, 386, 420

Ravenna, 525, 550, 551

Rees, Tpr G. J., 347

Reid, WO II J. G., 406, 428– 9, 463, 465– 6, 468

Renall, 2 Lt H. L., 383, 389– 93, 396, 417

Rendall, Capt A. C., 281

Reno R., 575– 7, 579

Rhind, Capt P. K., 43, 81– 3, 87– 8

Rhodes, Maj G. A. T., 10, 42, 72, 114, 124, 126, 154, 157, 166, 183– 4, 209

Riakia, 44– 6, 48– 9, 91– 3

Rice, Capt M. C., 10, 42, 71– 2, 92, 107, 111– 13, 115, 146

Rimini, 485– 7, 496, 503, 508, 510– 11, 520, 539

Ritchie, Capt J. A. H., 450, 459

Roberts, Capt C. O. D., 162, 167, 184

Roberts, Cpl H. D., 138

Robertson, Capt J., 292

Robertson, Tpr J. W., 10, 295

Robinson, Lt-Col H. A., 550, 555, 557– 8, 579, 589, 594, 597, 602

Robinson, Sgt W. J., 272, 283

Robson, WO II G. D., 137, 465– 6, 468

Rogers, Tpr R. H. D., 571

Rogers, 2 Lt Te W., 427

Rolleston, Maj J. W., 42, 73, 145, 282, 322, 353, 360– 1, 370, 485, 511

La Romola, 449– 53, 456, 458, 460, 468– 71, 473

Rome, 314, 367, 374, 437, 444, 477– 8, 577

Rommel, Fd Mshl E., 227, 290

Ross, Pte F. G., 133

12 Royal Canadian Tank Regt, 411

Russell, Sgt W., 335, 341– 3, 349, 352, 356, 358– 9, 399, 402– 3, 421, 433, 456– 7

Ruweisat Ridge, 245, 246– 7, 251– 2, 255– 8, 260, 265, 269, 271, 275, 277– 83, 288

Ryan, Maj W. H., 597, 602

Salonika, 44

Sanders, WO II J. R. A., 280

San Giorgio, 575– 6

Sangro R., 314– 15, 319– 20, 321, 353, 359, 361, 365

San Martino, 323, 328

San Michele, 374, 382, 385, 397– 8, 407, 409, 412, 441

San Severo, 365

Sant' Andrea, 454– 5

Santerno R., 561– 3, 593

Savio R., 515– 17, 520, 524

Sawyers, Lt-Col C. H., 585

Scarlett, WO II F. J., 283

Scoltock, Lt H. J., 10, 42, 113, 146

Scott, L-Cpl A. G., 56, 198– 9

Scott, Cpl F., 54

Scott, G., 292

Scott, L-Cpl J. B., 178

Scott, Sgt P. J., 420

Secord, S-Sgt L. P., 319

Senio R., 527, 529, 532– 3, 535– 6, 539, 542, 551, 555, 558, 560– 1, 592, 594

Servia Pass, 53– 6

Sfasciata spur, 324– 7, 329, 330, 335, 337, 345, 349– 50, 353, 358

Shacklock, Capt J. T., 306, 312, 401, 452, 483, 533

Shand, Lt E. A., 167, 265, 281

Shand, Capt J. A. T., 167, 282, 299, 322, 331, 337– 8, 340

Shand, Sgt M. L., 267

Shaw, Sgt R. J., 298, 428

Sheppard, L-Cpl J. C., 115– 16, 139

Shirley, Lt C. V., 71, 322, 333– 4, 336– 7, 344

Shorrock, Sgt H., 334, 436

Sidi Azeiz, 168

Sidi Barrani, 31, 32, 228– 9, 231

Sidi Rezegh, 173– 4, 178– 9, 181, 183– 8, 191– 3, 195, 198– 9, 210– 11

Siena, 446, 477– 8

Sillaro R., 562, 566, 568– 9, 571

Simmons, Sgt B. F., 433– 4, 441

Sinclair, Tpr W. R., 340

Sisam, Lt W. J., 566, 583, 585, 594, 595

Siwa Road, 164, 230

Skinner, Maj C. F., 90

Skinner, Pte W. G., 312

Smale, Tpr V. E., 529

Small, Cpl L. H., 319

Smith, Lt I. D., 253, 265, 281

Smith, S-Sgt L. G., 72, 137

Smith, Tpr P. J., 560

Snadden, Maj J. P., 186

Sobieski, 11

Sollum, 31– 2, 173

Somerville, Tpr J. J., 387

Sora, 423, 425– 6, 432, 434, 436, 439

Sorich, L-Cpl G., 392– 3

1 South African Bde, 194, 199

1 South African Division, 244, 253

Southon, Pte R., 34

Spaccarelli, 324– 5, 350

Speedy, Pte P. G. T., 91– 2, 194

Spence, Rev. G. A. D., 10, 41– 2, 47– 8, 91, 100, 120, 141, 166, 179, 194, 212– 14, 250, 281, 299, 301, 305, 420, 602

Spicer, Pte J. L., 90– 1, 148, 183, 210

Spiers, Maj P. W. G., 10

Spilman, Capt A. K., 56

Spriggs, Cpl E. D., 118

Stag, HMS, 157

Steele, Maj A. J., 4, 7, 20

Stevens, Tpr L. C., 562

Stewart, Cpl J. R., 445

Stewart, Maj-Gen K. L., 67, 387, 424, 472

Strang, Pte W. J., 63

Straithaird, 12

Strathallan, 8

Stringer, Sgt M. L., 508

Strutt, Brig H. W., 55, 69

Suda Bay, 68, 86, 95– 8, 101– 3, 105, 136, 139, 149

Suffren, 13

Sullivan, Capt J. G., 89, 91, 93, 123, 130, 133, 214, 227, 234, 240, 258, 263– 5, 266– 7, 269– 71, 280

Sussex, HMS, 15

Sutherland, Sgt J. M., 347

Sutherland, Sgt L. R. B., 125, 268, 281

Sutherland, Sgt N., 111

Syria, 217, 218– 26, 227– 8, 286

Talbot, Cpl G. L., 331

Tank Brigade, 1 NZ Army, 300, 303, 322

Tanner, Lt-Col V. J., 354

Taranto, 308– 9, 310, 315

Taylor, Cpl E. C., 31, 278

Taylor, Maj G. E., 370, 407– 8, 413– 15, 436, 440, 460, 472

Taylor, Cpl J. H., 545

Taylor, Tpr L. G., 567

Thermopylae Pass, 63

Theyers, Tpr K., 582– 3

Thomas, WO II A. W., 283

Thomas, Tpr K. C., 342

Thompson, Sgt J. H., 272– 4, 276, 278

Thompson, Pte C. I. A., 92

Thomson, Maj G. H., 79, 83

Thomson, Lt L. J., 281

Thurland Castle, 39

Thwaites, Sgt J. A., 283

Tito, Mshl, 587– 8, 591, 595– 6, 598

Tobruk, 163, 168– 9, 171, 173, 181, 185, 193– 4, 196, 200, 208, 210, 212, 214

Tollison, Tpr R. J., 385

Tremewan, Capt H. C., 10

Tressider, Lt E. J., 503, 586

Trieste, 414, 588– 92, 594, 595– 7, 599– 600

Trocchio, Monte, 369, 373, 379, 398, 415

Tryon, Capt J. G., 151, 282

Turner, 2 Lt N. J., 587, 589

Turner, L-Sgt R., 242

Ulster Prince, 76

Upham, Capt C. H., 5, 7, 42– 3, 52– 3, 102, 108– 11, 113, 116– 17, 124, 128, 131– 2, 143, 160– 2, 164, 166, 209, 215, 235, 241, 262– 5, 267, 270, 280– 1, 317, 617– 19

US Forces

- 1 Armoured Division, 368
- 5 Army, 314, 365, 368, 371, 377, 525

- 2 Corps, 368, 371
- 6 Corps, 367
- 34 Division, 368
- 36 Division, 368
- 760 Tank Bn, 387, 390

Uso R., 496– 7, 499– 502, 504, 509– 11

Uttley, Capt L. M., 23, 162, 167, 186, 190, 201– 2

Veitch, Sgt T. J., 26, 178, 192, 242

Venafro, 380

Venice, 582, 585– 6, 596, 600

Vernon, 2 Lt H. M. R., 283

Vietinghoff, Col-Gen H-G., von, 486

Vincent, Sgt W. H., 23, 127, 132, 143, 145, 164, 177, 196

Volturno R., 366

- Valley, 418

Walford, Lt R. F., 330, 336, 344– 5

Walker, Lt-Col T. G., 104

Walton, Lt I. M., 282, 322, 341– 3

Ward, Tpr J. C., 400

Washbourn, Maj G. W., 10, 41, 42, 116, 133, 139, 143, 169, 215, 235, 240, 265, 267, 271, 280

Waterhouse, Capt K. S. M., 280

Watson, Cpl C. S., 399

Watson, Sgt W. F., 404

Wavell, Fd Mshl Lord, 16, 19, 31– 3, 96, 136

Weenink, WO II G. G. P., 7, 92, 148, 282, 301, 305, 311, 415, 419

Weir, Maj-Gen C. E., 247– 8, 481, 513

Welch, Tpr W. T., 393

Welsh, Cpl P. L. G., 26, 311

Wesley, Tpr J., 272

West, Sgt A. McM., 139– 41, 188, 429– 31, 440, 485

West, L-Sgt C. J., 81

Westcott, HMS, 15

Weston, Maj-Gen C. E., 136

Wheeler, L-Cpl G. W., 88

White, 2 Lt T. D., 167

Whitteker, Pte D. N., 134– 5

Wilder, Lt-Col N. P., 434

Wilhelm, L-Cpl V. H., 562

Wilkinson, Capt A. E., 265, 281

Williams, Maj J. L., 357

Williams, Capt J. R., 537– 8

Wills, Sgt N. J., 93

Wilson, Maj C., 5, 10, 42, 64, 98, 103, 146

Wilson, Capt E. M., 167, 176, 179, 182, 188, 191, 207

Wilson, Sgt M. J., 188

Wilson, Fd Mshl Lord., 16, 19

Wilson, Capt S., 282

Wilson, WO I T. H., 4, 7, 90, 93, 95– 6, 120, 144– 5, 148– 9, 154, 162, 215, 248, 250, 281– 2, 322, 355, 370, 419

Wood, Maj D. L., 271, 273– 5

Wood, Lt S. L., 10, 42

Wright, Maj S. J., 509, 539, 557, 569

Wright, Sgt W. N., 575

Yates, Capt H. S. D., 43, 75– 6, 77, 83, 88

Zaafran, 212– 13

# 20 BATTALION AND ARMOURED REGIMENT

## [BACKMATTER]

This volume was produced and published by the War History Branch of the  
Department of Internal Affairs

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The book was printed, bound and distributed by [Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd.](#)