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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.

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Colin Doig

Added name tags around people, places, and organisations.

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Jamie Norrish

Added link markup for project in TEI header.

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Corrected date in map caption on page 316..

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Added funding details to header.

28 June 2004

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Added missing text on page iv.

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Added full TEI header.

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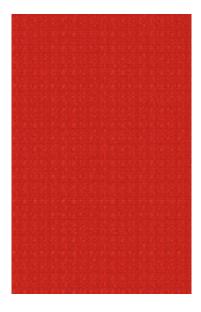
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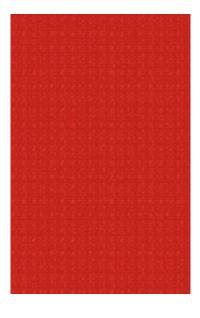
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21 BATTALION [COVERS]







21 Battalion

J. F. CODY

MAR TISTURY STANCE DEFARTMENT OF DETERMIL ATTAINS WILLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND 1955

21 BATTALION 21 BATTALION

21 Battalion

21 BATTALION [FRONTISPIECE]



Mount Olympus from Platamon

Mount Olympus from Platamon

[TITLE PAGE]

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

J. F. CODY

WAR HISTORY BRANCH

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND 1953 printed and distributed by

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FOREWORD

Foreword



by lieutenant-general lord freyberg, vc, gcmg, kcb, kbe, dso

The publication of these unit histories gives me, their Commander, the opportunity of correcting errors I have made in opinions passed at the time on operations and upon the achievements of units in various battles. In some cases we now know what appeared as a disaster has since been shown to be a gallant action in an inevitable defeat.

The 21st Battalion had the misfortune to be detached from the Division during the commencement of the Greek campaign, and came under another formation, and in the heavy fighting bore the brunt of an attack in which they fought with determination and great courage. They were overwhelmed by greatly superior forces and scattered; their losses were heavy. In light of the full details which history has now revealed, I wish to pay a tribute to the rearguard action that the 21st Battalion fought from the Tempe position where they suffered so heavily.

This book is a record of one of our most battleworthy Infantry Battalions, and I hope and trust it will be widely read. It tells the story of great bravery and endurance over a period of six years, during which time the Division fought in Greece and Crete, the Western Desert, Tunis and Italy, where it finished the War at Trieste.

I am often asked what made the New Zealanders such a great fighting Division.

In my opinion there were many factors, the most important of which was the quality of our men.

In my day to day dealings with them all, I had the great advantage of being a New Zealander and of knowing their country and their people. I knew also the great record of the First New Zealand Division in World War I. It is said that they went into battle on the beaches of Gallipoli with a prayer on their lips:

That they would measure up in battle and be a credit to their country.

In 1915 they established a tradition. When their sons had their baptism of fire in 1941 in the Greek campaign there was never any doubt about their confidence in themselves; they fought like veterans.

The New Zealand men have great qualities and are most practical, and in war it takes the form of knowing how to tackle any new problem that they encounter in battle. In our operations in the Western Desert, especially in the turning movements, they only had to be told what to do, never how to do it. This made the question of command very simple.

In this volume the historian deals with their raising, training and command in battle. During the war the 21st Battalion took their full part in our 'Triumphs and Disasters', both before, during and after the Battle of Alamein. They fought most gallantly at Platamon, at Alamein, at Takrouna and on the River Sangro in Italy. They fought from the first battle in April 1941 in Greece and finished in the final campaign from the River Sangro to the capture of Trieste on the 2nd May 1945.

This is a wonderful story. I hope many will study it and learn the deeds of heroism of this great unit.

Bernard Fryberg

Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor

Windsor Castle

PREFACE

Preface

This history is the story of the several hundred officers and men who served in the Middle East and Italy with the 21st New Zealand Battalion in the Second World War. Included in the text is only sufficient of the strategy and tactics of the various campaigns fought by the 2nd New Zealand Division to indicate the role of the battalion in those battles.

Immediately available to the writer were the war diaries, campaign reports, and other documents preserved by War Archives, but the intimate detail, the spirit of the unit, could be recaptured only from the members of the battalion themselves. I am therefore indebted to the many of all ranks who freely supplied personal diaries, eye-witness accounts, private letters, and answers to my questionnaires.

A considerable portion of any merit this history may have goes to the officers of the War History Branch, all of whom, without exception, went well beyond the line of duty in supplying and collating data and in reading and correcting the draft narratives.

J. F. Cody

wellington

June 1953

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CHAPTER 1 — TO THE UNITED KINGDOM

CHAPTER 1 To the United Kingdom

At 11.45 p.m. on 3 September 1939 a telegram was received by the Governor-General of New Zealand saying simply, 'War has broken out with Germany'. Within a matter of hours a. New Zealand Gazette Extraordinary declared that a state of war existed between New Zealand and the German Reich as from 9.30 p.m., 3 September, New Zealand standard time.

The Governor-General, Lord Galway, informed the Dominions Secretary that His Majesty's Government in New Zealand entirely concurred with the action taken, which they regarded as inevitably forced upon the British Commonwealth if the cause of justice and democracy was to endure in the world. The New Zealand Government wished to offer the fullest assurance of all possible support, and asked for suggestions regarding the method by which this country could best assist in the common cause.

In reply, the Dominions Secretary hoped that an expeditionary force would be despatched for service in France or to relieve United Kingdom units in Singapore, Burma, India, or elsewhere. By the first week in October, and after communications and negotiations concerning equipment, the decision was taken to send overseas a New Zealand division which would be supplied with arms and trained at its destination.

The force was raised in three echelons, and 21 Battalion was part of the second. On 8 November the officers for the battalion, together with those of some other units, entered Narrow Neck District School near Auckland, where they underwent an intensive elementary refresher course. Prospective NCOs went into camp on 9 December. All the non-commissioned ranks were temporary and no badges of rank were worn, those at the course being regarded as student NCOs. Some were from the First Echelon, some from the Territorial Force, and some were entirely new to the Army. The stronger personalities, irrespective of their previous training or lack of it, speedily rose to senior non-commissioned rank and were later confirmed in their appointments. There was not much variety of equipment available and training was necessarily restricted to musketry and to platoon and company drill.

After Christmas leave the nucleus of the battalion moved to Papakura and there, with the first volunteers marching in on 12 January 1940, the unit came officially into being.

The 21st Battalion was fortunate in the officers chosen to guide its early steps. Lieutenant-Colonel Macky, MC ¹ and his second-in-command, Major E. A. Harding, MC ² had both served with distinction in the New Zealand Rifle Brigade in 1914-18, while Major MacGregor ³ (A Company), Captain Le Lievre ⁴ (B Company), Captain R. W. Harding, MM ⁵ (C Company), Captain Howcroft, MC ⁶ (D Company), and the Quartermaster, Captain Trousdale, MC ⁷ were also First World War men.

Lieutenant-Colonel Macky was well known personally or by repute to many of his men. He had risen from the ranks to the command of a company in the Rifle Brigade and had been awarded the Military Cross in France. He was a well-known solicitor in Auckland, and as Commodore of the Royal New Zealand Yacht Club was known at least by sight to those who frequented the Auckland Harbour.

In addition to their active service experience, Lieutenant-Colonel Macky, Major MacGregor, and Captains Le Lievre and R. W. Harding had served for many years in Territorial units.

Other more senior appointments were Captain Sadler ⁸ (Headquarters Company), Captain Tongue ⁹ who replaced Captain Cauty, MM ¹⁰ (E Company), invalided out with a knee injury, and the Adjutant, Captain Dew ¹¹ New Zealand Staff Corps.

The battalion was recruited largely from Auckland city and North Auckland, with the balance from the Waikato and Hauraki districts. The city quota was required to report at the Rutland Street Barracks by 8 a.m. on 12 January, but many were there an hour earlier. Queen Street business premises were empty while the volunteers swung along in column of threes to the accompaniment of songs of the day. A chorus of cheering followed, with special outbursts from the doors of shops and factories where employees farewelled their workmates. Almost before they were aware of it, the recruits had entrained and were on their way to a life that was in the main entirely new to them.

The scenes in Queen Street had their counterparts in every town and village in the 21 Battalion area, until by 19 January the unit was fully assembled. For many the metamorphosis from civilian to soldier was not easy. Used to making their own decisions, they had to learn to obey without question the commands of NCOs, even if they were but temporary lance-corporals with one stripe insecurely fastened to their arms. Reactions to apparently pointless orders were prompt, but a system of lectures and later disciplinary action taught recruits what was expected of them in the Army, and all but the born outlaws settled down to the routine of military life. The first few days passed in a maze of marching and counter-marching.

Between the time the drafts stood huddled together on the camp parade ground, answering with varying degrees of military smartness as their names were called from the marching-in rolls, and the time they were assembled on their first company parade, they found that they had acquired a denim fatigue dress, suffered the dentist's chair, made their wills, had blankets thrust into their arms, been issued with paybooks, sorted into platoons, fed regularly, and had a place to sleep. After the finer points of folding blankets, dressing beds, and aligning boots had been demonstrated by platoon sergeants, and the necessity appreciated of fulfilling the orderly corporal's injunction to appear smartly at the company orderly room when required, life became one long queue—for pay, mess, inoculations, clothing, rifles, equipment, and respirators—until feet were tired and tempers short.

When he had broken in his army boots, perhaps the private soldier's biggest problem was his uniform. After the First Echelon had been fitted out there was a shortage of clothing, and most of the uniforms were culled from the stores of Territorial units. Those that were not outsize were rejects, of odd shapes and poorly matched shades. As one soldier in his first letter home put it, 'We have two kinds of uniforms to choose from—big ones and whoppers'. Camp tailors did their best, and later serge uniforms manufactured in New Zealand were available in some quantity, but at the time the Second Echelon sailed there were many with ill-fitting, ill-matching dress. The denim fatigue and drill uniforms were so poorly designed that they made men self-conscious in the presence of their well-turned-out officers.

This feeling of inferiority was accentuated on visiting days when wives, sweethearts and mothers, many with acquaintances in the officers' mess, were not

slow to make comparisons. However, a few months of familiarity, if it did not breed contempt, induced a feeling of acquiescence in a state of affairs that could not be altered. Drill, discipline, and the adjustment of outlook to the reality of training for war brought about a philosophical acceptance of the inevitable—so many civilian privileges had been surrendered that one more did not matter much.

There was, however, a limit, and that was reached when a Government decision was published to the effect that troops in uniform were to be denied the civilian right of carrying liquor away from hotels. It was mentioned that a similar decision had been made during the previous war. The paper containing the news reached the camp at breakfast time and soon the paragraph in question was the subject of bitter comment. Here was one civilian right the men felt should not be denied them. In a few minutes placards hung on the camp buildings announcing the attitude of a section of the men. They read: 'No beer no drill.'

This was followed by a gathering of about 150 men of all units on a subsidiary parade ground. The indignation meeting was addressed by a speaker who maintained the right of a soldier to carry away liquor from hotels and decried the injustice of the Government in imposing such a restriction.

When Colonel Macky was informed of the proceedings he went over to the ground, mounted the truck being used as a rostrum, and made it quite clear that the method of approaching the subject was illegal. He concluded by ordering the men back to their lines, whereupon the gathering dispersed. Expectations of banner headlines in the press did not materialise— merely a short paragraph to the effect that there had been a mild demonstration at Papakura Military Camp as a protest against the Government's decision. There the matter ended.

The general instruction was that training was not to go higher than platoon level, but as far as 21 Battalion was concerned this was disregarded. There was a minimum of parade-ground drill and a maximum of weapon training and fieldcraft—Colonel Macky and his company commanders had not fought a war for nothing.

This free translation of general instructions led to some criticism at the time, but it was not long before every training camp in New Zealand had adopted the same practice. Instead of spending hours on the parade ground learning the finer points of deportment, marching, or saluting, recruits were instructed as they moved around the training circuit.

Thorough training in infantry weapons was followed by daily visits to the rifle range at Penrose. Those who did not qualify in their first attempts were sent back until they became proficient. Every man also received some training with the Bren gun. These weapons were in very short supply at the time, and it was believed that 21 Battalion was the only Second Echelon unit in which every man had some practical experience with the new infantry weapon before going overseas.

Duder's Beach, east of Auckland, was a popular exercise ground and on one occasion every member of the unit had a training shoot at targets on the water. It was a valuable experience, for it was possible to see where every shot fell and each man could correct his own aim. Three times a week there was night training. In addition, full battalion exercises were held frequently and included operations with the Divisional Cavalry and engineer detachments training at Papakura. Because of this advanced training, the battalion led the majority of the brigade exercises in England.

Routine training was interspersed with formal parades. The Governor-General inspected the battalion on 8 February and on the 21st Brigadier Hargest ¹² who had been appointed to command 5 Brigade, also inspected the troops in Papakura. Two days later there was another parade, this time at the Auckland Town Hall in honour of the men from HMS Achilles, just returned from the victory at the River Plate. Later Captain W. E. Parry, commanding the Achilles, described the battle to the battalion at Papakura.

Day and night training continued until 13 March, when the Second Echelon was declared on active service and given 14 days' final leave. Early embarkation was expected but changes in shipping arrangements resulted in a delay of nearly three weeks. Everyone was rather depressed with the prospect, for with the last farewells said, weekend leave to Auckland was something of an anti-climax.

On 31 March the battalion took part in the funeral parade of the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. M. J. Savage. The parade was from the Auckland Railway Station to the corner of Queen and Customs Streets; 21 Battalion provided the guard of honour and

lined each side of the route.

Towards the end of April there were unmistakable signs of impending departure. Large troopships arrived mysteriously at Wellington and Battalion Headquarters became extremely active. Orderly-room clerks worked late into the night typing multiple copies of embarkation rolls, crossing off names for various reasons and including others in their place. Paybooks were checked to see that all the things that happen to a man before leaving for overseas had happened.

The farewell parade in Auckland took place on 27 April. After the march through the cheering crowds from the Domain to the wharf, rifles were piled and the men given leave from 1.30 p.m. to 7.45 p.m., when they were to report again at the wharf before entraining for Papakura. It was an experiment that was never repeated in subsequent farewell parades.

After six hours of send-offs, in which liquid refreshment took a prominent part for most, the troops reassembled. Many were on time; many were late. It was raining and the wharf was blacked out. The first-comers took their rifles from the pile, which then collapsed in a heap. Those arriving later had no chance of finding their own weapons, nor did they worry over the matter, but light-heartedly picked up the first they saw unclaimed. It was a scene of military chaos, with the troops out of control but in the best of spirits. The crowd of several thousand civilians was also out of hand, and the march back to the station was something that had to be seen to be believed.

The following day, Sunday, was the last opportunity for friends and relatives to visit the camp. It was a busy morning. Men were searching every corner in Papakura and Ngaruawahia camps for their own rifles. Then followed a voluntary church parade at which the attendance numbered four—three markers and the RSM, Ray Barnes. ¹³

The emotional strain of saying a last and definite goodbye to friends and relatives was countered the next morning with a lecture by Major E. A. Harding on the battalion's behaviour after the farewell parade. Major Harding normally had little to say but his address on that occasion was long and eloquent.

There was to be positively no leave from camp on the night of 30 April for the

troops were entraining in the morning, but the Carrier Platoon felt that they would like to take a little something with them for the road. There was no trouble with the main guard when an alleged picket, smartly turned out under the command of Sergeant Marshall-Inman, ¹⁴ explained that they had been detailed to collect an 'AWL'. Their haversacks were peculiarly heavy when they returned.

On the morning of 1 May the battalion, preceded by a band, swung out of Papakura and entrained for Wellington. A familiar figure to the men, 'Mum', who lived in a little cottage just around the corner where the camp road joins the Papakura-Hunua road, and who on many occasions had brought out hot buttered scones to men during rests on route marches, saw the battalion off. She joined the column and marched to the station, bidding farewell in a motherly fashion to the men who never passed her house without waving to her. The move was supposed to be a strict secret, but at all stations en route to Wellington the platforms were crowded with well-wishers who handed out cigarettes, chocolates, sandwiches, and bottles of liquid refreshment. Some of the farewell gifts induced a feeling of hilarity in their recipients, but for the most part the men were silent and thoughtful. (There were only seven of them serving with the battalion five years later.)

The battalion embarked at 1.30 a.m. the following morning on the Empress of Japan. As he went on board each man was handed a card showing his cabin number, the deck on which it was situated, the number and time of his mess, and his muster station for boat drill. The men called their cabin numbers as they stepped from the top of the gangway and the ship's officers directed traffic left, right, or below. Stewards were on hand to show each new party of troops to their cabins, where they changed hobnailed boots for deck shoes. They then paraded on deck to collect kitbags, were given a steaming pannikin of tea with bread and butter and sent to bed, most of them in the type of quarters that soldiers of 1914-18 would not have believed possible.

Troops messed in two sittings, most of them in the main first class dining-room, from which one wing had been partitioned to serve as the officers' and nurses' mess. All were served from the same kitchen.

Embarkation was completed by 5 a.m. It was at this point that the unit lost a valued member and a warm favourite. 'Sergeant Noodles' was the battalion mascot,

a snow-white terrier which followed at the heels of its owner, Private 'Tubby' Ryan ¹⁵ of C Company, on all route marches. Sergeant Noodles was an example to the untidy, for he was always correctly dressed in a red and khaki cover, on the side of which was attached his three stripes of rank. He wore his NZEF badge on his collar and was never known to give one away to a lady friend. Transport regulations prevented his embarkation and he was turned away at the gangway. However, somebody threw a rope from the deck to the wharf and, through the good offices of one of the wharf staff, Sergeant Noodles was nearly hoisted aboard. While the men were hauling him up his yelping attracted the notice of a ship's officer, who ordered him to be lowered again, and so the battalion lost its mascot.

At 6 a.m. the Aquitania slipped quietly from her berth, followed at half-hour intervals by the Empress of Japan and the Empress of Britain.

Though officially the embarkation was a secret, many friends and relatives in New Zealand knew of it, and thousands of them had gathered outside the locked gates leading to the wharf. Their night-long wait was rewarded at the last minute when, despite assurances to the contrary, the gates were opened and they streamed in to gaze hopefully at the towering sides of the large liners.

The Trentham Camp band 'Rolled out the Barrel' as each ship moved off into the mist over Wellington Harbour. At midday, under the protection of HMS Leander and HMAS Canberra, the ships slipped quietly out into Cook Strait, where they were joined by the Andes and HMAS Australia from Lyttelton.

The convoy, now complete, formed up in two divisions led by the Canberra and Australia, with Leander as whipper-in, and set a course for Sydney. That harbour was not entered, but a rendezvous was made off the coast with the Queen Mary and Mauretania, carrying Australian troops. Later the Empress of Canada came up when the convoy, en route for Fremantle, was passing through Bass Strait.

Both the sea and the troops were a little unsettled at first, but by the time the ships anchored off Fremantle on 10 May nearly everyone had found his sea legs and was in good shape for shore leave.

Leave to Perth was granted from 11 a.m. to midnight and the people of Western

Australia gave the visitors a royal welcome. Transport, refreshment centres, and guides had been arranged, but for the majority it was a rollicking riotous time, with the police turning a tolerant and myopic eye on the spectacle.

It was necessary to make a premature departure from Fremantle and the convoy sailed at midday on 12 May, with many of the guests slowly recovering from West Australian hospitality. Ceylon was the next likely port of call and the troops settled down to a long voyage through the tropics. Boat drill, training, lectures, entertainments, and gambling in secluded corners filled the time between queueing for meals and passing on the latest rumours. In this last pastime the troops were helped materially by the German radio, which maintained a very sympathetic interest in the voyage.

There was, however, enough bad news over the English radio to restrain the most optimistic. On the night of 9-10 May the Germans invaded Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg; then Rotterdam was destroyed and France invaded.

In anticipation of leave at Ceylon, paybooks were filled in to allow the men off the transports as soon as possible after arriving at that port. At 10 p.m. on the night of 15 May, while everyone was contemplating the purchase of ivory elephants and other souvenirs to send home, the convoy's course was altered. Nobody was aware of the change of direction till the morning, when the sun unaccountably rose on the wrong side of the ship. No official announcement was made concerning this extraordinary event, but the best and most reliable rumours said that Cape Town would be the next stop en route for England.

The New Zealand Government was aware of the possible diversion before the transports sailed. The attitude of Italy, with submarines in the Red Sea and her fleet ready to steam out from its Mediterranean bases, dictated a policy of caution that was amply vindicated when, on 10 June, Mussolini declared war and invaded France.

Tentative arrangements had been made for producing a ship's magazine to commemorate the voyage, and when the change in destination was confirmed it was decided to rush the copy and have the material ready to be printed at Cape Town. A competition was held for a pictorial cover and the two winning entries, a sketch of the ship by CSM Sexton ¹⁶ and a Maori design by Private Johnny Adams, ¹⁷ a Norfolk

Islander in 15 Platoon, were combined. No suitable title came forward but, in recognition of the continuous flow of rumours permeating the ship, the magazine was called The Grapevine. The Cape Times generously rushed the job through at cost price and, with sales at sixpence a copy, a profit of £10 was handed into regimental funds.

Because her Chinese crew had declined to proceed beyond Cape Town into the less peaceful Atlantic, the troops on the Empress of Japan had to be distributed among the remaining troopships. Preparations for the transfer were completed by the time the convoy reached Cape Town early in the morning of the 26th. The 21st Battalion moved into the Empress of Britain and bedded down along the enclosed promenade deck and in the main lounge. Thick mattresses ensured comfort and later, in the heat of the tropics, it was realised that the coolest part of the ship had been secured. The Empress at that time still had her elaborate peacetime fittings and appointments, including a variety of shops, all of which were open for business. In addition there was access twice weekly to her marble swimming baths, complete with roomy and pleasant dressing quarters. But perhaps the greatest luxury of all were the messing arrangements. There was no queueing for meals, and everybody sat at small tables covered with snow-white cloths and ate meals served on the ship's white crockery and brought to them by the ship's waiters. The battalion never travelled under such conditions again.

The citizens of Cape Town rubbed their eyes when the mist lifted off the harbour on the morning of Sunday 26 May. The naval authorities were the only people aware of the arriving transports and the secret had been well kept. The South African Women's Auxiliary Service sprang quickly into action and took charge of hospitality arrangements. South Africa's mixed population was known to be not entirely pro-British, and a security lecture to the troops stressing the presence of fifth columnists in Cape Town induced at first a cautious response to the many car owners offering sightseeing trips and invitations to their homes.

Leave was granted on three of the four days the transports were in Cape Town and everybody was overwhelmed by the kindness and hospitality of the people. With between six and seven thousand troops on shore leave, it was Fremantle over again. Hotels ran out of stocks and beer wagons rushing fresh supplies were unloaded in the streets by Australian and New Zealand troops. Traffic was dislocated, hotels

closed early, and many shops barricaded their windows. The Cape Town police force were as efficiently unobtrusive as their West Australian counterparts. Nevertheless they must have heaved a sigh of relief when the transports sailed again on the morning of 31 May.

The Cumberland replaced HMAS Australia at this point and Freetown was made without incident on the morning of 7 June. The days were growing steadily warmer, but in spite of the somewhat crowded conditions 21 Battalion managed an hour's route march in boots on deck each day, as well as organised sports and general training.

There was no leave at Freetown, and while the ships loaded water and fuel, the troops passed the time looking at the amazing collection of shipping concentrated inside the harbour boom. There were warships, aircraft carriers, and merchantmen of all sizes and nationality awaiting convoy.

Native canoes provided another form of entertainment. They clustered around the ships in dozens offering a varied collection of wares, which included bright scarves, breadfruit, mangoes, coconuts, monkeys, snakes, and little coloured baskets. The troops had very little money to trade with, but the natives overcame the difficulty by accepting oddments of clothing and packets of cigarettes in exchange for their wares. Shirts and deck shoes were good mediums of barter and two monkeys were acquired in this way. The transaction was not entirely successful, for the monkeys were put ashore before departure and there was still the orderly-room fine for shortage in equipment to be met.

Nobody was sorry to leave Freetown the following afternoon. It was steaming hot at anchor and the local breed of mosquitoes appreciated the change of diet offered them. There were 17 cases of malaria on the Empress of Britain. She was the last ship to leave the harbour, and the last person to wave farewell was a white woman in a launch. As the Empress took up her position, a plane overhead blinked in morse 'Best of luck'. Perhaps the pilot was thinking of what an enemy bomber could do to such a target if the aircraft carrier Hermes had not joined the convoy.

The convoy was to pass through dangerous waters now and blackout precautions were intensified. Four Vickers guns had been borrowed from the Australians and mounted for anti-aircraft defence; submarine lookouts were posted, and measures to be taken against possible incendiary bombs and gas were explained to the troops.

The entry of Italy into the war was known on the afternoon of 10 June, and when on the 14th the escort was augmented by HMS Hood, the aircraft carrier Argus, and four destroyers, there were thoughtful faces in 21 Battalion. The thoughtful ones received large reinforcements next day when the convoy passed floating wreckage strewn over the water— paper, barrels, empty lifeboats and rafts. Later a large fire that had been an oil tanker was seen on the horizon, and finally the ship shuddered violently from the explosion of a depth-charge dropped by one of the warships. Playing at soldiers was over from that moment.

The 17,000-mile journey was nearly ended, safely and uneventfully thanks to the Royal Navy and the RAF. The Irish coast was sighted at daybreak on the morning of the 16th and towards midday the convoy moved into the Firth of Clyde, finally coming to anchor at Gourock. The mist lifted and the neat, chequered pattern of the Scottish countryside disclosed itself to the sea-weary eyes of the men of 21 Battalion.

A fortnight before the convoy made port on the western coast another and larger body of troops had landed in the south-east of England. It was the British Expeditionary Force returned via Dunkirk, carrying only its rifles and its fighting spirit. An almost unbelieveable three weeks of catastrophe had eliminated France as a fighting force; in another week she was not even an ally, so the arrival of the New Zealanders and Australians could hardly have been more opportune. The peaked hat of the Kiwi and the equally characteristic head-dress of the Aussie, both well remembered from the previous war, were morale builders of the highest order—out of all proportion to the material help the Dominion troops would have been able to give had the expected German landing eventuated.

The afternoon was spent in listening to addresses of welcome delivered over the ship's loudspeaker by the GOC Scottish Command on behalf of the King; by Brigadier Falla, ¹⁸ representing the High Commissioner for New Zealand; and by Brigadier Miles, ¹⁹ speaking for the GOC 2 New Zealand Division. The King's message read:

To the Officers commanding the Australian and New Zealand contingents—A few months ago we sent a few words of welcome to the first echelons of the 2nd Australian and New Zealand Expeditionary Force when they disembarked in the Middle East. It has fallen to your lot to take your place alongside us. You find us in the forefront of the battle. To all I give a warm welcome, knowing the stern purpose that brings you from your distant homes. I send best wishes and look forward to seeing you soon.

GEORGE R.I.

When not preparing to disembark, the troops lined every point of vantage from the sun deck to the mastheads admiring the heather-covered hillsides and the quaint little cottages scattered over them. Lights out at nine o'clock with the sun still shining was a novelty not appreciated.

Disembarkation was spread over three days, 21 Battalion's turn coming on the 19th, when it entrained for Aldershot. Official news of the Anzacs' arrival was not released until they were safely in camp in the south of England, but they themselves exuberantly announced their own presence as they sang their way through Scotland and England.

It was a long but interesting journey after six and a half weeks at sea. While daylight lasted there were cheers and handshakes, gifts of sandwiches, rolls, pies, tea, coffee, and chocolate at every stopping place; there was the 'thumbs-up' greeting to passers by and the waving to and from girls, boys, and old men among the crops in the patchwork fields. The most blasé Kiwi felt he was among his own kith and kin. If there was any 'see the conquering hero comes' feeling engendered by the continuous welcome, however, it was dissipated when the unit detrained in the morning at North Camp, a few miles from Aldershot. Led by a band they marched, fully laden, five miles to their camp at Mytchett. The route was through a closely settled civilian locality and the coolness of their reception was very deflating indeed. Later they realised that the Aldershot area had seen troops coming and going for generations and that they were just another intake to Mytchett. When they reached the military area, however, they were welcomed with smiles, cheers, hand waving, and the thumbs-up sign from steel-helmeted British soldiers, and everybody felt better.

The troop trains continued to arrive until Friday the 21st, when 5 Infantry Brigade had assembled in one area for the first time in its short history.

Mytchett Camp was a new experience for men used to huts and tents in orderly array. Certainly there were tents, thousands of them, but pitched with an eye to safety from the air. They were scattered around under trees, and if there was a straight row it was only because there was a straight row of trees to shelter beneath. Tents in the open were pitched haphazardly around and camouflaged to merge with the brown pine needles or the green grass. Fifth Brigade and divisional details had to themselves three wide, tree-covered ridges and two broad valleys crossed by tree-lined lanes and divided into tree-lined paddocks.

Several miles away other arms were likewise dispersed, and a visit to every unit of the Second Echelon involved a journey of nearly fifty miles. Eight men to a bell tent with a wooden floor was thought by some to be rather cramped, but old diggers who remembered the Suez Canal zone after Gallipoli told tales of 24 to a tent, a man to each seam and the last two unable to lie down until the flaps were drawn—and no wooden floor. It was no use arguing with experts; but a few months later the same men were sleeping tentless in Greece and Crete. Until 24 June, when four days' disembarkation leave began, the time was spent in completing the camp facilities. Marquees were erected, sanitary and ablution arrangements organised, and slit trenches, though ill planned and badly sited, were dug. These holes in the ground were looked on with ill-concealed disdain until an air-raid warning in the early hours of the first night in camp had everybody roused and ready to move if necessary. It was not necessary that night; but at each company orderly room in the morning there was a queue of men to report the loss of steel helmets and request a new issue.

Londoners, still shaken by the defeat in France and the Dunkirk evacuation, looked with puzzled faces at the influx of soldiers wearing peaked hats and bright puggarees. Obviously they were strangers by the way they stood at street corners staring at such everyday things as London Bridge and Nelson's Monument, and obviously they were civilised by the way they made periodic visits to the nearest hotel. The older generation of Londoner was quick to recognise the return of the New Zealander. Organised and private hospitality were immediate and

overwhelming. If anybody got lost the London policeman was ready to oblige, and if the soldier found the local ales a trifle heavy, that was all right with him too.

Training began in earnest after London leave and anti-gas



GREECE

drill took a prominent part in the day's syllabus, for it was generally thought that gas would be one of the German invasion weapons. To show the troops that gas, though invisible, was real, each man was first taken through the gas chamber with his mask adjusted and later marched through without it. Tear gas was used for the demonstration and it was extremely convincing. A respirator was not just something you put on by numbers any more.

Training gear began to arrive and with it British instructors to explain the new techniques. Fearsome beings these Tommy officers and NCOs were supposed to be—tigers on saluting and devils for discipline—but, like most unknown terrors, they were not so bad when you got to know them. At first equipment was on a very meagre scale, as England was almost denuded of weapons and the High Command was counting the hours while the first convoys of American arms crossed the Atlantic. This position altered as the weeks went by and the flood of American arms, together with the rising tide of local output, flowed into every front-line battalion and every Home Guard unit. But all that was beyond the ken of the private soldier. His trouble was to get used to the English scale of rations, and until the battalion cooks learned how to get the utmost out of it, the NAAFI had many a hungry New Zealand

customer.

Perhaps the biggest uplift to morale was given by the issue of battle dress in the first week in July. The ill-matched uniforms, especially the narrow 'snake-proof' trousers, were thankfully discarded in favour of the easy fitting, neat, and comfortable battle dress. This in turn led to the worsted 'New Zealand' shoulder flash, a recognition device introduced by the Canadians. The characteristic peaked hat was not worn with battle dress and, except for the small badge on the cap, the New Zealanders' individuality was largely lost. It was completely obliterated on manoeuvres when the steel helmet replaced the cloth cap, but with the battle dress and the shoulder flash the troops were supremely content.

Fifth Brigade was inspected at different times in those first weeks by high civil and military dignitaries, including Mr. W. J. Jordan, New Zealand High Commissioner, and Mr. Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for War, but an event which will always be remembered was the visit of King George VI on 6 July. The King inspected the various units as they went about their training, which was carried out in the normal manner in spite of a persistent drizzle. After lunch with General Freyberg and a hundred officers from all arms and of all ranks, His Majesty met 21 Battalion route-marching. The weather had cleared in the afternoon and the King, standing on the side of a country lane, took the salute in an informal march past. On the opposite side a small group of women and children had gathered. One woman with a basket on her arm leaned unconcernedly on the handle bars of her bicycle as the troops passed, while a few miles away an enemy bomber could be heard dropping his unpleasant cargo. The march past was an unpretentious ceremony but a stirring one.

The separation of the First and Second Echelons had for the time being prevented the formation of the New Zealand Division in the Middle East, but plans had been made to use the Second Echelon to meet the expected invasion. The force was accordingly organised as a small division in three groups:

A covering force commanded by Brigadier Miles, comprising C Squadron Divisional Cavalry, a machine-gun company, and an improvised infantry battalion formed from anti-tank personnel.

5 Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier Hargest. A smaller mixed brigade under

Brigadier Barrowclough, made up of 28 (Maori) Battalion and a composite battalion formed from the reinforcement companies of each unit, including those intended for the First Echelon.

On 9 July, therefore, E Company 21 Battalion marched out to Dogmersfield and became part of the newly raised 29 Battalion of the mixed brigade. Major R. W. Harding, OC C Company, became second-in-command to Lieutenant-Colonel McNaught, ²⁰ CO 29 Battalion. Captain Reanney, ²¹ second-in-command of E Company, replaced Captain Tongue as OC of that company, and Tongue replaced Major Harding as OC C Company. E Company rejoined the battalion in Egypt and sailed to Greece.

In the role allotted to the force the emphasis was on mobility, and the balance of July was spent in day and night practice moves by transport, full-scale tactical exercises, and toughening-up marches.

Invasion was in the air. The Germans were concentrating barges and motor boats along the French coast and their air force was probing and testing the English defences. Air-raid warnings became more and more frequent, until they were almost continuous as the opening phases of the Battle of Britain were fought over the Channel. The battalion area escaped attention from bombers until 8 August, when a lone raider dropped a bomb among the slit trenches at the end of the camp. After that individual trenches were dug close to the tents.

Although the leave situation and quotas changed from time to time, there were always some troops in London, and the need for a residential club was met by the acquisition of the Italian Fascist headquarters building in Charing Cross Road. It was an all-ranks club with beer licence, billiard rooms, washrooms, storage rooms, and showers. Most of the Italian inscriptions, all plaques and decorations were taken down, but a bronze profile of Mussolini was so firmly fixed that the wall would have had to have been removed to displace it. The difficulty was surmounted by covering Mussolini with a large framed portrait of the Rt. Hon. Peter Fraser. A full-sized statue of Julius Caesar was also for the same reason left to adorn the balcony. Those who had studied him in their schooldays said he was not a bad sort of bloke and that, had he been born a couple of thousand years later, he might have been on our side because he did not like Germans either.

The final training exercise was scheduled to begin on 3 August and took the form of a 100-mile route march to be completed in six days. Because of the possibility of air attack the battalion marched by platoons at 50-yard intervals, and at the end of each day's march was picked up and taken by transport to the bivouac area, where the company trucks delivered the meals, valises, and blanket rolls.

It was the height of the English summer, and the route through the southern counties lay along tree-lined roads with villages every few miles. The consistent hospitality of the English people was shrewdly taken advantage of during this march, for whenever a village church spire indicated a settled area ahead the troops lustily announced their coming with a full-throated rendering of 'Maori Battalion' or 'We are the Boys from Way Down Under'. A wayside inn always produced agonised renderings of 'How dry we are'. The pathos in the final line, 'God only knows how dry we are', would have brought tears to the eyes of a bronze statue. It was seldom indeed that the vocal efforts failed to fill the village street with people offering fruit, drinks, and cakes. There was a particularly lucky break at the end of the fourth day near Partridge Green, after 16 miles of hard going, mostly over concrete-slabbed road and topped off by a long hill. The halt was in front of a private hospital and it was the first occasion that the transport was late in arriving, but the time was easily filled in. Within very few minutes the only people in the hospital were the bedridden patients; sisters, nurses, garden boys, walking patients, and later the Matron carried tea, biscuits, cakes and fruit to the lucky platoons nearby. Finally the Matron produced sufficient cigarettes to go round one company.

The bivouac areas on this march were at Pheasants' Copse, West Grimstead Park, Wych Cross, Partridge Green and Whiteways Lodge, and on each day the troops saw something of rural England prepared for invasion. Paddocks were strewn with old cars, trucks and carts, and any other obstacle that would make air landing hazardous; barbed-wire barricades were handily placed along the roads and tank traps ready for immediate use; every road junction was mined for demolition, with troops or Home Guard standing by—any day might see the invasion.

The exercise ended at Petworth, where the battalion embussed for Mytchett with 84 miles of marching behind it, and a long trail of empty inns waiting replenishment from their brewers. Seven days' leave followed the return to camp.

Troops with a free rail warrant and a comforting paybook credit set out for destinations ranging from the north of Scotland to the south of England; some even unfolded well enough a tale of pining relations in Ireland to manage a trip across the Irish Sea.

Those with lean paybook balances had to do some high financing to get away, for no one was given leave unless he had a credit of £3 IOS. to show. This regulation was a result of the first four days' London leave. With a touching regard for odd soldiers who might run short of cash, an auxiliary pay office had been opened in London, but the word soon got about that Father Christmas was in town and a rush set in to get some easy money.

With ammunition and equipment now up to war establishment, training emphasis was on mobility, anti-gas precautions, and passive air defence. Convoy organisation was tested in frequent practice moves by transport, as well as by exercises in embussing and debussing by day and by night.

As August drew to an end a close watch was kept on the German preparations for invasion. Everything pointed to Dover as the first objective. Troops and shipping continued to concentrate in the Pas de Calais area; two mountain divisions with mules, presumably to scale the Folkestone cliffs, were located, and powerful long-range batteries to command the Channel came into existence daily. If the attempt was to be made it would have to be in September, for the October equinoctial gales would preclude any small-boat crossing of the Channel.

It was an exceedingly pleased Second Echelon that learned on 3 September that it was fit for front-line duty and would probably move to the critical area around Dover. The Prime Minister, Mr. Churchill, addressed them the next day in a characteristic speech:

Soldiers of New Zealand, in the name of the British Government I wish to tell you how very glad we are to have had you with us during these last four months, so critical for our island home and so fateful in the history of the British Empire. When you came our forces in this island were by no means as strong as they are today. When you first came a comparatively small army of the enemy might have wrought much havoc before they had been finished off. But now we have very powerful

armies and if, as some think, that bad man is inclined to try his venture, we feel sure we shall give a good account of ourselves. And again I say we are very glad that troops from New Zealand would bear their part in the defence of this ancient State and island—the heart of the Empire, the cradle and the citadel of free institutions throughout the world.

We in this island are now bearing the accumulated weight of the malice and tyranny of the enemy. We do not feel unequal to it. We are sure we shall prove ourselves not unequal to the task of once again being the champion and the liberator of Europe. We do not feel lonely when the sons of our great Dominions overseas —lands where they breed the finest fighting races—come back here or come to other parts of the British Empire, there to bear their parts in this great contention. I wish you well. I wish you great good luck. May God protect you. I am sure you will crown the name of New Zealand with honours, with a lustre which will not fade as the years pass by. Of all the wars we have ever fought, none has been more honourable, more righteous than this. None has been more unsought by us. In none has greater weight been thrown upon us. From none shall we emerge with a greater sense of duty done. May fortune rest upon your arms. May you return home with victory to your credit, having written pages into the annals of the Imperial Army which will be turned over by future generations whenever they wish to find a model for military conduct.

New Zealanders are not very good at cheering, but they cheered that day.

Together with other troops massing on the south-east coast, the 2 NZEF (UK), with 8 (British) Royal Tank Regiment under command, was ordered to move closer to the coast and come under the command of 12 Corps in a counter-offensive role. The 21st Battalion moved by bus column on 5 September to a bivouac area in King's Wood, south-east of Maidstone, and was placed on short warning.

The task allotted to 5 Brigade was to counter-attack enemy forces moving on Dover from either the direction of Postling in the south or Canterbury in the north. To this end very thorough reconnaissances of the Dover area were made daily by the responsible officers, while the rest of the battalion watched the fierce combats overhead by day and listened to the noise of anti-aircraft guns by night. The weather, until then perfect, broke a few days later and the battalion, with its task

allotted, moved into billets in Leeds village. This was a new and not unwelcome experience, in spite of daily excursions and alarms. Battalion officers were quartered at Burgess Hall (Battalion Headquarters) and other ranks were billeted with the local residents in the village; Headquarters Company was in barns at the foot of the village; A and B Companies were at Langly close by; D Company was at Bleak House, some three miles distant; C Company, detached as support troops to 8 RTR, was at Eastwell Park and attached for rations only, with sleeping quarters in the stone towers at the entrance to the park.

Route marches to familiarise the troops with the countryside were interspersed with brigade exercises. There was London leave for 10 per cent, and regular weekend leave to Canterbury, Maidstone, and other nearby centres. At Maidstone on 17 September the battalion sustained its first casualties when a bomb landed close to a crowded leave bus. Two men were slightly wounded; the others escaped injury.

By the end of September it was thought that the invasion season was over, for winter was noticeably at hand. Football grounds were marked out and Rugby matches were played daily. They commenced at platoon level and gradually worked up to inter-battalion matches. It was not one of 21 Battalion's best football periods for, after drawing with 22 Battalion, it lost to 23 Battalion and 28 (Maori) Battalion. A one-point win was secured over the Artillery team and a convincing victory gained over a combined ASC and Divisional Headquarters team.

When all danger of invasion was thought to be over, there was an alarm in the early hours of 25 October. At 3 a.m. carriers were heard dashing along the main street shortly after a warning order to stand to was issued. Troops billeted with private families were wakened by runners and everybody warned to be ready to move by 8 a.m. This undoubtedly was it. The troops were fed at 5 a.m. and within two hours the brigade was ready to move off. At 8 a.m. it was learned that it had been an exercise to ascertain the time it would take to move the brigade without prior warning. It is not necessary to describe the men's feelings and remarks—they were unprintable anyhow.

The battalion went into winter billets at Camberley on 4 November, after two months in the field as part of Britain's defence force. The accommodation consisted of a number of vacated civilian houses less than a mile from the town, with heated

and lighted rooms available for reading, writing, and indoor recreation.

Facilities for free attendance at technical, commercial, language, and art classes at civilian colleges and night schools were also available. Owing to the lack of parade grounds, training took the form of thrice-weekly route marches and intensified weapon training. There were, in addition, range practices and shoots with Thompson sub-machine guns, anti-tank rifles, and mortars. It was an enjoyable period, with one melancholy exception when RSM Ray Barnes died of pneumonia on 9 November, the first death in the battalion. WO I Dave Sweeney ²² was appointed to the vacancy.

Night and weekend leave, temporarily suspended during the move to Camberley, was restored and with London only forty miles away quotas were always filled. Entertainment in Camberley was also varied and plentiful—there were inns, particularly the Victoria with its special singing hall, and the Cambridge, where Sandhurst officer cadets were quite swamped by other rank Kiwis, to the former's patent disgust. There were regular ENSA shows, dances, and private hospitality.

Although in those weeks it was far more dangerous to be a civilian in London than a soldier out of it, there were always plenty of applicants for weekend leave to the city. Air raids were at their height and London was burning, but the fact did not deter the troops. The reason became apparent by degrees. Owing to public commendation of the action of some men in helping the city fire-workers to rescue people from blazing buildings, the shrewd soldier saw the best excuse in his army career to overstay leave and get away with it. The number of people allegedly rescued rose steadily, while the AWL list grew to such proportions that Colonel Macky had to point out firmly that it was not the battalion's duty to do this noble work but to be clear of the city and back in camp by the appointed hour.

During the period the battalion was in billets at Camberley, the Commander-in-Chief Home Forces visited the area and garaged his car for the night adjacent to the quartermaster's stores. In the morning the stately Rolls-Royce had lost something of its stateliness for it was minus radiator cap and C-in-C's pennant. Widespread inquiries were instituted with no result, but suspicion naturally pointed to the Q staff, who were generally alleged to be thieves by both birth and instinct, otherwise they would not be quarter blokes. After some vicissitudes and changes in ownership, the

pennant now adorns the mantlepiece of a farmhouse in North Auckland.

Whispers of another early move involving travel by sea put new vim into training, and hitherto unheard of reasons for the granting of leave were hopefully submitted to Battalion Headquarters. By the middle of November it was generally known that 5 Brigade was going to join the First and Third Echelons in Egypt, and on 26 November orders for embarkation were received. Two days later the road party with all vehicles marched out for embarkation at Liverpool, followed the next day by the carriers. A march past for the Governor-General designate, Sir Cyril Newall, and for the Duke of Gloucester on the 9th and 11th respectively completed the brigade's training. Four days' embarkation leave commenced on 12 December with 50 per cent away at the one time. Twenty-eight were AWL from the first draft and 23 from the second, but their pay, accumulated during the nine weeks' voyage to the Middle East, helped to meet the fines inflicted, and they maintained that the extra days had been worth the cost.

The first snow fell on the evening of 23 December and it was in a typical English winter setting that the battalion celebrated Christmas Day. Even the enemy raiders refrained from marring the whiteness with black bomb craters. Many of the men accepted hospitality from local residents, others went to London and dined at the Forces Club, while those who had to remain in camp ate turkey served by the officers and NCOs, followed by a bottle of beer for each man and a rum issue in the afternoon. The last week of 1940, the last week of 21 Battalion's stay in England, was filled with preparations for embarkation.

¹ Lt-Col N. L. Macky, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 20 Feb 1891; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde 1915-19 (Capt 1918); CO 21 Bn 12 Jan 1940-17 May 1941.

² Lt-Col E. A. Harding, MC; Dargaville; born Dargaville, 4 Dec 1893; farmer; NZ Rifle Bde 1915-19 (OC 5 (Res) Bn); actg CO 21 Bn 20 Apr-17 May 1941; 1 North Auckland Bn.

³ Maj R. R. MacGregor, ED, m.i.d.; Rotorua; born Wellington, 22 Jun 1893; company director; Wgtn Mtd Rifles 1914-19.

- ⁴ Lt-Col C. A. Le Lievre; Whakatane; born Akaroa, 16 Nov 1891; farmer; Wgtn Regt 1915-19; p.w. Apr 1941.
- ⁵ Brig R. W. Harding, DSO, MM, ED; Kirikopuni, North Auckland; born Dargaville, 29 Feb 1896; farmer; Auck Regt 1916-19; CO 21 Bn 10 May-12 Jun 1942, 18 Jul 1942-30 Apr 1943, 14 May-4 Jun 1943; comd 5 Bde 30 Apr-14 May 1943, 4 Jun-23 Aug 1943; twice wounded.
- ⁶ Maj G. J. Howcroft, MC; Wellington; born London, 14 Sep 1896; insurance agent; BM 1 Bde Gp; BM Bay of Islands Fortress; Camp Commandant Ngarua-wahia.
- ⁷ Lt-Col A. C. Trousdale, MC; Howick, Auckland; born Canada, 20 Oct 1895; estate agent; comd 1 Bn North Auckland Regt Aug 1942-Jul 1943; CO 21 Bn 21 Jun-9 Jul 1944; comd Freyberg Wing, 2 NZEF PW Repat Unit (UK) 1944-45; wounded 22 Nov 1941.
- ⁸ Maj F. A. Sadler; Auckland; born Dunedin, 11 Feb 1902; clerk; wounded 27 May 1941.
- ⁹ Capt W. M. Tongue, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 22 Jun 1908; funeral director; p.w. 29 Nov 1941.
- ¹⁰ Maj J. V. M. Cauty, MM; Suva; born Wellington, 24 Jul 1896; farmer; NZ Rifle Bde 1914-19; Commandant 3 NZ Div Jungle Training School, New Caledonia.
- ¹¹ Maj M. T. S. Dew; Wellington; born Nelson, 27 Apr 1916; Regular soldier; 2 i/c 24 Bn Dec 1943-Jan 1944.
- ¹² Brig J. Hargest, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; born Gore, 4 Sep 1891; farmer; Member of Parliament 1931-44; Otago Mounted Rifles, 1914-20 (CO 2 Bn, Otago Regt); comd 5 Bde Jan 1940-Nov 1941; p.w. Sidi Azeiz27 Nov 1941; escaped Mar 1943; killed in action, France, 12 Aug 1944.
- ¹³ WO I R. S. Barnes; born NZ 21 Aug 1908; Regular soldier; died on active

service 9 Nov 1940.

- ¹⁴ Maj R. A. Marshall-Inman; Tokoroa; born Te Mata, 9 May 1914; linesman; wounded 27 Jun 1942.
- ¹⁵ Pte M. P. Ryan; Wellington; born Australia, 17 Mar 1914; blacksmith' striker.
- ¹⁶ Capt V. R. Sexton, m.i.d.; born NZ 16 Jun 1914; Regular soldier; wounded 22 Jul 1942; died 9 Jan 1948.
- ¹⁷ Pte J. R. Adams; Auckland; born NZ 1 Aug 1908; wood carver and driver; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.
- ¹⁸ Brig N. S. Falla, CMG, DSO, m.i.d.; born Westport, 3 May 1883; managing director Union Steamship Coy; NZ Fd Arty 1914-19 (Lt-Col comd 2 and 3 NZ FA Bdes); comd 2 NZEF Base, Feb 1940-Jun 1941; NZ repve on Ministry of Transport, London, 1941-45; died 6 Nov 1945.
- ¹⁹ Brig R. Miles, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; born Springston, 10 Dec 1892; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1914-19 (Bty Comd and BM); CRA 2 NZ Div 1940-41; comd 2 NZEF (UK) 1940; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped Mar 1943; died in Spain 20 Oct 1943.
- ²⁰ Lt-Col G. J. McNaught, DSO, ED; New Plymouth; born Wanganui, 26 Nov 1896; schoolmaster; NZ MG Corps 1916-19 (2 Lt 1919); CO 29 Bn (UK) Jun 1940-Mar 1941; 25 Bn Sep-Dec 1941; wounded 23 Nov 1941; headmaster New Plymouth Boys' High School.
- ²¹ Maj L. W. Reanney; Auckland; born England, 5 Jun 1905; haulage contractor; GSO 3 Auckland Fortress HQ, Jan 1942-Aug 1943; GSO 2 Northern Military District, Aug 1943-Feb 1946.
- ²² Capt D. M. Sweeney; Upper Hutt; born Waipukurau, 20 Jul 1913; Regular soldier.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 2 — CAMBERLEY TO ATHENS

CHAPTER 2 Camberley to Athens

The new year opened with the battalion cleaning billets in preparation for departure and trying to fight off a feeling of lassitude which under different circumstances might have been a slight hangover after the New Year celebrations. On this occasion it was the first waves of an influenza epidemic. A few men running really high temperatures were sent to hospital and about seventy others too ill to march were taken by bus to the station. The battalion marched out of Camberley at 3.15 a.m. on 3 January and entrained at Farnborough. The train was two hours late, the carriages were unheated, and everybody was extremely cold and miserable. At the same time every man was glad to be moving out, not because he was tired of England but because he was tired of inactivity. There was fighting in Egypt, and men who were civilians when the Second Echelon left New Zealand were now soldiers in the Western Desert. The feelings of 21 Battalion and, for that matter, of the whole of 5 Brigade may be judged by the ironical name of the troopship magazine— The Blitz Tourist.

The troop train's destination was Newport, in Wales, and when that port was reached the battalion was hungry as well as part-frozen. It was also quite fed up with the scenery, which for the first part consisted of a snow-covered countryside and later of miles of coal trucks festooned with icicles.

It was learned at the docks that 21 Battalion was to embark on HMT J24, the Duchess of Bedford, a 20,000-ton liner capable of 20 knots. It was learned a little later that she was scheduled to carry 3040 troops, 25 per cent more than there was hammock space for. The troops embarked by midday and were accommodated in hammocks on D deck. Other units followed at intervals until there were nearly 2800 men aboard, packed almost as tight as sardines.

The last troops came on board the following day and on 5 January three tugs towed the Duchess into the stream, where she anchored until the 8th. The time was spent in fatigues and in stowing away as much gear as possible in an endeavour to make a little more room.

Six months earlier the conditions on the ship would have created a storm of

protest, but those six months had done something to the fiercely individual and comparatively undisciplined volunteers who made up 21 Battalion. They had talked with men who had faced the mechanised might of the German Army; they had seen acres of London burning and had known there were women and children buried under the flames; they had watched white chalk marks drawn across a blue sky and knew they were the vapour trails of planes engaged in mortal combat. They had listened to the wailings of air-raid warnings, the roar of anti-aircraft barrages, the scream of diving planes and the whistle of bombs. Now, instead of watching from the sideline, they were going to join the team. Well, if the Duchess of Bedford was the best the authorities could do, the voyage could not last for ever. And there would be plenty of room in the desert.

The Admiralty order that all men would sleep in their battle dress and never be without steel helmets and life-jackets while they were in dangerous waters sent many a glance at the dark, swirling water and at the sky, darker even than the water. Destruction could lurk in either place.

Three other transports accompanied the Duchess when, guarded by a plane and a destroyer, she wallowed out of Newport into the Irish Sea. It was soon realised that she had not been called the 'Drunken Duchess' for nothing. The following morning she was in Belfast Lough, where the convoy was assembling. Sunday, 12 January, was departure day, and 21 troopships carrying 42,000 troops, protected by a battleship, two cruisers, and twelve destroyers, with the RAF overhead, began the seven weeks' voyage to Egypt.

The first leg was north-west into the Atlantic, out of the reach of enemy planes but still within the range of submarines. Boat drill was practised with some zeal after a warning on the second day out to expect a U-boat attack. It did not eventuate, but those who were not lucky enough to have been allotted a place in the boats looked with extreme disfavour at the rafts which could be the next form of transport. Antisubmarine guards kept a very close watch.

Within a week the northern winter was left behind, and influenza, which had assumed almost epidemic proportions, complicated further by an outbreak of measles, began to abate. To make sure they did not recover too quickly, or so it appeared to the convalescents, everybody underwent another TAB inoculation. The

destroyers left the convoy on the 16th. In the late afternoon the Duchess of Bedford pulled out of position and hove to, and all troops paraded at muster stations. There had been a death in 22 Battalion. The soldier had been a member of the battalion's pipe band and was accorded a piper's funeral. On the silent ship heaving in the long Atlantic swell, the piper's lament, 'The Flowers of the Forest', was heard on every deck as the remains were committed to the sea. It was a profoundly moving ceremony.

Because of the crowded conditions there was very little training, but the time passed not unpleasantly with singsongs, quiz tests, impromptu and regular concerts, card tournaments, and housie—that was the official programme. The unofficial programme included two-up, chemin-de-fer, crown and anchor, poker, vingt-et-un, and banker with all its variations. Vocal raid warnings by shrewdly placed scouts precluded any serious attempt by authority to curb the illegal pastimes.

With the coming of hotter days, compulsory showers and feet bathing were routine events, though fresh water was a problem from the beginning of the voyage. For some reason the Duchess had started with 400 tons of water less than capacity and rationing was introduced within a few days of sailing. Clothes washing was permitted only at ten-day intervals.

It was not the malarial season but, with Freetown lying in the fever belt, the troops were issued with a garment known to quartermasters as KDORSL, 'Khaki drill other ranks shorts long'. They were weird garments designed for malarial stations and had the legs lengthened to about eight inches below the knee, buttons and button holes permitting the extensions to be fastened above the knee. When fastened below the knee they had all the characteristics of a female garment usually hung on the least conspicuous part of the family clothes-line. The troops disliked intensely these 'Bombay bloomers' and, when the malarial belt was passed, rapidly converted the shorts long into shorts short, to the detriment at the next kit inspection of their pay balances.

Freetown was reached on 25 January and the troops passed thankfully through the submarine net into the river port. Four days earlier a special message had been promulgated that the convoy was in the southern danger zone and that at least three enemy submarines were between them and Freetown. Just at the moment when safety seemed assured, for a few days at least, every anti-aircraft gun in the harbour opened fire. The unexpected noise brought all hands on deck, but happily only to follow an unidentified aircraft making off smartly up river. The port was no more inviting than it had been on the previous visit, and after four days of sweltering in the steaming heat, the threat of U-boats was contemplated almost with equanimity. Cape Town was only nine days away, and after all there was quite a strong escort.

It was actually an interesting period. There was a practice shoot en route by Australia and Enterprise, an exercise in signal communication by blasts on the ships' sirens, the laying of a protective smoke screen around the convoy, which may or may not have been for a good reason, the pressing and washing of drill uniforms ready for Cape Town leave, and finally an unexpected payday—for those not working off fines.

The Duchess of Bedford berthed in Table Bay at 10.30 a.m. on 8 February, and leave was granted until midnight for all ranks. There was no repetition of the disorderly horseplay that characterised the first visit.

It was a different battalion that filled the streets of Cape Town—an experienced, disciplined, and battleworthy battalion, heartily fed up with cramped quarters and pleased indeed to bask on sunny beaches and accept the unbounded civilian hospitality. Elaborate entertainment had been planned in preparation for the visit, all buses and trams were free, and friends made on the first visit were waiting with cars and open houses.

During the five days in port the routine was the same—a route march for a couple of hours in the morning and general leave in the afternoon. Even those unfortunates suffering for military sins and technically denied leave saw, after months of England in the blitz, well-lighted streets and cars with headlights full on, visited shops that sold sugar without ration cards, and ate in restaurants which served as much butter as was wanted.

The Duchess sailed on the afternoon of 12 February and four days later picked up a portion of the convoy that had gone on to Durban. While the convoy was heading towards the Equator for the second time on the voyage, sporting events

helped to break the monotony. There were boxing, a tug-of-war, skipping events—even a beauty contest. The Gulf of Aden was entered on 25 February and the following day the enemy-occupied coast of Somaliland could be seen on the port bow.

The passage through the Red Sea proved uneventful, though it was noted that the Duchess did more zigzagging than usual, and the opinion that Red Sea sharks were particularly voracious was not received with any enthusiasm. The voyage ended on 3 March at Port Tewfik. Here there was the usual congestion of shipping, the usual barrage of balloons; and behind the white, flat-roofed buildings of Suez barren brown hills, half hidden in a purple haze, were like a drop scene hiding the desert stage. It was a stage on which the battalion was not yet to play a part, for while it was waiting to land at the southern end of the Suez Canal, the New Zealand Division had commenced embarking for an unknown destination at Alexandria. The 21st Battalion's turn to land did not come until 8 March, the same day as 18 Battalion berthed at Piraeus in Greece.

After disembarking 21 Battalion entrained for Helwan, 26 miles south of Cairo, where the advanced party had prepared the camp and was ready with a hot meal and guides to conduct the men to their quarters. In the canteens were details of every unit in 4 and 6 Brigades, half defiant and half patronising. The third section of the 4th Reinforcements were also there, residents of a fortnight's standing, not quite able to speak of Cairo with bored familiarity, not quite accepted by the First and Third Echelons, and not quite sure how they stood with the touring 5 Brigade. Constraint was broken down by closing time and the newcomers had learnt to say 'ackers' instead of piastres, 'Ities' instead of 'Wops', and 'Wogs' instead of 'Gippos'. The older residents told of desert marches, the newcomers spoke of the blitz on London, and the reinforcements supplied the latest news from New Zealand. Rumours were taken apart and critically examined, but it. was generally agreed that two-thirds of the Division was on its way to Greece, although the reasons were far from clear; there were enough Italians in North Africa without picking on those the Greeks were so roughly handling in Albania. Overall strategy is not the province of the private soldier and the reasons for the Allied landing in Greece are too involved for this history to examine thoroughly. Briefly, the events leading to the Greek campaign are as follows.

On 28 October 1940 Italy, anticipating an easy victory, had marched into Greece from previously conquered Albania. By the winter of 1940-41 the Italians were no longer in Greece and were in grave danger of being thrown out of Albania. Great Britain, hoping to bring in both Turkey and Yugoslavia against the Axis, and because of a guarantee to render all possible aid should Greece be attacked, made what preparations she could to help. Air support, based on airfields in Greece, had been sent in November 1940, and arrangements were in train to garrison the island of Crete. Further help by way of an expeditionary force on the mainland was being negotiated. Meanwhile the German High Command had been assembling forces in Roumania and Bulgaria for the invasion of Russia. The Greek victories over the invading Italians compelled German intervention, and plans were made for the total occupation of Greece.

During the complicated political negotiations with the Balkan States that followed, Turkey decided to remain strictly neutral but to resist territorial infringement. Yugoslavia first declared for Hitler but, after a coup d'état wherein the Regent was overthrown, decided to resist if invaded.

During this period Britain and Greece had come to an agreement concerning the land forces that could be made available for Greece, in spite of increasing British commitments in the Middle East. The New Zealand Division, training in reserve in Egypt and incomplete until the arrival of 5 Brigade, was to form the vanguard of an Imperial force of three infantry divisions, an infantry brigade, an armoured brigade, some artillery and corps troops. The first elements of the Division sailed for Greece on 6 March.

To the men.of 21 Battalion, strolling—in some cases rather unsteadily—back to the lines at Helwan, it was clear that they had been side-tracked again. The Division had gone from Egypt, leaving behind a disappointed remnant of itself and a desert full of rumours.

The first morning was given over to settling in and getting bearings. There was 80 per cent leave to Cairo in the afternoon and, with a pocket full of ackers, the battalion set out to smell the characteristic three smells of an eastern town—refuse, human beings, and animals—and to see the sights of a city that for a second generation of New Zealand troops was again a soldiers' playground.

They were warned that the stay in Helwan might be short and to take advantage of whatever leave was going—entirely superfluous advice after a long, cramped sea voyage. Route marches and night training occupied most of the few days the unit was at Helwan.

On 14 March the troops were ordered to be ready to move within 48 hours. Stores from the Duchess of Bedford were slow in coming forward and a working party was sent down to Port Tewfik to expedite the unloading, but even with this extra help lorry-loads of equipment and gear were still arriving on the day of departure. The battalion's first sandstorm blew up the same day and gave some indication of what the First Echelon had endured during its twelve months in Egypt. There is nothing you can do about a sandstorm, short of wrapping a towel around your head and waiting for it to blow itself out. The flour-fine dust gets into your eyes, ears, nose and throat, it floats on your tea and covers your food; but when you are getting fit and preparing for a campaign you train in it just the same.

The battalion marched out of Helwan just before midnight on 16 March and slept for the rest of the night at the railway siding. Breakfast was sent out from camp and the troop train left at 6.20 a.m. for Amiriya transit camp, just outside Alexandria, some 140 miles away.

One camp in Egypt was very like another—a number of tents grouped around a cookhouse, generally the only permanent building—and in this respect Amiriya was a typical staging area. During the eight days the unit was located there, swimming in the Mediterranean some six miles distant was added to the hardening-up training syllabus, but a succession of sandstorms and cold winds increased the general impatience to be on the way. Amiriya was regarded as a very unpleasant locality with perhaps one pleasant memory. There was a church parade on Sunday the 23rd at which the singing was led by Captain Dutton ¹ on his piano-accordion.

The battalion entrained at Metras siding on the morning of 26 March en route for Alexandria and its third sea voyage. By 10.30 a.m. it was packed on the 3000-ton Greek ship Ionia. Battalion Headquarters and HQ Company were on the open deck and the remainder below, with even less room than on the Duchess of Bedford. At 4 p.m. the Ionia sailed and joined the other four ships of the convoy. There were three escorting destroyers.

The officers of 21 Battalion on 23 March 1941 were:

Battalion Headquarters

CO: Lt-Col N. L. Macky, MC

2 i/c: Maj E. A. Harding, MC

Adj: Capt G. A. Dutton

IO: Lt L. N. Wallace

MO: Capt O. S. Hetherington

Padre: Rev Fr W. Sheely

Headquarters Company

OC: Capt F. A. Sadler

1 PI: 2 Lt G. E. Moore

2 PI: Lt S. W. Parfitt

3 PI: 2 Lt F. E. Wilson

4 PI: Lt K. G. Dee

5 PI: Lt H. R. Anderson

QM and 6 PI: Capt G. H. Panckhurst

TO and 6 PI: Lt R. Penney

attached: Lt W. J. Daniel

A Company

OC: Capt R. B. McClymont

2 i/c: Lt E. G. Smith

2 Lt W. J. Southworth 2 Lt G. A. H. **Bullock-Douglas** 2 Lt W. J. G. Roach attached: Lt M. C. O'Neill Lt R. D. Campbell **B** Company OC: Maj C. A. Le Lievre 2 i/c: Capt W. Dickson Lt. A. A. Yeoman 2 Lt R. C. B. Finlayson 2 Lt H. G. Rose attached: 2 Lt M. M. Clark C Company OC: Capt W. M. Tongue 2 i/c: Capt H. M. McElroy 2 Lt W. K. Henton 2 Lt E. J. Waters

D Company

OC: Capt A. C. Trousdale, MC

attached: 2 Lt H. H. W. Smith

2 i/c: Capt W. R. C. Saul

2 Lt N. R. Flavell

2 Lt V. D. Phillips

2 Lt H. L. Aickin

attached: 2 Lt J. M. Stevenson Lt N. R. McKay

A special order issued by the GOC (Major-General Freyberg) at the beginning of March was read to all troops on board the transport. It read:

Before leaving Egypt for the battlefront I had planned to say a last word to you. I find that events have moved quickly and I am prevented from doing so. I therefore send this message to you in a sealed envelope to be opened on the transport after you have started on your journey.

In the course of the next few days we may be fighting in the defence of Greece, the birthplace of culture and learning. We shall be meeting our real enemy the Germans, who have set out with the avowed object of smashing the British Empire. It is clear therefore that wherever we fight them we shall be fighting not only for Greece, but also in defence of our own homes.

A word to you about your enemy. The German soldier is a brave fighter so do not underestimate the difficulties that face us. On the other hand, remember that this time he is fighting with difficult communications, in country where he cannot use his strong armoured forces to the best advantage. Further you should remember that your fathers of the 1st New Zealand Expeditionary Force defeated the Germans during the last war wherever they met them. I am certain that in this campaign in Greece the Germans will be meeting men who are fitter, stronger and better trained than they are. You can shoot and you can march long distances without fatigue. By your resolute shooting and sniping, and by fierce patrolling by night you can tame any enemy you may encounter.

A further word to you, many of whom, I realise, will be facing the ordeal of battle for the first time. Do not be caught unprepared. In war, conditions will always

be difficult, especially in the encounter battle; time will be against you, there will always be noise and confusion, orders may arrive late, nerves will be strained, you will be attacked from the air. All these factors and others must be expected on the field of battle. But you have been trained physically to endure long marches and fatigue and you must steel yourselves to overcome the ordeal of the modern battlefield.

One last word. You will be fighting in a foreign land, and the eyes of many nations will be upon you. The honour of New Zealand is in your keeping. It could not be in better hands.

The voyage to Greece took three days and included several changes of direction which even the most knowledgeable found hard to explain. With the Italian fleet ready to pounce from the safe shelter of the Adriatic upon Allied shipping in the Mediterranean, the most direct route to port seemed indicated. In point of fact the convoy had been turned back to leave the British Fleet unhampered by troopships for the action that was later known as the Battle of Cape Matapan. The Italians had been attempting to interfere with the flow of convoys to Greece but the British Fleet, aware of the movements of the Italian ships, succeeded in bringing them to battle, with very unfortunate results for the Italians.

By the evening of 28 March the convoy was in sight of the island of Crete and by 10 p.m. the next day, after threading its way through the islands of the Aegean, it was safely berthed at Piraeus. The troops were immediately disembarked and taken by train to the staging camp at Mount Hymettus on the outskirts of Athens.

Daylight disclosed the panorama of the Greek capital to the troops camped under the pine trees along the slopes of Mount Hymettus. The Acropolis, a rocky citadel rising above Athens, was the subject of much speculation, and there were sufficient learned men in the battalion to describe some of the ruined temples on its sides. Those with memories of first-year Greek art and literature lectures were able to explain that the topmost ruin was known as Parthenon, the temple of the city's patron goddess, Athena, and that the Turks during their occupation of Greece had used it as a powder magazine. It was a very good magazine until a shell exploded the powder and blew off the roof, leaving the ruin as it is today. Delving deep into an academic past overlaid with a year's soldiering, the learned ones went on to

explain that, because of the shape of the temple steps, a hat placed in the centre of a step would disappear from sight if you sat at the end. The general opinion was that it was not necessary to go to all that trouble to lose a hat—it could be done much more easily in camp.

The novelty of the second foreign country in two months made the troops more or less disregard a rumour that seemed too bad to be true. The 21st Battalion was not going up the line with 5 Brigade, it was said, but was to remain in Athens guarding aerodromes, docks, and dumps. There was a near riot the next morning, 1 April, when orders were received to move from Mount Hymettus to Kamatero village, some nine miles away. Company commanders lectured the men on the importance of anti-paratroop duties, which role curiously enough also embraced guarding docks and supply dumps. The men were assured that the rest of the Division was only digging and labouring and that there was no fighting in sight, but it was a disgruntled battalion, bitterly alluding to itself as the 'Greek Home Guard', that settled into the pleasant tree-studded area at Kamatero.

It was an interesting sight that met their jaundiced eyes on arrival at Kamatero. The previous day Colonel Macky and Major Harding had been to the village and had pegged out the company areas, explaining to the head man through an interpreter that the troops would be moving in next day. The place selected for the camp was easy, rolling country dotted with olive trees under which bearded wheat was still in the green stage. The villagers evidently had not taken the warning seriously, but when they saw that the troops had really come to stay they set to work to salvage what they could of their crops. Men, women, and children turned out with sickles and got to work in the national style, when reaping or hoeing, with their heads down and tails in the air. The whole area was cleared and the crop removed within an hour.

While 21 Battalion, under command of 80 Base Sub-Area, with the worst of ill graces was guarding docks and dumps at Athens and generally performing its duties as 'Home Guards', the line of battle was being drawn across north-west Greece. German divisions were poised in southern Bulgaria and Greek troops were holding the Metaxas line and the Bulgarian gateway at the Rupel Pass, where the Struma River breaks through the mountains. If, however, the Greek position was forced or, as actually happened, outflanked, the way was clear to Salonika and thence down the east coast. It was to counter this possibility, and with the knowledge that the

Allies would not have sufficient resources to defend the whole of Greece, that the line of defence, known as the Aliakmon line, was chosen. Commencing on the coast at Neon Elevtherokhorion and running from Veria roughly north-west along the mountains to the Yugoslav border, it was a strong position with good natural defences. Three passes—the Olympus Pass, behind the line on the coast, and the Veria and Edessa passes—carried the only good roads suitable for a mechanised army.

Until the full strength allotted to the defence of northern Greece arrived the New Zealand Division was to prepare defences in the coastal sector of the Aliakmon line. From Katerine there were two possible thrust lines south, one along the railway line through the Platamon tunnel on the coast, and the other over the western shoulder of Mount Olympus by way of the Olympus Pass. Fifth Brigade, less 21 Battalion, was preparing reserve defences at the Olympus Pass, while 4 and 6 Brigades occupied the divisional sector of the Aliakmon line. One rifle company from 6 Brigade was sent to the narrow plain between the under-features of the mountain and the sea at Platamon, with instructions to prepare a defensive position for one battalion.

On the Division's left flank 6 Australian Division, still arriving, was to cover the Veria Pass, with the Greeks holding the Edessa Pass on the Australians' left. In addition there was the British 1 Armoured Brigade, some artillery and anti-aircraft units in support, and a few line-of-communication troops. It was hoped that Yugoslavia would withstand any German attack and prevent an attack on Greece through the Monastir Gap.

Germany declared war on both Greece and Yugoslavia on the night of 5-6 April. The declaration was followed next night by an air raid on Piraeus where, with the Mortar Platoon under command, A Company of 21 Battalion was guarding various oil depots and wharves. Magnetic mines were dropped in the harbour and bombs on land targets. Most of the bombs landed in the sea, but a lucky one hit the end of the main wharf, setting fire to the wharf shed and an ammunition ship moored alongside. Between the shed and the ship were a number of railway trucks, one already loaded with ammunition. No. 9 Platoon was on the wharf. Second-Lieutenant Roach, ² with some of the platoon, assisted in carrying wounded men from the ship, while Lieutenant Smith ³ prevailed on the reluctant Greek fire brigade to fight the

shed fire. Another wave of bombers came over and Captain McClymont ⁴ ordered his men to take cover in the air-raid shelters.

Meanwhile Second-Lieutenant Southworth, ⁵ with 7 Platoon, was having a wonderful time. They were a mile away at the Shell and Socony oil installations, and the planes passed low overhead as they came in to make their attack. From various posts on the roof of the buildings the platoon fired drum after drum of Lewis-gun and magazine after magazine of Bren-gun ammunition, as well as every available rifle, into the invaders. No planes were brought down, but the fire must have been a nuisance because the buildings were straddled with bombs and the platoon was extremely lucky to escape without loss.

There were, however, hundreds of casualties among the Greeks living in the dock area, where bombs fired an area of poorly built houses. The ammunition ship with 400 tons of explosives blew up at 4 a.m., and six merchant ships, twenty lighters, and one tug were sunk or set on fire by the explosion. Another ship blew up shortly afterwards; among her cargo were new banknotes printed in England for the Turkish Government. Two hours later and a mile away the sky literally rained banknotes, and the troops plucked them out of the air as they floated down. A Company had two minor casualties in this raid, probably the first in the Greek campaign.

¹ Capt G. A. Dutton; Katikati; born Stirling, Otago, 27 Jun 1910; schoolteacher; p.w. 28 Nov 1941.

² Maj W. J. G. Roach, MC; Inglewood; born Levin, 12 Oct 1909; bank officer; 2 i/c 21 Bn Oct 1943-Mar 1944; wounded 22 Nov 1941.

³ Capt E. G. Smith; Lower Hutt; born New Plymouth, 28 Aug 1906; schoolteacher; p.w. Apr 1941.

⁴ Capt R. B. McClymont; born Rongotea, 30 Aug 1906; public servant; killed in action 22 May 1941.

⁵ Lt W.J. Southworth, m.i.d.; born Christchurch, 30 May 1918; school-



21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 3 — CAMPAIGN IN GREECE

CHAPTER 3 Campaign in Greece

The 21st Battalion chafed and fretted in Athens while the Germans made their first moves towards the conquest of Greece. From Hungary, Roumania, and Bulgaria enemy divisions were moving towards the frontier. The northern Greek border is a rugged alpine mass pierced by three main passes —the Struma River valley which crosses the Bulgarian border at the Rupel Pass, the Vardar River valley in the centre, and the Monastir Gap between the Vardar and Albania. In a poor and mountainous country, the campaign would be essentially a struggle for the many mountain passes and the few good roads that twisted through them.

Within two days the ill-prepared Yugoslav Army had been thrust aside and enemy advanced elements were reported to be in Monastir. If the invaders were permitted to debouch from the gap they would be able to cut off the Greek Army in Albania and at the same time outflank the Greek and British forces on the Aliakmon line.

The Greek forces in the Metaxas line covering Salonika were likewise in a critical position, although they were only expected to delay the enemy advance as long as possible. The main German effort was in the Rupel Pass area where the defenders, fighting desperately, were being slowly infiltrated. With his numbers and superior equipment the enemy would have broken through in time, but there was an easier way, again through Yugoslavia. A panzer division followed the Strumitsa River from Bulgaria through the Serbian mountains to Doiran and outflanked the Metaxas line. On 8 April, while the Germans were occupying Doiran, 21 Battalion ceased to be under command 80 Base Sub-Area and entrained for Katerine. Perhaps entrucked would be more accurate, for when the sprinkling of old soldier's saw what was waiting for them at Rouf siding, they muttered sardonically, 'Hommes 40, Chevaux 8'. Cattle trucks were the usual form of troop transport in France during the First World War. When it was found that the 'hommes 40' was only 'hommes 34', they pointed out how much things had improved since they were young soldiers.

The veterans' forebodings were realised to the full, for rain was falling, that light misty rain with no weight but great penetration, and the roofs of the cattle trucks

leaked. The train left on its 300-mile journey at 6 p.m., and at first light it was a stiff, sore, and very damp battalion that sniffed the keen Greek upland air and watched the snow-covered peaks of Mount Olympus draw closer.

The B Echelon was luckier, for with the exception of the Bren carriers all 21 Battalion transport, with the Anti-Aircraft Platoon for local protection, travelled by road under the command of Major E. A. Harding. The road twined over wooded hills and hung precariously to the edges of precipices where ranges had been split asunder by prehistoric earthquakes. They passed grey-green olive groves and bright green fields, where workers among the spring crops stopped to wave. At villages and crossroads garlands of flowers were thrust by children upon the embarrassed drivers, while the adults made gestures of welcome. At every halt the villagers offered fresh eggs and wine, which was all they had, and thankfully accepted army biscuits and bully beef in return, for theirs was a hungry and war-torn land.

By the time the entrucked battalion, en route to Katerine, had stamped some warmth into its feet and had eaten its breakfast, the German columns had entered Salonika. To meet the double threat of an enemy advance from both Monastir and Salonika, plans were made for the British and Greek forces to withdraw to a line not dependent on Yugoslav co-operation. An intermediate position was chosen, from the coast at Platamon through the Olympus Pass, and then along the Vermion Range to link up with a hurriedly formed force at Veve covering the approach from Monastir. Fourth Brigade was withdrawn from the Aliakmon line and sent to the Servia Pass, a pivot position for the intermediate line and the final defensive position. Sixth Brigade was withdrawn to a reserve position behind the Servia and Olympus passes at Elasson. Eventually all troops from the Vermion Range and from Veve would be transferred to positions on the left of 4 Brigade at Servia, and the final position, called the Olympus- Aliakmon River line, would run from Platamon through the Olympus Pass to the Servia Pass, thence north-westward to link up with the Greek Army withdrawing from Albania.

Colonel Macky's instructions were to detrain at Katerine, but on reaching Larissa about midday he was informed by the RTO that telephoned orders had altered his destination to Platamon, 15 miles further on and only half-way to Katerine. The train left Larissa at 1 p.m. on 9 April, and while Battalion Headquarters was pondering over what the sudden change might mean, the Greek commander in eastern

Macedonia, completely cut off though his men were still fighting in the Rupel Pass, was surrendering his army and the Metaxas line to the Germans.



21 battalion positions, platamon

The Greek train crew must have been well informed about the potentialities of enemy dive-bombers because, when a small running air fight passed high overhead, the train stopped and the crew took to the hills. Colonel Macky was on the point of recruiting engine drivers from the battalion when the Greeks returned and the journey was resumed.

Platamon is on the coast north of Larissa, but between them is a range of high hills stretching from Mount Olympus to Mount Ossa on the eastern seaboard. At some time before the dawn of history an earthquake had snapped the range like a rotten stick, and the result was the five-mile-long Vale of Tempe, the gorge of the Peneios River. The river has scoured a 30-foot-wide path, on the southern side of which a road and on the northern a single-track railway line have been blasted out of its almost vertical walls. The eastern exit of the gorge is about one mile from the sea in open country which, however, narrows continuously in the next seven miles. The railway is then almost on the beach.

The hope that there would be further instructions waiting at Platamon was not realised, for with the exception of a solitary soldier the station was empty. The soldier said he was from D Company 26 Battalion, commanded by Captain Huggins, ¹ who was a mile further along at a tunnel where the company was digging and

wiring. The train was therefore taken on to the tunnel. Huggins had no definite information, but was preparing a battalion defensive position. Colonel Macky decided that he had reached his destination, detrained the battalion, and sent the trucks back to the station to unload the Bren carriers.

It was about 5 p.m. and, while the battalion had tea and arranged bivouacs for the night, the Colonel and Captain Tongue made a reconnaissance of the area. They found that the tunnel pierced a low ridge, an under-feature of Olympus running eastwards to the sea. To the north the level country widened again as the hills retreated from the seashore. The ridge, comparatively flat on top and about 200 feet high, fell away steeply on each side. At first glance it appeared impassable to any form of wheeled traffic, but about half a mile inland there was a saddle across which a track alongside the railway deviated to rejoin the line at the tunnel's southern exit.

The partially prepared positions were sited with the object of denying the tunnel and commanding the track. The first area was on the forward slopes above the tunnel and the second at Point 266, a conical hill slightly west of the saddle track. Macky decided to put A Company on the hill, B Company on Point 266, and C and D in reserve. Still without definite instructions and with no means of communication, he had sent Lieutenant Yeoman ² back to Larissa on a motor cycle to see if the track alongside the railway line was practicable for wheeled traffic and to contact Major Harding.

The transport, however, had already passed through Larissa. On arrival Major Harding inquired where the battalion was located and, as nobody appeared to have heard of it, he reported to the Area Commander. He also had never heard of 21 Battalion, but did know that the transit camp nearest to the New Zealand Division was at Elasson at the junction of the Servia- Olympus roads, 30 miles north. The transport accordingly was moved to that area, while Harding went on to locate 5 Brigade Headquarters, which he eventually found on the northern side of the Olympus Pass. Brigade Headquarters knew where the battalion was and gave permission to move the vehicles to a point where they could more readily serve it. Early on the next morning (the 10th) Brigadier Hargest sent his Intelligence Officer with written orders and a letter welcoming the battalion back to the brigade.

Also that morning Major Harding went by truck back to Larissa, then up through

the Peneios Gorge to where a barge ferried his truck across the river. The companies were settling in when he arrived and, after a conference with Colonel Macky, he returned to Elasson. The next day, the 11th, the transport moved to the vicinity of the railway station at Makrykhorion, about three miles south of the village of Tempe.

Shortly after Lieutenant Yeoman had set out on his mission on 9 April Lieutenant Jones, ³ 19 Army Troops Company NZE, reported from Katerine. His news was disquieting. Katerine was being evacuated and he had brought a section of engineers with explosives, some land mines, and a naval depth-charge to prepare the tunnel and saddle track for demolition. Two hours later Lieutenant Williams ⁴ arrived, also from Katerine. He had with him A Troop of 27 Battery 5 Field Regiment, and was under orders to report to 21 Battalion and to assist in the defence of the Platamon tunnel area.

The gunners went off to locate suitable ground, construct command and observation posts, lay telephone wires, dig gun-pits, and generally do the things gunners do when they take over a new area. Battalion Headquarters continued to wonder what was going to happen next. The troops slept out in the open, but the bitterly cold drizzle which began at dusk did not dampen the enthusiasm of men who had travelled halfway around the world and, in distance, half-way home again in search of a place in the New Zealand Division. At that moment they were still not with the Division, and the nearest New Zealand unit was on the opposite side of Mount Olympus. While they shivered the night away in almost complete ignorance of the general situation, 4 and 6 Brigades were moving back to their positions at Servia and Elasson and were passing through 5 Brigade, holding on Mount Olympus. The Divisional Cavalry and supporting artillery were forward patrolling the Aliakmon River, while 75 miles away on the left flank 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, less two companies, was at Veve, crouching in rain-sodden fire-pits waiting for daylight and the invaders.

The troops of 21 Battalion were up and had breakfasted before first light on 10 April, for if the Aliakmon positions were being vacated, enemy patrols at least could be expected within twenty-four hours. A Company looked curiously at, but wasted little time in exploring, the derelict castle that gave their hill its name. The crumbling tower surrounded by battlements was not a real castle but the remnants of the Turkish fort of Skotiniotika Manzarda. The top of Castle Hill was bare, with outcrops

of rock and a good field of fire to the edge of the scrub which covered its lower features. Second-Lieutenant Bullock-Douglas, ⁵ with 8 Platoon, was placed on the extreme right above the mouth of the tunnel. Both Second-Lieutenant Southworth, with 7 Platoon in the centre, and Second-Lieutenant Roach, with 9 Platoon on the left of the company area, commanded the track over the saddle, and theirs were the most forward posts. Captain McClymont's A Company headquarters was situated behind 7 Platoon and higher up the hillside.

Major Le Lievre's B Company area forward of Point 266 was rather more difficult. Dense scrub covered the terrain and the field of fire was limited. Ridges and ravines ran in all directions and mule tracks apparently began and ended at random. Lieutenant Rose, ⁶ with 10 Platoon, held the right flank, Lieutenant Yeoman and Second-Lieutenant Finlayson, ⁷ with 11 and 12 Platoons, were situated on opposite sides of a ravine that also covered the saddle track forward and to the west of 10 Platoon. Company Headquarters was near the junction of the saddle track and another track winding down from Pandeleimon village. If it had needed a name, 'Monastery Corner' would have been a good description, for there were ruins there, probably the remains of a Greek monastery.

A more detailed reconnaissance decided Colonel Macky to widen his front. Westward from Point 266 the ridge rose sharply and about a mile inland the village of Pandeleimon clung to the hillside, 1500 feet above sea level and a few chains below the snow line. Pandeleimon was the junction of several tracks connecting with other villages among the hills and on the plains to the north.

One of these tracks wandered in a south-westerly direction to Rapsane, thence to Gonnos on the Larissa end of the Peneios Gorge; another, more substantial than the average, connected Pandeleimon with Platamon station; yet another twisted down behind B Company and joined the saddle track. If the Germans came down the coast and Pandeleimon was not held, it would be a simple matter to cut the battalion's line of retreat at Platamon station, where the railway runs along the foot of a ridge skirting the beach. It was decided, therefore, to put Captain Tongue, with C Company, to hold Pandeleimon. Even then it was only a matter of how large the opposing force was before the open left flank was turned. The battalion's first assignment was a tough one.

C Company was disposed with 14 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Smith 8) and 15 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Mason 9) covering the mule trails to the coast, and 13 Platoon (Lieutenant O'Neill 10) in reserve near Company Headquarters on the path to the saddle track. Pandeleimon was still inhabited by the Greeks.

D Company dug in on the reverse slope of Castle Hill with 17 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Aickin ¹¹) forward on the right, 16 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Phillips ¹²) rear right near the southern exit of the tunnel, and 18 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Flavell ¹³) rear left.

While the forward positions were being prepared Captain Sadler (Headquarters Company) made himself familiar with the country south of the tunnel area. Lieutenant Dee's ¹⁴ carriers were parked a quarter of a mile south of Platamon station and patrolled the beach from the tunnel to the mouth of the Peneios River. They had a busy time checking the Greek boats landing refugees from Salonika and trying to conciliate irate farmers whose oat and barley crops were damaged in the process. In the same locality the Pioneer Platoon began the construction of a siding for the supply train when the administrative service began to function, and in anticipation Captain Panckhurst's ¹⁵ QM store was established nearby.

Forward Battalion Headquarters was for the time being on the side of Castle Hill, but later was moved into the defile where three sandbagged dugouts had been built, one for signals, one for runners, and one for the CO and the Adjutant. Second-Lieutenant Wilson ¹⁶ had placed his two mortars in the same locality, an action not appreciated by anybody in the area. Captain Hetherington, ¹⁷ with his RAP, Padre Sheely, ¹⁸ and Captain Sadler were located in a house about a quarter of a mile back.

Carrying ammunition, wire, and stores up the hillsides was slow and exhausting work, and some form of transport was badly needed. Colonel Macky had no authority to requisition pack animals, but the inhabitants were friendly and the battalion needed transport. The solution was to purchase some mules, but finance was something of a hurdle. This was finally overcome by platoon commanders taking the hat around and collecting what cash had escaped the Athenian taverns. Receipts were given for every donation to the transport fund, but there is no evidence that they were ever redeemed. Army Pay Office would probably have been very difficult if

they had been presented for payment.

With the finance position under control Lieutenant McKay ¹⁹ was appointed mule purchasing officer, although his knowledge of the Greek language was no greater than that of the rest of the unit, being confined to the challenge Alt tis E? (Halt, who goes there?) used on guard duty at Athens. In spite of the language difficulty, a mixed team of 24 mules and donkeys was acquired, a corral was erected near Platamon station, and private Jim Collingwood, ²⁰ a hunting farmer from Tirau, was appointed 'OC Mule Corral'. Several small boys also attached themselves as mule attendants. It is a melancholy coincidence that both McKay and Collingwood were killed in the battalion's first action.

The night was wetter, colder, and more miserable than the previous one. In 21 Battalion's area the only enemy activity was provided by the reconnaissance planes circling overhead, particularly one that the troops christened 'Hawkeye'. 'Hawkeye' met his end the next day when the one Allied plane seen by the battalion shot him down into the sea.

That night (11–12 April) the Germans attacked at Veve and the left flank of the Allied forces began to move back towards Servia.

In the morning D Company 26 Battalion was ordered to rejoin its unit at Katerine. They went up by train and got there in time to be among the last troops in the town; the RTO shot them back through Platamon the same night. The company went on to Larissa and eventually rejoined 26 Battalion in the Servia area. The 21st Battalion was made responsible for demolishing the road, bridges, and railway in the Peneios Gorge, six miles in its rear, so with everything except direct information pointing to action in the near future, Colonel Macky moved into battle headquarters. The day passed quietly, however. It was cold and wet, and on the higher levels it was snowing.

At Veve the enemy finally broke through the Monastir Gap and on the right flank his leading troops were feeling along the north bank of the Aliakmon River, but it was not anticipated that the German schwerpunkt would come down the Aegean coast. Even though it was the shortest route to Larissa, the key to northern Greece, the only road was worse than third-class, even by Greek standards.

The 13th, Easter Sunday, was another quiet day following a cold night. The sun shone from a cloudless sky and the men were able to dry their blankets, sodden after three rainy nights in the open. No. 14 Platoon celebrated the day by dining off a lamb they had bought for 65 drachmae. It was not much of a lamb, weighing a mere twenty pounds dressed, but it was a reminder of New Zealand and of final leave the previous Easter.

A party from Divisional Signals reported in the same day with a wireless set, which was established in Rear Battalion Headquarters. General instructions were to keep strict wireless silence until battle was joined, but these instructions were interpreted too narrowly and no listening watch was kept until 13 April, when an officer from Divisional Signals came to investigate. In the meantime Major Harding, at the transport lines, had to continue driving ninety miles to 5 Brigade Headquarters to deliver reports and receive orders.

While the troops were cleaning up and drying out in the warm sunshine that had followed the rain, the enemy crossed the lower Aliakmon. The New Zealand Division was now holding the line from the sea at Platamon to Servia, where 4 Brigade was being dive-bombed in the opening phases of the battle for the Servia Pass.

A train from Katerine passed through Platamon early on the morning of the 14th. The Greek general in charge of the area was on board and gave his certificate that it was the final train from the lost town. The enemy was probably entering Katerine at the same time as the certificate was being handed over. The 21st Battalion had almost caught up with the war, for Katerine was only 20 miles away.

About 3 p.m. another train, this time from Larissa, brought another general to Platamon. This time it was General Freyberg, bearing evil tidings. He informed Colonel Macky that it had not been possible to establish the Allied forces on the Olympus- Aliakmon River line, and that a decision had been made to withdraw south to the Thermopylae line, which it was hoped was short enough for the British alone to impose some delay on the German occupation of Greece. The 21st Battalion's part in the withdrawal to Thermopylae was, for the time being, to hold Platamon Ridge and deny the coast road to the enemy. It was still thought that, if the enemy came that way, it would be with infantry only on account of the terrain. Macky was not so sure, but did not press the point. He knew that the Intelligence Officer (Lieutenant

Wallace ²¹) had been forward on a motor cycle and had met a car with the 5 Brigade Intelligence Officer sent on 10 April with orders, and that the car had slid off the road and had been damaged. Lance-Corporal George Palmer ²² and Private Don Hookham ²³ had been able to go forward with a carrier to recover the car and put it on the train. Also the engineers' trucks and the artillery tractors had come down that road without much trouble. No doubt Corps and Divisional Intelligence could be relied on, but all the same....

The General had not long departed when Colonel Macky's forebodings were fulfilled. The men had been paid, had had tea, and were preparing to stand to, when winking lights like the sun's rays reflected from a moving windscreen were reported to Battalion Headquarters. Macky was holding a conference at the time and suggested to Lieutenant Williams, who was present, that if he went up to his observation post he would see something interesting and, after seeing it, would he please chase it away. The gunner officer shot up the hill almost as fast as one of his own shells, and through his glasses saw an enemy reconnaissance patrol about two and a half miles away, viewing the hill through their glasses. The battery opened fire at 5000 yards' range and an optimistic Bren-gunner let go a burst. The battalion had found its war.

The patrol hurriedly sought shelter, and there was some discussion among the troops whether or not it was a patrol of ours that had been fired on. The argument lapsed when a continuous stream of vehicles was seen passing over a rise in the road about 7000 yards behind the patrol. Fire was opened by the guns but, owing to the dust and reflection from the windshields, observation was poor. At 11,000 yards vehicles that looked very like enemy tanks began to deploy over the plain. They also were fired on, without much hope of damaging them, but with the intention of discouraging their closer approach.

As soon as the enemy patrol had been reported, Colonel Macky ordered Lieutenant Jones to blow the tunnel and demolish the saddle track. The engineers had been working under difficulties with insufficient explosives and no pneumatic drills, but one of the safety bays in the tunnel had been sealed off with sandbags, behind which 350 lb. of gelignite and the depth-charge had been placed. In addition a charge had been placed under the rails at both ends of the tunnel. The explosion



THE ORIGINAL OFFICERS OF 91 BATTALION

ACE RAW: Licatenants L. W. Reanney, A. A. Yeoman, G. A. Duttoe, C. A. Fenguson, E. G. Smith, R. McClymont, G. H. Panckhurst, A. G. Simms, W. Dickson, H. K. Benizsby, S. G. Hirst, K. G. Dre, J. R. Iarskall, J. B. Cranswick, W. J. G. Roach, W. E. von Schramm, E. B. Butcher, P. B. Allen, H. M. McEl, L. Thomson, R. D. Campbell.

Suddle Row: Captains E. C. N. Robinson, A. C. Trousdale, W. M. Tougue, R. W. Harding, G. J. Howeroft, Major E. A. Harding, Lieutenant-Colonel N. L. Macky, Lieutenant M. T. S. Dew, Major R. R. McGregor, Captains C. A. Le Liever, F. A. Sadler, Lieutenants O. S. Hetherington and R. H. Anderson.

FRONT ROW: Lieutenants G. A. H. Bullock-Douglas, J. N. Stevenson, S. W. Parfitt, R. Penney, G. E. Moore, C. Williams, W. R. C. Saul, W. J. Southworth, A. J. B. Dixon, A. C. Turtill, N. R. Flavell, C. S. Caddie, L. N. Wallace, W. C. Butland, N. MacKay.

THE ORIGINAL OFFICERS OF 21 BATTALION

Back Row: Lieutenants L. W. Reanney, A. A. Yeoman, G. A. Dutton, C. A. Ferguson, E. G. Smith, R. B. McClymont, G. H. Panckhurst, A. G. Simms, W. Dickson, H. K. Brainsby, S. G. Hirst, K. G. Dee, J. R. B. Marshall, J. B. Cranswick, W. J. G. Roach, W. E. von Schramm, E. B. Butcher, P. B. Allen, H. M. McElroy, H. L. Thomson, R. D. Campbell.

Middle Row: Captains E. C. N. Robinson, A. C. Trousdale, W. M. Tongue, R. W. Harding, G. J. Howcroft, Major E. A. Harding, Lieutenant-Colonel N. L. Macky, Lieutenant M. T. S. Dew, Major R. R. McGregor, Captains C. A. Le Lievre, F. A. Sadler, Lieutenants O. S. Hetherington and R. H. Anderson.

Front Row: Lieutenants G. A. H. Bullock-Douglas, J. N. Stevenson, S. W. Parfitt, R. Penney, G. E. Moore, C. Williams, W. R. C. Saul, W. J. Southworth, A. J. B. Dixon, A. C. Turtill, N. R. Flavell, C. S. Caddie, L. N. Wallace, W. C. Butland, N. MacKay.

BATTALION COMMANDERS



Lt-Col N. L. Macky Lt-Col N. L. Macky



Lt-Col J. M. Allen Lt-Col J. M. Allen



Lt-Col S. F. Allen Lt-Col S. F. Allen



Lt-Col R. W. Harding Lt-Col R. W. Harding



Lt-Col H. M. McElroy Lt-Col H. M. McElroy



Lt-Col J. I. Thodey
Lt- Col J. I. Thodey



Lt-Col E. A. McPhail Lt-Col E. A. McPhail



Camp at Duder's Beach, near Auckland

Camp at Duder's Beach, near Auckland



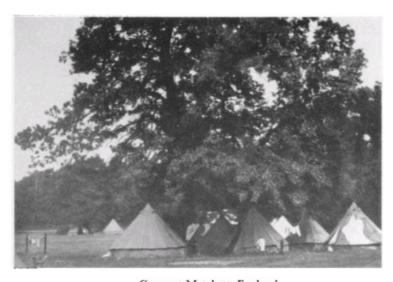
Firing Bren guns on the range at Penrose

Firing Bren guns on the range at Penrose



Fareweit march through Auckland, 27 April 1940

Farewell march through Auckland, 27 April 1940



Camp at Mytchett, England
Camp at Mytchett, England

gelignite, reserved for emergencies, was placed in a breach made in the roof. When this was fired most of the lining came down, but even so it was estimated that the damage could be repaired within six hours. (In actual fact the tunnel, although used for short periods, was still falling in a week later.)

The craters along the saddle track also were not entirely satisfactory for the same reason—lack of explosives and equipment for dealing with hard-rock country. As an extra precaution a small anti-tank minefield had been laid out on the forward slopes near the top of the ridge. It eventually caused more delay than all the road blocks put together.

When the engineers were satisfied that they had done all they could, they packed up and departed for the Peneios Gorge to prepare further demolitions on the road and railway. In the meantime the battalion was standing to in real earnest and Captain Tongue, high up at Pandeleimon, was describing to Colonel Macky how artillery and vehicles were parking in well-dressed lines across the plain. He said he could see at least one hundred tanks, but the Colonel told him not to count any further as nobody would believe it. A message was wirelessed that 50 tanks and 150 other vehicles were parking in front of Platamon ridge. ²⁴

All night there was the sound of movement as the Germans completed their deployment. No attempt was made at concealment and vehicles moved with headlights burning. Whenever anything came within range the four guns and the two mortars that composed the battalion's supporting arms were on to it. The glare of burning trucks and faint screams and shouting indicated that the fire was not being wasted. The highlight of the night was a direct hit by a mortar shell on a vehicle, which caught fire and blazed fiercely throughout the night.

The night before battle is a time of contemplation, no matter how experienced the soldier, and 21 Battalion was not yet experienced. Never was a rifle checked more carefully, never a bayonet point thumbed so thoroughly. Letters were written with the greatest casualness. Nothing important really, just thought I'd drop a line home—haven't written home for weeks. Would you mind seeing it's posted, in case of accidents? Sure. Been meaning to write myself ever since we landed in Greece. Don't half go crook at home if a man doesn't write regularly. What do the old soldiers say? Never mind a bullet you hear—it's miles away by then. It's the one you don't hear that hurts. Maybe you're lucky and its a field dressing and a quick move to the RAP. Maybe you're not so lucky and its a field dressing and stretcher-bearers at the double, and if you're really unlucky it's neither—but you won't be taking any interest in the subsequent proceedings.

If Colonel Macky was perturbed at the arrival of the enemy armour he did not show it, but the company commanders were not displeased when he decided to get some sleep. They were as anxious as he that the battalion should acquit itself well in the morning, and they knew as well as he that the only thing that would prevent the tanks from rolling over them was the terrain. It was thought to be tank-proof, and

the saddle track was in as big a mess as the engineers could contrive to make it. The men in the forward weapon pits listened to the rumbling of heavy vehicles and the bursting of shells on the plains below them. They passed the night peering into the scrub, fingers on triggers.

Shortly after daybreak on the 15th a patrol consisting of Sergeant Bill Davies ²⁵ and Private 'Tommy' Thompson ²⁶ was detailed to climb to the top of the ridge above C Company and estimate the enemy forces. The two men did not come back, but Major Le Lievre did not report them as missing, maintaining that such experienced bushmen could pass through a German army without being seen. His faith in their fieldcraft was not misplaced. It took them most of the day to scramble through the dense tangle of myrtus, ²⁷ fern, scrub, and brambles to a point near the summit, and when they finally got there they could see nothing through a misty drizzle that blanketed the high country. They did, however, discover a paved track along the top of the ridge, and they also found a party of Germans laying a telephone wire along it. They decided to return with the information but struck too far north and, when they eventually hit the coast, they found, in the words of Sergeant Davies, 'Jerry, of course, being in large numbers in front, behind and around us.' There was nothing for it but to make another wide detour southwards, and there we will leave them for the time being.

The first enemy shell arrived with the dawn. 'Hawkeye' had done his job well, for the shell burst fairly above the mortar position, but beyond sending Lieutenant Wallace, who was passing at the moment, smartly to earth, it did no damage. A Troop replied, and then all the German artillery emplaced during the night searched the ridge, paying particular attention to A Company.

The castle became the target for shells of various calibre, but of course nobody was in such an obvious position. Smoke was liberally mixed with the high explosives and, after an hour's bombardment, the enemy infantry, supported by fire from the rear, began to search through the smoke and scrub.

A patrol blundered on to a post of 7 Platoon. Second-Lieutenant Southworth had cadged a few sticks of explosive from the engineers when they were mining the saddle track and had also persuaded them to attach detonators and safety fuses. One of the home-made grenades killed the officer in charge and the rest dived back

into the scrub. Evidently satisfied that the position was strongly held and required more softening up, the enemy withdrew after an hour's probing.

For the rest of the day the whole ridge was drenched with high explosives, but the weapon pits, hewn out of almost solid marble, gave excellent shelter and there were very few casualties. Up till midday there were none at all. The first battle casualty notified to Battalion Headquarters was Lance-Corporal Lovell ²⁸ of B Company.

During the afternoon tanks were heard through the smoke, crashing and threshing about while endeavouring to force a way over the ridge, and about seven o'clock Captain Tongue reported an attack by infantry on his position around Pandeleimon. C Company had watched the enemy build-up during the day, and towards evening suspected that Pandeleimon had been entered. Private Bosworth ²⁹ was sent to investigate from the forward section of 15 Platoon and was told by a Greek that the Germans had indeed entered the village. At dusk 14 Platoon was attacked, but the sections stood their ground until dark. Part of 15 Platoon was involved, and there was much confused firing.

The busiest people in the interludes between the attacks were the signallers. The lines were continually cut by shellfire; the one between the artillery observation post and Battalion Headquarters alone had to be mended eleven times.

The third attempt to force the ridge was made with armour leading the attack. The infantry did not emerge from the scrub, but the tanks made a determined effort to climb the ridge. Small-arms fire was poured into them from all angles, but even the anti-tank rifles only raised sparks on their armour. The artillery was unable to protect A Company because of the steepness of the hill, but only one tank succeeded in getting close to 8 Platoon; it was not able to complete the climb and returned baffled to its companions.

The main thrust was along the track between A and B Companies. Two tanks were halted under 9 Platoon's position, though one got past 10 Platoon's post on the side of the track. They were engaged by every rifle that could be brought to bear and retired discomfited by the steepness of the ridge and the demolished track.

Seven more tried to get up the ravine where Yeoman's and Finlayson's platoons

were dug in, but were turned back by artillery and mortar fire. At last light the line was intact, the tanks had departed, and the silence was broken only by an occasional shot into the scrub, but A Troop had only 80 rounds a gun left.

The 3rd Panzer Regiment (2 Panzer Division) reported the day's fighting as follows:

At midday on April 15 the head of the Div was halted by stubborn English resistance at Pandeleimon on Mt. Olympus. There the English had taken up positions on a ridge running right down to the sea and greeted us with accurate shell fire. From the left position in an old castle they had splendid observation. The whole regiment moved to the attack, co-operating with infantry and motor cyclists, who were directed to make an outflanking move to the right. The tanks attacking the ridge were forced by the fall of darkness and the terrible going to halt at the foot of the castle. The light troops of the unit advanced to the obstacles just in front of the enemy position, but could go no further. The tanks formed a close laager for the night. The English shells crashed continuously around them, but the English did not counterattack.

The German tanks might have settled down for the night, but nobody else did. A Company was shelled spasmodically, and snipers crept around B Company's posts. Every time a branch snapped under the weight of a German boot, that area was sprayed with fire which was returned by snipers in the vicinity. The tang of burning cordite was mixed with the pungent aroma of smoke lying so heavily in the ravines that each man felt that he was utterly alone—not a pleasant feeling in your first battle, with bullets cracking past in all directions.

As the night wore on the infiltration behind B Company's position increased, and about midnight Major Le Lievre decided to pull 11 Platoon back from its forward area into a reserve role behind 12 Platoon.

High up on the ridge C Company had been forced to give ground after dark. No. 14 Platoon, widely dispersed to cover its sector, was unable to prevent infiltration. A runner informed Captain Tongue of this, and Lieutenant O'Neill was sent with a patrol from 13 Platoon to find and regroup 14 Platoon. While O'Neill was on the way forward a large German patrol swept through the area, across the ridge, through 14 Platoon, 13 Platoon and Company Headquarters. The Germans sprayed tracer bullets

at random, put up flares, kept in touch by shouting and whistling—and finally disappeared over the ridge beyond Company Headquarters. No. 14 Platoon was found in one formed group, and the sections were put astride the track between 13 and 15 Platoons. There was no further enemy action that night.

After the failure of the frontal assault, there was only one answer: the turning of the left flank was the obvious enemy move. A brigade with anti-tank guns and field artillery might have held Pandeleimon Ridge against an armoured division, but not a battalion with four 25-pounders in support and no effective anti-tank weapons.

At dawn on 16 April it was clear that the enemy had closed in on C Company from the north and west. Lieutenant Mason went forward from 15 Platoon, surprised a German, and shot him. Farther along the ridge Corporal Bert Howe's ³⁰ section (No. 7), covering the track from the village, saw the Germans coming out of Pandeleimon in four columns, evidently under the impression that there would be no opposition. Howe's section opened fire and scattered the enemy, who soon regrouped under cover to attack with the support of mortars and infantry support guns. The section was soon surrounded and taken prisoner. Corporal Jack Gardner's ³¹ section (No. 8), which had withdrawn closer to Company Headquarters during the night, suffered a similar fate. Men from these sections were surprised to find the Germans demanding food—they had not eaten for 24 hours—and were later incensed at being forced to help clear the tunnel demolition.

The remaining section of 15 Platoon, under Corporal Dick Pipe, ³² was overrun from the west, after a brisk but one-sided encounter. Captain Tongue sent O'Neill with a fighting patrol from 13 Platoon to help, but this patrol, after moving up the south side of the ridge, was held up by small-arms fire. Sergeant Kibblewhite ³³ moved forward alone and, although wounded three times, drew sufficient fire to allow the patrol to reach 15 Platoon's area, only to find it empty. In the meantime Tongue had himself been forward, had failed to discover 15 Platoon, and had returned to discover its survivors at Company Headquarters. After giving covering fire to 15 Platoon, 14 Platoon had also closed in to Company Headquarters, which was now virtually surrounded. Tongue ordered 14 and 15 Platoons to withdraw down the ridge under the covering fire of 13 Platoon. O'Neill returned with his patrol to find the company gone and, firing all the way, followed down the ridge to join what had become an orderly withdrawal. Half-way down the ridge it seemed to O'Neill that the

enemy attack had petered out, as if its objective had been to clear the C Company area.

Captain McElroy ³⁴ had rung through to Colonel Macky before the company withdrew, giving the situation and asking for instructions, but the line went dead before he could get a reply. Macky then instructed Captain Panckhurst to make ready for a withdrawal. Everything was to be destroyed except hot food already prepared, which was left for anybody who passed by.

At the same time as the attack on C Company began, the enemy artillery, supported by a line of approximately fifty tanks, blanketed the rest of the ridge with high explosive and smoke shells. Under cover of the bombardment, infantry attempted to infiltrate between A and B Companies' positions, but made little progress against the steady fire of the forward posts. There was, however, danger of B Company's 12 Platoon being cut off, and Le Lievre ordered its withdrawal to 11 Platoon's area. The position then was that C Company was apparently out of the battle; B Company, with the exception of 10 Platoon, was concentrated in the rear of Point 266; A Company was still holding; and D Company was under enfilade fire from the direction of Pandeleimon.

The carriers were disposed to protect the road out past Platamon station and the guns were prepared to adopt an anti-tank role, but the latter were almost out of ammunition. At 9.40 a.m. Colonel Macky radioed to Corps Headquarters that his position was very serious. Almost immediately the tanks thrust again along the saddle track and, with the local knowledge gained from the previous attempt, made steady headway. Macky, none too soon, gave the order for a general withdrawal.

A last signal that the battalion was retiring was sent at 10 a.m. before the wireless set was destroyed. There was no time to collect the telephone lines, and the loss of this equipment was to have an important effect in the next engagement. A Company came down off the hill in good order and was checked through by Lieutenant E. G. Smith. The right platoons of D Company followed, and then B Company, after making a detour, emerged on a track that ran through 18 Platoon's area.

The steady fire of 18 Platoon kept the enemy in the shelter of the scrub and

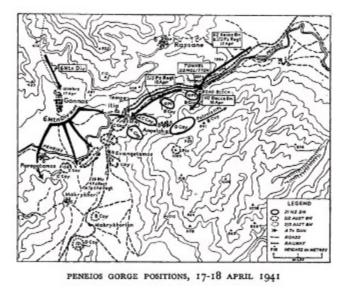
made B Company's escape possible. Major Le Lievre was checking the last elements of his company through when C Company arrived. They had fought an all-round action for four hours and had finally succeeded in getting clear. They felt that in retiring they had let the battalion down and were very relieved to know that, on the contrary, they were the last company to leave the ridge. No. 18 Platoon finally disengaged with the loss of one man taken prisoner.

The reason the Germans were prepared to break off the battle is clear from the 3 Panzer Regiment's war diary:

In the morning the attack was continued after a heavy preliminary bombardment, this time with the engineers in support. The right hand company of tanks forced its way forward through the scrub and over rocks and in spite of the steepness of the hillside got on to the top of the ridge. The country was a mass of wire obstacles and swarming with the enemy. In the thick scrub visibility was scarcely a yard from the tanks and hardly a trace was to be seen of the enemy except an occasional infantryman running back. The tanks pressed forward along a narrow mule path. Many of them shed their tracks on the boulders or split their assemblies and finally the leading troop ran on to mines. Every tank became a casualty and completely blocked the path. A detour was attempted. Two more tanks stuck in a swamp and another blew up on a mine and was completely burnt out. After strenuous exertions the track was cleared that evening while the engineers carried out a very successful sweep for mines. In the meantime small parties of infantry had followed up the English on foot, driven them completely from the ridge and late in the day hoisted the flag on the castle.

While the tanks were immobilised the Germany infantry were prepared to call it a day. Thus 21 Battalion had held up half an armoured division for 36 hours at a cost of 36 killed, wounded, and missing.

The gorge through which the Peneios River flows, and where 19 Army Troops Company was preparing demolitions, offered the greatest opportunities for delaying the enemy advance. The sea is a mile from the mouth of the gorge, but immediately south rise the foothills of Mount Ossa, making a long and difficult detour for wheeled traffic. It would take days to outflank the positions from the seaward side, if indeed it was possible to get around with tanks at all.



peneios gorge positions, 17-18 april 1941

The country north of the gorge consists of broken highlands running up to Mount Olympus, roadless and apparently impassable for any transport except a mule train, the only means of communication between the scattered villages in the Greek highlands. The gorge, five miles in length, is narrow, with on either side a series of spurs that end at the river bank in alternating cliffs and small re-entrants. At the western exit, where the railway crosses the river, the village of Tempe clusters around the station. Opposite, on the northern side of the Peneios, on one of the small flats between two spurs, is the twin village of Itia. Three miles west of Itia the larger village of Gonnos, situated on the edge of the river flats and the foothills, is the terminus of the mountain trail that passes through Pandeleimon. Fifteen miles south of Tempe is Larissa, the bottleneck through which the main force would have to pass en route to Thermopylae. If the Germans reached Larissa in strength before the withdrawal was complete, there would be no escape.

Colonel Macky boarded a carrier and went on ahead, while Lieutenant Dee disposed the rest of his carriers to cover the withdrawal. A Troop formed a gunline near the gorge. The Mortar Platoon, which had thrown its heavy equipment onto the artillery trucks, found on arrival that essential parts were missing, and from then on fought as riflemen.

As the rifle platoons reached the small river flat at the gorge mouth, they were dispersed under the mulberry and poplar trees or in the patches of wheat that covered the area. Enemy planes, mostly bombers returning from assignments further

south, passed overhead. C Company and half of B Company were still missing when Brigadier Clowes, CCRA Anzac Corps, ³⁵ arrived.

Corps had been thoroughly disturbed by Colonel Macky's comparatively modest estimate of the armour concentrating below Platamon Ridge and had sent Clowes post-haste to take whatever action he considered necessary. (In actual fact there were 100 tanks, 16 guns, one battalion of infantry, one motorcycle battalion, engineers, anti-tank guns, and specialist units.) Corps had expected that the main German effort would be made against the Olympus Pass area and had made its dispositions accordingly. That the enemy was also on the shorter eastern route in strength necessitated a readjustment of the scanty reserves and a new appreciation of the situation.

The advantages and drawbacks to defending the gorge from the seaward flank, the narrow middle, and the western end were considered by Brigadier Clowes and Colonel Macky. Because of the possibility of an outflanking move through the hills to Gonnos, the decision was taken to defend the western end.

Actually they had reached almost the same conclusion as had the Greek generals when discussing the same problem 2000 years earlier. Xerxes and his Persians had landed in the north and were moving on Athens by the coastal route. The Greek commanders planned to oppose him in the Peneios Gorge, but because of the danger of being outflanked and cut off, decided to defend their city at Thermopylae.

Brigadier Clowes, knowing the number of troops that had still to pass through Larissa, instructed Colonel Macky that it was essential to deny the gorge to the enemy until 19 April, even if it meant extinction, and told him that support would arrive within twenty-four hours. His final advice was that, if the enemy broke through the gorge, the battalion was to fall back to a position astride the point where the road and railway crossed, seven miles south of the western exit. The Brigadier departed and the battalion was preparing to cross the river when C Company and the remainder of B Company arrived and the battalion was complete again. The crossing was made on the same flat-bottomed barge that Major Harding had used, and the Pioneer Platoon, acting as ferrymen, found it exhausting work hauling on the heavy ropes. Only a few men could be taken at a time, and it was late afternoon

before the troops were all across. There remained the carriers and the guns with their 'quads', all too heavy for the ferry. There was a bridge five miles upstream at Tempe, where the railway crossed the river, and it was decided to ferry the guns across and send the rest of the transport along the rail track to this bridge. Lieutenant Parfitt, ³⁶ at B Echelon, had received the message that the battalion was withdrawing and had brought some transport through the gorge. The guns were hitched on to these trucks and taken back to rejoin the quads when they arrived.

There were two tunnels and a number of culverts on the railway, and when the last carrier, which had been used to haul a box-car from a siding into the first tunnel, was clear, the engineers blew the undercarriage off the box-car. The result was a tolerable blockage. The rail track on each side was also blown, to make it more difficult for enemy tanks to tow the wreckage out.

Explosives were still in short supply, but enough was found in a hut on the line to blow one of the culverts so high into the air that the rails came down on the other side of the gorge. The tanks, when they got so far, would certainly have to swim the river before they could advance further. This was a very comforting thought to men who had not slept for 48 hours. Tanks were not very good at swimming rivers in the early days of the war.

Just when the ferry was due for destruction and the hauling ropes cut, there was an incident that could happen only in Greece or in comic opera. Two shepherdesses arrived with small flocks of mixed sheep and goats and requested a passage. The Pioneer Platoon took time off from the war to haul them over before they ensured that nobody else would use the ferry for some considerable time.

The road was blown in the two most likely places, but the resulting craters were only reasonably effective. Second-Lieutenant Rose, with 10 Platoon, was left to cover the second or nearest crater, while Major Le Lievre disposed the remainder of B Company along a stream a mile inside the gorge up to the village of Ampelakia, high in the hills to the south. Finally the railway bridge at Tempe was blown by another section of 19 Army Troops Company which had been sent up for the purpose, and, feeling reasonably secure for the time being, the battalion bedded down for the night.

Battalion Headquarters had been set up in a house in Tempe and shortly after dusk Lieutenant-Colonel Chilton, commanding 2/2 Australian Battalion, arrived with the information that his battalion was on the way. It came up during the night and was disposed with one company near the gorge exit, the next some two miles west along the river bank opposite Gonnos, and the others still further westward. Before dawn 2/3 Australian Battalion was also in position, on the left of 2/2 Battalion.

Meanwhile 5 Brigade was breaking contact with the enemy on Olympus and moving back ten miles to the head of Olympus Pass preparatory to withdrawing to Thermopylae. While 2 Panzer Division was getting its tanks over Platamon Ridge and clearing the tunnel, 6 Mountain Division commenced a flanking movement across the southern slopes of Mount Olympus towards Gonnos, with the task of opening the Peneios Gorge for the tanks if they could not force it themselves. Next morning, the 17th, Lieutenant-Colonels Chilton and Macky, now joined by Lieutenant-Colonel Parkinson ³⁷ (CO 4 NZ Field Regiment), who had brought up 26 Battery, and Lieutenant Longmore, ³⁸ with L Troop 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, reconnoitred the gorge as far as B Company's road block.

After a meal and a night's sleep in the deserted village, the men of 21 Battalion were in better shape. Enemy planes were passing overhead at half-hourly intervals.

To help replace the tools lost at Platamon, the companies were told to collect any the villagers had left behind. A motley assortment of crude implements was obtained, as well as a varied collection of wines and liquors that had not been included in the instructions. Stray fowls were also captured and were soon cooking in whatever could be found to hold them. Across the river the inhabitants were seen to be evacuating the village of Itia. All day long the peasants were toiling up into the hills, with their belongings strapped onto mules and donkeys and driving their flocks in front.

It was agreed between the commanders that 21 Battalion was to be responsible for the gorge, the high country on its south bank, and the river bank to Tempe village inclusive. Beyond Tempe was the Australians' area. The battalion was disposed for the defence of the gorge exit along a steep shoulder that ran from Tempe village to the main ridge which formed the south side of Peneios Gorge. Beyond this ridge to the south-east stood Mount Ossa, surrounded by hundreds of

square miles of highlands seared with gullies and studded with lines of ranges radiating in all directions. D Company was on the right flank holding the small village of Ampelakia, a thousand feet above the river and about 2000 yards south of it. C Company held from the left flank of D Company down to the gorge road. Forward of this line and between C and D Companies, B Company headquarters and 12 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Finlayson) were on a spur about 600 yards in rear of the road block still held by 10 Platoon. No. 11 Platoon was detached from B Company and under command of Battalion Headquarters, with the task of patrolling a line parallel with the gorge and about two miles forward of Ampelakia and preventing any infiltrating enemy coming down the goat tracks. A Company, having borne the brunt of the Platamon tunnel action, was in reserve behind Tempe, where another ridge formed the second arm of the small valley enclosing the village. It was also the last ridge of the gorge, and westward of it was a long, wide valley where the Australians were digging in.

A Company was sited for all-round defence, with Second-Lieutenant Roach forward, Second-Lieutenant Bullock-Douglas in his rear, and Second-Lieutenant Southworth along the river bank. Battalion battle headquarters was in a deep ditch behind Roach and 100 yards south of the road. The RAP was in Tempe, which was defended by Headquarters Company details about a platoon strong under Lieutenant Anderson. ³⁹ The Carrier Platoon was deployed a thousand yards south-east of Tempe, while the remainder of Headquarters Company was behind A Company.

The artillery made its own dispositions to support the Australians along the river bank and to cover 21 Battalion inside the gorge, with two 25-pounders forward near Evangelismos in an anti-tank role. By early afternoon of the same day the companies were in position and digging in on the bare and rocky ridge. The position was a strong one but, as has been mentioned, the loss of the telephone wire at Platamon meant that all messages between the companies and Battalion Headquarters had to be carried by runner.

About midday Brigadier Allen, commanding 17 Australian Brigade, arrived and took command of the composite brigade preparing to defend the approach to Larissa. His headquarters was established at Makrykhorion, a small railway station three miles south of Evangelismos, where the battalion transport was situated.

It was not to be expected that the enemy would waste any time in following the route the battalion had taken, at least until he came to the destroyed ferry. No. 10 Platoon was not surprised, therefore, to see about 5 p.m. a tank lurching its way along the railway on the opposite side of the gorge. Knowing that the tunnel was blocked and the culvert very thoroughly demolished, they watched its progress with some satisfaction and called for artillery fire.

It was at this point that the defence received its first setback, for, owing to the winding gorge and the steepness of the hills, the forward observation officer's wireless set could not make contact with the guns. Consequently the artillery fire was not controlled by direct observation, and the tank remained undisturbed. Close behind it was a party of 112 Reconnaissance Group cyclists, whom 10 Platoon engaged with rifles and Bren guns. The enemy replied with a mortar and a machine gun, whereupon Privates McCabe ⁴⁰ and Clark ⁴¹ climbed up the cliff behind their post for a better view and helped to silence both weapons. The German infantry took shelter in the mouth of the tunnel, but the tank, impervious to small-arms fire, turned its gun on the post, and after some losses Second-Lieutenant Rose was ordered to withdraw the platoon 200 yards up the ridge to where there was cover from the tank. Both sides had an unseen audience perched high above the tunnel: the missing patrol, Davies and Thompson, were wondering how they were going to cross the river and rejoin their company. They decided that there was nothing for it but another detour southwards.

Just before dusk an Australian patrol came down the road, evidently under the impression that the enemy was farther back, and was fired on when it reached the block. The patrol took cover and returned the fire. No. 10 Platoon joined in the action until it was dark and the patrol was able to withdraw. The Australians left behind two seriously wounded men who were brought in later by 10 Platoon. While this outpost action was being fought, another demolition was made in the road just forward of Tempe by Australian engineers, and Major Le Lievre was instructed to withdraw 10 Platoon. The men were exhausted after three nights without rest, so the worst cases, including Second-Lieutenant Rose, were sent back to Battalion Headquarters for a night's sleep; the others joined 12 Platoon. Except for the artillery searching the hills above Itia and Gonnos, where moving lights suggested that the expected outflanking march was in progress, and half-hourly shelling of the

road below them, the night in B Company's area passed peacefully.

Elsewhere it was not so quiet. Fifth Brigade's transport was pouring back from Olympus through Larissa to the Thermopylae line; 4 Brigade was extricating itself from the Servia Pass and also moving through Larissa; 2 Panzer Division, blocked on the railway track, had found a ford further east and was getting its tanks across the river; 112 Reconnaissance Group was edging along the hills above the railway. Part of 6 Mountain Division was, in fact, nearing Gonnos, with forward patrols already on the far bank of the river. Probably with the idea of identifying the troops in the gorge, the patrols included English-speaking Germans who called out in an accent fondly thought to be Australian. Their inquiries as to which unit was opposite them were answered by A and C Companies on the river bank in what they thought was a German accent, and their remarks were very, very rude indeed.

The morning of the 18th broke clear and fine. As soon as it was light enough enemy movement was detected across the river. Transport was seen in Gonnos and troops were dribbling into the village of Itia. The guns opened on them, and the German mountain artillery replied in an endeavour to protect their infantry moving down the hills and taking position along the river bank. At first B Company, also under artillery fire, thought our guns were registering short and sent back messages to that effect. Fired on from front, rear and flank, B Company eventually was forced to move further up the ridge. A Company on the ridge below Tempe took a hand as soon as the enemy was within range. The Germans retaliated by changing from counter-battery fire to registering along the river bank and the re-entrants where the anti-tank guns were sited. More and more guns and mortars came into action along the whole length of the front. The 26th NZ Battery crashed 25-pounder shells into them, and every rifle and Bren gun in 21 Battalion searched the opposite hills. The valley was filled with the roar of rushing shells, the thunder of exploding mortar bombs, and the crackle of musketry echoing and re-echoing. The ancient Greek gods who dwelt on high Olympus might have been engaged in combat.

Throughout the morning the enemy's infantry strength continued to increase, as well as the number of his mortars and machine guns. As fast as the artillery silenced one nest, another would come into action. It was clear that an attempt was being made to smother any opposition to a river crossing. Colonel Macky held a conference with his company commanders and ordered that if the battalion was completely cut

off or overwhelmed, those who could would make their way out through the hills in small parties and rejoin the Division. Owing to lack of communications, each company would have to act on its own initiative.

The firing continued until eleven o'clock, when the enemy attempted his first crossing. The place was well chosen—in a sharp bend between the two nearest Australian companies. There were no troops in the immediate vicinity, but the movement was seen from Ampelakia and Brigade Headquarters was informed. Colonel Chilton then asked for 21 Battalion carriers to oppose the crossing.

Lieutenant Dee, waiting at Battalion Headquarters where the Australians had laid a line from Evangelismos, raced off and advanced his nine carriers to a position on the right of some Australian carriers already in action. The gunners did not wait until they were within effective range, but opened up at 1200 yards. Some enemy troops were across before the carriers were within range, but some were killed while still in the water. The Germans did not emerge from the cover along the river bank, and it is probable that the operation was a feint to draw forces from the main attack against the Australians opposite Evangelismos.

Following the first German attack came a double thrust against the gorge defences. Tanks gingerly felt their way over the road blocks, followed by lorried infantry and troops on foot. B Company engaged them immediately but, coming under fire from the tanks as well as from a concentration of mortars across the river, was forced further up the ridge.

Simultaneously with his armoured advance along the road, the enemy laid a heavy bombardment on Tempe and attempted several crossings. Two sections of carriers withdrawn from the Australian area helped A and C Companies to defeat this movement.

Eventually a crossing was effected between Tempe and C Company. It might have been thrown back if the tanks, with rifle bullets flattening themselves on the armour, had not arrived. C Company, on the western end of a small re-entrant where vehicles could deploy, was engaged by 17 tanks. No. 13 Platoon, across the road, was overwhelmed in a cloud of dust and smoke, and the survivors of the company withdrew up the ridge. Our artillery, still hampered by poor communications, rained

shells into the area but was unable to stop the advance.

The next obstacle was the cratered road in front of Tempe, where Anderson's platoon was still in possession. Streams of shells were poured into the village, while the leading armour inched its way over the obstruction. At the same time an enemy platoon stormed across the demolished bridge. The defence crumpled under the weight of fire, and only a few men got out to join A Company, grimly awaiting its turn. There still remained the troop of anti-tank guns; two that had survived intense mortaring destroyed two tanks and damaged a third before they were put out of action.

In the meantime Battalion Headquarters had moved from its ditch to the top of the ridge behind. From there it could be seen that the Germans had made good their crossing in front of Evangelismos and were heavily engaged with the Australians, but the line to Brigadier Allen had gone dead and there was no communication. When the tanks, as was inevitable, overran A Company and debouched from the gorge, the Australians would no more be able to contend with them than 21 Battalion had been.

Even if Larissa was not entered in force before dark, there was no apparent escape by road for the troops in the gorge. Captain McClymont was therefore instructed to prepare to withdraw the survivors of A Company up the ridge, after they had delayed the enemy as long as possible. Lieutenant E. G. Smith was shown a point on the ridge and told to go there, dispose the platoons as they arrived, and wait for McClymont. Only a few of A Company reported at the rendezvous and Smith, after leading a mixed party of New Zealanders and Australians by foot, boat, truck, and train, missing embarkation and, getting as far as the very toe of Greece, was eventually taken prisoner.

A Company, with a section of carriers in support, was now the last obstacle, but its rifles were no more effective against German armour than were those of the other companies. There was a longer delay than was justified by the strength of the position and it may have been because the carriers, in spite of severe mortaring, helped to keep the enemy infantry pinned down. It was clear that the enemy infantry would not advance without the tanks, and vice versa. At approximately 4.30 p.m. the tanks broke past A Company. Sergeant-Major Lockett, ⁴² in a last despairing

effort to stem the flood, rammed the leader with his carrier and forced it off the road. He won 21 Battalion's first MM.

Four of the six carriers holding the river line were knocked out; the others withdrew behind the artillery and asked if they could assist. The guns, however, did not need local protection, so the carriers went in search of the battalion transport.

It is not clear whether Second-Lieutenant Southworth ever received the withdrawal instructions, and as both he and Captain McClymont were killed in Crete, the point may never be cleared up. What is certain, however, is that this gallant young officer led his platoon out, reported to Colonel Chilton, and fought with 2/2 Australian Battalion until it in turn was forced into the hills.

Colonel Macky watched in the fading light from the top of the ridge and saw the first three tanks destroyed by the forward guns of A Troop 26 Battery before it in turn was overrun. Then the tanks fanned out and passed round the rear of the nearest Australian company. The 26th Battery, fighting a stubborn rearguard action, saw to it that they did not get into Larissa before dark, but the tide of battle had passed beyond 21 Battalion, shouldered aside by the tanks. With inadequate numbers and inferior equipment, it had done everything possible. The remnants of the forward companies moved back into the foothills, but from various vantage points enemy flares and signal lights could be seen far ahead—too far ahead to walk around. There was only one road left to safety—perhaps. It meant climbing over Mount Ossa to the coast, obtaining boats and rejoining the Division wherever it was making the next stand. And all the time Major Harding was waiting with transport to take them out.

As liaison officer Major Harding had been present at the corps conference that had decided on the composite brigade's movements. It was a most secret conference and no notes were permitted. The battalion transport was to proceed forthwith to Molos. The unit was to be withdrawn on the night of the 18th and taken by trucks to Molos, where it would rejoin its own transport. This arrangement was to avoid unnecessary congestion of traffic at the last moment, but it was later modified and Major Harding was told to arrange the move with his own vehicles.

Lieutenant Penney, 43 battalion transport officer, was accordingly instructed to

take the trucks to Molos, dump loads, and report back on the afternoon of the 18th. He was not able to return, but sent a despatch rider with a message to the effect that Colonel Clifton, ⁴⁴ CRE NZ Division, had countermanded his instructions on the grounds that all roads were needed for southbound traffic.

The battalion was then in the position of having no transport, and Harding set off post-haste to Corps Headquarters for new instructions. Corps Headquarters had moved in the meantime, but was eventually run to earth in an olive grove 20 miles south of Larissa. Harding was advised to get in touch with New Zealand Division.

Divisional Headquarters was located two miles south of Larissa and, when the position was explained, Colonel Stewart, ⁴⁵ GSO 1 NZ Division, made 20 trucks available from the Reserve Mechanical Transport Company. They were to rendezvous under a bluff in the area that the battalion transport had left, and Major Harding went on ahead to await their arrival. En route he met General Freyberg returning from Brigadier Allen's headquarters and was told that contact with 21 Battalion had been lost, the tanks were in Tempe, and the battalion was probably dispersing.

Before the General's visit Brigadier Allen had received two less-exalted callers. The two-man patrol last heard of above the halted tank opposite B Company had squirmed their way through the enemy around Gonnos and had persuaded a friendly Greek to row them across the river. They were making towards the sound of the fighting when, as Sergeant Davies describes it:

We ran slap bang into an Australian patrol who took us under close arrest to their Brigade Headquarters. After a thorough check up Brigadier Allen told us that Col Macky and the Battalion were in a tough spot. It was not possible to make contact owing to the enemy having made several crossings of the river. He asked me if we would go into the scrub again and endeavour to contact the Bn and apprise them of the position. He pointed out that no definite order for withdrawal could come from him but to tell Col Macky that he would be a very wise man if he foresaw such an order and acted accordingly.

The pair took off again but had not gone far when they met Captain Dickson ⁴⁶ and four B Company men. They exchanged stories and went back to Brigadier Allen's

headquarters, moved out with the Australians, and rejoined the battalion transport at Molos.

The RMT arrived at the rendezvous about 5 p.m. The position at that time was that 21 Battalion was isolated and dispersing, 2/2 and 2/3 Australian Battalions were disintegrating, the light was beginning to fail, and numbers of enemy planes were trying to silence the guns before darkness immobilised the tanks. The aircraft did not succeed, and 26 Battery withdrew of its own accord after dark.

In the meantime Penney had arrived from Molos, and Harding, disliking the prospect of passing the convoy through Larissa, where bombing was heavy and continuous, sent him to reconnoitre an overland route which would bypass Larissa and join the Volos road further south. Penney did not return from his mission; he ran into an ambush, was wounded, and was taken prisoner.

Colonel Parkinson had left 26 Battery firing on two fronts, successfully preventing the junction of a new enemy force coming up from the south-west with the tanks still unable to get on to the Larissa road. His idea was to ascertain Colonel Chilton's intention and to see how his two forward guns were faring. He found an empty battlefield: the Australians were gone, the enemy infantry was under cover waiting tank support, and his own guns were silenced. He did meet some troops, however—about 150 men of 21 Battalion, mostly Headquarters Company, who had decided to take a direct route along the lower slopes of the hills. Parkinson got them into formation and led them back to the 26 Battery position, where Harding was waiting. By seven o'clock another fifty men had arrived, and the convoy was sent off under the command of Captain Sadler, while Harding remained behind with two vehicles in case any more troops came down.

The leading trucks of Sadler's convoy ran into the same ambush that had captured Penney, and when they were fired on the men jumped out and scattered in the darkness. An attempt was made with a carrier and a volunteer crew to smash through the trap. Private Bond ⁴⁷ drove and Sergeant-Major Lockett, Sergeant Marshall-Inman and Private Black, ⁴⁸ armed with Bren guns, formed the crew. They headed straight into the ambush, spraying the road in front with fire, but the carrier was hit by a mortar bomb and lifted off the road. Lockett's gun was shot from his shoulder, and the carrier landed in a bog on the side of the road. Before they could

make dry land again the carrier was bellied on a rock and, as they were now sitting shots, the crew decided it was time to abandon ship and head into the darkness. The remaining trucks made a wide detour and after some trouble struck the main road south of Larissa. Once on the main highway they travelled all night and reached Molos about midday (19 April), with 114 men of all ranks.

The two trucks retained by Major Harding, with Second-Lieutenant Rose in charge, collected a few more men and about 9 p.m. joined the rear of an Australian transport column that was taking out the survivors of 2/3 Battalion. Larissa was thought to be in enemy hands, but as a matter of fact was still held by us, and the ambush that caused all the confusion was the daring action of a handful of Germans who had penetrated through the area between the Elasson road and the Tempe-Larissa road, swum the Peneios River and set up a road block at a point where the road and railway cross. The route followed by the Australian convoy was an exceedingly poor one skirting the foothills, and progress was slow. Rose's trucks were the last in the convoy, with Harding following in his pick-up, and when they eventually reached Molos on 20 April Harding was missing.

The battalion strength was then 132 all ranks: the commanding officer, second-in-command, adjutant, the four rifle company commanders, and the second-in-command of A, C and D Companies were missing. The men dug trenches in an olive grove, while enemy planes machine-gunned and dive-bombed at random without locating the troops under the trees.

The Thermopylae line, behind which the Anzac Corps was regrouping, extended from the coast near Molos along a ridge running east and west to the Pindus Mountains. These mountains, not unlike the Southern Alps of New Zealand, were the backbone of Greece and formed a natural barrier between the east and west. There were only two passes in the area: Thermopylae, on the east along the coast in the New Zealand sector, and Brallos, where the road and railway passed through the Pindus Mountains, defended by the Australians on the west. The Sperkhios River ran along the whole length of the front, mostly through marshy plains—difficult terrain for tanks—and added considerably to the natural strength of the broken country behind it.

On the other side of the Pindus it was a different story. The Greeks, previously

reluctant to give up a winning campaign against the Italians in Albania, were now forced to withdraw and had only tortuous mountain tracks left to them. Without transport, ammunition or supplies, they could do nothing against the weight of armour, guns, planes and men thrown in against them. Courage, all that remained to the Greeks, was not enough. The position was recognised as hopeless. The Greek Prime Minister committed suicide, and arrangements were pushed on to evacuate the Allied army. On 21 April the Greek Army in Epirus capitulated and the Thermopylae line was left with an open left flank.

For 21 Battalion the 21st was like the previous day, with machine-gunning and bombing attacks, again without casualties. The battalion was in reserve, while 6 Brigade held the right and 5 Brigade the left of the line, and 4 Brigade and the Divisional Cavalry kept watch on the coast in case a landing was attempted from Euboea Island.

A conference was being held at Molos between General Freyberg and Brigadier Hargest on the morning of 21 April when Major Harding reported. He explained that his pick-up had been bogged and that he had walked most of the way.

This explanation was rather an understatement. Soon after leaving his bogged pick-up he had met some of the battalion who had been in the convoy when it had been shot up in the German ambush. With a party of 30, of whom eight were Australians and the remainder from 21 Battalion, he had marched all day along the eastern side of Lake Voiviis. At the village of Kanilia they had been fed by the inhabitants, rowed across the lake, and provided with a guide who took them by a short cut through the hills to the Volos- Lamia road. The men were pretty well exhausted by then and were told to take a two-hour rest and push on to Lamia, while Harding went on to try and find some transport. He travelled part of the way on horseback and part in a commandeered Greek taxi shared with three Australians, which had brought them to a demolished bridge. On the other side they had found a serviceable civilian van, which carried them to Lamia and on to the Sperkhios River, where the bridges were down and the outposts on the alert. It was now dusk and a burst of Bren-gun fire had decided the party to wait until morning. At first light they had hailed an engineer who was making a report on the demolished bridges and, with the help of some planks, had got across without having to swim.

The General questioned Harding about the probable movements of the part of the battalion still missing, and said that arrangements were being made with the Navy to patrol the coast between the mouth of the Peneios River and the port of Volos. This was probably found impossible, for no troops were picked up by the Navy. However, two boats were taken across the bay by engineers to pick up the rest of Harding's party.

The news that Greece had capitulated and that the force was to leave the country was circulated among the troops on the morning of 22 April. Orders were issued by Harding, who had assumed command of 21 Battalion, to destroy all surplus gear, including tents, orderly-room records, and clothing. Every man was given an opportunity to change his clothing at the quartermaster's store, and what remained was sprayed with fire-extinguisher fluid and buried. The general scheme of retirement was for 4 and 5 Brigades to begin moving back towards embarkation points, while 6 Brigade, supported by the whole divisional artillery and two British artillery regiments, continued to hold the Thermopylae line. The 21st Battalion, being so very much under strength, was to be the first unit away on the road to Athens for embarkation. It was to leave after dark that night and to report to Headquarters British Troops in Greece at Athens for further orders. Before leaving, however, the battalion strength rose by five men: Lance-Sergeant Anderson, ⁴⁹ of A Company, and four other ranks came in after walking to Volos, stealing a boat, and sailing down the coast.

By dawn about fifty miles had been covered and the column was at Thebes. Enemy planes were strafing the road, but the drivers had been warned that there was no time for safety tactics; they were to keep their intervals and stop for nothing. The instructions were obeyed to the letter, and in spite of a series of attacks the column had reached Restos, about five miles outside Athens, by 9 a.m. The transport was dispersed in an olive grove while Harding went to Headquarters British Troops in Greece for orders. He was instructed to take the troops to Voula reinforcement camp and be prepared to move after dark to a point on the Athens- Rafina road, where guides from the embarkation staff would be waiting. One glance at the chaos at Voula was enough. The instructions about taking the men there were immediately forgotten, and they remained under the olive trees.

There were, however, some 21 Battalion officers and men at Voula. Four attached officers (Lieutenants Campbell ⁵⁰ and Daniel ⁵¹ and Second-Lieutenants Stevenson ⁵² and Clark ⁵³), together with a handful of NCOs and men, had been left behind when the battalion entrained for the front. They had been transferred to Voula, where a reinforcement camp had been established, and had been occupied on guard duties. When the situation began to deteriorate the reinforcement groups were organised on a battalion basis, with Stevenson commanding C Company and Campbell in charge of the platoon containing 21 Battalion personnel. Men from hospital and stragglers from the front had brought the numbers up to approximately forty, of whom a dozen were out on guard duty when Harding arrived. He obtained the release of the 21 Battalion platoon, which rejoined the battalion. Stevenson remained with the rest of his company and was captured, as was Clark, who was in charge of the men on guard. Daniel had been sent to Athens on special duty and escaped to Crete.

The troops of 21 Battalion hid all day under the olive trees. At 10 p.m. they started for Rafina, via Athens, and arrived at 2.10 a.m. The men were led away to dispersal areas, and the drivers took the trucks to another area and damaged them as much as possible without burning them. The strictest orders were issued against movement during daylight, but to lie quiet for a day in peaceful surroundings was no great hardship. About 10 p.m. that night (the 24th) the troops moved in small parties to D beach near Porto Rafti, were taken out in landing barges to the transport Glengyle, and climbed up nets to the dark decks above. They were ordered to throw overboard everything except arms, ammunition and personal gear, to save weight and space; they were fed on mugs of hot coffee and biscuits, and went to sleep wherever a space could be found to lie down. By 4 a.m. 5700 men had left Greece.

It was Anzac Day. Twenty-seven years earlier, and at the same hour, an Auckland battalion was preparing to land on a beach in the same Aegean Sea.

The 21st Battalion's casualties in Greece were: 14 killed and died of wounds, 26 wounded, 235 prisoners of war (of whom nine were wounded and eight died), a total of 275.

- ¹ Lt-Col F. W. Huggins; born England, 29 Jan 1894; importer; died 19 Nov 1945.
- ² Capt A. A. Yeoman, m.i.d.; Katikati; born Whakatane, 24 Feb 1914; dairy farmer; wounded and p.w. 26 Nov 1941.
- ³ Capt F. W. O. Jones; Wellington; born Wellington, 14 Sep 1911; civil engineer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.
- ⁴ Capt L. G. Williams, m.i.d.; Silverstream; born Christchurch, 2 Jun 1909; draughtsman; wounded 21 May 1941; p.w. 22 May 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.
- ⁵ Capt G. A. H. Bullock-Douglas; Hawera; born Wanganui, 4 Jun 1911; bank accountant; twice wounded.
- ⁶ Capt H. G. Rose; Auckland; born England, 7 Nov 1897; solicitor; wounded 21 May 1941; p.w. 22 May 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.
- ⁷ Capt R. C. B. Finlayson; Auckland; born Dunedin, 8 Nov 1914; labourer; p.w. 25 Apr 1941.
- ⁸ Capt H. H. W. Smith; Matatoki, Thames; born Waitotara, 11 Jan 1914; farmer; p.w. 29 Nov 1941.
- ⁹ Capt C. T. Mason, MC; born Pukerau, 9 Sep 1915; teacher; killed in action 12 Jul 1942.
- ¹⁰ Capt M. C. O'Neill, ED; Auckland; company secretary; p.w. 18 Apr 1941.
- ¹¹ Capt H. L. Aickin; Auckland; born Auckland, 1 Apr 1914; traveller; p.w. 25 Apr 1941.
- ¹² Capt V. D. Phillips; Christchurch; born Lumsden, 8 Apr 1916; salesman;

wounded 27 Nov 1941.

- ¹³ Maj N. R. Flavell; Dunedin; born Auckland, 17 Jan 1915; teacher; wounded and p.w. Apr 1941; escaped; reported safe 30 Nov 1941.
- ¹⁴ Capt K. G. Dee; born Onehunga, 6 Apr 1914; farmer; wounded 4 Jul 1942; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.
- ¹⁵ Maj G. H. Panckhurst; Waianakarua, North Otago; born Westport, 1 Nov 1906; accountant; twice wounded.
- ¹⁶ Capt F. E. Wilson, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born NZ 1 Aug 1915; clerk; p.w. 21 Nov 1941; escaped 16 Sep 1943.
- ¹⁷ Capt O. S. Hetherington, MBE; Rotorua; born Thames, 3 Apr 1903; medical practitioner; RMO 21 Bn Jan 1940-May 1941; p.w. 23 May 1941; repatriated Sep 1944.
- ¹⁸ Rev Fr W. Sheely, m.i.d.; Te Aroha; born Hunterville, 5 Oct 1907; priest; p.w. 28 Nov 1941.
- ¹⁹ Lt N. R. McKay; born NZ 22 Apr 1909; farmer; killed in action 16 Apr 1941.
- ²⁰ Pte J. Collingwood; born Auckland, 17 Dec 1904; horse breaker; died of wounds 16 Apr 1941.
- ²¹ Capt L. N. Wallace; Auckland; born Nohukohu, 8 Jan 1917; clerk; wounded 15 Jul 1942.
- ²² Sgt G. W. Palmer; Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 31 Jul 1905; plumber and steam engineer; twice wounded.
- ²³ Pte D. Hookham; Wellington; born New Plymouth, 2 Dec 1912; theatre attendant.

- ²⁴ German records make it appear unlikely that enemy tanks were opposite 21 Battalion that evening. Probably the tracked infantry carriers were mistaken for tanks. The enemy unit was 2 Motor Cycle Battalion, reinforced with engineer, artillery and machine-gun detachments. Tanks (? Panzer Regiment) did not reach Platamon until the middle of the following day, 15 April. A reconnaissance, combined with the reports of the demolitions, gave 2 Motor Cycle Battalion the impression that the 'enemy' (21 Battalion) was holding only the ridge near the castle.
- ²⁵ WO II W. Davies; Rotorua; born Wales, 13 Mar 1904; forestry worker; wounded May 1941.
- ²⁶ Pte B. S. Thompson; National Park; born England, 26 Jul 1908; labourer.
- ²⁷ A shrub closely resembling New Zealand manuka.
- ²⁸ L-Cpl N. E. Lovell; born Taumarunui, 29 Nov 1916; bushworker; killed in action 15 Apr 1941.
- ²⁹ Pte C. J. Bosworth; Palmerston North; born Auckland, 21 Mar 1904; wine dealer; p.w. 16 Apr 1941.
- ³⁰ Cpl H. C. Howe; Frankton Junction; born Hunterville, 21 May 1896; farmer; p.w. 16 Apr 1941.
- ³¹ Cpl J. Gardner; Auckland; born Stratford, 24 May 1902; labourer; p.w. 16 Apr 1941.
- ³² Cpl R. C. Pipe; born Opotiki, 30 Jan 1918; school-teacher; killed in action 15 Apr 1941.
- ³³ Sgt F. A. Kibblewhite; Thames; born Oamaru, 3 Dec 1905; school-teacher; wounded 16 Apr 1941; p.w. 21 Nov 1941.
- ³⁴ Lt-Col H. M. McElroy, DSO and bar, ED; Auckland; born Timaru, 2 Dec

- 1910; public accountant; CO 21 Bn 4 Jun 1943–21 Jun 1944; wounded four times.
- ³⁵ Anzac Corps, formed on 12 Apr 1941, comprised 6 Australian Division and the New Zealand Division.
- ³⁶ Maj S. W. Parfitt, m.i.d.; Hauraki Plains; born NZ 12 Dec 1914; farmer.
- 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 1 NZ Army Tank Bde and 7 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1941–42; 6 Bde Apr 1943-Jun 1944; 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.
- ³⁸ Capt K. A. Longmore; Wellington; born NZ 15 May 1918; clerk; p.w. 23 Jul 1942.
- ³⁹ Lt H. R. Anderson; born Dargaville, 24 Mar 1908; estate agent; killed in action 20 May 1941.
- ⁴⁰ Sgt C. A. McCabe, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ 31 Jan 1908; clerk; twice wounded; p.w. Nov 1941.
- ⁴¹ L-Cpl C. W. Clark, m.i.d.; Edgecombe, Bay of Plenty; born Timaru, 18 Jan 1915; blacksmith; p.w. 1 Jul 1941; escaped 10 Jul 1941; recaptured 26 Oct 1941.
- ⁴² WO II A. H. Lockett, MM; born Gisborne, 5 Jan 1905; student; killed in action 27 May 1941.
- ⁴³ Capt R. Penney; Hamilton; born Scotland, 18 Dec 1909; sawmiller; p.w. 18 Apr 1941.

- ⁴⁴ Brig G. H. Clifton, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Green-meadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; 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.
- ⁴⁵ Maj-Gen K. L. Stewart, CB, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Legion of Merit (US); Kerikeri; born Timaru, 30 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; 1 NZEF 1917–19; GSO I 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, and 5 Bde Mar-Aug 1944; p.w. 1 Aug 1944; comd 9 Bde (2 NZEF, Japan) Nov 1945-Jul 1946; Adjutant-General, NZ Military Forces, Aug 1946-Mar 1949; Chief of General Staff Apr 1949-Mar 1952.
- ⁴⁶ Maj W. Dickson; Auckland; born Auckland, 18 Mar 1906; school-teacher; wounded 26 May 1941.
- ⁴⁷ Pte G. R. Bond; born Scotland, 8 Mar 1916; truck driver; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.
- ⁴⁸ Pte G.R.A. Black, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Whangarei, 19 Apr 1918; labourer; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.
- ⁴⁹ L-Sgt F. J. Anderson; Auckland; born Auckland, 12 Mar 1913; labourer; wounded May 1941.
- ⁵⁰ Lt R. D. Campbell; born Perth, 2 Dec 1908; bank clerk; killed in action 26 May 1941.
- ⁵¹ Capt W. J. Daniel, m.i.d.; Auckland; born England, 15 Aug 1912; public accountant; wounded 26 May 1941; p.w. 24 Nov 1941.
- ⁵² Capt J. M. Stevenson; Auckland; born Auckland, 3 Apr 1902; solicitor; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁵³ Capt M. M. Clark; Auckland; born NZ 9 Sep 1910; clerk; p.w. Apr 1941.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 4 — BATTLE FOR CRETE

CHAPTER 4 Battle for Crete

The convoy carrying 5 Brigade from Greece was machine-gunned at intervals, but the only bombing attack on the Glengyle missed by a comfortable margin and there were no casualties.

By 2.30 p.m. on Anzac Day the troops were safe in Suda Bay, on the north coast of Crete, where a little town clustered around the end of a single quay. Behind the houses were vineyards and olive groves which, commencing as easy slopes, rose into the green and purple foothills of the snow-crested White Mountains. The harbour was full of transports, around and between which small boats fussed continuously, while landing barges unloaded soldiers evacuated from Greece.

The 21st Battalion marched inland some three miles to an area in the Perivolia olive plantation, called Rest Camp B to distinguish it from any other area in the same plantation. Instead of tents there were olive trees. Rations came from somewhere; cigarettes and matches had been distributed at a point en route, and as a final comfort there was a stretch of water and the Navy between the troops and the enemy.

The locality was regarded more as a place to live in than a defensive area, for Crete was then considered to be only a transit camp during the evacuation of Greece. Get everybody off the mainland first, move on to Egypt, refit, then get our own back on the Italians and Germans now in the Western Desert. That was the programme—everybody knew it—and in the meantime shelter under the olive trees and reorganise.

But Crete, although the information had not seeped down to the rank and file, was to be something more than a staging camp and recruiting ground for harried troops. It was essential for Germany to complete the defence of her southern flank, and the island's possession was also an important factor in our Mediterranean strategy. Intelligence reports indicated that the enemy intended mounting an attack before very long.

Brigadier Puttick ¹ took command of NZ Division on 30 April, when General

Freyberg was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the forces on Crete. The latter soon found that he could expect no important addition to the ground forces and little or no air support. The Navy promised all possible assistance, but the sky was dominated by the Luftwaffe.

In addition to the original garrison of one British brigade, General Freyberg found he had available for the defence of Crete eleven partly equipped and practically untrained Greek regiments, four British, eight Australian and eight New Zealand battalions, all short of equipment and under strength. In addition there was a heterogeneous collection of specialists formed into infantry units, although virtually untrained from an infantry point of view and strange to their weapons.

The topography of Crete gave no help to the defence. The island is about 160 miles long and 30 miles wide and has only one main road running the whole length of it; the ports and airfields are situated on the northern side of a mountain backbone rising to 8000 feet, across which the roads are few and elementary. The enemy had absolute air supremacy, with German planes based on airfields in southern Greece and the Italians in the Dodecanese Islands; our nearest bases in North Africa, over 200 miles away, were beyond effective fighter range.

The New Zealand sector was the northern coast westwards from (but excluding) Canea. It was from one and a half to three miles in depth, with the inland boundary along a ridge roughly parallel with the coast, and was scoured with steep-sided valleys. Many of the hills were wooded and the lower land was filled with olive groves and occasional fields of corn. Between the lower land and the almost perpendicular country was an area of terraced vineyards.

Brigadier Hargest, with an additional battalion, the Maoris, under command, was given the task of defending Maleme airfield. Fourth Brigade, eventually to be commanded by Brigadier Inglis, ² was held in general reserve between Galatas and Canea. Tenth Brigade, an ad hoc formation formed later and commanded by Colonel Kippenberger, ³ occupied the Galatas- Alikianou area.

Of the 5 Brigade units, 22 Battalion was made responsible for the airfield itself, with the other battalions in support to the east. On 30 April 21 Battalion moved to a position between Maleme and the Platanias River, with the dual role of defending

the beach and river mouth against a sea landing and of counter-attacking in support of 22 Battalion.

The 21st Battalion's strength was only 237 all ranks, but two New Zealand Engineer companies (7 Field Company and 19 Army Troops Company), already in the area, were attached. It was decided, however, that a battalion so diversely composed would not be solid enough, and 23 Battalion was given the counter-attack role, while the 21st moved again to rising ground south of Maleme. The 28th (Maori) Battalion remained in Brigade reserve east of the Platanias River.

By 3 May 21 Battalion had settled into a valley about two miles south-east of Maleme. Major Harding, now temporarily commanding, set up his headquarters in Kondomari. The companies bivouacked in and around the village, with battle positions facing west along the forward slopes of what became known as Vineyard Ridge. The top of Vineyard Ridge was comparatively flat, about one hundred yards wide, and covered with orange, mandarin and olive groves, while along each side were the usual terraces of grapes within a few weeks of ripening. The higher, southern end of Vineyard Ridge was dominated by a small knoll about half an acre in area, on which were located two 50-foot masts and the machinery of a radio-location unit. It was extremely hush-hush and was spoken of as the wireless station. The RAF operators, about fifty strong, were mostly unarmed, and local protection was provided by a platoon from 22 Battalion. From the wireless station a road had been formed along the side of yet another spur down through Xamoudhokhori to the Maleme airfield, about a mile and a half away.

As far as the troops were concerned, digging weapon pits on Vineyard Ridge was an exercise only, for unless the Germans arrived by air or the Navy took a long holiday, they considered there was small chance of using them.

Time passed pleasantly enough. There was a routine stand-to at dusk and dawn, and there were periods when all ranks had to be in their areas. At night one-third of the strength was placed on three hours' sentry duty, and in the daytime there was three hours' training; the balance of the time was spent in preparing battle positions, in swimming parades, and resting. Rations could have been more varied, but the cooks, working under battalion arrangements and cooking over open fires in kerosene tins, did their best to vary the invariable bully beef. Money was

scarce, but fruit was cheap and wine not unheard of. There was in addition a minute percentage of leave to Canea, and Captain Panckhurst opened a small canteen. He financed the venture with money lent by a few who had been lucky at two-up; he borrowed a truck from the 1st Welch in Canea, and purchased his stock from the YMCA there. ⁴

On 3 May, very much to everybody's surprise, Lieutenant-Colonel Macky, together with 39 men of all ranks, rejoined the battalion from Greece. They had marched all night over the hills from Tempe, hoping to get to the port of Volos, but when daylight came they were still far behind the enemy lines. Guided first by a Greek shepherd and then by a professional tobacco smuggler, they had climbed over Mount Ossa to the coast. There they had met Captain Dutton, Padre Sheely, and a handful of men who had missed Major Harding after escaping from the ambush on the Larissa road. They had been four days in the hills and nine at sea, during which time they had transhipped five times. Colonel Macky and several of the party were suffering from dysentery, brought on by irregular meals and exposure, and were evacuated to hospital. Lieutenants Smith and Roach, at the risk of being caught and shot, volunteered to return to Greece in civilian clothes and endeavour to collect odd parties of men still at large. The offer was not accepted by Divisional Headquarters, who evidently thought that two officers in the hand were worth an unknown number of men in the Aegean.

Two days later Captain Trousdale reported with another party. With him were three officers and 51 other ranks; eight sick and wounded had been left behind in hospital at Heraklion. Their story was much the same as that of Colonel Macky's party: they had been bombed, machine-gunned, starved, and occasionally overfed. They had sheltered on half the islands in the Aegean Sea and had almost landed in Turkey, but had decided against it from fear of being interned.

Almost daily the strength rose by ones and twos as parties in caiques, some navigated by Greeks, others steered by guesswork, reached the island. Lieutenant Flavell brought a handful of men across with the aid of a Greek Automobile Association map, the help of Providence, and a stolen boat. Captain Hetherington and RSM Dave Sweeney, together with Sergeants Dave Hawkins, ⁵ Herb Bellamy ⁶ and Bill Kenny, ⁷ rowed part of the way, then joined some Australians at the island of Tinos. They had stolen a larger boat with an engine and sails, but the engine

broke down and the wind would not blow in the right direction. It took them three days rowing day and night to get about 25 miles from Antikithira to Kisamos Bay.

Naturally enough such events called for suitable celebrations, which in turn necessitated unauthorised trips to Canea for supplies. These out-of-bounds excursions and late returns from lawful leave were going on in other units also, and eventually it became necessary to establish a Field Punishment Centre. Major Harding was asked to detail an officer to command the centre, and went to A Company because it had the most subalterns. Lieutenant Roach's appointment was almost automatic, for four of his depleted platoon were already under sentence owing to a misunderstanding about leave passes. ⁸

The theory that Crete was merely a transit camp was still widely held among the troops, even after 8 May, when Lieutenant



The castle on the ridge at Platamon

The castle on the ridge at Platamon

The coastline north of Platamon from the castle—the railway is on the left



The coastline north of Platamon from the castle—the railway is on the left



Looking towards Pandeleimon from the castle



Loading up a donkey between Platamon and Tempe

Loading up a donkey between Platamon and Tempe



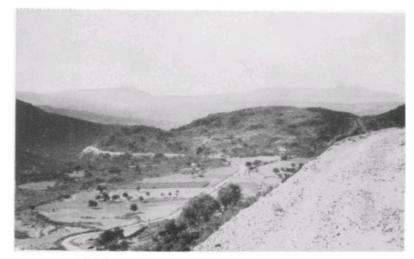
Demolition of the Pencios railway bridge

Demolition of the Peneios railway bridge



The outlook from 21 Battalion positions south of Maleme

The outlook from 21 Battalion positions south of Maleme



Looking north along the road from Suda Bay to Stilos, on which 21 Battalion fought a rearguard action

Looking north along the road from Suda Bay to Stilos, on which 21 Battalion fought a rearguard action



CRETE, Allied Dispositions, 20 May 1941

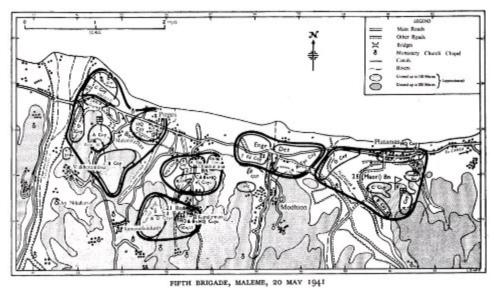
Campbell and six NCOs left the battalion to help train a Greek regiment at Kastelli. The supporters of the Cretan transit camp idea lost a little confidence two days later, when they learned that Sergeant Neil Robertson ⁹ and a detachment of ten men had been detailed for duty in the hills above Kastelli and that they were to report to Brigade Headquarters by the local telephone if there were any landings on the flats and beaches below them. If the telephone failed they were to use runners. Incidentally the runners would have had to show Olympic form because they were 20 miles west of Platanias, where Brigade Headquarters was situated.

There was another blow a week after the departure of the lookout detachment.

Lieutenant Anderson, with a mixed platoon of pioneers and transport drivers, departed to a post two miles west on the Tavronitis River bank. Their mission was to strengthen 22 Battalion's western flank and form the nucleus of a possible battalion defensive position.

On Saturday, 17 May, any remaining doubts about the coming invasion were dispelled. The battalion, now commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Allen, ¹⁰ was inspected by General Freyberg, who later told the men about the importance of holding Crete and the likely date for the attack. It was expected to come on Monday. The technique would probably be a preliminary strafing, followed by an attempted landing by parachute and glider troops. The General ended his remarks with a severe criticism of the withdrawal from the Tempe position in Greece and said that the transport column that had been ambushed on the Larissa road had panicked. The General, from the highest motives and without full knowledge of the facts, did less than justice to troops who, with inadequate support, had been required to meet the fire power of enemy tanks supported by experienced mountain troops.

The enemy substantiated General Freyberg's forecast by making the first use on Crete of dive-bombers. Stukas screamed down in 300-mile-an-hour power dives, released their bombs



fifth brigade, maleme, 20 may 1941

at low level around the airfield, flattened out and made off, not entirely scatheless, although the Bofors were few and the punishment they received severe.

Nobody envied 22 Battalion, which bore the brunt of the strafing.

There was no invasion on Monday. The troops agreed that the jittery prophets on the staff were wrong again as usual, or that the forecast was a trick to get them to dig weapon pits without picks or shovels to dig them with. In actual fact Intelligence had correctly reported the German timetable, later amended because their preparations took longer than was originally expected.

Tuesday, 20 May, began with the usual routine. The battalion had already stood down and was taking it easy waiting for breakfast. Topics of interest were the disposal of papers and parcels that had arrived late the previous night for men still missing in Greece, the somewhat heavier blitz over towards Suda Bay, and the new commanding officer.

Colonel Allen was no stranger to the men from the Hauraki district and within a few hours his biography was known to the battalion. He was a farmer from Morrinsville, had been elected to Parliament as Member for Hauraki, had been a Territorial officer in the Hauraki Regiment for years, and had sailed with 18 Battalion in the First Echelon. The commanding officer's short, slight, and wiry figure had covered much ground in the three days preceding the battle.

There was a rumble like distant thunder in the east. More reconnaissance planes, blast them, just when a man was going to have his breakfast. The rumble became a roar, and two dozen Messerschmitts, Dorniers and Stukas passed over the valley towards Maleme. They were followed by dozens more in quick succession. The muffled boom that distance and an intervening hill give to bursting bombs almost drowned the sound of the alarm. There was a hasty grabbing of equipment and a scramble for the positions that with much grumbling had been prepared on Vineyard Ridge. Those who had managed to evade the toil of digging owing to the lack of tools, put up miraculous records with tin hats, table knives, and finger nails.

The sky was black with planes swinging in over the high ground to the east, and the cloud of dust over Maleme, together with the thunder of explosions, the chatter of machine guns, and the quick bark of Bofors, settled all doubts. The invasion was on.

Like an orchestra following the baton of its leader, the noise built up to a climax

of detonating bombs, then stopped as suddenly as it had started. There was a new sound in the sky, a throbbing sound that grew in intensity until the ground shook. Overhead long lines of great, lumbering Junkers 52s were followed by ghostly gliders almost as large. From the bellies of the leading planes, now far to the west, fluttered what appeared to be little white handkerchiefs with little black blobs swinging under them. Paratroops! A few minutes later the sky was raining paratroops: in the west across the river, in the north among 22 and 23 Battalions, and in the east around 10 Brigade.

Subsequently paratroops were dropped nearer 21 Battalion, and for a while the unit was able to shoot many of them in the air. When there were no other targets close enough, potshots were taken at the doors in the sides of the Junkers to try to get the first man before he made his jump. At approximately 8.30 a.m. four plane-loads were dropped near D Company, but very few of them reached the ground alive; this was a slight recompense to 21 Battalion for being pushed around in Greece. A little later 24 paratroopers fell in Kondomari; one was capture alive, two were wounded, and the rest were killed.

The battalion had been allotted three possible roles:

- (i) To move to the Tavronitis River, where Lieutenant Anderson was already located.
- (ii) To take over 23 Battalion's area if that battalion counter-attacked in support of 22 Battalion.
- (iii) To remain and fight on Vineyard Ridge.

The telephone line to brigade was dead and no orders arrived. As in the first action in Greece, the battalion's commanding officer had to make his own decision. The 22nd Battalion had not asked for assistance, nor had 23 Battalion, with which he was in touch, been asked to counter-attack; so presumably 22 Battalion was successfully dealing with the situation. Lieutenant-Colonel Allen decided to remain and fight on Vineyard Ridge. His decision was understandable, but had he decided to move to the Tavronitis River area on the flank of 22 Battalion, the whole campaign in Crete might have taken a different course. Two companies of the enemy who had landed higher up the river might have been prevented from initiating a pincer movement on a vital sector of 22 Battalion's defences. The decision having been made, another platoon from A Company was sent to reinforce Lieutenant Anderson on the river bank and, if

necessary, to clear the villages of Xamoudhokhori and Vlakheronitissa en route. They reported some hours later that they could not get past the second village and had lost two killed and one wounded in the attempt. Two further efforts were made to contact Anderson, but on each occasion the patrols returned after their leaders, Lance-Corporals Bill Craig ¹¹ and Jock Agnew, ¹² had been killed.

A patrol under Lieutenant Dee was then sent forward of Xamoudhokhori. They went through the village, searched all the houses, and reported occasional fire from the direction of Vlakheronitissa between them and the river. The patrol returned at dusk and reported that enemy pressure was increasing.

After the paratroop drop had been completed there were long periods when there was little or no air activity in 5 Brigade's area. The enemy planes were giving air cover to the landings further east, at Retimo and Heraklion. A hot and thirsty day ended without the battalion having been heavily engaged. Colonel Allen was still without orders, Anderson's platoon was not accounted for, and the lookout detachment at Kastelli almost certainly was lost. ¹³ Double pickets were mounted, but the only indication that the airborne attack had secured a foothold at all was the coloured flares the paratroopers used for inter-communication, and they were mostly to the north and west.

At approximately ten o'clock the silence was broken by the sound of men approaching from the direction of 23 Battalion. They were talking and singing in Maori and were making a very considerable din. Captain Trousdale angrily asked what the idea was, and was told that B Company 28 Battalion was on the way to reinforce 22 Battalion. They were not sure of 21 Battalion's location and had no desire to be taken for paratroops and treated accordingly. They had adopted the ruse of speaking Maori to advertise their peaceful intention towards 21 Battalion.

At 2 a.m. on 21 May 23 Battalion rang through to say 22 Battalion was withdrawing from the airfield, and at about the same time the Maori B Company returned, accompanied by B Company 22 Battalion. The Maoris had been unable to locate 22 Battalion headquarters, but had encountered the withdrawing troops and guided them back.

Some time before daylight there were more sounds of movement. The missing

platoon arrived, very tired and very hungry. Sergeant Bill Gorrie ¹⁴ describes their adventures:

Our show started about 6 a.m. The cook had started to get breakfast and the chaps were getting roused when planes started to search and strafe the area we were in. This went on for about an hour when parachutists began to drop and the men of my section climbed the olive trees to get a better view for firing. Our arms were one rifle per man, one tommy gun, one bren gun which had jammed and would fire only single shots. Lieutenant Anderson had a 38 revolver and I also had only a 38 until one of our lads was wounded and I took his rifle. We accounted for quite a number of paratroopers. When things had quietened down I went along to report to Lieutenant Anderson, but met some of the section he was with coming to tell me he had been killed in the first few minutes, and that the Hun was moving forward through the olive trees. I decided to leave my section where it was and place the others, a little shaken by Lieutenant Anderson's death, on the lower bank of our position. We soon saw the Hun in his grey uniform feeling his way through the olive trees. However, we had the advantage and after we had accounted for several we were left alone from that quarter. In fact the whole area was more or less quiet, so I took the opportunity of withdrawing one section under Corporal Franklin 15 to the higher ground behind us as we did not know what might have landed there. This proved a good move for us, for no sooner had they left than we heard firing. I may say that one or two gliders had landed in the river bed by this time. The rest of the platoon moved up towards the firing and found Franklin's section very pleased with themselves. They had arrived just as a glider landed and had cleaned up everyone as they disembarked. I crawled out and counted seventeen and robbed one of his luger and ammo. Others in the section followed suit.

From what I knew our battalion was to have come forward to our area when the show started and joined up with 22nd Battalion on our right. My object was now, in view of the fact that we had no word at all from our commanding officer, to contact 22nd Battalion and let them know we were in the area and about ¾ of a mile away. I called for a volunteer to act as runner and Tom Cannon ¹⁶ started with a message. I am sorry to say nothing has been seen or heard of Tom since he left me.

Later in the afternoon I decided to try again to contact 22nd Battalion. I crawled

through some corn, but only found a dirty big glider and Huns could be heard talking; a problem with only a 38 and a luger, so I withdrew smartly and rejoined the boys. As soon as it was dark we started out to rejoin the battalion and got to our lines about 3 a.m.

At first light D Company saw a number of men whom they took to be enemy troops moving about. They opened fire and the 'enemy' took cover. Captain Trousdale managed to convince the company that the 'enemy' were in reality a portion of 22 Battalion, with a sprinkling of RAF, Australians and Royal Marine gunners, which accounted for the strange uniforms. He shouted to them to send two sergeants over to be identified. This was done, and elements of 22 Battalion's C, D and Headquarters Companies came into the 21 Battalion lines.

By early afternoon 22 Battalion had reorganised, with D Company and a few of C Company commanded by Captain Campbell ¹⁷ strengthening 21 Battalion's right flank. The 22nd Battalion's headquarters and Headquarters Company moved into Kondomari, and the rest of the battalion stayed with 23 Battalion.

The enemy was also consolidating around the captured airfield, while his planes endeavoured to silence the guns still firing on the drome. By late afternoon he was largely successful and a taxi service of Junkers landed a battalion, plus part of a regimental headquarters of 100 Mountain Regiment.

Elsewhere the position at first light was not unsatisfactory. The paratroops dropped around the other airfields were reported to have been mostly cleaned up, though it was thought that approximately three enemy battalions had landed and were consolidating in the reservoir and Prison Valley area south-west of Canea.

Still no orders came for 21 Battalion. Colonel Allen decided to feel out the enemy strength between Vineyard Ridge and the Tavronitis, and a strong patrol under Captain McElroy was directed to go past the wireless station to Xamoudhokhori. They were pinned down for three hours while some fifty Stukas were intent on their task of putting the wireless station out of commission. By the time they had finished the installation was in ruins, and many of the garrison were casualties. All documents of importance were burnt, and what machinery the bombs had missed was smashed before the position was abandoned. The patrol eventually

got past the wireless station to the village, where they found the enemy in some strength. He must have followed on the heels of the returning patrol, for shortly afterwards there was some sniping in A Company's area. The 23rd Battalion reported that the same blitz that had demolished the wireless station had also forced a withdrawal on its left flank but, with D Company 22 Battalion supporting Trousdale's company, Colonel Allen was not unduly disturbed. The three forward battalion commanders held a conference in the evening and agreed that the 23rd should retake the lost ground the following day, and that the 21st should assist with a platoon if necessary.

Meanwhile Brigadier Hargest had been preparing to recapture the Maleme airfield with 20 and 28 Battalions, the 20th being brought up from 4 Brigade and coming under command, but his difficulty was to let the forward battalions know the details. Neither wireless nor telephone was functioning, enemy aircraft made large-scale movement by day impossible, and snipers commanded the only road. Bren carriers or tanks by day or long detours on foot after dark were the only means of communication, and by a combination of both methods Allen was ordered to join 28 Battalion when the counter-attack reached Point 107, where the high country commanded the airfield. The unit axis of advance was the road from the wireless station to Vlakheronitissa, thence across country to the objective.

The battalion's attack was planned to commence at 7 a.m., and those not on patrol or picket duty were snatching a few hours' sleep. About midnight the sleepers were awakened to witness a battle off the coast. Tracer shells were curving across the sky, searchlights were waving wildly, balls of fire were speeding along the water, and there were salvos of gunfire. British destroyers and cruisers were racing among the German invasion fleet like terriers in a rat pit. Very soon there was no enemy fleet. Arguments as to the possible meaning of the sea action had hardly died down when the rattle of rifle fire and flares along the coast suggested that the counterattack had begun. The noise of battle drew closer and by daylight was near Maleme. The 21st Battalion made ready to do its share. Headquarters Company cleared a few snipers off the wireless station and A Company followed through along the road to Xamoudhokhori. The village was entered without much opposition and B Company went forward. It was not until they tried to advance beyond the village that the enemy showed his hand.

Heavy fire from the direction of Vlakheronitissa killed Captain McClymont and wounded several men before the others were forced to take cover. Lieutenant Yeoman posted Corporal McCabe and his Lewis machine-gun section in the tower of the village church and, though targets were difficult to pick up among the trees and grape vines, the enemy fire slackened considerably. Eventually a machine gun got onto McCabe's section and, when bursts of fire started coming through the open window and ricochetting off the stone walls of the empty room, they had to move.

A patrol from A Company under Lieutenant Southworth was directed to move south-west and, if possible, outflank the opposition. They did not return. It was then about midday. Headquarters Company was established under the olive trees near the wireless station, A and B Companies were around Xamoudhokhori, and C Company was moving up. A runner arrived from Major Harding at Rear Headquarters in Kondomari with a message from 23 Battalion, stating that the counter-attack had not gone well. There had been delay in getting on to the start line and then heavy opposition between the road and the beach at Pirgos.

Allen decided to stand on A Company's objective until he knew more of the general situation, and he went back to check with Captain Trousdale. A and B Companies were instructed to pull back if enemy pressure became too severe, and C Company was ordered to close the gap between D Company and the wireless station.

The enemy had not attempted to exploit the gap between D Company and 23 Battalion. Satisfied that the position there was satisfactory, Colonel Allen was returning to Xamoudhokhori when he met the forward companies back at the wireless station. Flanking patrols, snipers, and mortar fire had forced them into the village, but mounting casualties had decided the company commanders to withdraw in accordance with instructions. The enemy, appreciating the situation, had followed at a discreet distance, and his fire was increasing.

At the same moment that Colonel Allen arrived there was a lull in the enemy attack and a man came up the road carrying a white flag. He delivered a note to Colonel Allen who, after reading its contents, which demanded immediate surrender, screwed it up and threw it in the emissary's face. The gesture was sufficiently obvious, for the man retired quickly along the way he had come.

The track from the wireless station to Vineyard Ridge was now under fire, and there were some casualties before the battalion was reformed along its original position. Trousdale handed over to Lieutenant Daniel and took command of A Company beneath the wireless station, where the enemy strength was increasing. The sniping was extremely accurate, making movement difficult.

The third day of battle ended with a threatened attack against D Company's flank, followed by an hour's fierce dive-bombing which failed to dislodge the battalion but which inflicted more losses. B and C Companies of 28 Battalion came up and occupied the gap between D Company and 23 Battalion.

Apart from patrol encounters the night was relatively quiet. Elsewhere the enemy build-up was becoming threatening and, although no vital positions had been lost, the constant raids on Canea had disrupted the essential services and the civilian population was moved southwards into the mountains.

Although 5 Brigade was in some danger of being isolated, to leave Maleme in German hands was to lose Crete, and Creforce Headquarters ordered another attempt to capture the airfield. Brigadier Hargest reported that 5 Brigade was exhausted and not fit to make a further attack. There were no fresh troops left to throw in, and the decision was made to withdraw the brigade east of the Platanias River.

The brigade orders, stating that all moves were to be completed before first light, did not reach Colonel Allen until 5.20 a.m. on the 23rd, and it was broad daylight before the battalion started to thin out the forward positions.

Captain Hetherington's RAP had outgrown the cottage in Kondomari and he had 70 wounded men, including some Germans and RAF, under the shelter of a huge fig tree. There was no possibility of moving them without transport, and the medical officer decided to remain behind with his patients.

The three miles' scramble across the hills to Platanias, carrying what little rations and equipment the men still had, was an exhausting effort. The battalion moved out in two main parties, both widely dispersed; although reconnaissance planes were about there were no fighters to machine-gun them from the air. Those

who took a direct route to Platanias were joined by elements from 22 and 23 Battalions, with the enemy close on their heels. They were fortunate in finding that B Company 28 Battalion was already in position on the bluff above the waist-deep river and able to give covering fire while the troops waded the Platanias and climbed the bluff into brigade reserve.

The parties who took the higher route through the hills were less fortunate. Captain Trousdale was leading his company along a narrow track when they were fired on from Modhion village. He called very expressively for volunteers to get up the hill and deal with the snipers. Corporals Dave Evitt ¹⁸ and George Isley ¹⁹ and half a dozen others scrambled through grape vines to the top and engaged the enemy, who was firing through windows and holes in the roofs of houses. The snipers were soon silenced, but when the party returned to the track there was nobody in sight. While they were discussing the direction to take, a single German came along the track leading a donkey laden with a machine gun. He was a lucky man, because it was decided to let him pass in order to find out which way not to go.

The party thereupon split up into pairs, each taking what they thought the best route. The two corporals constantly encountered enemy troops ahead of them and spent two days hiding among the grapes and olives. They finally decided to make a detour over the hills and were creeping up a valley when a plane dropped a stick of bombs behind them and set the scrub alight. They scrambled up the valley ahead of the flames, only to be hit on the head with rifle butts by a party of Germans waiting for them.

The other sections making detours in the hills also did not arrive at Platanias. In all, the casualties since the opening of the attack were seven officers and 114 other ranks killed, wounded, or missing. With companies down to platoon strength, the word 'battalion' may be regarded as a courtesy title for the remainder of the campaign.

The 21st Battalion was detailed to picket the high ground south of Platanias hill, while the rest of 5 Brigade formed a line facing west between the hill and the sea. This new position was attacked frontally along the coastal road and pushed back to Platanias village, where another line was formed and held against determined

attacks. Brigadier Hargest was very worried by another threat to his rear from the Prison Valley area, and the brigade was ordered to withdraw eastwards again.

The battalion was detailed to hold off the threat from the Prison Valley while the rest of the brigade moved towards Canea. The attack did not develop and, when the last of the brigade was through, the battalion began to thin out. It was close to midnight when the rear party clambered down a rocky creek bed and joined the others waiting on the main road. A four-mile march brought them to some olive groves a mile west of Canea, where they bedded down for the rest of the night. When daylight came the troops found themselves in divisional reserve between the road and the sea, with 22 Battalion on their left. Forward were 23 and 28 New Zealand Battalions and 2/7 and 2/8 Australian Battalions supporting the troops around Galatas. Brigade instructions were that an attack could be expected at any moment, and 5 Brigade was to be ready to act in any of four roles: anti-paratroop, anti-beach, counter-attack, or to take up a line position.

Although the battalion was well sheltered from view, it was such a likely hiding place that the men were advised to dig slit trenches, an almost impossible task among the trees with only steel helmets and bayonets for tools. They managed, however, to get a little below ground level before they were subjected to the most severe bombing and strafing they had yet experienced. Being technically out of the battle line, though it was scarcely noticeable, the men were ordered to shave, clean their boots, and generally smarten up. Personal cleaning gear was held by about one man in seven, but it was passed around until they were more or less fit for a regimental inspection.

Clean exteriors did not compensate for definitely empty interiors, for rations were scanty and hard to come by. A scrounging party discovered a house not far away that contained eggs, potatoes and onions, but it was not possible to make the best use of them. No sooner was a fire lit than enemy planes would be over strafing the area.

The tide of battle continued to flow against the New Zealanders: Galatas was lost and a line behind it formed with cooks, batmen, the Kiwi Concert Party, brigade bandsmen, and stragglers; then two companies of 23 Battalion, with some other troops and two tanks, went forward and recaptured Galatas. A proud page in New

Zealand's history was written on 25 May 1941, but that is not part of 21 Battalion's story.

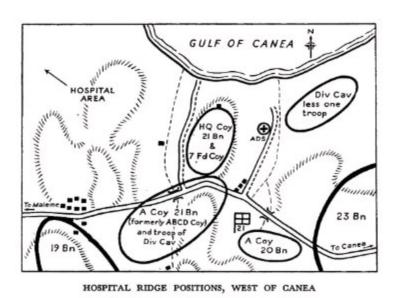
The 21st endured another day in reserve, being bombed and strafed at intervals, but after last light was ordered forward again. The Galatas position was to be given up and 5 Brigade was to form a new defensive line. To fulfil its task 21 Battalion's strength was increased by taking under command a detachment of Divisional Cavalry (Major Russell ²⁰), numbering 130 men; the survivors of 7 Field Company NZE (Captain Ferguson ²¹), 90 men; and A Company 20 Battalion (Lieutenant Washbourn ²²), 70 men. The 21st Battalion proper was now approximately 170 strong but, with the additional troops, made a unit capable of giving a good account of itself. The position allotted to the battalion was about a mile in length. It was a shallow valley that ran down to the sea just east of 7 General Hospital. The western side of the valley, known as Hospital Ridge, was bare, stony and without cover, but there were olive trees in the valley.

The dispositions made by Colonel Allen were as follows: The area from the seaward end of Hospital Ridge to the main road was held by Headquarters Company, about half the strength of the battalion, plus 7 Field Company, under the command of Captain Sadler; in reserve were A and B Squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry, with the additional task of preventing infiltration along the beach. A, B, C and D Companies of 21 Battalion and C Squadron Divisional Cavalry were on the left of the main road, with A Company 20 Battalion in reserve. Battalion Headquarters was at the foot of the ridge behind the reserve company.

The 19th Battalion carried the line southwards from another ridge in front of 21 Battalion's left flank, then came 28 Battalion, and finally 2/7 and 2/8 Battalions of 19 Australian Brigade.

There were only two hours of darkness left by the time most of the positions were occupied, and some of Headquarters Company did not get into position until dawn. The ridge was quite bare of cover and the ground so hard that picks would have been needed to dig weapon pits. There were no picks and there would have been no time to use them if there were. Rocks were gathered and sangars built to crouch behind. The sun rose on the bare, rocky hill and a hot and thirsty day began. Enemy spotter planes made a leisurely reconnaissance and were not gone more than

ten minutes when an accurate mortar concentration fell on the forward slopes of Hospital Hill.



hospital ridge positions, west of canea

The left platoon of Headquarters Company retired without orders, but Sergeant Bellamy refused to withdraw and fought on behind his sangar until he was killed. The fire was particularly heavy on the right flank, where an attempt was made by the enemy to work along the beach. This was turned back by the Divisional Cavalry detachment, but a machine gun got into position about 800 yards back and remained a menace all day. From 9.30 a.m. to 11 a.m. dive-bombing was added to the mortaring. Some of the bombs were delayed action ones and, the hillside being too hard to penetrate, they rolled down the hill before exploding. This was probably the most nerve-racking experience the sorely tried troops had experienced. Captain Ferguson, eventually suffering unreasonable casualties, took his engineers off the ridge back to the reverse slope.

When Colonel Allen heard that the right front was apparently breaking, he personally led a reserve squad of Divisional Cavalry up to the front ridge, and by 1.30 p.m. the situation, never really seriously impaired, was stabilised. Captain McElroy was sent over to command the right front in place of Captain Sadler, who was wounded, and Captain Trousdale took command of the other four companies. A platoon from A Company 20 Battalion was sent across to reinforce the Divisional Cavalry squadrons on the extreme right. Although scarcely a German was seen on the ground all day, the air spotting continued, with planes flying so low that the

pilots leaned over and dropped hand grenades as they passed.

An attack began to develop from Galatas in the late afternoon, but 19 Battalion broke it up. The situation was summed up by Colonel Allen in a message to 5 Brigade Headquarters at 5.45 p.m.:

Right flank has caused me considerable anxiety all day. Have had to counterattack once and regained lost ground. Since then have reinforced once; am standing by to reinforce again. If I have to do so I shall have used all my reserves, but at present line is holding. Left flank position all right but a good deal of mortar fire coming over. 19th Battalion have withdrawn company from ridge in front of me.

J. M. Allen, Lt-Col.

During the previous night Brigade Headquarters had moved back into dugouts vacated by Divisional Headquarters and had instructed battalions that a composite brigade under Brigadier Inglis would take over that night from 5 Brigade.

The strain of enduring the continued mortaring and air attack was beginning to tell on all ranks. A report from a wounded officer that the right flank was broken brought some companies of 23 Battalion up to fill a gap that did not exist. The 23rd suffered severely while coming up under instructions to restore the line at all costs but, having got there, remained in position about half a mile in the rear of 21 Battalion Group until nightfall.

The route out was along the road through the outskirts of Canea, and at one minute to midnight (26 May) a weary ten-mile withdrawal commenced to a hide-up area south of Suda behind a sunken road known as 42nd Street. Casualties during the day were four officers and 80 other ranks. It was the worst day and the greatest test of endurance 21 Battalion Group had undergone. Odd cases of hysteria were not to be wondered at under the circumstances. It was just as well the half-dazed troops did not know the chaotic state of affairs behind them. There was a near breakdown of communication and control between Force Headquarters, Divisional Headquarters, and Brigade Headquarters.

A signal sent out at 10.15 p.m. by Major Dawson ²³ (Brigade Major 5 Brigade) to all battalion commanders gives a picture of the obscure situation as it was known to

5 Brigade at that time:

A line is being formed two miles west of Souda at approximately the junction of two converging roads. Beyond this line all troops must go. Units will keep close together, liaise where possible to guard against sniper attack. 5 Brigade units in general will hide up in area along road between Souda and Stylos turn-off. Hide-up areas for units will be allotted by 'G' staff on side of road after passing through Souda. Bde HQ will close present location at 2300 hrs and travel at head of column. Will then set up adjacent to Stylos turn-off. A dump of rations boxes already opened is situated near the main bridge on main Canea road also some still at DID. Help yourself. It is regretted that NO further tpt is available for evacuation of wounded. It is desirable that MOs should travel with tps. There is possibility of a dump of amn being on roadside near main ordnance dump. Take supplies as you pass.

Captain Panckhurst had anticipated the instruction to do what he could about transport and had acquired a truck. The radiator had been damaged, but Private Jack Brydon ²⁴ patched it up, and the vehicle was loaded with rations and ammunition. When the battalion moved out Captain Dutton was given the job of taking the one-truck battalion B Echelon through Canea to the hide-up area, as the route the troops were taking was impracticable for vehicles. After Canea had been bypassed the country was criss-crossed by roads and tracks, with troops moving in different directions trying to find their dispersal areas.

The enemy added to the chaos with the first appearance of night-flying planes dropping parachute flares. They hung in the air for several minutes, outshining the brightest moonlight, and must have revealed the mêlée below quite clearly.

The 21st Battalion Group eventually staggered into a position in an olive grove at 4 a.m. on the 27th and, secure in the belief that there was a British brigade between them and the enemy, slept through the few hours of darkness.

Captain Dutton arrived in the area after daybreak. He had spent hours trying to find a passage through the confusion in Canea, and was eventually towed through by a tank which climbed over demolished houses without trouble. During the tank-conducted tour of Canea he had met 1 Welch moving west, but actually the covering force in front of 42nd Street had been outflanked and cut off. When Allen suspected

that he was open to attack, he set about discovering who were on his flanks. He found 2/7 Australian Battalion on his right and 28 (Maori) Battalion on his left. The whereabouts of Brigade Headquarters was not known, and the three battalion commanders agreed that until orders arrived they would dispose their units tactically.

Forty-second Street, a road sunken for part of its length and a mile west of Suda, ran southwards to the hills. It was a natural defensive line. The 21st Battalion Group was disposed with A Company forward on the right and A Company 22 Battalion forward on the left. In reserve were Headquarters Company and 7 Field Company in an orange grove on the right rear, and the Divisional Cavalry, also under cover, on the left rear.

About 8 a.m. General Weston, ²⁵ the commander of the Suda Bay area, passed through 21 Battalion lines and met Major Harding. He instructed the second-incommand to get the men moving back as quickly as possible, as the enemy was nearly up to 42nd Street and they would be cut off. He was told it could not be done without orders from Colonel Allen or Brigadier Hargest and left, not altogether pleased with Harding's point of view. General Weston then met Colonels Allen and Dittmer ²⁶ and told them (according to the latter) that 'they were fools to stay where they were', but his advice was again ignored. Eventually the two battalion commanders and Major Blackburn ²⁷ (of 19 Battalion) agreed that if the enemy attacked they would let him come right up and then have a go at him with the bayonet.

About ten o'clock there was a surprisingly close rattle of hostile small-arms fire on the unit front. Parties who had started to forage around for something more satisfying than cold bully converged from all directions on their company areas. There was a 50-yard field of fire with patches of oats and olive trees beyond, and there was movement in the scrub between the trees.

Meanwhile a runner from the Australians reported to Major Royal ²⁸ (28 Battalion) with his Colonel's compliments and asked what they were going to do about the advancing Germans. ²⁹ The runner was told that the Maoris were fed up with being pushed around and were going in with the bayonet. Arrangements were being made with 19 Battalion on the left of 28 Battalion to give covering fire, when

another message came from the Australians asking the Maoris to wait a little and the Australians would be pleased to join them. The forward companies of 21 Battalion had scarcely lined the sunken road when they heard yells that could come only from Maori throats. It was a blood-stirring haka. The Australians produced a scream even more spine-chilling than the Maori effort, and the sight of the Maori Battalion charging with vocal accompaniment sent the whole line surging forward. The reserves were sent up, but most of them kept on going instead of stopping in 42nd Street.

The forward elements of the enemy did not wait. They threw away their packs and ran. They were shot from the hip, and those who hid in the scrub were bayoneted. Some mortar teams that tried to get into action were overrun and dealt with. Patches of crop were trampled flat, drains were peered into and buildings ransacked. The chase went on for about half a mile without a prisoner being taken, before it was checked at a group of houses with rifles firing from every window.

Private Brydon scouted around with his truck and eventually found another one with a radiator that was in good order, which he changed before the Germans recovered from their shock. The 21st Battalion Group had about thirty casualties, and approximately seventy dead Germans were counted. The ground troops gave no more trouble that day.

But it was the end of the defence of Crete. The rear units were in full retreat and almost out of control. General Freyberg had already signalled to Middle East Command that evacuation was inevitable.

The German Command had no intention of permitting the harried defenders of Crete to withdraw unmolested, and parties of enemy troops could be seen moving across the ridges in the south. The main road across Crete passed through a defile near Stilos, and the enemy's object undoubtedly was to block the only practical way out.

Part of the Layforce ³⁰ commando, with two companies of 28 Battalion, was ordered to form a line across the pass through the hills at Beritiana. Fifth Brigade would halt at Stilos at the far end of the pass while the Australian brigade continued on to the Neon Khorion junction, a mile farther on. That was assuming, of course,

that the Germans did not get across the hills to Stilos first and close the route to Sfakia.

It was a tough 15-mile night march back but, in spite of eight days' fighting with little sleep or food, the spontaneous bayonet charge at 42nd Street had raised the troops' morale. It was generally felt that if the movement had been allowed to continue the enemy would have been pushed right off Crete into the sea. If a man could only have a fair go and run the war as it should be run....

By the time Stilos was reached at 4 a.m. everybody was prepared to sleep where he stood—concrete floors and the lee of stone walls were as acceptable as feather beds.

At dawn on 28 May 21 Battalion Group was deployed facing north in dried-up drains and watercourses. The 23rd was on its right, the 19th on the left, and the 22nd and 28th behind them. They did not have long to wait. The trained German mountain troops had lost the race, but they had brought machine guns and mortars with them. They did not venture an immediate attack but put down mortar and machine-gun fire, while reconnaissance planes promised more trouble in the near future. At 7 a.m. 21 Battalion heard heavy firing from the flank, where the 23rd was holding off an attempt at encirclement. A Company 20 Battalion and the Divisional Cavalry detachment were sent to reinforce the 23rd, and were in position by eight o'clock in case the encircling movement continued.

There was a brigade conference at 8.30 a.m. The question was whether to stand and fight, with the probability of being surrounded and the necessity of having to fight their way out at night, or risk a march along the only road in daylight in full view of enemy ground-strafing planes. Some were for marching, some for fighting—and to hell with the consequences.

Brigadier Hargest put the question: 'Can you fight all day and march all night tonight if we can extricate ourselves?' There was only one possible answer, 'No', and the Brigadier wound up the conference with 'Well, we'll march at ten'.

The 21st Battalion Group moved off at 11 a.m., followed by 22 Battalion, which became the rearguard until relieved by 2/8 Battalion of 19 Australian Brigade. The 21st Battalion Group marched by sections in file, taking advantage of what cover

there was. The control post at Babali Hani was passed at 12.40 p.m. and the column halted for lunch, which was anything the men happened to be carrying. There was a small creek at the side of the road, and boots were taken off for the first time in nine days. Those who could get the socks off their blistered feet bathed them; those who could not bathed their feet without removing the socks; those who had no socks merely emptied the blood and sweat and water from burst blisters from their boots onto the road.

Before the move the battalion truck was turned into a Red Cross vehicle, with some cooks as attendants. It was filled with wounded whom it had not been possible to evacuate, covered with a large Red Cross flag, and sent to the clearing hospital near Sfakia. Enemy planes made frequent close inspections en route, but did not molest the makeshift ambulance. On the return trip the Q staff was left at Sin Kares to prepare hot tea and any rations available, while the truck met the battalion at Vrises.

Vrises crossroads was reached at 3 p.m. Here 21 Battalion Group was dispersed under some olive trees and told to rest for a few hours before the climb over the snow-capped mountains towering above them. Water was plentiful at this point and the troops were told to fill their bottles, as it was the last they were likely to see for many hours. Some rations had been located and distributed—seven men to a tin of bully—before the ten-mile climb over the mountains began at dusk. The brigade movement order covering the march ended: 'Units are urged (1) to keep men together. (2) To adopt a reasonably easy pace. (3) To conserve water. (4) To retain arms and ammunition.'

The march to the top of the White Mountains began at dusk. The truck was again filled with sick and walking wounded, but the steep, winding road was too much for some of the wounded who could not be carried. One by one they dropped out to await some form of transport, hoping that the next vehicle going forward might have room for them. Along the whole length of the march the battalion group was impeded by others in like state from formations that had gone ahead. In addition the road was full of stragglers; some genuinely trying to find their units, some who had left the battle too early, some who were straight-out deserters. At every hourly halt there were men who could not get on their feet again. There was

nothing that could be done except to leave them. Near the top of the pass the column was stopped by a road demolition. Somebody had blundered and added a painful two hours' detour to an already heart-breaking climb. Sin Kares, on the edge of the upland plain of Askifou, where Captain Panckhurst was waiting with hot tea, was reached by 2 a.m. on 29 May. Water bottles had been emptied hours earlier, and the hot drink was a godsend to men in the last stages of exhaustion.

The battalion group rested under scrub on a steep hillside until the late afternoon. There were a few Stukas trying to get at them, but for once they were foiled because of the steep hills: by the time they were over the area they had to climb to avoid crashing on the mountainside.

Orders received during the day stated that the battalion group was to embark the following night (30 May). There would be no water and probably no rations. There would probably be more fighting, and all arms and ammunition would have to be carried. Lorries for sick and wounded might be available, otherwise they would have to get down to the beach in daylight as best they could.

The battalion truck changed its role once more and became a water cart.

Anything that would hold water was collected from the Sin Kares houses and loaded on the truck and filled.

The 21st Battalion Group moved again late in the afternoon and by midnight had passed through 4 Brigade, now covering the withdrawal to a point near Vitsilokoumos where, 2000 feet below and nearly three miles away as the crow flies, was the embarkation point, the tiny village of Sfakia. There was some air activity early in the march, but there was no time for the usual tactics of going to ground or remaining motionless while planes were overhead. The troops kept resolutely on. A greater hindrance to progress was the unorganised stream of stragglers, many of whom tried to slip into the column. Some managed to do so, but those without arms were summarily ejected. The men lay up in the scrub until daylight, when it was discovered that A Company 20 Battalion was missing. During the march through 4 Brigade's area Colonel Kippenberger had seen Lieutenant Washbourn and, in spite of the latter's protests, had ordered him to rejoin 20 Battalion for embarkation. It was not until after the return to Egypt that the disappearance of part of 21 Battalion Group was explained.

While the battalion slept during the few hours of darkness, walking wounded from the CCS at Imvros were staggering down the winding track to the beach, 4 Brigade was preparing to follow, and a transport, four cruisers, and three destroyers crowded with troops left before daylight; somewhere behind them a rearguard was holding a defensive line.

There was no move on the 30th until the late afternoon. Colonel Allen returned from a conference looking grim. The officers of the battalion were called together and soon they, too, were looking grim. The men gathered round their officers and were told that the 21st had missed out on the evacuation. The Navy was returning that night for the last time and 4 Brigade, with some of 5 Brigade, would be taken off, but 21 Battalion would fight a rearguard action back to the coast, then disperse into the hills. Flying boats would endeavour to drop supplies, but the troops would have to live off the land and be ready for any ships that might come, if they did not starve or get captured in the meantime.

Somebody pointed out that living in the hills was no novelty to 21 Battalion, but the laughs were a little strained. When the Maori Battalion passed through the area and heard that the 21st were staying on Crete, they handed over their water bottles and odd bits of equipment that might be handy. It was a fine gesture and, coupled with the news that a 'suicide company' of six officers and 138 other ranks had already been detailed from the Maori Battalion to be used by Force Headquarters as required, it started a friendship between the two battalions that lasted to the end of the war. The 22nd Battalion sent along their automatics and good wishes. They were going off that night. The 19th Army Troops Company had also missed out and was placed under command of 21 Battalion. The battalion group was disposed tactically, covering the road and a ravine that was a possible thrust line.

Whatever the evacuation arrangements had been, they were altered at the last minute, and Colonel Allen was informed that all 5 Brigade was staying and that it was hoped to get it all away the next night.

There was no contact with the enemy during the night on the battalion sector. At first light the battalion group withdrew down the escarpment into a valley near Sfakia, where the Q staff was waiting with hot tea and some rations landed by the Navy during the night. Some empty caves were found and occupied, a haven of rest

from marauding Stukas. The end of the road was almost in sight—but not quite. Orders arrived for 150 men to be detailed 'Under good officers' to picket the hills and help hold the line until dark. Captain Ferguson took his hundred men 2000 feet up the mountainside and joined some fifty men of 20 Battalion already there, and Lieutenant Roach took his fifty up a ridge that commanded the Sfakiano Ravine. Thus, dispersed in cave, on mountainside and on ridgetop, the battalion awaited the coming of darkness and the Royal Navy.

They were recalled before dark and formed up for the last march in Crete. After a few more tense moments when half a dozen Stukas machine-gunned the head of the long column, the crocodile writhed, spread out, and bunched along up the gully and on to the beach. They passed through a grim-faced cordon from 22 and 28 Battalions with rifles loaded and bayonets fixed, ready to use either bullet or steel on any stragglers who attempted to embark before the fighting men. Some had tried, but their fate convinced the mixed crowd of Greeks, Jews, Palestinians from labour units, as well as Australian, English, and New Zealand troops who had thrown away their arms, that the cordon meant to do the job it was there for. Assault landing craft and strings of lifeboats arrived like ghosts from the blackness over the sea, were filled, and disappeared again. The 21st Battalion's turn came at 11.30 p.m. and there were ready hands to help them on board the Phoebe.

Steaming hot cocoa and white buttered bread were passed around and, when the ship was fully loaded, 21 Battalion sailed and, in the terse report of the battalion war diary, 'Arrived Alexandria 1630 hrs. June 1. Arrived Amirya transit camp 1830 hrs.'

The battalion's casualties in Crete were: 33 killed or died of wounds, 33 wounded, and 80 prisoners of war (of whom 32 were wounded and five died), making a total of 146.

¹ Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Legion of Merit (US); Wellington; born Timaru, 26 Jun 1890; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Brigade 1914–19 (CO 3 Bn); comd 4 Bde Jan 1940-Aug 1941, 2 NZ Div (Crete) 30 Apr-27 May 1941; CGS and GOC NZ Military Forces Aug 1941-Dec 1945.

- ² Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Greek); Dunedin; born Mosgiel, 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn 1915–19; CO 27 (MG) Bn Jan-Aug 1940; comd 4 Bde 1941–42 and 4 Armd Bde 1942–44, 2 NZ Div 27 Jun-16 Aug 1942 and 6 Jun-31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, Germany, 1947–50.
- ³ Maj-Gen Sir Howard K. 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 and 9 Feb-2 Mar 1944; 2 NZEF Prisoner of War Reception Group in UK 1944–45; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories.
- ⁴ On their return to Egypt the surviving financiers were repaid in full and a modest profit was passed over to regimental funds.
- ⁵ Sgt M. D. F. Hawkins; Opotiki; born Gisborne, 19 Sep 1899; barman.
- ⁶ Sgt H. H. Bellamy; born Maungawhare, 7 Jun 1907; labourer; killed in action 26 May 1941.
- ⁷ Sgt W. H. Kenny; Opua, Bay of Islands; born NZ 26 Oct 1907; railway clerk; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.
- ⁸ The Field Punishment Centre did not function as such for long; when the attack came it turned itself into a fighting unit which shot many paratroops, and eventually both guards and prisoners rejoined their respective units. The sentences were all remitted after the campaign.
- ⁹ Sgt N. Robertson; born NZ 28 Aug 1917; labourer; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.
- ¹⁰ Lt-Col J. M. Allen, m.i.d.; born Cheadle, England, 3 Aug 1901; farmer; MP (Hauraki) 1938–41; CO 21 Bn 17 May-28 Nov 1941; killed in action 28 Nov

- ¹¹ L-Cpl W. B. Craig; born Scotland, 2 Sep 1916; grocer; killed in action 20 May 1941.
- ¹² L-Cpl J. J. Agnew; born Mokai, 20 May 1916; timber worker; killed in action 20 May 1941.
- ¹³ With the help of Cretan villagers, the detachment managed to evade capture and eventually succeeded in joining the withdrawal towards Sfakia. The men rejoined the battalion in Egypt.
- ¹⁴ Capt W. A. J. Gorrie, MM; New Plymouth; born Bedford, England, 4 Mar 1895; cartage contractor; wounded May 1941.
- ¹⁵ Cpl C. J. Franklin; Whangarei; born Australia, 19 Apr 1906; millhand; twice wounded; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.
- ¹⁶ Pte T. C. Cannon; born Auckland, 2 Apr 1918; labourer; killed in action May 1941.
- ¹⁷ Col T. C. Campbell, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Fiji; born Colombo, 20 Dec 1911; farm appraiser; CO 22 Bn Sep 1942-Apr 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Jan-Dec 1945; Area Commander, Wellington, 1947; Commander of Army Schools, 1951–53; Commander Fiji Military Forces, Aug 1953—.
- ¹⁸ Cpl D. M. Evitt; Auckland; born Thames, 1 Nov 1918; warehouseman; p.w. 28 May 1941; escaped 16 Jun 1941; recaptured 7 Dec 1941.
- ¹⁹ Cpl G. Isley; Murupara; born Scotland, 23 Sep 1915; stud groom; p.w. 28 May 1941.
- ²⁰ Lt-Col J. T. Russell, DSO, m.i.d.; born Hastings, 11 Nov 1904; farmer; CO 22 Bn Feb-Sep 1942; wounded May 1941; killed in action 6 Sep 1942.

- ²¹ Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson, DSO, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 27 Apr 1912; warehouseman; OC 7 Fd CoyMay 1941; CO 18 Armd Regt Dec 1943-Jan 1944; 20 Armd Regt Jan-May 1944; 18 Armd Regt Jul 1944-Feb 1945; wounded 6 Dec 1943.
- ²² Capt G. W. Washbourn, ED; Christchurch; born Timaru, 13 Jul 1916; bank clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.
- ²³ Lt-Col R. B. Dawson, DSO, m.i.d.; Lower Hutt; born Rotorua, 21 Jul 1916; Regular soldier; 23 Bn; BM 5 Bde May-Sep 1941, Jan-Jun 1942; BM 6 Bde 1942–43; Senior Tactics Instructor, Royal Military College, Duntroon, Jul 1943-Jan 1946; CO 3 Bn, 2 NZEF Japan, Jun 1947-Oct 1948; Director of Staff Duties, Army HQ, Nov 1949-Dec 1952.
- ²⁴ Sgt J. R. Brydon, m.i.d.; Hikurangi, North Auckland; born NZ 22 Jul 1911; truck driver.
- ²⁵ Lt-Gen E. C. Weston, CB, Royal Marines; then Maj-Gen commanding 1 Royal Marine Group, Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation, and commanding Suda Area; died 1952.
- ²⁶ Brig G. Dittmer, CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Maharahara, 4 Jun 1893; Regular soldier; Auckland Regt 1914–19; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Jan 1940-Feb 1942; comd Fiji Military Forces and Fiji Inf Bde Gp, Sep 1943-Nov 1945; Commandant, Central Military District, 1946–48.
- ²⁷ Lt-Col C. A. D'A. Blackburn, ED, m.i.d.; Gisborne; born Hamilton, 8 May 1899; public accountant; CO 19 Bn Apr-Jun 1941; 1 Army Tank Brigade (NZ) 1942–43; CO 1 Army Tank Bn Jan-May 1943.
- ²⁸ Maj R. Royal, MC and bar; Wellington; born Levin, 23 Aug 1897; civil servant; served in NZ Maori Bn in First World War; 28 NZ (Maori) Bn 1940–41; 2 i/c 2 Maori Bn and comd Maori Training Unit, Rotorua, 1942–43; CO 2 Maori Bn May-Jun 1943; wounded 14 Dec 1941.
- ²⁹ The runner may have seen Lt-Col Allen also but, owing to the latter's

death in Libya, confirmation is lacking.

³⁰ This commando (800 all ranks) was commanded by Colonel (later Major-General) R. E. Laycock, Chief of Combined Operations, 1943–47.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 5 – LIBYA 1941

CHAPTER 5 Libya 1941

Helwan, some fifteen miles south of Cairo, was (and probably still is) a small spa where fashionable Egyptians took the waters. It was also the generic name of a very large area of desert in which was situated one of the main camps for the British forces near Cairo. A New Zealand General Hospital took over a hotel in Helwan in July 1940, and from time to time 2 NZ Division trained in the desert, where it pitched tents around the Naafi and other permanent buildings. To reach Garawi, a part of Helwan Camp, you marched south from the Helwan railway station across a large flat wadi known as 'Sunstroke Plain'.

The day after disembarking at Alexandria the men of 21 Battalion entrained for Helwan. They were met at the station by Captain Tongue and Second-Lieutenants Wilson and Phillips, whom everybody had thought were prisoners in Greece. Hands were shaken and backs slapped. But that was only the start. In the battalion lines at Garawi a welcome-home party had been organised by a reception committee, some of whom were from hospital, some from Base, and some from the Peneios Gorge via Turkey or Cyprus. With the 169 men evacuated from Crete, the battalion strength was now 17 officers and 255 other ranks.

Parades for pay and essential clothing were followed by seven days' leave for all men from Crete. They returned to more parades for clothing, equipment, medical boards, and the marching in of 530 reinforcements. A new unit had to be built on the foundations of the old, and when routine orders issued a stern warning that mosquito nets were not to be cut up and used as covers for food containers, the veterans realised that they were back in training again.

Officers and prospective officers departed to and returned from courses. Major E. A. Harding marched out to 31 Infantry Training Battalion, and Major R. W. Harding marched in from the same training unit to succeed his brother as second- incommand to Colonel Allen. Headquarters Company was commanded by Captain Fitzpatrick, ¹ a Second Echelon man who had been OC4 (Infantry) Anti-Tank Company until it was disbanded; Major Trousdale went to A Company; Lieutenant Yeoman was promoted to captain and given B Company; Captain Tongue returned

to C Company; and Captain McElroy, who speedily wangled his way out of hospital after being wounded in Crete, took over D Company.

At first there was considerable movement amongst the officers and men: subalterns snarled at chits demanding returns of men with experience in occupations that would remove them from rifle companies to specialist platoons; section leaders found their commands changing daily as the sifting and probing went on; senior NCOs were no sooner appointed than they departed to schools of instruction. But gradually sections, platoons, and companies shook down and got to know each other. Scraps of Greek were discarded for the Arabic equivalents; 'Greekos' became 'Wogs' and grapes and Greek wines were succeeded by 'Or-in-ges very good, mandar-ins very cheap'. By the middle of July the unit had been reformed and was almost capable of taking the field again. On 26 July 5 Brigade moved to the Suez Canal area where, first at Kabrit ² and then at Geneifa, it underwent a course of night marching on compass bearings, desert battle tactics, and its first experience of combined operations.

By the end of August 5 Brigade was ready for training in real desert conditions, and 21 Battalion, with the rest of the brigade, moved into the Western Desert to work on reserve defensive positions in a corridor where the impassable Qattara Depression came to within forty miles of the sea at El Alamein, ³ sixty miles west of Alexandria. On flat tablelands above escarpments, Fortress A, better known as the Kaponga Box, was built by the brigade. For a month the troops accustomed themselves to desert conditions, with water rationed to one and a half pints daily. Tank ditches were dug, minefields laid, and supplies of food, water, and ammunition stored against a siege.

The brigade had its first lessons in desert mobile operations at the Kaponga Box. The necessity of moving an army on wheels, with flexibility in manoeuvre and defence, produced the drill that became almost second nature—the famous 'desert formation'. Tactically it was an arrangement of units and brigade groups whereby they were constantly deployed whether moving or stationary. Essentially the idea was that vehicles invariably occupied the same place relative to each other when moving in formation across the desert. A chessboard with the black squares representing vehicles and the white squares the desert is a convenient illustration of desert formation for a battalion. The four corners of the board were occupied by the

four rifle companies, with vehicles three abreast at 200 yards' intervals. Battalion Headquarters travelled in the front centre with the Intelligence Officer navigating; following Battalion Headquarters were the various elements of Headquarters Company, with the QM trucks between the two rear companies. When artillery was attached one troop was in position stretched across the front for quick anti-tank protection, and one troop in two lines behind the leading companies. Anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns fitted into the general scheme. Upon an alarm the carriers formed an outer screen, the vehicles closed on a flank or centre, and the infantry and anti-tank guns formed a perimeter around the artillery and the medical and other services. While the guns dropped trails the troops put out dannert wire and dug slit trenches.

In the first week of October the brigade joined the Division in the Baggush Box, ⁴ on the coast 80-odd miles farther west. The move was made in desert formation. At night a close laager was formed with the artillery outside the perimeter. It gave the older soldiers the greatest pleasure to chaff the gunners at being in the forefront for once in their lives.

About this time vehicles were fitted with sun compasses and drivers soon became expert in finding their way around the desert. Company messes occasionally had a change of menu when a gazelle, more curious than prudent, permitted a truck to get within easy rifle range.

It is elementary and fundamental that wars are not won without fighting, and signs were not wanting that the training period was nearly over. Early in November there was a brigade parade for the Commander-in-Chief Middle East Forces (General Sir Claude Auchinleck); practice moves in desert formation were interspersed with extra-keen kit inspections, coupled with instructions that all diaries be sent to Base; then, too, inspections of the battalion's arms were more than usually solicitous; and finally there was an informal talk by Brigadier Hargest on general conduct in battle, with an outline of what might happen in desert warfare.

Veiled references to forthcoming manoeuvres did not pass unnoticed. Neither did the departure of a reconnaissance party composed of Colonel Allen, Major Trousdale, Major Fitzpatrick, Captain Tongue and Captain Yeoman. It was whispered that they had gone far beyond the outpost line.

Nor did the goings on in D Company pass unnoticed. Captain McElroy left on a tour of duty at Base and was succeeded by Captain Trolove, ⁵ an officer who had left New Zealand with the Second Echelon in 5 Brigade's anti-tank company. D Company left Baggush as guard to an ASC convoy carrying petrol. The wires connecting the headlights and horns on the trucks were disconnected to ensure silence and secrecy.

Further evidence that the battalion was about to take part in an offensive was the detailing of seven officers and 50 other ranks to remain behind as LOB personnel. ⁶ That was carrying the game of 'Let's pretend' a little too far, even for the most credulous.

The officers who served with 21 Battalion in the Libyan campaign of November 1941 were:

Battalion Headquarters

CO: Lt-Col J. M. Allen killed

Adj: Capt G. A. Dutton PW

QM: Capt G. H. Panckhurst wounded

IO: 2 Lt J. H. Money wounded and PW

MO: Lt G. H. Levien

Padre: Rev Fr W. Sheely YMCA representative:

Mr R. H. Busfield PW

Headquarters Company

OC: Maj T. V. Fitzpatrick wounded

Sigs Pl: Lt G. E. Moore wounded

AA PI: 2 Lt H. K. Anderson wounded

Transport PI: 2 Lt W. K. King

Mortar Pl: 2 Lt F. E. Wilson PW

Pioneer PI: 2 Lt S. E. Carr wounded

Carrier PI: 2 Lt G. E. Cairns wounded

A Company

OC: Maj A. C. Trousdale wounded

2 i/c: Capt C. A. Ferguson PW

Lt W. J. G. Roach wounded

2 Lt C. P. Hutchinson PW

B Company

OC: Capt A. A. Yeoman wounded and PW

2 Lt V. J. Tanner wounded

2 Lt M. R. Faull killed

C Company

OC: Capt W. M. Tongue PW

Lt H. H. W. Smith PW

2 Lt E. G. MacPherson PW

D Company

OC: Capt F. J. Trolove wounded

2 i/c: Capt A. C. Turtill killed

Lt W. K. Henton with prisoner-of-war cage

2 Lt C. R. Hargrave wounded and PW

Security, of course, was all important; even if it was not possible to conceal the fact that an offensive was being prepared, it was essential that the time and direction remain a secret. To this end the polite fiction was maintained that all moves were purely incidental to training, and orders for a divisional exercise issued on 10 November made innocent reading.

This is where we pay off for Greece and Crete. This time we've got tanks and planes, the latest models fresh from the factory with the paint still wet on them. Tanks with power-driven turrets, mind you, even though their two-pounder guns might be a bit light, tanks that can fire on the move while Jerry mostly has to stop before he can shoot. And no roads for the Luftwaffe to follow strafing transport. Remember 42nd Street, the only time we had a fair go?

Fifth Brigade Group left for Divisional Exercise No. 4 on Armistice Day, 11 November. The assembly area was 30 miles south-west of Mersa Matruh and the route was along the main road to the Matruh turn-off, then along the Siwa track. The column of 1006 staff cars, guns, trucks, lorries, ambulance cars and Bren carriers, spaced ten to the mile, would have been more than a hundred miles long had the journey continued so far. As it was the head of the column was in position before the tail started to move. The men from Greece and Crete kept one eye on the sky, but the only wings over them were friendly. Things were different now.

On arrival the units formed up in the now familiar desert formation, every vehicle 200 yards from its neighbour by day and at visibility distance by night. Slit

trenches were dug and a little training done, while the balance of the Division (including D Company) moved into the area. The concentration was completed on 14 November and, at a conference attended by officers down to company commanders at Divisional Headquarters, General Freyberg threw pretence aside and revealed that the Division was on more than an exercise. The whole Eighth Army was in motion, and the manoeuvre was nothing less than a gigantic turning movement around the inland flank of the frontier fortresses. The immediate intention was to destroy the enemy in Cyrenaica and relieve Tobruk. The long-term objective was to drive the enemy out of North Africa.

Eighth Army comprised three main groups: 13 Corps, consisting of 4 Indian Division, 2 New Zealand Division and 1 Army Tank Brigade, was to isolate and eventually destroy the enemy positions on the frontier; 30 Corps, which included the bulk of the British armour, was to seek out and destroy the enemy armour; and the Oasis Group, which had the minor role of seizing oases in southern Cyrenaica and threatening the enemy lines of communication. The Indians were at first to hem in the frontier positions from east and south, while the main tank battle was being fought between Tobruk and the frontier. When conditions seemed favourable 2 NZ Division was to move round the escarpment and cut off the frontier fortresses from the west. At the same time the Tobruk garrison was to break out through the besieging enemy divisions and make contact with 30 Corps.

A long approach march from the assembly area across the flat plateau to the frontier wire south of Sidi Omar would be the first undertaking for the New Zealand Division. Starting on 15 November, the Division completed the 100-odd miles around the inland flank of the enemy's frontier defences in one day and four nights of travelling.

Eighth Army entered Libya on 18 November. The 21st Battalion passed through the Wire during the night of 18–19 November, with 4 Indian Division between it and Sidi Omar. The unit moved in fits and starts, conforming to the movement of the Division, until the afternoon of the 21st, when General Freyberg received orders to split the Division into brigade groups and move on different objectives. Sixth Brigade went north-west to reinforce the Support Group of 7 Armoured Division at Sidi Rezegh. Fourth Brigade went north to cut the Bardia- Tobruk road, and 5 Brigade moved north-east to contain the enemy forces in the Bardia- Sollum area.

The 21st Battalion was detached from 5 Brigade and was instructed to detail a platoon for guard duties at the prisoner-of-war cage at the gap in the wire and then to move on and capture Hafid Ridge, about ten miles west of Fort Capuzzo. No company commander wanted to lose a platoon on so ignoble a job when there was high adventure afoot, but D Company, whose officer commanding and second-incommand were both comparative newcomers to the unit, was awarded the doubtful distinction. Captain Trolove passed the buck in a masterly manner by leaving it to his two subalterns commanding platoons to toss for the job. Second-Lieutenant Hargrave ⁷ won the toss and went on to get a bullet in the throat and be taken prisoner of war, while Lieutenant Henton ⁸ took 18 Platoon back into Egypt ⁹ and lived nearly another year.

Under command for the capture of Hafid Ridge were 47 Battery 5 Field Regiment, one platoon of medium machine guns, one troop of 42 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, and a detachment of 7 Field Company. The importance of Hafid Ridge, a mere fold in the sandy waste a few feet higher than the surrounding desert, lay in the fact that it dominated the rear of the enemy frontier defence line, which extended from Sollum to Sidi Omar.

Not long before dusk the battalion group halted in the Gabr el Meduar depression. It would be more correct to say it was hoped that the battalion was in Gabr el Meduar, but the almost featureless country did not seem to conform with the map. In actual fact the battalion was between two and three miles south-east of the area it was ordered to occupy; a dozen derelict tanks on the horizon, however, went some way to confirm the position of Hafid Ridge, where a tank battle had been fought in June 1941.

At first light patrols identified and reconnoitred Hafid Ridge; they reported that it was not occupied, but that there was a concentration of transport some distance to the south. Colonel Allen, before leaving to visit Brigade Headquarters, ordered a fighting patrol to take a closer look at the hostile transport threatening the right flank of the ridge. The patrol consisted of 15 Platoon C Company, one section of carriers, one section of three-inch mortars, one section of machine guns, and the forward observation officer of 47 Battery (Captain Crawford-Smith 10).

Before they moved off, however, Colonel Allen returned with revised orders. The battalion was now to attack Bir Ghirba ¹¹ as a diversion in support of 4 Indian Division, which was attacking Libyan Omar to the south. Bir Ghirba included the low ridge to the south-east of Hafid. Instead of being a fighting patrol, Captain Ferguson's force changed its role to that of a spearhead for the attack, with orders to clear what was thought to be an outpost before the battalion advanced on Bir Ghirba, while C Company, with a section of carriers and a section of machine guns, occupied Hafid Ridge.

There was some artillery fire as the entrucked patrol moved off, but it was not well directed and there were no casualties in the early stages. The objective was about three miles distant, and the vehicles felt their way cautiously to within half a mile of what appeared to be wire defences in front of enemy transport. Second-Lieutenant Cairns ¹² took his carrier section forward to investigate, and immediately a shower of shells and mortar bombs fell around them. The platoon debussed and went forward by sections, but enemy machine guns came into action and halted the advance. The forward observation officer got his guns onto targets and the mortars helped to keep the fire down a little, but men were being picked off as they lay on the flat desert taking what cover they could. By 11 a.m. 15 Platoon had only 20 unwounded men left, and Ferguson called Colonel Allen on the artillery line. He came up in a carrier and decided to commit the battalion to an assault.

D Company was left in Gabr el Meduar to guard B Echelon, and the battalion moved forward. Captain Yeoman was ordered to attack about 900 yards to the right of Ferguson's position and, taking advantage of a heavy rain squall, B Company quickly debussed and got to within 300 yards of the wire before the shower stopped; it also was sent to earth by machine guns and mortars. Yeoman crawled forward and found that there was a minefield behind the wire. He tried to call Colonel



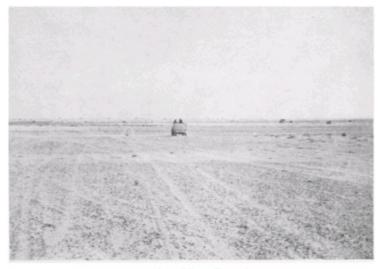
Regimental Aid Post, second Libyan campaign

Regimental Aid Post, second Libyan campaign



The New Zealand cemetery at Sidi Rezegh

The New Zealand cemetery at Sidi Rezegh



Returning from Libya, December 1941

Returning from Libya, December 1941

Battalion Headquarters, Baggush



Battalion Headquarters, Baggush



Flooded bivouac at El Adem

5 Brigade convoy passing through Syrian village on the forced march to Egypt



5 Brigade convoy passing through Syrian village on the forced march to Egypt



Regimental Aid Post, Alamein
Regimental Aid Post, Alamein



Bombing, August 1942

Allen on the company wireless, but the set failed to function. A runner was sent with a message but was shot before he had gone a dozen yards. Volunteer after volunteer tried to get through the hail of lead which started as soon as a target offered. Two were killed and three wounded before Corporal Norm Olde ¹³ got through with the information. He returned with the order to hang on until dark, when the engineers would clear a path through the mines.

At 1.30 p.m. A Company was ordered to attack between B Company and the patrol. It moved embussed until nearly level with B Company, and came under very heavy fire when the trucks halted. Within a few minutes half the vehicles were on fire or disabled. The company suffered severely before the troops were able to get

out into open order. Major Trousdale and Lieutenant Roach were wounded, leaving Second-Lieutenant Hutchinson ¹⁴ in command and 7, 8 and 9 Platoons commanded by Sergeants Ray Bonner ¹⁵ and Ralph De Costa ¹⁶ and Private Len Steiner ¹⁷ respectively. With supporting fire from B Company and Ferguson's patrol, A Company got forward another 150 yards before it in turn was pinned down.

Corporal Avery ¹⁸ describes A Company's part in the attack: Shortly before midday A Coy which was in reserve received instructions to move up in support of B Coy. The weather had now cleared and the approach was over very flat sandy country devoid of any cover. A Coy which was still in vehicles moved further forward under artillery fire and as the distance shortened came under mortar fire. Our own artillery was not giving close support but was firing at targets well back, and was possibly engaged on counter-battery work. The trucks were halted after going about 800 yards. The enemy was now using anti-tank guns in addition and before long all trucks excepting the OC's pick-up were either burning or destroyed. I counted ten vehicles that were knocked out. Two anti-tank shells went through the truck I was in, one passing through the centre of a roll of blankets on which we were sitting. The trucks were smartly vacated by the troops, many of whom were under fire for the first time, but who were nevertheless behaving in an exemplary manner. The volume of fire which now included that of small arms was intense and we moved forward in small rapid dashes of 25 yds. There were large sheets of water everywhere and although it had stopped raining the surface of the water was continually broken by shrapnel and falling sand. It was soon seen that nothing much could be done until the artillery dealt with the enemy's wire defences and machine gun positions which were behind the wire and on the forward slopes of a ridge. We could not engage the enemy effectively with small arms as we were still between 800 and 1000 yards away. The flat sand offered no cover and we couldn't get up to dig ourselves in, or mount our machine guns. We had no mortars or anti-tank weapons. Just discernible above the ridge were the turrets of two enemy tanks which from time to time changed positions and raked us with fire. We were suffering numerous casualties and our first-aid chaps were doing a great job.

We remained in this position throughout the afternoon. After dusk I returned to one of the trucks that had not been burnt out and picked up some dry rations and we dug in and made ourselves a little more comfortable.

The situation at 2.30 p.m. was that C Company had occupied Hafid Ridge, with only two casualties from long-range artillery fire, A and B Companies were pinned down, and D Company (less 18 Platoon) was held in reserve protecting B Echelon. The 47th Battery was firing continuously in an effort to silence the enemy tanks and guns, but for the second time 21 Battalion, with inadequate support, had been given an impossible job.

In actual fact the battalion was trying to capture the headquarters position of the Italian 55 Savona Division, defended by tanks, artillery, and machine guns firing from concrete pillboxes.

Extra artillery assistance was obtained from 5 Field Regiment, which detached a troop under Lieutenant Moir ¹⁹ to report to Colonel Allen. Contact was maintained with Moir by the roundabout means of first Major Trousdale and then Second-Lieutenant Hutchinson getting directions through by company No. 18 set to the Carrier Platoon's No. 18 set and then to Battalion Headquarters' No. 18 set, by runner to the battery commander, and finally by R/T (radio-telephony) to gun position officers.

Except for one short period while the ammunition was being replenished, the guns were never silent. At least one tank was destroyed and an ammunition dump set on fire. There was a terrific explosion followed by other and smaller ones during the night. There was, however, no apparent slackening of small-arms fire, and Allen asked Brigade for another company to assist the attack. The request was not granted, as all battalions were being employed, but permission was eventually given to withdraw C Company from Hafid Ridge.

At 5 p.m. C Company was ordered by R/T to return and attack on the left of A Company. It was almost dark when C Company debussed on the left of A Company and behind Captain Ferguson's group. Sergeant Kibblewhite, with 13 Platoon, passed through the sorely tried 15 Platoon. (Kibblewhite lost contact with his platoon and after a skirmish with enemy troops was taken prisoner next day.) There was no wire on this sector and the platoon advanced into the minefield. The red and green tracer bullets showed that the enemy had at least thirty machine guns covering his front. C Company found patches of dead ground and waited for orders.

It was now blowing a howling gale, and the stiff and half-frozen troops were glad to get out of the mud they had been lying in all the afternoon. The night was dark, with the sky clouded over, but a three-ton truck which burned all night was an excellent landmark. Casualties sustained by nightfall were 13 killed and 65 wounded.

It had been impossible to move the wounded in daylight, but they were gathered into trucks after dark and evacuated. Colonel Allen and the company commanders held a conference and agreed to attack again two hours before dawn, but while the details were being worked out, Captain Dutton came up with a message from Divisional Headquarters that the battalion was to withdraw.

The companies came out independently and returned to B Echelon at Gabr el Meduar. The supporting arms ceased to be under command and the battalion spent the morning reorganising.

While 21 Battalion was lying out in the muddy desert at Bir Ghirba the tank battle had suddenly turned against Eighth Army, and 6 New Zealand Brigade was ordered to move post-haste to the assistance of the support group of 7 Armoured Division beleaguered at Sidi Rezegh.

The news became worse, and 4 Brigade was ordered west through Gambut on the main road from Bardia to Tobruk to form a two-brigade front with 6 Brigade. Divisional Headquarters followed behind 6 Brigade, while in the meantime 5 Brigade had to blockade the frontier forts from the west until relieved by the Indians. The 21st Battalion, not needed for this task, travelled west in divisional reserve. Dawn on 24 November found the unit above the escarpment overlooking Bir el Chleta, with Divisional Headquarters and 20 Battalion laagered below. Twenty miles westward the Tobruk garrison had already started its sortie, but had halted on account of the unfavourable situation.

Our armoured forces were now severely mauled and almost out of the battle, and on the 23rd the enemy tanks had overwhelmed 5 South African Infantry Brigade advancing on Tobruk from the south. Fate was on the side of the New Zealanders that day, because the enemy chose to make a counter-thrust to the frontier instead of pressing on to attack the Division. With only four two-pounder anti-tank guns with each battalion, 6 Brigade would have certainly suffered the same fate as 21

Battalion did in the Peneios Gorge.

The country between Bir el Chleta and Tobruk is dominated by three escarpments, roughly parallel and about three miles apart; the northern or Belhamed escarpment was the axis of advance for 4 Brigade to Ed Duda through Belhamed; the most southerly escarpment began south-west of Bir el Chleta and petered out near El Adem, 15 miles south of Tobruk. Neither of these was tactically vital, but the middle or Sidi Rezegh escarpment, along which 6 Brigade was fighting its way, was the key to Tobruk. A tiny mosque (actually a tomb), about half the size of a State house and comprising two small rooms, gives the feature its name; it is situated near the western end of the escarpment, where the Trigh Capuzzo and the Axis-built road that bypasses Tobruk enter a narrow valley between the Sidi Rezegh and Ed Duda escarpments. The value of the Sidi Rezegh escarpment to the enemy can be estimated by the strength of his reaction to our occupation of it.

At midday orders arrived for 21 Battalion to reinforce 6 Brigade. Mobile enemy columns were reported in front, behind, and on the inland flank. They were part of the German counter-thrust which swept as far east as the Libyan frontier, disrupting communications and shooting up supply columns.

There was some delay while 20 Battalion, with tanks and artillery, attacked and chased an enemy column away, and then 21 Battalion moved south-west and came in behind 6 Brigade, now holding Point 175, on the escarpment east of Sidi Rezegh.

The 24th and 25th Battalions had lost heavily capturing Point 175 and the 25th had been taken under the command of the 24th, but the brigade was fairly astride the objective, though the enemy still held wadis on the escarpment. A square blockhouse further west along the escarpment prevented further exploitation.

Colonel Allen halted just short of Wadi esc Sciomar, which intersects the escarpment about three miles east of Point 175, and reported to Brigadier Barrowclough, ²⁰ under whose command 21 Battalion now came. He was ordered to swing south-west around the wadi and protect the left flank of 6 Brigade.

The 21st Battalion dug in and spent a cold, quiet night, while the other battalions of 6 Brigade spent a very busy one organising another attack. The plan was for the brigade to advance on a two-battalion front, capture the Blockhouse, and

carry on for five miles to an airfield that had been overrun in the preceding tank battle. The enemy had vacated the field, and all the planes had been destroyed by driving tanks over their tails. The 21st Battalion's part in the operation was to get onto the southern escarpment when ordered and conform with the other battalions. Fourth Brigade was also going to advance into line with 6 Brigade, preparatory to capturing Belhamed.

The assaulting troops moved off from the start line at 5 a.m., but 21 Battalion was not brought up until 10 a.m. Allen's orders were to prevent enemy movement from east to west, for the escarpments running in that direction were the main tactical features on this desert battlefield. Further south the flat country was being patrolled by 22 Armoured Brigade.

As the 21 Battalion column picked its way along the ridge-top it passed through part of the area where 7 Armoured Support Group had been defeated and 5 South African Brigade overwhelmed. Derelict tanks, burnt-out trucks, and overturned field guns were silent reminders of a savage battle. The 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions had lost many tanks, but had carried on to raid into Egypt and later to capture 5 NZ Brigade Headquarters at Sidi Azeiz.

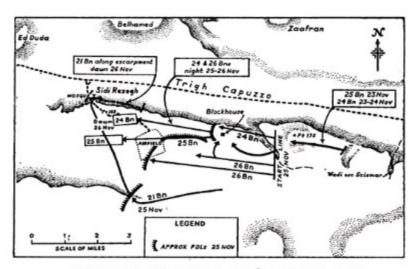
The battalion's objective, about seven miles west of Point 175, was reached at midday. En route A Company had been able to replace the Bren guns, mortars, ammunition, and blankets lost at Bir Ghirba. Three runabout cars, one with the engine still warm, and a truck were also added to B Echelon. The blankets were particularly welcome, for the nights were bitterly cold.

Company areas were allotted and patrols combed the wadis. No enemy were found in the immediate vicinity, but a wadi full was located two miles further west, in a position that might be a nuisance to troops advancing along the Sidi Rezegh escarpment. Colonel Allen was ordered to move into a position where he could harass the enemy without committing himself to an action. This was done, and Lieutenant Smith, with a carrier and a patrol of platoon strength, was sent out to probe the area. They approached from several directions, but bounced off each time and, with instructions not to press the attack, left the enemy in possession.

Other patrols combed the wadis that indented the escarpment. Second-

Lieutenant Cairns stumbled over a party of fifty mixed South African and German wounded under the care of a German medical section. They were loaded into B Echelon trucks and taken to a main dressing station in Wadi esc Sciomar. The makeshift ambulances were bombed en route, but there were no casualties. The wounded were hurriedly unloaded, as there was a tank battle in the vicinity. The enemy wounded did not remain prisoners for long, as the dressing station was later captured.

The night found 21 Battalion dug in on the eastern portion of the southern escarpment, about four miles south-west of 26 Battalion on the near side of Sidi Rezegh. Possibly there were enemy pockets between them; if the number of flares was any criterion, there was no doubt at all about the strength of the opposition east and north of Sidi Rezegh mosque.



ADVANCE TO SIDI REZEGH, 23-26 NOVEMBER 1941

advance to sidi rezegh, 23-26 november 1941

The Division was now in a position to attack the last obstacles on the road to Tobruk. The plan decided on was for 4 Brigade to take Belhamed and for 6 Brigade to clear the Sidi Rezegh escarpment to a point above the mosque, then change direction and move north on Ed Duda. The operation was to be an attack in two phases and was to be made that night as follows:

Phase 1: The occupation of the Sidi Rezegh escarpment to the point immediately above the mosque by 24 and 25 Battalions under Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttle-worth. ²¹ This position had to be in our hands before the

relief of Tobruk could be seriously considered.

Phase 2: The capture of Ed Duda by 21 and 26 Battalions under Lieutenant-Colonel Page. ²²

Sixth Brigade had to execute a very complicated manoeuvre calling for careful timing. Two battalions (24 and 25) had to move west and two (21 and 26) north, which meant that they had to cross each other's line and advance without colliding; as far as 21 Battalion was concerned, it had to march on compass bearings with four changes of direction.

Colonel Allen's orders, given at the company commanders' conference at midnight on 25–26 November, directed the companies to debus at the conclusion of the initial move in transport, and to form up with three companies abreast and one in reserve. Each company was to deploy with two platoons up and one in support, and the platoons were to adopt the same formation. B Company was to be on the right flank, D Company in the centre, C Company on the left flank, and A Company, which had suffered worst at Bir Ghirba, in reserve and escort for 47 Battery 5 Field Regiment, under command for the operation. The artillery Bren carriers and A Echelon trucks were to follow hard on the heels of the assaulting troops, and at first light the B Echelon transport, commanded by Major Fitzpatrick, was to move forward to the mosque. The Staff Captain of 6 Brigade would meet them there with further orders.

An hour later the battalion moved in trucks across the slight depression between the escarpments to the edge of the Sidi Rezegh feature, where it was to meet a guide from 26 Battalion. There was nobody there. Colonel Page was called on the wireless and the two commanders agreed that 21 Battalion would move forward until it made contact with Colonel Shuttleworth's force, believed to be near the Sidi Rezegh mosque. Page was not definite about his own exact position, and the combined effects of static and jamming prevented either commander from getting a clear idea of the other's location.

Deploying a battalion after an approach night march and without start lines is not easy; with the added distractions of shells passing low overhead, the rattle of musketry in the near distance, and a menacingly inscrutable obstacle ahead, it is extremely difficult. B Company, which had the farthest to go, was not ready when Colonel Allen passed the word to move off. He then went on ahead, with Battalion Headquarters and the Pioneer Platoon for protection, in search of Colonel Shuttleworth.

Captain Yeoman, as soon as B Company was ready, looked for somebody to report to, but could find nobody so decided to carry on. The noise of the transport following behind B Company brought down some indiscriminate shelling, but casualties were light and the troops climbed with determination towards the continuous enemy flares colouring the cloudy moonlight.

Before the top was crossed B Company passed through mixed elements of 24 and 25 Battalions dug in and out of touch with their units. Actually Phase 1 of the operation had partly failed and the line was being consolidated about a thousand yards short of the objective. The 21st Battalion was therefore behind the enemy lines but, owing to the wireless breakdown, Colonel Allen was not informed that Phase 2 had been postponed.

Completely unaware that anything was amiss, the Colonel had reached the bottom of the escarpment in search of 26 Battalion. The descent was too steep for wheeled transport, so Captain Dutton returned with instructions for it to report back to Major Fitzpatrick, waiting for daylight in the slight depression south of the escarpment with the B Echelon. He met Captain Yeoman, and B Company pushed on to join the commanding officer. When it came to a road that ran from the airfield along the top of the escarpment, however, it encountered a heavy concentration of artillery and machine-gun fire, extending for about a hundred yards on each side of the road. Dutton got his troops across whenever the fire slackened but, by the time they were all through, the company was some- what dispersed. Part had carried on down the escarpment on to the flat, while the rest waited for their commander. Day was breaking and Captain Dutton ordered everybody to get to the bottom of the escarpment. They were sitting shots on the skyline and casualties were heavy. Some dropped behind any cover they saw, some followed Dutton into one wadi, others followed Sergeant Lord ²³ into another.

D Company reached the bottom of the escarpment safely after a brush with a pocket of Italians. Although the company was advancing quietly it must have been

heard, for the Italians were chattering like a cage-full of monkeys and throwing grenades indiscriminately; they were obviously uncertain both of themselves and of the identity of the troops lying silently near them. Colonel Allen came along at this moment and Captain Trolove asked what should be done about the Italians. 'Fix bayonets and clean them out', was the reply. The leading platoon, commanded by Sergeant Wallace, ²⁴ was given the job and it took several prisoners. While the attack was going forward Captain Trolove was wounded by a grenade. The company formation was broken by the encounter and Second-Lieutenant Hargrave, unable to locate Captain Turtill, ²⁵ asked Colonel Allen for instructions. He was told to leave a runner with the Colonel and to carry on as far as the Trigh Capuzzo and wait there for the rest of the battalion.

C Company, on the left flank, did not encounter any opposition until it was almost in the valley at the bottom of the escarpment in front of the Sidi Rezegh mosque. It is a hard thing to keep contact at night under any circumstances, but especially so when marching on a bearing with no fixed points to tie to, across unknown country broken with gullies and spurs, and with some companies fighting to get through and others meeting no resistance. C Company lost touch with D Company and was widely dispersed. The forward elements of the company halted in the shelter of a wadi at the bottom of the escarpment, while Captain Tongue went forward to investigate.

The position at dawn, therefore, was that B Company was in three groups, two in wadis and one some distance forward on the flat ground north of the escarpment, with odd parties scattered behind cover on the escarpment. The majority of D Company was lying in dead ground near the Trigh Capuzzo and 400 yards from the bottom of the escarpment. Most of C Company was sheltering in a wadi near the Sidi Rezegh mosque waiting for Captain Tongue.

Corporal Olde describes the fate of B Company:

About ten of us under Sgt. Lord went into a crevasse in the escarpment to try and find out our position. We found that we were ... practically surrounded by enemy on all sides but one, and drew fire if we made a movement. We could look on to a flat and saw some of our company dug in down there but the enemy concentrated heavy mortar fire on them and then drove out and captured them.... We stayed in

our crevasse until noon then crept along a gully and met up with some 'A' Company personnel, and some more of our own chaps.

In the meantime A Company had reinforced 25 Battalion (as will be described later) and was on the extreme left flank.

Daylight found D Company stranded with over 400 yards of open country between it and the escarpment. Second-Lieutenant Hargrave decided to move eastwards, hoping that the sun would upset the aim of the enemy seen digging in about a hundred yards in front. As soon as the company began to move, however, it was shot at from all sides. Sergeant Robertson, at the rear, was killed instantly, and almost at the same moment Hargrave was wounded. Movement was impossible, and the survivors, about fifty strong, were taken prisoner.

Captain Tongue had returned from his fruitless quest for information when Colonel Allen and Captain Dutton arrived. The commanders discussed the situation and decided that C Company should pull back. The CO and the Adjutant returned to Battalion Headquarters and Tongue gathered up all the troops he could find, about one hundred all ranks. The light was growing fast, they were fired on, and there were many casualties. Men were seen on the skyline shaking blankets and moving about. They were Germans, and the company fixed bayonets and charged uphill. It was a bloody affair with grenades, bayonets and rifle butts, and when it was over there were 29 survivors, nine of whom were wounded, and five German prisoners. C Company, carrying its wounded, moved down the slight reverse slope. Lieutenant Smith, who was in the lead, saw men and vehicles ahead and went cautiously forward to investigate. They were from 6 Brigade, and the first man he met was one whom he had last seen working on his home farm. Captain Tongue reported to Brigade Headquarters, was put into brigade reserve, and for the first time found that the second phase of the attack had been cancelled.

The CO and Adjutant returned to Battalion Headquarters. The runner may have been sent—in all probability was—to D Company, warning it that something was amiss and to return. If so, he did not reach the company. Colonel Allen and his headquarters moved east, looking for B Company, but passed it and, when they in turn were caught out in the open by daylight, took shelter in a wadi. The 26th Battalion, dug in on the escarpment above, noticed Allen's predicament. Colonel

Page put on an attack by his C Company and, with a loss of 22 casualties, subdued the enemy fire sufficiently for the 21 Battalion troops to get onto the escarpment.

Meanwhile Major Fitzpatrick, waiting in the slight depression south of the escarpment with B Echelon, heard the rumble of wheeled traffic and thought it was the enemy on the move. It was, of course, the artillery Bren carriers and A Company, which had been turned back by Captain Dutton. The column missed the depression in the darkness and eventually reported to Brigade Headquarters.

B Echelon, now under undirected and spasmodic fire, dug in and watched the fireworks display of tracer and Very lights above them. A little before first light they moved up a narrow defile, passed through elements of 24 Battalion, and met some carriers heavily in action. There was no sign of the brigade B Echelon, and while Major Fitzpatrick was scouting round for information, a panic message from somebody in a staff car sent the vehicles streaming back. Captain Panckhurst stopped them near the Sidi Rezegh airstrip and, by the time Major Fitzpatrick arrived, had them sorted out again. A wireless van came up and a message from Brigade instructed the B Echelon to report to the brigade dispersal area east of the airstrip, where it had moved during the night.

A Company, the only organised company remaining of 21 Battalion, was sent up the ridge to reinforce 25 Battalion. Upon its arrival at that battalion's headquarters about 8 a.m., it was sent with the carrier platoon from 24 Battalion to support 25 Battalion, commanded by Major Burton, ²⁶ and dug in north-west of the airfield. The company found 25 Battalion hard pressed; shells were falling fast in the area and the position was overlooked by a slightly higher section of the escarpment, and small-arms fire was increasing hourly from that direction. The battalion mortars put down a smoke screen, and A Company, supported on the flanks by the carrier platoons of 24 and 25 Battalions, seized the high ground and dug in.

It was about this time that Sergeant Lord, with his dozen survivors of B Company, arrived in A Company's area. They had not yet had an opportunity of firing a shot and were not displeased when Captain Ferguson pointed out a machine-gun post that was giving trouble further along the ridge. Lord and his party stalked the post and silenced it at a cost of three killed and two wounded, one seriously. They found a stretcher and carried the seriously wounded man to an artillery field dressing

station, after which they reported to Battalion Headquarters where, in the words of Corporal Olde, 'We had a welcome hot meal of meat stew and rice pudding, as we hadn't had a cup of tea or a hot meal for two days.'

Down in the valley behind the brigade B Echelon area 21 Battalion spent 26 November reorganising. Survivors of the three companies who had managed to regain the top of the Sidi Rezegh escarpment made their way by various routes back to the unit, and by nightfall, as far as could be ascertained, the strength was 14 officers and 424 other ranks.

Colonel Allen reported back to Brigade Headquarters about 3 p.m. and found the Brigadier in conference with his other commanders. Another attack on the vital area above the mosque was being prepared: 24 and 26 Battalions were to advance west for two miles, and 25 Battalion was to join 21 Battalion in brigade reserve. A Company 21 Battalion, reinforced by 15 Platoon C Company, was to come under command of 24 Battalion for the operation. The plan was for 24 Battalion to clear the ridgetop and for 26 Battalion to advance across the wadis on the northern slopes as far as the point overlooking the Sidi Rezegh mosque.

The moon was just rising when the attack began. The 26th Battalion met stiff opposition all the way, but cleared each wadi with bayonet, grenade and tommy gun. The Bersaglieri fought bravely and no quarter was asked or given.

The 24th Battalion had an easier time in the early stages. After being pushed off the higher country the previous day, the enemy had withdrawn some distance west to prepared positions above the mosque. The battalion pushed on with determination to a point south of the eminence, where the enemy was waiting, and went in with the bayonet. It was another bloody affair with grenades, cold steel and rifle butts, and, when the position was finally captured, A Company 21 Battalion was down to fewer than forty men.

But the corridor to Tobruk had been opened. The 19th Battalion had linked up with 70 Division.

The operations up to this stage could be summarised as follows: The struggle for the all-important Sidi Rezegh escarpment had started with the attack by 25 Battalion, supported later by 24 Battalion, on Point 175 on 23–24 November. At

heavy cost this feature had been captured, but then it had been found that enemy fire from the Blockhouse further west along the escarpment had made the hold on the position precarious and expensive. The Blockhouse had been taken in the second big attack, made on 25 November. Then the night attack on 25–26 November had been undertaken with the intention of seizing the whole of the escarpment, breaking through to Ed Duda, and linking up with the Tobruk garrison. This had partly failed, and through lack of communications 21 Battalion had gone too far and had suffered severely. The final attack on the night of 26–27 November had captured the commanding position above the mosque, and the tactical advantages gained were some compensation for the terrible price that had been paid.

A light rain fell all day on 27 November, and the depleted platoons of A Company 21 Battalion dug themselves in on Sidi Rezegh under desultory long-distance shelling. The German armour was returning from its raid into Egypt. Sixth Brigade was reorganising. The 21st and 25th Battalions were to form a composite battalion under the command of Colonel Allen, with two rifle companies from each and a composite headquarters company. B and C Companies 21 Battalion were merged and arrangements were made with 24 Battalion for the relief at last light of A Company, which would merge with D Company. The 25th Battalion made similar dispositions but, owing to the distance between the two battalion areas, Colonel Allen's command was divided into two parts, one in front and one behind the vehicle dispersal area. A warning order was received for 21 Battalion to be ready to relieve 24 Battalion after dark, but it was later countermanded and A Company stayed on the escarpment with Colonel Shuttleworth.

Colonel Allen left the battalion area to visit A Company. Major Burton, who was commanding the remnants of 25 Battalion, writes:

Just before dark Colonel Allen came up in his car and told me he was going out to see some of his men who were some distance away. He told me the direction he was going, and I advised him not to go. Some of our troops who had just reported in stated they had contacted enemy in large numbers in that direction. 'The boys will be expecting me, so I must go,' he said, and with a wave of his hand he entered his car and he and his driver set off into the blue.

The driver (Clegg ²⁷) returned at daylight saying that Colonel Allen had left the

car and failed to return, though he had waited for ten hours. Major Fitzpatrick took command in the meantime, and the amalgamation of 21 and 25 Battalions was cancelled.

The night was as quiet as the day in 21 Battalion's sector. The rain stopped and Friday 28 November dawned with the promise of a warm winter's day after a cold night. But the stillness did not last. The Division still held two of the three escarpments, but there were not enough troops to man the third and most southerly of them, though 1 South African Brigade was expected hourly with the mission of guarding that vulnerable flank. About 9 a.m. a convoy of vehicles was seen on the escarpment moving west. It was assumed that the South Africans had got up as promised, but they were coming from the wrong direction, not that any direction was very right or very wrong in the confused battle. It was difficult in the haze to distinguish between friendly and enemy vehicles, and our artillery was silent. The convoy disappeared over the brow of the escarpment and soon shells were registering on the Sidi Rezegh escarpment. The enemy had returned to the attack.

With A Company still detached, Major Fitzpatrick formed the battalion into two rifle companies, each about forty strong, and a headquarters company. Captain Tongue commanded C Company, Captain Turtill D Company, and Captain Panckhurst Headquarters Company.

Colonel Allen's absence was explained when 26 Battalion decided to clean out an enemy pocket that had twice defied capture. It was a concreted strongpoint with slits that commanded the landing ground to the south and the valley across to Ed Duda to the north-west. The third attempt, assisted by a troop of 25-pounders was successful, and 26 Battalion captured 70 Germans, recaptured 23 of our troops who had been held prisoner, and found Allen's bullet-riddled body. He may have miscalculated the distance or, as is more likely, thought the wadi was unoccupied and offered a short cut to A Company. The news cast a gloom over the battalion. It had lost a brave man, a good soldier, and a commanding officer whose first thoughts were always for his 'boys'.

Now that the enemy was on the southern escarpment he could make it very hard for any troops to live on the ground below it, and with fire coming from two directions, the front (west) and the rear (east-south-east), the reserve position was

becoming untenable. Most attention was being paid to Sidi Rezegh, however, and the volume of fire directed against 24 and 26 Battalions increased hourly. Early in the afternoon an infantry attack from both south and west developed against 24 Battalion, which was holding the extreme western end of the position. The troops were dug in facing north and had to hurriedly readjust their position under a concentration of artillery, infantry gun and mortar fire.

Captain Ferguson had divided his company plus 15 Platoon into four sections, with about ten men in each. Lieutenant Hutchinson, with No. 4 Section, remained in position while the others moved out and attempted to dig new weapon pits under heavy fire. It was an impossible task in the time available on that stony ground, with the enemy less than a thousand yards away. D Company 24 Battalion had also moved out to face the threat, and a number of men were hit while they were hastily making sangars. The converging attack made steady progress and our casualties mounted; when the two companies were finally overwhelmed, A Company consisted of two officers, no NCOs at all, and 20 men. The 24th Battalion finally drove off the attack.

Brigadier Barrowclough decided to move his headquarters to a safer position north of Sidi Rezegh. Major Fitzpatrick was ordered to move on foot and to take only enough vehicles to carry arms and ammunition to a defensive position at Point 175. The balance of the transport would remain and move with Brigade to the new dispersal area. Six tanks (Major O'Neill) were placed under command, and seven anti-tank guns from 259 Battery RA (Major McKenzie) would be waiting to report at Point 175.

It was about 10 p.m. when the column started for Point 175. The night was dark and the sky overcast. Occasional shells exploded in the sand and random bullets whispered overhead. A platoon in extended line followed the guides, with the rest of the battalion in column of platoons, tanks on the left in line ahead, carriers on the right, and transport in the rear. After they had travelled the estimated distance, about three and a half miles, Point 175 failed to show up, so the column was halted while reconnaissance parties felt their way forward but failed to locate any landmark. Brigade was raised by W/T (wireless telegraphy) and agreed to the suggestion that the column remain where it was until daylight. Transport was heard moving and Very lights were seen going up on all sides, but recognition signals had

yet to be devised and each column carefully avoided the other. A close laager was formed, with tanks on the outside, until a liaison officer accompanied by Major McKenzie stumbled across them and guided the battalion to its destination.

The battalion B Echelon was guided by Captain Panckhurst. The brigade transport column halted several times and on arrival Panckhurst was horrified to find he had only six trucks. The others arrived later at the dispersal area, still under the impression that the head of the column had been overrun and captured by enemy tanks. What actually happened was that a driver had gone to sleep at one of the halts and only the vehicles in front of him had moved.

At first light a defensive position was organised. The enemy who had been driven off Point 175 by 25 Battalion had dug plenty of trenches, and those most suitable for the purpose were taken over by the new occupants. The battalion was spread in a semicircle, with Captain Tongue's company facing south towards the positions vacated during the night, and a platoon twelve strong—the remnants of D Company under Sergeant Lord—about 400 yards nearer the Blockhouse to take care of the flank and rear; Captain Turtill's company, facing east, completed the arc, with the carriers extending his left flank to the escarpment. The tanks were just behind the northern side of the escarpment, and the anti-tank guns were disposed in depth covering each other.

To the east there were unknown troops moving along the same escarpment over which the battalion had travelled from Bir el Chleta; there were more troops around the Blockhouse on the right, but these were identified as 25 Battalion. With both sides jamming each other's wireless, with front, rear and flanks always changing, and with each side using the other's transport with the utmost impartiality, every vehicle had to be assumed hostile.

Second-Lieutenant King ²⁸ discovered the truth of this when he was returning to look for the portion of the battalion transport that, as far as he knew, had not yet arrived. Incidentally his batman and kit were also missing.

Moving in the same general westerly direction was a column with three Dodge pick-ups on the flank—undoubtedly the South Africans. King's driver (Sheehan ²⁹) moved cautiously until they were within sixty yards of the column, when a rifle bullet

through the door of the car convinced them that a mistake had been made and a speedy withdrawal called for.

The next lone vehicle on 21 Battalion's front was not so lucky. Second-Lieutenant Money ³⁰ and Privates Bob Nicol ³¹ and Cliff Vause ³² were out forward looking for a good observation post for the 'I' section when they noticed a car approaching. When about 200 yards away the occupants were seen to be wearing German caps, and the section immediately opened fire. The car stopped and three men dropped into a slit trench. The section went forward to investigate and found one German wounded and two others with their hands in the air; one of these was wearing a general's epaulettes. The prisoners were bundled back into their car and driven to Battalion Headquarters, who rang Brigade and reported that a German general, complete with car, papers and maps, was being sent in. A quick search of the general's Mercedes-Benz showed that he had done very well for himself from our supply dumps, with a tin of Aulsebrook's biscuits, some cartons of South African cigarettes, a case of Crosse and Blackwell's tinned delicacies, a bottle of Greek brandy and a jar of rum. As it was considered that they were of no military significance, these were retained at Battalion Headquarters.

The capture was an extremely important event, almost as important as taking Rommel himself. The prisoner was General von Ravenstein, commander of 21 Panzer Division, and the marked maps and plans he carried warned Divisional Headquarters of the coming efforts to destroy the New Zealand Division. ³³

During the first part of the morning everything was quiet around Point 175. From the north-west there were sounds of a tank battle and shells were bursting on Belhamed Ridge. Lieutenant King gave the first warning that the quietness was not going to last. He came rapidly in in his pick-up from the direction of Wadi esc Sciomar, yelling that the b—Jerries were coming.

Making good use of the cover afforded by the southern ridge, the enemy had worked around into Wadi esc Sciomar and had captured the New Zealand main dressing station located there. The artillery was not able to bring down fire owing to the presence of hundreds of our own wounded.

D Company blew the sand off the sights of their rifles and watched the edge of

the wadi. Very shortly approximately two companies of German infantry shook out into extended order and, supported by four Italian 65s and some mortars, began to advance. D Company's fire was too accurate and the attack faltered and failed before the enemy was within 500 yards of his objective. The company's casualties were few but included Captain Turtill killed.

Towards midday Brigade rang up and said another attempt was likely, that some machine guns would be sent up, and that 'Our football friends' were not far away and would move on Sidi Rezegh via Point 175. An artillery forward observation officer also reported.

The attack that had been forecast developed from the south-east at 2 p.m., and was supported by manhandled mortars moving behind the infantry and several mobile machine guns. It was a much heavier attack than the previous one and made steady progress. Three of the supporting tanks went out to shoot up the enemy infantry, but one went up on a mine, another returned in flames, and the third parked itself among some derelicts of the previous battle, where it was soon silenced by boldly handled anti-tank guns. The timely arrival of the promised machine guns helped to turn the scale, but not before some of D Company's posts were captured.

When the situation in D Company's sector was reported, Major Fitzpatrick sent Captain Dutton with the Battalion Headquarters staff, except a signaller at the telephone and a few stretcher-bearers, to stiffen the line; and Second-Lieutenant Cairns left the carriers to become Adjutant.

Private Graham Goad ³⁴ helped materially in repulsing the attack on D Company. His post was surrounded and he could have surrendered without dishonour. At one stage he rang through and said there appeared to be no alternative but to surrender, but he hung on. When the attack fell away the machine-gun posts remained well forward and restricted all movement. The guns were being directed on to them, but some were in positions that could not be seen by the forward observation officer. Goad stood up whenever a shell was due to land, noted the fall and phoned directions through Battalion Headquarters direct to the battery until the machine guns were all knocked out. When the enemy finally withdrew there was only one tank left, and the English anti-tank guns were all silent,

with their crews dead alongside them.

The battalion reorganised, the wounded were got away, and General von Ravenstein's rum jar and delicacies provided an issue for the tired troops. Major Fitzpatrick was looking over the position when a runner brought a message from Second-Lieutenant Cairns to the effect that a column was approaching from the east. The CO returned to Battalion Headquarters while the Adjutant got through to Brigade with the information. Brigade said it was probably the South Africans who had been expected all day.

The column approaching at a steady six miles an hour was keenly watched. Brigade had mentioned that the South Africans would be easily identified by their Marmon-Harrington armoured cars, and there were cars with high turrets leading the column. The turrets were open and men wearing berets were sitting on top waving friendly greetings. The guns were given a range and bearing and a carrier patrol was ordered out to make a positive identification.

D Company, quite sure that the South Africans had got up at last, left their trenches and ran forward to welcome them with their steel helmets held high on their rifles, the recognised method of identification. Suddenly the turret lids were slammed down and the astounded troops were being fired upon. The forward observation officer yelled for fire, but his set must have failed for no fire came. Fitzpatrick put a frantic message through on the telephone to the guns, but could get no connection. As a last resort he rang Brigade to get the guns firing. Still no fire came, and the tanks behind the armoured cars were among the troops with their guns trained on the helpless men. Those who were furthest from the enemy ran an 80-yard gauntlet to the edge of the escarpment and scrambled down into the wadis.

Corporal Olde describes his escape:

About 5 o'clock in the afternoon we heard a lot of shouting where "C" Company were situated, and on Sgt. Lord having a look through his field glasses found that the enemy had surrounded "C" Company and taken them prisoners, so our platoon was called together and we made off down a gully chased by an enemy armoured car, but the gully and darkness was in our favour. Then a brilliant moon came up and we set our bearing upon Tobruk and had been travelling about 2 hours when we sighted

a truck in the distance, and were able to creep up unseen till we heard the personnel in the truck speaking English and found to our relief they were from the 6th Brigade artillery picking up their phone wire.

The leading tanks were within sixty yards of Battalion Headquarters when Major Fitzpatrick again rang Brigade, told them what had happened, and asked for instructions. He was told to 'Do the sensible thing', and with the Adjutant joined the others at the bottom of the wadi. There they met the commander of the anti-tank battery with a pick-up and two guns on portées. He had been gathering scratch crews for replacements, but as they were not needed now, took the party to Brigade Headquarters.

A few more stragglers came in during the night, and in the morning of the 30th 21 Battalion was once more reorganised. The roll was answered by five officers and 177 other ranks, with 40 vehicles and three carriers. Fitzpatrick divided them into two companies: No. 1 Company, 60 strong, under Second-Lieutenant Anderson, ³⁵ with Second-Lieutenant King as second-in-command; No. 2 Company, 49 strong, commanded by Captain Panckhurst. There was no headquarters company. The battalion transport, now commanded by Sergeant Gorrie, was faced north-east, the only direction from which no fire was coming, with instructions to keep the vehicles in running order.

The area was under sporadic shellfire, and Anderson was wounded before the rearrangement was completed. Second-Lieutenant Cairns took his place, leaving the commanding officer without an adjutant. Battalion Headquarters then consisted of Major Fitzpatrick and three runners.

It was a day of anxiety that ended on a note of tragedy. Both 4 and 6 Brigades were under close enemy observation from Point 175; their hold on Ed Duda was shaken; and terrific tank battles were being fought to the west and south. At dusk 24 and 26 Battalions were overrun and the keypoint at Sidi Rezegh was lost.

Brigadier Barrowclough asked permission to take his shattered brigade into Tobruk and was refused. The orders to keep the corridor open at any cost still stood. Major Fitzpatrick was instructed to move to a defensive position on the brigade perimeter facing Sidi Rezegh and west of the vehicle park. The cooks, spare drivers,

batmen and 'odds and sods' that largely composed 21 Battalion dug fire pits in front of three 25-pounders that fired until either silenced when red hot or out of ammunition. The rest of the artillery, which in daylight would have been under direct observation, was moved west, and a hopeless dawn drew near.

There was a mist over the battlefield at daybreak on 1 December. As soon as the sun cleared the air the enemy put down such a concentration of fire on the perimeter that movement was impossible. At 7.15 a.m. four lines of tanks with infantry following moved towards 21 Battalion. They were engaged with all weapons available, including three damaged tanks which fired until they were out of ammunition. The enemy tanks turned away at sixty yards, but rallied again and moved diagonally across the battalion front towards the Belhamed spur.

At that moment another column of tanks, appearing on top of the Sidi Rezegh escarpment, began to move down behind the perimeter. Beyond all doubt this was the end of 6 Brigade.

Resignation changed to jubilation, however, when the enemy began to shell the advancing column. It was not the first time that tanks on the same side had shelled each other, but through the haze it was seen that the newcomers were flying the pennant of British tanks. Some passed immediately behind 21 Battalion, with their guns blazing, but their armour was light and several were soon burning. The rest moved into the area occupied by Brigade Headquarters, and as they went forward the oddments of Brigade Headquarters, cooks, batmen, drivers and orderlies, went on with them without waiting for instructions. Brigadier Barrowclough wanted the tanks to continue the attack, but their commander's instruction was to cover the withdrawal of 6 Brigade. Fourth Brigade was split in two and was no longer on Belhamed Ridge. There was nothing to do but accept the inevitable.

Major Fitzpatrick was ordered to get 21 Battalion into as few trucks as possible and to move with Brigade Headquarters. There were 16 more casualties while the men were getting from the trenches to the vehicles. Both company commanders were wounded, but managed to keep going as far as the battalion transport, where Second-Lieutenant Cairns was left with the RAP truck. Captain Panckhurst remained with the unit.

The tanks, whose commander had taken control of the operations, directed the brigade transport along a route between Point 175 and the Blockhouse, under the impression that the enemy had been cleared from there and the route was safe. As the leading trucks came out of the shelter of a wadi onto the escarpment, they were met with murderous fire and were shot to pieces. Fortunately the smoke from the burning vehicles formed a screen while the column turned and swept down again. A safer route was taken north to Zaafran, the location of 4 Brigade and New Zealand Division's battle headquarters.

Troop-carrying vehicles were mixed with tanks, cars and carriers, and while 21 Battalion was getting sorted out, a liaison officer appeared with a message to bring the transport to the top of the escarpment and to put the men on the left flank. The area was being shelled and Major Fitzpatrick was wounded, but he remained with the unit. Second-Lieutenant King, who was now the only unwounded officer in the battalion, took charge while the tired troops dug a defensive position.

Meanwhile a conference was being held at Divisional Headquarters. Tanks and lorried infantry were closing in from north, west and south. There were only two courses left—either to try to fight through to Tobruk in the darkness, or to move south-east behind 4 Armoured Brigade and make for some place where the Division could refit. The latter course was decided upon and Corps informed: 'Remnants of Division at Zaafran. After dark will attempt break out direction Bir bu Deheua. If unsuccessful will attempt break out west.' Sixth Brigade travelled 42 miles southeast before daylight. The cooks produced something hot for breakfast and the march continued safely to the border wire, where Major Harding met and took command of what was left of 21 Battalion—fewer than 150 all ranks, including walking wounded.

While the column travelled east into Egypt the battle for Tobruk continued. Two attempts by the enemy to relieve the frontier garrisons were defeated, one by 5 NZ Brigade and the other by 5 Indian Brigade. Eighth Army regrouped and Rommel, after an abortive attack on the Tobruk salient, accepted the position and began to retire. The same day as the enemy withdrawal began in earnest (6 December), 21 Battalion arrived back in the old lines at Baggush. With the possible exception of Crete, Sidi Rezegh was probably the hardest-fought battle of the whole war, but the survivors wear no '8' clasp on their Africa Star. Somebody or other decided that

Eighth Army did not really come into existence until the Battle of Alamein.

The battalion's casualties in November 1941 were: 80 killed or died of wounds, 126 wounded, and 167 prisoners of war (of whom 18 were wounded and 19 died), making a total of 373.

- ¹ Maj T. V. Fitzpatrick; Auckland; born NZ 27 Nov 1909; solicitor; actg CO 21 Bn 28 Nov-3 Dec 1941; wounded 1 Dec 1941.
- ² Kabrit was the Middle East naval training and experimental station for combined operations at this time.
- ³ Within a year Eighth Army was to make a stand here on what became known as the Alamein Line.
- ⁴ The Baggush Box was a defensive position named after one of the two small oases in the area (Baggush and Burbeita); there was a railway station at Sidi Haneish, inside the Box.
- ⁵ Capt F. J. Trolove; Te Mata; born Raglan, 14 Feb 1905; sheepfarmer; wounded 26 Nov 1941.
- ⁶ Left out of battle—a nucleus of trained men available in case of disaster to a unit.
- ⁷ Capt C. R. Hargrave; Whangarei; born NZ 6 Feb 1911; public accountant and auditor; wounded and p.w. 26 Nov 1941.
- ⁸ Capt W. K. Henton; born Auckland, 12 Nov 1917; sports goods salesman; died of wounds 31 Aug 1942.
- ⁹ Incidentally Rommel threw a few shells in the direction of 18 Platoon when he passed that way later.
- ¹⁰ Maj H. O. Crawford-Smith; Wellington; born Lyttelton, 10 Apr 1909;

commercial traveller.

- ¹¹ Bir in Arabic indicates a well, but not necessarily one that contains water. The importance of a bir in a sandy waste almost as flat as a billiard table lay in the fact that there was usually a mound around it, something that could be positively identified when marching on a compass bearing. Birs were invariably used for map references and often gave their names to the surrounding country.
- ¹² Maj G. E. Cairns, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 13 Aug 1911; barrister and solicitor; BM 6 Bde; twice wounded.
- ¹³ Sgt N. C. Olde, MM; Remuera; born England, 8 Aug 1904; wool classer; wounded 15 Jul 1942.
- ¹⁴ Capt C. P. Hutchinson, MBE; London; born England, 25 Jun 1906; barrister's clerk; p.w. 25 Nov 1941.
- ¹⁵ L-Sgt R. Bonner; born NZ 3 Nov 1917; factory worker; killed in action 22 Nov 1941.
- ¹⁶ 2 Lt R. G. De Costa; born Gisborne, 14 Mar 1910; bank clerk; died of wounds 15 Jul 1942.
- ¹⁷ 2 Lt L. A. Steiner, DCM; born NZ 4 Mar 1918; farmhand; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.
- ¹⁸ L-Cpl F. T. Avery; Auckland; born Auckland, 19 Mar 1905; carpenter; p.w. Nov 1941.
- ¹⁹ Capt J. I. Moir; Auckland; born Auckland, 24 May 1911; accountant; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941.
- ²⁰ Maj-Gen H. E. Barrowclough, CB, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Masterton, 23 Jun 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde 1915–19 (CO 4 Bn); comd 6 Bde 1 May 1940–21 Feb 1942; GOC 2 NZEF in Pacific and

GOC 3 NZ Div 8 Aug 1942-20 Oct 1944.

- ²¹ Lt-Col C. Shuttleworth, DSO, m.i.d.; born Wakefield, 19 Jan 1907; Regular soldier; CO 24 Bn 23 Jan 1940–30 Nov 1941; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; died in UK 15 May 1945.
- ²² Brig J. R. Page, DSO, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Dunedin, 10 May 1908; Regular soldier; CO 26 Bn 15 May 1940–27 Nov 1941; wounded 27 Nov 1941; Commandant, Northern Military District, 1950–52; Adjutant-General, Army HQ, Apr 1952-.
- ²³ 2 Lt S. V. Lord, DCM; Frankton Junction; born Wellington, 22 Mar 1906; labourer.
- ²⁴ Sgt C. B. Wallace; born NZ 8 Dec 1906; storeman; three times wounded; died of wounds 1 Jan 1943.
- ²⁵ Capt A. C. Turtill; born England, 7 Jul 1909; chiropractor; killed in action 29 Nov 1941.
- ²⁶ Lt-Col H. G. Burton, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Christchurch, 1 Dec 1899; plumber; NZ Mounted Rifles 1918–19; actg CO 25 Bn 23 Nov-6 Dec 1941; CO 25 Bn 24 Jul-11 Sep 1942; CO 1 and 2 Trg Units 1944.
- ²⁷ L-Cpl F. Clegg; Auckland; born England, 26 Mar 1910; labourer.
- ²⁸ Maj W. K. King; Auckland; born England, 17 Mar 1905; traffic inspector.
- ²⁹ Cpl J. J. Sheehan; Auckland; born NZ 8 Jun 1919; wounded 2 Jul 1942.
- ³⁰ Capt J. H. Money; Auckland; born England, 17 Nov 1905; newspaper representative; wounded and p.w. 30 Nov 1941.
- ³¹ L-Cpl R. S. Nicol, m.i.d.; Mufulira, Northern Rhodesia; born Whakatane, 18 Feb 1919; wounded 31 Jul 1942.

- ³² Pte C. Vause; Dargaville; born Dargaville, 12 Jun 1917; grocer's assistant; wounded 6 Apr 1943.
- ³³ See account by J. H. Money, Appendix I.
- ³⁴ Pte G. H. Goad, DCM; born England, 28 Dec 1910; carpenter; died of wounds 26 Jun 1942.
- ³⁵ Lt H. K. Anderson; Mangere; born Auckland, 13 Sep 1904; farmer; wounded 30 Nov 1941.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 6 — SYRIAN INTERLUDE

CHAPTER 6 Syrian Interlude

The corridor to Tobruk had been opened by 2 New Zealand Division, closed by the enemy, and then reopened by Eighth Army. Rommel, with half his Afrika Korps and two-thirds of his Italian allies destroyed, had retreated from Cyrenaica and was regrouping behind the El Agheila line.

Colonel S. F. Allen, ¹ who had previously commanded the. Divisional Signals, took command of 21 Battalion on 7 December. He was an Englishman by birth and a soldier by profession; he had had many years of service as a Regular soldier in the New Zealand Staff Corps and had often applied for transfer to a more active command. He was soon known to the troops affectionately as 'Soldier Sam'.

A battalion precedent had been established in Crete by men returning unexpectedly after having been written off as lost. It was maintained on 9 December, when 118 ex-prisoners of war reported to Battalion Headquarters. After capture the officers had been separated from the troops and had been kept for five days at the bottom of a well near Tobruk before being taken to Benghazi and then to Italy. The men had been dragged around the desert for a week by their Italian captors, themselves on the run, until recaptured by a patrol of the Scots Greys.

A reinforcement draft of 20 officers and 320 other ranks arrived the following day, and the battalion began rebuilding for the third time. It reverted to the command of 5 Brigade, which returned from Cyrenaica on 30 December, and ended a year of reverses and disasters with an all-arms pyrotechnic display on New Year's Eve.

And what of the morale of a unit that had fought three campaigns and been cut to pieces in each one? The troops felt that they had had a raw deal in Greece, Crete and Libya, but the feeling engendered a manner and a loyalty that is best explained by what happened after General Freyberg's inspection on Christmas Eve. After the parade the GOC addressed the officers, and his remarks began something like: 'You look a tough lot. You'll need to be. Not many came back last time.' The men got to know of the General's opening words, and for days they greeted one another with self-critical ironic humour: 'You look a tough lot. You'll need to be. Not many came

back last time. There'll be none next time.'

The new year was ushered in with a terrific sandstorm, followed by wet, wintry weather, but there was a rumour of a move away from the Desert and a tour of duty in Syria. The first leg of what was hoped to be at least a move out of the sandy wastes of the Western Desert began on 3 January, when an advance party under Lieutenant West-Watson ² left by rail for an unknown destination. The transport moved out the following day and the rest of the unit entrained at Sidi Haneish in the evening.

The optimists who were already half-way to Syria took a very dim view of the situation when, after detraining at Kabrit in the early hours of 6 January, they found a course of training for a seaborne landing awaiting them.

Brigadier Kippenberger took over command of 5 Brigade about this time and was not in accord with the nonconformist attitude he found regarding dress, housekeeping arrangements, and the outward and visible signs of an inward soldierly spirit. The self-mocking toughness of the old hands that had been copied by the reinforcements came to a sudden end, and there were red ears among the junior commanders.

The weeks that followed were filled, between dust-storms, with exercises in ladder-scaling, rowing, embarking and disembarking from assault landing craft, stowage and unloading of supplies, the crossing of wired beaches and before-dawn landings. The only bright interlude came on 31 January, when the sergeants beat the officers at Rugby.

The amphibious training exercises reached their zenith on 4 February, when the unit embarked on the Glengyle and steamed down the Suez Canal to Port Tewfik where, with the rest of the training fleet carrying the other battalions of 5 Brigade, they anchored for the night. The monotony of the not unusual activity of the soldier —waiting for something to happen—was eased by a singsong, punctuated by caustic references to the green hills of Syria, and speculation as to where the landing was going to be.

The journey was continued next day down the Red Sea to Ras el Sudr, where practice landings and assaults were carried out. The troops dug in for the night and

carried on the following morning, but before midday the exercises were cancelled and the troops re-embarked. They were back in Kabrit in the morning of 7 February, wondering what it was all about. Actually the High Command had been toying with the idea of landing 5 Brigade at Ras el Aali, in the Gulf of Sirte, behind the position Rommel was holding at El Agheila, until unexpected developments intervened.

All our plans were based on what Rommel should have done —he was behind an immensely strong position and should have stayed there. The High Command may have been right about what he should have done, but that was not what he decided to do. He made a much quicker recovery in men and machines than had been thought possible, and launched a reconnaissance in force. The veteran 7 Armoured Division had been replaced by the inexperienced 1 Armoured Division, which was caught off balance, and the reconnaissance developed into an offensive that was eventually halted on the Gazala- Bir Hacheim line west of Tobruk. Fifth Brigade was hurried forward to El Adem to thicken the defence. The rest of the Division stayed at Kabrit for two or three weeks after 5 Brigade left.

The 21st Battalion left on 11 February by road and rail. The road party bedded down that night at Wadi Natrun, the next at Daba, and the following one near Matruh. On the 14th they met the rail party near Misheifa, where sufficient transport reported to carry everybody, and by nightfall were through the frontier wire and bedded down at Bir Gibni, 20 miles inside Libya. By 4.30 p.m. the following day 21 Battalion and the rest of the brigade were in position at El Adem; the 700 miles could not have been covered much more quickly. The brigade was to prepare a defended locality on the escarpment south of El Adem, with the intention of preventing the enemy severing the Corps' main supply line to the west, as well as providing protection for the El Adem landing ground.

It was a repetition of the stay at the Kaponga Box, except that the outcrops of rock made digging with pick and shovel extremely hard work, and eventually pneumatic drills had to be used at the worst places. The position was finished by the first week of March, complete with minefields and wire around the whole of its 14,000-yard perimeter. The enemy advance did not continue, although occasional bombing attacks on the airfield at El Adem were a reminder that the war was not far away.

As the desert around was still littered with debris from the previous year's battles, an inter-battalion salvage contest was held. The first week it was won by 21 Battalion, and the next by 22 Battalion, but 21 Battalion was given the decision on points. There was a tendency in some quarters to overdo these salvaging operations. First, four two-gallon jars of rum disappeared from 21 Battalion's ration dump, then the brigade ration dump discovered a shortage of sugar, milk, sausages and jam valued at £35. Finally Headquarters Company's canteen lost a considerable quantity of honey, tinned sausages and tongues. Battalion routine orders were very terse indeed, but the culprits were never discovered.

The ack-ack defences were stepped up with some captured Italian guns and the companies took turns trying to find out how they worked. The cooks felt that they would like to play with the new toys too, and eventually dragged one over to the quartermaster's lines. It was not a very good gun; it had no sights and the recuperator was faulty, but firing practice commenced forthwith. A petrol drum was set up in a wadi and the gun was sighted by looking through the barrel. The direction of the first shell was fine, but the elevation was a bit out, and the projectile went over the top of the wadi into space. Suitable adjustments were made and the next shell hit the ground half-way between the gun and the target. Before they were ready for the third effort, a car approached at breakneck speed and a South African officer asked the embryo gunners if they would mind not shelling the South African camp. The gun was finally swopped in condition 'as was' to another unit for an oversize battle-dress blouse.

The optimists took heart again when all ranks were warned on 13 March that the taking of sterling notes into Palestine was prohibited under threat of confiscation. This was a purely routine warning and had been published many times previously for the benefit of troops going there on leave, but it was regarded as a good omen. To the pessimists an opportunity to transport sterling into Palestine—or anywhere else for that matter—was difficult to visualise, cooped up as they were in a defensive position in the Western Desert. The pointer was real, however, for the unit was relieved by a South African battalion, moved out on 22 March, and was back at Maadi on the 28th.

A letter, which Colonel Allen published in routine orders, was received from the

commanding officer of the battalion which relieved 21 Battalion at El Adem. It read:

I would be failing in my duty if I did not write and thank you for the spotless condition in which we found our present camp when we took over from you. We are so accustomed to taking over camps which are in a filthy condition, that this one came as a real pleasure and surprise to us. I would add that never have we found a camp so clean in all our experience and this is the opinion of all our Officers and men. On behalf of the Officers and men of the Unit, I take this opportunity of wishing you the very best of luck in your new venture.

[Sgd] R. M. Blaker, Lt-Col., Offr Commanding 1 Imp. Light Horse.

Colonel Allen congratulated all ranks in having won the praise expressed in the letter. He also complimented them on their conduct during the time they had been at El Adem and on the spirit in which they had tackled their tasks and performed them in such a satisfactory manner.

Fifty per cent daily leave enabled renewed acquaintanceship with favourite haunts in Cairo. Paybook balances melted away and even the greenness of the Syrian hills faded a little. Such periods do not last long.

There was a ceremonial parade on 2 April during which decorations won in Greece, Crete, and Libya were presented. There was also an inspection by General Freyberg, who later informed the Colonel that he had never seen the battalion looking better and expressed his appreciation of its steadiness on parade and bearing on the march. The 21st Battalion was itself again.

The next day, Good Friday, was a day of church parades, after which the advance party really left for Syria. The last doubts were dispelled by some paragraphs in routine orders, which were taken from a letter from General Ritchie, GOC Eighth Army, to the Brigade Commander on the departure of 5 Brigade Group from Libya:

Now that your Bde is to leave the EIGHTH ARMY, I send you a message of warmest thanks for all you have done and my unqualified praise for the way in which you have accomplished it.

Your exploits in actions at the beginning of this campaign in which you were involved in the hardest and most tenacious fighting, won the admiration of everyone in the EIGHTH ARMY and moreover very largely made possible the relief of TOBRUK and subsequent advance into CYRENAICA.

Your recent work in the EL ADEM position has been carried out with that cheerfulness, thoroughness and efficiency which I associate with the troops of NEW ZEALAND.

I would be most grateful if you would convey this message to your Bde and to assure them that the best wishes of myself and the EIGHTH ARMY are theirs in whatever direction their future may be.

The next paragraph of the routine order was rather an anticlimax:

Cariage of Intoxicating Liquors.

Bottles of intoxicating liquors, which are not sealed and wrapped up, will not be carried through public streets of towns, or in any public conveyance, at any time of the day or night.

A pat on the back followed by a kick in the pants—what more could a Kiwi ask for?

The battalion again moved in two parties, the transport by road and the rest by rail. The road convoy, consisting of the vehicles of 21, 22, and 23 Battalions, left on 6 April and moved by easy stages through Moascar by the Sinai Desert road to Asluj, and then to Beersheba, Tulkarm, Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, which it reached on the afternoon of the 11th.

The rail party entrained on the afternoon of the 9th, had a hot meal at the Australian transit camp at Kantara, and continued on to Haifa, which it reached that evening. From daybreak until the train stopped at Haifa, the battalion feasted its eyes on cultivated fields, trees, orange groves and the long-looked-for sight of green hills in the distance. It was a greenness of surpassing loveliness to desert-weary eyes, and the strained squint of the sandy wastes changed to open staring. It was possible to capture something of what the Israelites must have felt when they saw

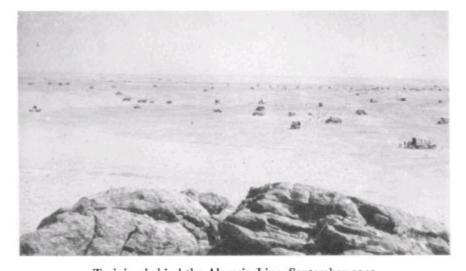
this same promised land after their forty years wandering in the wilderness. The headdress of the Arabs was identical with that in the illustrated biblical storybooks of childhood days.

There was, however, one fly in the Palestinian ointment. The ration trucks, delayed in crossing the Canal, had been left behind, and with them the day's rations. Oranges at the rate of two for a cigarette helped to fill the gap, but the hot meal at the Haifa transit camp was more than ordinarily welcome. The next leg from Haifa to Beirut was by bus along the coast road through a pleasant agrarian countryside. Orange groves alternating with vineyards and eucalyptus trees reminded some of Australia and others of the home farm, but in place of post-and-wire fences were cactus hedges, a setting that was neither of Australia nor New Zealand.

Dominion troops, rolling along on rubber tires, looked across a land that had in turn been conquered by Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Macedonians, Greeks, Romans, Mamelukes, Arabs and Ottomans, and where finally the Jews were coming back again after nearly two thousand years.

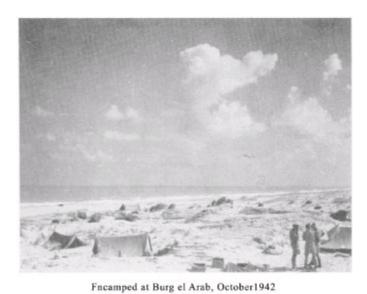
The buses stopped for a short time at the Customs post on the Palestine-Syrian border. From the top of the steep hill where the two countries meet, the cliffs drop sheer to the sea. A few feet above sea level the New Zealand Railway Construction Engineers were supervising gangs of natives working on the line which would join Haifa and Beirut.

Beirut was reached in the early afternoon, and three hours' general leave enabled everybody to see something of the town. There was no shortage of anything, except small change, of which the merchants and cafés appeared to be entirely bereft.



Training behind the Alamein Line, September 1942

Training behind the Alamein Line, September 1942



Encamped at Burg el Arab, October 1942



Officers of 21 Battalion on 21 October 1942 hear the plan for the Battle of Alamein



German tanks burning on the morning of the breakthrough at Alamein

German tanks burning on the morning of the breakthrough at Alamein



Flooding near Fuka



Enemy dugouts and sangars at the top of Halfaya Pass

Enemy dugouts and sangars at the top of Halfaya Pass

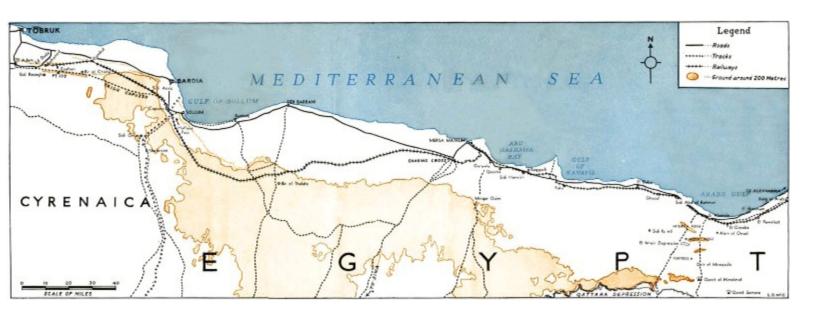


Where the Halfaya Pass action was fought



British armour going up Halfaya Pass after its capture by 21 Battalion

British armour going up Halfaya Pass after its capture by 21 Battalion



Absorbingly interesting as the whole move had been, the highlight of the

journey was the trip over the Lebanon Mountains to Rayak. The narrow-gauge railway from Beirut writhed its way along the lower slopes of the mountainside through orchards, clumps of trees, and small paddocks ablaze with wild flowers. Grey stone houses with red-tiled roofs, half hidden by mulberry trees, sheltered at the bottom of steep little valleys —the holiday resorts of Syria. Higher up were more houses built on narrow terraces lining the steep hillside, where rows of



eastern mediterranean

vines covered the few square yards of soil. The country, though not so well cultivated, was still green and strewn with anemones, cyclamen and jonquils. But the sight of snow-capped mountains from the summit made it difficult for South Islanders to speak clearly for a moment.

After a meal at Rayak the battalion transferred to a standard-gauge railway and departed for Aleppo, where it arrived early the next morning.

The 21st Battalion, in luck for once, relieved 26 Battalion, quartered in the Quartier Vingt Barracks in Aleppo. Duties consisted of picketing the town, maintaining outlying posts at Azaz, Djerablous and Akterine, and operating a snap road patrol. There was 50 per cent daily leave for the remainder of the battalion—when there was any remainder—after guards had been detailed for ration and ammunition dumps.

Still, spring and early summer are pleasant seasons in Syria, and the troops

were happy and carefree nearly a thousand miles away from the war. April passed into a May of sunny days and cool nights. The battalion soccer team was defeated by the Divisional Ammunition Company; the officers drew with the sergeants at hockey; the sergeants defeated the officers at basketball; platoons won and lost at Rugby. There were sightseeing tours, discussion clubs, and concert parties.

An afternoon's leave passed quickly enough. First a call at the YMCA or the Salvation Army building where you could read, write home, play games, or enjoy a good cup of tea and fresh cakes; where an orchestra played mixed opera and jazz while you sat in a corner thinking of the far-off days when your only care was how to pass a leisurely weekend. Maybe you were energetic and took a walk through the suq with a vague idea of picking up a bargain to send home. There weren't any bargains and you knew it, but you went just the same. A beer or so at the Naafi, and you strolled back to barracks.

Life in the outposts was not so varied. A day at Djerablous, on the Turkish frontier, is typical of the way the troops passed the time.

Bells from the church in the village ring out an unofficial reveille shortly after five and, while the men are shaving, 'George' the bootblack is looking for custom and ready to voice his opinion on Kiwis who clean their own boots. Things were different when the Aussies were in residence. After George comes Mahomet, who has the job of sweeping and cleaning the huts. He has all the news of the divisional area, most of it surprisingly accurate. Finally Ali arrives for the washing, which will be returned later by the 'Sergeant-Major', a bright youth of some thirteen summers, decked out in shorts and a fairisle pullover with half a dozen Aussie and Kiwi patches sewn on his sleeves. He is the firm's accountant; he keeps the accounts—on a cigarette packet—and handles the cash. The Sergeant-Major is definitely the boss of the firm. After breakfast the guard at the check point is relieved and the work of checking passes—Arabic, Turkish and Armenian—continues. A few yards away, in Turkey, a guard marches up and down, rifle slung and bayonet fixed.

For those not on duty there is an hour on the camp parade ground while junior NCOs give their words of command an airing: 'At the halt, on the right, form squad!' 'Slo-o-pe arms!' 'Left, right, left, right.' 'The squad will retire—about turn!' Down in the Sigs' hut routine messages are sent and received, while the rattle of dixies in the

cookhouse tells of another meal. The RAP hut is a busy place with a score of children fighting and playing around the door. Inside the orderly treats cuts, sores, and such ailments as he is able to deal with. For those not on duty the afternoons are free. They sleep, write letters, play baseball, or perhaps take a walk on the off-chance of a potshot at a hare. In the evenings a few pints in the canteen help to pass the time, then to bed while another day is paraded for inspection.

Maybe you have fluked a fatigue at the QM stores and a trip with the three-ton ration truck that travels daily along the winding streets and in and out of the narrow alleys and gateways of Aleppo. First call is at the petrol dumps to the north-west of the town, where you are surrounded by Kiwis, hungry for news and asking when is the so-and-so mail going to arrive. The war situation is discussed with particular reference to the little yellow Japanese baskets—how far away from New Zealand are they now?

After a heated argument between the cook and the quartermasters about short-weight rations— and what the hell do you think a man's going to use for tea tonight?—you make for the ammunition caves two miles away to the north-east.

This is a quiet, secluded spot behind a perimeter wire. The guard at the gate takes your matches and cigarettes. There's enough ammo there to blow Syria off the map, so fires are discouraged. This cook is tougher than the other one, and while he conducts his war with the quarter bloke the Pacific situation is again thoroughly canvassed. There's a latrine-wireless rumour that the Aussies are going home to defend Australia and we are to follow as soon as transport is available.

One of the guards had had a couple of beers with a bloke who knows a Div Sigs bloke at Baalbek who says orders are being prepared for a move to India. From there the Div is going to march across China and take them in the rear. The strategist in the guard draws a map on the ground and proves that the obvious thing is to land at Darwin in the north of Australia and go in there from the flank if the yellow stinkers try to attack New Zealand.

And there's another rumour that we are going to stay where we are. And so you go from post to post.

Spring slipped into a broiling summer and everything was just fine—except for

the unwelcome reappearance of Bombay bloomers. The Syrian malarial mosquito is a dive-bomber by instinct, and an army not conditioned to the climate could be decimated in a season. The most stringent precautions were taken by anti-malaria control squads, and after sundown all ranks were obliged to wear shirt sleeves fastened at the wrist and to have their knees covered. Because men wearing shorts could not cover their knees, the long-shorts were issued again. At sundown the turned-up length of leg was let down and securely tied around the ankles. The Bombay bloomers were efficient, but they were also ludicrous, particularly so when the youth and beauty of Aleppo, almond-eyed and raven-haired, 'made the promenade' in the cool of the evening. Lupine noises had no effect whatever, and an uneasy suspicion existed that the smiles, when there were any, were the result of a comparison between the Kiwi's nether garments and those of the boy-friend. Those Bombay bloomers were a definite blow to morale.

If the troops were enjoying themselves, there were furrowed brows and anxious nights in high places. Intelligence reports had early indicated the possibility of a double thrust at Egypt, one down through Turkey and the Caucasus from the East, the other by the Axis forces under Rommel in the Western Desert. An airborne landing from Greece was not impossible. Syria was seething with disaffection, and Iraq was full of enemy agents.

The Allied solution was to deploy a delaying force in Syria while building up strength to deal with Rommel. The 2nd New Zealand Division was given the task of preparing a fortress position barring the likely line of invasion down the Bekaa Valley, between the Lebanon and Anti- Lebanon ranges. The Division, less 5 Brigade (then in the Desert building the El Adem Box), had done a great deal of work on the Djedeide fortress. Divisional Headquarters had been set up at Baalbek, 20 miles south of Djedeide, and positions had been prepared for a protracted defence.

The 21st Battalion, luxuriating in Aleppo, had not been employed in building the fortress, but the lotus-eating time was nearly over. On 10 June 5 Brigade began to concentrate for training, and the next day moved out to its exercise area 60 miles east of Aleppo. It was while preparing for a night march and night attack on the evening of the 13th that Brigade Headquarters received the signal, 'Return to Baalbek forthwith'.

Within an hour the practice night march became a real approach march—to Egypt.

- ¹ Brig S. F. Allen, OBE, m.i.d.; born Liverpool, 17 May 1897; Regular soldier; CO 2 NZEF Sigs Sep 1939-Sep 1941; 21 Bn 7 Dec 1941-10 May 1942, 12 Jun-15 Jul 1942; comd 5 Bde 10 May-12 Jun 1942; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.
- ² Capt K. C. West-Watson; Sudan; born England, 16 Aug 1914; stage director; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 7 — DEFENCE OF EGYPT

CHAPTER 7 Defence of Egypt

When, on 22 March, 21 Battalion left the El Adem Box, Eighth Army was holding a line that stretched from Gazala to the Free French position at Bir Hacheim. Both sides were reorganising, but with the Mediterranean closed to our ships and with men and supplies being diverted to the Pacific, Eighth Army could build up only slowly. Rommel was ready first.

On 13 June, by which time 21 Battalion had moved into a training area and roasted in the oven of the Syrian Desert, with a temperature of 100 degrees—and had 30 men bitten by scorpions— Eighth Army had been beaten back to the Tobruk- El Adem line. The same day Divisional Headquarters received orders to make all speed for the Western Desert.

A brigade exercise was cancelled late the following day and rumours spread like wildfire—the Division was departing immediately for New Zealand, India, Australia, England, Singapore. By 17 June 5 Brigade was concentrated at Baalbek and the commanding officer and company commanders of 21 Battalion left for Maadi, apparently to prepare for embarkation to Australia, England, India, New Zealand, Singapore, or China.

The move (to the destination you fancied) began by truck on the 18th, and the brigade passed through Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee, to Tulkarm, after about two hundred miles of suffocating dust. The next leg was through Lydda and Gaza to Asluj; it then seemed quite definite that the Division was returning to New Zealand. On the third day, however, the brigade crossed the Sinai Desert to the Suez Canal and then continued on to Amiriya, outside Alexandria. And the same day, 21 June, Rommel captured Tobruk.

The 21st Battalion left Amiriya early next morning and followed the well-known route through Daba and Baggush to Mersa Matruh. The trucks travelled nose-to-tail along the only road, while an unending stream—sometimes four lanes of traffic — passed in the opposite direction. Eighth Army was in full retreat.

It was 1918 over again, with the New Zealand Division being hurried forward in

a desperate effort to halt a German army on the brink of victory. And in its final results four months later it was also 1918 over again, with the utter defeat of the enemy.

The five-day journey ended at Smugglers' Cove, in the eastern sector of the Matruh Box, after over nine hundred miles in crowded trucks during the height of summer, and the swim that followed was something to remember. The night after the swim was also something to remember. The Naafi staff had caught the general panic and had departed with the keys of the building. The local police did their best but were not able to stop the New Zealanders, whose regimental funds took some heavy punishment later. Many of the trucks held unusual cargo in the morning: for instance, the battalion ammunition truck, besides small-arms ammunition and grenades, could have produced a case of EWO Chinese beer. The driver of the vehicle, Private 'Lucky' Luckings, ¹ had a gift that almost amounted to genius in that direction. He was renowned in the battalion as a prince of scroungers for whom the words 'discipline' and 'fear' had no meaning.

For three days 5 Brigade dug trenches, laid wire, attempted to repair existing defences. The enemy's pursuit was swift and relentless; he advanced through Bardia and Sollum to Sidi Barrani with scarcely a check. On the 25th his vanguard was within forty miles of Matruh. General Auchinleck took personal command of Eighth Army and determined to make a stand on a line running from El Alamein to the Qattara Depression—the now famous Alamein Line.

El Alamein was on the coast, and the Qattara Depression, some forty miles to the south, was an impassable barrier. It is the dried-up bed of a former inland sea which stretches from the neighbourhood of Siwa Oasis, near the Egyptian frontier, to a point about 160 miles west of Cairo and 90 miles south-west of Alexandria. The bed of the depression consists of quick- sands and salt marshes, almost everywhere impassable to heavy vehicles, and on the northern side it is surrounded by precipitous cliffs. The Qattara Depression was as definite an obstacle as the Mediterranean in the north; and if Rommel was not stopped on the line between it and the sea, it was goodbye to Egypt.

But time was needed for Eighth Army to reorganise, and 2 New Zealand Division, one of the few battleworthy formations now available, was briefed to fight

a delaying action. The plan was to occupy the ridge of Minqar Qaim, 25 miles south of Mersa Matruh, and force the enemy to halt to deal with this threat to his flank and communications.

There was some fast movement. Surplus gear, including anti-malarial equipment and the detested Bombay bloomers, was called in; D Company, in pursuance of an order to reduce the proportion of infantry to artillery, went disgustedly back to Maadi.

The officers of 21 Battalion on 26 June 1942 were:

Battalion Headquarters

CO: Lt-Col S. F. Allen killed, Ruweisat Ridge

Adj: Capt W. C. Butland

QM: Lt A. C. Pryde IO: Lt R. B. Abbott

MO: Capt G. H. Levien

Padre: Rev Fr J. F. Henley

Headquarters Company

OC: Maj H. M. McElroy

Sigs Pl: 2 Lt L. E. Judd

Transport PI: Lt W. F. N. Gardner

Mortar PI: Lt G. S. Rogers

Carrier PI: Capt K. G. Dee wounded, El Mreir

2 Lt R. A. Marshall-Inman

A-Tk Pl: Lt H. Bailey

Lt W. D. Bremner

A Company

OC: Maj G. H. Panckhurst wounded, El Mreir

Lt A. E. Hogg

Lt R. A. Shaw

Lt K. C. West-Watson

B Company

OC: Maj R. W. Adams killed, El Mreir

2 Lt J. R. R. Barnsdall wounded, El Mreir

2 Lt P. P. Hutt wounded, El Mreir

Lt R. D. Trounson wounded, Ruweisat Ridge

C Company

OC: Capt L. N. Wallace wounded, Ruweisat Ridge

Lt I. M. Thomson

2 Lt R. E. Horrocks

Lt B. B. S. Catran

The following were left out of battle:

D Company complete

Maj R. W. Harding

Capt W. K. Henton

Capt C. Williams

Capt I. A. Murray

Capt E. B. Butcher

Lt A. T. Eady

Capt J. R. B. Marshall

2 Lt J. P. Stranger

Capt W. Dickson

2 Lt P. Robertson

Capt G. A. H. Bullock-Douglas

2 Lt B. T. Robertson

The company commanders, with the exception of Major Adams, ² were all original 21 Battalion subalterns: Major McElroy and Captain Wallace had fought through the Greece and Crete campaigns, and Major Panckhurst had been Quartermaster continuously until his promotion. Major Adams, from 24 Battalion, had served a tour of duty with Divisional Headquarters in the previous campaign, and had attended a course at the Staff College in Haifa.

The 21st Battalion was relieved by a battalion of 10 Indian Division on the night 25-26 June and moved via the Garawla track to a brigade rendezvous where the troops, widely dispersed, dug the inevitable slit trenches and watched the aurora of enemy flares in the west. Night-flying planes bombed the column in the moonlight but did no harm in 21 Battalion's area.

In the morning the Brigadier and the battalion commanders reconnoitred the position on Minqar Qaim and in the late afternoon the units were moving. Brigadier Kippenberger had been instructed in the interim to send a mobile column to defend a field maintenance centre at Bir Khalda, 16 miles south of Minqar Qaim, and as Colonel Allen was the senior battalion commander he was given the semi-independent mission. Nothing much was known about the conditions in the area except that I Armoured Division was sparring with the advancing 15 Panzer Division to the west of Bir Khalda. Allen had under command for the operation 27 Battery 5 Field Regiment, 2 Section 7 Field Company, and E Troop 32 Anti-Tank Battery.

There was an hour of daylight left when the column reached the Bir Khalda area, and Allen decided to dig in for the night on Gebel Khalda, a nearby hill. The cooks were instructed to prepare a meal while the company commanders went with the CO to reconnoitre their positions on the gebel. The column was climbing out of a wadi when the signal to halt was given, but because of the extra transport with B Echelon and the supporting arms, there was insufficient room left for correct dispersal. Most of the drivers used their initiative and moved out to flanks, but others remained huddled together. Two trucks from 1 Armoured Division raced up to identify the column, told B Company it was taking a risk if enemy aircraft came over, and departed at speed.

By the time the last of the column had climbed out of the wadi and dispersed as well as it was able, the light was failing and tea was ready. Several three-tonners of the supporting arms were driven over to the cooks' truck and, with the ration trucks grouped around the cookers, offered a perfect target if bombers came over, which was precisely what happened.

The troops were standing about, dixies in hand, when the drone of approaching aircraft was heard. About two dozen planes passed overhead, and the 'Ours or theirs' argument was in full swing when they came back and bombed and gunned the

column. Three ammunition trucks of 27 Field Battery were set on fire, a mortar platoon truck received a direct hit, and three other vehicles were damaged. Corporal Hedley, ³ of 4 Reserve MT Company, and Second-Lieutenant Horrocks ⁴ removed wounded men and driverless trucks from the vicinity of the exploding 25-pounder ammunition. The only opposition to the bombers came from Corporal Ray Blows, ⁵ who later received a letter of commendation from General Freyberg for blazing away at them with his Bren gun.

The casualties were 12 killed and 45 wounded. The worst cases were evacuated in the two ambulances attached to the column and Lieutenant Carnachan, ⁶ the brigade liaison officer, left immediately with a request for more ambulances. They arrived before daylight and evacuated the rest of the wounded.

About midnight Lieutenant Atkinson ⁷ reported with H Troop 32 Anti-Tank Battery, armed with two-pounders. He also had orders for Lieutenant Smith's ⁸ E Troop to return with its six-pounders to Mingar Qaim.

Because the enemy might have been in a position to attack by daylight, the night was spent in building sangars. There were flares in the western sky and the noise of gunfire in the north, but a reconnaissance by a carrier patrol at daylight found no enemy in that area. There were, however, columns of our own troops moving in all directions.

At midday a wireless cipher message instructed Colonel Allen that he would be relieved by a squadron of Divisional Cavalry, to whom he would hand over command of one troop of 27 Battery, and was then to rejoin 5 Brigade. Major Sutherland ⁹ arrived with B Squadron Divisional Cavalry about 3 p.m., and the 21 Battalion column, less the troop of 27 Battery, moved off an hour later. It halted to brew up at 5 p.m., when Colonel Allen was called to answer an R/T message from Brigade. Major Fairbrother, ¹⁰ Brigade Major 5 Brigade, asked where the column was and said the brigade was still in the same place. Allen asked if the same place was where he had left the brigade the previous day (Minqar Qaim) and said that, if so, 21 Battalion had travelled only five miles but would start again immediately.

Meanwhile 21 Panzer Division had received three surprises, all unpleasant: first, whatever formation was blocking the road to Cairo was not conforming to pattern

and moving back on the Germans' approach; second, the New Zealanders, supposedly in Syria, were actually deployed across their thrust line; third, the New Zealand massed artillery fire was something to be reckoned with.

The day at Minqar Qaim passed in a series of duels between the artillery and enemy tanks probing for a weak spot. Had a gap been found, a fourth unpleasant surprise would have been experienced by the Panzers, because most of the hitherto helpless infantry battalions were armed with eight of the two-pounder guns formerly used by the anti-tank regiment, now equipped with six-pounders.

By late afternoon the New Zealand Division was almost surrounded. It is not the function of this history to describe in detail how it broke out during the night from Minqar Qaim; it is sufficient to say that 4 Brigade cleared a gap with their bayonets and the Germans were left holding an empty bag.

By the time the navigating officer was ready to continue the march, Major Thornton, ¹¹ OC 27 Battery, brought information passed on by a nearby British armoured unit that enemy forces were both in front and behind the 21 Battalion column. A new course was then set, which would avoid the area where the enemy was thought to be, and which would bring the battalion to a point two miles southwest of Mingar Qaim.

The column moved towards the dust cloud over Minqar Qaim and halted near the lip of a depression, where it could be seen that the battalion was on the fringe of an exchange of fire between the rear of the New Zealand position and a German formation that had evidently passed and circled round to the south behind Minqar Qaim.

Major McElroy, under instructions from Brigade given at the previous R/T conversation, had gone on ahead to report to Brigade Headquarters; he returned with the information that the Division was preparing to move out from Minqar Qaim. He had been told this by the commander of an Indian formation which he had encountered a little north-west of where they stood.

Colonel Allen decided that there was no point in trying to break into a position that the Division was trying to break out from, and resolved to make use of the protection afforded by the Indian regiment. The flag signal was given for a left

wheel, and A Company was in the act of conforming when some vehicles were reported on the right flank. Captain Dee led two sections of carriers out to investigate. Norm Bai, ¹² the driver of Dee's carrier, describes what follows:

We advanced in line abreast and got well across to the other side near a couple of low hills, and tucked in at the foot of these hills I saw four guns, two of our own anti-tank, a six- and a two-pounder still painted yellow, and two enemy anti-tank guns. I was most interested in the six-pounder, as we were advancing in a direct line to it. It was the first to open fire, the shell landing just to the side of the carrier and close enough to shower us with sand. Captain Dee opened up with his Bren gun on the six-pounder to good effect. He gave me the about turn sign, and a little later signalled to turn in again and had another go at another gun. We were turning away for the second time when I saw another anti-tank gun coming around a corner on a portee. Captain Dee said to turn in again and he stopped the portee with direct hits and disastrous results to the crew.

The carriers, however, were no match for the anti-tank guns and turned back in accordance with earlier instructions from Captain Dee that, if they saw him turn back, they were to disengage. They managed to struggle up the escarpment, but three were so badly damaged that they had to be abandoned, the crews going out in trucks. When Dee found that a carrier was still in the depression he wanted to return and try to rescue the crew, but was refused permission by Colonel Allen.

Some of the enemy fire fell among the rear companies and A Company's wheel was construed as a withdrawal, whereupon the whole column turned about and set off at speed. The column was thus divided into two parts: A Company with Battalion Headquarters under the guidance of Major McElroy was moving west, and the other part was moving south-west. A Company turned south to rejoin the column, but a wadi running south-east separated them, and both portions searched for each other until dusk without success.

Colonel Allen, with A Company, and Major Adams, with B and C Companies, finally sought the protection for the night of armoured parties in their vicinity. Both moved at first light and caught up with the straggling tails of other columns. Little by little it became clear that the Division was making for the Kaponga Box which 5 Brigade had helped to build the previous year. Major Adams reported in that

evening. There was no sign of Colonel Allen or A Company and they were almost written off as lost, but true to battalion precedent they turned up the next morning.

With the obstacle at Minqar Qaim removed, the enemy rolled on towards the Nile Valley, engulfing Mersa Matruh and El Daba in the process. To stop the rush Eighth Army dug in on the Alamein Line. On the coast was 1 South African Division, disposed around El Alamein. Twelve miles south 18 Indian Brigade, recently arrived from Iraq, occupied a depression, Deir el Shein, with another Indian composite force on the western end of Ruweisat Ridge behind it. Twenty miles south-west of El Alamein, the Kaponga Box (Fortress A) was occupied by 6 New Zealand Brigade, which had not been at Minqar Qaim; 4 and 5 Brigades, together with Divisional Headquarters, were in a depression, Deir el Munassib, about nine miles south-east. Munassib is an oval basin three miles long and about a mile across. The northern lip, a fairly steep 50-foot escarpment, gave cover from Alam Nayil Ridge, four miles north.

Fifteen miles south-west of Fortress A was Fortress B, at Naqb Abu Dweis, on the edge of the Qattara Depression. A mobile column of 5 Indian Division held Fortress B, but had no guns and little water and did not expect to stay long. The 9th Australian Division was en route from Syria, but still some days away. West of the thinly held line, mobile columns were harrying the enemy but hardly delaying his advance. In the rear the remaining formations of Eighth Army were reorganising.

Fifth Brigade moved into Deir el Munassib on 30 June, with 22 Battalion facing west, 23 Battalion south and 21 Battalion north, and with 5 Field Regiment inside the perimeter. The enemy was reported to be within fifteen miles, and it was expected that he would bypass the Kaponga Box. The battalion dug for its life and hoped there were enough artillery and anti-tank weapons to stop the tanks. All dug except the Pioneer Platoon, who had been equipped with the new infantry arm and were living with their eight two-pounder anti-tank guns. They spoke learnedly of angles of sight and trajectories and portées, and were a little difficult to get along with.

The enemy chose the northern sector, however, and the following morning an attack was launched against the Alamein Box and Deir el Shein. The South Africans withstood the attack, but the Indians, after a gallant all-day defence, during which a

dust-storm helped the tanks to make a breach, were completely overrun.

The capture of Deir el Shein put the enemy onto the western end of Ruweisat Ridge, which poised a ten-mile-long dagger at the heart of the Alamein Line. The importance of Ruweisat lay in the fact that, though it rose only about twenty feet above the surrounding desert and was hardly discernible at any distance, it was actually 200 feet above sea level and dominated over a hundred square miles. The ridge was comparatively flat on top, about 500 yards wide, and sloped steadily down towards the coast. Like all other sand-blasted features of the Western Desert, it was corroded with shallow wadis. The Indians held the eastern part of Ruweisat Ridge, and a hastily formed gun column helped to retard the enemy's advance.

Nevertheless the situation of the New Zealand Division was critical, and 6 Brigade was warned to prepare to evacuate the Kaponga Box.

The pressure being exerted against the southern flank was lightened considerably on 3 July when 4 Brigade with attached artillery encountered the Italian Ariete Division along the Alam Nayil Ridge, four miles north of Munassib. The Italians were outmanoeuvred and our gunners fired over open sights at a thousand yards. The Ariete departed at high speed, leaving 44 field guns.

Locally the initiative had passed to the New Zealand Division, and 5 Brigade was ordered to exert pressure against the enemy's open southern flank by occupying the El Mreir Depression, five miles north of the Kaponga Box and about two miles southwest of the western end of Ruweisat Ridge.

The brigade was moving before midday and was deployed about 4.30 p.m. three miles short of the objective, with 21 Battalion on the right, 22 Battalion on the left, and 23 Battalion in reserve. There was a desert road running north across the western end of El Mreir which would be useful in the event of a thrust towards El Daba with tanks. It was therefore made the axis of advance, with the forward battalions occupying a half-mile frontage on each side.

The battalion dispositions were C Company on the right flank, B in the centre, and A on the left. When the battalion was about a mile from El Mreir a number of enemy armoured fighting vehicles made a cautious appearance on the right of C Company, and a section of 33 Anti-Tank Battery went into action. C Company

stopped to protect the guns, but the enemy vehicles, evidently a reconnaissance group, did not like the new six-pounders and shortly withdrew. C Company found the rest of the battalion debussed and sheltering behind a slight rise in the ground that was in fact the southern edge of El Mreir. The whole area was being heavily shelled, it was almost dark, and there was no contact with 22 Battalion. Colonel Allen called a conference and ordered the companies to dig in for the time being. The Mortar Platoon had previously been sent forward to quieten enemy posts on the far side of the depression. The distance was almost beyond their range, but the mortar crews jammed extra secondary charges into their weapons and fired until almost out of ammunition. The companies put out listening posts on the forward slopes of the rise and waited for daylight.

El Mreir is roughly pear-shaped and at the western end is shallow and ill-defined. The 22nd Battalion was on the left of 21 Battalion, which was behind a small ridge. The depression widened and deepened quickly, and it was approximately a mile across to the 50-foot escarpment that was the northern side of El Mreir and the enemy defensive position.

For the greater part of the battalion this was, except for the unnerving bombing at Bir Khalda, their first experience of being under fire, and Colonel Allen spent most of the night going from post to post speaking to his men. He lost two batmen wounded during his rounds.

Brigadier Kippenberger came up before daylight. The orders were still to exert pressure, although the idea of a thrust to Daba had been dropped, and Allen was instructed to get the companies across the depression. The company commanders were present at the conference and the plan decided upon was for each company to move independently in open order.

Zero hour was 6.30 a.m. and after a hurried meal the platoons deployed. C Company, on the right flank, where the depression was widest, encountered frontal and enfilade fire from guns and mortars, and Captain Wallace reported that without supporting arms it was impossible for the company to advance. The appearance of some enemy armoured cars approaching from the north-east lent support to the claim, and Wallace was instructed to face right and form a flank. He was reinforced by the Carrier Platoon, which made many sorties during the day and kept the enemy

vehicles at a safe distance.

B Company was not so heavily opposed during the move over the rise to the bottom of the depression, but suffered the loss of Major Adams killed before the advance had properly started. It was not long, however, before the company was forced to get down and move by sections. Progress was slow and the sun was soon beating like a furnace on the backs of the troops, who were face down in the sand, watching the searching bullets falling like a shower of hail on a lake. The platoons worked stubbornly forward but it was late in the afternoon before the majority of the company was across.

No. 12, the right-flanking platoon of B Company, did not manage to get over. It was pinned down by fire from its immediate and right front, as well as being enfiladed by machine guns sweeping the wadi from the east. Either by bad luck or good marksmanship, Second-Lieutenant Hutt ¹³ and every section commander was hit during that hot and thirsty day. Private 'Lofty' Ingham ¹⁴ took command after all the NCOs were knocked out and saved the platoon from probable capture. An Italian armoured car came out of a re-entrant in front of 12 Platoon and drove straight towards them, but by great good fortune the scattered sections were not noticed. What might have happened is conjecture, but what did happen was that Ingham emptied the magazine of his rifle into the car, which took fright and bolted back to the wadi again.

A Company had rather an easier time, although it was hours before it was across. The 22nd Battalion was able to give some covering fire, which assisted the advance and kept the casualties down. Major Panckhurst was wounded half-way over, leaving both assaulting companies without commanders, and Lieutenant West-Watson took command of both groups.

The position at 4 p.m. was that the two companies, less 12 Platoon, and with approximately thirty casualties, were held up at the bottom of the northern escarpment and the Italians were trying to dislodge them with grenades. Sergeant Jock Brown, ¹⁵ A Company, recrossed El Mreir with a request by West-Watson for assistance, food and water. CSM Bill Davies, B Company, was also asked to deliver the same request. Both made the journey successfully, reported to Battalion Headquarters, and returned to their companies.

If the Italians on top of the escarpment could be quietened, West-Watson's intention was to capture the lip of El Mreir, but Colonel Allen decided the position was untenable and the troops were withdrawn under cover of a smoke screen. The wounded were brought in after dark and evacuated by an American volunteer ambulance. The drivers must have remembered that it was Independence Day (4 July), for one of them pointed to the coloured enemy flares decorating the darkness and said, 'To think that the guys back home are killing themselves with those things'.

The men had a hot meal and bedded down for the night. B Company found that an Italian had joined them. He had come across to give himself up, but everybody was too tired to bother about him and he bedded down with the company until the morning, when the cooks got him to help with the breakfast.

Once again 21 Battalion was on the receiving end and the whole operation an apparent failure, but in actual fact the actions by 4 and 5 Brigades resulted in a considerable amount of pressure being taken off the northern flank. Rommel was so fed up with the defiant attitude of 2 New Zealand Division that he decided to liquidate the menace to his southern wing.

The following report was sent to General Headquarters, Rome, from Panzer Army on 4 July:

'.... Our intention is to hold our front line position and to regroup with a view to encircling and destroying 2 NZ Div.'

The 5th and 6th of July were relatively quiet days for 21 Battalion, still dug in at El Mreir. There was occasional bombing, including a stick from a Kittyhawk, which luckily did no damage. As a precaution against a repetition, a large aircraft recognition sign made of tins burning petrol-soaked sand was put out in front of the area after dark.

Fourth Brigade was now echeloned behind and to the west of 5 Brigade, but the enemy regrouping had brought 90 Light and 21 Panzer Divisions too close for comfort, and the two brigades were ordered to move east of the Kaponga Box, while 6 Brigade continued to hold the fortress.

Fifth Brigade moved after dark on the 7th behind the Kaponga Box. The distance

was not great, but vehicles were continually getting bogged in soft sand and the troops spent more time out of the trucks pushing them than riding in them. It was after daybreak before 21 Battalion was in position facing south. The whole line was retiring slowly, and again that night (8 July) 21 Battalion was pulled back further east. Guides with signal lamps had been posted along the route into the Alinda Depression, and once more the unit dug itself in.

The Kaponga Box was stormed by the enemy on the morning of 9 July. His task was made easier by the fact that 6 Brigade had been withdrawn into reserve the previous day and the Box was unoccupied. Fifth Brigade spent the whole day in digging, wiring, and helping 7 Field Company to mine the wire in case the enemy, having captured the empty Kaponga Box, might feel ambitious enough to take on something tougher.

On the night of 9-10 July a reconnaissance and fighting patrol of one officer and five men from each battalion in the brigade, all under the command of Colonel Allen, went out with instructions to (i) draw fire, (ii) estimate the strength of the enemy in the vicinity, and (iii) obtain identifications if possible. The 22nd and 23rd Battalion parties met no opposition and returned safely, but Lieutenant Trounson, ¹⁶ commanding 21 Battalion's patrol, had more success. This patrol revisited El Mreir and found what was thought to be half a dozen tanks bedded down for the night. The first one was rushed and turned out to be a heavy Italian tractor-drawn gun. The crew took shelter under the tractor, where they were dealt with, but as they were clad in overalls without straps or shoulder badges it was not possible to identify them. The patrol was withdrawn under wild and inaccurate small-arms fire without a scratch, although Private Phil Ross ¹⁷ complained bitterly all the way back that he had sprained his wrist using his jammed tommy gun as a club on a reluctant Italian gunner. For this exploit and others later, Sergeant Charlie Carter ¹⁸ was awarded the DCM. Lieutenant Trounson received an immediate MC.

The 10th of July was an anxious day for 5 Brigade, with enemy to the north-west and south. By evening the position was plainly untenable, and again the troops moved by night, this time into the El Muhafid Depression. The Italians rushed the abandoned area at first light. They had an audience of two attached men from Divisional Signals, who had overslept and were left behind. The signalmen were inclined to be peevish at the neglect, but were warm in their praise of the enemy's

steadiness.

The days were getting hotter and hotter and the flies hungrier and hungrier, while a night's rest was something to dream about. Everybody was thoroughly fed up with getting pushed around without much idea of what it was all about. For a fortnight the New Zealanders had been fending off probes, sidestepping, backstepping, leap-frogging, 'taking ground' (as the Army says when it wants to call a withdrawal by another name), and occasionally snapping back. The enemy, in spite of strenuous efforts, had not reduced the Alamein defences; nor had he gained complete possession of Ruweisat Ridge.

Gradually word got about that something more dynamic than desert chess was in the air. Something to do with 'bacon'. Operation Bacon was the code-word for an attack on Ruweisat Ridge. At five in the afternoon of 11 July, 5 Brigade set off in desert formation and crossed the Alam Nayil Ridge, seven miles south of Ruweisat. Shelling became progressively heavier as the trucks, widely dispersed, picked their way forward. When two miles had been covered the troops debussed and pressed on through the spouting dust for another mile into the wadi which was the assembly point for the night attack on Ruweisat.

The operation was postponed and for three blazing days the troops crouched in slit trenches, alternately sleeping, smoking, and gritting their teeth when the whistle of shells indicated a close landing. Periodically there was the roar that preceded a stick of bombs, the bang-bang-bang of the Bofors, the rattle of machine guns, and the crackle of rifles. Then the dive-bombers were gone, leaving silence, a sun burning like a magnifying glass, and an intolerable thirst.

But there were plenty of our own planes around also, and it was cheering to hear the rumble of bombs dropped from Bostons that never broke formation or took notice of the ack-ack exploding around them. Those Bostons looked wonderful as they roared overhead, all silver in the sunlight. Behind, above, below, and all round them, vicious little fighters raced and dived. Other fighters loafed around, tilting their wings to show their markings and waiting for the next Stuka visit.

A few reinforcements arrived from Base and partially filled the gaps made by the daily casualties. There had not been any reinforcements from New Zealand for

months, and most of the draft had been winkled out of messes, canteens, orderly rooms, and other base jobs, or were newly discharged from hospital after sickness or wounds. In many cases they were just not tough enough to take their places beside the tried and honest soldiers who comprised 21 Battalion, and for that matter all other battalions. Some collapsed with the heat, others gave out from thirst, and a few, a very few, malingered their way back to Maadi.

The reasons for the delay were probably good and sufficient, but they were not made known to the brigades who were most interested. It was a Corps' operation and Corps kept its reasons to itself. In the absence of definite information rumour supplied the answer—several answers. The most generally accepted appreciation of the situation was that it all depended on the Aussies in the north. They had held off two attacks, and if there was no further attempt to dislodge them we were to stay put. On the other hand, if the Aussies were pushed back, we were to retire for 14 miles, but if the enemy's attack failed we were to go in. Twice the signal came that Bacon was off, then on 14 July, definitely and finally, Bacon was on.

The following is an extract from 21 Battalion's Operation Order No. 1:

information

- 1. Enemy.—The enemy holds the line of the low ridge El Ruweisat 880279 as his main position, with an outpost line in front of 5 Inf Bde from 880 grid to incl trig 63 (4000 yds). A minefield had been located running north and south along the track on grid 881.
- 2. Own Tps.—(a) nz div and 5 ind inf bde are attacking ruweisat ridge and 7 armd div is moving to left of nz div. (b) raf is attacking enemy position in front of nz div, ceasing at 2300 hrs.
- 3. 5 nz inf bde will attack on a front of 2000 yds and then roll up to join 5 ind inf bde. 5 nz inf bde is disposed with 21 nz bn on the left and 23 nz bn on the right. 22 nz bn is in reserve.

intention

4. 21 nz bn will move by coys into position on start line; A Coy (right) at 2200 hrs; B Coy (left) 2145 hrs; C Coy (res) 2130 hrs; bn hq (res) 2200 hrs.

method

5. Start Line: In rear of 21 BN FDL's marked with lights as follows: Inter-Bde bdy—

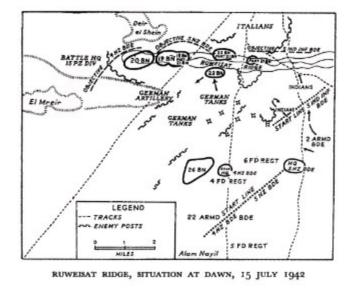
Red Inter-Bn bdy—Green Inter-Coy bdy—Red and Green IO will contact Bde IO with ref to lights and send guides to coy. Coy runners report to IO at BN HQ 2045 hrs.

- 6. Time past Start Line: 2300 hrs.
- 7. Bearings: 320 deg.
- 8. Distance to Objective: Approx 61/4 miles.
- 9. Rate of Advance: 1½ mih; 44 yds per min.
- 10. Formation: Line of Secs at 60 yds interval from the right.
- 11. Res Coy and Bn Hq will form up 30 yds behind fwd coys; Bn Hq behind A Coy and C Coy to the left. Res Coy will cross Start Line 400 yds behind fwd coys.
- 12. Action on Meeting Opposition: Secs will deploy to the left with an interval of five yds between each man. Touch will be kept with the right. The attack will be made with the bayonet. The outpost posn will be rushed with the bayonet and the Bn will pass on to the objective. 22 NZ BN will mop up.
- 13. A/TK Tps: All A/Tk guns will be under command oc A/TK BTY. Att tps and own tps will move out of present posn on orders Bty Comd.
- 14. M.G.'s: Will remain with A Ech and move from present posn under orders of coy comd.
- 15. R.E.'s: A det of one offr and two OR with detector will be located with BN HQ.
- 16. Dress: Battle Order with hard ration.
- 17. Recognition: The flank men of pls will wear a white patch on the back of the pack.
- 18. Arms: Bandolier of 50 rds, normal weapons, 2? mor, EY rifle, 68 grenades, two 36 grenades per man. A/Tk Rifle will be on pl 15 cwt.
- 19. Tpt: A Ech will include normal unit vehicles. Res MT will be located with A Ech. Carriers will remain with A Ech. All other vehicles will report to B Ech tonight before 2100 hrs. B Ech remains brigaded.
- 20. Blankets: Blankets, greatcoats and packs will be sent to B Ech, Res MT to supply one truck per coy for the purpose.
- 21. Tools: Tools will be collected from coys by a vehicle to be supplied by Res MT. This vehicle will remain with A Ech. ¹⁹
- 22. Spiggot Mortars: These will be placed on coy vehicles carrying cooks and will remain with A Ech.
- 23. Password: Speights.
- 24. Success Signal: Red when on the objective, repeated at five-minute intervals.
- 25. Consolidation: When the bn reaches the objective, A Ech vehicles will come forward as ordered....
- Owing to the width of front to be covered and the wide dispersal of sections—at 60 yards' intervals—it was likely that some strongpoints would be bypassed and that

the mopping-up battalion would have no lack of employment. Colonel Allen stressed this point at a last-minute conference: platoons were to carry straight through to the objective, only cleaning up opposition directly in their way, and were to leave the rest for 22 Battalion to deal with.

All companies were on the start line in good time and an hour before midnight there was a rustle in the darkness. It was the noise of troops making final adjustments to equipment, testing bayonets, loosening ammunition pouches, feeling for cigarettes and field dressings.

A quiet word of command and the battalion moved forward. For an hour there was nothing to be seen and little heard, only the shuffling of feet through sand, or the click of boots on stones and the smothered directions of platoon commanders correcting distances and alignment. Just on midnight one of our planes, with its navigating lights on, circled over the battalion area for 15 minutes. The pilot fired first two green Very lights then two red and came down very low. He was immediately answered with coloured tracer from the forward enemy posts, which disclosed their position. The presence of this inquisitive plane permitted more rapid progress, since the sound of its motors drowned the noise of the advance, which was just then over very stony ground. After the plane departed enemy listening posts must have heard movement, for a number of flares went up and disclosed the battalion's presence. Battalion Headquarters, between the forward A Company (Captain Butcher ²⁰) and the reserve C Company (Captain Wallace), was close up with the forward platoons at this time, and at Colonel Allen's yell, 'Give it to them 21 Battalion!', the sections swung into line and went on at the double, firing from the hip.



ruweisat ridge, situation at dawn, 15 july 1942

Enemy tracer lit up the area, but the forward posts were overrun without difficulty; then a battalion headquarters suffered the same fate, and finally some gunners joined the mixed bag of prisoners moving towards 22 Battalion and the prisoner-of-war cages.

The two flanking battalions, the 23rd on the right and the 18th on the left, were also busily engaged and were moving forward at different speeds; consequently contact was not maintained. A Company at first did not encounter the same opposition as B Company and lost touch, first with 23 Battalion and then with B Company. Battalion Headquarters had got mixed up with B Company, excepting the 'I' section, which was overtaken by the reserve C Company.

Colonel Allen realised that contact had been lost with 23 Battalion and, as his signal section could not be found, sent the Adjutant to re-establish touch with it while he endeavoured to locate A Company.

Captain Butcher meanwhile was nearing more field guns which were still shooting aimlessly. They were rushed, and the crews were sent back without escort towards the mopping-up battalion. Upon checking up Butcher found that Lieutenant Hawkesby, ²¹ with 7 Platoon, was missing, but a few strays from 23 Battalion had joined him.

Meanwhile B Company and Battalion Headquarters were reorganising on the move when they ran into a tank laager. Hawkesby, who had veered towards B

Company and was famous in the battalion for his brass throat and bull's roar, saw them and yelled light-heartedly, 'Sergeant, arrest those men!'

There was a concerted rush towards the tanks which, with their commanders standing with their heads and shoulders through the turrets, were already moving away.

A 23 Battalion man who had strayed from his company was armed with a sticky bomb with which he set a tank alight. By the illumination thus provided Sergeant Lord (B Company) climbed onto another tank, shot the commander and dropped a grenade inside, while others fired tommy guns through the slits, killing the crew and setting it on fire also. Lord killed the commander of another tank in the same manner, but the crew climbed out and surrendered before they could be dealt with. The rest of the tanks scattered into the darkness.

The presence of tanks so close to the outpost line had not been expected, and though at that stage in the war they were comparatively harmless by night, they would have to be dealt with at first light. Brigadier Kippenberger, leading the column of supporting arms towards the spot, about half a mile south of the ridge, knew nothing of the menace rumbling about in the darkness. The clash with the armour resulted in the battalion finally losing formation, with B Company, part of C Company, and Battalion Headquarters inextricably mixed. The left-hand platoon of A Company, No. 8, under Lieutenant Shaw, ²² went across the front after a tank and eventually joined 23 Battalion.

The remnants of A Company were still going forward when, about 1.30 a.m., Colonel Allen overtook them. The men were in need of a rest, and Allen gave permission for a short spell and a cigarette while a check was made. Captain Butcher found that he had with him, besides Lieutenant West-Watson and the majority of 9 Platoon, a handful of B Company, Lieutenant Cooper ²³ and 17 Platoon of 23 Battalion, and Captain Ironside ²⁴ with some headquarters men of D Company 23 Battalion, about fifty all told.

The general opinion was that they were on or near the objective. They appeared to be on the forward slopes; the men had been hard to restrain and had taken all opposition at the double. Colonel Allen disagreed and decided to advance

for another hour. At 2.45 a.m. he again called a halt. They were on the edge of a minefield situated in front of a double-apron fence, behind which loomed what appeared to be a huge gun emplacement. Scores of enemy trucks on their right were moving out hurriedly and the rumble of tracked vehicles could be heard. Convinced that he was now on the objective, Allen decided to return and bring up the reserve company before daylight. He left at 3 a.m., accompanied by Staff-Sergeant Philip, ²⁵ of D Company 23 Battalion, after instructing Captain Butcher to wait for an hour and then, if no other troops arrived, to use his own discretion.

Staff-Sergeant Philip writes:

[Ten minutes after we started] an Italian soldier joined up with us giving us some Nestles chocolate and a cold cocoa drink, [then] four more Italians thrust themselves upon us insisting on going back with us. [Shortly afterwards we heard] voices ahead, [and] I investigated, taking one of our prisoners on my bayonet. We had run into a strong point overlooked in our advance and I was set upon by several Italians. I was bayonetted and shot through the knee and chin. [Colonel Allen received four bullets in the chest and died about 3 p.m.]... I probably looked very close to dead. I was carrying a bit of loot, a Luger and a Biretta, and had the experience of being looted myself.... When daylight broke an Italian officer ... gave us both a drink of water. [About 7 o'clock] two enemy tanks appeared driving a good number of our troops ahead (west).... I managed to attract the attention of L/Cpl Rex Cross ²⁶ and Pte Victor Idour, ²⁷ both 23rd men... along with another lad they managed to get us on a 15 cwt truck close by.... The driver [turned eastwards, but] ran into a very large mob of Italians ... standing at the edge of a minefield ... [so we swung back west again]. We then came upon a dressing station set up in the middle of the battlefield and manned by both NZ and Italian orderlies and treating German, Italian and NZ wounded. To my knowledge there was no medical officer and the orderlies had just banded together and were treating the wounded irrespective of nationality.

B Company pushed on but lost all cohesion. Some of its men joined C Company as it advanced, and others carried on alone. Captain Marshall ²⁸ led the remainder forward and overran an Italian headquarters. A colonel with his staff and a number of men were sent back for 22 Battalion to gather in, and the advance was resumed. About this point Captain Marshall had been joined by Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch, ²⁹

commander of 18 Battalion, with some of his staff who had lost contact with their battalion. The group pushed on until 2 a.m., when at least three more armoured vehicles were encountered. They were attacked with grenades and one was set alight, but the encounter completed the disintegration of B Company. Marshall carried on with ten men of his company and some stragglers. He worked across to the right in an endeavour to make contact with A Company, and eventually met Captain Norris ³⁰ with A Company 23 Battalion. They were digging in so, thinking he had arrived at the objective, Marshall put up the success signal and dug in also.

C Company, in reserve, was advancing just sufficiently far behind Battalion Headquarters to keep within sight of it. Captain Wallace detailed Second-Lieutenant Horrocks with 14 Platoon to move just behind Battalion Headquarters and go where it did, irrespective of compass bearings, while 13 and 15 Platoons were to advance abreast. By the time Wallace had reached the tank left burning by B Company, Lieutenant Catran, ³¹ with 15 Platoon, was missing. (Catran first led his platoon west to join 4 Brigade, was turned back by machine guns, and eventually met some 23 Battalion men who were also out of touch with their unit. He then went forward until nearly daybreak without meeting friendly troops, eventually turned back, and reported to Brigade with 100 prisoners captured during the night.)

C Company then consisted of Captain Wallace, a runner or two, Lieutenant Thomson ³² and 13 Platoon. They carried on until they met New Zealand troops, whom they discovered were 4 Brigade Headquarters digging in. Wallace selected a position close by and began to consolidate.

To return to the right flank, where A Company and attached stragglers were waiting for Allen's return. Reconnaissance to the east and west had discovered no friendly troops and, after the hour suggested by Colonel Allen had elapsed, Captain Butcher gave orders to return on the back bearing of the original axis of advance. At approximately 4.30 a.m. they met Major McElroy, who had with him Second-Lieutenant Judd ³³ and three signallers from Battalion Headquarters, and also Lieutenant Hawkesby and 7 Platoon, who had become detached earlier in the night. They also had gone forward until blocked by enemy transport and challenged, whereupon they had removed themselves rapidly.

McElroy took command of the augmented party, 69 all ranks, of whom eight

were walking wounded. They moved back towards the ridge for a short period when, as it was near first light, McElroy proposed to dig in, but a check on the ammunition disclosed that they had an average of only five rounds for each man. This was distributed equally, but was definitely insufficient to face the possibility of counterattack, and the withdrawal was continued. Almost immediately they came to a wadi running due east, with defences blocking further movement south. In the wadi there was transport which they engaged, capturing a number of Italians. Further east more transport could be seen and the noise of a developing tank battle to the south was plain and ominous. McElroy decided to move along the wadi towards where 5 Indian Brigade might be expected.

The whole party, wounded included, was extended across the wadi. There was opposition from machine guns and small arms, also some shelling, but fierce charges and vicious bayonet work cleared the wadi and produced approximately 500 prisoners, including 30 officers, of whom two were colonels. The most determined opposition came from a party of 14 Germans who refused to surrender and had to be killed. Among the prisoners was an Indian intelligence officer who had been captured earlier and who acted as guide until they reached a minefield, through which an Italian officer obligingly led them. On the far side they were met by Indian armoured cars, which directed McElroy to their headquarters, where the prisoners were handed over.

Captain Marshall, after being originally on the left flank, was now digging in on the right flank near A Company 23 Battalion, where he was joined by Lieutenants Shaw and Horrocks with portions of their platoons, plus stragglers from practically every other battalion in the attack—in all about eighty strong.

The next arrivals in the area were Lieutenant Rogers, ³⁴ his runner (Private Alec Niven ³⁵), RSM Jack Farmer, ³⁶ and a few more men of 23 Battalion. They had dug in on what they thought was the objective. At daylight enemy fire from the rear swept the position, and during a lull the party dashed to a wadi further forward. Some trucks were parked there, among them two captured portées complete with two-pounders. Sergeant-Major Farmer describes how he became an anti-tank gunner:

I thought it would be a good idea to have a truck in case we had to make a quick get-away, and that the anti-tank gun might come in handy. The first one had a

dead German propped behind the steering wheel, but the other started at the second attempt, so I drove it to where we were consolidating. Lieut Rogers was elected gunner, Jack Niven the crew, and I appointed myself driver and ammunition wallah. Lieut Cameron ³⁷ had about a section strength of 23 Bn with him, and they were keen to clean up some of the remaining Italian posts in front of us so we thought we would scare them with our two-pounder before the boys went out. We backed the portée up to a hull down position on the side of the wadi and fired a few rounds. They had the desired effect, and the Ities came out and surrendered to the section.

C Company, which had started as reserve, had ended with part of 13 Platoon digging in near 18 Battalion, on the left of the battalion objective. It had been joined by Lieutenant Abbott, ³⁸ with the Intelligence section and a few stragglers who, like most other groups, had captured or bypassed numbers of prisoners during the advance. As soon as his men were dug in Abbott left to see if he could find the rest of the battalion.

He eventually located Brigadier Burrows ³⁹ at 4 Brigade Headquarters about a quarter of a mile away.

The Brigadier had no definite information as all his communications had broken down, but thought that the main portion of 21 Battalion was on Ruweisat Ridge, but not as far forward as 4 Brigade. Abbott was returning to C Company when he met Captain Marshall, who was looking for unattached troops to strengthen his position. He was the bearer of ill tidings: 22 Battalion had been captured by enemy tanks, no support weapons had got up, Colonel Allen was lying mortally wounded in a nearby RAP, and A Company was missing. (At that moment A Company was fighting its way towards the Indians on the eastern part of Ruweisat Ridge.)

Abbott found Colonel Allen, conscious and worrying about the battalion. The Colonel asked him to get the companies joined up, whereupon Abbott returned to Headquarters 4 Brigade and asked permission to move C Company over to where the remainder of the battalion was dug in. He was told to await Brigadier Kippenberger's instructions, and returned to C Company.

During the time Abbott was away, Captain Wallace realised that his party was in

the centre of a minefield and thought it advisable to move further forward. Some trenches were located in a small wadi about 400 yards ahead and, with enemy shells exploding the mines around them, he ordered an advance into the shelter of the wadi. Both Wallace and Lieutenant Thomson were wounded in helping some half-buried men out of a trench, and Lieutenant Abbott found Sergeant Leo Tucker ⁴⁰ in charge when he rejoined them.

The position, therefore, as far as 21 Battalion was concerned, was that of the three assaulting companies, each about ninety strong, a mixed group commanded by Captain Marshall was in position on the right of the objective, a smaller one under Lieutenant Abbott was on the left near 18 Battalion, and A Company, with strays, had fought its way diagonally across a portion of 23 Battalion and was with the Indians to the east. The CO was mortally wounded, headquarters was dispersed, the rear battalion was captured, and the troops on the objective were cut off and without supporting weapons.

It will be remembered that the supporting arms in A Echelon were to come forward as ordered after the ridge was taken. To that end the battalion anti-tank guns were to move with the six-pounders behind the reserve unit (22 Battalion). The column got lost and did not find 22 Battalion, but after a lot of frenzied rushing around in the darkness nearly all the battalion portées fell out and joined 5 Brigade Headquarters, which was moving up to its selected position. The column halted at 4 a.m. and the Brigadier went forward with a troop of six-pounders to investigate. While he was away tracer of a calibre that could come only from tank weapons went over the tops of the waiting vehicles. It was almost daylight and, with no Brigadier and no success signals, but with convincing evidence of armour in the vicinity, the Brigade Major turned the column around and withdrew to a safer locality in what was later known as Stuka Valley, about a mile in the rear.

The Brigadier found 22 and 23 Battalions and, when returning to Brigade Headquarters, saw enemy tanks closing on the rear of 22 Battalion. He went post-haste through them for support, but in the meantime the enemy armour captured most of 22 Battalion and marched them west in columns of threes.

The Brigadier found some tanks taking a languid interest in the battle for the ridge. After the commander had been convinced that there was enemy armour in the

vicinity, they moved up slowly—much too slowly to be of any assistance to 22 Battalion. The tanks were not under brigade command and were fighting according to their own rules. Agag never walked more carefully.

The morning passed with the troops consolidating on the ridge, the supporting arms trying to get up, and the tanks still moving imperceptibly forward. In the early afternoon the Indians, led by other tanks that were really on the job, advanced sufficiently close to 21 and 23 Battalions to permit a column of anti-tank and machine guns to get onto the ridge.

Lieutenant Abbott and his party were still out of touch. The area was under increasingly heavy fire from three directions and enemy tanks could be seen edging in about 4 p.m. Abbott decided to find 4 Brigade Headquarters and get instructions, but before leaving he instructed the men that, if anything happened to make the position untenable, they were to split into groups and move back independently. He writes:

I had gone about one hundred yards when all hell broke loose, and I took shelter and studied the position from a slit trench. It was apparent that 4th Brigade was being overrun, portées were going up in flames and tanks were among the forward infantry. I then continued in the direction of Headquarters 4th Brigade, but saw that Brigadier Burrows and brigade headquarters were surrendering. I decided that no useful purpose would be served by becoming a PW so took to my scrapers.

He evaded capture and eventually located the troops of 21 and 23 Battalions still securely in possession of their objective. C Company had split up when the tanks closed in. Those that moved eastward along the ridge escaped, but those that took the direct route south were mostly scooped up by the converging enemy armour.

The 23rd Battalion, with the small group of the 21st, the only New Zealand troops left on the ridge, were withdrawn after dark to a new line 1000 yards south of the ridgetop. All through the night parties, platoons, and companies reorganised and dug in.

With the death of Colonel Allen the battalion lost another popular commander, as well as 50-odd officers and men killed, wounded and missing. Ruweisat had been added to its long string of defeats, disasters and withdrawals: Platamon Tunnel,

Peneios Gorge, Vineyard Ridge, Bir Ghirba, Sidi Rezegh, Point 175, Bir Khalda, and El Mreir.

There was an uneasy truce in the Ruweisat Ridge area while each side licked its wounds and reorganised. Major R. W. Harding was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel and given command of the battalion; A and C Companies were amalgamated; D Company, left out of battle at Maadi, returned to the unit, and B Company went there for a spell. The troops cleared the recent battlefield. Enemy planes paid daily and nightly calls with bombs; so did ours. Sixth Brigade relieved the shattered 4th Brigade, and within a week the Division was in fighting form again.

On the night of 21-22 July 6 Brigade was ordered to capture El Mreir Depression. The infantry took El Mreir, the tanks once again failed to arrive in time, and the brigade was cut to pieces, with most of 24 Battalion in the bag.

Static warfare was resumed in 5 Brigade's area. The Indians made another attack on Ruweisat Ridge but did not hold their gains. There were alarms and excursions that did not develop into serious attacks, and there was a steady drain of casualties from bombing and artillery fire.

August continued in much the same way. Stukas, with sirens screeching, dived down out of the sun, flattened out, and left behind them mushrooms of dust heavier than the all-pervading haze. Spitfires—more and more of them thank the Lord—were getting the upper hand, however, and Stuka raids became fewer. From dogfights over the desert planes plummeted, fluttered, or glided to earth, not all of them enemy, but nearly all. The general opinion was that, were it not for the air force, we would have been properly 'in the cart'. Everybody knew the yarn about the Hurricane pilot who bailed out and was seen to be falling near 5 Brigade Headquarters. The Brigadier promptly ordered another place to be laid for lunch. The pilot had scarcely hit the deck before he was greeted by a staff officer saying, 'Brigadier Kippenberger's compliments, Sir, and would you be so kind as to have lunch with him.'

It is midsummer. Hot winds, scorching, searing. Heat and dust. Dust makes you thirsty. A salty film settles on your lips and when you lick them it dries your mouth right out. One water bottle a day, lukewarm and tasteless. A good remedy for a

parched palate is to rinse your mouth out without swallowing—if you have any water left. To clean your teeth is another cure for a sour-salty mouth—if your toothbrush didn't go with the rest of your gear when the truck was burnt out. Flies— millions and millions of fat, carrion-fed flies. You fight a losing battle against corpse-fed flies; they cluster on your mouth and in your eyes, they commit suicide in your tea, they cling to every part of your flesh and clothing, they tangle in your hair and try to crawl up your nostrils and into your ears. You work—digging and deepening weapon pits, choking in the dust you raise with every strike of pick or shovel, sweating like a pig and the sweat caking the dust into a mask. Red, sunken eyes peer through a rim of dirt. Listening patrols, reconnaissance patrols, fighting patrols, double pickets, working parties. Talk of another retirement. Operation instructions marked 'Most Secret' don't stay secret when unit officers drive off to look at new positions for no reason at all. Again you are pulling trucks out of soft sand and digging more slit trenches in a race against daylight. Pity Rommel wouldn't change sides and then maybe we might win the war instead of doing bloody marathons around the desert. Everybody is looking over his shoulder. Alam el Halfa Ridge is 15 miles back—that leaves about forty miles before the suburbs of Alexandria block the free movement of transport.

A new general, named Montgomery, takes command of Eighth Army. More 'Secret Instructions'. Only essential vehicles are to remain with the battalion; all others are to be ready to move at short notice to area 475905-475895-470895-470905, wherever the hell that may be.

At last a little light. 'We will fight where we are and there will be no more withdrawals' an order to Eighth Army from General Alexander, Commander-in-Chief Middle East Forces. 'Troop-carrying transport will be sent to the rear.' Then more light, a blinding flash that dispersed the darkness of frustration. On 17 August Brigadier Kippenberger issued a brigade instruction which, after deprecating a tendency, more prevalent in the rear areas than in the front line, to talk as if the New Zealanders were defending Egypt single-handed, went on:

We were now facing a very severe test. For the next few weeks we will be on the defensive and it is open to the enemy to make an attack which will test us to the limit. If he does not make it or if he makes it and fails, then the tide will quickly turn strongly against him, but these few weeks are critical. We hold an exposed and vital position of the line. Like the AUSTRALIANS, the SOUTH Africans, the indians and british we are burning our boats by sending our transport many miles away and it is our duty to stand and fight where we are, to the last man and the last round. It is probable, almost certain, that we will be subjected to extremely severe attacks by dive bombers, arty, tanks and infantry and in fact it is probable that the supreme test of the nz division is close ahead of us.

We are in a strong position, mined and wired with well over a hundred guns and an ample supply of A Tk guns and if we stand our ground firmly we cannot be broken. There must be no question of surrender if there is a 'break-in'. Every post must fight to the last, irrespective of the fate of its neighbour. This must be the guiding principle of the defence. The methods to be observed are as follows:—

INFANTRY POSTS

These will everywhere be dug to a depth of five feet without parapet and weapon pits will not be connected by crawl trenches. Each man is then safe against everything but a direct hit from bomb or shell and a tank can roll over him without damage. Each individual soldier must fight until he has no means of fighting left. SA [small-arms] fire will be concentrated on the enemy infantry, who will either precede or follow his tanks. Enemy tanks coming to close range will be tackled with sticky bombs and HAWKINS grenades, but this is only possible if they have been separated by fire from his infantry.

MACHINE GUNS

These will have pits dug sufficiently deep to remove the gun from its platform so that it is not crushed by a tank rolling over. Reserves of ammunition, spare barrels, will be dug in close by and MG positions will be defended with as much tenacity as Infantry posts. While the enemy is forming up and preparing his assault MMGs will engage his tanks and supporting weapons so as to force personnel to take cover and the tank to 'close down'. During the later phases MMGs will concentrate on supporting weapons.

ANTI TANK GUNS

All guns have already been sited in defiladed positions and have been dug in.

Ammunition will be stored close by and every gun will be fought to the last. All guns will remain still and silent until enemy tanks are within decisive range.

3? MORTARS

Mortars will be sited so as to cover the minefields and their principal function in the initial stages of an attack will be to stop infantry or engineers from lifting the mines. For this purpose good observation of the minefields is essential. They will then engage his supporting weapons if within range and otherwise continue to engage his infantry.

2? MORTARS

Enough 2? Mortars will be placed forward in each BATTALION Area to illuminate the minefields by means of the parachute flares if the enemy attempts to lift the mines under cover of darkness.

RAP

RAP will be dug in and cover provided for all personnel and as far as is possible for wounded held at RAP. Ambulance vans may be retained but will be dug in and NOT occupied.

DUMPS

Dumps of food, water and ammunition will be made in each company area and will be well dispersed.

HEADQUARTERS

All headquarters will be dug in and organised for defence and will be defended with as much determination as any platoon area.

FIELD GUNS

Fire will be put down on enemy unarmoured vehicles from the limit of observation. If the lorried inf can be separated from the Armour the attack may collapse early. After the enemy has debussed fire should be directed mainly at unarmoured supporting weapons and to blinding his supporting tanks.

A proportion of the guns may be used to engage the enemy infantry following the tanks.

When the A Tk guns become engaged it is of great importance that their view of the tanks is not obscured by arty fire coming down among the tanks and raising dust.

Destruction of enemy mortars, when they can be located, is of paramount importance.

It is the tradition of Field Gunners to fight their guns to the last.

[Signed] H. K. Kippenberger, Brigadier. Comd 5 NZ Inf Bde.

This was followed by a brigade operation order, the relevant portion of which said that 5 Brigade Group would hold its position against attack from any direction and that units would be prepared to counter-attack, with or without tank support, and would prepare plans accordingly.

Good. Now we know. Rommel will have to go through us or around us. As he's got no show of going through us, he'll have to go around us and we'll still be here to give him a kick in the pants. Wasn't there something in the school history books about a Maori chief taking on all comers at Orakau and telling the English soldiers to go to hell? We will fight on forever and ever. Ake Ake Ake. Must ask some Maori in 28 Battalion what it was all about.

Everybody 'prepared accordingly', a little harder, if possible, than they had been preparing in the past. Dumps of reserve battle rations were established and picketed; tanks, anti-tank guns and portées manoeuvred over the battalion area, working out their plans for dealing with enemy break-ins; the whole scheme of defence was inspected by the Brigadier and GOC, and finally the Corps Commander took a look. Now that the troops knew the state of affairs, their spirits rose remarkably, and the sense of frustration that had made every move a burden gave place to quiet determination. There was even a feeling of apprehension lest the 'reception committee' might not be called on to do its stuff.

General Montgomery met company commanders at Battalion Headquarters on

23 August, and the same day Brigade passed on this message:

On receipt of codeword Twelve Bore from this HQ units will stand at immediate notice and all tps will be ordered to the highest state of readiness for immediate attack. All posns will be manned bivouacs removed vehicles parked in vehicle pits gaps in minefields closed and line comns tested every 15 mins. W/T watch will be continuous.

All sangars in the battalion area were demolished, so that there might be no ready-made cover available for stray parties who managed to infiltrate. If Rommel was ready to attack, we were equally ready to receive him. Finally, so as to know who our attackers would most likely be, 5 Brigade was asked to put on a strong raid and collect some prisoners for identification. The raid was entrusted to 28 (Maori) Battalion, and the locality chosen was El Mreir. For any enemy who did not surrender very promptly indeed, this was likely to be unfortunate. The Maoris took nothing with them except their rifles, bayonets and light machine guns, plus as many captured automatics as they could drape around their persons and a grenade in every pocket. Nobody knows how many they killed, but they brought back 41 prisoners.

Everything pointed to an attempt by Rommel at a 'right hook' around the inland flank, and our dispositions were altered accordingly. The 132nd Brigade of 44 (British) Division relieved 5 Brigade on the night of 29-30 August, and 21 Battalion dug in behind minefields on the southern slope of Alam Nayil Ridge. The southern flank was refused, with 132 Brigade (under command New Zealand Division) facing west, 6 Brigade facing west and south, and then 5 Brigade, with 23 and 21 Battalions facing south, 22 Battalion facing east, and the Maoris in reserve.

Shortly after midnight on 31 August the code-word Twelve Bore was received at Battalion Headquarters and stand-to was ordered from 1.50 a.m. Later in the day an Order of the Day was received from the Army Commander:

- 1. The enemy is now attempting to break through our positions in order to reach CAIRO, SUEZ and ALEXANDRIA, and drive us from EGYPT.
- 2. The Eighth Army bars the way. It carries a great responsibility and the whole future of the war will depend on how we carry out our task.
- 3. We will fight the enemy where we now stand; there will be NO WITHDRAWAL and NO SURRENDER. Every officer and man must continue to do his duty as long

- as he has breath in his body. If each of us does his duty we cannot fail; the opportunity will then occur to take the offensive ourselves and to destroy once and for all the enemy forces now in EGYPT.
- 4. Into battle then, with stout hearts and with determination to do our duty. And may God give us victory.

B. L. Montgomery, Lieutenant-General.

Across the desert between the New Zealand Box and the Qattara Depression were minefields and wire entanglements, with mobile columns patrolling through the gaps and around them. This was Rommel's path to Cairo, the route for the classic envelopment of an inland flank, and the only way that avoided a head-on collision with dug-in troops disposed at great depth and determined not to be shifted. The enemy forced the minefields under cover of an air attack, of which 21 Battalion's area received its full share. But the RAF was not idle. Neither, as the gigantic left wheel around the pivot of the New Zealand position progressed, was our artillery. All through the day there was the noise of battle in the south as our armour fought delaying actions, and throughout the hours of darkness the throb of aircraft engines could be heard. Darkness was a relative term, for until the moon came up the sky was alight with flares.

Shelled from the ground, bombed mercilessly from the air, and harassed on three sides by light and heavy armour, the swift breakthrough of the German blitzkrieg became a slogging match on ground and under conditions dictated by the British. The enemy had other difficulties besides the uncooperative attitude of the defence: the necessity of maintaining a flank to the north of the axis of advance around the New Zealand position, the paucity of sheltering depressions for transport, and the bottleneck corridors in the minefields.

The first two days of September passed with Rommel standing at bay in front of the core of the defence on Alam el Halfa Ridge, awaiting a counter-attack which he considered would be delivered at once with every tank available.

Montgomery counter-attacked, but not with tanks. While the artillery continued to throw everything except their guns at the waiting enemy and the RAF dropped everything except their planes on top of him, the infantry was to try to narrow his lines of communication by capturing the northern edge of the Munassib Depression.

It was to be another night attack with 26 Battalion on the right, then 132 Brigade, still under the command of 2 New Zealand Division, and 5 Brigade on the left. The Maoris were given the major role, with 22 and 23 Battalions in support, and 21 Battalion guarding the open left flank.

Under command of 5 Brigade, besides the anti-tank and field artillery and the engineers, was B Squadron 50 Royal Tank Regiment. There were grunts of satisfaction when it was known that the tanks were under brigade control and not working on their own. The first couple of hours after first light and before the anti-tank guns were sited were always a dangerous time, and the only thing to stop a tank then was another tank.

On paper, and before the operation began, it appeared that 21 Battalion had the easiest task, and so it turned out. Two of our minefields ran south from and at right angles to the main field along the front, and it was the mission of 21 Battalion to line the inside of the eastern field from the start line to the western edge of the Muhafid Depression. The gap between Muhafid and Munassib, about half a mile, was to be closed by mines, and the Maoris' left was to make contact with 21 Battalion's right flank.

Companies left their areas independently, so timed that the whole battalion would be clear of the minefield gap before 28 Battalion arrived. The start line was already taped just outside the protecting 600-yard-wide minefield, and the track through was lighted by the provost detachment. As the attack progressed the provosts were to carry the line of lights forward as a guide for the tanks and fighting transport. Battalion Headquarters was first but was delayed because the track was not yet fully cleared of mines. In order not to hold up the assembly, Battalion Headquarters went through ahead of the sappers, while the rest of the companies passed through a walking gap three chains east. A wire on short pickets in the assembly area was the cause of more delay, until it was realised that it surrounded a dummy minefield. In spite of these delays the battalion was ready to move off at zero hour, with the exception of B Company, whose timing had gone astray. This company turned up later and was on its objective and in position by midnight.

D Company led, followed by C Company, each with two platoons in extended order and one in reserve. Battalion Headquarters followed C Company, with B

Company as battalion reserve, but as previously mentioned the latter had gone astray for the time being. The axis of advance was due south for a mile and a half, when the battalion wheeled left and each company took up its allotted position facing east. Up to this stage there was no opposition but, by the sound of the heavy explosions further south, the RAF was making things very uncomfortable in the depressions. At this stage the battalion's No. 11 wireless set and 'I' section jeeps went astray through being delayed in soft sand and failing to notice the left wheel; they turned up at Battalion Headquarters an hour later.

Of D Company, only the reserve platoon and Company Headquarters found their area. The two forward platoons had advanced so rapidly that they lost contact and, owing to a slight deflection westward, went on past the edge of Muhafid into 28 Battalion's area. Second-Lieutenant Robertson ⁴¹ took command when it was realised that they had gone too far and, after several clashes with enemy posts, in which a few casualties were suffered and several posts cleaned up, he succeeded in withdrawing the platoons and getting them back to their correct positions before first light.

The 21st Battalion's task was now completed. The companies consolidated their positions through the night, in spite of almost constant bombing by enemy planes, which first lit up the area with flares and then followed with incendiaries and high-explosive, but everybody was safely dug in and there were no more casualties. Supporting arms were guided up and were in position by 4.30 a.m.

There was, however, no contact with 28 Battalion on the right flank, nor had the engineers been able to lay the minefield between the two depressions. They had not been able to contact the left flank of the Maori forward defended localities, and enemy defensive posts had not been silenced. The Maoris had encountered strong opposition from German strongpoints, and both sides had fought to a finish, no quarter being given or taken. The Maoris had then overrun their objective, got down into Munassib Depression, and had played havoc with the transport and its drivers. Everything was fine from the Maori point of view, but Brigade did not see it that way and brought up 22 Battalion. The latter dug in behind the Maoris and extended the right flank of 21 Battalion. It was a wise move, for German tanks were moving up between the two depressions, and most of those attached to the brigade had already committed suicide on mines through an error, not entirely theirs, in guiding

lights. The divisional artillery took care of the tanks and also put down a smoke screen across the front, whereupon the Maoris extricated themselves with a hundred-odd prisoners.

The 132nd Brigade, on the right of the Maoris, did not take its objective and was badly cut about. Marching across the desert by night is a chancy business, even for troops trained in desert warfare, and 132 Brigade had only recently arrived from England. Our 26 Battalion also met severe opposition and, after reaching the objective, had its southernmost company cut off in enemy territory. The gap through the minefields to the south, therefore, remained open for the retreating enemy. Counter-attacks were mounted in the morning and again in the afternoon, but 22 Battalion, assisted by the artillery, dealt with them in workmanlike style. Apart from these interruptions, it was a day of intermittent shelling and occasional Stuka raids. One of those things happened that could only happen in that sandy sea, where tanks cruised like battleships and warlike tactics were half naval and half military. Across the desert where a thousand holes sheltered a thousand men, crouched finger on trigger, some trucks bumped, swayed and jolted; they were not rushing up bullets, shells or bombs, nor were they ambulances for the stretcher cases. They were civilians in khaki, YMCA men, with an issue of pineapple and biscuits. Their gallantry was appreciated all the more, as the previous night the ration parties had got lost and so had the hot meal they were bringing forward.

While Rommel's rear elements were returning through the minefields from what had begun as an offensive to knock out Eighth Army and had ended, according to the German radio, as a mere reconnaissance in force, 21 Battalion spent the time cleaning its arms, reading the mail that had just arrived, and sleeping.

The following message from the Army Commander was sent to all units:

The battle of Alamein has now lasted for six days and the enemy has slowly but surely been driven from Eighth Army area. Tonight 5 Sep his rearguards are being driven west through the minefields area north of Himeimat. All formations and units both armd and unarmd have contributed towards this striking victory and have been magnificently supported by the RAF. I congratulate all ranks of Eighth Army on devotion to duty and good fighting qualities which has resulted in such a heavy defeat of the enemy and which will have far reaching results. I have sent a message

to AOC Western Desert expressing our thanks to the RAF for their splendid support.

The 21st Battalion's casualties during the period 26 June-6 September 1942 were: 67 killed and died of wounds, 180 wounded, and 40 prisoners of war (including four wounded and three who died), a total of 287.

- ¹ Pte S. Luckings; born England, 12 Dec 1916; motor driver; killed in action 29 Jun 1942.
- ² Maj R. W. Adams; born NZ 4 Jan 1909; company manager; killed in action 4 Jul 1942.
- ³ Cpl A. R. Hedley, MM; Putorino, Hawke's Bay; born NZ 24 Jun 1914; station manager.
- ⁴ Capt R. E. Horrocks, MC; born NZ 9 Sep 1916; clerk; wounded 24 Oct 1942; killed in action 28 Nov 1943.
- ⁵ Sgt P. R. Blows; Auckland; born Halcombe, 12 Feb 1918; storeman.
- ⁶ Maj A. C. Carnachan; Tauranga; born Timaru, 29 Jul 1917; clothing salesman.
- ⁷ Maj J. D. Atkinson, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Wellington, 3 Mar 1909; plant physiologist; CO 2 NZEF OCTU 1945.
- ⁸ Capt R. M. Smith; Wellington; born 24 Sep 1906; auditor.
- ⁹ Lt-Col J. H. Sutherland, MC; Masterton; born Taieri, 10 Dec 1903; stock inspector; 2 i/c patrol of LRDG 1940-41; CO 2 NZ Div Cav 1942-43.
- ¹⁰ Col M. C. Fairbrother, DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Carterton, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; BM 5 Bde 1942-43; comd in turn 21, 23, and 28 (Maori) Bns, Apr-Dec 1943; CO 26 Bn Oct 1944-Sep 1945; Associate Editor, NZ War Histories.

- ¹¹ Brig L. W. Thornton, OBE, m.i.d.; London; born Christchurch, 15 Oct 1916; Regular soldier; CO 5 Fd Regt Jun-Dec 1943; GSO 12 NZ Div 1943-44; CRA 2 NZ Div 1945; DCGS Apr 1948-Jan 1949; Commandant, Linton Military Camp, Jan 1949-May 1951.
- ¹² Sgt N. A. Bai; Rotorua; born Dannevirke, 11 Jul 1908; dairy farmer.
- ¹³ Lt P. P. Hutt; Wellington; born England, 28 Jun 1909; civil servant; wounded 4 Jul 1942.
- ¹⁴ Pte H. T. Ingham; born NZ 12 Feb 1908; labourer; killed in action 23 Oct 1942.
- ¹⁵ WO II J. A. Brown, MM; born Scotland, 16 Apr 1906; warden instructor; wounded May 1941; died of wounds 20 Apr 1943.
- ¹⁶ Lt R. D. Trounson, MC; Bulls; born Dargaville, 1 Oct 1916; farmer; wounded 15 Jul 1942.
- ¹⁷ Pte P. Ross; Christchurch; born NZ 4 Dec 1918; labourer.
- ¹⁸ Lt C. W. Carter, DCM; Auckland; born Taumarunui, 9 Oct 1916; journalist.
- ¹⁹ Para 21 was cancelled at the last minute and the tools were carried by the troops.
- ²⁰ Capt E. B. Butcher; born Napier, 3 Dec 1904; schoolmaster; wounded 29 Jul 1942; died 26 Nov 1949.
- ²¹ Maj G. H. Hawkesby, DSO; Howick; born Auckland, 18 Apr 1915; manufacturers' representative; wounded 28 May 1944.
- ²² Capt R. A. Shaw; Taumarunui; born NZ 8 Jun 1912; commercial traveller; twice wounded.

- ²³ Capt G. S. Cooper, MC; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 31 Mar 1911; accountant; twice wounded.
- ²⁴ Capt C. G. Ironside; Dunedin; born Oamaru, 15 Oct 1917; civil servant; wounded 27 Jun 1942; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.
- ²⁵ S-Sgt R. J. Philip; Dunedin; born Dunback, Otago, 1 Oct 1914; commercial traveller; wounded 15 Jul 1942.
- ²⁶ Pte R. Cross; Wellington; born Nelson, 2 Jun 1916; labourer; wounded 4 Aug 1944.
- ²⁷ Cpl V. Idour, MM, m.i.d.; born NZ 22 Dec 1911; labourer and baker; killed in action 9 Mar 1944.
- ²⁸ Capt J. R. B. Marshall; born Auckland, 15 Feb 1913; clerk; wounded 6 Sep 1942; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.
- ²⁹ Lt-Col R. J. Lynch, MC; born Waihi, 24 Oct 1909; sales manager; CO 18 Bn 29 Jun-15 Jul 1942; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942; died of wounds while p.w. 26 Sep 1942.
- ³⁰ Maj P. T. Norris, MC; born NZ 18 Apr 1914; law student; wounded 27 Jun 1942; killed in action 17 Dec 1942.
- ³¹ Lt B. B. S. Catran; born NZ 6 Nov 1915; insurance inspector; wounded 22 Jul 1942; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.
- ³² Maj I. M. Thomson; born Auckland, 3 Jul 1914; accountant; wounded 15 Jul 1942; killed in action 7 Dec 1943.
- ³³ Maj L. E. Judd, m.i.d.; Hastings; born NZ 20 Feb 1919; commercial traveller.

- ³⁴ Maj G. S. Rogers; Palmerston North; born Opotiki, 17 Feb 1916; schoolteacher; wounded 22 Jul 1942.
- ³⁵ Pte A. A. R. Niven; Invercargill; born Otautau, 28 Sep 1913; farm labourer.
- ³⁶ WO I D. J. Farmer, MM; Waiouru Military Camp; born Wanganui, 3 Oct 1913; Regular soldier.
- ³⁷ Lt J. H. Cameron; Oamaru; born Dunedin, 17 Apr 1909; bank clerk; wounded 11 Jul 1942.
- ³⁸ Maj R. B. Abbott, MC; Ngaruawahia; born Auckland, 16 Feb 1919; insurance clerk; wounded 6 Jul 1942.
- ³⁹ Brig J. T. Burrows, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Greek); Christchurch; born Christchurch, 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO 20 Bn Dec 1941-Jun 1942; 20 Bn and Armd Regt Aug 1942-Jul 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-.
- ⁴⁰ Sgt L. R. Tucker; Whangarei; born Whangarei, 20 May 1918; carpenter; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.
- ⁴¹ Capt P. Robertson, MC; Auckland; born Torquay, England, 1 May 1918; company manager.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 8 — VICTORY IN EGYPT

CHAPTER 8 Victory in Egypt

Fifth Brigade was relieved by the Greek Brigade, and on the night of 8-9 September 21 Battalion marched for three hours non-stop to the staging area, where trucks were to pick up the troops at first light. Perhaps 'marched' is not quite the word; it was more of a shuffle, with heads down and feet dragging under the weight of arms, ammunition and accoutrements.

A few hours after the transport arrived 21 Battalion was on a beach only 37 miles from Alexandria, and the war seemed a million miles away. Everybody swam in the Mediterranean, lazed among the sandhills, or slept in the sun. The YMCA set up a continuous service of tea, lime-juice and cakes, and everything was on the house. In the evenings the Naafi bars and the regimental canteens did their part in reviving their desiccated customers. Blokes met blokes from other units and swopped items of news about other blokes: who was wounded and who was not, and who would never again share another bottle of Pilsener. Groups were formed where everybody tried to speak at the same time and nobody listened. Songs were sung, hands shaken and cigarettes shared, though there was no lack of smokes, and tangled nerves untangled themselves. There was daily leave to Alexandria and four days' leave plus travelling time to Cairo for those who wanted it. The Kiwi Concert Party performed twice daily. Men returned to normal again. The holiday ended on the 19th, when the Division moved into a training area 40-odd miles inland.

Weapon training, musketry and hardening-up marches, which generally included a limited night march on a compass bearing, were interrupted by a divisional exercise. It was an exercise with minefields and wire, close-support artillery, machine guns and tanks. There was everything except a real enemy. When the moon came up gaps were cleared in a real minefield, wire was gapped—with bangalore torpedoes—and the assaulting infantry advanced at a predetermined number of yards a minute behind a creeping barrage. After the objectives were taken and consolidated tanks came up in support, anti-tank weapons, mortars and machine guns moved along lighted tracks through the minefields and dug in. It was all very impressive and mystifying. After the battle was over and before they settled down for a couple of hours' sleep, the situation was canvassed by every Kiwi taking

part in the exercise. The known facts were that during the night advance they had attacked and captured a ridge, or rather what passes for a ridge in the desert, and had dug in on each side of it. The corollary followed naturally that there was another ridge somewhere that was scheduled for capture in the not-distant future. And no silent bayonet and tommy-gun affair either, but a full-dress show with orchestral accompaniment. Rumours had been circulating of new tanks. Some swore they had seen them. They were bigger and better than Jerry's and moved like steel greyhounds. Their armour was so tough that shells bounced off them like tennis balls against a brick wall, and their cannon could blow a panzer apart before it could get within range. New guns were landing at Alexandria by the hundreds and fresh troops by the hundred thousand.

As the weeks went by the tension mounted; the certainty of an early attempt at what Rommel had failed to do was accepted without qualification. Only two questions remained unanswered: when and where? Were we to attack in the north, where on account of the rail and road systems the defences were strongest, or in the south, where Rommel had failed to turn our inland flank? Were we to claw a way through his minefields and attempt an envelopment, or attack straight ahead and force him off the coast road. An Eighth Army general order made it very plain that there was tough fighting ahead:

This battle for which we are preparing will be a real rough house, and if successful will mean the end of the war in North Africa. It will be the turning point of the whole war, therefore we can take no chances. There will be no tip and run tactics in this battle; it will be a real killing match—the German is a good soldier and the only way to beat him is to kill him in battle.

The decision had been taken to attack in the north, where Eighth Army held the Tell el Eisa Ridge, and the capture of Miteiriya Ridge would give a four-mile-wide corridor partially protected against counter-attack by the enemy's own minefields. The 2nd New Zealand Division, with 51 Highland Division and 9 Australian Division to its north and 1 South African Division to its south in 30 Corps' sector, were to make the initial breaches in the enemy line. The New Zealand and South African objective was Miteiriya Ridge. It was intended to make two lanes for the armour, one through the Highlanders' and Australians' sector, the other through the New Zealanders'. Tenth Corps was to advance along these two lanes, with 1 Armoured Division on the right

and 10 Armoured Division on the left. The engineers would clear the way for the armour to get through and engage the panzer divisions.

Little by little the information was released to Brigade, then to battalion commanders, and finally down to the rank and file. The assaulting troops were to advance behind a creeping barrage, the first divisional barrage in North Africa. Stonks and concentrations were old friends—and old enemies—but a moving wall of shellfire was something new. It was so new that it had not been used since 1914-18. In effect it was to be the Battle of Messines over again, with the enemy holding the hill and knowing something of the preparations being made to remove him. But it was to be Messines with all modern methods besides the barrage—minefields, tommy guns, anti-tank guns, mobile field guns, armoured cars, tanks, wireless, and the RAF.

Suspense keyed up by rumours increased as October wore on and the training pace slackened off. The stalemate had to be ended, the series of defeats and half-successes stopped. Rommel and his panzers had to be chased out of Egypt.

Did you know that Div Cav have been issued with maps for as far west as Sidi Barrani? The tote is due to close any time now. Tomorrow night for a moral according to the Battalion Sigs who know everything. The transport is all jacked up for a quick move the night after tomorrow. Not while the moon's up. The whole show's off for a month and the brigade is going back to the beach....

The brigade did move back to the beach on 15 October, and 21 Battalion spent the time until the 20th route-marching in the mornings and swimming in the afternoons. At this time its officers were:

Battalion Headquarters

CO: Lt-Col R. W. Harding

2 i/c: Maj H. M. McElroy

Adj: Capt G. E. Cairns

IO: Lt R. B. Abbott

QM: Lt A. C. Pryde

MO: Capt G. H. Levien

Padre: Rev J. C. Draper

Headquarters Company

OC: Maj W. Dickson

Mortar PI: Lt G. W. Greensmith

Carrier PI: Capt K. G. Dee

A-Tk Pl: Lt B. T. Robertson

Lt G. S. Rogers

2 Lt J. P. Stranger

Transport PI: Lt W. F. N. Gardner

A Company

OC: Capt W. C. Butland

Lt H. Bailey

Lt B. B. S. Catran

Lt G. A. Hawkesby

Lt R. A. Shaw

B Company

OC: Capt J. R. B. Marshall

Capt W. J. G. Roach

Lt A. T. Eady

2 Lt C. A. Nunns

C Company

OC: Maj N. B. Smith

Capt M. P. Chinchen

Lt R. E. Horrocks

2 Lt G. M. Taylor

D Company

OC: Capt B. M. Laird

Lt K. C. West-Watson

Lt J. B. Dow

Lt P. Robertson

Detached: 2 Lt J. Lloyd (LO 5 Inf Bde)

An operation order issued by 21 Battalion on 21 October said it was intended that the battalion was to attack and capture an area at the north-western end of Miteiriya Ridge and facilitate the passage of 10 Corps. The attack by 5 Infantry Brigade was to be carried out in two phases, with a pause of 100 minutes between the first and second. Zero hour for Phase 1 was to be 10 p.m., at which time the artillery would fire on the enemy forward defended localities. The 21st Battalion was to operate in Phase 2. D-day was to be notified later.

Before the attack 21 Battalion was to be prepared to move from its lying-up area to the start line at nine o'clock. The start line was to be marked by the 'I' section with white tape and lamps to indicate the company boundaries. The battalion was to attack with A Company on the right, B Company in the centre, C Company on the left, D Company behind A, and Battalion Headquarters behind B. In each company two platoons were to be extended at intervals of five paces, and the third platoon was to have its sections in file in the rear. Company headquarters was

to be in the centre. A troop of six-pounder anti-tank guns and a platoon of medium machine guns would be under the command of 21 Battalion. The unit on the right would be 7 Battalion Black Watch (51 Division), and on the left 22 New Zealand Battalion.

The starting time for 21 Battalion was to be 12.55 a.m., when the forward troops were to cross the start line, and the rate of advance was to be 100 yards in three minutes. There was to be a pause from 1.40 to 1.55 a.m. One company of 28 (Maori) Battalion was to move in rear of 21 Battalion with a mopping-up role.

After the final objective had been captured D Company was to exploit to the enemy area, but its patrols were to be back within the company area by 4.30 a.m. The company was to carry 24 prepared charges with which the patrols were to demolish enemy weapons that could not be converted to battalion use. Reorganisation was to proceed on the final objective in depth to resist counterattacks supported by tanks, and all companies were to be sited with their forward elements 1000 yards beyond Miteiriya Ridge.

The vital part which pockets of resistance would play in obtaining victory had to be impressed on all ranks. There was to be no surrender and troops cut off were to continue to fight.

The battalion left during the night of 21-22 October, moved ten miles by lorry to the rear dispersal area, and dug in before dawn. Already the field guns had been dug in by night and the wheel marks smoothed away. Gun after gun, hundreds of guns, had been hauled forward by their tractors and unhooked on the precise spot selected in advance. Guns and ammunition were camouflaged and the gunners waited under cover for the order to open fire.

The infantry moved up the next night to within easy distance of the forming-up line. In front there was still silence and unsuspecting security—just the usual flares, the intermittent crackle of spandaus, occasional chatter of machine guns, and an odd shell from energetic gunners on either side. To quote the communiques of an earlier war, it was 'all quiet on the western front'.

All that day, while artillery men pored over maps and calculated distances; while tank crews checked engines, cleaned sights and oiled bearings; while engineers

double-checked mine detectors; while hospitals and advanced dressing stations arranged blankets, stretchers and dressings; while officers conferred and confirmed their arrangements; while all these things were being done, the infantry lay low.

When dusk fell the hidden troops emerged from their holes in the sand and stretched their cramped limbs. Shortly afterwards a hot meal was brought to them. There was purposeful movement in all directions, while the gunners stacked ammunition from the camouflaged dumps in readiness at the gun positions. First-line vehicles and anti-tank portées began moving along their allotted tracks, clearly defined by lights glowing behind the insignia of each track—Sun, Moon, Star, Boat, Bottle, and Hat. Farther back and moving to a strict timetable tanks rumbled, heaved, and clanked.

The curtain was due to rise at 9.40 p.m. The overture was to be 15 minutes' concentrated fire against suspected battery positions by 480 guns, after which the enemy forward defended localities were to be pounded until 10.23 p.m., when the divisional barrage was to begin to lift one hundred yards every three minutes.

The 23rd Battalion, which was to carry out Phase 1 of the 5 Brigade task, the advance to the first objective, went forward to its start line. Its job was to penetrate the enemy forward defences 2000 yards away to a depth of 1400 yards and clear the way for 21 and 22 Battalions to storm the ridge in the brigade's sector.

The minutes ticked on towards 9.40. Watches were held face up to the moon and the time checked and rechecked. One minute to go, 30 seconds, 20 seconds, ten seconds, five seconds, three seconds—the small hands on the watches flickered three more times, then spurts of flame tore red holes in the moonlight and the air was shivered and blasted with noise. The whole sky was a dancing, flickering sea of scarlet. A bank of dust rose in the west as roaring destruction fell on its target. More destruction winged its way forward as bombers made their targets and turned in a wide circle back to their landing strips and another load. There was a five-minute pause while the guns laid on the first line of the creeping barrage. Then the racing motors and whirling propellers overhead filled the night with rushing noises and the sharp tang of burnt cordite drifted like battle incense across the desert.

It was bright moonlight when the assaulting companies of 21 Battalion moved

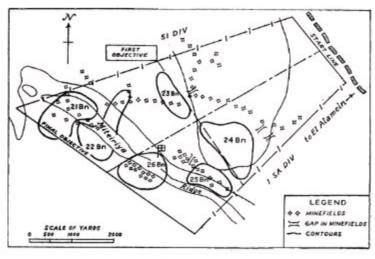
through the lane in our forward minefield that the engineers had already opened for 23 Battalion. The order of march was A, B, C and D Companies, followed by Battalion Headquarters. While the battalion was marching up to 23 Battalion's objective, which was the approximate start line for the second phase of the attack, the engineers were already clearing vehicle routes through the enemy mines, and Lieutenant Abbott and Corporal Bill Marshall ¹ were putting down the start-line tapes.

They were having a very uncomfortable time with their tapes and lights, for enough guns and mortars were unsilenced to make the laying of the lines hazardous. It was largely their work here that won Abbott an immediate MC and Marshall an MM.

The battalion arrived just as the laying was finished, and the companies were led out and put on the line by Lieutenant Abbott. Up to this time casualties were light, not more than six or seven wounded. The men waited flat on the sand until it was time to move, and listened to the crash of bursting shells in front. The blast as they exploded made it hard to breathe. Every now and again, when there was a slight lull, the music of the pipers leading 51 (Highland) Division into battle drifted down from the north. It was a grand sound.

At 12.50 a.m. 21 Battalion began to move forward, each company on its own bearing. As they went on so the front widened. A Company's bearing was 251 degrees, B Company's 249½, and C Company's 248; D Company followed A Company on the right flank. The front widened for the gunners as well as for the assaulting infantry; whereas at the first objective each gun had a front of 24 yards, on the final objective its front was 46 yards. Under these conditions it was inevitable that some enemy posts and batteries would escape and that defensive fire would increase as their forward lines were pierced.

The strung-out platoons began the advance through the drifting smoke. Soon the moon was darkened with the dust from the barrage and visibility was shortened to a few yards. Pink and red streaks ran through the fog where tracers from



BATTALION POSITIONS, DAWN 24 OCTOBER

battalion positions, dawn 24 october

enemy machine guns firing on fixed lines left their colours glowing behind them. Retaliation was becoming increasingly severe, but the pace never faltered. Whenever a man went down his rifle was plunged bayonet first into the sand as a mark for the stretcher-bearers, and the gap filled before the smoke of the explosion had cleared.

Contact was maintained with both flanking battalions until the 15-minute pause at 1.40 a.m. Navigating was done by companies and was checked by the 'I' section at the head of Battalion Headquarters through the inter-company wireless links. At this stage Major Smith ² found that touch had been lost with 22 Battalion on the left flank. He put his reserve platoon (No. 15) into the gap and re-established contact. The Black Watch was still up with A Company on the right.

As soon as the ridge proper was reached the fighting really commenced. A Company lost Captain Butland, ³ Lieutenant Catran, and eleven men killed by antipersonnel mines, machine-gun and mortar fire. Lieutenant West-Watson moved forward from D Company, took command, and was himself soon a casualty. Captain Marshall was killed in B Company, leaving Major Smith (C Company) the only company commander to reach the objective. The subalterns and NCOs, of course, were more than equal to the occasion.

When Lieutenant Catran was killed Sergeant Duncan Klaus ⁴ took command, rallied the platoon and led it coolly through the intense fire; Sergeant Bramwell ⁵ and his platoon ran into a whole nest of machine guns, but he left two sections to

engage them while he led the third to a flank and rushed the post. Most of the crew were killed and the guns captured. C Company had a relatively easy passage on the left but, when 14 Platoon was held up, Lance-Corporal de Stigter ⁶ stalked the machine gun responsible and took the crew prisoner. Slowly and methodically the opposition was silenced as post after post was rushed and the German occupants bayoneted or shot. There were not many prisoners.

C Company was first to report to Colonel Harding that it was digging in on the objective; then B Company reported that Lieutenant Eady ⁷ had taken command and was consolidating. Finally A Company was contacted through B Company and said it was reorganising in its appointed area. The success signal was put up at 3 a.m., runners were sent back to Brigade Headquarters with the information, and wireless communication was also established with Brigade.

After Lieutenant West-Watson had been wounded, D Company lost formation in the dust and murk behind the assaulting troops. Corporal McManus ⁸ gathered up as many of 17 Platoon as he could and led them forward. Sergeant Blakey ⁹ took command of 18 Platoon when Second-Lieutenant Stranger ¹⁰ was wounded. When he arrived at the objective McManus had only five men with him, but after scouting around found fragments of 16 and 18 Platoons. Lieutenant Robertson then arrived with part of 16 Platoon and merged the lot into one platoon, with McManus the sole NCO; there were 23 men altogether.

Robertson then led his one-platoon company forward on patrol. They had several clashes, took approximately ninety prisoners, killed and wounded many more, and blew up four 105-millimetre field guns, some anti-tank guns and some machine guns. Unfortunately time was too short for thoroughness, all patrols having to be in before the armour was due to go through at 4.30 a.m. They returned on time, with their prisoners, to their reserve position behind A Company, at a cost of only one wounded.

About forty prisoners were taken in the battle for the ridge-top which, added to D Company's bag, made approximately 130 for the attack. Sergeant Moyle, ¹¹ acting commander of the battalion's signal platoon, was kept very busy from the initial move off keeping touch with linked sub-units and then, during reorganisation on the ridge, keeping inter-battalion communications open. Owing to casualties in his

platoon he was continually out mending wires broken by shellfire and checking company wireless sets. All companies were quickly on the air and shortly afterwards telephone wires were laid to Battalion Headquarters.

The 21st Battalion, spread along the flat in front of the forward slopes of Miteiriya Ridge, worked steadily to get dug in before first light at 6.30, when counter-attacks could confidently be expected. It was hoped most fervently that support weapons would be up in time to deal with the tanks that would come with the dawn.

The enemy consistently searched the battalion area with mortars and swept it with machine guns, but neither prevented the stretcher-bearers from searching for wounded and getting them to the RAP in the shortest possible time.

The actual situation on 2 New Zealand Division's front was that 5 Brigade had taken its final objective but 6 Brigade was not quite up on the left flank. The north-western end of the ridge was firmly held, but neither the Highlanders nor the South Africans on the flanks were in full possession of their objectives. Only a few anti-tank guns were up and only a few tanks had passed through into the open.

The 21st Battalion was actually holding part of a salient that bit deep into enemy territory, and old soldiers did not view the prospect at dawn with much favour.

Corporal de Stigter's diary paints a realistic picture:

The show did not look good to us the next morning [24th]; our tanks had not made their appearance, our "scorpion", a Matilda tank with flailing chains attached in front to explode Jerry's mines, blowing up [on one] itself. There was a lot of machine gun fire coming from both our flanks and to our rear, the bullets going over our heads, and it looked to us as if we were too far forward. Actually 20 tanks did come through, but they went south to assist the 22nd and 6th Brigade. We stood to, expecting a counter-attack by Jerry all day, but it never came, and by early next morning [25th] we had all our supporting arms with us: 27th MG, 7th Anti-Tank and quite a number of tanks. The first tank to come my way was a Crusader, which we gave the appropriate signal to, but it came on, so I told my offsider Marsh Burrell ¹²

to get down, and just in time. They gave us 70 odd rounds from [their] Besa machine gun, from 15 ft. off, only the depth of the trench saving us. The tank commander then ordered the driver to run the tank into our trench, but the rest of the section then made themselves heard, not being in the line of fire.

The Tommy officer was very apologetic, but he was quite sure all our area was still held by the Hun; he now did us a good turn by stopping the machine gun cross-fire, which came from a section of 27th MG Bn attached to the 6th Brigade. C Coy HQ chaps found quite a bit of loot, including a piano accordion and a luger or two.

There was actually an attempt to counter-attack soon after daylight, but the forward troops did not know of it for the enemy armour was kept at a distance by the Divisional Artillery, which had observation posts on the ridge, and by a concentration of tanks firing from hull-down positions behind the ridge. Five enemy tanks were knocked out and one of our Crusaders was disabled by a mine near Battalion Headquarters. The gunner continued to use his Brownings in support until our machine guns arrived, when the derelict was converted into a machine-gun control post.

Enemy fire lessened during the day, but there were tank battles and distant infantry movement at intervals. Once a party infiltrated into a wadi about 300 yards in front of the battalion's forward positions, but was dislodged by captured Italian mortars.

As de Stigter says in his diary, by daylight on the 25th the battalion was consolidated with all supporting arms in position. Probably the enemy had too many other preoccupations to attempt to recapture Miteiriya Ridge. There was, however, one enemy post that kept up an intermittent sniping with short bursts of small-arms fire. Sergeant Bramwell decided to remove the nuisance and, as soon as it was dark enough, led a fighting patrol which captured the post, together with ten prisoners and two machine guns. The rest of the night was reasonably peaceful and the ration trucks were able to get up into the company areas. The hot meal put new life into the troops, and when the trucks departed they took the thanks of the battalion back with them. Arrangements for 28 Battalion to relieve the 21st after daylight were postponed until the following night (26-27 October).

The morning was enlivened for Sergeant Klaus and his platoon by the approach of three enemy trucks which had evidently mistaken their way. They were permitted to come quite close before they were fired on, when two of the three were knocked out and twelve prisoners and three anti-tank guns captured. The rest of the day was occupied in watching tank battles and dodging shells meant for the tanks manoeuvring in the unit area.

Nothing of note occurred on the battalion front until midnight, when C Company rang through to Battalion Headquarters reporting that an enemy minelaying party could be heard working about 600 yards in front of the forward positions. An artillery concentration was put down on the area, whereupon the enemy moved closer to our positions to avoid the shelling. C Company plastered him with captured mortars and drove him back again.

The 26th followed much the pattern of the previous day until about five o'clock in the evening, when another attempted counter-attack was repulsed by the tanks and a terrific artillery concentration before it got within range of infantry weapons. The Maoris came up after dark, took over the battalion area, and waiting guides led 21 Battalion back to the vicinity of the original front line behind the first enemy minefields.

The 21st Battalion's share in the Battle of Alamein was over. All the assaulting companies had lost heavily, A Company particularly so. Including two company commanders (Captains Butland and Marshall) killed, the battalion's casualties totalled 128 all ranks, and there were no replacements. Platoons and companies were merged, D Company was disbanded, the Anti-Aircraft Platoon became 15 Platoon C Company, and the companies were commanded by Captain Roach (A Company), Captain Moore ¹³ (B Company) and Captain Smith (C Company).

Brigadier Kippenberger addressed the troops informally and with maps outlined the part played by 5 Brigade. He congratulated the battalion on the manner in which it had done its part, and gave a summary of the general situation to date and the probable role of the Division in the near future. He mentioned that the Division would be treated a little easier for a while, that it would be trailing along and would be used only for a definite coup de grâce.

The original plan had been to make the major armoured thrust south-west from Miteiriya Ridge after the New Zealand Division had cleared the way, but there was still too much opposition for the armour to break through. The main thrust was then shifted to the north, but was again foiled in spite of 9 Australian Division's fierce efforts to open the way. It was not until 2 November that the enemy finally broke. Next day the Germans were in full retreat behind the protection of a strong anti-tank screen. Owing to lack of transport, the Italians in the southern sector were left to their fate, which for thousands of them was the prisoner-of-war cage. By dawn on 4 November the rearguard had been pushed off its line, and 21 Battalion received a warning order to be ready to move at 15 minutes' notice.

Just before midday the order to move came. With 4 (British) Light Armoured Brigade under command, the New Zealand Division was sent in a wide sweep to the south, with orders to press on and secure the escarpment at Fuka, some fifty miles to the west. The importance of the assignment lay in the fact that the escarpment, over 300 feet high, was almost impassable except on the axis of the road and railway. The alternative of a wide detour to the south was unthinkable to an army retreating by the quickest and shortest route. If the Division could get across the desert more quickly than the enemy could move along the road, his rearguard at least might be cut off.

All tracks westward at Alamein were congested beyond description and were a bomber's dream, but the RAF was there to see that the dream did not come true. As a matter of fact the Luftwaffe was too busy trying to protect its own disintegrating war machine, which was suffering a non-stop aerial bombardment, to pay overmuch attention to the congestion of transport.

Fifth Brigade moved from near the Alamein station to the divisional deployment area beyond the minefields. It was a nightmarish business trying to keep formation on account of the traffic. Once the deployment area was reached, however, the column was reorganised and left at a quarter to four in the afternoon, prepared to travel all night to Fuka.

There were, however, other units in the war besides those of 5 Brigade. Owing to a late start, the tremendous congestion and the consequent further delay, the light armour had reached its laager area about 15 miles south of Daba before the

tail of the Division had got properly under way.

The story has been told that when it was reported to Rommel that a mass of armour and lorried infantry was pressing westward towards his rear, he refused point-blank to believe it. He considered that the British were too cautious for such a manoeuvre, and that it must be the Italian Trieste Division retiring across the desert. General von Thoma attempted to convince his chief by going out on a personal reconnaissance, but was himself captured.

Fifth Brigade Group halted about midnight behind 4 Light Armoured Brigade in the Alam Damanhur area and waited for 6 Brigade to come up. Before its arrival there were less welcome visitors; either by accident or design five or six enemy trucks approached from the south and opened fire. There were some losses in the other battalions, but the fire directed towards 21 Battalion was too high and, before the guns were depressed, the troops had gone to ground. Fourth Light Armoured Brigade, out in front of the column, returned the fire, but in the darkness could not avoid shooting into 5 Brigade.

Sixth Brigade and 9 Armoured Brigade joined up before daylight and the drive was continued. At approximately 7 a.m. 4 Light Armoured Brigade engaged some German tanks, knocking out seven and capturing two, and three hours later the brigade captured the headquarters of the Italian Trento Division. Towards midday the advance was held up on the high ground south of Fuka by an enemy rearguard including tanks and guns, which necessitated the deployment of our artillery, and it was late in the afternoon before 21 Battalion was able to move again. The enemy had been operating behind a minefield, part of which was found to be dummy, and which was crossed by 4 Light Armoured Brigade. The 21st Battalion transport was shelled while passing through the minefield gap, but escaped any injury and reformed on the far side. Fifth Brigade pushed on behind the armoured brigade until nightfall, when it was still ten miles to the south of where the road climbs the Fuka escarpment. The Brigadier decided that the distance was too great to cover and take up a position before first light, and he ordered a halt for the night. The brigade dug in along the crest of a wadi with three battalions facing north, the 22nd on the right, the 23rd in the centre and the 21st on the left, and with the 28th in reserve facing west. Carriers formed a screen, double pickets were posted and outposts sited. The attempt to seize the bottleneck at Fuka had failed and the enemy was free to

withdraw, which he did, enthusiastically harassed by the RAF.

Fifth Brigade was not ordered forward towards Baggush, the next stage of the pursuit, until late in the afternoon of the 6th. The sky darkened in the morning and a light drizzle developed into steady rain. The task was to move 20-odd miles west and, if necessary, prepare to capture the high ground overlooking the airfield at Baggush. The rain continued and movement became increasingly more difficult, but the enemy had withdrawn from the area, and 21 Battalion closed in at 7 p.m. and halted for the night. There were few to remember it, but precisely 13 months earlier the battalion, reformed after Crete, had arrived in the same area on the same mission—to help end the war in North Africa.

The rain fell in torrents all night and by daylight on 7 November all vehicles in the brigade were glued to the desert like flies on a treacle sheet. And all that day the enemy retreated westward along the only tarsealed road across the saturated desert.

Nothing lasts for ever. The rain stopped, and in the morning (8 November) 21 Battalion hauled its bogged vehicles onto firm ground, dried its clothes and blankets, had an early hot lunch, and was on the move by 1 p.m. Matruh was the next objective, and to that end the Division was to concentrate near Minqar Qaim. If the enemy still held the fortress, 6 Brigade was to attack it from the west, while 5 Brigade feinted from the south. The enemy already had departed westward, however, and consequently 21 Battalion got to within forty miles of Sidi Barrani before darkness next day.

The general situation during the night of 8-9 November was that the enemy was withdrawing to the frontier area, 7 Armoured Division was advancing inland and south of Sidi Barrani, and 1 and 10 Armoured Divisions and 2 New Zealand Division were in the Matruh area. A thousand miles or so further west British and American forces under General Eisenhower were landing on beaches in North- West Africa.

The New Zealand Division continued the pursuit on 9 November, sometimes in columns along the road, sometimes in desert formation alongside. Sixth Brigade remained to garrison Matruh and 5 Brigade became the only infantry formation with the Division. The next morning (the 10th) 21 Battalion was detached to clear Sidi

Barrani. The enemy rearguard had vacated the town and little opposition was expected. The battalion shook out into desert formation and, with the carriers and anti-tank platoon deployed ahead, occupied the place without any opposition whatsoever. About forty prisoners were rounded up, B Company was left to guard an airfield still covered with bogged and damaged planes, and by midnight the battalion had regained its place at the head of the brigade column, 78 miles farther west than it had been in the morning. The tired troops had not been two hours asleep before they were roused again and told that Halfaya Pass had to be cleared before daylight.

The frontier between Egypt and Libya starts on the coast north-west of Sollum, runs south-west to Sidi Omar, and continues in a general southerly direction into the inner desert. East of the wire fence marking the boundary stands a 600-foot-high escarpment that extends in a general south-easterly direction into Egypt. There are only two routes for wheeled traffic over this obstacle, one where the main road passes Sollum and winds in hairpin bends up the cliff to the plateau above, the other through Halfaya Pass, less than two miles inland. Against a force approaching along the coast from the east Halfaya was a strong defensive position which, if resolutely held, would either have to be outflanked from the south (which was being done by 7 Armoured Division) or stormed.

Fourth Light Armoured Brigade, still in its role of leading the advance of the New Zealand Division, had deployed to attack the enemy near the foot of the pass, whereupon he had withdrawn to the top of the escarpment. The main road up the escarpment at Sollum had been effectively destroyed, but as far as was known the enemy had not blocked Halfaya Pass beyond probably renewing its minefields.

Colonel Harding had been warned early in the afternoon that he might be called upon to take Halfaya Pass. There was a motorised battalion (1 Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps) with 4 Light Armoured Brigade, but it had comparatively few assaulting infantry. About 6 p.m. word came from the armoured brigade that it would be able to force the passage without assistance. The subject of 21 Battalion's proposed attack was thankfully dismissed, for it had been a long tiring day with no sleep the previous night. Harding left Divisional Headquarters when the word came in from the armour that the services of the battalion would not be required.

Meanwhile Brigadier Roddick, commander of the Light Armoured Brigade, set

about bustling the enemy off the escarpment. He found the road mined and lost three tanks. After dark two small patrols from his motor battalion were sent up the pass to locate the enemy, whom they found in too great strength to attack. They then took up a defensive position just below the top of the pass.

About 2 a.m. Brigadier Kippenberger was wakened by an officer with a message from Brigadier Roddick asking that some troops be directed to clear a passage for his tanks. It was vital that the road be opened before first light disclosed the hundreds of vehicles converging on the entrance to the pass, like the crowd around the early gates to a Rugby test match. What the guns along the top of the escarpment could do in daylight to the lines of trucks on the coastal plain below did not bear contemplation.

The sombre bulk of the 600-foot escarpment silhouetted against the starlit sky was not an inviting spectacle. Halfaya had resisted a full-scale attack in 1941 and in the second Libyan campaign its strength had been conceded. Rather than risk a reverse at the beginning of the operation the Eighth Army, of which the Division had been a part, had made a wide detour into the desert. Even when attacked from its most vulnerable direction, the Halfaya garrison had been the last to surrender, and then only after being surrounded, pounded from the air, and short of water.

There was, however, a great difference between the circumstances governing the operations. This time the enemy was retreating as fast as his wheels could turn, and all reports suggested that Rommel intended to evacuate Cyrenaica. No matter what the Afrika Korps's intentions were, the rearguard commander was entitled to expect a full-scale deployment, a preliminary bombardment before the assault, and another breathing space for the harried main body.

Brigadier Kippenberger's plan did not envisage any of these refinements. A surprise assault in the dark with the bayonet might disorganise a defence by its unexpectedness; particularly if the rearguard was Italian. If it was German, the inference did not follow so readily, but there was only one way to find out.

Time was short and 21 Battalion was the nearest to the pass. There were not many bayonets available for the attack. The casualties sustained at Alamein had brought the rifle companies to less than half strength; instead of four companies

each 120 strong, there were only three with an average strength of 55, and one of them was away at Sidi Barrani. There were no maps and no air photographs. The only precise information was that a weak platoon of the KRRG was on the road near the top and that the opposition was too strong for it to engage with any hope of success. The enemy was estimated to be about a company strong, but it was only a guess and could be wrong—very wrong. With the exception of Major Smith, who had been up the pass the previous year, nobody had any idea of the terrain beyond the top; but 21 Battalion was used to dropping in unannounced on enemy strongpoints, and the assignment was taken philosophically by the stiff and sleepy Kiwis. Within fifteen minutes of being wakened, A and C Companies were embussed and ready to move off. As no supporting arms could be taken, a few sticky bombs were carried in case of tank trouble. Greatcoats were to be left in the trucks after debussing.

The two companies were on the move by 3.45 a.m., passed through the baffled armoured brigade, and debussed at the foot of the pass, where Brigadier Kippenberger was waiting with Brigadier Roddick.

Though their numbers were small, 110 all ranks altogether, Kippenberger thought they were sufficient, but this view was not shared by Roddick when he saw how it was intended to clear the road for his tanks.

Brigadier Kippenberger's instructions to Colonel Harding were short and succinct—put out an advance guard and point like in the Territorial training days and go in with the bayonet. Harding's reply to a question as to what might be expected was even shorter: 'Fight and find out.' The order of march was Major Smith and the guide (an officer from the KRRC), followed by C Company with Bren-gunners leading, then Battalion Headquarters (Harding and two signallers), and finally A Company, led by Captain Roach.

The march up the silent road that wound and twisted up the spur was a nerveracking business. The road was mined, as the damaged tanks at the bottom demonstrated, and there might also be anti-personnel mines with trip-wires hidden by the darkness. Finally, for a certainty machine guns and artillery were mounted on the escarpment. It was the fervent hope of everybody that the sound of the surf breaking on the beach a couple of miles away would smother the noise of feet stumbling in the dark.

The KRRC platoon was met coming down and passed on what information it had, which was negligible. It had been holding a covering position near the top and was under instructions to vacate it by 5 a.m. The enemy was in position facing the road as it emerged on to the plateau, and the sound of a motor cycle going from post to post had been heard.

C Company halted at the spot where the English post had been established, and Major Smith and party went forward to make a quick reconnaissance. The road, which at that point turned right for a couple of hundred yards before again turning left, was clear, though sounds of moving men and vehicles could be plainly heard. Colonel Harding and the company commanders held a short conference and decided that the road at the second turn would be the inter-company boundary, with A Company on the right and C on the left. The darkness was a few shades lighter by then and the skyline indicated higher ground ahead.

A Company moved quietly along the road and formed up beyond it. C Company, with its right flank resting on the axis of advance, was soon in position, but first Sergeant Jennings ¹⁴ was detached with a few men to act as protection for the CO and his two-signaller headquarters, as well as battalion reserve and collection-post guard.

The sky was beginning to lighten when the attack went in. There was a 30-yard rise to the final end of the pass, with trenches and dugouts scattered over it. C Company stumbled into one almost immediately and fifty sleeping Italians were wakened abruptly. They did not want to be shot and went quietly along to Battalion Headquarters, now established on a low mound on the left of C Company.

A Company soon found its line of advance blocked by a deep, steep-sided wadi, and Colonel Harding told Captain Roach to take his company through C Company, which had found more trenches full of Italians who were surrendering without much trouble. The need for silence was over, and Roach issued a string of commands seldom heard on a battle ground: 'Men, halt, left turn, quick march; halt, right turn, go through.' The unusual manoeuvre 'go through' took A Company through the left of C Company, which was still busily winkling prisoners out of trenches and dugouts.

Transport could be heard moving in front and Roach decided to keep on going

straight ahead instead of working over to his own area on the right. His right flank was protected by the wadi he had withdrawn from, and Lieutenant Chalmers ¹⁵ was told to take his platoon of 14 men along the edge of the escarpment to protect the company's left flank; the rest of the company advanced towards the noise of vehicles. Soon trucks could be seen in the growing light about 200 yards ahead and the company went slowly towards them, firing their rifles and light machine guns from the hip. There was some fire in return, but as the troops closed in white rags began waving from trenches and from behind the trucks. Five trucks and 40 prisoners were sent back under escort and, with the area apparently clear, A Company did a little systematic 'searching' in the scattered dugouts.



A sharp exchange of fire from the direction Chalmers had taken was making Roach uneasy, but the appearance of eight more trucks towing anti-tank guns through a minefield ahead indicated immediate action in that direction. Lance-Sergeant Steiner and Private Kirkcaldy, ¹⁶ who were furthest out in front, stopped the convoy with a few shots, and the arrival of the rest of the company produced the desired effect. The Italians debussed and went to ground, and soon another 180 prisoners were added to the bag.

WO II Hill ¹⁷ describes the incident:

Our central sector now seemed to be well cleaned up and our boys were searching in old dug-outs, finding an occasional very scared Italian and looking eagerly for souvenirs. A large cemetery in the area was a grim reminder of previous fighting that had taken place in the same locality. We were preparing to return for breakfast when we were surprised to see a convoy of enemy transport approaching towards us

from the south. There were 8 or 9 trucks in all, and each one was towing a small but useful anti-tank gun. Troops were also packed in the vehicles. Our own men were by this time so scattered that there were no more than 20 of us remaining, but we immediately prepared for another round up. The leading truck drove directly to two of our men who were 50 yards ahead and unaware that it was enemy transport. A gap of only a few yards separated them and immediately our men realised who they were they opened fire. Simultaneously all that remained of our central party moved forward with all weapons again firing. The whole convoy again debussed and went to ground, white handkerchiefs from beginning to end and a procession of officers and men walked toward our lines. Another bag of booty and we now considered our job was finished. We climbed aboard the enemy trucks and drove back to our starting line where the prisoners were being guarded.

As the position now seemed secure, with anti-tank guns sited and 4 Light Armoured Brigade starting to move up the road, Roach was able to allay his anxiety about 8 Platoon, which had also decided the show was over and was returning with a column of approximately 250 prisoners.

Corporal Frank Ellery ¹⁸ describes how they were taken:

The country was open and fairly level, but we were able to cross the minefields before visibility was good enough for the enemy to see what was happening ... I could see a number of enemy positions between 2 and 3 hundred yds out on our left.... I shouted to Chalmers that I would work out to the left to attack the positions.... By the time we had crossed another minefield we were separated from the Platoon [Corporal Ellery's section consisted of two men and himself] by about 250 yds. Opposition was not strong until we were about to step over the wire on the edge of the field and it appeared then that they had decided to put up a fight for it so we had to take hasty cover and return their fire. There was some fast shooting for a while, but it was not long before we saw a white flag appear, and most of the firing ceased. I felt a bit uneasy at this stage ... but realised that if we did not do something they would think we were afraid to go after them, so I ordered Hill ¹⁹ and Percival ²⁰ to try to cover me if possible while I went out to collect them ... after going about two thirds of the way, I saw a couple of Itis in a small dugout, so I collected them and made them walk in front of me ... [and] waved for Hill and

Percival to come on.

The first two dugouts yielded about 35 prisoners and after that it was just a matter of scouting around. The three New Zealanders ended up with 143 of them, including seven officers. When they were sure there were no more, they took the prisoners over to where the platoon had collected another hundred or so.

Meanwhile C Company, with its line of advance somewhat obstructed by A Company, was not idle. In the growing light the area was seen to be dotted with deep dugouts that needed doing over. The usual method was applied: after a grenade or a burst of automatic fire into the entrance, the attacker waited for results. About this time Major Smith saw five tractor-drawn guns on a ridge beyond the wadi that had blocked A Company, and told Second-Lieutenant McLean ²¹ to go after them. The platoon clambered on a captured anti-tank portée and set off at top speed, but the tractors were already attached to the guns and, although fire was opened in the hope of bringing the drivers down, the distance and the poor light were in their favour. They were the only enemy that got away after being seen.

Sergeant Jennings, still in reserve, saw a group of vehicles beyond a minefield and about 700 yards distant preparing to make a break. He took three of his platoon and went after them. The four New Zealanders were seen when about halfway across the mines and were fired on, but their return fire soon silenced the opposition. On the far side of the minefield they found an abandoned truck and, with a Bren-gunner in the cab, two riflemen in the back and Jennings driving, they rounded up the vehicles with some unorthodox fire-and-movement tactics. Their bag consisted of five trucks, two anti-tank guns, some machine guns and about fifty prisoners. Colonel Harding told Jennings that he was very lucky to be alive as he and his party had walked through an anti-personnel minefield.

Sergeant Kelly, ²² with the remaining platoon of C Company, had carried straight on collecting prisoners without much opposition. A string of them arrived at Company Headquarters about the same time as Colonel Harding, who was prowling around keeping his finger on the pulse of the action. He was amazed to see the single guard was unarmed and was a little terse about it, but Private Maru ²³ pointed to an Italian who was carrying the Bren gun and said airily, 'It's all right, sir, I have unloaded it.' It was supposed to be one of the few times that words failed the Battalion

Commander.

At that point the operation had developed into the collection of prisoners, most of whom seemed only too glad to be out of the war. Kelly and his platoon occupied themselves in running a transport service with captured Lancias and collected all the Italians in C Company area into one group at the head of the pass.

Lieutenant-Colonel Harding, who was awarded the DSO 'For his quick decision, resolution and inspiring leadership when hesitation would have led to a very dangerous situation', has admitted to experiencing one very bad moment. In describing the action he wrote:

It looked as if the show was successful, so I tried to get a message through [to Brigade Headquarters] but the tanks were warming up and nattering on their sets, and there was too much interference. I therefore sent a runner on a bicycle (Italian) to report the pass was clear to Brig Kip.

However, a Lt-Col of 4 Armd Bde arrived and I gave him the story. He asked why no message and I said your so and so tanks drown everything. He laughed, turned his Dingo and shot down the pass at top. Put the wind up me.

The armour began rolling up and I got a ride forward to report to Brig Roddick who had halted his Tac HQ about one mile from the top. My bn HQ (2 Sigs) remained put to answer enquiries and stop the cook truck if and when it arrived.

Reported to Brig and he asked 'how many prisoners' and I said 'about 5 or 6 hundred'. He said 'Nonsense'. So I invited him to look round. He said 'Very good show' and shook hands.

One of his Lt Cols wanted some trucks so I told him to help himself. He expressed gratitude and some surprise at my ready acquiescence.

Had the usual job of collecting the troops after a show and then started the prisoners down the pass. They looked like a long black snake. Brig Kip and the General came up and got the low down from me. Both expressed pleasure that the show had gone so well and they congratulated the Bn.

The excitement had died down now and we were a hungry tired dishevelled lot.

The high light of the morning was the arrival of the cook truck and my jeep. After a shave, polish boots and a meal I felt much better. So did the troops, they had found some cognac.

Headquarters Company and the rest of Battalion Headquarters, who had not been wakened in the night and knew nothing of the Halfaya action until they found the assault troops missing, moved off in column along the road to Sollum but found the Sollum hill route impassable. Priority up Halfaya was obtained and they joined the night fighters, who while waiting for breakfast to be brought up had spent the time making rude remarks about some Bofors guns firing at enemy planes from the foot of the pass. Their shells were exploding too near for comfort.

After crossing the frontier into Libya 5 Brigade was instructed to push on westwards along the Trigh Gapuzzo towards Sidi Rezegh, but this move was cancelled early in the afternoon, and the brigade turned off to the north to disperse for the night in the vicinity of Sidi Azeiz. Next morning (12 November) the brigade moved to the Bir Belchonfus area, on the high ground south of the Bardia- Tobruk road. The troops were warned that they might be there three days and were told to make themselves comfortable in the meantime. Actually they stayed three weeks.

The GOC-in-C Eighth Army, General Montgomery, issued a personal message on 12 November to be read to all men in the army. In it he said:

When we began the Battle of Egypt on 23 October, I said that together we would hit the Germans and Italians for six right out of North Africa.

We have made a very good start and today, 12 November, there are no German and Italian soldiers on Egyptian territory except prisoners.

In three weeks we have completely smashed the German and Italian army and pushed the fleeing remnants out of Egypt, having advanced ourselves nearly 300 miles up to and beyond the frontier.

The following enemy formations have ceased to exist as effective fighting formations:

21 Panzer Div 90 Light Div 164 Light Div

10 Italian Corps Brescia Div

Pavia Div

Folgore Div

20 Italian Corps Ariete Armd Div

Littorio Armd Div

Trieste Div

21 Italian Corps Trento Div

Bologna Div

The prisoners captured total 30,000 including nine Generals.

The amount of tanks, artillery, anti-tank guns, transport, aircraft, etc., destroyed or captured is so great that the enemy is completely crippled.

This is a very fine performance and I want, first, to thank you all for the way you responded to my call and rallied to the task. I feel that our great victory was brought about by the good fighting qualities of the soldiers of the Empire rather than by anything I have been able to do myself.

Secondly, I know you will all realise how greatly we were helped in our task by the RAF. We could not have done it without their splendid help and co-operation. I have thanked the RAF warmly on your behalf.

Our task is not finished yet. The Germans are out of Egypt, but there are still some left in North Africa. There is some good hunting to be had further to the west, in Libya; and our leading troops are now in Libya ready to begin. And this time, having reached Benghazi and beyond, we shall not come back.

On with the task, and good hunting to you all. As in all pursuits some have to remain behind to start with; but we shall all be in it before the finish.

The battalion's casualties between 23 October and 11 November 1942 were: 42 killed and died of wounds, 91 wounded, and two prisoners of war (one of them wounded), a total of 135.

- ¹ Sgt W. A. Marshall, MM; born Taumarunui, 13 Aug 1916; labourer; killed n action 4 May 1943.
- ² Maj N. B. Smith, ED; Hamilton; born NZ 6 Nov 1909; clerk; wounded 16 Dec 1942.
- ³ Capt W. C. Butland, MC; born Hokitika, 29 Aug 1915; journalist; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.
- ⁴ 2 Lt C. D. M. Klaus, MM; born Waihi, 20 Oct 1916; boiling-down worker; wounded 20 Apr 1943; killed in action 18 Mar 1944.
- ⁵ Capt H. J. Bramwell, DCM; Auckland; born Feilding, 8 Oct 1904; solicitor.
- ⁶ Sgt H. J. de Stigter, MM; Onerahi; born Bandoeng, Java, 18 Sep 1912; farmer; wounded 24 Oct 1942.
- ⁷ Capt A. T. Eady; Auckland; born Auckland, 26 Jan 1906; musician.
- ⁸ 2 Lt T. McManus, DCM; Waihopo; born NZ 15 Jun 1913; farmer; wounded 27 Jul 1942.
- ⁹ Sgt E. H. Blakey, MM; Maungaturoto; born Auckland, 30 Jun 1901; solicitor; three times wounded.
- ¹⁰ Capt J. P. Stranger; Auckland; born NZ 25 May 1918; labourer; wounded 24 Oct 1942.
- ¹¹ WO II R. J. R. Moyle, MM; Tauranga; born Karangahake, Ohinemuri, 23 Jul 1910; labourer; wounded 20 Apr 1943.
- ¹² Pte C. E. M. Burrell; Petone; born Christchurch, 15 Nov 1912; millhand.

- ¹³ Capt G. E. Moore; Auckland; born England, 6 Feb 1909; shipping clerk; wounded 26 Nov 1941.
- ¹⁴ WO II R. A. Jennings, MM, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Te Aroha, 7 Apr 1916; motor driver, NZ Railways.
- ¹⁵ Capt J. C. Chalmers; Auckland; born Greymouth, 8 Feb 1914; school-teacher.
- ¹⁶ S-Sgt G. M. Kirkcaldy; Auckland; born NZ 27 Feb 1918; dairy farmer.
- ¹⁷ Capt D. B. Hill, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born England, II Oct 1912; land and estate agent; p.w. 25 Apr 1941; escaped 10 May 1941; returned 2 NZEFOct 1941.
- ¹⁸ Sgt F. W. Ellery, MM; Katikati; born Wanganui, 28 Jul 1902; farmer.
- ¹⁹ Sgt W. H. Hill; Te Puke; born Auckland, 8 Apr 1913; farmer.
- ²⁰ Pte K. W. Percival; Ngawhatu, Nelson; born Sydney, 5 Aug 1919; fruiterer; wounded and p.w. 20 Apr 1943.
- ²¹ Capt R. W. McLean; Wellington; born Marton, 15 Jan 1909; line erector.
- ²² Lt B. F. E. Kelly, m.i.d.; Manurewa; born Hamilton, 12 Jan 1917; school-teacher.
- ²³ Pte R. T. Maru; born Hamilton; labourer; wounded 30 Apr 1943; died Hamilton, 20 Apr 1952.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 9 — PURSUIT TO TRIPOLI

CHAPTER 9 Pursuit to Tripoli

The 2nd New Zealand Division reorganised while the enemy was chased across Cyrenaica. Tobruk was occupied on 13 November, Derna on the lyth, and Benghazi on the 20th, and by the 23rd Eighth Army was in the Agedabia area and the enemy was safely behind his defences at El Agheila.

The New Zealanders found that Bardia, ten miles from where they were camped, did not warrant a visit. It was a deserted one-street village perched on the escarpment above the one-jetty anchorage below. The battered white stone houses had already been thoroughly inspected, and a view of the prisoner-of-war compound did not compensate for the difficulty in returning to the battalion area without getting lost. The absolutely featureless desert was covered by square miles of bivvies and vehicles, and it was easy to wander for hours looking for the unit area. The terrain, however, was ideal for the quick preparation of football grounds, and this important amenity was early provided. A terse note in the battalion routine orders, that 'Trucks will NOT be driven across the battalion sports area', illustrates the relative importance of transport and football to the resting Kiwi.

B Company rejoined the battalion on 14 November. It had had a more than interesting time at Sidi Barrani searching for mines and booby traps, and was relieved when the Air Force took over. A hit-and-run bombing attack had cost the company four casualties, three of them fatal.

While the Division was in reserve, one-third of the battalion went daily to Bardia for a swim; a school for NCOs and a course on enemy weapons were started, and there were lectures on mines and booby traps (how to recognise, use, and neutralise them). Fifty-one reinforcements came up, and soccer, Rugby, and hockey were played between salvaging and roadmending. There was an issue of canned beer. The water ration was increased to one gallon a man, with an extra gallon for washing.

The Division began moving again on 5 December. The route was across Cyrenaica, and the mission was to outflank the enemy position at El Agheila, where the defences commanded the only road into Tripolitania. Twice before British forces

had been turned back at Agheila because of its natural strength and remoteness.

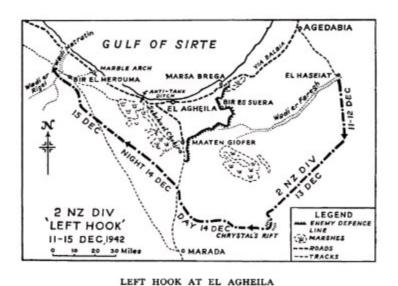
Extensive salt marshes east, south, and west of the main defences alternated with areas of soft sand, which in turn were extensively mined. There were wadis that further restricted manoeuvre, and strongpoints designed to channel transport into the mined areas. The supplying of a force of any size was exceedingly difficult, for the railhead at Tobruk was 450 miles away and, until Benghazi harbour was working to full capacity, supplies had to be carried by truck across the desert.

The New Zealand Division moved independently by brigades; 21 Battalion travelled via Sidi Azeiz, where 5 Brigade Headquarters had been captured during the relief of Tobruk the previous year, along the Trigh Capuzzo past Sidi Rezegh of bitter memory, then past Bir Hacheim to Msus, and finally through Saunnu to El Haseiat, which was reached on 11 December. The names sound important, suggestive of oriental cities, mosques, minarets and palm-strewn oases—actually they are mostly geographical expressions, mere points on ancient desert tracks and of no importance whatever except to mark the route of the Division's 350-mile journey across eastern Libya.

This journey was done in easy stages with hourly halts. The Cyrenaican desert is no different from the Egyptian; it has stones, shingle, scattered scrub, patches of soft sand, and wadis. North of the route lay the high country of Gebel Akhdar, with its towns and seaports and whatever population inhabited them; to the south lay the sand sea of the inner desert; in front there was nothing except the flat horizon; behind it was the same. Overhead was the winter sky, and there were sudden rainstorms.

The intention was to send the Division on a wide 'left hook', going well to the south to avoid observation if possible, and directed to the main road west of El Agheila, while 51 (Highland) Division and 7 Armoured Division attacked the position from the east. The New Zealand Division started on its out- flanking move on 13 December completely self-contained in supplies, with 4 Light Armoured Brigade again leading and 5 Brigade in the rear of the divisional column. The course was generally south-west for about fifty miles, across a long steep-sided valley called Ghrystal's Rift after its discoverer (Captain P. D. Chrystal of the King's Dragoon Guards, whose patrol had reconnoitred the route), then westwards. The country

soon became too broken for desert formation, and 21 Battalion formed into three columns. By 5 p.m. the battalion was at the rift, waiting its turn to cross by the tracks the bulldozers had made. The trucks crawled gingerly along the lighted tracks and laagered on the far side.



left hook at el agheila

The advance was continued in the morning, as soon as the ground mist had cleared, along a route first westwards, then north-west, until midnight. Late in the afternoon enemy aircraft discovered the Division, and from then on the enemy kept himself fully informed about its movements.

The next bound was intended to put the Division across the rear of the Afrika Korps holding Agheila. At 7.15 a.m. on the third day (15 December) 21 Battalion moved off in desert formation as rear battalion in 5 Brigade Group. The original intention was for 6 Brigade to occupy the high ground overlooking the road in the Marble Arch area, but the enemy was already there in too great strength for the armoured screen to shift. The Division was in consequence diverted further west towards the Bir el Merduma area. The going was very bad and the estimated ten miles an hour was not maintained. It was dark before 5 Brigade was halted and, after a conference, moved out to battle positions. Sixth Brigade had already been despatched northwards to attempt to cut the road along which the enemy was retreating.

Fifth Brigade formed a line facing east, and 21 Battalion on the left flank was in

position by midnight. The companies dug in, put out standing patrols, and listened to the enemy transport moving about in the darkness. At first light C Company, on the extreme left, was moved to a better position, about half a mile to the left rear, and the 'I' section established liaison with 6 Brigade and found there was a ten-mile gap between the two brigades.

Sixth Brigade had been prevented from cutting the road by 90 Light Division, with the result that most of 21 Panzer Division had escaped to the west almost without interference. The 15th Panzer Division had spent the night close to 5 Brigade, and it was the noise of its movement that had been heard by 21 Battalion patrols. The Germans made good use of the gap between the two New Zealand brigades. All that 21 Battalion saw of their escape was a party of 35 tanks coming from the east on a bearing that would take them across the unit's front. They were reported immediately, but the anti-tank guns did not get up in time. C Company thereupon withdrew 250 yards until the tanks passed, and then reoccupied its positions. The transport following the tanks was engaged at extreme range by machine-gun and mortar fire without any apparent success, although the trucks veered away to the north out of range.

The battalion carriers carrying machine-gunners and their weapons chased after the enemy for nine miles, but failed to get within range. The mortar carriers were also in the hunt and came back with 14 prisoners, six lugers, and some Jerry rations. In the afternoon the 5 Brigade transport was called forward. The 21st Battalion got into desert formation, moved into its position in the brigade group, and bedded down for the night.

The next place where the enemy decided to stand was at Nofilia, and on 17 December, while the Royal Scots Greys (Sherman tanks) and the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry were feeling out the defences and British armoured cars were reconnoitring further west, 5 Brigade moved forward with the intention of getting round the enemy's inland flank again. The order of march was 23 Battalion leading and responsible for speed and direction, the Maori Battalion on the right, and the 21st on the left. The brigade passed to the south of Nofilia and at 4.30 p.m., when about ten miles west of the village, was ordered to swing north towards the road, about three miles away. This was a change in the original plan, but the brigade was quickly deployed for the attack, with the Maoris on the right, the 23rd in the centre,

and the 21st on the left flank, with the carriers out in front. The 23rd Battalion was to get across the road and face east, with the 28th covering its right flank, while 21 Battalion was ordered to cross the road and then swing round between the road and the sea immediately to the north.

The area between the edge of the upland plain, along which the brigade had been travelling, and the road was crossed longitudinally by a number of low ridges that looked solid under the sparse covering of desert grass. The 21st Battalion deployed in three columns abreast with the Anti-Tank Platoon ahead, and the instructions were to get the trucks as far forward as possible before debussing. The trucks slid, lurched, and slipped down the escarpment. Enemy vehicles were streaming along the road, which the artillery was pounding as hard as it could.

The hills that looked so solid were quite the contrary, for under the desert grass the sand was loose and the trucks sank deep into the yielding mass. The drivers crawled along with their engines screaming in low gear. Mortars, 75s, and anti-tank shells dropped between the trucks but, beyond sending spurts of sand into the air, did little damage. After a mile of crawling up hills and sliding into gullies, with glimpses of enemy trucks that seemed as far away as ever, the troops received the signal to debus and took cover while the CO and company commanders went forward to reconnoitre. They found that the southern side of the road was held by a flank guard well supplied with machine guns and artillery. The battalion went forward but was soon held up, and with darkness falling the companies dug in. The battalions on the right had struck even heavier opposition, and the 21st was ordered to have the road under small-arms fire by daylight.

The sandhills gave perfect cover for wandering about unobserved, and the truck-weary troops stretched their legs while waiting for the cooks' trucks and their blanket rolls. The hot meal came up, but not the blankets. A patrol reported the country in front clear of enemy as far as the road, and 21 Battalion advanced with the Bren carriers, mortars and anti-tank platoon in support. The companies were within a thousand yards of the objective when the noise of the carriers attracted a stream of tracer shells that betrayed the enemy positions. Colonel Harding decided that the enemy was too strong to dislodge with the bayonet and, after lying doggo under extremely accurate fire for some time, the battalion was withdrawn to its original

position. Included among the 14 casualties was Major McElroy, wounded in the head for the second time. It was his third wound, and the troops reckoned that if he survived the 'Blacktracker' (McElroy was very dark complexioned) would be a thorn in the side of erring Kiwis for a long time.

That was the end of the action. The enemy flank guard had done its job well and the rearguard was clear by daylight. As far as 5 Brigade was concerned the next two days passed without incident, and on 20 December 21 Battalion moved north of the road and dug in close to the sea. The following week passed in routine duties and in swimming. Then the war was declared off for Christmas Day.

For the Second Echelon men in the battalion it was their third Christmas overseas and for many more the second in the Desert. At Baggush twelve months earlier the battalion, or rather the few who came back from Sidi Rezegh, had eaten their dinner thinking of defeats, withdrawals, and evacuations in Greece, Crete and Libya. It was different this Christmas. Although in Tunisia the Germans were savaging the English, French and Americans in the west, they were winning only Pyrrhic victories, while in Libya Rommel's Afrika Korps was still reeling backwards.

Considering the long supply line and the strain on transport to get the supply of petrol, water and ammunition up to the fighting troops, nothing much in the way of Christmas cheer was expected. The Q staff of the Division and Eighth Army, however, performed a series of miracles, and the makings for a real Christmas dinner came by road, sea and air. The cooks did the rest, and the troops sat down to roast pork, roast turkey, peas and potatoes, followed by plum pudding, a bottle of beer, a double issue of rum and 60 cigarettes. A nice long sleep in the sun ended a memorable day. 'Training as per syllabus', a convenient aphorism for taking life easily, was continued until New Year's Day, when the battalion, in common with the rest of 5 Brigade, was given an exceedingly nasty job. The RAF needed airfields in the forward areas south of Sirte, and labourers were required.

The 21st Battalion moved by transport on the first day of the new year and by evening was a hundred miles farther west in the Hamraiet area, some thirty miles south-west of Sirte. The task was to clear an airstrip of stones and load them onto trucks. Following a night of thunder, lightning and rain, a sandstorm blew for two days, making working conditions very unpleasant. The enemy soon realised what

was going on. There was no possibility of taking cover, and the first dive-bombing raid cost the battalion eleven casualties and 5 Brigade a total of 35. Brigadier Kippenberger arranged for air cover, and all ack-ack crews stood by their guns instead of picking up stones. The enemy did not have such an easy target after that, but the troops became almost cross-eyed looking down at the stones and up into the sky at the same time. As many as seventeen planes swooped down at a time, but the battalion escaped further losses though other units were not so fortunate.

While 5 Brigade carried stones, the enemy was standing on a line running inland from Buerat, a few miles along the coast, but planning was under way for the capture of Tripoli as soon as the supply position permitted.

There were still 300 miles of wadis, gorges, escarpments, hills, canyons and desert between us and Mussolini's 'Jewel of Africa', and the occasion was important enough to require the presence of the New Zealand Division. The overall plan was for 51 (Highland) Division to move along the coast, and 7 Armoured Division and 2 NZ Division on the inland flank. The schedule called for the capture of Tripoli within ten days from the kick-off.

Preparations were made for the move. A troop of six-pounders, a platoon of medium machine guns, and an anti-aircraft section reported to 21 Battalion and were so disposed that all companies were tactically self-contained. Meanwhile the Division less 5 Brigade had moved west and was concentrated on the eastern side of Wadi Tamet, between Hamraiet and El Machina.

Concealment was essential to the success of the operation. Camouflage nets were used freely, vehicles faced north at all halts so that there would be no reflection from the windscreens, and dusty formed tracks were avoided whenever possible. Strict wireless silence was imposed and no fires were permitted after dark.

Fifth Brigade rejoined the Division on 12 January 1943, and Wadi Tamet was crossed under fighter cover the same day. The Division rested on the 13th and moved during the night and again in the afternoon and evening of the 14th. Sixth Brigade was leading behind the forward armour of the Divisional Cavalry. As far as 21 Battalion was concerned, it was a case of moving from desert formation into columns, sometimes six, sometimes three, sometimes one column, according to the

going. Sometimes the trucks lurched along at a steady four miles an hour in the darkness; sometimes the march was in daylight, winding through a lost world. Dead hills scarred by the winds of centuries alternated with stretches where rocks protruded from the sand like icebergs in the southern seas. Escarpments of solid stone had to be circumnavigated; crevasses more desolate than the valleys on the moon had to be crossed.

Eighth Army attacked on 15 January and the enemy withdrew during the night. Wadi Zemzem was crossed on the 16th, Wadi Sofeggin on the 17th, and during most of the following day the New Zealand Division passed through perfectly hellish country towards the Beni Ulid oasis. The canyon in which the oasis lies was traversed on the night of 19-20 January, and in the moonlight the troops saw with incredulous eyes olive trees, palms, and fig trees. They saw also a town with a fort, stone buildings, and native villages; and after leaving the oasis and moving into the desert again, they refused to believe they had seen anything. Direction was then altered to the north-west towards Gebel Nefusa, the rampart of the coastal plains around Tripoli. Civilisation lay beyond the gebel—green grass, cultivated fields, roads, villages and people. The 21st Battalion spat the dust out of its mouth and spoke of running water and what could be done with something cool in a long glass.

An unimpeded passage through the gebel was not expected, and 5 Brigade, now in the lead, was prepared for trouble. The 21st Battalion, in the rear of the brigade group, moved in single column along the road towards Tarhuna, and by the evening of the 20th was near the Italian settlement of Tazzoli, about ten miles south-west of Tarhuna. The enemy rearguard had evacuated its position around Tarhuna and upset General Freyberg's plan for a divisional attack, but it still held the defiles through which the road passed. The engineers were told to find or make a road down the escarpment further west. They found a suitable defile and worked like beavers to make it passable for the forward screen of the Divisional Cavalry, the Royal Scots Greys, and a gun group to debouch onto the plain. Fifth Brigade followed and by 10 p.m. was in position among the tussocks north of the last barrier to Tripoli, only 40 miles away.

While 2 NZ Division and 7 Armoured Division were concentrating for the final spring, 51 Division, in the coastal sector, was battling along through demolition after demolition towards Tripoli.

Elements of 15 Panzer Division were found in position at Azizia, 26 miles south of Tripoli, and reacted violently to the approach of our cavalry screen. Artillery and tanks went forward and 21 Battalion awaited the issue. At midday Colonel Harding was warned that the enemy would probably withdraw after dark, and to be prepared to press on to Tripoli that night.

After last light 5 Brigade was formed up on the road to Azizia, with 28 Battalion leading and the 21st behind 23 Battalion. C Company was detached as infantry protection for the artillery sited on the left flank. The enemy tanks had departed, but the Maoris met infantry and artillery opposition near Azizia. The enemy, spread on a front of half a mile on each side of the road, turned on a fireworks display of tracer that was pretty to watch but too much to tackle when a few hours were of no importance. The column turned about, returned to its original position, and bedded down for what was left of the night.

In the morning the enemy had departed, and 21 Battalion climbed into the trucks for the last lap. After passing through Azizia, whence a broad tarsealed road led to their goal, the troops filled their eyes with green trees, cultivated fields, and the square white houses of the Italian settlers. At precisely 2 p.m. on 23 January 21 Battalion halted outside the city gate, where Brigadier Kippenberger was waiting to welcome them.

On the day of Eighth Army's arrival at Tripoli General Montgomery issued a personal message to all troops under his command, in which he said:

- 1. Today, 23 January, exactly three months after we began the Battle of Egypt, the Eighth Army has captured Tripoli and has driven the enemy away to the West towards Tunisia. By skilful withdrawal tactics the enemy has eluded us, though we have taken heavy toll of his army and air force.
- 2. The defeat of the enemy in battle at Alamein, the pursuit of his beaten army, and the final capture of Tripoli—a distance of some fourteen hundred miles from Alamein—has been accomplished in three months. This achievement is probably without parallel in history. It could not have been done unless every soldier in the army had pulled his full weight all the time. I congratulate the whole army and send my personal thanks to each of you for the wonderful support you have given me.
- 3. On your behalf I have sent a special message to the Allied Air Forces that have

- co-operated with us. I don't suppose that any army has ever been supported by such a magnificent Air Striking Force. I have always maintained that the Eighth Army and the R.A.F., Western Desert, together constitute one fighting machine, and therein lies our great strength.
- 4. In the hour of success we must not forget the splendid work that has been done by those soldiers working day and night in back areas and on lines of communication. There are many soldiers quietly doing their duty in rear areas who are unable to take part in the triumphal entry into captured cities; but they are a vital part of our fighting machine and we could gain no success if they failed to pull their full weight. I refer specially to stevedores at our bases, to fitters in the workshops, to clerks in our rear offices, and so on. I would like to make a special mention of our R.A.S.C. drivers; these men drive long distances day and night for long periods; they always deliver the goods. The R.A.S.C. has risen to great heights during the operations we have undertaken, and as a Corps it deserves the grateful thanks of every soldier in the Army.
- 5. There is much work in front of us. But I know that you all are ready for any task that you may be called on to carry out.
- 6. Once again I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

B. L. Montgomery

General, G.O.C., Eighth Army

The battalion, on three hours' notice for operational employment, camped in a bluegum plantation near the Azizia Gate and spent two days cleaning the desert out of its clothes, equipment, vehicles and throats, promising itself a taste of the flesh-pots at the earliest possible moment. A battalion, it was maintained, did not move 1400 miles across North Africa, living on hard tack and brackish water for three months, without needing a little stimulant at the end of the trek. Its casualties in the advance from Bardia to Tripoli had been nine killed, 26 wounded, and one prisoner of war, a total of 36.

On 25 January word was received that there would probably be no move for another five days and, no doubt for good and sufficient reasons, there was no leave either. There was a lot of planning done, however, for when the leave roster opened. Beverages figured largely in the anticipated menus. A party of South African engineers moved into the area and brought a wireless set with them. The troops were paid the same day and, with the wireless and some local 'plonk', had a good party.

moved to a bivouac 15 miles south of the captured city. As soon as the camp was organised, 10 per cent leave to Tripoli began. As a military objective Tripoli might have been of the highest importance to the generals, but as a leave centre for the troops it was an abject failure. Leave trucks left the area at 1 p.m. and were required to be clear of the city by 6 p.m. Rules were stringent, and when you deducted what might not be done on leave there was not much left to do. There were fine buildings to see, but no eggs and bacon to be bought anywhere; there were cafes but no beer; there were civilians, but they were mostly natives. The city was very short of food and, according to orders, no meals might be purchased and no liquor was on sale. The harbour was full of dead ships, and some of the buildings on the marine parade were battered, roofless and windowless, with large gaps where direct hits had crushed their neighbours. Fresh air and scenery were felt to be an inadequate diet for sand-blasted stomachs, and there was more scope for refreshment in camp. The local inhabitants, who soon lost their fear of the invaders, supplied the cooks with fresh vegetables and the troops with wine. At servicemen's reunions some of the parties held at this time are still recalled with longing.

The following day 51 (Highland) Division took over the area and 21 Battalion

The enemy was still being chased westward, but at this stage the Division was not called on to assist. The pursuit was halted in southern Tunisia, where the French had built their African Maginot Line to keep out the Italians. Rommel was now occupying this, the Mareth Line as it was called, with the same intentions towards ourselves. Arrangements were being made, however, to induce him, as soon as our administrative difficulties were overcome, to continue moving backwards. The first essential was to get the Tripoli harbour working again. British and American bombers had partially destroyed its usefulness while it was in enemy hands, and before departing the Germans had attempted to complete its destruction.

The 21st Battalion was soon to know the environs of the waterfront very well indeed, but its first job was to smarten up for a big ceremonial parade. Security did not permit names being mentioned, but the pseudonym 'Mr. Bullfinch' was soon narrowed down to Mr. Churchill. The review was held on 4 February, and the setting was worthy of the occasion. It was early spring, the almond trees were blossoming, and there were wild flowers in the grass around the olive trees. The whole Division paraded in review order and, to the music of the massed pipes of 51 (Highland)

Division, marched past Britain's war leader. The Prime Minister gave a stirring address in which he surveyed the change in fortune that had driven the enemy out of Egypt, Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. There were some there who could remember when he last addressed them, exactly 29 months earlier in England, before they left to take their place on the Dover coast to repel the invasion that never came.

The remainder of February was one long wharf fatigue, for with the improved harbour facilities more and more labour was needed to unload ships and load trucks. Sports and training, of course, were sandwiched in between the all-round-the-clock shifts of waterside work, but mostly it was work. Everybody appreciated the vital necessity of getting the stores ashore, and the ships were turned round in record time. There was also some spectacular souveniring of canteen delicacies. The cooks had only to mention what would be nice to go with the morrow's dinner and there it was.

New reinforcements began to arrive, the first from New Zealand for over a year. The 8th Reinforcements were welcomed with open arms, for they behaved with due humility in the presence of their military seniors and brought the latest news from the folk at home. And in the meantime the Division had been briefed for another desert campaign and another 'left hook'.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 10 — TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN

CHAPTER 10 Tunisian Campaign

The fall of Tripoli was virtually the end of Mussolini's colonial empire, for by February there was not a combatant Italian soldier in the length and breadth of Italian North Africa. The enemy forces, closely attended by Eighth Army, had retired into Tunisia, where the Italians were left to hold the defences of the Mareth Line.

Field Marshal Rommel, knowing that his adversary would need time to assemble sufficient strength to tackle this line, pitted his refitted panzer battalions against the Americans in western Tunisia, with the result that 2 United States Corps was very roughly handled and an Allied reverse seemed not impossible. An urgent request was sent to Eighth Army to do something to relieve the pressure, so while 2 New Zealand Division continued unloading stores at Tripoli, 7 Armoured and 51 (Highland) Divisions pressed up to the outer defences of the Mareth Line.

Whether the Eighth Army demonstrations succeeded in their object, or whether the American defence finally became too strong, is a matter for military strategists to determine, but the attack was called off and on 27 February a panzer division was back on the Eighth Army front. With the return of the German armour to the Mareth Line, there was now a chance that the enemy might try to overwhelm the two forward divisions before Eighth Army was prepared to receive an attack. When the possibility became a certainty, 2 NZ Division was ordered to move at once to Medenine.

At Medenine was located the most forward fighter airstrip. The town is a centre of semi-nomads and the junction of several tracks from the Matmata Hills, as well as the point where a good modern road turns north-west to Gabes after running nearly due west from Ben Gardane. And at Ben Gardane the supplies were being concentrated for the next offensive.

Fifth Brigade was ordered forward at short notice on 1 March and promptly issued a movement order to its battalions. It was a hectic day of preparation for the changeover from an occupational role to one of urgent action. Rations, petrol, ammunition, and other supplies were brought up to full battle scale, and the brigade moved at midnight. The convoy travelled all night, stopped for breakfast, then

carried on again until met at three in the afternoon by the Brigadier and the commanding officers, who had gone ahead to reconnoitre the brigade area, ten miles south of Medenine. To the troops it was just another move, but to the commanders it was a matter of pride that in a few hours their battalions could, without the slightest hitch, pack up in a rest area, travel 120 miles, and deploy for action.

It was too dark to complete tactical dispositions, so the troops bivouacked around the trucks until daylight, when the companies were led to their allotted positions. The Highland Division was holding the coastal area, with 7 Armoured Division immediately south, and 5 Brigade was disposed to extend the line further south. The Maoris, on the brigade's right, tied in with 201 Guards Brigade; 21 Battalion was in the centre and 23 Battalion on the left, linking up with a battalion of the RAF Regiment on the Medenine airfield. The rest of the Division was to be held in reserve when it arrived.

The front was very wide, with three battalions covering 14,000 yards, almost exactly eight miles. The 21st Battalion's sector, rather smaller than the other two, covered approximately two miles of undulating country broken with odd dry, stony wadis. The companies were sited for all-round defence across a road from Medenine to the Matmata Hills, shimmering blue in the haze, about ten miles away. The whole area was clothed in the spring rush of semi-desert grass, sprinkled with wild flowers with scent of an amazing strength and sweetness.

The preparations for meeting the anticipated armoured blow were based on the lessons of Minqar Qaim, Alam Halfa, and the Alamein counter-attacks, and included the careful siting of anti-tank guns and field artillery with 8 Armoured Brigade in support. For these measures to be thoroughly effective it was essential that the enemy tanks should be coaxed within point-blank range and that our own armour should be free to manoeuvre unhampered by minefields. To this end few mines were put out, but dummy fields consisting of a single strand of barbed wire with black tin triangles strung along its length were sited to herd the enemy armour towards the places where the anti-tank gunners were waiting. As an extra inducement to the tanks to advance boldly, the field artillery was instructed not to fire until the anti-tank crews had opened at killing range.

Such was the overall picture, and the battalion positions conformed to the general pattern. Mutually supporting platoon posts were dug and concealed, and mortars and anti-tank guns sited to cover them. By night listening posts were put out about half a mile in front, and beyond them a standing carrier patrol strained its ears for the sound of advancing panzers.

Two days and two nights passed thus; they were crucial days, for by 4 March General Montgomery had completed his arrangements and Rommel had missed his opportunity. In the event it was 21 Battalion which opened the battle for Medenine.

Colonel Harding, with Second-Lieutenant Lloyd ¹ as driver, had gone out in his jeep before dawn on 6 March to visit the carrier patrol at the foot of the Matmata Hills. They heard the noise of vehicles in the mist that precedes the sunrise in Tunisia, but the area was an unlikely place to meet the patrol and they carried on. Captain Hosking ² was just about to bring his three carriers in when the Colonel arrived and pointed out the direction of the suspicious movement. The carriers went to investigate and found enemy trucks, which were immediately engaged and destroyed. The carriers found further employment for, possibly attracted by the noise of firing, another and more powerful group of trucks escorting an anti-tank gun and a heavy machine gun appeared. Hosking shot up the leading truck and the gun before he was himself wounded and his carrier disabled. The other carriers completed the destruction of the enemy party, at least fifty strong, rescued the crew of the disabled carrier, and returned with the information that the attack was coming in and that Colonel Harding was probably captured. The CO and Second-Lieutenant Lloyd turned up intact soon afterwards, however; they had found the road blocked by enemy posts armed with machine guns and anti-tank weapons, and had had to make a wide detour.

Along and on both sides of the road through 21 Battalion's positions appeared the tanks of 10 Panzer Division, evidently directed on Medenine, but when they came to the wire of the dummy minefield the leaders obligingly veered to their left. There was a wadi there that offered shelter and a covered approach to the Maori Battalion lines, and there was also a nest of six-pounders of 73 Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery, covering the wadi. The gunners waited patiently until the leading tanks were just where they were wanted; then they all fired at once. Four tanks

were knocked out and, with the need for concealment gone, everybody let fly: machine guns, tommy guns and rifles bounced their bullets off the surprised enemy armour. Another tank was brewed up by 28 Battalion and the remainder fled. The artillery opened up on the following lorried infantry and they fled also. And that was practically all 21 Battalion saw of the battle of Medenine, for the enemy did not again come within range of small-arms fire.

The air was full of fighter aircraft dodging and diving among the white puffs of our Bofors and the enemy counterpart. The morning passed into afternoon with one long confused noise of tank and anti-tank gunfire, of artillery, of motor transport manoeuvring, deploying, advancing and retreating, but the panzers were baffled. Four times the German armour attacked, and four times it was driven back, gaining nothing and leaving 52 tanks on the battlefield. Friendly tanks came into the battalion area at dusk and aircraft recognition signals were prepared in case of an attempted breakthrough at night, but neither was necessary. When the mist cleared next morning carrier patrols reported that the enemy had gone. His attempt to delay the inevitable had failed.

The Medenine battle was virtually the beginning of the campaign to force the Mareth Line. The plan was a major attack frontally, combined with an outflanking movement—the now familiar 'left hook'. The assault on the Mareth Line proper was to be made by 50 Division, and the 'left hook' by 2 New Zealand Division, now regarded as specialists in that operation. It involved a march of over 150 miles across a waterless desert, where the going was incredibly difficult, and then forcing the defences at the Tebaga Gap, a two-mile-wide and four-mile-long defile. It was thought that the gap would not be strongly held, as the French builders of the Mareth Line had considered the outflanking march impossible. The enemy did not share this view, although it was hoped he would. He had disposed as many troops at the gap as he could spare from the main position, and held reserves available to move to either front.

Secrecy and concealment were essential if the proposed turning movement south through the Montes des Ksours and then north to the Tebaga Gap was to have any chance of success. To that end all fernleaf signs on vehicles were obliterated, shoulder titles and hat badges were removed, no fires or lights were permitted during darkness, and movement during daylight was reduced to an absolute

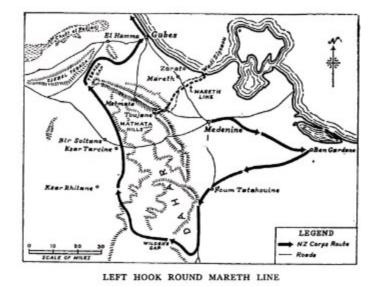
minimum. There was to be strict wireless silence, and in their despatches war correspondents made a feature of mentioning that 2 New Zealand Division was holding a position at the Mareth Line.

For the operation 2 New Zealand Division became the New Zealand Corps, taking under command 8 Armoured Brigade, some Royal Artillery regiments, a Free French column, and the King's Dragoon Guards (armoured cars).

Fifth Brigade moved to and stayed in the assembly area west of Foum Tatahouine until the night of 19-20 March, doing a little route marching at night to keep fit. A plaster model of the country to be traversed was studied by all commanders down to senior NCOs and explained by them to the troops, so that the broad outline of the operation was known to everybody.

Sixth Brigade was leading when the dash for Gabes started, and 21 Battalion covered thirty miles over wadis and sand dunes that only desert-wise drivers could hope to negotiate. A previously arranged code-word to push on regardless of concealment was received by New Zealand Corps Headquarters, so instead of remaining stationary and camouflaged the 27,000 men and 200 tanks of the Corps commenced the move from the assembly area and pressed on throughout the day on 20 March. By last light 6 Brigade was only a few miles short of the entrance to Tebaga Gap. The main attack by 50 Division was due to open at midnight, and it was hoped that the advancing New Zealand Corps would induce the enemy to move reserves to the gap.

In the late afternoon of 21 March 6 Brigade deployed and that night forced the first defences in the gap by capturing Point 201. The main thrust from the east was making slow headway and 6 Brigade, 8 Armoured Brigade, and the Free French column attacked again. On the 22nd the enemy reserves were thrown in against 50 Division and regained most of the



left hook round mareth line

lost ground. With the enemy reserves now committed, the plan was altered, and 1 Armoured Division plus Headquarters 10 Corps were sent to help New Zealand Corps break through the Tebaga Gap before the reserves could be moved across to oppose them. The New Zealand Corps was to storm the last defences in time for the approaching 1 Armoured Division to carry straight through to El Hamma, but before the attack

could be put in it was necessary to clear the enemy from Point 184, which gave observation over the whole front and enfiladed the proposed start line.

Should Point 184 not be captured, it would be impossible to move the troops to the proposed start line to lie up unseen, for the whole plan hinged on secretly disposing the assaulting battalions and doing the unexpected by attacking, not at night, but out of the westering sun in the late afternoon. The vital Point 184 had already resisted capture and, as it was essential that no mistake be made this time, it was made a battalion objective. The 21st Battalion was briefed to take Point 184 and, as on the previous occasion—at Halfaya Pass—when the 21st had been given a single-handed job, it was to be a night show; but, unlike at Halfaya, there was to be ample, even devastating, artillery support.

Harding received his orders at 10 a.m. on 25 March and left immediately with his company commanders to get the benefit of 26 Battalion's local knowledge. He decided to tackle the hill from a flank, and while the company commanders were making themselves familiar with the terrain, the battalion was formed up. There was

no time for written operation orders and, if the unexpected happened, the Halfaya instructions of 'Fight and find out' applied.

At 6.30 p.m. the battalion moved up ten miles by truck and debussed. There was no time then for excursion into archaeology, but the troops debussed at a point where a wall built by the Romans centuries earlier had served the purpose of keeping the Tebaga Gap closed to unwelcome visitors. At 11 p.m. the Intelligence Officer left with B Company to put out the start-line tapes. At 11.30 the rest of the battalion followed and formed up, with C Company on the right, D on the left, A in support of C, and B in reserve. Battalion Headquarters was established in a wadi half a mile south of the start line.

The objective was the high ground running north from Point 184 and was divided into two areas. Area 'A', to be attacked by C Company with A in support, was slightly forward of the point, and area 'B', nearly a thousand yards farther north, was allotted to D Company.

At 1 a.m. the artillery concentration was put down on the objective for 15 minutes, with an extra five minutes on D Company's area, and the assaulting companies advanced. C Company was at the foot of the hill within twelve minutes and had scrambled well up the rocky hillside before the artillery concentration ceased. The left flanking platoon (No. 14, under Second-Lieutenant Hirst ³) was held up by machine-gun fire, but No. 15 (Second-Lieutenant Miller ⁴) was able to carry on and deal with the posts giving the trouble. Contrary to their usual custom the German garrison, approximately a company strong, did not put up a very good fight. The artillery 'stonk' appeared to have stunned them, and the close follow-up with the bayonet completed their demoralisation. Six were killed and 37 taken prisoner. The others made off in trucks standing nearby.

D Company had a harder fight. The artillery concentration ceased when the troops were still 200 yards from the objective, and small-arms fire was quickly brought down on them. One platoon and Company Headquarters moved up to the saddle and round the south of the point, while the other two platoons moved round to the north. Then the whole company closed in from front and rear. The enemy was well dug in and fought until killed or wounded. Twelve were killed and eight captured, together with two mortars and an anti-tank gun. The 21st Battalion

casualties in the action were four killed and 17 wounded.

The troops did not expect to be left in undisputed possession of a feature that dominated the front, and prepared for the almost inevitable counter-attack. The ground was too hard and rocky for quick digging, so sangars were built instead. Lance-Corporal Negus, ⁵ D Company, had the company wireless set operating as soon as the fighting finished. He got into communication with Battalion Headquarters, as well as with the other companies, and when tanks and trucks were heard approaching he called for artillery support. The guns turned on a 'stonk' within minutes and no counter-attack developed. A Company, waiting to support D Company if needed, returned to its reserve position near Battalion Headquarters, while the Mortar Platoon and a platoon of machine-gunners dragged their weapons up the hill and formed a line. Around Battalion Headquarters six-pounder anti-tank guns got into position to deal with any enemy tanks that might survive the artillery protective fire. By first light the position was consolidated and at 8 a.m. some twelve tanks and 35 trucks were seen about a mile to the north, apparently preparing a tank-supported counter-attack, but after milling around for some time they eventually moved out of sight.

While the battalion was settling in on the hill that denied the enemy observation, the assaulting battalions of 5 and 6 Brigades were moving to their allotted lying-up position, and by dawn they had all disappeared into the ground. Further back tanks, light, heavy and medium, were concentrating for the final rush that would clear the way for the infantry to pour, like a river in flood, through the Tebaga Gap. On every landing strip within striking distance the Desert Air Force was tuning its engines and loading its bomb bays.

The day that was to see the turning of the Mareth Line opened with a dust-storm. Zero hour was 4.15 p.m. and, for the first time in the campaign, the attack was from the south-west, with the enemy under the disadvantage of looking into the sun. The 21st Battalion, perched on its hilltops, was given the role of protecting the brigade's right flank and neutralising all enemy fire possible. The defenders might not have known where the assaulting troops were hidden, but they had a very definite idea where 21 Battalion was and plastered the area with guns and mortars at intervals during the day. Corporal Negus was kept busy keeping his line and

wireless operating, and, after his line was broken by mortar bombs and the valves of his wireless set rendered useless by shellfire, was continually out repairing the line. D Company was never out of communication with Battalion Headquarters for more than a few minutes.

The 21st Battalion had performed its allotted share in the attack and was to have a grandstand view of the first Allied blitzkrieg of the war. Precisely at half past three in the afternoon a rumble grew into a thunderous roar as the first wave of bombers flew over the lines. The sounds were still echoing in the encircling hills when another wave came over in time to drown the drum-beats of exploding bombs dropped by their now returning advance party. Then the guns began to fire on their allotted targets; the heavy tanks emerged from their hiding places; the lighter tanks came in, followed by the carriers; and finally the long lines of Kiwis appeared, advancing on a two-brigade front. Behind all this the tanks and lorried infantry of 1 Armoured Division, the last of whose trucks got up only 30 minutes before the attack opened, were waiting to exploit success when the breach had been made. At 6 p.m. they passed through the forward positions, and then waited until the moon rose and there was enough light to see their way through the open country and the standing crops of barley and wheat towards El Hamma. The Mareth Line had been turned.

Situated as it was on the right flank of the advance, with Free French troops further east in the hills, 21 Battalion suffered a night of shell and mortar fire. The Maoris' right flank had been held up, and the enemy showed no sign of moving. He was in fact holding the fort while the Mareth garrison raced back from the doomed position to temporary safety west of the Gabes Gap, a narrow corridor between the coast and the salt lakes.

The day of the 27th was relatively quiet in the battalion area, although enemy shells were still coming from the east. Late in the afternoon the Maoris captured Point 209, and at 10 p.m., after being relieved by the Free French, the 21st was moved to the left flank of 5 Brigade on the El Hamma road. The armour was still battling against determined opposition and the Mareth garrison was still streaming westwards. After dark New Zealand Corps began to move forward, leaving 5 Brigade to take care of the right flank, where the Free French were still fighting in the hills.

The 21st Battalion was warned at eight o'clock next morning to prepare to

move, and set off at midday with the brigade group along a secondary road south and east of the New Zealand Corps' axis of advance. It was a day of clouds, dust, and many halts while mines were lifted, and the noise of the tank battle could be heard somewhere forward. Two trucks were damaged, luckily without casualties, when the Frenchmen mistook the column's nationality. Another truck was destroyed when it ran over a mine, and enemy planes dropped bombs at a wadi crossing. The enemy had evacuated El Hamma and 5 Brigade was directed on the seaside town of Gabes.

The 21st Battalion stood by its trucks for hours while the forward elements chased the enemy rearguard out of Gabes and the troops up front made a ford where a bridge had been blown. It was dark when the battalion passed through Gabes, where friendly French civilians had welcomed the rest of the brigade. The troops camped down west of the town and were amused to hear over the radio that 51 (Highland) Division had taken Gabes. The Scotties were good fighters and cheerful blokes off duty, and what was an odd town or so between friends. Anyway it was all cleared up later.

Fifth Brigade felt its way cautiously behind patrols of Divisional Cavalry which were prodding at the enemy rearguard preparing another stand on the far bank of the Wadi Akarit, about twenty miles north-west of Gabes. The rest of the Division concentrated in the area behind 5 Brigade, and at 5 p.m. on 31 March New Zealand Corps, its job done, was disbanded and 2 New Zealand Division again came under command of 30 Corps.

The brigade stayed in the area for a week. Plans were made for two attacks that did not come off, and the area was eventually taken over by 201 Guards Brigade. The 21st Battalion moved back nearer Gabes and rested. The officers and NCOs were addressed by the Army Commander, who briefly reviewed the Mareth battle and outlined the part Eighth Army would play in the rest of the Tunisian campaign. Enemy aircraft did their best to make life unpleasant. Parcels and papers from New Zealand were distributed. Engineers demonstrated the latest German mines. Unauthorised trips were attempted into Gabes with varying success.

Preparations were finalised for worrying the enemy out of his position at Wadi Akarit: 4 Indian, 50, and 51 Divisions were to make the breach and the New Zealand

Division was to carry on the pursuit. The Gabes coastal area was roughly thirty miles wide, bounded by the sea and inland by salt lakes, and covered with scattered scrub, brackish water and palm trees. The gap was about six miles wide, covered by wadis converted into anti-tank ditches. Two days' hard fighting opened the road. The troops stood by their trucks listening to the guns blasting the way for the assaulting infantry. They edged forward a little and on the morning of 7 April passed through the gap, over the last of the hills, and out on to the Tunisian plain.

The enemy gave up the maritime plain, together with the ports of Sfax and Sousse. Tripoli was now 300 miles behind the line, and as soon as these seaports were working again, the strain on the single road from Tripoli could be relieved.

The armour ranged far ahead and there were stubborn rearguard actions. The other Axis army was also falling back before the British and Americans coming up from Algeria, and the two had joined forces.

On the afternoon of 12 April 21 Battalion passed through Sousse. Again it was at the rear of the column, but it came in for its share of 'Vives' from the populace—'Vive les Anglais' and 'Vive les Enzed'—which accompanied odd bottles of wine given to the troops and bundles of flowers pressed on the grinning drivers. This was running a war on the right lines, and the battalion hoped to be at the head of the column at the next town.

The battalion halted for the night in an olive grove west of Sousse. It was a quiet night, and those who had known them told of olive groves in Greece and Crete. How many years ago? They could hardly remember, but it was in the days when they were very young soldiers.

As for the enemy, he had hills behind him again.

This was the overall position in North Africa at that moment. The Allied right flank was held by Eighth Army from the sea near Enfidaville to a point 25 miles inland. On its left, continuing the line westwards, the French 19 Corps covered a front of 25 miles, then came the British First Army, with a front of over thirty miles. The remaining thirty miles were held by 2 US Corps, with French formations on the coast. The enemy thus held the ports of Tunis and Bizerta, with a ring of steel in front of him and the sea behind. General von Arnim, the supreme commander of the

African Army Group, hoped to hold the line and continue to deny the Allies the Mediterranean passage.

Eighth Armoured Brigade, probing towards Enfidaville, was having a difficult time in country studded with olive groves, and complained that the low branches of the trees obscured the vision of both commanders and gunners. The 21st Battalion was detailed to give the armour local protection and moved off on the morning of the 13th to the new job. The Bren carriers ferreted around in front of the tanks, while the companies, moving in bounds, kept close on the heels of the tanks. Sergeant Housham's ⁶ carrier flushed a self-propelled gun and two machine guns, all of which objected violently to his presence. The carrier shed a track and had to be repaired under fire. By 4.30 p.m. they were about five miles south of Enfidaville, and the battalion formed a gunline behind which the armour harboured for the night.

The battalion rejoined 5 Brigade next day, to find that a plan had been made for the brigade to capture Djebel Garci, but finally this had been considered too tough for a brigade objective. Instead the brigade had been directed on the rocky outcrop known as Takrouna, between Garci and Enfidaville. It was an unmistakable landmark, a forbidding looking rocky crag slightly in advance of the range of hills forming the northern boundary of the coastal plain. What appeared to be a stone fort, but which was actually a mosque, crowned the summit. Below the building was a sharp drop to a rocky ledge on which was situated a native village. Behind Takrouna on its easier slopes was another part of the village, and at its base were olive groves and green barley-fields. To the left of the hill, as seen from 21 Battalion's position, was another and much smaller outcrop separated from the main feature by a wadi, and in the open spaces the grass was studded with flowering fennel, stocks, scarlet poppies, blue irises and white, mauve, pink, and yellow wild flowers. Tunisia in the spring has a breathless beauty.

To the enemy Takrouna was vital as an artillery observation post, for with his planes almost completely denied the air, he had to make the most of any advantage afforded by the ground.

Clearly the pursuit from Akarit was halted for the time being at least for the coastal plain narrowed to a few miles and was dominated by the northern end of the high ground in which the harried Germans and Italians were constructing defensive

positions. At this point the role of Eighth Army was changed: First Army was in easier country and was to make the main effort to end the war in North Africa, while Eighth Army exerted pressure on its southern sector.

As soon as it was dark 21 Battalion moved through 23 Battalion's outposts across the Wadi el Boul, about two miles nearer Takrouna, and formed a bridgehead. B, C, and D Companies were dug in forward of the wadi, with A Company in reserve. A troop of anti-tank guns was attached to each company, and in addition a platoon of machine guns was with C Company.

When daylight came the troops found that they were under direct observation from Point 121, a bare, bold feature which, like the kopje of the South African veldt, seemed to have no geological reason for being where it was. It was about one mile north of the Wadi el Boul and, though not extensive enough to contain many troops, was an excellent observation post. Two miles farther back stood the rocky, precipitous, 600-foot-high pinnacle of Takrouna.

From dawn to dark the time was passed in fighting mosquitoes, millions and millions of them. They outdid the Western Desert flies in tenacity, and puffed faces and swollen eyes bore witness to their blood-thirsty determination. Movement was almost impossible while the enemy remained on Point 121, and as soon as darkness fell Lieutenant Chalmers took 8 Platoon and attended to the matter. Six Italians were captured at a cost of two wounded. The platoon consolidated on the point, and the garrison, though isolated during daylight, was relieved each night by fresh troops.

The 16th of April was another quiet day for the battalion. That did not apply to the men on Point 121, which was plastered off and on by shellfire. There were no casualties, but a machine-gun platoon that had been sent up to strengthen the defence had a gun put out of action.

In the meantime plans were being made to capture the hills overlooking the coastal plain. No air photographs were available, but patrols established beyond doubt that the enemy was going to stand and fight. Second-Lieutenant Nunns ⁷ was detailed to take a reconnaissance party out on the night of 16-17 April to the foot of Takrouna and report on the condition of the country for wheeled traffic after the

proposed attack. They were returning by a different route when they were challenged in Italian and fired on by a Breda automatic and some rifles, about ten in all. After the fire died down the patrol edged away and carried on with their mission. Their report raised some doubts about the identity of the enemy formation — Germans had been reported by other patrols in the same area a night or so earlier—and the position of his forward posts. Brigadier Kippenberger felt that further investigation was necessary and suggested that a few prisoners would decide the question. Nunns knew the exact position of the outpost; he was given the assignment, told to make his own plan, and was offered artillery and carrier support.

He writes: 'I decided that a silent approach and sudden rush to the enemy position was probably the best approach. Ten men from my platoon volunteered to join the patrol, including Snowy Hutson, ⁸ although I told him I did not expect him to go out a second night.' Unlike on the previous night, there was a moon. The patrol was halted about 200 yards from the estimated position of the outpost and Nunns and Private Hutson crawled forward to reconnoitre. Soon afterwards there was a terrific burst of fire, which lasted for probably ten minutes. Nunns was severely wounded and his companion received wounds from which he died. 'I thought', Nunns continues, 'that the rest of the patrol might try to come in to get us out, which would have been fatal, so I called out and ordered them to get back to our lines and leave us... [Later] some Italians came out and picked me up.'



A 210 mm German howitzer overrun by British tanks at the top of Halfaya Pass

A 210 mm German howitzer overrun by British tanks at the top of Halfaya Pass



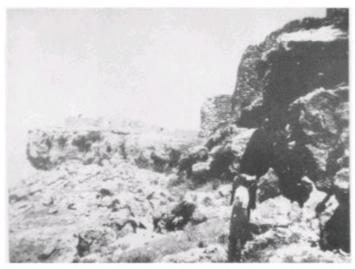
The battalion in the pursuit between Gabes and Sfax

The battalion in the pursuit between Gabes and Sfax



Acrial massic showing the dispositions at Trhags Cap

Aerial mosaic showing the dispositions at Tebaga Gap between 21 and 29 March 1943



The pinnacle of Takrouna from the ledge

The pinnacle of Takrouna from the ledge

From Takrouna south-west to the 21 Battalion start line



From Takrouna south-west to the 21 Battalion start line



Resting on the march to camp near Taranto

Resting on the march to camp near Taranto



The eroded gully on the right was part of the objective north of the Sangro

The eroded gully on the right was part of the objective north of the Sangro

The following orders were issued on 20 April for the attack by 21 Battalion on Takrouna:

21 NZ BN OPERATION ORDER NO 3

- information: 1. Enemy: Force of Germans and Italians holding takrouna.
 - 2. Own troops: 28 NZ Bn on right and 4 Ind Div on left.
- intention:
- 3. 21 NZ Bn with attached arms will attack western slope of takrouna feature and advance across enfidaville zaghouan rd. and form gun line facing approx NW.

method:

The operation will be in two phases.

Phase I:

- 4. The Bn will advance with three coys fwd. C right A centre B left and D in support. Bn Hq will follow D Coy.
- 5. Start line will be laid down by 5 Inf Bde on an east-west line. Coys will be on start line by 2245 hrs.
- 6. Bn will advance due north compass bearing 10°.
- 7. Arty concentration opens 2300 hrs for 30 mins. Barrage starts at 2332 hrs. Coys will move fwd to barrage line at 2300 hrs to within 2-300 yds of arty opening line.
- 8. During barrage Bn mortars from Z plus 30 to Z plus 40 will put down concentration as arranged and then await verbal orders.
- 9. Carrier Pl will move along left flank of Bn covering the advance.
- 10. Success will be signalled by wireless Squash or runner to Bn Hq.
- 11. Zero 2300 hrs.

Phase II:

- 12. On completion of phase one the Bn will form a gun line facing north-west from Enfidaville Rd. (Map ref 2786) to outpost feature general compass bearing along line 240°.
- 13. Order of coys A B C D. Extent of coy areas A B and C Coys 800 yds D Coy 500 yds to tie up with outpost feature.

 note.—Line will be reinforced at first light by one sqn notts Yeo.
- 14. A Coy 23 Bn will contact A Coy 21 Bn.
- 15. Carrier will form screen while gun line is being put down.

adm:

- 16. Bn Hg located in wadi 2784. RAP same area.
- 17. Dress battle order; one day's rations to be carried plus full water bottles.
- 18. Each fighting vehicle as per separate list will form up in rear clump olive trees at right of B Coy by 2100 hrs. These vehicles will be under OC Hq Coy and will be led fwd on a message from Bn Hq.

- 19. Bn Hq will be mobile following coys advance until completion of gun line when it will be est[ablished] as in para 16.
- 20. Cooks truck will remain in present area until sent for.
- 21. All blankets except one pl D Coy will be dumped at coy cookhouses on night zero and brought fwd as situation permits. Greatcoats will be carried.
- 22. Hot meals will be served as tactical situation permits. Coys will have 15 cwt trucks standing by at present cook house area loaded with blankets etc.

inter comm: 23. Wireless-line-runner....

In the morning of the 19th Colonel Harding received his final orders for a setpiece attack the next night. It was to be a two-divisional effort, with the New Zealanders on the right and 4 Indian Division on the left; 6 Brigade was to take the hill features west of Enfidaville, 5 Brigade the miniature Gibraltar of Takrouna, and 4 Indian Division was to tackle Djebel Garci.

The brigade plan was to attack in the first phase with two battalions forward—the Maoris on the right and 21 Battalion on the left. Takrouna was to be bypassed and taken from the north, where the grade was easier; this was a Maori Battalion objective, and the capture of the all-important feature was to be assisted by a diversionary attack by one platoon up the southern and less practicable side.

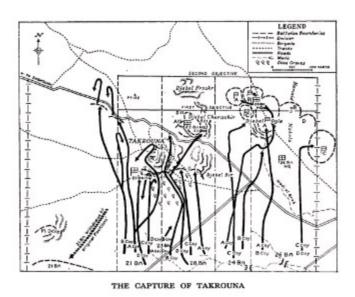
There was to be a barrage fired by 168 guns, and the two-mile gap between 21 Battalion's left flank and 4 Indian Division would be taken care of by the Carrier Platoon.

The 21st Battalion was to skirt the western slopes of Takrouna feature and continue over the Zaghouan road, then feel to the right for the Maoris' left flank. In the second phase 23 Battalion was to use the Zaghouan road as its start line and carry the attack on to the ridges Djebel Froukr and Djebel Cherachir.

The battalion moved from its positions along Wadi el Boul to the start line about half a mile forward, and was deployed in battle order an hour before midnight on 19-20 April. The sky was cloudy and there was a waning moon. The barrage was to start on a line a mile further forward, and the troops were to follow it for the remaining mile to the Enfidaville- Zaghouan road.

The company dispositions were: C Company (Major Laird ⁹) on the right, with 13 Platoon (Lieutenant Ashley ¹⁰) right, 15 Platoon (Lieutenant Shaw) left, and 14 Platoon (Lieutenant Hirst) in reserve; A Company (Captain Bullock-Douglas) in the centre, with 8 Platoon (Lieutenant Chalmers) right, 7 Platoon (Sergeant Howell ¹¹) left, and 9 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Upton ¹²) in reserve; B Company (Captain Roach) on the left, with 12 Platoon (Lieutenant Donaldson ¹³) right, 11 Platoon (Lieutenant Taylor ¹⁴) left, and 10 Platoon ¹⁵ in reserve; D Company (Captain Murray ¹⁶) in battalion reserve, less one platoon (Second-Lieutenant Bullock ¹⁷) on Point 121.

The ground was uneven, rising and falling sharply and studded with cactus shrubs and patches of prickly thorn. Where the ground was level there were patches of knee-high barley, but in spite of these obstacles to movement by night the forward companies were on the artillery opening line by 11.30 p.m. The barrage moved forward and the troops followed.



the capture of takrouna

On the right flank C Company ran into a patch of very difficult country: steep-sided wadis, tributaries of Wadi el Boul, wound haphazardly down from Takrouna, and there were cactus bushes everywhere. The rough going prevented the company from keeping up with the barrage, and the forward enemy posts, either missed by the searching shells or with adequate shelter, went quickly into action with small arms and their new weapon, the nebelwerfer. These six-barrelled mortars fired their bombs simultaneously and were the cause of much confusion that night.

At the start line Major Laird had detailed a section of 14 Platoon to accompany his headquarters, but when the enemy fire opened the section went astray in the thick, tall cactus, whereupon he joined the remainder of the reserve platoon. The advance continued until they reached a small olive grove at the foot of Takrouna. The grove was surrounded by a cactus hedge and a ditch, where 14 Platoon halted while Laird looked for the rest of the company. There was no sign of 15 Platoon. (It had missed the hedge and carried on with A Company until it came to the rocky outcrop on the left of Takrouna, where Lieutenant Shaw halted and waited for the rest of the company to arrive.)

Lieutenant Ashley and 13 Platoon were in difficulties, judging by the stream of fire being directed upon their axis of advance, and an attempt was made to debouch from the grove to their assistance, but fire through the trees made this impossible. There was no sign of the Maoris on the right, but steady enemy fire suggested that they also were held up. Hirst thereupon took half of 14 Platoon up the left side of the grove to try and outflank the opposition. They did not succeed and were forced to take shelter.

Laird was now left with one section of 14 Platoon. The barrage had moved forward on the left, where A and B Companies had gone in, but defensive fire was pouring from the foot of Takrouna. Ashley at this point arrived at Company Headquarters and reported that his platoon was held up in a patch of prickly thorn by machine guns above them, and that there had been several casualties. He returned and got the platoon back to the shelter of the ditch and joined up with the forward section of 14 Platoon.

The barrage was then far ahead of C Company and, judging from the number of enemy posts in action, it appeared to Laird that both the Maoris' and 21 Battalion's attacks had failed. Fire was coming from the east, west and above, nebelwerfers were dropping concentrations of bombs in front, while artillery was searching behind and around his position. He decided to report back for instructions, but missed Battalion Headquarters and eventually, with a dozen or so prisoners captured en route, found Brigade Headquarters, now located in the original battalion area.

There was some sharp and well-directed enemy shelling at A Company's

forming-up point, but this was soon silenced by our own artillery. The forward platoons got away on time, but Company Headquarters and Battalion Headquarters were delayed on account of casualties sustained in the shelling. No. 9 Platoon was largely composed of new men who did not realise the necessity of leaving the wounded to the stretcher-bearers. Meanwhile 7 and 8 Platoons kept well up to the artillery cover and did not suffer from the small-arms fire that opened as soon as the barrage had passed. A few prisoners were gathered in, but little opposition was met until the platoons were almost on the road objective.

No. 9 Platoon, owing to the delayed start, missed the barrage and was fired on from the lower slopes of Takrouna. After the platoon had advanced about 1200 yards without joining the company or making contact with C Company, Second-Lieutenant Upton moved over to his right to locate C Company. The platoon reached the olive grove behind C Company, but found the olive trees were booby trapped so turned left towards the original line of advance. The next obstacle encountered was a cactus hedge, which it followed towards Takrouna until it came to a minefield. Sergeant Dotchin ¹⁸ writes:

I told the platoon to take cover and wait until a way had been found through the mines. I soon managed to find a lane but on returning discovered the remainder of the platoon had tried to cross on their own initiative and had become casualties. At this point I noticed that Lieut Upton was missing. [He had found a hole in the hedge and was killed while making a reconnaissance.]

Captain Bullock-Douglas joined Dotchin at this time and the pair crossed the minefield and were in sight of the road when they were both wounded by rifle fire from Takrouna. They started back together but lost contact in the scrub. Dotchin continues:

Now alone, I withdrew until sheltered by a small wadi. I was applying a field dressing to a gunshot wound in the thigh when I noticed the head and shoulders of a figure approaching. I was just going to knock him off, for he was only a few yards away, when I saw the rest of the party about twenty all told with three machine guns. They were too many to engage single handed so I put my rifle down again. The enemy party continued on its way towards Takrouna and I passed through the lane in the minefields and returned to No. 9 Platoon.

Dotchin tried to move the wounded from the minefield but found that each movement resulted in further explosions, which in turn drew fire from the village above. He then found Battalion Headquarters and reported the position of the platoon before seeking the RAP. A Company, therefore, was on the road with two platoons and the third virtually eliminated.

In the absence of Bullock-Douglas, Lieutenant Chalmers assumed command of A Company and, with a patrol of two men, moved to the right to tie in with somebody on his flank. Neither C Company 28 Battalion, which was to clear the road for 23 Battalion, nor 23 Battalion was met, and the patrol returned to A Company's area. Chalmers found the company sheltering from persistent enemy shellfire. Sergeant Howell had been killed, and Sergeant Steiner was in command of 7 Platoon. They had been deluged with small-arms fire from a rise beyond the road, and Steiner had taken a few men with him and dealt with the situation. Under cover from 8 Platoon, they had charged with everything blazing and had destroyed five machine-gun posts, two of which fell to Steiner personally. There was only one other survivor when he returned to the platoon. The two leaders decided to report the position to Colonel Harding. The remnants of 7 and 8 Platoons, about twenty-five all told, were left on the objective under Sergeant Klaus, while Lieutenant Chalmers, accompanied by Steiner, returned to Battalion Headquarters.

B Company, on the left, also went forward on time behind the barrage. The two leading platoons veered somewhat to their left, so that 10 Platoon and Company Headquarters on the correct bearing lost touch and were stopped temporarily by the flanking fire from Takrouna, in the same way that the rear platoon of A Company was separated from the rest of the company. Nos. 11 and 12 Platoons went on without opposition until they came to a deep watercourse just short of the Zaghouan road. Defensive fire was being laid down in front of them and the company was on its objective, but Harding's instructions had been emphatic that the country in front would also have to be cleared to enable 23 Battalion to form up on its start line.

Sergeant Parris 19 describes what followed:

11 and 12 Platoons attacked from the road across a flat approximately 100 yards wide and to the left of a ridge running from enemy territory down to the road. We were heavily fired on by mostly small arms and some light mortars, although 12

Platoon casualties were actually light until we reached the hill and then we were attacked with grenades. I think we more than held our own in the close fighting and we took the ridge. After a quick check up I discovered that Mr Donaldson and all the other 12 Platoon NCO's had been wounded. The only contact I could make with 11 Platoon were two privates who informed me that their platoon was badly knocked about and a quick move over to their area convinced me of this.

Parris's account is something of an understatement. The two platoons had in reality captured a portion of the brigade objective, but there were only Parris and four men left to hold it. They occupied an enemy weapon pit, but later went back to the road when a counter-attack in force appeared imminent. The platoon lost 13 killed and nine wounded and missing.

The citation for Private Luxford's ²⁰ MM suggests the fate of 11 Platoon:

After his section commander was wounded he took charge of the section and, before they were all wounded, captured an anti-tank gun, two machine-gun posts and a mortar post. He then fought on alone until wounded and out of ammunition.

Meanwhile Captain Roach, out of touch and unable to get forward, halted 10 Platoon and Company Headquarters and returned to Battalion Headquarters for information and instructions.

It will be remembered that the Carrier Platoon was to patrol the left flank of the battalion area. There was a wadi running north and south that was to be the position of the gunline, and the carriers were to operate west of this wadi. The carrier commander, Second-Lieutenant Swanson, ²¹ had been the prime mover in the idea of carriers going into a night attack. The platoon did not keep in touch with B Company, but carried on without incident until within a few hundred yards of the Zaghouan road, when it ran into very heavy fire. Sergeant Mellsop ²² located and charged two machine-gun posts, silencing them both. He then engaged an anti-tank gun, which was also silenced. The enemy must have been prepared against a tank attack in this area, for it was covered by other anti-tank weapons and only the semi-darkness saved the platoon from annihilation. After shooting up everything it could see, the carriers withdrew to shelter some hundred yards in the rear. A check-up disclosed that the platoon had only four serviceable carriers left, and that Lieutenant

Swanson was wounded. Mellsop and Private Laurie Cornwell ²³ went on foot to report to Battalion Headquarters, as the wireless had been destroyed. When Mellsop returned he found that his carrier had received a direct hit in his absence, leaving only three still mobile.

D Company, less the platoon commanded by Second-Lieutenant Bullock on Point 121, advanced without interference until within 300 yards of its objective, roughly level with and to the left of the area in which C Company had been held up. It passed safely through a belt of enemy defensive fire, but shortly afterwards an artillery concentration fell amongst its men, killing and wounding a number. Captain Murray was among those killed. A strong following breeze had carried the smoke and dust ahead of the company and acted as a screen against enemy observation posts on Takrouna, but when the company arrived at its destination the smoke cleared, leaving it exposed in the moonlight. Lieutenant Robertson quickly took charge of the situation and moved the company over to the left in the shelter of rough ground that afforded protection from the bursts.

Battalion Headquarters, advancing behind D Company, was not so fortunate in passing through the artillery defensive belt and lost several of its number. Colonel Harding was among the wounded, but he carried on. Contact had been lost with D Company, but the RSM, WO I Jack Farmer, scouted forward through the artillery defensive fire until he located it and returned and led Battalion Headquarters forward.

The Colonel set up his headquarters in a wadi near D Company and instructed Lieutenant Robertson to get the company dug in across the axis of advance until the time came to establish the gunline along the left flank.

Information slowly trickled in to Battalion Headquarters. All wireless sets had been smashed or their operators wounded, but runners from A and B Companies reported that their companies were on the objective. Lieutenant Shaw, whom we left waiting for the rest of C Company to come up, found Battalion Headquarters and reported his position. Lieutenant Hirst, in charge of the remainder of 13 and 14 Platoons, had taken patrols out, but could not find a way through the cactus and had also reported to Colonel Harding. It was clear that Takrouna was still held by the enemy. Harding decided to keep the remnants of C Company in reserve, for unless

the enemy was denied observation from Takrouna by first light, the position of the battalion would be more than precarious.

Meanwhile the brigade attack was not going well; 28 Battalion had succeeded in fighting its way little beyond its start line. Both commanding officers had been wounded and casualties in both battalions had been very heavy. Brigadier Kippenberger decided to withdraw 21 Battalion unless the position improved before daylight, and a signal was sent to the battalion to that effect. Colonel Harding had come to the same conclusion prior to the receipt of the Brigadier's message; accordingly, when Lieutenant Chalmers, Sergeant Steiner, Captain Roach and Sergeant Mellsop reported almost at the same time, they were instructed that if contact had not been made with either 28 or 23 Battalions by 5.30 a.m., each company was to move independently and to return to the positions held before the attack. Contact was not made and the survivors of A and B Companies were brought back.

The position at first light on the 20th was that 21 Battalion was working back to Wadi el Boul, a part of 23 Battalion had got beyond the Zaghouan road but was virtually isolated and without communications, and Takrouna was still held by the enemy. All through the night the stretcher-bearers worked tirelessly bringing in the wounded, and when daylight exposed the position carriers went forward to evacuate some still untended. To the credit of the enemy, when he realised the carriers were being used as ambulances he refrained from firing on them. Even then some men were still unaccounted for, excluding 10 and 11 Platoons, who were beyond rescue behind the enemy lines. The missing were reduced by four the following night when Private Meyer, ²⁴ who had hidden in a wadi with three of his section, came in. They had been wounded and Meyer had stayed behind to care for them.

In the end it was 10 Platoon 28 Battalion, with the diversionary role on the south side of Takrouna, that captured the enemy strongpoint. Taking advantage of the chaos around the base of the hill, it divided into two parties, rushed the enemy weapon pits above them, and climbed the precipitous sides of Takrouna. Where it was too steep to climb, the Maoris clambered hand over hand up bunched telephone wires until they were on the topmost ledge and pinnacle. The enemy had depended on the posts at the bottom of the hill to protect the observation posts on the top, and with the Maoris now in possession, turned their guns on it. About noon Harding

was instructed to send a platoon to the top of Takrouna to relieve the hard-pressed Maori garrison.

No. 15 Platoon had suffered no losses during the night and Lieutenant Shaw was given the job. The platoon took a day's rations, extra water and ammunition, and went through the Maori Battalion area and up the southern side of the hill. It found a narrow track, which it followed in single file until it was fired on. The platoon took cover while Shaw with a couple of his men skirted around and came back above the enemy. About ten Italians vacated the post as soon as they were in turn fired on, and the rest of the climb was made without further incident. Shaw was being shown around by Sergeant Manahi, 25 who was in command of the few Maoris holding the approaches to the highest part of the hill, and the last of the platoon, still in single file, were scrambling onto the small ledge when they were attacked from two directions. The platoon was caught at a disadvantage, and though the Maoris stopped one party of the enemy, the other climbed up a rock-strewn wadi onto the ledge. The whole area was covered with stone huts, and there was some bitter fighting until one of the Italians threw a grenade into a hut sheltering Maori wounded. He may not have known that it held wounded men, but on this apparently callous action the Maoris went back a few generations and fought as their forefathers had done. No prisoners were taken, and the enemy were shot, bayoneted or pushed over the cliff; some jumped over of their own accord. The timely arrival of an artillery officer and a few more Maoris from the highest point of the hill demoralised the Italians, who made off by the way they had come. The attack had been launched by Italian reinforcements who had been rushed to the north-west corner of Takrouna in twelve trucks, but very few got back.

When enemy headquarters learned that the effort to retake Takrouna had failed, they plastered it with high explosives and there were several casualties. Most of the Maoris then went back to their battalion and 15 Platoon reconnoitred its position. The men found that they were on a narrow rock ledge, both sides of which were difficult of access. One end led down to a track to the village of Takrouna, perched on the hillside, and the other terminated at the stone ledge up which was a flight of crude steps leading to the pinnacle. Both areas were covered with stone buildings, and a small mosque was situated on the pinnacle. The sections were disposed to cover all likely avenues of approach to the ledge, and a message was

sent requesting reinforcements. No. 14 Platoon was detailed. Lieutenant Hirst arrived with his troops about 9 p.m.

The platoon arrived at an opportune moment, for another counter-attack was pending. The Italians were not molested until within point-blank range and few, if any, escaped, but to the consternation of all it was found that the pinnacle above the position had been occupied by the enemy. It was inexplicable, for there was no known method of access not covered, but the grenades thrown from the pinnacle and exploding between the huts were no figments of imagination.

At first light it was found that the enemy was holding three buildings isolated from the others and situated on the edge of the pinnacle. Shaw organised an attempt to rush them under cover of Bren-gun fire but was wounded in the attempt, and the position developed into a stalemate—neither party could shift the other.

Hirst took over from Shaw and, while the platoons were fighting a 50-yard duel with the enemy, firing through loopholes in their stone forts against their adversaries on rooftops and behind doorways, Manahi and 13 Maori volunteers rejoined the garrison. The Maori sergeant and the pakeha lieutenant discussed the problem of winning back the pinnacle, and decided that two parties, one from each battalion, advancing from different directions would attempt to rush the buildings. It was also decided to soften the opposition before the attempt, and Manahi tried to get the 28 Battalion mortars on the flat below to range on the pinnacle, but the distance was too great. Captain Harding, 26 forward observation officer 5 Field Regiment, had arrived by this time to set up an observation post, and suggested sniping with a 25pounder. There was no room for mistakes with less than fifty yards between the parties, but it was decided to give it a go. There was some fine artillery shooting as, step by step, the range was lifted up the hill, until finally three shells were landed slap onto the target. The parties commanded by Corporal Worthington 27 and Sergeant Weepu ²⁸ worked cautiously to within thirty yards of their objective, then rushed the buildings. They returned very puzzled indeed, for there was no enemy except a dead Italian. The mystery was explained when a rope was found dangling over the precipice, showing the way the enemy had come and gone.

From the new vantage point the defenders could see over a hundred Italians withdrawing into the stone buildings down the northern slopes of Takrouna. They

were given a send-off with grenades.

The 28th Battalion sent up a carrying party to evacuate the wounded, while the enemy, when he realised that Takrouna had been lost again, blanketed the top with high explosives. A large proportion of the garrison was already deafened with grenades bursting in enclosed spaces, as well as suffering minor wounds from the same cause, and the continuous rain of mortar fire inflicted more casualties. Captain Harding got his battery on to the mortar pits and silenced them one by one. The garrison took the offensive again and shot at any movement in the village below them.

By this time there were several more forward observation officers directing fire from the top of Takrouna, and Hirst discussed the position with Brigade Headquarters. The field artillery was not able to drop shells into the Takrouna village, huddled under the face of the pinnacle, and Hirst was instructed to reconnoitre a way for a night attack by 21 Battalion, now reorganised and ready for further employment. This was done, but in the meantime Major Fairbrother, Brigade Major 5 Brigade, had decided to try the effect of the new 17-pounder solid-shot antitank shells on the stone buildings of the village. The first shot tore through the roof of the building on the pinnacle occupied by the garrison and drew an emphatic protest from the occupants. The guns were promptly corrected and the shots now ripped through the stone walls of the village houses— demolished buildings marked their passage.

The Maoris were already stalking in the outskirts of the village and Hirst took Worthington and four others on a similar mission. They went down the northern slope to the rear of the village, which was not the way they were expected, and the now demoralised enemy defence collapsed completely. Altotogether over 300 prisoners, including 18 officers, were collected. Dusk was falling, and the platoons took over the enemy weapon pits around the village and wondered what the word 'sleep' meant.

Arrangements, however, had been made for their relief. A composite company had been made of the survivors of A and B Companies, under Captain Roach, to make the night attack for which Hirst had reconnoitred the route, but with the necessity for the operation removed, was standing by for new instructions. Roach

was instructed to relieve Hirst and to hold Takrouna firmly. Under command for the operation were the battalion mortar platoon and 12 Platoon 4 Machine Gun Company. They went up after dark in trucks to 28 Battalion headquarters, whence guides to ok them on foot through the mines to the top of Takrouna and then down to the captured village. After the relief Hirst's party went thankfully to sleep in reserve on the top of the hill, while the new garrison was disposed to protect the brigade's open left flank.

Later that night General Freyberg sent the following message to Brigadier Kippenberger: 'Please accept and convey to your brigade my congratulations for their magnificent efforts in the initial attack on Takrouna and in the action today which resulted in the capture of Takrouna village.'

There were no more enemy efforts to recapture the vital hill, and Hirst took his depleted force back to the battalion area in the morning of 22 April. Roach's company had the unenviable distinction of not only being subjected to continuous artillery and mortar fire, but of undergoing the severest concentration yet experienced in North Africa. It was relieved by a battalion of Cameron Highlanders (51 Division) during the night of 23-24 April. The mortars remained in position until the following day, then both sections rejoined the battalion, which had moved to a bivouac area after relief by 7 Battalion Black Watch.

The LOBs came up and the battalion reorganised, with the companies commanded by Captain Bullock-Douglas (A Company) Captain Roach (B Company), Captain Chinchen ²⁹ (C Company), Captain Bailey ³⁰ (D Company). Bullock-Douglas was wearing his arm in a sling after making an unauthorised departure from the casualty clearing station.

There was reorganisation at higher levels also. The Corps Commander, General Horrocks, went to another command further west and General Freyberg took temporary command of 10 Corps; Brigadier Kippenberger relinquished command of 5 Brigade to command the Division, and Colonel Harding became Brigadier 5 Brigade. The 21st Battalion's new commander was Lieutenant-Colonel Fairbrother, who took over from Harding on 30 April.

The battalion was withdrawn some fifteen miles or so and told it was to have a

lengthy rest period, with the emphasis on comfort—dug-in bivves for the troops, messes and mess tents for the sergeants and officers—all home comforts in fact. The sergeants, most of whom had been promoted since Alamein and who had been eating with the troops for months, took a dim view of their new splendour and asked that the old arrangements be continued. They were overruled and the erection of tents continued, but not for long. A message was received: `Colonel Fairbrother to report to Brigade Headquarters urgently.'

At the brigade conference Brigadier Harding announced that the brigade had been ordered to relieve an under-strength motorised battalion of King's Royal Rifles on the Djebibina sector, south-west of Garcia. More pressure than they could exert was to be brought to bear to distract attention from the main thrust being mounted further west and also to pin down enemy reserves.

With the previous commander of 5 Brigade to make the choice, there was no doubt which brigade would lead the Division, and with the previous commander of 21 Battalion to decide the brigade order of march, that was a foregone conclusion also. Certainly no one would be able to say they favoured their late commands.

There was some frantic pulling down of tents, checking of arms and ammunition, stowing of gear and general preparation for action, but no belly-aching —21 Battalion was a fighting machine with all its earlier troubles forgotten.

The starting point, 20 miles away, was passed ahead of time on the morning of 4 May. Further west and north the British and Americans were driving towards Tunis, with the enemy dashing tanks and troops against any point that promised an opportunity of bursting out of the frame that surrounded the vast canvas of the Cape Bon peninsula.

It was a brilliantly sunny day when 21 Battalion led the brigade towards Djebibina. There was a 20-mile trail of dust along the single road leading from friendly territory; near Djebibina village there was a light dressing station with a huge canvas red cross spread on the ground. Neither tell-tale trail nor Red Cross failed to deter what the battalion war diary diplomatically states were unidentified planes (but which everybody who could use his eyes could see were American Mitchell bombers) from doing over the village and the column. Provost Sergeant Bill

Marshall, MM, was killed, the only casualty in the battalion. An apology was received later, but the battalion had lost a very gallant soldier unnecessarily.

The companies dispersed widely at the laager area just in case the Mitchells came back again. The orders were to relieve the King's Royal Rifles that night, and the CO and his company commanders went forward to reconnoitre the position. The battalion holding the line was very thin on the ground on a wide front and could not be said to be in actual contact with the enemy. A motorised battalion taken forward by day to peck and snipe, about all its strength permitted, it was unable to undertake aggressive action. Little was known about the enemy's dispositions, except that he was holding high ground on the Saouaf-Pont du Fahs road and that the area was heavily mined. The relief was effected without incident after last light.

The companies went by road and lighted track to their allotted positions on the left of the brigade sector. The 23rd Battalion was up on the right flank, with the Maoris in reserve. Colonel Fairbrother disposed the battalion with C Company forward on the right and A Company behind in reserve, and with D Company forward on the left and B in reserve; each forward company covered a mile of front. The battalion anti-tank guns went with D Company and a troop of 32 Anti-Tank Battery with C Company, while each forward company had a section of mortars attached, with a section in reserve alongside the Carrier Platoon at Battalion Headquarters.

When daylight came there was no enemy in sight. Second-Lieutenants McGregor ³¹ and Dale, ³² two newly arrived 8th Reinforcement officers, volunteered and were detailed to make a daylight reconnaissance. Two other ranks accompanied them, and they went about two miles forward before they saw enemy troops in a phosphate factory and located a field gun. There were minefields strewn over the area, as well as elaborately constructed dugouts and defensive positions, all of which had been vacated for some days.

General Kippenberger came up while the patrols were out and decided to move the 5 Brigade line forward about a mile to higher ground. The line was to pivot on the small hill, Point 233, on the left of the 21 Battalion area, which D Company was to occupy while C Company conformed and kept touch with 23 Battalion. There was another hill, Djebel Doumais, forward of D Company, that the artillery thought would make a good observation post; a platoon of D Company was to take a look at it and,

if it was unoccupied, settle in.

The advance went in after dark and the objectives were reached without a shot being fired, but Djebel Doumais was found to be occupied and was left alone. There was some shelling and mortaring during the night, but no casualties. Perhaps the enemy patrols had found 21 Battalion in possession for, when D Company was ordered to advance under cover of a ground mist just after daylight and secure it, there was nobody there. C Company, securely in possession, found itself in a sea of S-mines and lifted approximately 150 inside its area. The enemy clearly was becoming annoyed and shelled both companies quite viciously at intervals during the day and following night.

The policy was still one of peaceful penetration, enemy permitting, and to this end it was decided to occupy another feature forward of and between C and D Companies. Artillery 'stonks' were put down on likely spots and A and B Companies, now some distance in the rear, went up in transport to the forward area and then on foot to the start line. In the meantime patrols had found enemy in B Company's area so did not advance further, and A Company settled in on the left edge of the feature. A check-up at daylight disclosed that the company had not taken all the ground Battalion Headquarters had intended, and Colonel Fairbrother told A Company to complete the occupation of Djebel Fareh, peaceably if possible, but fighting for it if necessary. Sergeant Steiner, with two sections, gave a model demonstration of fire and movement. They worked forward for nearly 600 yards and lobbed grenades into the post. Result: four dead Germans, four prisoners, and a real artillery hate on everybody when the German observation post saw the prisoners being marched off.

This was the day Tunis and Bizerta fell to First Army and 2 US Corps, and the news was relayed through Divisional and Brigade Headquarters to the battalions in the line. The signallers had lines out to the forward troops, and though these were frequently cut they remained in operation by alternative circuits, so the results were passed on from Battalion Headquarters to company headquarters, thence out to the platoon posts. As every bulletin giving the part-time score came through, there were cheers and yells of delight which echoed around the hills and must have created a sinking feeling in the hearts of the Germans, not knowing but fearing the worst.

The divisional plan was to keep on nibbling without walking into serious fighting,

so to tie up the brigade front 21 Battalion was told to secure another slice of enemy ground in front of C Company. The features, clear enough on the map, were not so easy to pinpoint on the ground, so the artillery was asked to fire a predicted concentration, with the dual purpose of making certain that the area selected for attention was the correct one and of softening up any opposition. B Company, up till then unemployed, was to make the attack, and Captain Roach and his platoon commanders watched the fall of artillery shells and were relieved to find the battalion map-reading correct.

It was a pitch-black night, with heavy rain and gale-force wind, when B Company started out for 21 Battalion's last action in North Africa. There was some shelling and mortaring, which may or may not have been intended for B Company, but good progress was made. The signallers trailed a wire out as the company advanced, so Roach was able to keep in touch with Battalion Headquarters. The cable-layer had not been oiled, however, and Roach's reports were interspersed with original and vehement curses concerning the squeaky layer and the fire it was bringing down on Company Headquarters. Seven prisoners were taken at no cost to the company.

Colonel Fairbrother, going up at first light to the new position, passed a German prisoner making his way unescorted to the rear. He could speak a little English and a conversation, something on the following lines, took place:

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'No.'

'Any good fighting on now?'

'No.'

'Then you had better go back and persuade your cobbers to throw in the sponge.'

'No.'

'Why?'
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'Do you know Tunis has fallen?'

'They'd shoot me.'

He might have been right, too, for the defence was as tenacious and vigilant as ever and the troops could take no liberties. There were some minor moves to tie the battalion line together, but no more advances were made, and the troops were relieved on the night of 10 May by the battalion they had taken over from originally. This was accomplished without incident, though C Company was given a send-off by the enemy artillery. The troops bivouacked in the B Echelon area that night and in the morning moved back to the old bivouac area near Takrouna, while in the main battle area the Axis armies were being cut off from their prepared bases in the Cape Bon peninsula.

Fifth Brigade remained in reserve, a most unusual occurrence, while the last incidents of the drama were worked out. Progress reports were still being relayed from Division to Brigade Headquarters and passed on to the units. The last message 21 Battalion received ran:

Army

13543

Signals

To British 10th Corps

From Italian Army

Your representatives have arrived here. They are speaking with our commander. We have nothing further to add. We suggest closing down.

T.O.R.

11.25

Field Marshal Messe surrendered the First Italian Army to General Freyberg at a quarter to twelve on 13 May, but 21 Battalion had one more duty to perform. Let the CO describe it:

Tunis had fallen and the surrender of the enemy followed. While we performed the melancholy duty of going over the Takrouna battlefields to discover and bury 21st Battalion dead, convoys of Germans and Italians drove themselves past. They stopped and asked for instructions—to whom could they surrender? We were sick at heart with our own business and told them to drive to Enfidaville and surrender to the nearest military police. When we had finished, the limit of 21st Battalion's advance at Takrouna was marked with little white crosses.

The battalion had 36 killed, 117 wounded, and 23 taken prisoner (two of them wounded) in the Takrouna battle. Its casualties for the whole campaign in Tunisia were 49 killed, 164 wounded, and 24 prisoners (including three wounded), making a total of 237.

¹ Lt J. Lloyd; Auckland; born England, 18 Sep 1913; warehouseman.

² Capt R. C. Hosking, MC; Whangarei; born Auckland, 24 May 1909; draper; wounded 6 Mar 1943.

³ Lt I. H. Hirst, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 5 Feb 1915; farmer; wounded 3 Sep 1942.

⁴ Capt L. M. Miller; Auckland; born Auckland, 19 Mar 1916; warehouseman; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

⁵ L-Cpl N. B. Negus, MM; Auckland; born 6 Dec 1913; farmer; died of wounds 21 Apr 1943.

⁶ Sgt F. T. Housham, MM; Waihopo; born Waihopo, 23 Jun 1916; tractor driver; twice wounded.

⁷ Capt C. A. Nunns, m.i.d.; Waipu; born Auckland, 1 Jul 1911; farmer; wounded Nov 1941; wounded and p.w. 17 Apr 1943; repatriated Oct 1944.

⁸ Pte J. P. Hutson; born NZ 25 Sep 1919; skating rink assistant; died of

- wounds 18 Apr 1943.
- ⁹ Maj B. M. Laird, ED; Auckland; born Rotorua, 5 Jul 1904; teacher.
- ¹⁰ Maj D. J. Ashley, m.i.d.; Kohimarama; born Auckland, 20 Feb 1912; draper.
- ¹¹ S-Sgt C. C. Howell; born Gisborne, 17 Feb 1913; Regular soldier; wounded Oct 1942; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.
- ¹² 2 Lt J. T. Upton; born NZ 11 Aug 1917; clerk accountant; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.
- ¹³ Lt R. Donaldson; born NZ 14 Apr 1921; Regular soldier; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.
- ¹⁴ Lt G. M. Taylor; born Walton, 23 Aug 1910; carrier; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.
- ¹⁵ Platoon commander not known.
- ¹⁶ Capt I. A. Murray; born Wanganui, 9 Aug 1917; Regular soldier; twice wounded; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.
- ¹⁷ Maj T. A. Bullock, m.i.d.; Te Kuiti; born NZ 9 May 1921; clerk; wounded 20 Apr 1945.
- ¹⁸ Sgt B. Dotchin; Auckland; born Wellington, 3 Mar 1915; oil storeman; twice wounded.
- ¹⁹ Sgt L. N. Parris, MM; Auckland; born Auckland, 15 Dec 1915; grocer; three times wounded.
- ²⁰ L-Cpl A. T. Luxford, MM; Rotorua; born Australia, 25 May 1915; timber

worker; twice wounded.

- ²¹ Maj W. T. Swanson, MC, m.i.d.; Whata Whata, Hamilton; born Auckland, 13 May 1914; farmer; twice wounded.
- ²² Sgt C. R. Mellsop, MM; Waimauku; born Waiuku, 17 Aug 1912; farmer; wounded 22 Apr 1943.
- ²³ Lt L. M. Cornwell; Auckland; born Kaitaia, 5 Feb 1920; student.
- ²⁴ Pte A. H. Meyer, MM; Auckland; born Hikurangi, 30 Nov 1911; porter; twice wounded.
- ²⁵ Sgt H. Manahi, DCM; Rotorua; born Ohinemutu, 28 Sep 1913; labourer wounded 23 May 1941.
- ²⁶ Maj A. F. Harding, MC; Wellington; born Wanganui, 27 Nov 1916; accountant's clerk; wounded 25 Nov 1941.
- ²⁷ L-Sgt B. A. W. Worthington, MM; born NZ 29 Jun 1919; labourer; wounded 20 Apr 1943; killed in action 19 Dec 1943.
- ²⁸ WO II I. Weepu, MM; Wellington; born NZ 19 Dec 1910; labourer; twice wounded.
- ²⁹ Maj M. P. Chinchen; Auckland; born Christchurch, 20 Jul 1909; bank clerk.
- ³⁰ Maj H. Bailey; Auckland; born England, 29 Apr 1916; driver; wounded 17 Mar 1944.
- ³¹ 2 Lt O. G. McGregor; born Papakura, 23 Mar 1921; student; killed in action 19 Dec 1943.
- ³² 2 Lt A. B. Dale; born Timaru, 9 Nov 1907; field supervisor; killed in action

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 11 — ENTR'ACTE

CHAPTER 11 Entr'acte

When a war that has become second nature suddenly ceases, you are left with a let-down feeling, one of anticlimax, just as if you were suddenly thrown out of a job that you thought was yours for life. Your eyes have been conditioned to picking out every scrap of cover, your ears tuned to the distant drone of planes, and you keep on listening and looking. Nothing happens and you don't believe it. No enemy, no danger. After a while you risk standing up, then you walk erect instead of moving like an animated hairpin. Then gradually values change and a battle bowler becomes a helmet, steel, to be charged against your next pay if you cannot produce one at kit inspection. You do produce one, for you haven't been a front-line soldier for nothing, but it isn't a life insurance any more. It is just something you carry around like your rifle, and if you fired that now you would probably face an orderly room charge for some such offence as 'Conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline inasmuch as he fired a rifle without permission.' The folks at home are no longer shadows of somebody you knew in a past life in another world. It takes a while to sort things out.

There was a minute percentage of leave to Tunis, but considerably more than this percentage managed a visit. Tattoo reports were works of art and orderly sergeants' mathematics something to marvel at. Apparently the problem of being in the lines and in Tunis simultaneously was not insoluble.

Actually Tunis was something of a let-down, for it was full of self-important American, French, and English soldiers with anything up to three months' active service. They were dressed as for a regimental parade, while the mostly present-without-leave Kiwi was no picture of what the well-dressed young conqueror of North Africa should wear. The New Zealanders' torn and travel-stained battle dress drew supercilious glances from the fashion plates parading the streets, and their weird assortment of enemy head-dress was frowned upon by the Provost Corps. Nevertheless they saw what there was to see, and perhaps some of the more thoughtful found time to look over the ruins of Carthage and wonder if Cato's 'Delenda est Carthago' might not be freely translated into Montgomery's 'We will hit the enemy for six right out of Africa.' At any rate both slogans worked out that way.

In the meantime the question was where do we go from here? No. I rumour was that the Division was destined for landing on an enemy coast. Of course we know now that as early as January planning had commenced for operation Husky, the code-word for the invasion of Sicily, and even though the rank and file were not in the confidence of the High Command, the average Kiwi was no mean strategist. Rumour No. 2 was that the Division was going home prior to service against Japan. You helped yourself to the one you preferred.

Opinion was evenly divided until another factor was introduced. It became known, strictly contrary to instructions, that two lists were being prepared: the first was of all the original members (50 all ranks) still serving with the battalion; the second, of all members of the First, Second, and Third Echelons who had transferred to 2I Battalion and were then on its strength. It was deduced from this information that the oldest hands were either going to stiffen up forces serving in the Pacific or to New Zealand in exchange for further reinforcements. After that security measures were really efficient and no confirmation or refutation was obtainable.

The order to move back to Egypt came by way of a message from Battalion Headquarters to all companies:

14 May

Bn will commence return trip 15 May. Order [of] march as already notified. Bn start point entrance to Bn area. Start time 0900 hrs. Column of route....

G. E. Cairns

Capt Adjt.

Time of origin

2230

The order produced grey hairs in some quarters because a very senior warrant officer and several very junior commissioned officers were not immediately available, being on unofficial leave in Tunis. Their understudies were equal to the occasion, and the unit moved without their assistance until they rejoined it unobtrusively a few

days later.

The route back was as follows:

15 May: Along the Enfidaville- Kairouan road to Gabes area: 118 miles.

16 May: Through Gabes, Mareth, and Medenine to Ben Gardane area: 132 miles.

17 May: Main road to Suani Ben Adem (Kiwi Concert Party in the neighbourhood): 138 miles.

18 May: Halt for maintenance; pay and leave to Tripoli.

19 May: Through Tripoli and Homs to Misurata area: 153 miles.

20 May: Night move owing to flood and mine damage to the road: 65 miles.

21 May: Through Buerat and Sirte to Nofilia area: 185 miles.

22 May: Past Marble Arch and El Agheila to Marsa Brega area: 135 miles.

23 May: Benghazi area: 136 miles.

24 May: Halt for maintenance; leave to Benghazi.

25 May: Through Barce to Derna: 133 miles.

26 May: Through Derna to Tobruk: 158 miles.

27 May: Through Menastir and Fort Capuzzo, via Sollum Pass, to Buq Buq: 118 miles.

28 May: Through Sidi Barrani to Mersa Matruh: 108 miles.

29 May: Through Baggush and Fuka to El Daba: 83 miles.

30 May: Through Burg el Arab to Amiriya: 92 miles.

31 May: Past Halfway House to Maadi: 135 miles.

The battalion changed its commanding officer for the move to Maadi. Colonel

Fairbrother went to 23 Battalion and Colonel Harding relinquished command of 5 Brigade and returned to 21 Battalion.

On arrival at Maadi the composition of the first draft to proceed to New Zealand on furlough was announced. Rifles were handed into store and the furlough draft was relieved of all duties. There was a memorial parade, the battalion was photographed by companies, and on 5 June half the unit went on 14 days' leave. The other half played a little cricket and drank a lot of beer until its turn came.

On 4 June Colonel Harding again relinquished command of the battalion and went to Brigade in the place of Brigadier Kippenberger, who was to command the Ruapehu furlough draft. Lieutenant-Colonel McElroy became the battalion's sixth commanding officer.

Company orderly rooms became very proficient in handling AWL cases and the GOC was publicly terse about the dress and behaviour of the troops. Nobody held it against the General and the celebrations continued. The furlough draft left on 15 June; the pace of the last fortnight's celebrations gradually slowed down and the Army began to reassert itself.

Early in July Eighth Army, less 2 New Zealand Division, left North Africa. Its departure was unheralded, but on 10 July, in company with the Seventh United States Army, it landed in Sicily. Thirty-eight days later the Allied troops were looking across the Straits of Messina towards the Italian mainland.

At Maadi reinforcements were marched in and 21 Battalion began to look like a battalion again. July passed in routine training, sports, picnics, and in reorganisation, for with the departure of the leave draft there were many gaps to be filled among the NCOs. August saw the training brought up from company to battalion level, with specialist platoons practising in attack and defence.

Sensitive noses that had smelt out coming events before began to twitch when brigade exercises started in September, and when word got about that the Division was to march on its flat feet to Burg el Arab, over one hundred so and so miles away, platoon strategists came into their own. The battalion left Maadi on 19 September, and in seven night marches—the last a 30-mile canter—reached the Burg el Arab area. And now the betting was any odds on Italy.

Divisional exercises, with all the usual trimmings for battle inoculation, including barrages, live mortar and machine-gun shoots—very interesting to the new hands, but a pain in the neck to the old-timers—followed until the end of the month. For the purposes of the training the desert became in imagination a country of roads and tracks, and the technique was practised of breaking through a defensive position covered by minefields and wire—not the odd strand of wire denoting a minefield, but wire defences, barbed wire, dannert wire, all sorts of wire. The only thing the officers who explained the objects and plans of the exercises were quite dumb about was the locality of the new war.

There were more and more signs of an early move: the issue of battle dress and winter clothing, muster parades, a talk by Colonel McElroy on the possibilities of the future role of the battalion, lectures on security, the departure of some vehicles and their drivers, medical inspection and trial packs.

Those trial packs were really something. Your worldly estate had to be carried on your shoulders to and from the transport, and when you had fastened around yourself a blanket roll, winter and summer clothing, an empty two-gallon water can, a bivouac tent (one between two men), emergency rations, respirator, anti-malarial equipment, your weapon and normal ammunition, and any odds and ends of loot you hadn't parted with, climbing a steep transport gangway was not easy. In fact, unless you were a close relation to Samson, it was barely possible. The apparently insane order, that each man was to carry his own belongings was dictated by the fact that the transports would have to enter and leave harbour the same day. Nobody thought it worth while to let the troops know why they were to carry loads that would put a camel to shame, and there should have been some burning ears in Divisional Headquarters as a consequence.

The 21st Battalion moved on 12 October to the transit camp at Ikingi Maryut, twelve miles away, and on the 17th was divided into three groups and went aboard the transports Llangibby Castle, Nieuw Holland and Letitia.

The convoy sailed at dawn the following day, had an uneventful passage across a calm Mediterranean while the troops did the things they usually do on transports, and entered Taranto Harbour in the morning of the 22nd. The ships anchored off

shore and the hardy veterans of the desert, while waiting their turn to stagger into the lighters, thoughtfully eyed the Italian mainland. Those in the battalion who had yet to face their first campaign wondered what fortune would attend them in this land where villages and farmhouses nestled and perched among trees on hillsides. The buildings along the waterfront looked imposing in the distance, but the men knew that the Air Force had bombed Taranto.

The battalion was ashore by midday, stacked its heavy gear on the quayside, and was ready to march the five miles to the divisional base area outside Taranto. There was plenty of evidence of the work of the Air Force. As the men swung through the wrecked waterfront and along the garbage-littered streets, they returned the gaze of the inhabitants, who were doubtless wondering how many of the tales told by the Germans about these men from North Africa were true. When they had passed out of the squalid waterfront, through the better streets of the commercial area and into the open, they found that the tiny stone-walled paddocks, the whitewashed stone houses and the greenness of the Italian countryside, after the blinding glare of the Egyptian sand, were of a surpassing loveliness.

But life in a base area, whatever the country, is much the same. After the settling-in period comes boredom. There was 15 per cent daily leave to Taranto—if you found your own transport—where you could buy next to nothing. The Germans were very thorough looters, but for all that they could not take with them all the wine of the country, which sold at fourpence a pint.

The town, particularly the older portion, was dirty; the inhabitants were hungry and apparently stood all day in food queues. Besides the civilians, Taranto was full of unkempt, unshaven sailors. It had been a naval base and the harbour was still full of Italian destroyers. By way of contrast the officers were objects of sartorial splendour, with yards of gold braid and coloured sashes and at least three campaign ribbons celebrating real and imaginary victories. Technically they were our cobelligerents, for the Italian Government had not only surrendered unconditionally but had declared war on its late partner. Nevertheless the shore-bound navy looked at the perambulating Kiwis as if it did not like them very much. After the sightseers had walked until their feet ached and had drunk 'purple death' until their heads were as sore as their feet, Taranto was largely written off as an amusement centre. It was not a good introduction to Italian civilisation.

Training was conditioned by the new type of warfare in prospect and consisted, besides the inevitable route marches and organised sports, of close-country tactics, keeping direction by night through wooded country, patrols, house fighting, camouflage and taking cover. The route marches around the area got the troops used to little grimy villages, olive, fig and almond groves, ox-drawn ploughs, and the sight of women working in the pocket-handkerchief fields. Fruit was plentiful, with grapes at two dixies full for a shilling, nuts the same, and peaches and apples six for a shilling. Very often they were even cheaper than that, when the unwary peasant wanted to smoke and was not acquainted with the near-lethal qualities of issue cigarettes.

Towards the end of October rain began to fall, the first since Tunisia. At first it was a pleasant novelty; then, when the countryside turned into a sea of creamy mud, it became a nuisance; and finally, when a heavy electrical storm raged for three days, with consequent flooded bivvies and saturated blankets, it was an unmitigated curse. The old-timers spoke of the good life in the Desert.

On the morning of 18 November the battalion left Taranto to join the rest of the Division, already in reserve positions near the fighting. The route lay through Martina and Noci to the staging area near Altamura, where the troops camped on the side of the road. The following day it continued through Canosa and Foggia to the staging area at Lucera. The 20th was a day of conferences while the troops waited in the rain, but they made up time the next day by travelling nearly one hundred miles through San Severo, then along a road that wound, twisted, and climbed into the hills via Serracapriola to Furci, and spent another night on the side of the road.

The country 5 Brigade was moving across was a system of rivers flowing eastwards to the Adriatic, and the roads north crossed watershed after watershed. The Italians, whatever their soldierly failings, are superb roadmakers, and what the maps called second- and third-class roads were considered by the Kiwi drivers to be good to excellent. It was no trouble to Italian engineers to carry a road up a sheer cliff with, of course, fearful hairpin bends, so that when looking down you could see at different levels parts of the column apparently travelling in opposite directions. The Germans, who are also excellent engineers but with a taste for destruction, had dynamited the outside edges of the worst bends. Our bulldozers had gnawed a way

round these demolitions and, though the troops had the utmost faith in their drivers, there were, in spite of the entrancing scenery, many white faces and squeamish stomachs.

The battalion rested on the 22nd and dried itself in the sun. The war was not far away, and the congestion on the road from Furci was unbelievable to drivers used to picking their own route across the desert. They made eleven miles in seven hours the next day, going into the bed of a stream below Gissi. It was here that the German engineers made one of their few errors in timing, for a bridge that would have held up the advance for days had not been blown. They had not forgotten to lay charges but had overestimated the length of fuse needed, and an English sapper had torn it out with his hands when the fire was within inches of the detonator.

The village of Gissi, high up on an almost perpendicular hill, is itself like something out of a child's picture book. The church stands on the edge of a sheer rock face at least 500 feet high, and the steeple rears up above the cliff like a needle in the sky.

The 24th was a busy day. B Echelon was established at the crossroads of Atessa, high up on the last hill looking down into the valley of the Sangro, then miles to the north, and after dark the battalion was guided into position on the Sangro River.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 12 — THE SANGRO AND ORSOGNA

CHAPTER 12 The Sangro and Orsogna

The German High Command was determined to hold Italy, and when the United States Fifth Army landed on the beaches of the Salerno plain on 9 September, with its immediate object the occupation of Naples, it had been opposed by every enemy formation available. The Americans' situation was precarious until the Eighth Army, which had crossed the Straits of Messina on 3 September, linked up at Vallo and the German left flank was forced to swing inland. Fifth Army, pivoting on Salerno, then began to advance towards Naples. Eighth Army struck for the strategic road centre at Altamura and the vital airfields at Foggia, on the Adriatic coast. These were captured by 27 September, and the first phase of the conquest of the mainland was completed with the heel of Italy firmly held.

The main weight of the Eighth Army was henceforth to be on the east coast, with the next bound across the Foggia plains towards more difficult country that favoured the defence. There was very bitter fighting before the Biferno River was forced. The Germans had recovered from the embarrassment of having a new front thrust upon them, and had brought reserve divisions down from Northern Italy.

By 25 October Eighth Army was ready to resume its advance, with two major river crossings between it and its objective—the Pescara- Avezzano lateral road across the Apennine Mountains to Rome.

By this time the German High Command was prepared to stand on the historic defence line across the narrowest part of Italy—the Sangro River, through the mountains to the formidable country around Cassino, thence to the Aurunci Mountains on the west coast. In addition the autumn rains had indicated the close approach of another German ally, and it is likely that Wellington at Waterloo never prayed for night or Blucher more earnestly than did the German Commander-in-Chief for winter and mud.

The crossing of the first river obstacle—the Trigno—was resisted with the greatest determination, and when the bridgehead was finally secured the enemy fell back step by step to the Sangro. It was then the second week in November and 2 NZ Division was ordered to move forward. On the west coast Fifth Army had crossed the

Volturno River north of Naples, but Rome was still a hundred miles behind the German line.

The Eighth Army plan was for a swift surprise blow on a narrow front, with diversionary attacks on the inward mountain flank. The New Zealand Division, between the mountains and the coastal strip, was to cross the Sangro, extend the enemy front, and break through the defences. The main assault on the coast would be announced by the noise of many guns, whereupon 6 Brigade, with New Zealand tank support, would launch, in the North African tradition, a silent night attack with the bayonet.

The whole operation depended on the weather being fine for two days so that the Sangro could be forded and the armour could get off the few roads available. The weather was not fine for two days, and after several modifications the idea of a stealthy night attack was abandoned. Finally the whole concept of a deep exploitation to the Pescara- Avezzano road and the consequent outflanking movement through the mountains was modified. In its stead was substituted a deliberate frontal assault against the Winter Line by 2 NZ Division. And even that had to wait until the treacherous Sangro was low enough to wade.

The troops had reached their company areas by 10 p.m. on 24 November after marching an 'army mile' carrying their blankets, greatcoats and bivouac tents. How long an 'army mile' actually is has never been determined, but it was a long way that night. To many of the battalion it was the first experience of taking up a position after dark in real earnest, and they plodded through the muddy fields half expecting a German challenge from every patch of cover.

C and D were the two forward companies and were ordered to establish standing patrols on the river bank. The former desert campaigners chosen for the job were unconcerned, but the others took the task very seriously. Hands and faces were smeared with boot polish, rattles in equipment tracked down, and the drill for close-country fighting mentally checked over. This was it at last. A little sporadic shellfire during the night added emphasis.

After the standing patrols were established, the river was probed for a crossing place, but the water was too deep and fast to attempt a passage.

It was a curious 21 Battalion that took stock of the position after first light on 25 November. It found itself on the edge of a river flat two miles south of the Sangro, and was able to do a little exploring.

The bivouac area was behind and east of Monte Marcone, a hill that rose sharply from the river flats to a height of nearly 600 feet. It was covered with olive trees through which a track led to a farmhouse near the top. The troops were getting used to seeing houses situated in unusual positions, and all eyes looked to the north across the river. It was a typical Italian river valley. Two roads followed the river, one on each side, and scattered over the flats were stone farmhouses, clumps of bamboo, the inevitable olive orchards, and patches of closely-wooded country—a romantic setting for a war. The sun shone bright and warm, the smoke from a dozen chimneys went straight upwards, roosters crowed, and the Italians moved freely about their business. Overhead came the RAF, and not a single enemy plane was in sight. Their targets were too far away to see the bombs dropping, but clouds of black smoke billowed up, and later the rumble and thunder of explosions echoed across the valley. This was war at its best, with the other side taking all the punishment, and that decently hidden.

Such was the superficial view held by the reinforcements, but the battlewise eyed the ramparts of bluish clay beyond the river with distrust. They were too steep for tanks and, unless there were tracks, might have to be stormed with the bayonet and held until the engineers got roads and bridges organised. Wadis (the troops still thought in terms of North Africa) breached the bluffs, ideal hideouts for spandau nests, and there were farmhouses and patches of good cover scattered over country rolling back for five miles or so to the 700-foot-high main ridge. A good road ran along the top of this ridge from



Regimental Aid Post on the north bank of the Sangro

Regimental Aid Post on the north bank of the Sangro



Inoculation day, Piedimonte d'Alife, near Cassino

Inoculation day, Piedimonte d' Alife, near Cassino



A meal for a mortar detachment, south of Cassino

A meal for a mortar detachment, south of Cassino

'I' Section group, south of Cassino



'I' Section group, south of Cassino



Aerial photograph of Cassino, taken before the bombing on 15 March 1944

Aerial photograph of Cassino, taken before the bombing on 15 March 1944



An aerial photograph of part of Casaino. Route 6 is at the top and

An aerial photograph of part of Cassino. Route 6 is at the top and right of the photograph



ITALY MAP No.1

Lanciano near the coast through Castelfrentano and Guardiagrele, thence back to the mountains. On the left was the valley of the Aventino River before it joins the Sangro, and Casoli village, a cap to another minor peak, with a trail of buildings winding down its northern slope. South-east of Casoli lay Altino, similarly perched on a peak, and behind all, filling the western horizon, the mountains of the Maiella chain, where the snow was daily creeping lower.

The 23rd Battalion joined the 21st that night, and Second-Lieutenant Massey ¹ with a patrol made another attempt to cross the river. They tried for five hours, but were eventually swept off their feet and had to swim for their lives. They were lucky not to be drowned, and did in fact return with one man missing, but he came in later after being carried downstream some distance. It was clear that the enemy did not regard the river as his defensive line; nevertheless plans for crossing the Sangro were necessarily postponed until the water dropped sufficiently for the troops to be able to wade its several channels.

Other topics of interest were the return of Brigadier Kippenberger from furlough to command 5 Brigade and the crash-landing of an enemy plane in the Sangro. The pilot, who may have had engine trouble or been shot up in an air fight, skimmed the divisional area before he made a landing. He and his gunner were a little unfortunate in their choice of direction, for with the opportunity of moving north or south, they picked on 9 Platoon's patrol post. They thus distinguished themselves and 21 Battalion by becoming the first prisoners of war to be taken by New Zealand

troops in Italy.

That night Major Bailey, with a small patrol, waded the river after a lot of trouble and reported that it would be hazardous to put men across without some assistance such as a rope to hold on to. Second-Lieutenant Maich ² led the only other patrol to get partially over. After several attempts he had crossed two channels and was about to try the third when he picked up an enemy party through his glasses. The enemy was probably trying to do exactly the same thing. Ordered to keep out of trouble, he returned forthwith.

The 26th was another fine day, and the river began to drop. A and C Companies probed across it after dark, tested routes up to the escarpment and returned safely. C Company's patrol, however, could have met plenty of opposition had its instructions permitted. Second-Lieutenant McGregor had trained in Australia as a commando before joining the battalion, and with Sergeant Bob Page ³ had a thoroughly enjoyable time poking about in the enemy's lines. They went over the crest of the bluff, found the first house they came to occupied, and withdrew discreetly. A hostile post disclosed itself when its garrison was seen walking on the skyline, so the patrol dropped in on them. An empty slit trench was found nearby and the visitors wished they had learnt some German at school. They returned safely at daybreak, convinced that there were no enemy posts on the forward slopes of the area they had traversed.

Sergeant Peter Oates ⁴ realised that he still had something to learn after one of these patrols:

On the way to the rendezvous we had to cross a creek over which a bridge had been blown, and a team of engineers were preparing to put in a small bailey. On the way back the bridge had been finished and I congratulated them on the job. Their reply was to ask us if we were the silly bastards who went through a few hours earlier and showed us a heap of shu mines they had dug out.

At the battalion conference it was agreed that a single rope would be satisfactory enough to show the position of the ford but too slow and cumbersome to pass a battalion across, and various other methods were discussed. The depth of the river was over four feet in some places and the current was swift. Roping the men

together was dismissed, as a casualty would have been an embarrassment. It was decided to cut poles which a man could hold on to for support, or release quickly if he got into difficulties. All details were finalised during the 27th, with zero hour fixed for a quarter to three the following morning, by which time all the infantry were to be over the river and on the lateral road start line.

According to the battalion operation order the attack was to be carried out in three phases: the securing of the main lateral road and flat ground north of the river; the capture of the first objective, two features on the escarpment beyond the lateral road; and the capture of the final objective, which extended south-westwards from a feature about a mile north of the first objective to a bluff on the eastern side of a stream that was to be the left boundary, and southwards to Point 117.

In Phase 1 A Company, starting at 10.30 p.m., was to attack and clear of all enemy the lateral road and flat ground forward to the escarpment. In Phase 2 B Company (with a three-inch mortar detachment) was to capture and consolidate the right-hand feature of the first objective, and C Company (also with a three-inch mortar detachment) was to capture and consolidate the left-hand feature; this attack was to start from the lateral road at zero hour (2.45 a.m.) and the rate of advance was to be 100 yards in five minutes. D Company, Battalion Headquarters, and 3 Platoon 1 Machine Gun Company were to move to the lateral road. On receipt of the success signal from B and C Companies, A Company was to reorganise and carry on the attack.

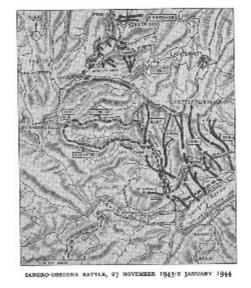
In Phase 3 D Company was to pass through B Company and capture and consolidate the feature about a mile north of the first objective, and A Company was to capture and consolidate the bluff on the eastern side of the stream and Point 117. Battalion Headquarters and the machine-gun platoon were to move in the rear of D Company and establish on a reverse slope in the vicinity of B Company's objective. The starting time for the third phase of the operation, zero plus 75 (4 a.m.), was subject to alteration to suit 6 Brigade's plans. The rate of advance was still to be 100 yards in five minutes. On receipt of the success signal from D and A Companies, B Company was to become the reserve company and was to reorganise immediately. The machine-gun platoon was to remain with Battalion Headquarters until it was established and was then to take up a position in B Company's area.

The 23rd Battalion would be on the right of 21 Battalion and 26 Battalion on the left. The 21st Battalion's boundaries were to be two streams (described in the operation order as 'river wadis') running north-westwards from the Sangro. In addition to the platoon of 1 Company 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion and a detachment of provost under its command, 21 Battalion would have in support A Squadron 19 Armoured Regiment (less one troop), two field regiments on the divisional front, and another platoon of 27 MG Battalion. The battalion's supporting arms (mortars, carriers and anti-tank guns), on completion of their move across the river by bridge, were to carry on to the lateral road and then eastwards until the mortar carriers were in the vicinity of the third house, the carriers, including the company ammunition carriers, in the vicinity of the second house, and the anti-tank guns in the vicinity of the first house.

At the last minute the Signals officer, Second-Lieutenant McLean, ⁵ reported that some of his equipment was still missing. Only the barest necessities had been packed on the first-line transport on leaving Egypt and, though expected daily, wirelesses and cable were still short. The wires to Taranto burned with urgent messages but did not produce the missing gear, and in the end the battalion had to borrow from the Maoris, who were in reserve for the first attack.

The troops had a hot meal at 4.30 p.m., a cup of tea with bread and cheese at nine, and at 10.45 p.m., laden with tommy gun or rifle, ammunition, grenades, greatcoats, gas capes, spare socks and 24 hours' rations, moved off through a dark and starless night to the river's edge.

Shaded lights glimmered from each bank and on the islands in the river where the crossing was to be made. A Company (Major Tanner ⁶), with the mission of securing the crossing, plunged into the waist-high, icy water and crossed safely. The lateral road and the flats as far back as the bluff were unoccupied. By 2.30 a.m. the whole battalion was across and in position, with the unfortunate exception of eight men in 18 Platoon who were wounded by a Schu mine soon after starting out.



sangro-orsogna battle, 27 november 1943-2 january 1944

Among the casualties was the platoon commander, Lieutenant Weeks, ⁷ and the command devolved upon Sergeant Wood. ⁸

The half-frozen men were changing their socks and reviving themselves with the contents of their water bottles—tea heavily tinctured with rum—when a shower of rain completed their discomfort, and they were not sorry to see the red, stabbing muzzle flashes behind them as the barrage opened. The enemy counter-barrage was quick to reply, but the German gunners had been outwitted and their protective curtain was wasted on the wrong side of the river.

At 2.45 a.m. the forward companies began to climb the slippery escarpment. On the right Major Hawkesby (B Company) led 10 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Massey), less one section, and 11 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Swainson ⁹) up the right-hand side of a re-entrant, while 12 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Campbell ¹⁰), plus the section from 10 Platoon, took the left-hand side. Both parties scrambled through grape vines and reached their objective without opposition.

On the left C Company was not so fortunate. Captain Horrocks sent 14 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant McGregor) and 15 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Maich) straight up the escarpment, while he, with Company Headquarters, 13 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Dale), and a section from 15 Platoon, moved up a gully to attack from a flank.

The arrangement was for 9 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Grant 11) to lead A

Company through C Company area, so on seeing C Company's success signal Grant immediately went forward. He met C Company headquarters and was told that Captain Horrocks had gone forward to reconnoitre a spandau nest that was holding up the advance and had not returned. Grant and Corporal Don Fraser ¹² went ahead to investigate and found Horrocks mortally wounded. The spandau was still spraying the area, and the two carried on to silence it but were themselves both wounded.

By this time the rest of A Company had arrived, and while Major Tanner was planning to deal with the situation, Corporal Perry ¹³ (7 Platoon) stalked the spandau nest. The gunner was difficult to locate, but was eventually found literally underfoot in a grass-covered pit. That was the end of the spandau, and with the opposition removed, A Company leap-frogged through C Company and carried on up the gully to its objective on Point 117, about three-quarters of a mile inland, without further incident.

Second-Lieutenant Dale led 13 Platoon towards C Company's objective, Point 200, where he hoped to find the rest of the company. There was a house in the area, which was quietly surrounded and the occupants ordered to come out. Some movement was heard inside, but the enemy's reluctance to emerge was overcome when Dale fired a Very light through a window. Twenty-four prisoners were taken, including two officers carrying very compact radio sets. It was felt that the sets could be put to better use by 13 Platoon. Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons arrived at this time. They had reached the objective without casualties, found a system of slit trenches but no occupants, and had come over to see what the commotion at the house was all about. The explanation for the empty trenches was found when some straw used for bedding burst into flame and disclosed that the floor of the house had been excavated and offered more protection from our barrage than did the open trenches. Second-Lieutenant McGregor took command of the company and consolidated.

At daylight the ground was found to be littered with S-mines, none of which had been exploded by the barrage or by the troops walking over them. Sergeant Bas Worthington, the company mine expert, made an examination and saw that the detonators had been wrongly fitted. The fact that the prisoners were mostly conscripted Poles and Czechs might have been the answer—sabotage on a small but acceptable scale.

D Company (Major Bailey), with the task of taking a hill forward of and between A Company on Point 117 and C Company on Point 200, ran into difficulty trying to climb the bluff which, in their sector, was almost a precipice. No. 18 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Ross ¹⁴) was missing when Bailey checked up at the top but, rather than lose time waiting, he pushed on without them until fired on from a house on his left.

Second-Lieutenant Hill 15 was sent with 17 Platoon to deal with the enemy post, while Bailey pushed on with the rest of D Company. They were within 200 yards of the company objective when they were fired on, and Bailey asked Colonel McElroy for reinforcements. B Company was ordered to help, and Second-Lieutenant Swainson set out with two sections of 11 Platoon, but the opposition was overcome before their arrival. It had been a difficult problem for one platoon, and it was largely owing to Sergeant Beaumont ¹⁶ and Corporal Hinton ¹⁷ that the objective had been so quickly captured. The flames from a burning haystack lit up the area and put the platoon at a disadvantage, but while Hinton with his section, from an exposed position in front, beat down the opposing fire, the rest of the platoon worked around to a flank. Hinton, after being beaten back three times, finally led his section in to capture the post. He then silenced three other posts, accounting for 20 enemy either killed or wounded. Swainson, hurrying across to the assistance of Major Bailey, fell in with 17 Platoon, which was still trying to close in on the house it had been sent to capture. The two platoons rushed it, capturing an anti-tank gun, a machine gun and nine prisoners; Swainson and one man were wounded by grenades.

A vigorous action was still going on around the company objective and there was some danger of being cut off. Fire was coming from both flanks and from the rear, but the enemy was cleverly concealed and could not be located. It was not until daylight, when the missing platoon and Hill's party arrived, that 14 hidden snipers were rounded up and the company consolidated.

B Company, behind them, had also missed some enemy posts in the darkness and were kept busy until after daylight. Corporal Tommy Sansom ¹⁸ writes:

I was digging my little hole when Brian Leach ¹⁹ [sic] came along with a young Pole on the end of his gat. He told me he was doing the same as me when he spotted this bird with a rifle to his shoulder about to pot him. Brian did a few quick

acts and wound up chasing him around a haystack and winning. We next rounded up a Jerry in one of the casa stables. He was behind the carcase of a freshly killed cow, so we had fresh meat for breakfast, and our cooks had the rest sent over to them very smartly. We then had a few rounds thrown at us from down hill a bit. By that time I had a spandau. I offered to give covering fire while some of the boys went down to see about the trouble. But the bloody gun jammed, so I galloped down with them....

The 'trouble' was two Germans and a spandau. They had emerged from a hidden dugout and were firing uphill into what had been their own headquarters. One of them was wounded by a lucky shot and was having a first-aid dressing applied when the B Company party arrived. The dugout produced three other Germans and, to everybody's surprise, Private Bill Harrington, ²⁰ a D Company stretcher-bearer. He had been going to the aid of a D Company man when he was beckoned over and captured. His only comment was: 'They didn't seem bad chaps.'

In all 17 prisoners were taken by A and B Companies after first light, making a total of 74 at a cost to the battalion of six killed and 27 wounded.

The infantry of all assaulting battalions were on their objectives by daylight, and the troops looked alternately forward for counter-attacks and backwards for the support weapons, without which they were helpless if tanks came lurching down the slippery ground in front. They also knew that 19 Armoured Regiment of 4 NZ Armoured Brigade would come lurching up the slopes as soon as the New Zealand engineers got the Bailey bridge across the Sangro. (As a matter of fact the tanks did not wait for the bridge, which the enemy, with direct observation from Colle Barone up on the left flank, kept under constant fire while the engineers were building it.) Some tanks were across by daylight, and a bulldozer was hauling others out of the river or out of the mud on the side long before the completion of the bridge, on which the engineers had continued to work in spite of casualties.

The troops breathed more easily when the mud-caked mortar teams staggered into the area during the early afternoon, after manhandling their weapons and ammunition up the bluffs. Later some of the anti-tank platoon arrived, its guns being hauled and winched into position by bulldozers. The New Zealand gunners were putting down concentrations on request, and the RAF was not absent.

The stretcher-bearers had a terribly exhausting time getting the wounded down to the RAP under the bluff, but did not let up until the last man had been collected. The bridge was getting such a hammering that it was a long wait for the wounded, but as soon as possible jeeps raced over 'Heartbeat Bridge', as it was christened, collected their loads, and raced away again.

The defensive line was still further forward and 5 Brigade was ordered to probe in a north-westerly direction, establish outposts, and remain in occupation. Enemy activity was negligible and the operations invariably ended with every platoon comfortably occupying an empty house—'casa', in the new language the troops were acquiring. By the night of 29-30 November the battalion was spread around the village of Cotti, with B Company forward astride an old Roman road.

The Division was now in a position to round off the approach to the Winter Line by occupying the main lateral ridge and the small town of Castelfrentano sprawled over its top. It will be remembered that a road, Route 84, ran from Lanciano through Castelfrentano and Guardiagrele to the mountains. From Guardiagrele another road curved back to Orsogna and finally to the coast; this was the core of the Winter Line.

C Company and A Company were detailed to carry out 21 Battalion's part in the operation which was, in conjunction with 23 Battalion, to occupy the San Nicolino slope, the southern bastion of the narrow plateau east of Castelfrentano. The town itself was the objective of 6 Brigade.

C Company, bivouacked in the rear of the battalion area at Caporali, left at 1.30 p.m. and spread across a spur leading to the top of San Nicolino. Captain Harding, ²¹ temporarily commanding the company, had disposed 13 Platoon on his right, 15 on his left, and 14 with Company Headquarters in the centre as reserve platoon. They were within 500 yards of their objective when 15 Platoon was fired on and forced to take cover. No. 13 Platoon was ordered to support it with fire and was itself fired on, whereupon Harding sent his reserve platoon in an outflanking move to the left of 13 Platoon. This move immediately brought down mortar fire, and the men were obliged to wait until dark before they could extricate themselves. The 23rd Battalion on the right of C Company was also held up and the brigade attack was at a standstill.

Meanwhile A Company, which had left Cotti at 3 p.m., reached B Company's area on the Roman road at dusk and found instructions waiting to go to the assistance of C Company. From the Roman road A Company's route lay along a ridge parallel with C Company, and the change in orders meant crossing a very deep ravine, passing through C Company, and attacking uphill. Major Tanner writes:

I was instructed to move through C Company commanded by Captain Harding and to capture the objective which they had been given. C Company had been subjected to very heavy machine gun and mortar fire and could make no forward progress. I decided to attack through C Company with No. 7 Platoon commanded by Lieutenant Jimmy Kirkland ²² and to take Company Headquarters and 8 and 9 Platoons around the right flank of this position [between C Company and the left flanking company of 23 Battalion]. More by good luck than good management, our timings were simultaneous and Kirkland made a frontal attack at the same time as we came in from the flank. Much credit for this attack must go to Lieutenant Kirkland and Lance-Corporal Perry.

Incidentally both companies must have considered that Major Tanner deserved a little credit also, for they christened the spot 'Tanner's Hill'.

Thirty prisoners were taken in this action, and both battalions were able to carry on the advance. Tanner directed his company on its original objective westwards towards Castelfrentano, with 9 Platoon leading, 8 Platoon in close support, and 7 Platoon in reserve with the prisoners. They had gone about a quarter of a mile and 8 Platoon had taken the lead from 9 Platoon when it was halted by fire from a post on its right. No. 9 Platoon came up in support and worked behind the opposition and rushed the post. Sixty prisoners were taken and Tanner found himself out of touch with Battalion Headquarters, and with more prisoners than he had troops. The prisoners were eventually passed on to 23 Battalion to take care of, and A Company dug itself in on the side of Route 84, with C Company 400 yards behind. Patrols were put out and a stand-to maintained until dawn, when it was found that 24 Battalion had entered Castelfrentano in the morning. In the afternoon 21 Battalion moved into brigade reserve in the Roman road-Cotti area.

Castelfrentano, normally a town of 6000 inhabitants but now considerably more on account of the number of refugees, was situated on one ridge and Orsogna on

another. The two ridges joined at the village of Guardiagrele, four miles south-west of Orsogna, and while the Germans held Guardiagrele the Orsogna Ridge was impregnable from that side. Further east the Castelfrentano and Orsogna ridges formed the opposite sides of a wide valley with parallel spurs meeting at the bottom, where the little Moro stream would have to be crossed and supply routes built before further assaults could be launched.

Sixth Brigade made an attempt by way of a secondary connecting road between Castelfrentano and Orsogna to bustle the enemy out of the latter village, but was driven back by tanks and flame-throwers. Other attempts by 4 Armoured Brigade to get into Guardiagrele were also repulsed.

Meanwhile 21 Battalion reorganised and rested. Lieutenant Bramwell became Adjutant in place of Captain Abbott, who went to command C Company. The troops neglected the army rations in favour of poultry. Sometimes the chooks were purchased from the farmers who had not left when their fields became a battle-ground; sometimes they were gifts; sometimes —most times—they were merely acquired. When poultry was not on the menu, bully beef and soup acquired a new flavour with fresh onions, cabbage, and turnip tops gathered from the vacant gardens. Fried potatoes for supper were very popular.

Preparations went on and on 6 December the battalion moved up into support along the Castelfrentano road. The next day saw another move to closer support across the road to Corato Ridge, behind 28 Battalion which, with 6 Brigade on its left and 23 Battalion on its right, was making a full-scale attack on Orsogna. The attack failed. Sixth Brigade entered the town but was driven back by tanks and flame-throwers. The Maoris held on, but without Orsogna their position would have been hopeless in daylight, and they were withdrawn.

The 23rd Battalion, which had secured the brigade right flank by storming Sfasciata Ridge, stayed there under cover of the trees. The 21st Battalion moved from support into reserve again and suffered a day of shelling, but the only casualties were six women and children.

New plans were made by Divisional Headquarters for taking Orsogna. It was impregnable from the west and frontal attacks had failed, so it was decided to

outflank it from the east, using 23 Battalion's Sfasciata Ridge as an approach. Again 21 Battalion waited while the engineers built tracks down to and bridges over the Moro stream for the passage of the armour and supplies.

The third effort was fixed for the night of 14-15 December and was to be undertaken by 23 and 21 Battalions, with the 28th in reserve. On the left 6 Brigade was to support the attack and on the right the British 17 Brigade, under command of 2 NZ Division, was also to assist with fire and movement. The intention was to cut the Orsogna road and prevent the tanks of 26 Panzer Division from moving to the coast, where 1 Canadian Division was to make the main thrust.

The battalion came forward after dark on the 13th to a lying-up position on the reverse slope of San Felice Ridge. The brigade plan was for 21 and 23 Battalions to attack north-westwards across the ravine and cut the road. If all went well 28 Battalion, with 20 Armoured Regiment under command, would then exploit westwards into Orsogna.

At seven the next evening the troops crossed the gully from San Felice to Sfasciata and were on the start line by eleven. Lieutenant-Colonel McElroy's plan was for D Company to secure the battalion right flank by consolidating on high ground short of the road, A Company to dig in on Point 332, where the road topped a rise, and B Company to cross the road. C Company was to stay near Battalion Headquarters in reserve. The air-line distance was about a mile, but the actual distance considerably more.

Waiting on the start line for the barrage to open is not usually a time for light-hearted persiflage, and this story of Corporal Jack Dooley ²³ and his pants is not meant to be funny except in retrospect. Captain Craig, ²⁴ who was a platoon sergeant at the time, vouches for it:

Jack Dooley was a good soldier and, on the start line before the Orsogna Road show, had so loaded himself up with Bren mags., grenades, Hawkins anti-tank mines and loose ammo in his trouser pockets that his two back buttons went. He came to me and said, 'For God's sake Sarge, lend me a couple of nails, me ruddy pants are falling down.'

The barrage opened at 1 a.m. and half an hour later the attack went in. Major

Bailey sent 16 and 17 Platoons to lead the company attack, with 18 Platoon in reserve. They were well up the forward slope of the gully when they were halted by mortar fire from beyond the road and were forced to lie low for two hours. Artillery concentrations eventually quietened the opposition and the company was able to continue. The forward platoons were close to the objective when enemy posts opened fire with small arms and grenades. No. 18 Platoon was thrown in and the extra fire power enabled D Company to take its objective. A patrol was sent out to the right to find 2 Northamptons, but did not locate them.

A Company met no serious opposition until near Point 332, when 9 Platoon lost several men in a mortar concentration. The company then swung to the right and moved parallel with the road until held up with grenades and spandau fire in 8 Platoon's area. Corporal Jack McCullough ²⁵ rallied his section and led an attack against the nearest post. This broke up the opposition and 30 prisoners were taken. By a quarter to three A Company was consolidating on its objective.

B Company also made good progress in the early stages, but moved too far to the left and passed through B Company 23 Battalion, which had been caught in the opening barrage and had suffered severely. Some strays from 23 Battalion joined B Company and remained with it throughout the action. The company was first fired on near the road, where 10 and 11 Platoons rushed through spandau fire and grenades and took some prisoners. The company carried on and reached the road about 400 yards to the left of its objective, so far with only one casualty. While Major Hawkesby made a reconnaissance to fix his position, Private 'Hungry' Hampton, ²⁶ an old campaigner from the Desert, found that one of the prisoners spoke a little English and, in a weird mixture of Italian, Arabic and English, the two had a heart-to-heart talk about old times. Both agreed that Italy was a lousy place to fight in—give them the Desert any day.

Hawkesby then led the company to its correct position and the platoons began to dig in, 10 and 11 on the far side of the road, between the road and the railway line that skirted it, and 12 Platoon on the near side. A Company was forward and to the right of 12 Platoon, and between them was a house which A Company was understood to have searched. The platoon was fired on from the house, so surrounded it. Corporal Bert Morris ²⁷ ordered the occupants to surrender. In all

eleven prisoners, including four officers, came out with their hands up. One of them spoke English and said boldly enough, 'Well, who is going to shoot me?' Nobody obliged him, but he was taken into the house to see if the place was really empty and, if so, that there were no booby traps around. He showed a decided reluctance to leave again but was bundled out, and the platoon resumed its digging in. The position was then that D Company held some high ground on the right of A Company, which was also on top of a rise in the road and separated from D Company by a shallow gully. On the edge of the road ran the railway and beyond the line the ridge fell away again. B Company, on the left of the objective, had 10 and 11 Platoons over the road at the top of a re-entrant and on the only piece of level ground handy to a small railway station. No. 12 Platoon and Company Headquarters were on the rear side of the road, while C Company was in reserve near the start line. Further left again 23 Battalion was also on its objective. The night was bitterly cold and rain fell at intervals.

Within half an hour of what might be called the case of the reluctant prisoner, that is approximately 5 a.m., tanks were heard approaching from the north-east along the road from Arielli. The battalion was still without its support arms, and the forward tanks of 18 Armoured Regiment were still battling up the slopes through the mud. The situation was strangely similar to that in the Peneios Gorge in Greece and the infantry were almost as helpless. The tanks came on with their engines idling, as if anxious not to attract attention, and halted in the middle of B Company. There is a slight bend in the road that does not show on the map, but it was sufficient to be a definite corner, and, in consequence, B Company did not see them, and it was too late for the platoons on the far side of the road to follow the example of the rest of the battalion and fall back. The tanks halted fairly in the middle of 12 Platoon's area, but that platoon and Company Headquarters had already moved out. The leading tank went off towards the house that had yielded the prisoners, while the others milled around as if anxious to be moving again. The tank commander's anxiety was considerably increased when a Piat mortar failed to explode against his tank and a burst from a Bren disclosed the position of 10 and 11 Platoons. The tanks—there were two of them— and a troop-carrier turned their guns on the platoons, but luckily they were unable to depress their muzzles sufficiently, although the troops were almost deafened by the blast. The third tank returned after finding the house empty, and they all departed a bare 15 minutes before the first tank of C Squadron 18

Armoured Regiment arrived, whereupon the troops went back to their positions. No. 14 Platoon was sent up from reserve to A Company, and some three-inch mortars arrived.

The mystery of the reluctant prisoner was explained at daybreak, for when the house was searched, besides maps and radio equipment, a telephone was found still connected to the German lines. It was obvious that the tanks had been called up when the house was surrounded and that the command post, for such it was found to be, was waiting for its troop-carrier when Corporal Morris intervened. By 7 a.m., in addition to the first C Squadron tank, there was a three-inch mortar with each company, as well as a second tank parked behind hedges in B Company's area.

The engineers, unknown to the troops, had performed miracles of endurance clearing mines and making tracks on to the ridge. The armour had not long to wait for employment, for at 9 a.m. D Company saw two enemy tanks approaching from Arielli with troops riding on them. D Company called for artillery fire and the forward platoon withdrew. The leading tank had got to the bend in the road past D Company when two shells from a Sherman knocked it out, whereupon the second tank and the surviving passengers of the first retired.

The previous owners of the derelict left behind some food parcels, evidently just received from home, containing cake. It was not very good cake by New Zealand standards, being too dry and sweet and short of raisins.

The block on the road was made good use of by planting Hawkins anti-tank grenades in the tall grass on each side of the obstacle. The troops improved their positions during the day under intermittent and at times heavy shelling, while 15 and 16 Platoons made up for their inactivity in reserve by ferrying water, food, and ammunition to the forward companies. Back at Brigade Headquarters preparations were being made for the Maoris, supported by 20 Armoured Regiment, to attack along the newly won road to Orsogna. The enemy was organising a counter-attack to regain the road, and the unusual situation developed of both sides attacking at the same time in the same direction.

A general enemy counter-attack against the whole 5 Brigade line began at 3.30 a.m. on the 16th. Both 23 and 21 Battalions' pickets reported movement, and

artillery support was called for, which was immediately forthcoming and immediately answered. The 23rd Battalion was attacked by infantry alone, but the enemy made no progress against artillery concentrations and machine-gun fire from tanks.

The attack on 21 Battalion came from the same direction as the others, down the road from Arielli. Nine tanks, five of them flame-throwers, supported by three Italian assault guns, preceded paratroops hurried over for the purpose of pushing 5 Brigade off the road. Two Mark IV tanks came in ahead of the flame-throwers and met the fire of the battalion mortars and tanks of 18 Armoured Regiment. The tanks searched the darkness with their coaxially mounted machine guns and, when their tracer raised sparks from armour, fired armour-piercing and high-explosive shells.

The paratroops did not come on, evidently awaiting the result of the armoured battle which raged furiously for half an hour, by which time two enemy tanks had been destroyed. The leading flame-throwers had been systematically burning up every building near the road, but though D Company had occupied some of them during the day, it had moved to alternative positions after dark.

Of the flame-throwing tanks Major Bailey writes:

We reported these flame throwing tanks attacking [the battalion] objective and pouring flame into buildings on our [D Coy] front. There were none of our men in these buildings and we suffered no casualties as a result of this flame attack, except it was the most demoralizing thing we had struck in our experience. While it lasted it was ghastly and we could do nothing but hold in the positions we were in because every time the tanks spurted fire the area was lit up and any movement would have been fatal as German infantry were with the tanks. ... D Company just stuck it out until our tanks came up and knocked out the flame throwers with some beautiful shooting.

The battle reached its peak at 4.30 a.m., when two flame-throwers had been hit; their 200-foot jets of flame died away like fire brigade hoses with the water turned off.

It was now the turn of the paratroops who had formed up on the reverse slope of the ridge. The remaining enemy tanks gave them covering fire while they deployed. Their first effort was along a gully on the open right flank of D Company, but artillery concentrations and the battalion mortars broke it up before it became dangerous. A second and fiercer thrust was made against the centre of the position, where A Company was dug in, but was met by an equally determined defence. A misty dawn was breaking when the enemy withdrew, carrying his wounded with him, but leaving four dead tanks and 50 dead men behind. Among the killed was the leader of the attack, a major who had served in Greece and Crete. He was one of a party which had nearly got past A Company's defences, but had fallen to Private 'Snowy' Munro's ²⁸ Bren. He was lying among his men with a pistol in one hand and a grenade in the other.

By six o'clock the area was quiet again after two and a half hours of fierce encounter, in which the battalion casualties were astonishingly small—five killed and 15 wounded.

The anti-climax came when our tank crews examined the knocked-out enemy armour and found parcels of loot all neatly tied up for posting home. Thereafter the motto was: 'Never trust a tankie after a battle.'

Fifth Brigade was now firmly across the Orsogna road, but the town itself was still in enemy hands. The day was quiet and the troops made themselves as comfortable as the sodden conditions would permit. Colonel McElroy forecast further attempts to push the battalion off the road after dark, but added that adequate support was assured. Soon after last light A Company patrols reported voices in front and sounds of tank movement to the north-east. A 'stonk' was put down and both voices and movement ceased until midnight, when B Company reported enemy digging in ahead and asked for protective fire. It was quickly supplied and had the desired effect, but by 3 a.m. D Company was standing to waiting for an attack to come in. This was also frustrated by artillery concentrations. Altogether it was a sleepless night, particularly for D Company, who had a tender open flank to watch. The 17th Brigade, or rather 2 Northamptons, the left flanking battalion, was not up, although it tied in the following afternoon.

The village of Poggiofiorito, a quarter of a mile east of the junction of the Orsogna road and a secondary road to Arielli, was in the Northamptons' area, and 13 Corps wanted to know if the Germans were still there. The job was passed on to Colonel McElroy, 21 Battalion being closest, and Second-Lieutenant Maich was

ordered to take a patrol and accompany three tanks into the village. They left early in the afternoon and, preceded by Corporal Hughie Holmes ²⁹ sweeping for mines, cautiously approached Poggiofiorito. It was not occupied, but live shells, soldiers' packs, loaves of black bread, and tins of jam strewn around suggested a hurried departure. A 17 Brigade officer, with a patrol and three prisoners in tow, reported the area clear, but a sudden 'stonk' indicated that the enemy was not far away.

Further instructions were received to continue on to Arielli, but to return as soon as the presence of the enemy was established. As soon as the leading tank topped a slight rise 200 yards up the Arielli road, the patrol saw the muzzle flash of an antitank gun in a house ahead, followed by a direct hit on the tank. The tank was brewed up and the commander killed. The patrol withdrew under a shower of high explosive from the enemy gun and found shelter in a culvert under the railway line. Corporal 'Jeff' Jeffries ³⁰ was reported wounded and lying behind a wall, whereupon Sergeant Oates volunteered to go back and get him out. He also was wounded, and they were both brought out by the 17 Brigade patrol which saw the incident.

The rest of the day and the following night were quiet in the battalion area. Soon after breakfast on the 18th McElroy was instructed to feel across the Arielli stream with a patrol, but not to get into any fighting. The reception accorded the patrol showed conclusively that the first ridge in the Fontegrande area was strongly held and could not be occupied without a fight.

Corps thought otherwise, however, and the upshot was that 21 Battalion was instructed to send out a fighting patrol in conjunction with 28 Battalion and 2 Northamptons, and if the operation was successful the line was to be advanced the following day. C Company had taken the least punishment to date and was, in McElroy's opinion, the only company fit for more fighting. It was given the job.

The detailed instructions were for Second-Lieutenant McGregor's platoon to put a patrol on to the ridge, reinforce it to platoon strength, and extend to the right until it met 2 Northamptons. All patrols, each twelve strong, left an hour before midnight, and it seemed at first that 13 Corps' commander had been right, for they got on the objective without opposition.

What followed happened many times to patrols of both sides in the next

eighteen months of the Italian campaign. The wireless messages from C Company while the men were worming their way forward in the darkness are self-explanatory:

0035: Patrol not quite on objective. Heard movement ahead. Waiting.

0055: Patrol on objective. Four enemy seen on left; going to engage them. Have not been observed ourselves. Patrol quite confident.

0115: Patrol observed three MG 34 nests about 80-100 yards in front. Attempting to take them.

0132: Patrol about to take on MG nest.

0158: Patrol has engaged first post.

0235: 2 Lt McGregor wounded; trying to get him out. Enemy holding fairly strongly. Tried three places and could not get through....

0240: ... Another man wounded. Patrol nearly surrounded. Having to pull out. Told to withdraw but to try and get McGregor out.

0253: Two now wounded. Both on way back....

0301: Can't get McGregor. Patrol withdrawing....

0309: Having a lot of trouble getting patrol out. Being shot up from rear....

0312: Posts to rear of patrol blocking retreat. Ordered patrol to use fire and movement.

0327: Sgt Page rather badly wounded. L-Cpl [Ken Babe ³¹] now in charge. Sending up flare in five minutes to guide patrol in. First wounded man reported in....

0356: All patrol back in B Coy lines. Think Sgt Page died on way in. Not sure yet. They have him with them.

0425: Sgt Worthington with McGregor both believed wounded and missing. Sgt Page died of wounds. One Cpl and one OR wounded and safe. Sgt Page went in

with Sgt Worthington to get McGregor. Both were shot in rear by MG 34.

0448: Still four men in addition to Lt McGregor and Sgt Worthington missing, but sure they will turn up.

0730: Two men still missing.

0945: Two missing men have returned.

There was a pause for a few days in the usual shelling and mortaring across the valley. Orsogna, high up on the left, was covered in a haze of smoke from artillery and fighter-bombers. The Brigadier visited 21 Battalion on 21 December and later in the day the troops were told to make themselves as comfortable as possible, as the policy was to go slow for the time being. It was soon found that the term 'time being' was purely relative, for Eighth Army had decided on yet another attempt to break the enemy line before the winter snows put further campaigning out of the question. On the 22nd there was a free issue of cigarettes and a distribution of Christmas parcels. There were also company commanders' conferences, but as there were always such conferences the troops carried on trying to construct shelters against the cold winds, rains and approaching snow.

Operation orders were issued at midday 23 December. Fifth Brigade was to do a show with the help of 26 Battalion, and the job was to take the next two ridges. The 21st was on the right flank and was to cross Fontegrande Ridge, where the patrol had been shot up on the night of the 18th-19th, cross the Arielli stream, and consolidate on the next ridge. The 26th Battalion on the left of 21, and the 28th on the brigade's left, had objectives that would prolong 21 Battalion's line towards Orsogna. Fifth Division, on the right of the brigade, was to advance its line also, but so far had lagged behind and had left 21 Battalion with a tender open flank. After reorganisation the attack was to sweep forward to the Feuduccio and San Basile ridges, in which event the enemy was expected to evacuate Orsogna.

The battalion attack was to be in two phases, the first with D Company on the right and A Company on the left, after which the final objective, Point 340, was to be taken by B Company, right, and C Company, left. There was to be a barrage and tanks were to be in support. Zero hour was 4 a.m. on 24 December. The start line was along the road behind the forward defences and the troops were in position half

across the gully and D Company went in. The men scrambled down the gully and up the other side towards Fontegrande Ridge, where the paratroops were dug in. The Germans fought well and the only prisoners taken were those wounded by the barrage or in the fighting. By 6 a.m. the company was firmly established, but there were enemy posts just ahead and 5 Division had not made any headway. A Company had the unfortunate experience of having a number of shorts from the barrage falling in its area, causing some losses and disorganising the attack. When it was able to leave the start line it had lost the barrage but carried on without it. The company found the gully very hard to climb and veered right into D Company's area. Once on top of the ridge A Company turned left and fought its way along to its objective. It met opposition from well-hidden weapon pits and from houses, and again the only prisoners taken were wounded. The paratroops were tough, but they had met somebody as tough as themselves, and who, by the way, had not had a spell since 27 November. During this advance the company passed the bodies of Second-Lieutenant McGregor and Lance-Sergeant Worthington, who had been missing since C Company's patrol on 18-19 December.

an hour before the barrage was to open. Promptly on time the first shells rushed

By the time B and C Companies were due to move forward the battalion on the right flank had not got as far forward as the start line, and Colonel McElroy, already troubled about his open flank, kept B Company back in the original A Company position as a flank protection.

C Company, owing to the stiff climb across the gully in front of its start line, was ordered to go round the left flank through 26 Battalion and move across the head of the gully, then strike for its objective. There was some mortar fire, but the company made good progress until it crossed the Arielli stream between the first and final ridges. At this point 13 and 14 Platoons were sent forward to cross the spur and go on to Point 340, but as soon as they were over the crest and on the forward slope they were halted by fire from across the gully. No. 13 Platoon was ordered to engage the enemy frontally while 14 Platoon worked around the enemy's right flank, but the fire was too severe and both platoons were withdrawn to the reverse slope, where they dug in. Some men from B Company 26 Battalion joined them, but that battalion also did not get past the first ridge. Further left the Maoris had also been stopped short of their final objective, but had taken the top of the gully where the two ridges

joined and so enabled tanks to get along a road on to Fontegrande Ridge in support of 21 Battalion. The tanks, a squadron of them, arrived with the dawn, and their fire soon quietened the sniping from the far ridge. In the meantime B Company, which had been held back as flank protection when 15 Brigade did not move up as expected, sent 10 and 12 Platoons to strengthen the front line, while No. 11 remained in battalion reserve.

The troops passed a miserably cold day, saturated by frequent showers, dead tired, and in need of a rest.

At midday Brigade rang through to say the battalion would be relieved that night by 25 Battalion. The relief was completed by midnight and the troops spent the rest of the night on Sfasciata. Early on Christmas morning the battalion moved back to Spaccarelli, where trucks of 4 Reserve MT Company met it and took it back to San Nicolino Hill, where it had stopped when Castelfrentano was occupied on 2 December.

The troops moved into houses, got fires going, and began to get rid of some of the mud that encrusted their clothes and arms. Christmas dinner was eaten that night, but there was no pleasure in it. Everybody knew that some men of C Company were under close arrest for failing to line up for the last attack. Such a thing had never happened in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force before and the disgrace hung heavily on the battalion. On New Year's Eve the snow began to fall. In the morning it was a foot deep, with drifts of three feet or more in places.

As far as Eighth Army was concerned, it was now a case of stalemate on the Adriatic. The weather had beaten the generals and there was no possibility of coming down on Rome from the north-east. As far as 2 NZ Division was concerned, it had fought itself out for the time being. The conversion of 4 Brigade to armour had left it with only six infantry battalions, and there is a limit to the number of times a formation can assault without a period to recuperate and reorganise.

On the night of 2 January 1944 21 Battalion relieved 25 Battalion again and settled into houses in the same sector. Static warfare had set in. It is interesting to consider how the more wars change the more they remain the same. In 1914-18 the opposing sides looked at each other from their trenches, left each other mostly alone

in the day, and stalked each other at night. In 1944 in Italy each side lived in houses scattered over their positions, each side let the other's houses largely alone, and patrols roamed at will by night.

The snow continued to fall at intervals and snow capes were issued. A German patrol sneaked up to a 23 Battalion house during a snowstorm and tossed a grenade inside. A Maori post set a trap and killed five of an enemy patrol. Two men of 21 Battalion were killed by a direct hit on a slit trench. The Russians pushed the Germans back across the Polish frontier. A Polish general accompanied Brigadier Kippenberger on an inspection of the battalion area, and an agitated new hand, pointing to his unsoldierly looking snow cape, says, 'Hell, do I have to salute him in this outfit?'

Defence was in depth and the forward companies were frequently changed. The troops experienced the new kind of war for a fortnight, and then returned to their old rest area near Castelfrentano after being relieved by a regiment of Punjabis. The Indians ploughed through the ankle-deep mud carrying their boots, socks, and pants in their hands and bulky loads of gear, including blankets, on their heads.

The battalion's casualties during the Orsogna campaign were 43 killed and 129 wounded.

¹ Capt F. F. Massey; Auckland; born Auckland, 12 Jul 1921; clerk; wounded Feb 1944.

² Maj J. A. Maich; Manurewa; born Dargaville, 19 Aug 1915; school-teacher; DAQMG HQ 2 NZEF, 1944; DAQMG 2 NZ Div, Aug 1945-Jan 1946.

³ Sgt N. J. Page; born Tauranga, 25 Nov 1921; clerk; killed in action 19 Dec 1943; commissioned in NZ but relinquished commission on going overseas.

⁴ Capt P. G. Oates; Auckland; born Gisborne, 9 Mar 1922; photographer; OC Provost Coy, J Force; twice wounded.

⁵ Capt I. G. McLean; Warkworth; born Auckland, 19 Apr 1913; bank officer;

wounded 22 Sep 1944.

- ⁶ 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.
- ⁷ Maj F. B. Weeks; Waipukurau; born Kimbolton, 30 Apr 1912; electrical engineer; wounded 28 Nov 1943.
- ⁸ Lt A. G. Wood; Hamilton; born NZ 7 Jan 1907; barrister and solicitor; wounded 2 May 1944.
- ⁹ Capt E. H. P. Swainson; Feilding; born Feilding, 19 Nov 1914; farmer; wounded 28 Nov 1943.
- ¹⁰ Maj R. G. Campbell, m.i.d.; born Manganui, North Auckland, 17 Sep 1918; labourer; twice wounded.
- ¹¹ Capt B. R. Grant; Auckland; born Sydney, 16 Apr 1920; civil servant; wounded 28 Nov 1943.
- ¹² 2 Lt D. Q. Fraser; Helensville; born Whangarei, 15 Nov 1909; farm manager; wounded 28 Nov 1943.
- ¹³ WO II F. W. Perry, MM; Auckland; born NZ 23 Jul 1914; grocer; wounded 1 Dec 1943.
- ¹⁴ Lt J. V. Ross; Auckland; born NZ 6 Nov 1907; farmer.
- ¹⁵ Lt J. C. O'N. Hill; Gisborne; born Hamilton, 15 Jul 1910; bank clerk; wounded 24 Dec 1943.
- ¹⁶ WO II C. W. Beaumont, MM; Pukemiro; born Auckland, 29 Sep 1915; baker; wounded 22 Sep 1944.

- ¹⁷ L-Sgt R. H. Hinton, MM; Te Awamutu; born Hamilton, 17 Jul 1904; coach builder; three times wounded.
- ¹⁸ 2 Lt T. A. M. Sansom, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Carterton, 12 May 1916; fellmonger; wounded 20 Apr 1943.
- ¹⁹ Sgt B. J. Leech; Waipu, North Auckland; born Wellington, 16 Apr 1920; armer; wounded 18 Dec 1943.
- ²⁰ Pte W. Harrington; Rowan, Taranaki; born NZ 28 Jun 1905; farmhand.
- ²¹ Maj R. M. Harding; born NZ 3 Apr 1913; farm manager; accidentally killed 11 Nov 1944.
- ²² Capt J. H. Kirkland; born NZ 6 Jan 1914; accountant; died of wounds 29 Jul 1944.
- ²³ L-Sgt J. J. Dooley; Taumarunui; born NZ 1 Oct 1920; reporter.
- ²⁴ Capt A. Craig; Auckland; born Roxburgh, 18 Aug 1908; company director; wounded 2 May 1944.
- ²⁵ 2 Lt J. R. McCullough, MM; Auckland; born Auckland, 5 Apr 1921; clerk.
- ²⁶ Pte H. R. Hampton; Waiheke Island; born Auckland, 1 Nov 1916; builder.
- ²⁷ 2 Lt A. Morris; Kaingaroa; born England, 22 Dec 1920; Post and Telegraph Dept employee.
- ²⁸ Pte D. S. Munro; Morrinsville; born NZ 28 Sep 1918; farmer.
- ²⁹ Sgt H. D. Holmes; Geraldine; born Ashburton, 8 Feb 1921; factory hand.

³⁰ L-Cpl A. R. Jeffries; Auckland; born NZ 10 May 1918; butcher; wounded 17 Dec 1943.

³¹ WO II G. K. Babe, DCM; Waikiekie; born Whangarei, 25 Jun 1920; dairy farmer; wounded 7 Feb 1944.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 13 — CASSINO

CHAPTER 13 Cassino

The operation that had envisaged 6 Brigade's leaping from the Sangro to Chieti was finally suspended at the end of December 1943. For political as well as strategical reasons the policy was still the capture of Rome at the earliest possible moment, and to that end Fifth Army on the west coast was reinforced at the expense of the Eighth on the mud-bound east.

Five divisions, including the New Zealand Division, were to be switched with the utmost secrecy to the west of the Apennines. When, on 18 January, 21 Battalion was warned to be ready for a move within a few hours, it thought it was going for a short rest. Breakfast was at midnight, and two hours later the troops, not unthankfully, were embussed and waiting to move. They staged a hundred miles away at San Severo, where they were told that the move was something more than a rest out of the line—the Division was transferring to Fifth Army and was heading for Naples, on the other side of Italy.

The next day the convoy crossed the Apennine mountain chain, passing the now familiar villages perched in impossible positions on mountain sides and tops. The third day's run ended in the divisional training area of Piedimonte d' Alife, between the Volturno River and the southern edge of the Matese Mountains.

It was a pleasant spot. The snow had been left behind, and though the nights were cold, the days were fine and the troops were soon comfortably established. The country rolled easily from the Matese foothills down to the 80-yard-wide Volturno, dramatically different from the turbulent, treacherous Sangro. The fighting around Cassino, 30 miles north, was only a rumble in the night.

Training, after the initial clean up and reorganisation, took the form of fire and movement exercises, interspersed with climbs into the Matese mountain ridge, lunch in the clouds, and a return to a hot meal. It was not long before the troops were in good shape.

There was a battalion parade at which Brigadier Kippenberger gave an address on the general war situation, the not unworthy record of the battalion, and the part likely to be played in the forthcoming campaign. He mentioned that the Division was in reserve to Fifth Army and under the direct orders of the Army Commander, with the role of exploiting towards Rome when Fifth Army had breached the Winterstellungen (Winter Line), as the Germans called their defences.

In the meantime they were to take it easy—well, comparatively easy—and recuperate. One of the Brigadier's ideas of taking it easy was to practise a brigade exercise in crossing the Volturno. The troops were in favour, for they had had enough of wading through the ice-cold Sangro, and if there were more rivers to cross they preferred to do it above the water rather than through it. The company commanders practised without troops—in Army parlance TEWTs (tactical exercises without troops)—the platoon commanders practised without platoons, and the platoons practised without boats. On the day, the operation went off very well. Patrols lined the river bank and beat down imaginary opposition; the artillery blanketed probable strongpoints with smoke and fire; platoons rushed folding assault boats to the riverside, were ferried across, and formed up and advanced on their objectives. Everybody, including the Brigadier, was pleased with the show, and the feeling was 'Bring on your river crossings'.

Since the landing on the Salerno plain, the junction with Eighth Army and the advance on Naples, Fifth Army had squared up to the line the Germans had chosen to stand on for the defence of Rome. The Italian General Staff considered the position impregnable; and they had the support of history, for only once in all Rome's stormy existence had it been successfully attacked from the south. On the selected line the Apennine Mountains reach almost to the sea, pierced by only a single valley, the Liri River depression, which runs north-west and south-east for 20 miles and varies in width from four to seven miles. West of the Liri River the roadless Aurunci ranges stretch to the coast. A main road hacked out of their seaward slopes had been destroyed beyond the possibility of early repair, leaving the Liri Valley the only axis of advance. Apennine peaks flank the valley, and its southern entrance is guarded by the precipitous foothills of Monte Cairo. From that watchtower runs a spur that terminates abruptly in the 1700-foot-high Monte Cassino, the bastion that guards the southern exit of Highway 6, the road to Rome.

The military problem was either to fight through the Liri Valley or outflank it by a sea landing. Fifth Army prepared to do both.

On 20 January, the day 21 Battalion left San Severo, Fifth Army crossed the 30-foot-wide, fast-flowing Rapido River, which was the first line of defence of the Liri Valley. On the 22nd, while the troops were cleaning the Orsogna mud off their clothes and equipment, a seaborne landing was made at Anzio. The 2nd New Zealand Division stood ready to exploit success, while the Americans launched attack after attack against formidable defences tenaciously defended. By 30 January only partial success had been achieved, and it was clear that the town and spur which dominated the mouth of the valley had to be taken or turned.

Cassino town, with a population of 7000, nestled under the extreme eastern end of the Monte Cassino feature, along the face of which an unbelievable road zigzagged for five miles to the summit. The Abbey of Monte Cassino was perched at the top of the height and looked south towards the invading Fifth Army, west towards the Tyrrhenian Sea and east towards the Abruzzis, in the centre of Italy. It was an incomparable lookout and had been there in one form or another for 1400 years. Cassino Monastery had seen a lot of war and had been destroyed at least three times. It was to see a lot more and was to be destroyed again.

The troops played a little football, route-marched, and were inspected—ceremonial parades are good for morale. Fifth Army tried to outflank the German defences and did not wholly succeed; a shadow New Zealand Corps became a reality on 3 February, preparatory to taking over if the Americans did not capture Cassino by the 12th; 5 Brigade was ordered to relieve 36 US Division, holding the line of the Rapido south of Cassino.

Colonel McElroy gave his orders for the relief on the morning of 4 February. In the afternoon the battalion, less 15 per cent LOB, was embussed and at 8 p.m. arrived in the battalion assembly area, where guides were waiting. It was a wild night of lightning, wind and rain, as the men squelched along the muddy tracks in single file towards their company headquarters. The battalion took over from 143 Regiment, 36 US Division, and occupied a mile and three-quarters of the front, with A, B, and C Companies forward in that order and D Company in reserve. The battalion signallers had a nightmarish job trying to trace the American telephone wires; there seemed to be lines laid to and telephones installed in every foxhole. Eventually they gave it up and ran their own system.

When it was sufficiently light the troops took stock of their position. They found themselves in part of the area from which the Americans had launched their first unsuccessful attempt to outflank Cassino from the south. Bullet-ridden assault boats were still lying about and heaps of abandoned equipment were everywhere. There were also heaps of rations still uncollected, but the acquisitive Kiwis soon altered that. C Company also acquired two brand-new Chevrolet trucks, which were callously taken from them by Battalion Headquarters and eventually found a home at Brigade.

Between the forward posts and the river, about 300 yards distant, were waterlogged paddocks, while in front, behind, and all around stood farmhouses in varying stages of demolition. Olive orchards, clumps of naked trees, and stumps of grape vines separated the company posts and blocked the view. The area had been held by a weakened American regiment, equivalent to three battalions, and there was as much as a quarter of a mile between platoons and three-quarters of a mile between the company areas. Owing to the distances the platoons could neither mutually support each other nor prevent infiltration. On the enemy side of the Rapido a narrow ledge of flat country was overlooked by the heights of San Angelo. Half-right and obscured by trees and houses, the town of Cassino crouched under the bluff of the Monte Cassino Monastery, while further back, dominating the background, were the peaks of Castellone and Corno at the foot of Monte Cairo.

The day was quiet in the battalion sector—maybe the enemy felt that there was nothing to fear from that direction—and the sunny morning was used to dry out saturated clothes and weapons. Of course quietness in the front line is a relative term, for the artillery fired whenever the spirit moved them. It is an article of faith among front-line soldiers that during a period of static warfare both sides' supporting arms have an unwritten agreement not to fire on each other, but to deliver their shells to the opposing infantry. The mortars, anti-tank guns, and attached machine guns came up after dark, and 28 Battalion tied in on the right flank. It is a very comforting feeling to have your own supporting arms behind you, no matter how good the Americans may be—they might not speak the same language should quick support or retaliation be asked for. It is also reassuring to have the Maori Battalion handy.

The 23rd Battalion was in reserve, and 5 Brigade was poised ready to make

another bridgehead across the Rapido and put the tanks across as soon as the Americans captured Cassino. They already had a bridgehead further north and a footing in the outskirts of Cassino town. Further west and north they held a line of strongpoints in the craggy hills, one of which, Point 445, separated by a ravine, was within 300 yards of the Abbey.

The night of 6-7 February was as busy as the day had been quiet. Brigade had ordered the battalion to reconnoitre the river bank and its approaches, with a view to the early crossing. The patrols were instructed to be back before dawn, not to cross the river, and not to lose any prisoners. It was hoped that the secret move from Orsogna was still a secret as far as the enemy was concerned.

The early part of the night, cold, frosty and moonlit, was like any other night in the front line of a static position—occasional shells whining high overhead, odd short bursts of small-arms fire from a nervous lookout beginning to imagine things, or a lazy one cleaning his rifle the quick way, and periodic flares that make patrols halt in their tracks and hope they look like trees.

Half an hour after midnight Battalion Headquarters was electrified by a phone call from Major Abbott. His company headquarters was surrounded by enemy. The house, a typical farm dwelling, was built of stone, and Company Headquarters occupied one room and an Italian family the other. There was a sentry at each end of the building outside, while inside Abbott and Second-Lieutenant Turley ¹ were studying various routes to the river, which the latter had just returned from examining. Sergeant Babe and his two-man patrol entered and reported that they had tied in with the left flanking troops, and then left to get some sleep. Babe had returned to see about something, when a couple of shots were heard and he went outside to investigate. He walked right on top of a German who dropped a grenade and darted around the side of the house. Babe kicked the grenade sufficiently far away to suffer only shock and some splinters when it exploded.

Major Abbott identified himself over the phone by using his Christian name, Brian, and one of the Germans called out, 'Brian, come on out and surrender!' He declined the invitation.

Between phone calls to the forward platoon to come and chase the Germans

away, Abbott exchanged shots with the enemy through the door and a shuttered window. It was a case of stalemate: the enemy patrol was outside and could not enter, nor could Company Headquarters emerge into the moonlight. The Germans solved the problem by leaving before the relief arrived. The serious aspect of the affair was that the secret that 2 NZ Division was on the western front was out, for a check-up revealed that one sentry and the two men of Babe's patrol were missing. The other sentry, an anxiety neurosis case awaiting evacuation, was found hiding with the Italians in their room.

While Abbott was searching for the missing men, Second-Lieutenant Fitzgibbon ² with a three-man patrol from D Company, was returning from the river bank. His party spotted an enemy patrol returning home and deployed across the track they were both using. When the Germans, dispersed and in line, were close enough the patrol opened fire, and a confused fight followed until the New Zealanders ran out of ammunition, whereupon they retired.

The firing and yelling was close to B Company's outposts, and Major Hawkesby sent Second-Lieutenant Burton ³ with his platoon forward to investigate. They saw the patrol coming in and covered them until they were in safety, for not only were the patrollers out of ammunition but they were helping Fitzgibbon, who had been wounded in the skirmish. They had also picked up a German anxious to surrender. He had been moving cautiously around calling 'Kamerad' and had volunteered the information that his party was twelve strong. Later two more wounded Germans were found in front of B Company, which suggested that the New Zealand patrol had had the better of the argument.

Fitzgibbon was not badly hurt and was soon back with D Company. His binoculars were picked up the next night, and their condition explained why he had complained of a pain in the chest when there were no signs of a wound: one barrel contained a piece of hand grenade and the other was full of powdered glass and a spandau bullet.

In the morning the Brigadier's comments were a little terse and included an instruction to reorganise the battalion sector. For a few days the quickest way to achieve unpopularity around Brigade Headquarters was to mention raiding parties or 21 Battalion.

It was a day of smoke drifting down from an American attack on Cassino, and it was followed by a sleepless night owing to the presence of American self-propelled guns close up and firing in support of the still raging battle. D Company moved into closer support, the outposts were re-sited to give better coverage of the over-long battalion front, but beyond minor alarms of enemy working parties and patrols, nothing more of note occurred.

The battalion, less D Company, was relieved during the night of 10-11 February by the Divisional Cavalry, operating as infantry; D Company returned to the battalion on the 13th. Hard frosts and fine days had given way to rain, and the sodden troops were glad to get out of the mud into bivouacs near San Pietro, about eight miles east of Cassino. It was an area of camouflaged dumps, with the troops living under olive trees. The Americans had fought over the area, which they had christened Cemetery Ridge, and emphasized the name by building a large cemetery on its side. The place was still a mess, with temporary bridges over and detours around blown culverts, cratered crossroads, mine warnings and wrecked houses. San Pietro, on the side of Cemetery Ridge, was a typical war-torn Italian village; in its narrow cobblestone streets a few Italians were trying to restore their homes to some sort of order.

The first battle for Cassino ended after ten weeks of continuous fighting with the Germans still in possession, and, as previously arranged, it was now over to New Zealand Corps.

The Corps was commanded by Lieutenant-General Freyberg and consisted of 2 NZ Division, 4 Indian Division, and two task forces of American tanks. The New Zealand Division was commanded by Major-General Kippenberger, who had relinquished 5 Brigade to Brigadier Hartnell. ⁴ The Corps' plan was for 7 Brigade of 4 Indian Division to follow the route fought over by 2 United States Corps to within 300 yards of the Monastery, while 5 New Zealand Brigade was to cross the Rapido just south of Cassino. The two brigades were then to clear the town, and a task force of American armour, with 21 Battalion in support, was to exploit through the Liri Valley.

On the New Zealand sector the only possible route into Cassino for tanks was along the causeway that carried the railway line to the station a mile south of the town. Both sides of the causeway were waterlogged and the embankment itself

thoroughly mined and demolished.

The Maori Battalion was detailed for the attack. The axis of advance was the railway line and the station its objective. Behind it the engineers would clear mines and fill demolitions so that the armour could get up, support the assault, and enlarge the bridgehead.

The second battle of Cassino opened on the night 17-18 February, with 21 Battalion on two hours' notice to move. By daylight the Maoris were in the railway station, but the engineers, in spite of superhuman efforts, had been unable to fill all the breaches in the embankment. Both assaults were necessarily on narrow fronts. The Indians were unable to close on their objective, and in the absence of armoured support the Maoris were driven from the station by fierce tank and infantry counterattacks. The 21st Battalion remained in reserve while Corps considered new plans.

The revised plan was for an attack on Cassino from the north, where we already had a footing on the outskirts of the town. The assault would be preceded by an air blitz with a thousand tons of bombs, which would paralyse the defence and destroy all but the most solid buildings. Sixth Brigade would then capture the town and the dominating spur of Castle Hill, whereupon the Indians would be able to use the natural line of approach to the Monastery. It was necessary to seize Castle Hill from the town side, as the north face was almost sheer and was pitted with caves sheltering machine-gun crews.

The operation orders for the second New Zealand Corps' attack were briefly:

- 1. The 6th NZ Infantry Brigade, with 19 Armoured Regiment under command, was to capture Cassino and Point 193 and then secure a bridgehead over the Rapido.
- 2. The 4th Indian Division, with C Squadron 20 Armoured Regiment, was to secure Point 193 after its capture by 6 Brigade, and attack across the eastern slopes of Monte Cassino and take the Abbey.
- 3. The 2nd NZ Divisional Engineers were to construct bridges over the river and clear the railway embankment and roads into the town.
- 4. US Task Force 'B' (approximately one battalion of medium tanks, with tank destroyers and 21 Battalion and New Zealand engineers under command) was to cross the first bridge completed and enlarge the bridgehead.
- 5. US Task Force 'A' (approximately one armoured brigade group) was to remain in reserve for subsequent exploitation.

The attack was to be put in at the earliest possible moment, as it was essential to relieve the pressure on the Anzio bridge- head. All that was needed was a spell of fine weather to dry out the Liri Valley for the armour, and to enable the heavy bombers to take off from their waterlogged aerodromes. The troops were moving into position on the 20th—and it rained and rained and rained.

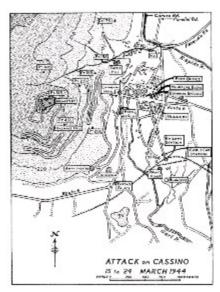
The 21st Battalion, under six hours' notice, did routine training for three weeks, while early spring covered the countryside with blossoming fruit trees, the oaks and the poplars came into leaf, and the grape vines sprouted.

The 78th Division took over the half-frozen and wholly saturated river line, including the area 21 Battalion had handed over to the Divisional Cavalry. Sixth Brigade hid up all day in the houses along the edge of Cassino, where it was mortared all night and mortared the enemy in return.

It was with a sense of personal loss that the battalion heard on 2 March that General Kippenberger—known as 'Kip' even to the newly joined recruit—had been seriously wounded. He had commanded 5 Brigade for so long that few could remember it before his time. He had made his presence felt at Kabrit in January 1942 when he took the battalion to pieces for slackness, and almost his last appearance in front of the troops was to recount the deeds of the brave men who had been in the unit and who had passed on to promotion, to hospital, or to a soldier's grave.

By 14 March the ground was sufficiently dry for the passage of tanks, and so, after several exasperating postponements, the attack on Cassino was fixed for the following day. The 21st Battalion left early in the forenoon by truck for its lying-up area near Monte Trocchio, where the American armour was concentrated. While the trucks edged into the fifty-mile-long stream of traffic, wave after wave of bombers roared overhead intent on the elimination of Cassino. The companies dispersed in creek beds and ditches and behind hedges and listened to the noise of 600 guns pouring an avalanche of shells into what the bombers had left of Cassino. The area was shelled spasmodically and there were some casualties. Sixth Brigade followed the barrage into the town in the afternoon and 21 Battalion waited all night for the word to advance. There was some shelling, and the troops with North African experience renewed their

acquaintance with the six-barrelled mortars, or nebelwerfers as the Germans called them. The Americans disliked the nebelwerfers intensely and had spotter aircraft up as soon as one was fired. The Germans kept these weapons in caves, ran them out on rails from time to time to fire a salvo, and then returned



ATTACK on CASSINO 15 to 24 MARCH 1944

them to their hideouts. Possibly because these mortars did not fall in their vicinity, the troops christened them 'Moaning Minnies', but the more popular title was 'The Andrews Sisters'. Their awe-inspiring shriek was almost as alarming as their shower of bombs.

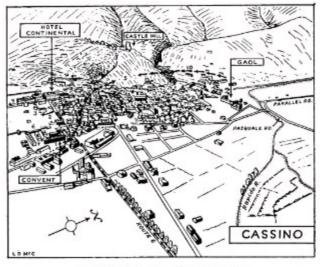
By daylight it was evident that the attack on Cassino had not gone as well as was expected. Another day and a night passed, and the battalion was bombed alternately by German pilots who knew what they were doing and Americans who did not. On the evening of the 18th the unit, still on two hours' notice, returned to San Pietro. There was some reorganisation in the battalion command, for, besides 15 casualties at Trocchio, three senior officers had gone off strength within ten days. Major Roach, second-in-command, had been evacuated sick on 8 March; Major Bailey, acting second-in-command, had been wounded at Trocchio; and Major Abbott was evacuated sick that night.

Major Tanner, himself slightly wounded at Trocchio, became second-incommand to Colonel McElroy; Second-Lieutenant Kirkland commanded A Company; Major Hawkesby remained with B Company; Major N. B. Smith, who had been away from the unit since North Africa, went to C Company; Captain Harding took over D Company, and Captain Robertson stayed with Support Company.

The situation in Cassino was that the town had been occupied, with the exception of vital enemy strongpoints situated along Route 6 where, after passing through the town, it turned sharply left and joined the railway before entering the Liri Valley. From right to left the Germans occupied the Continental Hotel, the Hotel des Roses and the Baron's Palace, as well as the higher ground at the foot of Monte Cassino, and possibly the Monastery itself directly above. In front of the strongpoints were several small streams, insignificant obstacles ordinarily but now dammed by fallen masonry, while the hotels, once multi-storied buildings, had been shattered into rubble heaps. They were stronger military obstacles after demolition than before, because their garrisons, ensconced in their cellars, were safe from shellfire.

The 23rd and 28th Battalions had already been thrown into the battle, and the 21st was the only fresh unit left. In the morning after its return from Trocchio (19 March), Colonel McElroy was ordered to move the battalion into Cassino the following night.

Cassino had been divided into two areas, with Highway 6 as the inter-brigade boundary. Fifth Brigade was north of the



21 BATTALION OPERATIONS IN CASSINO

21 battalion operations in cassino

- 1. Convent where battalion assembled.
- 2. 16 and 17 Platoons D Company move up Route 6 towards Continental Hotel.
- 3. House from which 17 Platoon was fired on. Platoon occupied it and was then held up.
- 4. 16 Platoon, held up by fire down road, deploys to right.
- 5. 18 Platoon reinforces, tries to outflank Continental Hotel and is also held up.
- 6. C Company's start line.
- 7. Battalion HQ in house at end of row of workers' flats.
- 8. Hidden German tank discovered and captured by 13 Platoon.
- 9. To Hotel des Roses.
- 10. A Company's attack along Castle Hill.

highway, with 23 Battalion around the foot of Castle Hill and 28 Battalion facing and just north of the Continental Hotel. Sixth Brigade held the railway station area, with the remnants of 24 and 25 Battalions in reserve.

McElroy went forward in a Sherman tank to reconnoitre the position. He found that most of the town lay north of Highway 6 and was in our hands. The church at the outskirts of the town was a battered wreck and its crypt the only shelter. Two blocks further in brought him to a large two-storied building that had been a convent, but which was then in the same state as the church. Around the Convent were several rows of two-storied workers' flats, with the Continental Hotel about 350 yards further on. The hotel corner was heavily built up, but between those buildings and the flats around the Convent were open park lands. At least it had been open

park land before the bombers had destroyed all the drains and culverts; it was now a waterlogged marsh, swept with fire from the Hotel des Roses.

The battalion's task was to clean up the area around the Continental Hotel and relieve C Company 24 Battalion, which was marooned on Point 146, between the hotel and the first leg of the road to the Monastery. Its final objective was to capture Point 202, below the second leg of the winding road.

The only approach to the hotel was along Route 6, and it was decided to put D Company in, with C Company in support. When D Company had taken the hotel, C Company would pass through to the high ground behind and tie in with C Company 24 Battalion, whereupon a line would be formed clear of the southern end of the town.

The assaulting companies moved after dark to the debussing point a mile short of the town, where the 'I' officer, Second-Lieutenant Voss, ⁵ met them and led them to the Convent, where Colonel McElroy was waiting. The commanders held a short conference and the troops tried to get their bearings from the shelter of the Convent wall. Tracer and mortar bursts gave momentary glimpses of houses leaning drunkenly with sides shorn off, and of jagged walls of partly destroyed buildings. They had already heard of the ability of the Germans to reoccupy buildings after they had been cleared, and there were wild stories of subterranean tunnels. The truth is, of course, that the paratroops holding Cassino were among the best troops in the German Army, had sworn to hold it at all costs, and had sufficient local knowledge to infiltrate between the New Zealand posts after dark.

Captain Harding decided to sent 16 and 17 Platoons up, one on each side of Route 6, and retain 18 Platoon with him in reserve at Company Headquarters, which was set up in a house adjacent to the Convent. C Company also took temporary shelter in the same area.

There was a moon by the time the two platoons moved around the end of the Convent on to Route 6, with 16 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Dewson ⁶) on the right and 17 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Rabarts ⁷) on the left-hand side. No. 17 was stopped within a hundred yards by a water-filled bomb crater and crossed to the other side behind 16 Platoon. There was a burst of small-arms fire close behind the

platoon, but evidently not meant for it, so it carried on. In actual fact Second-Lieutenant Voss had raised a hornets' nest while looking for a suitable battalion headquarters at the other end of the Convent. He was fired on from a house at the end of a row of flats and, with two of his 'I' section, had rushed it, whereupon the occupants fled. Voss decided that the cellar would make a suitable headquarters and sent for Colonel McElroy to move in.

No. 17 Platoon had scarcely begun to move forward after crossing the road when it was fired on from a house in the open on its left. Rabarts led his platoon through trip wires to the house and occupied it after a sharp exchange of grenades. The enemy disappeared in the gloom, but fire from the Hotel des Roses prevented the platoon from emerging again. No. 16 Platoon carried on until within a hundred yards of its objective, when converging fire from Castle Hill, the Continental Hotel, and the Hotel des Roses forced it to take cover. No. 18 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Hollies ⁸) was sent up; it took a diagonal track through some shrubbery and tried for the right of the hotel corner, but was also forced into cover.

It was now about 2 a.m., and Major Smith was ordered to move C Company around the left of D Company. The line of advance was across the open morass between the Continental Hotel and the Hotel des Roses, and the distance less than 300 yards; but it was 300 yards of trip wires, barbed wire and water-filled bomb craters, with converging fire from the two hotels. Second-Lieutenant Blackie ⁹ (15 Platoon) got his troops on the start line, a road in front of the ruins behind which they were sheltering, but was not able to make any headway through the obstacles and was finally forced to take shelter in the Convent.

The moon was quite bright by this time, and McElroy decided to pull 17 Platoon back out of their isolated house. He asked for a smoke screen to assist the withdrawal, but before the platoon could take advantage of it the enemy burst through and overran the platoon, taking most of the men prisoners. No. 18 Platoon caught momentary glimpses of the attack and brought all its fire to bear, but did not stop the enemy. No. 16 Platoon was also nearly overrun at the same time. Second-Lieutenant Dewson was wounded and the position was becoming precarious, but Sergeant Feoff Mason ¹⁰ took charge and put new heart into the defence. Single-handed he evicted a post that had been established in the platoon area and reorganised the platoon.

It was nearly dawn when 18 Platoon was attacked but, with five Bren guns covering its front, the platoon broke up the attempt to rush it. German stretcher parties were busy carrying in their wounded, and two New Zealanders were seen to be lying out in front of 18 Platoon. There were no Red Cross arm bands available, but Second-Lieutenant Hollies and Private 'Pom' Pomeroy ¹¹ took the risk of being shot from the Continental Hotel about 150 yards away, and assisted them both to regain our lines.

With daylight the enemy fire increased rather than diminished, and any movement in the open was almost impossible without the protection of smoke shells. D Company's wireless set was destroyed, and what protection the company had was being pounded by nebelwerfers. No. 18 Platoon and the remnants of 16 and 17 Platoons were withdrawn to the shelter of the Convent, where they found 15 Platoon and a handful of men from 23 and 28 Battalions sheltering.

Meanwhile Battalion Headquarters, in the cellar at the end of the row of flats, could hear the starter motor of a tank warming up. None of our tanks were in the vicinity, but the noise was unmistakable and was eventually traced to the next row of buildings. That noise explained why the battalion was being fired on from the back as well as from both flanks and the front. Second-Lieutenant Voss crept like an alley cat from building to building until he located a couple of Shermans, then guided them through the maze of debris to where they could fire on the enemy hideout. Either the enemy tank saw what was coming and called for assistance, or the mortar crews did not need telling, for a positive storm of artillery and mortar shells fell on the area. It was a battle within a battle, with the enemy firing on the Shermans and the Shermans firing on the enemy hideout. No. 13 Platoon, now commanded by Sergeant Babe, was ordered to occupy the building. Ably assisted by Corporal Reg Mathers, ¹² Babe led the platoon across the open ground through the hail of fire and, with grenade and tommy gun, cleaned up the post. The platoon remained in the building until the walls fell in and it was ordered to vacate it. The wireless set in the tank was still in working order and without doubt had been directing artillery fire on our positions.

The day passed in a haze of yellow smoke and an unceasing rain of shells and mortars. Stripped of code-words, messages from the companies to Battalion

Headquarters and from Battalion Headquarters to Brigade consisted of requests for smoke: smoke in front of platoon posts, smoke in front of enemy posts, smoke thinning by Hotel des Roses, more smoke over Continental Hotel, smoke to evacuate wounded, smoke to bring up ammunition, can't wait until dark, house falling around us, more smoke while we find another house, more smoke....

In the evening the battalion commanders went out in tanks to a conference at Brigade Headquarters. Each battalion explained its position and prospects of attacking. As far as 21 Battalion was concerned there was too much water and mud to attack frontally, and the only avenue that offered a chance of success was to go around by way of Castle Hill, clamber along the hillside below the first hairpin bend in the road, and try from the west.

The plan agreed upon was for an American tank-destroyer unit to try and silence the enemy tanks in the Continental Hotel and Hotel des Roses, while A Company 21 Battalion was brought up and, with D Company 23 Battalion, attacked across the north-east slopes of Castle Hill, then swung down towards the two hotels and took the Continental from a flank. Five tanks from 19 Armoured Regiment would fire on the objective, and smoke on Monastery Hill would obscure the attack from the enemy almost directly above.

Brigade Headquarters was notified that A Company (Second-Lieutenant Kirkland) was required at all possible speed, and in five minutes under the hour it was on its way into the town. In the meantime 25 Battalion was ordered to send a company to the School to protect the right of 23 Battalion, and CO 19 Armoured Regiment was requested to support 25 Battalion in the School area.

Colonel McElroy met Kirkland with A Company at the School at a quarter to six and gave him his instructions. The first objective was a number of enemy-occupied houses on the eastern fringe of Castle Hill and was the responsibility of D Company 23 Battalion.

The advance began about 10 a.m. under heavy fire from above. More smoke was called for, but had to be delayed until a party of Indians carrying wounded from Castle Hill had passed through, whereupon the attack continued. D Company closed in and cleared two isolated buildings, then called for more smoke to protect it from

the intense shelling. A Company was scrambling along the steep face of Castle Hill. The 19th Armoured Regiment, under armour-piercing shelling, requested artillery 'stonks', and the unseen enemy above was pouring in small-arms fire indiscriminately.

By half past three D Company 23 Battalion was within a hundred yards of its objective under terrific mortar fire, and enemy troops were evacuating the Continental Hotel. But D Company was finally pinned down. A Company, on the rock face above, tried to get down, but the track it was following permitted only single-file movement under fire from snipers and rifle grenades. A reconnaissance was made to find an alternative route, but without success. By 5 p.m. it was clear that both companies were unable to move, and the attack was called off. A Company then returned to houses in support of C and D Companies.

That attack was the last effort to clear Cassino. Both the Indians and the New Zealanders were too exhausted to continue the attack, and New Zealand Corps received orders to consolidate a line running from Castle Hill to the railway station.

The change in policy made no difference to the troops in Cassino: mortar shells continued to rain down on them; one house had a nebelwerfer bomb through the roof, another an 88-millimetre shell through the wall; yet another fell on the occupants, who had to claw their way out of the ruins. There is no day, only two kinds of night—a yellow, smoky, choking night, and a black, meteor-ridden night. Nerves stretched almost to breaking point and shaking hands lighting cigarettes. Too tired to feel pleased when 22 Battalion takes over—platoon half a dozen strong. Shelled all the way out, but too tired to give a damn. Climb into the waiting trucks—somebody tries to sing but falls asleep instead.

C and D Companies woke up at midday and found it was Sunday, 26 March. The same afternoon A and B Companies and Support Company in an infantry role relieved a battalion of 78 Division in the old river sector opposite Sant' Angelo. They passed an uneventful three days there and returned without casualties.

In pursuance of the order to hold Cassino in depth, the area had been divided into four battalion sectors. The right sector was under Castle Hill, the centre contained that part of the town facing the Continental Hotel, and the third faced

Route 6 on the left of the Continental. The fourth sector was not in the town itself, but comprised the railway station and approaches. The 21st Battalion was warned to relieve the 25th in the right sector, and moved in on the night of 1 April. If the New Zealand battalions were knocked about, the enemy was in no better shape, and a sort of armistice of exhaustion had arranged itself.

The German positions were about 200 yards away, and of course movement by day was out of the question, though both sides sometimes used the same well at night. A visit to it was a very carefully organised affair.

C and D Companies had been pooled and, though they remained two companies, were shuffled into what they called 'Bitza companies', each platoon composed of bits of C and bits of D. 'Bitza' D Company, now commanded by Major Copeland ¹³ (recently returned from a tour of duty in New Zealand) took over the Cassino gaol. They were very pleased with their quarters in the kitchen and the solid walls around them, and considered the lack of a roof no disadvantage. Between sleeping, listening to the mortars bursting against the stone walls, and keeping watch, they produced a newspaper containing all the latest news, some of it nearly true.

Owing to the bad reception in the area, some signallers with a powerful receiving set were in the gaol with a platoon of 'Bitza' D Company, and messages were relayed through them to the forward posts, and vice versa. The editorial staff of the Cassino Evening Post was thus able to get the BBC news and transmit it to the otherwise newsless troops. Printed and published at The Gaol, Spandau Alley, Cassino, the first editorial ended:

After only two days in the gaol, the proprietors are fully convinced that crime does not pay, and are quite prepared to sell their interests to anyone requiring a home.

The final edition ends on a highly moral note:

The Managing Director very upset following an insinuation that a concubine is being kept in these premises.

The Cassino Evening Post was handwritten on the back of message forms and delivered at night with the rations. And, speaking of rations, let it be clearly

understood that, although a battalion is primarily a fighting machine, it must be clothed and fed. Here is the 'Q' branch in operation:

It's April, 1944. The Bn. moved into Cassino again last night. The weather's not the best, cold and threatening rain. Bn. 2 I.C. Major Tanner, has ordered a hot meal to be taken in tonight. Coy. 2 I.C.'s will have food in hot boxes on ready to move by jeep and trailer by 18.30 hours.

The Bn. B Ech. and rest area is at San Pietro on Highway 6 about 12 miles south of Cassino. Coy. Cookhouse and Q Stores are dug in and well camouflaged. We get the occasional shell from up the Liri Valley just to remind us we are still in the war. We are reasonably safe from air strafing and bombing. We haven't seen an enemy plane for months.

Rations are brought up daily from the ration point well south, and at present Coy. 2 I.C.'s are supervising the preparation of the evening meal: hot stew made from fresh beef, with plenty of dehydrated vegetables, to be followed by rice pudding and tinned peaches. We have a little flour, so cornish pasties are being made and will be used as the mid-day meal. For breakfast this morning we had a change, good American Spam made into fritters. Quite a change from soya links.

The time is 18.30 hours. The food is ready packed in hot boxes and sand bags, the Coys have improvised Thermos packs for hot cocoa. Having poured boiling cocoa into Jerry cans, the cans have been placed in sacks and packed with straw. This will keep the drink hot for a couple of hours. The Bn. T.O. Lt. R. B. Reed, ¹⁴ and the Bn. Q.M. Capt. Vic Butler ¹⁵ make this trip every night. We take three jeeps with trailers and one fifteen cwt. for carrying the carrying party. The carrying party comes from Bn. Drivers and Coy. Storemen. The little convoy moves off just before dusk and drives quietly along Highway 6, but does not pass Mt. Trocchio feature until it's properly dark. We still have 2½ miles to Cassino along a straight highway which is under observation from the Liri Valley. Most nights it's quiet, with only the occasional shelling on Highway 6 near the crossroads to San Vittori, but it gets a little sticky down near the Rapido River. The enemy has several big guns in the Liri Valley and does the main road over at regular intervals just with the hope of catching a ration party moving in or out. We have been lucky, so far we have missed everything.

pulled off the road and the food unloaded. We have got an extra load tonight: batteries for the 38 sets, so our little carrying party is well laden down. Quietly, but efficiently the party picks up the load and moves off. We haven't far to go, only about 600 yds, but the road is all shell holes and under water in places. Lt. Reed is leading and Sgt. Ding Bell ¹⁶ is bringing up the rear. The party moves quickly and quietly, then suddenly the first mortar shells land bang square on the road, everybody is down. Herman the German certainly can put down a concentration of mortar shells just when he wants them and where he wants them. It stops as quickly as it started. Lt. Reed moves back through the carrying party, not a man has been scratched. The drivers don't like this and they're keen to get going again. We pick up our loads and get moving. We arrive in Cassino, or what's left of it. The T.O. falls in a shell hole at least 20 feet deep and narrowly misses getting shot up by a triggerhappy Maori boy who fired first and asked for the Pass Word afterwards. Lt. Voss arrived just in time to save the ration party. The food is handed over very quickly to Coy. Guides, who have been waiting with Lt. Voss. Batteries are dumped and empty containers plus a couple of walking wounded are picked up and our little party moves off again on its homeward journey. 'Seems funny how your legs move much easier on the way home', said Snow East ¹⁷ to Bill Henriksen. ¹⁸ We get back to the trucks where Cpl. Jim (Soya Link) Sawers 19 is waiting and dying for a smoke. We check everybody present, onto the vehicles and push off for San Pietro, tired, but we know the boys in the lines have a hot meal and everybody's happy. Only two more trips and the boys will be out for four days (we hope 20).

We get to the bridge over the Rapido. Everything is very guiet. Vehicles are

A battalion of Welsh Guards relieved 21 Battalion on the night of 7 April. It was Good Friday and, by way of a welcome, the troops in the Nunnery cellar had decorated their shelter with all the brass candlesticks, statues and vestments they could find in the ruined chapel above them.

The battalion's casualties from 5 February to 7 April were 16 killed, 62 wounded, and 20 prisoners of war (including two wounded), a total of 98.

¹ Lt B. C. Turley; Auckland; born Auckland, 12 Oct 1917; clerk; twice wounded.

- ² Lt R. G. Fitzgibbon, MC; Whangarei; born Whangarei, 25 Aug 1906; transport driver; three times wounded.
- ³ Maj A. E. Burton, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Christchurch, 24 Sep 1910; departmental buyer.
- ⁴ 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.
- ⁵ Lt A. J. Voss, MC, DCM; Auckland; born Mickleham, England, 3 Oct 1918; farmer; wounded 3 Jun 1944.
- ⁶ 2 Lt E. M. Dewson; Hastings; born NZ 27 May 1920; plasterer; twice wounded.
- ⁷ 2 Lt A. J. Rabarts, MM; Auckland; born England, 16 May 1915; farm manager; p.w. 21 Mar 1944.
- ⁸ Lt C. W. Hollies; Auckland; born Australia, 9 Sep 1918; bank teller.
- ⁹ 2 Lt J. T. Blackie; Auckland; born Gore, 27 Sep 1918; insurance clerk; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; released 2 Jan 1942; wounded 2 Aug 1944.
- ¹⁰ Sgt G. G. Mason, DCM; Waimamaku, Hokianga; born Kohukohu, 22 Dec 1911; truck driver; twice wounded.
- ¹¹ L-Cpl E. Pomeroy, MM; Bainham, Nelson; born NZ 9 Jan 1919; coal miner; wounded 22 Sep 1944.
- ¹² L-Cpl N. R. Mathers, MM; Te Rapa; born Hamilton, 5 Nov 1919; farmhand; wounded 2 May 1944.
- ¹³ Lt-Col A. D. Copeland, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 3 Feb 1912;

solicitor; LO GHQ MEF 1941; GSO 2, Staff College, Palmerston North, 1943; wounded 29 May 1944.

- ¹⁴ Maj R. B. Reed; Auckland; born NZ 16 Sep 1913; Auckland Metropolitan Fire Board employee; wounded 22 Jul 1942; 2 i/c Div Cav, J Force.
- ¹⁵ Maj V. C. Butler, ED, m.i.d.; Whakatane; born Auckland, 11 Sep 1907; schoolmaster; wounded 9 Apr 1945.
- ¹⁶ Sgt F. G. Bell; Auckland; born NZ 10 Jul 1910; truck driver.
- ¹⁷ Pte N. East; Auckland; born NZ 22 Mar 1914; labourer; twice wounded.
- ¹⁸ Cpl W. Henriksen; Auckland; born NZ 31 Jan 1908; truck driver.
- ¹⁹ Cpl J. W. Sawers; born NZ 12 May 1917; flax miller.
- ²⁰ Account by Lt Reed.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 14 — ADVANCE ON ROME

CHAPTER 14 Advance on Rome

New Zealand Corps had not been able to succeed where the Americans had failed, and on 26 March it was disbanded. Fifth Army relinquished the Cassino and Liri Valley sectors to Eighth Army and concentrated in the Aurunci Mountains, between the Liri and the sea, whereupon 2 New Zealand Division found itself back in Eighth Army again.

Tenth Corps and Eighth Army were to take over the Apennine mountain sector, relieving 2 Polish Corps for another attempt on Cassino. The role of the corps was in general to protect the mountain flank of Eighth Army, and the New Zealand Division under command was made responsible for the safety of the Poles' right flank. Large troop movements were involved in the reorganisation, and in the interim 5 Brigade went into divisional reserve.

The 21st Battalion left San Pietro on the morning of 8 April, rolled over a range and down to Venafro, out across a plain and a river, and into a valley near Isernia. From the top of the hills the fields in front looked like a chessboard, and from the camp area on the side of a hill with grassy slopes and tree-covered top, the country was like almost anywhere in New Zealand.

The troops built camp and settled in; the usual inspections, without which the Army could not exist, took place; the usual sudden cancelling and reinstating of leave occurred. The men of 21 Battalion relaxed, indulged in some swimming in a nearby creek, and tried not to interfere in the affairs of a number of three-foot-long black snakes that shared the area with them. An interesting event was a shipboard race meeting at which Brigadier Stewart presented the prizes. There were six races, with six horses in each. The tote rules were simple: tickets cost 20 lire; there were six purchase windows and one payout one; the tote was opened for ten minutes and no race was to start until it was balanced.

A Company's stable almost scooped the pool with four wins. The race card was typed in the battalion orderly room, and the results read:

21 Battalion Easter Race Meeting, Wed, 12 Apl 1944.

Maiden Sprint. Stake L2150.

Won by Chaos, by Detail out of Orderly Room; owned by Lt Sexton and ridden by Pte Wells, A Company.

Orsogna Hurdles. Stake L3200.

Won by Happy Again, by Kiwi out of Cassino; owned by Sgt Sylvester and ridden by Pte Rouse, Support Company.

Sangro Scurry. Stake L3110.

Won by Bashful Lady, by Unexpected Kiss out of Devilment; owned by Cpl Welsh and ridden by Pte O'Rourke, A Company.

Cassino Scramble, Stake L6400.

Won by Returned, by Kiwi out of New Zealand; owned and ridden by Maj Smith, C Company.

Berlin Stakes. Stake L3510.

Won by Sweet Music, by Bagpipes out of Hearing; owned by Sgt Brown and ridden by Pte Raunter, A Company.

Battalion Steeplechase. Stake L5270.

Won by Little Basket, by Batchelor out of Control; owned by Lt Kirkland and ridden by Cpl Perry, A Company.

The meeting was a great success and one of the highlights of the period.

In some respects it was a difficult time, for with the smoke of Cassino out of its eyes and lungs, the battalion felt new ferments working.

Firstly, there was the reaction to the return of the furlough draft farewelled so enthusiastically in Cairo; or rather those of the draft who had not remained in New Zealand. Those who had returned overseas were regarded as not quite levelheaded, while those who stayed in New Zealand were reviled for spoiling the

chances of further drafts. The 4th Reinforcements, due next for furlough, had missed only the short campaigns in Greece and Crete.

Then there was the question of the surplus senior NCOs. They were of two categories: ex-furlough-draft NCOs with a full and complete knowledge of warfare as waged in North Africa, yet strangers to Italian conditions; and ex-officers who had voluntarily relinquished their Territorial commissions in New Zealand with the waning of the Japanese menace. 'Fallen stars', the troops called the latter. The veterans were resentful at finding their places filled, and the 'fallen stars' blocked promotion for the junior NCOs. The ex-officers were in a particularly difficult position, because naturally enough the troops preferred their own battle-tried sergeants of either North African or Italian vintage to men who were their juniors in combat.

Finally, there were changes in the composition of the battalion itself. The Support Company had already been put in the line as straightout infantry with, to them, callous disregard for their specialised training, and the Anti-Aircraft Platoon was going out of existence, as also was a section of carriers.

Actually the Division was beginning to adjust itself to new conditions, for when it left Egypt it was perhaps the most heavily armed and most mobile division in the British Army. One infantry brigade had been converted into an armoured brigade with three tank regiments, prepared for a role that had not yet presented itself—that of pursuit and exploitation. It could be said in the light of after knowledge that when 2 NZ Division arrived in Italy it was trained and equipped for a war in North Africa. In a country of restricted manoeuvrability, armour was not the dominant factor in battle, and it followed that, as a corollary, anti-tank units were in over-supply. Anti-aircraft batteries also lacked employment, because German aircraft were mostly in France. In Italy it was back to first principles again—the infantry soldier with bayonet and tommy gun was the most important man, and there was not enough of him.

While the commanders wrestled with these problems, the troops, between training and camp duties, visited around. Naples was a rotten apple, fair enough to look upon at a distance, but beneath the skin a mass of corruption—a listless, half-starved population and a black market of terrific dimensions. It was crowded with American rear-area troops employed in repairing the harbour facilities and demolishing buildings that the retiring enemy had been too workmanlike to destroy

himself—he had merely put the multi-storied structures in such a state that they were beyond repair, liable to collapse at any moment, and they had to be pulled down. The semi-millionaire American troops had bought up everything worth while, leaving the Kiwis the choice between third-grade silk stockings and cameo rejects saved for tourists, and there were daily notices of shops put out of bounds for profiteering.

Caserta, nearer home, was a hospital town, where 2 NZ General Hospital shared an Italian army barracks with an English hospital. Caserta also contained a royal palace, a summer residence of the King of Italy, an enormous building with grounds to match; but the rank-and-file Kiwi had more chance of becoming familiar with the interior of 2 General Hospital.

Pompeii was different. You cannot do much to spoil a show place that has been buried for nearly two thousand years, except to sell obscene postcards. The troops roamed the ruins of the amphitheatre and inspected the tiny stone rooms where the lions were housed for the games. They visited the homes, wineshops, gambling and assignation houses, and thought that the ancient Pompeiian's idea of permanently running water in the streets an improvement on the present-day practice of roadside sanitation with its attendant smells and putrefaction.

The third week in April was the end of the rest period, and there was the usual bustle of preparing battle packs, getting rid of personal gear, and writing home. The 21st Battalion's destination was the Colle Abate salient, in the mountains west of the Rapido and about five miles north of Cassino. On 21 April the column travelled through Venafro and San Vittore to Cervaro, where there was a long delay because of congestion ahead. It was an unfortunate place to have to halt a convoy, for the stretch of road was under enemy observation and within shell range. There was a rushing roar, and a dozen high-explosive shells fell among the trucks, causing three casualties before the troops could find shelter. It was fortunate that the shelling did not persist.

The column remained there until dark, when the move was continued along the Michele track, a country lane that the engineers had improved but which was still rough, steep, and winding. The ridge-top village of Portella was reached safely, and Major Tanner established B Echelon at Hove Dump nearby.

From Portella the road wound down in a series of hairpin bends to the Rapido below, crossed the river at Sant' Elia, then again writhed its way up the other side to the mountain village of Terelle. Terelle was held by the enemy, and the road from Portella forward, the much-shelled Terelle 'Terror Track', was possible for convoys only after dark. It was less than two miles from the front line, in full view for most of the way, and the enemy gunners knew every yard of it.

The 21st Battalion, after debussing near Portella, moved down into the valley by another foot track, crossed the Rapido, and entered the lying-up area—a steep, narrow, tree-covered ravine at the bottom of Colle Belvedere. The walking distance was approximately five miles but, carrying a blanket, greatcoat, leather jerkin, gas cape, arms and ammunition, it took nearly three hours. A hot meal arrived at 1 a.m., after which the troops bedded down and were torn to pieces by mosquitoes.

As soon as it was dark enough the next night the troops assembled for the climb into position, and at 8.30 p.m. started up the track that was the battalion axis. Further forward there was a road to the top of the ridge used by jeep trains with rations and supplies. It doubled back on itself ten times before reaching jeep-head at the top, where the supplies were transferred to mule trains and delivered to the various units holding the mountain line. The position had recently been won by French colonial troops, the legendary Goums, who came from the Moroccan highlands and to whom, apparently, inaccessible precipices were child's play.

Battalion Headquarters was set up at jeep-head, half a mile above the valley of the Rapido, and when the all but exhausted troops staggered into the area they found the climb had merely started. The position was astride a road that led onwards and upwards to the ridgetop village of Terelle, with a valley dividing the opposing forces. For B Company (Captain Ashley) on the right flank, there was still another 700-foot climb on to Colle Abate, a mile further forward, the highest point in our lines and the key to the area. D Company (Major Copeland) plus 14 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Oates) held the centre with a gully between them and Colle Abate. A Company (Captain Kelleway ¹) straddled the Terelle road on the left of the battalion line and C Company (Captain Harding), less 14 Platoon, was near Battalion Headquarters in reserve. Altogether it took five hours of stumbling, slipping, and scrambling to get into position, and nobody who took part in that nightmare climb

will ever forget it.

There was no more than normal sporadic fire during the relief, which was effected by degrees as the less fit struggled up the side tracks that led to the company and platoon areas. By the time the changeover was complete there was a bare hour of darkness to settle into the sangars built with rocks and roofed over with blankets. The English garrison said the day was divided into two periods, one of 17 hours of daylight, when movement was impossible, and one of seven hours of darkness, which was full of movement. Water had to be carried up from wells scattered over the area, each ranged to a yard by enemy mortars. Boxes of rations, ten men's rations for one day in each box, had to be brought up and distributed and the empties returned. Cooking was out of the question, but an issue of heat tablets permitted an occasional brew up. Ammunition and grenades had to be replenished. In addition enemy patrols were likely to turn up at any moment, let go a burst of spandau, and disappear. No, we do not know where the enemy FDLs are, somewhere across the valley, but there are plenty of snipers hidden around, as you will very soon find out. Well, goodbye, and we hope you have a quiet time, which was more than we had.

The troops waited for the mountain mists to clear to see if the Tommies had been having them on. They found themselves perched on the forward slope of a ridge with a deep valley in front and the village of Terelle on a hill on the far side. To the right nothing but hilltops; to the left more hilltops; beyond Terelle the white pyramid spire of Monte Cairo, and behind them the flat valley of the Rapido.

Very soon snipers were knocking chips off the sangars and shells were being exchanged by the opposing gunners. Definitely the Tommies had not been exaggerating.

The orders were to rest and not look for trouble, but what really upset B Company, who from their Colle Abate salient could look over the crest of the enemy ridge, was the sight of their opponents airing blankets and, stripped to the waist, sunbathing in odd corners. Even the most easy-going Kiwi could hardly be expected to put up with that sort of thing, especially as, owing to the configuration of the country, he was forced to crouch behind a heap of stones or risk being shot at from both flanks, from Terelle above him, and from the ridge in front.

The suggestion was passed to the attached machine-gunners that a little indirect fire would relieve B Company's feelings, but Colonel McElroy was quite harsh over the disturbance which followed. Thereafter Jerry sunbathed in peace.

As soon as darkness fell patrols nosed around gaining a little local knowledge, but found no enemy. Nightingales and cuckoos sang and called to each other, for spring was in the air. Mail came up with the rations, and Anzac Day passed with the troops alternatively sleeping, brewing up, or playing crib. Major Trousdale, who had left the battalion in Libya, rejoined as second-in-command, and Major Tanner went on leave before returning to A Company. Routine shelling with some airbursts in the afternoon spoilt the day, and noise of movement at night was answered by the battalion mortars, who had inherited a good pile of ammunition and were aching to use it. Rain on the 26th made life miserable under the blanket roofs of the sangars, but a yell from the top of Colle Abate, followed by a burst of small-arms fire, confirmed the story of daylight raids. An enemy patrol had been spotted in the gully between B and D Companies and had disappeared in the mist, but it must have been peeved by the reception accorded it for D Company was mortared for two hours. The battalion mortars still had plenty of ammunition and took appropriate action in reply.

The period that followed was of much the same pattern until 1 May, when the enemy registered with guns much heavier than anything previously used. May Day on the Continent is a public holiday, and the Germans in Terelle celebrated with a concert supported by a brass band. The 21st Battalion sat outside their sangars and listened until the singing ended with 'Lili Marlene', whereupon the artillery was asked to mark their appreciation in the usual manner.

The early night was quiet—too quiet—and at 2.30 a.m. the whole of the battalion front was covered with a concentration of everything that had been ranging during the day. The blitz lasted for nearly an hour and destroyed all communications, both line and air. A Company reported movement on its front, but it proved to be a feint for the attack came in between 10 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Brewer ²), on the top of Colle Abate, and 14 Platoon, across the gully on its left.

While one party engaged 10 Platoon frontally, another worked around the left and penetrated among the sangars. Brewer withdrew his forward posts to the right of the position to keep the platoon intact, and there ensued a fierce exchange of grenades until the supply ran out, whereupon the platoon fell back to the forward post of 11 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Burton), which had hitherto been unable to fire owing to the close-quarter fighting in the darkness. Burton sent a runner back to Company Headquarters with the information that the enemy was on the top of Colle Abate, and Colonel McElroy turned the battalion mortars and as many guns as could register on to the colle. The position was vital because the point, a mere heap of loose rubble, commanded the area and would have meant a deep withdrawal if the enemy remained in possession. While a counter-attack was being prepared Lieutenant Voss, who happened to be at B Company headquarters showing Lieutenant-Colonel Hutchens ³ of 26 Battalion around prior to relief by that unit, gathered a handful of runners and odd men and dashed up the hill, closely followed by a party from C Company. They found that the enemy had not been able to get established and had withdrawn, whereupon 10 Platoon reoccupied its posts.

No. 14 Platoon was also hotly engaged. It was concentrated around a farmhouse—the usual stone building with four rooms on the ground level and one large one above, but owing to the damage it had received there was no intercommunication between floors. As soon as the attack opened several mortars landed on the roof, and the resultant fall of rubble wounded Sergeant Joe Ward, ⁴ who had taken over from Second-Lieutenant Oates, slightly wounded that day, and two others in the top room. The right-hand section was forced to take shelter in the ground floor of Company Headquarters, where Ward, after dropping from the top story, joined them. The enemy brought hand-operated flame-throwers into action against the building and called on the occupants to surrender, but the left-hand section helped the besieged garrison to drive the raiders off. The casualties in this action were two killed and 18 wounded, and in due course the following signal was received from General Freyberg:

From Main 2 NZ Div to 5 Inf Bde.

For Lt Col McElroy commanding 21 NZ Bn from Gen Freyberg. I have now heard details of engagement on Abate feature. Please convey to officers and men concerned my congratulations on way in which would-be determined enemy assault was held and counter attacked and situation fully restored.

The battalion sector remained reasonably quiet until 26 Battalion arrived to take

over. It came in soon after midnight on 3–4 May and made a quiet and efficient changeover. The relieving troops moved in silently with sandbags tied around their boots, but did not carry greatcoats and blankets; 21 Battalion left theirs for them and got a new issue later.

The troops slid and slipped down the tracks to the lying-up valley, where they found a hot meal waiting. They moved out the next night to a point near Sant' Elia, where transport was waiting, and after a very rough ride along the North Road were deposited at Montaquila, about five miles north of Venafro, in the Volturno valley again.

They found everything ready for them. The LOB party and B Echelon had put up bivvies, complete with blanket rolls, and a hot meal was waiting. A good night's rest was followed by the usual routine after a spell in the line—showers, washing clothes, cleaning up, sorting out gear, absorbing reinforcements, reorganisation and routine training.

A brigade ceremonial parade was preceded by smartening-up drill, and on 8 May General Freyberg presented the recipients of awards with their ribbons. There was a brigade sports meeting on the 11th, and in the evening each battalion entertained 30 officers and other ranks from the other battalions at a smoke concert.

Thirty miles away, at eleven o'clock the same night, another entertainment of a grimmer nature commenced. The night sky flickered with dull red light, and there was a sound of distant thunder. One thousand and sixty guns in Eighth Army and another thousand in Fifth Army opened the third battle of Cassino. The Poles advanced against the fortress that had defied Americans, New Zealanders and Indians, and within twenty-four hours were largely back on their start lines again. The English troops of 13 Corps, further west, had more success, and were fighting grimly to improve a precarious advance. Still further west the French Algerian Goums of Fifth Army broke through the enemy defences in country which both sides had regarded as practically impassable.

It was not 5 Brigade's war, however, and training continued according to syllabus. The Kiwi Concert Party, newly back from furlough, put on a good show, and the ENSA Concert Party did the same the following night.

The Poles attacked again on 17 May, but it was not until after bitter fighting that the Polish standard was hoisted over the remains of the Cassino Monastery on the morning of the 18th.

Sixth Brigade, holding the mountain line, was due for relief, and warning orders came to 21 Battalion on 17 May to prepare to move that night and take over from 25 Battalion in brigade reserve. The battalion left at 6 p.m., and the convoy waited at Vallerotonda until it was dark enough to carry on down to Sant' Elia, where the troops debussed and marched to the lying-up valley.

The enemy was still holding his mountain line, although his right was being forced back across the Aurunci Mountains by Fifth Army and Eighth Army was squaring up to the second line of defence, which also, like the shattered first line, hinged on Monte Cairo.

The march up, or rather climb up, to the relief was a welcome surprise, for the sappers had made a wonderful improvement in the track. The grade had been improved and steps had been cut in the steepest parts. Less than two hours' climbing brought the battalion into the brigade reserve area, and the changeover was completed without incident. With 23 and 28 Battalions holding the forward areas, 21 Battalion passed a quiet week.

Not very far away the Canadians were preparing to blast a hole through the Hitler Line in support of the French in Fifth Army, who were looking into the rear of the incomplete defences. The main assault began on the morning of 23 May, and by the evening of the 24th the German line across Italy was withdrawing northwards.

The role of 13 Corps was to secure the right flank of the advance, and as part of that operation 2 NZ Division was directed down mountain valleys to Atina, where the roads from Cassino and San Biagio joined, and where a possible enemy threat from the Adriatic coast could be sealed off.

From Atina the thrust line continued to Sora, the capture of which would open the way through the upper Liri valley that in turn led to Balsorano and Avezzano, the objective of the Sangro-Orsogna battles. So much for strategy.

With the Poles clearing the Monte Cairo slopes, the enemy facing Colle Abate

evidently felt disinclined to leave any ammunition unexpended before departing, for the support area was under intermittent fire up to the afternoon of 25 May, when 21 Battalion was ordered to patrol along the road to Terelle after dark. The battalion plan was for D Company to advance along the lower slopes of Monte Cairo on the left of the road, C Company to move across country following the right of the road, B Company to go along the road, with engineers sweeping and clearing mines, and A Company to work on demolitions.

At this stage the companies were commanded by Major Tanner (A), Major Hawkesby (B), Major Smith (C), and Major Copeland (D). There were hours of hard climbing before the companies were in position around Terelle, but when B Company with due circumspection entered it the troops were amazed to find Colonel McElroy and Lieutenant Voss leaning out of the castle window (no village in Italy is complete without a castle), grinning like a couple of mischievous schoolboys and waving the battalion flag. That flag, a completely unauthorised piece of equipment, had its origin around Cassino and was the result of the battalion's short sojourn in the American Fifth Army. Every American formation appeared to have one, and the whole countryside was littered with masts and flags. The 21st Battalion felt rather out of it and decided to have a flag of its own. The padre was deputed to do something about it and in due course handed over the result of his labours to the CO, who with his Intelligence Officer had taken the risk of blowing themselves up on mines and had driven into Terelle ahead of the troops. That flag waved from many a castle window and church steeple before the war was over.

Some tanks and the battalion carriers were in Terelle by daylight but, with no employment offering, were being withdrawn when a burst of fire from somewhere disabled one of the carriers. Private Mick Glucina ⁵ immediately took his carrier back and, under fire, pulled the other out of trouble.

With the Poles clearing Monte Cairo, Terelle secured 5 Brigade's left flank. The 23rd Battalion was ordered to occupy Belmonte Castello, half-way up the valley that led to Atina and the important Melfa River. The 21st Battalion was to hand Terelle over to 32 Anti-Tank Battery and secure the high country on the left of 23 Battalion, while 6 Brigade would perform a similar service further east.

A Company, directed to occupy the top of Monte Piano, half-way between

Belmonte and Atina, moved off at last light on the night of 26–27 May; D, B, and C Companies followed in that order to points above the road between Monte Piano and Belmonte. It was a solid eight hours' scramble up hill and down dale, along creek beds, across plough and fallow fields, through orchards, grape terraces and plantations. A Company was the only one to meet opposition during the night's scramble. It exchanged shots with and captured an enemy observation post on Monte Piano. Four prisoners were taken, and patrols pushed down the mountainside almost to the road without further opposition. The 23rd Battalion entered Belmonte two hours after the Germans had left and followed them to Atina, which it also found empty.

A Company remained on Monte Piano. D Company moved down to the road and level with A Company, while 23 Battalion passed on to Atina. C Company joined D Company, while B stayed in reserve overlooking Belmonte.

Soon after midnight—that is on the night of 27–28 May—they were on the move again. D Company did another long climb to the top of Monte Circuto overlooking the Melfa River, while C Company passed through 23 Battalion and patrolled to the river. The bridge had been blown, but the water was not deep and the troops crossed quietly and secured the bridgehead. The enemy rearguards must have had great faith in their road demolition parties, for 120 of them were scooped up by C Company before they were properly awake.

C Company reconnoitred ahead to the inevitable crossroads that abound in this closely roaded country, while 23 Battalion crossed the river on its right. No. 15 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Blackie) was leading the company, and Corporal 'Padre' Neale ⁶ writes:

We were in file, and as the country had not been reconnoitred, we were sticking our necks out a bit. My section was sent forward about a hundred yards ahead, presumably to draw fire and give the alarm—live bait as it were.

The 23rd Battalion spread across 21 Battalion's front and secured the Mollo River crossing, while 21 Battalion concentrated for the next move, which was the capture of the hilltop villages of Alvito and Vicalvi. A Company was to move on Alvito, B Company to Vicalvi, D Company to clear Monte Morrone, between and north

of both, while C Company stayed in reserve. The battalion started along the Atina-Sora road about midday and had not gone far when B, the leading company, came under fire. Sergeant 'Humph' Ward ⁷ wrote in a letter home:

What a day of hikes! Runners located us at six, and in a few moments we were on the move through Belmonte and along the road to Atina. After marching four miles or so, we stopped by a well, cleaned up and had a meal. Then on through Atina and down the valley.

We crossed several demolitions and two rivers, and were going flat out for a village away on a hill in the distance, when a burst of fire from behind a tree fallen on the road, stopped the leading platoon, then the rattle of machine guns made everyone vanish. They were just spandau nests that had been left to delay us, but cleaning them out took time, and we had to call up the carriers with the three-inch mortars to assist. The Italians in the area came forward with valuable information, and we were greeted as liberators. I'll never forget the sight of one old woman with a water jug nipping around giving everyone a drink just when we were too frightened to move from shelter too. In the running fight we lost one man killed and a couple wounded, and collected a few prisoners —Austrian Alpine troops they were.

It was some time before the opposition was removed and the battalion was able to approach its objectives.

At 8 p.m. A Company set out for Alvito across country, while B Company moved along the road towards Vicalvi. Patrols reported Alvito clear; Major Tanner led A Company into the village to find that the report was not quite correct, and a few prisoners were collected after a little firing. The church bells were rung as a success signal, and Lieutenant Voss, who had by this time arrived from Battalion Headquarters, produced the battalion victory flag and flew it from the steeple. The celebrations, however, were a little premature, for Alvito was a peculiar place—above the village at the foot of the hill was a belt of trees, and above that another village, the real Alvito. It was a summer resort for wealthy Romans, and the enemy was there in force, as 8 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Mackintosh ⁸) discovered when it attempted to move up the road connecting the two Alvitos. Major Tanner called for tank assistance and was told there were no tanks up yet, but that some armoured cars (Staghounds) were on the way.

Meanwhile B Company was moving along the road to Vicalvi and D was preparing to tackle Monte Morrone. B Company headquarters had organised a party of a couple of prisoners to carry their heavy gear; they were very glad of their foresight, for they shared a considerable amount of fire directed against the Staghounds of the Divisional Cavalry accompanying them, and took to the fields, where they had to push through shoulder-high wheat crops. Half a mile ahead there was a crossroads that led to Alvito (right), up the hillside to Vicalvi (straight ahead), and to Sora (left). B Company was directed to remain at the crossroads for the time being and it occupied a large building. Major Hawkesby was wounded during this move and command of the company fell to Lieutenant Campbell. The hostile shelling ceased after an hour, and B Company waited for the ration truck to arrive. It waited in vain.

D Company started an hour after B Company and was halted in the same area as B Company for the same reason. When the concentration lifted, D Company emerged from the ditches the men had dived into and moved towards the track between Vicalvi and Alvito leading up to Monte Morrone. After the troops had climbed about a third of the distance to the top of Morrone, Major Copeland found that he had only two platoons with him and decided to wait for daylight.

By this time two Staghounds had reported to Major Tanner. After the position was explained, they offered to go straight up the track without waiting for minesweeping operations, in spite of the fact that several of their number had already been knocked out by mines and shelling. No. 8 Platoon and 9 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Sexton) followed the armoured cars; the enemy departed hurriedly down the far side of the hill, and the troops consolidated. The battalion was going to stay on the Alvito- Vicalvi line, and as Alvito was a village of some importance the CO had told Major Tanner to act as Town Major. The position at 3 a.m. on 29 May, therefore, was that A Company had occupied Alvito, B Company was sheltering in a house near Vicalvi, D Company was waiting for daylight on the side of Monte Morrone, and C Company was at Battalion Headquarters in reserve. Somewhat intrigued by evasive answers to his inquiries about the state of affairs in Alvito, Colonel McElroy decided to drive up and see for himself. He heard most unwarlike sounds coming from a large house in the upper village and walked in on a dance that had been organised in honour of the new Town Major. The CO stepped a

stately measure with the hostess before he withdrew to carry on with the war.

D Company began climbing again shortly before daylight and encountered an enemy strongpoint, which was captured after a stiff fight and 24 prisoners taken. Ammunition was getting low, and the troops discarded their own arms in favour of their opponents', who had not been climbing like mountain goats for three days, and then pushed on to the top of Morrone, where they found the best part of a German battalion waiting for them. A counter-attack in company strength was beaten off, and D Company dug in. A second and heavier attack was repulsed with difficulty and the outlook was gloomy. Battalion Headquarters could not be raised on the air, but after repeated attempts a Divisional Cavalry armoured car picked up the signal and relayed it to Brigade Headquarters. A mortar concentration was immediately laid on, and D Company, assisting its wounded, who included Major Copeland, returned to Battalion Headquarters and went into reserve.

B Company sent a patrol towards Vicalvi at first light, but it was fired on and returned. Artillery assistance was called for and, before D Company was forced off Morrone, B Company attacked Vicalvi. As soon as the shelling ceased, and before the troops were properly moving up the hill to the village, there were sheets, towels, and anything white waving from every house. The rearguard had left and Italians—men, women and children—came out of the houses yelling, screaming, laughing and singing, crying and praying. They rushed on the nonplussed attackers, shaking hands, patting backs, hugging and kissing the embarrassed deliverers. Bottles of wine were handed around, the areas where mines had been placed were pointed out, and then the procession led the company to the castle around which the village was built.

Company Headquarters set itself up and made itself very comfortable in the living room of the castle, and by dark the position was secure. Ration trucks had been delayed by the road demolitions and the troops were glad to see the QM arrive in the morning. The 'Q' branch added to its stature by not only arriving but also by bringing extra rations souvenired from knocked-out Staghounds and tanks along the road. For the rest of the day the billy was never off the boil.

A very vigilant eye was kept on Monte Morrone, clearly a rearguard position of the retreating Germans, until the Maoris continued the advance in the evening (29– 30 May).

While the battalion rested after its strenuous days on the mountainsides, days that brought an approving signal from Brigadier Stewart, 'Well done 21 Bn Goums', armoured reconnaissance patrols poked up side roads and 6 Brigade was coming up. Further west Eighth Army had cleared the lower Liri valley, and Fifth Army was fighting in the Alban Hills south of Rome.

The occupation of Sora by the Maoris, with 23 Battalion clearing the hills on their right flank, prepared the way for a further push along Route 82 to Balsorano and Avezzano, the objective of the previous campaign on the Adriatic coast. It was again the turn of 21 Battalion to take the lead, and it handed over its comfortable quarters to 22 Battalion on 1 June, slept on the side of the road, and moved off the next day in convoy for Balsorano. The valley was to be cleared by 2 NZ Division on a two-brigade front, with 6 Brigade on the western and 5 Brigade on the eastern side of the river. Immediately south of Balsorano the hills commanding the road were steep enough to be called an escarpment, and their clearance was a necessary preliminary to the attack on the town.

The companies moved in the order of C (Major Smith), D (Lieutenant Voss), A (Captain Kirkland), and B (Lieutenant Campbell) to a point on the road three miles short of Balsorano. A and B Companies were to stay in reserve. They discovered a dry creek bed, also a patch of new potatoes and green vegetables, and set about organising a meal for themselves. C and D Companies girded their loins for the 2500-foot climb to the top of the 'Katipo Feature', as the escarpment had been named. Company commanders were instructed before departure not to get involved in heavy fighting.

C Company left after dark and marched, along the road for half a mile to a steep wadi, up which they clambered, then across gullies to the top of the escarpment. D Company took a longer route, with equally hard climbing, to between C Company and the road. Both companies reported that they were on top before daylight. Lieutenant Voss sent 16 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Gledhill ⁹) forward as soon as it was possible to see, and within a few minutes the chatter of automatics, the whine of grenade fragments, and shouted commands in English and German told their own tale. The enemy had 16 Platoon pinned down and almost surrounded. There was

only one thing to do—fix bayonets and charge. The two platoons swept forward, with the sun glinting off the steel, and the Germans pulled back. Voss and Gledhill were both wounded in the mêlée, and Second-Lieutenant Fitzgibbon, now in command, decided to withdraw the company back to the road as the enemy force was much stronger than his own.

There was no report from C Company, out on the right, after daylight. When wireless contact could not be made, a patrol was sent out to locate it, without success, and it was not until midday that a runner came in with the information that the company was safe in a position overlooking Balsorano but was not able to move in daylight.

At 4 a.m. B Company was sent to test the road into Balsorano. It passed through tanks waiting for bulldozers to fill in demolitions to within half a mile of the town before it was fired on. Second-Lieutenant Burton, leading the company with 10 Platoon, asked Sergeant Cliff Harris, ¹⁰ commanding 11 Platoon, to come up on the right flank and create a diversion, but Lieutenant Campbell, with his orders to keep out of heavy fighting in mind, ordered a withdrawal to some houses on the side of the road. It was there that B Company witnessed an incident that culminated in the whole company recommending a sapper officer for a decoration. Burton writes:

While in this casa we witnessed a magnificent piece of work by a bulldozer driver in the engineers. Two officers, who had been making a forward reconnaissance in a 'dingo' scout car, got stranded in a big blow left by the Hun and were being sniped at from the hills; they managed to get out and make a run for our casa which they reached safely. The 'dozer' driver ¹¹ who was sheltering with us offered, if the tanks would give him a smoke screen, to do something about the 'blow' so that the scout car could get clear. He did a magnificent job with the result that eventually [he was able to push the dingo back onto the road].

The companies stayed in their positions all day, and plans were made for another attempt to enter Balsorano after dark. A Company was instructed to join D Company and return to the top of the escarpment, where a strongpoint facing the road was to be established. C Company was recalled by a message sent with the runner who had reported in earlier, and 23 Battalion prepared to cover the rear of the two companies' strongpoint. C Company reported back at 10 p.m. and D and A

Companies left at 3 a.m. They were not long gone before they wirelessed that, on account of the difficult terrain and severe opposition, they would not be able to advance further without being engaged in heavy fighting. They were accordingly told to return, and Brigade Headquarters made plans to pass 23 Battalion around the right of 21 Battalion and try from another direction. The operation, however, was cancelled before the battalion moved, owing to a change in higher policy. The 21st Battalion stood fast during 4 June, and 6 Brigade prepared to attack Balsorano from its side of the valley. It was a day of intermittent mortaring from the stubborn enemy rearguard, but it ended with the electrifying news that Fifth Army had entered Rome.

There was now no point in forcing the enemy rearguard out of Balsorano—he would have to withdraw in any case—and the 6 Brigade effort was cancelled.

Enemy activity was on a much smaller scale the following day, and after a battalion conference the welcome news was announced that 21 Battalion was being relieved by the Divisional Cavalry and that 5 Brigade was moving back, while 6 Brigade continued harrying the enemy rearguard.

The troops marched back to the embussing point after dark and were carried back to B Echelon, five miles south-east of Sora, where they bedded down for the night.

In the morning of 6 June the troops set about making camp, cleaning weapons, checking gear, and all the usual routine after a period of action. The wireless brought the news of the landing in France, and that was the end of all work for the day. Discussion groups formed, broke up and reformed; platoon strategists agreed that it would not take more than a fortnight —three weeks at the latest—to enter Berlin. The heat of the day, the dust, and the discussion provoked an intense thirst, and the landing was suitably celebrated.

The enemy vacated Balsorano and 6 Brigade advanced on Avezzano. Fifth Brigade played games, swam in a nearby lake, discussed the latest bulletin from France, and offered advice to 'Monty' and the Allied General Staff.

There was a muster parade on the 12th at which Lieutenant-Colonel McElroy announced that he was marching out on furlough to New Zealand, and he thanked

the battalion for the way it had worked under his command. Everybody agreed that the Colonel deserved his trip home. He was a foundation member of the battalion, a double DSO, and had probably seen as much action as any battalion commander in the Division.

A brigade movement order was received the same night, directing a route march to Arce, about twenty miles north-west of Cassino, where the Division was concentrating.

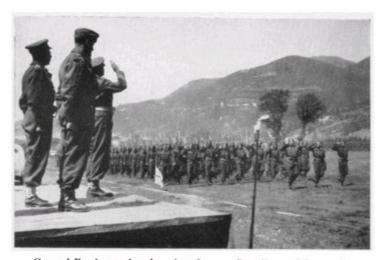
The troops commenced marching at 4 p.m. The first hour was a long steep climb as the road wound up a ridge. At Fontechiari the battalion left the road and struck across country through Arpino to the camping area a mile beyond the town. After tea the troops retraced their steps to Arpino to have a look around and maybe sample the local brew. Arpino is off the main road a couple of miles, and the inhabitants had not seen many troops since the Germans had departed. They were plainly puzzled about the nationality of their visitors, whose actions quite clearly indicated their desire for liquid refreshment and their ability to pay for it. As is usual in most Italian towns, English-speaking inhabitants were soon located and the troops heard all about the German occupation. Actually very little damage had been done to the place beyond destroying the largest buildings and the electric, water, and telephone installations.

The troops were marching again at 4 a.m., and by seven o'clock had reached the battalion area at Arce. The usual round of elementary training and smartening-up exercises were suffered with as much grace as possible. It was now almost mid-summer, and the routine was early reveille, training in the morning, and sports in the afternoon. An instructional class for junior NCOs was set up and a course for snipers commenced. Instructors from other arms lectured on subjects of interest and the need for understanding each other's problems. There were manoeuvres with tanks and picnic leave to Lake Albano. In the evening there were pictures and concert parties. A small amount of leave to Rome began on the 18th; it was soon noticed that the lucky ones were mostly Catholics, whereupon wholesale conversions appeared probable. The necessity of having the change of persuasion noted in paybooks brought the matter to the notice of the authorities, who took the hint, and thereafter the selections were more evenly spread. On the same day the Colonel left

on his furlough and Major Trousdale took temporary command of the battalion until Lieutenant-Colonel Thodey, ¹² from 4 Armoured Brigade, marched in early in July.

In the best Army tradition leave to Rome was cancelled on 8 July and reinstated with an increased quota on the 9th; and the next day was spent in packing up preparatory to moving north the following morning.

The battalion's casualties from 23 April to 4 June were 13 killed, 64 wounded, and two prisoners of war, a total of 79.



General Freyberg takes the salute from 21 Battalion at Montaquila. Brigadier K. L. Stewart and Lt-Col H. M. McElroy are on the dais

General Freyberg takes the salute from 21 Battalion at Montaquila. Brigadier K. L. Stewart and Lt-Col H. M. McElroy are on the dais



Battalion parcels, south of Sora

Battalion parcels, south of Sora



A direct hit on a carrier at Gatteo

A direct hit on a carrier at Gatteo



Serravalle, in the divisional rest area in the Apennines

Serravalle, in the divisional rest area in the Apennines



Officers and sergeants serve Christmas dinner for a platoon near Faenza

Officers and sergeants serve Christmas dinner for a platoon near Faenza



Going forward along Via Emilia (Route 9) near Castel Bolognese

Going forward along Via Emilia (Route 9) near Castel Bolognese



Bailey bridge over the Lamone—from captured German positions on the north bank

Bailey bridge over the Lamone—from captured German positions on the north bank



In the mud north of Facnza

In the mud north of Faenza

- ¹ Maj C. T. Kelleway, ED; Auckland; born Geelong, Australia, 15 May 1905; accountant; wounded May 1941.
- ² 2 Lt F. Brewer; Hamilton; born England, 23 Dec 1910; outfitter.
- ³ Lt-Col R. L. Hutchens, DSO, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Wellington; born Hawera, 26 Nov 1914; civil servant; CO 27 (MG) Bn Feb-May 1944; 26 Bn May-Jun 1944; 24 Bn Jun 1944-May 1945; wounded 21 Jul 1942.
- ⁴ Lt A. G. Ward; Hamilton; born NZ 7 Jan 1907; barrister and solicitor; wounded 2 May 1944.
- ⁵ WO II M. I. Glucina, m.i.d.; Whangarei; born Whangarei, 9 Apr 1915; metal contractor; wounded 2 Aug 1944.
- ⁶ Cpl B. H. Neale; Paeroa; born Nelson, 5 Oct 1914; civil servant; p.w. 28 May 1944.
- ⁷ WO II J. H. Ward, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born Kaponga, 24 Nov 1913; school-teacher.
- ⁸ 2 Lt G. W. Mackintosh; Huntly; born NZ 8 May 1912; accountant.
- ⁹ 2 Lt C. K. Gledhill; Gisborne; born Wellington, 3 Aug 1919; signwriter; wounded 3 Jun 1944.
- ¹⁰ 2 Lt C. C. Harris; Te Poi, Matamata; born NZ 17 Apr 1921; dairy farmhand.
- ¹¹ It was learnt later that the driver was Lt J. G. Gowan, of 5 Fd Pk Coy, who had already been awarded an MC.
- ¹² Col J. I. Thodey, DSO, m.i.d.; Perth; born Gisborne, 8 Dec 1910; life assurance officer; CO 21 Bn 9 Jul-30 Oct 1944, 25 May-2 Dec. 1945.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 15 — ADVANCE TO FLORENCE

CHAPTER 15 Advance to Florence

The pursuit beyond Rome had been swift and relentless in spite of a skilled and determined rearguard, but the Italian theatre no longer had first call on all resources of land, sea and air. The light of world publicity that had featured every incident in the Italian campaign was now switched to France; so were planes, shells, and three veteran United States and two French divisions. From this stage onwards the Italian campaign was designed to threaten an area vital to the enemy — Austria—and to force a diversion of strength from both Russia and France. In world strategy a hitherto main battleground became overnight a secondary front. But that was beyond the view of the rank-and-file Kiwi. All he knew and was concerned about was the fact that he was going into action again after, in his opinion, all too short a rest.

In actual fact there was nothing capricious in the sudden stopping of Rome leave. Divisional Headquarters had received a signal as imperative as the one recalling the Division from Syria to North Africa in June 1942, and acted on it as quickly.

The enemy had fallen back to a position around Lake Trasimene, and, after hard fighting, 13 Corps had broken through but was faced by a determined defence at Arezzo, 40 miles south-east of Florence. Two attempts to outflank the position had failed, and while Arezzo held the Germans had little to fear on the rest of the front. The whole Allied plan, therefore, was in jeopardy, for it was based on the early capture of Florence and a quick strike through the mountains to Bologna and the heart of the industrial north. The pressing need was for infantry to support 6 Armoured Division in its attack on Arezzo, and 2 New Zealand Division was the most immediately available. Sixth Brigade was detailed for the role and left on the night of 9–10 July. Fifth Brigade followed the next night.

Trucks arrived in the afternoon and the troops stacked their ear on board preparatory to moving when the time arrived to join the 1150-vehicle brigade column. The daylight hours were spent in burning rubbish, burying what could not be burnt, and giving away odds and ends to the swarming hordes of Italian women and children who invariably assembled when a move was about to take place.

The convoy rumbled through Rome, through the long straight miles of workers' tenements while their inhabitants slept, past palaces, churches and silent ruins, museums, libraries and grimy industrial buildings, and on to Route 3, where the road began to climb. Rome glistened in the growing light and, dominating the myriad spires, Saint Peter's, with its base of two and a half acres and its 400-foot-high dome, could still be seen 15 miles away. By breakfast time the convoy was dispersed in a divisional staging area at Civita Castellana, 30 miles north of the city, where it remained until the early hours of the next morning. Daylight saw it again dispersed at Paciano, a hundred miles further north. The third leg, a short one of about twenty miles, took a long time because of demolitions and detours. The enemy had defended the area tenaciously, his engineers had covered the retirement in their usual efficient manner, and the RAF had not been absent. The battalion dispersed near the hilltop village of Cortona, while 6 Brigade fought its way over the top of Monte Lignano and 6 Armoured Division made its third and successful bid to capture Arezzo. The following week was spent in training in co-operation with tanks and in being instructed by engineers on mines and mine detection. Commands in the battalion had altered considerably since Balsorano: on handing over to Lieutenant-Colonel Thodey, Lieutenant-Colonel Trousdale had spent a month as CO 2 NZEF Advanced Base before being appointed to the Prisoner-of-war Repatriation Unit in England; Major Dymock ¹ had come from 22 (Motor) Battalion; Major Hawkesby had returned from a sojourn in hospital; and Major Tanner had left to attend staff college.

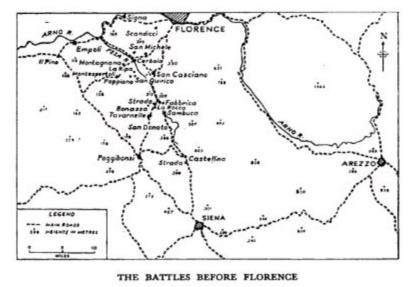
During this period the troops did several route marches to Lake Trasimene, eight miles away, and picnicked there. Lunch at the lake, followed by swimming and rowing assault boats borrowed from an engineer unit training there, made a pleasant day. Fruit was plentiful—and so were flies, ants, and bugs of various descriptions and varying voracity.

Monday, 17 July, was a memorable day. The air was electric. Something had been brewing for days, but the battalion orderly room had learnt the meaning of security, and beyond the fact that the new commanding officer would be present, there were only the vaguest suggestions of something interesting for somebody. The companies fell in, were inspected, and marched to the battalion parade ground. Colonel Thodey introduced himself, and then went on to announce that the 19

married men of the 4th Reinforcements were on the roll of the Taupo furlough draft, were excused all duties and would be marched out almost immediately. The brigade band played in the battalion area in the evening; a concert organised by Padre Duncan ² followed; and other gatherings, at which the departing Fourths were the guests of honour, organised themselves. A night to be remembered! The furlough men were inspected and farewelled by Brigadier Stewart next day and marched out the following day, while the battalion went for a long route march to get the parting celebrations out of its system. Movement orders were received in the morning.

Eighth Army had taken over from Fifth Army a 15-mile-wide sector astride the route Siena- Empoli, which was in the process of being vacated by 2 Moroccan Division. This was the quickest route to Florence, and 2 NZ Division had been directed to seize crossings over the River Arno on the thrust line Castellina- San Casciano- Signa (five miles west of the city). On the New Zealanders' right 6 South African Armoured Division would strike straight at Florence, and on the left 8 Indian Division would give flank protection and follow up the enemy withdrawal.

Fifth Brigade moved off on the morning of 21 July, but 21 Battalion, in brigade reserve, did not leave Cortona until the late afternoon. It was not a good day. The country was hilly, it was high summer, and the roads were inches deep in dust. Part of the column took the wrong turning while passing through Siena, whereupon French, American, and New Zealand provosts rushed up and down giving contrary orders in different languages. It was two hours before the transport tangle was straightened out. The halt that night was at Castellina, 50 miles north-west of Cortona, where the hundred-odd reinforcements who had joined the unit at Arce heard the rumbling like summer thunder in Egypt and did not have to be told what it really was.



the battles before florence

The general position was that the capture of Arezzo, in addition to the pressure further west, had forced the enemy into another fighting withdrawal to a new line based on the Arno. The divisional sector was held with two battalions forward, 23 Battalion on the right and 28 Battalion on the left, both supported by armour. Their instructions were to maintain close contact with the enemy and by aggressive action force his withdrawal to continue. While the situation remained fluid, each forward battalion would conduct its own advance with Brigade co-ordinating times and distances.

The operation began at daylight on 22 July and by the end of the day 23 Battalion, after some fierce fighting, was poised for the capture of Sambuca, where the River Pesa converges, on and follows the road to San Casciano, six miles further north. The 28th Battalion had an easier time and had patrolled as far as Pignano. The 21st Battalion edged up behind the forward battalions. A hot and arid ten-mile march through Castellina ended near San Donato, where bivvies were pitched and the troops listened to the BBC giving details of a bomb plot that had been designed to produce a new Fuehrer in Germany. The idea had been to eliminate Hitler and sue for peace, but though Hitler was not killed most of the plotters were. The Fuehrer went on the air in a national hook-up, firstly to prove that he was (unhappily) still alive, and secondly to order everybody to shoot everybody suspected of being in sympathy with the movement to liquidate him. Judging by the battle sounds ahead, 21 Battalion considered that the attempt had not upset the German defence of Italy to any noticeable extent.

After breakfast on the 23rd the troops packed up and moved along a road, over a couple of hills, and through San Donato to a lying-up position two miles further forward. The Maoris were in Tavarnelle and pushing on, while 23 Battalion had occupied Strada La Rocca, crossed the Pesa into Sambuca, and was patrolling up to Fabbrica. The 21st Battalion was to take over the pursuit from 23 Battalion after dark, and Colonel Thodey made a reconnaissance of the forward area. He found that 23 Battalion had at last been halted in front of Fabbrica, which was strongly held. Civilians had volunteered the information that the Germans had left Fabbrica, but when A Company 23 Battalion approached the village it was fired on at point-blank range and had to withdraw under cover of a smoke screen.

B Company (Captain Parfitt) relieved A Company 23 Battalion in Sambuca and A Company (Major Harding) relieved D Company 23 Battalion in Rocca. C Company (Major Hawkesby) moved up in close support of A Company and D Company (Major Dymock) remained in reserve. The enemy were holding Fabbrica in strength. B Company remained in Sambuca, but the Maoris were still going forward and at first light were in Bonazza. The remaining two companies of 23 Battalion were held up temporarily at a road block outside Strada. The 21st Battalion stayed in position during the 24th, while the Maoris and 23 Battalion reconnoitred ahead in the face of mounting opposition. Colonel Thodey moved Battalion Headquarters to a crossroads north of Rocca, and D Company was dispersed along the road. The men made frequent reconnaissances on their own account, but only to collect fruit and ripe tomatoes.

Armcav, a composite force of tanks, Divisional Cavalry, and a company of 22 Battalion, relieved B Company in Sambuca, whereupon the latter joined D Company, both in its reserve role and in its fruit-gathering activities. A Company, with C Company in close support, moved out of Rocca, passed through 23 Battalion during the night, and found that the enemy rearguard had departed. By mid-morning they were on the San Casciano- Montespertoli road, west of the Pesa. Thodey was ordered to stand on that line. He had lost touch with the Maoris, but they were known to be not far away.

By the end of the day, during which the battalion remained halted, the South African and New Zealand Divisions faced squarely up to the German Olga Line, which extended along the top of a ridge on the South African front to San Casciano, across the Pesa to another ridge at Poppiano, thence across the Indian Division's front.

The presence of Armcav striking at San Casciano enabled 5 Brigade to regroup, and 21 Battalion was ordered to sidestep west towards Poppiano, where the Maoris were halted, and to take over a portion of their front. Guides from the Maori Battalion reported to lead B and D Companies to their new area south-east of Poppiano. B Company's guide got lost, and the troops eventually settled into houses near to but not actually where they should have been.

Sergeant Ward gives a glimpse of the Tuscan countryside:

At three in the morning we bedded down in a house for the night and stayed there all the next day. Suited me, for I was able to look around a beautiful home. Tuscany, the wealthiest province in Italy, is made up of huge estates run on the feudal system of ancient England. Around the houses were acres and acres of flower and vegetable gardens, orchards, vineyards and park lands, all farmed by servants of the house. Evidently the owner had been on excellent terms with the Germans, for the place was not looted and in addition I collected the owner's membership card of the Fascist Union in Florence. On the top floor the chaps soon found and made use of the billiard table.

D Company had a very busy time, starting with an early reconnaissance by Major Dymock. He was looking over the area with Lieutenant-Colonel Awatere, ³ and had arrived at the left flanking platoon of the company he was to relieve. The platoon was settled in a house with all windows securely blacked out and was having a meal by candlelight, when the roof was lifted off by a bazooka or self-propelled gun. Grenade splinters and bullets ripped through the windows and within seconds a battle was raging around the house. Awatere and Dymock spent the time filling Bren and tommy-gun magazines, and the Major maintained afterwards that never before or since had he seen so many filled so quickly. The enemy withdrew after twenty minutes of furious firing, and the Maoris resumed their interrupted meal. The D Company guide had a sure eye for country, and the relief was effected by 3.30 a.m. The company was fired on quite heavily off and on during the rest of the night, and at first light 17 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Fitzgibbon), supported by a tank, went out to test the enemy strength. Three spandau nests were destroyed, but it soon

became obvious that there were more enemy than the platoon could handle. Fitzgibbon was wounded by a mortar fragment, but withdrew the platoon with six wounded back to safety.

Very little progress was made on the divisional front during the day, and at last light the enemy was still holding San Casciano on the right flank and was reported to be in strength in the Poppiano- La Ripa area. B Company made good progress with a billiards tournament.

The timetable did not call for 21 Battalion to advance until after dark that night (the 26th), when a very full programme had been arranged. A Company was to remain in position; B Company was to capture and consolidate La Ripa and remain as a firm base for 26 Battalion; D Company, with the M2 aid of a barrage, was to clear San Quirico and hold a crossroads immediately north of the village; C Company had the task of taking Poppiano, the key to the enemy line. At 10 p.m. the artillery opened with a 'stander' on D Company's start line, and an hour later the troops followed the barrage along the road to San Quirico. Fire was severe at first, but the company pushed determinedly on and through the village, searching the houses en route. An extra handicap was the short firing of a machine gun from somewhere in the rear, but the misdirected effort of the gunner caused no casualties, and D Company dug in on its crossroad objective.

As soon as the barrage started B Company left in a wide flanking movement that took it around the end of the firing. The men were sorry to part with their billiard saloon, but consoled themselves by taking a little something in their water bottles for the road. It was a wise precaution, for their route was down a long gully and across the mouths of several more gullies before they came to La Ripa, only to find the place empty.

At 4 a.m. C Company was sent to clear Poppiano. The Germans had just moved out and the sole occupant of the village square was the local priest. He led the company to the vaults under the church, where the population of Poppiano was gathered and where one prisoner who had evidently decided to desert was taken. He was the smallest German the troops had ever seen. He was so small that the fishermen among them maintained that he ought to be thrown back. After his removal the troops had to undergo one of the minor horrors of war by being soundly

kissed by all the unshaven inmates of the cellar. C Company then consolidated in the village, with 14 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Oates) and a troop of tanks in and around a castle on the forward slopes of the ridge upon which the village was situated. Mussolini was supposed to have used the castle as a hideout and shelter from air raids. If so, the rather palatable apricot-flavoured vino the troops found there might have been a favourite of his.

By this time 26 Battalion had arrived in La Ripa and had gone on down the road towards the Pesa River as the left flanking battalion of 6 Brigade. B Company was recalled and retraced its steps up the hillside it had descended a few hours earlier to D Company's road junction, where it was to join some tanks, sappers, and a bulldozer and push on to Montagnana, two miles west of 26 Battalion's objective, the town of Cerbaia. The place was being shelled, but the augmented B Company got away without casualties.

The road to Montagnana was down a long spur in full view of the enemy on the east side of the Pesa, but 6 Brigade, advancing with the evident intention of crossing the river, attracted most of the enemy's attention.

No. 10 Platoon led the way, strung out in open formation across the road, and about 300 yards in front of the tanks. Its wireless had broken down, and Lieutenant Bullock maintained communication by riding on the leading tank and watching his platoon in front. The company proceeded in this way for about two miles, when a road demolition was met. There were no mines about, so the bulldozer went ahead and, behind an infantry screen, cleared a track for the tanks.

The advance then continued to the outskirts of Montagnana, where there was a stalemate for half an hour, with the company halted and the tanks, without artillery support but with a Mark VI Tiger reported in the vicinity, reluctant to become sitting targets.

Sergeant Ward writes:

Paddy Sheehan crawled up to me and said he was tired of sitting down and thought he could see some camouflage out on the left and what about taking a look. We decided to sneak around the left flank and investigate the village. We nipped through back yards, opened doors quietly and crawled up staircases. There were no

enemy about, but they must have left in a great hurry, for there was food half eaten on the tables. The camouflage Paddy thought he saw was a fallen tree with a hay stack behind it, so we returned to the platoon with the information that the village was empty.

B Company moved into Montagnana and consolidated. It found a bigger and even more pretentious mansion than the one it had left in the early morning, but with this difference: the owner might have expressed pro-British sentiments, for everything possible, furniture, glass, earthenware and oil paintings had been destroyed, presumably by the enemy. Even the wine casks in the cellar had been broached.

The rest of the day passed on 21 Battalion's front without noteworthy incident. The Maoris assumed responsibility for the protection of the brigade's left flank, Armcav entered San Casciano, and the German Olga Line had gone. The battalion regrouped during the night. C Company moved from Poppiano and joined B Company in Montagnana; D Company stayed in position; A Company and Battalion Headquarters moved into the Montagnana area.

In the morning the Indians were seen moving up the ridge and thus securing the divisional left flank. The 23rd Battalion had passed to the command of 4 Armoured Brigade preparatory to the attack on the wooded hills north of San Casciano, the German Paula Line and the last defence in front of Florence.

Sixth Brigade, with 4 Armoured Brigade on its right, began the attack on the Paula Line, and D Company's crossroads were close enough to give a grandstand view of some of the fighting on the eastern side of the Pesa. The road was soon full of jeeps and pick-ups, and the German gunners, in spite of their preoccupation with 6 Brigade, found time to shell it.

Major Dymock remembers the occasion:

Jerry gave quite a lot of harassing mortar fire from the west, so Company Headquarters plus visitors (... the Padre and others) kept to the eastern side of headquarters house until an 88 began to work on that side as well. I remember the assembled company getting very restless under an assumed air of casualness, each

privately dying to duck away to the other side of the house, but waiting for me as senior officer to make the first move. I did so after about the third near miss from the 88, and we had not gone more than a minute when a direct hit came in through the window into the room we had just left. I have never seen such a shambles. The Padre asked me if I thought the chaps would like him to say a few words, which he did. Our visitors left during the first lull.

The 21st Battalion stayed around Montagnana until the morning of 30 July. There was fierce fighting for the Paula Line, with the enemy counter-attacking, the RAF making sortie after sortie, and the battle still undecided. The 23rd Battalion relieved two companies of 22 (Motor) Battalion, and the Maoris in turn relieved the left flank of 23 Battalion. The 21st Battalion was the last unit of 5 Brigade to vacate the area, and it moved by RMT to the town square of battered San Casciano. From there it marched into positions around that road junction, with the role of protecting the right flank of the brigade sector until the South Africans got up. The latter were strongly opposed and were still two miles or more south of the New Zealand line.

Meanwhile 6 Brigade was fighting desperately. Faltignano had been won and lost, San Michele had become a name 6 Brigade will never forget, and the Paula Line was still holding. The only event of importance that happened in 21 Battalion's area was the finding by attached engineers of an unrifled bank vault in dive-bombed San Casciano. The discoverers repaired the German omission with gelignite and shared the contents, about £200 each, so rumour went. The troops felt that a knowledge of explosives could be included with advantage in the training syllabus.

Fifth Brigade resumed the attack on the night of 30–31 July, with 23 Battalion on the right and 28 Battalion on the left, while the 21st continued to watch the right flank between the New Zealanders and the South Africans, whose forward elements were now drawing level. By the following night the brigade objective, a line running east from the Massanera crossroads and due east from San Michele, had been occupied after some hard fighting. The 23rd Battalion was relieved by a South African battalion that had come under the command of 5 Brigade, and 21 Battalion moved up to Il Pino crossroads behind the Maoris. The Division was now facing the last obstacle before Florence. The key position was the Pian dei Cerri Ridge, and the intention was for the whole Division to make a co-ordinated attack so that each brigade arrived on its objective simultaneously. La Poggiona Hill, on the eastern end

of Pian dei Cerri Ridge, dominated the road forward and was 5 Brigade's objective. The 21st Battalion was to make the brigade attack with two companies forward, each having for its objective a rocky outcrop on the side of La Poggiona called by the Italians Poggio Issi and Poggio Manache. These two outcrops were named by Brigade for reference purposes the Twin Nipples, and were referred to by the troops somewhat less delicately.

Colonel Thodey had under command for the attack one platoon of 1 Machine Gun Company, and in support a squad of 20 Armoured Regiment and two detachments from 7 Field Company with a bulldozer. He was to select his own start line, and a barrage would be provided. The Maoris were reported to have reached a crossroads two miles north of Il Pino, and it was decided to go in there. The barrage would open at the crossroads, and the Maori Battalion was to pull back out of danger before 21 Battalion passed through.

Brigadier Stewart drew up his plan of battle on the information that the Maoris were in square 7362 on the map 106–111 Signa, but the Maori Battalion had passed several crossroads during the night's fighting and was actually at the crossroads in square 7361, which is five-eighths of a mile (to be precise, one kilometre) farther south. Whether the Maoris made a mistake in plotting their position, or whether their message was mutilated in transmission, is not clear, but the brigade situation report placed them at the wrong crossroads.

The first consequence of the error was that Brigadier Stewart left at 5 a.m. on the morning of 1 August on a forward reconnaissance and drove straight into the enemy lines and became a prisoner for the duration. When frantic messages and searches failed to find the Brigadier, Colonel Pleasants, ⁴ second-in-command of 4 Armoured Brigade, assumed command of 5 Brigade, but the error in the situation report was not known and the artillery barrage was worked out on false premises. The 21st Battalion's attack went in that night, but did not succeed because the barrage started behind the enemy lines.

A Company advanced on the right and C Company on the left, with the road as the axis of advance. The barrage opened at 3 a.m. and both companies, each with two platoons up in extended order, went forward. The night was very dark and the twin features could not be seen. A Company advanced without much difficulty until the estimated distance had been covered, and reported that the objective was still not in sight. Daybreak was now not far off, and as the support arms had not got over the road demolitions, the company was recalled.

C Company, on the left of the road, had no trouble until it came to a place where a gully parallel to the road narrowed its front to a few yards. The forward platoon commanders, Second-Lieutenant Weir ⁵ (13 Platoon) on the right and Second-Lieutenant Blackie (15 Platoon) on the left, considered that they had gone the required distance, but they could not see the Nipples. They had decided to push on when they were fired on from four directions, forward, right-forward, left and rear-left. Private 'Mac' McEwing, 6 13 Platoon's wireless operator, was hit in the first burst but, after his wound was bandaged with a field dressing, carried on with his job. The right-hand section near the road was pinned down and eventually withdrew with A Company. Sergeant 'Ollie' Spinetto 7 engaged the left rear spandau with his Bren, while 15 Platoon tried to silence the third spandau. Corporal 'Mick' Fitness, 8 staggering back with mortar splinters in his leg and face, met Second-Lieutenant Weir, who nearly shot him for a German because of his inability to answer clearly when challenged. Instead of reporting to the RAP, Fitness guided Weir and McEwing over to where Spinetto, from the shelter of a tree, was shooting it out with the spandau. They arranged that the sergeant would keep the spandau busy while Weir and the rest of the section rushed it from a flank. The operation was completely successful and the two Germans operating the machine gun were killed. McEwing by this time had picked up the order to withdraw, but in the mêlée direction had been lost and the whereabouts of Company Headquarters was uncertain. McEwing thereupon wirelessed a request to Company Headquarters to put up a flare, and the platoons pulled back to the crossroads and were dispersed in houses in the vicinity.

Although 21 Battalion's effort had misfired, 22 Battalion was established a few hundred yards below the crest of the Pian dei Cerri Ridge, and 25 Battalion, leading 6 Brigade's attack, was within a thousand yards of the top. Both units had taken all their objectives.

A new programme was arranged for the following night, with B and D Companies of 21 Battalion making the attack. It was a day of heavy gunfire; the enemy positions on the ridge and the Twin Nipples were under fire from bombers,

fighters, and artillery almost without rest. B and D Companies, in spite of fire from a Tiger which forced them to take cover in a ditch alongside the road, were on the start line by 10.30 p.m. There was further delay because of a short-firing gun which cost several casualties, but otherwise the operation went according to plan. B Company swung into single file at the point where its front narrowed and where C Company had been held up, and formed up again in open order beyond the obstacle.

The opposition on the Nipples was quickly silenced. Thirty prisoners were taken and 60 dead Germans, mostly killed by the barrage, were buried, at a cost of two killed and 26 wounded. The Tiger had gone when the troops exploited around, leaving only traces of its hurried departure.

Within two hours of the capture of the Twin Nipples the enemy was thinning out. While this was going on the troops on the Nipples dug deep slit trenches in preparation for the retaliation daylight would most certainly bring. It came, but from the wrong direction—they were 'stonked' for some minutes by our own artillery, luckily without loss. The rest of the day was peaceful, probably because the enemy was too busy abandoning his positions south of the Arno River.

The battalion stewed in the August heat and watched the tide of battle roll along the road towards Florence. The 28th and 23rd Battalions passed through, and civilians emerged from their hiding places. The South Africans entered Florence early the next morning (4 August) and in the evening 21 Battalion moved forward to Scandicci village, within a couple of miles of the outskirts of the river city. The troops were feasting their eyes on the city spread below them and were promising to brighten the lights already beginning to twinkle across the river, when they were horrified to see a Tiger tank bearing down on the column. As a Tiger can shoot a Sherman to pieces with the greatest of ease, there was marked relief when it was learned that a 22 Battalion officer had found the Tiger intact and was driving it back as a keepsake.

The fleshpots of Florence were not for 5 Brigade, although 23 Battalion won a race with the Maoris for the honour of being the first New Zealanders into the city. They were recalled before the first draughts of victory had properly settled the dust, and the brigade moved on 6 August to the Fezzana area, a mile north-west of Poppiano. The Indian Division had not reached the Arno, and 2 New Zealand Division

was to take over and reconnoitre the approaches to the river.

The battalion left again the same night and, after debussing, marching several miles and getting lost in the process, eventually relieved the 3/8 Punjabis. The 23rd Battalion was on the left of the 21st, and the Maoris were in reserve.

The brigade was now 15 miles west of Florence and facing Empoli, a town about the same size as Cassino. The country was flat to undulating, with the hills on the northern bank of the Arno. The main body of the enemy had retired across the river, but he maintained outposts on the south bank, mostly in houses in and around Empoli. The battalion was deployed with B, A, and C Companies forward and D Company in reserve. C Company, on the left flank, was directly in front of the Empoli railway station and separated from 23 Battalion by a number of houses, around which there was a fair amount of German patrol activity at night. The patrols were not aggressive, however, and apart from interfering with the gathering of peaches and pears, did no harm.

From the 7th to the 11th 21 Battalion reconnoitred routes to the river bank by night and lay up in its houses by day. Some patrols were fired on and some were not. There were no casualties from enemy action, but a trigger-happy sentry in 11 Platoon shot Sergeant Don Naylor ⁹ in the leg when he was visiting the company posts.

The 21st Battalion was ordered to occupy Empoli, and B Company 28 Battalion came under command for the operation. It had been established that Empoli had been evacuated by its inhabitants and was not held in force, but snipers and patrols were active and the whole area was heavily booby-trapped.

The Maoris under Major Te Punga ¹⁰ went into Empoli on the night of 11–12 August, while C Company stood by to reinforce them if they were held up. They reported that they had cleared most of the town but needed assistance to hold it. C Company accordingly moved into the town, while engineers cleared demolitions so that tanks could support them if necessary.

Before the move Colonel Thodey and Major Hawkesby had made a reconnaissance of the situation and had found that, with the exception of the final block of houses on the river side of the town, the Maoris had killed, silenced, or chased the enemy out of Empoli. There was, however, still a fair number of mortar shells coming in, so substantial houses were decided on for platoon posts. No. 14 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Oates) went in first, passed through the Maoris, and took possession of a large house that commanded the road into the town square. No. 13 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Weir) followed on receipt of a signal that 14 Platoon was settled in. Its house, on the opposite side of the road from 14 Platoon's, was surrounded by a stone wall surmounted by iron spikes and guarded by a highgrilled, padlocked door. Mindful of booby traps, the platoon left the door alone and climbed over the wall. Corporal Frank Price ¹¹ was missing when the platoon reorganised prior to investigating the house, but was discovered securely fastened to the top of the wall with his foot caught between the spikes. After much pushing and pulling, aided by the Corporal supplying language suitable to the occasion, he was freed. Two doors into the house were booby-trapped with Schu mines, which were disconnected, and the platoon settled in, whereupon 15 Platoon (Sergeant 'Ginner' Murray 12), Major Hawkesby, and Company Headquarters completed the company dispositions in the house selected for the purpose.

There were sporadic spandau bursts until dawn, when a German was seen by a sentry at an upstairs window in 14 Platoon's house. Owing to the angle of approach it was impossible to shoot him without leaning half out of the window, but the German evidently thought the house occupied by his own side and waved a greeting before he vanished. Not to be outdone in politeness, the New Zealander returned the wave. The sequel came a few minutes later when four Germans were spotted by both platoons making for 14 Platoon's house. Three were wounded and one killed but, still regarding the house as a place of refuge, two of the wounded Germans ran for it, where they were disillusioned. They were told to go and bring in their mates, but were unfortunate enough to set off one of their own booby traps in the doorway that had failed to function earlier. One German was killed and two of the platoon wounded, luckily not seriously.

That was the end of active hostilities in Empoli as far as C Company was concerned. The town was mortared on and off during the day and more snipers were rounded up by the Maoris. An amateur burglar in 15 Platoon tried his apprentice hand on a safe that he discovered, no doubt spurred on by the exploit of the engineers in San Casciano. His first effort with a Hawkins grenade was not

successful, and a Teller mine merely altered its shape but did not open it.

The Maoris took over the occupation of Empoli that night and C Company returned to its old area until the 16th. The battalion moved to a staging area some eight miles south early the following morning, and left on a dark and dusty ride to Strada, about a mile south of Castellina and 5 Brigade's rest area. There was a strong rumour that the battalion would be staying in the area for some time and, although the troops had heard that tale before, the 'jacking up' of amenities was energetically undertaken. A cinema unit opened in the battalion area, grapes were at their best, and the product of other years' crops not unavailable. The invasion of southern France was going well and the Americans were nearing Paris. Less authentic news was that the war was scheduled to be over with the occupation of Berlin within two months, and that the Division was moving over to France to be in at the kill.

Six-day leave to Rome opened again; Siena was within bounds; and each company spent two days at the beach near Vada. Real sand and real salt-water bathing. If you could manage to forget the sunken ships off shore and the mined areas, it was just like a long weekend at home, even to the three hours' drive back in the evening and work the next morning. Of course it could not last. Company commanders began to attend conferences, and orderly-room sergeants began to look important; routine training commenced; France or ...?

The last company left for Vada on the 23rd. The following day the troops formed up along the Castellina- Siena road and watched Mr. Churchill drive past in a cloud of dust. On the 26th leave was cancelled and the carriers left the battalion. On Sunday, 27 August, there was no doubt about it; and the troops packed up.

The battalion's casualties during July and August were 19 killed and 61 wounded.

¹ Maj J. H. W. Dymock, m.i.d.; Te Karaka, Gisborne; born Gisborne, 3 Nov 1915; shepherd, twice wounded.

² Rev. D. E. Duncan; Wairoa; born Waikanae, 30 Aug 1912; Presbyterian minister; wounded 9 Oct 1944.

- ³ Lt-Col A. Awatere, DSO, MC; Rotorua; born Tuparoa, 25 Apr 1910; civil servant; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Jul-Aug 1944, Nov 1944-Jun 1945; twice wounded.
- ⁴ Brig C. L. Pleasants, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Fiji; 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-Feb 1945, May 1945-Jan 1946; twice wounded; Commander Fiji Military Forces 1949–53.
- ⁵ Capt G. L. Weir; Auckland; born Auckland, 2 Jun 1908; school-teacher.
- ⁶ L-Cpl J. R. M. McEwing, MM; Te Kopuru, Northern Wairoa; born Whangarei, 15 Jul 1922; farmhand; wounded 2 Aug 1944.
- ⁷ S-Sgt O. J. Spinetto, m.i.d.; Mangere; born England, 1 Oct 1914; stereo worker; wounded Nov 1941.
- ⁸ WO I K. N. Fitness, m.i.d.; Walton; born Pukekohe, 1 Aug 1922; dairy farmhand; wounded 2 Aug 1944.
- ⁹ Lt D. G. Naylor; Tauranga; born Havelock, 20 Jun 1911; civil servant; twice wounded.
- ¹⁰ Maj H. P. Te Punga, m.i.d.; born Lower Hutt, 27 May 1916; clerk; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.
- ¹¹ Sgt F. Price; Ohaupo, Waikato; born England, 1 Oct 1912; teamster; wounded 9 Apr 1945.
- ¹² WO II G. J. Murray, DCM; Auckland; born Pukekohe, 3 Dec 1919; carpenter.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 16 – RIMINI

CHAPTER 16 Rimini

The capture of Florence was virtually the end of the campaign in Central Italy, and the Allied Armies were now facing the line prepared by the German High Command for the defence of Northern Italy and, through it, of Central Europe.

The plains of Northern Italy are surrounded in a vast unbroken arc by the Alps running from east to west. Near Genoa they join the Apennines, which continue the sweep from the north-west to the south-east as far as Rimini. Near that seaport the direction is more southerly and follows close to the Adriatic coast. Together the ranges form a reap hook with the open side facing eastwards.

The problem was how to break into Northern Italy. There were two possible methods and it was decided to attempt both, for success with either would rupture the Gothic Line, as the Germans called their defences, either by outflanking or by dividing it. The plan was to switch the strength of Eighth Army to the Adriatic coast, where the main effort would be made, and after the enemy reserves had been drawn in Fifth Army would strike through the mountains at Bologna. To cover the regrouping, Fifth Army (greatly weakened by the transfer of the French Division that had broken through the Aurunci Mountains at Cassino, as well as by the loss of some seasoned American formations earmarked for the invasion of Southern France) was to make a general fuss. While this was going on Fifth Army's strength was to be concentrated on the right flank, while at the same time it was to create the illusion of moving its left up the coast towards the port of Leghorn.

On the Adriatic the enemy had either been pushed or had withdrawn of his own accord from the Sangro to the Metauro River, but there were still some thiry miles of corridor between the mountains and the sea to Rimini. Beyond Rimini there was room to manoeuvre—or so it appeared on the map.

Such was the plan to smash the Gothic Line, but there was a spectre watching the planning conferences, a spectre with sodden clothes and mud on its boots; the country between Fano on the Metauro and Rimini on the Marecchia was still 'Sangro country' and the autumn rains were not far away.

The battalion left Strada in the evening of 28 August. The usual precautions for a secret move had been taken—badges removed, truck signs obliterated, and all leave cancelled. Needless to say, the Italians passed en route were not deceived as to the nationality of the convoy, and the troops themselves felt that the operation was about as secret as a varsity capping parade. The only thing they and the whole countryside did not know was the final destination.

The column passed through Siena and Castiglione, which was not the way to Florence, and around the top of Lake Trasimene to Foligno, where it stayed until the following night.

Remember the night we left Castelfrentano for a spell and ended up on the other side of Italy? What's the odds we're going back again?

That was the guess and that was how it was going to be. The second leg ended at Iesi, 15 miles inland from Ancona and some 220 miles from Strada. As far as the troops were concerned, Iesi was a continuation of the rest period. In between bathing parties to the coast or to the Esino River closer home, enough training was done to keep in form. Iesi was a pleasant town and the news was good: the battle for the Gothic Line was going well, with the Canadian Corps, under the command of which was 2 New Zealand Division, and the Polish Corps moving steadily up the coast towards Rimini, the anchor of the German left flank. Montgomery was a Field Marshal; Paris had liberated itself; Brigadier Burrows, ¹ who had been commanding 6 Brigade for a period and now commanded 5 Brigade, was an All Black (a sound knowledge of Rugby is undoubtedly a good thing in a brigadier); the Russians had taken the Ploesti oilfield; most of the Americans had left New Zealand. Buono, it won't be long now!

But perhaps the most important local event was the decision to declare the football season open. Inter-company games started forthwith. The change in locality did not interfere with the selection committee's deliberations in picking possible and probable teams to find the battalion's representatives. Fifth Army had opened its drive through the mountains towards Bologna, which, of course, was important also.

Lieutenant-Colonel Thodey accompanied the Brigadier and other battalion commanders to take a closer look at the scene of the Canadians' next objective, the Fortunate Ridge and the key to Rimini. There was a possibility that the Canadians, now feeling the strain of incessant fighting, might not be able to clear this obstacle, in which case 2 NZ Division would take a hand.

It was undoubtedly 'Sangro' country, for the brigade moved a little closer to the front on 6 September, and left the Esino River to cross the Misa and Cesano before coming to the Metauro and billeting on the coast at Fano. Fano was much the same as Iesi, except that it had been fought over more recently. The fighting was still four rivers further north and the troops carried on with their bathing, football, and training.

Major Tanner returned from his staff course while the battalion was at Fano and became second-in-command to Colonel Thodey, vice Major N. B. Smith, who marched out on furlough. The company commanders were Major Harding (A Company), Major Ashley (B), Major Hawkesby (C) and Major Dymock (D).

Rugby now took a more serious turn with inter-battalion matches as circumstances permitted; there was talk of sending an NZEF team to England, and that was no trifling matter.

There was another move on 16 September, across the Foglia and Conca into the Coriano area. The road ran close to the coast, where the Adriatic sparkled blue in the sunshine and (on its eastern edge) lapped around the hills of Greece, where the Division had fought its first campaign. All around the convoy was the aftermath of war, while high up on the inland mountains were the towers of San Marino, the oldest and smallest republic in the world. San Marino is a pocket-handkerchief state in the heart of Italy, 32 square mountainous miles in area, with a population of 16,000 and a standing army of 700. It has defended its independence against all comers since the year 301 AD; it defied the might of Germany, and its neutrality has been, possibly out of amusement, largely respected. Before the war was over many Kiwis were to park their weapons at the border and enjoy the hospitality of the tiny republic.

The fighting, not so far away now, was to be the gambit of an ambitious game. Once 5 Brigade had secured and enlarged the bridgehead, 6 Brigade would pass through and, by the coastal routes, strike for Ravenna, 32 miles north-west of Rimini.

After Ravenna would come Bologna and Ferrara, then across the Po River, and the war in Italy would be over.

On the map the country was eminently suitable for fast movement—a flat, featureless river plain, widening as the mountains swept westwards. Had there been a geographer at the planning conferences, he might have mentioned that the low-lying plains built up by the silt of the frequently overflowing rivers was, with the possible exception of Holland, the most heavily canalised area in Europe. Even since early historic times eastern Italy has been so built up that the town of Adria, which was once a seaport and gave its name to the Adriatic Sea, is now 16 miles inland. The only reason why Venice remains a harbour is that no rivers of consequence discharge into the lagoon.

Maybe GHQ did know its geography and hoped Fifth Army would take Bologna before Eighth Army had to fight over country that had a ditch, a canal, or a river so situated that it was impossible to move a mile in any direction without encountering a tank trap or vehicle obstacle.

Running through the northern outskirts of Rimini was the many-pronged Marecchia River. Once this was crossed and Rimini safely held, the Gothic Line was burst wide open; and if the Canadians did not wholly succeed, 5 Brigade was to establish a bridgehead, whereupon 6 Brigade would pass through and exploit.

While the Brigadier waited throughout the 17th to see if 5 Brigade was to be drawn into the battle, 21 Battalion played Rugby against the 23rd and won 11 to nil. The following day was another one of waiting, as 1 Canadian and 4 British Divisions squared up to the ridge of San Fortunate. The assault on the 19th was one of varying fortunes, and 5 Brigade was told that it might be required to move that afternoon. The plan was cancelled later in the day, and instead of moving into battle the battalion B team played the Maori B team and was beaten 5—3. The Canadians got on to the ridge during the night and 5 Brigade was warned to be ready at a moment's notice. The battalion edged up a little closer the next morning (the 20th) and bivouacked near the airfield at San Lorenzo in Strada. A crossing was to be made over the Marecchia by the Canadians, and the unit was warned that in company with the Maoris it was to extend the bridgehead. The 18th Armoured Regiment would be in support.

The troops moved up in convoy on the night of 20-21 September and bedded down in front of Fortunato Ridge. It was the usual newly fought over scene—derelict tanks, abandoned vehicles, and intermittent artillery fire. One carrier was hit by a stray shell and two men killed by exploding ammunition. The autumn rains began in earnest and the 21st was a sorry-looking mud-caked battalion in the morning. The task given 5 Brigade was the capture of the Rio Fontanaccia position, four miles north of the Marecchia River. There were three report lines before the final objective —the first on the Canale dei Molini, the second on an imaginary line running southwest from the seaside hamlet of La Turchia, and the third along the Scolo Brancona.

The attack was to be carried out by 28 Battalion, with A Squadron's tanks, on the left, and 21 Battalion, with B Squadron's tanks, on the right. The 21st Battalion's axis of advance was Route 16, the coastal road joining Rimini and Ravenna, 30 miles north. C Company was on the right and A Company on the left of Route 16, with B and D Companies in support. The country up to Ravenna was uniformly flat, hardly above sea level, and was crossed by a number of rivers flowing north-west and canalised near the coast. There was thought to be no fixed defences except hastily prepared houses, but there was excellent cover in the many vineyards which largely covered the area.

The battalion, with supporting arms, began the approach march at 4 p.m. in the order of A, C, B and D Companies, Support Company, attached engineers, one troop of 32 Anti- Tank Battery, one platoon of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, and finally Battalion Headquarters. A and C Companies rode on their supporting tanks. This novel kind of transport was not appreciated by the troops for several reasons: the infantry soldier is never happy in a position where he cannot dive for cover when the occasion demands; the rain had softened the going, and while the tanks roared up the road they lurched, swayed, and slipped most alarmingly. The rain, which had reduced visibility, cleared when the column was near the top of San Fortunato Ridge, and enemy guns from the Vergiano Ridge further west plastered the area, whereupon the troops debussed, or rather detanked, very smartly. A smoke screen was quickly put down, and the battalion sheltered in a deep cutting where the road crossed over the ridge, until it was dark enough to move again.

The second leg of the approach march brought the column to the Marecchia

River, a mile and a half west of the Roman bridge at Rimini. Fighting was still going on near Rimini and the air was full of tank shells; ammunition dumps were exploding with cascading fireworks effects; shells of very heavy calibre fell at random in the area, but luckily not along the road on which the troops were marching. The river itself was no obstacle to marching men as it was only a few inches deep, but judging by the stretch of shingle between the banks, it could, with enough rain, be another Sangro. It was not known how deep the Canadian bridgehead was, and the assaulting companies dashed across expecting to be fired on at any minute.

By midnight the battalion was disposed with C Company in houses half a mile south of the Celle road junction, A Company on the left of C, and the supporting companies on the Sant' Andrea road south of the river. At the same hour twelve months previously the battalion had been lying in transports off Taranto.

Wireless communication had not been continuous during the approach march, and Colonel Thodey was not certain that the companies were in their correct positions. A Honey tank with a No. 22 set was sent forward to receive and relay messages, and from then on contact was maintained. Brigade was informed and the Colonel was ordered to move off at first light, or as soon after as possible.

During the night a new set of circumstances had arisen, about which, either through a wireless breakdown or through one of the mishaps that occur in war, Colonel Thodey had not been fully informed. Fourth Armoured Brigade, itching to be in at the final breaching of the Gothic Line, had obtained permission to establish its own bridgehead over the Marecchia. The original 21 Battalion front was from the coast to a line a thousand yards west of Route 16, and it was on part of this front that 4 Armoured Brigade had moved up to the Marecchia by way of the undamaged Roman bridge. That in itself would not have interfered with Thodey's plans, but part of 22 (Motor) Battalion had already crossed the Marecchia and passed through Celle, at the junction of Routes 9 and 16, without mopping up, an hour before 21 Battalion had arrived at its lying-up area. Celle was one of the battalion objectives and Route 16 the axis of advance. It was fortunate that 22 Battalion was directed back to the coast before 21 Battalion's attack started.

The first hint that there were loose ends came when C Company reported during the night that a company of Canadians had moved through it to attack Celle. The Canadians were also over the river on the New Zealanders' left, and had been ordered to clear Celle to facilitate the advance of 5 Brigade into the plains beyond. Celle was on C Company's line of advance, and Major Hawkesby sent out three patrols to establish the situation on his front—one under Second-Lieutenant Weir into Celle, one under Second-Lieutenant Clotworthy ² to locate 22 Battalion, and one under Second-Lieutenant Dempsey ³ to find the support tanks that had not as yet reported their position.

Weir found fighting going on in Celle but, on a return trip to the village two hours later, reported that the place was cleared and occupied by a platoon of 22 Battalion and some Canadians. Clotworthy could not find any trace of 22 Battalion nor could Dempsey locate the tanks. (They did not link up until just before the attack began the next morning.)

The only thing certain in a night of uncertainties was that Celle, where opposition might have been encountered, was clear. Lieutenant-Colonel Thodey tied in with Lieutenant-Colonel Young, ⁴ CO 28 Battalion, and the starting time for an advance without a barrage, but supported by tanks, was fixed at 6 a.m. (22 September).

As an extra precaution, a patrol was sent from D Company to make certain that Majors Hawkesby and Harding were quite clear about the position in Celle, the starting time, and the Canale dei Molini. Lieutenant McLean has vivid memories of that patrol:

The forward companies had lost touch during the night and I was sent across the river early in the morning with a section to make sure they were ready to start the attack and had not lost themselves. While trying to find them we were welcomed heartily by an Italian family and I was kissed on both cheeks by most of the family (men mostly unfortunately). Puzzled to know why I was treated thus, it transpired that I was ahead of our forward Coys—the time for the attack had not yet arrived and Jerry was just over the railway line a short way ahead and I had been wandering up and down the road in broad daylight (by this time) as if it was just a practice stunt.

Celle might be described as the 'cemetery suburb' of Rimini, for it was adjacent

to a cemetery much larger in area than the village itself. It was also an important road junction, for besides Route 16 inland from the coast, Route 9, the main highway to Bologna, 70 miles north-west, likewise passed through Celle. The railway line mentioned by McLean was built along a ten-foot-high embankment parallel to and between Route 9 and the Fossa Turchetta, about half a mile north.

In accordance with the instructions to begin the advance at 6 a.m., A and C Companies with their supporting tanks formed up about 200 yards south of a road from Santa Giustina to Celle. C Company, on the right flank, had to pass through Celle, already cleared during the night, and had little trouble crossing the railway embankment. Not until it was beyond the cemetery did it encounter opposition and take a few prisoners.

C Company carried on without much difficulty, although dispersed over a lot of country. Major Hawkesby enlisted the services of a Honey tank driven by Sergeant Booth ⁵ and roamed about like a sheepdog behind a scattered flock. They encountered a post that had been overlooked in the skirmishing and went after it, although Honeys are supposed to be purely reconnaissance vehicles. When his Browning jammed, Booth jumped down and killed two Germans and captured the other two. By this time the forward elements of C Company were half a mile past the Fossa Turchetta, and the Honey departed on its own affairs. Hawkesby rejoined his headquarters, where a signal had been received that an enemy force was moving towards him. There was a stretch of country between his right and the sea, and, with A Company not up, his left flank was also in the air, so he decided to concentrate 13 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Weir) and 15 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Dempsey) in the Casa Martignoni.

The Casa Martignoni was a big two-storied house surrounded by trees, and from the upper window the enemy could be seen creeping forward under cover of the ditches from the direction of the coast. At this time the news caught up with C Company that 22 Battalion was officially taking part in the operations, and that the boundaries of the battalion had been adjusted to give it a two-company front on the right of C Company. No. 14 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Clotworthy) was accordingly also withdrawn into the casa, and 22 Battalion with its armour was left to deal with the threatened attack. C Company remained in the house under a variegated assortment of mortar and shell fire until early afternoon.

Corporal Les Crews ⁶ describes C Company's early adventures moving up from the railway embankment to the Casa Martignoni:

The next morning we assembled and [Major Hawkesby] made an impassioned address to the throng (going something like this): 'You've all got automatic weapons, well give the bastards hell!'Well, the attack appeared to be a piece of cake at the start from our Coy point of view at least. After about a mile things began to warm up and my platoon (13) was pinned down several times by spandau fire and mortars. We had the tanks in support and they drew fire like nobody's business. I remember a Jerry spandau expert bailed up in a nearby railway wagon on our left. One of our tanks went to town on him By this time things were getting really hot ... his mortars ... were landing all around. [We] also had taken quite a number of prisoners, almost entirely Turkoman troops. Just like Japs. We began to wonder if we were in the right country. Things began to get so hot we took to houses for shelter and were shelled violently for several hours.

The night advance of 22 Battalion through Celle to the Fossa Turchetta and thence over to the coast had not disturbed the enemy dug in on the western, or A Company's, side of Route 16. The whole area was quite flat, highly cultivated, and criss-crossed with drains and ditches—ideal defensive country. The enemy posts were dug in behind grape vines with excellent cover from view, or in barricaded houses well supplied with spandaus and supported with mortars, anti-tank and self-propelled guns.

A Company was fired on before it reached the embankment, and 7 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Hill), caught in the open, had several men wounded. The opposition was entirely unexpected, for Major Harding at the company orders group conference had said that the Canadians had cleared the area. He had been misinformed, because there were posts on the embankment, in houses behind it, and in the Fossa Turchetta. No. 7 Platoon returned the fire, under cover of which Private Pat O'Rourke ⁷ stormed the bank and engaged the enemy single-handed until he was shot down. The platoon, through O'Rourke's gallant action, was able to get on to the embankment and finish the job, but it was still impossible to cross the double line of railway until the fortunate appearance on Route 16 of Sergeant Hunt ⁸ in a Honey tank. He noticed a large strongpoint in front of A Company and went

after it. Forty Germans tried to make a break, but Hunt got among them, shot six and captured twenty. He was disarming his prisoners when their own mortars opened on them, wounding several more. The survivors were herded into a ditch until some 22 Battalion men came over from Celle and took them away. A Company was then able to cross the embankment over an hour behind time, and Hunt went off with his Honey laden with enemy casualties.

The position was then that A Company had no contact with either C Company or the Maoris, both of whom were past the first objective line, the Fossa Turchetta ditch. The company made slow but steady progress through an area ideal for defence. The small farms were divided by drains, all of which appeared to be intercommunicating, while the masses of grape vines gave added cover to an enemy gradually retreating but putting up a stiff defence at the same time.

B and D Companies found ample employment mopping up, D Company particularly so. They were close on the heels of the forward troops, and almost up to a group of houses around a secondary crossroads a quarter of a mile past the Fossa Turchetta, when a spandau opened fire on them. Lieutenant McLean, who had had the adventure with the Italian family earlier in the morning, continues:

The attack developed alright and I was forward [reserve] platoon on the right—the forward Coys having passed on—when all of a sudden we were fired on by machine gun and I had a couple of chaps killed. We took shelter behind a house and I went forward to see what I could make of the affair. I got into a ditch and started up it when I was [wounded by a rifle bullet]. I scrambled back to the chaps and called up the Coy comdr who eventually brought up a tank and cleaned up a nest of about 28 Jerries. Unfortunately I wasn't there to see it—I had been evacuated by then.

D Company waited until the tank arrived some time later. After a round or two of high explosive, followed by a burst of Browning, a white flag was waved from a window, and shortly afterwards 16 Germans filed out. They had been missed by A Company for the good reason that they were hiding in a cellar and had taken turns operating the spandau from an upstairs window. Major Harding, with Company Headquarters, had also been delayed by this hold-up, and when he joined the forward platoons he found them under fire from the Canale dei Molini and the village

of Viserba, 800 yards ahead. He made his headquarters in the Villa Il Palazzone and took stock of his position. There was no sign of the Maoris on the left; firing from the right indicated that A Company was not far away; the support tanks were well behind through difficulties with the innumerable obstacles; and at least two anti-tank guns were firing from Viserba.

The whole battalion attack was in danger of bogging down, but just when most needed Lieutenant Hardy ⁹ arrived at the head of the Mortar Platoon. When the support companies began to advance after A Company had got away, Hardy suggested to Colonel Thodey that he might be able to help the forward troops. It is not the normal function of the Mortar Platoon to get involved in an advance, but permission was given to take the platoon up and see what could be done. Hardy decided not to try Route 16, but to make a wide left sweep with sections at regular intervals. They were to watch his progress and follow. Once out in the open he was confronted by a series of deep drains, at each of which he had to jump out of his carrier and dig away the top from both sides. Private Roy Martin ¹⁰ then drove over the obstacle, with his carrier almost vertical while going in and coming out.

The rest of the platoon followed as arranged, and the mortars were set up in the grounds of the house. Shells were pouring in from Viserba, and a tank endeavouring to support A Company was knocked out, but with Hardy spotting and directing from an upstairs window, both anti-tank and machine guns were quickly silenced. German stretcher-bearers carrying white flags came to within a hundred yards of Il Palazzone to pick up wounded, and the area quietened down, except for odd bursts of automatic fire from the support platoons engaged in mopping up. The reduction of the opposition at Viserba permitted A Company to resume the advance towards the Canale dei Molini, and by 2 p.m. it was on the canal line.



Mortar crews' billets near Faenza

Mortar crews' billets near Faenza



Mortar pit, Faenza

Mortar pit, Faenza



A party for the children of Muccia

A party for the children of Muccia



March past at Camerino

March past at Camerino



Minesweeping on the Senio

Minesweeping on the Senio



The 21 Battalion position was on the right of this stopbank on the Senio, and the enemy were on the left. (res page 412)

The 21 Battalion position was on the right of this stopbank on the Senio, and the enemy were on the left. (see page 412)



A cookhouse near the Senio

A cookhouse near the Senio



German graves on the beach at Lignano—in the background are enemy vessels which surrendered to 21 Battalion

German graves on the beach at Lignano—in the background are enemy vessels which surrendered to 21 Battalion



ITALY MAP No.2

A Company's success relieved the pressure on Major Hawkesby's company still concentrated in the Casa Martignoni, but there was a light tank or self-propelled gun that defied the efforts of the supporting tanks to locate and quieten it. Hawkesby took a few men and scouted along the ditches until they found the menace firing from the shelter of the Casa Carini, about half a mile ahead. They closed in quietly and killed the crew of a light tank while it was actually firing on the company.

Route 16 was now in use, and Colonel Thodey, driving up to A Company, met Hardy at Il Palazzone and directed him to find and assist C Company if help was needed. He found 13 Platoon in Casa Carini driving its captured tank around the

yard, while 14 and 15 Platoons were clearing a factory on the Canale dei Molini.

The successful advance to the Canale dei Molini had not been achieved cheaply. The battalion suffered 49 casualties, 13 killed and 36 wounded, but had taken 77 prisoners, two 75-millimetre anti-tank guns and one Mark IV tank.

The position in the late afternoon was that 21 Battalion was on the first report line, the intruding 22 Battalion's exact position was unknown but it was somewhere in the vicinity, and the Maoris were near the second report line but were having trouble with Tiger tanks.

Brigadier Burrows was instructed by the GOC that 5 Brigade would stand fast until dark, when it would push on to the Scolo Brancona, and if possible to the Fontanaccia, while 6 Brigade was to pass through at first light on 23 September and carry on the advance.

Colonel Thodey attended a conference at Brigade Headquarters in the evening, but while the details were being worked out further instructions were received that 5 Brigade would attack only to Scolo Brancona, which was some 2000 yards short of the Fontanaccia River.

The Maoris, who were well ahead of the troops on their left, were also to go to the Brancona, but were to watch their own left flank; while on 21 Battalion's right boundary, which was fixed at 600 yards from the coast, 22 Battalion and 19 Armoured Regiment were to move forward 15 minutes after the attack went in.

The battalion plan was for B Company, right, and D Company, left, to pass through C and A Companies, with Route 16 as the axis of advance. Each forward company would have a Honey tank linked by wireless to its battalion headquarters and to 18 Armoured Regiment. The supporting platoon of engineers would move with the tanks and clear the route of mines, while the anti-tank battery would consolidate with the infantry when the objective was taken. B and D Companies were to try and tie in with the flanking units, while 23 Battalion would have two companies ready in a holding position on the Canale dei Molini. A barrage of all available guns would be supplied, commencing to move forward at midnight. The opening line for the barrage was along the canal, and as the troops were forward of it in some places, it was essential that they should move back to a safe distance

before midnight.

Several harassing incidents made the night an anxious one for Thodey. Firstly, Major Ashley (OC B Company) did not turn up at the battalion conference because the company wireless was unable to receive headquarters' messages and he did not know one was being held; secondly, the Honey tank moving up to establish communications with B Company was hit by a mortar and immobilised; thirdly, the Honey blocked the road for transport and in consequence A and C Companies missed their hot meal that night. The delayed conference did not end until 11 p.m. and runners had to find B Company with little time to spare. However, everything turned out all right, and the troops were in position by 11.30. While things were being 'jacked up' behind it, A Company was having a very uncomfortable time forward. Route 16 was consistently shelled and haystacks in the vicinity were set alight. There was a negligible reply to the barrage, and the troops went forward without interference to the Scolo Brancona. Two patrols supported by tanks exploited forward for another half a mile without making contact. The Maoris and 22 Battalion also met little opposition.

Sixth Brigade passed through in the mid-morning and found the enemy prepared to resist the crossing of the Fontanaccia. B and D Companies remained in position that night and joined the rest of the battalion in the morning in Viserba, ¹¹ a seaside suburb of Rimini, and the troops were quartered in houses facing the beach. Battle grime was removed in the still warm Adriatic, clothes were washed in the sea, and the Italian women ironed and pressed shirts and pants most of the night. The usual reorganisation followed: Major Hawkesby marched out to furlough and Captain Campbell took command of C Company; the troops swam by day and held impromptu dances with the Italian girls and impromptu parties with themselves by night; 6 Brigade chased the enemy off the Fontanaccia and then across the Uso River. By this time rivers were the unit of distance —it was not so many miles to a place but so many rivers. The engineers spoke longingly of the good old days in North Africa where there were no rivers and bridges were something they read about in text books.

The battalion moved up to Bellaria, at the mouth of the Uso, on the 27th and in the evening took over from 24 Battalion, with 23 Battalion on its left. The 24th was expected to be found holding a line along a road parallel to and half a mile south of the Fiumicino River, but in actual fact it had been ordered to halt along the Fosso Matrice ditch, about a quarter of a mile short of its original objective.

The changeover was completed by midnight and patrols probed the country in front. The picture that emerged was that the terrain was generally open, with ploughed fields dissected by numerous ditches which were the only cover. Colonel Thodey decided that the crossing would have to be made in two phases, the first of which would be to clear the south bank, and he would prefer to do that by night. The 23rd Battalion, on the left of the brigade sector, concurred, and Brigadier Burrows later advised that the brigade would probably stand fast until next night.

After looking the country over by daylight, the Colonel decided to try for the lateral road which would be a good start line for the next attack. If the affair went well the battalion would not necessarily stop there, but would try to reach the river bank. The Brigadier arranged for the artillery to keep up the usual harassing fire while the attempt was made, and at 9 a.m. B Company on the right and D Company on the left left the cover of the ditch. The immediate enemy fire was too accurate and the cover too sparse, and by midday very little ground had been gained. The 23rd Battalion also tried, and with more success, to gain the lateral road.

It was decided to make another attempt in a set-piece attack to clear the enemy from the southern side of the river, preparatory to a general advance by the New Zealanders and their left-hand neighbours, 5 Canadian Armoured Division. It was appreciated that the success of the operation depended on the ability of 21 and 23 Battalions to push on to the river bank that afternoon, but it was also appreciated that the storm clearly coming up from the east might upset the whole operation. A torrential downpour with wind at gale force began in the early afternoon and continued on and off for the next twelve hours. The gunners were flooded out of their pits; the heavy ground was soon sodden, giving the engineers responsible for the roads, and the tanks and other vehicles dependent on them, a worrying time. An issue of rum was authorised for the half-drowned infantry.

Fifth Brigade's attack went in about 3 p.m., with B and D Companies still leading 21 Battalion. The artillery support and the cover of the blinding rain enabled the battalion to advance, although D Company had to bypass an enemy-held house and

leave it to the mopping-up troops. In spite of having the farthest to go, D Company was the first of the brigade units to get to the river bank, about five in the afternoon. B Company was stopped 300 yards short of its objective by a strongpoint beyond the river. Repeated artillery concentrations failed to silence it, and the troops were pulled back into houses that offered some cover and shelter from the storm. Thodey then sent A Company up to thicken and extend D Company's hold. It was a timely precaution, for by this time everything on wheels was bogged down and 23 Battalion's right flanking company had been withdrawn to protect its supporting tanks. The enemy attempted to loosen 21 Battalion's grip of the south bank, but the fire fight was not followed up and the troops remained in position.

Major Dymock (OC D Company) writes:

The attack took place about mid-afternoon. B Coy right D Coy left. The coy had had a heavy day with many casualties and were not enthusiastic about this new attack. However, we assembled or formed up in a very big barn or stable which was being heavily shelled. Eventually 2 Platoons advanced 1 Platoon and Coy HQ in reserve in barn. One Platoon got to the house by stopbank, which they held. Other Pl driven back soon after attack began.

I remember that we had a Div Cav corporal in charge of a tank without a turret, who was very game indeed, and was a tower of strength to us. I was wounded in arm that day and was out of the Bn for a long time, otherwise I should have recommended this corporal for his work that day.

I was busy trying to contact my forward platoon with the radio when a shell burst quite nearby and blew two German prisoners we had about ten feet from where they were without either getting scratched. It was most entertaining for us to watch them pick themselves up from the blast of one of their own. That same shell was the one that got me in the arm. However, things were in such a bad way that I couldn't possibly leave, so remained with the Coy for another four or five hours, until ordered back by Col Thodey at about 2000 hrs.

The general position now was that the enemy's fighting withdrawal had at last reached an obstacle on which he could make a determined stand. We held a jumping-off position on the Fiumicino, with 5 Canadian Armoured Division up on the

left; 3 Greek Mountain Brigade, which had relieved 22 Battalion, had also reached the river at its mouth. The river had risen from a shallow trickle to a raging forty-foot-wide torrent penned in by high stopbanks. The attempt at a breakthrough had not come off. The 23rd and 21st Battalions passed forty-eight very bad hours under fire. There were casualties from exposure and exhaustion, as well as from tank, mortar and artillery fire.

Classical history does not enter largely into infantry training, but even if it did the troops were in no condition to appreciate the fact that the Fiumicino, or one of its tributaries, is thought to be the Rubicon, ¹² where Caesar passed a night debating whether to cross and march on Rome or do as he was told and send most of his army back home. As a matter of history, he crossed the Rubicon, chased his cogeneral Pompey out of Rome, and set a precedent for Mussolini until he was bumped off by Brutus, as told by Shakespeare in his Julius Caesar.

The 21st and 23rd Battalions were relieved on the night of 30 September-1 October by the Maoris and 22 Battalion and went back to Bellaria. They stayed there for two days while new plans, leading to a decision to regroup, were considered. The probability of the enemy's breaching the stopbank and flooding vital coastal areas led to a decision to shift the weight of the attack to a more central sector where the conditions were more favourable. The Maoris were relieved by a Greek battalion, and 21 Battalion moved across the divisional boundary on the night of 2-3 October and took over from the right flanking battalion of 11 Canadian Infantry Brigade. The 21st Battalion was now on the left of 22 Battalion. The weather continued to be atrocious, and the troops had little to do beyond patrolling the river bank and being unwilling pawns in a contest between the opposing artillery as to who could damage the greater number of houses suspected of being occupied.

The 22nd Battalion was relieved by a composite force known as Wilderforce and composed of detachments of the Divisional Cavalry and of anti-tank and machinegun units organised as infantry. The 21st Battalion was now the only 5 Brigade infantry unit in the line, but it was also relieved later that night (5 October) by 25 Battalion and returned to a concentration area between Rimini and Viserba.

The overall position was that the enemy was being pressed hard from two directions—by Fifth Army from the mountains south of Bologna and by Eighth Army

on the Adriatic—and a decisive success by either would smash the German defences in Italy. But the weather was on the side of the enemy, and both Fifth and Eighth Armies were running short of assault troops. In Eighth Army there was just enough strength for one more attempt to break through, and regrouping continued. Meanwhile British forces landed on the Greek mainland and the liberated Greeks began to fight among themselves.

A full-scale attack was planned along an axis parallel to and north of the Rimini-Bologna road—Route 9. The New Zealand Division was to make another sidestep to a central position in front of Gatteo; its left boundary was to become its right boundary, while its new left boundary was to be the line of the Rimini- Cesena railway. The Division would then have a unit known as Cumberland Force, consisting of Greek, Canadian and New Zealand units, on its right in a holding role, while on the left 1 Canadian Infantry Division had in turn taken over a sector astride Route 9 from 56 British Division.

Fifth Brigade moved into its new area in front of Gatteo on 10 October under orders to attack on a two-battalion front, with the Maoris supported by B Squadron 19 Armoured Regiment on the right, 23 Battalion with C Squadron 19 Armoured Regiment on the left, and 21 Battalion in reserve.

The Indian and British divisions further west in the foothills, less handicapped by the rain that had immobilised the coastal plain, were across the Fiumicino and had observation over the enemy facing the Canadians and New Zealanders. The indications were that the German right flank was pulling back to a shorter line.

The 21st Battalion moved in its own trucks and RMT during the afternoon of the 10th, and by evening was dispersed in houses at the Fabbrona crossroads, two miles east of Gatteo. Air reconnaissance and patrols from the forward battalions confirmed that the enemy was in fact pulling back behind the Fiumicino, and platoons filtered over the river until a brigade bridgehead was established. The sappers got bridges across and support arms moved up, not without difficulty, for although the ground was drying, the roads cut up quickly. The Canadians extended the bridgehead on the brigade's left preparatory to 1 Canadian Division attacking along Route 9, with 5 Brigade guarding its right flank, maintaining contact, and prepared to fight if the opportunity presented itself.

The advance from the Fiumicino to the Pisciatello, four miles distant, was to be done in four bounds, the first to Rio Baldona, the second to the Scolo Rigossa, the third to the Scolo Fossalta, and the fourth to the Pisciatello. The brigade front, extending from Sant' Angelo to Gatteo, was about a mile and a half in length, and the start line was the road connecting the two villages.

The 11th was a quiet, sunny day in the battalion area, with the enemy hammering at the bridges and ranging on the startline road. The forward battalions pushed off at first light the next morning, and 21 Battalion distributed 80-odd reinforcements

among the platoons. The advance went forward without much difficulty on 23 Battalion's front, but the Maoris encountered fire from the hamlet of Sant' Angelo on their right. The second bound was not so easy, for the enemy outposts lay beyond the Scolo Rigossa, and the enemy showed no signs of withdrawing from Sant' Angelo, which was becoming a menace to the brigade's right flank. The Maori advance, however,



the advance to the savio, october 1944

went forward to the Scolo Rigossa, and 23 Battalion got elements close to the objective on the Maoris' left. The tanks were strictly road-bound, and all possible routes forward were both heavily demolished and dominated from Sant' Angelo. That night the Maoris attempted to force the enemy out of the village but did not succeed.

The Brigadier held a conference on the morning of the 13th and explained that the brigade was faced with the alternative of turning on a full-scale attack on Sant' Angelo to eliminate the danger on the right flank, or to secure the position with a flanking battalion and push on regardless of the enemy strongpoint. The decision was to attack with the Maoris, while 23 Battalion pushed on towards Gambettola. The 21st Battalion was to move up to Gatteo behind 23 Battalion, while B Company, under command of the Maori Battalion, filled the gap between the 23rd and that battalion. After last light all companies marched by the shortest routes to Gatteo, and B Company took up positions in houses between the Rio Baldona and the Scolo Rigossa vacated by elements of 28 and 23 Battalions.

The only event of importance during the night that affected B Company, and to a lesser extent the rest of the battalion further back, was the one-shell celebration of the German evacuation of Athens. To mark the event every gun in the Division fired one shell into Gambettola. The compliment was returned the next afternoon when the battalion area was heavily plastered for ten minutes, for the loss of a carrier, a jeep, and three men wounded. No advance was made during the day (14 October) by 5 Brigade. Sant' Angelo was still in enemy hands, but another attack was being prepared for that night. The new amenity of artificial moonlight was provided as well as a barrage. (Artificial moonlight, frequently used at this period, was provided by searchlight units playing their lights on clouds at such an angle that the light was deflected downwards.) The attack was successful and before daylight the engineers had got a bridge over the Rio Baldona at Sant' Angelo. The 23rd Battalion then resumed its advance, and by early morning had entered the abandoned town of Gambettola.

B Company returned to the battalion and Colonel Thodey was ordered to cross the Scolo Rigossa and form up on the Via Staggi, a road running from the north end of Gambettola in a north-easterly direction. From there the battalion would advance until level with 23 Battalion, whereupon the brigade would move on the Pisciatello with the Scolo Fossalta as the first objective. The timing of the operation would depend on the success of the engineers in bridging the canal for the passage of tanks and support arms. The battalion was organised as a battle group and took under command A Squadron 19 Armoured Regiment, 5 Platoon 104 Canadian Anti-Tank Battery, E Troop 32 NZ Anti-Tank Battery, 3 Platoon 1 Machine Gun Company,

and 2 Platoon 7 Field Company.

The battalion plan was for B Company on the right and C Company on the left to lead the advance. Each would be accompanied by a Honey tank for intercommunication. D Company, with two sections of carriers, was to be ready to move out and protect the right flank. A Company was to be in reserve. The Canadian antitank battery would work with the tanks, the battalion mortars would work independently, and the machine-gunners would move up for consolidation on the final objective. The Maoris were to go into reserve, and 22 Battalion would supply right-flank protection.

The bridge over the canal was ready by 2 p.m. and the battalion took up its dispositions along the Via Staggi, on the right of 23 Battalion in the Gambettola area. The battalion was arranged with No. 1 Section of the carriers supporting B Company and No. 2 Section supporting C Company; behind and to a flank were two anti-tank guns for each section of carriers; and still further support was afforded by five mortars in rear of the anti-tank guns. The left flank was in touch with 23 Battalion and the open right flank was the responsibility of D Company. A Company remained in reserve in Gatteo.

The supporting tanks of A Squadron were up by 4.30 p.m. and the advance began. The first battalion objective was from Bulgarno to a crossroads a mile and a half east of the village and about a mile forward of the start line. The troops made good progress for half the distance, when they were fired on from houses along a road parallel to the axis of advance and leading to Bulgarno. By the time the companies had worked as far forward as possible without engaging in a fire fight, it was nearly dark and Thodey decided to stand for the night. The position then was that B Company had edged around the opposition and was close to the road, but C Company had not been able to move more than a few hundred yards. So far there were no casualties. The 23rd Battalion, under instruction not to persist if the going was tough, was also not in full possession of the first bound. Further to the left the Canadians had made better progress and were within a mile of the Pisciatello; on the extreme right there was no change.

The battalion was to move again at first light on 16 October under the same plan and method. The 76 Panzer Korps facing the Canadians and New Zealanders

was in fact now making a fighting withdrawal and had left the Bulgarno road when the troops went forward at daybreak. By 8 a.m. C Company was in Bulgarno and B Company, on its right, slightly behind it. This was not on account of enemy resistance, but because B Company had been ordered to move west along the Bulgarno road and outflank the enemy rearguard holding up C Company. When it found the position vacated, C Company was ordered to occupy the village.

The companies waited in this position while the armour got up. The troop supporting C Company did not take long via the Gambettola- Bulgarno road, but the troop with B Company were delayed by a 200-foot demolition which had to be bypassed. When the tanks arrived B Company moved forward to approximately the line decided as the battalion objective for the previous day and, under instructions from Brigade, remained there until further orders. There were still no casualties.

About midday 5 Brigade received its orders to push on to the river, which was thought to be the enemy's line of resistance, and if possible without heavy fighting to secure a crossing. The 22nd Battalion was moving up to take care of the right flank, and 6 Brigade was also coming up with the intention of passing through 5 Brigade after the crossing was established. The 23rd Battalion's thrust line was along the road to Ruffio, thence due north to the river, while 21 Battalion was directed against Macerone, also due north and across the Pisciatello.

The battalion moved off at 1 p.m. for the river, about one and a half miles north, with the Scolo Fossalta lying half-way as the first objective. The troops were now nearing the enemy outposts defending the Pisciatello River line, and small-arms fire was added to the harassing enemy artillery fire that had been a feature of the morning operation. In addition smoke shells were used against the tanks and obscured their vision to some extent. With snipers' nests to be dealt with, progress was much slower than in the morning, and it was not until late afternoon, and with the aid of covering fire from A Company 23 Battalion, that C Company crossed the Scolo Fossalta, with B Company a little further back. Forty-eight prisoners were captured at a cost of two killed and three wounded. Thodey decided to wait until darkness before attempting the second bound.

Battalion Headquarters was moved up to the Via Staggi, and in the evening the company commanders met the Colonel there. A divisional order had been received

to the effect that 6 Brigade would relieve 5 Brigade on the line reached by 6 p.m. the following day. Brigadier Burrows already had discussed with his two forward battalion commanders the situation on the brigade front, and it had been agreed that 23 Battalion, at the crossroads short of Ruffio village, should wait until 21 Battalion got on to a lateral road connecting the two battalions, and about a quarter of a mile north of 21 Battalion's forward troops.

On the brigade's left the Canadians were squaring up for the final thrust to the Pisciatello; further left again 5 British Corps was in the final stages of its advance on Cesena, east of the Savio River; on the coastal front patrols felt about and the RAF shot up targets—there was no necessity for fighting because the enemy would soon have to pull back or be cut off.

Thodey's plan was for D Company to pass through B Company and advance up the road to Macerone, while A Company passed through C Company on the axis of a secondary road half a mile west of and parallel to D Company. B Company would provide flank protection if required, while C Company stayed in reserve. The engineers would move with the troops and clear the roads of mines so that the tanks could be on hand at first light. The Canadians' anti-tank guns would work with the armour, while the machine-gunners and mortars harassed the river line. The battalion carriers were not to move until daylight, when they were to be ready to support B Company in its role of flank support.

There was a thousand-yard gap which might be troublesome between the battalion's right and 22 Battalion, hence the precaution for flank support. The Colonel's final instruction was that, if the forward companies did not get to the river before daylight, they were to continue on if possible after first light. B and C Companies would take care of any pockets of resistance left behind in the darkness. The advance would commence at 11 p.m.

D Company, moving up level with A Company across the Scolo Fossalta, found a big demolition at the Fossalta crossing. It was not, however, a tank obstacle, as it could be bypassed easily enough, though it would take the sappers at least three hours to repair. About four hundred yards north of the Fossalta another road crossed the company's axis, where mortar and machine-gun fire was encountered from the enemy outpost line.

D Company halted until the fire died down a little, whereupon the advance proceeded. At 5 a.m. it was approaching the Scolo Olca, a canal approximately parallel with the objective a quarter of a mile farther north. Here it was fired on by enemy troops holding house positions in the vicinity and took some time to clear them out, but by 6 a.m. the company was firmly in possession of the Scolo Olca and consolidating in conformity with a message not to push further forward until further orders. A Company, moving along the secondary road, was not bothered with harassing fire like D Company, as the enemy was evidently fully occupied with 23 Battalion further left, judging by the metal thrown in that direction. A Company was up to the canal by 4 a.m., and a patrol quietly crossed the bridge over it and picked up two Germans who had no idea that the New Zealanders were so close.

Both companies consolidated on the bank of the canal and remained there throughout the day. They tied in with 23 Battalion, which had been compelled to bypass Ruffio and came up a little later. By 9 a.m. 5 Brigade was firmly established just short of the Pisciatello and under fire from all types of enemy weapons.

Previous experience had taught the troops that when the Germans were pushed back to a new position in flat country the first step was for the artillery, in lieu of spotter aircraft, to find its range by firing a few rounds of smoke shells. On this occasion there were no smoke shells, but there was steady and accurate fire soon after first light. The bell tower of the church in Macerone beyond the river suggested the answer. The belfry was a large affair supported on four columns, and Second-Lieutenant Craig suggested to a Sherman tank commander that its removal would be a good thing. The Sherman shot its supporting columns away and the whole edifice disappeared, to the detriment of the German gunners' accuracy. Later Craig and Sergeant Bill Marsh ¹³ made a special trip to see if the tower had really been used as an observation post. They found prepared and wired demolition charges in the base of the tower, and telephone wires hanging down the undamaged portion. The Italians said that three Germans had been killed in the crash.

Fifth Brigade ended its seven-day period in action that night. The plan was now for 6 Brigade to force the river and for 4 Armoured Brigade to exploit through if the ground remained firm enough. After last light A and B Companies of 24 Battalion took over from A and D Companies of 21 Battalion and the latter marched back to

Gambettola.

The troops cleaned up and caught up on some arrears of sleep, while 6 Brigade established bridgeheads across the Pisciatello and 4 Armoured Brigade fidgeted about waiting for the word to strike for the Savio River, about five miles ahead. The enemy was also considering whether to move back again before he was pushed back, and finally decided on another fighting retreat.

The following day 21 Battalion occupied Macerone. Fifth Brigade stayed in reserve, while 6 Brigade and 4 Armoured Brigade battled through farmlands, across ditches, over demolitions, and along lanes towards the Savio. But there was still no breakthrough.

A battalion history sketches but faintly the operations of other divisions and theatres, but it is necessary here to mention that Eighth Army had been engaged in incessant fighting since August and was sorely in need of rest and reorganisation. Two divisions were non-operational owing to lack of infantry reinforcements, and others were just about fought out; there were no armoured formations in reserve, and there was nobody to relieve the tired Canadians. All resources were going to France and there was even a grave shortage of shells for the guns. And, as if that was not enough, Eighth Army was required to send troops to occupy Greece. Finally the autumn rains, of which the troops had had a foretaste, were very close. Fifth Army, in the mountains, was already bogged down almost in sight of Bologna. It was decided to form an army reserve with 2 New Zealand Division and to rest the other divisions in any way possible. To this end 5 Brigade was relieved by 5 Canadian Division and moved out in RMT and its own transport in the early morning of 22 October.

The 21st Battalion's casualties in the Rimini operations were 35 killed, 81 wounded, and five prisoners of war, a total of 121.

¹ Brig J. T. Burrows, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Greek); Christchurch; born Christchurch, 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO 20 Bn Dec 1941-Jun 1942; 20 Bn and 20 Armd Regt Aug 1942-Jul 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-.

- ² 2 Lt J. W. Clotworthy; Pukehuia; born NZ 19 Mar 1914; farmer; wounded 5 Oct 1944.
- ³ 2 Lt J. W. Dempsey; born North Auckland, 18 Feb 1923; killed in action 16 Oct 1944.
- ⁴ Lt-Col R. R. T. Young, DSO; Richmond, England; born Wellington, 25 Jun 1902; oil company executive; CO School of Instruction Feb-Apr 1943; 28 (Maori) Bn Dec 1943-Jul 1944, Aug-Nov 1944; wounded 26 Dec 1943.
- ⁵ Lt R. J. Booth, MM; Opotiki; born Opotiki, 13 Feb 1921; clerk; wounded 24 Sep 1944.
- ⁶ L-Cpl L. B. Crews; Owaka, South Otago; born Balclutha, 17 Mar 1920; dairy assistant; wounded 22 Sep 1944.
- ⁷ Pte P. O'Rourke, MM; Auckland; born Palmerston North, 22 Oct 1916; glass cutter; wounded 22 Sep 1944.
- ⁸ Sgt C. Hunt, MM, Bronze Medal (Greek); Pukekohe; born England, 9 Jan 1909; farmer; wounded 3 Aug 1942.
- ⁹ Lt C. D. Hardy, MC, m.i.d.; Te Awamutu; born Ohaupo, 22 Jul 1916; Regular soldier.
- ¹⁰ Cpl R. I. Martin; born NZ 26 Jun 1920; labourer; wounded 30 Sep 1944; died 18 Apr 1948.
- ¹¹ There were two Viserbas: Old Viserba was an inconsiderable hamlet a mile inland, while New Viserba was on the coast.
- ¹² Some modern historians consider that the Uso River was the Rubicon.
- ¹³ WO II W. Marsh, m.i.d.; Manurewa; born England, 15 May 1921; farmer.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 17 — THE WINTER LINE

CHAPTER 17 The Winter Line

The route back was through the battlefields— Rimini, Pesaro, Fano—to lesi, where the column staged until the following day. A midnight start and a roundabout route through Fabriano and Foligno ended in a mountain valley tucked away in the heart of the Apennines. It was a wide valley flanked by high, craggy mountains and rose gradually to the hilltop university town of Camerino, centred around a twin-spired church. The war had passed the valley by and left it drowsing, a backwater of peace and tranquillity.

The troops stayed a month in the upland villages of Morro, Mucia, Serravalle and Strada, scattered within an hour's march of Camerino. The platoons were billeted in houses and lived with the Italians. For the most part they were friendly people, and where there were barriers of distrust the smiling Kiwi, with his half-dozen words of Italian and pockets full of chocolates for the children, soon broke them down. Within a matter of days the boys were sitting around the meagre fires of gathered twigs or fanning the charcoal burners at the side of the open fire with Emilia or Ginlia or Silvana perched on their knees playing draughts. Those kids could play draughts as well as they could sing, and what Italian cannot sing? Sometimes a tin of army rations would supplement the evening meal, and occasionally the troops would wrestle according to the local rules with a plate of pasta. Some casas had baths and most had electricity, generated by a diesel plant which did not work very well, for often the light was only a red smoulder in the filaments of the low-powered globes. But of all the amenities, what intrigued the guests most were the pull-chain closets in full working order. Buono! Just like being at home.

The peasantry appeared to own or at least to have a definite stake in the land they worked. Friday was market day and carts converged on Camerino from all directions. Car-minded Kiwis looked with interest on the donkey, bullock and cowdrawn vehicles laden high with produce, and ex-farmers studied the tall thin stacks of wheat built around poles and the winter quarters of the livestock. Others cast speculative eyes on the hordes of hens, ducks, turkeys, geese and pigs roaming at will around the farms and along the village street. It was a nice spot.

The troops, with the exception of 60 junior NCOs who entered a training school run by the battalion, rested for a week while the officers attended a series of conferences at battalion, brigade, and divisional level. A little desultory football was played and arms and ammunition cleaned, but the weather was mostly wet and cold, so the battalion cultivated the acquaintance of its new hosts.

A change of command took place on the last day of October. Lieutenant-Colonel Thodey and Major Tanner marched out on furlough and were replaced by Lieutenant-Colonel McPhail, ¹ with Major Ashley as second-in-command. McPhail was an original member of 20 Battalion, and had served in almost every capacity from 'full private' to CO of 23 Battalion before taking command of 21 Battalion. The retiring officers took the good wishes of the troops with them, for they were both brave men and capable leaders, which is not an invariable combination.

There followed three weeks of light routine training in the mornings and hard football in the afternoons. Limited leave to Florence began, and for those who did not get away, there were picture shows in Camerino and shows by the Kiwi and Canadian concert parties. The Italians produced some local talent; the sergeants' mess entertained itself; the battalion was host to 23 Battalion for a day's football, each company playing its opposite number by day and entertaining it by night. Subalterns held formal and informal parties and senior officers forgathered with their opposite numbers. Rank and file parties were numerous and exhausting. The first fall of snow, six weeks earlier than the previous year, might have furrowed the brows of very senior officers who remembered the Sangro and Orsogna, but in the villages around Camerino the troops were working too hard at resting to worry about the future.

The advance party left on 23 November to lay out a concentration area near Cesena, 30 miles along Route 9 from Rimini. Eighth Army had not been idle while the New Zealanders were resting, and in spite of dwindling manpower and the difficulties of a winter campaign, 1 Canadian Corps was nearing Ravenna and 5 British Corps on its left had reached the Lamone River, nine miles beyond the considerable town of Forli and 20 miles from Cesena. But the enemy defences were still holding and there was no breakthrough.

The troops packed up that night and were ready for an early move in the

morning. It was nearly as bad as leaving home after final leave—red-eyed women and children gathered round the trucks, while the men of both races spoke a little gruffly, no doubt owing to the cold, wet mountain air. The concentration area was reached in due course, and the battalion team beat the Divisional Signals 21—9 the same afternoon. The team had been left behind at Camerino for the purpose and rejoined the following day.

The troops stayed in the area while Colonel McPhail, company commanders, and platoon officers reconnoitred the part of the line the battalion was to take over. The situation at that period was that Eighth Army was regrouping for yet another attempt to break through. The enemy had withdrawn behind the Lamone River, which had been reached in the last advance, and the mission of 2 New Zealand Division was to probe for assault crossings, while 4 (British) Infantry Division was going out for a rest. The New Zealand Division took its place between 10 Indian Division on the right at Corletto and 46 (British) Division on the left, with Route 9 included in the New Zealand sector.

The instructions mentioned that some mines and booby traps were to be expected and that the conditions were unpleasant, which was another illustration of the English leaning towards understatement.

Fifth Brigade was on the right in the New Zealand sector, with 22 Battalion, now back in the brigade as an infantry battalion, on the right, 21 Battalion on the left, and 23 and 28 Battalions in support. Sixth Brigade, with a shorter line, had only 26 Battalion up.

The route up was along Highway 67 to Cesena, then along Route 9 for five miles, where a secondary road was taken to Reida village. It was an area of long fields of winter wheat and sugar beet, separated by lines of mulberry trees latticed in grape vines. Ditches and small canals criss-crossed the countryside and drained into the Lamone. It was still Rimini country, though, further inland. The houses ranged from substantial villas set among small plantations of oak and pine, substantial farmhouses with their groups of outbuildings and straw stacks, and the more numerous cottages clustered around the secondary crossroads. Dull and overcast skies gave place to a cold drizzle, and the troops were glad to reach the casas that were their platoon posts.

The civilians had been evacuated or had left of their own accord, and the platoons occupied the newly vacated dwellings. According to the luck of the draw the houses were good, bad, or indifferent, but nearly always there were beds, a stove, and provisions. It was a period of intermittent rain, incessant patrolling by night, and counter-battery work by day. You hoped Jerry would not pick on your house for a target. Movement by day was discouraged by enemy observation posts, and the troops found relaxation in various ways: reading, writing home, playing crib without a scoring board. On account of the weather conditions (when there was no rain, which was seldom, the dull visibility made it fairly safe to light fires), some surprising culinary talent was discovered at the expense of the supplies left behind—flour, fat, sugar, and fruit. For a while scones were commonplace, and pikelets not uncommon, while the more accomplished cooks produced real apple pies with pastry under and over. It was some recompense for the utterly vile conditions outside.

Battalion dispositions were A Company on the right, B Company on the left, with D and C in support. Patrols went out immediately, but their reports were not encouraging. The control banks were a hundred yards apart, the river itself two chains wide and running, according to the rainfall, in four channels or from bank to bank. The banks themselves were 20 feet high and seven feet wide on top, with a sharp drop to the water—definite tank traps and only passable to infantry after a spell of fine weather. There was, however, no evidence of enemy standing patrols on the eastern side of the river. Sergeant Spinetto, a very strong swimmer, tried to cross with a rope, but found the current too swift and had difficulty in returning. Obviously the only way to cross the Lamone was with assault boats.

On the night of 3-4 December the Division had an unusual role for assault troops. It was to simulate a crossing to cover a real crossing by 46 Division on the left of the enemy-held town of Faenza, and all arms did their best to make it a good show: tanks lumbered about without going anywhere, engineers dumped bridging material in full view, and mortars became active.

The night was cold and dark, with a moon due to rise at 8.15 p.m. At seven o'clock a barrage by 25-pounders came down 400 yards on the enemy side of the river and after half an hour began to creep forward at the rate of 100 yards every five minutes. Simultaneously the battalion three-inch mortars opened up with smoke

and high explosive, while the six-pounders used high explosive and tracer. The platoons opened fire with Brens, rifles, Piats and three-inch mortars, and the machine-gunners fired belt after belt into the darkness.

Wireless silence was broken for the occasion and the enemy should have picked up some surprising information. Messages were sent in clear to give him every assistance, and the battalion conducted an imaginary attack over the river. Platoons reported the capture of strongpoints, asked for artillery support, stirred up the engineers for not getting bridges over the river, reported casualties, and jeered at each other for not getting forward fast enough. A good time was had by all, and the deception was so effective that intercepted enemy messages reported that they were being savagely attacked, and later, when the show was over, that the attack had been beaten off. The New Zealand casualties were two wounded, and 46 Division made good its bridgehead. Two more feint attacks were put in the next day by the field guns and smoke-generating units while 46 Division was consolidating and extending its position. Nothing further of note occurred in the 21 Battalion area until the afternoon of the 6th, when it was announced that the battalion team would play 5 Field Regiment at 1 p.m. on 8 December. They won 5—3. With the 46 Division across the river on one flank and the Canadians wading through the mud to capture Ravenna on the other, the German High Command had enough on its hands without stirring up trouble on 21 Battalion's front, which remained quiet until the battalion was relieved by 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade on the night of 10-11 December.

The troops were billeted in Forli and close to the village where the man who was responsible for their presence in Italy was born. If the Italian papers ran a births, deaths and marriages column in 1883, the Forli Times or its equivalent would probably have contained an announcement to the effect: 'To Mr. and Mrs. Mussolini at Dovia on July 20, a son.' It is a pity he was not born a girl.

The billets in Forli were a definite come-down after the Lamone casas, and for once the troops almost wished they had not been relieved. The nights were bitterly cold, with hard frosts and a ground fog in the mornings. The rooms were bare and the wood and charcoal issues microscopic. Anything made of wood had been used for fuel by previous garrisons and even demolished houses had been thoroughly searched for odd rafters. There just wasn't any wood. Nevertheless 21 Battalion's luck was really in, for another switch had begun and the New Zealand Division was

moving south of the railway line and over the river to replace British units west of Faenza, still held by the enemy. The 23rd and 28th Battalions, representing 5 Brigade, were under the command of 46 Division, but returned to New Zealand command the next day, when the switch was complete and 6 Brigade was up on the brigade's left.

The 21st Battalion returned to the line during the night of 14–15 December. A two-divisional attack had been planned for 10 Indian and 2 New Zealand Divisions, with 5 Brigade to advance about four miles and seize the slightly higher ground overlooking the Senio River. The brigade attack was to be on a three-battalion front, with 21 Battalion in reserve. A long forced march after debussing was expected, for the battalion was to advance through 23 Battalion and seize a bridge over the Senio on Route 9, but the operation did not go according to plan. The instructions were cancelled and the troops were billeted in the Orestina area, just north of the Lamone River.

The battalion waited in cold and draughty billets while the battle ebbed and flowed. The key positions of Pogliano and Celle ² were taken and lost and taken again, but by the late afternoon the enemy had had enough of a combined air, tank, artillery and infantry assault and was pulling back to the next of the innumerable rivers, the Senio. At first light on the 16th the Division attacked again, with four battalions forward, the 28th, 23rd, and 22nd from 5 Brigade and the 25th from 6 Brigade, and with the 21st still in reserve. The advance went well and by evening outposts were well up to the river line, but enemy rearguards were still on our side of the river. The Divisional Cavalry Battalion cleared German rearguards out of Faenza, and D Company 21 Battalion (Major Rogers) went into Celle in case of enemy counter-attack.

Celle was more than usually battered. Built around a crossroads, the main one in the area, its possession by the enemy had prevented wheeled transport towards the Senio. It had in consequence suffered the fire power of two armies. First the New Zealand divisional artillery had shelled Celle; then, with both sides holding part of it at the same time, mortars and bazookas had taken their toll; finally the Germans, after it had been wrested from them, had smothered it with retaliatory fire.

D Company passed over paddocks of winter wheat that had been so torn up that

the shell holes were only a few paces apart, and through fields where the cornstalks were mown chest high by enfilading machine guns. The church was the only building not entirely in ruins, and it had one wall missing; the rest of the buildings were rubble heaps that the engineers used for roadmending. Scattered around were empty machine-gun belts and civilian clothing, meat tins and sheets of music, barbed wire and broken beds, cartridge boxes and crockery, mortar cases and school books. Hidden by the tree tops straight ahead stood the tower of Castel Bolognese, to the left were the ridges of the southern hills, and everywhere else stark tree trunks and farmhouses with wounds hidden by distance.

Limited advances from house to house were continued behind barrages, but it was not until the evening of the 20th that 21 Battalion was called on to move and relieve both 23 and 28 Battalions before first light.

The take-over was complete before daylight, with the battalion straddling Route 9. The line had been advanced from the sea to the mountains, but there was still no breakthrough. The decision had already been taken not to continue the offensive beyond the Senio, but to remain static for the winter months. The enemy had more divisions than we had, and our lack of depth invited a counter-offensive. We had tried to win a game with too few pieces on the board, and had failed to reach the Po Valley by the narrowest of margins—but had failed nevertheless. The Americans were stuck in the mountain snows and Eighth Army was stuck in the mud for the winter. The first thing to do was to convince Jerry that even if the advance was postponed, which he knew, and that our artillery was very short of ammunition, which it was hoped he did not know, he was not to assume that the static period was going to be in his favour. The general position was to his advantage, for with the winter closing down, it was natural to assume that our troops, like his, would for the most part be living in houses. The houses close to the stopbank could not be seen from ground level because the banks themselves were over twenty feet high and he held both of them. They were, of course, all marked on the maps, and while he held the observation points he could both observe and predict shoots on our houses, while we could only predict shoots on his.

The enemy made good use of his advantage and fired his mortars and machine guns freely by day, while self-propelled guns or tanks came up nightly and shot up

our forward houses. Even if our guns were restricted to a few rounds a day, that sort of thing could not be permitted. There was plenty of tank ammunition available, and the divisional tanks were lined up a couple of thousand yards behind the forward posts and returned every shell several for one. In addition the counter-mortar organisation, long prepared for such an emergency, found full employment supporting the tanks. It had its own methods of detecting enemy weapon positions which were not ineffective —flash spotting and sound bearings from the forward troops— but these methods needed prompt reports. The forward troops were only too happy to co-operate, and telephone communication was arranged to all forward posts, with the result that by constant vigilance on the part of the pickets the direction of enemy fire was quickly reported. The resulting concentration of fire from mortar, medium machine gun, tank gun, and heavy anti-aircraft airburst changed the position materially, and the troops were able to get some sleep.

Snow fell on Christmas Eve. The troops sat in their casas with barricaded windows and doors and hoped that Jerry would remember the date. He was in fact very quiet all day, and the battalion did nothing to annoy him. Patrols went out as usual after dark, lifting mines and clearing tracks to the river bank, and one of them upset the peace by tripping over an alarm wire while coming back, causing a standto in B Company. There was scarcely a shot fired on Christmas Day until late in the afternoon, and the troops in the line had their dinner in peace. It consisted of tinned rations, with each strongpoint providing its own menu, and ran mostly towards soup, oxtail or steak-and-kidney stew, roast pumpkin (scrounged by the troops), plum pudding, oranges, nuts and sweets. The padre visited each platoon and held short services, and Sergeant Don Naylor organised a carol team to accompany him from post to post. The CO also paid informal visits to all company posts.

There were frequent inter-company reliefs, but nothing of note occurred until 30 December, when the Maoris relieved the battalion and it went into billets in Faenza. Forli and Faenza were the nearest approach the troops ever had to Armentieres and other behind-the-line towns in France in 1914-18. Certainly the mademoiselles were signorinas, but otherwise, with due allowance for 25 years' advance in civilisation, the amenities were the same. There were cinemas and restaurants with waitresses, and cosy spots where small gatherings could discuss a bottle or so of vino. The Dorchester in Forli was an English Naafi, which was a home away from home for

mud-caked Kiwis back from the Senio, while in Faenza the troops could relax and gaze on a ceiling painted by an amateur Michelangelo.

The possibility of an enemy push across the Senio was still in the minds of General Headquarters, and the troops were put to digging defences around Faenza. It was a wet, cold and miserable job digging trenches in the waterlogged countryside, and it would have raised a sardonic grin on the face of an old-timer from France should he have passed that way. When not trench-digging it was a time of light training and heavy relaxation until 9 January, when the battalion took over from the Maoris in the old sector. It was during this spell in the line that the battalion made itself the most talked of unit in the Division by reporting the presence of a train. During the night of 14-15 January a train was distinctly heard due north of 15 Platoon.

No train could possibly use that damaged line, and the troops did not believe their own ears; nevertheless it was heard three times during the night. The Ghost Train, as it came to be called, caused a tremendous stir at Brigade Headquarters. The artillery lost a lot of sleep shelling the track, and the brigade tanks were alerted. Daylight put the report in the right perspective—clearly a case of jitters, or reinforcements with overripe imaginations, or the delayed action of an overdose of vino. The fact that a standing patrol of 17 Platoon of D Company 26 Battalion also heard the ghost train that night was attributed to the same cause or causes. Divisional Intelligence really sat up when the following night's reports were analysed. No. 16 Platoon reported a train moving across the front before daylight, and 22 Battalion turned in two reports of a train heard in the night. Air photographs were called for and clearly showed that the line had not been repaired, and it just was not possible to run a train on what was left of the rails; and if it was possible, that train would have to dispense with bridges. More reports were compiled by Divisional Intelligence and weighty deductions made, which boiled down to the theory that, if the enemy was capable of performing miracles of engineering, he was bringing up panther turrets to strengthen his defences.

The 21st Battalion did not hear the ghost train any more, but others did. The 22nd Battalion heard it during the night of 16-17 January, an anti-aircraft battery heard it the next night, and 10 Indian Division reported train noises during the nights of the 18th and 20th. The 21st Battalion was relieved by 28 Battalion on 23 January

and, not to be outdone, the latter reported the ghost train during the nights of the 26th and 28th.

No explanation was ever forthcoming. Probably the answer was the combination of still, frosty nights and a blanket of fog, plus a train that was running ten miles away and a trick of acoustics.

The battalion was given the option of remaining in Faenza or moving back to Forli for the rest period, and it chose the latter town. The air in Forli was full of smuts from diesel oil burners, which were converted charcoal burners and exploded at irregular intervals. But Faenza was under distant shellfire and Forli was not. The determining factor in the choice of locality was neither the absence of shellfire nor the presence of oil-fuel burners, however, but the fact that a furlough draft of four officers and 98 other ranks of the 5th and 6th Reinforcements, who had been in Fiji before serving with 2 NZ Division, were marching out, and the facilities of the larger town offered more scope for farewells.

The Tongariro draft list was circulated on 1 February, and farewells began immediately. There was a formal parade the next day, when the CO spoke to and inspected the draft, the battalion presented arms, and the brigade band played them off the parade ground. Within the hour the depleted battalion was moving back to Faenza. The next day 103 reinforcements marched in. They were mostly 3 NZ Division men from the Pacific, arriving via New Zealand and Egypt. They had done a lot of training and some campaigning against the Japanese, and it was not their fault that there were not many Japs around their part of the Pacific. They called themselves half-defiantly and half-bitterly the 'Coconut Bombers'. They had their first taste of Italian active service when the battalion relieved the Maoris from 6 to 21 February.

The 14th of February was notable for the introduction by the enemy of a little psychological warfare. Leaflets were fired over the area containing information on how to produce symptoms of various diseases. The instructions were guaranteed harmless, and ended with the motto, 'Better a few weeks ill than all your life dead'. You could take your choice of skin inflammation, dysentery, paralysis, stomach ulcers, heart disease, or tuberculosis. The pessimists pointed out that various chemists' supplies were needed, and that chemists' shops were not usually found in

the forward area; also that army medical officers were notoriously suspicious, and what would happen if half the battalion paraded sick with heart disease or stomach ulcers did not invite contemplation. The desirability of staying alive was emphasized by a blitz on platoon houses, five of which were badly knocked about with delayedaction shells that penetrated a couple of stone walls before exploding, necessitating hours of reinforcing with sandbags. It was hoped that our counter-blitz was equally successful.

A new policy regarding machine guns was introduced about this time. Each infantry battalion had its own guns and trained its own gunners. Second-Lieutenant Knowles, ³ who had been in charge of the attached platoon from 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, was attached to 21 Battalion and took over its Machine Gun Platoon. With the paramount need for another infantry brigade, 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion was changed into an infantry battalion and became a unit in the newly formed 9 Infantry Brigade. The Divisional Cavalry was also disbanded as such and formed into an infantry battalion, while 22 (Motor) Battalion made the third unit of the new brigade.

The Division had thus returned to its original formation of three infantry brigades, but had its armoured brigade in addition. Even with this accession of infantry strength, another brigade (Gurkhas) had to be taken under command to keep up the momentum in the next campaign. Truly the infantry soldier had come into his own again.

That tour of duty was much the same as the previous one: a mixture of snow, rain and mud, hiding up by day and patrolling by night. All day you tried to convince yourself that snow capes reaching from neck to waist made you invisible, and that legs and arms black against the snow did not really matter at night when you were worming your way up to a Jerry post with the idea of throwing the odd grenade. At night you were quite convinced that the cape itself did not matter with extremities showing like dark hemstitching on a white sheet. ⁴

By day there were the usual mortar, artillery, and rocket guns searching for and occasionally finding inhabited casas, and if there was rain and poor visibility each side improved its defences; companies in reserve maintained the roads in the battalion area, and the Machine Gun Platoon finished its training and came into the line for a little live target experience; the machine-gunners dug their guns in and

shot up every known enemy post and thoroughly enjoyed themselves, particularly as the enemy did not retaliate. Prior to relief on the 21st the battalion organised a shoot called a 'Chinese attack', with all its own and attached support arms. Again every known and several unknown enemy posts were shot up and again there was little retaliation. Taken by and large it was an instructive period for the Coconut Bombers. The rest of the battalion was glad to get back to Faenza again.

The following rest period was taken up with practising river crossings with kapok bridges and assault boats, watching demonstrations with Wasp and Crocodile flame-throwers, and wondering where and when the real thing was coming off. The Russians were close to Berlin, the British and Americans not far off and maybe the war would end first.

On the afternoon of the 24th the battalion gave a demonstration of river crossing. The distance between stopbanks was about a hundred yards and the river 25 feet wide. The audience was a distinguished one, consisting of the GOC, CRA, CRE, brigade commanders, staff officers, battalion commanders, 9 Brigade officers, and newly arrived officers from 3 NZ Division.

Launching two kapok bridges and assault boats, the troops were completely across in three and a half minutes. Wasps then demonstrated their flame-throwing capacity by mounting the stopbanks and flaming the opposite bank, while Crocodiles showed what they could do by directing their fire from the foot of the bank.

Colonel McPhail was informed that the battalion would not change over as planned with the Maoris in the line, but would repeat the demonstration in conjunction with the engineers, who would throw bridges over the river behind the assaulting troops. The show was arranged for 3 March and the audience was even bigger than at the previous command performance. Everything went well, the sun shone brilliantly, the engineers threw a high and a low-level bridge across the river in record time, and General Freyberg was complimentary. Two days later the troops returned to Camerino to train and organise for the spring offensive—if the war did not end first.

A and C Companies were billeted in Morro, B, D and Administrative Companies in Muccia, Support in Serravalle, and Battalion Headquarters in Strada. While training

and sports filled the days, there was a thorough comb-out of all those, irrespective of rank, who showed the slightest signs of war weariness. The last campaign—and everybody knew it would be the last campaign—was no place for tender nerves or low morale. The result was a battalion with a hard core of tough fighters to whom the prospect of another battle was not distasteful, while the rest were fresh troops from 3 Division and the Pacific.

The battalion took a day off on 18 March and entertained all the children in the area at a party. There were actually two parties, one at Muccia and the other at Morro, and at both there were sports, music, and games with prizes that came out of the battalion funds, and afternoon tea provided by the cooks out of the battalion rations. The troops enjoyed it as much as the kids.

The sure sign that training was nearing its end came on the 20th with orders to prepare for a brigade ceremonial parade on the 24th. The battalion steadied its nerve by beating the Maoris at both Rugby and hockey, and began to smarten up in readiness for the ordeal, for ceremonial parades are not popular with front-line soldiers. A battalion rehearsal on the 22nd was followed by a brigade rehearsal the following day; but that was an occasion, for the salute was taken by the brigade's former commander, Major-General Kippenberger, standing, with the aid of a walking stick, on two artificial feet. He had lost his own at Monte Trocchio before Cassino. The big parade was held on the 24th at Castel Raimondo, where the troops were inspected by the Eighth Army Commander, Lieutenant-General McCreery, accompanied by Lieutenant-General Freyberg. The New Zealand High Commissioner in London, the Hon. W. J. Jordan, was also present and visited the unit the following day. He was in high good humour at being mistaken for an Italian, or possibly an enemy agent, the same morning. He said he had risen early and was leaning on the rail of a bridge in Camerino admiring the view spread out below. He remarked to a passing soldier: 'My word, this is a beautiful country.' The Kiwi looked at him suspiciously for a moment and then asked: 'Where the hell did you learn to speak such good English?'

The troops entertained 24 Battalion at a sports gala at Serravalle on the 28th, which was run on the same lines as that held with 23 Battalion on the same ground the previous year. The officers and sergeants of each company played their opposite numbers at football and hockey, and on the day the battalion had the greater array

of sporting talent. The provision of a little drop of something on the sideline added to the conviviality of the occasion. The highlight of the day was the officers' match and it was the only really closely contested game, with the battalion scoring a one-point lead in the last few minutes. The spectators were loud in their approbation and generous with their advice.

The next day, in spite of the handicap of a slight hangover, the battalion team played 18 Armoured Regiment in the final round of the divisional competition and won 13—9, thus establishing the team as one of the three divisional champions. And the next day, 30 March, the news was out—back to the Senio tomorrow. It was a quick move, but it suited everybody. The Coconut Bombers were keen to show their mettle and the old-timers liked it better that way.

The battalion's casualties from October 1944 to March 1945 were eight killed and 25 wounded.

¹ Lt-Col E. A. McPhail, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d.; Wyndham; born Wanganui, 31 Dec 1906; bank official; CO 23 Bn 6 May-10 Jun 1944, 4 Aug-13 Oct 1944; CO 21 Bn 30 Oct 1944-25 May 1945; wounded 9 Apr 1943.

² Not to be confused with the Celle of the previous chapter.

³ Capt J. L. Knowles; Timaru; born NZ 20 Oct 1920; bank officer.

⁴ White jackets and trousers replaced snow capes about this time.

21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 18 — THE FINAL OFFENSIVE

CHAPTER 18 The Final Offensive

The object of the campaign was now the destruction of the enemy forces south of the River Po, which was several awkward canals and five rivers away—the Senio, Santerno, Sillaro, Idice, and Reno.

The method was first to threaten the enemy's left flank by a diversionary attack around Lake Comacchio and then, when control had been gained of the southeastern corner of the lake and the enemy's attention drawn to his seaward flank, to launch a two-corps attack along the axis of Route 9 towards Bologna. Finally, when more enemy reserves were trying to counter that blow, Fifth Army would pour down the mountainsides and capture Bologna, then strike north-west towards Milan, Turin and Genoa.

Fifth Corps was opening the attack with 2 New Zealand Division on the left and 8 Indian Division on the right; 2 Polish Corps would have 3 Carpathian Division on the left of the New Zealanders. General Freyberg's plan was to attack with two brigades (the 5th and 6th) up and 9 Brigade in reserve. Each brigade would attack on a two-battalion front—5 Brigade with 21 Battalion on the right and the Maoris on the left, 6 Brigade with 24 and 25 Battalions. There would be a barrage heavier by far than that fired at El Alamein, and air support of shattering dimensions.

The troops were at a staging area north of Forli before daylight on 1 April. Lieutenant-Colonel McPhail, who had already been forward, gave the company commanders their orders, as well as all the information he had been able to pick up. He mentioned that the German 98 Division was opposite the New Zealand sector. The area had been very quiet for some time with no artillery fire, very little mortar fire, and only the usual machine-gun bursts at night. The south side of the stopbank was still held by the enemy, except for one post; there were many Schu mines about, and only hastily laid mines of our own spread somewhat indiscriminately. All lanes and paths were to be regarded as suspect until swept. The line would be held with two companies up and two in support. C and B Companies, which would be forward, were instructed that the first night would be spent in settling in and no patrol work would be called for. Strict wireless silence would be observed unless an

emergency arose, and when using line telephones the battalion would not be mentioned under any circumstances. This precaution was necessary because the enemy possessed a device which permitted him to listen to line-telephone conversations. Speakers were to identify themselves, therefore, by using the codeword H84. No letters or papers were to be carried, and 78 Division's patches were to be worn.

The object of these deception measures was to keep the New Zealanders' entry into the line secret and to suggest that the movement was merely an internal relief. The enemy knew very well that the presence of 2 NZ Division generally meant trouble, and it was hoped that no hint would be given of the coming offensive.

While the commanders were holding their conferences, the troops were explaining to the new hands the amazing difference a month had made to the near-swamp they had been wallowing in during the winter. There was sunshine instead of snow, dust instead of mud, green leaves and flowers instead of stark-limbed trees and waterlogged fields.

Battalion Headquarters went forward in mid-morning on 1 April and the companies followed at quarter-hour intervals after lunch. The 21st relieved a battalion of Northamptons which was deployed as usual in platoon posts around houses, the most forward of which was 120 yards short of the stopbank.

It was understood that 78 Division had captured the greater part of the eastern stopbank and that only a few enemy posts remained. That was probably true enough in a general way, but the uncaptured portion was mostly in 21 Battalion's sector, where only 200 yards in B Company's area was held. In addition, there was a small bend in the river near the railway line that enfiladed C Company's stopbank. It was going to cost the battalion fifty killed and wounded to secure that stopbank.

The new sector was on the right of the one held throughout the winter, about six miles north of the Rimini- Bologna road, more familiarly known as Route 9, and three miles south of Lugo.

When the take-over was completed late in the afternoon, the position was that, with C Company (Major Parfitt) right and B Company (Major Butler) left, 21 Battalion was on the Division's right flank and holding a line of outposts short of the Senio

stopbank. D Company (Major Fleming ¹) and A Company (Major Bullock) were in support; behind them was the Machine Gun Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Knowles), and further back the Mortar Platoon (Captain Fallon ²). The supporting arms under command were G Troop of 32 Battery and A Squadron of 18 Armoured Regiment; 28 Battery of 5 Field Regiment was also in support. The battalion front was three-quarters of a mile in length, with the right flank, exclusive of a railway line, crossing the river at that point. On the left the Maoris held the rest of 5 Brigade's sector, and 23 Battalion was in brigade reserve; the sector left of the Maoris was held by 6 Brigade, and 9 Brigade was in divisional reserve.

The Senio, wriggling across the flat country in its general north-easterly course to the Adriatic, ran almost due east in the battalion sector. The river itself wasn't the obstacle—it was only about five feet deep and 25 feet across—it was the twenty-foot-high stopbanks. To the infantry they were like a curtain permitting the enemy fairly free movement as long as he held the banks. The mass of vines, fruit and olive trees, grass and self-sown crops almost made the men from 3 NZ Division think they were back in their Pacific jungles again, and there were mines everywhere.

The troops had the choice of sleeping in houses that were registered by the enemy guns or in ditches that were not, and they mostly chose the latter, which were quite dry at the time. They carried in armfuls of straw and covered it with their bivouac tents, to make quite comfortable sleeping quarters.

The first day passed quietly enough for the battalion, except for that portion of B Company actually on the stopbank. The men of this company found their situation both novel and unpleasant. Their previous experience of stopbanks had not included inhabiting opposite slopes of the same bank as the enemy and within a few feet of him, for although the top of the bank was firmly held, the Germans were still dug in on the reverse slope. Grenades were the most practicable weapon under the circumstances, and were thrown by both sides at uncertain intervals. A German variation was to roll down an S-mine with a two or three-second fuse attached. B Company started to dig a tunnel so that they could see their reverse slope and the forward slope of the far stopbank. When the tunnel was finished, the view was not very reassuring—the reverse slope was covered with wire entanglements, and there were foot-bridges permitting the enemy a quick passage to and from his forward

posts dug into the bottom of the bank on our side of the river.

During that and the following day C Company and the rest of B Company swept for mines and cleared paths, while the reserve companies built camouflaged bays for assault boats. C Company tried the next day (the 3rd) to get a footing on the bank. No. 14 Platoon (Lieutenant Utting ³) and 15 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Smith ⁴) tried twice, and twice were prevented by grenades and snipers. By this time B Company had its tunnel completed and mortars were directed on to suspected enemy posts. A tank was brought up to assist in the work, and there was no enemy retaliation until the evening, when the whole battalion area was heavily shelled. Possibly the enemy thought the battalion activities were the prelude to an attack, because the deluge was preceded by four flares, three green and a red, evidently a call for defensive fire. The night for B Company was one of fierce grenade exchanges, for the enemy were still able to cross the river at will, and their side of the stopbank was honeycombed with defensive posts dug well into the bank. The situation was reminiscent of Quinn's Post on Gallipoli, where the Turks and New Zealanders held opposite sides of a ridge top within a few yards of each other; except, of course, that the grenades of 1915 were embryonic in comparison with the 1945 model.

Both companies tried for the stopbank the next afternoon. B Company was able to get a firmer footing, but C Company, with the Germans firmly in position, had more trouble. Utting and Smith selected a new locality to the right of their previous attempt, and 13 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Burton ⁵) also tried near the railway line. They found a German strongpost already established there, and before dawn were grenaded off the bank and back to their original position. Only 15 Platoon got a hold just under the top of the bank on the left of an enemy post, but there was not enough room for both of them. One of the posts would have to move, and Smith decided that it would not be 15 Platoon's. Accompanied by Sergeant Murray and covered by fire from the platoon, he chased the Germans away with grenades, smoke, and tommy guns. Before dawn there were five two-man posts dug in on the bank, with covering positions sited back to platoon headquarters.

B Company's grenade throwing the previous night had evidently been effective, for the company had a quieter night. A Company was to relieve it after last light, and Second-Lieutenant Kirkcaldy 6 and Sergeant Pat Leech 7 came up to do a

reconnaissance. Leech proposed to take a look at the far stopbank, and Kirkcaldy was to assist by blowing a track through the wire with Bangalore torpedoes. There was no enemy reaction to the explosion, and Leech passed through the gap and waded across to the far side. The river bank was too steep to climb, so he returned without drawing fire. There were still two enemy posts on the bank near 15 Platoon, and another tank was brought into range to deal with them. The shoot was effective, but the railway area continued to be a menace. It was outside the battalion's area, and several polite requests to the neighbouring unit to quieten it failed to produce any action.

C and B Companies were relieved by D and A Companies in the morning. This was not contemplated when the positions were taken up, because D and A Companies were to lead the assault over the river, but all-night grenade-throwing parties had not been contemplated either.

No. 18 Platoon (Lieutenant Speight ⁸) had a tough time taking over from 15 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Smith), then the only troops on the near stopbank in C Company's area. No. 15 Platoon had thinned out in anticipation of relief, and 18 Platoon was hampered by enfilading snipers firing from the railway, but after some delay the posts were established. The enemy later put down a barrage of high explosive and smoke between them and the platoon covering positions, and when it cleared three men were missing. For the second time before a major battle 21 Battalion had the bad luck to lose prisoners and thereby compromise security precautions.

No. 18 Platoon was exceedingly angry over the loss of the post; Sergeant Bert Gardyne ⁹ threw caution to the wind and with two sections raced up on to the bank and began to dig in. They dug right through the bank and came out above an enemy weapon pit from which they took five prisoners. The platoon felt better after that. The enemy put down several more 'stonks', but there was no further infantry activity, and by last light 18 Platoon was firmly established on 21 Battalion's front. The nightly grenade duels were continued, and five more Germans put up a white flag and came over the bank to surrender.

There was an enemy observation post-cum-strongpoint between A and D Companies which Major Bullock felt should be removed, and the first attempt was

made at dawn by Lieutenant Naylor and a section of 9 Platoon. The plan was to place a Bangalore torpedo as near as possible to the post and, as soon as it blew, to storm it with grenades. The plan did not succeed, for the Bangalore seemed only to serve as a warning and the enemy was waiting. Naylor was wounded and fire from both stopbanks forced a complete withdrawal under the protection of two Bren guns mounted on tripods and fired from the second story of Company Headquarters' house. They had been sited to sweep a few inches above the stopbank in case of a counter-raid and were manned by CSM Jim Perry and his runner, Private 'Weary' Weir. ¹⁰ C and B Companies caught up on the sleep they had lost the previous two nights.

As D Company in general, and 18 Platoon on the stopbank in particular, would remain exposed until the enemy was removed from his enfilading strongpoint at the junction of the railway and stopbank, Major Fleming was instructed to capture the position, and arrangements were made for two tanks to support a platoon attack the next morning.

In the meantime A Company was also arranging another attempt on the post that had defied its first effort. Two tanks were brought up close to Company Headquarters and fire was directed at a point on the stopbank below and in line with the enemy stronghold, in the hope that some of the shells would penetrate far enough to cause dismay and confusion. The shells did not penetrate, but ricochetted over the bank, and the attack led by Lieutenant Hooper ¹¹ was not successful.

That night was of the same pattern as the others and in the morning it was D Company's turn. Two tanks arrived to support a platoon attack on the railway strongpoint. They were to fire a ten-minute concentration of armour-piercing and high-explosive shells into the ground around the position in the hope of exploding some of the mines in the area. While the tanks were trying to get into a position to fire, one of them ran on to a mine and was put out of action. The other fulfilled its programme, but the volume of fire in return was too much to face without the certainty of very heavy casualties. Major Fleming thought that a quick dash by a few determined men might take the enemy by surprise. He rang the CO and told him that he contemplated leading the party himself. Colonel McPhail told him that the task did not warrant such a course, but left the matter to the Major's own discretion

as the post had to be taken. Fleming decided to lead the attack and called for volunteers. Sergeant Rae, ¹² Privates Griffiths, ¹³ Tolich, ¹⁴ and Stephens ¹⁵ offered to accompany him. They waited until what appeared an auspicious moment, when the enemy post had been silent for some time, and on an agreed signal streaked across the open space dividing them. The raiders were among the enemy before he knew what was happening and captured ten prisoners and two machine guns.

One section from 17 Platoon (Lieutenant Lockett ¹⁶) occupied the captured post, while a second section dug in on the lower slope of the bank, and the third section, led by Sergeant Rae, went through a culvert under the railway line and dug back on an angle close to the other sections. By midday D Company had the position secure, with two platoons on the bank and 16 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Boys ¹⁷) in reserve. Major Fleming was awarded an immediate DSO for his exploit, Sergeant Rae a DCM, and Private Tolich an MM. Sergeant Gardyne was also awarded the MM for his leadership of 16 Platoon.

During the afternoon another party of five Germans surrendered to D Company. This party included a CSM who had forgotten to destroy his trace of the enemy defensive fire lines on the battalion front.

That sector of the Senio stopbank was beginning to look like a rabbit burrow. B and C Companies were due for relief on the night of 6–7 April, with 1/6 Surreys of 78 Division taking over the railway line position, which was of course in their area.

Previous nights had been lively, but that night was really exceptional. The enemy put over a succession of harassing concentrations of mortar and artillery fire, mingled with rocket oil projectors and nebelwerfers, with grenade duels in between. Haystacks and buildings were set alight, while the battalion mortars and support arms added to the uproar.

The enemy had in fact been preparing to pull back to the Santerno River, and an extravagant fire plan had been organised to cover the withdrawal. At the last moment the movement had been cancelled on higher orders, but the local commander, anxious not to damage the morale of his gunners, who had been nearly starved of ammunition for a long time, decided to fire part of the programme. No change in position took place, much to the relief of the GOC, whose plans for the

coming offensive were based on the supposition that the Germans would continue to hold the Senio line. It was actually a 'Chinese attack' in reverse and was not appreciated by the recipients.

The 8th of April was spent by those not actually holding the bank in building ramps to enable flame-throwing carriers and tanks to get high enough up to flame the opposite bank before the attack. This work was done in B and D Companies' areas under a continual shower of rifle grenades and light mortars firing obliquely from the right and left, but the troops countered by building roofs with timber to work under. In spite of these precautions there were six casualties, bringing the total of killed and wounded up to fifty—about half as many in a week as in the two months' fighting in front of Rimini.

Secrecy as to the date of the attack, the use of flame-throwers, and the weight of the artillery support was complete, and even company commanders were not informed of the timing of the assault until a few hours before the attack. In fact the forward companies were withdrawn to prepared position some 400 yards from the stopbank while the battalion orders group was receiving orders, and the bombardment had opened before the company commanders had returned to their companies. The crossing of the Senio had been fixed for the evening of 9 April after a four-hour bombardment commencing at 3.20 p.m. The time of the attack, twenty minutes past seven, was chosen because it still left the Air Force an hour of twilight to strafe any strongpoints that survived the preliminary deluge of shells and bombs. In all 1640 aircraft were to be used on the corps' front—650 Fortresses, 200 Halifaxes and Liberators, 120 Baltimores and Marauders, 200 mediums and 470 fighters. The artillery support would be provided by 256 guns, which would fire 140,000 rounds in the preliminary bombardment and 110,000 in the creeping barrage. In the divisional area three New Zealand armoured regiments (150 tanks) were standing by ready to deal with the enemy armour and to assist the infantry.

Fifth Brigade's plan was to cross the river with 21 Battalion on the right and the Maoris on the left, and to form up on a lateral road 400 yards beyond the far stopbank. From that start line they would follow the barrage for approximately a mile to another lateral road half a mile short of Lugo, which was outside the battalion's right boundary. Lugo, a small town but an important road centre, was the junction point of 8 Indian Division and 2 NZ Division. The Indian Division's line of

advance was north-west across 78 Division's front, which would squeeze the latter division into reserve. Finally the battalion would exploit for another mile to the Canale di Lugo, which ran past the western outskirts of Lugo.

The battalion operation was to be done in three phases:

- Phase 1: Assault crossing of the Senio and mopping up as far as the artillery opening line.
- Phase 2: Set-piece advance under a barrage to the lateral road objective.
- Phase 3: Exploitation to the Canale di Lugo.

Phase 1 would commence after four hours' bombardment by artillery and aircraft from the west bank of the Senio to the Santerno River, five miles behind the enemy lines.

Before the attack began the battalion was suddenly called to side-slip and take over a section of the Maori Battalion's front, and the right boundary was moved left to correspond. Colonel McPhail felt, however, that the attack would be difficult if the enemy in front of C Company's position were left on his open flank, so he decided to take over the extended front by attacking with three companies up. C Company, therefore, remained on the right flank, and A Company had moved in on B Company's left and got busy with the preparation of ramps for the flame-throwers. The work was completed about an hour before the preliminary bombardment and the Wasp drivers were being briefed while the shells were falling.

The battalion plan was to cross the river and advance to the start line with three companies, D on the right, B in the centre and A on the left, while C Company, assisted by the East Surreys adjoining, would give covering fire to D Company on the open right flank. The advance to the final objective would be made by D and A Companies, with C and B in support. The exploitation might be carried out by either the forward or support companies according to circumstances. The Senio crossing was an elaborate operation that could not have been undertaken with less seasoned troops than those of 2 NZ Division. It was impossible to reconnoitre, and maps and aerial photographs are at best a poor substitute for actually looking over the ground; the start line and direction of attack were on an angle to the flow of the river, which

meant that fences, roads, and other obstacles were completely useless as guides to direction, but were doubly effective as obstacles to platoons moving in extended order. The section leaders' and platoon commanders' difficulties were increased by a thick smoke cover and failing light.

Twenty minutes before the bombardment was due to open, the troops withdrew 400 yards from the stopbank and for four hours watched the nearest approach to Dante's Inferno this side of the River Styx. First the ack-ack guns made a pattern grid of shellbursts in the clear sky to guide the aircraft; then flight after flight of planes flashing silver in the sun, and the thump-thump as the bombs exploded.

Major Bullock, to whom barrages were no novelty, wrote:

It is always difficult to describe an artillery barrage, but in this barrage when the Div. had nearly 300 guns on a fairly restricted frontage the noise defies description. It was impossible to distinguish any particular lull between salvoes. The noise of firing was a continual loud thunder clap of noise and in the disintegrating enemy territory the bursting shells and screaming shrapnel made a holocaust of noise that rent the air. The very air was vibrating and the sky above us was cut by the swishing, whistling, screaming shells tearing into the very guts of the land. There is something tingling and exciting about our own artillery fire as a rule, but this time it was awesome. There seemed no end to it and then, above this noise was heard the drone of hundreds of bombers coming from the south, their silver bodies glinting high in the sun as they crossed our line and dropped tons of small anti-personnel bombs immediately behind the line of the artillery barrage. Clouds of choking dust swirled from the parched fields. At 5 minutes to the hour, for the whole of this fourhour barrage, silence cut the air like a knife. The guns stopped, but the silence was replaced by a different sound of furious noise. Dive bombers screaming out of the blue hurtled down to strafe and bomb strongpoints in the stopbank. No sooner had these planes hurtled to safety when the drums of death thundered out again as the barrage started for the next 55 minutes' symphony.

There was worse to come, but in the meantime the troops recleaned and rechecked Brens, tommy guns, rifles, grenades, picks and shovels, Piats and two-inch mortars; the signallers broke wireless silence and netted in their 38 and 19 sets.

The last bombs were dropping and the last shells—for the time being—screaming over at twenty past seven, when the Wasps and Crocodiles raced up to their prepared positions and spilled their Hell's brew on the far stopbank, while the dive-bombers roared overhead making dummy runs. Two minutes later the standing barrage opened on the start line. Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons of C Company raced for their positions on the stopbank to perform their covering role, and the battalion mortars, plus a mortar platoon from the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders under command, opened up on the right of D Company's line of advance.

Each company crossed on a two-platoon front, using kapok bridges, while the support platoon had boats in case of damage to the bridges. The leading platoons of D Company crossed without much difficulty, but the post that had survived two attacks by A Company had also survived the barrage and the flame-throwers and came into action. Its defenders deserve full credit for their fortitude, for seldom had troops survived such a deluge and fought back so quickly. Their fire prevented Company Headquarters from crossing, but the post was eventually silenced by Second-Lieutenant Boys, who blew it out with a Piat, while CSM Ker ¹⁸ focussed attention on himself in a tommy-gun duel. The company 38 set had gone dead in the meantime, and when the complete D Company was across the river it was found that the leading platoon had gone up to the start line independently. The barrage was moving forward when Major Fleming reached the start line, and in the deepening dusk and tangle of grape vines and ditches Company Headquarters was separated from the reserve platoon. They stumbled after the crashing steel wall towards the final objective line and overran a casualty clearing station. Sixty-odd prisoners were taken before the other two platoons were found, each with a nice bag of captives, bringing the company total up to approximately 150.

B Company lost two officers wounded at zero hour and was slightly disorganised in consequence. A footbridge used by the Germans had miraculously escaped damage, and Lieutenant Primrose ¹⁹ was wounded leading his platoon towards it. Major Butler thereupon raced up the bank to supervise the use of the bridge as the quickest way over the river, but he too was wounded. The CSM, 'Diamond' Jim Edmond, ²⁰ took charge of Company Headquarters and held the company together until Captain Warrington ²¹ came up and took command. When Warrington was killed a few hours later, Edmond again commanded the company until Captain

Kermode ²² took over. Once over the river, B Company got away behind the barrage and took the lead from D Company on its right, and was first up to the final objective, where it halted.

At a quarter past seven the assault boat and bridge parties of A Company moved up, preceded by 8 Platoon (Lieutenant Hooper) in a covering role. The Wasps, in spite of the rushed arrangements, were smartly in position, but owing to hold-ups through the Wasps returning down a narrow road, 9 Platoon (Sergeant 'Blue' Whittleston ²³) was late in getting its bridge across the river. No. 7 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Kirkcaldy), with its less bulky boats, made better progress, but lost its radio when a grenade blew the end off Company Headquarters' boat, and the operator, Private McCarthy, ²⁴ made a jump for the bank and fell into the water instead. Hooper's set also failed to function and for 'some unexplained reason Company Headquarters' set could raise neither Battalion Headquarters nor the flanking companies. The Maoris were not far away, however, for when Company Headquarters' operator tried to speak with 9 Platoon the air was full of Maori commands. The wave-lengths were apparently too close to their neighbours for good working.

The forward platoons were clearing a group of houses across the river when 7 Platoon joined them after making a delayed but safe crossing. Sergeant Leech had made history in inventing a new weapon. The custom had grown in the battalion of carrying the shovels for digging in thrust inside the web belt, like an officer's sword worn on ceremonial parade, instead of down the back. Leech was slightly wounded by a grenade splinter when the platoon came upon a group of Germans still showing fight. His tommy gun jammed in the mêlée, and when he found himself covered by a machine pistol he 'drew' his shovel and threw it at the owner of the pistol. Exit the enemy!

The platoons, separated and out of touch with Major Bullock, moved independently towards the start line, while Company Headquarters, having found some overlooked enemy in deep dugouts, winkled them out before moving up. The prisoners, quite tame for the most part—those who were not tame had been suitably dealt with—were sent back under escort, and Company Headquarters advanced in the growing darkness to find the forward platoons. They were overtaken, each with

a batch of prisoners, after further delay in grenading a strongpoint that barred the way about a quarter of a mile from the stopbank. By the time the company was reorganised and the prisoners got rid of, it was quite dark and the barrage too far ahead to be of any use. The company was still out of touch with Battalion Headquarters and both flanks, and was in a maze of grape-vine wires, ditches, and unoccupied enemy pits. Progress was depressingly slow and Major Bullock, convinced that he was behind the rest of the battalion, formed the company into column of route with 9 Platoon the right, 8 the centre, and 7 the left-hand file. In this novel formation they covered a mile without meeting friend or enemy.

Three hours after zero the company moved out of the Italian jungle on to a road that should have been the final objective, but the complete lack of contact invited caution. Bullock continues: 'I crouched in a ditch and shone the hooded torch on the map while the Pl. Commanders huddled over me like American footballers receiving instructions from the Coach. I had just put my pencil on 338357 and said "This is where we are now" when I was conscious of another shadow joining the three Pl. Commanders huddled above me. I didn't attach any special significance to this new arrival, thinking it would be one of the Sergeants or a runner nosing in, when Blue Whittleston gave a shout of "What the ..." [soldierly but quite unprintable], swung his tommy gun round, and spread-eagled the shadow, who was disappearing down the road very smartly. Yes, an enemy observer at our Conference!'

At this stage odd enemy parties began roaming up to the company and in the smoke and mist 15 prisoners were gathered in. The company was apparently surrounded by enemy moving aimlessly about and 9 Platoon was sent to find a good defensive position, but all they found were more roaming Jerries and an enemy tank, so with the total of 39 prisoners, Bullock ordered the company to dig in where it was.

The next two hours were very busy indeed. Private 'Atta' Johnson, the company's Piat wizard, prepared a suitable welcome for the enemy tank, which however did not come on; but the company had struck the flank of a counterattacking force moving from Lugo to Cotignola, and it was fortunate that the enemy was not well organised. Ninety were taken prisoner and as many killed before the area quietened, but it was a great relief when Second-Lieutenant Boys arrived with his platoon. About an hour before first light Captain Warrington arrived with B Company. The CO had been rather concerned over the disappearance of A Company,

and when Warrington was sent up to replace Major Butler, he was told to locate the missing company. With the situation now under control, Boys was detailed to return with his men and guide the supporting tanks up as soon as the engineers got their bridges over the Senio. The whole success of the operation depended on those bridges, and there was a certain amount of uneasiness at Battalion and Brigade Headquarters. But they need not have worried —the bridges were up and the tanks were over according to plan.

C Squadron of 18 Armoured Regiment was in position before daylight and then A and B Companies commenced the exploitation phase. Little trouble was experienced, and both companies were on the Canale di Lugo by 10 a.m., waiting for breakfast. The position was then that the forward troops held the canal line across the battalion front, with the right flank resting on the Lugo- Massa Lombarda railway line. D Company was on the final objective in support, and C Company was deployed to face Lugo and guard the open flank. Civilians reported that the enemy had left Lugo about 9 a.m., so Sergeant Murray took a patrol from 15 Platoon and went to investigate. They found Lugo in charge of a partisan group, who handed over eleven Germans apparently very glad to exchange captors. A search for weapons disclosed that the enemy had already been thoroughly checked over.

The battalion stood on this position and reorganised. The casualties in the advance had been light—22 all ranks, of whom three were killed. The 23rd Battalion passed through in the early afternoon and took 21 Battalion's place on the right of the Maoris, who were carrying on to the Santerno. The 21st continued to rest the next day (11 April), while the forward troops crossed fields of long grass and foothigh wheat crops separated by rows of grape vines and fruit trees. The relentless pressure of the infantry, the terrific bombardment, and the sky full of menacing planes had disorganised the defences sufficiently to permit the rushing of the highbanked and heavily wired Santerno, and the Division waited for the Indians and Poles, who had been outpaced, to get up on each flank.

Colonel McPhail was ordered to relieve the Maoris after dark on the 12th, and made a preliminary move during the day to an area two miles further forward and half a mile short of the Santerno River. The dispositions were C Company on the right and A Company on the left, and the orders were to pass through the Maoris and

advance on Massa Lombarda, a small town five miles from Lugo and the junction of the railways from Lugo and the considerable town of Imola. After the relief the Maoris were to watch the right flank, where the Indians were still fighting their way forward.

The brigade attack was to be preceded by a barrage, but when 23 Battalion passed on information given by partisans that the enemy was pulling back, the gunners were notified that their services would not be required. The partisans' information was correct and the troops entered Massa Lombarda at midnight without encountering opposition. The town was combed for hidden enemy, but he had departed, and the battalion consolidated along the Canale dei Molini, which ran across the front west of the town. In view of the fact that there was little contact with the enemy, McPhail decided to push on to the Scolo Zaniolo, a mile further forward. A pocket of enemy was encountered at the Zaniolo, and after some firing 30 prisoners were taken without casualties. The 23rd Battalion, which had remained on the Canale dei Molini, drew level, and 6 Brigade was also on the general line of the canal.

The 21st Battalion was ordered to sit firm while the Division reorganised and Eighth Army regrouped. Fifth Brigade was to drop back into reserve, while 6 Brigade sidestepped to the right and took over 5 Brigade's front at the same time as 9 Brigade moved into the area vacated by 6 Brigade. This manoeuvre was in preparation for an advance on a two-brigade front to capture both stopbanks of the Sillaro River, five miles ahead. The German 98 Division had been smashed in the Senio and Santerno operations, and 278 Division had been withdrawn from Fifth Army's front to stop the New Zealanders. In the event it had no better fortune than the disintegrated 98th.

On the broader canvas Eighth Army's advance along the coast was going well, and the left flank in the Apennines was secured by the attack across the Senio. It was decided to let 5 Corps concentrate on its seaward operations and to bring 13 Corps out of the mountains and down on to the plains. Actually General Sir John Harding, commanding 13 Corps, brought with him only one division (10 Indian Division) to join the New Zealanders as the divisions of 13 Corps, and until the Indian formation was fed into the line 2 NZ Division was the only division of the corps engaged in active operations. On the rest of the Italian front the eastern wing

of Fifth Army was thrusting towards Bologna and its western wing towards Genoa. Further north the Russians fought their way into Vienna. The whole German front was cracking like an ice floe in the spring.

The 21st Battalion stayed in the wheat fields and under blossoming fruit trees in the Massa Lombarda area until the afternoon of 16 April, when orders were received to pass through 26 Battalion. The enemy had not only been chased off the Sillaro, but 26 Battalion was half-way to the Gaiana Canal, eight miles beyond its objective. There was talk of field guns being overrun and Tiger-hunting with phosphorus grenades.

The thrusting force of the Division was increased the same night by taking under command 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade, composed of 14/20 Horse, 2 Royal Tanks, and 2/6, 2/8 and 2/10 Battalions of the Gurkha Rifles.

The 26th Battalion was found by the leading companies, B and D, over the Scolo Sillaro (not to be confused with the river of the same name), with patrols forward to the Scolo Montanara, half a mile further on. The troops were not to move beyond the Scolo Montanara that night, but to resume the following morning, and were not to pass the main road to Medicina, two miles ahead. There was no opposition on 21 Battalion's front, and the troops were consolidating along the road by first light. The position was then that 23 and 21 Battalions were on the road objective and the Maoris disposed to protect the right flank. The Division regrouped again to continue the advance, with 9 Brigade on the right and 43 Gurkha Brigade on the left, while 5 and 6 Brigades passed into reserve.

Fifth Brigade stayed in reserve for two days while the forward brigades assaulted the Gaiana and the Scolo Acquarolo and dug in a mile and a half past the Quaderna River. Although 21 Battalion had been lucky in finding a comparatively easy piece of enemy line, the rest of the Division had made a complete mess of 278 Division and was now getting even for being pushed around in Crete in May 1941 by German paratroops. In those days, when the German war machine was moving from victory to victory, 4 Parachute Division had had everything— overwhelming air support and splendid equipment—while the Kiwis had rifles and precious little else. The first game had been undoubtedly the paratroops', but this time it was game and rubber to the New Zealanders.

The paratroops fought with even more than their usual determination. It was their mission, at any cost, to stop the relentless New Zealanders. The result was dead Germans in the fields and on the roads, burnt Germans on the stopbanks and in the water, live Germans in the prison cages or marching back towards them. Faintly through the hot summer air, tainted with the stench of unburied horses, oxen, and Germans, came the brr-p, brrr-p, brrrr-p of defiant spandaus. In front, behind, and all around the reserve troops, tired with incessant marching and sleeping in the sun, could be heard the characteristic slap of 25-pounders, the crack of 3.7s, and the smash of 155s speeding their shells to join the bombs raining down. Finito paratroops!

On the night of 19 April 5 Brigade, with 23 Battalion on the right and 21 Battalion on the left, relieved 9 Brigade and pushed on for approximately a mile to the outskirts of Budrio. C and A, the leading companies of 21 Battalion, were ordered to reconnoitre Budrio, but whatever the position, were not to advance before daylight. A Company had a very difficult time, not from enemy fire but from the Gurkhas, who were in the process of being relieved by 6 Brigade in rear of the company's position. The Gurkhas must have mistaken 21 Battalion for enemy troops, for they gave a splendid demonstration of defensive fire and wounded two men in A Company. A patrol from this company was fired on from a crossroad near Budrio, and called up the artillery to 'stonk' it. Both A and C Companies advanced after daylight and found the crossroad strongpoint still unsubdued, but the support tanks soon quietened it.

A Company went into Budrio and dealt with a few snipers there, while C Company moved through the right outskirts of the town; both companies carried on to the River Idice, a mile beyond the town, arriving at 11 a.m. The enemy was there in force on both banks, and 21 Battalion halted. While the troops were breasting up to the Idice, the Division's thrust line was shifted more to the north, and to conform with this side-slip the Maoris were ordered out on to the right of 23 Battalion. The Brigade Commander then ordered 23 Battalion to cross the river, with the support of Wasps and artillery, and form a bridgehead, while 21 and 28 Battalions manned the east stop-bank on either flank. For the rest of the afternoon the artillery on both sides was active, ours continually, and his when our planes were not overhead.

The CO returned from a brigade conference with instructions to cross the Idice and occupy ground not covered in the still proceeding side-slip. A and C Companies had manned the stopbank after 23 Battalion's action had convinced the enemy that there was still no rest for him and that his position was untenable against determined assaults. Commencing at 8.30 p.m., B, C, and D Companies in that order crossed the Idice without difficulty before midnight. A set-piece attack was to be launched at that hour, while 23 and 28 Battalions widened and deepened the bridgehead. They advanced a mile and a half without trouble. Sixth Brigade conformed and squeezed 21 Battalion out of the line and into brigade reserve.

Beyond the river the troops were in an area largely untouched by the blight of war: the bridges were intact, the gravelled roads unmined and uncratered; the houses were intact, too, and the population unfeignedly glad to see them. The Italians showed their gladness with high hospitality—unlimited bottles of the wine of the country.

Saturday, 21 April, was the beginning of the end. The Americans and Poles were in Bologna; the German line had finally broken, and whole divisions were in headlong flight in an effort to get behind the Po River defences.

The next day 21 Battalion, still in reserve, chased after the forward troops in trucks to a point seven miles north-east of Bologna, where they waited until the following morning (the 23rd) for bridges, then pushed on again and crossed the Reno.

The battalion moved again at midnight, passed through the Maoris and, as there was no opposition, carried on to Sette Polesini, north-west of Ferrara and two and a half miles short of the Po. Sixth (British) Armoured Brigade was already sitting on the river. The convoy reached the Po after a drive across country that was still flat, but with longer intervals between canals. The roads were lined with poplars, and there were occasional plantations of oak and pine trees. In every direction and at every distance the pointed spires of village churches showed above the trees. Clouds of light yellow dust were reminiscent of desert days as the trucks swung through the Italian countryside, lovely in the first spring clothing of lucern and wheat. Every ditch was gay with yellow buttercups, white daisies and blue snapdragons, every field fenced with mulberry, poplar, elm, chestnut and oak trees, all supporting grape vines

in full leaf. The populace waved to the speeding trucks or crowded around with flowers and wine at the frequent and unpredictable halts.

The River Po was about 300 yards wide, with high double stopbanks containing its fast-flowing muddy water. There were poplar plantations along the banks and the river could have been a larger Waikato.

The fleeing enemy had suffered an Italian Dunkirk trying to cross the Po. The debris of pontoons lined the muddy banks, while for at least a quarter of a mile there were dead horses and oxen, and piled guns, tanks, trucks, and ammunition where the planes had blasted the waiting columns.

When 21 Battalion arrived it was found that 6 Armoured Division had cut across the divisional axis and was already sitting on the river bank waiting for bridges. The troops debussed and A and D Companies reconnoitred the river's edge under instructions to cross and take a look at the far side if at all possible. D Company saw enemy in front of it, but A Company's area looked empty, so Second-Lieutenant Carr ²⁵ and Corporal Len Bisley ²⁶ decided to make the attempt. They paddled across in an assault boat and, while Bisley remained with the boat, Carr climbed the bank and nearly trod on a sleeping German in a slit trench. He left him to his slumbers, and after a quick look round the two New Zealanders returned. They claimed to have broken all records for the distance, spurred on by their inability to watch the enemy bank and not knowing when the sleeping German was likely to wake up. Immediate steps were taken by both battalions to cross forthwith. Canvas and rubber assault boats were coming up from the rear as well as amphibious tanks, 'ducks', and motordriven assault boats. The idea was for the tanks to hammer the far bank while the troops paddled across, but General Freyberg was taking no undue risks and ordered the crossing to be deferred until the night, when a barrage would be provided. At 1.30 on the morning of 25 April (Anzac Day) A Company, with 1 Battalion Grenadier Guards on its right and 23 Battalion on its left, pushed off in its assault craft, and 20 minutes later was in possession of the far bank without casualties. D Company, under way a few minutes before two o'clock, made a safe crossing and moved out to the right of A Company. C Company crossed at 3.30 in support of A and D, which had consolidated on a defensive line in contact with a battalion of Grenadier Guards.

Continuing the policy of keeping right after the disorganised enemy, C and D

Companies, with 23 Battalion on their left, moved off at first light for the high-banked, swift-flowing Adige River. Odd pockets of enemy were bypassed and left to the not very tender mercies of the partisans, and the river was reached by early afternoon. The rest of the day was spent in preparing for an assault crossing after dark. C Squadron 18 Armoured Regiment panted up in time to do over the far bank, just in case opposition had been organised. The rest of the battalion had arrived by then and gave covering fire, while the troops ferried themselves across the 200-yard-wide Adige under some erratic and harmless small-arms fire. The battalion remained in what would normally have been a very precarious position, with half the troops on each side of the river and no supporting tanks forward until bridges were got across. There was some sniping from the open right flank, but a carrier and Wasp patrol chased the snipers away, and the engineers got on with their bridge. The Gurkhas and 9 Brigade took over the chase the next morning, and 5 Brigade went into reserve.

There was a possibility that the Germans would attempt a stand on the remaining important river lines, the Brenta, the Sile, and the Piave, on all of which defences had been prepared.

Thirteenth Corps was ordered to take advantage of the enemy's disorganised state and get to Trieste as quickly as possible. On account of supply and traffic problems, it was decided to continue the advance with only one division, and 2 NZ Division, with four infantry brigades, was given the job. The Division was ordered to advance on the axis Padua- Mestre and thence along Route 14, through San Dona di Piave- Portogruaro- Monfalcone to Trieste. At the same time the area west of Route 16 as far as Padua was to be cleared by 43 Gurkha Brigade, on the completion of which task the brigade would halt and come under the direct command of Corps.

The battalion rested on two hours' notice until the 29th, when 5 Brigade was sent after 9 Brigade, which was concentrated in Padua and had arrived after the partisans had fought a pitched battle with the German garrison. The partisans had had between three and four thousand casualties, but had captured the city and held approximately 4000 prisoners. It was a long, hot and dusty drive along the excellent tarsealed road that led through Padua and twelve miles up the coast from Venice to Portegrandi, where the troops bedded down at 2 a.m. That moonlight drive will not be soon forgotten, for it was a populated countryside and the civilians still were

capable of cheers and welcoming shouts for every convoy, in spite of the fact that they had been doing little else for twenty-four hours.

There were hills again close to the road, flares cutting green arcs in the moonlight, an occasional rifle shot when a partisan put paid to an old score against a Fascist or a German; croaking frogs in the canals and nightingales in the trees; villas, mansions, crossroad villages, small towns and church spires.

While the convoy was heading north, Mussolini and twelve members of his Fascist Cabinet had been executed by the partisans. Mussolini was left hanging feet upwards in front of a roadside petrol station.

The battalion was to take over from 27 Battalion the job of clearing the right flank of the divisional axis near Piave Vecchia, and as a preliminary 7 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Homewood ²⁷), with some tanks, was directed to clear an enemy naval party from flak boats on the canalised Piave River.

A Company was to move before daylight and relieve a company of 27 Battalion which was protecting the undamaged bridge at San Dona di Piave, but within half an hour of departure word was received that a large enemy force had cut across the front after shooting up 5 Field Park Company's area. The enemy was reported to be moving in the direction of the battalion, and A Company made immediate preparations to receive him. The company climbed on to the supporting tanks and made all haste along the road towards 5 Field Park, with the rest of the battalion following, but the enemy had disappeared, together with 20 trucks and 80 prisoners. Partisans soon located them holed up in a monastery near Meolo. C and B Companies went after them, accompanied by half a squadron of tanks, while A Company carried on to its bridge-guarding assignment, and D Company stayed to protect Battalion Headquarters and as a reserve.

The information from the partisans was correct, and the tanks were expecting some target practice when the enemy commander, realising the position, asked what were the terms of surrender. He was told that there were no terms except unconditional surrender, and to make up his mind smartly—or else. He made it up and a column 1500 strong was marched back to San Dona di Piave, where in the meantime Battalion Headquarters had been established. Field Park sappers took

some pleasure in accompanying their late captors. The Germans were a coast defence force and had decided to break out and try to get back to Germany. They had only three trucks, but had mounted a number of flak guns on bullock carts and had used them to shoot up 5 Field Park Company the previous night.

A Company was also doing some collecting of prisoners, for partisans brought in information that there was a coast defence battery nearby that was prepared to surrender to soldiers but not to partisans, whose alleged methods of disposing of prisoners were known to the battery.

The battalion moved on to Monfalcone the next morning, leaving A Company to guard the prisoners. Captain Burton writes:

Prisoners continued to increase and A Coy was detailed to remain behind and hold these prisoners now amounting to several hundreds and arrangements would be made to return [them] to POW cages in the rear. The Bn and Division pushed on and then a problem arose, everybody seemed to have forgotten A Coy; I was approached by the Partisan commander in the area and was asked to take over nearly 2000 prisoners that were in their hands. I agreed on condition they evacuated their HQ, which was a very large building with a very large courtyard surrounded by buildings (it could and might have been a barracks). We marshalled all the enemy in, and our total prisoners were now about 2800, and still no sign from Div. Feeding was a problem now, and we commandeered some cattle and had them killed. The cooking was being done by Italians at this stage until the Germans asked permission to do it, saying they could procure stores of flour etc; this was agreed to and a truck was sent under guard with a Jerry working party and they came back with plenty of everything. Eventually we stopped and commandeered any empty vehicles going to the rear and got rid of the lot.

Meanwhile the battalion convoy had got as far as Latisana, 15 miles to the north, where partisans reported that an estimated enemy force of 4000 was landing from ships at Lignano. The area is a huge sand spit running out into a big lagoon, and at its southern end the Tagliamento River enters the sea. Colonel McPhail immediately sought and gained permission to divert the battalion and deal with the situation. Second-Lieutenant Craig was sent off to find some tanks, and Major Swanson left with three carriers to investigate. He found a large force in the process

of landing from 26 ships of all types at the mouth of the Tagliamento River. The Germans were protected by naval craft holding off three British MTBs, which were outranged and could not get in close enough to use their guns effectively. The Germans had evacuated Trieste to escape the Yugoslav Army and were under the impression that they were landing in an area still held by themselves and that the road to the Fatherland was still open. A number of the enemy were deployed, but took no action when Swanson drove up and demanded the whereabouts of the force commander. His headquarters was obligingly pointed out, and the Major went there and asked to see him. The commander would not be there for an hour was the answer, but a curt 'Get him here in five minutes' had the desired effect. In five minutes the commander was there. He was uncertain about his future actions, but was definitely not enamoured with the idea of giving in without a fight. The 21st Battalion's force was outnumbered by 20 to one, but Swanson airily explained that he was supported by multitudinous planes, tanks and artillery, at that very moment waiting word to open up, and suggested a 50-minute truce to enable his commanding officer to arrive. This was agreed to and a tense period was relieved by the arrival of Colonel McPhail, who had brought the battalion up and driven over to see what was going on. The position was thoroughly explained again while enemy troops, trucks, and guns were being landed as if there were no New Zealand troops in sight. Craig arrived at this time after finding a squadron of tanks commanded by Major 'Gunboat' Nelson, ²⁸ who were following hard on his heels. It was a dramatic situation. McPhail and Swanson were sitting on one side of a table, two German officers on the other, and a German interpreter explaining that they could not surrender. They insisted on going back to Germany to fight the Russians, and it would save unnecessary bloodshed if the New Zealand troops would kindly step aside.

McPhail replied that the war was over for them; their personal effects would be respected but they must lay down their arms immediately. Precisely at that moment a runner arrived with a message that the tanks were in position and what did McPhail want them to do about the enemy. It was the sight of the tanks in hull-down positions, indicated by a wave of the CO's arm, that was the deciding factor.

The Colonel describes the last act in the drama: Before the final decision to surrender was reached the Force Commanders assembled some 30 officers and after

being correctly fallen in and giving the usual 'Heil' these officers were addressed by Tolar [Lieutenant-Colonel Wilhelm Tolar, commanding the German forces] and presumably the pros and cons of surrender were put before them. We had impressed on the Commander that we were the advance elements of the NZ Div and fortunately two of our fighter aircraft were circling overhead. The officers then broke off and moved into a small room in a casa returning on parade in ten minutes when I was advised that the decision to surrender had been made. A very young Nazi officer was in tears at this betrayal of Hitler. However, the others treated him very kindly. I then gave Tolar instructions as to the dumping of arms, etc., and arranged for him to send a naval officer out with the Bn I.O. to contact the commander of the British M.T.B.'s to ensure that the navy took as many vessels as possible loaded with personnel to Bari to lighten the problem of feeding so many PW's—Craig was sick en route!

One prisoner-of-war cage was established at Latisana under the control of Support Company, and one at Lignano under C Company. The night was spent in marshalling long columns of Germans and escorting them to their cages. There were about 6000 of them and their equipment included E-boats, LSTs, a small hospital ship, all types of transport, and a variety of weapons. In recognition of the outstanding work of 21 Battalion in the campaign now all but concluded, McPhail was awarded the DSO.

The prisoners were set to work the next day unloading food from their fleet, as the surrender terms included the feeding of themselves for some days until fresh arrangements could be made. They set four ships on fire, and the naval commander was informed that he would be held personally responsible for the safety of the remaining units. There was no further incident, but the German and New Zealand points of view about carrying out an agreement differed, as the following certificate obtained to protect the good name of the battalion testifies:

to whom it may concern

Under the terms of the surrender as arranged between Lt. Col. E. A. McPhail, 21 NZ Bn and the two commanding officers of the 6,000 surrendering troops, Lt. Col. Wilhelm Tolar (Army) and Captain Friedrich-Karl Birnbaum (Navy) the following clause came into effect:— "That the private property, other than military equipment,

in the possession of and carried by the surrendering forces will not be interfered with and will remain the property of the individual."

E. A. McPhail, Lt. Col.

Cmd. 21 NZ Bn. 4 May 1945

Certified that all personnel left Lignano Camp with their personal gear intact. Tolar Oberstlt.

After all the prisoners had been marched off to captivity, Colonel McPhail, Second-Lieutenants Thompson ²⁹ (Signals Officer) and Craig (Intelligence Officer) made an inspection of the captured fleet and discovered an omnibus on a blown-up landing craft stranded on a sand bar about 400 yards from the beach. The bus was in good order, and it was decided that it would make a suitable addition to the battalion's transport for sightseeing purposes. How to get the bus ashore was the question, for there was a quarter of a mile of eight-foot-deep water between the landing craft and dry land. McPhail agreed to the two officers attempting to salvage the bus, and left to push on with the war. Craig describes how the battalion performed its first and only naval occasion:

A platoon of enthusiastic helpers volunteered, and after a long discussion, daylight the next morning saw about twenty men clad in underpants, building a raft of all the pneumatic rubber lifeboats available, finishing off by lashing corrugated iron on top as a decking. This contraption, which (with regard to appearances) had nothing in common with anything we had seen floating before, was pushed and towed to the vessel and lashed underneath the lip. After dumping other vehicles in the way, the omnibus was driven up and run down on to the improvised raft, which, much to our dismay, promptly sank. Luckily the water was only three feet deep in the bar, as the tide was then out. A hurried consultation was held and all hands immediately collected every available life jacket, of which there were dozens strewn along the beach, and proceeded to push them under the sunken raft. By the time this was completed the tide was well on the make again, and when the depth of water made it impossible to place any additional buoyancy underneath, the party could only wait and hope for the best at full tide.

Great was the relief when after what seemed hours of waiting, with relays of

men pulling and pushing in five feet of water, somebody called out saying that there was movement. All hands immediately jumped into the water and by darkness had managed to work the half submerged omnibus into three feet of water a hundred yards from the smooth sandy beach. The machine was left there for the night and at low tide next morning dozens of sheets of heavy corrugated iron from the ships were placed end on end on the sea bottom to make two wheel tracks and prevent the wheels becoming bogged in the soft sand. A portee was then run onto the firm ground three hundred yards inshore connected up by a wire rope, and the vehicle towed out of the water. Getting the omnibus over the soft sandhills to a road some distance off also caused a few difficulties, but everyone felt they had done a good job, and besides had had a lot of amusement.

The 'captured' enemy vehicle was later presented to the New Zealand Forces Club in Florence, and if the troops it conveyed around that city had as much enjoyment from driving in it as the salvage party had in getting it ashore, their experience was a pleasurable one.

While these events were occurring the war in Italy had officially ended at noon on 2 May, when the unconditional surrender of German forces west of the Isonzo River became effective. The 2nd New Zealand Division, however, was not west of the Isonzo, and the surrender terms were not effective on its front, where fighting was still going on between the Germans and the Yugoslavs.

The work of unloading the ships and gathering in enemy troops who had strayed from the area was finished on the 5th, during which time Battalion Headquarters had moved to Lignano; A Company, having got rid of its prisoners, had joined it there. The following day the battalion, less B and Companies, moved over the Isonzo to Aurisina, about ten miles short of Trieste. As far as 21 Battalion was concerned, the war in Italy had stopped from lack of enemy, but from the situation around Trieste it appeared that there was every chance of another one starting.

The battalion's casualties in April 1945 were 12 killed and 98 wounded.

¹ Maj Y. K. Fleming, DSO; Auckland; born Dunedin, 6 Oct 1912; plastering contractor; wounded 22 Apr 1945; Area Officer, Invercargill, 1947–51; Hamilton, 1952; DAQMG NMD, 1953-.

- ² Capt I. J. Fallon; Christchurch; born Dunedin, 12 Apr 1920; clerk; now Regular soldier.
- ³ Lt G. N. Utting, Kawakawa, Bay of Islands; born Auckland, 2 Jan 1910; school-teacher.
- ⁴ Lt R. W. Smith, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 25 Oct 1913; bank officer.
- ⁵ Capt E. D. Burton; Auckland; born Auckland, 29 Jun 1915; school-teacher.
- ⁶ 2 Lt R. B. Kirkcaldy; Auckland; born Auckland, 15 Aug 1919; farmer; wounded 20 Apr 1945.
- ⁷ S-Sgt A. A. Leech, DCM; Waikiekie; born Westport, 16 Mar 1913; farmer; wounded 9 Apr 1945.
- ⁸ Lt M. W. Speight; born NZ 17 Jun 1919; student teacher; wounded 7 Apr 1945; died of wounds 11 Apr 1945.
- ⁹ Sgt A. J. Gardyne, MM; Gore; born Gore, 25 Jan 1916; farmer; three times wounded.
- ¹⁰ Pte G. Weir; Rotorua; born NZ 20 Feb 1923; baker's assistant; wounded Sep 1944.
- ¹¹ Lt J. P. Hooper; Auckland; born Auckland, 16 May 1912; accountant.
- ¹² WO II C. D. Rae, DCM; Ohinewai; born Southbridge, 24 Jul 1910; clerk.
- ¹³ Pte M. W. Griffiths; born Whangarei, 12 Nov 1921; storeman; killed in action 10 Apr 1945.
- ¹⁴ Pte I. Tolich, MM; Te Awamutu; born Yugoslavia, 6 Nov 1922; restaurant

- assistant; wounded 6 Apr 1945.
- ¹⁵ Cpl A. P. Stephens; Whatawhata; born Papakura, 12 Dec 1922; dairy farmer.
- ¹⁶ Lt R. B. Lockett; Wellington; born Gisborne, 21 Feb 1913; Regular soldier; wounded 12 Apr 1945.
- ¹⁷ Lt D. G. Boys, MC; Auckland; born Dargaville, 31 May 1922; farmhand; wounded Jan 1944.
- ¹⁸ WO II A. B. Ker; Pukekohe; born Invercargill, 20 Mar 1921; grocer; now Regular soldier.
- ¹⁹ Lt G. M. Primrose; Auckland; born Scotland, 11 Oct 1920; van driver; wounded 9 Apr 1945.
- ²⁰ WO II J. D. Edmond, m.i.d.; Mayfield; born Christchurch, 27 Mar 1913; transport driver; wounded 27 Mar 1944.
- ²¹ Capt J. R. Warrington, m.i.d.; born Hamilton, 7 Mar 1922; student; killed in action 10 Apr 1945.
- ²² Maj L. A. Kermode; Auckland; born Gisborne, 11 Jun 1919; Regular soldier; DAQMG HQ BCOF, 1946.
- ²³ S-Sgt A. H. Whittleston, m.i.d.; Wollongong, New South Wales; born Dunedin, 19 Mar 1912; rigger.
- ²⁴ Pte T.W. J. McCarthy; Kaipaki, Ohaupo; born NZ 27 Jul 1922; cooper.
- ²⁵ 2 Lt E. F. Carr, DCM, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ 13 Feb 1920; apprentice sheet-metal worker.

- ²⁶ Sgt A. L. Bisley, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ 13 Apr 1923; student.
- ²⁷ 2 Lt E. C. Homewood; Cambridge; born Auckland, 31 Jul 1921; farm labourer; wounded 21 Mar 1944.
- ²⁸ Maj G. B. Nelson, DSO; Auckland; born Ngaruawahia, 13 Aug 1917; clerk.
- ²⁹ Lt S. M. Thompson, m.i.d.; Napier; born Motueka, 13 May 1915; commercial traveller.

CHAPTER 19 — EXIT 21 BATTALION

CHAPTER 19 Exit 21 Battalion

The province of Istria, extending from the eastern bank of the Isonzo to the Yugoslav border, is a political no-man's-land inhabited by Italians, Austrians and Slavs, the Italians and Austrians, broadly speaking, living in the towns and the Slavs in the country. The province had been ceded to Italy after the First World War. Coincident with the general rising of partisans throughout North Italy, Yugoslav forces, besides carrying on a civil war between themselves, had chased the Germans out of the province and occupied part of it, including the city of Trieste.

A city and seaport of a quarter of a million people of mixed nationality, Trieste was a madhouse where frenzied Italians took sides as Fascists or Monarchists and paraded with banners and German weapons against each other, while in the surrounding country Communist partisans under Tito shot up Monarchist partisans under Mikhailovitch.

There were two certainties: first, that Tito and his Communists were in the ascendant and meant to hold the province for Yugoslavia, and second, that the Allies were not going to permit it. In this combustible mixture of races and sympathies, it was the role of British, American, and New Zealand troops to keep the peace, while diplomacy, backed by swarms of Allied planes overhead and warships along the coast, convinced the Yugoslav leaders that Istria's future lay with the Peace Treaty countries.

The men of 21 Battalion, sensing the hostility of the peasantry around Aurisina, but too busy debating how soon they would be on the way home to worry about it, were not directly involved. In between times they guarded ships, explored Venice, lost Lieutenant-Colonel McPhail as battalion commander and regained Lieutenant-Colonel Thodey; they also discussed to the point of exhaustion the situation in the Pacific, where the Yanks had the war almost to themselves. Nobody wanted to deprive them of it.

The battalion remained in the Aurisina area until 20 May, when it was ordered to Trieste to take over positions previously occupied by the Divisional Cavalry Battalion, which was moving further into the centre of the city. The job was to hold

the main road out of Trieste and cover the withdrawal of 9 Brigade in the event of operations against Tito Force, as the Yugoslav Army was called. There were about 70,000 of them, and they still had not been convinced that Istria belonged at least for the time being to Italy. So that the troops would be clear in their minds as to the issues involved, Field Marshal Alexander released the following message:

The territory around TRIESTE and GORITZIA and EAST of the ISONZO river is part of ITALY known as VENEZIA GUILIA. The territory around VILLACH and KLAGENFURT is part of AUSTRIA.

The above ITALIAN and AUSTRIAN territory is now claimed by Marshal TITO, who wishes to incorporate it in YUGOSLAVIA. We have no objection to the claims being put forward by Marshal TITO to this territory. His claims will be examined and finally settled with fairness and impartiality at the peace conference in exactly the same manner as other disputed areas throughout EUROPE. Our policy, as has been publicly proclaimed, is that territorial changes should be made only after thorough study and after full consultation and deliberation between the various governments concerned.

It is, however, Marshal TITO'S apparent intention to establish his claims by force of arms and by military occupation. Action of this kind would be all too reminiscent of HITLER, MUSSOLINI and JAPAN. It is to prevent such actions that we have been fighting this war. We have agreed to work together to seek an orderly and just solution of territorial problems—this being one of the cardinal principles for which the peoples of the United Nations have made their tremendous sacrifices in an endeavour to obtain a just and lasting peace. It is one of the corner stones on which our representatives with the approbation of world public opinion are now at SAN FRANCISCO to build a system of world security. We cannot throw away the vital principles for which we have all fought. Under these principles it is our duty to hold these disputed territories as trustees until their ultimate disposal as settled at the Peace Conference.

Within these territories our duty and responsibility is to keep law and order by our military forces and to secure a peaceful and secure life for their peoples through our Allied Military Government. We may be relied upon to act impartially as we do not covet these territories ourselves.

In this situation I tried my best to come to a friendly agreement with Marshal TITO but did not succeed. The US and BRITISH governments have therefore taken the matter up directly with Marshal TITO. The SOVIET government has been kept fully informed. We are now waiting to hear whether Marshal TITO is prepared to cooperate in accepting a peaceful settlement of his territorial claims or whether he will attempt to establish them by force.

It has always been my policy to keep you all, whatever your rank, fully informed about the general situation and objects for which you fought. I send you this message so that you may know the issues which are now at stake.

The 21st Battalion's role, while the high-level discussions went on, was to do an enormous number of double guards, with the troops decked out in their best clothes in an endeavour to impress the motley garmented Yugoslavs, whose uniforms were partly German, partly Italian, and partly British. In between times they bathed and lazed on the beach at Barcola by day and danced with the populace by night.

Tito finally agreed that might was right, and Istria still belonged to Italy. His forces moved out of Trieste on 12 June and the Italians gave themselves a celebration. Flags were displayed from windows, the Yugoslav flag being conspicuously absent; crowds roamed the streets, speeches were made at intervals, and the people enjoyed their first day of liberation very thoroughly indeed. But down in Barcola more serious things were afoot—the 7th Reinforcements were marching out to New Zealand, and appropriate functions were being organised. They left on the 16th, carrying their own hangovers and the good wishes of the battalion.

Leave by companies to Klagenfurt, in Austria, was punctuated by rumours of a Communist rising in Trieste, but nothing happened, and by the 19th all Yugoslav troops, with the exception of their sympathetic Guardia del Popolo police force, had departed. Cricket, rowing, and leave to Venice were interrupted by the necessity of convincing the People's Guard that their days of intimidating the Italians in Trieste were over. Most of them left quietly, and those who remained were arrested and sent to prisoner-of-war cages.

The rest of June and all July were passed in an unending round of leave, guard and picket duties, regattas, swimming, tennis, and athletic meetings. Just to remind

the troops that they were still in the Army, all leave was stopped for a week and eight hours' daily work or duty substituted as a disciplinary measure.

The New Zealand Division's tour of duty in the Trieste trouble spot ceased at the end of July, when 56 (London) Division took over and the Kiwis departed for the divisional area near Lake Trasimene, which was reached on the afternoon of 2 August. Tents were pitched among oak trees. En route the convoy, after a warm farewell from the feminine populace of Barcola, staged near Mestre after an easy hundred miles, near Bologna after another hundred, near Fabriano after saying goodbye to Faenza, Forli, and Fano, and finally passed through the mountains to Trasimene. At each stop, whether leave was granted or not, the battalion farewelled the 8th Reinforcements, who were marching out to New Zealand at the end of the trek. It was a triumphant farewell to the battlefields and to the last of the North African veterans. Japan still remained as a possible objective for the later reinforcements, who recovered sufficiently to give the returning troops a rousing farewell on 6 August. Nine days later an early morning broadcast gave the news of the Japanese acceptance of the surrender terms. The war was definitely mafeesh, finito—over. The Army granted an official two days' holiday to celebrate—the celebration lasted longer than two days and was not completely over when the battalion moved to the coast at Mondolfo on 30 August. The troops ranged far and wide on leave, official and otherwise—Paris and Marseilles were put out of bounds. Toujours l'armée.

Another move brought the battalion back to Lake Trasimene on 14 September, and the first signs of the break-up of the unit appeared with the departure to New Zealand of the 9th Reinforcements on 26 September. This was not so much a farewell as a 'See you later; we won't be far behind you' celebration. The Italian summer was drawing to an end and on 7 October the troops moved to winter quarters in Florence. While it was the main object of the 2 NZEF to get the troops back to New Zealand as soon as possible, leave to the United Kingdom was available for those who were prepared to risk missing their turn if and when shipping became available. The first battalion party, 61 all ranks, left for England on 13 October, and two days later 90 men of the 13th and 14th Reinforcements marched out to J Force and the occupation of Japan. By the end of October the battalion was down to half strength. The first United Kingdom leave draft returned on 17 November, the second

on the 25th, and the third left the battalion on the 26th. The married men of the 10th Reinforcements marched out on 27 November, and on 2 December the last entry was made in the battalion war diary:

An important order re increased allocation of shipping from Italy was published. As up to and including the majority of the 12 Reinforcements would be going home, a 5 Brigade group was made and the battalion ceased to exist.

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APPENDIX I — CAPTURE OF MAJOR-GENERAL VON RAVENSTEIN, 29 NOVEMBER 1941

Appendix I

CAPTURE OF MAJOR-GENERAL VON RAVENSTEIN, 29 NOVEMBER 1941

[Reprinted from an article in the North Auckland Times, Dargaville, 17 May 1947]

The story of the capture of Major-General von Ravenstein, second-in-command to Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel, commander of the Afrika Korps in the Western Desert, and the part played by two local residents has been told by Mr. J. H. Money, intelligence officer for the 21st Battalion at the time of the capture.

The two local men who shared in the capture with Mr. Money were Messrs. R. S. Nicol and C. Vause who, at the time, were members of the battalion intelligence section. Despite all other claims by various units, it was these three men who effected the capture which took place at Point 175, Sidi Rezegh, on November 28, 1941. ¹

'That the General's capture, complete with order of battle and marked maps, was of some importance was proved by the report in the NZEF Times that "it gave us possession of important operational orders against which we were able to prepare counter plans. The encircling movement of the Ariete force was thus no surprise and our artillery kept it at a respectful distance," writes Mr. Money in the Auckland Weekly News.

'For the benefit of any uninitiated who are prepared to read further it is necessary to give an indication of the composition of an intelligence section in an infantry line battalion. It generally consists of seven men, a sergeant and a subaltern. The men should be handpicked—fit, alert, first-class marksmen and natural scouts, for they may be called upon to accomplish some strange tasks. In the case of 21st Battalion at the time of this incident I claim to have had the perfect section. They were grand boys, and I wish I could record that they all came back. There is a degree of intimacy between the officer, the n.c.o. and the men in an "I"

section, not always possible in larger groups. I can scarcely recall ever calling my chaps anything but "Boy", "Cliff", "Bill", "Ben", or "Ox", but not one of them ever took advantage of the informality or ever gave me anything but the most loyal support.

Heavy Casualties

'And this is how three of us fluked the capture of von Ravenstein. By November 27, 1941, the 21st Battalion had suffered fairly heavy casualties. The C.O. had been killed, the second-in-command wounded and the remnants, with the exception of A and B Companies, were withdrawn from Sidi Rezegh, placed under command of Headquarters Company commander, and sent by night to Point 175.

'I believe the move was made by 6th Brigade, to whom we had been temporarily attached, as much to give us a rest and a chance to recoup as for any other reason. Quite incidentally it had been mentioned that we were to close the back door on 6th Brigade headquarters against surprise from the rear.

'Desert navigation was the problem of Intelligence, and up to the night of November 27–28 I had not been displeased by our efforts over the Libyan Desert. But I was not clever about this night march on foot of some $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles, and we did not strike the spot until the early hours of November 28.

'It was a cold dawn to which we awoke having wearily dossed down in the sand once we were certain of our location, and the scene which met our eyes was pretty cheerless.

German Staff Car Appears

'Dispositions having been decided, the sadly-depleted companies proceeded to dig in and in due course Bob Nicol, Cliff Vause and I went forward to find a suitable observation post. Other members of the "I" section nosed around getting an idea of the place and making ground maps for use by company and platoon commanders. The sun wastes no time in rising in those parts and by the time we had found what we wanted—a bomb hole with an excellent field of vision and adequate cover for messengers to slip back—the day had warmed up. D Company was on our right rear, a distance of perhaps 400 yards.

'We had just decided to enlarge our observation post when, without warning, a German staff car, travelling slowly from the direction of the escarpment on our left, crossed our front scarcely 200 yards away. This did not necessarily mean that it was manned by Germans as by then both sides were driving each other's vehicles with complete impartiality. But all saw the peculiar flat caps of the occupants at the same moment.

'No sooner had I given my version of a fire order than Bob and Cliff opened up. Now both are pretty marksmen and the effect of their opening rounds, which followed each other like lightning, was simply bewildering. The car stopped dead and simultaneously three figures leapt from the car and disappeared from view—obviously into a handy slit trench. We then proceeded to wage a private little war which was interrupted by some bursts of well meant machine-gun fire from the more distant D Company.

Decided to Go Forward

'We seemed to be getting nowhere fast, so it was eventually decided that we should go forward, firing as we went and attempt a capture. To this end I yelled across to the unknown gunner to give us covering fire and forward we went. Almost immediately two pairs of hands went up and we wondered why we hadn't tried it before! All the same we badly wished to see that third pair of hands and in the most lurid language told the opposition what we wanted. They were desperately trying to tell us something, and one of the two lowered a hand to indicate the third member who hadn't shown up. The movement nearly cost him his life!

'We had visions of a Jerry trick and were awake to surrendering enemy heaving ugly hand-grenades. However, I had caught the word "blessé" and a vague memory of schoolboy French came to my aid. Wounded he was, across the shoulder blade. And very luckily for us, because he was the bloke who was carrying the Germans' tommy-gun and our shot had made him drop it in the back of the car.

Some Very Big Game

'As we got close we saw the badges of rank of the tall member of our trio of near-captives. My heart, already doing 60 to the dozen, missed a beat because, unless I was greatly mistaken, those interwoven epaulets meant a general!

Unconsciously I must have taken a firmer grip of my rifle for the tall one hoarsely yelled, "Nein! Nein! General! General!" He was a general all right! General von Ravenstein, no less, second-in-command to the great Rommel. Twenty-first Battalion "I" section, had, all unconsciously, bagged some very big game indeed.

'I had the pleasure of relieving the general of his excellent Luger pistol—a beautiful thing I fully intended smuggling out of Libya and home to New Zealand in defiance of all orders! Then D Company commander and many of his chaps came up. Captain T. wanted binoculars. His chaps wanted anything they could souvenir.

I protested. "Hey! You're not trying to rob us of our prisoners, Alan?" To which he replied: "No! No! They're your prize all right—but I am short of binoculars."

'So was Bob Nicol, and the binoculars were already snugly settled inside his shirt so I was able truthfully to say: "Well, I don't see any around." Poor old Alan stopped one for keeps an hour or two later.

'We wasted no time in getting our prize to battalion battle headquarters in his own car and obtained permission to take him back to Brigade. Before leaving we made a cursory examination of the car. It was most comfortably furnished! And the general had displayed a truly catholic and international taste for, among other things, he carried a tin of Aulsebrook's biscuits (yes, we got a shock too!), several cartons of South African cigarettes, a case of Crosse and Blackwell's tinned goods, a bottle of Greek brandy and a jar of rum, country of origin unknown but excellent quality for all that.

Handing Over the Prize

'We had made a mess of the general's Benz. A front and back tyre, and the spare, which was strapped to the side, were all flat. One round had pierced the upholstery between the general and his driver after ricochetting from the dashboard. Unbeknown to us another had punctured the radiator. No wonder the general, who, by this time, was rapidly regaining his Teutonic composure, paid us the compliment of admitting in broken English: "British! Noo Zeeland? Ja! Ja! Good soldiers, British!"

'With Bob driving and with Cliff and I doing guard duty we set out for Brigade.

Bob had a very hard time steering because of the flat tyre. Even so we should have made the $3\frac{1}{2}$ odd miles but for the punctured radiator which leaked dry and caused the engine to seize.

'Believe me, we felt much alone when this happened. We were in a wadi and were perfectly sure we were in view of the enemy. Where a German general is doing a personal reconnaissance as lightly escorted as was this chap, there also will you find German troops not far away. We were not at all sure whether our own Brigade had spotted us and if so what they would make of a German staff car making its leisurely way toward our lines. I sent Cliff Vause back with an urgent request for a Bren gun carrier and begged him to "Egri George!" (Hurry up).

Excellent Supplies

'Bob and I then waited. By this time von Ravenstein was completely composed. He indicated in broken French and much German that some food would be a good idea. We suspected a trick when he pointed to the back of his car. However, we were curious, so, making it perfectly clear that we were still very trigger-happy, I gave permission to the German driver to open up the back.

'In a compartment we had not discovered were two excellent loaves of German bread beautifully wrapped in celophane, delicious German butter and some of the best cheese I have ever tasted. There was also a packet of raisins and another of dried figs. Still suspicious, we made the general eat first; the sight was too much for us so Bob and I took turns at covering the enemy while the other had a good feed of the enemy's excellent supplies.

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Farewell to a General

'The rest of the journey was uneventful. It was with great glee that we proclaimed our prize to various of our troops who were with Brigade. We handed over the wounded German to the R.A.P. and we disposed of the unwounded German driver to the Field Security Section. Incidentally, he had been very worried about the possible effect of a signet ring emblazoned with the Nazi emblem and had made motions indicating his willingness to chuck it away. We reassured him, however, for which he was grateful. I shall never forget the Teutonic click of heels with which he farewelled his general or the icy-cold acknowledgment of von Ravenstein. The latter, after I had convinced an astonished Brigade liaison officer of his importance, was handed over. His speedy evacuation to Divisional Headquarters and his hazardous journey from there to Cairo are none of my story.

'Our part was completed. We went back to our own unit to find the battle on in earnest. That same evening, having successfully withstood an attack from motorised infantry all day long, we were ignominiously rounded up by tanks and our own lives as prisoners of war had begun.'

¹ General von Ravenstein was captured on 29 November.

[SECTION]

[Reprinted from an article in the North Auckland Times, Dargaville, 17 May 1947]

The story of the capture of Major-General von Ravenstein, second-in-command to Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel, commander of the Afrika Korps in the Western Desert, and the part played by two local residents has been told by Mr. J. H. Money, intelligence officer for the 21st Battalion at the time of the capture.

The two local men who shared in the capture with Mr. Money were Messrs. R. S. Nicol and C. Vause who, at the time, were members of the battalion intelligence section. Despite all other claims by various units, it was these three men who effected the capture which took place at Point 175, Sidi Rezegh, on November 28, 1941. ¹

'That the General's capture, complete with order of battle and marked maps, was of some importance was proved by the report in the NZEF Times that "it gave us possession of important operational orders against which we were able to prepare counter plans. The encircling movement of the Ariete force was thus no surprise and our artillery kept it at a respectful distance," writes Mr. Money in the Auckland Weekly News.

'For the benefit of any uninitiated who are prepared to read further it is necessary to give an indication of the composition of an intelligence section in an infantry line battalion. It generally consists of seven men, a sergeant and a subaltern. The men should be handpicked—fit, alert, first-class marksmen and natural scouts, for they may be called upon to accomplish some strange tasks. In the case of 21st Battalion at the time of this incident I claim to have had the perfect section. They were grand boys, and I wish I could record that they all came back. There is a degree of intimacy between the officer, the n.c.o. and the men in an "I" section, not always possible in larger groups. I can scarcely recall ever calling my chaps anything but "Boy", "Cliff", "Bill", "Ben", or "Ox", but not one of them ever took advantage of the informality or ever gave me anything but the most loyal support.

HEAVY CASUALTIES

Heavy Casualties

'And this is how three of us fluked the capture of von Ravenstein. By November 27, 1941, the 21st Battalion had suffered fairly heavy casualties. The C.O. had been killed, the second-in-command wounded and the remnants, with the exception of A and B Companies, were withdrawn from Sidi Rezegh, placed under command of Headquarters Company commander, and sent by night to Point 175.

'I believe the move was made by 6th Brigade, to whom we had been temporarily attached, as much to give us a rest and a chance to recoup as for any other reason. Quite incidentally it had been mentioned that we were to close the back door on 6th Brigade headquarters against surprise from the rear.

'Desert navigation was the problem of Intelligence, and up to the night of November 27–28 I had not been displeased by our efforts over the Libyan Desert. But I was not clever about this night march on foot of some $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles, and we did not strike the spot until the early hours of November 28.

'It was a cold dawn to which we awoke having wearily dossed down in the sand once we were certain of our location, and the scene which met our eyes was pretty cheerless.

GERMAN STAFF CAR APPEARS

German Staff Car Appears

'Dispositions having been decided, the sadly-depleted companies proceeded to dig in and in due course Bob Nicol, Cliff Vause and I went forward to find a suitable observation post. Other members of the "I" section nosed around getting an idea of the place and making ground maps for use by company and platoon commanders. The sun wastes no time in rising in those parts and by the time we had found what we wanted—a bomb hole with an excellent field of vision and adequate cover for messengers to slip back—the day had warmed up. D Company was on our right rear, a distance of perhaps 400 yards.

'We had just decided to enlarge our observation post when, without warning, a German staff car, travelling slowly from the direction of the escarpment on our left, crossed our front scarcely 200 yards away. This did not necessarily mean that it was manned by Germans as by then both sides were driving each other's vehicles with complete impartiality. But all saw the peculiar flat caps of the occupants at the same moment.

'No sooner had I given my version of a fire order than Bob and Cliff opened up. Now both are pretty marksmen and the effect of their opening rounds, which followed each other like lightning, was simply bewildering. The car stopped dead and simultaneously three figures leapt from the car and disappeared from view—obviously into a handy slit trench. We then proceeded to wage a private little war which was interrupted by some bursts of well meant machine-gun fire from the more distant D Company.

DECIDED TO GO FORWARD

Decided to Go Forward

'We seemed to be getting nowhere fast, so it was eventually decided that we should go forward, firing as we went and attempt a capture. To this end I yelled across to the unknown gunner to give us covering fire and forward we went. Almost immediately two pairs of hands went up and we wondered why we hadn't tried it before! All the same we badly wished to see that third pair of hands and in the most lurid language told the opposition what we wanted. They were desperately trying to tell us something, and one of the two lowered a hand to indicate the third member who hadn't shown up. The movement nearly cost him his life!

'We had visions of a Jerry trick and were awake to surrendering enemy heaving ugly hand-grenades. However, I had caught the word "blessé" and a vague memory of schoolboy French came to my aid. Wounded he was, across the shoulder blade. And very luckily for us, because he was the bloke who was carrying the Germans' tommy-gun and our shot had made him drop it in the back of the car.

SOME VERY BIG GAME

Some Very Big Game

'As we got close we saw the badges of rank of the tall member of our trio of near-captives. My heart, already doing 60 to the dozen, missed a beat because, unless I was greatly mistaken, those interwoven epaulets meant a general! Unconsciously I must have taken a firmer grip of my rifle for the tall one hoarsely yelled, "Nein! Nein! General! General!" He was a general all right! General von Ravenstein, no less, second-in-command to the great Rommel. Twenty-first Battalion "I" section, had, all unconsciously, bagged some very big game indeed.

'I had the pleasure of relieving the general of his excellent Luger pistol—a beautiful thing I fully intended smuggling out of Libya and home to New Zealand in defiance of all orders! Then D Company commander and many of his chaps came up. Captain T. wanted binoculars. His chaps wanted anything they could souvenir.

I protested. "Hey! You're not trying to rob us of our prisoners, Alan?" To which he replied: "No! No! They're your prize all right—but I am short of binoculars."

'So was Bob Nicol, and the binoculars were already snugly settled inside his shirt so I was able truthfully to say: "Well, I don't see any around." Poor old Alan stopped one for keeps an hour or two later.

'We wasted no time in getting our prize to battalion battle headquarters in his own car and obtained permission to take him back to Brigade. Before leaving we made a cursory examination of the car. It was most comfortably furnished! And the general had displayed a truly catholic and international taste for, among other things, he carried a tin of Aulsebrook's biscuits (yes, we got a shock too!), several cartons of South African cigarettes, a case of Crosse and Blackwell's tinned goods, a bottle of Greek brandy and a jar of rum, country of origin unknown but excellent quality for all that.

HANDING OVER THE PRIZE

Handing Over the Prize

'We had made a mess of the general's Benz. A front and back tyre, and the spare, which was strapped to the side, were all flat. One round had pierced the upholstery between the general and his driver after ricochetting from the dashboard. Unbeknown to us another had punctured the radiator. No wonder the general, who, by this time, was rapidly regaining his Teutonic composure, paid us the compliment of admitting in broken English: "British! Noo Zeeland? Ja! Ja! Good soldiers, British!"

'With Bob driving and with Cliff and I doing guard duty we set out for Brigade. Bob had a very hard time steering because of the flat tyre. Even so we should have made the $3\frac{1}{2}$ odd miles but for the punctured radiator which leaked dry and caused the engine to seize.

'Believe me, we felt much alone when this happened. We were in a wadi and were perfectly sure we were in view of the enemy. Where a German general is doing a personal reconnaissance as lightly escorted as was this chap, there also will you find German troops not far away. We were not at all sure whether our own Brigade had spotted us and if so what they would make of a German staff car making its leisurely way toward our lines. I sent Cliff Vause back with an urgent request for a Bren gun carrier and begged him to "Egri George!" (Hurry up).

EXCELLENT SUPPLIES

Excellent Supplies

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FAREWELL TO A GENERAL

Farewell to a General

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ROLL OF HONOUR

ROLL OF HONOUR

Killed in A	ction
Lt-Col J. M. Allen	28 November 1941
Lt-Col S. F. Allen	15 July 1942
Maj R. W. Adams	4 July 1942
Capt W. C. Butland	24 October 1942
Capt K. G. Dee	24 October 1942
Capt R. E. Horrocks	28 November 1943
Capt R. B. McClymont	22 May 1941
Capt J. R. B. Marshall	24 October 1942
Capt I. A. Murray	20 April 1943
Capt A. C. Turtill	29 November 1941
Capt J. R. Warrington	10 April 1945
Lt H. R. Anderson	20 May 1941
Lt R. D. Campbell	26 May 1941
Lt B. B. S. Catran	24 October 1942
Lt W. M. Clark	13 April 1943
Lt R. Donaldson	20 April 1943
Lt J. B. Dow	20 April 1943
Lt N. R. McKay	16 April 1941
Lt W. J. Southworth	22 May 1941
Lt L. E. W. Speed	16 December 1943
Lt G. M. Taylor	20 April 1943
2 Lt A. B. Dale	24 December 1943
2 Lt J. W. Dempsey	16 October 1944
2 Lt M. R. Faull	22 November 1941
2 Lt O. E. J. Ferguson	24 April 1944
2 Lt I. L. Marshall-Inman	28 July 1944
2 Lt O. G. McGregor	19 December 1943
2 Lt C. J. O'Dea	29 May 1944
2 Lt J. T. Upton	20 April 1943
2 Lt M. Wickman	21 January 1945

WO II A. H. Lockett	27 May 1941
WO II G. D. H. Mahoney	22 July 1942
WO II W. L. Wiley	1 December 1943
S-Sgt C. C. Howell	20 April 1943
Sgt H. W. Abbott	26 June 1942
Sgt H. H. Bellamy	26 May 1941
Sgt P. M. Bowmar	30 November 1941
Sgt N. Buxton	29 March 1943
Sgt R. Crompton	2 August 1944
Sgt D. H. Day	23 April 1944
Sgt K. S. Hetherington	30 April 1944
Sgt F. K. Krone	26 July 1944
Sgt W. A. Marshall	4 May 1943
Sgt J. B. Negus	26 November 1941
Sgt N. J. Page	19 December 1943
Sgt N. Robertson	26 November 1941
L-Sgt R. Bonner	22 November 1941
L-Sgt E. D. Green	22 September 1944
L-Sgt J. Pennell	24 October 1942
L-Sgt M. T. Roseveare	26 November 1941
L-Sgt G. P. Turner	3 July 1942
L-Sgt N. StA. White	28 September 1944
L-Sgt B. A. W. Worthington	
Cpl F. L. Abbott	15 December 1943
Cpl G. A. Coffin	22 September 1944
Cpl A. L. Cowley	23 April 1943
Cpl R. T. Gilmore	18 May 1941
Cpl D. F. G. Hall	16 December 1943
Cpl K. Howard	24 October 1942
Cpl D. Hughes	26 March 1943
Cpl E. E. J. Lanning	24 October 1942
Cpl W. Love	20 April 1943
Cpl W. L. Mannix	29 November 1941
Cpl E. Mulgan	19 April 1941
Cpl A. J. Parry	23 December 1943
Cpl R. C. Pipe	15 April 1941
Cpl J. C. Sadgrove	28 September 1944

Cpl D. E. Sanderson	26 July 1944
Cpl W. C. Whittaker	7 April 1945
L-Cpl J. J. Agnew	20 May 1941
L-Cpl B. S. Brunskill	1 December 1941
L-Cpl J. H. Burch	22 September 1944
L-Cpl J. R. Caldwell	24 December 1943
L-Cpl H. Chapman	29 May 1944
L-Cpl W. B. Craig	20 May 1941
L-Cpl H. Dalbeth	16 July 1942
L-Cpl D. J. H. Death	1 December 1943
L-Cpl J. R. Edmondson	22 September 1944
L-Cpl I. T. Forsman	7 April 1945
L-Cpl I. J. M. Gray	1 December 1941
L-Cpl E. G. Jones	15 July 1942
L-Cpl G. K. Keeling	26 November 1941
L-Cpl N. E. Lovell	15 April 1941
L-Cpl G. D. Mackie	21 April 1943
L-Cpl W. S. McMahon	10 April 1945
L-Cpl L. W. Milne	17 October 1944
L-Cpl V. J. Palmer	1 December 1941
L-Cpl W. L. Reid	13 December 1941
L-Cpl A. G. Roberts	30 September 1944
L-Cpl T. M. Roper	15 July 1942
L-Cpl W. R. Rowe	24 May 1941
L-Cpl L. E. Rowlands	26 July 1944
L-Cpl W. S. V. Rush	26 October 1942
L-Cpl J. R. Shand	9 April 1945
L-Cpl G. A. E. Smith	15 March 1944
L-Cpl L. C. Smith	4 September 1942
L-Cpl J. A. Steenson	28 September 1944
L-Cpl A. E. Stephenson	1 December 1941
L-Cpl J. W. Stockley	24 December 1943
L-Cpl R. W. Taylor	15 December 1943
L-Cpl G. Warwick	30 November 1941
Pte A. Aitken	22 September 1944
Pte B. G. Allaway	8 February 1944
Pte A. J. Anderson	30 November 1941

Pte C. A. R. Andrew	23 December 1943
Pte D. S. Ansin	21 March 1944
Pte A. W. E. Armstrong	27 November 1941
Pte R. C. Armstrong	25 May 1941
Pte J. V. Aro	22 May 1941
Pte K. H. Ashworth	26 March 1943
Pte H. McC. Atkinson	24 October 1942
Pte S. J. Attwood	15 December 1943
Pte T. R. Baker	3 October 1944
Pte E. W. Bancroft	12 January 1945
Pte L. G. Bennett	22 September 1944
Pte T. R. Berghan	23 November 1941
Pte J. Bernsten	30 November 1941
Pte F. R. Berridge	25 March 1944
Pte E. I. Binzegger	22 September 1944
Pte C. A. Bisman	1 December 1941
Pte I. H. L. Black	20 April 1943
Pte J. Bogun	2 June 1941
Pte G. R. Bond	26 November 1941
Pte W. C. Bond	11 November 1942
Pte J. Boon	26 November 1941
Pte J. Borovich	24 October 1942
Pte J. Boston	22 September 1944
Pte C. Boswell	22 September 1944
Pte E. J. Bowie	5 January 1943
Pte D. E. Bradley	20 April 1943
Pte R. Braggins	20 April 1943
Pte A. H. Bramley	15 July 1942
Pte K. T. Brewer	27 May 1941
Pte R. Brighouse	4 October 1944
Pte J. R. Brockbank	16 December 1943
Pte A. W. J. Brown	27 May 1941
Pte J. Bruce	8 April 1943
Pte G. B. Burns	15 December 1943
Pte J. H. Burr	2 August 1944
Pte F. Burton	13 December 1941
Pte A. Butland	21 April 1943
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Pte R. J. Campbell Pte T. C. Cannon May 1941 Pte M. L. Carrie Pte C. Carter May 1941 Pte C. A. Carter Pte N. Catley Pte W. H. D. Claris Pte A. S. Coleman Pte R. C. Cook Pte D. Cooper Pte D. I. Crowley Pte L. L. Cubitt Pte E. W. Cunningham Pte A. Curwen Pte A. Curwen Pte A. C. Davies Pte A. C. Davies Pte A. C. Davies Pte R. D. Douglas Pte K. G. Downer Pte R. D. Douggan Pte R. S. Eades Pte R. S. Eades Pte T. K. Dyer Pte R. S. May 1941 Pte A. January 1942 Pte D. January 1943 Pte January 1942 Pte January 1941 Pte January 1941 Pte January 1941 Pte January 1942 Pte January 1941 Pte January 1941 Pte January 1942 Pte January 1941 Pte January 1941 Pte January 1942 Pte J
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Pte C. H. Daniels Pte G. E. Davenport Pte A. C. Davies Pte L. C. Davies Pte C. Dixon Pte R. D. Douglas Pte K. G. Downer Pte T. C. Duggan Pte T. K. Dyer Pte R. D. Davies 1 December 1943 24 October 1942 25 July 1942 16 July 1942 17 March 1944 1 December 1943 28 November 1943 Pte R. S. Eades 21 April 1943
Pte G. E. Davenport Pte A. C. Davies Pte L. C. Davies Pte C. Dixon Pte R. D. Douglas Pte K. G. Downer Pte T. C. Duggan Pte T. K. Dyer Pte R. D. Davies 24 October 1942 25 July 1942 16 July 1942 17 March 1944 1 December 1943 28 November 1943 Pte R. S. Eades 21 April 1943
Pte A. C. Davies Pte L. C. Davies 24 October 1942 Pte C. Dixon 25 July 1942 Pte R. D. Douglas Pte K. G. Downer Pte T. C. Duggan Pte T. K. Dyer 28 November 1943 Pte R. S. Eades 15 December 1942 24 October 1942 25 July 1942 16 July 1942 17 March 1944 1 December 1943 28 November 1943 21 April 1943
Pte L. C. Davies 24 October 1942 Pte C. Dixon 25 July 1942 Pte R. D. Douglas 16 July 1942 Pte K. G. Downer 17 March 1944 Pte T. C. Duggan 1 December 1943 Pte T. K. Dyer 28 November 1943 Pte R. S. Eades 21 April 1943
Pte C. Dixon 25 July 1942 Pte R. D. Douglas 16 July 1942 Pte K. G. Downer 17 March 1944 Pte T. C. Duggan 1 December 1943 Pte T. K. Dyer 28 November 1943 Pte R. S. Eades 21 April 1943
Pte R. D. Douglas 16 July 1942 Pte K. G. Downer 17 March 1944 Pte T. C. Duggan 1 December 1943 Pte T. K. Dyer 28 November 1943 Pte R. S. Eades 21 April 1943
Pte K. G. Downer Pte T. C. Duggan 17 March 1944 1 December 1943 Pte T. K. Dyer 28 November 1943 Pte R. S. Eades 21 April 1943
Pte T. C. Duggan 1 December 1943 Pte T. K. Dyer 28 November 1943 Pte R. S. Eades 21 April 1943
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Pte R. S. Eades 21 April 1943
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Pte P. D. Edwards 25 March 1944
Pte F. G. Ellwood 1 December 1941
Pte G. S. Empson 16 July 1942
Pte I. K. Evans 30 September 1944
Pte L. D. Evans 20 April 1943
Pte C. V. Fitze 30 November 1941
Pte W. F. Fitzgerald 22 November 1941
Pte J. B. Florance 19 December 1943
Pte C. Ford 26 June 1942

Pte H. I. S. Fox Pte W. G. Frear	29 July 1942 29 November 1941
Pte W. J. Fryer	21 April 1943
Pte T. W. Fursdon	22 November 1941
Pte E. Gallot	4 October 1944
Pte C. M. Gerlach	6 March 1943
Pte R. R. Gilbert	May 1941
Pte J. W. Girven	11 November 1942
Pte B. C. Granger	26 October 1942
Pte J. A. Green	19 April 1941
Pte A. J. Greene	26 November 1941
Pte M. W. Griffiths	10 April 1945
Pte F. L. Hall	30 November 1941
Pte L. H. Halliday	22 September 1944
Pte L. F. Hamerton	22 November 1941
Pte C. W. Hansen	17 April 1941
Pte C. H. Hardaker	4 June 1944
Pte A. W. Harrison	16 July 1942
Pte W. A. Hawkins	21 April 1943
Pte W. P. Hayes	23 October 1942
Pte W. Hearne	25 October 1942
Pte J. C. Henry	24 October 1942
Pte S. D. Henwood	2 August 1944
Pte D. A. Herman	30 November 1944
Pte T. Heslop	17 December 1942
Pte L. R. Higgins	17 April 1941
Pte J. C. P. Higginson	28 July 1944
Pte A. E. Hill	28 September 1944
Pte W. L. Hilton	4 July 1942
Pte T. J. Hoggard	May 1941
Pte A. V. A. Holmes	26 November 1941
Pte C. A. Holmes	20 April 1943
Pte A. Hoy	22 February 1942
Pte M. D. Hughes	24 October 1942
Pte R. J. Hughes	26 March 1943
Pte W. J. Hunt	22 November 1941
Pte H. H. Hunwick	24 December 1943

Pte R. B. M. Hurren Pte H. T. Ingham	22 November 1941 23 October 1942
Pte G. A. J. Irvine	24 December 1943
Pte A. E. Jensen	5 December 1941
Pte R. L. E. Jerram	May 1941
Pte J. J. Johnston	19 April 1943
Pte K. L. T. Jones	30 November 1941
Pte I. F. G. Kellow	7 December 1944
Pte O. M. Kelsey	20 April 1943
Pte F. Kelso	22 July 1942
Pte G. King	1 December 1941
Pte P. G. Kirby	3 July 1942
Pte C. G. Knofflock	30 November 1941
Pte B. J. Leahy	26 May 1941
Pte E. H. Leaity	1 December 1941
Pte A. E. Leen	26 June 1942
Pte K. E. Leitch	17 April 1941
Pte C. L. T. Lewis	28 September 1944
Pte J. Lewis	22 November 1941
Pte E. Lingard	27 April 1944
Pte C. R. Lockett	20 April 1943
Pte C. Lowe	1 December 1941
Pte S. Luckings	29 June 1942
Pte F. G. Lynch	8 January 1944
Pte T. B. Lyons-Philp	16 April 1941
Pte W. J. McDevitt	20 April 1943
Pte N. Mace	5 December 1941
Pte T. A. McIvor	2 August 1944
Pte A. McKenzie	21 March 1944
Pte A. W. McKenzie	26 July 1944
Pte J. R. McKenzie	22 July 1942
Pte C. J. McLean	5 April 1945
Pte J. M. McLean	20 April 1943
Pte T. A. McLean	21 March 1944
Pte C. E. Maddren	15 December 1943
Pte J. H. Madigan	30 November 1941

Pte G. Major Pte C. H. Martin	May 1941
Pte G. E. Martin	24 December 1943
Pte G. K. Masters	28 April 1944
Pte D. Maunsell	May 1941
Pte A. A. J. Mitchell	5 December 1941
Pte S. Mitchell	24 October 1942
Pte C. H. Mong	1 December 1943
Pte B. H. Moody	24 October 1942
Pte E. H. Morris	30 November 1941
Pte B. H. Mosdell	23 May 1941
Pte K. J. Munro	28 May 1944
Pte C. G. Murphy	25 December 1943
Pte J. A. Murphy	22 September 1944
Pte A. E. Nash	18 May 1941
Pte R. E. Nicholson	16 July 1942
Pte W. J. Nicholson	5 April 1945
Pte R. Oliver	24 October 1942
Pte G. R. W. Osmand	29 September 1944
Pte J. O'Sullivan	20 April 1945
Pte J. O'Toole	4 July 1942
Pte R. G. Ozanne	24 October 1942
Pte H. C. L. Page	27 April 1944
Pte M. N. Palmer	22 September 1944
Pte A. A. Parker	2 August 1944
Pte M. E. Parker	11 November 1942
Pte S. H. Parker	21 March 1944
Pte M. G. F. Parkinson	30 November 1944
Pte W. J. Payne	21 March 1944
Pte L. R. Pearson	18 May 1941
Pte A. S. Phillips	21 April 1943
Pte D. F. Pike	22 November 1941
Pte T. McD. Pollock	3 July 1942
Pte H. C. Porter	22 July 1942
Pte R. L. Priaulx	26 July 1944
Pte H. C. Rau	16 December 1943
Pte H. H. Reardon	15 July 1942

Pte A. Redmanner Pte A. H. Reynolds Pte E. Rinoldi	29 O etibber 1942 13 December 1941 15 July 1942
Pte T. Riordan Pte E. G. Roberts Pte T. J. Robinson Pte N. G. Rule	24 October 1942 22 November 1941 4 July 1942 29 March 1943
Pte G. R. Russell Pte F. G. Salisbury Pte P. G. Samson Pte R. A. J. Scott	21 April 1943 24 May 1941 18 March 1944 26 June 1942
Pte R. D. Scott Pte A. S. Searle	4 January 1944 26 June 1942
Pte A. Seymour Pte H. Seymour Pte V. C. Sharplin Pte B. C. H. Sherwin	2 May 194420 April 194330 November 19415 December 1941
Pte A. E. Smith Pte A. G. Smith Pte G. A. Smith	27 May 1941 30 November 1941 3 June 1944
Pte W. H. Snowden Pte S. W. Solley Pte E. H. Sparrow	25 October 194229 November 194122 November 1941
Pte A. T. Standing Pte E. C. Stewart Pte J. Stewart	20 April 1943 18 May 1941 1 December 1941
Pte T. S. Sutcliffe Pte P. K. Sutton Pte J. R. Taylor Pte P. Taylor	May 1941 26 June 1942 5 October 1944 20 September 1944
Pte C. A. Temm Pte W. Thomas Pte A. Thomason	5 December 1941 22 November 1941 15 July 1942
Pte C. G. Thomson Pte H. E. Thorburn Pte C. B. Thornhill	24 October 1942 15 July 1942 22 July 1942

Pte B. Pr. Tooley	28 November 1943
Pte F. R. Tucker	30 September 1944
Pte F. R. Turnock	29 November 1941
D. T. C. I. T	2671.4044
Pte T. C. J. Turrall	26 July 1944
Pte J. R.Walker	22 November 1941
Pte H. W. Wardlaw	20 April 1943
Pte E. B. O. Warringto	•
Pte L. S. White	22 September 1944
Pte I. S. Wilkie	15 July 1942
Pte A. H. Williams	20 April 1943
Pte F. A. Williams	May 1941
Pte K. J. Winks	25 July 1942
Pte P. T. Wouldes	16 July 1942
Pte E. P. Young	26 June 1942
Died of \	Vounds
Capt W. K. Henton	31 August 1942
Capt J. H. Kirkland	29 July 1944
Lt M. W. Speight	11 April 1945
WO II J. A. Brown	20 April 1943
Sgt M. A. Coombe	25 July 1944
Sgt N. C. Duke	3 April 1945
Sgt P. D. Lane	28 September 1944
Sgt T. R. McCracken	2 December 1941
Sgt M. R. Mutton	1 January 1943
Sgt T. B. Walker	2 May 1944
Sgt C. B. Wallace	1 January 1943
Sgt A. R. Wilson	28 November 1943
Sgt A. C. Zohrab	17 March 1944
Cpl K. I. Aiken	2 January 1944
Cpl E. A. Griffiths	25 October 1942
Cpl N. E. Wordsworth	5 January 1942
L-Cpl V. R. Elvin	15 December 1943
L-Cpl L. H. McClimont	23 December 1943
L-Cpl N. B. Negus	21 April 1943
L-Cpl E. A. Phillips	25 October 1942
L-Cpl R. J. Smith	15 July 1942

Pte H. A. Adams	25 November 1941
Pte K. F. Adams	17 October 1944
Pte W. D. Armitt	16 November 1942
Pte H. Ashcroft	15 July 1942
Pte R. A. Atkinson	28 November 1943
Pte J. E. Ayton	26 June 1942
Pte W. N. Betts	23 October 1942
Pte F. C. Blatch	18 April 1941
Pte J. G. Broad	6 April 1944
Pte H. Brosnahan	4 July 1942
Pte G. Brown	26 November 1941
Pte A. B. Buckle	24 July 1942
Pte J. A. Burrows	12 December 1941
Pte F. Bussey	6 October 1944
Pte J. F. H. Cain	27 July 1944
Pte B. L. Callagher	11 April 1945
Pte R. E. Caseley	30 July 1942
Pte J. C. N. B. Clark	24 July 1942
Pte L. N. Close	18 November 1942
Pte J. Collingwood	16 April 1941
Pte W. C. Collinson	1 December 1941
Pte C. R. Connors	28 November 1941
Pte R. G. Dalton	8 April 1943
Pte J. A. Dench	3 December 1944
Pte H. J. Edge	21 March 1944
Pte M. L. Edwards	11 March 1943
Pte C. C. Ellenberger	26 November 1941
Pte K. J. Fearn	26 June 1942
Pte G. E. Fitzsimmons	24 November 1941
Pte A. J. Gilroy	26 October 1942
Pte T. E. Ginders	17 December 1943
Pte G. H. Goad	26 June 1942
Pte O. H. Goodhue	10 June 1943
Pte A. K. Hatcher	22 November 1941
Pte W. H. Hilliam	May 1941
Pte N. L. Hinton	28 September 1944
Pte J. P. Hutson	18 April 1943

Pte E. J. Idle	17 January 1944
Pte H. P. Jackson	23 October 1942
Pte E. O. Jacobsen	26 June 1942
Pte H. W. Jesen	11 April 1945
Pte D. E. V. Jones	1 December 1941
Pte V. J. Jones	24 October 1942
Pte H. F. Kerry	22 July 1942
Pte R. M. Lamb	28 April 1943
Pte T. C. Leith	25 July 1944
Pte C. R. McCathie	3 January 1943
Pte W. J. McCluskey	27 June 1942
Pte A. R. McGregor	14 December 1941
Pte J. A. McKay	15 July 1942
Pte T. MacKenzie	22 July 1942
Pte J. McLuckie	4 September 1942
Pte L. G. Moran	28 March 1944
Pte S. Moyes	25 October 1942
Pte B. R. Munns	1 September 1942
Pte R. F. Pasley	22 November 1941
Pte K. W. Peterson	24 July 1944
Pte J. S. Platt	23 November 1941
Pte R. C. Polglase	25 October 1942
Pte F. C. H. Pope	23 May 1941
Pte G. A. Prindle	16 July 1942
Pte R. A. Pringle	4 July 1942
Pte D. A. Rashleigh	10 July 1942
Pte E. W. Ritchie	6 January 1943
Pte V. J. Robertson	15 December 1943
Pte G. H. Robinson	3 December 1941
Pte K. F. Rogers	4 September 1942
Pte G. H. Scott	28 August 1942
Pte L. G. Shand	21 July 1942
Pte E. D. Shellam	19 December 1942
Pte A. P. Somerville	17 July 1942
Pte F. C. Southey	23 November 1941
Pte R. B. Spice	21 March 1944
Pte D. H. Stephens	22 November 1941

Pte C. J. St John Pte J. L. Sutton Pte F. V. Talbot Pte A. G. Thomas Pte H. E. Tyrrell Pte T. A. Walmsley Pte W. G. Whelan	30 December 1941 1 December 1941 30 December 1942 21 July 1942 26 June 1942 7 May 1943 22 November 1941
Pte W. G. White	27 November 1941
Pte W. Worsp	22 November 1941
Died While Pri	
Sgt P. R. Woods	11 January 1942
L-Cpl A. T. New	8 January 1944
L-Cpl F. H. T. Oldham	9 December 1941
Pte H. Barnaby	9 December 1941
Pte G. E. Binnie	19 July 1941
Pte R. W. Boyes	9 December 1941
Pte E. S. Brown	9 December 1941
Pte E. F. Chell	17 August 1942
Pte G. H. Collinson	25 May 1941
Pte A. G. Coomber	12 September 1941
Pte E. F. Davies	17 April 1941
Pte J. J. Ferguson	24 June 1941
Pte H. Goldsmith	28 May 1941
Pte R. W. Graham	9 December 1941
Pte E. Greene	12 April 1942
Pte W. A. Griffin	15 February 1944
Pte H. W. Hutchinson	30 October 1944
Pte B. McKay	5 December 1941
Pte A. C. McLennan	9 December 1941
Pte N. McLennan	9 December 1941
Pte B. B. Manning	9 December 1941
Pte D. MacD. Mickell	28 December 1941
Pte J. R. Nelley	28 May 1941
Pte T. W. H. Pendray	15 March 1945
Pte F. Prior	9 December 1941
Pte E. A. Reid	21 October 1941
Pte D. Russell	27 November 1941

Pte F. Sharples 9 December 1941 Pte W. F. Sotham 9 December 1941 Pte N. L. Stevenson 13 August 1941 13 August 1943 Pte M. Sullings Pte J. H. Twidle 29 August 1944 Pte A. F. Urwin 26 August 1942 Pte W. S. Wallace 9 December 1941 Pte F. Welsh 2 August 1941 Died on Active Service Maj R. M. Harding 11 November 1944 WO I R. S. Barnes 9 November 1940 Cpl V. G. Blott 14 July 1942 L-Cpl R. D. Shilling 5 December 1941 Pte R. J. Adams 13 December 1943 Pte E. C. Bevington 31 October 1941 Pte S. H. Cleland 21 December 1941 1 December 1940 Pte J. Craig Pte N. M. Elliott 12 July 1945 2 June 1941 Pte J. Fagan Pte H. Goodall 23 June 1944 Pte H. S. Green 17 March 1945 Pte J. Grey 20 May 1943 Pte F. T. Lambie 5 December 1941 Pte J. T. Leuty 5 December 1941 5 July 1944 Pte J. M. Lovell Pte C. S. Neumann 22 February 1942 Pte A. New 3 August 1940 Pte C. R. Smeaton 5 December 1941 Pte P. J. Titford 3 August 1945 28 March 1942 Pte J. M. Watson Pte K. C. Wells 21 April 1945 15 April 1944 Pte J. N. West Pte A. N. Whytock 9 September 1944 Pte R. L. Wrathall 1 August 1945(ex p.w.)

1 July 1941

Pte A. J. C. Wren

HONOURS AND AWARDS

HONOURS AND AWARDS

Distinguished Service Order and Bar

Lt-Col H. M. McElroy

Distinguished Service Order

Lt-Col R. W. Harding

Lt-Col E. A. McPhail

Maj Y. K. Fleming

Maj G. H. Hawkesby

Maj V. J. Tanner

Military Cross

Maj A. C. Trousdale

Capt R. B. Abbott

Capt W. C. Butland

Capt G. E. Cairns

Capt W. J. G. Roach

Capt W. T. Swanson

Lt C. D. Hardy

Lt R. C. Hosking

Lt P. Robertson

Lt R. D. Trounson

Lt A. J. Voss

2 Lt D. G. Boys

2Lt R. G. Fitzgibbon

2 Lt I. H. Hirst

2 Lt R. E. Horrocks

2 Lt C. T. Mason

2 Lt R. W. Smith

Member of the Order of the British Empire

Capt C. P. Hutchinson

Distinguished Conduct Medal

WO II D. L. Newlove

Sgt G. K. Babe

Sgt H. J. Bramwell

Sgt C. W. Carter

*Sgt J. T. Donovan

Sgt A. A. Leech

Sgt S. V. Lord

Sgt G. J. Murray

Sgt C. D. Rae

L-Sgt G. G. Mason
L-Sgt L. A. Steiner

Cpl T. McManus

Pte G. H. Goad

Military Medal

WO I D. J. Farmer

WO I W. J. Kennedy

WO II A. H. Lockett

Sgt E. H. Blakey

Sgt J. A. Brown

Sgt N. Buxton

Sgt A. J. Gardyne

Sgt W. A. J. Gorrie

Sgt F. T. Housham

Sgt R. A. Jennings

Sgt W. A. Marshall

Sgt C. R. Mellsop

Sgt R. J. R. Moyle

Sgt L. G. Scott

L-Sgt C. W. Beaumont

L-Sgt F. W. Ellery

L-Sgt C. D. M. Klaus

L-Sgt L. N. Parris

L-Sgt W. B. Wright

Cpl W. M. Baker

Cpl G. A. Dodunski

Cpl E. Fullerton-Smith

Cpl R. H. Hinton

Cpl F. W. Perry

Cpl H. J. de Stigter

L-Cpl R. M. Caitcheon

L-Cpl T. G. Carter

L-Cpl H. F. Cochrane

L-Cpl W. T. Hutchinson

L-Cpl J. R. McCullough

L-Cpl N. R. Mathers

L-Cpl N. B. Negus

L-Cpl H. R. Stanley

L-Cpl B. A. W. Worthington

Pte H. R. Barton

^{*} Awards made for escaping while prisoners of war

Pte M. J. Brown Pte A. T. Luxford Pte J. R. M. McEwing Pte A. H. Meyer Pte N. C. Olde Pte P. O'Rourke Pte A. J. Parry Pte E. Pomeroy Pte H. R. Russell Pte I. Tolich Pte W. M. White George Medal Cpl F. G. Herring **British Empire Medal** *Cpl B. A. Morrison **Greek Medal for Outstanding Services** S-Sgt F. O'C. Sainty

* Awards made for escaping while prisoners of war

SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

Summary of Casualties

	killed		wounded		prisoners of war	r
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs
Greece	1	13	1	25	10	225
Crete	4	28	5	28	1	79
Libya 1941	3	80	11	115	10	157
Egypt 1942	7	104	21	256	-	40
Tripolitania and Tunisia	16	52	12	178	1	24
Italy	12	134	33	487	1	26
						
total	33	411	83	1089	23	551

The killed include men who were killed in action or who died of wounds and those presumed to have been killed in action or to have died of wounds; the prisoners of war include 5 officers and 64 other ranks who were wounded before capture and 35 other ranks who were killed or who died of wounds or sickness while prisoners of war. One officer and 25 other ranks who died on active service are not included in the above casualties.

COMMANDING OFFICERS

Commanding Officers

Lt-Col N. L. Macky	12 Jan 1940–17 May 1941
Maj (actg Lt-Col) E. A. Harding	20 Apr 1941–17 May 1941
Lt-Col J. M. Allen	17 May 1941–28 Nov 1941
Maj T. V. Fitzpatrick	28 Nov 1941-3 Dec 1941
Maj R. W. Harding	3 Dec 1941–7 Dec 1941
Lt-Col S. F. Allen	7 Dec 1941–10 May 1942
Maj R. W. Harding	10 May 1942–12 Jun 1942
Lt-Col S. F. Allen	12 Jun 1942–15 Jul 1942
Maj H. M. McElroy	15 Jul 1942–18 Jul 1942
Lt-Col R. W. Harding	18 Jul 1942-30 Apr 1943
Lt-Col M. C. Fairbrother	30 Apr 1943–14 May 1943
Lt-Col R. W. Harding	14 May 1943–4 Jun 1943
Lt-Col H. M. McElroy	4 Jun 1943–21 Jun 1944
Lt-Col A. C. Trousdale	21 Jun 1944–9 Jul 1944
Lt-Col J. I. Thodey	9 Jul 1944–30 Oct 1944
Lt-Col E. A. McPhail	30 Oct 1944-25 May 1945
Lt-Col J. I. Thodey	25 May 1945–2 Dec 1945

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[BACKMATTER]

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