

23 BATTALION

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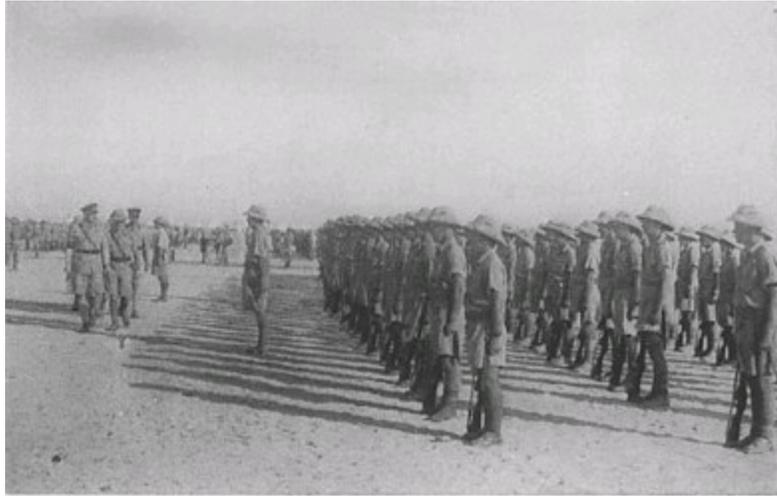
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General Freyberg inspects 23 Battalion, July 1941. Lt-Col Leckie is on the General's left

General Freyberg inspects 23 Battalion, July 1941. Lt-Col Leckie is on the General's left

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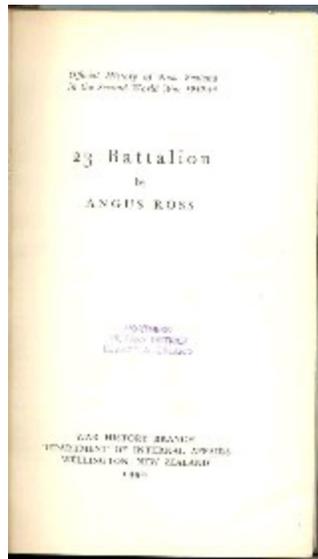
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[TITLE PAGE]



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

ANGUS ROSS

WAR HISTORY BRANCH

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND 1959

23 BATTALION

FOREWORD

Foreword



windsor castle

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

I am proud to write this foreword to the war history of this infantry battalion, partly because of the family link—my son Paul served in it as a full private—and because no unit in the [2 NZEF](#) had a more distinguished record.

The 23rd Battalion came overseas with the [Second Echelon](#), under command of Colonel Falconer. It went with the other units of the 5th Brigade to the [United Kingdom](#), where it took an active part in the preparations that were made to repel the German invasion, which was thought to be imminent. When the threat of invasion had passed, the 5th Brigade was shipped back to the [Middle East](#), where it joined the Division in [Greece](#). The battalion's first action was in the defence of the [Olympus Pass](#). In Crete the battalion fought with great distinction at [Maleme](#) and in the brilliant counter-attacks at [Galatas](#) and 42nd Street. These counter-attacks, by tired troops, were the highlight of the Battle of Crete. The battalion fought in the Libyan campaign of 1941 at [Capuzzo](#), [Musaid](#), and [Gazala](#). During these engagements Colonel Leckie had succeeded Colonel Falconer, who had been promoted to a higher command.

After the Libyan campaign the Division was moved to [Syria](#). When Tobruk fell on 20 June 1942, the Division was moved back to the [Western Desert](#) and fought in the battles to defend Egypt. It fought with great distinction at [Minqar Qaim](#), at Ruweisat and [Alam Halfa](#), first under Colonel Watson and then under Colonel Reg Romans.

In the final campaigns in North Africa the 23rd Battalion fought with great dash and success from [Alamein](#) to [Tunis](#), especially in the battles at [Tebaga Gap](#) and the brilliant assault at [Takrouna](#).

In Italy it fought with distinction on the [Sangro](#), where the link between the battalion and Reg Romans was severed when Romans died of wounds. He was followed by worthy successors, in Connolly at [Cassino](#), McPhail at [Rimini](#), and Sandy Thomas at [Florence](#), [Faenza](#), and from the [Senio](#) to [Trieste](#).

This is a wonderful story and should have a great appeal, and I hope it will be widely read.

Bernard Fryberg

Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor

Windsor Castle

7 November 1957

23 BATTALION

PREFACE

Preface

In writing this book, I have had a twofold purpose. In the first place, I have attempted to place on permanent record, primarily for the benefit of the members of the 23rd Battalion itself, their friends and relations, including, I trust, their descendants to the second and third generations, the part played by this unit in the Second World War. Secondly, I have tried to make this history something more than a chronicle of the life and battles of the 23rd Battalion by making it a study in morale. The writing of a unit history, especially of a faithful and true unit, needs no justification: in an age when wars are fought, not by professional soldiers but by virtually the whole nation, it sets down a segment of our national history; it records the achievements of New Zealand citizens turned soldiers; it contributes to the growth of regimental traditions; it commemorates the sacrifice of those who fell, and it may help to inspire infantry soldiers of the future.

My interest in morale is the product both of my own experience in the fighting in North Africa before and after the battle of [El Alamein](#) and of my reading of military history. Morale is still the most important factor in fighting (the degree to which it may depend on the quality of machines and weapons being understood), just as man remains the first weapon of battle. War is not just a matter of logistics, of plans, of operation orders and generals' decisions; it is a flesh-and-blood business. In the last analysis, it is fought—or, at any rate, prior to the atomic age, was fought—by men, organised in battalions such as the 23rd Battalion.

In his last report on active operations, [General Freyberg](#) paid tribute to the qualities of the men of [2 New Zealand Division](#). 'In the New Zealander you have qualities of heart and mind that place him high among men. It is to resolute courage in our junior officers and men that this Division owes its fighting record. No men could have done more than they have done.' The campaign histories do not neglect the morale of the fighting men but, by necessity, they cannot mention many individuals. Since they treat periods of a few weeks or months, they cannot treat the rise and fall of units' fortunes and the reactions of individuals over longer periods. A

unit history therefore seems to be the best place where morale can be studied at the level where it is probably most important—that of the fighting infantry, the men who, in both defence and attack, were normally in the front line.

I have tried throughout to remind myself and my readers that the battalion was made up of individual New Zealanders and not simply the 'personnel' of certain Army orders and memoranda. Unfortunately, the official records credit certain companies or platoons with various achievements and only rarely mention individuals by name. In addition, the unit war diary was sometimes very limited in its treatment of hard-fought battles or periods for which the fullest details were required. This was often so because those responsible for keeping the diary were killed or wounded. To remedy these deficiencies, I collected as many private diaries as possible. Although the keeping of these diaries was forbidden on security grounds, they have been most valuable in giving me contemporary evidence of the state of morale. But they, too, were brief and only rarely mentioned individual efforts of note.

Where official and private records were sketchy, I secured, by correspondence and interviews with leading actors in the scenes I was trying to reconstruct, some of the essential details, including the names of individuals who would not otherwise have been mentioned. Again, when chapters were completed in their first draft, I circulated them among those members of the unit most likely to make constructive criticisms and to remedy omissions. Nevertheless, I am only too conscious of my failure to mention many many members of the battalion who rendered splendid service. I trust such men will appreciate the difficulty of doing justice to each and every individual and accept my sincere apologies for not having honoured them as they deserve.

Particularly in dealing with individual reactions to danger or events involving fear or excitement, I have preferred to quote directly from the contemporary statements to making my own summary. To those who might criticise this use of quotations as a 'scissors and paste' method of writing history, I would say that, in dealing with the emotional side of military history, the author should intervene as little as possible between the reader and the fighting men who have spoken for themselves. Furthermore, some of the quotations from private diaries are so good and so picturesque in themselves that it would have been a grave mistake to tamper

with them. John Ruskin exaggerated when he wrote: 'the only history worth reading is that written at the time of which it treats; the history of what is done and seen out of the mouths of the men who did and saw it', but his statement applies particularly to the feelings of men in or about to enter battle.

After reading some of my chapters, readers may ask, 'How trustworthy as witnesses were the men who kept these diaries? Were they typical? Were they not, like some writers, more emotional and more inclined to embroider than the normal down-to-earth South Islander who never put pen to paper concerning his experiences, still less his emotions or feelings?' My answer is that I have known personally most of the men whose diaries I have used. In the main, they were reliable soldiers, men of steady eye and no lack of courage, men I would and do trust. In addition, it should be remembered that their diaries were not written for publication but as a record for the writers and their more intimate relations. My debt to most of these diarists is acknowledged in the text or in footnotes.

I am also indebted to Mr John Clark, who, before the war ended and for some time thereafter, assembled source material and copied official records.

In addition to thanking those members of the unit who have supplied me with information or have corrected drafts for me, I should like to thank the late [General Sir Howard Kippenberger](#) and his staff at the [War History Branch](#) for their unfailing courtesy and co-operation. Without the records and campaign narratives they placed at my disposal, this book could not have been written. Without the maps and sketches they have supplied, it might have been unintelligible.

Angus Ross

dunedin

15 December 1957

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CHAPTER 1 – ‘WHAT’S IN A NAME?’

CHAPTER 1

'What's in a Name?'

'WHERE Britain goes, we go! Where she stands, we stand!' said Michael Joseph Savage, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, at the outbreak of the Second World War. He spoke for the whole country. Many factors, including traditional loyalty to the British Crown for nearly one hundred years, sentiment born of ties of kinship and a common heritage, and material interests relating to markets, loans and security, made New Zealand's decision to enter the war the only possible decision at that time. New Zealand declared war against [Germany](#) as from 9.30 p.m., New Zealand standard time, on the 3rd day of September, 1939, a time coinciding to the minute with the declaration of war by the [United Kingdom](#).

Almost immediately, the Dominion Government resolved to send a Special Force to fight in the European theatre of war. Somewhat later it decided that this force should be an infantry division under the command of [Major-General B. C. Freyberg](#), VC. The Special Force was to be despatched in three echelons, each made up of an infantry brigade with appropriate supporting units of artillery, engineers, machine-gunners and [Army Service Corps](#). Since the Territorial Army, or [1st Division](#), with its three infantry brigades was nominally required for home defence, the [2nd Division](#), as the new force later came to be known, was divided into the 4th, 5th and 6th Brigades. To avoid duplicating numbers borne by any earlier or existing units, the numbering of the infantry battalions began at 18, that is, immediately after the 17th (Ruahine) Regiment of the [1st Division](#). Thus, the units of the [First Echelon](#) or 4th Brigade were the 18th ([Auckland](#)), the 19th ([Wellington](#)) and the 20th (Canterbury-Otago) Battalions. Similarly, the 5th Brigade had units drawn from the Northern, Central and Southern Military Districts of New Zealand in its 21st ([Auckland](#)), 22nd ([Wellington](#)) and 23rd (Canterbury-Otago) Battalions. Sixth Brigade was organised in the same way. A tenth infantry unit, the [28th \(Maori\) Battalion](#), sailed with the 5th Brigade and served for the greater part of the war in that brigade.

Twenty-third Battalion, therefore, was a wartime creation, constituted for the one purpose, namely, to fight in the Second World War. But, despite its complete lack of a regimental history or any glorious record of service on earlier battlefields, this unit was to distinguish itself by its active participation in all the campaigns in

which [2 New Zealand Division](#) was engaged. Actually, it inherited more from the past than is immediately apparent. The insertion of the geographical names in the official nomenclature of units represented a compromise between simple numerical titles and the older Territorial Army regimental names as well as an attempt to evoke some of the local or provincial pride typical of many parts of New Zealand. The first commanding officer used the title 'to impress upon all ranks the responsibility of 23rd Bn to uphold the high tradition established in 1914–18 by units of [1 NZEF](#), particularly the Canterbury and Otago Regiments, which included representative companies from all the existing Territorial Regiments in the [South Island](#).'

So far as New Zealand Army Headquarters in [Wellington](#) was concerned, the name 23rd (Canterbury-Otago) Battalion was retained throughout the war. A list of authorised abbreviations, issued by that headquarters on 8 April 1940, stated that the 23rd (Canterbury-Otago) Battalion was to be known as '23 Canto'. Another abbreviation, 'Cant-Otago', officially authorised on 30 April 1940, was much more popular and was used until a 2 NZEF Order of 29 August 1941 stated that the words 'New Zealand' or the abbreviation 'NZ' must thereafter form part of the designation of all units of the force. From that date, therefore, the 23rd New Zealand Battalion was the name by which this unit was officially known. To most of its members, however, it was known as '23 Battalion' or 'The Twenty-third'. Naturally, the omission of the 'Canterbury-Otago' part of the name was strongly favoured by the men who came from Southland, [Nelson](#), [Marlborough](#) and the [West Coast](#). Possibly the Southland origins of the acting commanding officer were responsible for the premature dropping of the 'Canterbury-Otago' portion of the title and the adoption of a further but unofficial name. After embarkation and during the voyage overseas, unit routine orders appeared as issued 'By Major D. F. [Leckie](#),¹ commanding 23rd Rifle Battalion'. These orders were signed by the first adjutant, 'R. B. [Dawson](#),² Capt. N.Z.S.C., Adjutant 23rd Rifle Battalion', although he had previously issued orders from 'HQ 23 Canto'. But, as Shakespeare said, 'What's in a name?... a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.' This South Island battalion, with only a number to distinguish it from other units, was to win fame in battle which would have done credit to historic regiments with long lists of battle honours.

Foundation days are not easily selected when no official ruling has been given. When 23 Battalion came into existence is a question of no great significance, but it is

of some interest to recall certain dates in the period of the unit's formation. On 8 November 1939 a group of officers from the South Island Territorial regiments entered [Burnham Camp](#), about 20 miles south of [Christchurch](#), to prepare for the training of the men who were to join them two months later. So far as they were concerned, 8 November was the foundation day or birthday of the 23rd and in later years they celebrated it as such. Several prospective NCOs entered camp in early December and the main body of volunteer recruits entered [Burnham](#) on 12 January 1940 as the men of 23 Battalion. On 13 March, as if to mark the close of a brief introductory chapter in its history, 23 Battalion was placed on active service. On 1 May it left New Zealand for the great adventure overseas.

The period of training in [Burnham](#) differed only very slightly from similar periods in the history of all infantry units preparing to go to war. Nevertheless, habits and traditions of some importance began to grow. While, on the surface, the time was spent in fitting each individual into his company, platoon and section, in supplying him with the roughly manufactured denims, peaked felt hat and boots which made up the working dress of the private soldier of early 1940, and the serge jacket with brass buttons which, together with the narrowly cut serge trousers, constituted the 'walking out' uniform, and in teaching him to look more like a soldier both on and off the parade ground, changes were taking place in the men and the unit. Whereas, at first, the volunteers had merely entered 'the Army' or 'the Special Force', soon they were talking and thinking in terms of 'the 23rd Battalion' and of its quality compared with other units. The senior officers of the 23rd insisted that the fine record established by New Zealand soldiers in the past must be maintained and that the traditions of [1 NZEF](#) and of the Territorial regiments must be upheld. Such talk meant little or nothing to some recruits, but from commanding officer and company commanders to subalterns, sergeants and section leaders, and thence to the men, there slowly percolated a genuine consciousness of responsibility in this matter. Even more important was the steady growth of a determination to make the 23rd 'second to none'.

Questioned in post-war years about the origins of the esprit de corps for which the 23rd was justly famous, most officers and men agreed in giving the principal credit to their first CO, Lieutenant-Colonel A. S. ('Acky') [Falconer](#).³ The comments of J. R. J. [Connolly](#),⁴ a subaltern in [Burnham](#) and later CO himself, are worth recording:

I am sure the foundation of our "esprit de corps" was laid among the original officers of the battalion in [Burnham](#) school. Acky must take a lot of credit as he always treated us as full grown men. We were together for long enough to straighten out points among ourselves before the men arrived and I can think of few better weeks in all my life. Either one was in the swim voluntarily or one was thrown in. Absolutely no resisting them and our minds were 23rd right from the start! ... I remember [Brian Bassett](#)⁵ giving talks on the subject of morale, esprit de corps, etc., to the companies in [Burnham](#) and I never heard a better job made of any subject than he made of it. Brian was intensely Irish and didn't realize it. I saw men—strong men—surreptitiously wiping their eyes that day. Fair Dinkum! It was a great job and many men today will remember it. He skimmed the cream from the regimental histories of World War I [South Island](#) units and put it over to each company. I repeat—a really fine job he made of it.'

Without good officers, a battalion cannot readily become a good fighting unit. The 23rd was fortunate in its original officers, who were men of character and personality with natural qualities of leadership. The first commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Falconer, already possessed a long and distinguished record of service. A Territorial NCO before 1914, he had wide regimental and staff experience as an officer in 1914–18 and, for some years after 1929, he was commanding officer of 1 Battalion of the Otago Regiment. His men took pride both in his Distinguished Service Order and Military Cross and in his record from [Gallipoli](#) to [Flanders](#). The second-in-command, Major Leckie, had served for over three years in the earlier war as a trooper in the Canterbury Mounted Rifles and for some fifteen years as an officer in the Southland Regiment. Similarly, Major [Fyfe](#),⁶ commanding HQ Company, had served as a sergeant in the Otago Regiment in the First World War and as an officer in the Southland Regiment in the inter-war years. Major [Thomason](#),⁷ commanding C Company, had won an MM in the earlier war and had served as a Territorial officer in [Nelson](#) for many years. Both Captain [Kelly](#),⁸ B Company's commander, and Captain [Patterson](#),⁹ the Quartermaster, were First World War men and serving Territorial officers. Twenty of the officers had been commissioned before the war in their respective Territorial regiments. The remainder were selected from the original ranks of 20 Battalion for commissioning in New Zealand after a special course of training at [Trentham](#). The general result was that the battalion was officered by a team of men who combined age and experience with youth and

enthusiasm, war and regimental training with the latest in courses of instruction.

But good officers alone do not make a good unit. The men who joined the 23rd in January 1940 represented a fair cross-section of the male civilian population of the [South Island](#). Nearly all walks of life were represented, and if miners predominated in C Company and farmers and farmhands in B, this factor accounted for the physical prowess displayed by these two companies on rugby as well as battle fields. There were a few rogues and military 'undesirables', some of whom had been inherited from the [First Echelon](#). A greater number were freedom-loving New Zealanders who believed that they themselves were the best judges of what they should do and how and when they should do it. 'There was a good percentage of ratbags who kept going Absent Without Leave,' wrote one 23rd officer about his first platoon. 'But every second New Zealander will make at least an N.C.O.,' [General Kippenberger](#) has said, and the two statements are not irreconcilable. Men of initiative, accustomed to complete liberty of action, do not submit immediately to a life of discipline. But, when trained and brought to understand the value of organisation and discipline, these same men can often prove to be able and popular leaders. Only a very few proved to be unworthy of a place in the 23rd. The camaraderie, the mutual feeling of confidence between leaders and led, and the generally excellent relations between officers, NCOs and men had their beginnings in the training period in [Burnham](#). Most of the NCOs and many of the men had undergone some military training in High School cadets or in Territorial regiments, and what the others lacked in experience they made up for by keenness to learn.

A Southern Military District recommendation to adopt 20 Battalion's nomenclature for companies was followed and thus A Company drew its men from Canterbury, B Company from Southland, C from [Nelson](#), [Marlborough](#) and the [West Coast](#), and D from Otago. In the main, this practice was followed throughout the war and reinforcements normally went to the company connected with the province from which they came.

All the training was done under the unit's own officers and NCOs. The senior officers already mentioned, together with Captain [Campbell](#),¹⁰ formerly [Highland Light Infantry](#) and Indian Army, and Captain [Pugh](#),¹¹ commanding A and D Companies respectively, kept the training as realistic as possible. [General Freyberg](#) had insisted that training for war was to be the keynote of all instruction given and

this suited both officers and men. Nevertheless, the senior NCOs, especially the Regimental Sergeant-Major, WO I [Johnson](#),¹² and the Company Sergeants-Major, A. M. [Buckley](#),¹³ A. E. M. [Lawrence](#),¹⁴ A. W. [Moodie](#)¹⁵ (these four from the New Zealand Permanent Staff), L. M. [Kidd](#)¹⁶ and J. D. [Conning](#),¹⁷ saw that the time spent on the parade ground produced a general smartening. But more time was spent on musketry, elementary tactics and fieldcraft. The CO demanded a high standard of marksmanship and, despite the poor range facilities at Redcliffs, this was attained by the great majority. Route marches and night exercises along lines familiar to most infantry units completed the pattern of training. Potential NCOs and specialists in HQ Company were amazingly keen: Major Leckie later reported that 'the few Bren guns, Bren carriers, 3? mortars and A/Tk rifles were always in use for training purposes by the many enthusiasts long after parade and training hours were completed for the day.' The same officer also reported that 'all problems in training that arose were met and overcome with the usual 23 Bn resource and initiative'. A Highland pipe band, formed from pipers in the unit, produced a marked improvement in the marching. Most of the light-machine-gun training was done on the Lewis. The men were introduced to the Bren but too few of this new weapon were available for full training to be done on it. The Thompson sub-machine gun was not issued in New Zealand and anti-tank weapons were in short supply. Otherwise, the battalion trained under good conditions with suitable equipment for basic and individual training.

To assist the recruiting rallies which were a feature of the appeals for volunteers until conscription was introduced, the whole battalion paraded and gave special demonstrations in [Christchurch](#). A party of 250 from the 23rd also paraded in Dunedin, Gore and [Invercargill](#). On various occasions, the unit was inspected by the commander of 5 Brigade, Brigadier James [Hargest](#),¹⁸ whose record in the 1914–18 war inspired complete confidence in his ability and whose Southland associations made the battalion feel that it had a special claim upon his interest. Two special parades came in late February and early March: the first was for [Lord Willingdon](#), the official representative of the British Government at the New Zealand centennial, and the second was for the Governor-General, [Viscount Galway](#). In mid-April Major-General J. E. Duigan, Chief of the General Staff in New Zealand, inspected the unit. That meant the day of departure from New Zealand was not far distant.

Final inoculations, final leave, the fighting of the last round of 'the paper war' in New Zealand, official and private farewells were soon completed. The 23rd was now trained as well as time and equipment available would permit: the men were physically fit, the administration had reached a reasonable standard of efficiency, and the unit, while not yet ready for action, was fitted to proceed to final training overseas. Its nearest neighbours in [Burnham](#) were the men of the Railway Construction and Maintenance Unit, who looked on themselves as skilled technicians rather than as men-at-arms. By way of contrast, the men of the 23rd felt that they were fighting soldiers. In common with most of the early units of volunteers, they had a superb confidence in their ability to live up to the record of New Zealanders in earlier wars. A new unit had come into being. Its members were already proud to belong to the 23rd.

¹ [Col D. F. Leckie](#), OBE, ED, m.i.d.; [Invercargill](#); born Dunedin, 9 Jun 1897; school-teacher; Canterbury Mounted Rifles Regt, [Anzac Mounted Division](#), 1916–19; CO 23 Bn Aug 1940-Mar 1941, May 1941-Jun 1942; comd 75 Sub-Area, [Middle East](#), Aug 1942-Mar 1944; wounded 25 May 1941.

² [Col R. B. Dawson](#), DSO, m.i.d.; [Bangkok](#); born [Rotorua](#), 21 Jul 1916; Regular soldier; BM 5 Bde May-Sep 1941, Jan-Jun 1942; BM 6 Bde 1942-43; CO 3 Bn, [2 NZEF \(Japan\)](#), 1947–48; Director of Staff Duties, Army HQ, 1949–52; Director of Plans, 1955–57; Planning Staff, SEATO, 1957-.

³ [Brig A. S. Falconer](#), CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born [Mosgiel](#), 4 Nov 1892; tobacconist and secretary; Otago Regt 1914–19 (BM 2 Inf Bde); CO 23 Bn Jan-Aug 1940, Mar-May 1941; comd 7 and 5 Inf Bdes in [UK](#), 1940–41; NZ Maadi Camp, Jun 1941-Oct 1942; [5 Div](#) (in NZ) Dec 1942-Aug 1943; Overseas Commissioner, NZ Patriotic Fund Board, Nov 1943-Feb 1945.

⁴ [Lt-Col J. R. J. Connolly](#), m.i.d.; [Ashburton](#); born NZ 13 Aug 1910; petrol serviceman; CO 23 Bn Apr-May 1943, Dec 1943-May 1944; twice wounded.

⁵ [Maj B. I. Bassett](#), m.i.d.; born NZ 12 Sep 1911; barrister and solicitor; BM 10 Bde May 1941; BM 4 Bde Aug 1941-Jan 1942, Jun-Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

⁶ Maj T. Fyfe, ED; born Pakanui, 3 Oct 1892; school-teacher; killed in action 20 May 1941.

⁷ Maj H. H. Thomason, MM, ED; Motueka; born Ngatimoti, Nelson, 9 Oct 1896; estate manager and orchardist; Wgtn Regt 1914–19 (2 Lt); wounded 29 May 1941.

⁸ Lt-Col S. J. Kelly, ED; Invercargill; born Winton, 7 Feb 1895; schoolteacher; OC NZ Reception Depot, Maadi, Oct 1941-Apr 1942; CO 1 NMWC Regt (in NZ) 1942–43.

⁹ Capt I. Patterson, MSM, ED; Dunedin; born Wellington, 5 Dec 1895; company representative; CQMS, NZASC, 1914–18 War; wounded 22 May 1941.

¹⁰ Capt A. le G. Campbell; Stoke, Nelson; born Wellington, 3 Dec 1896; Regular soldier.

¹¹ Maj T. J. G. Pugh, ED; Mosgiel; born Highcliff, 17 Jul 1904; farmer; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

¹² Lt A. Johnson; born England, 3 Jul 1900; Regular soldier; wounded May 1941.

¹³ Lt A. M. Buckley; born Christchurch, 24 May 1911; Regular soldier; died of wounds 3 Sep 1942.

¹⁴ Maj A. E. M. Lawrence, MBE; Christchurch; born Hokitika, 30 Dec 1913; Regular soldier.

¹⁵ 2 Lt A. W. Moodie; born Dunedin, 9 Jun 1913; Regular soldier; killed in action 29 Apr 1941.

¹⁶ WO II L. M. Kidd; Amberley; born Amberley, 22 Jul 1922; farmhand; wounded 15 Jan 1944.

¹⁷ WO II J. D. Conning; born Wanganui, 15 Sep 1916; carpenter; killed in action 24 May 1941.

¹⁸ Brig J. Hargest, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; born Gore, 4 Sep 1891; farmer; MP, 1931–44; Otago Mounted Rifles, 1914–20 (CO 2 Bn Otago Regt); comd 5 Bde May 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; escaped Italy, Mar 1943; killed in action, France, 12 Aug 1944.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 2 – BATTLE OF BRITAIN MEN

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Battle of Britain Men

ATROOPSHIP berthed in [Lyttelton](#) on 12 April 1940. Rumours as to the date of embarkation flew thick and fast round [Burnham Camp](#). On 27 April a special parade and civic farewell function was held in [Christchurch](#). On 30 April the order to pack for departure the next morning was given. That night was spent in last-minute packing and letter-writing, and in drinking toasts of good luck and celebration with the one hand and drowning sorrows with the other. At dawn the straw from the palliasses on which the men had slept was burned: in a curiously dramatic way, this detail in the tidying of the camp symbolised the end of a chapter.

At this time of departure from New Zealand, the officers of 23 Battalion were:

Battalion Headquarters

CO: Lt-Col A. S. Falconer, DSO, MC

2 i/c: Maj D. F. Leckie

Adjt: Capt R. B. Dawson

IO: Lt B. I. Bassett

MO: [Capt R. S. Stewart](#)

Padre: [Rev. R. J. Griffiths](#)

A Company

OC: [Capt C. N. Watson](#)

2 Lt H. C. Black

Lt B. Y. W. Baxter

2 Lt P. T. Norris

B Company

OC: Capt S. J. Kelly

2 i/c: Capt I. O. Manson

2 Lt E. A. McPhail

Lt R. E. Romans

2 Lt A. F. G. McGregor

Headquarters Company

OC: Maj T. Fyfe

Lt J. B. Gray (AA Platoon)

Lt E. E. Richards (Mortars)

Lt M. J. Coop (Bren carriers)

Lt J. R. J. Connolly (Pioneers)

Lt N. Jones (Signals)

Capt I. Patterson (QM)

Lt T. B. Morten (Transport)

C Company

OC: Maj H. H. Thomason, MM

2 i/c: Capt E. Caldwell

2 Lt R. M. S. Orbell

2 Lt F. S. R. Thomson

2 Lt W. B. Thomas

D Company

OC: Capt T. J. G. Pugh

2 i/c: Capt H. M. Smith

Lt R. L. Bond

2 Lt J. C. Scoular

2 Lt G. H. Cunningham

Officers who embarked with the 23rd and were treated to all intents and purposes as members of the unit included Captain M. D. Harvey, Lieutenants D. J. Bell, E. R. Ferguson, M. D. Grant, R. G. McKinlay, and K. Simmonds, Second-Lieutenants T. F. Begg, J. H. Ensor, R. G. Deans and R. K. King.

On the morning of 1 May the troop train from [Burnham](#) ran alongside the [Andes](#). The men carried large and small packs as well as rifles and sea kits but they were quickly accommodated in a most satisfactory way. By noon the embarkation of 23 Battalion, the Forestry Company, the Railway Construction and Maintenance Group and some nurses was completed. Ten minutes before the departure time, the wharf gates were opened and friends and relations rushed to the ship's side to take a last farewell. Streamers were thrown from the wharf to the soldiers leaning over the rails of the [Andes](#). They broke as the ship moved out into the stream. That was the signal for the exchange of round after round of cheering between the thousands on the wharf and the departing soldiers. Every whistle and siren joined in sounding a farewell; pipers played their pipes and some soldiers sang the inevitable 'Roll out the Barrel'; [Lyttelton](#) harbour rang with the noise. But there were some who could neither cheer nor sing—they felt a tightening of the throat as well-loved faces faded from view.

Since no structural alterations had been made to their luxury liner, the men were well pleased with conditions on board the [Andes](#). On this voyage 76 officers and 1323 other ranks were carried. With the exception of 214 men for whom hammocks were supplied, all soldiers found themselves in cabins with private bathrooms.

Swimming baths, excellent dining-rooms, wide deck space for training and

recreation, wet and dry canteens where cigarettes, beer and spirits sold for approximately half the usual New Zealand prices, and friendly sailors—all these made for happy voyaging and good morale. Comparing conditions with those experienced by soldiers in the First World War, Brigadier Hargest said: 'This time we all travel in great comfort in the finest super-ships the British Merchant Navy has ever gathered in one convoy. And the comfort is not limited to officers. The most poorly-placed man of this echelon is infinitely better off for accommodation, food and attention than the most favoured of his predecessors in 1914–18.' ¹

On 2 May the [Andes](#) joined the other ships in the convoy in Cook Strait. They were the [Aquitania](#), the Empress of [Britain](#) and the Empress of [Japan](#). Escorted by the [Canberra](#), [Australia](#) and [Leander](#), the convoy made a good crossing of the Tasman. The [Queen Mary](#), the [Mauretania](#) and the Empress of [Canada](#) in turn joined the convoy, which made a wonderful picture of both speed and majesty. A few weeks later, in [London](#), [The Times](#) described it as 'the grandest convoy in all history'.

Life at sea for the 23rd passed very much as it did for other New Zealand army units proceeding overseas. Boat drill, the manning of sixty-nine sentry posts, physical training, lectures and a variety of athletic competitions filled the days and weeks. A welcome break came at [Fremantle](#) on 10 May. The residents of [Perth](#) more than lived up to their reputation for generous West Australian hospitality. The day passed all too quickly with visits to shops, places of amusement, hotels and private homes. The men returned to ship at or after midnight, some more than a little elated and others with souvenirs as varied as toy koalas, a live kangaroo and 'Aussie' hat-badges. The CO's orderly room was busy dealing with offences committed on shore, but only one member of the 23rd was left behind at [Fremantle](#). [Perth](#) was soon little more than a pleasant memory, and the men were thinking about the news that the Germans had invaded [Holland](#), [Belgium](#) and Luxembourg.

As the [BBC](#) announced further German advances almost daily, the interest in the news grew keener. A bulletin was produced and posted on notice boards. The latest news was read out at evening lectures or concerts. Thus, on 18 May, it was announced that [Brussels](#) had fallen and that the British Army's lines of communication were threatened. 'After a moment's hushed silence,' wrote Lieutenant Brian Bassett to his wife that night, 'one of the boys jumped up and suggested an item to the band, and a thousand voices sang "There'll Always be an

England". Then they rose and sang "God Save the King".'

By that date all were aware that their destination had been altered. When they left New Zealand, no official announcement had been made on this subject but everyone took it for granted they were going to join the [First Echelon](#) in Egypt. 'Berlin, via [Cairo](#)' was chalked on one railway carriage on that last morning in New Zealand. Late on 15 May, when the convoy was south-west of [Cocos Island](#), it received orders to steam towards South Africa. The arrival of HMS Shropshire and the departure of HMAS [Canberra](#) and HMS Leander indicated that the voyage was to be continued in the [Atlantic](#).

On 26 May the [Andes](#) reached [Capetown](#). Again the hospitality was superb. But the excesses of some, coupled with a large amount of absence without leave, led to a reduction of shore leave until the stragglers had been rounded up from different parts of the Union. Some men had tried to reach Johannesburg, so eager were they to take the fullest advantage of their opportunity to see the world. The [Capetown](#) Chief of [Police](#) made his own comment on the horseplay of the Australians and New Zealanders who had commandeered donkey carts, fire-engines and buses. 'He told me,' Brigadier Hargest reported later, 'we have loved having both you and the Australians, but, pray God, you never both come back together again.'

When they left [Capetown](#) on 31 May, the troops were confident that [Britain](#) must now be their destination. As the convoy steamed north up the [Atlantic](#) coast of [Africa](#), training continued so far as conditions permitted. Lieutenant-Colonel Falconer, as OC Troops, and Major Leckie, as acting CO of the battalion, worked out a detailed scheme for anti-aircraft protection of the [Andes](#): four Vickers guns, carried by 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion reinforcements, were mounted on improvised mountings and four rifle platoons at a time were given anti-aircraft duties. Crossing the line was celebrated in time-honoured fashion for a representative number of troops and boxing contests stimulated interest when enthusiasm for ordinary PT flagged. The tropical heat was stifling during the call at [Freetown](#) (Sierra Leone), where no leave was granted on account of the risk of contracting malaria and other diseases.

On and after 10 June, 'Action Stations' was regularly called. This included the manning of additional anti-aircraft and submarine defence posts as dangerous

waters were now being entered. Live ammunition was used in practice shoots. Those who had been inclined to complain about the heat and other conditions forgot to complain. On 10 June, too, it was announced that [Italy](#) had entered the war. Colonel Falconer told the troops that this deterioration in the military situation meant that they must expect no leave on disembarkation but rather a short period of intensive training preparatory to entering the firing line. The men responded by cheering him loudly. On 15 June the [Andes](#) passed the wreckage of two ships which had been torpedoed the previous night. Later that day an oil tanker sticking straight up out of the water and belching forth flames and smoke was seen. These were certainly dangerous waters but, with the aid of the [Royal Navy](#) and the [RAF](#), the convoy reached [Gourock](#) in the Firth of Clyde without untoward incident on 16 June. The 17,000 miles of ocean had been safely crossed.

By this time [France](#) had signed an armistice with the Germans and therefore the British Commonwealth had to fight on alone. This meant that the Australians and New Zealanders were made doubly welcome. The GOC Scottish Command came on board to deliver an inspiring message from the King. Other messages from Mr Jordan, New Zealand's High Commissioner in [London](#), [General Freyberg](#) and the Under-Secretary of State for the Dominions heightened the feeling that the troops had arrived at the right place at the right time. When the troops disembarked at [Gourock](#) on 19 June and travelled by train to [Aldershot](#), they found that the formal welcomes were reinforced a thousand times by the people who greeted them at nearly every station.

Arriving at [Aldershot North Camp](#) station on the morning of 20 June, the battalion marched behind its own pipe band to its tented camp at [Mytchett](#). Brigadier Hargest spoke for all when he said: 'We are glad to be here. We would rather be here than anywhere else in the world. We enter this fight boots and all.' Gratitude to the Navy for its successful escort during a long voyage and pleasure at their stirring welcome from the British people mingled with their original New Zealand spirit to make the men of the 23rd determined to give of their best in the 'Battle for [Britain](#)'.

Already, on 4 June 1940, Mr Churchill had declared, 'We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills: we shall never surrender.' Invasion was definitely

expected. Consequently, the spirit in which the men entered upon their training could not have been more serious nor more willing.

Conditions in the [Mytchett](#) camp were not as luxurious as in [Burnham](#), but they were much more in keeping with the idea of being on active service. The tents were well dispersed or concealed among the pine trees instead of being, as in the [Aldershot](#) tented camps of the previous world war, regularly pitched in the open. At first, the men worked on camp improvements and in digging slit trenches in case of bombing. Issues of steel helmets, groundsheets and anti-gas equipment were made and the elementary training undergone in New Zealand was revised. Before the end of June, Bren guns and anti-tank rifles had been issued, and intensive training on them begun. Commenting on these issues, Major Leckie wrote in his diary on 29 June: 'We get down to hard training for all we are worth—German attack expected soon'.

[War Office](#) orders placed the New Zealanders, with the role of a mobile reserve, on eight hours' notice to move. Anxious to be present to command the New Zealanders most likely to enter battle first, [General Freyberg](#) arrived on 27 June by air from Egypt. In addition to 5 Brigade, he had another brigade under his command. This brigade, eventually christened the 7th, was composed of 28 (Maori) Battalion, a Composite Battalion, later known as the 29th, formed from the reinforcements for both 4 and 5 Brigades, and 4 Anti-Tank Company. Under the arrangements made for this New Zealand Division ([UK](#)), the senior officers of the 23rd carried out an extensive reconnaissance of south-eastern England while the troops continued with their intensive training. Their route 'recce' in [Surrey](#), Hampshire and [Kent](#) in spring, when the hopfields were at their greenest and the countryside looked its best, made their journey a sheer delight. They were more than ever convinced that England was a country worth fighting for. They returned to the unit determined to push ahead with training with renewed vigour, only to find that the [War Office](#) had unexpectedly ordered the New Zealanders to go on leave. Apparently, the value to public morale of the appearance of Canadian, Australian and New Zealand troops in [London](#) and other cities at this time was held to justify a short postponement of training. Certainly, the distinctive 'Kiwi' felt hat and the reputation earned by the New Zealanders in 1914–18 opened many doors for the men of 1940 and there was scarcely a man who did not have some story of unexpected hospitality when the

main leave party returned to camp on 3 July.

Various important people visited and inspected the unit in those early days in England. In turn, Mr Jordan and [General Freyberg](#), accompanied by Mr Anthony Eden, then Secretary for War, visited the battalion. Mr Eden later said of the New Zealanders: 'They are a magnificent body of men and are looking exceedingly fit. We are delighted to have them here.' On 6 July His Majesty the King paid an informal visit to the 23rd who, at his request, continued with normal training. Of course, the opportunity to put on something of a show was too good to miss and Private 'Joe' [Murphy](#),² a man with the torso of an Olympic shot-putter, appeared, shirt open to the waist, and 'instructed' the NCOs in bayonet fighting to such good effect that [War Office](#) visitors accompanying the King marked the New Zealanders down for a front-line role if it became necessary to repel the Germans. General Sir Alexander Godley (GOC 1 NZEF) was also present that day, and he spoke in glowing terms of the training being carried out.

The issue of battle dress to the men improved the appearance of many, but still more important was the arrival of more weapons. By 8 July the battalion had 10 Bren guns, 8 Boys anti-tank rifles, 3 two-inch mortars and 1 three-inch mortar. The Quartermaster, Captain Patterson, the RQMS, Harry [Dalton](#),³ and their staff were very busy in those days. Cooks as well as men had to be trained to manage with British rations which were in many items only half as generous as those issued in New Zealand. Clothing and ordnance stores also gave the Q staff plenty of problems, especially as so many issues were in short supply. The scrupulously exact accounting required even in the face of invasion, the filling of the correct forms demanded by Equipment Regulations (a 1000-page volume), and the attempt to secure the scale authorised in the G1098 tables provided the administrative staff with practical training which later proved most valuable. Further useful experience both in administration in the field and in the siting of defensive positions was gained during the first full-scale tactical exercise which was undertaken in the Ashdown Forest area in [Sussex](#) between 18 and 22 July.

Defence, a relief in the line, and a withdrawal were practised during this first exercise. On 28 July another training scheme saw the 23rd acting as the advanced guard for 5 Brigade in an attack on [7 Brigade](#). Later the battalion passed into reserve before being called upon to 'leapfrog' through the forward units and pursue the

retiring 'enemy'. July passed without invasion. In August [General Freyberg](#) decided to toughen his force with a route march of 100 miles. For some it was a real test of stamina; for others it proved the last straw so far as their boots were concerned. [General Freyberg](#) took the salute as, on the fourth day of the march, the 23rd was marching out of Partridge Green. This was the occasion celebrated thereafter in story in the 23rd: who has not heard Dick [Orbell](#) ⁴ give his best rendering of the General's saying 'Best platoon so far!' to each platoon as it marched past, well separated from the others as a passive air defence measure?

From early July onwards, selected officers, NCOs and men of the 23rd, as of other New Zealand units, attended courses of instruction in a variety of military subjects—gas warfare, tank hunting, cooking, Bren-carrier driving and maintenance, and other forms of mechanical training. At several of these courses, and also at a special school set up at Headquarters NZ Division ([UK](#)), the instructors were officers and NCOs with experience of the fighting in [Europe](#) prior to [Dunkirk](#). Some of these instructors were attached for a period to the 23rd: an officer of the [Coldstream Guards](#) dealt with infantry experiences, while Tom Wintringham demonstrated how very simple it was to deal with tanks. A unit tank-hunting platoon under Second-Lieutenant 'Ted' [Thomson](#) ⁵ was organised right away. Its members were among the first to be issued with tommy guns, which were still in short supply. Otherwise, by mid-August, ammunition and equipment were up to establishment. More and more unit and brigade tactical schemes gave the battalion practice in moving rapidly to occupy defensive positions or to oust the 'enemy' from strongpoints. Still the threat of invasion failed to materialise. The apparent passing of the crisis enabled the battalion to send 10 per cent of its number at a time on a week's leave. Again the hospitality offered by private individuals and a host of organisations was most generous.

August passed into September. On 31 August General Sir Alan Brooke, CIGS, inspected the battalion. In a message which he later sent to all New Zealand units, he said: 'New Zealand troops are not strangers to Great Britain. The New Zealand felt hat is remembered here by all of us and it gives me the greatest pleasure and pride to have New Zealanders serving under my command at this critical moment. My inspection today ... shows that you have reached a high standard of training and it reflects credit upon all ranks.... I am sure that the [2 NZEF](#) will worthily uphold the

high traditions of the New Zealand forces.'



A few days later, on 4 September, Mr Winston Churchill inspected the New Zealanders and told them: 'I am sure you will crown the name of New Zealand with new honours, with a lustre which will not fade as the years pass by. 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.'

All ranks of the 23rd considered that these important inspections and messages presaged highly important events on the South Coast. Indeed, Major Leckie, then commanding the unit, wrote in his private diary about Mr Churchill's visit: 'He addresses us "on the eve of battle" as he did the New Zealanders as Minister of Munitions, when in France with Lloyd George in 1917.' Actually, the war in the air had been very much intensified of late, invasion was expected more confidently than ever before, and on 5 September the 23rd moved, along with other New Zealand units, to take up defensive positions in East Kent, a vital sector if the Germans did attack.

The New Zealanders were now front-line troops required to deal with enemy airborne or parachute troops in the area Maidstone-Chatham-Faversham and also to counter-attack the enemy should he land at Deal, Dover or Folkestone. The Luftwaffe intensified its raids on London at this time and the Battle of Britain was on. The 23rd had seen a few bombing raids in London and in the vicinity of Mytchett. Now swarms of enemy raiders were seen crossing the south coast daily, 'like a run of whitebait', as one soldier wrote at the time. Regular 'stand-to' periods at 4.45 a.m.

and 7.30 p.m. were observed and route-marching, physical training and reconnaissance work in the surrounding country occupied most of the time when the troops were not watching 'dogfights' in the air, crashing aircraft or parachuting airmen. Several 'near misses' from bombs were recorded but no casualties were suffered from direct hits. The first losses arose from accidents in which men were struck by motor vehicles in the blackout.

The Battle of Britain was fought and won in the air. Britain was not invaded and, although the danger remained, and therefore the NZ Division (UK) was retained in Britain for a few months longer, General Freyberg evidently concluded that the invasion season was over because on 22 September he returned to the Middle East. The improvement of the military situation and the onset of colder weather meant two things—that the men were moved from their bivouacs under the trees into houses or barns and that rugby football became the principal means of maintaining the interest of men who had been keyed up to expect action of a more violent nature. Inter-company and inter-battalion games were played and, although beaten by the Maoris and by the Artillery, the battalion won its remaining five games. From the 23rd, Lieutenants F. S. R. Thomson and King,⁶ Lance-Corporal Graham⁷ and Neighbours⁸ played for the NZEF (UK) XV which contested eight games in England. Hockey and soccer enthusiasts played their own games. The playing fields for all sports were on these occasions usually ringed with Bren and other machine guns, and frequently air battles were being fought while the game was played. But no game was ever stopped on account of the danger. Thus was launched the tradition that during the appropriate season football matches must go on, unless active operations dictated otherwise.

Although tactical exercises and training schedules continued to keep the unit employed in the Maidstone area till early November, the nearest the 23rd came to battle was on 25 October, when at 3 a.m. 'stand-to' was called, with the word passed down that this time it was the real thing. It proved, however, to be nothing more than a test of the time it would take the brigade to move. The continuance of an operational role without real operations was growing somewhat irksome. No useful purpose was served by staying in Kent and, on 4 November, the battalion was transferred to vacated civilian houses in Camberley. So attached had most of the men become to the Maidstone-Bearsted district that 'the gloomy business of

departure' was, as Brian Bassett wrote home, 'almost like our departure from New Zealand, the girls really looked heartbroken and the older women actually had tears in their eyes. Our men's faces were pretty grim ... they look on [Maidstone](#) now as their English home.'

During the remaining few weeks in England training continued steadily. There were range and battle practices with all weapons, exercises with the wireless equipment, which was good without being perfect, and route marches. Leave schemes were operated with up to 50 per cent of the battalion away at a time for four days. On 29 November all the unit transport was sent under Lieutenant [Coop](#)⁹ to Liverpool, the embarkation port. That was the beginning of the move to the [Middle East](#). The men had to remain in England till 4 January 1941. They thus had their first Christmas overseas in their quarters in [Camberley](#): mess huts were decorated with holly and streamers in provincial colours, the fare included roast pork and plum pudding and made what one private soldier recorded in his diary 'a damned good dinner and well cooked'. After dinner most men visited the homes of friends or the local public houses such as the Brown Jug, the Cambridge and the Camberley Court, where they made the rafters ring with their songs.

Visits from Air Marshal Sir Cyril Newall, Governor-General designate for New Zealand, and from the Duke of Gloucester were occasions for extra effort. On 28 December Brigadier Hargest conducted his last inspection of the unit in England.

The period the 23rd spent in [Britain](#) was of great importance in its moulding. The sharing of so many experiences—travel on ship and train, visits to the same places, training under the same stirring conditions before the Battle of [Britain](#) and literally under the air-war, living together alternately in bivouacs and mansions—gave the men a common background and a fuller understanding of one another. Since they constituted the only [South Island](#) battalion to serve in England, they developed a spirit of exclusiveness which was partly pride in the 23rd and its record and partly the result of being nicknamed 'Cook's Tourists' and 'the Glamour Boys' by those units which had gone straight to Egypt. The tactical training in the fields and hedgerows of [Surrey](#), [Sussex](#) and [Kent](#), as well as the experience of seeing the battles in the sky above them, helped to prepare the men for fighting in the close country of [Greece](#) where the enemy was to have air superiority. They felt they had been privileged to have been front-line troops manning the southern ramparts of

England at a time when invasion was expected daily. If it had been somewhat frustrating to be inactive when the [Air Force](#) and Navy were doing so much and when civilians were being mercilessly bombed, their experiences in [Kent](#) toughened the 23rd both physically and mentally for the conflict that was to come. When the unit left England, senior officers said that the men were as ready for war as it was possible for them to be without actual battle experience.

¹ By way of comparison, it may be stated that the [Andes](#) was a Royal Mail Line ship of 25,800 tons while the [Hawke's Bay](#), which sailed from [Port Chalmers](#) in September 1914, was a cargo ship of 7207 tons with practically no passenger accommodation, yet she carried 970 all ranks and 569 horses to Egypt.

² [Pte J. R. Murphy](#); [Dunedin](#); born [Dunedin](#), 13 Jul 1918; labourer.

³ [Capt W. H. Dalton](#), m.i.d.; [Ashburton](#); born [Ashburton](#), 21 Mar 1913; company secretary.

⁴ [Maj R. M. S. Orbell](#); [Greymouth](#); born [Oamaru](#), 17 Feb 1915; shipping clerk; wounded 17 Aug 1942.

⁵ [Maj F. S. R. Thomson](#), MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 25 Aug 1912; draper; twice wounded; died of wounds 28 Mar 1943.

⁶ [Capt R. K. King](#), MC; [England](#); born NZ 20 Feb 1909; school-teacher; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁷ [L-Cpl T. Graham](#); born [Scotland](#), 20 Jul 1913; upholsterer.

⁸ [Pte F. J. Neighbours](#); [Waimangaroa](#); born [Waimangaroa](#), 4 Apr 1918; miner; wounded 3 Jul 1942.

⁹ [Maj M. J. Coop](#); [England](#); born [Christchurch](#), 21 Jul 1911; shepherd; three times wounded.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 3 – TO GREECE VIA EGYPT

CHAPTER 3

To Greece via Egypt

FOR the voyage to Egypt the battalion embarked on the [Athlone Castle](#), a Union Castle luxury liner and the convoy flagship, which proved to be nearly as spacious and as comfortable as the [Andes](#). The massing of the convoy took time and practically a week was spent at Liverpool and another two days in Belfast Lough, off Bangor, before the ships headed north and west for the [North Atlantic](#). At first the twenty-one ships were escorted by one battleship, four cruisers, twelve destroyers and by bombers of the [RAF](#).

The men of the 23rd showed little enthusiasm for this voyage. Many were genuinely sorry to leave England; the majority had found the thrill of sea travelling under war conditions wearing thin during the voyage to England. But soldiers adapt themselves to all kinds of conditions and, to combat the malaise produced by idleness, a full programme of training and entertainment was organised. Some twenty Bren guns were mounted in an anti-aircraft role and all the routine of 'Action Stations' was learned afresh. The deck space permitted route marches and plenty of PT as well as revision of weapon training. Advantage was taken of the specialised knowledge acquired on courses in England by getting the officers and NCOs concerned to lecture to the troops. Concerts, debates and sporting contests of all kinds were held. Nevertheless, the days stretched into weeks before the destination was reached.

The troops had to remain on board when [Freetown](#) was visited, but leave was given at [Capetown](#). The convoy divided off [Capetown](#) and half went on to [Durban](#). This half included the Australians, a circumstance which was later held to explain the very orderly conduct of the New Zealanders on this particular visit. On five days, while the ships were refuelling and securing supplies, the troops had shore leave. A six-mile route march preceded leave, but even route-marching on land was a pleasure after weeks at sea. Once again the hospitality of this sister Dominion was lavish and much appreciated. On 11 February the GOC Cape Command took the salute during a march past by 5 Brigade, and later complimented the men on their bearing. The Mayor of [Capetown](#) also commended the troops for their exemplary behaviour during their five-day stay. Their experiences in England and their extra

months of training had done much to make the 23rd a disciplined body of men, able and willing to conduct themselves in a fitting manner. But, if none of the excesses of the visit of the previous May were repeated, the unit's record was spoilt in another direction—thirteen men were left behind when the convoy sailed. For security reasons, no sailing date had been announced. Most of the absentees would have been on board had they known when the convoy was departing from [Capetown](#).

Sharing the [Athlone Castle](#) with the 23rd on the voyage to Egypt were the [Maori Battalion](#), B Company [5 Field Ambulance](#) and 5 Field Company, New Zealand Engineers. The specialists of the Field Ambulance and the sappers instructed the infantry in the mysteries of their respective crafts. But, from the point of view of the subsequent history of the 23rd, the association with their brother infantrymen in the 28th was of considerable importance and between them a remarkably strong feeling of friendship and mutual regard sprang up. In the tug-of-war and other tests of strength, the Maoris usually emerged victorious but the 23rd won most of the boxing contests. Suitable celebrations followed in bars and officers' messes: foundations were laid for the remarkable 23–28 co-operation which was a feature of the history of 5 Brigade. In subsequent years the men of the two battalions fought alongside each other on a number of occasions, and always with the greatest of confidence in each other. 'The White Horis', as the 23rd were known to many Maoris, was a title of which the South Islanders were justly proud.

By the time the Somaliland coast was sighted on the voyage up the east coast of [Africa](#), the battalion had been on board the [Athlone Castle](#) as long as it had been on the [Andes](#) on the voyage from New Zealand to England—such was the effect of using the Cape route to Egypt during the war. On 4 March, however, the troops went ashore by lighter at Port Tewfik, whence the journey was continued by train to [Helwan Camp](#), where the area vacated by 20 Battalion was taken over. All members of the 23rd did not arrive in Egypt at this time. Apart from the small group absent without leave in [Capetown](#), others had been detached for manning anti-aircraft guns in ships which did not arrive simultaneously with the [Athlone Castle](#). For example, one detachment under Corporal [McEwen](#)¹ embarked at [Glasgow](#) on 18 December 1940 but did not reach Egypt till the end of April 1941. The exciting experiences of their ship, which was left behind by the rest of the convoy and had to return to port, may here receive only the briefest mention as one of the incidental features of the

move from England to Egypt.

The 23rd did not stay more than a few days in [Helwan Camp](#) but, for some, the contrast between the Egyptian sands and the countryside of [Kent](#) and [Surrey](#) was too stark to warrant any display of enthusiasm over their new surroundings. Typical entries in diaries and letters at this time by soldiers of different ranks are 'nothing but sand and stones here', 'sand, sand, and more sand', and 'sun, sand, and flies and smell and bareness'. In one respect, and that an important one, there was an improvement: rations were more plentiful than in England. As one private soldier wrote: 'meals very good—plenty butter and sugar'. Under the tutelage of the 26th, their sister [South Island](#) battalion in 6 Brigade, the 23rd soon settled down to training and hardening up after two months at sea.

On 7 March Lieutenant-Colonel Falconer returned to the battalion as its commanding officer. Those officers who had to revert to a lower rank did so cheerfully because of the respect and regard in which they held the Colonel. Reinforcements from 29 Battalion made up for 'wastages' suffered since the departure from [Burnham](#). Route marches and minor tactical schemes occupied most of the training hours. The hardening process continued slowly. Despite the attractions of [Cairo](#), the original opinions of Egypt were more than confirmed when khamsin dust-storms blew up and filled ears and nostrils as well as tents and mess buildings with a fine dust which seemed to penetrate everywhere. The battalion was not sorry to learn that its stay at [Helwan](#) was to be less than a fortnight.

In consequence of decisions taken at a higher level, 4 NZ Brigade was leaving Egypt for [Greece](#) just when 5 Brigade was arriving from England. Sixth Brigade moved out of [Helwan](#) on 6 March and, eight days later, Headquarters 5 Brigade issued a warning order to all its units telling them to be ready to move as from Sunday, 16 March. Equipment was checked and, where necessary, brought up to scale or replaced by the latest available. The issue of Thompson sub-machine guns was increased to forty for the battalion and the officers exchanged their Webley revolvers for Smith and Weston pistols which fired the 'tommy-gun' ammunition. Base kits were packed and sent into store at the New Zealand Base Camp at [Maadi](#), a few miles north of [Helwan](#). On 16 March all tents were struck and packed; the camp site was made as tidy as time permitted; surplus items were sent to the salvage parks. The battalion was ready to move off. The unit transport left early

next morning and took the desert road through [Mena](#) and past Halfway House to [Amiriya](#). The troops followed later in the day by train.

Of considerable importance as a transit and staging camp for troops moving from the [Cairo](#) area either to the [Western Desert](#) or to the European theatre of war, [Amiriya](#) was probably the most unpopular camp in the [Middle East](#). Invariably there was a sandstorm blowing there and frequently the 'flight' before one's own had been summoned forward on short notice and had left the bare, dismal camp area in an untidy and filthy state. When the 23rd arrived for the first time at [Amiriya](#) at 10.30 p.m. on 17 March 1941, this camp was no better than usual. Only one tent for every twenty men was available and cooking arrangements could scarcely have been more primitive in the field. The seven days spent there awaiting orders to embark must count amongst the most boring in the history of the unit. The NAAFI's had been cleaned out of stock by earlier 'flights' of troops; no one was expected to stay long and therefore no amenities and no entertainments were provided. Perhaps the battalion had been spoilt in England, but life seemed to have suddenly become unnecessarily grim. All were glad to leave [Amiriya](#) and proceed by train on 25 March to the [Alexandria](#) wharves to embark.

The 23rd went on board the [Cameronia](#), an Anchor Line ship which had been a member of the convoy in which it had come from England. The troops soon found themselves at sea for the third time, and whether or not there was anything in the theory that the third time was lucky, they were confident that this voyage would bring them into touch with the enemy and enable them to strike the blow they had imagined striking when they first entered camp fifteen months earlier. A special order of the day, issued by [General Freyberg](#), was read to all troops on board the [Cameronia](#). In it the General said: 'In the course of the next few days you may be fighting in 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.' After praising the fitness of the troops and warning them against being caught unprepared or being upset by the conditions of modern warfare, the General concluded: 'You will be fighting in a foreign land and the eyes of many nations will be upon you. The honour of the New Zealand Division is in your keeping. It could not be in better

hands.'

The General's message confirmed the view that battle would be entered within a matter of weeks if not days. Its effect no doubt varied from man to man, but the battalion's Intelligence Officer made a sound estimate of reactions when he wrote home on 26 March: 'I have in front of me [General Freyberg's](#) Special Order.... It is to be hoped that once more we may be given a responsible place in the line as in [Britain](#), but this time action should be a certainty. I have been struck with the changed attitude of our fellows—from a happy-go-lucky rabble they have suddenly become a compact force to be reckoned with, and perfectly confident of the issue. Everybody is pleased with the prospect of coming to grips at last—New Zealand troops tend to rot with inactivity, and spirit and camaraderie plus our long training make up for what I once imagined was a weakness in the original recruits.' In keeping with the more serious spirit abroad, the Padre, the Rev. Bob [Griffiths](#),² held an evening church service. Although it was Wednesday, the service was well attended.

On 27 March the 23rd landed at [Piraeus](#), the port of [Athens](#) and the chief port of [Greece](#), to the accompaniment of every conceivable demonstration of pleasure on the part of the Greeks. Lieutenant [McGregor](#),³ the battalion transport officer, and some of his drivers, who had gone to [Greece](#) as an advance party, were at [Piraeus](#) to ferry the heavier stores and equipment to the transit camp. The troops marched in battle order through the crowded streets of [Piraeus](#) and [Athens](#) to this camp, Hymettus No. 3, a camp as different from the sandy desert waste of [Amiriya](#) as day from night, since it was situated among cypresses and pines on the slopes of Mount Hymettus. The Greek people gave the battalion a most enthusiastic welcome: they applauded their arrival, they entertained the men with the wines of the country, and presented them with flowers. This grand welcome made everyone feel that the Greeks were, as one man put it, 'well worth fighting for and alongside'.

Next day, at 4 p.m., the battalion began its move north in a train composed mainly of sheep and cattle trucks. The trucks were crowded with forty or more men in each. But, if there was insufficient room in which to stretch out and sleep comfortably, most men had secured a bottle of the local cognac or other warming drink for the long journey. If the night was somewhat trying, daybreak on the 29th revealed scenery of real grandeur. Early spring had clothed the trees and fertile

plains with green, but the rocky hills stood out, silhouetted against snowclad mountains. Picturesque villages, perched high on precipitous slopes, looked like pictures from Grimm's fairy tales. The peasants appeared to be sturdy, thrifty, hard-working people capable of producing good fighters.

The 23rd reached [Katerini](#), its destination on the train journey, about 4 p.m. on 29 March. The battalion was but one of many units recently arrived in [Greece](#) and now ready to put their long months of training to the test. British, Australian and New Zealand troops, numbering 58,364, had crossed to help the Greeks defend their land.

Their arrival at [Katerini](#) brought the men of the 23rd into touch with 4 Brigade for the first time since the [First Echelon](#) left New Zealand in January 1940. Interchanges of visits, particularly with their sister [South Island](#) battalion, the 20th, were frequent. The welcome given by [Lieutenant-Colonel Kippen-berger](#)⁴ and Major [Burrows](#),⁵ CO and second-in-command of the 20th, was much appreciated, especially by those who had originally entered camp with the 20th. ' [Kip](#) came over with Jim Burrows to welcome us. It was good to see him again—so quiet, efficient and confident, just like our own C.O. I travelled up with Falconer and relished his imperturbable good humour,' wrote Bassett. Men began to realise the potential strength and solidarity of the New Zealand Division, the concentration of which was now practically complete in the country where its first battles were to be fought.⁶

¹ [WO II G. H. McEwen](#); [Masterton](#); born [Cheltenham](#), England, 23 Jan 1918; civil servant.

² [Rev. R. J. Griffiths](#), MBE; [Waimate](#); born [Gisborne](#), 26 Jul 1905; Presbyterian minister; p.w. 23 May 1941.

³ [Lt-Col A. F. G. McGregor](#), MC (Gk); [Christchurch](#); born [Invercargill](#), 2 Nov 1918; butcher; p.w. Nov 1941; CO 2 Royal NZ Regt ([Japan](#)) 1948.

⁴ [Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger](#), KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; Legion of Merit (US); born [Ladbrooks](#), 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; 1 [NZEAF](#) 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; GOC 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, 1946–57; died Wellington, 5 May 1957.

⁵ Brig J. T. Burrows, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Gk); Christchurch; born Christchurch, 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO 20 Bn 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; Commander, Southern Military District, Nov 1951–Oct 1953; Commander K Force, Nov 1953–Nov 1954; Commander SMD, Jan 1955–.

⁶ The main officer appointments of 23 Battalion on its arrival in Greece were:—CO: Lt-Col A. S. Falconer, DSO, MC; 2 i/c: Maj D. F. Leckie; Adj: Lt R. M. S. Orbell; IO: Lt B. I. Bassett; QM: Capt I. Patterson; MO: Capt R. S. Stewart; Padre: Rev. R. J. Griffiths; HQ Coy OC: Maj T. Fyfe; A Coy OC: Capt C. N. Watson; B Coy OC: Maj S. J. Kelly; C Coy OC: Maj H. H. Thomason; D Coy OC: Capt I. O. Manson.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 4 – CAMPAIGNING IN GREECE

CHAPTER 4

Campaigning in Greece

WHEN the 23rd arrived in [Katerini](#), the stage was practically set and the curtain was about to rise on a modern Greek tragedy: the German Twelfth Army was massed in [Bulgaria](#) and Field Marshal List had reported to [Hitler](#) that he would be ready to invade [Greece](#) on 1 April. A coup d'état in Belgrade overthrew the pro-Axis Government. [Hitler](#) decided to attack [Yugoslavia](#) and [Greece](#) simultaneously and orders were given for invasion to begin on or soon after 5 April. To meet this threat from twenty German divisions, Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Wilson, GOC British Troops in [Greece](#), had a pitifully small force. In addition to the various Greek divisions which had already been fully committed against the Italians, there were 1 British Armoured Brigade Group, the New Zealand Division, [6 Australian Division](#) and some corps and line-of-communication troops.

The New Zealand Division went into position on the right of what was called the Aliakmon position, 4 and 6 Brigades forward, 5 Brigade (less 21 Battalion) in the [Olympus Pass](#) (strictly the Petras Pass). On 9 April 21 Battalion took up an isolated position at [Platamon](#), barring the coastal road east of [Mount Olympus](#).

The 23rd spent two nights in [Katerini](#) before moving out on 31 March to prepare and occupy its first battle positions. While waiting to move, the men cleaned their weapons and sharpened their bayonets. A church parade was held and was watched with interest by the local Greeks, with whom the men mingled freely in the evenings. After their somewhat upsetting experiences with the cognac bought in [Athens](#), most men now preferred to sample lighter Greek wines such as mavrodaphne. An entry in the diary of Private Charles S. [Pankhurst](#) ¹ recalls the pleasure of those and similar nights: 'Scottie and I drank considerable red wine (several bottles at 60 drachmae each) but we did not get drunk, only happy and lovable'.

More serious business lay ahead. Brigadier Hargest and the senior officers of the battalion had already reconnoitred the battalion's sector of the [Olympus- Aliakmon River](#) line, and on the morning of 31 March the companies moved by truck southwest to the [Petras Sanatorium](#) and then on foot up towards the mountain. As they marched up the newly formed road, the men of the 23rd met the 26th coming down

to move forward in the transport to the Aliakmon line. Greetings were exchanged in passing, but this time feelings were very different from what they had been at the two units' last meeting in [Helwan](#). This time the men were conscious of entering upon their first real operational role. Hearts beat a little faster as their owners realised they would almost certainly face the enemy in the positions they were about to occupy. In 5 Brigade's sector in the [Olympus](#) line the 23rd was on the right, the 22nd in the centre astride the [Olympus Pass](#) road and the 28th on the left.



olympus pass positions, 5 brigade, april 1941

The 23rd companies soon found themselves on the ground chosen for them: a spur from the snowline on [Mount Olympus](#) stretched down to and along a ridge which ran north-west towards the Itamos stream and the [Olympus Pass](#). Partly because this was their first battle line and partly because of the natural beauty of the surroundings, those who were there will always remember their [Olympus](#) positions. To the south-east was [Mount Olympus](#), the highest and most important mountain in [Greece](#). Rising from pine-filled valleys through belts of oak and beech till its snow-capped peak was caught up in the clouds, this mountain had from ancient times been known as 'the home of the gods'. It reminded the South Islanders of some of their own Southern Alps. To the north-east the plain around [Katerini](#) lay between the blue Aegean on the east and the low Macedonian hills and the low-lying areas around [Salonika](#) farther north. On the immediate front, the downs were covered with scrub and undergrowth which would afford cover to attacking infantry. Bushes of daphne and clumps of red-flowered Judas trees added a touch of colour

while wild flowers grew plentifully under the trees.

The narrowness of the ridge and the length of the battalion front—nearly four miles—made defence in depth impossible. All four rifle companies had to be placed in the front line and, at first, no company had a platoon in reserve. On the right flank, D Company, under Captain [Manson](#),² was stretched to the utmost from where 17 Platoon, under Lieutenant Dick Connolly, covered the junction of tracks from [Strapokameni](#) and [Vrondou](#) to where 18 Platoon was dispersed on the west of [Ravani](#). 'Right of the line for the whole Div!' was the proud boast of 17 Platoon on this occasion. Next to D came C Company, under Major Thomason, overlooking the village of [Lokova](#), and B Company, under Major Kelly. On the left, A Company, under Captain Carl Watson, had its left flank on the western end of the ridge more or less in touch with 22 Battalion across a steep-sided gully.

Practically every man in the battalion was soon hard at work preparing and later perfecting the defensive positions. Some dug and wired the section posts, some improved fields of fire by clearing scrub on the immediate front, some made more or less covered approaches from company headquarters to the forward posts, while, in the rear, others worked hard on the roads which would enable trucks to supply each company area. The 26th had already constructed a dry-weather road which gave access to the battalion area from the Sanatorium on the left front. Men worked on extending this road along the ridge behind the main company positions, where it was known as the 'Back Road'.

On 2 April [General Freyberg](#) and Brigadier Hargest visited the sector. They were impressed by the work already done but were worried about supplying the unit when the main entry to the area was from the front. In addition, should the necessity to withdraw arise, the 23rd would be unable to reach the [Olympus Pass](#) road in the face of enemy pressure. The construction of a road to the south along the steep track which was understood to lead to the village of [Kokkinoplos](#) was therefore decided upon. Consequently, Lieutenant Bassett, the IO, with Sergeants Jim [Bevin](#)³ and 'Mick' Bowie,⁴ well-known Mount Cook guide, and Private [Mannering](#),⁵ a former surveyor, went on a special road reconnaissance. Next, in this effort to provide the 23rd with its own supply and exit route, the pioneer platoon, under Second-Lieutenant Jim [Ensor](#),⁶ made strenuous efforts to make the road capable of taking vehicular traffic. Later, for two or three days, it was assisted by two companies of 22

Battalion, while [7 Field Company](#) of the New Zealand Engineers began working towards the 23rd positions from the [Kokkinoplos](#) end. But, even with this team of workers, the going was so difficult and the weather so wet that a short but vitally important stretch of this road was incomplete at the critical time.

As the men worked from dawn to dark on their positions in the keen mountain air, they grew harder and fitter and more expectant of playing a worthy part in the approaching battle. Perhaps they were excited at the prospect of meeting the enemy or pleased with their spring-beflowered surroundings, where banks of primroses and anemones, violets and crocuses, contrasted strikingly with the sandy wastes of [Helwan](#) and [Amiriya](#), but, in any case, most men thoroughly enjoyed their soldiering in early April 1941. Even the misty rains, common at that season, did not damp their spirits at first. 'Worked on excavation for signal office and had pretty good day,' wrote Private [Johnston](#) ⁷ in his diary on 5 April. 'Gee! I am happy and in the best of health'.

The battalion's defences were steadily improved. The front was too long, however, and the danger of enemy infiltration was so serious that on 9 April two companies of the 22nd took over the whole of A Company's position and nearly half of B Company's. This enabled the 23rd to thicken up its positions and strengthen the whole front. The order of the companies from right to left now became D, C, A and B. Headquarters Company provided a reserve force which was the smaller because the Bren-carrier platoon under Lieutenant Max Coop was on duty in an anti-paratroop role around the landing ground between [Katerini](#) and [Kalokhori](#).

Rarely, if ever again, did the battalion take such pains over a defensive position. Everything was done that the experience of the First World War officers and the training courses of the subalterns could suggest. The section posts could scarcely have been made stronger or been better camouflaged in the time available. Minor causes of annoyance arose and hindered progress. The anti-personnel mines, on which the companies were depending to deal with the remaining covered approaches on their front, arrived without fuses. 'Just another army mix-up!' was the laconic comment of one soldier in his diary. The weather deteriorated rather badly: rain fell, the roads in the area became quagmires, much time had to be spent on their maintenance, work was held up on the [Kokkinoplos](#) road, and the troops

slopped about in the mud trying to improve their section posts under most discouraging conditions.

By this time, events on the wider front to the north were bringing the war closer to the [Olympus](#) positions. At 5.45 a.m. on 6 April, [Germany](#) declared war on both [Yugoslavia](#) and [Greece](#). Attacks were made on the frontier posts of both countries and the [Luftwaffe](#) struck as far south as the port of [Piraeus](#) that night. The speedy defeat of the southern Yugoslav army opened the way to [Greece](#) through [Monastir](#). In addition, the Germans simultaneously made good progress through northeastern [Greece](#). On 8 April the 23rd could see the fires started in [Salonika](#) by enemy action. The advance through [Monastir](#) threatened to outflank the Aliakmon line, occupation of which in any case had not been completed. On 8 April, therefore, 4 NZ Brigade was ordered back to [Servia](#). The withdrawal of 6 Brigade to a supporting position south of [Elasson](#) followed. For two days and nights a steady stream of traffic flowed back through [Olympus Pass](#) as the two forward brigades withdrew through 5 Brigade. Apart from the armoured cars of the Divisional Cavalry and their supporting artillery, all New Zealand units affected had withdrawn through the pass soon after nightfall on 10 April.

The war was definitely coming closer. On 9 April the refugees from [Salonika](#) and the bombed villages to the north created a fresh problem: the Germans were believed to be making use of both real and bogus refugees, and consequently these people had to be ruthlessly turned back and directed to follow the coastal road to the south. The inhabitants of the small village of [Lokova](#) in the centre front of C Company's area also had to be evacuated. At 11 p.m. on 9 April the 23rd was ordered to man all section posts and the troops stood-to throughout that night while the traffic could be heard rumbling through the pass. 'Standing to', frequently in the rain and once in a late snowfall, became the accepted routine while the battalion remained in its [Olympus](#) positions.

On 10 April the supporting arms necessary to complete the defences of the area went into position. Fifth Field Regiment placed its guns in the pass area behind 22 Battalion and [27 Battery](#) of this regiment established two observation posts in the 23rd's area. No. 10 Platoon of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion set up its Vickers guns in A Company's front to the left rear of [Lokova](#), while 32 Battery of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment sited its two-pounder guns to cover the road leading to the Sanatorium and the

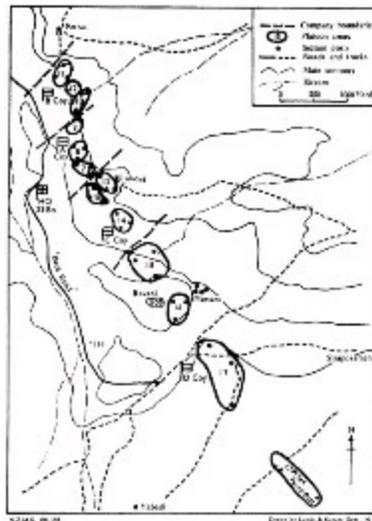
tracks which came in from the right flank in D Company's area.

Now it was obvious that a stand would be made on the [Olympus- Aliakmon River](#) line. More barbed wire arrived and, despite the pouring rain, the men worked long hours erecting more obstacles and strengthening the defences. To give warning of enemy patrols at night, rattles of tins with stones and bells 'borrowed' from mountain goat-herds were hung on the wire. With increased activity in the air and evidence of enemy successes in front, the atmosphere grew more electric: rumours passed from section to section of disasters in [Yugoslavia](#) or, more encouraging, of the arrival of fresh squadrons of [RAF](#) fighters. The 'old hands' put these rumours down to a mixture of fear and wishful thinking and concentrated further on the defences. But, as Brian Bassett wrote home on 11 April, 'War provides fluctuating moods—during the day one feels thoroughly confident and ready and anxious to tackle the aggressor. Then at night, when the rain pelts down and we wade ankle-deep in mud, noises are heard and one cannot help feeling that somehow he has slipped through somewhere and is on us.' Once again, with tension mounting and most men anxious to get the first shock of action over, the untried soldiers of the 23rd were glad to have a few veterans of the 1914–18 war present to give them a lead.

Twenty-six years earlier, in April 1915, the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps had earned a grand reputation for the soldiers of these two Dominions of the South Pacific in the landing at [Gallipoli](#). Appropriately enough, since the New Zealand Division had passed under the command of [1 Australian Corps](#) on 5 April, General Blamey announced on 12 April that his corps would be designated the ANZAC Corps. Perhaps it was with thoughts of what Anzac meant, or perhaps it was the mountain scene or the Easter season, but more probably it was the imminence of battle that made one soldier refer to the Easter Sunday church service, held on the early morning of 13 April, as 'one of the most impressive church services ever attended'.

On the following day, 14 April, it was obvious that the Divisional Cavalry could not continue its delaying action much longer. That night Colonel Falconer recorded in his diary: 'Enemy advanced troops entered [Katerini](#) late afternoon. All possible preparations made here to meet him.' All vehicles such as the 30-cwt and office trucks that were not needed during battle were sent back to the unit B Echelon area

at [Pithion](#), about three miles south of [Kokkinoplos](#). As the direct road to [Kokkinoplos](#) was not completed, these trucks went via the Sanatorium and [Olympus Pass](#) roads. Late on the afternoon of 14 April, only a short time before demolitions cut the battalion off from the pass road, ten Bren carriers rejoined the unit, making a welcome addition to its fire power. Throughout the afternoon the officers watched through their binoculars the approach of enemy transport. As evening drew on, an enemy 'recce' party approached the pass but their motor-cycles were quickly knocked out by 22 Battalion. Contact had been made by 5 Brigade. Fourth Brigade also reported first contact with the enemy in the [Servia](#) area.



22 battalion positions, 13 april 1941

At 8 a.m. next day Colonel Falconer attended a conference at 5 Brigade Headquarters, where he was told that the Yugoslav-Greek line to the west had broken and that 5 Brigade was to withdraw at nine o'clock that night. For the officers and men who had put days and nights of hard work into perfecting their positions and who were confident that they could beat off any ordinary infantry attacks, these orders to withdraw were most depressing. The additional news that the road to [Kokkinoplos](#) was still incomplete and that the ten carriers and nineteen trucks still in the area would have to be destroyed was scarcely cheering. Major Leckie went back to see if the tracked Bren carriers could negotiate the unformed portion of the new road. He found that the steepness of the gradient and the greasy nature of the track made the passage of any transport impossible. A Greek detachment of thirty mules arrived to assist with the evacuation of ammunition, heavy stores and, if necessary,

the wounded. Sergeant Norman Trewby ⁸ was placed in charge of the muleteers and their animals. With 40-pound packs on the sides of each mule, the animals had very great difficulty in climbing the steepest part of the track, but although some of the muleteers disappeared, five return trips were made by this mule train. In the meantime, the men had been told to destroy everything they could not carry on their persons during the withdrawal. Each man cut two of his three blankets to ribbons, destroyed spare clothing and holed petrol and ration tins. The officers hid their valises and other valuables in trees or in holes. After this had been done, orders arrived that the [Olympus](#) position was to be held another day. Thus the message sent out by Major Thomason to his platoons read: 'Hold everything for 24 hours. Troops will hold their present positions at all costs'. The news that they were to hold on for at least another day was welcome, although the language used about the premature destruction of blankets and clothes showed how annoyed some were with what was a very natural action under the circumstances. ⁹ Captain Max [Smith](#) ¹⁰ was sent back with 8 Platoon to start work on a new position at [Kokkinoplos](#).

The day passed without anything in the nature of a battle being fought on the 23rd's front. The enemy could be seen bringing up trucks and tanks on the plains below and the New Zealand artillery shelled some light forces on the [Katerini](#) road. Despite the rain, German reconnaissance planes came over, doubtless reconnoitring the occupied positions.

On 16 April German infantry began to infiltrate across the battalion's front, searching for gaps and weaknesses or for an exposed flank. C and D Companies on the right saw the most action as most of the enemy patrols concentrated on their sector. Possibly their air reconnaissance had told them how the 5 Brigade positions grew weaker, with fewer men holding more ground, the farther away they were from the pass road. In any case, A and B Companies, whose fronts were shorter, received less attention than the two more fully extended companies.

In C Company's area, Second-Lieutenant Dan [Davin](#) ¹¹ with 13 Platoon held a forward outpost position with the role of breaking up any attack before it reached the main positions of 14 and 15 Platoons. On the platoon's right flank was a wooded and unoccupied spur. Davin called for a volunteer to patrol this spur and to create the illusion of its being defended, and selected Corporal [Campbell](#) ¹² for this difficult

and dangerous task. Once this spur was seized by the enemy, the sections were unlikely to be able to move, so overlooked would they be from the higher ground. No. 3 Section, under Corporal [Quinn](#),¹³ had orders to face the spur if trouble threatened from that quarter.

Higher up the slopes of [Olympus](#), D Company was even more widely dispersed: 18 Platoon under Second-Lieutenant [Cunningham](#),¹⁴ next to C Company, and 16 Platoon, under Lieutenant [Bond](#),¹⁵ farther up, held positions on either side of the [Ravani](#) feature, while 17 Platoon, on the extreme right, was attempting to cover a front much wider than that covered by both A and B Companies together.

From an early hour, well before daybreak, the 23rd stood-to and consequently was not taken by surprise when the German patrols made their first appearance. Action began when Private [Todd](#),¹⁶ of No. 3 Section, 13 Platoon, opened fire with his Bren on three or four Germans he had seen making across open ground for the wooded spur on the right. He hit two but, apparently, in the earlier darkness, some enemy had reached the spur. Shortly after dawn, firing broke out on this spur and Corporal Campbell's tommy gun was heard firing short bursts. But one man had no hope of holding that feature alone and Campbell was taken prisoner.

From time to time, thereafter, firing broke out to the right rear of No. 3 Section. Assuming that his platoon was too completely under observation from the spur for men to move, Davin called Company Headquarters for assistance. Two patrols, one under Sergeant [Templeton](#)¹⁷ from 15 Platoon and one under the company commander himself, quickly restored the position. As Major Thomason led his small patrol down the face towards 13's area, he almost ran into a party of four Germans resting in a hollow. A grenade, tossed into the hollow, proved, to quote Major Thomason, 'very effective'.

Davin next reported that a large party of Germans, estimated at a company strong, was massing in the scrub near the cemetery about 500 yards in front of 13 Platoon. The 5 Field Regiment OP officer quickly brought fire on the area and the appearance of German stretcher-bearers soon testified to its effectiveness. The infantry were delighted with this evidence of the value of artillery support.

Although C Company and 13 Platoon received further attention later in the day

and the wooded spur had to be cleared once more, D Company was most frequently engaged. Early in the afternoon, under cover of the fog which rolled down [Mount Olympus](#), the enemy approached 16 Platoon's area, east of [Ravani](#). Probably they had no idea they were so close to occupied positions as they came up to the wire in an extraordinarily close formation for a patrol. A sudden break in the fog let the 16 Platoon Bren and tommy gunners do their work. The Germans who did not fall to these first bursts of fire quickly withdrew, and although they attempted to infiltrate through the gaps, the line held until it was time to withdraw. One or two Germans succeeded in penetrating between 16 and 18 Platoons and caused some consternation by firing bursts of sub-machine-gun bullets in all directions without actually coming into touch with the D Company men.

Later in the afternoon, the enemy evidently found where the right flank of the whole New Zealand position was and No. 17 Platoon, under Lieutenant Dick Connolly, could not prevent its position being outflanked. It was impossible for the platoon, in fact, both to hold its position and prevent infiltration and at the same time keep the enemy from moving round the right flank. Connolly has described the first contact. 'We could hear the enemy coming closer. They had a dog with them and we all agreed later that this dog did a lot of recce work for them. That could be so, too, as it never barked, came up the gullies and then went back down again. When they finally got to us, it was very misty and wet. I was following them along at my left section when I had my first coloured tracer exhibition. They opened up along our skyline but all the section posts were down the slope. Under cover of this, two Jerries jumped up and bounded into our straggling wire. Fortunately, one of Bond's Bren gunners saw them and gave them a good squirt. They were his first shots in anger and they were good shots, too. The leading Jerry rolled over and said something which sounded like "I'm hit, Bill!" The 16 Pl bloke gave him another burst and said "Too bloody right you are!"'

On the extreme right flank, Corporal Bob Buick's ¹⁸ section held an outpost very near the snowline. Private [Souquet](#), ¹⁹ the sniper whose slit trench was farthest up the mountain, later reported that although he shot at them he could not prevent the enemy outflanking him at the snowline. Either the Alpine soldiers seen by Souquet or the individual or two who penetrated between 16 and 18 Platoons got within range of D Company headquarters and the stray shots flying around proved rather

disconcerting. Captain Manson telephoned an SOS to Battalion Headquarters. The CO sent Major Leckie, Captain Patterson and some members of the signals and transport platoons to assist D Company. Major Leckie found the situation by no means as bad as had been feared; true, cooks and clerks at the cookhouse were ready to deal with the 'tommy-gunners' who had disturbed them—Private Alex Agnew²⁰ was stirring the stew with one hand and holding his rifle with the other—but the second-in-command and his party found no enemy when they made a vigorous sweep through the scrub.

Thus the day of 16 April passed, with alarums and excursions, with the enemy probing along the front no doubt as a preliminary to a full-scale assault the next day, and with the artillery, the Vickers guns and the unit 3-inch mortars, under Lieutenant Richards,²¹ engaging any targets which presented themselves. B Company did a small amount of shooting and reported one enemy soldier killed and others driven off with casualties. In the excitement of getting their first bomb away, one of the mortar crew forgot to remove the nose cap from the bomb: it did no damage but the successful ranging on the target prepared the way for some effective shooting, while the experience of that first shot at the enemy taught in one lesson what training had failed to teach in a hundred.

During the day preparations for the withdrawal that night continued: trucks took all the equipment that could be sent back as far as possible and the mule train attempted to do the rest. Captain Ron Stewart²² also evacuated the sick and wounded—there were only four or five at this stage—by the mule train. Only half the task of transporting the heavy stores and equipment was done before nightfall. The falling-off in the numbers of the muleteers had something to do with this, but time did not permit of completion of the task.

The actual withdrawal was rendered more difficult by the pressure exerted by the enemy on C and D Companies. According to brigade orders, while 22 and 28 Battalions withdrew by the main pass road, the 23rd was to withdraw up the unfinished road to Kokkinoplos and there occupy a position with one company in front of the village and with three companies in reserve behind it. The order for withdrawal and for the march back was HQ Company, B, A, C and D Companies. Headquarters Company began its march back at 8 p.m.; B and A Companies withdrew without incident. In the middle of C Company's front, Davin had arranged

for his three sections to rendezvous at 8.30 p.m. Five minutes before the appointed time, Private [Inglis](#),²³ one of Corporal Quinn's No. 3 Section, arrived in a state of great excitement to report that 'the rest of the section was scuppered.' He informed Davin that 'Todd had gone off with the Bren to see what he could do and had told this chap to report to me that the Jerries were pouring in'. It was too late to commit the platoon to action which might have made disengagement impossible. Davin therefore decided to get the rest of his platoon out as quickly as possible.

'I and the sergeant drove and scolded the men until they were through 15 Platoon perimeter. Once they were through, I handed them over to Sergeant [Dutton](#)²⁴ and went back (followed against orders by Congo [Smith](#),²⁵ a fine, bold ruffian) to see if I could find any of the others. We hadn't gone far when we heard cries. Eventually we found Todd—almost exhausted, but still with his Bren. With him were three or four others, but missing were Quinn, Campbell, [Martin](#),²⁶ [Fisher](#)²⁷ and [Weir](#).²⁸ '29

'Sandy' [Thomas](#)³⁰ and his men in 15 Platoon opened fire on the Germans who were following Todd and the remnant of Quinn's section. The disengagement of C Company was delayed an hour by this minor flare-up on its front. Farther along, D Company's 17 Platoon also had trouble, having to fight back vigorously to prevent the enemy from penetrating to the line of withdrawal, which was being guarded by some Bren-carrier men and other HQ Company men under Major Fyfe. As it was feared that some of the enemy might have succeeded in outflanking Fyfe's party, Second-Lieutenant Fergus [Begg](#)³¹ was sent with his platoon, 10 Platoon, to act as a battalion vanguard and clear the route.

At and around Battalion Headquarters, Private 'Buster Bill' [Beynon](#)³² of the unit pioneers successfully blew six road demolitions. The Colonel and Beynon were the last to leave the old headquarters, where everything that had to be left was destroyed. Some items were hurled into the ravine behind the 'Back Road'; rations were contaminated with petrol. Private Pank-hurst's diary gives the picture: 'What a wreck we left behind! Cookhouse utensils, clothing, tents, bicycles, food, wireless sets and equipment of all kinds we smashed and rendered useless.'

At the junction of the track from [Strapokameni](#) with the 'Back Road', the Colonel and Bassett waited till midnight for 17 Platoon to disengage. But Connolly brought

his men out in good order and without suffering any losses. No wonder Major Leckie gave Connolly special mention in his private diary: 'This officer has done great work throughout the operation on our extreme right flank.' The detachments under Major Fyfe and Second-Lieutenant Begg, responsible for keeping the line of withdrawal free from enemy interference, were collected, and the withdrawal continued with D Company acting as rearguard.

The march to [Kokkinoplos](#) will always be remembered by those who took part in it as the toughest they ever endured. The troops were tired before they started—tired with standing-to on three consecutive nights and with slopping about in the mud and rain; they were heavily laden with their arms and ammunition, their greatcoats and large packs, many of which were to be discarded during the withdrawal; the gradients were steep and the road, as far as it went, had been churned into a sea of mud; the night was so dark that it was nearly impossible to see the man in front; the only consolation was that there was no enemy interference during the march. The distance was approximately eight miles but the going made it appear more like twenty-eight to the dog-tired troops.

Those present can speak best of their own experiences. 'What with the steepness, rain and mud we had to fight for every inch of progress but as we knew that to lag behind meant capture by the Huns we did our best,' wrote Pankhurst. 'We were mud from — to breakfast & soaking right to the skin. The hardest march we have done yet,' Private Johnston recorded.

Dick Connolly's account has its amusing side. 'We collected in the gully where the road branched. The Bren Carrier Pl. were there armed to the teeth but no carriers. Ted Richards awaited me—had stayed there to see if I would get away whole from the noise aforementioned. The C.O. was there, full of that confidence I always felt when near him. He was a grand chap, our "Acky". One, [Stanger](#),³³ of my Pl complained about the weight of his Boyes A/Tk rifle so I took it and he was to take my rifle. I had a raincoat on with full webbing and a good full pack on my back, 3 bandoliers of .303 and the Boyes rifle. I'm sure you're miles out in the distance we had to go. Nearer 100 miles, I think. We set off, Ted and I together behind my Pl. We were the last on the track. The time was spent in kicking and swearing at the men who would sit down and fall asleep in the rain from fatigue. Any fellow missed

that night must have crawled off the track a bit and we missed them. It was just break of day when we neared A Coy's sentries and I managed to get the Boyes off my shoulder to talk to Carl Watson when I noticed the bolt was missing. I asked Stanger and he said, "I threw it away and didn't like to tell you." The aid of temper gave me the strength to throw the Boyes about 200 yards. Was I mad!'

A Company took up a rearguard position across the north of [Kokkinoplos](#) while the rest of the battalion got some rest in the village. In an attempt to get their clothes dry, the troops lit fires in the school and the houses into which they crowded. Their pleasure at arriving at the village and at the prospect of the first rest in dry conditions for some days was cut short when firing broke out about 7 a.m. and A Company engaged the first of the enemy to arrive.

The armoured division of the German corps which had attacked up the [Olympus Pass](#) road without success sent its infantry battalion round via [Vrondou](#) and [Kokkinoplos](#) to open up the pass road by a threat from the south-east. These German companies under a Captain Baacke ³⁴ were prevented by the 23rd's stand, in what the Germans described as their 'well situated and fortified hill positions', at [Olympus](#) and again at [Kokkinoplos](#), from interfering with 5 Brigade's withdrawal programme. Nevertheless, these Germans were able to approach the A Company positions under cover of the mists and open fire without giving any warning of their approach. ³⁵ They attempted first to shoot up the company headquarters, which was placed alongside the track with a platoon on either flank. Captain Carl Watson found himself under fire from two directions at once and escaped only by wriggling out of his unbuttoned greatcoat and web gear and rolling downhill out of range.

Some of the A Company forward posts were forced to withdraw before reinforcements from other companies arrived. Of these, 10 Platoon under Fergus Begg was the first on the scene and rendered effective aid by driving off the enemy on the flank, where they had threatened to cut off A Company from the village. Part of D Company also assisted.

The exchanges of fire at [Kokkinoplos](#) went in favour of the defenders. Sergeant Brian [Walsh](#) ³⁶ of No. 9 Platoon was killed by one of the first bursts of machine-gun fire. Others were wounded then or later but the Germans suffered the greater casualties. When Sergeant 'Mick' [Mulhern](#) ³⁷ and Private 'Shorty' Brook ³⁸ of 7 Platoon

called at Company Headquarters, they were surprised to find it occupied by Germans. Mulhern promptly shot two German machine-gunners before returning to his own platoon. Here he found that his men, with the exception of Corporal Roy Cherry,³⁹ Private McGoverne⁴⁰ and a man from B Company, had pulled back under the enemy fire and the threat of being outflanked. A grenade thrown into the bushes, where the lifting of the mist revealed movement, temporarily halted the Germans but they soon returned to the attack. Hit in the chest by a rifle bullet, Mulhern was left for dead, but he was able to observe the enemy burying their dead. When captured, he was told by an English-speaking German officer that the defending company 'had accounted for many of his men' and 'that besides having many wounded, he had buried 25 men'.⁴¹

The individual is only occasionally typical. Usually, he can speak only for himself, but in his description of his reactions to his first contact with the enemy, as he wrote it up soon after this Kokkinoplos engagement, Private Minson⁴² of 8 Platoon, A Company, described the reasonably common experience of discovering that shooting at a human target was simply a degree or so more exciting than shooting at any other target:

'We had been ordered many times to lie down in our positions and stay there, but we were too wet and hungry to sit still, and had to walk round to keep warm. Suddenly at 9.30 a.m. there was a terrific roar of machine guns, tommy guns and rifles; bullets whistled in all directions. Fortunately, I was near a slit trench, talking to a couple of other chaps, and I swear that the bullets went in between us. We made one dive and landed in the mud and slush of the slit trench. The bullets were still hitting the parapet, but luckily it was a good one. I could not understand why they kept firing at our trench because I thought it was well hidden until suddenly it dawned on me that it might be my pipe: I was sucking so hard on it that it was sending up enough smoke for a chimney. It was here I shot my first Jerry. I shall never forget the feeling. I watched him come over a rise and walk straight at me. I could not believe my eyes, so I asked my cobber what I should do. All he could say was "Shoot the bastard! Shoot the bastard!", and shoot the bastard I did. And to tell you the truth I was as excited as a boy rabbiting.'

While this engagement was being fought, Colonel Falconer was at Brigade Headquarters reporting on his unit's withdrawal. General Freyberg arrived at 5

Brigade Headquarters and, on hearing that the 23rd rearguard was in contact with the enemy, ordered an immediate withdrawal from [Kokkinoplos](#) to the plain below, where transport was waiting to convey the troops farther south. He explained that the small number of Imperial troops in [Greece](#) and the serious danger of the [Anzac Corps's](#) being outflanked on the west necessitated further withdrawal and the taking up of a much shorter line in southern [Greece](#).

The 5 Brigade operation order issued later in the day also mentioned that 21 Battalion had been forced back in the [Platamon](#) tunnel area: the threat to the rear was likely to come from both east and west. This order stated: 'The N.Z. Div is disengaging and withdrawing to the area [Volos](#) as a preliminary to the subsequent withdrawal to the Thermopylai line. 5 Inf Bde is carrying out a preliminary withdrawal to the Volestinon- [Almiros](#) area near [Volos](#)'. The 23rd was to be the leading unit in the convoy, which was directed to follow the route [Elasson-Dhomenikon- Larisa](#).

Under cover of the heavy mist, Colonel Falconer successfully withdrew the 23rd from [Kokkinoplos](#). C Company acted as a rearguard and 14 and 15 Platoons beat back a last-minute sortie by the more daring of the enemy. At [Pithion](#), before embussing on RMT trucks, the men enjoyed their first proper meal for over twenty-four hours. Food and hot tea gave new life to the troops, but no sooner were they crowded on the trucks than most of them dropped off to sleep. Fortunately, no enemy aircraft disturbed them, because although the enemy had undisputed superiority in the air, the mists and low cloud provided welcome cover on the journey south on 17 April. Something of the spirit of the private soldier at this time is seen in J. R. Johnston's diary entry for that day: 'We are all in a hell of a mess. Wet through to the skin and covered in mud, but we are as happy as Larry. Travelled all night in transport, each truck holding 32.'

The journey south was slow and tiring but not without incident. Moving off soon after 1.30 p.m., the convoy halted at 3 p.m. with the 23rd's trucks conveniently near a ration dump. Here, tinned black currants and other delicacies were quickly seized and, as one soldier put it, 'we made gluttons of ourselves with tinned fruit and loaded some on to the trucks'. After this halt, word arrived that the [Larisa- Volos](#) road was impassable and that the convoy was to proceed on the [Larisa- Pharsala-](#)

Lamia road until directed to turn off. Following the main road, the 23rd passed through the covering positions held by 6 Brigade south of Elasson in the late afternoon, and later still through Larisa. This town had been damaged, first by earthquake, and then by enemy bombers. Dead Greeks, dead Australians, dead mules and other animals lay where they had fallen. Overturned and burnt-out trucks were seen on the roadside near Pharsala. Although orders arrived to proceed due east to Almiros from Pharsala, this route proved impassable and Colonel Falconer ordered the unit convoy to proceed direct south over the pass from Pharsala. As he himself recorded that night: 'On this pass route the utmost confusion prevailed. Orders and counter orders were given by various Staff officers, and vehicles were turned about and turned about again on the two way road.'

By dawn on 18 April the battalion halted near Dhomokos while the CO sought definite information or orders as to the route. He found none and the convoy moved on towards Lamia. As the coastal route towards Almiros and Volos looked in a bad state, he ordered another halt while he went back up the road towards Pharsala in the hope of finding 5 Brigade Headquarters. He met Brigadier Hargest and together they decided to proceed via the Lamia- Stilis road towards the original destination near Volos, but to go into hiding from enemy air attacks if the road did not permit of a speedy move. The wreckage on the side of the road indicated how successful earlier Stuka and other bombing raids had been.

The 23rd now passed through Lamia, where rations were drawn, and then turned east towards Stilis. While it was halted for lunch very shortly afterwards, Lamia was heavily bombed and columns of smoke arose from the town and adjacent roads. The unit had just escaped being in the bombing area. Soon afterwards the move was recommenced, and when near Stilis Major Heal,⁴³ Brigade Major of 5 Brigade, met Colonel Falconer and told him that the move to Almiros had been cancelled and that the 23rd now was to move to the area of Molos, south-east of Lamia. Some members of the battalion thought that careless transposition of the initial letters of Volos and Molos had led to their being given the wrong destination in the first place, but the brigade order quoted above makes the original intention clear and the resemblance in names was only coincidental. In any case, after skirting Lamia by a dusty side-road and being held up in a huge traffic jam at the bridge about six miles south of Lamia, the 23rd eventually reached its dispersal area in a

riverbed near [Molos](#). Here, after nearly thirty hours in the crowded trucks, the men were quickly settled into company bivouac areas for the night.

On the following day, 19 April, orders were received to take up defensive positions east and west of the coast road through [Molos](#). Before the officers had completely reconnoitred these positions, fresh orders were received to move to the foothills south of the eastern bridge over the Sperkhios River, the bridge about six miles south of [Lamia](#). There the battalion was to take its place in the [Thermopylae](#) line, a name which recalled the gallant efforts of Leonidas and his Spartans when they were overwhelmed in that same sector by the Persians in 480 BC. In the 1941 [Thermopylae](#) positions the New Zealand Division, on the right, covered the coast road between the sea and the hills and [6 Australian Division](#), on the left, was responsible for the [Brallos Pass](#) and the main road to [Athens](#) which runs through that pass. In the New Zealand sector 6 Brigade was on the right watching the actual coast, 4 Brigade was in reserve in the rear, while 5 Brigade was forward and slightly to the left of 6 Brigade, with the role of covering the most likely crossings of the Sperkhios. In 5 Brigade, the 22nd was on the right, the 28th in the centre and the 23rd on the left, and therefore responsible for making contact with the Australians.

On 20 April the 23rd companies were disposed as follows: B Company was forward covering the bridge, A Company occupied a spur overlooking the bridge, while C and D Companies were disposed across the coast road and south-east of B Company. During the afternoon [General Freyberg](#), Brigadier Hargest and Colonel Falconer examined the front and the disposition of the companies was improved. D Company was therefore moved to the high ground in left rear of B Company, while C Company was also ordered from its position on the flat up on to the higher ground while the Maoris took over their positions on the coast road. D Company moved in trucks in time to reach its new sector at dusk. The Colonel heard that the blowing of the bridges would sever D Company's road communications and therefore rushed a truckload of barbed wire and tools to this company.

C Company, most of HQ Company and Battalion Headquarters all had to move to their new positions on foot. Many men of these companies found the manhandling of their arms, equipment and general stores up the high steep slopes very exhausting—they were no longer as fit and fresh as they had been on the slopes of [Olympus](#).

Lieutenant Dick Connolly from D Company and Second-Lieutenant Sandy Thomas from C Company made contact with the Australians of 23 Battalion on their left. Thomas found that the Australians had no clear idea of the whereabouts of the New Zealanders and, indeed, had a 3-inch mortar trained on the gully where 23 Battalion's headquarters was situated. Connolly's description of being taken to the Australian brigade headquarters is typically entertaining: 'It was up near the top of the high pass and we swapped pass words. Ours was "Oamaru-Timaru-Waipukurau" with reply "Hi Ha Blowflies". This annoyed the Aussies as they had difficulty with the challenge part. Their Brigadier said "Our challenge is 'Sydney'." I said "Reply 'Harbour Bridge'." In horror they asked me how I knew it.'

Next day the Australians took over a large portion of D Company's position. This made the 23rd's sector more compact and enabled it to have a company in reserve for the first and only time in the Greek campaign. During the afternoon the Bren-carrier patrol, under Lieutenant Max Coop, shot up a German motor-cyclist and side-car reconnoitring the bridge and ground to the east of it: one German was killed and another taken prisoner. The latter said that the German air reconnaissance had reported the forward British area free of troops—an unexpected tribute to the battalion camouflage.

The activity in the air was more marked at this time than at any other during the battalion's stay in Greece. Enemy planes were over the area at various times: with machine-gun fire, the fighters and fighter-bombers would search out likely scrub and other cover and, on spotting sufficient movement to warrant it, would call up the two-engined bombers. On 20 April six Hurricanes unexpectedly arrived and shot down a bomber. 'The hillside was a sea of tin hats thrown in the air and it echoed to loud cheering,' reported Connolly. For the most part, however, the enemy planes were free to bomb and machine-gun as they pleased and the battalion's rear areas came in for marked attention.

Artillery duels went on for most of 21 April, mainly between German and Australian guns. D Company had a grandstand view of the enemy guns sited in trees and scrub in front of Lamia. The arrival of a section of Vickers guns meant that B Company men had to work till 1.30 a.m. carrying ammunition, wire and supplies up a steep cliff-like face to their positions. Some extremely hard work went into improving

the defences generally as it was understood that a 'last man, last round' stand was to be made on this line.

At noon on 22 April, however, the Colonel was informed that the Greeks were about to capitulate, that continued resistance might simply increase the devastation of the country, and that the Imperial troops were again threatened with being outflanked. They were therefore to evacuate [Greece](#). In the New Zealand Division, 5 Brigade was to withdraw first to the point of embarkation: it was to move along the coast to [Ayia Konstandinos](#) on the night of 22 - 23 April and to the beaches at [Marathon](#) on the following night.

Colonel Falconer was distressed to learn that the two forward platoons of B Company, Nos. 10 and 12, commanded respectively by Second-Lieutenants Fergus Begg and Alan [McPhail](#),⁴⁴ were to be left in position to defend the vital ground around the demolished bridge and to bluff the enemy into thinking that a determined stand, and not a withdrawal, was being made. Under the company second-in-command, Captain Jock [Worsnop](#),⁴⁵ this small detachment formed part of a 5 Brigade force, completed by two platoons from 22 Battalion and the Bren carriers of 22 and 28 Battalions, which had the responsibility of covering the bridge site and providing some link between 6 Brigade and the Australians until 9 p.m. on 24 April.

Although the 23rd's B Echelon had been strafed and bombed during the afternoon, Lieutenant McGregor, the transport officer, had his trucks ready behind the forward positions by 8.30 p.m. on 22 April. At the same hour, the forward companies withdrew and began their march back to the trucks. Their movement was not detected by the enemy. The Colonel and B Company headquarters took a regretful farewell of Captain Worsnop and his detachment: few thought it likely they would ever see 10 and 12 Platoons again. The convoy made slow progress back through the 6 Brigade positions at [Molos](#) to [Ayia Konstandinos](#). Dawn was breaking on 23 April before the battalion's last vehicle was safely concealed in the trees. The German 'recce' planes were over shortly afterwards and later their fighter-bombers took up their task of bombing and strafing all likely targets in the rear areas. The 23rd was either well concealed or singularly fortunate: no enemy aircraft troubled it that day.

In the late afternoon of 23 April, orders arrived from 5 Brigade for the

withdrawal to be continued that night, with [Marathon](#) as the destination. The route was to be via [Livanatais](#) and [Atalandi](#) and the main central road to [Athens](#), where an authority entitled 'Movement Control' was to give further directions. At 9 p.m., in 3-ton trucks of the [Divisional Ammunition Company](#) and its own remaining trucks, the 23rd set out on its 150-mile journey. As far as [Livanatais](#), side-lights only were used but thereafter the headlights were turned full on. This enabled the trucks to travel at high speed and, as the Germans were doing practically no night flying at that time, the risks were not increased. This was the fastest road move made by the 23rd in [Greece](#). 'We travelled like the hammers of hell all night,' says Private Johnston in his diary. In places the road wound up and down steep hills and over many dangerous sections, and yet speed was essential if vehicles were to be off the roads before sunrise. The sight of miles and miles of vehicles with headlights blazing moving round the side of the mountains was one to be remembered. Only one vehicle belonging to the battalion was lost over a bank. It carried some 3-inch mortars which had to be abandoned with the truck.

The 5 Brigade convoy reached [Athens](#) just before dawn. Precious time was spent in discovering which beach was to be used by the different units. Eventually, some definite ruling was obtained and the 23rd moved down the [Athens- Marathon](#) road to its place of hiding among some pine trees. Every vehicle was again hidden before 'Egbert' and the other 'recce' planes came over. The day was spent resting in concealment. 'Am beginning to feel a bit weary of things,' wrote the normally cheerful Johnston in his diary.



At 9 p.m., 24 April, the 23rd embussed again and moved another 20 miles to an

assembly area whence it was to march to D Beach, [Porto Rafti](#). Some vehicles had been destroyed at [Marathon](#) and the remainder were either left with sumps drained and engines running or were sabotaged with hammer and hacksaw. Some confusion prevailed as contradictory orders were passed along in the dark, but eventually the troops marched to the correct beach, waded into the sea, boarded the barges and were embarked on the [Glengyle](#), the [Calcutta](#) or, in a few cases, the [Phoebe](#). Some embarkation officers, strictly obeying an instruction that no heavy equipment was to be embarked, ordered picks and shovels and heavier weapons to be dumped. Some tools were dropped but all Bren guns and other weapons were taken. The 'scramble nets' and ladders enabled the men to climb the steep sides of the ships without unnecessary delay.

The battalion completed embarkation soon after 2 a.m. on 25 April. 'Thank God we have a Navy!' This expressed the feelings of the great majority as they got on board. 'We were greeted with the most wonderful kindness and the most wonderful cups of cocoa,' says R. D. Minson of A Company. As around 3 a.m. the ships weighed anchor for [Crete](#), those nearest him heard Major Thomason remark: 'To think that just twenty-six years ago today, I was sailing the opposite way!' It was Anzac Day and, almost to the hour, the anniversary of the original Anzac landing at [Gallipoli](#).

On the [Glengyle](#) Bren guns had to be mounted in an anti-aircraft role. 'The alacrity with which our fellows volunteered for this job was an inspiration,' wrote Colonel Falconer at the time. Low cloud and some fog, combined with the fire of the various guns, prevented the enemy bombers from doing any serious damage to the ships in which the battalion made the crossing to Crete. Indeed, two German bombers were shot down, much to the delight of those who saw them fall. In the late afternoon, the 23rd arrived safely at [Suda Bay](#) in Crete. For it the Greek campaign was over.

In the meantime, the rearguard party under Captain Worsnop had passed under the command of 6 Brigade. Platoon dispositions were altered and improved. No. 10 occupied the more important forward positions previously held by A Company, while 12 Platoon made some changes to ensure that the vital ground covered by B Company was still adequately safeguarded. The night of 22-23 April passed quietly. The following morning was reasonably quiet: several enemy fighter-bombers appeared but concentrated on gun positions; the rival artilleries shelled vehicles or

other indications of activity.

About 4.30 p.m., however, enemy machine guns opened fire on the B Company positions nearest to the river. Under cover of this fire a party of eighteen Germans dashed up to the bridge site on motor-cycles and attempted to cross the river. Captain Worsnop immediately instructed Second-Lieutenant McPhail to take a patrol out on the right flank to cut off the Germans who crossed the river. He himself dashed off to get Second-Lieutenant Begg to do the same on the left flank, but he had not gone very far when he saw McPhail in trouble under heavy machine-gun fire. He helped him by getting a 10 Platoon Bren, sited on the bluff due south of the bridge, to shoot up the principal enemy machine-gun post. This was done successfully and McPhail was able to proceed, although he was unable to get into his own section posts which remained under fire.

McPhail now proceeded to carry out the task of the patrol alone. Armed with a tommy gun, he moved beyond the wire and between the road and the river until he was able to attack the enemy from a flank. Ten more of the enemy were just about to cross the river when McPhail opened fire: two Germans were hit and fell into the river, the others withdrew. Taking up a covered position from which he could bring aimed fire on to the blown bridge, McPhail remained there until he had only one magazine left. His fire deterred the enemy from further attempts to cross. Returning to his platoon at approximately 8.30 p.m., he ran into two of the enemy who had crossed the bridge when the first attempt was made. He shot one of these but the other escaped. So successful were his attempts to discourage the enemy from penetrating into a sector held by the merest handful of New Zealanders that the Germans did not renew their attempts to cross the river until 10 a.m. next day.

When McPhail got back to his platoon, he found that orders to withdraw at nine o'clock that night had been received. Although their area was shelled rather heavily after the machinegunning ceased, the two platoons of B Company withdrew successfully and without casualties. Withdrawal would certainly have been rendered difficult, if not impossible, if the enemy had managed to get a strong foothold south of the river. Nos. 10 and 12 Platoons reached [Molos](#) in the early hours of 24 April. The trucks which were to have carried them to rejoin 5 Brigade did not arrive, and consequently they had to wait and travel out with 6 Brigade, which left this area

about 10 p.m. At first they followed the same route as the rest of the battalion to the south, but instead of going through [Athens](#) to the beaches to the east, they crossed the [Corinth Canal](#) and moved by stages to [Monemvasia](#), where they embarked on HMS [Hotspur](#) on the night of 28-29 April. As 6 Brigade did not disembark in [Crete](#), 10 and 12 Platoons continued their voyage, after transfer to the Comliebank in [Suda Bay](#), to [Port Said](#).

Two other parties of the 23rd must also be mentioned here. The 1st Reinforcements had trained with the 23rd in New Zealand, England and Egypt. Captains [Scoular](#) ⁴⁶ and [Caldwell](#), ⁴⁷ Lieutenants [Simmonds](#), ⁴⁸ [Grant](#), ⁴⁹ [McKinlay](#), ⁵⁰ [Deans](#) ⁵¹ and A. W. Moodie represented the 23rd in the reinforcement camp at [Voula](#). Of these, McKinlay and Deans did guard duty at the Hasani aerodrome before being evacuated in the night of 26–27 April. Captain Caldwell and Lieutenant Simmonds participated in the fighting at [Kalamata](#) on the night of 28–29 April. Most other ranks in the 1st Reinforcements had been absorbed into the battalion before it left Egypt, but a number who had been sent back when sick or who had been separated from the unit for some other reason were in the New Zealand Composite Battalion at [Kalamata](#). Unfortunately, like the officers named, they were taken prisoner when the plans for evacuation broke down.

Major Kelly, Lieutenant Bassett, Lance-Corporal [Bowers](#), ⁵² Privates C. Pankhurst and [Ludke](#) ⁵³ preceded the main body of the 23rd to [Athens](#) and were given special duties in embarking troops from C Beach at [Rafina](#). They did not rejoin the unit till 29 April, by which time they had been placed on the 'not accounted for' list. They were among the last to embark from their beach and narrowly escaped capture.

The 23rd had not been committed to any attack in [Greece](#) nor had it been attacked in force. Its casualties were therefore moderately light: 9 were killed or died of wounds, 8 were wounded, and 36 (6 of whom had first been wounded) were prisoners. The battalion remained a well-organised fighting force.

Its men now had a better understanding than before of what war meant. What had previously been vaguely understood was now a reality and a matter of poignant regret. 'As we left this beautiful country, we felt like traitors to think we were leaving these good people to the scant mercy of the Huns,' wrote one private.

Their first campaign had been short but trying. They had at times been so exhausted that they had needed all their stamina to carry on under the difficulties, but they had proved themselves to one another and the unit was the better for its experience of action: officers trusted men and men trusted their officers as they would never have done in years of training. Some practical lessons had been learned, especially on concealment and camouflage and on the way to deal with enemy infantry. Most men also took pride in having participated in the battalion's first actions and in knowing that, despite being completely outnumbered and lacking adequate air support, they had never been forced from a position before the time ordered for withdrawal. They knew, too, that despite difficult night withdrawals and confused convoy moves, the battalion had never been seriously disorganised but had continued, as it had begun, a compact fighting unit. As with most other units, officers and men of the 23rd held that man for man they were superior to the Germans and that, supported in the air and on the ground with machines comparable in quality and quantity with those used by the Germans, they could go on to win. When the 23rd left Greece, there was nothing wrong with the unit that a short period of rest and some good food could not remedy. The spirit to continue the fight was strong.

The unit's official war diary, as written by Lieutenant Bassett, summarised the battalion's experiences in Greece with apt brevity. 'In Greece we lived amongst the gods at Olympos, held the Pass at Thermopylae and ran for Marathon.'

¹ Pte C. S. Pankhurst; Riverton; born Gummies Bush, Riverton, 18 Sep 1914; farmer; wounded 25 Oct 1942.

² Maj I. O. Manson; Invercargill; born Otautau, 9 Jul 1905; clerk; CO 20 Bn 5–21 Jul 1942.

³ Capt J. A. Bevin; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 31 Jul 1911; clerk.

⁴ 2 Lt A. R. M. Bowie; Hermitage, Mount Cook; born Timaru, 28 Oct 1901; alpine guide; wounded 27 Mar 1943.

⁵ Pte I. P. Mannering; Christchurch; born NZ 11 Feb 1906; bushman;

wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁶ Capt J. H. Ensor, m.i.d.; Cheviot; born NZ 29 Jan 1908; farm manager.

⁷ Pte J. R. Johnston; born NZ 30 Nov 1918; carpenter.

⁸ 2 Lt N. Trewby, DCM; Dunedin; born NZ 18 Sep 1901; insurance manager.

⁹ The food and clothing thus destroyed would have been of little use to the well equipped Germans and might well have been left for the Greeks.

¹⁰ Capt H. M. Smith, ED, MC (Gk); Dunedin; born Dunedin, 26 Apr 1906; journalist.

¹¹ Maj D. M. Davin, MBE, m.i.d.; England; born Invercargill, 1 Sep 1913; student; wounded 20 May 1941.

¹² Cpl P. V. Campbell; Timaru; born NZ 23 Feb 1914; salesman; p.w. 16 Apr 1941.

¹³ L-Cpl A. H. Quinn; born NZ 14 Feb 1915; dredge worker; died of wounds 17 Apr 1941.

¹⁴ Maj G. H. Cunningham, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Dunedin, 5 May 1910; stock agent; twice wounded.

¹⁵ Capt R. L. Bond; Adelaide; born Aust., 19 Feb 1908; brewer; enlisted in AIF 1942.

¹⁶ WO II A. H. Todd, MM; Otautau; born Scotland, 6 Aug 1910; labourer; three times wounded.

¹⁷ L-Sgt J. Templeton; born Kaiapoi, 27 Dec 1905; electrician; died of wounds while p.w. 5 Jun 1941.

¹⁸ 2 Lt R. E. Buick, MM; Alford Forest, [Ashburton](#); born NZ 17 May 1918; tractor driver; wounded 6 Jul 1942.

¹⁹ L-Cpl J. Souquet; born Dunedin, 14 Jul 1904; labourer; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941; died 6 May 1949.

²⁰ Pte A. Agnew; [Greymouth](#); born NZ 20 Sep 1904; painter; wounded 4 Jul 1942.

²¹ Lt-Col E. E. Richards, DSO, m.i.d.; [Nelson](#); born Kumara, 6 Dec 1915; civil servant; CO 26 Bn Dec 1943-Apr 1944.

²² Capt R. S. Stewart; Gore; born NZ 17 Mar 1906; medical practitioner; RMO 23 Bn May 1940-May 1941; p.w. 23 May 1941.

²³ Cpl R. W. Inglis; [Greymouth](#); born [Greymouth](#), 13 May 1919; yardman.

²⁴ Sgt C. H. Dutton; [Motueka](#); born England, 24 Jan 1913; butcher and farmer; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

²⁵ Cpl H. A. Smith; [Christchurch](#); born Chayley, England, 1917; seaman; twice wounded.

²⁶ L-Cpl J. B. Martin; born [Greymouth](#), 15 Nov 1914; bushman; killed in action 15 Apr 1941.

²⁷ Pte T. J. Fisher; born NZ 2 Nov 1902; surfaceman; p.w. Apr 1941; deceased.

²⁸ Pte R. McL. Weir; [Lower Hutt](#); born NZ 23 Mar 1910; labourer; p.w. Apr 1941.

²⁹ The fortunes of 13 Platoon on [Mount Olympus](#), as seen through the eyes of a novelist who was himself the platoon commander, are fully described in

Chapters 2 and 3 of Davin's novel *For the Rest of Our Lives*. Practically all the characters are easily recognised, although names are changed, for example, 'Congo' Smith becomes 'Jungle Jones'.

³⁰ Lt-Col W. B. Thomas, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d., Silver Star (US); London; born Nelson, 29 Jun 1918; bank officer; CO 23 Bn Jun-Aug 1944, Oct 1944-May 1945; 22 Bn (Japan) Oct 1945-Nov 1946; wounded and p.w. 25 May 1941; escaped Nov 1941; returned to unit May 1942; twice wounded; Hampshire Regt, 1947-.

³¹ Capt T. F. Begg; born NZ 17 Jul 1912; stock agent; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

³² Pte W. Beynon; born NZ 24 Aug 1908; builder; wounded May 1941; deceased.

³³ Pte P. J. Stanger; born Dunedin, 27 Jul 1918; farm labourer; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941; died 20 May 1949.

³⁴ Gebirgsjager in Griechenland und auf Kreta gives a brief account of this effort from the German standpoint.

³⁵ The prevailing conviction that the Germans were using all kinds of tricks of deception is reflected in the 23rd's official unit war diary for 17 April: 'Enemy party ... presumably Alpine troops ... wearing battledress and some N.Z. patches, some shouting in English.... When Sgt. Mulhern killed by S.M.G. by enemy in N.Z. battledress'. Actually Mulhern was not killed and he had every opportunity for observing the enemy. He subsequently wrote to the author: 'The enemy were not wearing battledress.... They were Austrian Gebirgsjager and wore the usual German uniform, with the edelweiss flower on their side-caps when they were not wearing helmets.'

³⁶ Sgt B. J. Walsh; born NZ 25 Jun 1917; clerk; killed in action 17 Apr 1941.

³⁷ Sgt M. E. Mulhern; Christchurch; born Geraldine, 6 Jun 1904; railway fireman; wounded and p.w. 17 Apr 1941.

³⁸ Pte J. E. Brook, MM; born NZ 12 Mar 1918; labourer; accidentally killed 24 Jun 1942.

³⁹ Sgt H. R. Cherry; Christchurch; born Kaiapoi, 11 Apr 1909; NZR employee; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

⁴⁰ Pte L. C. J. McGoverne; Trentham; born Dunedin, 16 Sep 1922; freezing worker; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁴¹ German reports now with War History Branch state that the German losses were 5 killed and 5 wounded. Possibly the statement made to Mulhern referred to the combined Olympus- Kokkinoplos affair

⁴² Sgt R. D. Minson; Motukaraka; born Christchurch, 24 Sep 1918; dairy worker; twice wounded.

⁴³ Maj G. H. Heal, MBE; Auckland; born NZ 29 Dec 1906; Regular soldier.

⁴⁴ Lt-Col E. A. McPhail, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d.; Wyndham; born Wanganui, 31 Dec 1906; bank official; CO 23 Bn 16 May-10 Jun 1944, 4 Aug-12 Oct 1944; 21 Bn Oct 1944-May 1945; wounded 9 Apr 1943.

⁴⁵ Lt-Col J. A. Worsnop, MBE; born Makotuku, 31 Jan 1909; Regular soldier; 1 Army Tk Bn 1942-43; CO Div Cav, Japan, 1946; wounded 22 Jul 1944; Area Officer, Christchurch; died Christchurch, 24 Jul 1957.

⁴⁶ Capt J. C. Scoular; Dunedin; born NZ 3 Oct 1918; clerk; p.w. Apr 1941.

⁴⁷ Capt E. Caldwell; Hamilton, born NZ 26 Feb 1904; savings bank officer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁴⁸ Capt K. Simmonds; Dunedin; born England, 15 Mar 1907; factory manager; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁴⁹ Capt M. D. Grant; born NZ 9 Jan 1904; clerk; killed in action 17 Jul 1942.

⁵⁰ Maj R. G. McKinlay; Dunedin; born NZ 20 Oct 1908; slipper manufacturer.

⁵¹ Capt R. G. Deans; Homebush; born Christchurch, 5 Apr 1915; farmer; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

⁵² Cpl W. J. Bowers; Ward; born NZ 14 Jan 1917; labourer.

⁵³ Pte E. G. W. Ludke; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 30 May 1916; sawmill hand.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 5 – BATTLE OF CRETE

CHAPTER 5

Battle of Crete

IN April 1941 the rugged and mountainous Greek island of [Crete](#) was strategically important to both British and Germans. Situated close enough in the Eastern Mediterranean to [Greece](#), [Turkey](#) and North Africa to make its three airfields of [Maleme](#), [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#) of considerable value for offensive and defensive purposes, [Crete](#) also possessed in [Suda Bay](#) a large and useful harbour.

Unfortunately, from the British viewpoint, the ports and airfields of [Crete](#) were all in the north and consequently within very easy reach of German aircraft based in southern [Greece](#).

From 1 November 1940 the British had occupied the ports and other strategic points in [Crete](#) but, even by April 1941, little had been done to prepare for invasion. Although a small British garrison had been established on the island, [Middle East Headquarters](#) had too few men and supplies available to cope with simultaneous demands in the [Western Desert](#), [Abyssinia](#), [Greece](#) and [Iraq](#), and thus no effective provision could be made for the defence of [Crete](#) prior to the German victory in [Greece](#). Thereafter, it was almost certainly too late to complete adequate Cretan defences, but this did not lessen the strategic importance of the island. At the highest level, therefore, the decision was taken to defend [Crete](#) with the aid of troops evacuated from [Greece](#). [Crete](#) was not to be given up without a stubborn defence.

In the afternoon of 25 April the 5 New Zealand Brigade units disembarked at [Suda Bay](#). With a view, no doubt, to making an equitable distribution later, British officers and NCOs on the quays ordered the dumping of weapons and tools. Men who had carried their rifles and Brens from [Mount Olympus](#) refused to part with them on arrival in [Crete](#). The 23rd, still an organised and complete unit (less the two platoons of B Company left with 6 Brigade), marched five or six miles to a bivouac camp on the Prison road to the west of [Suda](#). Hot tea, cigarettes and chocolate, handed to the troops at a halting place, helped to tide them over a tiring conclusion to their move from [Greece](#).

Relieved to find themselves safe on dry land and temporarily free from bombing

and machine-gunning from the air, the men of the 23rd spent the first night in [Crete](#) in 'B' transit camp. Conditions were primitive: cooking had to be done in cut-down petrol tins; many men had no messing gear and fewer had blankets. To keep warm at night, men had to sleep fully dressed. Drinking vessels and eating implements were manufactured out of tins and pieces of wire. Supplies in this and other more important respects remained short during the period the battalion spent in [Crete](#).

As [General Freyberg](#) did not reach the island till 29 April, Brigadier Hargest, as the senior New Zealand officer present, took command of the New Zealand troops in [Crete](#). Colonel Falconer took temporary charge of 5 Brigade, leaving Major Leckie again in command of the 23rd. The first day was spent in reorganisation and in resting. Stragglers were collected and efforts made to secure new equipment, especially tools. Later, when the weapons brought out of [Greece](#) were fully checked, it was found that the battalion still had intact some 31 Brens, 2 Boys anti-tank rifles, 26 Thompson sub-machine guns, 2 two-inch mortars and 499 rifles—a total reached only because men had preferred to sacrifice personal belongings to their weapons and the stronger had carried more than their share. In his diary Major Leckie praised the man who brought from [Greece](#) to [Crete](#) '500 rounds, 6 Bren magazines, a Bren gun, his rifle and a shovel.'

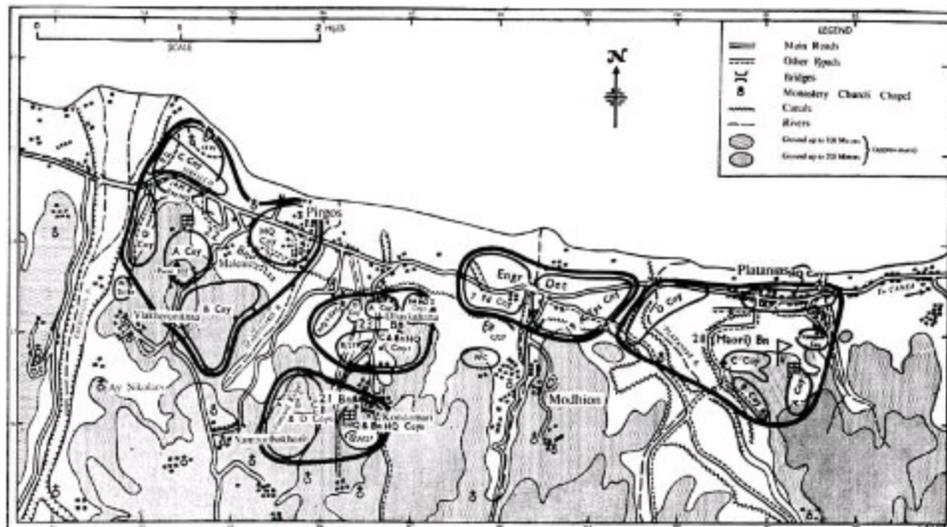
On 27 April the battalion marched 11 miles west to take over a position in and around [Platanias](#) from 1 Battalion, The Welch Regiment. On the following evening Brigadier Hargest and Colonel Falconer returned to their normal commands. Two days later, General Wavell arrived from [Cairo](#) to put the defences of [Crete](#) in order for the airborne attack which was now definitely expected. Much to his surprise, since he had expected to leave that day for Egypt, where he hoped to re-equip and reorganise his whole Division, [General Freyberg](#) was appointed to command ' [Creforce](#)', as the combined British, Australian, New Zealand and Greek forces in [Crete](#) were now called. There were now approximately 15,000 British, 7750 New Zealand and 6500 Australian troops in [Crete](#). Many of these were unarmed or were specialists who had been forced to leave their guns, heavy equipment or trucks in [Greece](#). The 10,000 Greek soldiers were mostly untrained and ill-equipped. On 1 May [General Freyberg](#) notified the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, that the forces at his disposal were totally inadequate to meet the attack envisaged. 'Unless the number of fighter aircraft is greatly increased and naval forces are made available to deal

with a seaborne attack I cannot hope to hold out with land forces alone, which, as a result of the campaign in Greece, are now devoid of any artillery, have insufficient tools for digging, very little transport, and inadequate war reserves of equipment and ammunition.' He urged that, unless the full support of the Navy and Air Force could be assured, the question of holding Crete should be reconsidered.

Nevertheless, although the problem of supplying Crete though the increasingly heavily bombed ports on the north coast grew more acute, General Freyberg disposed his troops to cover the sectors of Heraklion, Retimo, Suda Bay and Maleme. While British, Australian and Greek troops covered the first three of these sectors, the New Zealanders and some Greeks were made responsible for the last-named. This sector stretched west for some ten miles from the outskirts of Canea and had two main centres of defence—that of 4 Brigade between Canea and Galatas and that of 5 Brigade covering the important Maleme airfield. As 6 Brigade had been evacuated to Egypt from Greece, a new brigade, the 10th, was formed on 12 May from 20 Battalion, 6 and 8 Greek Battalions, a composite battalion of men from various New Zealand non-infantry units and a detachment of three squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry temporarily converted to infantry. Brigadier Puttick¹ had command of the New Zealand Division for the battle. Conferences on the various levels followed the giving of orders by Generals Wavell and Freyberg. After a 5 Brigade conference on 1 May and a personal reconnaissance of the Maleme sector by Brigadier Puttick, 21, 22, 23 and 28 Battalions altered their positions slightly and took over the ground they were to hold in face of invasion from air or sea.

Whereas the four 5 Brigade units had at first been centred on Platanias and facing west, they were on 3 May moved to cover the Maleme landing field. Twenty-second Battalion was given the post of danger and of honour covering the actual landing field; 21 Battalion was moved to the higher ground south-east of Maleme while the 23rd moved into the 21st's former bivouac area east-south-east of Maleme; 28 Battalion was dispersed in and around Platanias, with 5 Brigade Headquarters remaining south of that village and on the east flank of the brigade position. The 23rd's area was mainly among olive trees about two to three thousand yards from the edge of the Maleme airstrip and on the slopes above the Sfakoriako stream south of Pirgos. The small village of Dhaskaliana was in the battalion's northern sector. Brigadier Puttick had written that 'a good solid battalion' was

required for the counter-attack role and this was the task given to the 23rd, which was under orders to be prepared to counter-attack the enemy should he land on the airfield or on the beach to the east of it.



FIFTH BRIGADE, MALEME, 20 MAY 1941
fifth brigade, maleme, 20 may 1941

Once they had recovered from the Greek campaign, the men enjoyed immensely their first week or two in Crete. During the first ten days the weather was perfect and most men suffered no hardship from sleeping under the olive trees with practically no bedding. Lieutenant Bassett, the IO, recorded in the unit diary on 2 May: 'Conditions very pleasant in this peaceful waiting existence—parties bathe in the [Mediterranean](#) and bask in the sunshine; the area is fertile with vineyards, cornfields and vegetable patches, and orange vendors ply a steady trade.' That this official statement was quite in keeping with the experience of individual soldiers may be seen from these extracts from Private Johnston's diary: 'Weather fine. Am very happy and in the best of health. (26 April) ... went down to the sea for a swim. All we do is eat oranges and swim. Having a marvellous time. God! I'm as fit as a fiddle—a real box of birds! (29 Apr) ... on fatigues all day, carting wood and water for the cookhouse. We are having a grand time. The grub is rather awful though. (30 Apr) ... went for a long march over the hills for the day, and took our grub, with about a dozen oranges each. Boy! I am feeling fit. Never been so well off before. (2 May) ... This holiday we are having seems too darned good to last. These swims in the old [Mediterranean](#) are great. (7 May)'

Actually, the 'holiday' had involved the preparation of company defensive

positions: with limited supplies of tools and wire, the new defences did not compare very favourably with those constructed on [Olympus](#). As most of their heavier equipment and all their trucks had been left in [Greece](#), the men of HQ Company were organised into two rifle companies, designated HQ No. 1 and HQ No. 2 Companies. Since 11 Platoon of B Company was included in the former, this company was commonly called B Company. All platoons had their 'action stations' which they were to occupy in the event of an attack. Officers and NCOs reconnoitred routes both to the beaches to the north and to the [Maleme](#) airfield in case they had to mount a counter-attack in either direction. Stand-to was observed from 5 to 6 a.m. and from 8.30 to 9.30 p.m. On 9 May, in accordance with a directive from Creforce Headquarters, the CO issued a regular training syllabus and, in order to reduce the activity in the 23rd's area, sent half the unit out on route marches and tactical exercises while the other half engaged in weapon and other training near their posts. 'Concealment from the air must be practised at all times,' stated an order from Battalion Headquarters issued in early May. The product of experience in [Greece](#), it was so well obeyed that German reconnaissance planes did not locate the battalion's positions prior to the invasion. The dousing of all cooking fires on the approach of such aircraft was a dreadful trial to the cooks, but this was an important aspect of the concealment plan.

On Sunday 4 May, 'Bob' Griffiths, the 23rd's padre, paid tribute to those members of the battalion who had died in [Greece](#). After the church service, [General Freyberg](#) spoke to the officers and NCOs on the Greek campaign and on their role in Crete. He praised the withdrawal as a well executed feat of arms and assured his listeners that he had never commanded better troops. He then insisted that the situation in [Crete](#) was serious, that invasion was imminent, and that any enemy troops who landed must be met and destroyed.

While the 23rd and other units awaited invasion, the position concerning close-support weapons improved slightly. A party of 3 officers and 75 other ranks from [28 Battery 5 Field Regiment](#), temporarily under command of the battalion, moved out on 8 May to man some Italian and French 75-millimetre guns. Nevertheless, the almost complete lack of artillery meant that the higher command could not secure a sufficient concentration of guns to be of real advantage. On 3 May Lieutenant [MacDonald](#)² of No. 1 Company 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion arrived with four Vickers

guns, which were sited on a commanding slope to fire down upon [Maleme](#). On 8 May Lieutenant Richards and the mortar platoon received two 3-inch mortars of South African manufacture and they were sited behind and below the Vickers guns. Some barbed wire arrived and, since there were no pickets, it was strung from tree to tree or along the vines on the lower slopes. Signals equipment was particularly short. The 23rd possessed three telephones and a few hundred yards of signal wire. Other telephones had been brought from [Greece](#) but had been handed over to Brigade Headquarters for distribution to less fortunate units. One telephone was run by Lieutenant Noel [Jones](#),³ the signals officer, and his men to 22 Battalion, and arrangements were also made for visual communication with that unit in the event of the line being cut. On 'Lookout Hill' behind the Vickers guns, provision was made for giving a warning of invasion: two beacon fires, fifty yards apart, were to signify invasion by sea and three, invasion by air. When the time came, no beacon fires were needed.

After seeing very little of the [RAF](#) in [Greece](#), the New Zealanders were pleased to see a few friendly aircraft operating from [Maleme](#). But daily the number of fighters was reduced in their fight against great odds and it became apparent that, until fuller support was available from Egypt, to keep the handful of surviving fighters in [Crete](#) was merely to sacrifice them in vain. Consequently, on 19 May, the remaining four Hurricanes and three Gladiators were sent back to Egypt. By that time the German bombing which had first been directed almost exclusively at the shipping in [Suda Bay](#) and other ports had switched to the 'softening-up' of [Maleme](#) and other defences. From 13 May onwards, bombing and machine-gunning from the air increased in intensity: it was the prelude to invasion.

On 13 May Colonel Falconer bade farewell to the 23rd and went to command 10 Composite Brigade, and later 4 Brigade, before proceeding to Egypt to take charge of [Maadi Camp](#). All ranks regretted his departure. Colonel Falconer had achieved, however, what he set out to do in accepting the command of the 23rd: he had commanded it through its vitally important training period and then had led it through its first campaign. His influence was felt long after he left the unit: his example and views were quoted again and again by younger men who succeeded him in command of the battalion. The private soldiers shared the general admiration and respect for their first CO. Thus, in writing to his mother on 8 October 1941,

Private W. Beynon said: 'I saw Brigadier Falconer.... He is a fine man. I do not know what would have happened to the 23rd Bn in [Greece](#) if it had not been for him.'

Another private, whose spelling detracted in no way from the sincerity of his tribute, recorded in his diary on 7 December 1941: 'Saw our old Colnol Falkener who is now a Brigadier—The best Colnol we ever had or ever will have!'

Brian Bassett, the IO, accompanied Colonel Falconer and continued as Brigade Major of 10 Brigade when its command was taken over by [Colonel Kippenberger](#). For a junior officer, Bassett exercised a considerable influence on the spirit and the traditions of the 23rd. Later on, after Bassett's death, [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) paid tribute to his qualities and to his efforts on [Crete](#): 'Brian was undefeatable, gay, tireless, dazzlingly gallant, an inspiration to the whole motley collection called 10th Brigade, and to his Commander.'

Major Leckie, who had commanded the 23rd on board ship and in England, resumed command of the battalion. Major Fyfe became second-in-command while Second-Lieutenant Dan Davin became IO. Some NCOs departed at this time for the Middle East OCTU and this necessitated promotions additional to those arising from casualties in [Greece](#). Prominent among those who wanted to stay to see what they termed 'the fun' and had to be ordered to go to OCTU was Paul [Freyberg](#),⁴ who had joined the 23rd in England.

The intensification of the bombing of [Maleme](#) and the more obvious defences of [Crete](#) lent colour to the higher level intelligence reports that German airborne and seaborne attacks were to be expected within a week. Although the successful German raids on British shipping made the supply problem acute, and there were always too few troops for the many defensive tasks, some progress was made in preparing for invasion in the 5 Brigade sector. On Sunday 11 May, Brigadier Hargest convened a conference at the Court House in [Maleme](#) village and issued verbal orders to the nine units and sub-units under his command. On 18 May 5 Brigade Operation Instruction No. 4 confirmed these orders and clarified the roles of the various units. A detachment of the New Zealand Engineers of [7 Field Company](#) and [19 Army Troops Company](#) linked the [Maori Battalion](#) at [Platanias](#) with 23 Battalion at [Dhaskaliana](#). In addition to the platoon of 1 Company [27 MG Battalion](#) with the 23rd, two platoons of the same company were under command of 22 Battalion and were placed on the outskirts of the airfield. The 22nd also had two I tanks dug into a

position overlooking the aerodrome and ready to 'roll down' in a 'mopping-up' role in the event of a major landing. The artillery support was limited: [27 Battery](#) had A Troop with two English 3.7-inch howitzers in the 21st's area, B Troop with three Italian 75-millimetre guns in the 23rd's area, and C Troop with four French guns in the area held by the engineers. Two troops of 156 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, one troop of 7 Australian Light Anti-Aircraft Battery and some 3-inch anti-aircraft guns covered [Maleme](#) airfield.

So far as the infantry units were concerned, the operation instruction confirmed their roles: 5 Brigade was to 'defend its position at all costs' and, in the event of the enemy making an airborne or seaborne attack on any part of the brigade area between [Platanias](#) and the Tavronitis River, its units were 'to counter-attack and destroy him immediately'. The Maori Battalion was to remain in the [Platanias](#) area, to patrol the neighbouring beaches and to be 'available for counter attack'. The engineers were made responsible for their area and the beaches on their front. Similarly, 21 Battalion was to remain in its position but, since Brigadier Hargest and others recognised the very real danger of an enemy landing in the unoccupied and quite undefended area and beaches to the west of the Tavronitis River, it was to be prepared 'to move and hold line of the river facing West from [22 Bn](#) left flank', and two platoons with a mortar were to take up a holding position along this west flank immediately. Twenty-second Battalion retained, as its primary task, the static defence of the aerodrome by fire. Its support and reserve companies were to be utilised for 'immediate counter-attack under cover of mortars and M.G. fire.' The instruction added: 'If necessary, support will be called for from 23 Bn and should telephonic means of comn fail here the call will be by "verey" signal (WHITE-GREEN-WHITE)'. Subsequent events make it important that the 23rd's orders be quoted as given: '23 Bn will maintain its present position and be prepared to counter-attack if enemy effects a landing (a) on the beach or at [Maleme](#) Aerodrome, (b) on area occupied by Det N.Z.E. West of [Platanias](#).'

The 23rd laid some anti-personnel mines as well as some more wire along the north of its sector. The increased enemy air activity gave colour to the message from Mr Churchill which was read to all troops on the night of 19 May. He said: 'All our thoughts are with you in these fateful days.... Victory where you are would powerfully affect world situation.' [General Freyberg](#) had reported that morale was

high. In the 23rd, the troops were fit and looking forward to action. As one private wrote after the bombing of [Maleme](#) and its environs had begun: 'Boy! The fun has started. All the boys are just waiting on this invasion by parachutists, which is to take place sometime.'

The invasion came on 20 May. For over two hours from shortly after dawn, large forces of bombers and fighters attacked the airfield perimeter and such anti-aircraft guns as were visible. The heavier Dorniers, Heinkels and Junkers bombed and bombed again; the Stukas, many with screamers attached, dived on their targets with an ear-piercing and terrifying whistle; the fighters, with no [RAF](#) opposition to counter, fired cannon and machine-gun bullets indiscriminately through the trees and other cover. If the enemy could not annihilate, he could at least attempt to intimidate the defenders of [Maleme](#). Immense clouds of dust stirred up by the bombs rose high into the air and acted as a partial screen for the gliders and troop-carrying planes which came next. The gliders came swishing over but, although Lieutenant MacDonald's Vickers guns got on to the nearest, they landed well outside the 23rd's area. Those which landed on the airfield or to the east of it were shot up, but others landed safely in the dry riverbed of the Tavronitis or on the undefended flats and beaches to the west. Next came the troop-carriers and the sky seemed to fill suddenly with opening black, white, brown and green blossoms. The paratroops were landing. It was a Jules Verne fantasy come to life.

Although some men were more than a little bewildered by the strangeness of the situation, the 23rd quickly went into action. The excitement was intense during the period of the first 'drop': one officer described those moments as 'like the last minute of an even score test match'. Many of the Germans were shot in the air; some were caught in the olive trees or could not get rid of their harness before a bullet ended their struggles; only a few landed safely in or near the battalion's area and managed to bring their sub-machine guns into action. In his diary Private Charles Pankhurst gives a typical account of those first minutes of the fighting in [Crete](#): 'I thought the end of the world had come as the air seemed full of the parachutes but, once I got something to shoot at, I lost my fear. Duck shooting must be tame compared to parachutist shooting. As they drifted down ... we blazed away with our rifles and there were not many to reach the ground alive. Those who did were nearly all mopped up....'

Before they were mopped up, a few of the Germans in the area inflicted casualties. Thus, Major Tom Fyfe, the battalion second-in-command, was killed by a parachutist just after he had visited the intelligence section observation post on 'Lookout Hill', about 100 yards south-east of Battalion Headquarters. But, for the most part, the only enemy to form up successfully were those who dropped in unoccupied territory. To deal with these, parties of the 23rd were quickly organised and sent out. Thus Major Thomason sent Lieutenant W. B. Thomas and his No. 15 Platoon to mop up the Germans who had landed unmolested on high ground overlooking both 22 and 23 Battalions. By careful stalking and determined attacking, this patrol succeeded in killing twenty-nine Germans and taking three prisoners for the loss of two men killed. ⁵ As Thomas has stated, 'Before long every man in the platoon was wearing a Luger revolver and a pair of Zeiss binoculars, and our morale ran extremely high.' Lieutenant Rex King and 14 Platoon wiped out a small enemy party which was threatening Battalion Headquarters from the south-east and which probably included the parachutist who had killed Major Fyfe. D Company was also ordered to send its platoons to the north and west of the battalion area. Lieutenant Bond and 16 Platoon worked their way along the irrigation canal and ran into a platoon or more of enemy who were just collecting arms and equipment that had been dropped separately. Fierce fighting ensued and 16 Platoon suffered casualties before all the enemy were killed. Lieutenant Connolly and 17 Platoon mopped up to the north of [Dhaskaliana](#) while Lieutenant Cunningham and 18 Platoon linked up with elements of HQ 2 Company and cleared the area round the church. While they were there, another 'drop' of paratroops came fluttering down and were dealt with effectively. As the last of the troop-carriers came over and opened its release door, an 18 Platoon Bren-gunner got his Bren firing right into the open doorway: few, if any, paratroopers landed alive.

In the meantime, the greater part of III Battalion Assault Regiment of II Air Corps had been dropped over the 23rd's positions. Two troop-carriers dropped their loads directly over Battalion Headquarters but the troops there proved equal to the occasion. Colonel Leckie shot five parachutists as they were descending more or less directly on top of him. Lieutenant Dick Orbell, the Adjutant, rose from his packing-case desk to shoot another two. Again a few paratroops landed safely and gave trouble: Lieutenant Dan Davin and others in and around the headquarters area were wounded. Again the danger was effectively removed by Lieutenant King and his

men. Twenty-third Battalion estimates of the number of Germans killed in and around its area vary from four to six hundred. The official historian of the [Crete](#) campaign, the 23rd's IO up to the time of his being wounded, D. M. Davin, has conservatively estimated 'as many as 200 killed in the air, in the trees and on the ground' by his unit on that first day. He mentions, however, that II Air Corps estimated that 400 out of 600 men of III Battalion were killed, but suggests that not all of these would have fallen to the 23rd. Although no careful count was made, all who visited the battalion were impressed by the number of dead paratroopers there. Thus Captain Dawson, Brigade Major of 5 Brigade, who visited the unit to deliver messages and orders, described the scene: '23 Bn at this stage was fairly satisfactory. They had cleaned up all the Huns dropped in their area. Even around Bn HQ there were bodies everywhere, every 10 – 12 yards. One stepped over them as one went through the olive groves—and some very good looking fellows there were, too.' The casualties in the 23rd were, by comparison, surprisingly light on 20 May—only 7 killed and 30 wounded—and morale was high. When Lieutenant Gordon Cunningham passed through three companies en route to Battalion Headquarters that afternoon, he found that every one 'had the same story that the Huns were easy shooting'.

The difficulty of maintaining communications with 22 Battalion meant that the position on [Maleme](#) airfield was not known to Colonel Leckie. After the telephone wires between the two units had been cut by both bombing and by paratroops, Corporal [Pettit](#) ⁶ and other signallers attempted to establish contact by 'visual signalling' but without success. No flare signals from 22 Battalion were seen, despite the fact that the 23rd intelligence section's OP was manned throughout the day and various officers watched the [Maleme](#) environs for signals. Of course, the more or less continuous activity of the enemy aircraft discouraged both battalions from doing very much that would attract bombs or machine-gun fire from the air.

During the afternoon, under orders from the CO, Lieutenant Connolly and 17 Platoon tried to establish contact with HQ Company of 22 Battalion but, despite raising their British tin hats on their rifles as an aid to recognition, they were kept back by the steady fire of the 22 Battalion men. Connolly later on found the explanation in the widely current stories of the tricks the Germans would play, especially in trying to pass themselves off as New Zealand soldiers. 'I had a yarn to

the HQ Coy Cmdr [22 Bn](#) after [Crete](#) and he told me that he remembered us when we tried to contact him on the 20 May. He said he had it drilled into him to trust no one as they might be Huns in disguise. He certainly didn't trust us and in particular a bloke with a 2" mortar simply hated us. 17 Platoon could swear very well and if all ears in the [22 Bn](#) from the CO down didn't burn that day they must have been made of asbestos.'

So far as the 23rd observers who studied the [Maleme](#) situation through their glasses could determine, the Germans were unable to move in the open. Twenty-second Battalion appeared to hold the environs of the 'drome and also had the runways under fire. Colonel Leckie therefore concluded that the situation generally was as satisfactory as it obviously was in the 23rd's own area. This impression was strengthened about mid-afternoon by the arrival of a message from Brigadier Hargest, whom Leckie had advised in the late morning that mopping-up operations were proceeding very well. The Brigadier's message, initiated at 2.25 p.m., said: 'Glad of your message of 1140 hrs. Will NOT call on you for counter attacking unless position very serious. So far everything is in hand and reports from other units satisfactory.'

Actually, the situation with 22 Battalion was not at all satisfactory and Colonel [Andrew](#),⁷ the CO, was expecting the 23rd to counter-attack in response to his Very light and other signals, but, on account of the clouds of smoke and dust over the airfield, these were not seen by the 23rd. Practically all his companies suffered from the bombing and machine-gunning which preceded the arrival of the gliders; his communications with his outlying companies broke down and runners sent out either failed to make contact or failed to return; the enemy, especially those who had landed unopposed in and west of the Tavronitis riverbed, built up their strength and effectively isolated 22 Battalion Headquarters from most of its companies. The 22nd's counter-attack did not succeed, largely because the two I tanks broke down and had to be abandoned. Establishing contact with 5 Brigade Headquarters on his No. 18 wireless set when the batteries were fading, Colonel Andrew asked for reinforcements and eventually secured, at 6 p.m., the assurance that one company each from 23 and 28 Battalions would be coming. That 5 Brigade Headquarters did not regard the situation as particularly serious at the end of this first day of fighting in [Crete](#) may be seen from the following report sent to [Divisional Headquarters](#)

shortly before 10 p.m.: 'LO reports 23 Bn, 7 Fd Coy tired but in good fettle, hundreds of dead Germans in their areas. All units keeping a sharp watch on beach tonight.... In general the situation quite satisfactory.'

Captain Carl Watson took A Company of the 23rd out about dusk along a previously reconnoitred route to reinforce the 22nd. En route A Company captured two paratroopers. The route followed led via the 21st's area, across the head of the Sfakoriako and the road which led to the south of Point 107. At 22 Battalion Headquarters Watson was told by the second-in-command and adjutant that he and his company were to take over the positions previously occupied by their depleted D Company on the west flank. Lieutenant McAra ⁸ of 22 Battalion led the way as guide to where 7 Platoon under Sergeant Hooper ⁹ was to take up a defensive position. Shortly afterwards, as McAra was leading 8 Platoon into its position, a German machine-gunner opened fire at short range, killing McAra and wounding Lieutenant Baxter, ¹⁰ Sergeant-Major Wilson, ¹¹ and Lance-Corporal Johnson ¹² of A Company. Without his guide, Captain Watson was uncertain where to place his men and returned to the 22nd's headquarters to secure another guide or fresh information, only to be told by Colonel Andrew that, since the greater part of his unit had been lost, he was withdrawing the remainder, and that A Company of the 23rd was to provide the rearguard to cover this operation. A Company, which had been joined by the remnant of the 21 Battalion platoon which had manned the bank of the Tavronitis, now occupied the ridge behind Point 107 while Colonel Andrew withdrew that part of his battalion with which he remained in touch. About 2 a.m. Colonel Andrew reported his battalion withdrawal complete—apart from those of whose continuing existence he was not aware—and A Company returned to its own 23rd area, taking with it a number of walking wounded from 22 Battalion's RAP.

By early morning of 21 May, therefore, part of 22 Battalion had withdrawn to the area to the south of the 23rd. Several anti-aircraft gunners and stragglers from various British sub-units were also fitted into the defensive scheme. As Colonel Andrew had reported large numbers of enemy in the Tavronitis riverbed, preparations were made to repel an attack from the west. The first attack on 21 May came from quite a different direction. At dawn an enemy party of little more than platoon strength rushed and captured 'Lookout Hill', but a dashing counter-attack by two sections of 14 Platoon, ably led by Lieutenant King, recaptured this vital ground

and destroyed the enemy, apart from twelve taken prisoner.

During the morning the enemy began shelling and mortaring the 23rd from the direction of the airfield. A German officer captured by C Company was found to have on his person a large red Nazi flag, which he explained was the ground sign for the dropping of supplies from the air. Major Thomason, now the battalion second-in-command, and Lieutenant Thomas spread out the flag to see what happened. To their delight, containers with a heavy mortar and a supply of bombs for it, snipers' rifles, LMGs, ammunition, hand grenades, entrenching tools and food were dropped from the planes which were coming regularly over the area. The mortar was quickly brought into action by Thomas and the Bofors gun which the enemy had been using near the 'drome was knocked out. The value of this weapon having been proved, volunteers now went out to secure more enemy equipment which was lying outside the battalion wire. Private [Schroder](#)¹³ of C Company was so fearless in moving in the open when low-flying aircraft were overhead that they apparently mistook him for a German and he was able to collect or destroy several containers.

On 21 May the Germans strengthened their hold on [Maleme](#) airfield and its environs: two and a half companies of parachutists were safely landed on or to the west of the airfield in the morning. Two companies of 2 Parachute Regiment, which landed on the road and beaches between [Pirgos](#) and [Platanias](#), were roughly mauled by the 23rd, the engineers and the Maoris. Direct support from the air aided the attacks the Germans launched eastwards from [Maleme](#) during the day. The 23rd suffered more casualties than on the previous day through the bombing, machine-gunning from air and land, mortaring and shelling which the Germans directed against its forward positions. This enemy fire covered the advance and later the probing of the Germans on the sectors held by HQ 1, D, A and B Companies. These probing advances were discouraged by aimed fire and nothing came of them. On one occasion, Lieutenant Cunningham and Sergeant Hobbs¹⁴ advanced with Brens firing from the hip and turned back or killed the enemy trying to infiltrate through the olives and vines. About 4 p.m. a more definitely organised attack from the north came in on the platoons commanded by Lieutenants F. S. R. Thomson and J. Ensor. These HQ Company men stood their ground and repelled or killed the enemy with their steady fire. Men on the spot estimated, perhaps a little optimistically, that nearly 200 German dead were left in front of the 23rd positions. But, in the main, the

day was one of attacks, recurring attacks, from the air rather than of serious attacks from the troops on the ground.

The situation generally in [Crete](#) was deteriorating. Although the Germans had failed to take [Retimo](#) and [Heraklion](#), where they had landed parachutists, they had sufficient men in those sectors to provide nuisance value and prevent the transfer of forces to the more seriously threatened [Canea](#) and [Maleme](#) sectors. In the reservoir-prison area of the valley south-west of [Canea](#) and south of the 4 Brigade area, a 3 Parachute Regiment force was building up strength. But [Maleme](#), with its airfield, was the most important and most seriously threatened sector. About 5 p.m. on 21 May, the Germans tightened their grip on it by landing II Battalion and Regimental Headquarters of 100 Mountain Regiment from Junkers 52 aircraft. The more heavily armed infantry of the Mountain Regiment strongly reinforced the parachutists and the glider-borne troops who had preceded them.

As the troop-carriers began to land at [Maleme](#) or on the beaches, the 23rd MMGs and mortars had excellent targets and concentrated fire was directed at them, despite the distracting counter-fire of German guns and mortars. Lieutenant MacDonald's Vickers poured belt after belt of ammunition into the first plane to land. It managed to take off again but one of its landing wheels fell into the sea, much to the delight of the battalion's observers. Into another plane landing closer, on a beach to the north, the Vickers pumped all the rounds they could, and it remained in the shingle. No German came out. Immediately afterwards, the 3-inch mortars under Lieutenant E. E. Richards and Sergeant A. R. M. Bowie landed a bomb directly on the plane and guaranteed it would remain grounded. Regardless of losses suffered from artillery and other types of fire, the Germans continued to land or crash-land their troop-carriers at or near [Maleme](#), and the new commander of the [Assault Regiment](#), Colonel Ramcke, was able to take over a much-strengthened sector. That night the attempt to land more German forces and equipment by sea was defeated at some cost to themselves by the destroyers and cruisers of the British Navy.

To restore the situation at [Maleme](#), it was decided at Brigade Headquarters and higher levels to counter-attack the `drome with 20 and 28 Battalions in the early morning of 22 May. Had this attack gone in, as intended, at 4 a.m., it would almost certainly have succeeded, as the Germans could not call for direct air support while it was still dark. Unfortunately, for various reasons which need not be detailed here,

this counter-attack was delayed until it had to proceed in broad daylight. It was a gallant attempt against heavy odds, rendered worse by the nature of the country, which favoured the defenders. After suffering heavy casualties, both units had to withdraw, although their leading companies had killed many Germans and made fair progress.

During this counter-attack, elements of A Company of the 23rd, under Captain Watson, joined in to assist the Maori advance. Apart from 7 Platoon under Sergeant Hooper, these A Company men were unable to proceed farther than [Maleme](#) village, where they were held up by mortar and machine-gun fire which caused several casualties. No. 7 Platoon, however, proceeded across country without meeting more than 'continuous mg fire' and got well beyond the village to high ground from which they could see the 20th held up on the beach. Hooper later wrote an account of this incident:

'From this position we had quite a good view of what was happening and a building almost on the beach some 300 yards from the drome appeared to be the HQ of the force that was holding up the [20 Bn](#). While we waited there, one section of my platoon under Pte. A. E. H. [Stephen](#)¹⁵ crawled through the vines etc., across the road and almost on to the beach between this building and the drome. Pte. Stephen told me that he thought the Germans were evacuating the building as while he lay in some scrub several German officers passed within a few yards of him hurrying back to the drome. However it was not long before we realized that the [20 Bn](#) were retiring so we had no option but to make our way back.'

Twentieth and 28th Battalions withdrew in the course of the afternoon of 22 May and took up positions in and around the 23rd's area: most of the Maoris occupied the rough ground between 21 and 23 Battalions, while three companies of the 20th strengthened the northern sectors of the 23rd. Elated with their success in knocking back a threat, the Germans pressed hard on the western flank of the combined positions in the late afternoon. B Company had to repel a thrust on the road junction and Captain Mark [Harvey](#)¹⁶ with some D Company men drove off another party. The Maoris launched one of their bayonet charges and cleared their front. The mutual regard for one another of the 23rd and 28th was strengthened by this brief association. Of the 23rd officer nearest to him, Major [Dyer](#)¹⁷ of the [Maori](#)

Battalion said: 'Mark Harvey was on my right; a brave officer, collecting his men and encouraging them under fire.'

The German successes both in holding and reinforcing **Maleme** and in increasing their threat to cut off 5 Brigade resulted in the decision to withdraw that brigade into divisional reserve. Brigadier Hargest received the orders to withdraw about 1 a.m. on 23 May. As Captain Dawson, the Brigade Major, knew the route up to the forward battalions best, he again went forward, for the second time that night, to advise the units of the plan. The withdrawal to the **Platanias** River was supposed to be completed by first light but, as the 23rd did not receive its orders till about 4.30 a.m., it could not comply. Although positive from his own appreciation of the local situation that the 23rd and the other units could have held their positions, Colonel Leckie gave his orders for the withdrawal. C Company was to provide the battalion rearguard while the rest of the companies followed Dawson along a route through the foothills and inland some hundreds of yards from the coast road. No. 18 Platoon waited and assisted with the withdrawal of **28 Battalion**; HQ 2 Company under Lieutenant Max Coop withdrew with 21 Battalion. The members of the mortar platoon took their own and some **Maori Battalion** mortars to the road, but as no trucks could get through to lift them, they had to be abandoned.

The walking wounded had been evacuated during the night but some sixty stretcher cases remained in the 23rd RAP, which was situated in a natural air-raid shelter in a dry watercourse with steep banks. Here, the battalion MO, Captain Ron Stewart, and the Padre, Bob Griffiths, had worked strenuously on both New Zealand and German wounded. These officers and their orderlies, Privates **Walsh** ¹⁸ and **Buchanan**, ¹⁹ felt it their duty to stay with the wounded and see that they got the best of treatment. Giving priority to the interests of others as they did, they were rightly described by Major Thomason as 'brave and courageous gentlemen'. On the other hand, from the point of view of the battalion's continuing needs and the problem of replacing them, this was an unnecessary sacrifice of officers and men.

By 10 a.m. on 23 May, the withdrawal of the battalion to its new positions was complete. While crossing the flat country near the **Platanias** River, the battalion had some thirty casualties from both ground and air fire. Just when the men seemed to be clear of the enemy on the ground, a dive-bomber or a fighter would give a sharp reminder of the Germans' unchallenged mastery of the air over Crete. In the

absence of a medical officer, Sergeant Henry McGrath²⁰ set up an RAP in the [Platanias](#) village church, the thick walls of which prevented further casualties during the mortaring to which the unit's new positions were subjected. The RQMS, Harry Dalton, who had taken over the duties of Quartermaster when Captain Patterson was evacuated as a casualty from [Maleme](#), also took charge of the wounded at this stage. His St. John's Ambulance training proved invaluable and, ably assisted by Staff-Sergeant Reg Jenkins,²¹ he attended to the bandaging of the wounded.

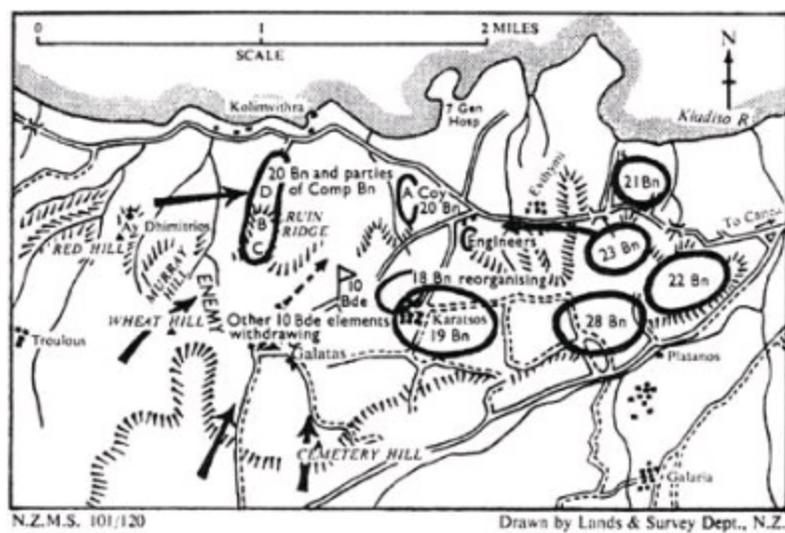
As 5 Brigade still appeared in danger of being cut off, orders for a further withdrawal arrived late in the afternoon. On this occasion the 23rd acted as rearguard: the 20th and 28th, accompanied by 5 Brigade Headquarters, withdrew first, and then, after 21 Battalion had passed through, the 23rd withdrew in good order. All units were successful in evacuating their wounded on this occasion, for although two trucks sent up for them were shot up, a third was able to get through safely. Dalton, Jenkins and others, including Private 'Ginger' Evans,²² did excellent work as stretcher-bearers despite the mortaring of the area. When it became obvious that the evacuation of the wounded was going to delay the final rearguard beyond the time given in orders, Major Thomason, Lieutenants King and Ensor organised a road block and persuaded two British tanks to support their defence of it. C Company, temporarily commanded by Lieutenant Thomas, again acted as rearguard to the battalion. By 4 a.m. on 24 May all companies were back in the 'rest area' at Makri, about a mile and a quarter north-east of [Galatas](#), where 4 Brigade continued to hold a line.

During 24 May 23 Battalion and other 5 Brigade units reorganised in reserve on a north-south line astride the main [Galatas- Canea](#) and the [Alikianou- Canea](#) roads. Enemy aircraft were again active and caused further casualties. A new medical officer, Captain Wilson,²³ arrived and set up his RAP in a house near Battalion Headquarters. Issued rations were short but most men had secured food from the Germans they had shot.

Most of 25 May passed with the 23rd still in reserve. A reconnaissance plane persisted in hovering over its area and, in the early afternoon, a flight of Stukas came over. At this and other stages the Germans in the air, not those on the ground, made the war in [Crete](#) almost unbearable for exhausted men. Six days of fighting,

lack of sleep, and a growing uneasiness about the outcome meant that stores of nervous energy were running out for some men. Commenting later on the effect of the Stuka raid in nearly producing panic, Lieutenant Thomas wrote: "Tired and frightened men lose their sense of proportion and if one crossed an open space between trees with a Stuka anywhere even within sound, urgent and panic-charged shouts would be hurled from all directions: "Get down, you bloody fool! Do you want us all killed?""

In the meantime, the enemy had been attacking strongly along the Galatas line and 4 and 10 Brigades had been hard pressed. Orders issued on 24 May had authorised 4 Brigade to call on the 23rd if necessary. Early on 25 May the senior officers of the 23rd—Colonel Leckie, accompanied by Lieutenant Bond, who was now IO, Major Thomason, accompanied by Sergeant Hulme,²⁴ and some of the company commanders—carried out a reconnaissance of the routes up to the forward areas. In the early evening, when the Germans had gained so much ground that they threatened the whole Galatas line, the 23rd was called forward. Shortly after 7 p.m. it moved off towards Galatas.



GALATAS, 7 P.M., 25 MAY 1941
galatas, 7 p.m., 25 may 1941

An hour or two earlier, the Germans had occupied the village and had pushed in behind three squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry under Major John Russell.²⁵ The line between the village and the sea was weakening as major elements of the Composite Battalion and 18 Battalion had been beaten out of their positions. If the enemy made a complete break-through at this juncture, most of the New Zealand

Division and some other troops would be placed in an extremely dangerous position. [Galatas](#) appeared to be the key to the situation. As the 23rd advanced towards the stone buildings of [Galatas](#), machine-gun fire was coming down the road. Colonel Leckie was wounded in the leg and had to hand over command to Major Thomason. The latter had been coming forward with D Company when he was sent by Brigadier Hargest to attempt to stabilise the line where it appeared to be cracking. During the minutes that elapsed before he could rejoin the 23rd, the attack on [Galatas](#) was organised.

[Colonel Kippenberger](#) had earlier established his headquarters on the side of the road leading into [Galatas](#) and was directing the troops as they came forward. He had just placed a mixed force of 4 Brigade Band, the [Kiwi Concert Party](#), and some of HQ and D Companies of the 20th on a ridge running north from [Galatas](#). He now ordered the leading 23rd company, A Company under Captain Carl Watson, into position extending the re-formed line to the north. B Company, under Lieutenant [Gray](#),²⁶ entered the line between the band and A Company. The line was being stabilised, but the essential requirement to ensure stability was the recapture of [Galatas](#).

At this stage, [Colonel Kippenberger](#) sent the two light tanks of [3 Hussars](#) under Lieutenant Roy Farran into [Galatas](#) to discover the strength and position of the enemy. Their advance was the signal for renewed fire all along the line. Guided by Sergeant [Sullivan](#)²⁷ of 20 Battalion, C and D Companies of the 23rd under Captains Harvey and Manson now arrived and their commanders received their orders from [Colonel Kippenberger](#). There was no time for further reconnaissance, they were simply to follow the tanks, one company on either side of the road, and recapture [Galatas](#). On arrival, Major Thomason agreed with the arrangements already made. Farran returned with his two tanks, reported 'The place is stiff with Jerries' and announced that he had a tank commander and a gunner wounded. When [Colonel Kippenberger](#) and Major Thomason called for volunteers, Lieutenant Noel Jones, the 23rd's signals officer, promptly volunteered but was just as quickly turned down by Major Thomason as his services were needed in his normal capacity. Headquarters Company of the 23rd under Lieutenant McGregor was moving out to the left flank which appeared, in Thomason's words, 'to be in the air'. Two men with this company but not of it, Private [Lewis](#),²⁸ a machine-gunner attached to the 23rd, and Private [Ferry](#),²⁹ from 4 Brigade Headquarters, said they 'would give the job of manning the

tank a go'. Farran gave them some instruction and then the two tanks were ready to lead the way. Lieutenant Connolly of D Company took the opportunity to speak to [Colonel Kippenberger](#): 'I asked him about the coming show, about two minutes away, and he said "They'll run like Hell". I know I immediately had the feeling they would and so did all that heard him.'

The companies were now briefed, bayonets were fixed and all were ready. On the right, C Company was attacking along the road; on the left, D Company was attacking with 17 Platoon, under Lieutenant Connolly, following a route parallel to the road, and the other platoons, led by Lieutenant Cunningham, coming in from the left flank. In C Company, 15 Platoon, under Lieutenant Thomas, was on the right, and 14 Platoon, under Lieutenant King, on the left, while 13 Platoon, under Sergeant Dutton, brought up the rear. Realising the smallness of their numbers, the men of the 23rd were glad to be joined by small parties from the 18th and 20th. A handful of men from 23 Battalion Headquarters and from HQ Company, including some cooks who were anxious to join their mates, followed C Company.

About 8.10 p.m. [Colonel Kippenberger](#) gave the word to the tanks to lead the way and the attack was on. This time the 23rd was not withdrawing, as had been too often the case, but was going forward to attack the enemy. The onset of darkness meant an end to Stuka raids: this time it would be men against men on the ground. Their spirits rose! As the tanks moved off, the infantry gave a cheer and the cheer changed quickly to a deep shout of defiance and determination. Leading participants in the attack can best describe that shout.

Lieutenant Cunningham: 'The uproar of yells accompanying the attack was sufficient to make the enemy in front of A Company withdraw off the ridge. Above the noise, Rex King could be heard roaring like a bull as he led his men forward.' 'Hook forwards, hook!' was King's main battle cry, say others.

Lieutenant Thomas: '... suddenly.... I found myself shouting to my men and we were away.... And then it happened. I don't know who started it, but, as the tanks disappeared as a cloud of dust and smoke into the first buildings of the village, the whole line seemed to break spontaneously into the most blood curdling of shouts and battle cries.... the effect was terrific—one felt one's blood rising swiftly above fear and uncertainty until only an inexplicable exhilaration quite beyond description

surpassed all else, and we moved as one man into the outskirts.... By the time we entered the narrow streets, every man was firing his weapon to the front or in the air and every man, you could feel it, was flushed with confidence. Nothing could stop us.'

Lieutenant Connolly: 'I was on top of the world that night yelling and shouting like old Orb does on parade or in the mess'.

The fierce battle cry had its effect: it startled the enemy and impressed New Zealanders of other units. Thus [Colonel Gray](#),³⁰ commanding officer of the 18th, wrote in a private letter: 'I shall never forget the deep throated wild beast noise of the yelling charging men as the 23rd swept up the road. There was a hell of a battle in the village.' Private [Adams](#)³¹ of the 18th's 'I' section recorded how he was too late to join in the attack but how, 'Twas quite dark now and suddenly from [Galatas](#) 400 yards away we heard the most ungodly row I have ever heard—our chaps charging and yelling and screaming to put the wind up them, cat calls and battle cries, machine guns, rifles, hand grenades all going at once.' Ferry, the volunteer gunner in one of the tanks, said: 'The howling and shouting of the infantry sounded like the baying of dogs ... as it rose and fell, it made my flesh creep.'

The tanks in the lead fired their guns at the slightest sign of the enemy, who shot up flares, called for mortar fire, most of which fell harmlessly in the rear of the attackers, hurled stick bombs and grenades, and fired all their small arms at the advancing New Zealanders. One tank had a track blown, Lieutenant Farran was wounded, and the other tank temporarily retreated but was turned back into the village by Thomas and his men as they surged forward. Streams of tracer bullets came from the windows and from behind low stone walls. They were ill-aimed but caused casualties nonetheless.

On the right, the C Company men cleared the first few houses one by one but, finding more Greek women and children than Germans in some, they pressed on. Well supported by Sergeant Templeton, Corporals [Thompson](#)³² and [Irwin](#),³³ Privates [Diamond](#)³⁴ and [Bellamy](#)³⁵ and several others, Thomas led his platoon up to the knocked-out tank, clearing the enemy with bayonet and bullet as they went. Here they halted, reloaded and, under some cover from the Spandau bullets coming from across the square, gathered themselves for a last charge. But Thomas can tell

his own story:

'I realized that my force was rapidly dwindling in spite of the reinforcements of Sgt. Dutton and his men. The opposition was desperate but to retreat with the knowledge of the consequences to the Division was unthinkable. Templeton, my Sgt., kneeling by me on the road, suddenly jerked and stretched out gasping quietly. Action, quick action was essential: I decided to charge. The boys rose as one man, we jostled each other for the lead, and firing from the hip we advanced across the square. The consternation at the far side was immediately apparent. Screams and shouts showed desperate panic in front of us and I suddenly knew, with that peculiarly clear insight which sometimes comes in battle, that we had caught them ill prepared and in the act of forming up.... By now we were stepping over groaning forms, and those which rose against us fell to our bayonets, and bayonets with their eighteen inches of steel entered throats and chests with the same horrible sound, the same hesitant ease as when we had used them on the straw-packed dummies in [Burnham](#). The Hun seemed in full flight. From doors, windows and roofs they swarmed wildly, falling over one another to clear our relentless line. There was little aimed fire against us now. The earlier exhilaration returned, victory seemed assured.'

Victory was assured, despite the last-ditch stand of a group of diehards. Thomas himself was wounded shortly afterwards—hit by a bullet in the leg and by a grenade in the back. Lieutenant King, whose experiences in the advance were somewhat similar, was also wounded, as was Captain Harvey. But, without officers, the men of C Company hastened on to make an end to the job which had been so successfully begun. Private Gallagher ³⁶ made a solo charge and cleared one strongpoint singlehanded. Sergeant Hulme and Private [Dunn](#) ³⁷ cleared another. Sergeant Dutton and Private [Joyce](#) ³⁸ led the way in a rush which took some 13 Platoon men in and through a large stone building which held up progress for a few minutes. Everywhere the fighting was bitter and no quarter was given on either side. 'From one building we got 11 machine guns,' wrote Gallagher later, 'it was like a butcher's shop inside—some grenades had been popped in the windows.' Soon they came out on the side of the village opposite that on which they had entered. There were about thirty of the men who had gone in with C Company left standing.

Entering from another angle, D Company had its measure of success. The

leading platoon, No. 18, under Lieutenant Cunningham, took the hardest way of entering [Galatas](#) by going over walls and through backyards, but this was sound tactics as it enabled some heavy machine-gun posts to be outflanked or overrun. When they did find themselves forced to charge up a narrow street, a machine gun held up the attack for a minute or two until Private David [Seaton](#)³⁹ broke the spell by striding forward firing his Bren gun from the hip. While he kept up steady bursts, others edged round to a flank and knocked out the machine gun with grenades. Seaton was killed but the attack surged on again.

It is perhaps unfair to single out a few for special mention since practically all were heroes of the fight to retake [Galatas](#). But those not mentioned will not grudge the honour done to a few as representatives of them all. Corporal Alan [Henderson](#),⁴⁰ a section leader in 16 Platoon, showed outstanding qualities of leadership in leading his men to knock out some of the last machine-gun posts on their flank. Private [Fitchett](#)⁴¹ used grenades coolly and effectively in the house-clearing, while Private 'Ginger' [Drysdale](#)⁴² knocked out a troublesome post. As one particular strongpoint was making progress impossible, Lieutenant Cunningham tried to knock it out with a grenade lobbed up in the air but it burst harmlessly on a roof, scattering slates in all directions. He next rolled another grenade along the cobblestones and it burst in the doorway of the house. As the German occupants dived out, Private [Lydiate](#)⁴³ shot four of them while Cunningham despatched the officer with his pistol. In many places the enemy stood firm until wiped out by fierce hand-to-hand fighting. Bayonets, rifle butts, pistols and bare hands were all used in what was the closest (in the most literal sense of the word) fighting in which the 23rd ever engaged.

Lieutenant Connolly has recorded an incident which illustrates the closeness of the fighting in [Galatas](#): 'My platoon followed Cunningham's.... one [Larsen](#)⁴⁴ must have walked into the village square from another direction as when I got there he was held off the ground by a huge German paratrooper. I had with me one [Kennedy](#)⁴⁵ (... can't be sure of the name but he was wounded with me next day). The German had Larsen by the throat at arm's length while he fumbled with his other hand for a knife. Kennedy and I had rifles with bayonets and as we hopped in, the Hun used Larsen as a shield to keep us off. As we separated to get around him, he exposed his back for a moment and Kennedy split his head with a lovely butt stroke. Larsen was a man with a grown family but was up and off in the hunt in no time.'

While the recapture of [Galatas](#) was principally a 23rd achievement, credit must be given to the representatives of other units who joined in this fierce fighting. Colonel Gray rallied those of the 18th nearest him and led them into the village, where they joined in destroying some of the German posts. Some of his officers, such as Lieutenants [Macdonald](#) ⁴⁶ and [Lambie](#), ⁴⁷ also led their men in this fighting. Platoons of the 20th under Lieutenants [Bain](#), ⁴⁸ who was badly wounded, and Green, ⁴⁹ who was killed, and some gunners under Lieutenant [Carson](#) ⁵⁰ joined in the bayonet charges, which put the issue beyond all doubt and gave the Germans their first real setback after they had occupied any part of Crete.

German accounts of the battle, some published in 1942 and others secured from prisoners captured in [Italy](#) in 1944–45, show that [Galatas](#) was occupied by both parachutists and troops from different mountain regiments. These accounts fully confirm the closeness of the fighting, as a few extracts demonstrate. 'A bitter hand-to-hand fight develops in the darkness.... In the village itself hell is let loose, and everywhere the battle comes down to bitter individual clashes. Cpl. B. of a machine gun company described these.... "Suddenly we are face to face with a crowd of Tommies three yards away; in the darkness they are only recognizable by their flat helmets and lowered bayonets. As quick as lightning our lieutenant whips up his machine pistol and fires into the attackers, and the rest of us fire our pistols and carbines as rapidly as possible. But bullets and grenade splinters are whistling round our ears too. There is thunder and lightning in every corner and cranny, and the flashes of grenades flicker like a fire.... our machine guns fall silent, one after the other, grenade splinters are putting them out of action. The crews are nearly all wounded or dead; but they are holding the position! Our brave comrades defend themselves with pistols and hand grenades in this fearful hand-to-hand struggle. It is a case of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth! ... our ammunition is running out slowly. With a heavy heart our lieutenant decided to evacuate the village with his still further diminished band".'

⁵¹

In [Galatas](#) the 23rd suffered serious casualties: C Company lost all its officers and most of its senior NCOs wounded, while both companies lost some of their best men. At such a cost is victory won in close fighting. The enemy was estimated to have lost 200 killed and many more wounded. These estimates may be high, but the German accounts both of the different companies in [Galatas](#) and of the fierceness of

the fighting would appear to support them. ⁵²

In a letter written on 30 July 1946, [General Kippenberger](#) summed up 23 Battalion's efforts in [Galatas](#):

'... The counter attack was carried out with the greatest gallantry right through the village and the blow delivered by Farran's two tanks and the two little companies of Infantry stopped the whole German advance. When the village was cleared and the firing died down it also stopped on the whole field. Anyone who was there could never forget the occasion. [General Freyberg](#), in his report on the Battle of [Crete](#), says that this counter attack was the highlight of the whole battle.

'The intention of the counter attack was to deliver a blow that would check the Germans' advance. The position was so bad and so many troops were disorganized that I thought it useless to try and patch up the line any further. The secondary object was to give the Divisional Cavalry an opportunity of extricating themselves, and this was seized very ably by Major Russell. Both objects were therefore achieved.

'I have given you this account at length because it is one of the most brilliant episodes in the history of the 23rd, and the reasons for the attack must be of interest to those interested in the Bn. It was one of the best and most effective efforts made by any single Bn in the division throughout the war.'

When the fighting died down, the Germans established themselves in one strongpoint at the south-western exit from [Galatas](#) while Lieutenants Connolly and Cunningham, the two surviving officers of the battalion, proceeded to regroup their forces inside the village in case the enemy should in his turn launch a counter-attack. Colonel Gray and his party of the 18th left the village to the 23rd, 'whose objective it was', as Colonel Gray termed it. The 23rd signals platoon 'teed' into a cable and established contact with 4 Brigade Headquarters, which received its reports of a successful attack on [Galatas](#) with scepticism. Lieutenant Jones had, however, received the correct report from his runners with the two companies, Privates [Redfearn](#) ⁵³ and [Ericksen](#). ⁵⁴ Their report was confirmed by Captain Harvey who, though wounded in the mouth, was able to give a useful account and solicit help for the wounded. At this point [Colonel Kippenberger](#) handed over to Major Thomason

and went back to 4 Brigade Headquarters, where a conference was being held on the next moves to be made.

Major Thomason placed Connolly in command of C Company and left it to hold the village, and made D Company establish contact with B Company on the right centre, while HQ Company continued to cover the left flank. From some-where he secured a small truck, which he sent up to the edge of the village to evacuate the wounded, many of whom were carried out on doors in the absence of stretchers. Unfortunately, most of the wounded reached 6 Field Ambulance's dressing station too late to be sent back to catch the last hospital ship and therefore had to remain and be taken prisoner of war.

After the attack had gone through Galatas, a steady stream of refugees came down the road past the 23rd headquarters established on the side of the road. Sergeant Young⁵⁵ and Corporal Wastney⁵⁶ examined them carefully to make sure no Germans were among them. Throughout the fighting in Crete, Bob Young, although only a private at the time, carried out the duties of Intelligence Sergeant with conspicuous success. Frequently employed in liaison work between companies and between the 23rd and Brigade, he normally made a habit of collecting the maximum amount of useful information. As Lieutenant Bassett wrote of him later: 'Steady as a rock and undauntedly cheerful, he reconnoitred night and day without ceasing, his reports being always full and accurate.'

Since Galatas itself could be outflanked and the line through the village was too long for the troops available to hold effectively, the conference at 4 Brigade Headquarters, under Brigadier Inglis,⁵⁷ decided that the forward troops must withdraw to a shorter line to be established by 5 Brigade. Orders to this effect were received about 3.30 a.m. on 26 May by Major Thomason and the 23rd were successfully withdrawn about an hour later. Many of the battalion were highly indignant at having to withdraw so soon from a position so hardly and so gloriously won. For example, Connolly could write later: 'Then the awful order to retire came. Cun and I were mad. Both of us felt we'd won the war at that moment.... I was giving all the Brass Hats Bun Hats that night.'



An A Company 'listening post' under Sergeant A. C. Hooper, on a small ridge to the north of Galatas, was inadvertently forgotten when the order to withdraw was given. At daybreak Hooper reported to his company headquarters only to find it occupied by the enemy. He and his party then made for the hills in an attempt to outflank the enemy and rejoin the battalion. Passing through the outskirts of Galatas, they ran into some Germans who were too surprised to act quickly. After an exciting and exhausting series of narrow escapes and record-breaking sprints from one patch of cover to another, often under fire, this section rejoined the battalion in the early afternoon.

By this time, the 23rd was in reserve on either side of the coast road and behind the line held by 21 Battalion, which included A Company of the 20th for the time being, 19 Battalion and 28 Battalion, whose positions linked up with those of 2/7 and 2/8 Australian Battalions. Here the weary soldiers of the 23rd carried out normal post-battle reorganisation. But they could not rest for long. The usual amount of strafing and bombing was experienced. About 2 p.m. a wounded officer reported a 'break-through' on the coastal sector: Brigadier Hargest ordered the 23rd to send two companies forward 'to restore the line at all costs'. Major Thomason sent A and C Companies forward to do this job. On its way forward C Company was ruthlessly machine-gunned from the air and, as a result of two savage attacks, the company suffered thirty casualties. Headquarters No. 2 Company and B Company were sent forward to replace C. The German fighters and Stukas were still active and, according to one member of the relieving party, it took about four hours to advance one mile. Actually, the situation in the front line was not as serious as had been reported. Major Thomason carried out a personal reconnaissance of the forward area

and found that, despite attacks and temporary penetration, the line was still holding.

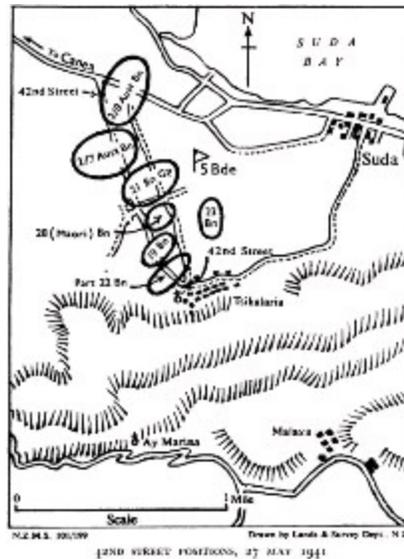
Private Pankhurst's account of being under fire from the air on this occasion deserves recording for its graphic picture of an all-too-common experience of that time:

'Our Btn was told to go to a position on the right because the Huns were thought to be breaking through.... We got hell ... I think the 23rd lost 34 men.... Now here's a close shave. As we were making our way up a small gully C Coy were coming down causing a lot of congestion. A Hun fighting Messerschmitt crossed this gully firing his guns. I felt the heat of the bullets pass my face and the leaves were dashed from the tree under which I was crouched. "Damn it all," I thought, "this is no place for mother's little boy now that bloody squarehead knows we are here". So I out of the gully, crossed the road & made my way among the olive trees to our rendezvous and it's just as well I did for that darn plane came down the gully a few minutes later (not across as it did the first time) and cleaned up fifteen men with one burst from its guns.'

Late that night word came that 5 Brigade was to withdraw again to a new line 'two miles west of [Suda](#) at approximately the junction of two converging roads', and that 23 Battalion would provide the rearguard. The battalion established a strongpoint covering the bridge on the [Canea](#) road just east of the junction of the main coast road and the [Alikianou- Canea](#) road. It held this position till after 1 a.m. on 27 May, by which time the rest of the brigade had withdrawn through it. As they marched back, the troops helped themselves to rations and ammunition from dumps which were being abandoned. Although little was known of their efforts at this time, the withdrawal of the New Zealanders was assisted by the stand made by 1 Welch and 1 Rangers Battalions and a detachment of [Northumberland Hussars](#) who had been sent forward by Major-General C. E. Weston, the commander of the [Suda](#) sector.

The position to which the 23rd withdrew in the early hours of 27 May was known as 42nd Street because the sunken dirt road about a mile to the west of [Suda](#) and prominent in this area had been worked on by 42 Field Company of [Royal Engineers](#). The Brigade Major, Captain Dawson, allocated battalion areas south of the main road to the 21st, 28th, 19th and 22nd in that order, with the 23rd, as the rearguard

force, expected to pass through the forward units into a reserve position behind the Maoris. On the morning of 27 May, however, the units were not arranged as methodically on the ground as the Brigade Major had planned. Many men had dropped exhausted where they found themselves at the end of their tiring night march. Thus the men of the 23rd found themselves in touch with both the Maoris and 2/7 Australian Battalion, one of the units of 19 Brigade which was holding the ground north of 5 Brigade.



42nd street positions, 27 may 1941

About 9.30 a.m. enemy bombers came over again and began the 'softening-up' process which was a preliminary to an infantry attack which began about an hour later. The Maoris and 2/7 Australian Battalion, assisted by platoons and small parties from the 19th, the 21st, the 22nd, and the 23rd, launched a counter-attack with the bayonet which gave 42nd Street a name of some importance in the Battle of Crete. On the whole front the Germans lost some 300 men and their advance was checked. The 23rd men who participated in this charge were mainly from HQ and A Companies, led by Sergeant [McKerchar](#)⁵⁸ of the signals platoon. The rest of the unit were ordered to man the line of 42nd Street when the alarm was given and this they did.

The rest of the day was comparatively quiet, apart from some bombing and strafing. About 3.30 p.m., however, the Germans were reported to be carrying out an outflanking movement round the hills to the south. One small party of Germans entered the village of Tsikalaria on a hill to the south of the 23rd. D Company, with

men from A and C Companies, hurried over to drive the enemy out. The Germans withdrew without a fight. The 23rd men returned elated—not only had they succeeded in their primary mission but they had also discovered a dump of beer, whisky and gin.

By this time, it was clear that the programme was one of withdrawal to [Sfakia](#) in the south, whence the troops could be evacuated by the Navy. In the late afternoon, orders were given for that night's withdrawal. The Maori Battalion was to move first but was to leave two companies at [Beritiana](#) to prevent the route out from being cut by enemy coming through that point. The 23rd was to act as rearguard again and allow the other units to withdraw to [Stilos](#). When the time for final withdrawal came, the enemy was applying pressure. The 2/7 Australian Battalion counter-attacked and this enabled the 23rd to break contact with the enemy about 11 p.m. D Company, the last to withdraw, had to avoid heavy machine-gun fire on fixed lines as it pulled back. At the cemetery, east of the [Suda](#) end of the tramlines, the 23rd passed through A Battalion of [Layforce](#), a commando force lately landed in [Crete](#) under Colonel R. E. Laycock.

A gruelling night march followed. All were feeling the lack of sleep and of regular meals, to say nothing of the strain imposed by frequent attacks from the air. The road grew steeper and rougher the farther south it went. At daybreak the battalion reached [Stilos](#). Major Thomason established his headquarters in a cave and ordered A and D Companies to occupy a ridge on the west of the road, covering the northern approaches to [Stilos](#). Lieutenants Norris ⁵⁹ and Cunningham, the two company commanders, made a reconnaissance before settling down. As they reached a stone wall at the top of the ridge, they saw Germans coming out of a creek bed about 400 yards away. Machine-gun fire whizzed over the ridge. In great haste the men of the two companies, many of whom had already dropped off to sleep, were summoned to the ridge. Major Thomason ordered those near him to join A and D Companies, shouting, 'Sergeant Hulme!' Get men on top of that hill! Whoever gets men there first wins! 'Hulme was among the first to arrive and opened fire from behind the stone wall just when the enemy leaders were about 15 yards away. He was joined by Sergeant Bob Young and then by D Company. After the leading elements of II Battalion of 85 Mountain Regiment had been repelled, Hulme was to be seen sitting side-saddle on the stone wall, shooting at the enemy on the

lower slopes. His example did much to maintain the morale of men whose reserves of nervous and physical energy were nearly exhausted. At one stage, too, Hulme threw the grenades that were being hurriedly primed by others. Eventually, after shooting several Germans, he him-self was wounded in the arm.

Twenty-first Battalion and a company of the 19th also responded to Thomason's call, joined in repulsing the enemy and, after extending the line taken up by the 23rd to either flank, succeeded in beating off the attack. Had it succeeded 5 Brigade's withdrawal would have been seriously endangered. Possibly the Germans concerned were anxious to justify themselves, but 85 Mountain Regiment subsequently reported of this engagement: 'A terrific struggle developed, including bloody hand-to-hand fighting.'

Even exhausted men could smile and say 'Joke!' when they saw the predicament of some hundreds of Italians who now approached [Stilos](#) from the south. A prison camp for Italians captured by the Greeks in [Albania](#) had been opened and its inmates were marching with white flags to join their German allies. They looked like a procession marching on Parliament, but the effect was spoilt by the German mortars which opened fire on the road: the Italians scattered like frightened rabbits. But their nuisance value was such that they were hurried through the 5 Brigade area to join their allies.

At a 5 Brigade Headquarters conference at nine o'clock that morning of 28 May, Brigadier Hargest asked, 'Can you fight all day and march all night if we can extricate ourselves?' The battalion commanders, apart from Lieutenant-Colonel [Dittmer](#)⁶⁰ of the [Maori Battalion](#), who was worried about his two companies left at [Beritiana](#), said 'No!' and agreed that they must push on by day and avoid being cut off. Fifth Brigade was at this stage co-operating very closely with [19 Australian Brigade](#) under Brigadier G. A. Vasey, and the plan was for the New Zealanders to fall back through the Australians, who were seven miles back.

When the time to withdraw came, the 23rd's forward companies were again in contact with the enemy and it seemed that a counter-attack would have to be launched to enable them to disengage. To the delight of the 23rd, shouts and hakas were heard from the rear of the Germans, who withdrew in some confusion. Captain Royal's⁶¹ two companies of Maoris at [Beritiana](#) had sent back their wounded under

care of a strong escort, which had decided to charge through the enemy to rejoin 5 Brigade.

The daylight withdrawal was in some ways both more and less difficult than had been expected: enemy aircraft did not trouble the men that day, a change that the exposed nature of the rising road through the mountains made especially welcome; but the heat and the going were most trying. A few men had acquired new boots in those happy days immediately after arrival in [Crete](#) but the majority were now finding their boots wearing out and giving trouble. Dirt- and sweat-stained clothing chafed and rubbed. Only the strongest were able to carry on without showing signs of collapsing with the steadily mounting fatigue. They reached [Vrises](#) at 3 p.m. and rested there for three hours. During this halt, those who could not keep up were given permission to continue the march in their own time.

At 6 p.m. the march continued. Brigadier Hargest urged all units to keep their men together, to adopt a reasonably easy pace, to conserve water and to retain arms and ammunition. His wise counsel was followed to the benefit of all and some stragglers were picked up. The Brigadier's determination to bring his brigade out as nearly intact as possible was a major factor in the success of this withdrawal. As Lieutenant Cunningham said of this operation: 'During the next five days being reduced in numbers and seeing our Brigadier frequently we could admire his coolness and ability.'

The battalion moved back first from [Vrises](#) in order to take up a defensive line on top of the pass behind [Amigdhalokorfi](#), five miles farther to the south and some 2300 feet above sea level. About 11 p.m. the 23rd occupied its positions, with D Company on the left of the road, HQ Company, A Company and a detachment of gunners under Captain John [Snadden](#),⁶² who temporarily counted themselves part of the 23rd, on the right. The other 5 Brigade units marched through about and after midnight and made their way down to the [Askifou Plain](#).

The 29th May passed quietly. The enemy had also found the march exhausting and, in addition, had had to deal with the 'blowing' and blocking of the road. Only about 4 p.m. did the leading scouts of two companies of mountain troops put in an appearance. Water was sent up to the 23rd in all kinds of containers, including great glass wine bottles carried in basketwork panniers. But the enemy were seen to have

supplies dropped to them from the air. The 23rd companies were seriously reduced by now: A Company, for example, had only forty men under Lieutenant Norris, the only officer left with the company. Several officers and men had been sent back suffering with dysentery and many of those still with the unit were troubled by the same complaint. All needed more sleep, more food and more drink. After giving his order to withdraw shortly after 4 p.m., Major Thomason handed over command to Lieutenant R. L. Bond. Thomason had been a tower of strength to the battalion from [Galatas](#) onwards. He had carried on with a bomb splinter in his knee until he could no longer walk; he had served the 23rd well.

As the battalion withdrew from the Rogdhia position, the two rearguard companies, A and D, were hurried along by enemy fire. [Corporal Dan Davis](#),⁶³ who had commanded 16 Platoon from 20 May onwards with both ability and gallantry, again showed his quality as a soldier by covering the final withdrawal of D Company. Farther back, 2/7 Australian Battalion ensured that the enemy would not follow. After marching through a beautiful valley and the village of [Sin Kares](#), the 23rd embussed in 15-cwt trucks supplied by the [Royal Marines](#) and was taken south to within a short distance of the zigzag road leading down to [Sfakia](#). Its march across [Crete](#) was practically at an end. Despite the steepness of the slopes and the roughness of the rocks, men slept where they lay.

The next day, 30 May, was not a particularly happy one for the battalion. Although not engaged in any active role, it came under enemy mortar and shell fire in the late morning and had to shift its position. In the early afternoon, Lieutenant Bond received orders for the final withdrawal to the beach at dusk and for the embarkation that night. Even a renewal of the mortaring could not rob the men of a feeling of satisfaction that their trials and troubles in [Crete](#) were practically over. This feeling of satisfaction was rudely shattered, however, when it was announced about 5 p.m. that the orders for the embarkation of the 23rd had been cancelled, that there was some prospect of getting away the following night, and that, if it were not possible to embark at [Sfakia](#), Brigadier Hargest was determined to lead all able-bodied men eastwards along the south coast to some other point where embarkation might still take place. The prospect of being taken prisoner of war loomed up and was not improved by the fact that no rations and no water were issued that day. In difficult circumstances, the very junior commanding officer proved

himself a worthy successor to his three predecessors: as a brother officer put it, 'Bond's optimistic spirit and determination dominated the 23rd Bn scene.'

Next morning 5 Brigade moved down to [Sfakia](#). The 23rd reached the village about 8 a.m. and was issued with a light ration of two tins of bully beef and three packets of biscuits for eight men. The battalion was called upon to supply a rearguard of thirty to fifty of its fittest men to scale the hills again and with 'Burrows Force', the 4 Brigade rearguard, give protection to the evacuation beach. Volunteers were called for and found: soon Lieutenant Cunningham was leading his party up the 2000 feet to man a protective outpost till dusk. Prominent in this party were Sergeants [Barcock](#), ⁶⁴ M. Bowie, Trewby and Mckerchar and Corporal Davis. The rest of the battalion held a reserve position farther down the slopes while those who were not fit remained in the village. Lieutenant Jones improvised a system of signals communication between Battalion Headquarters and the troops in the hill positions. The day passed without their being attacked.

At 9.15 p.m. on 31 May the battalion reassembled east of [Sfakia](#) and, with the other 5 Brigade units, began moving to the embarkation beaches. The troops passed through the cordon supplied by 22 and 28 Battalions to prevent stragglers usurping positions reserved for fighting and organised troops and shortly before midnight began embarking on the landing craft, pinnaces and launches used for taking the troops out to the waiting ships—the cruiser [Phoebe](#) and the destroyers [Abdiel](#), [Kimberley](#), [Hotspur](#) and [Jackal](#). Mere words cannot express how glad these men were to be aboard these ships or how grateful they were to the Navy and to the individual sailors for their help. Private Pankhurst can speak for his fellows: 'The sailors fed us and treated us very well.... We were in the space where mines were usually kept and, as we were very crowded, it was hot as a furnace. But it would not have mattered to us if the ship had been a slave trader so glad were we to be off Crete.'

The 23rd came off [Crete](#) with reduced numbers but still a disciplined fighting unit. On 20 May, when the fighting began, it numbered 24 officers and 547 men, a total of 571. On 31 May the strength state was given as 230. The only officers left on the active list were subalterns—Lieutenant Bond as CO, Lieutenant Jones as Signals Officer, Adjutant and IO, Lieutenant Norris in command of A Company, Lieutenant Cunningham in command of D, and Lieutenants McGregor and Coop with HQ

Company. Lieutenants Orbell and Gray, also evacuated with the unit, were sick men. The battalion's casualties in [Crete](#) were not known at the time but were later officially listed as 56 killed or died of wounds, 187 wounded and 114 prisoner of war, of whom 58 had been wounded—a total of 299 casualties. This leaves a discrepancy of 42, a figure no doubt made up of those who were evacuated sick or for some other reason. ⁶⁵

Its individual members make a unit but a battalion history can rarely spare space for stories of individuals. In [Crete](#), various individual acts of daring and gallantry went unrecorded and unrewarded. Decorations were won which were never awarded. Nevertheless, justice was done in the case of Sergeant Clive Hulme, who was awarded the Victoria Cross for his gallant exploits on [Crete](#), and justice demands that the history of his unit should record, even if briefly, some of those exploits.

Some mention has already been made of Hulme's participation in the counter-attack on [Galatas](#) and the repelling of the enemy at [Stilos](#). But most of his outstanding efforts were made alone or with small patrols and did not fit into any unit actions. They were typical of this man who sought so frequently to fight a one-man war. Hulme was the battalion provost sergeant from early 1940 onwards. In his official capacity he was assisting Lieutenant [Roach](#) ⁶⁶ of 21 Battalion to run a [Field Punishment Centre](#) east of the 23rd's area and south-west of [Platanias](#) when the Germans began to land on 20 May.

At first Hulme and the other members of the [Field Punishment Centre](#) were busy dealing with the parachutists dropping in their area. Later, Lieutenant Roach reported that the Germans gave some trouble but 'Sgt. Hulme got cracking—very aggressively. He stood in full view of any German and fired bursts into any suspected places and that closed up the odd burst of fire.' Sometimes alone and sometimes with another—for example, on two occasions he had Private [Shatford](#) ⁶⁷ with him—Hulme went out and dealt with enemy riflemen. Stalking them carefully, he almost invariably got his man. Roach's report shows how much one determined infantryman could dominate an area when it says: 'Hulme used to wander about a lot—from the camp to the road was all his country.' Hulme himself claimed no special credit for the manner in which the Punishment Centre men cleaned up their area but 126 German

dead were counted in that general area. Reporting in to 5 Brigade Headquarters on one occasion with some marked maps, Hulme was detailed by Brigadier Hargest to deal with a sniper, whom he stalked and shot.

Hulme returned to the 23rd the day before the unit left its area near [Maleme](#). By this time he had acquired two items from parachutists he had shot which gave him some protection on his stalking patrols and may possibly have misled the Germans. These were a camouflage suit or blouse which he wore over his battle-dress tunic and a camouflage hat, which could be worn either rolled up like a balaclava or down in a hood, with eye-slits, over the face. He killed two other Germans before the order to withdraw came. On a visit to Brigade Headquarters, he ran into a small party of New Zealand engineers held prisoner by one German sentry. Afraid to shoot for fear of hitting a New Zealander, Hulme crept up behind the sentry, jumped on him and killed him with a short German bayonet. Directed to find out how many Germans were in [Pirgos](#), Hulme ran into two unguarded aircraft which he set on fire with German fusee matches.

After [Galatas](#), Hulme heard that his brother, Corporal 'Blondie' [Hulme](#),⁶⁸ of 19 Battalion, had been killed. Determined to avenge his brother, Hulme dropped behind the withdrawing unit and, taking up a position covering a food dump, waited till the leading Germans arrived. Before this patrol pulled back, Hulme shot three of them.

During a conference of senior officers, including Australian and British, at 5 Brigade Headquarters behind 42nd Street, German snipers sent bullets whistling over. Hulme volunteered to deal with the trouble. He climbed the hillside from which the Germans were firing, came out above four Germans, and shot the leader. He was wearing his camouflage suit at the time and, when the Germans looked round to see where the shooting was coming from, Hulme also looked round, giving the impression he was one of them. When the men below him looked down again, he quickly picked off two of them and then shot the fourth as he moved up towards him. A fifth he shot as he came round the side of the hill towards him. Most of these proceedings were watched by Major Thomason through his binoculars.

Sergeant Hulme's official citation says that he 'made his score thirty-three enemy snipers stalked and shot.' It adds: 'Sergeant Hulme's Brigadier, in supporting the recommendation for the award of the Victoria Cross, states that during the whole

of the fighting until he was wounded, Sergeant Hulme conducted himself with such courage that the story of his exploits was on everyone's lips'. That this was true of the commanding officer of the 23rd may be seen from Lieutenant Thomas's account of a visit from Colonel Leckie in the dressing station behind [Galatas](#): 'Colonel Leckie limped over to see me. He stayed and talked with me for some time, speaking sadly of the Battalion's casualties and proudly of its showing throughout the fighting. He spoke at length of Sgt. Hulme who ... had done wonders.'

In his letter of recommendation of Hulme, Brigadier Hargest also said: 'From my own personal observation I know he showed such a complete contempt for danger that it amounted to recklessness.' With the prescience of a mystic and the assured self-confidence of a man who trusted his intuition or 'sixth sense' in the special kind of fighting in which he engaged in [Crete](#), Sergeant Hulme established something of a record for an infantryman.

For the New Zealanders, [Crete](#) was neither a success nor a failure. The Germans had won the island but at such a cost that they were never again to employ their airborne troops in an invasion or large attack. One German spearhead had been effectively blunted. Many lessons concerning the importance of supporting arms and good signals communications were learned by the New Zealanders.

In the 23rd, those men who had lasted out till 31 May had every reason to be proud of their stamina and courage. To the end, they had remained a fighting unit and provided rearguard after rearguard. In his report on the campaign, Major Thomason concluded with some satisfaction: 'The officers and men fought a great action against hopeless odds. They did everything that was required of them and more—no matter what odds were against them.... continually bombed and machine-gunned from the air, at no time were there complaints or any suggestion of down-heartedness, and never a thought of surrender.'

The men quickly looked to the future with confidence. The conviction, born in [Greece](#), that when they were supplied with adequate equipment and well supported on land and in the air they would pay old debts with interest, now grew in intensity. Private L. A. Diamond wrote soon after the campaign: 'I long for the day when we can match the Germans in the sky, 'plane for 'plane. When that day dawns, [Germany](#) is beaten. We know by experience that we can whack his land forces, tanks included,

any day of the week.' The outlook for the future was lightened by this confidence which came from the knowledge and experience gained in Crete.

¹ Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); [Wellington](#); born [Timaru](#), 26 Jun 1890; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Bde 1914–19 (CO 3 Bn); comd 4 Bde Jan 1940-Aug 1941; NZ Div ([Crete](#)) 29 Apr-27 May 1941; CGS and GOC NZ Military Forces, Aug 1941-Dec 1945.

² [Capt H. J. MacDonald](#); [North Auckland](#); born [Napier](#), 9 Aug 1908; sheep-farmer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³ [Capt N. Jones](#); [Nelson](#); born [Nelson](#), 29 Jan 1914: real-estate agent; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

⁴ [Capt P. R. Freyberg](#), MC; England; wounded 12 Dec 1941; Grenadier Guards.

⁵ Some details of this patrol are given by Thomas in [Dare to be Free](#),

Chapter 1.

⁶ Cpl L. T. Pettit, m.i.d.; born NZ 23 Apr 1912; clerk; wounded May 1941.

⁷ Brig L. W. Andrew, VC, DSO, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Ashhurst, 23 Mar 1897; Regular soldier; Wellington Regt 1915–19; CO 22 Bn Jan 1940-Feb 1942; comd 5 Bde 27 Nov-6 Dec 1941; Area Commander, Wellington, Nov 1943-Dec 1946; Commander, Central Military District, Apr 1948-Mar 1952.

⁸ Lt E. J. McAra; born Dunedin, 5 Apr 1906; commercial artist; killed in action 20 May 1941.

⁹ 2 Lt A. C. Hooper, MM; Christchurch; born Waipiata, 9 May 1906; farmer.

¹⁰ Capt B. Y. W. Baxter; Lower Hutt; born Timaru, 15 Mar 1907; wool clerk; wounded 20 May 1941.

¹¹ WO II C. D. Wilson; born NZ 3 Aug 1914; labourer; wounded 20 May 1941; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

¹² L-Cpl W. Johnson; born NZ 29 Jun 1915; lorry driver; wounded 20 May 1941.

¹³ Pte S. W. J. Schroder, DCM; Kowhiterangi, Westland; born NZ 20 Dec 1913; bridge builder; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

¹⁴ WO II E. W. Hobbs, DCM; born Dunedin, 11 Nov 1904; diesel shovel driver; wounded 26 May 1941; died of wounds 31 Aug 1942.

¹⁵ Pte A. E. H. Stephen; Nelson; born NZ 3 May 1914; coalminer.

¹⁶ Maj M. D. Harvey, ED, m.i.d.; Palmerston North; born Dunedin, 29 Feb 1904; salesman; wounded 25 May 1941.

¹⁷ Lt-Col H. G. Dyer, m.i.d.; Onerahi, Whangarei; born Hamilton, 7 Mar 1896; school-teacher; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Dec 1941-May 1942; comd 9 Inf Bde 1943.

¹⁸ Pte J. E. Walsh; Christchurch; born Auckland, 27 Jan 1915; NZR employee; p.w. 23 May 1941.

¹⁹ L-Cpl W. T. F. Buchanan, MM, m.i.d.; born NZ 17 Apr 1917; lorry driver; p.w. 23 May 1941; escaped Nov 1941.

²⁰ Sgt H. I. McGrath; Christchurch; born 17 Sep 1919; carpenter.

²¹ 2 Lt R. D. Jenkins; born Invercargill, 22 Oct 1918; storeman clerk; killed in action 24 Apr 1943.

²² Pte S. C. Evans; Dunedin; born Tasmania, 21 Jan 1919; miner; wounded 26 May 1941.

²³ Maj R. A. Wilson, MC; born Christchurch, 2 Feb 1909; medical practitioner; RMO 23 Bn 1941–42; 3 Gen Hosp Dec 1942-Jan 1944; PW Repatriation Unit (UK) 1945–46.

²⁴ Sgt A. C. Hulme, VC; Te Puke; born Dunedin, 24 Jan 1911; farmer; wounded 28 May 1941.

²⁵ Lt-Col J. T. Russell, DSO, m.i.d.; born Hastings, 11 Nov 1904; farmer; 2 i/c Div Cav 1941; CO 22 Bn Feb-Sep 1942; wounded May 1941; killed in action 6 Sep 1942.

²⁶ Maj J. B. Gray, ED; Milton; born Milton, 12 Jul 1907; draper.

²⁷ Capt J. G. Sullivan, DSO, m.i.d.; Cobb Valley, Nelson; born Grey-mouth, 1 Aug 1913; survey assistant; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

²⁸ Lt C. D. Lewis, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ 25 Oct 1913; draughtsman.

²⁹ Cpl E. H. Ferry; Palmerston North; born Wanganui, 1 May 1917; civil servant.

³⁰ Brig J. R. Gray, ED, m.i.d.; born Wellington, 7 Aug 1900; barrister and solicitor; CO 18 Bn Sep 1939-Nov 1941, Mar-Jun 1942; comd 4 Bde 29 Jun-5 Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

³¹ Tpr H. M. Adams; Auckland; born England, 9 Jul 1915; warehouse-man.

³² Sgt R. W. Thompson; born NZ 2 Apr 1909; saddler; wounded May 1941.

³³ WO II A. T. Irwin, m.i.d.; Pukeatua; born Timaru, 22 Jun 1912; musterer; twice wounded.

³⁴ Pte L. A. Diamond; born NZ 25 Jul 1911; labourer; wounded May 1941; died of wounds 4 Sep 1942.

³⁵ Pte H. J. Bellamy; Auckland; born NZ 11 Sep 1914; carpenter; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

³⁶ Sgt B. O'C. Gallagher; Cobden; born Dunedin, 29 Jun 1913; miner; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

³⁷ Pte M. J. Dunn; born Christchurch, 8 Aug 1912; bushman; died of wounds 18 Nov 1942.

³⁸ Pte A. M. J. Joyce; Christchurch; born NZ 15 Oct 1904; labourer.

³⁹ Pte D. E. Seaton; born NZ 27 Oct 1907; tractor driver; killed in action 25 May 1941.

⁴⁰ Cpl A. J. M. Henderson, m.i.d.; born NZ 4 May 1917; storeman; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁴¹ Pte J. P. Fitchett; born Gore, 19 Aug 1918; sawmillier; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

⁴² Cpl J. Drysdale; Taihape; born Dunedin, 31 Jan 1917; labourer; twice wounded.

⁴³ Pte J. P. Lydiate; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 27 Mar 1922; biscuit maker.

⁴⁴ Pte A. E. Larsen; born Denmark, 27 Oct 1905; cook.

⁴⁵ Pte M. Kennedy; Rapahoe, West Coast; born NZ 23 May 1911; labourer; wounded 26 May 1941.

⁴⁶ Capt D. H. St. C. Macdonald; Hamilton; born Auckland, 15 Jul 1915; shop assistant; wounded and p.w. 27 May 1941; repatriated Oct 1943.

⁴⁷ Capt R. F. Lambie; Wellington; born Ashburton, 4 Feb 1911; salesman.

⁴⁸ Capt F. J. Bain; Waipara; born NZ 16 Mar 1916; warehouse assistant; wounded and p.w. 26 May 1941.

⁴⁹ 2 Lt S. J. Green; born Invercargill, 6 Jan 1910; commercial traveller; killed in action 25 May 1941.

⁵⁰ Maj W. N. Carson, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 16 Jul 1916; warehouseman; died of wounds 8 Oct 1944.

⁵¹ Gebirgsjager auf Kreta, pp. 188–92.

⁵² When General Kippenberger and others visited Crete after the war, they

counted 4400 German graves in [Maleme](#) and [Galatas](#) alone.

⁵³ [Sgt B. A. Redfearn](#), MM; [Nelson](#); born [Christchurch](#), 19 Jul 1920; carpenter; won MM with 16 Fd Regt in [Korea](#).

⁵⁴ Pte [C. H. Erickson](#); [Lyttelton](#); born [Lyttelton](#), 20 Mar 1920; sheet-metal worker; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁵⁵ [Lt R. C. Young](#), MM; [Halcombe](#); born [Havelock](#), 6 Sep 1902; farmer.

⁵⁶ [Cpl E. R. Wastney](#); [Nelson](#); born [Nelson](#), 22 Mar 1893; labourer; served 1914-18 War; wounded [Gallipoli](#), 1915.

⁵⁷ [Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis](#), CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Gk); [Hamilton](#); 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; GOC 2 NZ Div 27 Jun-16 Aug 1942, 6 Jun-31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, [Germany](#), 1947–50; Stipendiary Magistrate.

⁵⁸ [Lt F. J. McKerchar](#), m.i.d.; born NZ 3 Jul 1917; grocer's assistant; killed in action 17 Dec 1943.

⁵⁹ [Capt P. T. Norris](#), MC; born NZ 18 Apr 1914; law student; wounded 27 June 1942; killed in action 17 Dec 1942.

⁶⁰ [Brig G. Dittmer](#), CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Maharashtra](#), 4 Jun 1893; Regular soldier; [Auckland Regt](#) 1914–19 (OC 1 NZ Entrenching Bn); CO 28 (Maori) Bn Jan 1940-Feb 1942; comd 1 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) Apr 1942-Aug 1943; 1 Div Aug 1942-Jan 1943; [Fiji Military Forces](#) and Fiji Inf Bde Gp Sep 1943-Nov 1945; Commander, Central Military District, 1946–48.

⁶¹ [Maj R. Royal](#), MC and bar; [Wellington](#); born [Levin](#), 23 Aug 1897; civil servant; Maori Pioneer Bn, 1914–18 War; 28 (Maori) Bn 1940–41; wounded 14 Dec 1941; 2 i/c 2 Maori Bn (in NZ) 1942–43; CO 2 Maori Bn May-Jun 1943.

⁶² Maj J. P. Snadden, MC; Wellington; born Te Kuiti, 24 May 1913; salesman; 2 i/c 5 Fd Regt Mar-Oct 1944; twice wounded.

⁶³ Lt D. G. Davis; born Wales, 15 Jan 1917; NZR surfaceman; three times wounded; died of wounds 8 Jan 1944.

⁶⁴ Lt W. A. Barcock; born Christchurch, 24 Mar 1913; salesman; wounded Oct 1942.

⁶⁵ In the above figures, five men who died of wounds while prisoners of war have been included with the killed; the wounded include those wounded and taken prisoner.

⁶⁶ 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.

⁶⁷ Sgt J. E. H. Shatford; born NZ 16 Jun 1912; gardener; died of wounds 24 Oct 1942.

⁶⁸ Cpl H. C. Hulme; born NZ 16 May 1914; clerk; died of wounds 26 May 1941.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 6 – LIBYA 1941

CHAPTER 6

Libya 1941

FIVE and a half months elapsed between the safe arrival of the 23rd back in Egypt and its return to battle. In that time the battalion reorganised and recuperated, was reinforced and trained for desert fighting and for combined operations with the Navy and the RAF.

Sleep and more sleep between intervals of eating and drinking, seven days' leave with sightseeing in Egypt or Palestine, swimming and activities of not too strenuous a nature were the principal aids to recuperation after the fighting in Crete. By mid-June, 239 reinforcements had joined the battalion. ¹ At first some of the old hands were inclined to look down upon these untried soldiers, but the need for reinforcement was so great that the family circle of the 23rd was soon widened to admit the newcomers. Before long, B Company's method of welcoming reinforcements at an evening party in the company lines became standard practice: there the men endorsed the formal welcome given by the commanding officer. In a private letter, Lieutenant-Colonel Leckie, back in command after a period in hospital, described those who joined the unit in June 1941 as 'very fine reinforcements ... fit, keen and well-trained'. ²

Till near the end of July 1941, the 23rd trained at [Garawi](#), a desert camp and training area not far from [Helwan](#). Refreshed by their leave and kept in good physical shape by their training, the troops were soon as fit and as full of energy as an Egyptian summer would allow. Morale, which always rose with good health, was also improved by news from the battlefronts of the world: the fighting in [Syria](#) ended in victory by 17 July, and the German invasion of [Russia](#) on 22 June meant the diversion of most of [Hitler's](#) army to that front. The institution of a speedy airmail letter-card service to New Zealand at this time was much appreciated. A unit picnic and sports meeting at the Special Constabulary Club, [Mena](#), the music of the 33 Battalion pipe band, and improved amenities all helped to relieve the tedium of the hot July.

On 27 July, however, the battalion moved to [Kabrit](#) on the [Great Bitter Lake](#) in the [Suez Canal](#) to engage in combined operations training. First came instruction in

the handling of the boats and practice in embarkation and disembarkation from landing craft. Soon landings were being practised, first by day and then by night, on the [Sinai](#) shore. During the full-scale brigade exercise carried out on 12–13 August, the battalion encountered many of the problems connected with the execution of carefully timed night operations involving all three services.

After this training, the 23rd moved to [Moascar](#) for a fortnight and then, with the other units of 5 Brigade, moved in early September, by road and rail, to [El Alamein](#). South-west of the railway station in a desert area later known as the '[Kaponga Box](#)', the brigade group proceeded to develop a horseshoe-shaped fortress area, which it was hoped would be able to hold out in the event of any deep enemy penetration into Egypt. For most of September the 23rd laboured hard: two flat-topped features north of the [Qattara Depression](#) were made secure against tank attack by escarping the forward slopes, minefields were laid, gun and section positions were sited. But most men felt keenly that they were in the [Western Desert](#) for a very different purpose from digging defences over 230 miles behind the existing front line. On 5 October the brigade reverted to the direct command of the New Zealand Division, then part of [13 Corps](#), operating under the newly formed [Eighth Army](#). This transfer and the move to [Baggush](#) pointed to a very different role.

From this stage forward, training was directed to preparing units for the fast-moving war of manoeuvre, typical of the thrust and counter-thrust in the [Western Desert](#), the 'tactician's Paradise'. Since the desert in many places resembled the sea in its lack of conspicuous features and obstacles to movement, transport convoys in what was known as desert formation resembled convoys of ships at sea. In the 23rd the vehicles, led by the Intelligence Officer's 'pick-up', formed up on a two-company front, with 100 yards between vehicles during daylight and a much shorter distance at night. When the whole brigade moved in desert formation, it did so at this stage on a two-battalion front with the Bren carriers of its units providing a covering screen some distance (up to four miles) in front and on the flank. Anti-tank guns and machine guns were placed near the perimeter, where they could come quickly into action. Anti-aircraft guns were so positioned throughout the formation that triangulation was provided, or they moved to cover any defile which might cause a congestion of vehicles.

During October the battalion spent several days in practising convoy discipline

and communications with flag signals, in speedy debussing and deploying, and in all the procedure of navigation in the desert. A brigade exercise involving an attack on two dummy fortress positions, 'Sidi Clif' and 'Bir Stella', marked an important stage in the training. This exercise showed that further training in the use and lifting of mines was required, but the night approach of some 30 miles without vehicle lights and the deployment to attack at first light went well. Such an exercise could only be a rehearsal for the real thing. The issue in early November of battle dress to replace the summer dress of shorts and shirts, the sanding of windshields to prevent their flashing in the sun, and similar preparations were followed by the move of the battalion on 11 November towards the Egyptian frontier.

Later, in his report on the Libyan campaign, [General Freyberg](#) stated: 'The move of the Division to its assembly area...was carried out as an exercise. No mention was yet made of an attack. I do not think this deceived anybody.' The 23rd certainly believed they were 'in the know'. On 10 November Second-Lieutenant Alf [Jeavons](#),³ the 23rd's IO, wrote: 'This last 10 days we have been making our preparations and today is the great day to move forward. The spirit of the blokes amazes me. Each one has been quietly putting his house in order, destroying papers and letters, paying all debts and so on, each doing it with the intention of having everything in order in case he might be one of the unlucky ones. Yet I never saw men in higher spirits, laughing, fooling, boozing, and rioting, and far more excited over the N.Z. v S. [Africa](#) football match⁴ than the death or glory just ahead.' But excitement over such a football match was the best stimulus to morale before a new campaign began.

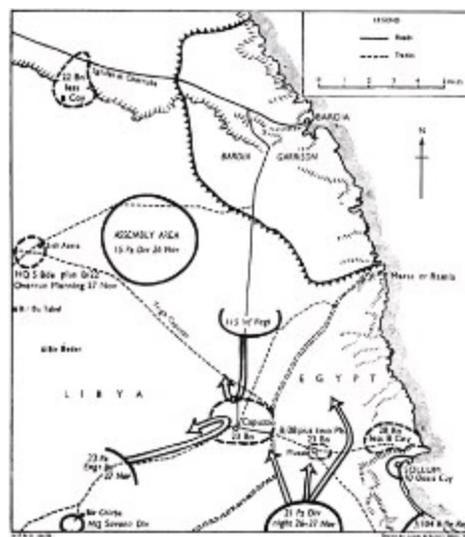
The campaign on which the New Zealanders were embarking is known by its code-name of 'Crusader' or as '[Libya](#)'41', although all the fighting took place in [Cyrenaica](#), the eastern province of Italian Libya. By November 1941 the pendulum of military success, which had swung one way and then another since [Italy](#)'s entry into the war in June 1940, had become temporarily stationary and was waiting for a push from either side. Waveil's wonderful thrust in December 1940-February 1941 had been followed, in the days of the Greek campaign, by the advance to the frontier of the newly arrived [Afrika Korps](#) and the Italians, who had found fresh courage when supported by German troops, tanks and aircraft. But [Tobruk](#), some 80 miles from the Egyptian border, held out, a thorn in the side of Rommel's forces, which were thus compelled to halt at the escarpment running inland from above [Sollum](#) through

[Halfaya](#) Pass towards the south-east. The line of forts, protected by minefields, which ran north-east from the Omars towards the coast at [Sollum](#) made a frontal assault impossible and forced the British to seek an approach route in the south.

When the 23rd left [Baggush](#) in the trucks of an [RASC](#) unit, 309 Transport Company, the role of the New Zealand Division was to cross the frontier south of the Omars, which 4 Indian Division was facing, and advance north to cut off and contain the frontier garrison from the west while the armoured units sought out and destroyed the enemy armour. The route followed was along the main road to the [Siwa](#) road and then down it to an area near Abar el [Kanayis](#). Here the 5 Brigade units rested while final plans were made: the troops completed the last details of desert camouflage for vehicles and made a last overhaul of weapons and equipment while the officers attended conferences and studied maps.

On 15 November 5 Brigade continued the advance to the frontier by a daylight move of some 45 miles. The whole Division on the move, with its guns and its three thousand vehicles, made an imposing sight. On 16 November Major-General Godwin-Austen, Commander of [13 Corps](#), visited the Division, where officers down to company commanders were drawn up to receive him. Captain Orbell, the 23rd's Adjutant, reported on the speed with which the Corps Commander moved: 'He arrived in a cloud of dust, shook hands all round, bellowing how "that fellow Rommel" would hate to meet us, and how proud he was to command us and tore off in his car before we realized he had arrived.'

Moves of some 25 to 50 miles each followed on the nights of 16–17, 17–18 and 18–19 November. All of these were carried out without the use of vehicle lights. An electrical storm on the second of these nights provided a prelude for the noise of the shelling of [Sidi Omar](#) on the Indians' front. The Divisional Cavalry and 5 Brigade were the first through the 300-yard gap in the frontier wire cut by the engineers. While the Division waited about eight miles south of Libyan Sheferzen for news of the armoured battle which was being fought in the northwest, the men of the 23rd derived much pleasure from seeing the sky so full of [RAF](#) aircraft. 'The Boys are in marvellous spirits. At dawn, they warm themselves at football! What a war! The sight of the R.A.F. busy in the skies is a great tonic to us,' wrote Private Diamond in his diary that morning.



5 brigade positions around bardia, november 1941

Fifth Brigade Group's first task was to advance to the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) and sever the communications of the frontier positions with the west and cut the [Bardia-Capuzzo](#) water pipe. The move to execute these tasks did not come until 21 November. Shortly before midday the brigade moved north, preceded by a squadron of tanks of the [Royal Tank Regiment](#). Rain fell during the afternoon and the sodden muddy ground nearly bogged some of the vehicles.

About 20 miles from its starting point, the brigade split up: 21 Battalion turned west-south-west towards [Hafid Ridge](#), the 22nd west-north-west to cover the road junction at [Sidi Azeiz](#), while Brigade Headquarters and the 23rd and 28th moved west with Bir Bu Tabel as their destination. Actually, led by the Brigade IO, these units reached Bir Beder, about a mile and a half nearer [Capuzzo](#) than the destination given. At this point, Colonel Leckie received orders to send out a strong patrol to reconnoitre the approaches to [Fort Capuzzo](#) and to cut the pipeline supplying [Sollum](#) and [Halfaya](#) Pass with water. The intention was that this patrol should test the defences of the Fort and then, if necessary, the battalion would attack and capture it at dawn next morning.

Built by the Italians to keep the [Senussi](#) under control, [Fort Capuzzo](#) was originally little more than four stone walls, with a tower and crenellated battlements, but the shelling of each successive campaign made more and more holes and finally lowered the walls to the ground. In November 1941, however, it was still of some importance as a centre of desert road communications: directly to the north about

14 miles away lay [Bardia](#), to the east lay [Sollum](#) and [Halfaya](#), while to the south and south-west were the frontier posts. Captain F. S. R. Thomson, commanding C Company, led the 23rd patrol, which was composed of his company of infantry, a sub-section of engineers under Second-Lieutenant [Brady](#),⁵ one troop of anti-tank guns and a section of Bren carriers. Lance-Corporal Ramsay⁶ of the 'I' section acted as navigator for the move of nearly ten miles across the open desert.

The patrol started at 8.30 p.m., had trouble with the heavy going and had vehicles stuck on more than one occasion, but about 11.30 p.m. it reached the disused landing ground west of [Fort Capuzzo](#). Captain Thomson now decided to go forward to the [Capuzzo- Bardia](#) road before advancing to the Fort itself. As this was being done, some of the trucks and anti-tank portées got stuck in the mud and soft sand. Private Diamond graphically recorded his impression of the scene: '...still they bog, the noise, shouting, blue language, and roaring of engines flat out is terrific. Our approach is not at all like the silent swift approach that we have had drilled into us. We find comfort in the thought that the unorthodox is often successful. Surely, we tell each other, the enemy will think a whole Division is coming.'

After reaching the road about half an hour after midnight, Thomson left the company B Echelon, under Captain Ted Richards, with the anti-tank guns and signals, to hold a defensive position on which the patrol could retire if necessary. The Bren carriers were also placed in reserve to protect the flanks of this position. The infantry then simply walked down the road and occupied the Fort without meeting any real opposition. Apparently, the Italians on guard had heard the noise of the advancing patrol, including the uproar when the trucks were stuck, and had concluded that only friendly Italians would make so much noise at night. They never dreamed that New Zealanders engaged in a 'silent' night attack, unsupported by artillery or other fire, could be coming in to occupy their fort.

Thus, [Fort Capuzzo](#) was captured shortly after 1 a.m. on 22 November. Captain Thomson whistled up the B Echelon and supporting arms and proceeded to consolidate his position. By 1.30 a.m. he had advised Battalion Headquarters by radio of C Company's success and Colonel Leckie gave up his plans for employing the squadron of tanks entrusted to the 23rd for the capture of [Capuzzo](#). Captain Richards and his men cut all telephone wires in the area but experienced some difficulty in cutting the pipeline until a captured Italian officer obligingly indicated how to remove

a section of it. Everything was working out so smoothly that it seemed like a picnic. About 5 a.m. two Italian trucks arrived from [Bardia](#). The tossing of a grenade and the firing of a few shots halted them. Three Italians were killed and the remaining dozen with their officer quickly surrendered. The rations they were bringing into [Capuzzo](#) were also seized. The latest prisoners explained that they had come from [Bardia](#), where no one had any idea that anything untoward had happened to the Fort.

The rest of the battalion arrived soon afterwards, Their experience on the way resembled that of the patrol the previous night. 'We pitched and rolled and tipped into holes mile after mile,' wrote one officer afterwards. By 6.30 a.m. the battalion was organising itself in and around the Fort. Company positions were soon allotted and the supporting arms and tanks deployed in defence of the recently occupied area.

Before turning into the Fort, Second-Lieutenant Jeavons, escorted by three Bren carriers, reconnoitred past [Musaid](#). Close to [Sollum](#), he ran into a large telegraph line junction. The direction and number of its wires indicated that it probably connected [Gambut](#), [Bardia](#), [Sidi Omar](#), [Sollum](#) and [Halfaya](#), or virtually all the Axis strongpoints in that part of [Cyrenaica](#). A Bren carrier quickly rammed two poles, the wires were cut and the resulting break in enemy communications helped to preserve the surprise gained that morning. As a result, carrier and other patrols kept on capturing trucks and small parties of the enemy, including some German signallers and an Italian Water Company officer and party. By mid-morning there were 118 prisoners (38 Germans and 80 Italians). This number grew steadily during the day as more trucks were captured. The equipment taken was also useful: B Company took two motorcycles and a 3-ton truck, HQ Company under Captain Morten, ⁷ mainly through the efforts of the carrier platoon, captured nine trucks, four of which were still in perfect order, A Company knocked out another vehicle, and D Company claimed a wireless vehicle equipped with a range-finder. C Company had earlier captured three six-wheeled Spa trucks and a small scout car as well as the large telephone exchange in [Capuzzo](#). In the exchange were also found orders of battle, location statements and code-names for all Axis forces in [Cyrenaica](#), which with marked maps and other Intelligence documents were sent on to Brigade Headquarters as quickly as possible. Stores of ammunition, 400 gallons of petrol, and other supplies were

also captured. The Libyan war was going well. 'Everything going swell, our Boys marching prisoners in by the score,' wrote Diamond.

Without realising how simple the capture of [Fort Capuzzo](#) had been but appreciative of the results, [General Freyberg](#) wrote in his report: '5th Brigade Group moved on by night and [22nd Battalion](#) occupied [Sidi Azeiz](#) while 23rd Battalion moved against [Capuzzo](#). It was a brilliant move and an excellent piece of desert navigation. The attack on [Capuzzo](#) was also an excellent piece of planning carried out at dawn with "I" Tanks. The small force there was taken completely by surprise. It was like a dress rehearsal for the Battle for "Sidi Clif". Two hundred prisoners (60 Germans and 140 Italians) were captured without casualties to ourselves.... The capture of [Capuzzo](#) played a most important part in disorganising the enemy because the Army Signal Exchange was situated there. In the afternoon [21st Battalion](#) occupied [Hafid Ridge](#).'

Stimulated by their success, the 23rd companies favoured more and more aggressive patrolling and B Company, under Captain Reg [Romans](#),⁸ set about forestalling [28 Battalion](#) in the capture of [Fort Musaid](#). At 12.15 p.m. Romans advanced with 10 Platoon, supported by two anti-tank guns, a section of mortars, and four I tanks. The diary of Bob Stone,⁹ a reinforcement private, gives a first-hand account of this excursion:

'22nd November.... Noon. No. 10 told we were to proceed to [Fort Musaid](#). We'd never heard of that and more than a few of us had a sinking feeling in the stomach, imagginnnnnng wiiireee, mineees, trenches, etc.... Crawled down the road and Jerry promptly fired a couple of mortars at us. It seemed big stuff to us. Reggie leading us. Off the trucks near a wrecked Hun plane and Pat Lynch¹⁰ lined us up—16 of us to make a line. The tanks buzzed off towards [Sollum](#) barracks and Reggie headed us forward—ran us in fact. Past a heap of rocks and rubble which Colin P., the RAP boy inspected and said had nothing. The sight of 16–20 figures trotting along by themselves with one out in front waving them on must have intrigued Jerry—maybe it was a surprise move. Flashes from the barracks and shells bursting in front of us. "Back a bit, boys," said Reggie. Pat L ran us back 50 yards and we went smartly.... Then over the rise came Doug Leckie in a Bren carrier. "Where the B—H—do you think you chaps are going, there's your objective." The piles of rocks and rubble C.P. had inspected alone—so that is [Fort Musaid](#). Back we head and Jerry

decides we are harmless and shuts up. Heavy rain falls and squatting among piles of rocks amongst a collection of Itie gear and letters, we wondered how long war would be like this—wet through, no food, no loot. Black as pitch at night.... Advice received from Bn that the Maoris to come up in the morning and take [Sollum](#) barracks and that man with the ea had No. 10 go in in broad daylight. Very little sleep and then we heard the Maoris go in. Day broke and boys poking about the rubble discovered a cellar from which 16 Ities promptly emerged and surrendered. We had stood guard above ground all night while the Ities slept beneath. I hope they slept well. 10 a.m. and some hot stew arrived. We felt 100% again. "Hadn't we captured [Musaid](#)?"

On 22 November, too, Colonel Leckie sent out a larger patrol to test the [Bardia](#) defences. Captain J. R. J. Connolly took A Company, supported by five tanks, a troop of 25-pounders from the battery of [5 Field Regiment](#) supporting the 23rd, a section of mortars and two carriers, but his patrol was heavily shelled and was unable to penetrate the defences of [Bardia](#).¹¹ The strength in which this place was held was thus confirmed for the higher command.

During the Maoris' successful attack on [Sollum](#) on 23 November, their commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Dittmer, was wounded and evacuated. Brigadier Hargest now placed Colonel Leckie in command of the Gapuzzo- [Sollum](#) area with orders to 'co-ordinate the defence of the area. All troops already there come under your command. You will ensure that the enemy is not allowed to concentrate for an attack. You will watch the [Halfaya](#) flank in case the enemy attempts to break through'.

In the consolidation of the unit position at [Capuzzo](#), the CO placed A and C Companies in the north, with A astride and to the east of the [Bardia](#) road and C to the west of it. B Company was on the east with two platoons at [Musaid](#) and a third at the old Customs House site between [Capuzzo](#) and [Musaid](#). D Company, under Captain R. McKinlay, covered the south to south-west sector, while HQ Company held a line facing west and linking C and D Companies. Battalion Headquarters occupied trenches to the north of the Fort and parallel to the [Bardia](#) road. The unit transport was dispersed between Battalion Headquarters and HQ Company.

Shortly after midday on 23 November, the first enemy troops to make any serious approach to the battalion's area made their appearance on the A Company

front. After exchanges of fire, the enemy withdrew after having one of their trucks hit by mortar fire. Their withdrawal was hastened by the appearance of fourteen British tanks on their way westwards. The rest of the day passed quietly, apart from exchanges of fire between carrier patrols and enemy troops on the [Bardia](#) road.

By 23 November, too, important changes had been made in the distribution of the New Zealand Division: to the west, 6 Brigade had moved to the support of British troops at [Sidi Rezegh](#) while 4 Brigade had moved via the [Menastir](#) area to [Gambut](#), and [General Freyberg](#), taking 21 Battalion into [Divisional Reserve](#), was forced to let the rest of 5 Brigade pass under the command of 4 Indian Division, which was still too far south to be in intimate touch with developments around [Fort Capuzzo](#).

The next day, 24 November, passed quietly enough. In a message that morning Brigadier Hargest announced: 'The decisive battle is being fought west of us and as every tank will contribute towards our success I have released those attached and they are proceeding "hot foot" to the assistance of the Division'. To make up for the tanks removed, the Brigade Commander increased the supporting arms with the 23rd. Thus, a section of Vickers machine guns was added to A Company's sector, and a second troop of anti-tank guns from 32 Anti-Tank Battery and three Bofors guns from 42 Battery of the Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment arrived. On patrols, Brigadier Hargest had laid down as his policy: 'In none of these patrols do I wish to incur casualties or be engaged in battle, but to harass the enemy and if possible pick up prisoners'. During the day, Lieutenant E. A. McPhail took an A Company patrol with supporting arms to reconnoitre the Marsa er Ramla area, near the coast between [Bardia](#) and [Sollum](#), and reported it strongly held by the enemy. At night Major Tom Pugh, who had succeeded Major Thomason as second-in-command in July when the latter was evacuated to the [Convalescent Depot](#), took out four patrols to different wadis and points on the escarpment which, under Lieutenants G. H. Cunningham and [Stubbs](#),¹² Second-Lieutenants [Brittenden](#)¹³ and [Hoggans](#),¹⁴ they reconnoitred without coming into very close contact with the enemy.

On 25 November 5 Brigade gave warning of the approach of thirty enemy tanks from the south, but by midday it was reported that the Indians had knocked out seven and forced the remainder to retire. Similar threats were reported in the afternoon and it grew increasingly obvious that heavier enemy movements were

taking place. Around 4 p.m., about 200 enemy vehicles debouched from [Halfaya](#). The artillery and the squadron of Divisional Cavalry with 23 and 28 Battalions opened fire and, after some exchanges and some tactical movements which suggested tentative manoeuvring to secure an attacking position, the enemy went back into the [Halfaya](#) area. Spasmodic enemy shelling and transport movements near the horizon continued. To safeguard the gap between the 23rd and 28th, Colonel Leckie placed a company of Maoris at [Musaid](#) and drew one of the B Company platoons back.

The next two days, 26 and 27 November, were the most exciting of the whole campaign for the 23rd. At 5 a.m. on 26 November, Brigade Headquarters reported that a large enemy convoy had blundered into its lines but had been broken up. Heavier shelling from the direction of [Halfaya](#) than had so far been experienced suggested that the 'picnic' conditions were at an end. The battalion's intelligence section and the artillery OP in the tower of [Fort Capuzzo](#) reported many movements on the skyline or closer in. About 9 a.m. Bren carriers returned from a patrol and reported much movement of enemy transport from [Halfaya](#) Pass. At 11.30 Brigade advised that some thirty enemy tanks were to be seen making for [Bardia](#). The CO, as a precaution against any approach from that sector, moved two anti-tank guns into the A Company area. The one tank from [8 Royal Tanks](#), which had been left behind for repairs and was now mobile again, was also moved into a position covering the [Bardia](#) road. Further reports of enemy tank and other vehicular movements continued to come in. At 2 p.m. Brigade warned that some 30 tanks and 700 vehicles of all kinds were moving towards [Bardia](#). Shortly afterwards the OP observed some fifty trucks moving on the escarpment from [Halfaya](#) Pass. More trucks were seen a little later in the same locality. The artillery reported that three of these had been hit by their fire. The afternoon wore on with mounting reports of enemy transport movements in the south, the south-west, the north-east and north-west. [Fort Capuzzo](#) appeared to be seriously threatened.

Soon after 4.30 p.m. on 26 November, the expected attack came in on the 23rd. One of the officers most concerned has left a detailed account of that attack:

'About middle afternoon a great cloud of dust to the north-west became visible and later we watched hundreds and hundreds of vehicles making eastward to [Bardia](#) just out of range of our guns. It kept on all afternoon till it became fantastic to

estimate their numbers. By 4 p.m. enemy had been reported on all sides of us. The situation had got too ludicrous to worry about and everybody was quite cheerfully determined to do his best, though our ultimate fate seemed to be certain. Promptly at 4.30 p.m., the shelling over [Sollum](#) way suddenly became intensely heavy and in two minutes [Sollum](#) was invisible under an enormous pall of smoke and dust. ¹⁵ It was obvious that the attack was coming. Five minutes later, big guns, apparently brought up from [Bardia](#), opened fire on us and, at the same time, down came a terrific barrage from the east.... I was busy observing to the north, and presently in they came—scores of vehicles flying down the [Bardia](#) road and through the desert on either side, just like our own method of mechanised attack in desert formation. Our artillery opened up on them and, two minutes later, the rattle of machine gun fire from A Coy told that the party was on. At the same time, a 'phone ring from B Company to the south-west reported tanks and infantry flying in on them.

'What a pandemonium! Shells crashing in, tank shells whizzing everywhere like fiery comets, bullets whining and screaming about and the Jerry explosive bullets everywhere.... An hour or so after dark, it began to ease off in the north and we realized the Jerry had a guts full there. A Company's casualties were large, but not bad considering. To the south, the tanks had been beaten off by our artillery firing over open sights at point blank range and by our anti-tank guns.'

A review of the companies' experiences shows that the 23rd had repelled a serious attack. A Company, under Captain Connolly, met the brunt of the infantry and AFV attack down the [Bardia- Capuzzo](#) road. Connolly sent 8 Platoon, under Lieutenant Brittenden, forward about three miles from [Capuzzo](#) to cover a section of 2 Platoon, 1 MG Company, under Corporal [Mack](#), ¹⁶ and two 3-inch mortars. This small force fought a particularly gallant action against superior numbers and was later paid a handsome tribute by the diarist of [15 Panzer Division](#), whose 115 Infantry Regiment was engaged in the advance towards [Capuzzo](#).

The approach of the German infantry was delayed by artillery fire directed by an OP officer with 8 Platoon, but shortage of ammunition meant that the battery had to reserve its fire for targets closer in to the Fort. The Vickers guns, however, opened fire and forced the enemy to debus. Connolly reported 'Much good shooting was done by the M.M.G. and mortar and ... they must have caused much damage.' Heavy

enemy mortar and artillery fire preceded the advance of the German infantry and persuaded the A Company commander that he should pull his forward platoon back to its main prepared defences nearer the Fort. Darkness was falling by the time this order reached Brittenden, who passed it on by runner to his forward sections. After seeing what he took to be the left-hand section withdrawing, Brittenden went forward to supervise the movement back of his right-hand forward section, failed to locate it, decided it must have moved back unnoticed in the dark and withdrew according to plan. In fact, the two forward sections had moved to attack the advancing infantry battalion, which had begun to outflank them on the left flank. Corporal R. D. Minson's personal account scarcely does justice to his own leadership but it gives the essential facts:

'By dusk we had made small arms contact with about a Bn of infantry in extended line of advance. Our platoon put up very heavy fire ... and stemmed their advance for approx. 1 ½ hours. By this time it was completely dark ... our Sgt., R. Cherry, was badly wounded through the chest. I, being the only full corporal, took charge. The Hun made a rapid advance after dark and appeared to be attacking from our left flank. I decided to send one of my section, Pte. H. O'Neill, ¹⁷ back to Bn HQ for permission to withdraw, being obviously heavily outnumbered. I reformed the platoon parallel with the road and made a bayonet advance to meet what I thought was the strongest quarter of their attack. At this stage we had six casualties, two killed.... We had temporary success with what Huns we could see [who] withdrew rapidly. The mortar fire became very intense. I received a shrapnel wound in the thigh and was unable to walk. I handed over the remainder of the platoon to L/Cpl. M. O'Connell, ¹⁸ who carried on with the attack but was soon overwhelmed. I managed to crawl back to our Bn, arriving there about 4 or 5 a.m.'

That the Germans in this sector thought they were up against the main 23rd defences and had no idea that they were opposed by only one platoon can be seen from the [15 Panzer Division](#) diary. 1 Battalion of 115 Infantry Regiment advanced about 600 yards after dark and eventually overran the forward positions of 8 Platoon and the Vickers guns they were covering. But the diary admits that the defenders took the initiative as indicated by Minson: 'In the dark the enemy managed to get close up to our positions and bitter close-range fighting with bayonets and hand grenades took place'. Then, still unaware of the limited strength of the New

Zealanders, the German writer not only admits temporary success by 8 Platoon but also mentions the supporting attack by the second battalion of 115 Infantry Regiment. 'In one place the enemy made a penetration but was stopped by two light infantry guns of 5/115 and forced to surrender. By this time 11/115 had advanced to 800 metres NE of [Capuzzo](#) and had driven back the enemy, who hurriedly withdrew SW.' A report from the attacking I Battalion states that 'on the left flank of the road there was hard fighting for every slit trench', and that '2/Lt. Keim (commander of the spearhead) was killed while charging a pocket of resistance at the head of this company'.

Corporal Mack and Privates [Harrisson](#),¹⁹ [Baker](#)²⁰ and [Hoggard](#)²¹ kept their Vickers gun firing during this engagement. Later, this gun crew shammed death when their gun position was overrun in the dark and they withdrew to safety only when the Germans had withdrawn in the early hours of the morning. The mortars in the 8 Platoon position were too hot to move in the withdrawal but they and the machine gun were recovered next morning by a Bren-carrier patrol which reported that, in addition to the twenty enemy dead buried that morning by A Company, there were several fresh German graves in the advanced battlefield. A Company lost 3 killed, 2 wounded and 18 missing. The question of why the Germans had not followed up their success by a more determined attack on the Fort was discussed at the time. German documents have since provided the answer: the order to break off contact and return to the starting point arrived, having been issued at the direct command of General Rommel, who had reached [Bardia](#) and had decided on another operation.

On B Company's front the attack on the afternoon and evening of 26 November was also heavy. At 4.45 p.m. a large enemy convoy advanced from the south, preceded by a heavy bombardment. This column divided into three, one part going towards [Capuzzo](#), one towards [Musaid](#) and the third towards [Sollum](#). The Musaid column was the most determined on action: it split into two, the lorried infantry from eight troop-carriers debussed about 1000 yards south of [Musaid](#) while the remainder moved out to the east, debussed in a slight depression and began their attack. Immediately the attack opened, Captain Romans moved out to [Musaid](#) from the Customs House and ordered 11 Platoon up to reinforce 10 Platoon and the Maoris' B Company at [Musaid](#). Private [Blampied](#)²² of 11 Platoon recorded his impressions as

follows:

'... Then the excitement commenced, the curtain went up with crossfire from Jerry's machine guns, and we could see the trail of lead owing to the tracers in them. For some distance we advanced and, when the show got too hot, we flattened out.... we safely negotiated the fire and reached the platoon we were to reinforce. We lay there for some time, watching and listening to the sound of trucks and tanks (Jerry's). They were faintly visible in the darkness and we could hear the orders being given in German.... after what seemed an eternal age, this convoy passed and we breathed again.'

Possibly, things would have turned out less happily had not E Troop of the anti-tank guns done considerable damage to the enemy. Nos. 2 and 3 guns, under Lieutenant Fagan,²³ scored direct hits on four AFVs. Nos. 1 and 4 guns, under Lieutenant Foubister,²⁴ knocked out two light tanks. Later, in the growing darkness, an AFV was seen towing a gun near the ruins where No. 1 gun was sited. Sergeant Gibson²⁵ laid his gun on the target, despite enemy machine-gun fire, and destroyed the vehicle.

No. 12 Platoon, left at the Customs House, also had its share of excitement as some of the enemy vehicles passed to the west of Musaid when the main column circled out to come in from the east. These forces brought two 50-millimetre guns and several machine guns into action against 12 Platoon and the vehicles parked in the rear. The two-pounder at the Customs House put a tracked troop-carrier out of action but could not stop the guns from firing. The mortars attached to B Company were now brought into action. Lance-Corporal Russell,²⁶ whose section of 12 Platoon had kept up a steady fire of small arms, and Second-Lieutenant Hoggans, the platoon officer, stalked the guns and passed back reports on the fall of mortar bombs so successfully that the mortars were able to get right on to the guns, scatter their crews and enable the infantry to capture both of them.

Although the enemy carried away most of their wounded, they left sufficient of their number dead to indicate how heavy had been their losses. At Musaid, six wounded and two unwounded prisoners were taken, while seventy-three of the enemy were buried later. At the Customs House, one dead German was found and three wounded prisoners taken. Similarly, although the enemy carried out vehicle

recovery measures during the hours of darkness, the Maoris at [Musaid](#) collected 12 trucks, 2 armoured cars and a light tank, and at the Customs House, B Company of the 23rd had the two 50-millimetre guns and an armoured troop-carrier.

There was no slacking on the 'stand-to' on the morning of 27 November but, when daylight came, the front was quiet, with only a small amount of transport disappearing to the north-west to be seen. Bren-carrier patrols reported engaging at extreme range some trucks and a staff car. At 8.15 a.m. A Company engaged four armoured cars and a light tank which were escorting about twenty trucks down the [Bardia](#) road. This force withdrew, but a German supply truck captured at this time supplied the explanation: the driver stated that the German task on the previous day had been the recapture of [Capuzzo](#) and that he had been told they had succeeded. The 'I' section OP reported enemy transport in the north-west and the sound of battle could be heard and much smoke seen from the Brigade Headquarters area at [Sidi Azeiz](#). It was not till the following day that the 23rd learned that at about 8.40 a.m. Brigade Headquarters had been overrun by the German armour and that Brigadier Hargest was a prisoner. More enemy transport came into view, and shortly after 11 a.m. shells began to fall again in the area around the Fort. This fire was coming from 105- and 150-millimetre guns in the north-west sector. The [27 Battery](#) guns replied but, as they could not reach the enemy, and as ammunition was running low, Captain [Nolan](#) ²⁷ and his gunners decided to wait till enemy tanks or infantry had to be repelled. It was a wise decision as about 1 p.m. the real attack was launched by the Germans.

To the surprise of the troops, the German attack came in from the south-west and not from the area on which their attention had been concentrated during the shelling. 'Look at this charging in on us! There's hundreds of them!' shouted the 'I' section OP when the enemy vehicles were seen charging at full speed, not in open desert formation, but in close order as if they were determined to cleave a way through by sheer weight of transport. The guns switched quickly to this new target and very soon they scored several direct hits and set a number of trucks on fire. The German convoy dispersed and some of the lighter vehicles sheered off to a flank. But the tanks and some troop-carriers came on, headed for one of the weaker parts of the battalion perimeter, the part held by mixed elements of HQ Company and drivers of 309 British Transport Company. A two-pounder of G Troop of 32 Battery knocked

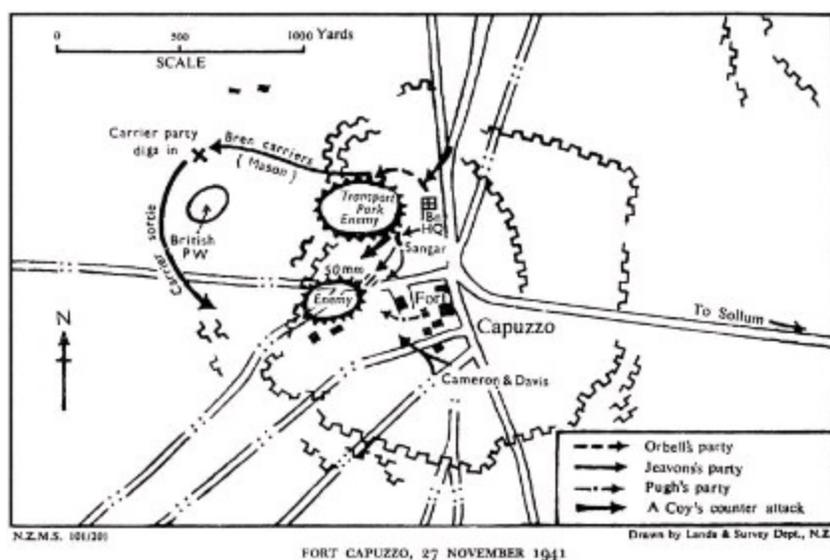
out three or four vehicles before it was itself left blazing and bullet-ridden. The enemy appeared to be in some strength, about one battalion, supported by four to six light tanks and some mobile guns. The one tank still with the 23rd was ordered into action and it disabled two guns and some vehicles before it received a shell through a bogey.

The nearest platoon of C Company, No. 14, also opened fire and the effect of the combined artillery, anti-tank, machine-gun and small-arms fire was to make the enemy veer to the north and come in more directly from the west. Shortly after 2.30 p.m., enemy tanks broke through the sector held by the transport drivers and part of HQ Company, directly west of Battalion Headquarters. About sixty English, Maori and 23 Battalion drivers were captured. Enemy infantry were coming in to consolidate, but Lieutenant [Stratton](#)²⁸ with his Bofors gun from E Troop of 42 Light AA Battery set one troop-carrier on fire with a direct hit. Unfortunately, this Bofors soon drew the concentrated fire of the tanks and guns and was quickly silenced.

The enemy set up machine guns and mortars in the transport park about 200 yards to the west of Battalion Headquarters and also in the shelter of the walls of the south-west corner of the Fort. Some of the 23rd's trucks and two or three German tanks were blazing. The situation was deteriorating rapidly: the enemy was in position to overrun Battalion Headquarters and then attack the infantry companies from the rear. There was no time for detailed reconnaissance or for calling in one or more of the infantry companies from the perimeter defences; it was a time for immediate action. Captain R. M. S. Orbell, the Adjutant, shouted, 'Every second man follow me and we'll clear these bastards out'. He evidently meant to leave half the men in position to hold and operate the headquarters but there were few who did not respond to his call. Under Orbell's leadership, about twenty men with fixed bayonets set off for the north-west, intending to come in on the transport lines from the north. Second-Lieutenant Jeavons collected another five or six men and set off due west. The CO, busy on the telephone calling on A Company for support, shouted 'Attack! Attack! Attack!' What happened to Jeavons and his gallant few is best told in his own words:

'I got my blokes to fix bayonets and spread them out to look as imposing as possible.... At the same time I had a chance to look them over and see what I'd got. I noticed at once [Dudley Fraser](#),²⁹ [Dick Brett](#),³⁰ [Docherty](#),³¹ and [Johnstone](#),³² the

Colonel's driver. I was considerably cheered. As stout a lot of blokes as I could have picked if I'd had the chance! I took them forward at the double two hundred yards, and then put them down in the last cover available, an old stone sangar and a wrecked I tank, for a much needed breather. From here they kept up an intensive fire on the Jerries ducking in to reinforce those already under our transport, while I took a poke about to find out what was what. Jerries were obviously still hidden in amongst our transport in front, and among the fort buildings on the left— others were racing to join them and I got in a few pot shots at these.... There was heavy small arms fire close at hand to the left. I calculated a demonstration here was necessary no matter what the cost. We could not stop them by firing from cover and, if they came on, we were sunk. I called my few brave lads to come on, telling them to try and clear the broken ground to the left. They rose like one man and away we went. I made straight for the gun position ahead.... After going about fifty yards, I was hit in the right shoulder. A few yards further on, the boys on either side of me were both hit and killed at the same moment.... Fifty or sixty yards further on I was hit again, this time on the head, my helmet spinning off into the middle distance.... I went on again until a moment or two later, with the gun position almost in reach, I got a sledge hammer blow in the chest which knocked me head over [Turkey](#), and left me winded and gasping for breath on my face.'



fort capuzzo, 27 november 1941

While this gallant if costly bayonet charge was going in, Orbell's party cleared the ground up to some burnt-out Matilda tanks, relics of an earlier campaign. There

they were pinned down by particularly vicious machine-gun and small-arms fire from among the transport lines. Lieutenant Noel Jones, the signals officer, went free-lancing among the trucks, ran out of ammunition and found himself under one end of a truck with two Germans, one with a Spandau and the other with a pistol, at the other. These two Germans, taken by surprise, surrendered. But, in his next encounter with a German in a nearby slit trench, Jones was badly wounded in the leg. Others in the Battalion Headquarters party had similar experiences and their counter-attack halted.

Another minor sortie, which failed to dislodge the enemy but at least checked their advance, was that made by the party gathered together by Major Tom Pugh, Second-Lieutenant [Phillips](#),³³ the transport officer, and Captain Berry of 309 Transport Company. This group, made up of drivers and mechanics, and joined by the nearest section of D Company, advanced from a more southerly quarter until, with Major Pugh, Second-Lieutenant Phillips and others wounded, and three or four, including Captain Berry, killed, they were forced to go to ground.

Meanwhile the CO had organised other forces to restore the situation. Six Bren carriers under Second-Lieutenant Charlie [Mason](#)³⁴ raced round to the north-west before turning south and coming in on the rear of the attacking enemy and the captured English drivers, who were held in close ranks about 1000 yards west of the transport. The carriers, commanded by Sergeants E. Hobbs and [McGregor](#),³⁵ attempted to release the prisoners but found they could not halt without coming under fire. [McGregor](#) and his crew took a chance, dismounted and fired their machine guns from the ground, but without attaining their object. Boarding their carrier again, they moved towards a low stone wall behind which enemy infantry were sheltering. As these infantry tried to rejoin some half-tracked vehicles, [McGregor](#) and Private J. P. Fitchett opened fire on them and accounted for fifteen or more. At this stage an anti-tank gun fired on their carrier and scored a direct hit, killing [McGregor](#) and wounding Fitchett. Corporal [Price](#)³⁶ took his carrier forward in support of [McGregor's](#) but it too was knocked out, Price being killed. Two or three light tanks forced the other carriers, which had followed a different route, to retire after they had fired several bursts into enemy transport.

One section of the nearest platoon of D Company had already gone forward with Second-Lieutenant Phillips and, once he had collected his other two sections, the

platoon officer, Second-Lieutenant [Cameron](#),³⁷ led them into the attack. They, too, met with stiff opposition in the shape of machine-gun, mortar and small-arms fire, but they forced some of the enemy to withdraw. Thereafter, they were unable to fire to their front owing to the danger of hitting the prisoners who were being used as a screen by some of the enemy. The tide was turning, however, and Second-Lieutenant Ken [Armour](#)³⁸ and his 3-inch mortar crews, who got over 300 bombs away that afternoon, caused many enemy casualties. In addition, Second-Lieutenant [Chance](#),³⁹ Sergeant [McClelland](#)⁴⁰ and Bombardier [Manning](#)⁴¹ knocked out a German tank, a heavy machine gun and another gun with well-aimed fire from the No. 3 Bofors.

Another D Company platoon, No. 16, under [Sergeant Dan Davis](#), advanced from the south to clear the enemy from the fort buildings. Attacking from a flank, it took the enemy by surprise and, in addition to putting some infantry to flight, destroyed one machine gun and two anti-tank gun crews. No. 16 Platoon next joined in a bayonet charge launched in grander style and on a larger scale than any of the earlier efforts. Captain Connolly had arrived with practically the whole of A Company. The tide which was already turning rose to the flood, and the enemy who were not destroyed or captured beat a hurried retreat. Second-Lieutenant Jeavons, the man nearest the enemy at the time this last charge was launched, can best describe it: '... there was a sudden intensification of the fire about me and I heard the sound of many cheering roaring voices and good lusty New Zealand cursing. They came nearer and I heard good old Dick Connolly's voice urging them on. I lifted my head and saw them coming, a long straight line of determined blokes, bayonets fixed and firing from their hips. A Company was putting in their counter attack and making a job of it. I tried to give them a cheer but only got out a gurgle. They swept on past me.'⁴² They swept on with some of that same irresistible spirit of the counter-attack in [Galatas](#) and, within minutes, what remained of the enemy had been put to flight.

One private soldier later wrote home saying: 'The greatest sight I ever wish to see in my life was a bayonet-charge by the 23rd Battalion. I consider myself very highly favoured by Fate to have been able to witness this charge.... In five hours of fierce fighting, our boys were almost fought right out of the place. Instead of running away—which seemed just about all there was left to do—they fixed bayonets and in 30 minutes had won back all they had lost, as well as chasing the Germans back two

miles and capturing some of their light artillery.'

As soon as the enemy were 'seen off', Colonel Leckie reorganised the defences, reducing and strengthening the line of the perimeter. The Maori Battalion's transport was sent to [Sollum](#) and the 23rd's was transferred to the east of the Fort. A counting of casualties revealed that the unit had emerged comparatively lightly from its ordeal. The battalion group had lost 2 officers (Captain Berry, 309 General Transport Company, and Second-Lieutenant Foubister, 32 Anti-Tank Battery) and 16 other ranks killed, and 4 officers and 32 men wounded. The transport drivers, with the exception of seven of their number, were released some distance west of the Fort by the retreating enemy. Some sixty Germans were buried next day, while the Indians later reported burying several more on the western fringes of the area. The 23rd also took 1 German officer and 11 other ranks prisoner. Captain Romans became second-in-command of the battalion. He was succeeded in command of B Company by Captain Murray Grant.

Of course, on the night of 27–28 November, the 23rd did not know how soon or in what strength the enemy might renew his attack. The battalion group was short of artillery ammunition and rations and other supplies were running out. The carriers which patrolled to the west and south-west reported that enemy to the strength of possibly a brigade had debussed less than five miles away on the side of [Hafid Ridge](#) nearest to [Capuzzo](#). Throughout that night, the 23rd broadcast the following message in code on the various frequencies on which British forces were believed to be operating: 'New Zealanders holding out at [Capuzzo](#) and [Sollum](#). Aid and air support wanted urgently.'

But, if the senior officers were worried about their isolation, the lack of any word and any supplies from Brigade, and the likelihood of a heavier attack, the men generally were so pleased with their success in repelling two attacks that they had no very grave fears. Thus, on the morning of 28 November, Len Diamond wrote in his diary: 'They must have captured one of our supply columns, hence the shortness of our rations. Still, we've got the pumping station and that's what Jerry wants. He appears to have miles and miles of transport and God knows how many men, but, for all the numbers he has against us, our battalion are in fine fettle and we reckon we're sitting pretty.'

The morning of 28 November was devoted to tightening the defences and improvising where necessary. Thus, old dumps of ammunition, located some distance out by the carriers, produced HE shells without charges for the 25-pounders, and these were made fit for use by inserting charges from the smoke shells, which were practically the only ones left with the guns. All water containers were filled and [Musaid](#) and [Sollum](#) were well supplied with these in case of a siege or long-drawn-out battle. But the day passed without any renewal of the action of the previous day. About 10.15 a.m., [27 Battery](#) made wireless contact with 4 Indian Division and orders were received that 23 and 28 Battalions were to hold on in their present positions and that supplies of all kinds would be sent to them. A later message stated that 5 Brigade Headquarters had been overrun and probably captured. One 23rd Bren-carrier patrol, supported by a section of Vickers guns, shot up a small enemy convoy and captured one 3-ton truck and two prisoners. Otherwise, the day passed without any contact with the enemy.

The next day, 29 November, saw an end to the isolation of the two battalions. After a comparatively quiet morning in which two enemy trucks and two prisoners were taken as a result of anti-tank and other fire put down on a small convoy passing in the north, and two small British trucks were recaptured by a Bren-carrier patrol, 22 Battalion escorted by the Divisional Cavalry arrived in the [Capuzzo](#) area. A new 5 Brigade Headquarters was established at [Musaid](#) with Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew as temporary commander. Of even more importance from the point of view of the men was the arrival of the Indian supply column about 5.30 p.m. The ration situation would have been desperate had it not been for the Italian rations captured at [Capuzzo](#) and in some of the trucks taken later.

The next day passed quietly and on 1 December the Indians relieved the 5 Brigade units in [Capuzzo- Musaid- Sollum](#). That afternoon the brigade moved north-north-west about 15 miles to the [Menastir](#) area, where it was to establish a base from which to conduct mobile operations against columns operating between [Bardia](#) and the west, to raid enemy dumps and create as much confusion as possible.

Actually, the next three days passed without much excitement. Carrier patrols by day and infantry patrols by night met with limited success: on 2 December one ration truck and two Germans were captured, six Italians surrendered to a patrol,

and several large dumps outside the [Bardia](#) wire were discovered, several of which were blown up the following day. On the afternoon of 3 December, the 23rd had to stand to in its prepared positions as a strong German column was approaching, but the Maoris fended this force off and the 23rd made no contact with the enemy. Diamond, the veteran of [Greece](#) and [Crete](#), could write at this time: 'The Boys are keen to have another crack, feeling easy about it myself'. That evening 5 Brigade was ordered to return to [Capuzzo](#) to relieve the Indians, who were required for operations in the [Tobruk](#) sector. The move back was begun at 2.30 a.m., the escarpment was safely negotiated by moonlight, and after a bone-shaking ride, hurried somewhat by shelling from tanks, the battalion was back in its old [Capuzzo](#) positions by 9 a.m. on 4 December.

Four and a half days were spent comparatively quietly at [Capuzzo](#) under command of [2 South African Division](#), the New Zealand Division's headquarters and the other two brigades having been withdrawn to Egypt. Carrier patrols continued to provide the more interesting news. With one of these, Sergeant E. W. Hobbs outflanked and shot up an enemy patrol on the [Bardia](#) road. A 37-millimetre anti-tank gun was captured and added to the number of enemy guns, which were given plenty of use, mainly in practice, by their new owners.

On 8 December Brigadier [Wilder](#) ⁴³ took over command of 5 Brigade and, that evening, the brigade was ordered to move into 13 Corps Reserve and be available for operations west of [Tobruk](#). So sudden was this order that a section of a patrol which could not be recalled by radio had to be left behind for the time being. The battalion moved off at 3.30 a.m. on 9 December with Second-Lieutenant Mason in charge of the vanguard of three carriers, one anti-tank gun and one medium machine gun. The infantry had to march approximately ten miles to a rendezvous with the trucks of 4 RMT Company. While this march was not to be compared in severity with the one to [Kokkinoplos](#), it served to show how speedily the physical condition of men could deteriorate during campaigning on poor and scanty rations. 'Long as I live, I'll never forget that march—we were all dead beat, and our feet are in a bad state through no washing for weeks,' wrote one diarist. But there was consolation that day in the arrival of a good parcel mail from New Zealand. As one private recorded at the time: 'That morning we were eating dry biscuits and mouldy stale bread, that afternoon we ate fruit cake, shortbread, and sweets'. Another said:

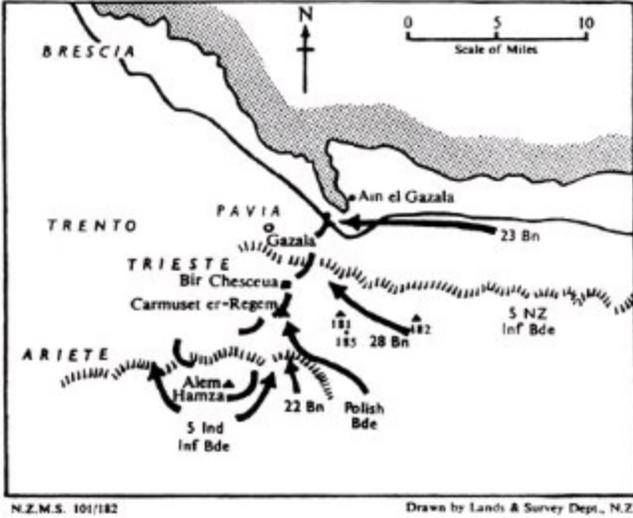
Some parcels have just arrived—couldn't have come at a better time. We can go to bed with full bellies for a change. The old wolf was nearly in the door'.

At [Sidi Azeiz](#) the brigade formed up for a move to the west. The news that both [Japan](#) and the [United States of America](#) had entered the war was received at this time with mixed feelings, but most men concluded that, while the war might approach New Zealand more closely than they had previously thought possible, the best thing they could do was to get on with the job in hand. Sidi Bu Amed, about 20 miles east of [Tobruk](#), was reached about dusk on 9 December. A day was spent at this place. It rained heavily and was very cold. Small wonder, therefore, that a private diarist recorded: 'Carriers brought in barrels of cognac—the boys got tight'.

At 3 a.m. on 11 December the brigade moved on with the 23rd in the lead. C Company supplied the advanced guard, which was strengthened by three Bren carriers, a section of Vickers guns and a troop of anti-tank guns. The route followed led via the [Tobruk](#) by-pass to [Acroma](#), where the 'Chestnut' troop of the [Royal Horse Artillery](#) joined the advanced guard. By 7.30 a.m. they had turned west along the [Tobruk- Derna](#) road. At the 136 kilo peg (the numbering started from [Derna](#)), the advanced guard made contact with elements of 32 Army Tank Brigade and some South African armoured cars. The orders from Brigade were to make contact with the retreating enemy and then reconnoitre the [Gazala](#) Box defences. About 10 a.m. enemy shellfire caused C Company to debus just short of the Kilo 130 peg. The RHA troop went into action and soon silenced the enemy guns. Enemy aircraft—very few had so far been seen in the campaign—came over at a very low altitude and apparently unaware that British forces were already so far west. The Bofors guns with the 23rd shot down four Junkers 52s before these German aircraft were able to take any evasive action.

The advance continued in the afternoon with C Company's 'flag'—a [West Coast](#) football jersey—showing the way on Captain Thomson's 'pick-up'. About 2 p.m. the trucks came under fire again. Captain Thomson ordered the infantry to debus and advance in open order. The trucks screeched to a halt, the infantry jumped down and deployed in their sections just as they had done in the October manoeuvres. Then they advanced resolutely through the flying shrapnel and dust and smoke. The Bren carriers with the advanced guard did their best to help the attack: Sergeant Ernie Hobbs raced his carrier forward and out to a flank where he set up a Spandau

machine gun and fired belt after belt of bullets into the enemy positions. He stopped firing only when the advancing infantry masked his target. Captain Thomson was wounded and Lieutenant Len Stubbs took over. He, too, was badly wounded as the company approached its objective, but the attack went on.



THE ATTACK ON GAZALA, 11-17 DECEMBER 1941
the attack on gazala, 11-17 december 1941

Two participants in this attack have left eye-witness accounts which the historian cannot do better than quote. Diamond, who had previously mentioned in his diary that, of the original C Company members who went through Greece and Crete, only fifteen were left, recorded: 'The Eyeties put down a real hot barrage, big stuff and small stuff, it whinnied and whined, whispered and whanged over our heads and in our ranks. The Boys went through it like veterans. Never once did they falter; they obeyed their orders promptly and went on—some good stuff amongst these reinforcements! Later on we got out of the artillery range; it was dropping behind us, and now we get the small stuff and mortars. Brens and rifles spat out and Bredas, fired somewhat erratically, spurted up the stone and dust around us. We were heavily engaged and too far in to withdraw—we would have been cut to bits by artillery. Our wireless had broken down with the result that communications were nil. Three or four hundred yards from the ridge and the trenches, we sent back runners for tanks and support, a long way back to Battalion, 5 or 6 miles. By the time the poor devils got back we were in the trench and over the ridge. When we got within say 50 yards of the trench and prepared to go in with the bayonet and tommy gun, the Eyeties chucked it in. You never saw such a sight—they came running out from

behind rocks, out of caves, up from trenches in front of us. Everywhere they came waving anything that appeared white, shirt tails, underpants, cigarette papers, rags. Crikey! What a sight.'

Sergeant [Hargreaves](#),⁴⁴ who was on the left flank of the advancing company, has also left a stirring account:

'... So steady was the advance that the gunners could not range quickly enough with the result that the shells were bursting behind our line, though to me it seemed that several direct hits were made on the right flank but the boys came out of the smoke and dust still in line, never faltering. It was a magnificent sight to see that thin line moving steadily forward into a hail of lead, with shells of all sizes ... bursting all around.... the fact that the ground was sandy saved more casualties.... One more dash brought us to within bayonet reach. We crossed the ground swiftly, some of the boys shouting encouragement to each other. From my position on the left flank, I could see our line, straight enough to bring joy to any bayonet instructor, stretching away to the right flank. Roaring "Forward!", I came up ready for the final dash. It made the blood sing to see the boys leap forward, a steady line of gleaming steel backed by grim faces. Nothing short of death could stop them now.'

On the right flank, Sergeant Gallagher showed his usual courage and sound tactical sense by waiting for an infantry assault gun to turn to a flank before dashing in with his tommy gun blazing to silence its crew. Then, as described by Diamond, white rags and flags made their appearance with such rapidity as to give point to the jest that they must be 'army issue' with the Italians in [Libya](#).

Another four or five hundred yards on were more trenches manned by many more Italians. Their artillery and mortars switched to 'Thomson's Ridge', as the freshly captured feature was now called, and it seemed that a counter-attack, with the odds, numerically at any rate, very much in favour of the Italians, was about to be launched. Lieutenant [Slee](#)⁴⁵ quickly organised the left-hand platoon to face this threat, while CSM Norman Trewby took over the two right-hand platoons and ensured that all likely approaches were covered by fire. Diamond's account can be resumed at this point:

'A slight pause and then the counter-attack, shot and shell, mortar and [Breda](#)

make the ridge a red hot hell, a very determined counter-attack it seemed. Eyeties 50 or 60 yards off as thick as flies, and no support in sight for little old C Company. We grabbed their Bredas and used them. We give them everything, and then the unexplainable happened, they chucked it in, simply left their guns and hopped it towards [Derna](#). There's no accounting for them. Through the action of aggressive, high spirited men, a mere company of us put to flight at least a battalion of sawdust cæsars. We captured two hundred odd prisoners, a large number of Bredas, Fiats, mortars, etc. But you ought to have seen the Eyeties that got away.'

All the Italians on that front did not withdraw and C Company was glad when D Company arrived to fill gaps in its defences and to extend the short right flank which had been causing Sergeant-Major Trewby some concern. The troop of RHA had its OP officer well forward throughout both the attack and the counter-attack, and his calls for artillery fire were quickly answered and probably did more than C Company realised to discourage the Italians. Despite the shellfire falling in the area of the advance, Driver O'Donnell ⁴⁶ drove a truck across the flat and picked up all the wounded he could find.

C and D Companies held their ridge till after darkness had fallen. About 5.30 p.m., acting on instructions from Battalion Headquarters, D Company covered the withdrawal of C back to its trucks on the road. About half an hour later, D Company also withdrew. No enemy fire troubled the withdrawal: the Italians, too, were pulling back to other positions. C Company's casualties were light for an attack on the forward positions of two battalions—2 officers wounded, 2 other ranks killed in action, 2 missing and 24 wounded. The Italians, mostly from 20 Regiment, Brescia Division, lost an unknown number killed and, as prisoners to C Company, 9 officers and 252 other ranks. The enemy also gave up much equipment, including several dumps of stores and ammunition.

On the following day, 12 December, carrier patrols were out early but did not contact the enemy. The remainder of 5 Brigade were advancing on an inland track due west from [Acroma](#) and the battalion's only communication with Brigade Headquarters was by wireless. Orders were received to continue the advance. This was done and thirty more prisoners of war were taken: 22 from the Trento Division gave themselves up to B Company headquarters. In the afternoon, with a tank and carrier screen in front and extending to both flanks, and with A Company on the right

of the road and B Company on the left, both in desert formation, the 23rd advanced closer to Ain el- [Gazala](#) before enemy shelling compelled its troops to debus and prepare for another attack. Just past the wreck-strewn [Gazala](#) aerodrome, the infantry of A and B Companies began to advance on foot, well supported by the RHA gunners. Scrub and low mounds offered plenty of cover for a defending enemy, but no contact was made during daylight. Warm fires and other signs of hastily evacuated positions showed that the enemy had pulled back under his own artillery fire as the [South Island](#) infantry began to move forward. Quite heavy shelling from guns back on the escarpment continued most of the afternoon and compelled the transport to be kept out of range. At dusk the tanks pulled back to laager at Kilo 118. The advance had not been turned into an attack, but this was in keeping with the brigade instruction: '... gain contact with the enemy but do NOT incur casualties.'

That night, at 6.30 p.m., Second-Lieutenant P. Lynch took 10 Platoon out as a patrol to locate the enemy gun positions in the area to the left of the road, west of the Kilo 110 peg. Corporal Dave Jenkins ⁴⁷ wrote an account in his diary, which may be quoted both as a useful description of this patrol and as giving a typical reaction to a death in a platoon: 'We got right up close in the dark and they opened up at less than fifty yards with all kinds of fire—machine guns, tank guns, grenades—and had us in a sweat for a while. We returned the fire and moved in closer and threw some grenades, then they quit and scattered. We killed a few and wounded some. Harry got one with his tommy gun. Then we opened fire on a big bunch further in to the escarpment and wounded six before discovering they were Indians taken prisoner. They were relieved to find who we were.... Poor old Tony [Valli](#) ⁴⁸ was killed, and we all feel bad about it. He was one of the old original members of No. 10 and one of the best workers we had.'

During the time the patrol was under fire, Corporal A. D. Smith ⁴⁹ worked his way forward, rushed a machine-gun post, killed the crew with a grenade and then swung their machine gun into action against other MG posts nearby. The patrol saw several 75-millimetre and other guns but it was not strong enough to bring them away, nor was it equipped to destroy them. In addition to recapturing the forty-three members of an Indian first-aid unit, which had been captured late that afternoon through taking the wrong road, Lynch's patrol took some prisoners, which brought the total for the day to 3 officers and 70 other ranks.

The battalion spent the next few days at [Gazala](#) with little more action than the interchange of artillery fire to report. The normal carrier patrols went out and an OP was established to watch enemy transport movements on the [Derna](#) road. Brigade expected the next advance to be made in the south and therefore had told the 23rd to 'Hold present positions until further orders.' A few more prisoners were taken. Diamond's diary gives the story of one lot: 'Our fellows marched in 11 Italians including an officer. Nearly got a Hun, too. This is dinkum. When our fellows approached them, the "Hun" wanted to have a crack at us, with the help of the "Eyeties" of course, but the Italians didn't agree with the Hun, so to ease the situation they shot the Hun.' A few more Bersaglieri captured by the carriers brought the unit total for the week 9–16 December to 18 Italian officers, 387 Italian other ranks and 2 Germans. The marked contrast in a soldier's life between such action as he experienced in the night patrol of 12 December and the inactivity of waiting for something to happen is well illustrated in what Corporal Jenkins wrote three days later: 'Been reading a Free Lance, all about the Grand National, even the fashion notes to pass the time—Fred [Blanchard](#) ⁵⁰ says he read all about Mrs. Elworthy's frock and Miss Orbell's hat.'

On 16 December the [Polish Brigade](#) launched an attack inland. The 23rd gave a demonstration of fire power in support of this attack. About ten o'clock next morning Brigade signalled that enemy resistance was collapsing and that the battalion was to push on with all speed. The Bren carriers and A and B Companies therefore advanced to the anti-tank ditch where, after a small amount of skirmishing, they rounded up some 200 Italians, whom they ordered to start marching back along the road towards Battalion Headquarters.

In the early afternoon, when the carriers were giving chase to some enemy trucks, they ran on to a lightly sown but well concealed minefield. Actually, Second-Lieutenant Mason had crossed the field in the leading carrier before one of those following was blown up. This carrier went on fire immediately and the three members of its crew, who had been wounded or knocked unconscious, would have had no chance of survival if Charlie Mason had not rushed back and, despite the exploding ammunition, lifted them out.

At this time, brigade orders to hand over to the Poles and to withdraw to a

rendezvous at Bir el-Geff, some 20 miles to the south-east, reached the leading elements. Although the 'hand-over' did not take place till 18 December, the campaign was concluded for 5 Brigade. Nevertheless, things were going so well that most men would cheerfully have gone on. Some were talking about the greener country between [Derna](#) and [Benghazi](#); others were over-optimistically forecasting 'Tripoli for Christmas'. A day or two before, Diamond had recorded in his diary: 'This is a different battle from the battle of [Greece](#) and Crete. We no longer go unwashed, unfed, unrelieved.... This battle is ours, we eat, shave, wash, polish our boots, rest, fight, and give the enemy hell. The men are bursting with confidence, the Morale was never higher, and last, but not least, the Battalion wears the hallmark of parade ground smartness.' Little wonder that three days later he should write: 'The game's very quiet now, seems as if the battle has passed us by. The rumour is that we are to withdraw back to the [Baggush](#) Box.... Blast them! Why can't we go on and be in at the kill!', and on 21 December: 'Today we got the dinkum oil. As far as we are concerned, the Libyan campaign is over. The crowd are very disappointed.... It's galling to find we can't go on and pluck the fruits of our first victory'.

Soon the brigade was on its way back to Egypt. On 19 December much of the transport was handed over to 22 Guards Brigade, which was taking up the pursuit. All ammunition in excess of the regular scale, all captured guns and equipment,⁵¹ and all the Bren carriers had to be delivered to the appropriate authorities in [Tobruk](#).

On 21 December the padre, the Rev. Stan [Read](#),⁵² took a church and memorial service. While they waited for transport, company and later battalion teams played football on 'Romans Oval', the desert ground named after Major Romans. The 23rd celebrated Christmas Day and dinner at [El Adem](#). It had plenty of captured cognac but rations were still light. One diarist recorded: 'Xmas Day we got extra rations in the form of green peas and potatoes—the peas were like the pebbles on the beach, and the potatoes—well, this is the 27th and the cooks are still battling with them.' On 26 December the battalion ran into one of the worst dust-storms it ever experienced in the [Western Desert](#) but, despite the loss of contact and direction by several trucks, they all arrived eventually at the railhead and returned to the [Baggush](#) Box, seven weeks from the date on which they had left it.

The 23rd's first experience of desert fighting was certainly much more fortunate than that of most other New Zealand units in the same campaign. This was the

result of fortuitous circumstances over which the units had no control. The battalion had the one short period of facing German soldiers—and it proved its worth in the defence of [Fort Capuzzo](#)—but, otherwise, it had fought Italians who had not offered very strenuous opposition, especially when it came to close fighting. Nevertheless, even Italian shells and bullets could do damage: the battalion's casualties were 25 killed in action or died of wounds, 68 wounded, and 17 (of whom 10 were wounded) lost as prisoners of war.⁵³ The men had endured the severe conditions—the cold winds, the rains, the short rations, the salty water, the jolting truck rides and the dust. But most of the battalion took these as part and parcel of campaigning in the desert and would have agreed with the concluding diary entry for this campaign made by Corporal Jenkins: 'Still we had some good times and experienced things we'll never forget and, if B Coy's luck holds as good next time, we ask no more.'

¹ These came mainly from the 4th and 5th Reinforcements, which had arrived in Egypt between 16 December 1940 and 13 May 1941.

² Actually, these reinforcements were to see a longer period of fighting than the original members of the 23rd. Many of the originals went on furlough on the Ruapehu scheme, introduced in June 1943, whereas some of the 5th Reinforcements did not go on furlough till early 1945.

³ [Capt A. J. H. Jeavons](#); Dunedin; born [Auckland](#), 26 Apr 1909; barrister and solicitor; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

⁴ In this match, played on 8 November, New Zealand beat South Africa by 8 to nil. [R. T. Miller](#), a New Zealand war correspondent, began his despatch on this match: 'Three thousand great-coated, battle-dressed fans, from Rugby-mad privates to a Rugby-minded General, yelled most of their throats hoarse today across a sandy field....'

⁵ [Capt N. R. Brady](#); Kerikeri Central; born [Auckland](#), 20 Nov 1912; civil engineer; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

⁶ 2 Lt [J. N. Ramsay](#); born Dunedin, 15 May 1918; solicitor; killed in action 23 Oct 1942.

⁷ Lt-Col T. B. Morten, DSO; Little River; born Christchurch, 20 Sep 1913; shepherd; CO 25 Bn Jan 1943-Feb 1944; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

⁸ Lt-Col R. E. Romans, DSO, m.i.d.; born Arrowtown, 10 Sep 1909; business manager; CO 23 Bn Jul 1942-Apr 1943, Aug-Dec 1943; twice wounded; died of wounds 19 Dec 1943.

⁹ Sgt R. W. S. Stone; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 2 Feb 1914; storeman; three times wounded.

¹⁰ Capt P. L. Lynch; born Invercargill, 23 Oct 1912; civil servant; killed in action 23 Oct 1942.

¹¹ Bardia did not fall until 2 January 1942.

¹² Maj C. L. Stubbs; Lower Hutt; born Dunedin, 17 Jan 1905; traveller; wounded 11 Dec 1941.

¹³ Maj J. A. M. Brittenden; Wellington; born Tinwald, 28 Mar 1914; artist; wounded 5 Jul 1942.

¹⁴ Capt R. D. Hoggans; Invercargill; born NZ 25 Jun 1916; storeman clerk.

¹⁵ The Maoris in Sollum had earlier made an advance towards Halfaya as they thought the transport movements meant its evacuation. Now they were being attacked.

¹⁶ WO II R. J. G. Mack, MM; Papakura; born NZ 3 Apr 1917; hospital orderly.

¹⁷ Pte H. O'Neill; Waimate; born NZ 14 May 1917; labourer; wounded 16 Jul 1942.

¹⁸ L-Cpl M. G. O'Connell; Oxford; born Rangiora, 2 Jun 1918; labourer; wounded and p.w. 26 Nov 1941.

¹⁹ Cpl J. G. Harrisson, m.i.d.; Henderson; born England, 2 Dec 1910; gardener.

²⁰ Pte C. A. Baker; born Whitianga, 14 Apr 1917; millhand.

²¹ Cpl D. F. Hoggard; born NZ 22 Nov 1917; labourer; twice wounded.

²² Sgt G. R. Blampied; Invercargill; born NZ 9 Dec 1917; clerk; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

²³ 2 Lt J. F. Fagan; born NZ 6 Aug 1918; shop assistant; killed in action 17 Dec 1941.

²⁴ 2 Lt W. Foubister; born NZ 1 Aug 1916; clerk; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.

²⁵ WO II D. Gibson, m.i.d.; Lower Hutt; born Dunedin, 3 Dec 1915; electrician.

²⁶ Cpl A. Russell, MM; Bluff; born Ruapuke Island, 3 Jun 1905; oyster-man; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

²⁷ Lt-Col H. T. W. Nolan, DSO, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 23 Jul 1915; sheep-farmer; Adjutant, 5 Fd Regt, Dec 1940-Jun 1941; comd 30 Fd Bty Sep 1942-Dec 1943; BM NZA, Aug-Nov 1944; CO 4 Fd Regt Mar-Dec 1945; wounded Feb 1942.

²⁸ Maj M. I. Stratton; Australia; born Auckland 5 Jan 1914; Regular soldier.

²⁹ L-Cpl W. D. U. Fraser; born NZ 18 Nov 1918; student; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.

³⁰ Pte R. F. G. Brett; born NZ 19 Aug 1918; machinist; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.

³¹ Pte A. W. Docherty; Mosgiel; born NZ 2 May 1913; fitter.

³² Pte H. K. Johnstone; Otahuti, Southland; born Johannesburg, 5 Feb 1910; farmhand.

³³ Lt V. D. Phillips; Christchurch; born Lumsden, 8 Apr 1916; salesman; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

³⁴ Capt C. T. Mason, MC; born Pukerau, 9 Sep 1915; school-techer; killed in action 12 Jul 1942.

³⁵ Sgt L. A. McGregor; born NZ 27 May 1913; baker; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.

³⁶ Cpl M. A. Price; born Lumsden, 6 Feb 1914; shepherd; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.

³⁷ Lt J. H. Cameron; Oamaru; born Dunedin, 17 Apr 1909; bank clerk; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

³⁸ Maj K. I. Armour, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Scotland, 16 May 1913; indent agent; wounded 16 Jul 1942; OC ERS, J Force, Mar 1946-Mar 1947.

³⁹ Capt G. R. Chance; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 21 Jun 1916; optician; wounded 2 Sep 1942.

⁴⁰ Lt A. V. McClelland; Auckland; born Auckland, 13 May 1918; hardware assistant.

⁴¹ Lt A. C. Manning; born Balclutha, 21 Feb 1918; clerk.

⁴² Jeavons and other wounded were picked up shortly afterwards by stretcher-bearers taken out, under fire, in a truck driven by Private Jack O'Fee, the driver of the unit water truck. Writing to the author, Colonel

Leckie described how he called to pay a last farewell to Jeavons the next morning: 'The M.O. gave him little hope of living. Alf greeted us thus: "I suppose you bastards have come to attend my bloody obsequies. Well, there's not going to be any. The ground here is too bloody hard to give a man a decent burial." Alf pulled through. He was typical of the real 23rd spirit.'

⁴³ Maj-Gen A. S. Wilder, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Order of the White Eagle (Serb); Te Hau, Waipukurau; born NZ 24 May 1890; sheep-farmer; Wgtn Mtd Rifles 1914–19; CO 25 Bn May 1940-Sep 1941; comd NZ Trg Gp, Maadi Camp, Sep-Dec 1941, Jan-Feb 1942; 5 Bde 6 Dec 1941–17 Jan 1942; 5 Div (in NZ) Apr 1942-Jan 1943; 1 Div Jan-Nov 1943.

⁴⁴ Sgt J. Hargreaves; born England, 27 Jan 1917; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

⁴⁵ Maj C. A. Slee, m.i.d.; born Westport; clerk; died of wounds 5 Apr 1944.

⁴⁶ 2 Lt A. M. O'Donnell; Bunnythorpe; born Palmerston North, 25 Oct 1913; mental hospital attendant.

⁴⁷ 2 Lt D. S. Jenkins; Tuatapere; born Orepuke, 21 Dec 1912; farmer.

⁴⁸ Pte A. Valli; born Nightcaps, 10 Sep 1918; flaxmill hand; died of wounds 12 Dec 1941.

⁴⁹ Cpl A. D. Smith, MM; born Wyndham, 21 Jul 1911; labourer; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

⁵⁰ S-Sgt F. J. Blanchard; Maheno, North Otago; born NZ 7 Aug 1905; shepherd.

⁵¹ The inventory of captured guns, etc., sent in by the 23rd included one 210-mm gun, one 150-mm, six 105-mm guns, three 75-mm, ten 37-mm, twelve Breda 20-mm guns, four 81-mm and 22 50-mm mortars, 10 Fiat 8-mm machine guns, 15 Breda 6.5 and 2 Spandau 8-mm machine guns, and two Mark III tanks (one of which had been placed in running order with

parts from the other).

⁵² Rev. S. C. Read; New Plymouth; born Invercargill, 24 Aug 1905; Presbyterian minister; National Patriotic Fund Commissioner, UK, 1944–46.

⁵³ A measure of the 23rd's good fortune in this campaign is found in comparing the casualties given above with those suffered by other units. Twentieth Battalion's casualties were 24 officers and 524 other ranks, of whom 9 officers and 354 other ranks were prisoners. The 26th, the third South Island unit, suffered 449 casualties, of whom 89 were killed and 9 officers and 217 other ranks were taken prisoner. The 21st, which was separated from the rest of 5 Brigade in this campaign, had 376 casualties made up of 83 killed, 126 wounded and 167 prisoners of war.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 7 – THREE INTERLUDES: KABRIT, EL ADEM, SYRIA

CHAPTER 7

Three Interludes: Kabrit, El Adem, Syria

THE reunion of 5 Brigade with the rest of the Division nearly coincided with the end of 1941 and the celebration of New Year's Eve. The appropriate parties held in the [Baggush](#) Box were marked by huge fireworks displays in which German flares, Italian grenades and other captured items were used to such effect that neighbouring British units 'stood-to', anxiously expecting an enemy seaborne attack. In their dugouts, 23rd officers and men cheerfully toasted 'Happy New Year—Victory and Home'.

During the next few weeks, the battalion's moves were determined by decisions taken at divisional and higher levels by [General Freyberg](#) and General Auchmleck. These, in turn, were directed to countering the moves made by Rommel and the [Afrika Korps](#). Early in January 1942 Rommel had temporarily withdrawn into the strong [El Agheila](#) position. [Middle East Headquarters](#) considered that a frontal assault on that key defensive position would be materially assisted by a landing in the Gulf of [Sirte](#) in the enemy's rear. Fifth Brigade was selected for this task of landing to the west of [El Agheila](#) and, on 4 January, set out for [Kabrit](#) to refit and undertake further combined training exercises.

A small road party from the 23rd travelled with the unit's own transport, while the main body of the battalion entrained at [Sidi Haneish](#) for [Geneifa](#) and [Kabrit](#). On this occasion, most of the men had to travel in crowded box wagons, many of which had previously been used for transporting live sheep for Indian troops, whose religion demanded that only butchers of their own faith should handle their meat. After a journey of twentyeight hours notable for cramped limbs and the strong smell of sheep, the battalion arrived at 1.30 a.m. at [Geneifa](#) and was quickly taken by trucks to a tented camp at [Kabrit](#).

After a few days spent in reorganising and refitting, during which men from the 6th and 7th Reinforcements were welcomed in what was becoming the traditional 23rd manner, the battalion began training for combined operations. Under the direction of naval officers, all ranks practised scaling rope ladders when fully equipped, rowing heavy boats, embarking and disembarking from assault landing

craft, crashing through barbed wire and other beach defences, and attacking after landing. On 14 January the 23rd carried out a highly successful exercise involving a landing on a hostile coast and the securing of a position seven miles inland. On the next big exercise, a practice dawn landing, nearly everything went wrong that could go wrong. Some of the predicaments in which men found themselves were most realistic.

Although, as from 20 January, up to 50 per cent of the unit at one time was granted a week's leave, general training was continued. The last combined operations exercise concluded on 7 February. On the following day [Brigadier Kippenberger](#), who had taken command of 5 Brigade on 17 January, paid a visit and announced that the brigade was returning to [Libya](#) three days later.

On 21 January Rommel emerged from the [El Agheila](#) position and began a reconnaissance in force, which developed into an advance when he found the British opposition weak. On 28 January he re-occupied [Benghazi](#), and by 7 February the British forces were falling back on [Gazala](#). These moves shattered any idea of a landing at [Sirte](#). Reinforcements were required in [Libya](#). While 4 and 6 Brigades remained for two or three weeks at [Kabrit](#), 5 Brigade moved to [El Adem](#).

Starting on 11 February, the 23rd moved back to [Libya](#) by both road and rail. The road party of 119, under Captain T. B. Morten, OC HQ Company, and Second-Lieutenant [Cook](#),¹ Transport Officer, travelled, by not very difficult stages, via [Mena](#), [Wadi Natrun](#), [Amiriya](#) and along the [Western Desert](#) road. The rail party of 15 officers and 560 other ranks, under Major Romans, the second-in-command, had a slow and cramped journey of forty hours before reaching the desert railhead at [Misheifa](#) about 4 p.m. on 13 February.

Under instructions from Lieutenant-General 'Strafer' Gott, commanding [13 Corps](#), [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) set his units to construct a defensive position or 'Brigade Box' at [El Adem](#). This 'Box' was expected to give depth to the [Gazala- Bir Hacheim](#) line, to prevent the enemy from severing the supply routes along the [Trigh Capuzzo](#), and to provide local protection for the Corps Field Maintenance Centre and the [El Adem](#) landing ground. In these defences the 23rd was given the western sector and, for the next five weeks, the men were busy developing and improving their positions. First, they dug slit trenches and weapon pits, getting help from the engineers'

pneumatic drills where the rock was hard; then they dug crawl communication trenches and erected dannert wire fences; later, they thickened the wire in many places and fitted both wire and weapon pits into the arrangement of minefields laid by the engineers. By the end of February most of this work was complete. The names given by the intelligence section to most company localities and a few platoon positions did not last long enough to immortalise the officers after whom they were given, but Morten's Wadi, Norris Narrows, Grant's Gully, and McKinlay's Gulch, as well as Cooper's Canyon and Davis Ditch, temporarily commemorated the officers most concerned with particular sectors of the battalion defences.

Infantry patrols went out at night and carrier patrols by day, but more for training purposes than with any expectation of meeting the enemy, who had been halted west of the [Derna- Mechili](#) line. An inter-unit salvage competition, won by 21 Battalion, was held in the first fortnight of March and a weird assortment of items was collected from the nearby battlefields. The 'I' section brought out the El Adem News Herald Tribune with all the 'Good news'—not that the fall of [Singapore](#) on 15 February could be considered good. C Company's football ground was the scene of some vigorous struggles. Sometimes the enemy aircraft, which bombed [El Adem](#) landing ground nearly every day, turned their attention to the 23rd transport. At nights, when [Tobruk](#) harbour was bombed, the men could see if not hear the ack-ack barrage covering the sky with hundreds of red-hot lances. Occasionally, as on 4 March, heavy rain soaked the area and flooded the dugouts and dug-in bivouac tents. On the whole, the men were, as one private recorded in his diary, 'fit and healthy and happy', but they were growing bored with the desert and were glad to hear that the other brigades had gone to [Syria](#) and that they were to follow.

On 1 March [General Freyberg](#) met the Brigadier and the unit commanders at [Gambut](#) to tell them of the Division's move to [Syria](#). Fifth Brigade was not relieved for nearly three weeks, but on 19 March the brigade advance party left for [Maadi](#), and on the 22nd, as 3 South African Brigade had arrived, the 23rd convoy joined the rest of the brigade in moving to near [Sidi Rezegh](#). On 27 March the battalion arrived in [Maadi](#) where tents, erected by the LOB party under Captain Connolly, were waiting for them.

The unit's stay in [Maadi](#) was short, but on 2 April the first full-scale parade and inspection of 5 Brigade in Egypt was held, after some unit practices and a full

brigade rehearsal. [General Freyberg](#) inspected the parade and presented decorations won in [Greece](#), [Crete](#) and [Syria](#). Captain McPhail, Sergeants Hobbs and Trewby, and Corporal A. D. Smith represented the 23rd on this occasion. On the following day, Good Friday, the battalion made up for its Christmas dinner of bully and biscuits with a dinner in the Pall Mall theatre in [Maadi Camp](#). Several of the original members of the unit who had been posted to duties in Base or elsewhere attended this celebration, which was voted a great success. The next day the advance party left for [Syria](#).

Part of that land bridge which links the continents of [Europe](#), [Asia](#) and [Africa](#), [Syria](#) appeared likely in 1942 to maintain its reputation for being politically and strategically important. Whether or not, in the German grand strategy, an invasion came through [Turkey](#) or the Caucasus, it seemed likely that a pincers movement would be directed on the [Suez Canal](#), with one arm coming out of [Libya](#) and the other stretching down the Levantine coast through [Syria](#) and Palestine. Allied, mainly Australian, forces had occupied [Syria](#) in June and July of 1941 to prevent the spread of German influence among the Vichy French and the Syrian natives. Now, with the movement of other forces to the East, the New Zealand Division moved to [Syria](#) and came under the British Ninth Army, which was responsible for internal security and for fighting a delaying action in the event of invasion. In late February and early March, 4 and 6 Brigades entered [Syria](#). Thus, before it left the [Western Desert](#), the 23rd knew that the 'green fields' to which [General Freyberg](#) had said they would move were in [Syria](#), not, as some had optimistically hoped, back home in New Zealand.

On 4 April the advance party, under Major Morten, moved off from [Maadi](#) by road. A larger road party left two days later, while the main body of the battalion left by train on the 9th. The routes of the two parties were somewhat different. After crossing the [Suez Canal](#) and the [Sinai](#) desert with its picturesque sand dunes, the road party camped at Bir Asluj, a recently established petrol and water point, and then travelled via [Beersheba](#), Ramleh and Lydda to the [Tulkarm](#) transit camp. They passed through many places with names more exciting or more historically interesting than their appearance seemed to warrant; they found the local inhabitants, both Jew and Arab, apparently more pro-British than the Egyptians and they enjoyed the oranges and grapefruit of 'the promised land'. From [Tulkarm](#) they

moved via Hadera, through Affula on the Plain of Esdraelon, to [Tiberias](#) on the Sea of Galilee, over the Upper Jordan and through the hilly country around Kuneitra to the staging area at [Damascus](#). Thence the route led north through [Homs](#) and Hama, past the big groaning water-wheels on the [Orontes](#), to [Idlib](#), where Battalion Headquarters was to be for the next two months.



eastern mediterranean

The rail party, under Major [Reid](#),² who had taken over command of B Company from Captain M. D. Grant, crossed the [Suez Canal](#) at [Kantara](#) and continued its train journey to El Kehir, near [Haifa](#). After two days in the tented transit camp at At Tira, the troops travelled by civilian buses to [Beirut](#). 'Twas the most hair-raising trip I ever had—either with full-throttle or consistently degeared, the ever-grinning drivers rounded the coastal hair-pin bends with maniacal, reckless abandon,' wrote one 23rd man later. Next, they travelled by a narrow-gauge railway up over the steep Lebanon—nine miles in seven and a half hours was one estimate—to [Rayak](#), where they changed to the main line for [Aleppo](#). 'It is marvellous country—wonderful after being in Egypt.' A New Zealand YMCA party provided a hot drink and a meal at [Homs](#). A story told against one sergeant described how he was told to get his men out for this meal at [Homs](#), woke from a fitful sleep, saw the sign 'HOMMES' near a small station, and promptly ordered all his men to parade with mugs or mess-tins. By 16 April all companies had arrived in [Idlib](#).

In [Aleppo](#) and on the Turkish frontier, 5 Brigade relieved 6 Brigade, which moved back to assist 4 Brigade in the task of constructing the [Djedeide](#) fortress in

the Bekaa valley. Fifth Brigade's tasks were to watch the frontier, prepare demolitions, maintain internal security, show the flag among a people of uncertain political sympathies, and continue general training. The 23rd took over from 25 Battalion. Battalion Headquarters was established in a solid stone house on the outskirts of Idlib, a large village about 35 miles south-west of Aleppo. Headquarters Company (Major Morten) occupied the Idlib barracks, which had been built by the Turks and occupied more recently by the French. B Company (Major Reid) and D Company (Captain McKinlay) occupied Nissen huts and tents in a sheltered area among the olive trees about a mile out of Idlib. These companies provided the men for guards and for the mobile columns which were training for rearguard actions. A Company (Captain Connolly) was at Bab el Haoua, right on the Turkish frontier. A Roman triumphal arch, various ruins and a Roman road, which ran alongside and then joined the road into Turkey, gave an air of departed glory to this area. A Company checked passports, covered the demolitions the engineers were preparing and kept guard on an important entry from Turkey. Farther south along the frontier, C Company (Captain Thomson) covered two more roads into Turkey at Qenaye and at Harim. C Company's duties resembled A's, but they were somewhat more complicated as many Syrian Arabs lived in its area.

On the whole, life in north-west Syria in the spring of 1942 was very pleasant. Green fields and trees made a pleasant contrast to desert sands. Although anti-malaria precautions had to be taken, neither the mosquitoes nor the flies constituted a serious problem. The ration scale in the Ninth Army was not generous by New Zealand standards and parcels from home were much appreciated. The beer ration—two bottles per man per week perhaps—encouraged some to try the wines of Syria. Several acquired a taste for the forbidden arak; others drank liqueurs almost as they normally drank beer, with the result that some members of B Company who drank too much crème de menthe had green lips for days. Leave to Aleppo was given regularly. Here the troops found a city more oriental and more medieval than any they had as yet encountered. Its amenities for soldiers on leave were, however, very limited and its prices for goods worth buying very high.

Major Romans and other officers organised plenty of sporting contests and other entertainments to make up for the inadequacy of the fare in Aleppo. Inter-company cricket matches were the scenes of big hits and much hearty barracking. Debates

provided food for argument. Individuals and teams participated in various shooting competitions. The most important of these was a match between a team from HQ, B and D Companies and a team from the local French gendarmerie in which the New Zealanders emerged victorious. Colonel Leckie added to the triumph by defeating Commandant Vabre in a private shoot. An HQ Company XI defeated an [Aleppo](#) American College soccer team but was defeated by a local [Idlib](#) team. Private Dick [Baker](#)³ won the divisional middleweight boxing championship at [Baalbek](#). The Kiwi Concert Party, 5 Brigade Band, and the YMCA Mobile Cinema Unit all visited the battalion. Celebratory and other parties also helped to pass the time and to keep spirits from flagging. Such convivial gatherings marked the second anniversary of the unit's departure from New Zealand, the meeting of the widely separated companies at cricket or other matches, the arrival of reinforcements and, on 11 May, the happy occasion when Lieutenant Sandy Thomas, who had been left wounded in [Crete](#), arrived across the Turkish border at Dick Connolly's post.⁴

As part of the 'showing the flag' policy, the 23rd extended hospitality both to local notables and to the French officers in the district. This hospitality was usually reciprocated, often to the distress of the officers involved in these gastronomic adventures. It was almost certainly no coincidence that Colonel Leckie needed medical treatment at the end of this Syrian interlude. Thus, the Abdine Agar-Rustum treated twenty of the battalion's officers to a fourteen course meal which lasted from midday to seven o'clock. On one occasion, Commandant Vabre and his officers sent a dashing detachment of cavalry led by a gendarme, who twirled a shining scimitar, to escort Colonel Leckie and his senior officers to a showing of French films. On another, a French military band gave a carnival air to a garden party.

But, despite these pleasantries, training did go on, often quite strenuously. As commonly happened in similar periods out of the line, several officers and NCOs went on courses of instruction. Despite the late arrival of the brigade in [Syria](#), a party of two officers and sixteen other ranks left the 23rd on 17 April to attend the last course for the season at the Ski School at Les Cèdres in the [Lebanon](#). Such experts as Lieutenant Harold [Richards](#)⁵ and WO II Bowie enjoyed the course immensely, but some of the others found it tough going. Probably the most important course for the battalion, especially in view of the intention to equip infantry units at an early date with twopounder anti-tank guns, was the month's

training in the use of these guns given to infantry officers by 7 Anti-Tank Regiment. Captain Herbie Black,⁶ Lieutenant Robin Deans and Second-Lieutenant Don Grant,⁷ all in turn commanders of the anti-tank platoon in the 23rd, attended this course. Thirtysecond Anti-Tank Battery, attached to the 23rd at this time and under Lieutenants Betts⁸ and Slyfield,⁹ also instructed a number of NCOs and privates in the use of the two-pounder. In addition, several men attended a physical training course in Aleppo.

A Ninth Army course which indirectly influenced the battalion's training was the G (R) course in irregular warfare run in the hills above Eriha by commando officers. Officers and NCOs attending this course learned a great deal about sabotage and commando raids. They reported that the commandos could march 6 miles in one hour, 9 miles in two hours, and 12 miles in three hours. In a fiercely competitive frame of mind, Colonel Leckie claimed that anything the commandos could do, the 23rd could do better, and the order went forth that route marches by day and by night were to aim at both distance and speed. The following company and battalion diary entries indicate something of the outcome: 'C Company at Kafer Harim are setting new records in marching, fitness and proficiency of all arms. They have attempted several long marches and have come through every one of them in fast time and with an absolute minimum of foot trouble.' On 27 May an A Company man recorded: 'Today we carried out a route march to a point in C Company's area—roughly a distance of 20 miles. There were no casualties, everyone finishing the march in good fettle.' Even HQ Company men, usually anxious to escape route-marching, caught the fever, and the mortar platoon, in particular, went on several long marches. Thus the 'I' diary for 26 May: 'The Mortar platoon left early in the morning for a cross country march to A Coy's position.... All sections of the Battalion have at one time or another gone on long marches, some of them during the night, and the standard of marching, endurance and the lack of complaints speak highly for the fitness of all ranks.'

Although no battalion manoeuvres were possible, some companies did combine in mobile column training. Thus B Company moved as in its anticipated role to the Turkish frontier, where C Company, acting as enemy, put in an attack while B Company fought a delaying action in which it was supported by the carrier and mortar platoons. On the way back to camp, B Company found itself cut off by D

Company 'paratroops' and a full day 'battle', involving attempts at outflanking the D positions, was fought.

During the latter half of May and the first week of June, both 4 and 6 Brigades carried out brigade manoeuvres in the Syrian desert near [Forqloss](#), east of [Homs](#). By 13 June, 6 Brigade had relieved 5 Brigade in order that the latter might take its turn at desert training, including co-operation with infantry tanks. That day the 23rd left [Idlib](#) for the northern Syrian desert; the officers brushed up their rusty knowledge of flag signals for moves in desert formation and the men reverted to living in and around their trucks. Next morning the battalion began its training in desert manoeuvres, but as the day wore on, the heat became unbearable—the metal parts of vehicles could not be touched for more than a split second with the bare hand and the petrol was vapourising. [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) called off the afternoon exercise; the units withdrew to the Euphrates River and the men relaxed in its cool waters. In the late afternoon orders were issued for a brigade move in desert formation, to be followed by a night attack. But, before this move began, a message arrived from [Divisional Headquarters](#) saying that the Division was under notice to move and ordering the brigade to return forthwith to [Djedeide](#). The night attack and other exercises were cancelled. The move to join the rest of the Division began next morning and was completed by 16 June. The 23rd spent 17 June in packing base kits and preparing for the return to Egypt. Next day the battalion left [Syria](#) by road. A peaceful and happy chapter in the unit's life had ended.

When they left [Syria](#), all ranks were physically fit and well trained in the use of their weapons. The spirit of the unit was excellent. Unfortunately, the scattered nature of the company localities in [Idlib](#) and along the Turkish frontier and the sudden cancellation of desert exercises had prevented the rehearsal of a battalion night attack or any unit or formation training. Lack of this training was the greatest handicap with which the unit entered Egypt.

¹ [Capt D. W. Cook](#); [Invercargill](#); born Gore, 16 Jan 1917; truck driver; wounded 20 May 1941; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

² [Lt-Col A. D. Reid](#), ED; [Timaru](#); born Waikoikoi, 11 Jan 1903; garage manager.

³ Sgt R. V. R. Baker; Invercargill; born Otautau, 11 Feb 1918; shop assistant; wounded 25 May 1944.

⁴ The story of his escape from a German prison camp in Greece is told in his book, Dare to be Free.

⁵ Lt H. T. Richards; born Ashburton, 1 Dec 1906; farm manager; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

⁶ Capt H. C. Black; born NZ 29 Aug 1917; warehouseman; twice wounded: killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

⁷ Lt-Col D. G. Grant, MC, m.i.d.; Invercargill; born NZ 29 Feb 1908; school-teacher; CO 23 Bn May-Sep 1945; wounded 15 Jul 1942; Rector, Southland Boys' High School.

⁸ Capt B. F. Betts; born Christchurch, 1 Apr 1913; warehouseman.

⁹ Lt H. D. Slyfield; Kaikohe; born Auckland, 28 Dec 1911; insurance inspector; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; escaped, Italy, Sep 1943.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 8 – BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 8

Battle for Egypt

DURING the [Libya](#) fighting of May-June 1942, the pendulum of success had swung even more strongly than before in favour of the Axis forces. Despite stands at [Bir Hacheim](#) and other 'boxes' by Free French and British troops, Rommel broke through the [Gazala](#) line and pressed on to [Tobruk](#). When the New Zealand Division was called to return to the [Western Desert](#), it was expected to take up a position near the Libyan frontier, but by the time its move was completed, it was too late to occupy such a position. This was in no way due to lack of speed in making the move. The 23rd, for example, took only five days to move from [Djedeide](#) to [Mersa Matruh](#). The battalion left [Djedeide](#) on 18 June and, after passing through Merd-jayoun, Upper Galilee and [Tiberias](#), staged the night at [Tulkarm](#). [Asluj](#) and the Canal marked the next two staging points. Officers only had been informed of the unit's destination and a few rumours circulated concerning the ships at [Suez](#) which were to take the Division back to New Zealand or to the war in the [Pacific](#). But, as the [BBC](#) news grew worse, fewer and fewer men believed in any destination other than the [Western Desert](#). The report that [Tobruk](#) had fallen came as a genuine shock. Any lingering doubts as to destination were removed on 21 June as the convoy rolled through [Cairo](#) and took the [Wadi Natrun](#) road to [Amiriya](#).

Although the move was 'Top Secret', with divisional shoulder flashes and hat badges removed, and vehicle signs and fern leaves painted out, the newsboys and other street sellers of [Cairo](#) hailed the 'Kiwis' as confidently as if flags and all identification signs had been shown. [Amiriya](#) itself was just a little dirtier and a little more dismal than usual. On the move along the coastal road towards [Matruh](#) on 22 June, the battalion met heavy traffic pushing, without any sign of organisation or control, towards [Alexandria](#) and [Cairo](#). Sometimes in two and sometimes in three or more columns, trucks of all kinds from a variety of units, loaded with gaunt-faced weary men, forced their way back from [Libya](#) and the scene of the [Eighth Army's](#) latest defeats. Sometimes the convoy was disorganised by interference from this down traffic and a dust-storm at [Daba](#) did not improve the going, but all trucks managed to report at Smugglers' Cove, a few miles east of [Mersa Matruh](#), on 22 June. Later [General Freyberg](#) termed the Division's move of over 900 miles from [Syria](#) to [Matruh](#) as a 'most remarkable military move'.

During this return to the desert, Colonel Leckie was evacuated sick and Major Romans temporarily took command of the unit. As Colonel Leckie, the last of the First World War officers to leave the battalion, did not return to the 23rd, his departure marked a decisive break with the unit's early history. As its original second-in-command and its commander on board ship, for a time in England, and from 13 May 1941 till 21 June 1942, Colonel Leckie made a notable contribution to the spirit and outlook of the 23rd. All who recall how ardent were the supporters of pre-war Southland Ranfurly Shield football teams will know something of the spirit Doug Leckie infused into the battalion. This spirit, a fierce pride of unit, was sometimes narrow and not markedly friendly towards other units, but it generated a Highland clannishness and a determination to make the 23rd the best fighting battalion in the Division. In the mess, Leckie was 'one of the fighting Leckies'¹ and in no way a stickler for formalities. He encouraged an independent individualism in his officers and NCOs. In particular, he encouraged them to hold and enthuse their men, not by virtue of their rank but through such natural powers of leadership as they possessed. This helped to make the 23rd a hearty unit in which respect for officers and NCOs grew according to the qualities they possessed and was not something enforced by King's Regulations and adherence to the letter of the law. Sometimes this led to a neglect of what is often termed the 'regimental' side of the unit's life. 'We never over-organised in the 23rd but we always got things done'. In this typical remark of his, Leckie possibly summed up his views on command. During his term as CO, the 23rd may not have been 'regimentally' perfect, but it built up a remarkable esprit de corps which was one of the major forces in making it a strong and successful battalion.

Although the sight of an army in retreat was depressing, morale soon recovered: a swim in the [Mediterranean](#), a good meal and an equally good beer—company canteens had picked up cases of tinned beer at the various NAAFI's en route—enabled most men to recover their normal high spirits. On 23 June Major Romans placed the companies in position in the eastern sector of the [Matruh](#) defences which were then being occupied by the New Zealand Division. On 24 and 25 June the battalion worked hard to clear the accumulated sand out of trenches, to re-erect or improve flattened barbed-wire fences, and to dig new weapon pits. In keeping with orders, a large LOB party, consisting of the whole of C Company and the seconds-in-command of all companies, was sent back to [Maadi](#).² Late on 25 June, to the delight

of all who had given any thought to the likely outcome of being shut in this so-called coastal fortress, the New Zealanders handed over the [Matruh 'box'](#) to [10 Indian Division](#) and moved out on a more mobile role to the south.

After a night move, 5 Brigade took up a defensive position at the head of Wadi el [Garawla](#), but in the afternoon of 26 June moved to the vicinity of [Minqar Qaim](#), a peculiarly shaped escarpment about 25 miles south of [Matruh](#). Here the Division (excluding 6 Brigade which, in keeping with the current [Eighth Army](#) doctrine that a division had more infantry than its guns could support, was being held at [Amiriya](#)) occupied a battle position with 5 Brigade in the west and 4 Brigade in the east. In 5 Brigade, 21 Battalion was sent off on a separate mission to guard a petrol dump at [Bir Khalda](#), the 22nd was placed on the west facing south and west, while the 23rd took up positions on a terrace and a flat area to the north of the escarpment. In the unit area, D Company was on the west and almost entirely on the flat ground in positions which faced north and north-west. A Company was in the centre on the terrace and covering Battalion Headquarters, while B Company was on the right facing north and north-east.

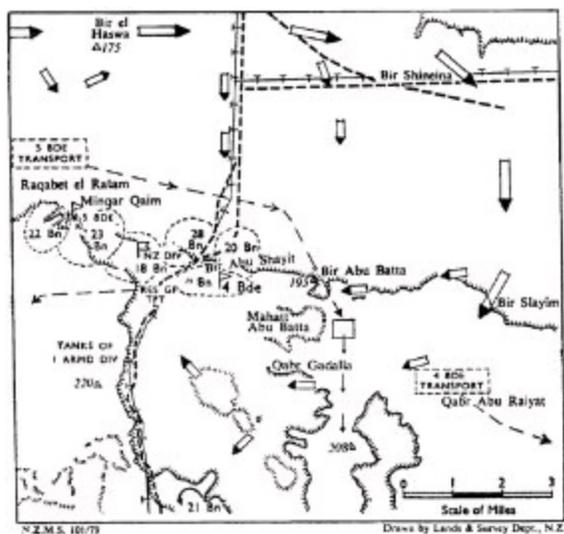
The ground at [Minqar Qaim](#) was extremely hard and, although the urgency of the task kept many of the troops digging till well after midnight on 26–27 June, some slit trenches were still very shallow and sangars had, in some cases, been built up from the excavated rocks. The digging-in of the spigot mortars, the new but rather big and clumsy infantry anti-tank weapons which were supposed to be most effective if a hit was scored at 100 yards range, proved virtually impossible in the time available. The news that the enemy had 'broken through' at [Charing Cross](#) stimulated the diggers to make fresh efforts. Of course, the late discovery that HQ and B Companies had trespassed on the 22nd's area and that the men responsible had to begin digging fresh slit trenches was greeted with typical comments from the soldiers concerned.

After stand-to on 27 June at 4.45 a.m., work on the defences was continued. Carrier patrols went out to the south and west. After breakfast, Captain J. Ensor, the brigade transport officer, conducted all the non-fighting transport to what was hoped would be a safe locality in the south. When, about mid-morning, large transport columns came over the north-west horizon, Major Romans, who was inspecting company defences, was asked the question in most minds, 'Ours or theirs?' With

typical optimism, he replied, 'Ours, of course. You don't think the enemy would move at such speed when we have 100 tanks between him and us'. The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the opening rounds in a lengthy artillery duel were fired. The enemy vehicles came on but shells forced them to retire. Several times, as their numbers increased, they advanced and then pulled back out of range. Later in the day the enemy tanks and trucks moved round to the east on the north flank of 5 Brigade and, somewhat later, attacks on 4 Brigade were reported.

The battle of **Minqar Qaim** was not one in which the 23rd was at all actively engaged. The men were well enough dug-in to be safe from most of the shelling, which varied in intensity from very fierce to spasmodic. All platoons came under this fire, but possibly 11 Platoon came under the heaviest shelling. This platoon was dug in on a small spur running out from the main terrace. One artillery troop had its guns at the end of the spur, another was in the slight depression east of it and a third was in a similar position west of the spur. When the counter-battery shooting reached its heights, 11 Platoon received many 'unders and overs' but, although one man was buried temporarily, no serious casualties were sustained.

Shelling is an experience which the infantryman comes to take for granted, but the first time under such fire is trying enough. Private Jack **Bickley**³ wrote an account during the day of 27 June which is of value both as giving a reinforcement soldier's reactions and a picture of the shelling to which the 23rd was subjected on that and many other days:



21 panzer division encircles minqar qaim, 27 june 1942

'1030 hrs. 27th June.... My first experience of battle.... It's not very pleasant. I'm not actually afraid but a bit het up just like before a football match. Unfortunately, last night in the bustle, we didn't get a very good position. I'm on a solid rock floor, could get only about 6" under the level of the ground and built a rough barrier round me of stones.... That was close! Up by Bn HQ. Whir-r-r-rr DUCK! A couple of trucks are on fire out in front.... Gosh! It's getting hot in here with a tin hat on and the sun streaming in.... 1130 hrs. I'm getting stiff and sore—this rock isn't as comfortable as it might be. Can see the flash of his guns now. Here's the first casualty and here's the closest yet.... that one was close, but it was a dud. Quite a few duds come over. A bit of shrapnel just landed next me. 1145 Too close altogether and I can't get any flatter. Bits flying in all directions.... 1200 The skyline is covered with vehicles now. Our 25s have stopped for some time and he's just stopped too.... Later. The shells started again about 1300 hrs and dozens landed round by Brigade. We finished off our area map and I took a copy to Brigade.... There had been five killed in their wadi after dinner. Poor lonely smashed bodies of men lying out in the sun where they had fallen. That was my first sight of the grimmer side of war, and it set me back a bit.... I found Bde and headed back.... back to my hole again. There was a chap dead at the RAP. The shells are coming pretty close now.... Then in come the mortars, horrible things they give you no warning. Jerry seems to be right round us now—will probably attack tonight—don't like the position at all.'

The men in the unit RAP were the hardest worked members of the unit that day. Captain Alan Wilson, the MO, had to attend to artillery and engineer casualties as well as the 23rd's, often under the most trying of conditions, especially after the enemy guns began firing from the north-east. But, for the most part, the long hot day passed with the men lying low in their slit trenches. After dark, Major Romans announced that the New Zealanders were to 'break out' from [Minqar Qaim](#): 4 Brigade was to attack with the bayonet and 5 Brigade was to drive through the gap carved in the enemy. Since the unit's B Echelon and the 5 Brigade troop-carrying vehicles had been attacked by tanks and driven off to the south where they were out of touch, the troops were ordered to board artillery, ammunition and any vehicles available. Tactical loading was impossible and platoons were to be split, very often between widely separated trucks.

At 10 p.m. the troops formed up and marched to the brigade rendezvous, where

the trucks were waiting in three closely packed columns. Although some difficulty was experienced in loading all the men on the vehicles, by 11 p.m. the columns were practically ready to move. Moving slowly at first via the [Divisional Headquarters](#) area, the 5 Brigade group turned south-east about midnight towards the enemy. The zero hour for the 4 Brigade attack was 10.30 p.m. but, as it was postponed because some of the troops could not reach the start line in time, Brigadier Inglis, who had taken command of the Division after [General Freyberg](#) had been wounded in the afternoon's shelling, decided to try to outflank the enemy positions. Actually, 4 Brigade's attack was highly successful, but the 5 Brigade and other vehicles had in the meantime become involved in a most exciting drama.

Eye-witness accounts of the scene during the actual 'breakout' give something of the colour and tension of the few minutes involved. The 23rd carriers covered the right flank of the transport columns; they were told to form a screen. Private Bruce [Robson](#)⁴ reports: 'The carriers kept bunching like a flock of frightened sheep. The sergeant ["Scotty" [Anderson](#)⁵] stood up shouting and waving his arms like a maniac. "Spread out! Spread out!" They didn't seem to understand. Behind us came the deep, steady roar of the column.... The gunner leaned forward suddenly and pointed at the ridge ahead. "There's tanks there", he said in a hoarse whisper. And sure enough their turrets could be dimly seen at intervals along the skyline. There was a breathless moment, a sort of frozen inaction, then, crash! a great ball of fire burst out of the blackness and bounced between us and the next carrier. In a second the air was alive with these horrible messengers of death. As if by a prearranged signal the whole covey of carriers turned and sped away to the right in a desperate effort to divert the fire from the vulnerable line of trucks. The poor old carrier—it seemed to be straining every nut and bolt to out-pace those bouncing balls.... We eased up to a halt. Over at the column it looked as if the lid had been lifted off Hades.... Almost uncanny misfortune had guided one of those first shells into a petrol tank among the foremost trucks, and in a moment the whole ghastly scene was lit up by the blaze. Even as we looked a truck full of ammunition blew up, men's bodies could be seen thrown twenty feet in the air, outlined against a great livid wall of flame. The noise was terrific—engines revving and revving, ammunition bursting, the tear and crash of guns. Confused, helpless figures could be seen running in and out among the fires.'

In the columns, things looked much worse than they were. Much of the German tank fire went high. But the Germans could not very well miss such a perfect sitting target and a petrol truck exploded, an ambulance burned fiercely, and boxes of ammunition blew up. Streams of tracer bullets flew down the columns, now clearly shown in the light of the burning vehicles. A Bofors and some other guns were quickly swung into action while, without waiting for orders, some of the trucks in the left-hand column swung left, raced north and then east, and those on the right did the opposite and eventually broke clear of the enemy.

Private Bickley recorded his impressions early next day: 'At 0200 hrs we ran into it—the experience I'll never forget. We were perhaps 150 yds from the head of our charging roaring column and about the third row in from the right. One bullet—tracer—cracked over the roof of our truck. From straight in our front came streams of fiery machine-gun fire right towards us and straight down our column.... A shell hit an ambulance just on our right.... It was a flaring mass in a minute filling the air with a horrible orange glare. The drivers rushed round to the back doors, jerked them open, but the inside was a blazing inferno.... Then we were round with the fire coming from our right side and back. I saw tracers glancing off trucks and others disappearing through them. I was right on the back of the truck and, even crouching down, felt as though I was ten feet high and six broad. The driver of every truck was flat out—a thundering mass of trucks. I take my hat off to the drivers....'

Private Charles Pankhurst of B Company confirms this impression: 'Shells and bullets whizzing everywhere—trucks, ambulances on fire everywhere.... What a target for Jerry and I thought that every moment would be my last. However, someone directed the truck to turn left and the drivers were wonderful. They got us away from there in record time though it seemed like hours'.

Private Garnet Blampied was slightly resentful at not being able to return the enemy's fire: '... soon he had streams of bullets chasing each other through our truck.... It seemed as though the furies of hell itself had been let loose. The worst part about it was that we were unable to return the fire, we could only crouch low in the trucks expecting any moment that ours would be the next one to go up in flames.'

During the night, the three main groups into which the transport had divided

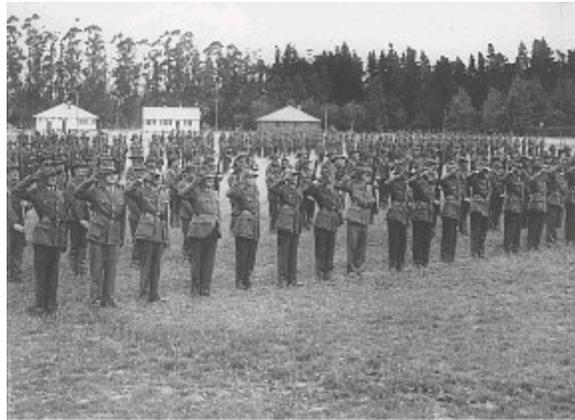
made their way independently back towards [Kaponga](#). In the morning, only Major Romans's staff car and two 23rd 3-ton trucks were with [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) and 5 Brigade Headquarters, but during the next twenty-four hours practically the whole unit made its way to [Kaponga](#), where a very happy reunion took place.

The 23rd's casualties at [Minqar Qaim](#) were 1 officer, Lieutenant [Torrens](#),⁶ and 4 other ranks killed, 14 wounded and 14 lost prisoner of war. The majority of these casualties had been incurred during the 'break-out' when a mine-carrying truck had been blown up. As this truck had been loaded with A Company men, most of the casualties which resulted from its destruction were from that company.

On 30 June Lieutenant-Colonel [Watson](#)⁷ arrived to take command of the battalion. One of the first of the 23rd officers to be decorated, he had left on a tour of duty just prior to the unit's move to [El Adem](#) in January 1942 and had served as CO of the Southern Infantry Training Depot in [Maadi](#) and, for a short time, as CO of 26 Battalion. He found the 23rd in good heart and shape. The men were still physically fit. Morale was high: any demoralising effect of heavy shelling or of losses was forgotten in the memory of the 'break-out' and the exhilarating dash across the desert. The reinforcements had been 'blooded' and had been knit more tightly into the unit. A man could not share a single blanket or a single greatcoat with a mate, as had been the fairly common experience on the night of 28 June, without coming to regard him as a special comrade. A day or two in action was doing what many weeks of ordinary training could not do, especially for those who had joined the unit since the last campaign.

To halt the advancing Panzerarmee, [Eighth Army](#) dug in on what became conveniently known as the [Alamein](#) line. This defensive 'line' extended for nearly 40 miles from the sea in the north to the virtually impassable [Qattara Depression](#) in the south. The only line which existed at the end of June 1942 was one drawn and redrawn on the maps. Three defensive boxes, 16 to 18 miles apart, at [Alamein](#) in the north, [Qaret el Abd](#) (Fortress A or the [Kaponga Box](#)) in the centre, and [Naqb Abu Dweis](#) (Fortress B) in the south apparently provided strong defended localities. But, as both Fortress A and Fortress B were vacated early in July, 'falling back on the [Alamein Line](#)' simply meant taking up fresh positions in the desert between the one firm position at [Alamein](#) on the coast and the [Qattara Depression](#). At this time, [1 South African Division](#) occupied the [Alamein Box](#), the [New Zealand Division](#) was

responsible for the centre, and **5 Indian Division** held the south. Large gaps remained to be covered by light mobile columns or by troops arriving from farther east. Eighteenth Indian Infantry Brigade from **Iraq** occupied Deir el Shein, a depression about eight miles north of Fortress A, while columns of **1 Armoured Division** watched the gaps in the south.



Second Echelon units at Burnham Camp give the General Salute. The parade was inspected by Lord Willingdon, official representative of the British Government at the New Zealand centennial. 23 Battalion is on the left. The officers in front are (from left) I. O. Manson, A. F. G. McGregor, M. J. Coop, A. Ie G. Campbell, B. I. Bassett, R. E. Romans, C. N. Watson and H. C. Black

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Entraining at Burnham for overseas, 1 May 1940
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On the wharf at Lyttelton. Lt Reg Romans (top left), S Sgt Reg Jenkins and Sgt John Trotter, all later killed in action, are prominent

On the wharf at Lyttelton. Lt Reg Romans (top left), S-Sgt Reg Jenkins and Sgt John Trotter, all later killed in action, are



Boxing match on the *Andes*

Boxing match on the Andes



The Andes at Gourock, June 1940

The Andes at Gourock, June 1940



King George VI visits 23 Battalion at Mytchett, 6 July 1940

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Mr Churchill, followed by Brigadier Hargest, inspects the Second Echelon, 4 September 1940

Mr Churchill, followed by Brigadier Hargest, inspects the Second



The *Cameronia* arrives at Piraeus, March 1941.
From left: Carl Watson (top), Dick Orbell, Dick
Connolly and Brian Bassett

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23 Battalion men march
past the Acropolis to
entrain for Katerini

23 Battalion men march past the Acropolis to entrain for Katerini



Warrant officers and sergeants travel first class. *From left:* WO I A. Johnson (RSM), Sergeants A. R. M. Bowie, S. J. Edgar and J. D. Trotter

Warrant officers and sergeants travel first class. From left: WO I A. Johnson (RSM), Sergeants A. R. M. Bowie, S. J. Edgar and J. D. Trotter



Bren carriers and crews go on 'flatties'. The RMO, Captain Ron Stewart, is in the foreground

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The oldest and youngest members of the battalion—Les Wilson and Jim Lydiate—at Katerini. They are wearing 'Bombay bloomers'.



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View from A Company headquarters tent in the Olympus Pass.
Lt Bruce Baxter is in the center

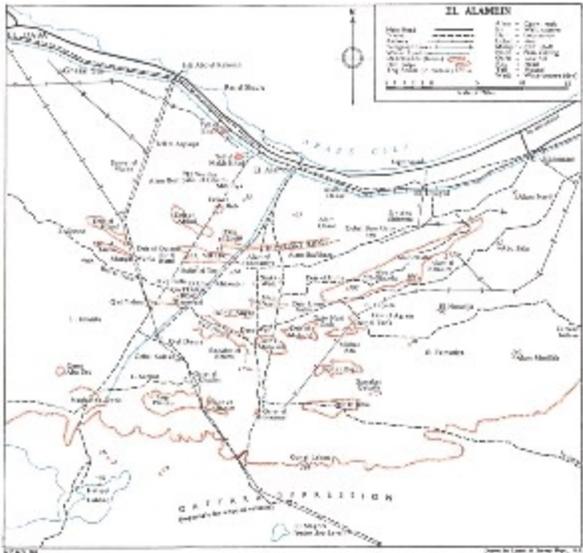
View from A Company headquarters tent in the Olympus Pass. Lt Bruce Baxter is in the center



German paratroops drop over Maleme, 20 May 1941
German paratroops drop over Maleme, 20 May 1941



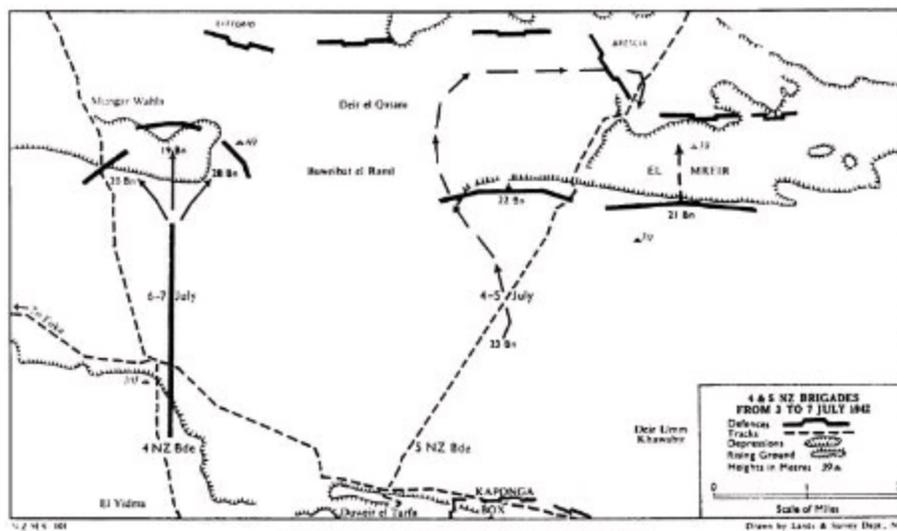
Galatas, a photograph taken before the battle
Galatas, a photograph taken before the battle



In the New Zealand Division, 6 Brigade, which had come forward from Amiriya,

occupied the [Kaponga Box](#) while the other two brigades moved in a mobile role to the south-east. Within half an hour of Colonel Watson's arrival, the 23rd moved from the outskirts of the [Kaponga Box](#) to Deir el Munassib. In this area 4 Brigade took up a position to the east while 5 Brigade held the west, with 21 Battalion on the north, 22 on the west and 23 in the south. The unit's defences were strengthened by the 23rd's own anti-tank guns, which were under the command of Captain Herbie Black, who rejoined the battalion on 30 June.

The next two days passed with only light artillery fire and intense heat to trouble the men, who were often very thirsty but otherwise had few worries. On the second of these days, 2 July, B Company, under Captain Fergus Begg, and a section of carriers moved out with a gun column of [28 Field Battery](#) and a troop from [32 Anti-Tank Battery](#). This mobile force, under Major John Snadden, moved north-east and joined a larger 4 Brigade force under the CRA, Brigadier C. E. [Weir](#).⁸ Enemy forces were sighted on several occasions but they did not come to grips. Both sides were manoeuvring for position. The B Company men, who were responsible for protecting the guns in their column from infantry attack, dug in on seven occasions that day as a result of the many changes of position. In the late afternoon an artillery and tank battle opened north of [Alam Nayil](#) ridge. At dusk the New Zealand guns enabled the tanks of [7 Armoured Division](#) to disengage and withdraw to a laager area. The CRA's group remained in position overnight. As the B Company men had only light dry rations for the day, the CSM, [Dan Davis](#), returned to the 23rd area both to get meals and to secure more picks and shovels. Just before dawn next morning, Lieutenant J. Brittenden, the battalion's liaison officer, brought out a truck of supplies, hot stew and tea, and reported cheerfully that 'the Aussies are arriving from [Syria](#) soon and Jerry will get a shock'.



4 AND 5 BRIGADES' ACTIONS, 3-7 JULY 1942

4 and 5 brigades' actions, 3–7 July 1942

About 7 a.m. on 3 July, before the New Zealand mixed group had moved, an enemy transport and gun column began to move southward across [Alam Nayil](#). Battle was quickly joined; the guns under Brigadier Weir asserted their superiority; 19 Battalion, quickly called to the scene, launched a highly successful attack which completed the destruction of the artillery group of the Italian [Ariete Division](#).⁹ The New Zealanders captured a large number of trucks, and captured or knocked out forty-four artillery pieces. Some 350 prisoners were also taken. While all the credit for this highly successful action was due to the gunners and to 19 Battalion, the 23rd men present returned later that day to their own unit with spirits as high as if they themselves had been responsible for this success.

When B Company returned to Deir el Munassib, it found that the rest of the battalion had gone. Early that morning, 5 Brigade had been ordered to seize the [El Mreir Depression](#), a steep-sided feature about four miles north of Fortress A. Picking up [6 Field Regiment](#), [33 Anti-Tank Battery](#) and [43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery](#) near the fortress, the brigade moved to a position astride the [Alamein](#) track and southwest of El Mreir. In the face of enemy shellfire, [21 Battalion](#) on the right and [22](#) on the left occupied positions near the lip of the depression. The [23rd](#) occupied an area in rear of the two forward units.

On the night of 4–5 July, however, after a day of much shelling and considerable air activity and bombing, the [23rd](#) was sent to raid the enemy positions on the north side of El Mreir. [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) ordered the unit to move north by trucks to a

start line about a mile west of the depression and then attack on foot from west to east through the enemy positions until it reached the [Alamein](#) track, which the troops were to follow back to their original positions. Years later, he wrote: 'It was probably an over-elaborate plan and there was little time for preparation'.¹⁰ The plan was not too complex, but the 23rd companies had too little time to prepare for their attack. Although the attack was not due to commence till 9.30 p.m., the company commanders had barely sufficient time in which to give their instructions to their officers before the men had to embus for their move to the start line, which was being marked by the 'I' section. Platoon commanders had no adequate opportunity for briefing their men before they moved off in their trucks. The 23rd's raid was to be supported by a limited artillery programme, timed to open as the infantry crossed the start line at 9.30, with normal fire for eight minutes searching and sweeping the enemy area, then fifteen minutes' slow fire after a lift in range. When the guns opened fire, the trucks were stuck in soft sand and the infantry were pushing, shoving, struggling and swearing. Eventually, the men got their vehicles on to solid going, but [6 Field Regiment](#) had completed its task before the infantry had even arrived at the start line. The artillery thus did little more than alarm the enemy and certainly lent little direct support to the late-starting infantry.

The situation on the start line was confused. It deserves description, if only to show what results if troops are thrown into a night attack without rehearsal of the drill that should be observed on such occasions. The 23rd's misfortune in being recalled to Egypt on the very eve of embarking on battalion and brigade training in [Syria](#) was now revealed: not once since before [Libya](#) 1941 had the unit, now with a new commander, new company commanders and many reinforcements, both officers and men, rehearsed the procedure for moving on to a battalion start line and then moving off smoothly in correct formation for a night attack. On this occasion, the lack of training was made worse by the tension arising from the knowledge that the attack was late, that the benefit of artillery support had been lost, and the number of questions which still had to be asked and answered. Thus, one of the best platoon commanders, Lieutenant Alf [Boag](#),¹¹ had to inquire of the Adjutant: 'What's the compass bearing for the axis of advance?' Others wanted to know what was the back-bearing to be followed if they could not locate the [Alamein](#) track in the dark. The CO and Adjutant, the IO and the company commanders all had to work hard to bring order out of chaos, but eventually the companies began to advance, with D

Company on the right, A Company on the left and B in reserve.

But the possibilities of confusion had not been exhausted. D Company advanced with its three platoons in line—16 on the right, 18 in the centre and 17 on the left. Major [Cameron](#),¹² in the centre of 18 Platoon, was too far from his company's left flank to be able to tell whether or not contact with A Company was being maintained. A Company, with two platoons forward and one back, veered slightly to the left while D stayed some-what to the right, and a gap opened between the two leading companies. Captain Fergus Begg hurried B Company, in reserve, along in a tight box formation, with a narrow frontage, in an effort to maintain contact with the forward companies. In his determined efforts to keep in touch, he increased the pace and B Company passed through the gap and began to take the lead. D Company men, hearing the sound of marching feet and doing their best to re-establish contact with A Company, side-stepped towards the left and found most of B Company were in front of them. Something of a mix-up resulted until the correct formation was re-established. Indeed, as one D Company private recorded later: 'We advanced again and almost shot up B Company who, by some unknown means, had got in front of us'.

Very shortly afterwards, when the companies had advanced about 1600 yards, the enemy opened fire with mortars, anti-tank guns, machine guns and small arms of all kinds. This concentrated fire showed that the 23rd had lost the advantage of surprise and the men went to ground until the officers of the leading companies selected the posts they were going to attack. As some of the fire came from the left, it was obvious that, in crossing the flat bottom of the depression, the unit had missed the exposed flank of the enemy positions. Captain Norris therefore led A Company more than half-left against a large Italian outpost he had sighted. No. 7 Platoon on the left went wide and did not strike many enemy, but the rest of the company, encouraged by the shouts and example of their officers, Captain Norris, Lieutenants [Fane Vernon](#),¹³ [Ian Wilson](#)¹⁴ and Horace Cameron, got to grips with the Italians in quick time. The leading troops fired their rifles and tommy guns and threw grenades with good effect. They killed a number of Italians and penetrated their positions to a distance of about 200 yards. The last of the Italian positions were found vacated as the Italians had taken to their heels and fled in some disorder. No. 8 Platoon had some of the toughest fighting that night and Private John [Milne](#),¹⁵ an

acting section leader, did good work in heading the attack until the first enemy posts were overrun. Even when wounded in the hip, he continued to urge his men on. Corporal 'Dagwood' Bain¹⁶ took prisoner one Italian, who surrendered quickly. After quite a fight with the occupants of one heavy machine-gun post, Lance-Sergeant Bruce Gillies¹⁷ and his men knocked out the post and captured the Breda gun. In the darkness, the A Company men got separated in chasing the scattering Italians, but Lieutenant Wilson led 7 Platoon and some of 9 out by the route used on the advance, while Captain Norris collected most of 8 and some of the stragglers and led them out by the Alamein track. A few stragglers joined D Company.

When the 23rd first came under fire, Major Cameron was wounded in the knee and he therefore handed over command of D Company to Lieutenant Boag, the officer in charge of the centre platoon. Finding that the enemy fire sounded worse than it was in fact, since most of it was going high, Boag shouted to his men to follow him. Both 17 and 18 Platoons, with bayonets fixed, dashed into the attack. As they approached the enemy positions, Boag himself was practically knocked off his feet by an Italian grenade. He replied in kind by lobbing a 36 grenade into the nearest Italian weapon pit, which was later found to contain seven dead Italians. The men of these two platoons charged, shooting to the front, throwing grenades and later using the bayonet. In the first positions they struck they wiped out the enemy but, as with A Company on their left, the farther they went the fewer enemy they found, as the Italians simply fled. The enemy small-arms fire ceased and, as several members of D Company claimed later, it seemed that nothing could stop the 23rd from penetrating to the enemy gunline. Unfortunately, at that stage, the order to halt and withdraw came from the rear. Private 'Red' Kearney,¹⁸ who had done good work throughout, grabbed the last Italian to be seen and the only one left alive in the sector and brought him back as a prisoner. Boag led 17 and 18 Platoons and a few of A Company back by the Alamein track, which was only about 100 yards east of where D Company had mounted its attack. The third D Company platoon, No. 16, failed to join in the attack. In its position on the extreme right of the battalion's front in the advance, its men possibly came under heavier fire than the rest of the attacking troops. At any rate, the platoon commander claimed: 'We got pinned down by heavy fire and couldn't move'. That this failure to attack when they were supposed to do so had a depressing and demoralising effect on the men may be seen from the fact that during the next few days this platoon was the only one in the

battalion to have men evacuated as anxiety neurosis cases.

B Company took no part in the attack. Especially after the shouts of A and D Companies had indicated their entry into the attack, Captain Begg was fretting to commit B Company, but his orders were to wait for the CO's decision. Since, in the confusion of the advance and the move of D Company through B, all contact between the Colonel and B Company had been lost, the company was reluctantly withdrawn with the others without having fired a shot.

Shortly after 2 a.m. on 5 July, the three companies were back in their own areas. Their casualties were light for the amount of fire which had been directed at them. Three had been killed, 15 wounded and 3 left to become prisoners of war. Lieutenant [McCambridge](#)¹⁹ had been wounded twice, and with two others had then wandered in the wrong direction, falling into enemy hands. Although a New Zealand Divisional situation report described this raid as 'completely successful' and a message was received which stated, 'C in C congratulates NZ Div on success of last night's raid', the men of the 23rd were not particularly proud of this engagement. Indeed, it provided many of those who participated in it with a perfect example of how an attack should not be mounted. Nevertheless the battalion was pleased to learn from a divisional intelligence summary that its prisoners had led to the identification of the Pavia Division, and that one of the prisoners had reported that a battalion less a company had been broken up by the raid.

For the next two days 5 Brigade remained in position to the south of El Mreir. Conditions were anything but pleasant: vicious shelling and occasional bombing did provide some distraction from complaints about the heat and lack of water. Jack Bickley's diary entry for 4 July reads: 'Independence Day for the U.S.A. and a stinking hot thirsty shell-battered day for us.' But, on the day after the raid, mail arrived from home, always a welcome event but one that was particularly appreciated by men who had been campaigning for over a week in the heat of the Egyptian summer. Thus Bob Stone wrote: 'Mail arrived for us—4 for me—great to get it in front line'; Garnet Blampied described the arrival of letters as 'one of the happiest events of a soldier's life', while Jack Bickley reported: 'We got a great surprise today—mail arrived. What a great time to get letters, they are as good as a tonic'. Spasmodic shelling and intermittent air raids continued: a few more casualties occurred. Lieutenant Boag was one of these and D Company was left temporarily with only

one officer. News from the rest of the [Alamein](#) line gave no hope of an early success.

The policy of harassing the enemy was continued. On the night of 6–7 July, Second-Lieutenant Don Grant took his platoon, No. 12 of B Company, to Deir el Qatani, a depression only a mile west of El Mreir. Setting out at 10.15 p.m., this fighting patrol ran into about two dozen Germans with a troop-carrier, an anti-tank gun, a Bedford 15-cwt truck and a car. No. 12 Platoon opened fire with all its weapons on this small laager. The troop-carrier bolted, the Bedford was put out of action, several of the enemy were killed or wounded and one of the German wounded was brought back as a prisoner. He belonged to 580 Mixed Reconnaissance Unit. Although the patrol had three men wounded and had lost one 'presumed killed', its members were very pleased with their successful brush with the enemy and with having beaten Germans, who were classed as so much better fighters than the Italians.

These days of waiting also saw the 23rd's new anti-tank platoon fire its first shots in action. On 5 July a small enemy convoy approached from the west. Captain Black and his men waited till the leading vehicle came within range before opening fire. Their 'bag' was only one vehicle but it was a good start. On 7 July, again, the anti-tank guns kept enemy armoured cars, engaged in reconnaissance work, at a distance and knocked out one vehicle.

For the infantry, 7 July was, according to Bob Stone's diary, 'another very hot and weary day. Doing nothing on very little food and water and being shelled and bombed continuously is a bit nerve racking. Heat terrific—it is hard to rig up much shelter in our holes'. But late that day orders came for a move to the south: the higher command appreciated that the panzer divisions were probing for a gap between the two British corps in the area between [Alam Nayil](#) and Munassib and therefore ordered the New Zealand Division to occupy that area. At 8.45 p.m. the 23rd took the lead in a brigade column moving to the south and east. Unfortunately, the enemy's evening 'hate' was intensified at that time, and one truck went up in flames and others were damaged. But, despite having a few trucks on tow and striking soft sand en route, the move was completed by 2 a.m.

With the 22nd to the west and facing north and the 21st facing south, the 23rd dug in on and around some escarpments not far from Point 104, about three miles

east-south-east of [Kaponga](#). After practically no sleep, stand-to came at 4.30 a.m., and thereafter men busied themselves with improving the positions chosen in the darkness or selecting and digging new and better ones. The day was reasonably quiet: no enemy columns approached within range. On 8 July, too, some of the keener members of the unit arrived back from [Maadi](#), having refused to wait any longer for an official posting. Thus Privates W. [Valli](#) ²⁰ and E. [Green](#), ²¹ both of 10 Platoon, arrived with the supply column, having taken French leave in order to rejoin their comrades in the desert. Captain Charles Mason also returned from a course in Palestine and again took over command of the carrier platoon. 'Charlie had a reputation for recklessness but his downright common-sense was a tonic in the depression fairly prevalent at this stage. Even the men in the companies seemed affected by the new atmosphere he created.'²²

That night, 8–9 July, 5 Brigade moved another three miles to the east. Daylight reconnaissance of the route and the new positions, and the marking of the route by lamps, enabled the move to be completed before midnight. The 23rd now took up positions on a low feature which the troops named 'Iggri Ridge', a name derived from the Arabic for 'Hurry-up!', which describes the treatment administered by the enemy guns while the 23rd occupied that position. On 9 July, too, the enemy occupied [Kaponga Box](#) unopposed. Earlier that day demolitions were carried out and vast columns of smoke rose from the Box. The giving up of this prepared strongpoint, the frequent night moves to new positions, and the general lack of reliable information led to much questioning of the ability and intentions of the higher command. 'I can't understand this war in the least, but I suppose somebody must,' wrote Private Bickley that day. '[Kaponga Box](#) blown up by our engineers, had not expected we would not defend this place but suppose the heads have their reasons, all our hard work of last year gone,' wrote Private Stone. In fact, the Box was too far to the west to form part of a defensive line with the troops available and it was in danger of being isolated. But even Rommel was puzzled and wrote: 'we were at a loss to understand why they had given the position up'. Other actions about this time were somewhat baffling to thinking troops. On the night of 8–9 July the 23rd established a listening post, under Corporal Jim Baxter, ²³ at Point 104, but on the following night the Germans occupied this useful observation point, with a resulting marked increase in accurate shelling of the battalion's positions on the following day.

While it would be both difficult and unfair to generalise at all dogmatically concerning morale in the unit at this time, it cannot be denied that it was beginning to flicker. While the majority were in good heart and condition, some were growing very tired of the shelling, the bombing, the heat, the various moves and the need to dig in again and again. Thus, the normally cheerful Johnston could write at this time: 'It is very disheartening and we are all beginning to get in the dumps at having to withdraw all the time. Digging in every day is not the best on a bottle of water per day. Have never been so dry before.' Some found the various moves under threat of encirclement or pressure quite exhilarating, but too much excitement can itself become exhausting. On 9 July Bob Stone wrote: 'We sat quiet all day confident we could smack the enemy if he tried anything on.' Actually, the enemy was engaged in a reconnaissance in force and, in the late morning, four German tanks and seven or eight troop-carriers approached the gap between B and D Companies. Sergeant Moncrieff's ²⁴ anti-tank-gun crew opened fire at about 1200 yards and hit the leading tank. Although it did not 'brew up', it came to a halt. The New Zealand artillery opened fire immediately afterwards and the enemy column turned tail, leaving one tank and the two trucks behind. A minefield was laid in the gap but the enemy did not venture again into that sector. Towards evening the battalion's forward troops reported mortar and airburst fire as well as ordinary shelling. Reports of much enemy movement continued to come in. The Germans appeared to be massing for an attack. Consequently, although the word did not reach the troops till after midnight, 5 Brigade made another move to the north-east.

The late announcement of this move meant that several who were dog-tired and sleeping soundly were nearly forgotten. Most platoon officers carried out the normal check and were able to report their men all present and correct, but so hurried were the preparations that some men were left to look after themselves. Thus, Corporal [Ward](#) ²⁵ and Private [Herbison](#), ²⁶ in a listening post about 400 yards forward of the D Company position, only just heard the trucks in time to join their company. Sergeant Percy [Cunningham](#), ²⁷ acting CSM of D Company, not being in any platoon, was not warned of the move and remained asleep in his slit trench. Early next morning he watched the occupation of the area by German tanks. He was close enough to see German tank drivers lighting cigarettes and laughing at having conquered unoccupied ground. Later in the day, Cunningham managed to move away unobserved and, by following the convoy's tracks in the sand, he rejoined the

unit in El Muhafid Depression.

The news from other parts of the [Alamein](#) front was good, without being very good: at the beginning of July, 1 South African Division, aided by the determined stand of 18 Indian Brigade, had held the coastal sector against Rommel's first attempt to punch a way through to [Alexandria](#); next, 1 Armoured Division, supported by 1 and 2 South African Brigades and battle groups of 50 Division, had operated aggressively but without scoring any decisive victory; and then, on 10 July, 9 Australian Division, freshly arrived from [Syria](#), attacked in the sector forward of El [Alamein](#) station, took the mounds around Tell el Eisa, and captured over 600 prisoners. This encouraged General Auchinleck, Commander of [Eighth Army](#), to order increased pressure along the whole front. Consequently on 11 July, 13 Corps, with 1 Armoured Division on the right and 2 New Zealand Division on the left, moved to an attack generally directed against [Ruweisat Ridge](#), a long narrow feature running east and west about five miles north of the New Zealanders' positions and a short distance east of El Mreir. This 13 Corps attack was to be in three phases: first, the attacking divisions were to seize a start line running north-north-east from [Alam Nayil](#) ridge to a wadi later well known as [Stuka Wadi](#); secondly, in operation BACON, the New Zealanders were to seize the western end of [Ruweisat Ridge](#); and thirdly, 1 Armoured Division was to exploit to the west.

However long the various headquarters in the chain of command between [Eighth Army](#) and 23 Battalion had been deliberating over the first phase of this attack, the troops who were supposed to execute it, in the 23rd at least, had no time whatsoever to think about it. At approximately 4.30 p.m. on 11 July, Colonel Watson returned to the unit from a conference at Brigade Headquarters with word that the companies had to embus and move off at 5 p.m. As he had gone to Brigade without notifying his Adjutant, no Orders Group was waiting for him and his IO was fast asleep, making up for several very short nights. By the time Captain Cunningham had summoned the company commanders and Lieutenant Pat Lynch had sorted out his maps, worked out compass bearings for the advance in the trucks and attended to other details, there was no time left to give even the company commanders full information and proper orders. The Adjutant insisted: 'It isn't on! It can't be done!', but the CO declared that the unit could be pulled together with flag signals. He himself drove off slowly in his jeep waving a flag to indicate that the companies

must follow in desert formation. Although the troops hurled themselves into their trucks with no information as to where they were going or what was intended, the 23rd did not move at the stipulated time. Once again the hurried scramble to move led to an atmosphere of rush and tension, but the battalion was sufficiently well trained in moves in desert formation to follow the CO's lead without being briefed on what would normally be considered essential details.

The Division made an impressive sight as it shook itself out into desert formation, with 5 Brigade on the right and 4 Brigade on the left. In 5 Brigade, 22 Battalion was on the right, the 23rd on the left and the 21st in the rear in reserve. The enemy artillery quickly opened fire on the target thus provided, and shells began to land thick and fast around the advancing trucks. Garnet Blampied probably described a general experience when he wrote: 'It is surprising how helpless one feels, with the truck dashing forward and shells screaming and bursting on all sides. On the outside we appeared cool and calm and even made feeble attempts at cracking jokes but I fear that inside we were seething with conflicting emotions, and I guess there were very few who could not honestly say that they had "the wind up".' Unfortunately, the driver of the CO's jeep was one of the first hit by shrapnel. Colonel Watson at once took his place at the wheel and drove him back to the RAP. The temporary departure of the CO on an errand for which no flag signal was provided led to the slowing down of the battalion's advance. About the same time, B Company on the left got its trucks involved with those of the Maoris and thus provided the enemy gunners with an even better target than before. The 23rd suffered casualties from this fire, the most important so far as the direction of the unit was concerned being the loss of the Adjutant, Captain Gordon Cunningham. At this juncture, some of the trucks turned about and drove back to a safer area where they let the infantry debus; others allowed their occupants to debus on the spot. Most men promptly started to dig in and only on the return of Colonel Watson was the advance resumed.

By this time, the units of both brigades had begun to advance in a series of long extended lines. They made an inspiring sight as they advanced through the shelling with bayonets fixed and gleaming in the setting sun. After about 6000 yards had been covered, they reached [Stuka Wadi](#), where they were to form up for the night attack. All were certain that they must be intended to go straight into an attack that

night but, before the advance was complete, the 23rd LO at 5 Brigade Headquarters roared up in his jeep with the message: 'No BACON tonight. Bacon is off'. This message made sense to those acquainted with the code-word for the next phase of the operation, but sounded like an insult to the men who had been hurried into an advance before they had been given their tea. As it was, all hands had to dig in since shells and mortar bombs were still falling. To be without greatcoats and blankets for the night after a long advance in shirts and shorts and to go without tea did not help morale, but there were compensations. The British tanks which moved to a laager area in rear of the battalion were much discussed. 'As good as a tonic to our boys was the sight of our tanks. At last we've seen them and know for certain they're here,' wrote one 23rd private. About midnight, Major Romans brought a truckload of dixies of hot stew to [Stuka Wadi](#). That meal put new heart into the cold and hungry troops.

During the night Colonel Watson, worried that the 23rd was in touch neither with the 20th on the left nor with the 22nd on the right, moved his forward troops to the right, with D Company required to fill the gap between the 22nd and the 23rd. Staff-Sergeant Ron [Philip](#),²⁸ D Company's CQMS, temporarily in charge of 16 Platoon in view of the shortage of officers, received the order to be prepared to move in five minutes. Certain in his own mind that this meant that the attack was now on, Philip sent one section back to Company Headquarters with the runner and went to rouse the other two sections. This took a little time and, when they were all ready, Philip led them forward. Imagining that they must have fallen behind the others, Philip and his men hurried on, never for a moment dreaming that they alone were advancing towards the enemy. After about an hour, dawn began to break and, about 300 yards ahead, they saw the forward posts of the enemy but no sign of the rest of the battalion. Some desultory fire—probably nothing more than early morning clearing of machine guns—sent the two sections of men to ground in a slight depression, where they remained unobserved by the enemy throughout the day of 12 July. Philip ordered 'No smoking!' in case their presence was betrayed by the sight or smell of smoke. Thus, the seventeen men lay out in the broiling sun all day, scarcely able to move and steadily growing more parched with thirst. They watched the Italians going about their business, wiring and mining their defensive posts, and Philip was later able to report on movement of guns and vehicles and the siting of machine guns. Darkness fell about 8.40 p.m., but Philip delayed moving his men until certain

their withdrawal could not be detected. The sections then went back to a small wadi where they rested and some fell asleep. Later they were picked up in a 3-ton truck by Lieutenant Grant Robertson²⁹ of B Company.

Another 23rd soldier, Private George Ellis,³⁰ went missing on the night of 11–12 July. A signaller, he left the B Company area to check on communications with D Company. In returning, he either lost his way or was misled by the moving of the companies during the night. He was posted 'missing' and remained on the list of missing for nine months, although, in fact, he was killed on the morning of 12 July along with three members of a Bren-carrier crew whose story follows.

Before first light on 12 July, Lieutenant Charles Mason, with a crew of three—Privates P. Rayner,³¹ driver, D. A. A. Griffin,³² gunner, and B. Robson, signaller—set out to contact B Company and then to try to locate Philip's two sections. They saw nothing of B Company nor of the D Company men, but picked up Ellis some distance out from the 23rd. Robson, the only survivor, can best tell what happened next: 'Just over a slight rise we ran slap-bang into the enemy lines and the next thing I knew we had stopped practically among gun positions and slit trenches. Griffin, our gunner, hopped out with a 38 and the daft idea of taking prisoners. Charlie acted promptly. He signalled the driver quick about turn and shouted urgently to Griffin, "Back in! Quick man". In a moment we were off. The Italians started to run for their guns and before we had got up speed or could get over the rise plastered us with small arms fire. Griffin was working an MG on the back of the carrier and I worked the bolt of my rifle like a madman but they had too much fire for us. Griffin got one through the head. George Ellis had one leg all but shot off below the knee. I got hit in the thigh of my right leg. Charlie called for more speed. But the engine choked and stopped. Not fifty yards away to our right sat a Jerry Mark IV tank—its fire had stopped the carrier. Another tank also opened up on us.'

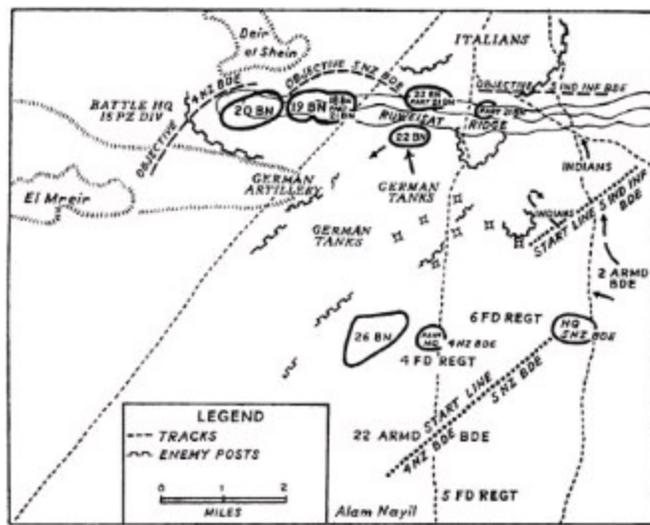
The odds were too great. Mason, Rayner and Griffin were killed. Ellis was shot by an Italian and Robson was taken prisoner. When the carrier was located nearly a week later, it was in a burnt-out condition and, in the absence of identification discs, the bodies could not be identified. None of the burial party had any idea that Ellis had been picked up, and, consequently, Mason and his men were reported killed in action. Some nine months later, word came back from an Italian prisoner-of-war camp that Robson was alive and that the 'missing' Ellis had been killed under the

circumstances described.

Bacon, the attack on [Ruweisat Ridge](#), confidently expected by the 23rd on the morning of 12 July, was postponed till the night of 14–15 July. While waiting, most men endured the spasmodic shelling and the heat, and found some consolation in the tins of fruit brought up by the [YMCA](#) truck and the sight of the eighteen Bostons going over to bomb the enemy and coming back in undisturbed formation. On 14 July the Divisional Supply Point was bombed by Stukas while 23rd reinforcements were coming forward and the Quartermaster's truck was collecting rations. Sergeant [Greig](#),³³ who had done a fine job as unit ration sergeant, was killed. So also was Lieutenant Ivan [Dillon](#),³⁴ who had been a spare officer in [Syria](#).

In the interval of waiting, more detailed plans had been worked out for the [Ruweisat](#) attack: [30 Corps](#), represented by [5 Indian Division](#), was to take the eastern end of [Ruweisat Ridge](#), while the New Zealand Division from [13 Corps](#) was to take the western end. [Eighth Army](#) orders for the tanks of [2 Armoured Brigade](#) were watered down in the orders of [13 Corps](#) to '2 Armd Bde will be prepared to move on centre line of the inter-corps boundary with the tasks of (a) exploiting success of the N.Z. Div to the NW; (b) countering any counter-attack by the enemy armour against NZ Div which may develop from the NE, North or NW.' The Eighth Army was still learning how to mount a major attack involving different divisions: provision for liaison and for guiding the tanks forward were limited and no specific times were given to the Armoured Brigade.

In the New Zealand Division, 5 Brigade was to attack on the right and 4 Brigade on the left, as in the advance on 11 July. In 5 Brigade, the attack was to be executed on a 1000-yard front with the 23rd on the right, the 21st on the left and the 22nd in reserve with a 'mopping-up' role. 'There is nothing more nerve-racking than waiting in idleness for the hour of a projected attack to arrive. Thus it was with a feeling of profound relief that we received the news at 5 p.m. on the 14th July that our attack would go in that night'.³⁵



RUWEISAT RIDGE, DAWN 15 JULY 1942

ruweisat ridge, dawn 15 july 1942

The starting time for the attack was 11 p.m. Long before that hour, the brigade 'I' section marked the start line with coloured lights, shaded from the front but visible from the rear, and the units moved into position behind this line. No rum was issued to the 23rd on this occasion as its arrival had been delayed by the bombing of the supply point. A more serious shortage arose from the same cause: no sticky or other anti-tank bombs could be obtained. The RSM, 'Buzz' Daly,³⁶ tried hard to secure these bombs but he could not replace those destroyed that day by the enemy bombers. Although the artillery fired a few concentrations, these fell far ahead of the infantry, who were to attack without close artillery support.

Promptly at 11 p.m. the 23rd moved off on its six-mile advance, with B Company under Captain Fergus Begg on the right and D Company, now under Captain Ironside,³⁷ on the left, and A Company under Captain Peter Norris in reserve, moving about 300 yards behind the attacking companies. Battalion Headquarters moved in rear of A Company with elements of HQ Company, not normally committed to an attack, but including Major T. B. Morten, the company commander, and Lieutenant W. Cook, the transport officer, who was most anxious to avenge his lost friend, Charlie Mason.

The first two miles of the advance were made in comparative silence, broken only by the occasional word of command— 'Keep your interval! Don't bunch!'—and the curse that accompanied a fall into a disused slit trench. The sound of boots on stones was covered in part by an RAF plane which circled overhead, flicking its

navigation lights on and off and drawing fire which helped the infantry to locate some of the enemy posts.

Just on midnight, B Company encountered heavy fire which came from behind a minefield. Bursts of tracer fire flew across the front of and towards the advancing infantry. Soon the heavier booming of a quick-fire close-support gun added to the noise of the light and heavy machine guns. Mortars also opened up and the noise of firing spread along the front of the divisional advance. Begg quickly decided to chance casualties in crossing the minefield and courageously set the example by leading his men into it. As Private Blampied wrote later: 'It was a queer sensation crossing the minefield and one seemed to step very lightly.' Apparently, it was either a dummy or was sown with anti-tank mines only, as no one was blown up on it. At any rate, the infantry were quickly across and, with bayonets fixed and tommy guns blazing to the front, were speedily engaged in wiping out Italian machine-gun and other posts. 'Despite the heavy fire and bursting of hand grenades, our chaps made short work of the forward positions,' says Blampied. Unfortunately, during one of the first bayonet charges, Captain Begg was killed by a direct burst of machine-gun fire. Private 'Nip' Nolan ³⁸ of 11 Platoon took a speedy revenge and followed up his grenade by going in with the bayonet on the machine-gun crew responsible. Similar incidents occurred at other points. Several casualties were also sustained. No. 11 Platoon, under the command of Sergeant Dave McKay, ³⁹ lost some of its connecting files as well as an outstanding section leader in Corporal Henry. ⁴⁰ This platoon thus became temporarily separated from the rest of the company in the confusing fighting which followed. No. 12 Platoon, under Lieutenant Don Grant, was on the extreme right of the divisional advance and, as a gap remained between the New Zealanders and the Indians farther to the east, this platoon was much troubled by fire from its right flank. Grant had some difficulty in keeping his platoon on its correct bearing and preventing it from sheering off to deal with this fire. After B Company had cleaned up a series of enemy positions and taken some dozens of prisoners in a fighting advance of over three hours, its men went to ground for approximately half an hour while Lieutenant Grant Robertson, OC 10 Platoon, who had taken over command of the company, reorganised and also discovered what the movements of tanks on the left front meant. By now all contact with D Company had been lost.

In the meantime, on the 23rd's left, D Company had also encountered the

enemy. In addition to small-arms fire, it came under heavier fire from anti-aircraft or anti-tank guns. At this stage D Company was well organised, with the two forward platoons, 18 under Lieutenant J. H. Cameron on the right and 17 under Lieutenant Cooper,⁴¹ in touch and not very far forward of 16 Platoon under Staff-Sergeant Philip. The D Company men held their fire until they were practically on top of the enemy and then went in, firing from the hip and using the bayonet to good effect. As at El Mreir, some of the Italians withdrew hurriedly to the rear, but the great majority of what proved to be the Brescia Division surrendered as quickly as possible. The determined riflemen of D Company promptly shot any who showed fight or were slow in surrendering.

Soon after striking the first enemy positions, D Company encountered tanks belonging to 8 Panzer Division. The first of these tanks was on the move and spraying the ground with indiscriminate machine-gun fire. One D Company man expressed the general feeling when he shouted at the top of his voice to the German tank: 'Why the hell don't you go home? You're spoiling the whole show.' The lack of sticky bombs was a serious handicap at this time. Nevertheless, Cameron and his men went tank-hunting and, with the aid of a tin of petrol luckily found nearby, Private Jack Clark⁴² set one tank on fire. It burned furiously for some time and, as men did not want to show up as a target against its glare, they avoided it.

In the confusion caused by the moving tanks and in an attempt to retain contact with 21 Battalion on the left, the rest of D Company veered to the left and lost touch. By 1.30 a.m. on 15 July, therefore, formation had been lost. Most of D Company, under Captain Ironside and Lieutenant Cooper, kept in touch with what they understood to be the 21st, but when, after cleaning up pockets of resistance encountered en route, they halted for a rest at around 2.30 a.m., they discovered that this force was made up of Colonel S. Allen,⁴³ CO of the 21st, two other officers and one 21 Battalion platoon under Lieutenant Keith West-Watson.⁴⁴

A Company, the reserve company of the 23rd, was meanwhile advancing steadily. At first, its men had no fighting to do, although they came under mortar and later machine-gun fire. About 3000 yards from the start line, they met an enemy tank. Lieutenant Ian Wilson, in command of 9 Platoon on the right, shot at it and threw a grenade at its tracks without doing obvious damage. Lieutenant F. Vernon, with 7 Platoon on the left, later described his company commander's actions on this

occasion: 'Peter was rushing round with a "Tommy" gun when we came upon a Hun tank which was roaring round aimlessly. Peter goes up to it, shoves his "Tommy" through the driver's slits and lets him have it ... the result was electric. The tank sort of stood on its rear bogies, raced its engine a good deal and then started to lower its gun at him, so Peter skips round the back and throws a grenade under it and, after the smoke and dust had died down, the tank could be seen going for its life—away from Norris.' The Battalion Headquarters group also ran into tanks during its advance. Some tanks in enemy forward areas were partially dug-in and sandbagged and to outward appearances knocked out. They came to life after the second wave of infantry passed and one of them roared into action practically in the middle of the 23rd headquarters. Brens were fired at its slits in the vain hope of getting some shots inside. Sergeant [Thomas](#)⁴⁵ and Private 'Congo' Smith, both of the anti-aircraft platoon, made valiant attempts to get a track off and to lever open the turret with a pick—but to no avail. The tank fired several shots in various directions without hitting anyone, got up speed and made off in the darkness.

A Company continued to advance until Captain Norris considered the right distance had been covered and that the forward companies should be on the objective. He then sent Lieutenant Ian Wilson and Private Ken [Cooper](#)⁴⁶ forward to contact D Company. About 300 yards ahead they found Lieutenant Cameron and a dozen of his men, the remainder of his platoon having become casualties or been scattered. He could give no indication of the whereabouts of the rest of D Company, which by this time was a long way farther on. Wilson and Cooper returned to A Company headquarters, whence Norris sent them south-east to report to Colonel Watson. About this time, too, Lieutenant Robertson led B Company not forward but practically at right angles to the axis of advance and succeeded in linking up with the Battalion Headquarters group. Colonel Watson now halted this mixed force while he himself went forward with Wilson to reconnoitre the area in which A Company was halted.

After a brief reconnaissance, the Colonel ordered those elements of the battalion available to consolidate, with A Company on the left, the handful of D Company in the centre and B Company on the right. Lieutenant Wilson he sent back to bring up those troops halted in the rear. On this occasion, Wilson ran into [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) and gave him a report on the situation. The Brigade

Commander then left the area to hurry into position the troop of anti-tank guns he had brought up, and also to ensure that the tanks of [2 Armoured Brigade](#) came forward in time to support the infantry on [Ruweisat Ridge](#).

From about 5 a.m., therefore, everyone was busy digging in and organising a defensive position. After a small amount of fighting, A Company and Cameron's men captured about sixty more Italians slightly to the north-east of the area in which they were consolidating. After siting his headquarters in the rear of the area, Colonel Watson went back to check on the position of 22 Battalion and to arrange for it to fit into a scheme of all-round defence. Major [Hanton](#),⁴⁷ the commander of the 22nd, has recorded: '0545 hrs. Contacted Lt.Col. Watson 23 Bn and everything seemed to be OK. He left for his Bn and I for mine. Then the tanks began firing at us—the ground was very rocky with about only 1'– 11/2' of sand.' Seven or eight tanks of 8 Panzer Regiment swung in from the south, sprayed the area freely with lead, and quickly captured 22 Battalion, with the exception of Sergeant Keith Elliott's⁴⁸ platoon on the extreme right flank. Colonel Watson and those with him had no chance of escape and shared the fate of the 22nd.

The guns of K Troop 33 Anti-Tank Battery under Lieutenant [Ollivier](#)⁴⁹ were between 22 and 23 Battalions. Their crews fought gallantly and scored some direct hits but were all knocked out within a few minutes. At this stage, when it seemed that the tanks would sweep the 23rd 'into the bag', Captain Norris shouted to the whole 23rd group to move forward to the main ridge, which could now be clearly seen about 300 yards ahead. His appreciation was that shelter on the north side of the ridge offered the only hope of protection from the tanks and their devastating fire. 'Never had we moved so fast as when we sprinted across the 400 yards of bullet-swept flat until we reached the temporary cover of the ridge,' wrote Blampied in describing the wild dash up to and over the very low rise which was [Ruweisat Ridge](#). Fortunately for the 23rd, the tanks now concentrated on getting the 22nd away to an area from which they could not be recaptured. Despite some fire from machine guns and from armoured cars in the north, the 23rd crossed the ridge and took up positions mainly to the west of the pipeline. Some elements of the 21st and Sergeant Elliott's platoon later joined the 23rd but, as senior officer, Norris took charge and laid out all-round defensive positions, although quite a few preferred to shelter in the pipeline ditch rather than attempt to dig new positions in what seemed

to be the solid rock of the main ridge.

It will be remembered that the larger part of D Company—Company Headquarters and most of 16 and 17 Platoons—had joined Colonel Allen of the 21st in the advance. Although Ironside and Cooper thought they had reached the objective when they halted for a rest at 2.30 a.m., Colonel Allen insisted they should push on. After advancing for another hour, they met a few isolated groups of enemy with whom they dealt speedily, killing some and sending others back, unarmed and unescorted, as prisoners. During the cleaning out of two strong machine-gun posts, such section leaders as J. S. Baxter, J. Richardson,⁵⁰ W. D. H. Lory⁵¹ and W. Smellie⁵² distinguished themselves. Cooper says: 'At 3.50 a.m. we encountered a minefield and an enemy B echelon or tank repair workshop of some description—for at least 20 prisoners were sent running back towards the 22nd. Cpl. "Hank" Rogers⁵³ then spotted a couple of Iti drivers trying to start their trucks, and a burst from his tommy gun found its mark, and the air was rent with agonized Italian.'

After a conference at which Colonel Allen concluded that the mixed group had come too far, he and Staff-Sergeant Ron Philip went back, hoping to meet their own reserve companies or the 22nd. On the way, they ran into fire from a strongpoint overlooked in the advance. Colonel Allen died of his wounds, but Philip, whose wounds were dressed by Privates Rex Cross⁵⁴ and V. Idour⁵⁵ of the 23rd, was picked up about 4 p.m. in a truck by Lieutenant Paddy Lynch, the 23rd IO.

After waiting some time for the return of Colonel Allen and Staff-Sergeant Philip, the mixed party decided to move back towards the other units before consolidating. Lieutenant Cooper's story runs:

'Promptly at 0420 hours we fanned out in formation, and commenced our walk back, and no sign of either Col. Allen or Ron Philip did we see. We walked for approximately 3/4 of an hour when we came across Major McElroy,⁵⁶ 21st Bn, who was in charge of approximately 20 men and 20 prisoners, so after explaining our theory, we pushed on until we considered we were near Pt. 64 on Ruweisat Ridge. The first grey streaks of dawn were breaking at this stage, and Capt. Ironside along with Major McElroy, and a Capt. from the 21st,⁵⁷ had a conference on a course of action. Suddenly we saw a truck moving not 30 yards from us, and Jim Richardson's Bren started things going. The truck stopped, and out came 20 Itis, who must have

received a horrid shock finding us behind them. They quickly joined Maj. McElroy's party. We then surged forward in formation for it was fast breaking day. The area was fairly thickly populated with Itis, but they soon caved in and joined the rest of their comrades. We were moving down a wadi at the foot of the ridge, and our stiffest resistance came from a mixed bunch of entrenched Huns and Itis, and we had a couple of charges at them, and in the last of these Tinny Ironside received a machine gun bullet through the head, and was killed instantly. A bayonet attack or two overcame all resistance, and Ray Searle's ⁵⁸ burst of a Bren magazine down a long trench convinced them that the fight was one sided.... They say New Zealanders are resourceful, but I'll go so far as to say they think of most things. A certain Dunedin wharfie, ⁵⁹ member of 17 Pl., was helping to escort the prisoners when he stopped and carefully cleaned his bayonet, and on being questioned he answered, "You never know how this war might swing around, and they say that blood on your bayonet doesn't help to prolong one's life"....in the course of rooting out the Itis we came across an I officer from the 5th Indian Division who had been captured that morning while on a recce. He was delighted to lead us back to his lines....'

Cooper's account of the capture of over 500 prisoners, mainly Italians of the Pavia Division, must be supplemented, especially concerning Cooper's own work. The last main attack by this party was launched by Jim Richardson's shout as he saw a truck move off: 'We can't let them get away. We must give it a go!' In view of their shortage of ammunition by this time, bayonet charges were the order of the day. Until he was wounded, Corporal Jim Baxter set his section an excellent example as he led them into one charge after another. He was wounded when the party struck the Germans mentioned by Cooper. At this point, Privates Stanley [Wilson](#), ⁶⁰ Alan [Hamilton](#) ⁶¹ and Douglas [Elliott](#) ⁶² attacked two German posts where an anti-tank gun and a medium machine gun were situated close together. Their grenades and close following up with the bayonet wiped out the opposition. Many splendid individual efforts were made, but the more important charges were led by Cooper himself. As Major McElroy reported to the commander of 5 Brigade on the following day: 'Throughout this action, Lt. Cooper who had armed himself with a rifle and bayonet fought superbly. He was cool, rallied his men all the time and often as not led the bayonet charges. I have not seen a better example of courage and leadership.' ⁶³

As this party moved back to the Indian lines, Private Tyler⁶⁴ got an enemy truck to go and Corporal J. C. Rogers was sent back to pick up Baxter and the other wounded men. He did not find Baxter, who was rescued by others, but, after picking up some wounded, he spotted some more Italians, including a colonel and three other officers. He took them prisoner and was escorting them back when his truck was blown up on a mine. A 'quad' came out from the newly advanced Indian positions and took this last group of D Company and its prisoners back to the Indian brigade headquarters. Later in the day Cooper and his party joined the 23rd A Echelon.

Meanwhile, the 23rd men under Captain Norris were organised on Ruweisat Ridge, with A Company under Lieutenant Vernon on the west (but not in immediate touch with 4 Brigade), Lieutenant Cameron and 18 Platoon in the centre, and B Company under Lieutenant Robertson to the east of the sector. Farther east were elements of the 21st and Sergeant Elliott's platoon from the 22nd. Soon after their arrival on the ridge, the forward sections of the 23rd saw some Italian trucks moving off to the north-west. Private Herbison and others opened fire at a range of something over 100 yards and had the satisfaction of seeing their tracer bullets pass through more than one truck.

Some infantry and other enemy posts remained occupied. Supported by fire from a captured anti-tank gun, manned by Lieutenant Rogers⁶⁵ and Sergeant-Major Farmer⁶⁶ of the 21st, Cameron and his men attacked the nearest of these posts and took about thirty prisoners. They were sent along the ridge to be evacuated by 4 Brigade, with which contact had been made.

Later in the morning, Brigadier J. T. Burrows, commanding 4 Brigade,⁶⁷ sent word to Norris to contact the Indians to the east. Lieutenant Cameron was sent on this errand but found enemy still holding out between the New Zealanders and the Indians. Cameron was badly wounded but his runner returned with the news. Lieutenant Ian Wilson was then told by Norris to organise a fighting patrol to rescue Cameron and clean up the enemy post. With volunteers from 8 and 9 Platoons and some from B Company, Wilson went out accompanied by a 21 Battalion officer who had observed the route followed by Cameron. They started off in a truck, but were soon fired upon and debussed. Wilson then led a bayonet charge in which 'Dagwood'

Bain, Varley,⁶⁸ White⁶⁹ and 'Darky' Munro⁷⁰ were prominent. They killed a number of Italians and forced their way through to an Italian RAP, where they rescued Cameron and other wounded New Zealanders. Some twenty-five to thirty prisoners were taken. Wilson and Signalman Wootton,⁷¹ who had brought a signals vehicle to the north of the ridge, took the wounded on Wootton's truck, first to the 23rd area and thence to a 4 Brigade RAP. As the patrol started back with its prisoners, some German posts farther west opened rapid fire and wounded some of the prisoners as well as members of the patrol.

For those on the ridge, it was a long weary day. Jack Bickley, who with other members of the 'I' section had gone so far to the left in the night advance that they were temporarily associated with the 20th, later reported that at intervals they were 'shelled, mortared, and fired at with vicious anti-tank guns'. Small parties of Italians came in and surrendered. In twos and threes, several of the 23rd went out to explore deserted enemy posts and trucks. They found plenty of water, some wine and all kinds of loot. For example, in the afternoon Blampied and two mates found one large Italian truck—to quote Blampied— 'packed full of the wildest variety of goods to delight the eye of a soldier. Cameras, revolvers, knives and binoculars....officers' clothes, scent, soaps, hair clippers, razors and even a wireless set...even more important to us was the find of bottles of aerated and lime water and tinned fruits.'

But the situation was by no means so secure as to make looting a safe occupation. The New Zealand infantry were still lacking artillery support. The British tanks, expected at or soon after dawn, did not arrive until late afternoon. As well as the differences in wording and in interpretation of operation orders and other matters mentioned earlier, the late arrival of the tanks was due to the minefields and the enemy opposition encountered on their way forward. Enemy strongpoints with some 88-millimetre guns to the south of Ruweisat Ridge continued to hold out till mid-afternoon. During the course of the afternoon, however, the Indians supported by tanks made some progress along the ridge from the eastern end. By 2.30 p.m. the Indians had established contact with the New Zealanders. Apart from hold-ups caused by minefields, the way was now open to bring up supporting arms. Although movement brought down hostile fire, vehicles now began to arrive. One of the first brought Major Romans, who had spent an anxious day trying to get Bren

carriers with ammunition, rations and water, as well as the battalion mortars, through to the forward infantry. Some of these carriers got through but the majority were held up by minefields. Thus, the carrier with B Company's rations, driven by Private Joe Murphy, reached the pipeline.

Major Romans took command of the 23rd on the ridge not very long before increased shell and mortar fire and armoured car activity to the north presaged an enemy attack. Towards 5 p.m., armoured cars, tanks and some lorry-borne infantry attacked 4 Brigade from the west and north. Through the dust and smoke, the 23rd men could see the brigade's anti-tank portées burning and correctly surmised that more New Zealand units had been overrun. Stragglers arrived with more definite news of the disaster that had overtaken 19 and 20 Battalions. Jack Bickley gives an account of events as the attack moved towards the 23rd: 'About 5 p.m. a big barrage was put over us and lying in my bit of a trench, I fell half asleep. The boys were all dog tired. I woke up to find we were being attacked—dashed into my equipment and ran down to find our Bn HQ. They were gone. Mr. Norris said they were over the ridge. I hurried over there and ran right into our tanks. It was a nasty position as the enemy was firing all he had at the tanks.' The 23rd was threatened with being overrun and only the arrival of the British tanks, which many members of the unit credited Reg Romans with having brought up, prevented this calamity. To clear the ground to give the tanks freedom of manoeuvre, Romans ordered the infantry to pull back two to three hundred yards. Blampied records the experience of some of B Company: 'We left behind most of our hard-won treasure and sought cover in some trenches from ever-increasing tank and machine gun fire....the order was given to return once more on to the flat. We once more ran the gauntlet of machine-gun fire as we raced across the flat to find temporary cover near a pipe line'.

Major Romans withdrew his men closer to the Indians' position around Point 64, where they were in less danger of being cut off. Although the British tanks did not advance far, their presence sufficed to keep the enemy armoured cars and other vehicles at a distance. With tanks in front and with routes open for bringing up supplies, Romans felt justified in telling his troops there would be no further withdrawal and in advising [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) at dusk that he felt perfectly confident of the 23rd's ability to hold its position. Later that night, after consultation with General Inglis, [Kippenberger](#) ordered the withdrawal of the 5 Brigade troops.

Between 11 p.m. and midnight, therefore, the men boarded all available vehicles, Bren carriers and anti-tank portées mainly, and 'we were taken several miles back to a more peaceful spot where we laid on the sand and slept from sheer exhaustion.'

The official New Zealand historian of this campaign has recorded: 'On the evening of the 15th... There seemed to be few survivors of the rifle companies of 19, 20 and 22 Battalions; 18 and 21 Battalions were disorganised and their casualties were difficult to assess. Only 23 Battalion of the six battalions of 4 and 5 Brigades appeared to be fit for further operations.' That this was so may be termed a matter of the fortunes of war. Had the 23rd been where the 22nd was in the early morning or where the 19th and 20th were in the late afternoon, it would have suffered the fate of those units. Nevertheless, that the 23rd was still an organised unit capable of fighting when it entered the forward defence line on the following day was at least partly due to the cool decisive actions and the energy of Captain Peter Norris, who had taken over in a moment of crisis. The field censor's comment on home-going mail—'Since the division went into action again, the morale has been of the highest standard...even higher than before'—might have had special reference to the 23rd, where all companies had given of their best and were able to go forward with the confidence that comes from having fought a good fight. Jack Bickley's last diary entry for 15 July has a pleasant ring of confidence in the new commander as well as a note of pleasure at the thought of something gained: 'Old Reg took over as Colonel. I picked up a nice pair of binocs. on the ridge'.

Although on the morrow of [Ruweisat Ridge](#), plans were made for sending the badly mauled 4 Brigade units back to [Maadi](#) to reorganise, 5 Brigade dug in afresh to the north and northwest of [Stuka Wadi](#).⁷² Although not committed to another major attack during this period, the 23rd remained in the line another six weeks and helped to construct and hold the ' [New Zealand Box](#)', the southernmost defended area of the [Alamein](#) line.

On 16 July the enemy tried to push eastwards along [Ruweisat Ridge](#). Some of 5 Brigade's officers and men had stayed with the Indians in the forward defences there and Captain Ken Armour, the 23rd's carrier officer, helped materially to stem the enemy advance. Manning a two-pounder anti-tank gun some 80 yards in front of the foremost six-pounders and well in advance of the Indians' guns and supporting tanks, Armour and his friends, Lieutenant Rogers and WO I Farmer of the 21st,

engaged enemy tanks and armoured cars at short range and to good effect. Armour was wounded and the unit lost an officer whose services were badly needed at this time.

Officer casualties were now creating something of a problem. In addition to Colonel Watson and Lieutenant Cook who had been taken prisoners of war, and Captains Begg and Ironside killed during the attack, Lieutenant Harold Richards was killed in a bombing raid on B Echelon on 15 July. He was one of those strong and cheerful characters whose death was mourned by all ranks. Major Morten and Lieutenant Cameron were among those who were evacuated wounded. But more casualties came from the heavy bombing and shelling to which the 23rd's area was subjected after Ruweisat. Thus, on 17 July, reinforcements arrived from [Maadi](#), but, within twenty-four hours, several of the officers and men were dead. Captain Murray Grant, who had again taken over command of B Company on his return to the unit, was killed by shellfire on the day of his return, and [Lieutenant Lee](#)⁷³ died of wounds received during the same burst of heavy shelling. This left B Company temporarily with only one officer, and its situation was by no means unique. On 20 July, however, new life was given to the battalion by the return of C Company under Captain Ted Thomson from [Maadi](#). D Company, now under Captain G. S. Cooper, became the LOB company and went back to base for a rest.

As the war became static, the battalion under Colonel Romans worked on wiring and mining at night and on general improvement of the defensive position in the 'box', wherein 5 Brigade was holding the northern sector and 6 Brigade, which arrived in the line on 17 and 18 July, the southern. So many patrols went out during this period that to do justice to them individually would require a special chapter. Sometimes two or three patrols went out from the 23rd on a single night. Scarcely a night passed without at least one carrying out a reconnaissance, going out to protect a minelaying party, to establish a forward OP, or to attempt to collect a prisoner. For example, on 18–19 July Lieutenant Ian Wilson's patrol covered the engineers responsible for the demolition of vehicles which might have provided cover for enemy OPs in no-man's-land, while on 20–21 July [Lieutenants F. Vernon](#) and [C. A. Slee](#) took out similar patrols to protect engineers searching for mines.

This search for minefields and other obstacles was a preliminary to a major

attack on the eastern end of [El Mreir Depression](#) by 6 Brigade. In support of this attack, which went in on the night of 21–22 July, the 23rd mortars moved forward and were brigaded with those of the 21st and 28th under Lieutenant G. S. Rogers. Once again the infantry fought magnificently and took their objective, and once again the enemy counter-attacked with armour before the British tanks got up to support the infantry. Late on 22 July, the battalion heard the depressing news that most of 6 Brigade had been overrun by German tanks. For all practical purposes the New Zealand Division was reduced temporarily to a one-brigade division, but 6 Brigade was quickly reinforced and the two-brigade division completed the [New Zealand Box](#).

A period of stalemate followed: both sides suffered from exhaustion and from supply problems. More patrolling followed as information on enemy reinforcement and moves was badly needed. In late July and early August, morale in the battalion sank slowly but surely to what was probably its lowest ebb. The 23rd emerged from the fighting of July as a well-organised fighting unit with some pride in its record, and its morale never slipped to a point where the battalion became unfit for fighting, but material conditions did lower the spirit of the men. Human flesh can endure more than the men were called upon to endure in the grim summer of 1942, but only with a deterioration in the enthusiasm for the task in hand. In the main, the factors which caused the drop in morale were physical and did not originate in the life of the unit.

Stuka dive-bombing and the dropping of heavier bombs—sometimes as often as six times a day—and accurate shelling were a worry to infantry who could do nothing in retaliation. Confidence was sapped when some men were killed by direct hits in their slit trenches. Was there no safety even in a slit trench, and was it merely a matter of time before the rest of the section suffered a similar fate? The intense heat by day and the patrolling and other work by night were exhausting limited reserves of energy. Worst of all, billions and billions of corpsefed flies were apparently concentrating on sending each and every man insane. The following private diary entries of 23rd men indicate how serious was this problem: '21 Jul. The flies are terrible now. There was a terrific number of dead men lying out in front, and those that have been buried are scarcely below the rocky ground. The smell is bad at nights.' '25 Jul. These flies are terrible. There's millions of them.... as I lie here

writing this, there are hundreds of flies walking all over me, on my mouth, in my nose, eyes, ears, everywhere.'`27 Jul. No wind today so heat very bad and flies something terrible—they just about drive us frantic.'`1 Aug. Several in our coy evacuated with dysentery. Had a cup of tea in morning and put it down for a second—8 flies in cup straight away.'`1 Aug. Had Geoff's complaint today—vomiting and diarrhoea'.

As the weeks wore on, the men were issued with mosquito-netting covers for their heads and all kinds of precautions were taken in the manner of field hygiene and sanitation. But so long as the unit remained in that area, flies continued to be a problem. As Peter Norris wrote on 20 August: 'The flies which are decreasing a bit now have played merry hell with stomachs and there are many desert sores'. With the resulting physical debilitation and the strain that resulted from being subjected to regular bombing and shelling, men lost some of their former confidence. Thus two private soldiers—one in B Company and the other in Battalion Headquarters—recorded quite independently their reactions on 11 August: 'About 7.30 a.m. Hun started shelling.... Put one about 6' from foot of hole and another even less distance from head. Covered me with rocks and dirt—rifle ruined and steel box of Bren magazines split open. Am not so cocky about shelling as I used to be.'`Had some more shells lobbed in our little area again today. These weeks of tension are beginning to tell: I can't stand up to shelling as well as I used to.'

Nor did the latest reinforcements from [Maadi](#) help morale much, except perhaps by reaction to the poor spirit shown by some. The war with [Japan](#) in the [Pacific](#) meant that no reinforcements left New Zealand for the Division between the 7th Reinforcements on 15 September 1941 and the 8th on 12th December 1942. After Ruweisat, therefore, some men of indifferent quality not very well fitted for front-line service were sent forward from [Maadi](#). A critical attitude, coupled with a determination to preserve the high standards the 23rd had known in the past, is shown in these two diary entries: 'Am not impressed by some of the newcomers to the platoon—too much self about some of them. They would drink the reserve water we are carrying if given a chance. Our old platoon certainly stuck together and helped each other.'`I have a poor opinion of some New Zealanders—the majority who have just joined us have been brought from jail and from soft jobs in base; they are moaning already, wanting to get a spell. Some one has to stay here, so why

moan?’

This last question shows that, despite hardships and minor sickness—there was scarcely a man who did not suffer from ‘Gypsy tummy’ and desert sores—the 23rd continued to do its job. The factors which maintained morale probably varied from man to man. But highly important was the growing conviction of the men in the ranks that what they had done was of value in the winning of the war, that what they were doing in the [Alamein](#) line was essential, and that, if half the reports of the [Eighth Army's](#) growing strength were true, the tide of battle would surely turn and the enemy would be driven out of Egypt and eventually out of [Africa](#). Before Ruweisat, [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) had issued a survey of operations which ended with the assurance that the New Zealanders had ‘played a vital part in stopping the enemy onrush into Egypt’. This required no demonstration after the front became static.

This sense of purpose in what they were doing grew stronger as August progressed. The arrival of General Montgomery on 13 August to take command of the [Eighth Army](#) produced electric impulses which were felt even by the infantry soldier in his slit trench. Monty's orders that all transport should be sent some miles back since there was to be NO further withdrawal made a good impression. [Brigadier Kippenberger's](#) instructions of 17 August stressed the guiding principle of the defence that ‘Every post must fight to the last, irrespective of the fate of its neighbour’. The challenge in his words, ‘Each individual soldier must fight until he has no means of fighting left’ produced the desired response: men determined to stand and fight it out where they were in the event of another enemy attack. Visits of commanders to the unit area aided the growth of confidence in the command at all levels. [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) paid regular calls, and General Inglis and, after his return to the Division on 10 August, [General Freyberg](#) inspected the defences from time to time. The news that Mr Churchill was in the desert strengthened the belief that the material needs of the [Eighth Army](#) would be met. His message to the New Zealand Division which was read to all ranks—‘You have played a magnificent, a notable, even a decisive part in stemming a great retreat which would have been detrimental to the cause of the [United Nations](#)’—was well received. Shoulders went back and heads were carried a little higher.

Within the unit, officers and NCOs did their utmost to look after the welfare of

their men. Colonel Romans set the standard by radiating confidence on his rounds of the companies. He also insisted on regular reliefs of the company in the worst forward area and on a supply of fresh food from [Alexandria](#). The YMCA continued to do good work in bringing up to B Echelon and to the rear companies such heartening extras as tinned fruit, chocolate and cigarettes. Letters and parcels from home and tins or bottles of beer, secured by company canteens, all helped to make life endurable. The picture of men sitting after dusk on the edge of a slit trench eating fruit cake and sharing a can of beer must be set against the more sombre sketch of flies and hard rations in a hot Egyptian August.

The company in the western sector of the battalion area could only be approached under cover of darkness, so dangerous was the shelling and machine-gun fire. Consequently, breakfast arrived before 5 a.m. and dinner came about 9 p.m. No company was kept there for more than a fortnight. Blampied holds that: 'There was one thing, which...kept us from cracking up under the strain of these twelve days in this area—and that was the "chai". Every afternoon, despite the often bursting shells, the rite of "boiling up" was carried out by two members of the platoon, who would then carry it round from hole to hole and serve it to the thirst-parched men, and, despite the top layer of floating fly corpses, it was more valuable than fine gold.'

A normal relief of the company in this dangerous forward area was often followed by two days' rest back at B Echelon. That was good, but the six days' leave scheme introduced in August was better. It allowed two days for travelling and four days for leave in either [Alexandria](#) or [Cairo](#). A hot bath, an expensive meal, a few drinks (or more than a few) and a sleep between clean sheets made dirty, dehydrated soldiers feel like new men. But even on leave, the good soldier was mindful of his comrades—most of the old hands made a point of visiting wounded mates in [Helwan](#) hospital or wherever they could be reached. The comradeship of those who had fought and lived together under trying conditions was a very real thing.

The padres made every effort to meet the spiritual needs of the men in the line. Until he, too, was evacuated sick—for flies were no respecters of persons—Padre Stan Read, who had been with the unit from the end of 1941, moved round the

companies endeavouring to cheer and assist wherever possible. The Roman Catholics went regularly to Brigade Headquarters for Communion and other services taken by Father [Henley](#).⁷⁴

Through the weeks, the work on the defences went on. Most of it was of necessity done at night. Practically every day the 23rd reported on the amount of wiring done or on the success or failure of a patrol. For example, on the night of 5–6 August, the battalion laid 500 yards of dannert wire and 500 yards of double-apron wire despite the fact that the wiring party was fired upon by both machine guns and mortars. Other nights saw similar lengths of wire laid. The engineers of [7 Field Company](#) helped the infantry to get their slit trenches down to the required depth, both by drilling with compressors and by shattering rock with explosives. The sappers also joined in minelaying and mine-lifting patrols but, as they grew more experienced, the infantry handled mines, especially the Hawkins variety, with more confidence. Thus, on the night of 9 August, a B Company patrol under Second-Lieutenant [Kinder](#)⁷⁵ laid mines on the [Kaponga](#) road and neighbouring tracks where they might damage enemy vehicles. Other patrols of these days were commanded by Captains Thomson and Orbell, Lieutenants J. [Garbett](#),⁷⁶ M. [Cross](#),⁷⁷ I. Wilson, C. A. Slee and F. D. [Sutherland](#),⁷⁸ and Second-Lieutenants D. Grant, J. W. [McArthur](#),⁷⁹ A. [Bailey](#),⁸⁰ T. [Ferris](#)⁸¹ and A. C. [Marett](#).⁸²

Most patrols went through a standard drill of thorough briefing as to task, compass bearings, distances and paces to be counted, formation to be adopted when on the move, evacuation of wounded and so on. Some patrol tasks appeared simple enough as they involved little more than securing information concerning the enemy's defences, wire or minefields, but even the simplest patrol usually involved danger and much nervous tension for those in it. In theory all officers should be equally competent but, in fact, some stand out as being exceptionally good at moving stealthily towards their objective and in showing the determination necessary to accomplish their task in the face of enemy flares and fire. Like most units, the 23rd came to depend on two or three junior officers of proved ability in this specialist craft when special information was required: Don Grant,⁸³ Arthur Bailey and Fred Marett.

Some slight idea of the dangers and difficulties of night patrols may be gleaned from the diary of Ray Minson and the reminiscences of Arthur Bailey. On one

occasion, Bailey was plotting the wire fence of an enemy minefield, when 'in one place the wire instead of being loose was taut between two standards and, on closer inspection, a huge booby trap was discovered. It was on a push-pull igniter which meant that if the wire was pulled tighter or slackened it would go up. We did neither....' On another occasion, Bailey was taking an artillery OP officer out to a position among some derelict vehicles where he could lie up all day and better observe the enemy. Minson's account states: 'we were stalking along very cautiously when suddenly, right in the middle of us—bang!' An S-mine, an anti-personnel mine filled with shrapnel, had been accidentally kicked, but the canister had merely jumped out of the casing without exploding. Minson continues: 'When we recovered from the shock and looked around, we found ourselves in the centre of an anti-personnel mine field. Incidentally, I lifted my head to find my tin hat touching a detonator.'

Sometimes the concluding stages of a reconnaissance patrol in enemy territory had to be carried through by the patrol leader alone. Bailey gives a good account of the nervous tension experienced by the solo patroller. He left his men inside a wired minefield and went forward to examine two knocked-out tanks the enemy was suspected of using for an OP. 'Leaving the others with instructions to retire smartly if I stirred anything up, I crawled slowly and carefully forward, going to ground when a flare went up however distant. I had proceeded some fifty yards or so when I suddenly remembered that I was no longer proceeding on a bearing. I broke out in a cold sweat, pulled out my compass.... Forward and slightly right, I suddenly heard footsteps and, as they came towards me, my heart commenced to thump till I was certain "Footsteps" would hear it. However, they stopped, then moved away again. I lifted my head out of the dirt where it had been pressed, wiped the sweat out of my eyes with my sleeve and slowly made my way forward and left. "Footsteps" approached again—turned and crumped away—obviously a sentry on a beat.... At this point another pair of footsteps approached the first, and I listened intently to hear if they spoke in Italian or German. However, no word was spoken and after the second pair departed, "Footsteps" halted and I could hear him sip loudly at a cup of something hot.' Despite the near proximity of this sentry, Bailey secured the information he sought, rejoined his patrol and returned to the battalion. Few who read the brief item in the divisional intelligence summary next day realised how close the patroller had gone to the enemy.

Of course, the task of securing a prisoner was one of the most difficult for a patrol to execute—it is always easier to kill than to carry off a determined man—but Lieutenant Garbett's patrol of 14 August secured a member of the Bologna Division. The higher command considered this quite important as it was the first indication it had received of the introduction of Italians into the eastern end of El Mreir. Three nights later, a large fighting patrol under Captain Orbell went to the same general area to take more prisoners. The arrival of this patrol was apparently expected, as no sooner were its members inside the first enemy wire than they were fired upon from both flanks as well as from the front. They were forced to retire, having two killed—Sergeant Andrew Swale⁸⁴ and Private Gorton⁸⁵—and three, including the patrol commander, wounded.

Fifth Brigade's major effort to hinder enemy preparations for resuming the offensive was a major raid on El Mreir by the Maoris before dawn on 26 August. A good patrol by Bailey on 17 August confirmed the view that this would be best launched from the south and not from the east. Standing patrols under McArthur on 23–24 August and Ian Wilson on 24–25 August kept the area of the Maoris' start line clear of enemy patrols. At 9 p.m. on the night preceding the raid, Wilson took 7 and 12 Platoons to the standing patrol's area and provided protection for the start line until the raid was successfully launched. The Maoris killed some scores of the enemy and took forty-one prisoners.

Probably the hardest worked members of the 23rd at this time were the signallers. With seriously reduced numbers—at one time they had five only as most of the platoon had been taken prisoner at Ruweisat—the signals platoon kept communications functioning extremely well. With captured equipment to aid them, they had some 14 miles of cable and 32 telephones operating in the unit area in place of the regulation scale of 8 miles and 10 telephones. The 'Sigs' worked day and night repairing lines cut by shells or by Bren carriers. Although many lines were eventually dug in, the technique of driving along at about 10 m.p.h. in a jeep with the cable running through a crook at the end of a stick saved much time in checking for breaks in cables on the surface. Until Second-Lieutenant Reeves⁸⁶ took over command of this platoon from Lieutenant Hoseit,⁸⁷ who became Adjutant for a time, Sergeant Bruce Redfearn was ably assisted during this period by such men as F. C. Irving,⁸⁸ D. Scott,⁸⁹ J. F. Dennison,⁹⁰ L. Stammers,⁹¹ E. J. Fenton⁹² and C. H.

Ericksen.⁹³ Although not present through-out the whole of this period, Lance-Corporal Jock [Bell](#)⁹⁴ should also be mentioned as instrument mechanic and an outstanding member of an important platoon.

Another 23rd soldier whose work at this time deserves special mention was Sergeant Harry [Parfoot](#).⁹⁵ He acted as transport officer from the time Second-Lieutenant W. Cook was taken prisoner until the arrival of Second-Lieutenant [Foote](#)⁹⁶ some weeks later, and ensured the efficient care and functioning of the battalion transport.

At the end of August, the period of waiting for Rommel to move came to an end. On the [Eighth Army](#) side, General Montgomery had concluded that his troops needed more training and new Sherman tanks to support them before resuming the offensive. He therefore concentrated on giving Rommel a hot reception when the latter attacked. The Allied bombing from North Africa and [Malta](#) had taken toll of the tankers supplying the Axis forces in Egypt and Rommel had difficulty in accumulating sufficient petrol for his purposes. Although he gave his preliminary orders on 22 August for the attack which he hoped would take the [Afrika Korps](#) to the [Nile Delta](#) and to [Cairo](#), this attack did not begin till the 30th. The plan was to force a way through the minefields to the south of the [New Zealand Box](#) and then swing north-east towards [Alam Halfa](#) ridge and the main road to [Alexandria](#). Eighth Army Intelligence had appreciated that Rommel would work on some such plan and General Montgomery had made his plans accordingly.

On 30 August, before it was known the Axis advance had begun, 5 Brigade was transferred to the south and south-east corner of the Box, where most trouble was expected in the event of an attack. Fifth Brigade was replaced in the western sector by a brigade of the recently arrived 44 Division, the 23rd handing over to [5 Royal West Kents](#). Early on 31 August the code-word twelvebore came through from Brigade Headquarters. This meant that the enemy had attacked and that every man must prepare to resist that attack. With typical 23rd spirit and sceptical of the wisdom of passing on code-words which needed explaining, Colonel Romans had told his men that on the command 'Action Stations' they would stand to, clear away all indications of occupation that might attract air or other attack, and prepare to resist to the last. Consequently, in the 23rd, twelvebore was received and the order 'Action

Stations' was issued to the companies. Actually, the day passed quietly with only a marked increase in air activity and some extra shelling to show that the campaign had taken a fresh turn.

On the night of 31 August, B Company under Captain Robertson went to the south of the Box on a fighting patrol. With three tanks and some carriers, the company went the required distance but did not encounter any enemy. On its return to the Box, a carrier and a 'pick-up' were blown up on a mine and one man was badly wounded. Later that night, the enemy launched a half-hearted attack on a neighbouring sector of the Box, but the Maoris drove them off. The next day passed uneventfully, although some enemy tanks appeared on the skyline. That night a small reconnaissance patrol under Second-Lieutenant Arthur [Parker](#)⁹⁷ went out into the [Muhafid Depression](#) and returned with two German prisoners from 155 Panzer Grenadier Regiment. The GOC directed that Parker's patrol should be congratulated on its success.

On 2 September an even more daring patrol penetrated farther into the lanes of the enemy advance in the south. An attack on the following night was contemplated and Second-Lieutenant Fred Marett was directed to secure all possible information concerning the enemy in the area to be attacked. Marett and a Maori officer penetrated behind the enemy FDLs and brought back details of the enemy positions. The two officers were complimented by [Brigadier Kippenberger](#), who subsequently wrote of 'An exceptionally good patrol led by young Fred Marett of the Twenty-third'.

Rommel's attack had failed and he was beginning to withdraw through the southern minefield. To prevent his retrieving damaged trucks and tanks and generally to harass his forces, the New Zealanders and a brigade of 44 Division attacked on the night of 3–4 September with 6 Brigade on the right, 132 Brigade in the centre and 5 Brigade on the left. The 23rd did not participate, apart from providing A Company to cover the forming-up area for 21 and 28 Battalions. The attack was fairly successful and the northern edge of the [Munassib Depression](#) was captured: 132 Brigade suffered some setbacks in what was its first attack and, on 4 September, the 23rd was ordered to take up a defensive position in depth to the rear of the Buffs. This it did to the accompaniment of some heavy enemy shelling. After dark came the welcome word that the New Zealand troops were to withdraw to the Box and then proceed on leave before refitting and training for a fresh offensive.

After a long march out—a march which one soldier wrote 'will always live as a vivid memory'—the battalion waited for two days for transport to take it to a rest area near the beach. This period in the line, from before [Minqar Qaim](#) till after the battle of [Alam Halfa](#), was by far the longest without relief the unit had so far experienced. The unit's casualties were also the heaviest suffered in any campaign to this date: 71 killed and died of wounds, 178 wounded, and 72 lost prisoner of war, of whom 11 were wounded. Despite these casualties, the 23rd was still a fighting battalion. Although, for the meantime, all were delighted to be going on leave, most men were confident that the tide was at last about to turn at [Alamein](#). They felt that Montgomery knew what he was doing—hadn't he been proved right at [Alam Halfa](#)?—and that the steady arrival of Sherman tanks and other supplies would soon see the [Eighth Army](#) going over to the offensive.

An extract from Dave Jenkins's diary closed the [Libya](#) 1941 chapter of this history. His words, written about the middle of December 1942, when he was in hospital but about to go for his commission, may also conclude this chapter: 'It's been a nerve wracking six months, bitter memories most of it, but a man is proud to have been part of such a game outfit. It was mighty hard on the central sector at [Ruweisat Ridge](#), week after week of blazing heat and those terrible night patrols, continual shelling, when we were pinned to the ground from morning till night, and things got so bad in the forward position which No. 10 platoon held that we had to be relieved or we would have cracked up. That terrible day when Gordon [Bone](#)⁹⁸ and Butch [Conner](#)⁹⁹ were killed in their trenches! I mind Harry and I nearly got shot up burying them after dark. And always there was the flies and the sickly smell out in front where the dead of both sides lay unburied. And the long hours of darkness when we laid minefields and did miles of wiring, all half sick with dysentery and desert sores. A wonder how we stood it! My God what a pack of scarecrows we were! We have McArthur to thank for much, he was always so good and kind to us.

'Looking back, it was the loss of so many fine chaps that was so hard, the old Battalion can never replace men like Ernie Hobbs, Ginger Cunningham, and Charlie Mason. The three best that No. 10 ever had, Alex Smith and Pat Lynch¹⁰⁰ killed, and Ivan [Stott](#)¹⁰¹ missing from the 26th. Little Keith Todd, the first to go, he's buried in a quiet wadi near the old [Kaponga](#) road, what a fine little joker he was! Ray [Hope](#)¹⁰²

and Ted Loper,¹⁰³ the platoon will never have better men than them.... Yes, they were crazy days that followed the run out south of [Mersa Matruh](#). By God, that was a terrible night, the worst of all perhaps. Well, it's behind us now, thank Christ. Here's hoping the Div never sees such times again.... To us it has been a memorable period and though things were often terribly hard and often hopeless, the comradeship and sheer guts of the boys concerned have been among the finest things in our lives.'

¹ In southern New Zealand the Leckies have built up a record of achievement in the ring and on the athletic field. The best-known boxer of the family was generally known as 'fighting Johnny Leckie'.

² Company commanders at this time were Maj T. B. Morten (HQ Company), Capt M. Coop (A), [Capt P. T. Norris](#) (B), Capt F. S. R. Thomson (C) and [Maj D. B. Cameron](#) (D). Captain Connolly was on a tour of duty as second-in-command of the Southern Infantry Training Depot; Maj D. Reid was transferred to 20 Battalion in exchange, as it were, for Maj Cameron; and Capt McKinlay was returning to New Zealand as an instructor. When Capt Coop was evacuated wounded on 27 June, Capt Norris returned to A Company and [Capt T. F. Begg](#) took command of B Company.

³ [WO II J. W. Bickley](#); Orawia, Otautau; born [Riverton](#), 30 Jan 1915; school-teacher; wounded 19 Apr 1943.

⁴ [Pte B. M. Robson](#); born Dunedin, 4 Feb 1919; P and T cadet; wounded and p.w. 12 Jul 1942.

⁵ [Lt H. C. Anderson](#), m.i.d.; Hanmer Springs; born [Scotland](#), 7 Oct 1910; builder.

⁶ [2 Lt A. A. Torrens](#); born [Lyttelton](#), 22 Feb 1917; clerk; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

⁷ [Lt-Col C. N. Watson](#), MC, ED, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born Tinwald, 8 Jan 1911; school-teacher; CO [26 Bn](#) 20–29 Jun 1942; [23 Bn](#) 29 Jun–15 Jul 1942; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁸ Maj-Gen C. E. Weir, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; Wellington; born NZ 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO 6 Fd Regt Sep 1939-Dec 1941; CRA 2 NZ Div Dec 1941-Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div 4 Sep-17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944-Sep 1946; Commander, Southern Military District, 1948–49; QMG, Army HQ, Nov 1951-Aug 1955; Chief of General Staff 1955.

⁹ In *The Rommel Papers*, p. 249, Rommel says: 'This reverse took us completely by surprise, for in the weeks of fighting round Knightsbridge, the Ariete—covered, it is true, by German guns and tanks—had fought well against every onslaught of the British.... The resulting threat to our southern flank meant that the Afrika Korps' intended knock-out attack now had to be carried out by the 21st Panzer Division alone, and the weight of the attack was consequently too small.... The attack came to a standstill.'

¹⁰ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 144.

¹¹ Lt A. J. Boag; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 23 May 1904; bus driver; wounded 4 Jul 1942.

¹² Maj D. B. Cameron, m.i.d.; born NZ 30 Sep 1908; clerk; twice wounded; drowned Maoribank, 24 Feb 1951.

¹³ Lt F. Vernon; born Christchurch, 29 Jul 1911; clerk; wounded 3 Aug 1942; killed in action 23 Oct 1942.

¹⁴ Maj I. M. Wilson; born NZ 8 May 1912; civil servant; three times wounded.

¹⁵ Lt J. Milne, MM; Purua, Whangarei; born Scotland, 18 Jan 1920; farmer; three times wounded.

¹⁶ S-Sgt L. S. Bain, MM; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 16 Jun 1915; shoe operator; wounded 21 May 1941.

¹⁷ L-Sgt B. H. Gillies; born England, 15 Feb 1919; carpenter; killed in action

5 Jul 1942.

¹⁸ L-Sgt A. S. Kearney; born Dunedin, 23 Nov 1910; tiler; wounded May 1941; killed in action 23 Oct 1942.

¹⁹ Capt P. N. McCambridge; Timaru; born Timaru, 5 Dec 1916; customs officer; wounded 29 Jun 1942; wounded and p.w. 4 Jul 1942.

²⁰ Pte W. G. Valli; Invercargill; born Nightcaps, 6 Dec 1914; lorry driver; twice wounded.

²¹ Pte E. L. E. Green; Gore; born NZ 18 Nov 1921; labourer; wounded 22 Jul 1944.

²² B. Robson, Barb Wire Saga, unpublished personal account.

²³ 2 Lt J. S. Baxter, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 23 Jun 1916; labourer; twice wounded.

²⁴ Lt C. M. Moncrieff; Nelson; born England, 28 Jan 1917; student.

²⁵ Cpl J. J. Ward; Auckland; born NZ 7 Oct 1914; hairdresser; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

²⁶ Lt S. Herbison, MM; Dunedin; born Ireland, 4 Sep 1904; bar manager; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

²⁷ Sgt J. P. Cunningham; born NZ 17 Dec 1915; labourer; killed in action 14 Jul 1942.

²⁸ S-Sgt R. J. Philip; born 1 Oct 1914; commercial traveller; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

²⁹ Capt G. McG. Robertson, m.i.d.; born Ladbrooks, 20 Apr 1909; bank

officer; killed in action 26 Mar 1943.

³⁰ Pte G. S. Ellis; born Christchurch, 24 Oct 1914; clerk; killed in action 12 Jul 1942.

³¹ Pte P. Rayner; born NZ 2 Nov 1914; fisherman; killed in action 12 Jul 1942.

³² Pte D. A. A. Griffin; born Christchurch, 4 Aug 1918; labourer; killed in action 12 Jul 1942.

³³ Sgt J. McN. Greig; born Scotland, 27 Jun 1906; manager; killed in action 14 Jul 1942.

³⁴ Lt I. H. Dillon; born Stratford, 2 Nov 1910; company representative; died of wounds 14 Jul 1942.

³⁵ G. R. Blampied, B Company, personal account.

³⁶ WO1 J. D. B. Daly; Christchurch; born NZ 26 Apr 1916; Regular soldier; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

³⁷ Capt C. G. Ironside; born Oamaru, 15 Oct 1917; civil servant; wounded 27 Jun 1942; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

³⁸ L-Cpl F. G. Nolan, MM; born NZ 26 Jul 1917; labourer; killed in action 15 Dec 1943.

³⁹ Sgt D. R. McKay, m.i.d.; Gore; born Dunedin, 9 Nov 1917; shepherd; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

⁴⁰ Cpl R. A. Henry; Mokoreta, Wyndham; born Edendale, 7 Sep 1914; farmer; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

⁴¹ Capt G. S. Cooper, MC; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 31 Mar 1911; accountant; twice wounded.

⁴² Pte J. D. Clark; born NZ 19 Jul 1913; linotype operator; died of wounds 14 Jul 1942.

⁴³ 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 Dec 1941-Jul 1942; comd 5 Bde 10 May-12 Jun 1942; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

⁴⁴ Capt K. C. West-Watson; Sudan; born England, 16 Aug 1914; stage director; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

⁴⁵ Sgt A. E. Thomas; Wellington; born Gore, 24 Dec 1912; mechanic; p.w. 16 Jul 1942.

⁴⁶ Lt K. C. Cooper; Ashburton; born Christchurch, 24 Jun 1907; clerk.

⁴⁷ Maj S. Hanton, ED; Wanganui; born Forfar, Scotland, 6 Aug 1908; printer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁴⁸ 2 Lt K. Elliott, VC; Pongaroa; born Apiti, 25 Apr 1916; farmer; twice wounded.

⁴⁹ Capt C. M. Ollivier; Kaikoura; born Christchurch, 27 Aug 1918; clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁵⁰ WO II J. G. Richardson, m.i.d.; Oamaru; born Melbourne, 5 Nov 1904; labourer; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

⁵¹ L-Sgt W. D. H. Lory; born NZ 8 May 1917; shepherd; wounded 23 Oct 1942; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

⁵² WO II W. S. Smellie; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 24 Dec 1907; stock buyer;

wounded 9 May 1943.

⁵³ Lt J. C. Rogers; Dunedin; born NZ 4 Mar 1906; manufacturer.

⁵⁴ Pte R. O. Cross; Wellington; born NZ 2 Jun 1916; labourer; wounded 4 Aug 1944.

⁵⁵ Cpl V. Idour, MM, m.i.d.; born NZ 22 Dec 1911; baker; killed in action 27 Feb 1944.

⁵⁶ Lt-Col H. M. McElroy, DSO and bar, ED; Auckland; born Timaru, 2 Dec 1910; public accountant; CO 21 Bn Jun 1943-Jun 1944; four times wounded.

⁵⁷ Capt E. B. Butcher.

⁵⁸ L-Cpl R. H. W. Searle; Oamaru; born Oamaru, 25 Oct 1914; shepherd; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

⁵⁹ Pte L. McCarrigan.

⁶⁰ Cpl S. Wilson; Dunedin; born NZ 21 Jan 1914; shopkeeper; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

⁶¹ Cpl A. G. Hamilton; Oamaru; born Scotland, 25 Apr 1907; labourer; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

⁶² L-Cpl D. Elliott; born NZ 2 Dec 1912; machinist.

⁶³ For his gallantry, Cooper was awarded the MC.

⁶⁴ Pte E. J. Tyler; Methven; born Ashburton, 6 Jan 1915; truck driver; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

⁶⁵ Maj G. S. Rogers; born Opotiki, 17 Feb 1916; school-teacher; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

⁶⁶ WO I D. J. Farmer, MM; Waiouru Military Camp; born Wanganui, 3 Oct 1913; Regular soldier.

⁶⁷ He had succeeded Brigadier Inglis when the latter took over command of the Division on 27 June, had relinquished command to Brigadier J. R. Gray for a few days, and had again been appointed when Brigadier Gray was killed on 5 Nuly.

⁶⁸ WO II K. Varley; Prebbleton; born Christchurch, 13 Jun 1919; farmer; twice wounded.

⁶⁹ Pte W. K. White; Palmerston North; born England, 2 Mar 1912; carpenter.

⁷⁰ Pte D. Munro; Christchurch; born NZ 11 Dec 1918; labourer; wounded May 1941; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁷¹ L-Cpl L. H. K. Wootton; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 4 Sep 1917; linesman; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁷² 19 and 20 Battalions went back immediately; the 18th and 22nd followed later. By decisions still to be taken, 4 Brigade became 4 Armoured Brigade, with the 22nd as its motorised infantry. The 28th replaced the 22nd as an integral part of 5 Brigade.

⁷³ Lt R. Lee; born NZ 23 Dec 1913; accountant; died of wounds 20 Jul 1942.

⁷⁴ Rev. Fr. J. F. Henley; Invercargill; born Palmerston North, 10 Sep 1903; Roman Catholic priest.

⁷⁵ Capt J. W. Kinder; Omarama; born Dunedin, 10 Jul 1912; chemist's assistant.

⁷⁶ Capt J. J. Garbett; Eltham; born Waihi, 25 Jun 1905; solicitor; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

⁷⁷ 2 Lt M. E. Cross; born NZ 16 Nov 1916; clerk; killed in action 7 May 1943.

⁷⁸ Lt F. D. Sutherland; born Christchurch, 24 Jan 1918; copy-writer; killed in action 23 Oct 1942.

⁷⁹ Maj J. W. McArthur, MC, m.i.d.; Alexandra; born Clyde, 3 Sep 1906; school-teacher; wounded 12 Apr 1945.

⁸⁰ Lt A. F. Bailey, MC; Christchurch; born NZ 22 Jun 1913; window dresser; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

⁸¹ Lt T. J. Ferris; Geraldine; born England, 18 Mar 1910; butcher; wounded 3 Aug 1942.

⁸² Maj A. C. Marett, MC; Wellington; born NZ 5 Aug 1916; warehouseman; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

⁸³ Grant later became an instructor in the art of patrolling at the Eighth Army School of Instruction.

⁸⁴ Sgt A. McL. Swale; born Kennington, 4 May 1917; clerk; killed in action 18 Aug 1942.

⁸⁵ L-Cpl G. J. W. Gorton; born NZ 13 Nov 1898; labourer; killed in action 18 Aug 1942.

⁸⁶ Lt W. A. Reeves; Greymouth; born Hanmer Springs, 25 Nov 1907; electrician; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

⁸⁷ Maj W. Hoseit; born Oamaru, 5 Dec 1911; manufacturer; killed in action 23 Jul 1944.

⁸⁸ Capt F. C. Irving, MC; Otautau; born Invercargill, 13 Aug 1918; sawmill hand; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped 21 Jun 1941; safe in Egypt 28 Aug 1941.

⁸⁹ Sgt D. F. Scott; Rotorua; born NZ 1 Jul 1919; Regular soldier; wounded 10 Jul 1942.

⁹⁰ Pte J. F. Dennison; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 18 Jan 1913; orchard worker.

⁹¹ Sgt L. Stammers; Gisborne; born Christchurch, 18 Jan 1917; plasterer.

⁹² Pte E. J. Fenton, m.i.d.; Lyttelton; born NZ 15 Jun 1918; storeman; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁹³ cf. H. K. Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 179, for account of how Privates Irving, Fenton and Ericksen were on a signals course but 'broke camp and marched out to 2nd New Zealand Division without authority.'

⁹⁴ L-Cpl J. Bell; born Scotland, 12 Sep 1904; linesman; twice wounded.

⁹⁵ WO II H. D. Parfoot, BEM; Timaru; born NZ 3 Dec 1901; engineer; twice wounded.

⁹⁶ Capt D. D. Foote; born NZ 29 Dec 1919; motor mechanic; p.w. 8 Dec 1943.

⁹⁷ Capt A. H. Parker, MM, m.i.d.; Wakapuaka, Nelson; born Nelson, 18 Jul 1918; company manager; wounded 20 Mar 1944.

⁹⁸ Pte G. D. Bone; born Otautau, 22 Jul 1914; deer stalker; killed in action 4 Aug 1942.

⁹⁹ Pte R. H. Conner; born NZ 15 Sep 1915; butcher; killed in action 4 Aug 1942.

¹⁰⁰ This statement is given here because it has special reference to the July-August 1942 period, but it was written in December 1942 and therefore contains this reference to Lynch's death at [Alamein](#) on 23 October.

¹⁰¹ [Sgt I. L. Stott](#); [Invercargill](#); born [Invercargill](#), 18 Jul 1906; NZR ganger; p.w. Sep 1942; escaped [Italy](#), Jun 1943.

¹⁰² [Pte R. G. Hope](#); born Woodlands, 11 Apr 1906; painter; killed in action 16 Jul 1942.

¹⁰³ [Pte E. C. Loper](#); born NZ 27 Oct 1918; labourer; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 9 – THE BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

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The Battle of El Alamein

AFTER a period of over two months in the front line, the men of the 23rd needed some time in which to rest and relax before beginning fresh training. For ten days, therefore, they camped with the other 5 and 6 Brigade units in the sandhills near [Burg el Arab](#). Sea-bathing, good meals, two bottles of beer a man each day, freedom from worry about patrols, shellfire and Stuka raids—these, with concerts by the [Kiwi Concert Party](#) and 5 Brigade Band and other entertainments, helped to restore a feeling of well-being. Six days' leave was granted to those who had missed this privilege during the days after [Ruweisat Ridge](#). Daily leave to [Alexandria](#) was rationed to the remainder. 'The sea breeze is great and the water marvellous. What a treat it is to get thoroughly wet all over! Once again a man feels clean!' 'This rest is very enjoyable. Already I feel the benefit of this fresh air and change'. 'Plenty of beer and I rather enjoyed myself last night.' These typical private diary entries tell better than any official report how quickly the tired men responded to improved material conditions.

But the essential purpose of this time out of the battle area was to prepare the infantry and their supporting armoured brigade for the great attack in which they were to drive the enemy from Egypt. During the rest period, the 23rd was built up in strength by the return of many of those who had gone out sick or lightly wounded. On 13 September D Company returned from [Maadi](#) and thus, for the first time since the end of June, the unit was complete. Six days later, 5 Brigade moved some 30 miles south into the desert west of [Wadi Natrun](#). The desert in this 'Swordfish' training area was very like the desert near [Alamein](#), but it was comparatively clean and free from flies.

The first few days of training were spent on musketry practices and platoon and company night exercises. Some routemarching to get the troops fit and a battalion night-attack exercise followed. On 24 September all units moved off on a divisional exercise which, although none of the 23rd knew this at the time, was a rehearsal for the attack on [Miteiriya Ridge](#), the main New Zealand objective in the forthcoming offensive on the [Alamein](#) line. In it, the two brigades practised moving forward to an assembly area by night, attacking behind an artillery barrage against strong

defences, getting supporting arms and tanks through gaps in the wire and minefields, and consolidating on the objective in preparation for an enemy counter-attack. On 26 September the mock night attack was launched on a two-brigade front with intermediate objectives given to one battalion in each brigade. On the 5 Brigade front, the 23rd was entrusted with taking this first or intermediate objective—'cracking the hard outer crust of enemy resistance', Brigadier Kippenberger called it. In the rehearsal of this attack, the infantry had no trouble in keeping up with the barrage. Unfortunately, one gun was firing a little short and Lieutenant Ian Wilson was wounded in the leg by shrapnel. General Leese, commander of 30 Corps, followed the barrage with the 23rd, 'just to get the feel of it', as he said, and later he told Brigadier Kippenberger that he was well satisfied with the way the infantry had conducted themselves in this important rehearsal. The men in the 23rd were also very pleased with the competent organisation and conduct of this exercise: it obviously augured well for the future. The three attacking companies kept orderly formation and took their objectives according to plan; Battalion Headquarters maintained communication with the companies and with Brigade Headquarters; the supporting arms came up as planned. This satisfactory try-out was good for morale and the confidence of the private soldiers was further increased by the keen interest shown by the senior commanders. Thus Private Charles Pankhurst recorded in his diary: 'Old Tiny stops beside me and asks questions about everything—even to my fitness'.

After returning to the bivouac area, the battalion took part on 30 September in a ceremonial parade at which General Montgomery presented the decorations awarded in recent campaigns. In the 23rd, Major P. T. Norris and Captains R. A. Wilson and G. S. Cooper received the Military Cross and Sergeant J. Milne and Corporal A. Russell the Military Medal. General Montgomery congratulated the troops on their steadiness and said how pleased he was to have the New Zealanders under his command. Two contemporary diary entries must suffice to illustrate the generally favourable reaction to the new Army Commander. 'General M. addressed us and paid the usual compliments. I was rather impressed by his style though—he is a very peppery sort I should say but would stand no nonsense. One thing he said he had decided the NZ Div had to have tanks under its own command. If we had had this before Ruweisat, many of our men who are now POWs would still be with us.' 'General Montgomery spoke the usual bullsh— how he thought what great jokers we

were and so on.'

Training of a varied character continued throughout the first half of October. Preparing for an infantry attack by night was given first priority, but there was also training for the day when the infantry would again have a mobile role. Thus, the Maoris demonstrated infantry co-operation with tanks in a hasty attack. The 23rd practised moves in desert formation and in setting-out an anti-tank gunline, the infantry answer to an enemy armoured attack. The men also hardened up on route marches. 'The heads are gradually extending distances of these marches. [Freyberg](#) is insisting on plenty of marching in order to get our feet properly O.K.,' wrote Bob Stone. Another flare-up of jaundice led to the evacuation of several members of the unit. Several officers and men, who knew that 'The Day' was approaching, tried to stay on. These references to a popular B Company officer by Sergeant Dave Jenkins bear witness to the personal struggle which was fought by several at this time. 'Looks as if McArthur will have to go out soon or we'll be burying him here. He's a mighty sick man.... Next day.... Poor Mac went out to hospital this morning. We're all pleased as he's been miserable for days.'

On 15 October the battalion returned to the beach, but this time there was no leave and route-marching went on as usual. 'No leave! No beer! What a life!' one private wrote in his diary on the day after the return to [Burg el Arab](#). But two or three days later Sergeant Jenkins was able to write: 'Got some beer in today. Been neither beer nor bread for days—the boys want to know what they're fighting for!' Actually, they were not to be kept in the dark much longer. On the evening of 19 October, [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) addressed the 23rd. He himself subsequently wrote of that occasion when rising spirits matched the feeling of anticipation and the certainty that it was 'Now or never!'. 'I spoke to the Twenty-third, seated on the slopes of some sand-hills. I told them that this was the turn of the war and the greatest moment of their lives: they had the duty and the honour of breaking in, on which everything depended; our hats were in the ring and I expected them to do it, whatever the cost. Reg called the men to their feet and they gave three fierce, thunderous cheers.' Those cheers were both for ' [Kip](#)' himself and for the occasion of which he had told them. The time out of the line had been just long enough to prepare for the task ahead.

The Brigadier's address put the finishing touch to the rousing of spirits. Jenkins

wrote in his diary: 'The Brig gave us the lowdown on the show and it's certainly going to be a big one, by far the biggest the East has seen. In or out this time and a week should tell the tale. Our battalion is to set the ball rolling. Old [Kip](#) was very serious, he looks an old man like the rest of us. I liked the figures he quoted, we seem to have superiority in everything, but he says everything depends on us and on our reaching the first objective. A hundred thousand troops to take part right along the line and twelve hundred tanks in support, so if that can't break Mr. Rommel, nothing can.' Sergeant Ray Minson wrote: 'Today we had from our Brigadier one of the most serious and impressive speeches I have ever heard. He told us that the 23 Bn had pride of place in the forthcoming attack ... and now with this from him we know it is not far distant'.

Later that night, after the Brigadier's address, the battalion moved by trucks along the main road to the [Alamein](#) front line, where it relieved the Seaforth Highlanders of 51 Highland Division around midnight. The New Zealanders now occupied a position in the line about ten miles north of the [New Zealand Box](#). From north to south, the line was now held by 9 Australian, 51 Highland, 2 New Zealand, 1 South African, 4 Indian, 50 British, 44 British, and 7 Armoured Divisions, with the French, Greeks and others also occupying sectors in the south. On the enemy side, Italian companies and battalions had been interlaced with German in order to stiffen the defences. The enemy positions opposite the New Zealanders were held by the German 164 Division and the Italian Trento Division, with [15 Panzer Division](#) in a counter-attack role in rear of [Miteiriya Ridge](#).

General Montgomery's Order of the Day was read to all ranks. Probably the best order he issued, it struck an answering chord in the 23rd and confirmed the men in an absolute determination to see this particular battle through to a victorious conclusion. It said:

'The battle which is now about to begin will be one of the decisive battles of history. It will be the turning point of the war. The eyes of the whole world will be on us, watching anxiously which way the battle will swing. We can give them their answer at once, "It will swing our way".

'We have first-class equipment; good tanks; good anti-tank guns; plenty of artillery and plenty of ammunition; and we are backed by the finest air striking force

in the world.

'All that is necessary is that each one of us, every officer and man, should enter the battle with the determination to see it through—to fight and to kill—and finally, to win.

'If we do this there can only be one result—together we will hit the enemy for "six", right out of [Africa](#).

'The sooner we win the battle, which will be the turning point of the war, the sooner we shall all get back home to our families. Therefore let every officer and man enter the battle with a stout heart, and the determination to do his duty so long as he has breath in his body.

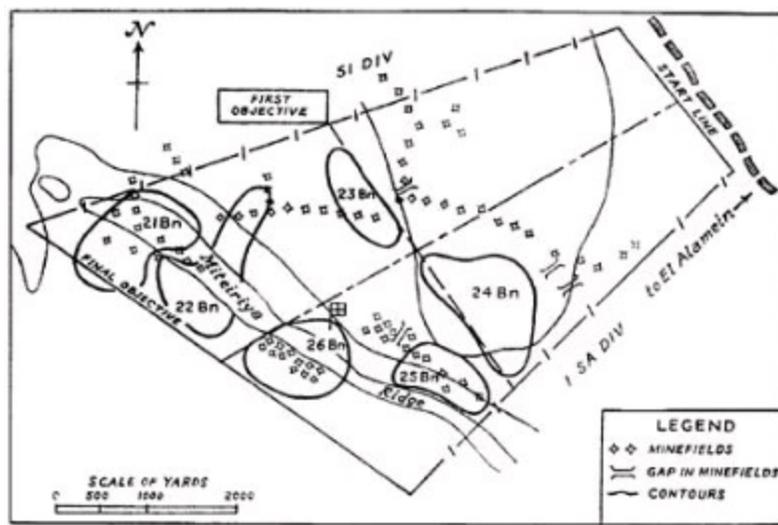
' and let no man surrender so long as he is unwounded and can fight.

'Let us all pray that "the Lord mighty in battle" will give us the victory.'

This stirring message arrived just when battalion morale had reached a new pitch of confidence, not untouched by excitement. The 23rd had not been allowed to patrol in case the discovery of the New Zealanders' presence in the line betrayed the intention to attack at that point, but the men were ready and waiting for action to begin. Jenkins, a grand soldier whose diary has already been quoted as giving the authentic ring of 23rd sentiment, wrote: 'Friday 23rd October. Early morning of the big day, the day that's going to make history. Or rather the night for we go in tonight to attempt to breach the enemy defences.... We have had a few days rest but are not keen on any further delay.... the sooner night comes the sooner we can get going. The fight will be tough, the Hun always dishes out plenty.... Still we have the feeling we'll smash the b—and that's the main thing.' Minson of A Company wrote: 'The men are all itching for success and I pray we shall have it'. To which he added three days later: 'We heard on the morning of the 23rd that that day was the day. Everyone appeared more confident than I have ever seen them before.' Almost certainly that day marked the peak of battle anticipation in the battalion. ¹

At last everything was ready. Everyone knew the general plan: the [Eighth Army](#) was attacking along the whole front, but special attention was being paid to the northern part now held by 9 Australian, 51 Highland, 2 New Zealand and 1 South

African divisions. The New Zealanders were attacking with 5 Brigade on the right and 6 Brigade on the left; in 5 Brigade, the 23rd had to take the first objective while, in the second phase, the 21st and 22nd were to take the final objective on [Miteiriya Ridge](#) and exploit beyond it; in both brigade sectors the Maoris were supplying two companies to mop up; the artillery had one regiment to provide a creeping barrage for the infantry to follow, while the remaining guns were to fire concentrations and counter-battery tasks; the engineers were to lift mines and prepare marked and lighted routes through the minefields; and the tanks of [9 Armoured Brigade](#) and the supporting arms of the infantry units were to come forward as soon as these gaps were ready. Every man also knew his own unit's plan and his own particular task: the majority, of course, were to perform their normal tasks as riflemen, tommy-gunners or signallers, but, to assist in making a gap through the formidable enemy wire defences, the 23rd had ten bangalore torpedoes—heavy metal pipes packed with explosives—and two grapnels. The battalion was attacking with three companies forward and one in reserve. C Company on the right was to cover 4100 yards on a bearing of 250 degrees, B in the centre 4060 yards on 247 degrees, and A on the left 4030 yards on 243 degrees; D was to follow B and Battalion Headquarters was to follow D. The different distances and bearings were necessitated by the way in which the objective swung across the front. This objective was merely a mark on the map; no geographical feature would assist its identification. All ranks were shown sketch plans indicating the direction and plan of the attack, the artillery barrage's lifts and the like. Never before had the men been so well briefed. Never had morale been so high. Practically every man prepared to carry a record load of ammunition. As [Bob Wilson](#)² recalled the occasion later: 'We packed our foodless pack with Bren and tommy mags—no time for food where we're going. Shorts and shirts should hold a few grenades, a sticky bomb is tied to someone's belt—a hell of a load but we're taking it!'



5 AND 6 BRIGADE POSITIONS, DAWN 24 OCTOBER 1942
5 and 6 brigade positions, dawn 24 october 1942

Immediately after dusk on the night of 23 October, the [Eighth Army](#) areas behind the front line became a scene of tremendous activity: all tracks, lit with their own distinctive signs facing to the rear—Sun, Moon, Star, Bottle, Boat and Hat—began to fill with trucks and tanks moving forward in their correct order towards the gaps the infantry and engineers were to clear. [General Freyberg](#) visited Battalion Headquarters and made a last-minute check on the numbers in the assaulting companies, their fitness and experience, the degree to which information had been circulated to all ranks, and the morale of the troops. At 8 p.m. the 23rd moved to its forming-up place. Then, as the companies moved to the taped start line, [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) spoke to various groups, saying 'Good luck, boys' and telling some of the officers: 'We are privileged men to be here tonight participating in this first great Allied offensive'. He himself has recorded that 'the responses were stirring: "We'll do it, Sir." "We won't let you down, Sir." "The Twenty-third will do it, Sir."'

The battalion stepped off from the start line at 9.30 p.m., ten minutes before the guns opened twenty minutes of counter-battery tasks. For the infantry the feeling of excitement was intensified by the startling noise with which the guns settled to their work. Comments made at the time and later in diary entries give something of that mixture of surprise, delight and shock with which the men heard a great weight of metal screaming overhead. 'With a crack like a thousand thunderbolts, the silence of the night was rent by the roar of the hundreds of guns in our support suddenly leaping into action as one man'. 'Hell was let loose—the sky behind us was a blaze of fire'. 'Every man of every unit on the [Alamein](#) line will never

forget till his dying day the great bombardment on the night of the 23rd. It was beyond description, the air was filled with screaming shells and the ground fairly shook under us.'

When the infantry had advanced 1800 yards and were therefore still 200 yards short of the artillery opening line, they were ordered to lie down and wait. Once the bursting shells of the barrage were spotted, the battalion moved closer and was ready to go forward in its wake when it advanced at the rate of 100 yards every three minutes from 10.23 till 11.5 p.m., that is, for a distance of 1400 yards. At first there was no reply from the enemy, but soon shells and mortar bombs began to pour into the area through which the infantry had to pass. Smoke and dust rose in great clouds and, despite the moonlight, visibility was seriously reduced and keeping contact became a real problem, which was made worse by the casualties suffered by connecting files. Occasionally, men glimpsed the Bofors tracer shells which were being fired as aids to keeping direction on the inter-brigade and inter-divisional boundaries. Through the murk which was broken by the flash of the bursting shells of the barrage and the enemy's return fire could be seen the flares shot off by a worried enemy. The 23rd next came under some Spandau and small-arms fire from pits under and around the derelict trucks forward of the first enemy minefield. This opposition came from two or three listening posts manned by Germans and Italians. The first of these was overrun by 15 Platoon. When the Italians kept firing until the C Company men were within ten yards of them, Privates [Slaven](#),³ [Evans](#), [Squire](#)⁴ and [Batchelor](#)⁵ went in with all weapons firing, showed the enemy no mercy and wiped out the post. The other posts were similarly treated by other sections of B and C Companies.

By this time, casualties from shell and mortar fire were mounting fast. They were no doubt increased by the bunching which occurred as the difficulty of maintaining contact increased. 'The air was filled with noise, terrific noise, and continuous noise,' wrote one man later, and even shouted orders did not carry far. Speaking for his section in 14 Platoon, R. Wilson says: 'We moved on and into trouble. Like lightning it struck and most of the leaders were down—rely on the unity of veterans now! Stan [Bennett](#)⁶ dumped our treasured Bren⁶ gun, smashed by shrap, grabbed a rifle no longer needed by its owner, Bill [Tilson](#)⁷ lumped the Bangalore torpedo, Shorty [Dunlop](#)⁸ still had the sticky bomb down his left buttock—we were

still intact.' As the 23rd approached the first minefield, A Company lost some of its connecting files and, while maintaining contact with 24 Battalion on its left, lost touch with the rest of the 23rd.

Since A Company did not link up with the other companies until twelve hours later, its fortunes may be conveniently followed separately at this juncture. The map overprints had shown more enemy posts on A Company's front than elsewhere and, after striking a listening post or two, the company came up against solid opposition in a company strongpoint in and behind the first minefield. The intense Spandau fire caused a temporary hold-up, especially as there did not seem to be much room for manoeuvre. Captain Pat Lynch, whose birthday it was that day and who had gone into the attack in the same joyous spirit in which he joined issue on the rugby field, gave the order to charge. He set a fine example by heading the attack on the first machine-gun post. Hit by a full burst of machine-gun fire, he was killed soon afterwards. But the attack swept on and, despite heavy casualties in 8 Platoon, the strong-point was taken. [Lieutenant Fane Vernon](#), the company second-in-command, here sustained wounds from which he later died, while Second-Lieutenant Wally Johnson, Sergeant John Milne, and other men were also wounded about this time.

As on a previous occasion, Sergeant Ray Minson took over his platoon and completed the task of knocking out all enemy resistance in that locality. One of his men, Private Robert H. S. [Harper](#),⁹ distinguished himself both in the attack and by volunteering to get in touch with the troops on the right and left. After failing to establish contact with B Company on the right, as it had moved forward, [Harper](#) re-established contact with 9 Platoon under Second-Lieutenant Andrew [Cooper](#)¹⁰ on the left and notified Cooper that he was the only officer left on his feet in the company.

No. 9 Platoon had gone forward until held up by another strongpoint, and it was suffering casualties from its machine-gun fire when 'a runner from 24 came up to say that they calculated that we were past the line of the objective and were actually on the opening line of the Arty's second phase'. An original NCO of the battalion who had been recently commissioned, Cooper found himself in this, his first battle as a junior officer, forced to take command of a somewhat depleted company and make the difficult decision to withdraw to conform with the position taken up by the 24th. Aided by his sergeant, Bob Young, and by Corporal Gordon [Shaw](#),¹¹ who had been

prominent throughout the attack, he managed to get the company organised in a firm defensive locality. Harry [Sievwright](#)¹² materially assisted by the covering fire he supplied when Cooper's leading men were pulling back to join the 24th. After discussing the situation with Captain Ted [Aked](#),¹³ the 24th company commander, Cooper sent messages via the two brigade headquarters to the 23rd as to A Company's position. But, as communications between 5 Brigade and the 23rd had broken down, these messages did not reach Colonel Romans.

In the meantime, the remainder of the battalion had pressed on far past its proper objective. As they had advanced towards it, the leaders were constantly looking for the formidable enemy defences which the map overprints had led them to expect. The men carrying the large bangalore torpedoes were itching to use them, but the first wire they struck was a single strand and the next 'fence' was composed of two slack wires. There simply were no impenetrable defences such as they themselves had constructed in the [New Zealand Box](#). Most men were more than half-way through the first minefield before they realised they were in it at all. Trip-wires attached to mines and large bombs made those who spotted them tread gingerly. Bill Tilson, a humorist in 14 Platoon, who had been carrying a bangalore torpedo, inquired at this point: 'Do I have to lump this bloody useless bangalore any further? It restricts my spearing power!'

Some opposition was encountered in or to the rear of this minefield. Both B and C Companies came under machine-gun and other small-arms fire. Bob Wilson of 14 Platoon says: 'Then suddenly we were amongst them—small narrow communicating trenches, dugouts, spandaus belted and bullets flew around. On we went, grenading, tommy gunning and Bren firing inside—no come out?—too bad!—for a mere handful of chaps had no option but to kill!' Similarly, the leading B Company platoons, led by [John Trotter](#),¹⁴ B's sergeant-major, who did consistently good work with grenade and bayonet, charged and quickly overran the enemy posts.

In the lull which followed, D Company, under Major Dave Cameron, and Battalion Headquarters, sadly depleted in numbers as a result of casualties from shell and mortar fire, joined the forward troops. Captain Robertson, commanding B Company, handed over the eight German prisoners who had survived the bayonet charge of his forward platoons. The Colonel and others expressed their satisfaction

at capturing Germans and not Italians. But a handful of prisoners and a few dead seemed a pitifully small 'bag' for the breaking of the hard outer crust. The 23rd had met neither the obstacles nor the resistance its members had been given to expect.

At this point, Captain Robertson announced that he had identified a burnt-out aircraft as the one shown on the map overprint as being central to the 23rd objective. 'Surely there are any number of crashed aircraft in the desert,' commented another officer. Colonel Romans was not prepared to accept this aircraft as the one which would identify the objective. While he called in Captain Hoseit, commander of C Company, he consulted his Intelligence Sergeant, Tom Hutchesson,¹⁵ who assured him that the battalion was on the right axis of advance as he himself had been following the correct bearing on his compass. But Hutchesson held that, as the 23rd's objective was on a clearly defined rise, it must be further ahead. His description of the objective—and there was no rise where the unit was halted—was based on his knowledge of a plaster-cast model of the area that he had studied the day before. What he did not realise was that the contour lines such as the one along which the battalion's objective ran were 'blown-up' or magnified five times and the objective itself did not follow any observable feature on the ground. According to Hutchesson, the Colonel 'looked in the direction we had been advancing, saw Miteiriya ridge looming up ahead and decided that was the only distinct rise ... Colonel Romans stopped the discussion with "You see that rise ahead of you. That is your objective. Take it!"' Others present heard the Colonel declare, after a brief discussion of the situation, 'We haven't done any real fighting yet—let's get cracking.' Then he gave the ringing order which was already, and was still more in the future to be, the slogan of the 23rd: 'Push on! Push on!' The 23rd pushed on.

Actually, Robertson was right and, when the artillery barrage stopped, the 23rd was on its correct objective, but, apart from the B Company commander, no one could really believe that the objective had been taken with so little fighting. Wise after the event, the historian is sometimes tempted to rationalise actions which arose from a fortuitous coincidence of circumstances. In this case, the reasons for this extraordinary action on the part of the 23rd must be examined, not to justify this serious, if gallant, blunder, but simply to explain why the unit did not halt where Robertson recommended, but instead pushed on to the brigade final objective. Although part of the explanation lies in the impulsive nature of the commanding

officer and the ardour and enthusiasm for battle of those nearest him, various factors help to account for the decision taken. First, although great care had been taken, both in giving verbal and written orders to detail the number of paces and the distance from the start line to the objective, and several men were responsible for counting paces, when the halt came about 11.5 p.m. no one could say what distance had been covered. By a singular coincidence, not unknown in battle, all those responsible for counting paces had been killed or wounded during the advance. Thus, at Battalion Headquarters, the IO, Second-Lieutenant Arthur Bailey, his runner and two intelligence section privates were all counting paces and checking on distance. All four were wounded and dropped out. The same thing happened in the rifle companies. No one could report on the distance covered when the excitement of the assault on the forward enemy posts had passed.

Secondly, the 23rd officers all understood that the artillery barrage was to 'stand' about 200 yards beyond their objective as a guarantee against any sudden enemy counter-attack while the unit was consolidating. The 'Trace as issued with Operation Order Showing Arty Fire Plan ... for Operation Lightfoot'¹⁶ clearly confirms that the infantry had good ground for expecting the artillery barrage to 'stand' and thus indicate their objective. This artillery trace gives the opening and lifting times for each line of the artillery barrage: thus, on the first objective, the legend reads 'Arty Fire opens at hrs 2302 lifts at hrs 2305', and, on the line 200 yards ahead, where the infantry confidently expected it to 'stand', it reads 'Arty fire opens at hrs 2305 lifts at hrs 0055'. The infantry were therefore more than a little baffled when, after overcoming the opposition at the minefield, they could see and hear no standing barrage. Nor could anyone report having seen the smoke which the artillery fired on the battalion objective at 2300 hours. The general feeling of those nearest the Colonel confirmed him in his belief that the 23rd had stiffer resistance to overcome if it was to do its job. The blood of these fighting men was up. They had been told again and again of the terrific responsibility that was theirs to break into the enemy positions. Encouraged by the Colonel's 'Push on!', they went on to discover more enemy. As Blampied wrote later: 'Of course, once we started we sort of had to keep going—we couldn't sit down in the middle of enemy sangars'.

Around 11.20 p.m., therefore, the 23rd resumed its advance—not with any definite intention of taking the brigade objective but quite unaware of the true

location of its own. As the smoke and haze had cleared, the infantry were better able to see where they were going. Their advance for the next 600 yards or so was uninterrupted. But, as the front widened, one or two enemy posts on the left flank were missed by the leaders and later opened fire on the small Battalion Headquarters group at the rear. On approaching [Miteiriya Ridge](#), B and C Companies came under fire. With loud shouts and the weapons of the men in front blazing, the forward platoons charged. On the right, C had some sharp fighting: Captain Bill Hoseit, the commander, and Captain Stan [Wilson](#),¹⁷ the second-in-command, were both wounded, while Lieutenant F. D. Sutherland and several good men were killed. Second-Lieutenant Fred Marett was also lightly wounded but he carried on, took command of the company and led it to a successful occupation of a series of enemy posts and dugouts. According to Bob Wilson, 'We pushed on linking with D Company. Freddie Marett, Eric Batchelor, Moss Squire, Bill Evans, Skin Irwin, Phil [Burnett](#),¹⁸ Jim Slaven, Ian [Thomson](#),¹⁹ Bill Tilson and I and a handful of others. More dugouts, more lead, more groans—we began to feel better.'

B Company also struck opposition, but, as the enemy in its sector were Italians, it quickly overran the trenches at the foot of the ridge. [CSM Trotter](#), Sergeant Dave Jenkins, [Corporal Payne](#)²⁰ and several others did good work with tommy gun and bayonet. Some of 11 Platoon got separated from the rest of the company and, not satisfied with what they had already accomplished, they pressed on to the other side of the ridge. Led by Second-Lieutenant John Kinder and Corporals Martin [Svensson](#)²¹ and Don [Black](#),²² these men—and F. [Sanders](#),²³ W. [Henderson](#),²⁴ F. Nolan and J. [Murdoch](#)²⁵ were prominent—killed quite a number before pulling back to join their comrades. D Company also came up into the fight and CSM Bob Buick knocked out the crew of a light gun and then swung this gun into action against other enemy posts. Most of the enemy encountered at this time were killed but over fifty prisoners were sent back to Brigade.

As the rear wireless link with Brigade Headquarters had broken down and the success signal rocket had been damaged by enemy fire and would not function, Colonel Romans sent Second-Lieutenant Lex Reeves, the signals officer, back to report that the battalion was on its objective and also to advise Captain Coop, the Headquarters Company commander, to bring up the supporting arms. At this time, Colonel Romans was out of touch with his companies and was acting on the sounds

of jubilation to be heard in front. When he and the other members of Battalion Headquarters tried to join the forward infantry, they came under heavy Spandau fire from the left flank. As the five surviving members of the original nineteen in the headquarters group tried to outflank these posts, they heard the crash of bursting shells about 1200 yards to the rear. Soon they realised that this was [4 Field Regiment](#) firing on the opening line for the second phase of the operation and that the battalion was away out in front of its own barrage. As [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) had insisted that, if communications broke down, an officer fully informed of the situation should be sent back with any important message, Colonel Romans now sent his Adjutant back to report that the 23rd was up to [Miteiriya Ridge](#), and also to warn the advancing units to keep a sharp lookout for the battalion. Since only one field regiment was firing the barrage on the whole divisional front, which was widening as it advanced, the fall of shells was by no means thick. The Adjutant passed safely through it, met officers and men of 21 Battalion, and asked them to hold their fire until they had passed through the 23rd and to inform those on both flanks of the approximate location of the 23rd. At Brigade Headquarters, [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) received his report and despatched him with very definite orders to Colonel Romans to pull the 23rd back to its proper objective.

In the meantime, C, B and D Companies were well aware of the advance of the barrage. Most men were able to shelter in enemy slit trenches and gunpits and, as the prisoners taken were still with them, it was not uncommon for Germans and Italians to be sharing shelter with the New Zealanders. Some were unlucky in their choice of a deep slit trench: thus Sergeant Gilbert ²⁶ and Private [Chambers](#) ²⁷ found their trench to be an Italian latrine which had been only partially filled in. Naturally enough, the shelling seemed and sounded worse than it was. But 'after what seemed like an eternity', according to Blampied, the barrage passed on. Joe Murdoch, one of the B Company men out in front, later wrote: 'The worst part was being caught in the creeping barrage but luckily no one was hit. It was a great relief to me when I raised my head and saw a smoke shell land not far in front of me, as I knew then that the barrage was going to lift. Our next worry was to contact the blokes of the other Battalion, before they started shooting us up. But we made that without any of us getting shot'.

In going forward, Colonel Romans and Sergeant Hutchesson successfully

outflanked the machine-gun post which had been troubling them and took twelve prisoners. The CO then marshalled the troops and, in correct anticipation of the Brigadier's orders, was leading them back to their proper objective when the Adjutant returned. Before leaving the ridge, Captain Robertson had the pleasure of telling the 21st headquarters, as they shot off their success signal, that the 23rd had taken their objective for them. Of course, this was only partially true, as both 21 and 22 Battalions had some stiff fighting over the crest and their exploitation forward before dawn was marked by the fiercest fighting of the whole operation.

Back near their correct objective, the troops met their fighting transport, which had also experienced trouble. Early in the attack, the carriers and jeeps following Battalion Headquarters ran into the first enemy minefield before they knew of its existence. The engineers then cleared a gap which they and the divisional provost marked with tapes and lights, and Lieutenant Harry [Low](#),²⁸ with his mortar carriers, set out to find the battalion. The leading carrier struck a mine—outside the marked field—and suffered casualties. Captain Coop, the officer in charge of the fighting vehicles, passed through the gap soon after it was cleared and advanced to the unit's objective without finding Colonel Romans and his men. After reporting back to the Brigadier, he was carrying out a further reconnaissance when his truck was blown up on one of the unmarked mines and he suffered a broken leg. His sergeant, Jack O'Fee,²⁹ took charge of the situation, dispersed the transport in the area forward of the minefield and thus cleared the way for the tanks of [9 Armoured Brigade](#). O'Fee himself next set about collecting those wounded men who had been unable to make their own way back to the RAP.

Consolidation now proceeded smoothly: the 23rd infantry dug in with C Company on the right, B on the left, and D in reserve. The unit anti-tank guns and those of H Troop 32 Anti-Tank Battery, and the guns of 12 Platoon [4 Machine Gun Company](#), were also nearly all sited and dug in by dawn on 24 October. The 23rd RAP was established on the east side of the first minefield and the Medical Officer, Captain [Johnson](#),³⁰ had an extremely busy time attending to the numerous casualties.

Early attempts to establish contact with A Company failed, but about 10 a.m. Private Stan [Ralston](#),³¹ the member of the intelligence section attached to A Company, reported to Battalion Headquarters with the story and location of that

company. Later, the CO directed A Company to take up a position forward of and covering the gap between B and C Companies. Apart from intermittent shelling and some 'overs' from the tank battle being waged in the west, the infantry had a quiet day. They were tolerably well pleased with the work of the preceding night. Thus Jenkins was able to write: 'We actually struck little bother from enemy positions, and were hardly held up anywhere. We cleared out some dugouts and I sent Bob Grey³² and Len back with several German prisoners.... Plenty blunders were made and we went much further than our objective but the main job was done and done well. We got the tanks through. So it's their show now.' It was a grand sight to see so many Sherman and Grant tanks rolling towards the enemy. Not so cheering was the sight of five tanks on fire where they had been hit by 88-millimetre fire when held up on a minefield on Miteiriya Ridge. No junction on the ground was established with the 5th Camerons, the nearest Highland Division unit on the right, but liaison was maintained. 'It's good to hear the pipes playing in their lines,' wrote one 23rd man.

With 33 killed, 143 wounded and 1 missing, the 23rd had the highest casualties of any unit in the Division during the attack on Miteiriya Ridge. This was a measure of the heaviness of the shell and mortar fire encountered rather than of the toughness of the enemy infantry. Dave Jenkins gives some idea of the seriousness of losses among NCOs: 'I'm the only sergeant left in B Coy. Dave McKay, Mark Clay³³ and Bob Manson³⁴ all wounded ... we are 13 strong in the platoon, we began the show with 27. Harry and Mac are the only NCOs besides myself in the platoon.' The Colonel promptly made the necessary alterations in appointments. Major Cameron took over command of HQ Company, handing over D Company to Second-Lieutenant Dave Kirk.³⁵ Captain 'Sandy' Slee took command of C Company and, for a short period later on, he had both C and D Companies under his command. Similar changes took place at all levels down to section leaders. WO II Bob Buick replaced WO I 'Buzz' Daly as RSM. The numbers in the four infantry companies were around half-strength or below until a small reinforcement arrived from Maadi some days later. The war diary gives company figures as HQ Company, 7 officers and 207 other ranks, A 1 and 53, B 3 and 52, C 2 and 33, and D 2 and 52. Of course, these figures include all ranks on company strength, including cooks, clerks and company quartermaster-sergeants and staff. In fact, on 24 October, the fighting men in C Company numbered only 22, a number which fell to 19 when three of the lightly wounded were evacuated.

The 23rd remained in the line till late on 27 October. For four days the men were spectators of the war, albeit spectators with ringside seats. Apart from a noisy but comparatively harmless air raid on 24 October, some shellfire each day, and a large dive-bombing attack on the evening of 26 October, the unit had little to report. Late on 27 October, a South African unit relieved all 5 Brigade units, which were transported back to the Alam el Onsol area, south-east of [Alamein](#) station.

The battalion rested for the next three days. Some company groups went to the beach for swimming; all ranks changed their dirty clothes and checked and cleaned their weapons and equipment. The YMCA made free issues of fruit, chocolate and cigarettes. Patriotic parcels were distributed. A bottle of beer per man was issued on two successive days—and many of the shrewder characters knew how to get more beer or more than beer.

On 30 October [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) addressed the battalion. He gave a general account of the battle as it had been fought up to that date, explaining how, although all attacking divisions had taken at least part of their objective on the first night, the armour had run into deeper minefields and a greater depth in defence than had been expected. The result was that the 'dogfight' phase of the battle was still proceeding but the 'break-through' was to be expected within a few days. The New Zealand Division would then be employed in a mobile role, chasing the enemy out of Egypt or cutting off his retreat. He concluded that the New Zealanders had so far done all that had been asked of them, but, in view of their heavy casualties, they almost certainly would not be used again as assault troops in the Battle of [Alamein](#). In an aside to some of the officers, the Brigadier referred to the 23rd's advance to [Miteiriya Ridge](#) and said: 'I made only one mistake in giving my orders: I should have made the 23rd's objective [Berlin](#).'

Of course, the men could appreciate all that the Brigadier had said, especially about casualties. There were few who did not mourn the loss of a friend. 'It's rotten luck losing a chap like Tick—he was a great fellow, a close mate of mine, we had many good times together, he and Harry and I in England and on the boats and the various leaves here and our stay in [Syria](#),' wrote one man in typical comment on his personal loss. But, despite the inevitable sorrowing which accompanied such losses, the morale of the battalion was not seriously lowered. The complete rest out of the

line, patriotic parcels, mail from home, and, above all, the realisation that at long last the tide was turning helped to maintain the spirits of the men. Blampied, who was not given to exaggerating, was able to write later: 'Strange though it may seem, despite all that the battalion has been through and the casualties inflicted, I have never known before or since, a time when the morale of the men was so high as it was those days following the attack on [Miteiriya Ridge](#). Maybe it was the glorious relief experienced of knowing that the long strain of waiting was over and at last the fight was well under way'.

Although the fight did not terminate as early as expected by some and the Australian and British divisions had much bitter fighting to do, the end was in sight. On 1 November the 23rd moved back towards the front line. It waited in an assembly area till 4 November, when the good news that the enemy had cracked and the [Alamein](#) line was broken was announced. In the early afternoon of 4 November, the New Zealand Division took up its mobile role and, preceded by the British [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#), headed west through the gaps in the various minefields with the intention of moving on [Fuka](#), about 50 miles away, and cutting off as many of the retreating enemy as possible. At that time, the Australian infantry were still fighting in the north and the heavy tanks of the mobile force became involved in a battle not far beyond the line. All units carried eight days' water and rations as there was a possibility that, during the pursuit, they would be cut off from their normal supply services. Behind the armoured spearhead, the New Zealand divisional provost marked the thrust line with the black diamonds on iron pickets which were to guide New Zealand units all the way across North Africa from [Alamein](#) to [Enfidaville](#) in [Tunisia](#).

The order of march should be noted. Fourth Light Armoured Brigade led, then came Main HQ 2 NZ Division. Fifth Brigade followed and, after a gap, came 6 Brigade. In 5 Brigade, 22 Battalion was followed by the 21st and the 23rd. In the 23rd a section of carriers led the way, then came Battalion Headquarters, A Company, C Company, a section of carriers, B Company, D Company, the anti-tank platoon, a section of carriers, the remainder of HQ Company, and part of B Echelon in the rear. Although sections of carriers were distributed through its length, the column had a weak tail, with few fighting troops in it.

As the 23rd moved westward through the former enemy positions about 4 p.m.,

plenty of evidence of the battle could be seen—knocked-out guns, burnt-out tanks of both sides, abandoned equipment, a few unburied dead, and later, in the evening, burning tanks and vehicles, which indicated how close behind the actual fighting the column was moving. A few lorry loads of prisoners and large groups of marching prisoners, mostly Italians, were also met. After dark the pace of the column slackened but the advance continued till about midnight. During the hours of darkness the rear vehicles closed up on those in front until all trucks were more or less nose to tail in a tightly packed column. A halt came about 2 a.m. to enable 6 Brigade to catch up. During the halt, and just when everybody was feeling drowsy, five trucks of Germans drew up slightly to the left rear of the battalion. The Germans, together with a few Italians who brought the total of the enemy party to approximately seventy, set up four heavy machine guns and a towed infantry gun and opened fire on the column of packed vehicles. At first, such was the surprise effect of this attack, no one in the rear vehicles appeared to know what to do. Most men naturally went to ground, where they lay flat, listening to the stream of bullets hissing past or pinging against the trucks. An ammunition truck was hit and the fire and explosions added to the confusion. But as soon as they could locate the enemy, the infantry of D Company, the fighting troops nearest the tail of the column, fixed bayonets and began to move in extended line against the enemy force. Meanwhile Lieutenant Harry Low, commanding the mortar platoon, had taken offensive action: he ordered the mortar carriers to turn about and the men to 'mount mortars'. Unfortunately, the enemy picked up the battalion mortars and concentrated their fire on them. One mortar was knocked out and the mortar crews suffered heavy casualties. At one stage, men were holding a mortar barrel almost vertical in an attempt to bring their bombs closer to the enemy, but, as the mortar crews were being knocked out without apparently doing any damage, Low gave the order to cease fire. The spectacular 5th of November fire in the ammunition truck enabled the enemy to direct their shots more effectively. Low and other mortar men were wounded and others had to take over the task of driving off the enemy. B Company infantry were now moving to join their comrades of D Company; Lieutenant George Lawrence³⁶ had two Bren carriers moving down a flank firing as they moved; some tanks from the Light Armoured Brigade began to rumble back to take part in the fight. Realising that they had stirred up much more opposition than they could cope with, the enemy took a hurried departure. As the enemy would appear to have

merely blundered on the rear of the column in the dark, the 23rd was unfortunate in suffering so many casualties. In this more or less chance engagement the unit lost 6 killed and 16 wounded. It was small consolation that the enemy left 17 dead behind them.

By daybreak on 5 November, the Division was on the move again. At the breakfast halt, the troops saw some hundreds of Italians, who had been left without transport by their German allies, moving back on foot to the prisoner-of-war cages. Occasionally, a few trucks of escaping enemy would heave in sight, shoot off a few rounds and then sheer off to the south and west. Captain Harry Dalton, the Quartermaster, was bringing up supplies in a small separate convoy. He went farther west than the rest of the unit, which had turned north towards [Fuka](#). He was offered the surrender of some thousands of Italians, all of whom appeared to have a white cloth which they waved vigorously. He also saw masses of enemy transport moving west in what appeared to be a mad rush to escape. When fired upon by anti-tank guns, Dalton wanted to give fight, but the counsel of more cautious members of his party prevailed and his three trucks made their way north to join the unit.

After a series of starts and stops and short moves, the 23rd arrived about 5 p.m. at a gap in the large minefield about ten miles south of [Fuka](#) and, despite the intermittent shellfire of the German rearguard, passed quickly through. Fifth Brigade took up a position as a firm base preparatory to making an attack on [Fuka](#). Preliminary plans to this end were cancelled on receipt of an order from [General Freyberg](#) stating that 5 Brigade was not to get heavily involved as it would be required for a fast move to seize the landing grounds at [Baggush](#).

On the following morning, 6 November, the rains began to fall. The column moved forward about 23 miles, but the light rain of the morning turned to a deluge and the desert was transformed into so many lakes and lagoons. Soon trucks were sinking to their axles and further progress was impossible that day. On 7 November the rain continued unabated and the only movement of trucks was an attempt to form up for a forward move which simply had to be postponed another day. The mud increased, as did the misery of those troops who got wet and cold. Most of the men had to spend the nights of 6–7 and 7–8 November crowded in their trucks. 'We were,' wrote Jenkins, 'just like cattle in a truck in winter weather in Southland and all the weapons and gear got plastered with mud'.

But, if physical conditions were disagreeable, the news was good. Details of the thousands of prisoners taken at [Alamein](#) and reports of the damage done by the [Desert Air Force](#) were coming in. The BBC reported that the Axis forces were being pushed back at [Stalingrad](#) and in the Caucasus, in [New Guinea](#) and in the [Solomons](#). The Americans and the British First Army had landed in [Morocco](#) and were advancing to meet the [Eighth Army](#). This was all very heartening, but the most amusing item was the announcement that the Germans and the New Zealanders were racing neck-and-neck across the desert. For once, the [BBC](#) was behindhand with the news, but it redeemed itself a night or two later when the 23rd men preparing to attack [Mersa Matruh](#) heard the [BBC](#) announce that [Matruh](#) had fallen. 'This war moves quickly. We can hardly catch it!' was the comment of one man.

On Sunday, 8 November, the sun shone again and the desert dried out quickly. Movement by wheeled vehicles was again possible. The battalion moved another 28 miles that day. Next day, with the going practically back to normal and with the 23rd striking the tarsealed road, some 63 miles were covered. The sights on the roadside continued to gladden the hearts of those who had seen their own trucks and equipment similarly treated by the [Luftwaffe](#) in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#). Thus, Jenkins was able to write with pleasure: 'What a sight!—miles and miles of wrecked and burnt out vehicles all the way. What a lathering the [RAF](#) must have given them! It means a lot to us to have him on the run like this and by now there must be few Huns safe on this side of the border.' The enemy made no serious stand at any point east of the border. At 2 a.m. on 10 November the battalion was called out to make a dawn attack on [Sidi Barrani](#). It was cold and dark when the men embussed to move forward. But no attack was necessary: [Sidi Barrani](#) fell to the 21st without a fight. For most of that day the battalion advanced in the desert south of the road with a view to outflanking the [Halfaya](#) position, but it was recalled to the main road.

In the early morning of 11 November, the 21st took some 600 prisoners with only two casualties to themselves at the top of [Halfaya](#) Pass. Although scattered mines made care necessary and progress slow, 5 Brigade advanced 38 miles that day. Egypt was now clear of the enemy and the [Eighth Army](#) was in [Libya](#) again. That afternoon the 23rd passed [Musaid](#) and all that was left of [Fort Capuzzo](#), and stories were told and exchanged of the fighting of the previous year. Towards

evening, acting on instructions from Brigade, Colonel Romans sent a patrol of twenty men under Second-Lieutenant Max Cross to discover if **Bardia** was occupied by the enemy, and, if so, in what strength. The patrol did not return till after daylight on 12 November, but it was able to report that the town was clear.

Later came news that the Germans were blowing up dumps in **Tobruk** and were moving back on the **El Agheila** position. That day General Montgomery sent a message to all his troops: `...today, 12 November, there are no German and Italian soldiers left on Egyptian territory except prisoners.... The prisoners total 30,000, including nine Generals.... Our task is not finished yet; the Germans are out of Egypt but there are still some left in North Africa.... 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 New Zealanders had been with the vanguard of the advance up to this stage. Now it was their turn to `remain behind' to reorganise and prepare for the tasks ahead.

Sgt A. C. Hulme, VC



Sgt A. C. Hulme, VC



Pte A. Freeman and L-Sgt C. McIntosh, who escaped from Crete by barge

Pte A. Freeman and L-Sgt C. McIntosh, who escaped from Crete by barge



D Company lunch queue, Kaponga Box, September 1941

D Company lunch queue, Kaponga Box, September 1941



The battalion in desert formation on the move into Libya,
14 November 1941

The battalion in desert formation on the move into Libya, 14 November 1941



A Company bayonet charge at Capuzzo, 27 November 1941
(See p. 119)

A Company bayonet charge at Capuzzo, 27 November 1941 (See p. 119)



Fort Capuzzo, looking towards Musaid and Sollum

Fort Capuzzo, looking towards Musaid and Sollum



Captains Ted Richards and Dick Connolly, Libyan campaign,
1941

Captains Ted Richards and Dick Connolly, Libyan campaign, 1941



'The parcels which saved our bacon.' At Fort Capuzzo,
8 December 1941

The parcels which saved our bacon.' At Fort Capuzzo, 8 December 1941



At Gazala: some 11 Platoon men play cards before the battle

At Gazala: some 11 Platoon men play cards before the battle



After the battle: B Company plays HQ Company

After the battle: B Company plays HQ Company



Christmas dinner at El Adem
Christmas dinner at El Adem



Peter Norris and Herbie Black
at El Adem, March 1942. Both
were later killed in action

Peter Norris and Herbie Black at El Adem, March 1942. Both were later killed in action



23 Battalion officers at Maadi, April 1942

Back row (from left): Angus Ross, Peter Norris, Herbert Black, Fergus Begg, Fane Vernon, Paddy Lynch, Sandy Slee, Max Coop, Ian Wilson, Ted Richards. Third row: Harold Richards, Duthie Hoggans, Bill Hoseit, Stan Read, Doug Cumming, 'Tinny' Ironside, Dick Orbell, Jim Ensor, Alan McPhail, Ralph McKinlay, Len Stubbs, Ken Armour. Second row: Tom Morten, Doug Reid, Ted Thomson, Sid Kelly, Reg Romans, Doug Leckie, Gordon Cunningham, Carl Watson, Mark Harvey, Dick Connolly, Bob Dawson. In front: Charlie Mason, 'Spot' Wilson, Bill Cook, Harry Dalton, Robin Deans

23 Battalion officers at Maadi, April 1942

Back row(from left): **Angus Ross**, Peter Norris, Herbert Black, Fergus Begg, **Fane**

Vernon, Paddy Lynch, Sandy Slee, Max Coop, Ian Wilson, Ted Richards. Third row:

Harold Richards, Duthie Hoggans, Bill Hoseit, Stan Read, Doug Cumming, 'Tinny'

Ironside, Dick Orbell, Jim Ensor, Alan McPhail, Ralph McKinlay, Len Stubbs, Ken

Armour. Second row: Tom Morten, Doug Reid, Ted Thomson, Sid Kelly, Reg Romans,

Doug Leckie, Gordon Cunningham, Carl Watson, Mark Harvey, Dick Connolly, Bob

Dawson, In Front: Charlie Mason, 'Spot' Wilson, Bill Cook, Harry Dalton, Robin Deans



Sergeants' mess, Maadi, April 1942

Back row (from left): Sgts Bowie, Merlo, Southern, Bevin, Hedwig, Irvine, Trotter, Trembath, Stokes, Kelly, Parfoot. *Third row*: Sgts Scott, Polkinghorne, McIntosh, Ball, Moncrieff, Buick, Mathie, Appleby, Worthington, Wilson, Gillan, Skillen. *Second row*: Sgts Loomes, Davies, Chubbin, RQMS Jenkins, RSM Daly, Lt-Col Leckie, Sgts Trewby, Hawtin, McDonald, Stammers, Le Lievre. *Front row*: Sgts Thomas, Woodbury, Blanchard, Canham, Cunningham, Anderson, Ron Phillips, Greig, Treleaven

Sergeants' mess, Maadi, April 1942

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C Company men and Turkish guards meet on the Turkish-Syrian border

C Company men and Turkish guards meet on the Turkish-Syrian border



In the Alamein Line, August 1942. From left: Capt Paddy Lynch, Lt-Col Romans, Capt Peter Norris, Capt Bill Hoseit. All were subsequently killed in action .

In the Alamein Line, August 1942. From left: Capt Paddy Lynch, Romans, Capt Peter Norris, Capt Bill Hoseit. All were subsequently killed in action



¹ The battalion's officers, with their appointments, on the eve of the Battle of Alamein, were:— Battalion Headquarters: CO, Lt-Col R. E. Romans; 2 i/c, Maj J. R. J. Connolly; Adj, Capt A. Ross; IO, 2 Lt A. F. Bailey; MO, Capt A. R. Johnson; Padre, Rev R. B. Spence. HQ Coy: OC, Capt M. J. Coop; Lt H. J. Low (Mortars); 2 Lt W. A. Reeves (Signals); 2 Lt D. D. Foote (Transport); Lt W. H. Dalton (QM); 2 Lt G. Lawrence (Carriers); Capt R. G. Deans and Lt D. G. Grant (A-Tk); A Coy: OC, Capt P. L. Lynch; 2 i/c, Lt F. Vernon; 2 Lt A. F. Cooper; 2 Lt W. F. Johnson. B Coy: OC, Capt G. M. Robertson; 2 i/c, Capt S. Wilson; Lt J. W. Kinder; Lt J. L. Johnston. C Coy: OC, Capt W. Hoseit; 2 i/c, Lt C. A. Slee; Lt F. D. Sutherland; 2 Lt M. E. Cross; 2 Lt A. C. Marett. D Coy: OC, Maj D. B. Cameron; 2 i/c, Capt G. S. Cooper; Lt A. L. Fletcher; 2 Lt K. W. Clark; 2 Lt V. D. Kirk.

² Lt R. J. Wilson, DCM; Waimate South; born NZ 26 May 1916; clerk; wounded 14 Dec 1944.

³ Cpl J. Slaven; Nelson; born Cardenden, Scotland, 16 Sep 1916; labourer; wounded 11 Dec 1941.

⁴ 2 Lt A. W. Squire; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 30 Aug 1913; cellarman.

⁵ Sgt E. Batchelor, DCM and bar, m.i.d.; Waimate; born Waimate, 29 Aug 1920; milkman; twice wounded.

⁶ Pte S. E. Bennett; Invercargill; born NZ 4 Feb 1919; labourer; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

⁷ Pte W. F. Tilson; born NZ 11 Sep 1904; contractor; died 25 Nov 1957.

⁸ Pte D. M. Dunlop; Dunedin; born NZ 26 Apr 1918; milk roundsman; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

⁹ L-Cpl R. H. S. Harper, MM; born NZ 29 Aug 1912; woollen worker.

¹⁰ Capt A. F. Cooper, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 20 Oct 1919; civil servant; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

¹¹ Sgt W. G. Shaw; Moa Flat, Heriot; born Scotland, 22 May 1907; farm labourer.

¹² Sgt H. M. Sievwright; Lake Tekapo; born NZ 28 Oct 1914; musterer.

¹³ Lt-Col E. W. Aked, MC, m.i.d., Aristion Andrias (Gk); Tauranga; born England, 12 Feb 1911; shop assistant; CO 24 Bn 4–8 Jun 1944; CO 210 British Liaison Unit with 3 Gk Bde, 1944–45.

¹⁴ WO II J. D. Trotter; born Woodlands, Southland, 23 Jul 1907; agent; killed in action 17 Dec 1942.

¹⁵ 2 Lt T. Le M. Hutchesson; Hamilton; born Kent, 15 Mar 1915; public accountant; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

¹⁶ The New Zealand Division in Egypt and Libya, Part II, Map 4. Cf. H. K. Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 230.

¹⁷ Capt S. Wilson, m.i.d.; born NZ 23 Dec 1903; french polisher; twice wounded; died Palmerston North, 4 Jun 1949.

¹⁸ Cpl P. J. Burnett; Wakefield; born Murchison, 27 Mar 1919; farm labourer; wounded 14 Apr 1943.

¹⁹ WO II I. F. Thomson, m.i.d.; Milton; born Milton, 28 Sep 1910; town clerk; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

²⁰ Cpl H. K. Payne; born Winton, 30 May 1916; labourer; killed in action 23 Oct 1942.

²¹ Sgt M. S. Svensson; Gore; born Invercargill, 23 Sep 1916; sawmill worker; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

²² L-Sgt D. A. Black; Invercargill; born NZ 21 May 1918; bushman; twice wounded.

²³ Sgt F. P. Sanders, MM; Queenstown; born NZ 26 Mar 1917; labourer; wounded 28 May 1944.

²⁴ Sgt W. D. Henderson; Edendale; born NZ 23 Jul 1914; labourer; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

²⁵ WO II J. R. Murdoch, m.i.d.; Queenstown; born Gore, 28 Jan 1913; truck

driver; three times wounded.

²⁶ 2 Lt R. G. Gilbert; born NZ 10 Sep 1914; hospital attendant.

²⁷ Cpl E. Chambers; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 17 May 1916; labourer.

²⁸ Lt-Col H. J. G. Low, DSO, MC, ED; Wellington; born Nelson, 27 Apr 1919; clerk; wounded 5 Nov 1942; Director of Plans, Army HQ.

²⁹ Sgt J. A. O'Fee; Dunedin; born Fortrose, 26 Mar 1918; butcher; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

³⁰ Maj A. R. Johnson; London; born NZ 1 Oct 1912; medical practitioner.

³¹ Pte J. S. Ralston; born Dunedin, 20 Aug 1918; labourer; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

³² Cpl R. Grey; Christchurch; born NZ 6 Dec 1912; labourer; wounded Nov 1941.

³³ Sgt M. J. Clay; born NZ 15 Sep 1912; plasterer; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

³⁴ Capt R. H. Manson; Paeroa; born Springbank, 10 Oct 1919; student; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

³⁵ Capt V. D. Kirk, DCM; Blackball; born Blackball, 17 Sep 1915; winchman; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

³⁶ Capt G. L. Lawrence; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 12 Nov 1918; carpenter.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 10 – ON TO TRIPOLI

CHAPTER 10

On to Tripoli

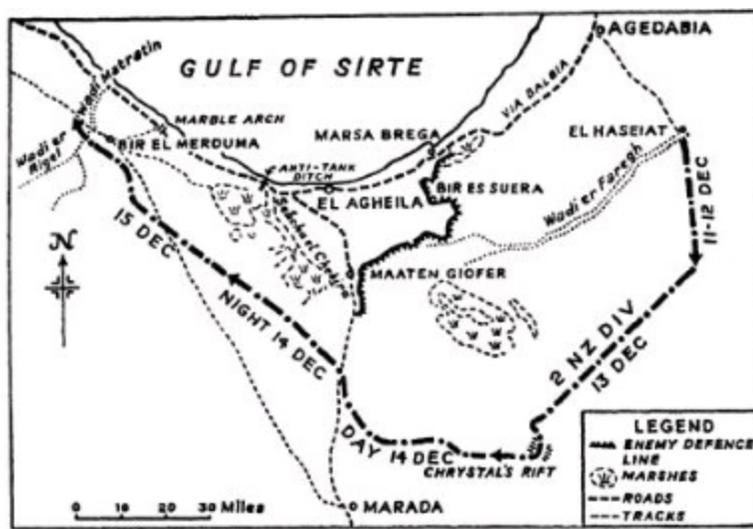
FROM 13 November till 5 December 1942, the battalion remained in the desert south of [Bardia](#). At first, as was customary in the days after battle or strenuous moves, relaxation and recreation were considered more important than training. With the weather growing colder, the inevitable goal-posts appeared and inter-company and inter-unit games of rugby were played. Battledress was issued on 15 November. In turn, the companies undertook guard duties for a Sherman tank park, for a prisoner-of-war cage at [Capuzzo](#), and for a newly established supply depot. To bring the newly appointed or promoted NCOs up to standard, an NCOs' training course was organised with Second-Lieutenant [Robins](#),¹ recently posted back to the unit after a term on the staff of the Maadi School of Instruction, as chief instructor in weapon training and Second-Lieutenant A. F. Bailey in charge of training in drill and duties. Lieutenant Frank [Foster](#),² [7 Field Company](#), also gave the infantry companies special instruction in 'Mines, Enemy and British' and in 'Booby Traps'. In general, however, while they recognised the value of knowing as much as possible, the infantry were well content to leave the sappers to handle mines and booby traps. Just when a plentiful supply of tents had been secured from [Tobruk](#) and the battalion's 1st XV had been picked and had gone into strict training, orders arrived to move on.

[Tobruk](#), [Derna](#) and [Benghazi](#) fell in quick succession, and by 23 November the enemy was behind the strong [El Agheila](#) defences, which the [Eighth Army](#) had so far been unable to penetrate. On 29 November Colonel Romans put an end to all rumours that the Division would be returning to [Maadi](#) for Christmas by announcing that the return to the Egyptian Delta would be via [Tripoli](#), and probably via [Tunisia](#). On 5 December the move forward began. By this time the 23rd was in good shape, although somewhat depleted in numbers. Small reinforcements of men recovered from jaundice or light wounds had joined the unit at different times since leaving [Alamein](#): such officers as Captains Norris, Black, Thomson and Orbell, Lieutenants Marett, McArthur, Grant, Ian Wilson, Hoggans and Bailey had all returned, along with 73 men. Nevertheless, there were only 26 officers and 471 other ranks on 5 December. Later in the month, when it was known that the 8th Reinforcements were about to arrive in [Maadi](#), requirements were 7 officers and 260 other ranks to bring the unit up to strength. But, if under strength numerically, the battalion was at this

time made up of veterans, tried in a series of campaigns.

On 5 December the 23rd led the 5 Brigade convoy across [Cyrenaica](#) to a bivouac near [El Adem](#). Next day, in rain and heavy going, they moved on via [Bir Hacheim](#) to west of [Msus](#). Thereafter the route turned south past [Saunnu](#) to an area near [El Haseiat](#), where the New Zealand Division was concentrating for the next phase of the campaign. In four days the unit covered 350 miles. This move was mainly over rough going and hard on trucks, but the drivers, the mechanics and other members of the transport platoon had worked wonders with their old vehicles. Their work was normally taken for granted, but, in fact, they were an indispensable part of the battalion during all these moves across North Africa.

To drive Rommel out of [El Agheila](#) frontally was bound to be a difficult undertaking. On two previous occasions the enemy had retreated behind the naturally strong defences of this position only to re-emerge when strong enough to scatter the Allied forces. The strength of the [El Agheila](#) position lay in its resemblance to the [Alamein](#) line: its northern end near [Marsa Brega](#) rested on the coast and its southern, which curled back to the west, on salt marshes and a sea of soft sand believed to be impassable to heavy vehicles. Barbed wire and mines added to the hazards of a frontal attack. The [Long Range Desert Group](#) and other British patrols, notably one under Captain P. D. Chrystal of the King's Dragoon Guards, had reconnoitred the area in the south and had proved that a 'left hook' or outflanking movement would not be impossible for such an experienced mobile force as the New Zealand Division. The general plan, therefore, was for 51 Highland Division to attack along the coastal road towards [Marsa Brega](#) with [7 Armoured Division](#) probing on the front farther south, while the New Zealanders, with the British [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) under command, executed a wide outflanking movement in the south and emerged from the desert to cut the [Tripoli](#) road fifty or more miles west of [El Agheila](#). As the [Royal Scots Greys](#), with their Sherman tanks, could scarcely be expected to dispose of 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions, it would appear that the intention was more to threaten the enemy's only line of withdrawal than to cut him off. By this time, the administrative position had improved considerably and supplies were coming forward from [Tobruk](#) and [Benghazi](#). The stage was set for the next advance. The 23rd spent 10 December in overhauling vehicles and equipment preparatory to beginning the 250-mile outflanking move.



LEFT HOOK AT EL AGHEILA
left hook at el agheila

On 11 December the 'left hook' force advanced about 30 miles. The next day was very wet, but on 13 December the Division began the swing to the south and west with 4 Light Armoured Brigade leading, 6 Brigade following and 5 Brigade bringing up the rear, all in desert formation. Recent rains kept down the dust, wireless silence was observed and it was hoped that the secrecy of the move could be preserved. The force covered some 90 miles, crossing the huge steep-sided wadi where the bulldozers had prepared the way at Chrystal's Rift, and laagered about 40 miles north-east of Marada. The advance continued next day, sometimes over very rough desert and sometimes through soft sand. On the night of 14–15 December, a move in three columns at a speed of 4 miles per hour covered 24 miles. Early on 15 December wireless silence was broken: two enemy reconnaissance planes flew overhead that morning and later in the day the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry armoured cars came under enemy ground fire. Towards evening the 23rd received orders to occupy a sector in a brigade defensive position to the north. After 9:30 p.m. it reached the area indicated and occupied a temporary defensive locality. Near Wadi Matratin 90 Light Division, deployed as a flank guard, prevented 6 Brigade from blocking the main road, along which 21 Panzer Division withdrew without interference during the night of 15–16 December. Next morning, in full view of the 23rd, 15 Panzer Division, moving at great speed, escaped through a gap between 5 and 6 Brigades. The outflanking force was not strong enough to cut off these German divisions.

Nevertheless, it was thought that some of the German rearguard might be cut

off in [Nofilia](#). A 5 Brigade operation order of 16 December announced that the Highland Division had arrived at [El Agheila](#) and [7 Armoured Division](#) at [Marble Arch](#), and that the brigade was to move by desert route to [Nofilia](#) with '23 NZ Bn leading and responsible for speed, halts and direction, 28 NZ (Maori) Bn on right. 21 NZ Bn on left....' At daybreak on 17 December, 6 Brigade moved off behind [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#), followed by 5 Brigade. Before noon the force came under shellfire. Fifth Brigade, on [General Freyberg](#)'s instructions, passed to the south of [Nofilia](#) in an attempt to cut the road about ten miles to the west.

[Brigadier Kippenberger](#) decided to mount a brigade attack. Quickly, but without fuss or apparent hurry, he ordered the 23rd to get across the road and face east, the 28th to cover the right flank on the south of the road and the 21st to cover the left between the 23rd and the sea. All three units were to go as far as possible in their trucks and continue on foot when that was rendered necessary either by enemy fire or by the going.

About 2 p.m. the 23rd carriers, forming a screen in front of the brigade, turned north towards the road. They soon came under heavy fire from armoured cars and a tank or two, as well as from anti-tank and other guns. At this time, most of the carriers had Spandaus and Bredas as well as their normal Bren guns mounted on them and were able to bring down an immense amount of machine-gun fire on a target. As one enemy gun on a forward knoll appeared to be holding up the advance, a carrier manoeuvred into position and its gunner, Private E. J. [Bullock](#),³ brought his machine gun into action. Getting on to the target quickly, he maintained a high rate of accurate fire, inflicted a number of casualties on the enemy and forced them to withdraw. His carrier then advanced to a point where, in spite of counter fire from armoured cars, he was able to shoot at long range at the enemy transport moving westward along the road. But the carriers could not continue to advance in the face of the heavy fire of the enemy flank guard.

Time did not permit the giving of detailed orders but the principal order to reach the men was one they all understood. It was 'Push on!', accompanied by a wave of the Colonel's arm in the direction the battalion was to move. And so to cheerful shouts of 'Push on!', the 23rd trucks were forced forward at their best pace. The sand was soft and deep, the going extremely heavy, and the trucks lurched from side to side as they plunged forward. Shells rained down amongst them, setting one A

Company truck on fire but otherwise, thanks to the soft sand, doing little damage.

Despite the intensifying shell and tank fire, the battalion pressed on. A few trucks stuck and others made headway with difficulty. The desert grass of that coastal area gave an illusory appearance of firmness and the trucks which slowed down became better targets for the mortar bombs, the shelling and heavy machine-gun fire. Seeing how strong the enemy were, and in view of his lack of tanks and the distance 21 and 28 Battalions still had to travel, [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) sent Major Connolly forward in his jeep to tell Colonel Romans to debus and attack on foot and, if necessary, to dig in on the last ridge overlooking the road. Before Connolly could reach the Colonel, the latter had signalled to his men to continue the advance on foot and, setting them a fine example, led them forward until they were about 3000 yards from the [Via Balbia](#). On his arrival, Connolly was halted by the usual greeting the Colonel gave his second-in-command in such circumstances: 'Get back to your B Echelon!' His message delivered, Connolly assisted in calling in the company commanders for an Orders Group and in getting the Bren and mortar carriers forward to return some of the fire which was steadily increasing as the infantry approached the road.

Unfortunately, just after the Orders Group had dispersed, a tank or armoured car opened fire along the wadi where its members had met and Captain Peter Norris, one of the 23rd's most promising officers and a potential battalion commander, was killed by a direct hit. Lieutenant Ian Wilson took over command of A Company, getting the orders and information from Captain Ted Thomson, commander of C Company. As the men advanced, they ran into quite heavy fire from guns of various calibre and from tanks and infantry, all obviously well prepared in a flank-guard position. As Sergeant Minson chronicled, after commenting on the death of Norris, 'There were other casualties, including Lieut. Ian Wilson, one of the finest officers we have ever had.' Signals were now passed along telling the men to dig in where they were.

As the infantry began to dig in with C and A Companies on the left, facing north, and B and D on the right, facing east, the unit's heavier weapons began to arrive. If only a squadron or even a troop of tanks could have joined in, the road might still have been cut, but a single infantry battalion had no chance of success in daylight.

Private J. R. Johnston gives the picture of the frantic efforts to get the supporting arms across the soft sand and into action: 'Everything seemed to be one mad rush. Shelling and machine gun fire was very thick and most unpleasant. However, we got the mortar into action and did not [do] bad.' Although they much preferred to fight from carefully dug-in positions, the battalion's anti-tank guns soon came up and joined in the action. Captain Robin Deans and Lieutenant Don Grant directed their troops to firing positions and quickly had their two-pounders pumping off shells at the enemy guns. Sergeant Hector H. [McLean](#)⁴ took his portée as far forward as possible, got his gun into action with all speed, knocked out a 50-millimetre anti-tank gun and forced two enemy armoured cars to withdraw. Shortly afterwards, the combined fire of the anti-tank guns and mortars knocked out another gun and two trucks. At this stage, McLean's portée was badly damaged by tank fire and its courageous driver, Private Norman H. [Jones](#),⁵ lost a leg. Jones was shortly afterwards given a blood transfusion at the RAP by Captain Johnson, the RMO. This was one of the few transfusions given as far forward as an RAP up to that time.

Even after darkness fell, the enemy kept up a steady fire from tanks and machine guns on the ridge occupied by advanced elements of the 23rd. Tracer shots appeared to be going here, there and everywhere, but did little damage. The Brigadier told Colonel Romans to keep up the pressure on his front as, with the 21st mounting a night attack on the left flank, he expected the flank guard to withdraw. To assist the 21st, Colonel Romans sent Captain Thomson with C Company to try to cut the road. Thomson had been leading his company forward during the late afternoon with his usual energy and determination and he now led them out on this patrol. Accompanied by three carriers, a troop of anti-tank guns, and a section of [7 Field Company](#) sappers well supplied with mines for mining the road, the company came under mixed MMG and anti-tank-gun fire, but pressed on until shortly after 11 p.m., when the men could see the road. The sappers laid 160 mines and then pulled back about 400 yards from the road. About 5 a.m. on 18 December, Thomson reported that several tanks could be heard moving on the road. When this report reached Brigade, [Brigadier Kippenberger](#), unwilling to risk the decimation of an infantry company, ordered its recall. No doubt he was influenced by a report received a little earlier from the 21st that it was impossible to reach the road in face of the determined resistance of enemy tanks and infantry. Nevertheless, the pressure exerted would appear to have speeded the enemy's departure. Before 9 a.m. [4 Light](#)

Armoured Brigade reported [Nofilia](#) clear of enemy.

This sharp engagement at [Nofilia](#) was almost entirely a 23rd action. It enabled Colonel Romans, a leader of great courage and also a daring opportunist, to display some of the qualities for which he will always be remembered. The verve and gay enthusiasm with which he entered on the advance under fire and gave his shout of 'Push on!' were typical of the man. Those present long remembered [Nofilia](#), not so much as a successful action but as one when the speed of the advance and the dash of all ranks were unexcelled. All ranks who knew Peter Norris mourned his death and in B Company they lamented the deaths of two of their finest soldiers— [John Trotter](#), the CSM, who had led several bayonet charges at [Alamein](#), and Private Jock Brand, ⁶ who had recently been awarded the MM for his exploits in escaping from the [Salonika](#) prisoner-of-war camp and bringing back useful information from [Greece](#). But as such engagements go, the 23rd escaped lightly with only twenty casualties. At a service conducted near the graves of the fallen, [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) spoke of the losses of 'this good faithful battalion, the 23rd.' Not without sacrifice was this reputation earned.

Fifth Brigade spent 18 December in the area west of [Nofilia](#). The mechanics were able to spend the day on very necessary maintenance of vehicles. On 19 December the Brigadier announced that the brigade would spend the next ten days at least in the area. In case Rommel seized the opportunity of a lull in the chase to strike back, units occupied a brigade defensive position, with the artillery in the centre of the triangle formed by the three units. In fact, the battalion's operational responsibilities were very light: the carriers visited areas where enemy dumps were thought to be situated and carried out other reconnaissance work. On 21 December General Montgomery addressed the senior officers of the Division and congratulated them on the success of the [El Agheila](#) left hook, 'a very fine performance'. He held—and this was particularly interesting to the 23rd—that it was arguable whether or not a full, heavy armoured brigade could have been moved round the enemy's flank with the New Zealanders, and that without one it was virtually impossible to hold any large enemy force which might have been cut off. He announced that once supplies had been built up the [Eighth Army](#) would continue the advance.

Sports programmes, football practices and matches, and preparations for Christmas meanwhile occupied the men. Despite the distance from [Benghazi](#), which

was fast becoming the main forward port, the [Eighth Army](#) did its utmost to provide good Christmas fare for its soldiers. Of course, initiative was not lacking at the battalion level. With memories of the 'bully beef and biscuits' Christmas in [Libya](#) in mind, Major Connolly had been very busy procuring the best Christmas supplies, and, as was customary with him, the interests of the men were not neglected in favour of the officers' mess. Word was passed round that Christmas dinner was to be something special, but nobody really expected the fare the cooks provided. Christmas Day was observed in traditional fashion: church services included Communion at 7.30 a.m., a Mass for the Catholics at Brigade at 10 a.m., a service and parade attended by the Brigadier at 10.30, and soon after midday a dinner at which the menu read: 'Soup, fish, chicken, turkey, pork, green peas and carrots, boiled and roast potatoes, plum duff'; each man also received a bottle of beer and a rum issue. Extracts from the diaries of two 23rd soldiers provide a contrast between low expectations and happy realisation, the very reverse of normal experience. Thus Bickley on 22 December: 'Christmas will soon be here but what a Christmas!' But on 25 December: 'Christmas Day! We had a most magnificent Christmas—a most surprising Christmas too, considering our position here. After church parade, our parcels arrived, there were 5 for me....' On 20 December Minson wrote: '... now we are busy making football fields and preparing for Xmas. They are promising us a lot of stuff, but I'm afraid it will be like the last one—bully beef and biscuits.' But on 25 December he wrote enthusiastically: 'Xmas dinner has been and gone and I take back all I said about the Army. It was wonderful. Our officer (Cliff [Hunt](#) ⁷) had a movie camera and I'll more than likely get a job in Hollywood if the promoters get hold of it. The only trouble was that I was not acting; it was the treble rum issue, plus the beer. We had everything you could wish for, plus a big parcel mail, which made it a real Xmas'.

But, apart from, or in addition to, a good Christmas, morale was high in the battalion at this time. The war was going well, the advance to [Tripoli](#) was continuing without severe casualties and with these pleasant periods of rest while supplies were built up. A psychiatrist, sent out by the [War Office](#) to study the psychology of veterans and their reaction to battle conditions, spent some time with the battalion. He confessed that the high morale of the men 'staggered' him. Expecting to be told, 'Leave to [Cairo](#) or return home to New Zealand', he asked several men to name the first thing they would like for themselves. Almost invariably the answer was 'Mail and

then beer'.

On 27 December the Brigadier announced a training programme, with the main emphasis on sport and recreational training, as no move was contemplated for some days. At rugby, the 23rd beat the 26th and an ASC team and lost other games. On 30 December [30 Corps](#) asked the Division to provide 1500 men to clear landing grounds in the Hamraiet area so that the [RAF](#) could support the next stage of the advance. As the normal troop-carrying vehicles were away on supply tasks, the infantry had to march and be lifted in stages for over 100 miles. For six days from 3 January 1943, working parties from 5 Brigade units removed stones and did all the other manual work needed to clear landing strips. They experienced some bombing and strafing raids while on this work, and 11 were killed and 30 wounded. Writing later of these days, but also recalling other times of stress, J. W. McArthur paid tribute to two of his men, R. W. Stone and J. [Marshall](#) ⁸: 'It wasn't till much later that one really realized the sterling worth of these two. Many chaps were later decorated for only a fraction of what these chaps did as a matter of course. I remember Bob Stone during a raid on the landing grounds being constructed in the Hamraiet area—everybody flat on the ground with Bob out in the middle firing his mounted Bren and cursing because he could not get another mag. on before they got away. Jim Marshall was a tower of strength both then and during the static line in the southern area at [Alamein](#).'

In the second week of January 1943, the build-up of supplies had progressed sufficiently for the [Eighth Army](#) to begin its drive on [Tripoli](#), its goal for so long past. Once again General Montgomery planned to advance along the coast road with 51 Highland Division and with the New Zealanders outflanking the enemy in the [Buerat](#) position. This time [7 Armoured Division](#) was to give greater strength to the left hook. Rommel was short of supplies and, although he mounted a number of rearguards and sought to impose the maximum delay, he did not seriously contest any defensive line. Within ten days the [Buerat](#) position had been turned and [Tripoli](#) itself taken. So far as fighting was concerned, this campaign was the tamest in which the 23rd participated, but the actual day and night moves were exciting enough since no one knew just when contact would be made with the enemy and when he would stand and make a fight of it.

On 11 January 5 Brigade Group assembled and joined the rest of the Division. On the following day the [Wadi Tamet](#) was crossed. That day General Montgomery issued another of his personal messages 'to be read out to all troops'. He declared: 'The Eighth Army is going to [Tripoli](#).... Nothing has stopped us since the Battle of Egypt began on 23 October 1942. Nothing will stop us now. ON TO TRIPOLI.'

To conceal the Division's moves to the south and west, all the usual precautions were taken. Camouflage nets were used in bivouac areas, vehicles faced north at all halts to ensure that no sunlight glinted on their windshields, dusty tracks were avoided, no fires were lit during the hours of darkness, and wireless silence was observed. On 13 January a night move of about 16 miles brought the leading elements of the Division to the Wadi Bei el Chebir, still some miles short of the enemy outposts but within attacking range. Seventh Armoured Division, moving parallel to the New Zealanders but closer to the coast, attacked on 15 January and the enemy withdrew from all forward posts. The next day was one of slow movement with many delays caused by minefields, real and dummy, but with little contact with the enemy. For the 23rd, it was merely another day of truck riding, first in desert formation across a sandy plain covered with scrub, and then in column of route to negotiate the [Wadi Zemzem](#). And so, day by day, the advance continued—across the [Wadi Nfed](#) and the [Wadi Sofeggin](#)—with, on 19 January, the good news that [Misurata](#) had fallen to the Highland Division. Late that evening the brigade began an all-night move through [Beni Ulid](#), then north to the [Tarhuna](#) road, and again took the lead from 6 Brigade. Minefields provided the only problems.

While [7 Armoured Division](#) attacked rearguards in positions near [Tarhuna](#), the New Zealand Division was diverted farther to the west, via [Tazzoli](#), to the [Garian-Azizia](#) road to [Tripoli](#). Many old ruins on the surrounding hills indicated closer settlement in earlier times and, on 21 January, the route entered the well-cultivated lands of the Italian settlers. Here the scenery changed from brown, yellow and grey to green. About midafternoon on 22 January, 5 Brigade struck the road about 12 miles south of [Azizia](#).

Shortly afterwards, [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) gave his orders for an advance on [Azizia](#). The 28th was to act as advanced guard on the main road, with the 23rd on the left and the 21st on the right. About 5 p.m., after the battalions had begun their

advance, the Brigadier, Colonel [Bennett](#)⁹ of the [Maori Battalion](#), and Colonel Romans had a short conference with [General Freyberg](#), who said that an intercept message stated that the enemy forces in [Azizia](#) and [Suani Ben Adem](#) had been ordered to hold these places until seven o'clock that night. The Maoris sent a company forward to see how strongly [Azizia](#) was held, while the brigade moved forward by bounds. When about a mile and a half from [Azizia](#), the column halted as it was obvious that the Maori company had stirred up plenty of trouble in the town. Defensive fire, mainly from tanks and guns, crisscrossed the front. Little of it came straight down the road but some of the 23rd's trucks were hit by shrapnel splinters and three casualties were sustained. After consulting the GOG, the Brigadier decided that, for the sake of the few hours involved in waiting for the enemy to withdraw, he would not be justified in launching an impromptu attack. The maximum fire power was made available to the Maoris and the 23rd carriers were sent forward to shoot up any enemy transport while all 5 Brigade's vehicles withdrew to safety.

Next morning [Azizia](#) was clear of enemy and the brigade was ordered to push through to [Tripoli](#). '5th Brigade is being given the honour as we have had the most fighting during the Egyptian campaign,' wrote one 23rd private in his diary that day. The order of march was the 28th, Brigade Headquarters, the 23rd and the 21st. The move was along a tarsealed road lined with gum trees and with green fertile land on either side. 'A real treat for the eye. Beautiful surroundings, it really made one homesick,' wrote Stone. Fifth Brigade entered [Tripoli](#) by the [Azizia](#) Gate on the afternoon of 23 January, but 51 Highland Division already had troops there.

[Tripoli](#) itself, the place New Zealand soldiers had dreamed about reaching for years, was more than a little disappointing. The sights on the waterfront were fine enough. Indeed, the wide palm-fringed esplanade was better than the one in [Alexandria](#), but there were none of the amenities for which [Cairo](#) was famous. Soldiers could buy nothing to eat. The shops were mainly small hole-in-the-wall affairs and they contained only rubbishy souvenirs. The troops did enjoy a good bath, however, after their weeks in the desert. 'The bungalow in the garden had a porcelain bath so several of us heated water and had a scrub. What a relief it was to feel clean again!' This was a typical comment. Apart from cheap red wine, there was nothing to drink in [Tripoli](#). Consequently, few were sorry when on 26 January they handed over guard duties to the Highlanders and marched out to a bivouac area at

[Castel Benito](#). There the 23rd stayed for over a month. The battalion entered on the routine of a training camp with mounting and relieving of guards, drill and other 'spit-and-polish' exercises. But life would have been dull without some play. The men played football and engaged in other activities. At the 5 Brigade sports meeting held on 10 February, the Maoris emerged the victors and the 23rd took the wooden spoon. But Corporal R. Stone won the competition for stripping and reassembling a Bren gun in the shortest time, an event unknown to peacetime sports meetings. His time was 1 minute 17 seconds. Later on, Private [Burford](#)¹⁰ of D Company set what was claimed to be a [Middle East](#) record by completing this task in 70 seconds.

Once supplies of good 'plonk' had been located, the company canteens did a roaring trade. Thus, D Company's canteen, 'The Blue Duck', was very popular and there were many sore heads on Sunday church parades. But, if parties were a regular feature of life at [Castel Benito](#), the biggest and best party of all, and certainly the best put on by the officers' mess, was held on 10 February to celebrate the 100th birthday of Mr. George Henry Romans, the CO's father, the 'Grand Old Man' of Arrowtown, whose fame had long been known in Otago and was now to spread throughout the Division and, indeed, the [Eighth Army](#). Of course, colossal supplies were required for this party. [NAAFI](#) supplies had been saved up for some time but even more were required, and Major Connolly went to Eighth Army Headquarters to see what could be obtained. He met with little success at first and was eventually referred to a brigadier who held the appointment of DA & QMG, [Eighth Army](#). Here he was not very well received and was turning somewhat disconsolately away, muttering something not very complimentary about the 'Pongos', when a sharp voice inquired, 'What's the matter with you, Kiwi?' It was General Montgomery himself, and when he learned of the special occasion—after all, there was no other commanding officer in the [Eighth Army](#), or possibly any other army, whose father's 100th birthday had to be celebrated—he gave orders that the 23rd's needs should be met so far as available supplies would allow. Dick Connolly thus managed to retire with two cases of gin and one of whisky where none had been forthcoming before the General's intervention. It was a good party, attended by officers representing all units in the New Zealand Division and some from farther afield.

Special parades figured prominently in this period of waiting and training at [Tripoli](#). On 30 January Captain Orbell and 40 selected NCOs and men went to [Tripoli](#)

for an [Eighth Army](#) church parade and special march past the Army Commander. On 4 February the New Zealanders paraded for Mr Winston Churchill, who took the salute and gave one of his brief but inimitable addresses. 'When I last saw your General, [Bernard Freyberg](#), my old friend of so many years of wars and peace, the Salamander, as he may be called, of the British Empire, it was on those bluff and rocky slopes to the south of [Alamein](#).... But what a change has taken place since then. By an immortal victory, the victory of Egypt, the Army of the Axis Powers...was broken, shattered, shivered, and ever since then, by a march unexampled in all history for the speed and force of the advance, you have driven the remnants of that army before you until now the would-be conqueror of Egypt is endeavouring to pass himself off as the deliverer of [Tunisia](#).... He is now coming towards the end of his means of retreat and in the corner of [Tunisia](#) a decisive battle has soon to be fought.' [General Freyberg](#) later described the parade as 'the most impressive and moving parade of my career'. In the 23rd, Minson wrote: 'We had one of the biggest and best parades I have ever been on—for Churchill. From what I can gather our home-coming is a long way off yet.' He was right.

As the accumulating of supplies was a first priority task in preparation for the next advance, the 5 Brigade infantry were employed as wharf labourers from 12 February onwards. They put up records for unloading the vessels, and if they deducted their own small pourboire from [NAAFI](#) and similar supplies, they argued that this was small compensation for the dangers they had experienced and little enough in comparison with what similar workers in New Zealand received by way of ordinary pay and 'danger money'.

Of great importance in the life of the battalion was the arrival of reinforcements from [Maadi](#). Some of the earlier ones were old hands returning after recovering from wounds or sickness, but the later and larger parties were drawn from the 8th Reinforcements, who had arrived in Egypt on 5 January 1943. They were the first to arrive from New Zealand since 20 October 1941. The Eighths who joined the 23rd—4 officers and nearly 120 men—made a good impression; they were fine physical types, keen to learn and anxious to live up to the traditions and past record of the battalion. Colonel Romans greeted them on arrival and told them what was expected of them. In their new companies, parties were quickly arranged to welcome them.

Thus, when the order to move came, the 23rd was nearly back to full strength.

Its members were in good heart after their six weeks' rest in what one of their number described as 'for us a veritable paradise'. Their memories of [Castel Benito](#) were mixed. They recalled the green fields, the bluegums and other trees, the additions to normal fare which came from working on the wharves, and the days and nights of heavy rain. Minson recorded: 'We have had a pretty gay time here.... They tell me that during our stay in [Tripoli](#) we (in A Company) have drunk nearly 800 gallons of plonk—120 men. I will be pleased to be able to drink good old beer again.'

On 28 February, while the Catholics attended Mass celebrated by Father Henley, the rest of the battalion attended a brigade church parade and marched past [General Freyberg](#). The 'gay time' was nearly over.

¹ [Maj A. S. Robins](#), MC; Queenstown; born Queenstown, 8 Aug 1917; shepherd; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

² [Lt F. E. Foster](#), MC; [Auckland](#); born NZ 24 Sep 1903; engineer; three times wounded.

³ [Pte E. J. Bullock](#), MM; Dunedin; born [New Plymouth](#), 30 Jun 1921; labourer; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

⁴ [Sgt H. H. McLean](#), MM; born NZ 3 Mar 1918; factory hand; wounded 13 Apr 1943; died 15 Nov 1955.

⁵ [Pte N. H. Jones](#); born NZ 14 Jun 1919; engineer's apprentice; wounded 17 Dec 1942.

⁶ [Pte J. McR. Brand](#), MM; born [Invercargill](#), 12 May 1909; labourer; killed in action 17 Dec 1942.

⁷ [Capt C. C. Hunt](#); born NZ 31 Dec 1910; clerk.

⁸ [L-Cpl J. J. R. Marshall](#); Pukemaori, Tuatapere; born NZ 1 Jan 1918; farmer; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

⁹ Lt-Col C. M. Bennett, DSO; England; born Rotorua, 27 Jul 1913; radio announcer; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Nov 1942-Apr 1943; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

¹⁰ Cpl L. W. Burford; Christchurch; born Timaru, 8 Feb 1912; joiner; wounded 28 Mar 1944.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 11 – THE TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN

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The Tunisian Campaign

While the New Zealanders were at [Tripoli](#), the war in North Africa was moving to the stage where decisive battles had to be fought in [Tunisia](#). The Allied landings in the west had been followed by the landing of Von Arnim and Axis troops, up to a thousand a day, in northern [Tunisia](#). This meant that the [First Army](#) and the Americans were unable to link up with the [Eighth Army](#) in [Tripoli](#) but were held up at various points in western [Tunisia](#) from Medjez-el-Bab, in the north, to near [Gafsa](#), in the south. In mid-February, Rommel, anxious to prevent the junction of the First and Eighth Armies, successfully attacked 2 [United States Corps](#) around the [Faid](#) and [Kasserine](#) passes. Appeals to the [Eighth Army](#) for assistance led to the pushing forward of 7 [Armoured Division](#) and 51 Highland Division to the environs of [Medenine](#) in south [Tunisia](#). Here they held a position about ten miles south of the strengthened [Mareth](#) line, but in insufficient strength to withstand a full-scale armoured attack by Rommel's panzer divisions, now largely re-equipped and with morale soaring again after their successes against the Americans. It was forecast that Rommel would attack early in March. Consequently, on 1 March, the New Zealand Division, with 5 Brigade leading, was ordered to move forward to consolidate the position at [Medenine](#).

Before daybreak on 1 March, the 23rd was notified of the urgency of this move. Colonel Romans left that morning with the Brigadier's Orders Group to conduct a reconnaissance, while the rest of the battalion spent the day in preparing to move and in tidying up the bivouac area. By 6.30 p.m. Major Connolly had the battalion ready, but orders arrived postponing the starting time till 11.30 p.m. The night move in column of route along the main road was bitterly cold, but fair speed was maintained. The frontier between [Tripolitania](#) and [Tunisia](#) was crossed shortly before noon on 2 March. Heavy traffic on the roads, including tank transporters which took a long time to cross culverts, slowed down the convoy and it was after 5 p.m. before the Colonel was able to direct the companies to their positions about five miles from [Medenine](#). The siting of the main defensive positions was left to the following day, when the officers could see where the main threats were likely to develop.

By the evening of 3 March, the [Eighth Army](#) was ready to meet Rommel's attack.

The three brigades of the Highland Division held the sector between the coast and the [Mareth](#) road, 201 Guards Brigade covered Point 270, an isolated hill which dominated the centre of the defensive area, and next came [131 Brigade](#) and 5 New Zealand Brigade. The 28th held the right, the 21st the centre, and the 23rd the left of the 5 Brigade sector. The 23rd's area was an extended one with a front of nearly three miles. The country was rough, being interspersed with dips and steep-sided wadis, in one of which Battalion Headquarters was snugly sited. D, A and B Companies, in that order from right to left, held the forward positions, while C was in reserve. On 3 and 4 March the companies prepared their positions, giving their six-pounder anti-tank guns the best possible tank-killing zones. A dummy minefield, marked by a single strand of barbed wire, from which black tin triangles dangled as a warning for mines, ran across about 1000 yards of the battalion's front. Depth was given to the anti-tank defences by the siting in C Company's area of 'Pheasants', the new 17-pounder anti-tank guns, which were still on the secret list and were to be used only in the event of the forward defences being penetrated. When the Vickers guns were added to the defences, the artillery sited within call and some 3.7-inch guns sited in the 23rd area, everyone was confident that the attack would be 'seen off' without much trouble.

As the ground was thinly held, extra precautions were taken at night: company listening posts were placed 600 yards forward of the FDLs and, in each platoon, a whole section 'stood-to' during the hours of darkness, while all ranks 'stood-to' from 5.30 till 6.30 a.m. On the left of the 23rd was a landing ground which was shelled by a big long-range gun and bombed. A and B Companies received a few of the shells and bombs intended for the airstrip. The battalion's carriers patrolled for about ten miles along one of the roads leading into the [Matmata Hills](#) in the west and maintained a standing patrol on this road at night. Nothing happened on 4 or 5 March, and the troops were beginning to bet on the chance of Rommel's calling off the attack. Their confidence in their own strength is seen in private diaries. Thus Stone wrote on 4 March: 'It is hard to see how Hun can do much good by attacking us. To get to us here he has to come through high range of hills. There are very few tracks and if we could catch him between the hills and us he would get hell'.

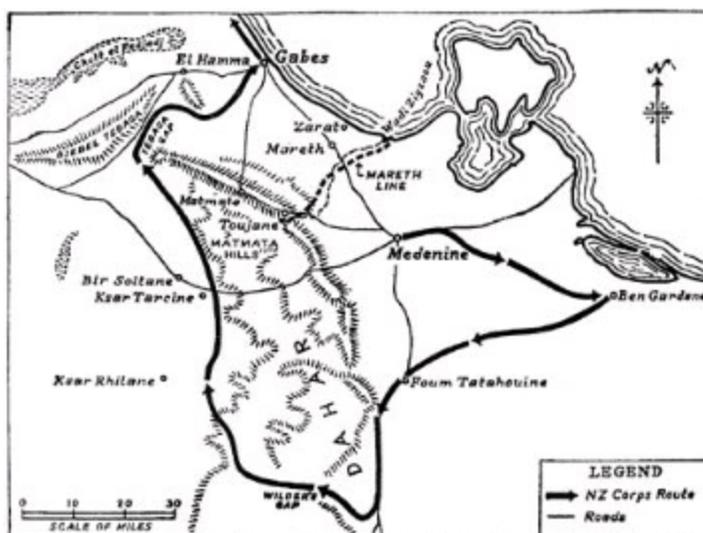


allied positions at medenine

On 6 March the attack came from the west and north-west. Shelling of [Eighth Army](#) positions was followed by attacks by German fighter-bombers. Then, out of the morning mist which had covered their debouching from the hills, came three columns of enemy transport led by tanks. The tanks of 10 Panzer Division, a formation which had seen service on the Russian front, advanced towards 21 Battalion's area and veered across towards the Maoris' front, where five were knocked out by the anti-tank guns. But the main attack was made farther north against the central feature, Point 270, which was also known as Edinburgh Castle and Elephant Hill. The enemy tanks did what the British had done in [Libya](#) and ran on to the carefully prepared anti-tank defences. When the supporting infantry tried to advance, the whole corps artillery opened up with devastating effect. The first main attack was beaten off by 10 a.m. and a combined tank-infantry attack in the late after-noon was no more successful. Altogether, the Axis forces lost 52 tanks, plus a large number of infantry killed or wounded and 83 as prisoners. The battle of [Medenine](#) resembled that of [Alam Halfa](#), in that the [Eighth Army](#) was able to administer a defeat to the enemy before going itself on to the offensive. For the 23rd, however, the battle was only indirectly important. At no time during the day did the battalion appear likely to become seriously engaged. But the reports from those parts of the front directly involved were most cheering, as entries in private diaries show. Thus Stone: 'Noise of battle was terrific. Many fires burning. Hun has taken a heavy pasting today'. And Johnston, after recording the enemy losses in tanks, added: 'Our tanks didn't fire a shot. Things are going very well indeed. All the lads are in the highest of spirits and happy'.

On the following day both air forces were busy. The Desert Air Force Spitfires flew 100 sorties that day. The 23rd carrier patrol reported enemy transport moving towards the hills, but all enemy vehicles seen were in retreat. The fighting at [Medenine](#) was over, although the New Zealand Division remained in the area until 11–12 March.

General Montgomery now gave orders for Operation PUGILIST, in which he aimed to crack the [Mareth](#) line by a frontal assault combined with a left hook. Thirtieth Corps, which included 50 and 51 Divisions, was to attack frontally, while the New Zealanders were to undertake the outflanking movement in which they were now specialists. This time they were to be stronger than at [El Agheila](#) and, with the title of [New Zealand Corps](#), were reinforced by [8 Armoured Brigade](#), the King's Dragoon Guards (armoured cars), 64 Medium Regiment and 111 Field Regiment, [Royal Artillery](#), General Leclerc's Free French column and other sub-units. The obvious target for this left hook was the [Tebaga Gap](#), the flat gap between [Djebel Tebaga](#) on the north and west and the [Monts des Ksour](#) (or [Matmata Hills](#)) to the south. Through this gap ran a road to [El Hamma](#) and [Gabes](#) and it appeared to offer the best means of outflanking the [Mareth](#) line. Early in January, a New Zealand patrol of the [Long Range Desert Group](#), led by Captain [Wilder](#),¹ found a passage through the [Matmata Hills](#) about 30 miles to the south-west of [Foum Tatahouine](#). The New Zealand Corps was now to move to an assembly area just to the west of [Wilder's Gap](#) and about 25 miles south-west of [Foum Tatahouine](#).



LEFT HOOK AT MARETH
left hook at mareth

On 11 March 6 Brigade moved back to [Ben Gardane](#), turned inland towards [Foum Tatahouine](#), and then, after dark, moved to an assembly area. In the 23rd, Major Connolly took an LOB ² party back to the Divisional LOB camp at [Suani Ben Adem](#). On 12 March 5 Brigade moved to the assembly area. The normal measures for deception were taken—all vehicle fernleaf signs, shoulder titles and badges were removed. The move to the staging area was carried out in daylight, but the additional 70 miles to the assembly area, over the roughest possible desert going, was carried out during the night of 12–13 March.

The New Zealanders spent six days in this area. The 23rd did some route-marching in the evenings to keep everyone fit, and played some games of baseball on ground which was altogether too rough for rugby. On 16 March [General Freyberg](#) visited the unit and told the officers the general plan for the attack on the [Mareth](#) line. The Bren carriers, which had been left at [Medenine](#), caught up with the battalion on 18 March. That day [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) gave the whole battalion a detailed account of the moves and of the anticipated fighting. As the unit war diary recorded: 'All ranks were deeply impressed by the address'. Such an address was the recognised preliminary to action, and, at 7 p.m. on 19 March, the move forward began. Fifth Brigade was well back in the column and, apart from the alternating softness and roughness of the going, this was just another desert move. The original intention had been to continue the move by night on 20 March, but in accordance with instructions received from Eighth Army Headquarters, [General Freyberg](#) ordered the advance to be continued by daylight that day. That night a solitary enemy bomber hit an ammunition truck in [5 Field Regiment](#) and caused the brigade to increase the interval between its vehicles and many men to dig slit trenches. On 21 March the advanced elements of the [New Zealand Corps](#) were in touch with the enemy. The 23rd was not involved, but C Company was detached with a section of carriers and a troop of anti-tank guns to cover the right rear of the column in case an enemy mobile column launched a surprise attack from the hills. That night 25 and 26 Battalions launched an attack, supported by artillery concentrations, against Point 201, the large hill which dominated the entry to [Tebaga Gap](#). This was brilliantly successful: the minefields were breached and some 32 officers and 817 other ranks, all Italians, were captured. This vital ground was thus taken twelve hours before the

arrival of the infantry of [21 Panzer Division](#) who were under orders to relieve the Italians there.

But the way forward to [Gabes](#) was not yet clear. The enemy, reinforced by fresh German troops, continued to hold defences inside the gap. The Divisional Cavalry and [8 Armoured Brigade](#) probed forward and to both flanks, took some prisoners and enabled 6 Brigade to extend its FDLs beyond the remains of the old Roman Wall which had covered the Gap in the days of the Roman Empire. For the most part, the enemy, further reinforced by the arrival of the German 164 Division, showed his determination to contest every inch of the ground.

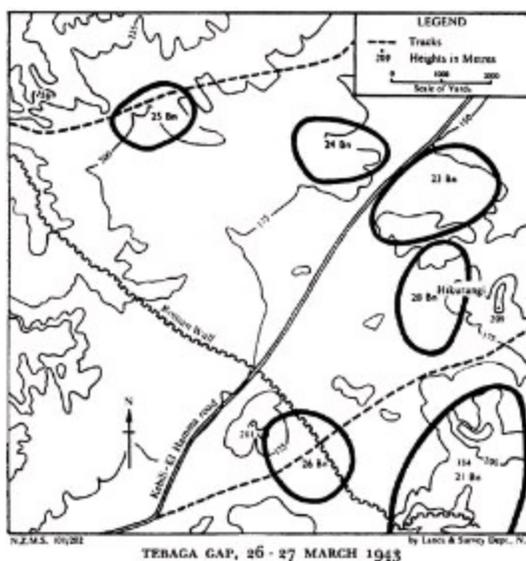
In the meantime, the main frontal attack on the [Mareth](#) line had not gone well. Difficulty in getting tanks and heavier supporting arms forward led to the giving-up of a hard-won bridgehead. By this time, 23 March, General Montgomery had decided to switch his main effort to the New Zealand sector and to send Headquarters [10 Corps](#) and [1 Armoured Division](#) to reinforce the outflanking movement. A blitzkrieg attack to burst through the enemy defences in the [Tebaga Gap](#) was now planned for 26 March, when [1 Armoured Division](#) would be ready to pass through to [El Hamma](#) and possibly to the coast.

On 23 March, however, in view of the possibility of an attack by [10 Panzer Division](#), 5 Brigade units were ordered to take up a defensive position to the west and south of the Gap. The next two days were devoted to improving these defences for a battle which was never fought, as the enemy, too, was concentrating on defence. Enemy bombers were active but, although they annoyed the 23rd by dropping 'butterfly bombs', they did little serious damage.

On the morning of 25 March, Colonel Romans and Lieutenant Arthur Bailey, his IO, accompanied the Brigadier on a reconnaissance of the proposed battle area. They looked down on it from high ground on the right flank. One of the vital points, Point 184, on this flank was still held by the enemy, but the 21st, supported by the corps artillery, took this point before dawn on 26 March. This prevented the start line for the attack from being overlooked.

General Montgomery decreed that this attack should be made in the afternoon in order to secure tactical surprise: all previous New Zealand infantry attacks of any

importance had been made at night and the switch to daylight was expected to catch the enemy napping. In addition, it would enable both the air force and the armour to be used to maximum advantage in a blitzkrieg. Zero hour, 4 p.m., was selected as the attacking force would then be able to attack out of the sun. The attack, to be supported by the corps artillery, strengthened by that of **1 Armoured Division**, was to be made on a three-battalion front. From right to left, the units were to be the 28th, the 23rd and the 24th. The Sherman tanks of **8 Armoured Brigade** were to lead the attack and were to be followed by the infantry carriers, the light Valentine or Crusader tanks, and the infantry companies. The infantry were to lie up during the day in slit trenches dug and camouflaged before dawn in an area up to 1000 yards forward of the Roman Wall. The first objective was 3000 yards forward of the Roman Wall and the second another 3000 yards on, where the **Tebaga Gap** ended.



tebaga gap, 26–27 march 1943

At 7 p.m. on 25 March, the 23rd moved by transport to a lying-up area south of the Roman Wall. Here the troops attempted to sleep in their greatcoats until 3 a.m., when a hot meal, their last for over twenty hours, was served. The companies then moved forward until they were practically on the infantry start line. Here they dug in and did everything possible to make themselves inconspicuous. The two forward companies were B, under Captain G. Robertson, on the right, in touch with B Company of the 28th, and D, under Captain Herbie Black, on the left, with its left flank on the road, the interbrigade boundary. The two rear companies were A, under

Captain Sandy Thomas, on the right, and C, under Captain Sandy Slee, on the left. The infantry remained concealed in their slit trenches throughout the day. The dust which was blowing around made the day unpleasant and most men were glad when the order came to line up on the start line.

At 3.30 p.m. on 26 March, the softening-up of the enemy positions began. Fighter-escorted light bombers at three-squadron strength swept in low and bombed the enemy guns and other defences which were indicated by artillery smoke shells, while the New Zealand infantry burned orange smoke canisters right along the start line to show their positions on the ground. From then on, two and a half squadrons of Kittyhawk bombers were fed into the battle area every quarter of an hour and they bombed all visible targets. Hurricane 'tank-busters' also tried to locate and shoot up enemy tanks. While the aircraft were distracting the enemy's attention and creating enough smoke and dust to obscure the front, the Sherman tanks, carriers and light tanks emerged from their lying-up area in the wadis and dips behind the Roman Wall and behind Point 201 and moved forward to the start line, which they reached shortly before the artillery opened fire at 4 p.m. With six field and two medium regiments employed, some two hundred guns were engaged in supporting this attack.

At 4.15 p.m., with sun and wind favouring the attackers, the infantry rose from their concealed slits and shook themselves out into their long lines. Almost immediately, with six to twelve yards between men, they began to advance about 100 to 150 yards behind the light tanks. The attack was on! Although the dust reduced observation on both sides, it was still a thrilling spectacle to see the lines of advancing armour and infantry. First, the big Shermans rose and dipped like battleships as they cleared the low rises, then came the Bren carriers, firing burst after burst as quickly as they could locate a fresh target, then the light tanks, and then the infantry with bayonets fixed and automatics ready. Previously somewhat nervous about losing the cover which darkness normally gave them in such an attack, the infantry now caught the spirit of this great daylight assault. Even the new 8th Reinforcements, whose first major attack it was, sensed the irresistible power with which the attack was moving forward into the enemy positions.

One of these new soldiers, Private 'Peter' [Newton](#),³ has described the action briefly and paid tribute to the quality of his section leader, Lance-Corporal 'Johnnie'

Hoban⁴: '... the tanks went through us and we followed them in. All Hell was suddenly let loose and my one fear was that my courage might not prove equal to the task. Johnnie Hoban was on my right and as we slipped out of our holes I instinctively looked to him. To all appearances, he might have been simply strolling down [Queen Street](#) for the good of his health and his very indifference steadied me completely. Indeed, Johnnie's unconcern on this occasion was the one factor above all that made me—such as I was—a soldier'. Of course, Hoban was one of several junior but experienced NCOs whose influence went far beyond the credit given to them.

Although the 23rd suffered some casualties from enemy shelling as the troops left their start line, practically everything in this battle went according to plan for the battalion, a most unusual thing even in the best-planned attack. Although [General Freyberg](#) had originally doubted the wisdom of a frontal attack and had feared that pushing forward in the centre, where the 23rd was now advancing, would be playing into the enemy's hands, the Germans had apparently counted on some such British appreciation and had not strengthened their defences in that sector. Nor had they placed any strong minefields there. The going was good for tanks and they advanced in formation, with only a few pauses caused by tank or antitank-gun opposition. The infantry followed on. For once they were little more than 'tank followers'. The first enemy infantry encountered by B and D Companies had their hands up in surrender. They were undoubtedly surprised by the weight and variety of the air and artillery bombardment and had not recovered when the tanks and infantry appeared out of the dust and smoke. Up to the first objective, little serious opposition was met. The prisoners were simply ordered to the rear or placed in charge of the battalion's walking wounded.

Between the first and the second objectives, when the rate of the advance was expected to be slower—100 yards in two minutes was given in orders—more opposition was met. On the right flank, B Company, under Captain Robertson, came under increasingly heavy fire. This was due to the fact that the Maoris and their tanks on the right had been unable to reach their first objective on account of the difficult going and the stern resistance of strong enemy posts on the lower approaches to Point 209. Enemy fire from what now became the 23rd's open flank sent many of the B Company men to ground on a number of occasions. B Company

lagged somewhat behind D and edged to the left. On the left flank, D Company under Captain Black made good progress and was scarcely held up at all. Sergeant Sam Herbison, in charge of 16 Platoon, led his men with great dash. At one point near the final objective, some stout-hearted Germans threw grenades from behind a knocked-out tank, but Sergeant De Vantier,⁵ Private Keith Barnett⁶ and others threw grenades in reply and followed them up with the bayonet. D Company was the first on the final objective, where Black and some of his men advanced into Wadi el Hernel a short distance ahead of the Sherman tanks.

B Company, despite its delays, fought its way through to the objective. No. 10 Platoon on the left had an easier time than 11 Platoon on the right, but all encountered enemy infantry, especially in trenches on reverse slopes. Bob Stone gives a brief account of his experience in 10 Platoon: 'We followed 100 yards behind armour. A lot of hate flying around but we had no trouble getting first ridge & from then on we were in among Huns the whole time. They soon chucked the sponge in when we got among them. Many dead Huns about. Quite a few tanks both ours & Hun in flames. No. 3 section got onto final ridge and got pinned in a wadi by 2 Hun tanks, very uncomfortable position but one of our tanks kept Hun tanks off us until dark when were able to get behind ridge.'

As B Company veered somewhat to the left, A Company came up on the right and open flank. The men in 9 Platoon, under Lieutenant A. F. Cooper, on the extreme right, ran into heavy fire both from their exposed flank and from Germans who had surrendered to the tanks but had taken up their arms again once the tanks and Bren carriers had passed on. Coming over one low rise, these 9 Platoon men came under particularly vicious machine-gun fire from a strong position on the right. Sergeant L. S. Bain promptly took a section with an extra Bren, outflanked this position and by fire and movement removed this obstacle to the advance of A Company. Later this same platoon came under tank and infantry fire. Cooper was wounded but Bain took over. In his words: 'We ran into three Mk. IIIs and about forty odd enemy who opened up on us with everything they had. In face of this intense fire, I ordered the men to take cover behind the ridge and engage the enemy from there. This they did with great effect and took such heavy toll of the Hun infantry with the Brens and rifle fire that quite a lot of them came forward with their hands up. The enemy tanks also slowly pulled back ... but they still remained a

threat.... By now it was becoming dark so I pushed ahead with my men and cleaned out some machine gun positions with hand grenades and the bayonets.'

C Company played a more prominent part in this attack than was to be expected of a reserve company. Somehow the word that their much respected company commander, Ted Thomson, had been badly wounded reached the men as they were leaving their slit trenches. As Bob Wilson said later: 'Our respect and admiration for Ted were such that C Coy joined battle from start to finish in a spirit of vengeful purpose'. The first objective was taken in such copybook style in this practically model attack that C Company men did not get the opening they sought. But thereafter, when D Company swerved towards the road on the left boundary and a gap appeared between B and D, C surged forward. To quote Wilson again: 'We had a legitimate axe to grind coupled with a human desire to miss no fun. C Coy, Sandy Slee in charge, with Ted on our minds, bee-lined up the centre gap and joined the front. Max Cross, our platoon commander, led a pack alongside and sometimes in front of the tanks, on to Jerries in slit trenches, despite their defiance.'

Colonel Romans had organised very satisfactory infantry-tank communications at the battalion level, and these he used to secure tank assistance in dealing with enemy positions which threatened to hold up his infantry. Whenever he wanted action from the tanks, he spoke to the RSM of the [Staffordshire Yeomanry](#), who was in a Grant tank moving in the rear of the first wave of infantry. The RSM promptly passed the request over the regimental wireless net to his commanding officer, who invariably secured the desired assistance from a single tank or a troop of tanks. Throughout the attack, Colonel Romans travelled in his jeep and was as ubiquitous as his vehicle would allow. When B Company got behind D, he was there encouraging the men to push on, and when the source of trouble was located he was back at the Grant tank securing the help needed from the Shermans. To travel round the battlefield in a jeep when all other vehicles were armoured was a dangerous business: the Colonel had his water bottle shot from his side and two holes drilled in the back of the seat of the jeep, but he and his driver came through the day unscathed.

Throughout the attack, the co-operation between the tanks and the infantry was of a very high order. In this respect the 23rd was singularly fortunate, since the hilly ground in the Maoris' sector and minefields in that of 24 Battalion disrupted and

delayed the advance of the tanks co-operating with those units. When the nature of the ground, with some awkward rises on the right, tended to push the tanks across to the left, the Colonel managed to get them back where they were most needed. At the beginning of the battle, the commanding officer of the [Staffordshire Yeomanry](#) could be heard calling over the regimental link to his men, 'This is the moment you've been waiting for! Give them all you've got!' His men responded magnificently to this call and went through to the final objective with an élan worthy of the best traditions inherited from their cavalry predecessors. Two Mark III, one Mark III Special and one Mark IV Special tanks were knocked out during the advance. The [Staffordshire Yeomanry](#) did not escape without casualties: Mark III tanks in hull-down positions gave the most trouble, but the German anti-tank gunners fought with great bravery, several of them being killed at their guns. Six Shermans were knocked out during the advance. Possibly this number would have been greater had not the 23rd carriers, under Lieutenant George Lawrence, used their great fire power to effect against anti-tank gunners and infantry. Thus, on one occasion, when a Sherman had difficulty in advancing without making itself a target to well-sited guns, Sergeant A. [McLennan](#)⁷ manoeuvred his section of carriers cleverly, knocked out the guns and secured the surrender of the German infantry. As Lawrence reported later: 'Our fire power was murder, and we soon had the Germans coming towards us with hands raised'. Supporting tanks had never before given the 23rd such complete satisfaction as the [Staffordshire Yeomanry](#) gave on 26 March 1943. No praise was considered too high for them. A new bond, such as could never have been considered possible in the bad old days of [Ruweisat Ridge](#), was forged between British armour and New Zealand infantry.

Thanks to the absence of serious obstacles to tank movement and the consequent speed of advance by the tanks and carriers, the 23rd was the only one of the three attacking battalions to take its final objective on time. By 5.45 to 6 p.m., right along the battalion's front, the leading infantry were forward of the tanks and looking from the objective to north and east where the ground sloped down to the Wadis el Hernel and el Fellag. There they saw a few burning vehicles, some infantry and gun positions and a few enemy tanks, but no sign of any counterattack. After the final objective had been taken, a ricochet off the side of a tank killed Captain Robertson, the commander of B Company. Later on Captain Stan Wilson came up to take command of the company.

The 23rd proceeded to consolidate with A Company on the right flank, B on the right centre, D on the left and C in the rear of Battalion Headquarters in the centre. While the infantry were digging in from 6 p.m. onwards, Colonel Romans told Lawrence to take a section of carriers forward about 1000 yards on a reconnaissance. This 'recce' did not get far as the carriers were driven back by enemy tank and shell fire. Since the tanks and vehicles of [1 Armoured Division](#) were occupying the road during the early hours of darkness, Captain McPhail had difficulty in getting the 23rd's convoy of supporting arms forward and the men did not get their evening meal till after midnight. During the night some official and some unofficial patrolling was done. C Company, in reserve, provided a patrol under Lieutenant Marett which investigated the Wadi el Hernel in front of B Company; it failed to locate any enemy but found a battalion or higher-level headquarters where office equipment was scattered in glorious confusion. Unofficial patrols examined immobilised enemy vehicles for loot. During the night, too, contact which had been lost during the advance was re-established with the two flanking units. Between 7 and 8 p.m., D Company made contact with C Company of 24 Battalion on the left of the road. Once the 23rd rear link to Brigade, a No. 11 set, which had failed during the attack, made communication possible with Lieutenant-Colonel Bennett, in command of the [Maori Battalion](#), it became clear that the two units must establish each other's location on the ground. With a section of A Company's reserve platoon, Lieutenant Cliff Hunt succeeded in finding the Maoris, but discovered that the gap was too large to be covered by the troops available.

Next morning the enemy showed that, although he had withdrawn from positions close to the 23rd FDLs, he was determined to make a stand on the far side of the wadis, presumably until his troops had been evacuated from the [Mareth](#) line. Although [1 Armoured Division](#) had pushed through to the vicinity of [El Hamma](#), the enemy escape route to the north had not been cut. To keep it open, the enemy tried to delay any New Zealand advance by holding out on the Maoris' immediate front and by heavy fire directed at 23 and 24 Battalions. At an early hour, heavy shells from 105- and 210-millimetre guns began to arrive in the battalion area. One landed in the middle of Battalion Headquarters. It killed Private Angus [Wood](#),⁸ the Colonel's jeep driver, 'my old cobber and one of the best chaps I ever knew', as one of his friends recorded at the time, and wounded several, including Captain Black and Second-Lieutenant Mick Bowie, both of whom were forty yards away from where the

shell burst. [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) came up to inspect the 23rd's sector and advised making some adjustments on the right flank, where already Captain Thomas and WO II L. Kidd, A Company's sergeant-major, were bringing the maximum amount of mortar and MMG fire to bear on the rear of Point 209 and the other features in front of the Maoris. Thomas's aggressive tactics, together with numerous very heavy 'stonks' fired by the Divisional Artillery, paid handsomely both in the number of enemy dead later counted in those areas in the succession of Germans who surrendered. Of course, the taking of prisoners was facilitated by the successful tank battle fought that morning by the [Staffordshire Yeomanry](#), who moved forward of the 23rd and engaged the enemy tanks acting as a rearguard. They knocked out three Mark IIIs and two Mark IVs. Artillery OPs, again in association with the aggressively minded Thomas, also brought shellfire down on all signs of enemy occupation or movement. Apart from continuing this pressure by fire on the right flank, the battalion merely stood fast during the day. As there had been no opportunity of replenishing water bottles, most men spent a dry day under shellfire. Typical comments were: 'Very hot today, would like a wash but we have not even got enough to drink let alone wash' from Stone, and 'Everyone is as dry as a lime kiln' from Blampied.

[Brigadier Kippenberger](#) has recorded that Colonel Romans and his Adjutant 'were in very good form and hoping there would be orders to press on'. This spirit was typical of the 23rd at that time. The [Tebaga Gap](#) battle had gone extraordinarily well for the battalion: the close support from the air force had been splendid, the artillery fire was up to its normal high standard, and, as recorded already, the co-operation of the tanks had left nothing to be desired. There was a general feeling of elation abroad and the high morale which comes from a sense of achievement was conspicuous. Over 400 prisoners, all Germans, had been sent back by the unit to the brigade prisoner-of-war cage. More were sent back on 27 March. The battalion's losses were by no means high for an infantry daylight attack—3 officers and 8 other ranks killed and 1 officer and 29 other ranks wounded. From the military point of view, the loss of such experienced company commanders as Captains Ted Thomson and Grant Robertson was serious.

Thomson died of the wounds he received when a low-flying fighter shot up his truck some distance behind the battle area. A fearless and natural leader of

tremendous energy, he had frequently galvanised his men into action in the most trying circumstances. The sight of Ted with his floppy 'cheese-cutter' cap worn at a rakish angle over his inimitable happy grin invariably stirred the C Company men to follow his lead, while his slogan in battle or on the rugby field of 'Get cracking' always produced the desired response. Grant Robertson had been in command of B Company from [Ruweisat Ridge](#) onwards. Reliable and conscientious, he had proved himself a capable company commander. The third officer killed, Lieutenant Dudley [Harrowell](#),⁹ a promising Duntroon graduate, died before he was able to fire a shot. The losses tinged with sadness the pride the battalion felt in having participated in such an exciting and successful battle.

Late on 27 March, 5 Brigade was ordered to take up an anti-tank gunline facing south-east. This line was to run parallel to the [Kebili- El Hamma](#) road and provide protection for [1 Armoured Division's](#) lines of communication. The battalion moved in trucks in the moonlight to its new positions, but the enemy had gone. Before midday on 28 March, the Brigade Group was again on the move with the 21st in the lead. When the 23rd was crossing the Wadi el Melab about 4 p.m., an enemy bombing attack came in so quickly that there was no chance of dispersing and 3 men were killed and 9 wounded, all from a 13 Platoon truck. The noise of a tank battle could be heard to the north-east and, when the brigade was practically up with the fighting, the Brigadier ordered the units into a defensive position, with the 21st covering the road in the centre, the 28th on the right and the 23rd on the left. That night Lieutenants A. Parker and C. C. Hunt took out patrols to locate the enemy guns. They found only vacated positions: the enemy was retreating under cover of darkness.

On 29 March 5 Brigade was directed on [Gabes](#). The news was good. Although the Armoured Division was held up near [El Hamma](#) by tanks and an 88-millimetre gunline, the [Mareth](#) line had been abandoned by the enemy. The advance was continued with the 23rd as the leading infantry unit. A battery of [6 Field Regiment](#), a troop of six-pounders and one of 17-pounders, and a section of the 23rd carriers made up the advanced guard, with which one squadron of armoured cars from the KDGs co-operated. At first the pace was slow on account of the broken nature of the road and the number of mines left behind by the enemy, but when a tarsealed road was reached the trucks were speeded up to 30 miles per hour. Fifteen miles were

covered before any serious opposition was met. The enemy appeared likely to make a stand on a ridge lined with concrete pillboxes, but the six-pounders soon demoralised the occupants of these defences with armour-piercing rounds. [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) next ordered the armoured cars and the carriers to take the main road into [Gabes](#). Such was the speed with which they moved that one of the carriers ran right on to a mine placed hurriedly in the middle of the road by the retreating enemy. The casualties suffered in this carrier were the only ones incurred by the battalion in the entry to [Gabes](#). Within a few minutes, at about 12.40 p.m., the advanced guard and the leading troops of the 23rd were in [Gabes](#) itself. As the first Allied infantry to enter the first of the French towns to be liberated, B and C Company men received a royal welcome. The jubilation with which the troops had speeded up their advance on the good road and expelled the enemy from his last defences south of the town reached quite new heights with the enthusiastic welcome given by the French citizens of [Gabes](#). One 23rd diary entry for the day reads: 'The people of [Gabes](#) gave us a great welcome, threw flowers, kissed us and waved French flags and sang the Marseillaise'. It was a great day: the English-speaking wife of a schoolmaster acted as interpreter for the men who knew no French, but a surprising number appeared to make good progress with only a limited command of the language. The men would have liked to prolong their stay in [Gabes](#), but orders came to move on.

As the New Zealanders entered the town the enemy left, blowing up the main bridge over the stream which flows through [Gabes](#). Later, after some Messerschmitts had attacked the men trying to build a crossing with stones, a ford was found up-stream and the advance continued. The leading vehicles passed through the palm plantation on to the main road in time to see Lieutenant D. L. Holt's ¹⁰ six-pounders knock out two Italian armoured cars which had come in from a lateral road. Half an hour later, the column halted just north of the pleasant palm oasis at [Bou Chemma](#), where the battalion rested for the afternoon and where many of its members enjoyed a bath in its warm sulphur spring. At 6 p.m., however, B and D Companies went forward with the unit's anti-tank guns and Bren carriers, plus the carriers of the 28th, to form an outpost line about a mile and a half south of [Rhennouch](#). That night the men in this outpost line had a miserable time with rain, but the enemy gave no trouble.

The [Wadi Akarit](#) position which the enemy now occupied was naturally strong, as it had the sea on the east flank and practically impassable salt chotts, or marshes, on the west. During the next few days, [Eighth Army](#) troops faced up to the prepared defences. On 31 March the [New Zealand Corps](#) was disbanded and 2 NZ Division passed again under command of [30 Corps](#). That night 21 and 23 Battalions dug in so far forward that they had to 'lie doggo' next day. But the plan for the attack on [Wadi Akarit](#) required the New Zealanders to be reserved for exploitation only. Consequently, on the night of 1–2 April, the New Zealand infantry was withdrawn from the front line, the 23rd being relieved by the 2 Seaforths, the Highland Division unit whose place the 23rd had taken when entering the [Alamein](#) line in the previous October. The battalion now moved back to an open plain about six miles from [Gabes](#), where it remained till 6 April.

This period was spent in maintenance of vehicles, cleaning and checking of weapons, reinforcing—6 officers and 67 other ranks arrived on 5 April—and in general reorganisation. On 2 April General Montgomery addressed officers and NCOs of 5 Brigade. He discussed the [Mareth](#) line actions, insisting that the [Tebaga Gap](#) daylight battle would go down to history as a classic battle illustrating to perfection how tanks and infantry could combine.

Before daylight on 6 April, the battle to secure a break-through at the [Wadi Akarit](#) began with 4 Indian, 50 and 51 Divisions attacking under a particularly heavy barrage. In the late afternoon, 5 Brigade moved forward about five miles and waited for the break-through. This was made that night, and next morning the New Zealand Division passed through the gap carved in the formidable defences by its [Eighth Army](#) comrades. Enemy armoured rearguards imposed some delays, but some 25 miles were covered before, at last light, the 23rd was sent forward to cut the [Mahares- Gafsa](#) road, on which the remnants of the Axis forces which had been operating in the west were moving back to the coast, and then to the north. With its own anti-tank guns and a troop of tanks well forward, the battalion set off at a smart pace. Around midnight the leading vehicles, following the IO, ran into marshy ground along the eastern edge of Sebkret en Noual. The IO, whose navigation had led these vehicles into the salt marsh, came in for more than a little abuse. For more than two hours, men heaved and pushed, put down sand trays and sacks to help the spinning wheels get a grip, and yoked Bren carriers and anti-tank portées to the bogged

trucks, but all to no avail. After these fruitless efforts, accompanied by much swearing and cursing, the Colonel decided to push on and leave the trucks to be pulled out in daylight. But neither the IO nor anyone else could find a way through or round the marsh and, about 3 a.m., the Colonel ordered the men to bed down till first light. As flares had been seen going up not very far ahead, it appeared possible that the bogged trucks would be sitting targets for enemy tanks when daylight came. Consequently, as soon as two [8 Armoured Brigade](#) tanks arrived, they were persuaded to pull the 23rd vehicles out of the bog. This was completed by 5.45 a.m., by which time the harassed IO was confident he had found a passable route forward for the battalion.

About 7 a.m. on 8 April the unit was moving forward on hard going near the road junction at Rir er Rabaia when some enemy trucks were seen preparing to move off from a laager area. With only the briefest shouted orders from Colonel Romans and Captain Thomas, the 23rd gave chase and launched a fire and movement attack. The carriers and the forward infantry in their trucks opened up with their machine guns and rifles. Colonel Romans picked up Thomas in his jeep and they ran two German officers in a captured American jeep into a wadi from which there was no escape. Within a few minutes the battalion had knocked out or captured the enemy trucks, all of which belonged to the B echelon of IO Panzer Division. The speed of the attack enabled the battalion to take ninety prisoners, without any casualties, and to capture eight trucks, including the American jeep which was to serve Sandy Thomas as a personal vehicle for the rest of the Tunisian campaign. According to a captured officer, had the battalion arrived half an hour or more earlier it would have struck a dozen German tanks which were being supplied with petrol and the boot would have been on the other foot. As the unit had left its supporting tanks well behind in the anxiety to make up for the time spent in the marsh, the chances of dealing successfully with German tanks would have been somewhat remote. Being bogged had probably saved the battalion from an encounter with tanks instead of B echelon vehicles. As all the trucks contained goods taken from the Americans at [Kasserine Pass](#)—cigarettes and tobacco, candy of various kinds, toilet goods, and clothing—as well as the standard equipment of a German B echelon, the infantry hailed their acquisitions as the most perfect loot taken in a long time.

Later that morning, the 23rd rejoined 5 Brigade. The advance, with the 28th taking a turn in the lead, was continued that evening. The going was rough, but improved when cultivated fields were struck. The Mahares- [Maknassy](#) railway was crossed before the unit halted for the night about 11 p.m. During the advance on 9 April, the 23rd came under attack from the air: strafing and bombing caused some casualties. For the next few days the advance continued without notable incident. The war appeared to be going well: on 7 April contact was made between [Eighth Army](#) armoured cars and American troops; the [First Army](#) was exerting pressure in the north; the enemy was withdrawing slowly on all North African fronts. As they moved northward, the troops were delighted with the change in the scenery. After the scrub-covered, salt-marsh country and the more or less barren desert came barley and other green crops, groves of olive trees, and fields streaked and sometimes covered with the red, white and yellow of poppies, daisies and other flowers. The Colosseum at El Djem evoked the admiration of those who inspected this imposing ruin. The town of [Sousse](#) was the scene of an enthusiastic welcome from both French and Arabs. But the move into close country meant a change in the character of the fighting: the hills, which north of [Sousse](#) came closer to the coast, and the cactus hedges and natural cover meant that the days when tanks deployed as in the open desert were ended. Henceforth most operations were to be primarily infantry affairs, and the foot-soldiers were to discover how difficult it is to dislodge a determined enemy from strong positions in hills and close country.

On 13 April 5 Brigade advanced from the squalid village of [Sidi Bou Ali](#) towards the dominating [Djebel Garci](#). After passing through some olive groves and along dusty tracks marked off by high cactus, the 23rd, in the lead, emerged on open ground with only demolished railway and telegraph lines to indicate that the enemy had passed that way. The general plan was to take the high ground of Garci and swing towards [Enfidaville](#) from the west, but about 2.30 p.m. [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) decided that Garci was too big, and that the same purpose would be served if the brigade took [Takrouna](#). Directly ahead of the advancing brigade and a mile or so to the east of Garci lay this rocky, steep-sided hill about 600 feet high. The squat stone buildings on the top of the [Takrouna](#) pinnacle gave it a sinister appearance, as if they belonged to a Berber bandit's headquarters. There was something particularly challenging about this superlatively good observation point, which the troops called ' [Castle Hill](#) ' until they learned its correct name. Within a few days, [Takrouna](#) became

a name full of meaning and memories for all New Zealanders in that part of North Africa.

Brigadier Kippenberger decided that the quick attack—gatecrashing the position—was the tactic to try, especially if, as appeared likely, the enemy had not occupied prepared defences. Without even halting the 23rd, now moving forward in its nine-column desert formation, he gave his orders to Colonel Romans. As he says in **Infantry Brigadier**: 'It was no use waiting for the guns, strung out behind over miles of narrow tracks, and we moved on at once. Reg ran his car alongside mine, I pointed and shouted and he sent an orderly on a motor-cycle with orders to his companies. It struck me that it was not a very scientific way of starting a battle but the alternative was hours of delay waiting for the guns and completely under observation. It might come off if the enemy were completely unready, or if they were Italians only'.

As the 23rd moved towards **Takrouna**, a convoy of enemy trucks could be seen speeding along the lateral road which ran from **Enfidaville** across the front of **Takrouna**. This looked promising. If only the guns could have been farther forward, they would have had plenty of good targets. But before even the 23rd carriers' heavy machine guns could get on to these tempting targets, salvo after salvo of heavy shells began to arrive. The vehicles speeded up and bumped and bounced over the rough ground. More and more shells burst among them but, although one man was killed and six were wounded, no vehicle was knocked out. But the enemy was quite obviously well prepared to make a stand and, as the stream, the Wadi el Boul, about a mile short of **Takrouna**, appeared likely to halt wheeled vehicles, the Brigadier decided to call off the impromptu attack. By this time, the leading infantry had debussed and their trucks had hastened back out of range. The companies were extending into line and advancing on foot when Colonel Romans, acting on the Brigadier's instructions, gave the order to dig in.

Short of the Wadi el Boul ran a low ridge, surmounted by the Arab village of Hamadet el Salah, a mere collection of stone hovels surrounded by cactus hedges. The companies dug in on the reverse slope of this ridge, with B on the right, A in the centre, D on the left and C in rear in reserve. Some of the A Company men prepared positions in the village itself and were able to observe **Takrouna** and the surrounding country through gaps in the cactus. Only incidentally were they able to seize the

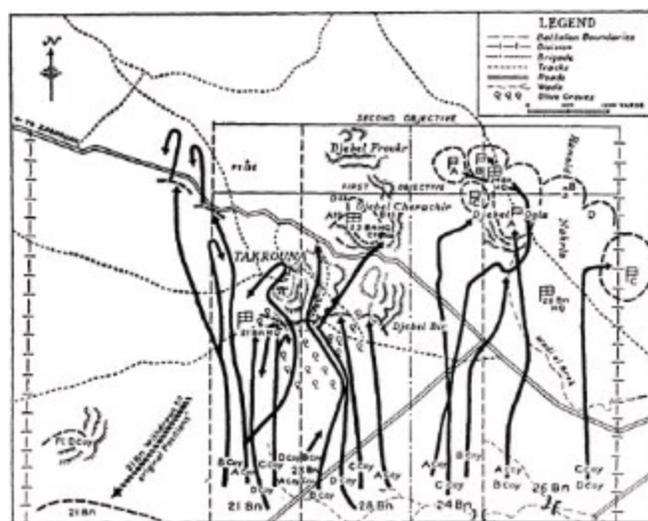
stray fowl or nest of eggs. At 6 p.m., to the accompaniment of more shelling, the Brigadier held a conference of his commanding officers at the 23rd headquarters and stated his intention to hold the ground occupied that day. The 28th was required to bring up two companies on the left flank of the 23rd, patrol forward with its other two companies and later complete the line with them. Later on, the 21st came up to occupy a position farther to the left.

Private diaries give the picture of events as 23rd men saw them that day. Thus Stone wrote: 'As we approached mountains Hun began plastering us with 15 guns. [Castle Hill](#) is very high and impossible to take in day time. Till 6 p.m. we were plastered unmercifully. Cyril [Owen](#),¹¹ my No. 2 on Bren gun, killed and several wounded. Bad Luck! Thank God we were able to get down with our holes. Attack cancelled. Heads did not expect such opposition.' Johnston agreed: 'We received rather a severe shelling en route. Needless to say, it didn't take us too long to dig slitties for ourselves. Moved further forward after dark and dug in our mortar positions. Seemingly the Hun intends to make a bit of a stand here in the hills.'

After dark, too, the unit anti-tank guns were moved well forward and two platoons from 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion—No. 12 on the right and No. 5 on the left—came up on the flanks. Apart from this activity in the area, the troops did not have a very comfortable night with only greatcoats and one blanket per man, and with mosquitoes voraciously hunting for human blood the whole night long. Shortly after midnight, Lieutenant Hugh [Montgomery](#)¹² took a patrol from 13 Platoon across the stream to the nearest road without encountering any enemy. This patrol, the first in the [Takrouna](#) sector, did not penetrate far enough to discover any information of consequence.

During the next three or four days, enemy activity was restricted to shelling. The unit mortars, the attached MMGs and the artillery engaged enemy transport and other targets. The war became static. The mosquitoes, however, were extremely active and many soldiers had swollen faces to show how effective were the raids of these insects. To secure more information on enemy positions, more patrols went out. Thus, on the night of 16–17 April, Lieutenant Fred Marett, A. D. [Alexander](#)¹³ and Eric Batchelor approached the foot of [Takrouna](#). They got quite close to an enemy working party and examined several empty trenches. In daylight on 17 April,

the IO, Lieutenant Arthur Bailey, and Private Dawson¹⁴ carried out a daring reconnaissance which showed that the enemy was using mortars and guns to defend Takrouna. As some reports indicated that the enemy might be falling back, stronger probing of the position was ordered. That night, therefore, the 23rd sent out two fighting patrols, one from B Company under Lieutenant Alex Robins and the other from D Company under Second-Lieutenant Ken Clark.¹⁵ Robins was instructed to act on his own initiative and discretion but, if possible, to get to the top of Takrouna and hold there till reinforced. Robins and his patrol returned at 3.15 a.m., reporting that the enemy appeared to be using dogs to give the alarm when patrols approached, that 40 to 50 enemy were seen digging weapon pits with a compressor on the lower slopes of Takrouna, and that machine guns covering the working party had forced the patrol to withdraw. Clark's patrol had similar if less exciting experiences farther east. On the night of 18–19 April Lieutenant Arthur Parker took a 'recce' patrol forward. It served to confirm earlier reports of the alertness and defensive preparations of the enemy. None of these patrols had been markedly successful, but they indicated clearly enough that the enemy was consolidating his defensive positions and that a full-scale attack would be required to dislodge him.



THE CAPTURE OF TAKROUNA, 19-20 APRIL 1943
the capture of takrouna, 19–20 april 1943

By this time, the Maoris had been withdrawn to the rear to prepare for the forthcoming attack and the 21st had come up on the left of the 23rd. Sixth Brigade had come forward on the right of the 5th. Fourth Indian and 7 Armoured Divisions moved into position on the left of the New Zealand Division, while 50 Division was

shaping up to the [Enfidaville](#) coastal sector. In fact, however, the [Eighth Army's](#) primary role at this time was to draw enemy forces from the north where, three or four days later, the [First Army](#) and [2 United States Corps](#) were to launch an all-out attack on [Bizerta](#) and [Tunis](#). The enemy line, protecting the reinforced 'fortress of [Tunis](#)', ran westward from [Enfidaville](#) and then in a north-westerly direction across the peninsula to the other coast west of [Bizerta](#). In keeping with the plan for the [Eighth Army](#) to occupy the maximum enemy force in the south while the [First Army](#) delivered the knockout blow in the north were the preparations for attack made on the [Enfidaville](#) front. Thus, on the 5 Brigade front, the crossings over the Wadi el Boul made by the sappers at night and the bringing up of more guns were clearly visible to the enemy from his positions on the hills. Naturally enough, the enemy took counter measures and precautions which were to make any advance in the [Takrouna](#) area a hazardous and difficult undertaking.

By the morning of 19 April, plans for the [Eighth Army](#) attack were ready. Fiftieth Northumbrian Division was to probe towards [Enfidaville](#) in the coastal sector, the New Zealanders were to attack in the centre, and 4 Indian Division was to attack [Djebel Garci](#). In the New Zealand sector, 6 Brigade was to attack on the right and 5 Brigade on the left. At 9 a.m. [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) gave his detailed orders for 5 Brigade. The 28th on the right and the 21st on the left were to take the first objective, and the 23rd was to take the second. The Maoris were given the formidable task of taking [Takrouna](#) itself, [Djebel Bir](#) (the hill feature about half a mile east of [Takrouna](#)), and part of [Djebel Cherachir](#), the rocky hill north of Bir. The 21st was to take the slopes close to but west of [Takrouna](#) and join up with the Maoris on the [Enfidaville- Zaghouan](#) road, which ran across the front north of Bir and [Takrouna](#). The 23rd was to follow the Maoris' advance through the valley between [Takrouna](#) and Bir, form up on the [Enfidaville- Zaghouan](#) road, attack from a start line laid by its own 'I' section about 200 yards forward of the road and a short distance behind the first objective, and take [Djebel Froukr](#), the brigade's final objective. The Brigadier indicated verbally that, if the 28th and 21st were unable to reach their objective up to time, the 23rd was to fight to reach its start line and aim at capturing [Cherachir](#) as a first step to taking [Froukr](#). Zero hour for the first phase was fixed at 11 p.m., when the artillery—six field and two medium regiments were employed on the New Zealand front—would open on the first line of the barrage table. The rate of advance was laid down as 100 yards in two minutes.

Soon after midday, Colonel Romans issued his orders to his company commanders. The 23rd was to attack with two companies forward, B on the right under Captain Stan Wilson, and D on the left under Captain Black, and the other two companies 150 yards back, C on the right under Captain Slee and A on the left under Captain Thomas. All necessary plans for bringing up supporting arms and for exploiting from the objective were made but, in the event, circumstances were to dictate otherwise.

During the remainder of 19 April, information and orders were passed down to the fighting soldiers and final preparations made. Everyone was confident that, as in all the more recent battles, everything had been done that could be done to make the attack a success. Some of the officers were a little apprehensive about the possible need to fight for a start line, but most men were genuinely pleased with the prospect of leaving the low-lying country where mosquitoes abounded. Indeed, some were heard to remark or to agree that 'an attack on [Takrouna](#) can't be any worse than staying here to be eaten alive'—such was the irritation caused by mosquito bites and loss of sleep from various causes.

After a hot cup of tea at 9.30 p.m., the companies moved to their forming-up place. Promptly at 11 p.m. the artillery opened fire. At first, all shells were flying towards the enemy and, as one officer remarked to his men as the sound of the supporting guns broke the silence of the night, 'It's music to my ears! It's music to my ears!' But very soon there were discords and jarring notes in the music as enemy shells and mortar bombs began to arrive on or around the route the 23rd was following. As Corporal W. Smellie described this early stage: 'We marched past our M. guns in full operation cunningly concealed in the crop. The clatter from them gave one that thrill of assurance which spurs a soldier on when marching into battle, and the remarks of optimism were "I wouldn't like to be in Jerry's boots now", or "The Maoris will be giving him Hell". However it wasn't long before we were chewing our own words.'

As the unit advanced, in the order Battalion HQ, D, B, C, A, engineers and provost, the IO had difficulty in locating the tree and other landmarks by which he had proposed to lead the way up the valley between [Takrouna](#) and Bir, and Colonel Romans took over the guiding himself, leading his men across country and over the

road towards the entrance to the valley. The enemy fire intensified as the battalion advanced. The southern entry to the gap between [Takrouna](#) and Bir had apparently been marked out as 'killing ground' by the planners of the enemy defences and it was the target for heavy artillery and nebelwerfer concentrations. The valley itself was also covered by criss-crossing machine-gun fire from both sides and on its floor were S-mines and other anti-personnel mines. The Maori companies ran into shell, mortar and machine-gun fire, suffered many casualties and lost contact with each other. As the 23rd advanced from the road and began to move up a wadi and track into the valley, its men came under increasingly heavy fire. In addition to the criss-crossing machine-gun fire on fixed lines, trip-wires at ankle to knee height, attached to tins or other warning devices in weapon pits at the foot of [Djebel Bir](#), brought down bursts of Spandau fire on the men unfortunate enough to stumble over them. In the growing barley and among some olive trees were more trip-wires attached to S-mines and box-mines. Casualties among the forward companies quickly mounted.

Two of those wounded, Blampied and Stone, had previously been through several battles. Their impressions confirm the general view that the fire in this sector was viciously intense. Stone wrote next day: 'Mines and boobytraps everywhere.... I collected couple of bullets through legs when I touched a trip wire. The fighting around [Takrouna](#) was some of the worst I have been in. In fact it was Hell'. Blampied says: 'We headed along a wadi. Jerry's fire got heavier ... we lay down while a recce forward was made ... Hell seemed to break loose in the wadi then, mortar bombs and bullets were flying all around —dozens of our chaps were hit here.'

The valley appeared to be filled with smoke. Apart from the red tracer, the bursting flashes of light as mortar bombs exploded, and the spurts of fire from machine guns, all was dark and men groped their way forward or dived for cover. Colonel Romans called a Bren carrier, which was travelling with his headquarters group, to deal with some Spandau fire. Corporal Smellie, with 16 Platoon of D Company, and therefore one of those farthest forward at the time, writes: 'Dave [Smith](#) ¹⁶ from Dunedin was the Sgt. and he said "I can't see" and "The ground is too broken for a Carrier but I'll give it a go." They started off in a nose dive and didn't get very far before an axle broke or some such.' Colonel Romans was himself badly wounded in the leg at this stage and, according to plan, Captain Thomas was

summoned from the rear to take command and carry on with the attack.

By this time, all the platoon commanders in D Company, Lieutenants [McPherson](#)¹⁷ and K. W. Clark and Sergeant S. Herbison, had been wounded, as had been Lieutenant Lex Reeves, the signals officer, Captain Stan Wilson, commander of B Company, and [Second-Lieutenant Dan Davis](#), a B Company platoon commander. Several of the unit's most experienced NCOs and men were also wounded or killed about this same time. Smellie's memory of the occasion gives a good picture of the confusion and difficulties: 'Between getting wounded out and trying to organize an attack while we were being attacked, there was a good old Kiwi mix-up going on. Sgts. were promoting themselves to Platoon commanders, Corporals to Sgts. and so on and in many cases they no sooner promoted themselves than they were wounded, but everyone stood their ground and there was no panic.'

Some of the leaders who realised that the Maoris had been unable to take their objective were considering the wisdom of continuing the advance when Captain Thomas arrived and took a firm grip of the situation. He quickly gave orders for the advance to continue, despite the need to fight to reach the battalion start line. Captain Black got D Company into formation for attack with 16 Platoon, under Lance-Sergeant W. D. H. Lory (and, when he became a casualty, under Corporal Smellie), on the right, and 17 Platoon, under Sergeant Noel [McLean](#),¹⁸ on the left, and 18 Platoon, under Sergeant Frank Muir,¹⁹ in the rear. Lieutenant Alex Robins brought part of B Company up on the right of D. Thomas says: 'The companies were close enough to be handled personally from the centre so I called on the men after a brief talk with the officers and we prepared to move forward "A la Galatos" with every man firing to the front and yelling to give confidence as well as, I hoped, to terrify the odd Hun.'

Actually, the battalion was so strung out over a hundred yards or more that, in the noise of bursting shells and the clatter of machine guns and other weapons, Thomas's call 'Follow me!' was not heard very far back and the rear companies were quite some time in learning what was being done in front. The casualties in officers, NCOs and connecting files also made communication difficult. Indeed, some of those at the rear of C Company understood that they had been ordered to hold fast where they were. Some such word probably did go back at the time of the hold-up and the reorganisation prior to Thomas's taking over but, if so, it was meant to apply to the

limited period until a definite plan was decided upon. Getting everyone informed of the plan or the decision of the moment in that fire-drenched area around midnight was impracticable. As Bob Wilson, a C Company NCO, wrote later: 'It was nigh impossible to hear oneself think above the din, dust and fire, let alone fully understand an order to proceed or stay put. I remember our platoon officer, Max Cross, yelling in my ear to stay where we were while he reconnoitred forward to contact our advancing troops. He would send back a runner for us. No fault of his that I didn't see him again till the following night!'

Meanwhile, the barrage could be heard falling about 1000 yards ahead, and Thomas decided that, if any advantage was to be secured from following it, he must advance at once without waiting to be sure that the rear companies were following. Consequently, with only D Company, part of B and the 'I' men from Battalion Headquarters, he went forward and the remaining elements of B, A and C followed separately at different times.

With Thomas, Black, Robins, Bailey, and senior NCOs such as Jim Richardson, the CSM of D Company, giving a hearty and determined lead, every man shouted loudly and those in front fired their rifles, Brens or tommy guns in short bursts as they advanced. Most men caught the thrill of participating in this noisy, energetic advance. As Thomas himself says: 'We went forward with terrific enthusiasm in advances of about 200 yards, going to ground together and firing concerted bursts on the spandaus on the two features. These were easy to pick up as the red tracer pinpointed them to us'. Robins confirms: 'We were using much of our ammo firing as we advanced, but the morale was very high'. The intimidating effect of this 'Galatas' method of advance may be judged from the report of Lieutenant Haig,²⁰ a Maori officer, who encountered Thomas and his men as he was trying to locate other members of his company. 'Their advance was a particularly vociferous one and I assure you it was a fearsome thing to encounter, especially when on one's own'.

The advance in line was continued in this manner to the [Enfidaville- Zaghouan](#) road. A few more casualties were sustained en route, some from anti-personnel mines and some from machine-gun fire. Twice when they halted momentarily, once at a cactus hedge and once at a shallow ditch, both of which ran at right angles to [Djebel Bir](#), the men came under heavy machine-gun fire from that feature. The road,

too, was under fire, but it was crossed in a rush. Here Thomas made a check on his numbers. As 16 Platoon had become temporarily detached through keeping touch with some of B Company, Captain Black could report only 17 in D Company. Lieutenant Robins had only 20 of B Company with him. Shortly afterwards Smellie arrived with 16 Platoon and he was followed by Lieutenant McArthur, Corporal J. Murdoch and the rest of B Company. In the meantime, Thomas had sent the IO, Lieutenant Bailey, back for A and C Companies, and had decided to take the nearest hill feature, Cherachir.

Thomas established his headquarters in a bend of the deep but dry wadi about 200 yards north of the road and told Robins to take the eastern end of Cherachir while Black and his men took the western. If the 23rd was to hold its ground forward of the road and take part of the brigade objective in that locality, it was necessary to dislodge the enemy from the high ground immediately above the new headquarters. The two small bands of infantry now set about this task.

On the right, Robins decided to make a silent attack in line, with two Brens posted on the right flank to cover the advance and to hit back at any enemy machine guns. Two parties of Germans with three machine guns moved back before B Company and stopped once or twice to fire down at the Southlanders. But the Brens put a stop to this firing from above. The gully up which Robins and his men advanced was very steep, rough and stony, but although the enemy on or over the crest above fired mortars and flares right over the heads of the advancing infantry, the advance was apparently unobserved and the B Company men reached the crest without casualty. Before they could consolidate, however, they came under fire from enemy positions farther along the ridge to the left, and also from the two parties which had retreated before them and which were now only a short distance away to the right. With Corporals Kelly ²¹ and Greenhalgh ²² showing plenty of fight and directing all the fire they could at these Germans on the right, B Company was soon rid of this problem. As Robins says: 'They like ourselves had no prepared positions. We engaged them and had the advantage of their being silhouetted. We inflicted casualties and the rest made off down to the right.'

Farther along to the left of B Company on Cherachir, the D Company men met with more formidable opposition, but their efforts relieved the pressure on B Company and prevented Thomas's Battalion Headquarters from being seriously

overlooked at dawn. Captain Black led his men forward in extended formation up the almost sheer face of the bluff at the western flank of Cherachir. He and his Company Sergeant-Major, Richardson, made determined efforts to storm the crest and to force the enemy to retreat to the north. During this operation Black was killed—although this was not known till some days later—and Richardson, Corporal [Common](#)²³ and others were badly wounded. On the right, Sergeant Noel McLean led his men with conspicuous courage and dealt effectively with some of the opposition. After some delays and casualties, McLean with 17 Platoon joined 18 Platoon under Sergeant Frank Muir, who organised a series of short bayonet charges. As all officers had been killed or wounded, Muir took command of the company and completed the capture of the nearer slopes, a task in which he was assisted by the fire of Smellie and his men who had ascended the hill farther east with B Company. Corporal [Challis](#)²⁴ of B also brought fire to bear on enemy positions at a critical juncture. Muir, McLean and Smellie now consolidated with their respective platoons in positions on the southern slopes below the crest, which was rendered untenable by sporadic enemy shelling. The enemy artillery responsible apparently did not know that their own troops still occupied the northern slopes, but their presence was shown by the odd grenade which continued to come over the crest till after daybreak.

Once the barrage had ceased at 1.44 a.m. and the noise of shelling had died down sufficiently, Germans could be heard shouting from one high feature to another all round Thomas's headquarters. As they were thought to be checking on the damage done by the attackers and to be organising some concerted action, Thomas gave orders for confusing shouts to be raised whenever the Germans called out. From the distant rear, the noise of transport and tanks could be heard. Possibly this worried the Germans as the word 'Panzer' could be distinguished in their shouting. Several members of the 23rd took up the call of 'Panzer!' 'Panzer!' and no doubt added to the fears of some Germans. Quite unaware of the presence of Thomas and his handful of men, a party of about twenty armed Germans, making for the north-west, dashed along the wadi past Battalion Headquarters, without either group engaging the other. Corporals Challis and Smellie brought in or shouted down reports from B and D Companies, along with requests for reinforcement. Three German prisoners—the first of a steady trickle—were also brought in. According to W. D. Dawson, an 'I' section man who spoke fluent German, 'a Jerry prisoner said that his mates up on the hills were willing to surrender'. Thomas therefore got the

prisoners to call to their mates to come in and give themselves up. The only result was a further series of calls from the Germans trying to make sense out of the confused situation.

Other groups of the 23rd were now arriving and were promptly given tasks by Thomas. Thus, when Captain Slee arrived with 13 Platoon under Lieutenant Hugh Montgomery soon after 1.30 a.m., this platoon was immediately sent to take the southern end of Cherachir, to the south of where B Company was already in position. The enemy on this part of Cherachir were the two parties which had retreated before B's advance and had continued to give trouble from the right flank. Although slightly under strength, through the loss of Lance-Sergeant [Roberts](#)²⁵ and others on the approach march, 13 Platoon attacked energetically up the rugged hillside. Aply led by Lieutenant Montgomery and Sergeant [Jeffries](#),²⁶ the men fanned out in face of Spandau, machine-pistol and other fire. Corporal Eric [Stoddart](#)²⁷ worked round to a flank before coming in on a Spandau post with his tommy gun blazing. He and Montgomery wiped out the opposition on the crest, but not before Stoddart was badly wounded with a grenade. Lance-Corporal [Clearwater](#)²⁸ and Private [Atkinson](#)²⁹ were killed in this assault and, in addition to Stoddart, Privates [Mora](#)³⁰ and [Jose](#)³¹ were wounded. Assisted by his remaining section leaders, Corporal [Hoare](#),³² Lance-Corporals [Allan](#)³³ and [Tulley](#),³⁴ Montgomery completed the occupation of the end of Cherachir, knocking out all the enemy posts which might have given B Company further trouble and made Thomas's headquarters untenable. As evacuation of the wounded was impossible, they were placed in a cave found half-way down the hill.

Some time later, Lieutenant Montgomery discovered that a knoll at the end of Cherachir was occupied by Maoris of D Company [28 Battalion](#). These Maoris, under Captain [Ornberg](#),³⁵ had been surprised to hear shouts in both German and English coming from the north of the road, but a reconnaissance by Lieutenant [Lambert](#)³⁶ revealed that members of the 23rd were there. Contact was made with Captain Slee and the Maoris took over the southern end of Cherachir just north of the road.

Other elements of the 23rd arrived during the early hours of the morning. Thus Lieutenant A. Parker, with his platoon reduced in number to ten, covered the wadi in which Battalion Headquarters was located and the flat area between the wadi and Cherachir. The remainder of A Company, now under Lieutenant Cliff Hunt, took over

an area west of headquarters and on the flat between the road and Cherachir. The perimeter was completed by 14 and 15 Platoons of C Company, which Lieutenant Marett brought forward about 4 a.m., after he and Eric Batchelor had been sent forward by the Adjutant to investigate the situation. These platoons held the road line in rear of headquarters and provided a somewhat elastic link between A Company and 13 Platoon.

Enemy parties were still moving around and shouting to one another and fire was directed at the battalion posts which had been located. But, by dawn, Thomas had completed his consolidation and held practically the whole of Cherachir and the area between it and the [Zaghuan](#) road. The companies were sited for all-round defence, and those that had ammunition left directed fire into the rear of [Takrouna](#) and Bir at enemy posts there. The 23rd's isolation was greater than was realised at the time: 6 Brigade's attack had succeeded, but the nearest unit was out of touch to the east; the 21st had fought desperately to reach the road but had suffered such heavy casualties in reaching positions dominated by [Takrouna](#) that it had been withdrawn to its original area; the Maoris had also suffered losses but, in addition to the D Company men now associated with C Company of the 23rd, they had parties of about a platoon strength still active on the southern slopes of [Takrouna](#) and Bir. Since he was confident that the [Nottinghamshire Yeomanry](#) tanks and the unit's supporting arms would get through to him and bring ammunition, Thomas decided to take a chance on the ammunition question. He thought that an aggressive show of strength might deter the enemy from counter-attacking and also clear him from some of his more menacing posts. Therefore, shortly after daylight, he ordered his men to engage the nearest enemy with all weapons and authorised the firing of all ammunition down to five rounds per man.

As he himself writes: "I think it worked. First, we tackled the Huns on our front. We were more or less in the centre of a saucer and from there commanded all the slopes upwards and we soon had the Hun abandoning the few posts he had held on to during the night... Then we tackled the rear of [Takrouna](#). Now all the Hun and Iti positions were beautiful targets from the rear and we were firing right into the open doorways of shelters and dugouts. A large party of Itis came down the feature quite early and wound round towards 21 with their white flags... We could also fire onto Huns on the rear of Dj Bir at the same time as they were engaging the now

advancing Maoris. Some forty of these surrendered, some coming back to us and others going forward to meet the Maoris.'

B Company, in roughly dug positions below the crest of Cherachir, probably had the most trouble and the greatest success. As Robins reports: 'With the coming of daylight, we were well pinned down from [Takrouna](#) and posts on Cherachir. We returned the fire and were successful in chasing out one post that was bothering us and capturing about twenty Huns who were wandering about and who were probably sent to counter us. But not knowing exactly where we were they walked right into us. Things quietened a little as the day wore on.' After describing 14 Platoon's loss of ten men in the advance to the north of the road, Bob Wilson mentions that only seven of the platoon got to the wadi, where Lieutenant J. L. [Johnston](#)³⁷ directed them into a re-entrant. Writing of the efforts of Ian Thomson, J. [Whipp](#),³⁸ E. [Thomson](#),³⁹ D. [Gillanders](#)⁴⁰ and himself, Wilson says: 'In the first confusing hour, we had our fun. Everybody quietly opened up on choosy targets.... 'Twas a shame that Jimmy Whipp bowled an Itie having his morning constitutional "squat" on the rise about 500 yards away! Five Jerries, creeping through the wadi 200 yards away, received all we had at 100 yards. Three went down but two got away! A green flare a few minutes later from further back brought finale to our movements through mortar, spandau and sniper fire from our immediate right above the B Company lads.'

Meanwhile, with no sign of supporting arms or tanks and with enemy activity around Point 136 suggesting a counterattack, Captain Thomas sent Lieutenant Bailey back to Brigade Headquarters about 9 a.m. After a hazardous journey down the valley, Bailey gave the Brigadier a detailed report on the position, stressing the danger of enemy moves from Point 136. As a result, within a few minutes the artillery landed a 'stonk' on this feature, to the great delight of Thomas and his men. Later in the day, further artillery fire was brought down on Point 136.

The scale and intensity of enemy fire rendered the movement of vehicles up the valley virtually impossible. The tanks of the [Nottinghamshire Yeomanry](#), expected to reach the [Zaghuan](#) road about 4 a.m., were held up by minefields and gunfire. The troop commander supporting the 23rd reported to [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) that he had lost contact with the infantry. Ordered to get his tanks forward, he reported again about 6 a.m. that minefields south of [Djebel Bir](#) were holding up his tanks.

Later the tanks assisted the Maoris to secure the surrender of Germans on Bir and about 7 a.m. two tanks reached the [Zaghouan](#) road. One crossed the road to the south-east of Cherachir but promptly ran on to a mine and was immobilised. No other tanks reached the 23rd, although one made some progress up the valley and shot up targets on the east face of [Takrouna](#).

The HQ Company officers knew how important it was to get the various supporting arms forward but, despite several determined attempts, they were unable to get them up to the area occupied by Thomas and his men. During the night, the Bren carriers did good work in evacuating wounded to the 23rd and 28th RAPs. At dawn, acting on instructions from the Brigadier, Lieutenant Lawrence placed his carriers in fire positions on the brigade's right flank, a little to the east of Bir. There some of the carriers were able to combine with the tanks in firing on enemy posts still occupied on the nearer slopes of Bir. Heavy artillery and mortar fire prevented the carriers from getting up to the unit area. The officers in charge of No. 12 MMG Platoon and the anti-tank guns made several fruitless attempts to reconnoitre a route forward. Captain Robin Deans, commanding the 23rd anti-tank platoon, was wounded while engaged in this task and had to be evacuated. Lieutenant Don Grant, his second-in-command, made strenuous efforts to get at least two six-pounder guns up to the required area but eventually had to be content with placing them in position covering the southern entrance to the valley between [Takrouna](#) and Bir. Neither the sappers nor the artillery FOO ⁴¹ attached to the 23rd were any more successful in getting forward to Battalion Headquarters. The FOO, Captain [Muirhead](#), ⁴² had his armoured car stuck in a watercourse and decided that he could secure the best possible observation from the top of [Takrouna](#) itself. He therefore threw in his lot with those engaged in scaling the southern face of that feature and distinguished himself by climbing to the top more than once.

The conquest of [Takrouna](#) proper was the work of Maoris of B Company of [28 Battalion](#) led by Sergeant [Rogers](#) ⁴³ and Lance-Sergeant [Manahi](#). ⁴⁴ The epic story of their achievements is told elsewhere, but mention must be made here of the work of Sergeant W. J. Smith ⁴⁵ of A Company of the 23rd. Separated from his company in the advance, Smith joined the Maoris in their ascent of [Takrouna](#). He and Private [Aranui](#) ⁴⁶ gained a crag from which they poured fire into Italian trenches below them. Later they used a cluster of telephone cables to reach the main ledge, where they

secured the surrender of a German artillery officer and his signaller. Other 23rd men, separated from their companies, joined in tackling [Takrouna](#). Thus, Private [Stan Smith](#) ⁴⁷ of C Company climbed to the top and, with an unidentified A Company man and two Maoris, helped to silence the opposition in one sector there.

But the main body of the 23rd was so far forward that it was virtually isolated and without supporting arms or tanks. Fortunately, the enemy launched no counter-attack upon Thomas and his men; they were too preoccupied with the ebb and flow of the struggle on top of [Takrouna](#) to bother much about Cherachir. Nevertheless, troop movements around Point 136 gave concern from time to time, and to be able to call directly over the air for artillery fire was felt to be an urgent necessity. Eventually, after mid-afternoon, the Adjutant, [Captain Ross](#), ⁴⁸ got through to the [Zaghuan](#) road in the only soft-skinned vehicle to pass up the valley. When the advance began the previous evening, the 23rd had two links with Brigade Headquarters, a light No. 18 set which could be conveniently manhandled and the heavier, somewhat cumbersome No. 11 set carried in the Adjutant's jeep. When the Colonel was wounded, the 18 set was knocked out by a direct hit, as was the wireless link with the companies. The Adjutant ran his jeep into the shelter of a watercourse, from where he reported to the Brigade Major, [Major Fairbrother](#), ⁴⁹ on the situation of 28 and 23 Battalions. Told to remain on the air as his was the only forward link still operating, and therefore the only means Brigade possessed of discovering anything about the battle, the Adjutant remained in the wadi, reporting as he secured fresh information from Maret's solo reconnaissance and from such walking wounded as passed. In the morning, Brigade Headquarters advised that the tanks would provide all the communication the 23rd needed, but when this means did not prove satisfactory, the Adjutant was told to wait for an armoured vehicle to take his precious No. 11 set up to the battalion.

A White armoured car duly arrived but, before the wireless could be transferred, it was holed in several places and had a wheel rendered unserviceable. About 2.30 p.m. a more urgent call for artillery fire came and, after this had been passed on, the Adjutant decided to run the gauntlet of shell and machinegun fire in his jeep. Although the vehicle was hit in several places by Spandau fire, [Ross](#) and his signaller, Private [Cheeseman](#), ⁵⁰ reached the shelter of a gravel pit at the northern end of Bir just off the [Zaghuan](#) road. Here Cheeseman dismantled the radio and

broke it up, with its two heavy batteries, into five one-man loads. German prisoners, warned' in advance of the consequences of sabotage, meekly carried the wireless set into Thomas's headquarters, where Cheeseman quickly reassembled it. Thereafter, in Thomas's words, 'we were able to keep in touch with brigade, particularly to call for fire on any enemy movement. And we gave some good targets.' Many of the enemy on Point 136 and Froukr were out of range of small arms and had begun to move in full view, with the result that the first artillery concentrations were very effective.

In the 23rd companies the day had passed slowly but not without incident. After their early morning burst of aggressive shooting at enemy posts, the men made themselves as inconspicuous as possible. Although some shell and mortar fire came into the area and snipers and machine-gunners gave trouble from time to time, few casualties were sustained. Fred Marett reports: 'A German sniper must have been close because for two hours his odd shots played havoc. A C Coy man on the Bren was definitely a marked man. He spent an hour getting into position, looked up once, and was shot clean through the head.' Robins indicates that B Company continued to be aggressive: 'We fired on transport moving towards the back of [Takrouna](#) and pinned down all afternoon a party of about fifteen Huns moving across the flat towards [Takrouna](#) in front of A Company. We were firing over the heads of A Company.' Montgomery says: 'No counter attack developed, though shelling and mortaring continued unabated all day with sporadic MG fire.' D Company men found the range too great for effective shooting at the Germans seen to the north-west. Bailey, the IO, records, however, that 'the men had fun sniping at enemy in pockets of resistance.' Actually, the ammunition supply did not permit of very much shooting. Marett sums up: 'From daylight to dark on that eventful day was spent in sorting ourselves out, trying to locate the snipers, endeavouring to decide what side owned what ground, using sparingly what ammunition we had, digging a slit trench in hard ground, and devouring cold bully and biscuit'. As the day wore on, most men became more conscious of the exhaustion resulting from the efforts of the previous night. Smellie says: 'it was just impossible to keep awake and fighting exhaustion was very hard on the nervous system.' Consequently, few members of the 23rd were sorry to hear that they were to be relieved in their forward positions that night by 25 Battalion.

On hearing that 5 Brigade had suffered over 400 casualties, [General Freyberg](#) placed the 25th under command of [Brigadier Kippenberger](#), who wanted to relieve the 23rd. The commander of the 25th was Lieutenant-Colonel Tom Morten, a former company commander of the 23rd, and mutually satisfactory arrangements for the relief were quickly made in the late afternoon of 20 April. About 9 p.m. the 25th companies were to follow the 6 Brigade axis of advance, some distance to the east of Bir, and then move along the [Zaghuan](#) road to the 23rd area. This avoided the valley route, which continued to receive much attention from the enemy. Indeed, [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) later described the gap at its southern entrance as being as badly pock-marked with shell and mortar fire as [Flanders](#) fields had been in the First World War.

In order to evacuate some of the non-walking wounded on the track through the valley and round a minefield, the Adjutant left just before dark with his jeep loaded with eight 23rd wounded and one badly wounded German. Damaged by fire on the way in, the jeep would not move under its own power, and therefore some German prisoners pulled on ropes from the front while others pushed behind. The Germans in front signalled with handkerchiefs to their friends still occupying weapon pits on [Takrouna](#), and the latter allowed the jeep to pass without firing a single shot at it.

The relief by the 25th passed off satisfactorily and appeared to be completed by 11.15 p.m. The company relieving B Company, however, went astray and B was not relieved till nearer 1 a.m. With the exception of that company, the infantry companies marched out to the [Enfidaville- Djebibina](#) road, where trucks met them and took them back to B Echelon; here a welcome hot meal was served and the men settled down for even more welcome sleep. B Company missed the transport and the meal, camped down in the open south of the [Enfidaville](#) road, and only reached B Echelon and a meal after daylight on 21 April.

That day, while the 21st and 28th continued the assault on [Takrouna](#), the 23rd reorganised, checked on casualties and rested. Its losses, incurred mainly in the valley entrance, were heavy. Thirteen were killed and 107 were wounded. Depressing though these casualties were, everyone had much satisfaction in knowing that a grand effort had been made to live up to a unit tradition, 'The 23rd always takes its objective'. In addition to taking about fifty prisoners from 104

Panzer Grenadier Regiment, the battalion had contributed to the capture of Bir and had hindered the enemy reinforcement of [Takrouna](#). Most 23rd soldiers engaged in that battle would agree with Private J. R. Johnston's diary entry: 'this battle is the toughest and bitterest we've ever experienced yet', and also with Alex Robins in his comment: 'Thomas's aggressive spirit and the fine example he set were the biggest factors in the Bn's success'. The dent made in the enemy line by the fighting at and around [Takrouna](#) was comparatively small and the ground captured did not serve as a springboard for further advances. Nevertheless, in the larger scheme of things, the New Zealand attack concentrated the attention of a very large enemy force in the south while the [First Army](#) mounted its successful attack in the north.

On 24 April Major Connolly, the battalion second-in-command, arrived from the LOB camp to take command of the 23rd. Next day, Anzac Day and Easter Sunday, Padre [Spence](#)⁵¹ conducted a service. Lieutenant McArthur paid a tribute to the Brigadier in reporting on this service in a letter written to his wife: 'The Brig attended our church service this morning. After the service he went out in front and said, "I have very little to say. I am proud and humble to be your commander." He then walked off as I don't think he could trust himself to say any more. But it was all that was necessary. [Kip](#) is a great soldier with utter disregard of his own personal safety but ever solicitous of that of the men under him and he is loved and respected by all'. The original Anzac Day was not forgotten, but the Brigadier and the men of the 23rd were thinking of the events and losses of the preceding few days.

On 26 April Lieutenants Kirk and Johnston arrived back with 44 men of the LOB party and 103 reinforcements. Strength was being built up again, both in numbers and in the individuals who had felt exhausted after the night attack. The distribution of National Patriotic Fund free issues of cigarettes, tobacco and chocolate, swimming in the [Mediterranean](#) off [Sidi Bou Ali](#), and freedom from strain all helped to fit the unit for its final period in the line in [Tunisia](#). On 29 April the Hon. F. Jones, Minister of Defence, addressed the troops and tried to answer some awkward questions.

On 4 May the New Zealand Division, now under the temporary command of [General Kippenberger](#), moved to [Djebibina](#), on the Pont du Fahs sector, some distance west of [Takrouna](#). The main task of the New Zealanders at this time when the [First Army](#) was about to deliver its final victory punch was to prevent the enemy from withdrawing troops from the south. But to distract the enemy's attention from

the north meant occupying ground close to his and making a show of force from time to time. On the night of 4–5 May, therefore, 5 Brigade relieved 2 King's Royal Rifles.

On the following night, the brigade moved forward again and took up a line across the road [Saouaf](#)-Pont du Fahs, with the 23rd on the right, the 21st on the left and the Maoris in reserve. Heavy shelling was experienced in this area, although no contact was made with the enemy until 6 May. On that day, patrols under Lieutenants McArthur, Kirk and [Edgar](#) ⁵² proved the feasibility of moving forward another two or three thousand yards and C and B Companies advanced to take Points 200 and 221 respectively. Lieutenant Max Cross's platoon, No. 14, over ran an enemy outpost, taking one prisoner from 433 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, and killing two of his comrades. No. 15 Platoon also hit the enemy: Private J. Slaven shot the first German to challenge and the platoon killed or wounded the other members of a section post. Captain Slee found that Point 200 was overlooked by a higher feature and that it was impossible to dig in. He therefore withdrew his men across a deep and rocky gully to a more satisfactory position. Kirk and his men were unable to get through a dense minefield of box and anti-personnel mines to take Point 221. They reported hearing German voices and successfully established the location of more than one enemy post.

The end of the first week of May brought good news from the north while the 23rd continued to exert pressure on its own front without becoming too heavily engaged. At 4 a.m. on 7 May, Colonel Connolly took a section of mortars forward to the C Company area and checked on the revised positions now occupied by the company. Accompanying the CO was the indefatigable IO, Bailey. Together they spotted some Germans lying low in their slit trenches on the other side of the gully forward of Point 200. In the CO's words, 'Bailey looked at them like a retriever dog and off. He stirred up hell and brought back a couple'. Later, Bailey increased his 'bag' to nine, but there was no sign of a general surrender on the 23rd front.

The news from the north that day was that the enemy defences were crumbling fast and that both [Bizerta](#) and [Tunis](#) had fallen. Possibly the news reached the enemy opposite. At any rate, the gunners in this force appeared more determined than ever to blaze away their reserves of ammunition in a hurry; they plastered indiscriminately the battalion's forward area, wounding Lieutenant J. L. Johnston and

killing Lieutenant Max Cross. Enemy shell and mortar fire also cut the signals cables to the forward companies so often that the signallers were under pressure to maintain communications. In this connection, a comparatively new reinforcement, Private [Whiteley](#),⁵³ distinguished himself by the cheerful and efficient manner in which he repaired lines under fire. When Whiteley was wounded on the following day, other signallers such as Privates [King](#)⁵⁴ and 'Bluey' [Smail](#),⁵⁵ and Corporals Ron [56](#) and Ernie [Ritchie](#)⁵⁷ carried on with their difficult work with equal cheerfulness and devotion to duty.

On 9 May, after more heavy fire from enemy guns and nebelwerfers, word came that the 23rd was to be relieved by the Free French under General Leclerc. The General himself visited the unit headquarters to arrange details. Unfortunately, transport movement before dusk brought on very heavy shelling during the withdrawal of the companies and three men were killed and five wounded. By 10.30 p.m., however, the battalion was out of the line for the last time in [Africa](#). The war around [Djebibina](#) had seen no major attacks, but the amount of shelling had taken its toll on the nerves of some men who had already been feeling the effect of a long campaign. Thus one private diary entry reads: 'Hot day, heavy shelling, I crack up', while the last entry in the unit diary for 9 May says: 'All ranks were very tired and strained and required a complete night's rest'. The unit's casualties for this part of the campaign were 1 officer and 4 other ranks killed, 2 officers and 12 other ranks wounded.

On 10 May 5 Brigade moved back to the area south of [Takrouna](#). From now on the men were able to enjoy organised and unorganised entertainments—swimming at the beach, the race meeting run by [1 NZ Mule Pack Company](#), in which the 23rd had its own representatives, the film shows provided by the [YMCA](#), and later, the limited official, and the not so limited unofficial, leave to [Tunis](#). On 13 May General Alexander notified Mr Churchill that all enemy resistance had ceased and the war in North Africa was over. General Alexander's Special Order of the Day told his troops: 'Today you stand as the conquerors and heroes of the North African shores. The world acknowledges your victory; history will acclaim your deeds.... this great victory ... will go down to history as one of the decisive battles of all time.' The men of the 23rd felt there was something unreal about this news since they had not been in at the death. Nevertheless, they derived much solid satisfaction from seeing the

columns and columns of prisoners that passed back to the camps in the next two or three days. General Alexander's despatch says: 'A quarter of a million men laid down their arms in unconditional surrender; six hundred and sixty-three escaped.' It was a great victory and the battalion was proud to have participated in it. Although many of the men were very tired, they rejoiced in the ending of the war in North Africa, as Private Johnston's diary shows: 'Everyone is in the highest of spirits and happy.... The whole of North Africa is cleaned up now. It's really wonderful!'

On 15 May, with the return of [General Freyberg](#) to the command of the New Zealand Division, there was a general post in commands. [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) returned to 5 Brigade and Colonel [Harding](#),⁵⁸ who had been commanding the brigade, to the 21st. [Lieutenant-Colonel Fairbrother](#), who had been Brigade Major of 5 Brigade for the period from [Syria](#) to [Takrouna](#) and who had more recently commanded the 21st, was appointed to command the 23rd. His seniority, his regimental experience in 20 Battalion, and his staff training as well as his qualities as a man fully justified the appointment, but the change in command was unwelcome in the 23rd, as it involved the supercession of Dick Connolly, popular second-in-command for so long and CO for the last part of the Tunisian campaign. Other units readily accepted similar changes of command on several occasions, but the 23rd retained a clannish spirit which was not easily reconciled to appointments from outside its ranks. But, in the army, men learn to do what they are told and, in any case, with the departure of 5 Brigade on its long journey back to Egypt that same day, they had other things to think about.

¹ [Lt-Col N. P. Wilder](#), DSO; [Waipukurau](#); born NZ 29 Mar 1914; farmer; patrol commander LRDG; CO [2 NZ Div Cav](#) 1944; wounded 14 Sep 1942.

² Left out of battle.

³ [L-Cpl A. N. W. Newton](#); Cass; born [Wellington](#), 15 May 1906; head shepherd; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

⁴ [L-Cpl O. M. Hoban](#); born NZ 16 Aug 1914; labourer; killed in action 9 May 1943.

⁵ Sgt A. A. De Vantier; born Dunedin, 21 Jan 1910; organiser; wounded 20 Apr 1943; killed in action 15 Dec 1943.

⁶ Cpl K. E. Barnett; born NZ 4 Aug 1918; boilermaker.

⁷ Sgt A. McLennan, MM; Seddon; born Blenheim, 14 Feb 1917; cordial maker; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

⁸ Pte A. F. Wood; born Scotland, 28 Dec 1906; labourer; killed in action 27 Mar 1943.

⁹ Lt D. S. Harrowell; born NZ 14 Oct 1919; Regular soldier; died of wounds 27 Mar 1943.

¹⁰ Lt D. L. Holt, MC; Napier; born NZ 14 Apr 1918; farmer; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

¹¹ Pte F. C. Owen; born NZ 8 Feb 1918; farm labourer; killed in action 13 Apr 1943.

¹² Maj H. Montgomery, ED and clasp; Ashburton; born Carmunnock, Scotland, 25 May 1907; school-teacher.

¹³ Sgt A. D. Alexander; Timaru; born Scotland, 11 Apr 1917; fisherman; wounded Dec 1941.

¹⁴ Sgt W. D. Dawson; Wellington; born Dunedin, 1 Nov 1920; student.

¹⁵ Capt K. W. Clark; Dunedin; born Wellington, 29 Mar 1919; grocer's assistant; twice wounded.

¹⁶ Sgt D. E. Smith; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 16 Jul 1918; carpenter.

¹⁷ Lt J. A. McPherson; Wellington; born Dunedin, 18 Sep 1920; Regular

soldier; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

¹⁸ Sgt N. C. McLean, MM, m.i.d.; born Palmerston, 3 Jan 1918; labourer; twice wounded.

¹⁹ 2 Lt F. J. Muir, MM; born NZ 8 Feb 1915; clerk; killed in action 15 Mar 1944.

²⁰ Capt W. Te A. Haig, m.i.d.; Ruatoria; born Waipiro Bay, Ruatoria, 14 Nov 1904; clerk.

²¹ Cpl I. H. Kelly; Kapuka, Southland; born Invercargill, 15 Feb 1914; labourer; wounded 6 Jul 1942.

²² 2 Lt H. G. Greenhalgh; Invercargill; born England, 4 Apr 1917; farmhand; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

²³ Cpl S. G. C. Common; Christchurch; born NZ 16 Oct 1914; fireman; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

²⁴ Cpl L. P. Challis, MM; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 14 Jul 1918; clerk; wounded May 1944.

²⁵ L-Sgt R. J. Roberts; Hokitika; born NZ 15 Dec 1913; sawmill hand; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

²⁶ Sgt U. J. Jeffries; Blenheim; born Spring Creek, 14 Mar 1907; farmer; wounded 25 May 1941.

²⁷ Cpl E. M. Stoddart, MM; Dunedin; born Aust., 5 Apr 1914; tiler; twice wounded.

²⁸ L-Cpl G. J. Clearwater; born Portobello, 22 Jun 1911; farmer; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

²⁹ Pte L. W. Atkinson; born 17 Aug 1919; labourer; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

³⁰ Pte R. V. Mora; Christchurch; born NZ 10 Jun 1916; clerk; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

³¹ Pte R. Jose; Westport; born Westport, 20 Jan 1921; sawmill hand; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

³² Sgt N. E. Hoare; Timaru; born Timaru, 2 Jun 1918; butcher.

³³ WO II A. T. Allan; Mosgiel; born NZ 7 Feb 1913; farmer; wounded 15 Dec 1944.

³⁴ L-Cpl R. Tulley; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 4 Jan 1917; fireman; twice wounded.

³⁵ Capt P. F. Te H. Ornberg, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 2 Apr 1919; clerk; wounded 20 Apr 1943; died of wounds 30 May 1944.

³⁶ Maj H. C. A. Lambert, MC; born NZ 14 Jun 1914; clerk; wounded 28 May 1944.

³⁷ Maj J. L. Johnston, MBE, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 19 May 1906; solicitor; wounded 7 May 1943.

³⁸ Cpl J. L. Whipp; Invercargill; born NZ 30 Apr 1922; fish cleaner; wounded 12 Dec 1944.

³⁹ Sgt E. S. Thomson; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 20 Sep 1913; clerk.

⁴⁰ Cpl D. H. Gillanders; Takaka; born NZ 11 Nov 1918; mill hand; wounded 25 May 1941.

⁴¹ Forward observation officer.

⁴² Maj J. C. Muirhead, MC; Palmerston North; born Palmerston North, 5 Oct 1911; clerk; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

⁴³ Sgt J. Rogers; born NZ 29 Dec 1916; school-teacher; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

⁴⁴ Sgt H. Manahi, DCM; Rotorua; born Ohinemutu, 28 Sep 1913; labourer; wounded 23 May 1941.

⁴⁵ 2 Lt W. J. Smith, DCM; Lower Hutt; born Timaru, 24 Sep 1917; labourer; wounded 26 May 1941.

⁴⁶ Pte K. Aranui; Rotorua; born Rotorua, 6 Oct 1914; labourer.

⁴⁷ Pte S. Smith; born NZ 30 Dec 1911; deceased.

⁴⁸ Maj A. Ross, MC and bar, ED, m.i.d., Aristion Andrias (Gk); Dunedin; born Herbert, North Otago, 19 Jul 1911; university lecturer; four times wounded.

⁴⁹ Brig M. C. Fairbrother, CBE, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Carterton, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; BM 5 Bde Jun 1942-Apr 1943; comd in turn 21, 23 and 28 (Maori) Bns, Apr-Dec 1943; GSO II 2 NZ Div Jun-Oct 1944; CO 26 Bn Oct 1944-Sep 1945; comd Adv Base 2 NZEF Sep 1945-Feb 1946; Editor-in-Chief NZ War Histories.

⁵⁰ L-Sgt L. H. W. Cheeseman; Kawakawa; born Kawakawa, 25 Jan 1920; exchange clerk.

⁵¹ Rev. R. B. Spence; Auckland; born Toa Valley, 13 Mar 1903; Presbyterian minister.

⁵² Capt S. J. Edgar, m.i.d.; Tapanui; born Tapanui, 8 May 1913; farm

worker; twice wounded.

⁵³ Pte H. B. Whiteley, MM; Rotorua; born Manuka Creek, Otago, 10 Nov 1905; forest ranger; wounded 8 May 1943.

⁵⁴ Cpl H. G. King; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 16 Oct 1917; businessman; twice wounded.

⁵⁵ L-Cpl W. A. Smail; Gore; born Gore, 2 Sep 1918; dairy factory assistant; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

⁵⁶ WO II R. V. Ritchie; Wellington; born Aust., 17 Jul 1918; salesman; wounded 28 Jun 1942.

⁵⁷ Cpl E. J. Ritchie; Gore; born NZ 7 Jun 1909; exchange clerk; three times wounded.

⁵⁸ Brig R. W. Harding, DSO, MM, ED; Kirikopuni, Dargaville; born Dargaville, 29 Feb 1896; farmer; Auck Regt 1916–19; CO 21 Bn 1942–43; comd 5 Bde 30 Apr-14 May 1943, 4 Jun-23 Aug 1943; twice wounded.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 12 – MAADI TO ORSOGNA

CHAPTER 12

Maadi to Orsogna

THE 23rd began its move back to Egypt on 15 May and arrived in [Maadi Camp](#) on the 31st after following the main coast road practically throughout the journey. During this journey the troops had few problems and no serious responsibilities, since there was no urgency about getting into position in some battle area and no enemy air activity. Instead, they had the happy feeling of being tourists in good company and in receipt of pay from the [New Zealand Government](#). They saw many places they had missed when engaged in 'left hooks', and others, better known, associated with memories of victories won and comrades lost.

Back in [Maadi](#), the men soon heard the names of those returning to New Zealand on the Ruapehu furlough scheme. Those named included all the 'original' married officers and men and a high percentage of [Second Echelon](#) single men, chosen by ballot. They were to return to New Zealand for a minimum period of three months, but the majority did not return to the 23rd. When they left the unit on 15 June, the numbers of other ranks dropped from around 700 to 543. For the first time the 23rd had lost, not by the normal wastages of war but by an act of government policy, a large number of its men, including many of its best war-hardened veterans.

Unit records merely chronicle the marching out of the Ruapehu contingent on 15 June and the much smaller Wakatipu contingent at the beginning of September. ¹ The historian may only very tentatively attempt to assess the effect of this furlough scheme on the unit. 'The 23rd will never be the same again,' said many, without reflecting that the unit had been changing its membership, if not its character, from the first campaign in [Greece](#) onwards. Nevertheless, the degree of rate of change was accentuated. A hole was being made in the team which it would take time to repair: the continuity, the understanding, the trust and confidence that had been built up over the years were subjected to the severest of tests with the loss of so many stalwarts of the battalion. How could the 23rd be the same again without, for example, Dick Connolly as second-in-command? He had held that office for nearly a year after having been a company commander for a longer period. He knew all the cooks by their christian names, the 'two-up kings' and those who counted their drinks by the bottle. He knew the good men and true and more about most men than

anyone else in the battalion. Could the 23rd manage without Harry Dalton as its Quartermaster? He and his staff had solved the problems of supplying meals and water in the desert so efficiently that the Q side of administration had come to be taken for granted. Percy [Canham](#),² as RQMS, and Bill [Mason](#),³ as Ration Sergeant, had done great work in keeping the supplies up to the fighting troops. Dalton has paid his tribute to Les [Carran](#)⁴ and Jim [Law](#),⁵ indispensable members of his staff. 'I think my driver, Les Carran, was the best 15 cwt driver in the Division. Jim Law was our ration truck driver for the whole desert campaign. It was largely due to Jim's ability as a pathfinder and driver that we always delivered the rations on time'. Company Quartermaster-Sergeants such as Fred Blanchard and Gavin McEwen had played their part in seeing that their men were fed.

A similar tale could be told of other specialist sections. How could anyone possibly replace Harry Parfoot as Transport Sergeant? He had carried a load of responsibility at different times and had tended the unit transport as carefully as an owner tends a new and expensive car. He had organised moves into position and dispersion of vehicles in a most competent manner and had been the general handyman to whom anyone with transport problems automatically turned. Behind Parfoot were the mechanics who maintained the transport and saw that each truck and carrier was mechanically fit to reach its destination. How would this section survive without Sergeant Ned [Trembath](#)⁶ and Private Les [Curtz](#)⁷? But it was much the same throughout the battalion. In every platoon and in nearly every section, there was a man whose reliability or experience or wit or simple failings had led his comrades to regard him as a permanent member without whom the platoon would 'never be the same again'. Now he was going. Perhaps he was an 'old-timer' like Angus [Scott](#),⁸ already grown grey in the service. Such men would be missed in the unit and they, in turn, would miss the 23rd.

In any case, in war no man must be considered indispensable and a vacancy left by a good man is always filled, for better or for worse, by another. The 23rd went on and, although it took time to build up the team spirit and the close understanding between officers and men that had existed in the earlier campaigns, eventually added notable pages to its record as a fighting unit. To be relieved of those who were physically exhausted and had lost their enthusiasm and of those who were bitter about what was happening back home in New Zealand was a good thing, but,

for the most part, the men from the 23rd went home with mixed feelings. The majority were elated and emotionally stirred at the prospect of returning to kith and kin in New Zealand, but they were also sad at parting with comrades who had accompanied them and helped them in the many phases of life in the army, comrades in one of the most tightly knit communities imaginable, who would always mean much more to them than the casual acquaintances of civilian life.

The loss of the older and more experienced soldiers would have been more keenly felt had the New Zealanders been returning to the desert. But the next operational zone was [Italy](#), and the difference between mobile warfare in the desert and close fighting in a European country was so great that the changeover of officers and men was not as serious as it might have been. There were sufficient old hands left to ensure that the 23rd traditions would continue. Those original members and reinforcements left had been very completely indoctrinated with the 23rd's peculiar pride of unit. They provided a solid core of men who felt and believed in the spirit of the 23rd. Even the men of the 8th Reinforcements who had fought only in the Tunisian campaign were already intensely proud of belonging to the 23rd. They, in turn, had proved themselves to be first-class fighting material and had been fully accepted by the older men. One of D Company's best soldiers, Bill Smellie, paid tribute to this particular reinforcement after [Takrouna](#): 'That night they made a name for themselves which they maintained till the end of the war.... the older soldiers gave them the distinction of being "Just the Best". Those boys had youth and virility and somehow they seemed to stand out wherever they were.... they must stand as the flower of youth in the N.Z. Division.' Probably Smellie's tribute could be paid to the best representatives of all the reinforcements, but somehow the physical vigour and enthusiastic spirit of that particular reinforcement caught the imagination of those who had been bearing the heat and burden of the day in an under-strength unit in the rather grim days of 1941–42.

The summer of 1943 was spent in comparative luxury in [Maadi Camp](#). A fortnight's leave to [Cairo](#), [Alexandria](#) or Palestine was taken, according to a roster drawn up in each company, by all ranks in June and early July. For those in camp, swimming and cricket occupied most of the working day in that period. The cricket team eventually emerged second in the inter-unit competition. As success followed success, interest in cricket boomed and pride in the unit team grew and grew. The

battalion scored no successes in the divisional athletic sports but that did not matter—cricket was the game.

Men from the 9th and 10th Reinforcements arrived to bring the unit up to establishment. Thus, 78 men joined it on 7 July, 126 on 9 July, and 124 on 1 September. They brought the posted strength to 32 officers and 796 other ranks. Many of these new men were desperately keen and anxious to learn all they could in the training programme, which passed from the somewhat boring squad drill and other elementary training to night manoeuvres with live ammunition and a brigade group exercise in the Bir Gindali area, where the employment of artillery, anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns and the like gave the training some semblance of the real thing. Of course, few could visualise the close country with its hedges, houses and obstacles of all kinds that they were told to imagine. The finishing touches to the training could only be applied in the theatre of active operations.

During this period, changes in command were of some importance. While [General Freyberg](#) was in New Zealand discussing the future of the Division with the Government, General L. M. Inglis had command.⁹ Similarly, while [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) was away, Brigadier Stewart¹⁰ had charge of 5 Brigade. In the 23rd, Colonel Romans returned to take command on 23 August. As already noted, the arrival of [Colonel Fairbrother](#) had not been welcomed in the clannish 23rd, but his departure was regretted by many who had come to respect his efficiency and his qualities as a director of training at a time when reorganisation and serious training were necessary. Especially in respect to officer training and co-operation with other arms, the benefits of [Colonel Fairbrother's](#) regime were to be felt long after his departure to take command of the [Maori Battalion](#). By the time the unit left [Maadi](#) for the last time on 19 September 1943, the only original officers still with the battalion were Colonel Romans as commander, Major Thomas as second-in-command, and Major Orbell as OC Headquarters Company. A few of the junior officers, such as Captain Robins, Lieutenants Edgar, Irving and Davis, were original members of the 23rd, while Lieutenants Kirk, Marett and Parker were originals of the 20th and 26th. The remainder were reinforcement officers, and most platoon commanders had not yet seen action.

The intensified training at [Maadi](#) was followed by a 99-mile march to the [Burg el Arab](#) locality. This march was designed both to toughen the men for what lay ahead

and also to inform [General Freyberg](#) of the degree of hardening still required by his troops. From [Burg el Arab](#), a divisional exercise saw 5 Brigade training with 4 Armoured Brigade in an attack on a mine-covered defensive position. This exercise, which ended on 1 October, marked the culmination of training in Egypt. Attention was now turned to preparations for the move to what practically everyone guessed must be [Italy](#).

The end of the first week of October saw a ceremonial parade and an address by Brigadier Stewart. Anti-typhus injections and the taking of atebirin tablets were part of the embarkation preparations. On 12 October the battalion moved to a transit camp at [Ikingi Maryut](#). Five days later the battalion, divided into three groups, each consisting of one-third of Battalion Headquarters and HQ Company and one platoon from each company, embarked on board the transports [Llangibby Castle](#), [Nieuw Holland](#) and [Letitia](#), one group to each ship. The march along the wharves at [Alexandria](#) was not easy. As a corporal's private diary indicates, the men were well burdened. 'We have to carry big valise on our back, small pack on side. All army and personal clothing has to be put into valise or tied to it, then blanket roll of 4 blankets, greatcoat and jerkin has to be tied around valise. Besides this, we have rifle, tent (one per two men), mosquito net & 2 gallon water-can to carry. One can hardly stagger along.... They must expect us to be pack-horses.' But stagger they did, right up the gangways on to the ships.

The Mediterranean crossing was uneventful and the troops disembarked at [Taranto](#) on 22 October. Although [Taranto](#) itself was not very impressive, the men were delighted with the green countryside, the pine and olive trees, the abundance of grapes, and the other items which marked such a pleasant change from the desert. Of course, the new surroundings also spelt rain and mud, but, at first, everyone was prepared to accept such things as part of life in southern [Italy](#).

While the New Zealanders had been training in Egypt, the war had not stopped. On 10 July the British Eighth Army and the United States Seventh Army invaded [Sicily](#). In the first week of September, some of the same forces crossed the Straits of Messina and began the conquest of [Italy](#) proper. Later, with the landing of the Fifth United States Army at [Salerno](#) and with the advance of the [Eighth Army](#) up the Adriatic coast, the war in [Italy](#) appeared to be progressing favourably. To resume its

place in the fighting team of the [Eighth Army](#), the New Zealand Division carried out training in the new close-country conditions, such as attacking among hills, trees and villages. At first, as the unit transport did not begin to arrive till the end of October, training was restricted to areas easily reached on foot. But the most serious drawback to advanced training, which should have included combined exercises in the new surroundings for infantry battalions and armoured regiments, was the late arrival of the tanks. They arrived too late in November for any such training to take place before the Division moved into action. This enforced lack of practical training under Italian conditions contributed to the failure of tank–infantry co-operation to measure up to expectations.

Heavy rains in the [Taranto](#) area, a report by Colonel Romans on the difficult conditions on the [Eighth Army](#) front, and operations in areas where the enemy could be expected to have perfect observation and sound defences led to a general anticipation of tough fighting. Rain and mud, more rain and worse mud dampened the enthusiasm with which the green Italian hills had been greeted. Nevertheless, life was good and morale was high. Italians supplied two dixies full of grapes for one shilling and, later, nuts and figs were available. Wine, much better in quality than the 'purple death' secured in [Libya](#) and [Tripoli](#), was also available. 'Boys on the plonk tonight' is a common private diary entry for this period. For a time it became necessary to defend some of the men against overindulgence in these heady wines. After two men were found unconscious and drowning in the mud into which they had fallen, the CO ordered that wine should be purchased by the battalion Quartermaster only and should then be on rationed sale through company canteens. Since leave to [Taranto](#) was not very exciting, the Padre, John [Holland](#),¹¹ organised inter-platoon football competitions, campfire addresses and inter-company quiz sessions.

Before October 1943 ended, the stubborn German resistance, aided by the close country, the hills and rivers, the wet weather and the difficulty of getting tanks and vehicles forward, had convinced General Montgomery that the [Eighth Army](#) needed more infantry if the advance on the Adriatic coast was to continue. Consequently, in early November, the New Zealand Division was ordered forward from [Taranto](#). Fourth Armoured Brigade and [Divisional Headquarters](#) moved first, next came 6 Brigade, and on 18 November 5 Brigade began its move forward. This move was slower than anticipated, partly because the single road, often in a bad state of

repair, could not carry heavy traffic quickly, and partly because the late arrival of 'third flight' transport caused delay. Thus, the 23rd's 'third flight' ¹² vehicles under Lieutenant Bernie Cox ¹³ did not rejoin the unit until the afternoon of 23 November. The Bren carriers, under Lieutenant Keith Burt, ¹⁴ and the mortar carriers, under Sergeant Eric Thomson, only caught up with the 23rd on 24 November, by which time the battalion was well north of Foggia and approaching Atessa.



10 Platoon men wait for transport behind the front line, September 1942

10 Platoon men wait for transport behind the front line, September 1942



5 Brigade begins the long journey westwards after the breakthrough at Alamein, 4 November 1942

5 Brigade begins the long journey westwards after the breakthrough at Alamein, 4 November 1942



C Company cooks serve Christmas dinner at Nofilia, December 1942

C Company cooks serve Christmas dinner at [Nofilia](#), December 1942



Another C Company meal as men wait to enter Tripoli

Another C Company meal as men wait to enter [Tripoli](#)



Takrouna from the start line

[Takrouna](#) from the start line



5 Brigade sector,
Takrouna

23 Battalion advanced through the valley between Takrouna and Djebel Bir (marked Bin) to take up positions on Djebel Cherachir, top right

5 Brigade sector, Takrouna

23 Battalion advanced through the valley between Takrouna and Djebel Bir (marked Bin) to take up positions on Djebel Cherachir, top right



8 Platoon before Takrouna. The platoon had heavy losses. Third from right, wearing cap, is Lt C. C. Hunt

8 Platoon before Takrouna. The platoon had heavy losses. Third from right, wearing cap, is Lt C. C. Hunt



L-Cpl P. M. Kerr, Pte B. O'Hagan and Sgt C. F. Rose, Bren-carrier platoon, at Takrouna

L-Cpl P. M. Kerr, Pte B. O'Hagan and Sgt C. F. Rose, Bren-carrier platoon, at Takrouna



The battalion's cricket team, runners-up in the Division's competition, Maadi, 1943

Back row (from left): L. Southern, B. Donaldson, H. Jordan, D. Milne, N. Smythe, B. Wilson, Front row: G. Agnew, R. Bluett, A. Cresswell, P. De Vantier and R. Jaffray

The battalion's cricket team, runners-up in the Division's competition, **Maadi**, 1943
Back row (from left): L. Southern, B. Donaldson, H. Jordan, D. Milne, N. Smythe, B. Wilson. Front row: G. Agnew, R. Bluett, A. Cresswell, P. De Vantier and R. Jaffray



Fred Marett leads the field in the mile at the battalion sports, August 1943. He finished second

Fred Marett leads the field in the mile at the battlion sports, August 1943. He finished second



C and D Company men on the wharf at Alexandria prior to embarking for Italy

C and D Company men on the wharf at [Alexandria](#) prior to embarking for [Italy](#)



Looking west from Castelfrentano towards Orsogna

Looking west from [Castelfrentano](#) towards [Orsogna](#)



The approach to Cassino. Monte Trocchio is on the left of
Route 6 running towards the town

The approach to **Cassino**. **Monte Trocchio** is on the left of Route 6 running towards the town



14 Platoon after Cassino
14 Platoon after Cassino



12 Platoon comes out of the line at Terelle, May 1944
12 Platoon comes out of the line at Terelle, May 1944



The journey north gave the troops an excellent view of the southern Italian landscape as they moved, first by the **Taranto- Bari** road and then by an inland route, through the villages of Locorotondo, Alberobello, Gioia del Colle and **Altamura** on the first day, and through the towns of **Corato**, **Andria**, **Canosa** and **Foggia**, and then through **San Severo** via the main coastal road through **Termoli** to the **Furci** staging area. Again and again the road wound up to the top of a hill and then down and round and up to the top of the next because the villages were built on the hilltops; it passed right through the villages with their narrow twisting streets, past the old and probably medieval church, through the square with its 1915–18 war memorial or statue to Garibaldi or some other hero of the Italian wars of unification, out past the cemetery with its stately cypress trees into the open country. Continuous rain, deep mud, and congestion of traffic slowed down the northward move and produced several traffic jams. The older men rejoiced that no enemy aircraft appeared to claim the harvest they might have reaped when hundreds of trucks were jammed nose to tail for miles. When the trucks of **2 Ammunition Company** deposited the infantry of the 23rd on the ground—or rather in the foot-deep mud—and went off on a petrol-carrying mission, the troops crowded for the night into such trucks as were left, into straw stacks and nearby Italian houses and farm buildings. From this point onwards, sheltering in casas became the accepted practice.

On 25 November the battalion moved forward again in the trucks of **4 RMT** to the village of **Atessa**. Here it was in sight of the River Sangro across which the Germans had withdrawn. Nearer the coast, **8 Indian Division** had crossed the river, and it was already known that the New Zealanders were to attempt a crossing on

their own front when the weather and the consequent depth of the river permitted. Already the 6 Brigade units had standing patrols on the south bank of the **Sangro** and reconnaissance patrols had crossed to the German-held north bank.

The Eighth Army plan involved the cracking of the German Winter Line which ran along the high ridge north of the **Sangro**, pushing on to smash the **Chieti- Pescara** line, and then switching south-west to **Avezzano** and, with possible aid from seaborne forces, joining the **Fifth Army** in the capture of **Rome**. Climatic and geographical conditions were to make the later phases of this programme little better than a pipe-dream, but the progress made in penetrating the **Winter Line** sufficed to keep German divisions in **Italy** which might otherwise have been transferred to the Russian theatre or to **France**, where a Second Front was to be opened in June 1944.

The New Zealand attack on the **Sangro** was to be made on a two-brigade front, with 5 Brigade on the right, next to the Indians, and 6 Brigade on the left, up-stream nearer the foothills which lay below the frowning mass of the **Montagna della Majella**. In 5 Brigade, the commander, **Brigadier Kippenberger**, just returned from furlough in New Zealand, decided to attack with two battalions, the 23rd on the right and the 21st on the left.



SANGRO RIVER-ORSOGNA AREA, NOVEMBER 1943-JANUARY 1944

sangro river-orsogna area, november 1943-january 1944

On the evening of 25 November, in preparation for this attack, the 23rd moved on foot into the trees, straw stacks and houses around **Monte Marcone**, the higher

ground just short of the [Sangro](#). That night the IO, Second-Lieutenant Tom [Mackie](#),¹⁵ and two of his section tried to cross the river but it was too swollen after heavy rains. Next morning Colonel Romans took his four infantry company commanders, Wilson (A), Montgomery (B), Robins (C), and [Ross](#) (D), forward to a splendid observation post where, under good cover from olive trees, they could study the river valley, the opposite banks and Point 208, the unit's main objective. The postponement of the attack till 2.45 a.m. on 28 November gave the platoon commanders, NCOs and many of the men an opportunity to visit this perfect OP and view the sector over which they were to attack.

Meanwhile, other preparations had been made. On the night of 26–27 November, Second-Lieutenant Geoff De Thier¹⁶ took a patrol of ten men from 2 Platoon, now the assault pioneer platoon whose men were organised and trained as snipers and infantry sappers, to reconnoitre suitable crossings of the river. De Thier and his men were responsible for stretching ropes across the [Sangro](#) to prevent any men from being swept downstream by the current. Second-Lieutenant Frank [Coe](#),¹⁷ Eric Batchelor and Don [McLean](#)¹⁸ also reconnoitred the north bank of the river in order that their company might provide the protection of the starting point there for the advance of the other three companies.

On 27 November preparations for the first attack of the 23rd in [Italy](#) were completed. Ammunition, on the scale of 200 rounds per rifleman, 500 per Bren, and 200 per tommy gun, with one grenade per man, was issued. Bully and biscuits to carry the men over the twenty-four hours they were expected to be without hot meals were also issued. On the previous evening, Padre [Holland](#) had held an extremely well attended voluntary church service. Padre Henley gave Communion to the Catholics in the small church behind [Marcone](#). Colonel Romans addressed the platoon commanders on their responsibilities and on the need to make every effort to live up to the traditions and record the 23rd had built up in [Greece](#), [Crete](#) and North Africa. Morale was high without being so enthusiastically aggressive as before [Alamein](#). Most men wanted to get started and find out what an attack was like and how one reacted to it. Sandy Thomas has recorded: 'The 23rd was in great fettle when they formed up in the [Taranto](#) area. I felt myself that there was a new discipline and smartness afoot which had been lacking in the final phases in the desert. Perhaps we had not needed it there so much since each unit was on more of

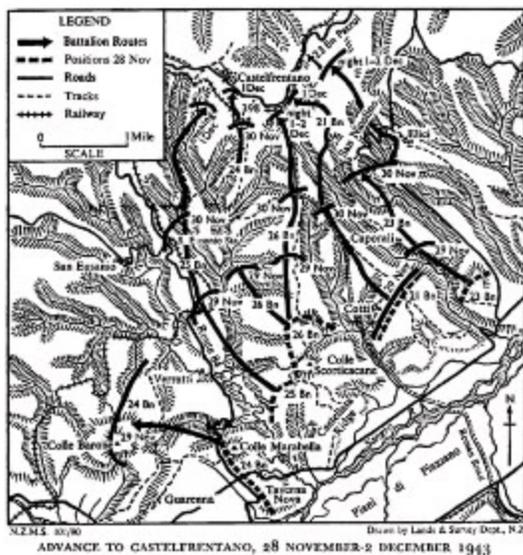
a family basis'. The official war diary added that: 'morale was raised considerably with the arrival of a large mail from home'.

Meanwhile, to soften up the objective generally, two 17-pounder guns were moved into the olive trees, whence they fired 130 rounds across the river at selected houses, potential enemy strongpoints. No. 2 MG Company fired its Vickers guns in bursts at the same targets in the hope of catching the enemy who ran out of the houses shaken by the flying rounds of the 17-pounders. This fire, combined with the air sorties flown that day and the general shelling by the artillery, provided a grand demonstration of offensive fire power to encourage the 220 men of the 23rd who had not been in action before. Company commanders were also able to advise their men that the artillery had 250 rounds per gun to fire timed concentrations on all likely enemy positions during the attack. Everything was also ready for the construction of a Bailey bridge to enable supporting arms to cross the river and for a troop of tanks of [19 Armoured Regiment](#) to join and support the 23rd.

At 7.30 p.m. De Thier and his men left for the river where, with the aid of stakes driven into both banks and ropes, they established a crossing. Two hours later C Company moved across. Captain Robins sent one platoon to the top of the steep and slippery cliff-like bank and held the other two on the river flat to cover the crossing. After a hot meal and a rum issue, the attacking infantry began crossing the [Sangro](#) shortly before midnight. Despite the cold and swift current in the middle of the river, they crossed without untoward incident. Most men were wet to the thighs or hips, some of the shorter ones to the waist, and a few who stumbled, to the neck. Then they floundered through the sticky mud of the river flat before preparing to climb the cliff face. The plan for the three attacking companies was for A to move 600 yards down the [Sangro](#) and cover a sector about four to five hundred yards wide which would deny the battalion's right flank to the enemy, and for B to advance 900 yards, clear some haystacks and buildings of the enemy and provide a link between A and D Companies, while the last-named had the major task of advancing 1200 yards and taking Point 208, a conical feature with a building not yet recognised as a church on the summit.

Zero hour, the time when the artillery concentrations opened, was 2.45 a.m. on 28 November. By 2.15 a.m. the battalion was assembled at the foot of the steep bank and the attacking companies then proceeded to climb this muddy, slippery

slope. Battalion Headquarters was established in the mill house at the foot of the bank and C Company was ordered to remain in position to act both as protection for the headquarters and as a battalion counter-attack reserve. At 2.40 a.m. D Company on the left began its advance, with 16 Platoon, under Lieutenant [Duncan](#),¹⁹ on the right, 18 Platoon, under Lieutenant [Bannerman](#),²⁰ on the left and 17, under Lieutenant D. Foote, in reserve. Five minutes later, the artillery and Vickers guns opened fire, and, at the same time, B Company moved off. A Company, with the shortest distance to go, advanced down river at 2.55 a.m. None of the advancing companies met any serious opposition. Some mortar bombs fell in the area but, in general, the enemy appeared to have withdrawn before the attack began. A Company was able to report its objective taken in less than an hour. A little later, D and B, in turn, reported they were in position. Each company exploited forward some 500 yards, with its reserve platoon acting as a fighting patrol while the other two platoons consolidated. During this period, 17 Platoon of D Company fired a few shots across the front of the figures they saw in the murky light and took nine prisoners on the reverse slopes of Point 208. These men were subsequently identified as belonging to 3 Company, I Battalion, 145 Regiment, a part of [65 Division](#) which contained both Poles and Austrians who were not very enthusiastic about fighting.



advance to castelfrentano, 28 november-2 december 1943

Soon after first light, the FOO arrived and made preparations for directing fire from the church on the top of Point 208. Unfortunately, his wireless set broke down and no line communication was at first available. The Vickers guns of the machine-

gun platoon under Lieutenant Pat [Grace](#)²¹ and two of the 23rd's 3-inch mortars also came forward to D Company's area. The mortars were soon dug in a short distance below the crest; the Vickers guns took up positions forward of the infantry on terraces which commanded long fields of fire. One section of these machine guns was with 18 Platoon to the left of the church and the other was slightly forward of 16 Platoon to the right. Immediately to the north of this latter section, the ground fell sharply away in a steep gully, which could only be observed by a man right on the lip of the terrace. Half an infantry section was moved closer to cover this machine-gun section but, mainly because the attack had been so surprisingly simple and enemy opposition so slight, little serious thought was given to the protection of the machine-gunners, who were left in a somewhat isolated position.

Not very long after daylight, the war warmed up a little: B and D Companies' positions came under both mortar and machine-gun fire while A's area also received a sprinkling of mortar bombs. About 8 a.m. some enemy movement was seen in and around the houses to the east of Point 208. A section of 16 Platoon investigated the area and returned with four more prisoners. But, while this section was away, much more enemy movement was seen farther east. Indeed, so cheeky and confident did the enemy appear to be in moving from one house to another in full view that Colonel Romans, who was then making his round of the forward companies, shouted out for all weapons, including MMGs and mortars, to engage the enemy. In fact, this enemy activity was a clever diversionary move to distract attention from the gully to the north of Point 208, where a raiding party of about forty Germans was then approaching. Well-directed Spandau fire from the north-east drove the artillery FOO and others near the lip of the terrace back into cover behind or alongside the church—at any rate so far back that they could not look down the gully. The enemy raiders were thus able to approach in 'dead ground' and completely surprise the section of machine-gunners on the terrace to the right of the hilltop by coming in from above and behind them. The Germans took thirteen machine-gunners and one member of the 23rd prisoner. The 16 Platoon men closest to the terrace opened fire with Bren and rifle, but they were outnumbered and Lance-Corporal Allan [Rennie](#),²² Privates John [Bathgate](#)²³ and [Reg Walker](#),²⁴ who had stood up to bring their fire more effectively to bear on the enemy, were shot down by the raiders.

A counter-attack force was quickly organised from 17 Platoon and Company

Headquarters but, as it moved forward, artillery defensive fire, brought down on the call of Colonel Romans from B Company headquarters, landed on the top of Point 208, wounded the company commander and broke up the advance. By the time the artillery fire was called off, the enemy had got clear away. Less than an hour later, further heavy Spandau fire from the east and some movement between the houses led B Company to report that the enemy was preparing to launch a counter-attack. The artillery brought down more defensive fire and, if the enemy moved at all, it was towards his stronger defensive positions in the [Winter Line](#) between [Lanciano](#) and [Castelfrentano](#).

Although anti-tank guns and tanks had the very greatest difficulty in crossing the [Sangro](#) and in negotiating the mudflats to the north of the river, the forward infantry were never seriously threatened with a counter-attack. No enemy tanks appeared and the clever raid on Point 208 was the only indication the enemy gave of any aggressive outlook. Twice in the morning and once in the afternoon, however, enemy aircraft bombed and strafed various parts of the 23rd area, causing two casualties. For the advance across the [Sangro](#) and the following day, this brought the battalion's total casualties to 3 killed, 12 wounded and 1 taken prisoner.

Although the New Zealand units to the west of the 23rd had higher casualties, they all took their objectives and the bridgehead over the [Sangro](#) was secure. The next few days saw all units patrolling forward and then occupying areas which the enemy found he had insufficient troops to hold. Thus, on the night of 28–29 November, Lieutenant Tuan [Emery](#)²⁵ with 14 men from C Company provided the 23rd patrol to La Cerralina, a point about a mile north-north-east of Point 208. Emery and his men made a careful reconnaissance, found a minefield of S-mines and a straw stack which had been hollowed out as a cover for a German tank, but saw no enemy. Indeed, the Germans were already mortaring the area, thinking the New Zealanders must have advanced into it. On the following night, C Company moved up from reserve and occupied the area reconnoitred by Emery's patrol. Battalion Headquarters also moved forward.

On 30 November patrols from A and B Companies and a daylight reconnaissance by Sergeant [Street](#)²⁶ of C Company proved that the enemy had again withdrawn. Consequently, at ten o'clock that evening, the whole battalion advanced, met no opposition and dug in around Caporali in heavy rain mixed with some German

shelling and mortaring. Farther east, the Indians attacked and made some progress over the hills. While the rest of the battalion was consolidating, Lieutenant Emery and Corporal [Harland](#)²⁷ were sent forward to discover the practicability of establishing a start line for a brigade attack on the following evening. In the event this attack was not needed. Emery was ordered not to fire or fight unless forced to do so. The success of a much larger operation might depend on the surprise factor, and silent reconnaissance was required. Thus, while Harland covered him, Emery investigated an isolated outhouse and had, as he says, 'the frustrating experience of counting thirteen Huns asleep and, after toying with ideas of waking them either gently or with the 36 grenade I had in my hand, I obeyed my orders of "No noise!", especially as there was movement at the other end of the shed ... by the expected sentry.'

Next morning Colonel Romans sent patrols from A and C Companies forward to locate the enemy and, when they reported 'coast clear', pushed his companies cautiously forward. A and B Companies passed through and round [Elici](#), and by 1.40 p.m. on 1 December an A Company platoon was in position on Point 240 overlooking [Castelfrentano](#). [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) now required these forward companies to make contact with the enemy. Two small patrols again reconnoitred forward—with experiences detailed below—and then A and B Companies began to climb the steep [San Nicolino](#) ridge. These companies came under Spandau fire when about half-way up the slope. They halted till after dark and then B, C and D Companies moved forward another 500 yards to form a continuous line by 10.30 p.m. A patrol from D Company then went forward to the [Lanciano- Castelfrentano](#) road without encountering any enemy.

Throughout this advance, the 23rd had been keeping pace with the 21st on the left, closer to the mountains. Everything had gone relatively smoothly. Physical conditions had been scarcely pleasant but casualties had been small and progress steady. Of course, the advance had not been without incident. This can be seen most clearly from this extract from Second-Lieutenant Selwyn Jensen's²⁸ private diary, which describes first the daylight reconnaissance of 1 December:

'Ian Wilson told me to go out and find where the Hun was ... I was to take rations and a couple of men.... I went round a hill and advanced some thousand

yards covered by my men. We were on a forward slope and took things fairly carefully. I saw 3 people dodging into a barn some 250 yards away. They were Jerries. At the same time, one of my men said he saw a Spandau just 50 yards on our left. As he called me, it opened up and the bullets fairly sizzled past, all around us.... I chanced it and scrambled across the road, drawing more fire.... I made my way back by fits and starts whenever he ceased firing. I saw Ian and Pete Edgar moved his platoon to cover the original crest.... Then I saw Tuan Emery.... He had Norm Street with him. I took Tuan to the top of the hill and we were edging round a house when the damned Spandau started again. We ran for cover and dodged into a Jerry mortar pit, but the b—must have ranged this, as once we got in, he kept spraying the pit.... We finally decided to make a break as we did not know his numbers nor whether he might come up and investigate. I went out with some 50 yards of open ground to cover and, of course, he started firing as soon as I appeared. I fell down after about 30 yards (whether from fright, exhaustion—it had been a tiring day—or intuition, I don't know) for he apparently thought he had scored a hit and ceased firing. Anyway, I scrambled up and made cover. Tuan said later that the bullets were kicking the dust up around my feet. Tuan and Norman moved out while he was doing me over.... We moved at 0600 next morning. No opposition and we started to dig in once again. There was the odd house about and the people, when they found we were English, welcomed us with open arms. I've never met with a more fervent welcome. We shifted after half an hour and dug in about a mile further on and then moved forward again. This made the sixth move and the sixth slittrench I had dug in 24 hours and we were completely tired out.... We have been in action now about a week and have had blankets only one night of these. The nights have been bitterly cold and I wonder we have not had some cases of pneumonia.'

When Jensen wrote up his diary on 3 December, the 23rd was just forward of [Castelfrentano](#) in positions on the road which ran along the east side of the [Moro](#) valley. During their march through [Castelfrentano](#), the men received a great reception from the local inhabitants. Bob Stone, for example, says: 'Italian civilians gave us a tremendous reception, tears ran down the women's cheeks, they had wine out for us as we passed.' It was an emotional and cheering scene. Here were people glad to be liberated. Here were men proud to be liberators! The unit war diary reflects the cheerful optimism of those days: 'With the Battalion now firmly

established on the enemy's highest and most strongly defended ridge, it appeared as though the [Sangro](#) line had finally cracked and the enemy fled'. In general, the men had been given to understand that the [Sangro](#) and the Siegfried Winter Line beyond it would constitute a tough nut to crack. They had heard of the blood baths suffered by other divisions in earlier river crossings and of the general difficulties of fighting in close country, but here they were tasting the wine of victory in [Castelfrentano](#) after suffering very few casualties. No wonder Sandy Thomas wrote later: 'The Battalion marvelled at its success and, as they pressed forward on the thrilling advance to [Castelfrentano](#), their morale was so high that Col. Romans had to hold them in check.'

But, although the success was real, it was limited and the New Zealanders were soon to learn that a second and more important series of defences ran north-east from [Guardiagrele](#), a village high up above the source of one of the [Sangro's](#) tributaries, through the town of [Orsogna](#) and along the road to [Ortona](#), near the coast. The ridge on which this road ran was separated by the valley of the [Moro](#) from the road and ridge on which the 23rd had taken up the positions it was to hold for five days while 6 Brigade units, notably 25 Battalion, attempted to take [Orsogna](#).

While in these positions west of [Castelfrentano](#), the 23rd came under some heavy shelling and a few [Luftwaffe](#) attacks, deaths and casualties being suffered from both. D Company on the left, nearest the 'Mad Mile' which ran past the brickworks although on a different road, came under the heaviest shelling. On several occasions, trucks moving on this road were subjected to accurate and heavy shelling. More than once, [Private Norman M. Christie](#),²⁹ the RAP orderly attached to D Company, dashed to the rescue of the wounded, dressed their wounds and assisted in carrying the badly wounded to the refuge of the nearest house, all with a complete disregard for his own safety.

During the 6 Brigade attacks on [Orsogna](#), prisoners were taken, and information secured from them and from other sources showed that the enemy had hurried [26 Panzer Division](#) and some veteran paratroop units, now serving as infantry, into the line. This convinced [General Freyberg](#) that the enemy defence had hardened and that the day for platoon and company advances, with the enemy retreating ahead of them, was over. Tougher fighting lay ahead. But before a brigade or divisional attack could be launched, more information was required and patrols became the order of

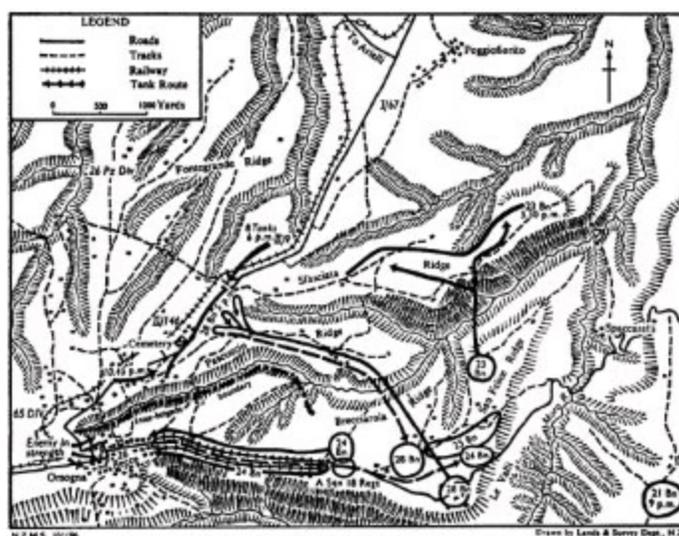
the day. The 23rd sent one of these patrols. Tuan Emery, by now something of a specialist in patrolling, took eight men out at 9 a.m. on 4 December and moved through 25 Battalion, then forward of the 23rd, in the general direction of enemy-held [Poggiofiorito](#). Warned by members of the 25th of enemy posts on Sfasciata ridge, a large spur which ran out from the main ridge between [Orsogna](#) and [Poggiofiorito](#), and then curved north-east to run nearly parallel to it, Emery led his men farther down the [Moro](#) before turning west towards the [Orsogna-Ortona](#) road, which was his main objective. Two members of the patrol lost contact in the late afternoon and returned to the battalion to report hearing movement of enemy guns and transport along the road towards [Orsogna](#). The remainder climbed the slippery slopes to approach the road about a mile to the north-east of [Poggiofiorito](#). Under cover of darkness, they approached within twenty yards of an 88-millimetre gun, but did not fire because the enemy infantry in their rear might cut off their line of withdrawal. Later, about 200 yards south on its journey back, the patrol surprised an enemy working party and shot it up. Without waiting to count casualties or to deal with enemy reinforcements, the patrol then moved back to the [Moro](#). By 5 a.m. it was back in the 25th area and by 11 a.m. in the 23rd's, where Emery reported results.

The 23rd also assisted in protecting the right flank of the forward troops of 6 Brigade. Thus, on 4 December, the carriers took up fire positions on the right of the 25th, while, on 5 December, Second-Lieutenant Eastgate ³⁰ took 18 Platoon to the same sector to provide infantry protection for the Vickers gun crews there.

As preparations for the attack went on, morale in the battalion mounted. Those who had been wet, tired and cold after the [Sangro](#) crossing and the nights in the open were refreshed and now wanted to do something about the more or less continuous shelling to which they had been subjected. The issue of patriotic parcels by the [YMCA](#) and the arrival of a large home mail on 6 December helped spirits to rise still further, as the following diary extracts indicate. R. A. [Somerville](#), ³¹ a reinforcement signaller, says: 'Had our mail delivered. Sitting here quite forgot the background of guns while I read. Morale away up. I really needed this mail I believe.... Issue patriotic 3 gold flake choc issue Parkdrive.' And Bob Stone wrote: 'A bit off colour but much improved when mail arrived! 9 letters and airgraph for me.... Have been getting our meals regularly since we came here and all feel much better.'

Fr. Henley round in afternoon, heard Confession and gave Holy Communion’.

That the Padre should be so active on a Monday was an almost certain indication that action was near, and so it proved. On 6 December, too, **Divisional Headquarters** issued an operation order for the two infantry brigades to attack across the **Moro**, capture **Orsogna** and a one-mile stretch of the road to **Ortona**. While 6 Brigade was to advance up Brecciarola ridge with 24 Battalion, supported by **18 Armoured Regiment**, 5 Brigade was to attack up Pascuccio spur with the 28th, while the 23rd took the greater part of Sfasciata ridge in order to safeguard the Maoris' right flank. Strong artillery support was to be provided and also an air blitz which, together with a zero hour of 1.30 p.m., made some of the North Africa veterans recall the Division's last daylight attack at **Tebaga Gap**, a day of happy memories.



5 and 6 brigades' attack, 7 december 1943

These orders did not reach the 23rd on the morning of 7 December until after Colonel Romans and his company commanders, Wilson, Kirk (who had taken over B Company from Montgomery, evacuated sick), Robins and **Ross**, had gone on a reconnaissance of the front in the 25th FDLs. They returned with only just sufficient time to get their men moving to commence the attack at 1.30 p.m. from a start line on the crest of San Felice ridge on the near side of the **Moro**. The plan was for A to move first and to seize the centre of the ridge around the 'Pink and White House', B was to seize and hold the right flank, while C was to edge up the ridge towards its junction with the main **Ortona** road ridge, and D, in reserve, was to move later and

fill any gaps in rear of A and B.

Sandy Thomas has left a vivid impression of the state of the 23rd: 'The Battalion was fit, well officered, and as keen as mustard. They were at peak of morale and efficiency under Colonel Romans as they faced up to Orsogna Ridge such as they were not to achieve again until the later campaigns in [Italy](#).' Twenty-eighth Battalion was allowed to clear the 25th's area before the 23rd began to advance at 2 p.m. The supporting artillery and various weapons of the 25th filled the [Moro](#) valley with smoke. As Thomas says: 'While we were waiting for the start of the battle Colonel Morten was laying on the finest example of inter-unit co-operation.... His battalion brought every possible weapon to bear on our objective to help us onto it.... 25 Bren guns alone fired 29,000 rounds of SAA onto the trenches in the vicinity of the Pink and White House ... [25 Bn](#) were indeed a great help.'

Drizzling rain reduced the supporting air activity and made the climbing of slippery slopes somewhat difficult, but A Company had no great difficulty in taking its objective. Indeed, all three attacking companies had an easy task since no infantry opposition was met. Either the positions on the forward slopes of Sfasciata were occupied at night only or the enemy who had repelled C Company of 25 Battalion on 5 December had withdrawn before the attack started, or as the artillery concentrations drew closer. In any case, by 3.10 p.m. the three attacking companies were established on the ridge. Battalion Headquarters was soon set up in the Pink and White House and D Company came forward to its reserve position on the right flank. While this company was coming forward, the valley of the [Moro](#) was heavily mortared and the 23rd mule train, composed of the unit pioneers and some Italian muleteers, came under fire as it brought forward the reserve ammunition, the 3-inch mortars and other heavier supplies. As the mules had to be held in case they bolted, some men were unable to dive for cover and three men, including one Italian, were killed and one wounded.

This advance on to Sfasciata had gone as well as the earlier advances from the [Sangro](#). That the new reinforcements were being battle-inoculated in an eminently satisfactory way, as well as showing plenty of spirit, may be seen from this contemporary diary entry by Somerville: '... pack up for attack. Carrying 38 pack 18 set. Went across country. Then the road for 1 mile or so ... sweating in the rain ...

then went over the top, down valley and up other side under terrific arty barrage.³² Writing just after objective is reached. Never knew before what thrills there were. Our guns point blank, filled both valleys with cordite smoke, could only see 20 yards. Fires from tracer everywhere. Mervyn [Chick](#)³³ hit in leg in gully. Shrap near us.... Gave away a lot of lit Capstans. Shells whizzing over brow of this hill. Left at 12 so haven't had a meal yet. Wet through and covered with mud but enjoying it. Good getting mail! 7 p.m. Day gone quick. Dug in on sheer face. Got straw behind blazing house. Lukewarm tea came up by mules. Writing by moon as rain has gone. Boots off, tired out but if never worse shall enjoy it.'

Something of a similar reaction in a reinforcement officer is evidenced in this extract from Jensen's diary: '... Luckily we occupied the ridge without opposition, as we were exhausted on reaching the top. I placed the platoon and they started to dig in. His DF³⁴ came down then, 88 mm and mortars and it was hell for a while. I was out trying to contact the platoon on the right and I met Reg Romans who was wandering round with a walking stick. A rather nasty shell landed about 25 yards away or less and he remarked that it was rather close and we wandered behind a ruined house. So far I have been rather amazed at my own attitude to shelling. Probably because this is new to me. I have had no fear whatsoever and even view the shelling in a dispassionate manner as though it couldn't affect me at all.'

That evening two patrols went out from the 23rd. Lieutenant Coe took a C Company patrol out to the left to establish contact with the Maoris but ran into enemy fire and was forced to withdraw. Lieutenant Dick Duncan took 16 Platoon forward towards the [Ortona](#) road with the intention of patrolling later to [Poggiofiorito](#). After hearing tanks moving towards [Orsogna](#), this patrol fired with good effect on an enemy patrol or working party. In the lively exchanges of fire which followed, Lance-Sergeant Toner³⁵ was wounded but otherwise the patrol returned without loss. Lieutenant Don Foote's patrol from 17 Platoon, which went out at 7.15 a.m. next day to discover whether or not [Poggiofiorito](#) was still occupied, was by no means so fortunate. Apparently expecting that the enemy would be falling back as he had done on the slopes above the [Sangro](#), Foote led his daylight patrol forward with more resolution than care and ran into an ambush. The Germans saw the patrol approaching, held their fire until it was cut off by Spandaus on both flanks and then pinned it down, forcing the leaders to surrender. Private [Fastier](#)³⁶ was shot

through the neck. Examined by two German soldiers, he was left for dead and later made his way back to the battalion, where he reported the fate of the patrol— 1 killed, 2 wounded, and 5, including Foote, missing believed prisoner of war. The enemy was obviously making a firm stand on the line of the [Ortona](#) road.

By this time, official word had reached the 23rd that the other attacking units, the 24th, who had entered [Orsogna](#), and the 28th who had got across the road, had been forced to withdraw before daylight. They had no hope of getting tanks or anti-tank guns up to them and were being attacked by tanks, including flame-throwers. This meant that Sfasciata was the only territorial gain made, and that the 23rd was forward and somewhat isolated from the rest of the Division. The higher command decided to reinforce this minor success and to use Sfasciata as a route for bringing forward tanks and supporting arms which would enable the infantry to take and hold a bridgehead over the [Ortona](#) road. The danger of enemy tanks attacking down the muddy spur was considered a risk which had to be accepted. The enemy also appreciated the potential threat to his line of communication with [Orsogna](#): he therefore shelled and mortared Sfasciata regularly and, on occasion, bombed and strafed it. Of course, the longer the Division took to complete its preparations for the attack, the longer the enemy had to perfect his defences. The fact that the attack was not launched until a week later meant that the enemy was fully prepared to deal with just such an attack as was made on the only possible axis of advance.

During that week, the 23rd continued to live on Sfasciata and to send out various patrols. Of course, the first requirement was a route across the [Moro](#) and up Sfasciata ridge which would suffice for getting supporting arms and tanks forward. After 'recces' by Second-Lieutenants Keith [Esson](#)³⁷ and Tom Mackie, it was decided that an old cart track could be improved to serve the purpose. D Company provided infantry protection to keep enemy patrols away from the bulldozers, while a heavy fire programme by the Vickers and artillery was laid on to drown their noise. By the morning of 9 December, with the help of the engineers and their machinery, the 23rd had four six-pounders sited in tactically useful positions. No. 2 Platoon further strengthened the anti-tank defences by placing mines across the track in the western end of C Company's sector.

That the shelling was taking toll of the nerves of the infantry may be seen from Jensen's diary for 9 December, an entry which shows that the 'dispassionate' attitude

to shells was passing. 'This has been a terrible day. At lunch time the shelling started and continued till 1600 hours. All directed at my platoon which is on a forward slope and we lay in our slitties and waited for the worst to happen. C—— cracked under it and went back behind the crest and —— had his trench filled in and had to leave too'. The other companies had their full share of this shelling with C, nearest the top of the spur, possibly having the most. That night, blanket rolls were brought forward by the mule train and the men were able to make themselves a little more comfortable. To reduce the number exposed to the shelling and to enable men to get their clothes dry and to get something hot to eat and drink, small pickets only were kept on watch in the forward areas and the remainder were withdrawn to houses. Appreciation of the resulting improved conditions is shown in Corporal Stone's diary: '10 Dec. Permission obtained to pull back and rest in house for day with a picquet on out in front.... had a wash and shave. What a relief to get out of holes and be able to keep warm during day. 11 Dec.... rain began at 1 a.m. blankets wet.... pulled back into house at dawn and spent day there. Rain ceased but very cold and muddy. A person sinks in mud when walking. Killed 12 fowls and cooked them. Helped us a lot.' In D Company, Sergeant-Major Cecil Rogers usually had mulled wine ready for the men returning from picket duty or patrols. New Zealand initiative was making the war in the early Italian winter bearable.

The night of 9–10 December saw twenty-six tanks of [18 Armoured Regiment](#) and the battalion's carriers move up, under cover of heavy artillery fire, into the 23rd area, where they were camouflaged behind houses and trees. Their arrival was expected to lead almost immediately to the attack, but this was postponed mainly on account of other [Eighth Army](#) plans. On or towards the coast, the Canadians and Indians were mounting more or less successful attacks. But, before the various attacks could be co-ordinated with maximum effect, the gap between [8 Indian Division](#) and the New Zealanders had to be filled by bringing up into the line [17 Brigade](#) of 5 British Division. Twenty-third Battalion patrols under Coe, Irving and Jensen continued to report enemy troop and vehicular movement. In Irving's patrol, Privates Cecil [Hammond](#)³⁸ and J. [Mathews](#)³⁹ got behind the enemy forward posts. Kerr,⁴⁰ the resourceful sergeant of No. 2 Platoon, was cut off and taken prisoner, if only temporarily, while trying to locate where the enemy had laid mines at the top end of Sfasciata.

During the daylight hours, the forward companies continued to suffer from shelling and mortaring. C Company edged a house at a time closer to the Ortona road. This company was strengthened by the carrier platoon, under Second-Lieutenant K. Burt and Sergeants Collett⁴¹ and Oates,⁴² whose Brens with other machine guns gave a welcome accession of fire power. The enemy reacted strongly to this policy, defended certain houses and sent a fighting patrol to drive the C Company men back. Thus, on 12 December at about 1.30 a.m., the Germans were engaged in a sharp stand-up fight by 14 Platoon, now under Sergeant R. J. Wilson since Lieutenant Emery had been wounded during the occupation of Sfasciata. Grenades were thrown by both sides and sub-machine-gun fire exchanged for several minutes. Bob Wilson took the initiative in advancing to drive the enemy off and, after they had suffered some casualties, the Germans withdrew, leaving tools, mines and a machine gun behind.

After daylight on 12 December, C Company took over another house which would give better observation of the road. This action stirred the enemy into great activity. So savage were German shelling and tank fire that the OP sent to this newly won house was forced to withdraw. That evening a D Company platoon joined C Company in covering what was now recognised by Germans and New Zealanders alike as vital ground. A protective screen was put out about 200 yards at night by C Company in an attempt to deny the enemy any observation of the build-up for the attack. German patrols or working parties engaged in laying mines were fired upon and defensive artillery fire was brought down on movement nearer the road. On the 13th a German reconnaissance patrol penetrated C's area before it was discovered. Its two members did not return—one was killed and the other, from 5 Company, 9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, was captured.

Though the enemy shelling continued to cause casualties, the troops adapted themselves well to life in this muddy front line. Thus, at A Company headquarters, Somerville could write: 'Had great lunch of marrow, spud, and cabbage we cooked in old tins, and rations as well. Great feed at night.' In B Company, Corporal Stone wrote at the same time: 'We cooked up a sheep down in gully, also some potatoes and had a grand feed. A full stomach makes a big difference'. These Napoleonic reflections show that the 23rd was in good heart, and Colonel Romans felt justified in telling the Brigadier that the battalion was fit to join in the assault.

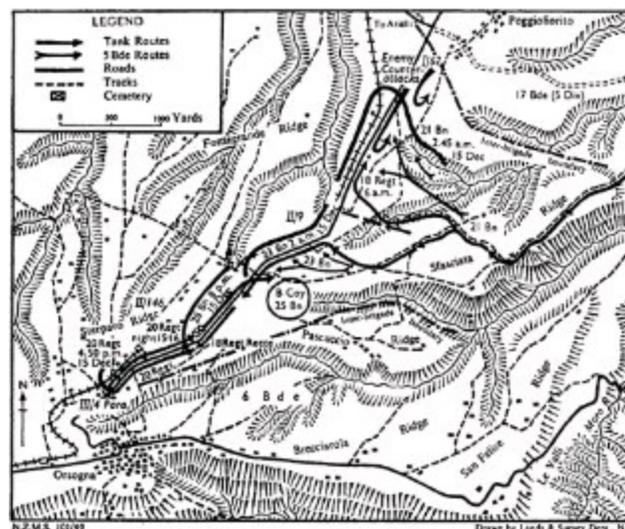
On 14 December orders were issued for the attack to secure a bridgehead over the **Ortona** road. Fifth Brigade, with the 21st on the right and the 23rd on the left, was responsible for the main attack, but 17 British Brigade was to attack on the right of the New Zealanders and around **Poggiofiorito** and 6 Brigade was to guard the left flank, with the 25th advancing up Pascuccio ridge to join the 23rd at the cemetery on the **Ortona** road. In the 23rd, the attack was to be made from C Company's FDLs up Sfasciata and over the road and railway. C Company was to remain in reserve while B on the right, D in the centre, and A on the left made the attack under an artillery barrage. Zero hour was fixed for 1 a.m. on 15 December. The tanks of **18 Armoured Regiment** were to support both the 21st and the 23rd against an armoured counter-attack and were to be prepared to exploit to the west.

As if warned of the shape of things to come, enemy shelling intensified in the afternoon of 14 December and two officers and two men were wounded. Captain Ian Wilson, OC A Company, was one of these. As there was not time to get the second-in-command up from B Echelon, Second-Lieutenant Peter Edgar, a well-proved fighting soldier who had been commissioned earlier in the year, took command. Somerville's diary gives the reaction excited in A Company by the loss of a popular commander: '... unexpected salvo.... Our boss was wounded while taking Mr. Tither⁴³ up to RAP. Capt Wilson should have a row of medals. He is whitest man I know and all of us are cursing the bloody Hun. Our phone wires cut to hell and is suicide to go and fix them yet. We are attacking tonight. What a bastard the boss should be hit!' By this time, the unit's total strength had been reduced to 26 officers and 645 other ranks, but the number of attacking infantry in the three companies to be committed was about 330.

By half an hour after midnight, the three attacking companies were in their forming-up places about 100 yards behind their start line. Battalion Headquarters had already moved into a house in C's forward area. Two of the battalion's 3-inch mortars were dug in directly behind the start line. Promptly at 1 a.m. the artillery barrage opened and the mortars joined in. As the barrage was to stand on its opening line for ten minutes, and as Colonel Romans had warned that some of the 'mediums' might have difficulty with crest clearance and 'shorts', the infantry took their time about approaching the start line. Whether supporting guns were firing short or whether the ten-minute interval sufficed for the enemy to bring his heaviest

concentrations on to the top of Sfasciata, the infantry, still somewhat crowded together as they approached a short start line, came under heavy fire and suffered serious casualties. The fact that the crew of a 3-inch mortar, dug in on a reverse slope and therefore reasonably safe from enemy shellfire, was also knocked out might indicate that 'shorts' were the trouble, but it is obvious that the enemy had appreciated the vital importance of the junction of Sfasciata with the main ridge and the Ortona road. The opening of the New Zealand barrage was the signal for the German gunners to stand to their guns and concentrate the maximum amount of fire on the one sector they knew the New Zealanders had to take if they were going to get tanks and supporting arms forward to guarantee the holding of the ground taken by the infantry.

In a sense, the 23rd now paid the price for the delay of a week in moving forward from Sfasciata. German guns around both Orsogna and Arielli directed the maximum amount of fire on to the top of Sfasciata and therefore on the 23rd's start line. Some forty men, truck drivers, company storemen and clerks, had been detailed in advance to act as stretcher-bearers in this attack. Their services were called for before the companies began to advance and some of them were added to the list of casualties. Very soon it was obvious that there was too much work for the number of stretcher-bearers available. But the barrage was moving on and the attack went on. Above the noise of bursting shells, the voices of the leading officers and NCOs could be heard calling the men to shake out into their lines and then to advance.



5 BRIGADE'S ATTACK, 15 DECEMBER 1943

5 brigade's attack 15 december 1943

On the right, B Company lost its company commander, Captain Dave Kirk, wounded at the start and Second-Lieutenant Fred Irving took command. Ably assisted by Bill Leonard,⁴⁴ who took over as Company Sergeant-Major when WO II H. G. Greenhalgh was wounded, Irving got the company moving forward with little less than its customary élan. Corporal Bob Stone, in charge of the company's right-hand section, gives this description of the occasion in his diary: 'Night fine but very dark. Guns opened up, instead of barrage beginning 300 yards ahead shells fell amongst us and caused many casualties before we even began attack.... 2 killed in 10 Platoon on S.L. Advance began but had to stop because barrage hardly lifted at all. Shells whizzing round our ears. A bit later able to continue. Coys on our left making better progress. Got in among a few Huns, most of them well down in holes. Reached the road and railway, crossed them and at last arrived on objective. Only 10 left in platoon now. Began digging. Hun counter attack began.' B Company reported on its objective by 2.8 a.m. and very shortly afterwards the enemy made his first uncoordinated attempts to drive back the South Islanders.

As the company in the centre, D probably encountered the worst shell and mortar fire but the ground on its front enabled it to make good progress. The rate of lift of the barrage for the level ground was too slow at 100 yards in four minutes and, as at [Alamein](#), the infantry went to ground when they caught up with their own barrage and waited for the next lift before advancing further. The leading sections killed a few enemy machine-gunners and riflemen as they advanced but the Germans encountered were not in the numbers expected. Some Germans lay 'doggo' in deep holes, covered and camouflaged with scrub bushes, or under corners of straw stacks, until the attack had passed. Then they emerged to shoot up signallers or others. D Company crossed the road and the railway in quick succession. Once these easily recognised features were crossed, the objective was quickly reached and the company reported back to Battalion Headquarters to this effect before 2 a.m.

On the left flank, A Company had its share of casualties but, led with determination by Peter Edgar, it advanced to the railway which, in its sector, ran through a small cutting with steep banks on either side. Reduced numbers and movement to the right meant that A was not so far south nor so close to the cemetery as had been intended. Jensen gives some account of A's experiences: 'We

left the S.L. under a very heavy barrage with Jerry's counter barrage mixed in—it was coming from all round the clock and things became rather chaotic—casualties occurred almost at once and by the time we reached our objective, after 1400 yards of absolute undiluted hell, I had lost 13 of my platoon'.

Young Somerville at A's headquarters confirms Jensen's impression and gives other graphic details: 'The attack right from zero hour was Hell with the lid off. Was lost from time we left till 0500 when reached objective. Both barrages opened together with us in the middle. Smoke and flames. Near first ridge, wireless aerial blown off and I was knocked over with shrap in leg as shell exploded at my feet. Kept going. Chaps getting bowled right and left. Couldn't think. Peered in faces, asked way, finally got across road into railway cutting. Was giving Jerry prisoner a spell with my hole when got one between the eyes—right eyebrow gone! Dave yelled to shoot the prisoners as they came streaming in but they had their hands up and Harry looked after them. Got set going in time to get arty to break up first counter attack. Held on while waiting on tanks despite tough time. Just got out of cutting in time on to far bank and dug in before dawn. Tom Sloan's ⁴⁵ section stayed in it and all got wiped out.' The railway cutting was a target on which the Germans concentrated their mortars and later, from much closer, their rifle grenades.

About twenty minutes after the attack got under way, Colonel Romans established a tactical headquarters in a house a short distance forward of the start line. The IO, Second-Lieutenant T. Mackie, and the signals officer, Second-Lieutenant H. [Staton](#), ⁴⁶ and some of their men accompanied him. As they went to enter the house, someone mentioned that mopping-up had not been completed and Sergeant Garnet Blampied, the 'I' sergeant, therefore fired a few bursts from his tommy gun through a hole in the wall. Two Germans with a Spandau promptly emerged and surrendered. Other German prisoners arrived, and several of them were employed as stretcher-bearers and in the general evacuation of the wounded.

Not long after 2 a.m. the forward companies reported enemy activity on their respective fronts and apparent preparations for a counter-attack. Small parties of enemy approached and either set up machine guns to harass the 23rd infantry or tried to penetrate the freshly won area. Without exception, these probing moves were broken up either by infantry or artillery defensive fire. These enemy moves to exploit the situation before consolidation was complete were followed by a more

fully organised counter-attack from the north in which tanks played a major role. Thus, three tanks from the direction of [Arielli](#) penetrated 21 Battalion's sector, and one of these moved farther down the road to where it halted behind B Company's 12 Platoon. Here Lance-Sergeant Ian Taylor ⁴⁷ had done a good job of reorganisation after the loss of his platoon officer. The tank made no attempt to leave the road but began spraying the area occupied by B and D Companies with machine-gun fire. For a moment it appeared that the forward infantry would be cut off by tanks. But Private Bob [Clay](#), ⁴⁸ occupying a German mortar pit along-side the railway embankment with Frank [Dawson](#), ⁴⁹ now proved the worth of the Piat as an anti-tank weapon as well as his own quality as a soldier. Taking careful aim when the tank was only 20 yards away but when its machine-gunner was firing across at D Company, Clay scored a direct hit, but without apparently doing much damage. The tank rolled forward another 5 to 10 yards, closer to Clay, who had the nerve-racking experience of having a misfire. The bomb simply dropped out the front of his gun. Clay therefore had to take the chance of being shot, but he pulled his Piat back and recocked it in the pit. His next shot hit the tank at the base of the turret, which apparently became locked. The tank quickly reversed and withdrew some distance to a bend, where it halted and was abandoned by its crew. Clay's action undoubtedly saved the forward infantry from being cut off and also ensured that no enemy tank was waiting to greet the Shermans of [18 Armoured Regiment](#) when they crawled over the crest of Sfasciata about half an hour later.

The sappers of [7 Field Company](#), assisted by the 23rd's No. 2 Platoon, worked hard to lift the mines at the top of Sfasciata ridge. But the area was so covered by fire that their task was not easy and 18 Regiment's tanks were overdue when the 21st and 23rd infantry were being threatened by German tanks. As C Squadron, in the lead, pressed forward, its tanks suffered from a series of accidents. In the dark, the leading tank slipped over the edge of the track and down a steep bank. Two tanks burned out clutches trying to handle impossible conditions. Three more became hopelessly bogged and blocked the track. Colonel Clive [Pleasants](#) ⁵⁰ found a route round these for the remaining three tanks of C Squadron, but two of them also ran off the track. The sole surviving 'runner' from C Squadron halted on reaching the flat ground near the road and waited for A Squadron, which arrived intact just before daybreak. The C Squadron tank and one troop from A then moved into the 21st sector. The undamaged German tanks and a troop-carrier quickly withdrew and the

enemy threat was at an end—at least for the present. Other A Squadron tanks moved down the road towards the cemetery on the left and took up positions in support of the infantry.

When he inspected the forward area immediately after first light, Colonel Romans found his troops rather thin on the ground. On the left flank, 25 Battalion had climbed Pascuccio spur and suffered casualties but there was no liaison on the ground with the 23rd. To remedy this, B Company of the 25th was placed under command of the 23rd to cover the gap between the two units and the head of the gully between Pascuccio and Sfasciata; it reverted to its own battalion about seven o'clock that evening, when other arrangements had been made for the 23rd's left flank.

The three forward companies of the 23rd completed their consolidation after daybreak. They cleared a few more houses and took a few more prisoners. Lieutenant Mick Tither brought up the 3-inch mortars and shot bombs into enemy-occupied areas. Individual tanks shot a few rounds into houses beyond the FDLs to discourage enemy machine-gunners, who were still annoying if not very active. The task of exploiting towards [Orsogna](#) was undertaken by [20 Armoured Regiment](#) and the Maoris, but heavy fire from concealed anti-tank guns defeated their attempts to enter [Orsogna](#).

The 23rd's casualties already numbered over 20 killed and 80 wounded. They were increased by shell and mortar fire during the day. Thus, at 2 p.m., Colonel Romans was moving back to his main headquarters when a shell burst beside him, giving him what later proved to be fatal wounds. Later in the afternoon Major Thomas came forward and took command. He inspected the company positions with Tom Mackie and later recorded his impressions. 'The troops were still tremendously proud of their success.... On the right 2/Lt. Irving had the remnants of his company well organised and in contact with [21 Bn](#) on the right. In the centre [Angus Ross](#) was well organised, on the left Peter Edgar was exposed on the flank so in conformity with a decision already taken by Col. Romans, I moved C Coy into position there. This left me with no reserve but with the build-up of armour in the area, I deemed it better to have a secure perimeter and rely on the tanks to deal with any threat.'

As usual, the battalion signallers did everything possible to maintain

communications between the forward companies and the headquarters. The first line party to go forward came under unexpected fire from enemy who had remained concealed in a straw stack, and George Simpson⁵¹ was killed and others wounded. Later, Henry King, Feasey,⁵² Ron and Ernie Ritchie and others made valiant attempts to cope with the number of breaks in the lines. Eventually they established two complete circuits, which met at D Company's headquarters, and these preserved line communication from then on.

In the evening the Quartermaster, Captain Cliff Hunt, and his assistants, the company seconds-in-command and quarter-master-sergeants, got a hot meal up to the forward troops with the aid of the mule-pack train. Captain Don Grant took a party of fifty men from HQ Company to the cemetery area to give infantry protection to 20 Regiment's tanks. These men from the carrier and other support group platoons were relieved later by a company of Maoris.

The night of 15–16 December was quiet and peaceful until after midnight, when the men in the forward posts reported enemy movement in front. Artillery defensive fire tasks were brought down and although it was obvious that enemy troops had taken up positions, nothing further was heard until 3.15 a.m., when 21 Battalion and B and D Companies of the 23rd were attacked by tanks and infantry, preceded by heavy artillery concentrations. Nine tanks, five of them flame-throwers, supported by assault guns and paratroops acting as infantry, came in and shot up the area. In the main, the attack on the 23rd front was confined to infantry, but on the road close to B Company, two tanks and a flame-thrower approached close enough to cause concern. Although the major attack was centred on the 21st front, the 23rd men saw an unforgettable sight of belching flames, tracer bullets flying in wild profusion, flares and, eventually, burning tanks. About 4 a.m. Lieutenant Burt and some Bren-gunners from the carriers arrived to reinforce the position in D Company. About the same time, Sergeant-Major Rogers secured the movement forward of a couple of 18th tanks to positions where they were able to fire with good effect on the enemy tanks. Eventually, after four enemy tanks, including two flame-throwers, had been knocked out and the infantry advances repelled, the enemy withdrew. By 5 a.m. the area was quiet again.

The battalion was relieved about twelve hours later by the Maoris. Overnight the unit had lost 5 killed and 6 wounded. This made the total casualties for the two

days 28 killed and 88 wounded, the worst casualties the unit had suffered in a long time. Most of those killed lay thick near the start line. Eric Batchelor, a veteran of several campaigns, later wrote: 'The scene after the battle was the most terrible I saw in [Italy](#), the dead lay side by side in places.' In his diary for 16 December, Somerville recorded: 'Sandy Thomas said he had never seen so many dead on a battlefield. Initial attack was worse than [Takrouna](#). The first shell that got me got two other chaps badly. They fell on each other, so she was tough when casualties were two deep.... May get my revenge when we are reorganised. C.O. badly wounded this afternoon. God! I'm dirty and literally covered in blood and mud.' Of course, many of the dead on that battlefield were Germans. The battalion diary records that the attacking companies took eighty prisoners but no count of the German dead was made. That the number was high may be deduced from the report of Lieutenant-Colonel Berger, commanding 9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment: '15 December had seen the regiment committed to the very last man. It had lost heavily in men and equipment. A large number of men were missing and it was considered that the vast majority must be killed or wounded.'

After dark, when the Maoris had taken over the forward posts, the 23rd infantry moved back to the ford over the [Moro](#). In places on the track, the tanks had churned the mud into a quagmire three feet deep and many of the men staggered and fell as they toiled down the Sfasciata track. Once across the ford, they were picked up in RMT lorries and taken back to the houses which they had occupied in [Castelfrentano](#) before they began their daylight advance on 7 December. They had been away only nine days but it seemed an age.

For the remainder of December, while other units enlarged the bridgehead which the 23rd had established, the battalion remained in [Castelfrentano](#). The troops worked on roadmaking and similar jobs for a few days, but normally they rested and recuperated, enjoying the hot showers that were now available and the parcel and other mails which arrived before Christmas. Over 130 reinforcements arrived during this period and the companies were brought back to correct numerical strength.

On 22 December all ranks were shocked to hear that Colonel Romans had died of the wounds received on 15 December. An original officer of the unit, he had earned the right to command his battalion for nearly eighteen months. He had also

earned a secure place in the hearts of his men. He was a strong natural leader who inspired others with his own regard for the battalion. Many men who joined the battalion when he was the commanding officer will remember his address of welcome, in which he invariably traversed the highlights of the unit's history and insisted that the newcomers must make up their minds to maintain the traditions and the proud record of the 23rd. 'In the 23rd,' he used to say, 'we play hard but we also fight hard'. With pardonable exaggeration, he would add, 'And we always take our objective.' Brave, almost to the point of foolhardiness, he never shirked what he considered to be his duty. Thus, he always visited every forward platoon on the morning after an attack. Wearing his soft SD cap and, after [Takrouna](#), where his leg was injured, carrying a walking stick, he would arrive in the forward areas as nonchalant and as cool, apparently as happy and as carefree, as if he had come up to inspect the turf. The men were proud of him as their CO and his visits always seemed to revive flagging spirits. On the administrative side of his office, he frequently assigned tasks to the junior officers best able to execute them. In the idiom of the Central Otago sheep-men he knew so well, he used to say: 'I don't keep dogs and then do the barking myself'. He delegated responsibility wisely, selected subordinates shrewdly and always backed up those executing the tasks he had allotted. In his day, the 23rd had two priceless assets for which he was largely responsible—a team of loyal, efficient officers and NCOs and a fighting spirit and esprit de corps admired by all who knew the unit. His personal courage and his devotion to the battalion were the outstanding characteristics of Reg Romans. As Dick Connolly, his second-in-command and successor, said later: 'There wasn't a petty inch in him. Every thought and every action was for the battalion.' He certainly gave the 23rd all that was in his power to give, especially in loyal devotion and courageous leadership. Those qualities made him make heavy demands of himself and of others, but they also inspired loyalty of a high order among his men.

In announcing the death of the Colonel to the companies, Colonel Thomas sent a typed message in which he said: 'On the day prior to his death the C.O. wrote to me enclosing the following message to you:

"Officers, Non-commissioned officers and ORs. This will be the first time that I will not have been with you at our Christmas celebrations. Our first Christmas celebrations when the battalion was formed were in England, our second in [Tobruk](#),

our third in [Nofilia](#) and now our fourth celebrations in [Italy](#).

“I can only wish you from the bottom of my heart that our fifth celebrations will be with our mothers, wives and families back in New Zealand.

“God bless you all.

R. E. Romans, Lt. Col.”

The 23rd mourned the loss of a grand soldier. That afternoon Padre Holland conducted a short memorial service for Colonel Romans and for all members of the battalion who had fallen in recent fighting.

During this period out of the line, the [Support Group](#) was made into Support Company, separate from HQ Company and responsible for its own administration. Captain D. G. Grant became the first commander of this new company. As Major Orbell had become second-in-command, Captain Slee took command of HQ Company. Other changes included the promotion of Captain Arthur Parker to the command of A Company and of [Second-Lieutenant Dan Davis](#), with the rank of acting captain, to that of B.

Despite the sadness inevitable after such bitter losses, Christmas Day was observed in traditional fashion. The Padre conducted carol services in the company areas. A and D Companies had their service in a stable with hay-filled mangers. Good food, including oyster soup, turkey, pork, and plum pudding, was served. As one private wrote: ‘Christmas dinner was so good, and my appetite so satisfied that when I came back to my slitty could only think “Thank goodness I'm home”.’ Actually, the majority were already living in houses at this stage. A few preferred sleeping out-of-doors to enduring bites from fleas or bedbugs, but bad weather, culminating at the end of December in a heavy fall of snow, drove even the hardy ones indoors.

On 27 December Colonel Thomas left for furlough in New Zealand and Colonel Connolly, who had just returned from his furlough, took command of the battalion. On 2 January he took it forward to relieve the 26th in a sector only a mile ahead of that taken by the 23rd on 15 December, so slow had been the advance in the bad weather. The 23rd remained in this area, with only internal reliefs of forward

companies, until 15 January when 1 Royal Sussex Regiment of 7 Indian Infantry Brigade took over.

The fortnight in the line on and behind 'Jittery Ridge' was a far from happy time. Weather and ground conditions and, at first, lack of suitable equipment for these conditions made life in the forward area physically tougher than the infantry had experienced before. Equipped with snow capes and other white clothing necessary for night patrolling, the enemy took the initiative and, about 2.45 a.m. on 6 January, taught 18 Platoon a sharp lesson. It was snowing, but sentries kept watch on the house in which the remainder of the platoon slept. Sergeant Johnston and another picket kept watch at the front of the house nearest the enemy and a sentry mounted guard at the back door. Suddenly, out of the snow, an enemy raiding party approached the back door. They shot and wounded the sentry, who had apparently put down his tommy gun for a minute in order to beat life back into his chilled hands. Taking the sentry prisoner, they flung open the door and tossed in a couple of grenades, which wounded three men sleeping on the floor. Johnston and his associate doubled round from the front of the house, opened fire on the retreating enemy and appeared to wound two. The whole incident was all over in less than two minutes but the enemy had scored points.

A Company relieved D in this sector on 6 January. Jensen's account, written after five days in the forward area, gives a good idea of the strain: '... some of the reinforcements are not part of us yet and are inclined to get on the old nerves a bit. I sound quite like a grim dig! A Coy is on the reverse of a ridge forward of our troops and on the forward slope of this ridge are our friends the Hun.... In places he is 160 yards away and at night things are only middling.... I divide my PI into two and Frank Fielding, ⁵³ my Sgt., with one half goes to an outpost about 150 yards left. PI HQ and half the PI is in a badly shelled house of two rooms and Frank's outpost in a similar house. We have a picquet at each corner of the house and with only 12 men in my outpost, there is not much sleep for the blokes. I get no sleep at all during the night as I change the reliefs every hour and also visit the other outpost every hour. The trouble is that there are so many stand-tos that everyone is becoming jittery and we now have more than half the pl as recent reinforcements; at least six of these are no use whatsoever and we would be better without them. They are so frightened that they won't stick their noses above the sandbags when on picquet and I have to keep

constant watch on them. Re sandbags—when we took over this area, the house had no defences, but I have had deep slitties dug at each corner, all sandbagged.... The snow is still thick on the ground and I am coughing like the devil which is a nuisance because the Hun can hear every sound. We can ourselves hear him speak from his outposts the other side of the ridge. We are all fed up with this job and are becoming very nervy.'

Although the tacit agreement between the combatants that houses were needed for living in and therefore should not be shelled was generally observed, occasionally houses were shelled and mortared. On 7 January, for instance, a house in B Company's area received a direct hit. Lieutenant M. C. Tither, the mortar officer, was killed, and [Lieutenant Dan Davis](#) received wounds which later proved fatal. One other soldier was killed and four more, including three artillery OP men, were wounded. Although other casualties were sustained during this period, the losses on this occasion were the worst for the period in the Fontegrande area. Tither, who had been decorated as an NCO with the 26th in the desert, was a very able mortar officer. [Davis](#) had distinguished himself in [Greece](#), [Crete](#) and North Africa and had, on being commissioned, quickly found himself in command of a company.

Of course, with Dick Connolly as commander, the 23rd was not always on the receiving end. Outposts regularly shot up any enemy patrols or dogs seen in the area, especially after it was gathered that dogs were being used to locate occupied posts. When snow clothing became available, patrols went out with aggressive missions. A Company sent the first of these out on 8 January. Corporal [Rothera](#) ⁵⁴ took five men from 8 Platoon, Privates Jim [Craw](#), ⁵⁵ Leo [Clark](#), ⁵⁶ John [Davies](#), ⁵⁷ Sam Green-slade ⁵⁸ and Dave [Spring](#), ⁵⁹ out at dusk to occupy a house known to be used by German patrols. No. 7 Platoon had watched the house all day without seeing any Germans but, soon after the patrol had left, the men saw eighteen Germans enter the house. Fortunately, Rothera took all precautions and, as a member of the patrol recorded later, 'Leaving the others to give covering fire and watch the flanks, Jack, Leo and Dave advanced on the house. When about 25 yards from the house, we observed a German machine gun post in a barn and some quick shooting enabled us to shoot first and silence this position. The Jerries at the house immediately fired flare signals and an artillery and mortar concentration came down but away behind us. We continued shooting it out with the Jerries who fired from the roof and from

the building. We succeeded in silencing all their fire. From the cries of the wounded Jerries, our patrol could be counted as being very successful, especially as our casualties were nil.'

The revelation that the New Zealanders had taken the initiative, together with the clearer moonlight nights, put a stop to aggressive patrolling by the Germans. This experience of 'static warfare' under Italian winter conditions was not without its effect on morale. The weather and the impossibility of cross-country movement by the tanks had made a mockery of General Montgomery's early December message in which he had confidently claimed that 'having smashed through the enemy's winter line, we are now well placed to tackle the enemy in the open'. Already the men in the battalion realised that the early talk of a mobile role and exploitation on the plains of [Lombardy](#) had been wildly optimistic and that only hard slogging lay ahead. The boundless confidence of the approach to fighting in [Italy](#) was being replaced by a grim determination and a realistic appreciation of the general situation, in which [Italy](#) was becoming of secondary importance.

The 23rd was more than pleased to be relieved by 1 Royal Sussex before midnight on 15 January. The move back to the trucks entailed a march down Sfasciata, which was in a worse state than ever before. When he wrote up his diary, Somerville gave up trying to find words to describe that night march: 'It would be useless to try and make people understand about that march. 3 miles odd took 4 hours and was over knees in mud practically all the way.' But this was the end of the fighting on the Adriatic coast for some time because the New Zealanders were soon to be switched to the other side of [Italy](#), where it was hoped ground and climatic conditions would favour attacking forces more.

¹ Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, Vol. II, p. 222 et seq and p. 328 et seq deal with the furlough and the later replacement scheme.

² [WO I P. Canham](#); [Lower Hutt](#); born England, 24 Jun 1904; labourer; wounded 21 May 1941.

³ [WO II W. J. Mason](#); [Greymouth](#); born [Greymouth](#), 11 Jan 1907; bridge

carpenter.

⁴ Pte A. L. Carran; Dunedin; born Dacre, Southland, 20 Nov 1907; lorry driver.

⁵ Pte J. W. Law; Richmond, Nelson; born Dunedin, 23 Feb 1917; labourer.

⁶ Sgt E. A. Trembath; Waimate; born NZ 22 Jun 1904; transport contractor.

⁷ Pte L. S. Curtz; Napier; born Palmerston North, 6 Mar 1917; lorry driver.

⁸ S-Sgt A. A. Scott; Waimate; born NZ 25 Apr 1905; tractor driver.

⁹ From 6 June to 31 July 1943.

¹⁰ Maj-Gen Sir Keith Stewart, KBE, CB, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); Kerikeri; born Timaru, 30 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; 1 NZEF 1917–19; GSO I NZ Div, 1940–41; DCGS 1941–43; comd 5 Bde Aug–Nov 1943, 4 Armd Bde Nov 1943–Mar 1944, 5 Bde Mar–Aug 1944; p.w. 1 Aug 1944; comd 9 Bde (2 NZEF, Japan) 1945–46; Adjutant-General, NZ Military Forces, 1946–49; CGS 1949–52.

¹¹ Rt. Rev. J. T. Holland; Bishop of Waikato, Hamilton; born Newcastle-on-Tyne, England, 31 Jan 1912; Anglican minister.

¹² This was the name given to the third of the three groups into which the vehicles had been divided for shipment to Italy.

¹³ Maj W. B. Cox, MC; born NZ 17 May 1909; salesman; wounded 13 Oct 1944.

¹⁴ Capt J. K. Burt; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 14 Apr 1907; public accountant; wounded 20 Mar 1944.

- ¹⁵ Lt T. T. Mackie; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 2 Nov 1913; clerk; wounded 27 Feb 1944.
- ¹⁶ 2 Lt G. N. De Thier; Christchurch; born NZ 10 Jul 1916; land agent; wounded 15 Dec 1943.
- ¹⁷ Capt F. R. Coe, MC; born England, 21 Aug 1912; gold miner.
- ¹⁸ Pte D. McLean; Christchurch; born Reefton, 2 Apr 1917; vinegar manufacturer's assistant; twice wounded.
- ¹⁹ Capt R. S. Duncan; Nelson; born Nelson, 21 Mar 1911; company secretary; wounded 31 Jul 1944.
- ²⁰ Capt J. R. Bannerman; Gore; born NZ 3 May 1921; farmer.
- ²¹ Lt M. P. Grace; Invercargill; born Invercargill, 30 Sep 1917; company manager; wounded 9 Dec 1943.
- ²² L-Cpl A. J. C. Rennie; born Timaru, 15 Jun 1919; butcher; killed in action 28 Nov 1943.
- ²³ Pte J. W. McN. Bathgate; born NZ 9 Apr 1922; farmhand; killed in action 28 Nov 1943.
- ²⁴ Pte R. W. Walker; born NZ 16 Jun 1918; dredge hand; killed in action 28 Nov 1943.
- ²⁵ Maj T. G. Emery, ED; Christchurch; born NZ 4 Nov 1922; student; wounded 8 Dec 1943; 2 i/c 22 Bn (Japan) 1946–48.
- ²⁶ WO II N. W. Street; Nelson; born NZ 7 Dec 1910; Regular soldier; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

²⁷ Cpl D. N. Harland; Christchurch; born Bluff, 11 Jun 1905; waterside worker; three times wounded.

²⁸ Capt S. R. Jensen, m.i.d.; Wellington; born NZ 3 May 1915; law clerk; later Regular Force.

²⁹ Cpl N. M. Christie, M M; born Milton, 10 May 1920; farm labourer; killed in action 3 Apr 1944.

³⁰ Lt R. R. Eastgate; Hokitika; born Richmond, Nelson, 16 Apr 1921; baker.

³¹ L-Sgt R. A. Somerville, m.i.d.; Lawrence; born Balclutha, 17 Sep 1921; electrical engineering apprentice; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

³² No barrage was fired on the 23rd front, only concentrations.

³³ L-Cpl M. D. Chick; Rotherham; born Oxford, 5 Jan 1921; farm worker; three times wounded.

³⁴ Defensive fire.

³⁵ 2 Lt T. O. Toner; Balclutha; born Doyleston, 7 Nov 1914; driver; twice wounded.

³⁶ Pte A. M. Fastier; Dunedin; born Palmerston North, 19 Sep 1921; traveller; wounded 8 Dec 1943.

³⁷ Capt W. K. Esson; born Wellington, 19 May 1910; salesman; p.w. 20 Feb 1944; wounded 21 Apr 1945.

³⁸ Pte C. H. Hammond; Limehills, Southland; born NZ 31 Aug 1917; labourer; wounded 23 Jul 1944.

³⁹ L-Sgt J. V. Mathews; Ardlussa, Balfour; born NZ 23 Aug 1915; labourer;

wounded 9 Dec 1943.

⁴⁰ 2 Lt P. M. Kerr, m.i.d.; [Christchurch](#); born Kaitangata, 5 Jan 1908; garage manager; p.w. 10 Dec 1943; escaped 16 Dec 1943; reached Allied territory 2 Mar 1944.

⁴¹ Sgt J. C. Collett; [Motueka](#); born [Oamaru](#), 18 Sep 1915; tobacco farmer; wounded 10 Aug 1942.

⁴² Sgt J. G. A. Oates; [Invercargill](#); born NZ 10 Mar 1910; motor driver; wounded 30 Nov 1943.

⁴³ Lt M. C. Tither, MM; born NZ 24 Feb 1913; school-teacher; killed in action 7 Jan 1944.

⁴⁴ Lt W. J. Leonard, m.i.d.; [Tuatapere](#); born [Invercargill](#), 7 Feb 1919; NZ Forest Service; twice wounded.

⁴⁵ Cpl T. M. Sloan; [Christchurch](#); born NZ 16 May 1917; labourer; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

⁴⁶ Capt H. Staton; [Auckland](#); born [New York](#), 7 Sep 1910; company manager.

⁴⁷ 2 Lt I. R. Taylor, MM; [Riverton](#); born [Christchurch](#), 23 Feb 1919; caretaker; wounded 9 Apr 1943.

⁴⁸ Pte R. E. Clay; born [Invercargill](#), 3 Nov 1920; cheese-maker; killed in action 16 Dec 1943.

⁴⁹ Sgt F. C. Dawson; born [Invercargill](#), 9 Oct 1906; barrister and solicitor; killed in action 16 Dec 1943.

⁵⁰ Brig C. L. Pleasants, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [Halcombe](#), 26 Jul 1910; schoolmaster; CO [18 Bn](#) and Armd Regt Jul 1942-Mar

1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Sep-Nov 1944; 5 Bde Nov 1944-Jan 1945, May 1945-Jan 1946; twice wounded; Commander, [Fiji Military Forces](#), 1949–53; Commander, Northern Military District, 1953–57; Central Military District, 1957-.

⁵¹ [Pte G. A. D. Simpson](#); born NZ 3 Jan 1919; butcher; killed in action 15 Dec 1943.

⁵² [Sgt R. P. Feasey](#); born NZ 11 Sep 1918; labourer; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

⁵³ 2 Lt [F. Fielding](#); born 1 Apr 1919; clerk; wounded 15 Dec 1944.

⁵⁴ [Cpl J. A. Rothera](#); [Christchurch](#); born Newcastle-on-Tyne, England, 12 Jan 1920; upholsterer; wounded 23 Jul 1944.

⁵⁵ [Pte O. J. Craw](#); [Duvauchelle](#); born [Akaroa](#), 16 Mar 1922; farmhand.

⁵⁶ [Sgt L. C. J. Clark](#), m.i.d.; [Christchurch](#); born [Marton](#), 13 Jun 1921; nurseryman; wounded 23 Mar 1944.

⁵⁷ [Pte J. H. Davies](#); [Stillwater](#); born [Wellington](#), 20 Dec 1915; labourer; twice wounded.

⁵⁸ [L-Sgt S. P. Greenslade](#); [Prebbleton](#); born 11 Nov 1921; farm manager; wounded 22 Apr 1945.

⁵⁹ [Cpl D. M. Spring](#); [Seadown](#), [Timaru](#); born [Timaru](#), 12 Aug 1920; farm labourer.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 13 – CASSINO

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Cassino

Early in 1944, General Alexander decided that conditions on the west coast of [Italy](#) offered better prospects for an advance to [Rome](#) than did those on the Adriatic, where a stalemate had been reached. He therefore decided to withdraw the New Zealand Division from the [Eighth Army](#) and make it available for [Fifth Army](#) exploitation up the [Liri](#) valley. When the 23rd began its move back from the [Sangro](#) on 19 January, the men thought they were merely withdrawing to a rest or training area. At a staging area about 105 miles to the south, they were told that their journey was to be continued across the spine of [Italy](#). Two days later, after a grand scenic drive across the [Apennines](#) and through many villages and towns, they reached their destination, [Piedimonte d' Alife](#), a lovely spot with the valley of the [Volturno](#) below them. Here they stayed till 5 February.

During this period, [Brigadier Kippenberger](#) and Colonel Connolly organised training designed to get the men physically fit again after their occupation of static defences. Hill climbing, route marches, shooting, showers at the luxurious American Bath Unit where soap and towels were provided, rostered leave to [Pompeii](#), and a variety of entertainments, including vino parties, soon had the men feeling fresh and fit enough for action. The most important new feature of training in this area was concerned with river crossings. The officers did various tactical exercises on the subject and on 28 January the men practised crossing the [Volturno](#) with assault craft. 'Had a lot of fun. Craft went every way but the right one for a while. Some of the boys finished well down stream,' wrote Jim [Blakie](#) ¹ in his diary. Eventually the technique was mastered and, when [General Freyberg](#) came to inspect progress, the companies crossed in two waves and completed their landing on the opposite bank in fifteen minutes.

The Fifth Army was now facing up to the German ' [Gustav Line](#)' which ran, more or less, across the peninsula and from the mountains to the coast. Central to this line on the [Fifth Army](#) front was [Cassino](#), a town of about 7000 inhabitants. Situated on the flat western edge of the Rapido valley and astride Route 6, the main road between [Naples](#) and [Rome](#), it was itself completely dominated by the mountains to the north and west. Immediately west of the town was the precipitous feature

crowned by [Montecassino Abbey](#) and farther west were other high features, such as [Monte Cairo](#), a 5400-foot height. The Germans had the advantage of the perfect observation the high ground gave them. They had also improved the naturally strong defences with mines and wire and by flooding the flat approaches to [Cassino](#). The January attacks by [2 United States Corps](#) had been driven back, mainly because its supporting arms could not be got up in time.

To reinforce the New Zealand Division for the heavy task ahead, General Alexander formed the temporary [New Zealand Corps](#) on 3 February by placing 4 Indian Division under the command of [General Freyberg](#). On 11 February, [General Kippenberger](#) took command of the Division while Brigadier [Hartnell](#)² became the commander of 5 Brigade. By this time the brigade had entered the line. When the 23rd moved forward from [Alife](#) on 5 February, the Colonel left Captain Robins, Lieutenant Edgar, Second-Lieutenant [Sinclair](#)³ and 48 other ranks, most of whom had seen long service, there as an LOB party. The rest of the battalion took up positions as brigade reserve in the rear of [Monte Porchio](#). Two to three miles ahead, the 21st and 28th occupied ground forward of [Monte Trocchio](#).

The 23rd remained in reserve and well back from [Cassino](#) for the next fortnight, but its area was shelled spasmodically by German heavy guns. Box and other mines also caused trouble: on 6 February, for instance, Sergeant [Leathem](#),⁴ an A Company stalwart, lost his leg on a mine. The companies were unable to do any training on account of the perfect observation the Germans had over most of their area. The spasmodic shelling about which it seemed impossible to do anything effective did not help morale.

When [Prince Peter of Greece](#) lunched at Battalion Headquarters on 10 February, Captain F. C. Irving and Sergeant-Major McIntosh⁵ were the only two Greek campaign men, besides Colonel Connolly, still with the battalion in the line. During this period of waiting for the attack on [Cassino](#), B Company and No. 2 Platoon were the only 23rd troops at all actively engaged. B Company, under Captain Irving, went forward on 13 February to hold a position about 1500 yards south of the railway line near the Ladrone stream. Here it was under the command of the Divisional Cavalry until 16 February. Although still over four miles from [Montecassino](#), the troops could now see the monastery plainly and had a grand view of its bombing on 15 February. No. 2 Platoon, the 23rd sappers, lifted and laid mines as required. On 14 February,

after laying mines in the Divisional Cavalry area, they were withdrawing when someone stood on a mine and Lieutenant Neville [Barker](#)⁶ and Corporal [Edgecombe](#)⁷ were killed.

The general plan for the February attack on [Cassino](#) involved a right hook by the Indians and the establishment of a bridgehead over the Rapido by 5 Brigade. In the latter operation, the 28th was to seize ground near the railway station and then assist [19 Armoured Regiment](#) in an attack on the town itself. The 23rd was then to assist [20 Armoured Regiment](#) to cross the Gari river farther west. Full preparations were made for this attack: in particular, several reconnaissances from the top of [Monte Trocchio](#) were made. But success at each stage depended on success at the preceding stage and, in the event, although the Maoris took their objectives in their night attack on 17–18 February, no tanks or supporting arms could be got over the demolitions and the river to assist them to consolidate. The attack in which the 23rd was to participate was therefore cancelled.

On 19 February the 23rd was ordered to relieve the 24th in the line forward of [Monte Trocchio](#) that night. This relief was completed without untoward incident. B Company returned to its former positions and again passed under the command of the Divisional Cavalry. In the 23rd area, C Company under Lieutenant Frank Coe held ground on the right as far north as Route 6, while D Company, under Major Sandy Slee, continued the line south to just below the bend in the railway. A Company was in reserve, more or less covering the gap between the two forward companies, although its 9 Platoon was with C on Route 6. So heavily shelled and mortared were the forward areas that they were thinly held. Picket posts were so far apart that going round them at night was no easy task. Thus, on 20 February, while Lieutenant W. K. Esson was making his rounds, he was ambushed and taken prisoner by a German patrol which had crossed the Rapido unobserved. To thicken up the defences without increasing too dangerously the number of men in the area, the device adopted on the [Orsogna](#) road was again employed and sixteen men from the carrier platoon, armed with Bren guns, came up to reinforce C Company.

Although enemy observation over most of the area made much movement difficult and meals had to be brought up under cover of darkness, the CO and IO, Second-Lieutenant Tom Mackie, invariably visited the forward companies each

morning. Dick Connolly's robust cheerfulness, which no amount of shelling or neberwerfer mortaring appeared able to shake, instilled some measure of confidence into many young soldiers, especially some of the new men who had been given no time to find their feet in the unit. Forty-seven reinforcements had joined the battalion on 6 February and 16 more arrived on 21 February. Private Warwick [Anderson](#),⁸ who normally made the briefest of entries in his diary, recorded at this time, 'Old Dick a great sort!' Another outstanding officer in Major Ian Wilson returned to the battalion in late February and was given command of HQ Company.

On 24 February A Company moved up Route 6 in preparation for an attack which was postponed because the weather broke, and the heavy rains not only waterlogged airfields in the rear but also rendered impracticable the employment of tanks in an approach to [Cassino](#). B Company had reverted to the command of the 23rd and, with D also, moved into position on Route 6. The battalion felt it was shaping up for the attack, but time and time again orders were cancelled or altered. And still the shelling continued. On 27 February Battalion Headquarters was heavily shelled—two were killed and nine wounded. One of those killed was the RAP Corporal, 'Vicky' Idour, whose gallantry in attending the wounded under all sorts of fire had become something of a legend in the battalion and had earned him the Military Medal and a mention in despatches. The three officers wounded were Second-Lieutenant Mackie, the IO, Captain D. B. [Robertson](#),⁹ the MO, and Second-Lieutenant Rex [Musgrave](#),¹⁰ the former RSM, who had been commissioned in the field for his sterling service. Captain Alan Wilson, a former MO of the 23rd, came up on 29 February to relieve until Captain Robertson was fit to return. Another change in command came to 5 Brigade at this stage: Brigadier J. T. Burrows, a South Islander trained in the 20th in the [Kippenberger](#) tradition, took command on 28 February.

The 23rd's forward companies were relieved on 28–29 February and passed into partial reserve. The month ended without any effective blow struck at the enemy. Much work had been done on plans and preparations which had come to nought. The 23rd had lost 1 officer and 6 men killed and 13 wounded. Sergeant Garnet Blampied, the 'I' sergeant, correctly noted: 'It has been a queer sort of month with nothing actually accomplished'.

The next two weeks passed in much the same way. The weather which broke so

badly on 24 February continued wet. One day's rain succeeded another and the attack was postponed, not once but several times. Apart from the depressing effect of the weather itself, the repeated postponements were bad for morale, which could not be whipped up to the high pitch appropriate for the launching of an attack and then damped down again without some loss of enthusiasm on the part of the troops. These delays also enabled the pessimism and doubts at various levels to filter through to the fighting troops. Was this not the toughest defensive position the New Zealanders had ever been called upon to attack? Had not the Americans suffered terrible casualties without scoring a success? Had not the enemy had more than enough time in which to perfect his defences? Was there no way other than the direct approach and the head-on attack? These were questions which gnawed at the minds of commanders at various levels and the fears aroused by them were indirectly communicated to the troops.

Casualties contributed to the growing concern about the time taken to launch this attack. A few casualties were always taken for granted, but somehow the shock was greater when an outstanding leader whose presence in the field had also been taken for granted was suddenly removed. On 2 March, [General Kippen-berger](#) was returning from a reconnaissance up [Monte Trocchio](#) when he stepped on a mine and had one foot blown off and the other so badly shattered that it had to be amputated. At the time, the nearest troops belonged to D Company of the 23rd and their prompt actions undoubtedly saved the General's life. Private William Green,¹⁰ a stretcher-bearer, and Private Graham [French](#)¹¹ went immediately to his assistance. As they approached, the General raised his head and called, 'Be careful, boys, there's mines here!' To which Green gave a soldier's reply, '— the mines!', clambered up and applied a tourniquet. French organised stretcher-bearers from 16 and 17 Platoons and soon had the General on the way back to an ambulance. No soldier of the 23rd who kept a diary failed to record the loss of the Divisional Commander as a disaster of some magnitude. Thus Bob Stone gave a typical reaction: 'News that " [Kippie](#)" has been wounded—lost both feet. Bad luck, for there could be no better man after Tiny than [Kippie](#).' Brigadier [Parkinson](#)¹² took temporary command of the Division.

On the night of 5 March, Colonel Connolly sent A and B Companies forward to occupy the sector between Route 6 and the railway on the east side of the Rapido. During the next ten days, these companies lay low in the daylight hours and

occupied listening posts or engaged in reconnaissance patrols at night. On some nights covering parties helped the engineers in their work on possible crossing places over the Rapido. Only rarely did the men have close contact with the Americans in the field but one happy incident deserves to be recorded. Lieutenant Jim [Hennessy](#)¹³ and his men in 8 Platoon were short of cigarettes and when Jim saw an American captain—at least, he was wearing three stars and Jim thought they were the equivalent of 'pips'—he engaged him in conversation and persuaded him to part with a couple of cartons of cigarettes from the back of his jeep. That night Jim mentioned to the Colonel that 'a Yank captain, who seemed to be a good sort' had given him the cigarettes. The Colonel smiled. He knew 'the Yank captain' was General Mark Clark.

The ground and living conditions in the scattered houses were anything but pleasant. Private Jim Blakie's diary gives a first-hand account of life in the line during those days: '... raining, very mucky. What a track in ... still raining, track a quagmire. Soaked from knees downward. Settled down to picquet and at 4.30 this morning had to go out again for rations.... 8 March ... Bill [Gale](#)¹⁴ O-Pipping for our mortars today. Didn't take Jerry long to find out and send back some—pretty close, too. 9 March. We didn't have much rest this morning. Jerry plastered our little white house with mortars etc. Very close, no hits. Four on big house nearby.... 16 March ... everything was peaceful when, bash! I thought the roof had fallen on me. I knew the house had been hit and I knew I had been hit with rock from shoulder down to my right hand.... Smoke shell coming down at steep angle came in top window, glanced off side, hit the floor, exploded and the shell part came right through window behind me and finally rested on Ray Tweedie's¹⁵ bed in corner ... Vin O'Keefe¹⁶ wounded upstairs, Fred very lucky blown into corner undamaged. Our wounds dressed by Ron [McIvor](#),¹⁷ had a tot, cup of tea and walked to Coy. Jeep to our RAP ... ambulance to 5th ADS, 4th MDS, finally CCS.'

But the day before Blakie was wounded, the oft-postponed attack on [Cassino](#) was launched. The plan, settled on 23 February, provided for the capture of [Cassino](#) by 6 Brigade after a colossal bombing of the town area by nearly 500 medium and heavy bombers. One thousand tons of 1000-pound high-explosive bombs were to be dropped on the target. Artillery support on a grander scale than ever before was then to assist the infantry on to their objectives. Fifth Brigade was again earmarked

employed, it would not be for exploitation but in assisting the troops already engaged in [Cassino](#) itself. On 19 March Colonel Connolly received orders to relieve one company of the 24th and the whole of the 25th. A Company (Captain A. Parker) was to relieve the company of the 24th in positions along a sunken road in the south of the town. To the north of A, C Company (Lieutenant Frank Coe) was to occupy the houses—or, rather, their remains—on Route 6 opposite the German-occupied Continental Hotel. North of Route 6, D (Major Slee) and B (Captain Irving) were to occupy sectors running towards the foot of [Castle Hill](#). At first light next morning, the 23rd was to clear the rest of the town of the enemy. In view of the experience of 6 Brigade, this task of clearing the town sounded too delightfully simple.

At 6.45 p.m. Colonel Connolly, his IO, Lieutenant Ewart [Hay](#),²⁰ and a party of signallers and intelligence section men went forward and established a tactical headquarters in the crypt of the convent, where a variety of command posts were operating. Telephone communications were soon established with the main 23rd headquarters and with Brigade, but heavy shell and mortar fire soon cut the line to bits and made its maintenance impossible. The 23rd therefore had to be content with wireless communications, which were also subject to interference.

After dark, the companies moved independently along Route 6 to the crypt. Mortar and machine-gun fire forced them to move cautiously, with intervals between the men in single file. Even so, casualties were sustained and progress was slow. It was a taste of things to come. Second-Lieutenant John [Morrow](#)²¹ was wounded on the road in and had to be evacuated. As they arrived in turn at the crypt, the company commanders took their platoon officers or sergeants inside to be briefed. The crypt was full of wounded and, as fresh officers entered, it seemed to be a seething mass of men of all ranks, as it contained so many headquarters as well as individuals who had been driven to shelter there. Each 23rd company orders group thus received its briefing under most difficult circumstances. The only air photographs which could be studied at this time had been taken before the bombing, and therefore showed orderly streets and neat rows of buildings, whereas now rubble filled the streets and the buildings had been reduced to heaps of masonry and gaunt, broken walls.

As C Company proceeded to relieve the 24th company, it came under fire and

had to approach the Post Office, its future headquarters, through and over several demolished buildings. The Post Office itself had been a three or four-storied building. It had been reduced to one room. In it, Second-Lieutenant [Armstrong](#)²² of the 24th indicated, to the accompaniment of bursting grenades and small-arms fire outside, how his men were placed. Despite the very obvious closeness of a very active enemy, the relief went through. Coe placed 13 Platoon in a building south of the Post Office and separated from it by an open area, 14 in another ruined building west of the Post Office and 15 he retained with Company Headquarters.

The amount of enemy fire of all kinds which met the 23rd on the way in necessitated a slight alteration in the proposed disposition of the companies. D Company relieved C Company of the 25th as arranged, while A Company relieved the remains of both A and B Companies of the same battalion. But B Company remained in reserve with battalion tactical headquarters.

Next morning the three forward companies had the task of clearing out the enemy. C Company sent a patrol under Keith Burtt to reconnoitre before launching any attack. Burtt led his men along the remains of the Post Office corridor but found that every exit, whether broken hole or proper doorway, was covered by Spandau fire and it was practically impossible to move outside. Eventually, in climbing out over some rubble, Burtt was wounded at short range and the patrol returned to Company Headquarters, where Coe managed to call for tank fire on his radio. Since the enemy machine-gunners had not been located, they had to be flushed from their building by a process of trial and error. Second-Lieutenant Geoff [Hargest](#),²³ with 13 Platoon, took his men downstairs while the tank put a shot through the top story, and then the procedure was reversed. By this means, 13 Platoon's house was cleared of enemy and the main machine-gun nest manned by paratroopers was located in the next house. Waving Red Cross flags, they secured a cessation of the fire, but, instead of surrendering or waiting to be captured, they made off into other demolished buildings. C Company made a small advance but found any daylight advance across open ground impossible without serious losses, and the tank which had helped them clear one house could not follow up to clear more.

The main 23rd attack of the day was meanwhile being made by A and D Companies with the intention of clearing all enemy from the houses at the foot of Point 193 ([Castle Hill](#)). These companies made good progress for nearly 300 yards,

although the rough state of the going made movement slow and awkward. The centre of the town was a wilderness of ruins. But in the heaps of rubble, or in the cellars and basement rooms covered with debris, were enemy strongpoints. As they advanced over some particularly rough mounds, the point sections of A and D Companies came under Spandau and sub-machine-gun fire from these strongpoints. Their progress slowed to a halt.

A Company slowly advanced towards the occupied houses and ruins on the west of [Cassino](#) but found that the worst enemy fire was coming from concealed dugouts below Point 193. From vantage points higher up the slope, enemy machine-gunners and snipers poured a withering fire on the advancing infantry as they tried to make their way through or over the piles of rubble. Even when a man went to ground he was not safe as snipers appeared able to bring plunging fire to bear on points which were sheltered from the immediate front. Wireless operators, such as Private David Smith,²⁴ had a trying time but they kept communications going. As the opposition grew stronger and more casualties were sustained, Captain Parker decided that an advance in daylight was just not possible. He appealed to Battalion Headquarters for artillery smoke to cover the advance from observation by the enemy on the side of [Castle Hill](#). The reply indicated that smoke could not be laid on Point 193 and the rest of [Castle Hill](#) as it was partly occupied by our own troops. After a series of fruitless attempts to get forward, and after several of the leaders, including Parker, had become casualties, A Company went to ground in the best cover offering. The wireless link with Battalion broke down and it was after dark before the wounded could be evacuated. Lieutenant Van Asch²⁵ took command of the company and drew it back to a holding position a little west of the centre of the town.

Because of the broken nature of the terrain, the D Company attack was not coordinated with A's but it achieved little more in the way of success, although more casualties were sustained. Major Slee and his men understood that their attack was to be made under a smoke screen but no smoke was laid in any place where it was likely to help them to get forward. With unsatisfactory communications and the resulting uncertainty as to whether or not smoke was to be laid, the company waited and waited until after midday, when Slee gave the order to advance without waiting longer for smoke.

Slee's plan was for 18 Platoon to remain in reserve in and around the school buildings and to support with fire from all weapons the advance of 16 and 17 Platoons. No. 18 Platoon certainly fired at the lower slopes of [Castle Hill](#), but its men had no sight of the enemy and therefore no definite target to engage. Nos. 16 and 17 Platoons advanced with sections and parts of sections moving independently on account of the extremely broken nature of the ground. Three Maoris appeared from nowhere and, seeking to revenge the loss of their comrades the previous day, joined in the advance. But, as the men moved down the forward faces of piles of rubble or threaded their way carefully round the edge of cellars or bomb craters full of water, they came under enemy rifle and machine-gun fire. The leading section of 16 Platoon was allowed to move right out into the open before the enemy opened fire: Corporal Les [McMillan](#) ²⁶ and all his men, except two, were picked off before they could reach cover. ²⁷ Platoon Headquarters and one section of 16 Platoon probably got the farthest forward: their path was probably more protected from view than those of the sections to left and right. But their experience when they emerged from behind cover was the same. Private Stewart [Hewett](#) ²⁸ was killed and others hit before they dived for the cover of a hollow surrounded by shattered walls. But even here the enemy had some observation, for when Second-Lieutenant Norm Hardie ²⁹ stood up to look over the remains of a window ledge he was promptly shot by a German with a Schmeisser sub-machine gun. While Sergeant Alan [McLay](#) ³⁰ was dressing Hardie's wounds, a grenade came hurtling over the wall and wounded McLay and others.

Up to this point, no member of the 23rd had so much as seen a German, but Private Bill [Stirling](#), ³¹ a wireless operator with the 38 set at Platoon Headquarters, was following in the rear of the others when he spotted a German in a doorway of a shattered house about twenty yards farther on from the walls where Hardie and his men were sheltering. [Stirling](#) fired a shot with his revolver but missed. He moved forward and, using the rifle of a wounded man, fired several rounds into the occupied locality. Next, he borrowed the Bren from Private Frank [Phillips](#) ³² and shot off a magazine at the same area. Still dissatisfied with his efforts and suspecting that the sniper had only temporarily gone to ground, [Stirling](#) waited when his mates moved into the shelter of another wall. Sure enough, the German appeared, ready to take another shot. [Stirling](#) took a more careful shot with his revolver—'a lucky shot,' he recorded later—and the German fell forward. Much elated, [Stirling](#) ran forward to join

the others, shouting in some excitement: 'I got the bastard! I got the bastard!'

This simple story has been told at some length because it is one of the very few of even limited success that can be told of those [Cassino](#) days, when the general complaint among the 23rd men was that they could see no enemy, no rifle or other flash to indicate the whereabouts of the enemy, who had perfect cover combined with perfect observation, and therefore complete mastery of the situation. Under these circumstances, daylight attacks over ground so cratered and covered with debris that running was usually impossible did nothing more than give the enemy good targets. Certainly, all the attacking sections on 20 March found progress impossible and the majority had to wait till well after dark before they could withdraw their wounded. One of the finer acts of courage that day was performed by Private [McIndoe](#),³³ who saw a mate lying wounded in the open where small-arms and some mortar fire was still falling. Ignoring this fire and disregarding his own safety, [McIndoe](#) dashed forward and carried his mate back under cover.

The experience of A and D Companies did not help morale: hours of uncertainty and of being harassed by an unseen enemy who had apparent mastery of the ground over which the 23rd men wanted to move, the casualties, and the failure to take the objective were all rather depressing. It is not surprising, therefore, to find one man in D Company writing in his diary for 20 March: 'Hell of a day.... Platoon casualties 8 killed 5 wounded. Grim show! Rest of us very nervous and jittery.'

Back at Battalion Headquarters the day had not been exactly quiet. Apart from the hammering of shells and mortar bombs on the top of the cellars and the crypt—and some B Company men counted over one hundred direct hits on their cellar—a 'stand-to' was called at 4.30 p.m. as enemy were reported to be infiltrating through the ruins to the right of C Company. Tanks sheltering behind the crypt opened fire on the danger area and, with B and C Companies able to direct Bren and other fire on the same sector, 'this enemy advance was successfully stopped.' Throughout this and other crises, the Adjutant, Fred Marett, was, as Colonel Connolly said, 'a tower of strength'. The Colonel added: 'I really believe nothing daunts that man. I cannot speak highly enough of him.' Brigadier Burrows visited Colonel Connolly about 6 p.m. and discussed plans and tasks for the next day. The 23rd was now to hold the area to the north of Route 6, with A Company forward on the left and B forward on the right in the school area, and with the other two companies in reserve. Another attack

was to be launched by the forward companies under a smoke screen which was promised for first light.

After dark B Company moved forward from the crypt to relieve D in the school. Although only 600 yards separated the two places, the company took over half an hour to walk the distance because of the bomb craters and the general accumulation of debris in what had once been tidy streets. The relief passed off without fighting or casualties.

The plan for the attack on 21 March was for A Company to hold fast while B launched the attack on the houses and dugouts on the lower edge of [Castle Hill](#) in roughly the same area where A and D had been held up the previous day. The artillery were to provide smoke to give some cover from the aimed fire of the enemy. Captain Irving's plan was for 10 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant [Welsh](#)³⁴) and 11 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant [Greig](#)³⁵) to attack frontally under the smoke, while 12 Platoon went round to the right flank and came in over the ridge which ran down from the old fort on [Castle Hill](#).

At 6.30 a.m. the smoke screen came down and provided effective cover for the forming-up place. The advance from the school went well for nearly 100 yards. Enemy fire, apart from the odd mortar bomb, was limited. Then, just as the leaders were approaching the last heaps of rubble which separated them from their objective, the smoke shells stopped falling and, as if a malevolent fate were operating against the attackers, the light breeze changed and lifted all the smoke away. 'It was like a blanket being lifted or rather being flicked away from a bed, the way that smoke disappeared,' said one of the B Company men later. The men were left exposed to the enemy fire which now poured in upon them. Streams of machine-gun bullets as well as rifle shots came from concealed positions. Not one member of the attacking platoons could locate accurately the source of fire. Naturally enough, they went to ground in bomb craters, where these were not full of water, or behind rubble. The leaders decided that the alternative lines of action were to push on into the enemy positions or to pull back. They determined to try the former. Word was passed along that the advance would continue: a shout was given and the men rose to dash over the next rise. Almost immediately, the leading ranks were shot down. Second-Lieutenant Carson Welsh ran to assist one of the wounded, but as soon as

he appeared over the rise his body was literally riddled with bullets. With most of their leaders gone and with no room to manoeuvre, the survivors sought cover. Captain Irving decided that to ask these men to attempt a further advance was to invite them to commit suicide. He therefore called the attack off. Under cover of heaps of rubble, he managed to dribble his men across to the right flank and thence back to the school buildings.

In the meantime, Second-Lieutenant Bill Gale, with 12 Platoon, had met with a fair measure of success. In the first instance, their approach over the ridge on the open face of [Castle Hill](#) apparently caught the enemy off guard. Although they were aiming at the same houses and ruins that the other platoons were attacking, 12 Platoon soon found itself among a series of dugouts which had not been seen before. Immediately, with Gale setting a magnificent example, the men attacked with grenades and fire from tommy guns and Brens. Several short-range duels were fought and no quarter was given on either side. The Germans had the advantage of being able to withdraw into their caves and some of the dugouts, but Gale and his men accounted for several—'at least a dozen but probably not more than 20' was the estimate made later. But some of the grenades thrown or rolled into the dugouts possibly did greater damage than was estimated. Captain Irving had no chance of letting 12 Platoon know that the frontal attack had failed and had been called off, but when, through his binoculars, he saw Gale and three others fall under stiffening enemy fire, he wirelessly contacted battalion tactical headquarters asking for tank fire to be laid on the lower slopes of [Castle Hill](#) to enable the platoon to withdraw. Colonel Connolly was quickly on the job and Major Jock [Thodey](#)³⁶ soon had two tanks firing in bursts on the correct area. No. 12 Platoon had suffered 15 casualties but was able to withdraw under the tank fire back into 25 Battalion's area.

Another minor attack had gone in and had failed, but it was apparently thought that 12 Platoon had discovered the secret to a successful attack and that its line of approach should be tried again. Both Slee and Irving declared that to send men into a frontal attack on such a narrow front over such rough, broken ground, against such opposition as had been encountered by B and D Companies, was asking the impossible. The Colonel agreed that daylight attacks in that sector of [Cassino](#) were 'useless and foolish'. Nevertheless, he was required to mount another attack to follow the approach route used by 12 Platoon.

During 21 March, the companies not engaged in the attack came under shell, mortar and tank fire. In the morning A Company called down several artillery DF tasks when it feared that the enemy was building up strength opposite it. C Company had more than its share of casualties that day. So reduced in numbers was 14 Platoon in the forward area that 13 Platoon was sent forward in the evening to thicken up the defences. While leading his platoon forward, Second-Lieutenant Geoff Hargest, son of 5 Brigade's first commander, was fatally wounded. Under the conditions applying in [Cassino](#), normal administrative arrangements could not be carried out. For once the 'Q' side had to admit itself defeated in its attempts to get hot meals up to the men. Rations were therefore carried on or with the men in the forward sectors. The evacuation of wounded was also a serious problem in view of the shelling to which [Cassino](#) generally, and the bridges over the Rapido and other key points on the roads in particular, was subjected. Jeeps ran nightly up to the crypt, but rations were taken forward from there on foot and wounded were evacuated to that point on stretchers. Frequently, the wounded had to wait for stretchers and bearers to become available. Far too frequently, the bearers had to struggle back in the darkness and could not avoid stumbling and falling into the craters and other holes. Several wounded men endured unimaginable pain and discomfort on these trying journeys back. Headquarters and Support Companies supplied extra men for stretcher-bearing. Thus, on the night of 21–22 March, sixteen men from the anti-tank platoon carried ammunition forward and wounded men back out. The count of the battalion's casualties taken that night showed that 17 had been killed and 58 wounded since the move into [Cassino](#) two nights before.

At 5 a.m. on 22 March, at a conference of COs of the three units of 5 Brigade, it was decided to attack with two companies of infantry round the face of [Castle Hill](#), with supporting fire from tanks. A Company of the 21st and D of the 23rd were to execute this attack, which was to be directed on to the houses already attacked twice by the 23rd companies and was this time to include the Continental Hotel. Since 8 Platoon of A Company of the 23rd was in the direct line of the fire of the tanks supporting this attack, it was withdrawn about 200 yards just before dawn.

At 8.30 a.m. D Company moved into position in the forming-up place near the school but it was after 9 a.m. before contact had been satisfactorily made with A Company of the 21st. At 9.50 a.m. the tanks, still well to the rear but as far forward

as the state of the ground would allow, opened fire on the objective. Shortly after ten, the infantry began their advance, but they had not gone very far before the unexpected appearance of a party of Indians evacuating their wounded, under cover of a Red Cross flag, from the top of Castle Hill necessitated the postponement of the attack. The time taken by the Indians to bring out their wounded and that needed to reorganise the supporting tank fire meant that the attack proper was not mounted till 12.45 p.m. While the D Company infantry waited, a Focke-Wulf 190 nose-dived above them and appeared to be certain to shoot them up, but instead it crashed somewhat to the rear. The pilot emerged safely and tried to make his way back to the German positions but blundered into A Company and was taken prisoner.

At first, the advance went smoothly enough, cover from enemy observation being given by the sharp-edged and rocky ridge which ran down the face. For the assault, 18 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Hanrahan³⁷) was in the centre and in the lead, while 17 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Eastgate) was on the right and 16 Platoon (Sergeant Reid³⁸) on the left. As they approached the opening in the ridge which they named 'The Gap' or 'The Pass', Hanrahan prepared to lead the dash through the gap. He shouted back to his men, 'Are you right?' and Corporal L. W. Burford, in command of the leading section, replied 'All O.K.!' Hanrahan ran through the opening and his men hurried to follow, but the first man to attempt to negotiate that gap was hit by a stream of bullets and it was obvious that the yard-wide opening was under heavy machine-gun fire and could not be used. But Hanrahan himself had no option but to go forward. He ran slightly downhill about 30 yards to the nearest house and, from the shelter of it, signalled to his men to stay behind cover. Peering through a window, he saw two Germans hurrying upstairs to get a Spandau into position. He shot them both with his tommy gun and was not troubled further by Germans trying to occupy the room next to the point where he was sheltering.

In 18 Platoon, NCOs and men realised the impossibility of passing through 'The Gap' and therefore they tried to advance on a broader front by clambering over the rocks. But no sooner had the first heads appeared over the ridge than streams of bullets whistled past and the leading men suffered casualties. Obviously the tactical advantage of surprise was lost and the chances of a successful advance appeared to be nil. Hanrahan's problem was now one of getting back to his men through the

continuous fire which greeted any movement on the ridge. This problem was solved in a manner not provided for in the textbooks. 'I thought I had no show of getting out alive,' he said afterwards, 'and, if ever I prayed, I prayed then and almost immediately afterwards a smoke shell landed in exactly the right place for me and I went back at the double'.

Slee now sent 16 Platoon round to the left, lower down the slopes of [Castle Hill](#). Even before its members ventured into view of the enemy, they came under heavy rifle grenade fire but, by keeping low and crawling from rock to rock, they got farther forward. Privates Jim [Niles](#)³⁹ and Bill Stirling saw the opening to a dugout farther down the slope to the left and went to investigate. A grenade tossed in the entrance served as a visiting card, but actually the only occupants were already dead, probably killed by 12 Platoon two days earlier. [Stirling](#) slipped into the dugout, which is worth describing as an example of the Germans' ingenuity. Inside, it was big and roomy and partially furnished for long-term occupation with, for example, an old chesterfield couch from some Italian home. A narrow fire slit gave a perfect view over [Cassino](#) town and the frontal approaches to the base of [Castle Hill](#). In the foreground outside lay six dead Maoris in line, just as they had fallen in their attack. Farther along could be seen some of the 23rd dead from the earlier attacks on the same sector.

The intensified enemy fire and the precipitous nature of the ground halted the advance. No. 16 Platoon engaged the enemy houses and dugouts with Brens and rifles but, in view of their exposed positions, which compared unfavourably with the cover enjoyed by the enemy, it was obvious that the defence had the better of the duel. Once again stout defenders using the natural advantages of terrain had shown how costly and unsatisfactory further daylight attacks would be. After lying out on and behind the ridge till after 5 p.m., D Company moved back to the gaol.

Above it on the rocks, A Company of the 21st had had a similar experience. According to its unit history, A Company '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.... the attack was called off'.⁴⁰

That attack was the last attempted by the New Zealanders in [Cassino](#). The

defences had been tested but had been proved more than adequate until improved weather and ground conditions permitted the mounting of an attack on a wider front. Although some territorial gains were made in the first attacks made after the bombing of [Cassino](#), the later direct frontal attacks were doomed to failure. The way to break the [Gustav Line](#) was eventually found, but it was not by attacking it at its strongest point. ⁴¹

The 23rd remained in [Cassino](#) a few days more before being relieved. On the night of its attack, D Company returned to the cellars and the crypt at Tactical Headquarters. The men arrived there at midnight, dog-tired and seeking nothing but somewhere to lie down and sleep. In the dark, they quickly slumped into deep sleep. Only in the morning did they discover that in quite a few instances the living and the dead had been lying together and that some had slept with their heads pillowed on German dead.

Practically every day of the 23rd's term in [Cassino](#) was a day of continuous heavy shelling and mortaring. The Germans appeared to lay guns on certain roads and likely occupied posts. Communications were broken for long periods and casualties mounted steadily. In A Company Lieutenant Van Asch, the new commander, was wounded. Second-Lieutenant Jim Hennessy took command and reorganised his company positions to cope with the problems of holding their sector despite reduced numbers. In eight days, the company's strength was reduced from 75 to 33. Corporal [Anderson](#) ⁴² took over 8 Platoon from Hennessy and handled it like a veteran. In particular, he assisted in the evacuation of wounded under most difficult conditions. Sergeant [Griffin](#) ⁴³ did equally good work in command of 7 Platoon.

C Company had somewhat similar experiences to A. This company was taken back for a short rest on the night of 22–23 March but, while resting near the crypt on the way out, was heavily mortared and suffered ten casualties. The Bren-carrier platoon supplied the extra stretcher-bearers required that night. In 15 Platoon, after Lieutenant Burtt was wounded, Lance-Sergeant A. D. Alexander took charge and proved himself an able leader, as did Sergeant Len [Temperley](#), ⁴⁴ the temporary commander of 14 Platoon.

B Company had the worst time of all as it continued to occupy the school

buildings during this period. Here conditions were probably the most horrible that 23rd men had to endure throughout the war, at any rate for more than a few hours. Two platoons were in the new school, where only the corridor remained, while the third platoon was in the ruins of the older school building. In some cases, the men dug down into the floor and the earth to secure protection, but as the building had stood up to several direct hits, some men were content to shelter against the wall nearest the Germans. Late on 22 March a shell came through a window or hole in the wall and burst, as if with a time-fuse, killing five and wounding eight. Amongst the wounded was the CSM, [WO II J. R. Murdoch](#), who had done good work in handling every situation as it arose —getting up rations, manning picket posts and keeping up the spirit of the men. Lance-Sergeant Frank Sanders now took over Murdoch's duties and went back through heavy fire to Tactical Headquarters to get more stretchers and bearers to evacuate the wounded, a most difficult task under mortar fire in the dark and over the rough going. Sergeant Bill Henderson, commanding 11 Platoon, and Sergeant R. Stone, who had just returned from hospital and taken command of 10 Platoon, helped Sanders in his task of evacuating the wounded through the 25 Battalion area. That same night, Private [Callanan](#) ⁴⁵ showed courage of a high order in going back under fire to the crypt to get assistance for the wounded and, later, in stretcher-bearing.

The one shell which caused the thirteen casualties had the same effect on morale that shells scoring direct hits on men in slit trenches had had in the dark days after [Ruweisat Ridge](#). Life was grim enough without this danger, exaggerated by the fear arising from the recent losses. There was plenty of food in the shape of dry rations but few felt like eating very much. Good drinking water was very short because the water in and around the buildings was polluted with the debris and the dead. Part of the building in which the men were cramped together had to be used as a latrine. As elsewhere in [Cassino](#), it had been impossible to bury the dead and their bodies lay heaped together under wet blankets. Nothing could be more demoralising for these troops than living with the sight and smell of the dead, several of whom were their own comrades. The lack of success in the attack, the loss of confidence caused by the enemy's successful shelling, the depressing physical conditions, and the likelihood of another reverse if the company were committed to another attack—all these factors led to a serious falling-off in morale. The good soldiers for which B Company had long been noted continued to do their duty and

would have answered any call, but generally spirits were low. Even Bob Stone, a veteran NCO of sterling character, and one who could always be relied upon to keep up the spirits of his men, wrote in his diary for the two days 24 and 25 March: 'Very little sleep— too cold. I got a blanket and four of us used it.... [Monastery Hill](#) towers above us and Hun looks down on our positions.... Lads could do with a spell— conditions here pretty awful. No sleep. Heavy shelling.... Many dead Kiwis lying around—impossible to bury them in rubble and equally so to carry them out. Fair amount of shelling all day.... No hot drink today, cold and miserable.... Another cold night. Again no hot drink.'

To this company, which had lost all its officers, apart from its trusted company commander, the only original member of the battalion left in action who had not been home on furlough, came the news that Captain Irving was to go out of the line on the evening of 24 March. For their company commander to be withdrawn at this time made the men ask: 'And when do we go out?' Sick at heart at having to leave his men in such a situation, Irving went back to give the Colonel some of his thoughts on the subject. ⁴⁶ He learned that the company, now under Captain B. V. A. [Jones](#), ⁴⁷ was to be relieved without delay. 'Morale in B Company was almost certainly lower at that stage than at any other time of which I have knowledge,' Irving summed-up later.

By this time, reliefs of forward companies were part of the decision that recognised that a deadlock had been reached inside [Cassino](#). On 23 March, General Alexander had decided on a strategic regrouping: the [New Zealand Corps](#) was to be dissolved on 26 March and the New Zealand Division was to pass under [13 Corps \(Eighth Army\)](#) and continue to hold part of [Cassino](#). Active defence was to continue and no ground of value for later operations was to be surrendered.

There is a limit to what human flesh can endure or to what men can force themselves to do. Individuals as well as companies had to be relieved and, on 23 March, Brigadier Burrows sent Major Orbell up to relieve Colonel Connolly for twenty-four hours, as the latter had had practically no sleep since entering [Cassino](#). That same night D Company went back to houses near Main Battalion Headquarters behind Trocchio. Here Bill Smellie, the CQMS, and his staff had shakedown beds ready for them. A good sleep out of the line and good hot meals and morale immediately began to rise again.

On the morning of 25 March, when the Tactical Headquarters area was being subjected to heavy fire of all kinds, a tank was set on fire by a German self-propelled gun. Private Fred K. Jones, ⁴⁸ a 23rd signaller, distinguished himself by dashing out, seizing an extinguisher from another tank, climbing on top of the burning vehicle and putting out the fire. His act was all the more meritorious in view of the intensity of enemy fire in the general area at that time.

Meanwhile, provision was made for a second defence line east of [Cassino](#) and of the Rapido as a precautionary measure. On 26 March, D Company moved to new positions in this line and C Company, now under Captain Ken Clark, also took over a sector alongside D. On the same night, back in [Cassino](#), A Company was relieved by a 24th company and B was relieved by a company of the 25th. Both A and B Companies went back to the houses behind Trocchio and had one night's perfect rest before entering the new line in the Rapido sector. The 23rd held this sector for only two days, when the [Welsh Guards](#) relieved it.

The battalion now went back to [Mignano](#) for a few days' complete rest. Some changes in company commands were made at this juncture. Major Ian Wilson returned to his former command of A Company, an event which led one A Company man to note the fact in his diary with the comment: 'Just the very best!' Major Bill Hoseit took over B Company, while Major Alan McPhail took the command of HQ Company relinquished by Ian Wilson. The command of 5 Brigade changed again with the return of Brigadier Keith Stewart, who visited the battalion on 30 March and met several old friends.

The stay in [Mignano](#) was brightened in the various ways customary for short periods out of the line—the 5 Brigade band played, pictures were screened, mail and bottles of beer were distributed and hot showers were provided. On Sunday, 2 April, Padre Holland preached on the text, 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends'. Every man present had lost friends in [Cassino](#). As one private wrote in his diary after listing six of his best friends who had all been killed, 'They were all good chaps. It's a knock after living with them for weeks to know I won't see them again'. And he added a special word for his platoon commander: 'Bill Gale was a darned good officer. If you got hurt or were sick, Bill would look after you.' Possibly the human losses in [Cassino](#) were regretted more

bitterly than usual because there was so little to place in the credit scale of the balance. But the 23rd was not quite finished with [Cassino](#).

After the church service on 2 April, arrangements were made to relieve the 26th in the [Cassino](#) railway station on the following evening. A Company was to remain LOB ⁴⁹ in the rest area. C and D were to be forward in and around the station and B was to be in reserve east of the Rapido. After dark on 3 April, C, D and B Companies, in that order, went forward by lorries to the 26th headquarters, whence they marched to their company positions. C had the farthest to go but, although some machine-gun and mortar fire worried them, the troops managed to reach their posts without casualties. No. 14 Platoon covered a crossroads north of the station with 15 just south, while 13 Platoon covered a crossroads west of the station. Either the Germans had heard the C Company troops entering the area or were just firing on suspicion, as a dreadful 'hate' session developed just as D Company was moving into position. As they moved along the railway line, which they could not leave for part of the journey because of the flooded swamp on either side, the men could hear the moan of the nebelwerfers and the 'crunch, crunch' of the bursting mortar bombs. Bursts of Spandau and heavier fire also crossed their route. D Company headquarters was caught in the middle of a mortar 'stonk'; Major Slee and Corporal [McCabe](#) ⁵⁰ received fatal wounds and all other members of the headquarters, apart from Cecil McIntosh, the CSM, were wounded. Second-Lieutenant Norm Milsom, ⁵¹ 17 Platoon officer, and his sergeant, Noel McLean, were among the eight wounded. As usual, Bill Green did outstanding work in attending to the wounded under fire.

In D Company, Second-Lieutenant Hanrahan took command and followed Slee's intentions in the placing of the platoons: 16 (Second-Lieutenant Ernie [Taylor](#) ⁵²) occupied the station and part of the yards, 18 (Corporal [Higgie](#) ⁵³) the Round House or engine shed and the rest of the yards, while 17 Platoon was back at the Hummock. The men in 18 Platoon found that the greasing pits, either under a stationary engine or under heavy sleepers, made safe if dirty shelters. For three important forward observation posts, Hanrahan selected three of his best men from 18 Platoon—'Pinky' [Maitland](#), ⁵⁴ 'Chook' [Healy](#) ⁵⁵ and 'Snow' [Wilks](#). ⁵⁶ To avoid the coming and going of 'Q' staff, the men carried four days' rations with them and one bottle of water per man. Luckily they discovered an unpolluted water-tank and plenty of rations left behind by the Americans in an early occupation of that area.

Although the forward areas came under shell and mortar fire, this period in the line was not remarkable for any special incidents. The deadlock was recognised on both sides and there was no real infantry fighting. On 4 April, [General Freyberg](#) visited Battalion Headquarters behind B Company and asked searching questions as to the state of the unit.⁵⁷ On the night of 6–7 April, the battalion was relieved without casualty by British troops. This marked the end of the 23rd's association with [Cassino](#), apart from that day, 'the saddest day I ever put in', as one of those present termed it, when on 30 June representatives of each infantry company returned to bury their dead.

[Cassino](#) was one of the least happy chapters in the life of the battalion. It was a period of frustration and bitter disappointment. The men were prepared for one role which they never got a chance of executing. Instead of joining in the sharp attacks of exploitation after a break-out, they had to fight from house to house and to cross open stretches covered by enemy fire. They entered on the slogging match with customary vigour, but they had had no experience of and no serious training in street fighting. Furthermore, they entered the battle only when the chances of success were remote. The official historian of this campaign has said: 'For the [New Zealand Corps](#) the events of 19 March were a premature culmination of the battle... when the second New Zealand brigade was deployed, the time had gone by for any but a limited and costly victory. Day after day the New Zealand infantry rolled the stone of Sisyphus against the western defences of [Cassino](#).'⁵⁸ In the 23rd, too many good men were lost in these attacks in and around [Cassino](#)— 5 officers and 36 other ranks killed or died of wounds, 10 officers and 102 other ranks wounded, 1 officer and 3 other ranks prisoners of war.

The battalion 'I' section wrote up the unit war diary during the [Cassino](#) fighting:

'There seems little doubt that the conditions under which the troops are at present fighting are the worst ever yet experienced.

The Town is in ruins and the damage wrought by our bombers was so great that even streets are scarcely recognizable. Bomb craters many feet deep and filled with water hinder the advance of the troops, who have to suspect every heap of rubble as a likely spot for enemy snipers who infiltrate sometimes behind the forward troops. All day long German shells and mortars pound the ruins where the troops try to

obtain a little protection and movement by day is made impossible. Fighting is at times so close that only a wall may separate friend from foe and the enemy has been taking advantage of this proximity by calling to our troops in English and sometimes misleading them to enemy positions. Many of the troops while in the Town never had the opportunity to brew up. The situation was not improved by the number of dead (both friend and foe) which lay unburied in the ruins.'

¹ Pte J. Blakie; born NZ 12 Mar 1910; farmer; wounded 16 Mar 1944; killed in action 22 Jul 1944.

² Brig S. F. Hartnell, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; 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.

³ Lt C. H. Sinclair; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 23 Mar 1918; warehouseman; wounded 25 May 1944.

⁴ Sgt A. T. Leathem; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 1 Jun 1905; plumber; wounded 6 Feb 1944.

⁵ 2 Lt C. McIntosh; Cave; born Timaru, 29 May 1908; bus driver.

⁶ Lt N. Barker; born England, 22 Sep 1912; journalist; killed in action 14 Feb 1944.

⁷ Cpl L. M. Edgecombe; born NZ 31 Mar 1912; salesman; killed in action 14 Feb 1944.

⁸ Cpl J. W. Anderson; Dunedin; born Christchurch, 8 May 1921; chemist.

⁹ Capt D. B. Robertson; Auckland; born Auckland, 20 Aug 1916; medical practitioner; wounded 27 Feb 1944.

¹⁰ Capt L. R. Musgrave; born NZ 1 Dec 1912; Regular soldier; wounded 27

Feb 1944.

¹⁰ Pte W. E. Green, BEM; born England, 2 Jul 1905; blacksmith's striker.

¹¹ Pte G. E. French; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 18 Mar 1922; civil servant; wounded 3 Apr 1944.

¹² 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; GOC 2 NZ Div 3–27 Mar 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div Jun-Aug 1944; comd 6 Bde Aug 1944-Jun 1945; NZ Military Liaison Officer, London, 1946–49; Commander, Southern Military District, 1949–51.

¹³ 2 Lt J. M. Hennessy, MC; Duvauchelle; born London, 5 Oct 1917; farmer; wounded 28 Mar 1943.

¹⁴ 2 Lt W. K. Gale; born NZ 9 May 1912; wool classer; wounded 8 Dec 1943; killed in action 21 Mar 1944.

¹⁵ Pte R. M. Tweedie; born NZ 15 Mar 1923; butcher's assistant; killed in action 22 Mar 1944.

¹⁶ S-Sgt V. O'Keefe; Invercargill; born Scott's Gap, Southland, 24 Dec 1912; labourer; wounded 16 Mar 1944.

¹⁷ Pte R. J. McIvor; Oamaru; born NZ 15 Sep 1922; farmhand; p.w. 11 Dec 1944.

¹⁸ Maj J. R. Harrison; Takapau; born NZ 23 May 1921; student; wounded 15 Mar 1944; NZLO Bombay 1945–46.

¹⁹ 2 Lt N. P. Ball; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 20 Feb 1917; fruiterer; three times wounded.

²⁰ Lt E. M. Hay, m.i.d.; born [Timaru](#), 3 Nov 1913; civil servant; wounded 30 Jul 1944; died 11 Nov 1956.

²¹ Lt J. B. Morrow; Mayfield; born [Ashburton](#), 4 Apr 1914; auctioneer; wounded 19 Mar 1944.

²² Capt J. B. Armstrong, m.i.d.; [New Plymouth](#); born [Cowra, New South Wales](#), 7 Oct 1912; bank clerk; twice wounded.

²³ 2 Lt G. R. Hargest; born [NZ](#) 30 Jun 1922; bank clerk; died of wounds 30 Mar 1944.

²⁴ Not traced.

²⁵ Lt A. G. Van Asch; [Rangiora](#); born [NZ](#) 12 Jan 1910; solicitor; twice wounded.

²⁶ Cpl L. R. McMillan; born [Dunedin](#), 25 Aug 1908; produce salesman; killed in action 20 Mar 1944.

²⁷ Pte Jack C. Irvine, one of this section, was given up for killed and was later 'buried' by the official 23rd burial party which visited [Cassino](#) on 30 June. Actually, he was picked up wounded by the Germans and turned up months later as a prisoner of war.

²⁸ Pte S. C. Hewett; born [NZ](#) 23 Feb 1920; farmer; killed in action 20 Mar 1944.

²⁹ 2 Lt N. A. Hardie; [Kaiapoi](#); born [NZ](#) 7 Nov 1917; insurance salesman; wounded 20 Mar 1944.

³⁰ WO II A. H. McLay; born [Dunedin](#), 15 Sep 1920; P and T employee; wounded 20 Mar 1944.

- ³¹ Pte W. H. Stirling; Dunedin; born Invercargill, 30 Aug 1906; clerk.
- ³² Pte T. F. Phillips; Queenstown; born Invercargill, 27 Jan 1923; wool classer.
- ³³ Sgt W. J. McIndoe, MM; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 25 Feb 1915; carpenter.
- ³⁴ 2 Lt C. W. Welsh, MM; born Invercargill, 31 Mar 1915; farmer; killed in action 21 Mar 1944.
- ³⁵ Lt G. A. J. Greig; Karioi; born Edinburgh, 24 Feb 1919; storeman; wounded 3 Aug 1944.
- ³⁶ Col J. I. Thodey, DSO, m.i.d.; Perth; born Gisborne, 8 Dec 1910; life assurance officer; CO 21 Bn Jul-Oct 1944, May-Dec 1945.
- ³⁷ Capt T. F. P. Hanrahan, m.i.d.; Ashburton; born Ashburton, 26 Jan 1919; builder; twice wounded.
- ³⁸ Sgt S. J. Reid; Christchurch; born NZ 15 Apr 1918; warehouseman.
- ³⁹ Cpl W. J. H. Niles; Timaru; born Temuka, 16 Nov 1911; lorry driver.
- ⁴⁰ J. F. Cody, 21 Battalion, p.324.
- ⁴¹ Cf. Admiral de Robeck, watching the Gallipoli landing: 'Gallant fellows, these soldiers; they always go for the thickest place in the fence.'
- ⁴² Cpl F. H. Anderson, MM; born NZ 15 Oct 1921; motor painter; wounded 20 Apr 1943; deceased.
- ⁴³ Sgt W. E. G. Griffin, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 15 Nov 1905; carpenter; twice wounded.

⁴⁴ Sgt L. W. Temperley; Greymouth; born Hokitika, 22 Mar 1918; shunter.

⁴⁵ Pte A. J. Callanan, MM; Balclutha; born Milton, 18 May 1922; student; three times wounded.

⁴⁶ The relief of Fred Irving was a very special case. Not only was he the only 'original' who had had no furlough, but he had had no leave in eighteen months, partly as a result of going to OCTU in the summer of 1943 when general leave was last granted. Now he was being sent as a 5 Brigade representative to join a leave party going on the Army Commander's plane to Algiers. Colonel Connolly read the above statement in first draft and commented: 'I remember well Fred Irving having me on about his being sent out. Grand soldier all the time!'

⁴⁷ Maj B. V. A. Jones; born Timaru, 11 Sep 1902; law clerk; killed in action 30 May 1944.

⁴⁸ 2 Lt F. K. Jones, MM; born NZ 18 Jan 1913; business manager.

⁴⁹ Left out of battle.

⁵⁰ Cpl K. A. McCabe; born NZ 31 Jul 1911; school-teacher; died of wounds 4 Apr 1944.

⁵¹ 2 Lt N. R. Milsom; Gore; born Ashburton, 10 Mar 1912; bank officer; wounded 3 Apr 1944.

⁵² Lt E. T. H. Taylor; Wellington; born NZ 23 Jan 1921; clerk.

⁵³ Cpl W. Higgin; Waiwera Sth.; born Dunedin, 23 Aug 1919; fisherman.

⁵⁴ Sgt R. Maitland, MM; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 27 Jul 1922; plumber; wounded 28 Nov 1943.

⁵⁵ L-Sgt E. P. Healy; born Lumsden, 30 Nov 1920; farm labourer; killed in action 24 Jul 1944.

⁵⁶ Pte F. T. Wilks; born NZ 17 Jul 1922; sawmill hand; wounded 12 Oct 1944; killed in action 30 Dec 1944.

⁵⁷ Cf. Documents, Vol. II, p. 291, where General Freyberg writes: 'I am adding this paragraph on returning from a visit to the units in the line. After the hard battle the troops were tired, but they are recovering quickly and are in good heart.'

⁵⁸ N. C. Phillips, *Italy*, Vol. I, p. 349.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 14 – TERELLE, ATINA, ROME

CHAPTER 14

Terelle, Atina, Rome

After its withdrawal from [Cassino](#), the 23rd went back to the [Mignano](#) rest area and, on 7 April, another 30 miles back to [Isernia](#) to rest and recuperate. It was spring time: the green leaves had returned to the trees, the blossom was coming out and the view from the bivouac area was over a peaceful and attractive valley, full of fields of various colours and welcoming farmhouses. The memory of [Cassino](#), with its ghastly ruins, its stark tree-stumps, its mud and pall of smoke, served to highlight the beauty of the surrounding countryside.

Almost immediately, leave parties were despatched to [Naples](#), to [Pompeii](#), and to other points of interest. Many men went to visit friends in 2 NZ General Hospital at [Caserta](#). A few stayed at the [Eighth Army](#) rest camp at [Campobasso](#). A few officers left on furlough, for which they were very much overdue, but no general extension of the scheme came at this time. A unit history cannot do justice to the complicated problem of maintaining a furlough scheme according to a timetable acceptable alike to those responsible for preserving the Division at a high standard of experience and to those who felt they had done more than their share of fighting. That 'Ruapehu' chickens were coming home to roost may be deduced from entries made in private diaries. Thus, a senior sergeant of the 23rd, a man with a grand record of service, could write: 'I'm afraid our chances of getting home on furlough are definitely "out the monk"'. This is causing a lot of dissatisfaction among the old hands and also the fact that we haven't had a real spell since crossing the [Sangro](#) and it doesn't look as though we are going to get one either'.

This April saw more changes in officer appointments than was usual for a static period out of the line. Major Alex Robins, Captains Fred Irving and Fred Marett left on furlough but others returned from New Zealand. Major Alan McPhail took over as second-in-command from Major Orbell, who left on a tour of duty at [Bari](#). Major Bill Hoseit took command of D Company, Captain Bernie Jones of B and Captain Frank Coe of C Company, while Second-Lieutenant Rex Musgrave became Adjutant. Padre John Holland, who had been a tower of strength in many ways, was replaced by the [Rev. J. G. B. Talbot](#).¹ Any number of tributes to [Holland](#) could be quoted from contemporary diaries, but one—from a Presbyterian to an Anglican padre—must

suffice: 'Went up to church for the last service of Major Padre Holland. He is the best minister I have ever had the honour of knowing'. Father Henley, who had looked after the spiritual needs of the Roman Catholics with marked devotion, also left 5 Brigade at this time. He was succeeded by Father [Callaghan](#).²

As the period out of the line was expected to be short, Brigadier Stewart issued instructions for training on 10 April. The troops were to be kept fit with plenty of route-marching and hill climbing. Specialist training was to be revised. The rifle companies trained hard in tactical movements in the surrounding hills during the day but most evenings were given to convivial gatherings. For the majority, the old spirit of the 23rd was reasserting itself. Some men, determined to be back for 'the next show', returned direct from the Convalescent Camp without passing through the slow official channels and Advanced Base. Lance-Corporal Jack Rothera, for example, hitch-hiked back with the new padre. For such men, it took more than a [Cassino](#) to produce a permanent lowering of morale.

The outstanding social event of this period out of the line was the race meeting run by the 23 Battalion Jockey Club on 18 April, the 23rd's 'Spring Meeting'. With assistance from Brigadier Stewart, Colonel Connolly borrowed twenty mules from the 618 Mule Pack Company for 'training purposes'. Captain Dick [Harvey](#)³ and an efficient staff prepared a taped track and the 'I' section organised a totalisator and tickets. Fifth Brigade Band supplied music and suitable refreshments were provided free. The five races provided plenty of thrills: several amateur jockeys fell from their steeds just when they appeared to have a race won; Major Frank [Jarrett](#),⁴ well known as a Canterbury Jockey Club official, was the announcer and course commentator; about £250 was 'invested' on each race and the spectators enjoyed the holiday spirit. 'Had the fun of our lives at the mule race meeting,' wrote W. D. Dawson in his diary. 'It was a real success, all the battalion in its most hilarious mood'. A winning punter could write: '... ended up with 200 lira to the good. One of the best days I've had in [Italy](#).' Even a loser could say: 'Really a good day's change today, so can't regret losses to any extent'. The rules were relaxed for the last race, which was confined to officer riders. Terry Hanrahan rode the D Company mule to victory. But he must tell his own story: 'It was a hard fought race right from the drop of the hat. I was on a gelding, who had a shine on a little mare and would not pass her. The climax came when entering the straight for the last time, and every jockey

was working overtime on his mule, with D Coy lying third. Half of 18 Pl rushed out on the track, throwing coats and gas capes over the heads of the leaders, and stoning and flailing my mule over the finishing line where I did a perfect three point landing, and the tote paid out four to one!

Two days later, the battalion moved back into the line, this time into a sector in the lower [Apennines](#) about four miles north of [Cassino](#). The men moved by a route which ran through [Venafrò](#), [San Pietro](#), [Cervaro](#), [Portella](#) and the notorious '[Inferno Track](#)' to a debussing point, where guides from 2 Somerset Light Infantry met them and led them on foot to a 'lying-up area' where they waited till after dark on 21 April. Then, they took over their new positions, which involved climbing 2200 feet up to the 'Jeep-head' (the area where jeeps from the administrative part of HQ Company, temporarily called 'B 1 Ech Group', unloaded stores), and then another 500 or more feet to platoon positions. Private diary entries show how tough was that climb:

'Had a most gruelling clamber up rocky faces along a track meant only for mountain goats.'⁵ 'It took us 2 hours to climb last 500 feet. Terrible country! B Coy positions right on peak among boulders. Jack Leonard's⁶ section only 50 yds off Jerry. Means having nearly every one standing-to all night. Jerry threw a lot of hand grenades at us but no damage'.⁷ '... climbing up a steep slope, grade about 1 in 3, to height of over 2,000 feet. It was a terrible struggle with packs and gear as well as climbing on toes most of time and often sliding down again. I have never made a worse journey.'⁸

By 4.35 a.m. on 22 April, the relief was complete and the 23rd companies settled down for their ten days in these hill positions. C Company was on the right, A in the centre and B on the left, with D in reserve near Battalion Headquarters, not far from the jeep-head. The view to the left front took in [Monte Cairo](#) and, farther on, [Montecassino](#), with the remains of the monastery showing clearly when neither fog nor smoke intervened. Unfortunately, the Germans occupied higher ground and daylight movement was virtually impossible.

The daily routine in this sector was very much the same for all the forward companies—a minimum of movement during the day and, after dark, the collecting of rations, water and supplies, as well as the posting of pickets or patrols to prevent enemy infiltration. Enemy snipers were troublesome and Colonel Connolly and his

IO, Lieutenant E. Taylor, normally visited the companies before first light or after dark since daylight visits would have brought down too much fire. The general directive for this period in the line demanded that casualties should be kept to a minimum and that the maximum number of enemy troops should be kept occupied in that sector. This directive was followed, with the result that the 23rd had only six men wounded while the fire from forward posts kept the enemy on the alert. No major attacks were launched, but private diaries reveal that occasionally shots were fired with effect. For example: 'Three Huns got a hurry-up from B Coy as they came towards us. Yesterday we shot one when he had his pants down. Nasty trick!'

The 'Q' staff, responsible for bringing up the rations in the jeep train along the much-shelled Inferno track, had a more dangerous time than usual. Quite frequently their jeeps had narrow escapes from bursting shells. Among those who were evacuated sick about this time were Padre Talbot, Major Bill Hoseit and Captain Ken Clark.

On the night of 1–2 May, 24 Battalion relieved the 23rd in this mountainous and rocky sector. To prevent noise from betraying the relief to the enemy, most men wore either rubber-soled patrol boots or canvas shoes. 'First steps down to Bn were in an uncanny silence, as not even a flare disturbed the mountains in their sleep'. After a successful relief, the men spent the day of 2 May in the lying-up area and about 10m;30 p.m. began their march down to the embussing point. They were shelled on the way and, just before they reached the transport, a shell hit an ammunition dump and the resulting blaze and explosions delayed the move by nearly two hours. 'What a sight! One huge orange glare with occasional blinding flashes of illuminated smoke which billowed into the clear sky'.

The 23rd spent the next fortnight out of the line in much the same way as before entering the [Terelle](#) sector—day leave to [Naples](#), visits to [Caserta](#), and longer leave to [Campobasso](#) and, for a few, to [Bari](#). Hot showers, issues of chocolates and cigarettes from the [YMCA](#), and other extras helped to make men feel that life was good. Small quantities of beer and larger supplies of local wine were available. Noisy singsongs and hearty parties were the order of the night. A visit from the [Kiwi Concert Party](#) and a concert organised out of the unit's own resources helped to vary the entertainment.

On 5 May, when he was returning from a visit to sick and wounded in [2 General Hospital](#) in his staff car, driven by his regular driver, Colonel Connolly was involved in an accident in which he had both legs broken and sustained other injuries. This accident ended his long and meritorious service with the 23rd. His departure was regretted by all ranks. A real man's man, a strong and natural leader, who would never have had any difficulty in leading men irrespective of the rank he held, Connolly had proved himself at all levels between platoon and battalion commander. For many, he typified or embodied in himself the spirit of the 23rd—a grand fighting spirit, an amazing pride in unit, and a somewhat happy-go-lucky independence of outlook, which, in Connolly's case, no doubt stemmed from his Irish forebears. He was succeeded as CO by Lieutenant-Colonel [Blundell](#),⁹ Brigade Major of 5 Brigade for the past year.

During this interval out of the line [General Freyberg](#) took the opportunity to inspect 5 Brigade and present decorations awarded in the earlier Italian campaigns. Although they usually groaned and moaned about the 'spit and polish' and rehearsals needed for these special parades, the men responded well to the demands made on them and usually got immense pleasure out of feeling themselves part of a unit which was demonstrating its quality by its marching and its drill. The brigade parade on 8 May was no exception. 'Two or three of the boys who watched it from the hill said we did it all pretty well,' wrote one B Company private later. A general knows his own business best, but that soldiers expect to be addressed by the inspecting officer may be gathered from their private diaries. Thus, the B Company private just quoted wrote: 'Tiny gave the awards—plenty of M.Ms. He left us without saying a word'. An A Company man went further: 'Spent all morning on a bde parade.... Everyone was annoyed because Tiny told us nothing.' Two days later Brigadier Stewart sent a message to the unit which conveyed [General Freyberg's](#) congratulations on 'excellent ceremonial parade on 8 May; we were all greatly impressed by standard of arms drill and marching and general bearing of everyone on parade'.

Training resumed, with hill climbing and shooting occupying a prominent place in the syllabus. At this time, Support Company ceased to function as a separate company and rejoined HQ Company as [Support Group](#). This group was smaller than the company had been: the carrier platoon was now reduced to two sections only,

each of three carriers, and the anti-tank platoon, which had seen little action for some months past, had its guns reduced to four six-pounders. A reshuffle of men between HQ Company and the rifle companies also took place. Those riflemen who, on account of health or age, were due either for an easier time or furlough, transferred to HQ Company and their places were taken by younger, fitter men. Reinforcements also arrived at this time. On 7 May 2 officers and 28 other ranks returned to the unit and, on 13 May, 62 members of the 11th Reinforcements arrived. 'Lot of new reinforcements banged in and do they look young? Shame to send them in!' wrote one grim old dig.

On 11 May a new offensive opened, and on 16 May the 23rd moved forward to take another turn in the line near [Terelle](#). A quite unexpected change in command took place that day: the CO's jeep went over a bank and Colonel Blundell broke his wrist. Major Alan McPhail therefore came forward to take command of the 23rd. Other commands at the company level had also changed: Captain Don Grant took over D Company from Lieutenant Dick Duncan; Captain Arthur Parker took command of A Company from Captain 'Peter' Edgar and Major Ian Wilson, who had in turn relinquished command to go back to New Zealand on furlough.

On the night of 17–18 May, after a day of torrential rains while it waited in the lying-up area, the battalion relieved the 26th in a sector somewhat to the east of the one it had held on the last occasion it was in the line. The hill road to [Terelle](#) ran through the left-hand company area while the company on the right held [Colle Abate](#), the highest feature in New Zealand hands. A Company took over this right-hand area, D went into the centre and B took the left forward sector, while C remained in reserve. While B Company was moving into position around 1 a.m., a German patrol appeared. The Germans hurled grenades at the men of No. 12 Platoon and the 26th men, still in position, opened fire with Bren, tommy gun and rifle, killing three Germans, including the patrol's officer, wounding two others and taking one prisoner. The relief was completed by 4 a.m.



Later that day, 18 May, the 23rd received the welcome news that the Poles had occupied [Cassino](#) and had raised their flag on the remains of the monastery. British troops, supported by 19 NZ Armoured Regiment, had taken advantage of the drier conditions and had crossed the Rapido in strength south of the town. They had then cut Route 6 and forced the Germans to give up their hold on [Cassino](#). The Gustav Line was broken but the Germans' next line, the Adolf Hitler Line, also hinged on the [Monte Cairo](#) region, remained, and the enemy continued to hold out in the sector opposite 5 Brigade for another week. Indeed, so far as the 23rd was concerned, the enemy was more aggressive than he had been for a long time. Of course, he was deliberately firing away ammunition which he could not carry when he did withdraw, but the knowledge that this was so was small consolation for the infantry who had to suffer under the heavy shelling and mortaring.

The best picture of the week leading up to the move forward on 25 May is given in private diaries kept by men in the forward company areas. Thus, Private J. Blakie of B Company wrote: '20 May. Stand-to last night. Very cold. No sleep at all at nights. Went for rations and drew water for Coy. Noisy job, bad track, slippery for gym shoes. 21 May. Jerry mortaring every day, shrapnel and rock flying everywhere. 22 May. All day picquet in O Pip from 0400 hrs to 2100 hrs tonight. 23 May. Mortars and Spandaus crackle every night, Shrap flies everywhere. 24 May.... Jerry patrol tried to bazooka house. Shelled and mortared very heavily today'.

Under the conditions described by Blakie, the signallers had a weary and dangerous time repairing broken lines, the maintenance of which was necessary for bringing artillery fire to bear on enemy movements, seen or heard. The battalion had

3 killed and 25 wounded from the heavy enemy fire of this week.

On 23 May the battalion was ordered to take Points 708 and 875 and the high ground east of Point 730, while the 21st took [Terelle](#), when the enemy withdrew. Preliminary reconnaissance on the night of 23 and 24 May showed the enemy still in occupation of his forward positions and still shooting hard at the New Zealand positions. But, on the evening of 25 May, a B Company patrol moved forward to Points 708 and 875 and found the enemy had gone. Colonel McPhail at once gave the order for the advance to begin. At 8.30 p.m., therefore, the three forward companies began to move forward. Before 10 p.m., C and D Companies reported their occupation of the knolls across the first gully. By 11.30 p.m. B Company had reached its objective. Soon after this, some of D Company ran into an unmarked minefield. The bright flash with which one large mine exploded brought enemy shellfire down on the area. Had it not been for the fact that many shells were duds, casualties would have been heavy. As it was, Second-Lieutenant [Bradley](#),¹⁰ who had been commissioned in the field a month before, was killed and nine men were wounded. When Private [Bathgate](#)¹¹ was wounded and unable to get himself back to the RAP, Private 'Snow' Wilks lifted him across his shoulder and carried him back nearly 300 yards to Company Headquarters, where a stretcher was procured. Before dawn, the three forward companies had consolidated on their objectives after some tough climbing over the rocky slopes—'a whale of a climb in places', according to Private Blakie. During the mortaring and shelling which continued for some hours, Sergeant [Mitchell](#),¹² the efficient technical sergeant of the signals platoon, was killed.

On 26 May Colonel McPhail ordered the advance to continue by the 'Blue route' through [Belmonte](#). With the sappers clearing many mines, B and C Companies moved forward at dusk to the first objective, then D moved up on them, allowing B to continue the advance. At 6 a.m. on 27 May, B Company entered [Belmonte](#) without opposition, the enemy having withdrawn about two hours earlier. A Company, now under Lieutenant J. R. Harrison, took the lead and, continuing down the [Belmonte-Atina](#) road, entered the village of La Vaccareccia about 2.30 p.m. and [Atina](#) at 4 p.m. A Company took eleven prisoners during the advance, Harrison himself taking four at the point of his revolver. [Atina](#) was built on the junction of roads from [Cassino](#) and [San Biagio](#) and its capture was considered of some importance in guaranteeing that

no German relief force would come in from the Adriatic coast. The main thrust line for the advance was now directed on [Sora](#) and up the upper [Liri](#) valley from [Sora](#) to [Balsorano](#).

On 28 May, therefore, the 23rd pushed on towards [Sora](#). Mines and demolitions held up the transport: the infantry marched and were supplied by the mule pack train under Lieutenant Bernie Cox, now quite an expert in handling mules and muleteers. Good progress was made with the companies taking turns in the lead. In the afternoon, B Company ran into an enemy rearguard: No. 10 Platoon under Second-Lieutenant [Waetford](#) ¹³ captured an enemy-occupied house and took eight prisoners at a cost of three wounded. Other enemy positions, including some perfect dugouts, were found unoccupied. Some miles farther on explosions were heard, indicating that the Germans were blowing the road. D Company found one bridge prepared for demolition but with the charges not fired. The sappers, who were working overtime to open up the road for transport, speedily removed the charges, and the 23rd moved on into a lovely valley, in which green poplars edged cultivated fields and red poppies provided an attractive patch of colour against the background of snowy mountains. Cherries were ripening and were gathered and eaten by the thirsty infantry.



23 battalion's advance from belmonte, 27 may-1 june 1944

On the morning of 29 May, B Company occupied the village of Gallinaro which the enemy had evacuated during the night. The thrill of liberating such a place was not lessened by the ease with which the task was accomplished, as private diary

entries show. 'The people were mad with joy, kissed our hands, shook them, gave us roses and greeted us all the way. Church bells ringing all over the valley. They told us we have liberated them from the Germans, can't do enough for us,' wrote Jim Blakie. 'The effect on the emotions of the villagers had to be seen to be believed. The women wept, were barefooted as a sign of welcome, kissed our hands and boots, mind you! Showered us with rose petals and handed us armfuls of flowers. To most of us, it was the first time that we realized that some good has been brought about by the war,' wrote Private Doug [Leckie](#).¹⁴

In the late afternoon, Battalion Headquarters was visited by Mr Peter Fraser, Lieutenant-General Puttick and two war correspondents. As the battalion was still in an active role— indeed, A Company picked up a couple of Germans about this time— not very many of the men saw the distinguished visitors. Next morning the unit was relieved by 2788 Field Squadron, [RAF Regiment](#), and later that day moved forward in trucks to a concentration area on the way to [Sora](#). All the trucks moved into a wheat field, where the troops were told they were to have twelve hours' rest. The term 'concentration area' was fully applicable as the vehicles were literally crowded together. Suddenly, unexpected but heavy enemy shelling of the 'rest area' began. It was impossible to move the trucks out of the field. Drivers and infantry alike took cover under the bank of a nearby stream but not before casualties had been sustained. Major Bernie Jones, OC B Company, and Corporal [McRae](#)¹⁵ were killed; Second-Lieutenant N. Ball and two men were wounded. The shelling continued for nearly an hour and no fewer than fourteen RMT and four 23rd trucks were damaged. At midday the troops marched to another rest area, safe behind a hill, where the battalion and its transport were reorganised. Captain Alan [Fletcher](#)¹⁶ took command of B Company and Lieutenant H. Dalton, just returned from furlough, became second-in-command of A Company.

Fifth Brigade resumed its advance that night. In the 23rd, A and C Companies went by truck to relieve the Maoris in the village of [Brocco](#) and on the hill [Monacesco](#). On 31 May the Maoris were directed on [Sora](#) while, in keeping with the brigade plan to advance on a broader front, the 23rd had the task of mopping up the villages and high ground to the north-east of [Sora](#). In the afternoon, therefore, the 23rd advanced with A Company on the left, D in the centre and C on the right, with as its objective the general line of the [Sora- Campoli](#) road. The enemy shelling was

wild and inaccurate. Demolitions held up the supporting tanks and the infantry waited from 3 till 6 p.m. to allow the tanks to catch up by a route cleared by the sappers. In the afternoon A Company captured six Germans who were basking in the sun, unaware that the New Zealanders were so close, and at 8 p.m. was the first company on its objective. Farther along the ridge, D Company got into position an hour later after taking ten prisoners from 134 Regiment 44 Division. Farther out still, C Company found its objective held in strength by the enemy. Attempts were made to get B Company up to reinforce C and to get artillery and tank fire to shoot the infantry on to their objective, but these attempts were not very successful and C Company was pulled back to await 20 Regiment's tanks. On the morning of 1 June the tanks advanced on [Campoli](#). They were followed by the 23rd carriers and D Company, which moved to occupy the village of [Pescosolido](#) in the afternoon while A came up and occupied Forcella. The civilians in this area added presents of wine and cherries to their vociferous welcome of their liberators.

Next day Colonel McPhail announced that, as the battalion had made so many forced marches by both day and night and the men were in need of sleep, Brigadier Stewart had said the 23rd would be given forty-eight hours in which to rest. Cook and store trucks were brought up to the company areas; battle dress was replaced by drill; and losses in equipment were made good. A special 'mountain' platoon of volunteers under Lieutenant [Karsten](#)¹⁷ set out on 3 June for Monte Cornacchia to clear out German OPs on the heights. Second-Lieutenant K. Burtt also took a fighting patrol to mop up an enemy pocket reported to be holding out in the hills. These patrols possibly hurried the enemy on his way as they invariably found the positions recently vacated. On 4 June the battalion was under orders to attack [Balsorano](#) when word was received that [Rome](#) had fallen to the Allies at eight o'clock that morning. The night attack was cancelled and instead, as one diary put it, 'the boys got plonked up'.

The next few days were spent in reorganising and in discussions and demonstrations on tank-infantry co-operation in the [Posta-Fibreno](#) area near [Sora](#). The news that [Rome](#) had fallen was eclipsed two days later by the word that the Second Front had opened and that operations in [Normandy](#) were proceeding favourably. Hope of an early ending to the war was revived, especially when in the next few days came reports of big Russian advances. In Italy the news continued to

be good: advances were being made north of [Rome](#) on a two-army front; the [Eighth Army](#) had taken 3500 and the [Fifth Army](#) nearly 13,000 prisoners.

On 8 June Brigadier Stewart addressed a battalion parade on the war situation in [Italy](#) and also emphasised the good work done by the 23rd in the last few weeks. On the same day, Major Sandy Thomas returned from furlough and assumed command of the battalion. Major McPhail resumed the office of second-in-command, while other appointments made or confirmed were those of Lieutenant J. R. Harrison as OC HQ Company, Lieutenant W. B. Cox as OC Support Group, Major W. Hoseit as OC A Company, Captain A. L. Fletcher as OC B Company, Captain K. Clark as OC C Company, and Captain D. Grant as OC D Company.

On 13 June the brigade moved to the divisional concentration and training area near [Arce](#). Leave, by the day, to [Rome](#) was soon instituted. Two privates, Doug Leckie and Doug [Coster](#),¹⁸ had hitch-hiked into [Rome](#) on Sunday 11 June and 'claimed to be the first Kiwis in [Rome](#)', apart from the Rt. Hon. Peter Fraser, Brigadier Inglis and one or two senior officers. A training syllabus was put into operation which worked the men hard in the mornings and left the afternoons free for swimming at the [Fontana Liri](#) pool or for other sports. For this advance in the upper [Liri](#) valley, the 23rd had lost 7 killed and 53 wounded. Small reinforcements—up to twenty-five at a time—arrived at different times and made good the losses in numbers. Memories of the [Cassino](#) fighting were revived by the visits paid to the remains of the town by burial parties at the end of June. But, for the most part, the battalion now settled to a pleasant routine of training, rest and recreation.

¹ Rev. J. G. B. Talbot; [Gisborne](#); born [Gisborne](#), 10 Dec 1914; Anglican minister.

² Rev. Fr. V. D. Callaghan; [Lower Hutt](#); born [Wellington](#), 9 Dec 1909; priest.

³ Capt R. K. Harvey; [Blenheim](#); born [Blenheim](#), 28 Sep 1914; clerk; twice wounded.

⁴ Maj F. A. Jarrett, MBE, m.i.d.; born [Christchurch](#), 1 Jun 1907; company manager.

⁵ W. D. Dawson.

⁶ L-Sgt J. F. Leonard; born Invercargill, 28 Nov 1918; farm labourer; wounded 14 Apr 1943; killed in action 22 Jul 1944.

⁷ R. Stone.

⁸ G. Blampied.

⁹ Lt-Col E. D. Blundell, OBE; Wellington; born NZ 29 May 1907; barrister and solicitor; BM 5 Bde Apr 1943-May 1944; CO 23 Bn 8–16 May 1944.

¹⁰ 2 Lt B. O. J. Bradley; born Christchurch, 17 Oct 1913; company representative; killed in action 26 May 1944.

¹¹ Pte W. E. Bathgate; Mosgiel; born Taieri, 16 Oct 1907; farmer; wounded 26 May 1944.

¹² Sgt J. M. Mitchell; born Dunedin, 12 Jun 1913; school-teacher; died of wounds 25 May 1944.

¹³ 2 Lt E. B. Waetford, MC; Whangarei; born Whangarei, 29 May 1917; labourer; wounded 3 Aug 1944.

¹⁴ Cpl D. McE. Leckie; Invercargill; born NZ 2 Jan 1923; bank clerk.

¹⁵ Cpl J. McRae; born NZ 22 May 1921; farmhand; killed in action 30 May 1944.

¹⁶ Capt A. L. Fletcher; born Palmerston North, 26 Oct 1914; school-teacher; wounded 27 Oct 1942.

¹⁷ Lt R. Karsten; born NZ 7 May 1917; warehouseman; killed in action 30 Jul

1944.

¹⁸ Pte D. R. Coster; born NZ 29 Oct 1922; lorry driver; wounded 22 Jul 1944; died of wounds 3 Feb 1945.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 15 – ON TO FLORENCE

CHAPTER 15

On to Florence

ON 20 June [General Freyberg](#) told senior officers that he did not expect the Division to be called forward for active operations for another month. At this time, [Rome](#) leave was extremely popular with those lucky enough to get it. The new New Zealand Forces Club there was voted first rate. Although, for the time being, other ranks could not get overnight leave in [Rome](#), some compensation was provided for a small percentage of the battalion who went to [Salerno](#) and [Sorrento](#) for six days' leave.

Training went on throughout the hotter weather. More attention than before was given to infantry-tank co-operation and the 23rd combined with [19 Armoured Regiment](#) in two instructive exercises. First, combined officer syndicates did TEWTs (tactical exercises without troops) on problems of communications and command, of target indication, the selection of tactical bounds and the like. Secondly, the infantry received instruction in signalling to the tanks—in indicating targets and in calling for support—before they carried out a practice attack in which both infantry and tanks fired all their weapons. Everything went well in this attack, mainly because there was no enemy to complicate matters. That the 'tankies' considered this combined training profitable may be gathered from Colonel McGaffin's message to Colonel Thomas: 'We feel that we have had something valuable out of the exercise, which proved a suitable climax to our troop training.... the exchange of ideas between the tankies and your enthusiastic infantry craftsmen cannot fail to reap its reward when the opportunity offers—as I hope it soon shall—for us to share the battle honours of the 23rd Bn.'

By the end of the first week in July, the enemy had been pushed back to positions just south of [Arezzo](#). Here the German higher command prepared to make a firm stand both to keep the Allies out of the valley of the [Arno](#) and to give their own reserve divisions time to prepare the [Gothic Line](#), which ran from the Gulf of Genoa across [Italy](#) north of [Florence](#) to [Pesaro](#) on the Adriatic. On 7 July the shortage of infantry in the [Arezzo](#) area caused the New Zealanders to be summoned forward earlier than had been expected. Actually, the men had begun to wonder when they would return to the fighting. Thus, on 7 July, one 23rd private was writing

in his diary: 'Time must be getting short for us now. Funny how one should be thankful for every day in safety, but is not! A chap wishes to get out of line and, when he does, the army makes it so tough, he wants to get back in again for a rest from discipline.'

For the move north, 6 Brigade took the lead on the night of 9–10 July. Fifth Brigade followed on the next night. Once again every effort was made to make the move secret and to conceal the identity of the New Zealanders. On their first night of this move, the 1065 vehicles of 5 Brigade moved up Route 6, through [Rome](#) and along Route 3 to a staging area at [Civita Castellana](#). Next night they moved via [Narni](#) and Amelia to [Orvieto](#), and then to the concentration area near [Lake Trasimene](#). Here they spent a day at Paciano before moving to the 5 Brigade area just south of [Cortona](#).

On 14 July it was announced that all 4th Reinforcement other ranks were to be LOB (left out of battle) as they were to return to New Zealand as soon as transport arrangements were completed. Officers from that reinforcement were, however, to continue in their existing appointments until further notice. In the 23rd, 9 officers and 69 men were affected by this 'Taupo' scheme. A wine factory near Battalion Headquarters had sufficient stock to meet the demands for celebration and farewell parties. As a [Third Echelon](#) man, Captain Ken Clark was placed in charge of the Taupo draft and command of C Company passed to Captain F. R. Coe.

On 15 July the battalion passed under command of 6 Brigade and moved forward into a reserve area to be ready to support an operation designed to capture high ground which would aid 6 Armoured. Division's drive on [Arezzo](#) and generally assist the advance to [Florence](#). In the event, the 23rd was not needed and, on the evening of 16 July, reverted to its normal command. For the next few days, the troops were engaged in general training which, in view of the current rumour that the enemy might use gas as a last resort, included gas respirator drill. On 19 July Major Jock Worsnop rejoined the unit and took over the command of B Company from Captain R. K. Harvey, who had replaced Major Fletcher when the latter was evacuated sick. Next day Captain Clark and the Taupo men departed and those who were left breathed a sigh of relief at being able to return to normal. The dropping of butterfly and other bombs at night indicated that the [Luftwaffe](#) could still strike, even if its activities were much curtailed.

The enemy was still offering stiff opposition in hilly and wooded country that was ideal for defence. Fifth Brigade had now to take its turn in attacking the enemy and driving him out of his strongly held positions. On 21 July the 23rd moved by trucks through the hills and through the outskirts of old [Siena](#) to a pleasant lying-up area of olive groves, vineyards and gardens just south of [Castellina](#). Colonel Thomas took his Orders Group forward another seven miles to the headquarters of a French Moroccan battalion at [San Donato](#), with a view to relieving this unit after dark. That night the relief of these Frenchmen was successfully carried out, although two members of the 23rd were wounded by shellfire.

Fifth Brigade now had the 23rd forward on the right and the 28th forward on the left, with the 21st in reserve. On the right of the New Zealanders, 6 South African Division was directed on certain crossings of the River Arno with the intention of forcing an entry into [Florence](#). Next on the right came [4 British Division](#) supported by 6 British Armoured Division, while on the left of the New Zealanders [8 Indian Division](#) covered the left flank.

The 23rd established Battalion Headquarters in [San Donato](#). The town itself had been heavily shelled: its streets were full of rubble, and its skeleton buildings stood with half walls and half floors. B and C Companies took over positions forward of the town, D was immediately to the rear and A farther back in reserve. A Company was to provide the infantry to exploit with the Divisional Cavalry Staghounds and the Sherman tanks of either the 757 United States Tank Battalion, who were already on the spot, or of a New Zealand Armoured Regiment if one should get up in time.

Shortly after midnight, B and C Companies sent out small fighting patrols to discover the approximate strength of the enemy in his forward posts. B Company sent out a patrol from each platoon with orders to advance about 3000 yards along the ridge and discover whether or not the houses were occupied. At 2.30 a.m. one B Company patrol reported opposition at Point 337. But, soon afterwards, C Company patrols, farther to the left, reported Point 357 clear of the enemy. Determined to set the ball rolling for the New Zealand Division in the advance to [Florence](#), Colonel Thomas ordered B and C Companies to occupy the areas traversed by their patrols. ¹



23 battalion's advance from san donato, 22–24 july 1944

Just before first light Captain Coe pushed C Company along the ridge towards Point 357, which 14 Platoon, under Sergeant Eric Batchelor, occupied quickly. Some opposition was met but Batchelor, who had learned his patrolling with Fred Marett and other experts in North Africa, took the initiative and cleared the troublesome houses of enemy in double-quick time. More than once he left his men to cover or fire at a house while he entered it and extracted its German occupants. In this way, he personally took five prisoners. C Company's bag numbered nine, all from II Regiment 4 Parachute Division.

B Company had a more difficult time in its advance on Point 337 and towards **Sambuca**. Major Worsnop directed that, at first light, the company would occupy the houses cleared by the patrols and then 10 and 11 Platoons would take the group of houses known as Martino a Cozzi. The first part of the operation went according to plan. Then 10 Platoon attacked, without supporting artillery or tank fire, up a slight slope towards a large house which was later found to be held by sixty Germans. These paratroopers held their fire until 10 Platoon was too close to withdraw easily and then fired all their weapons at short range with devastating effect. The platoon had 3 killed and 3 wounded and 8 pinned down and taken prisoner, although three of these escaped later in the day. No. 11 Platoon also came under heavy Spandau fire but made some progress. As 12 Platoon under Second-Lieutenant E. B. Waetford had met no opposition, Major Worsnop switched it to the aid of 10 Platoon. Waetford's men also suffered casualties, but took the two nearest houses before being forced to withdraw when ammunition ran low. Private Doug Leckie, jun., the

No. 1 man on the 2-inch mortar with this platoon, gives the best contemporary account:

'Moved in an attack at 0920 to capture those houses known as [San Martino](#) village. Took objective and cleared two houses, but had to withdraw after two hours' terrific battle, fighting sometimes at 10 yards range, as we had expended all our ammo ... 10 wounded 2 seriously, one of them my best mate Doug Coster, and 1 killed, Jim Blakie, a farmer from [Riverton](#), married with 2 children. We were shelled heavily by an S.P. gun as we made an orderly withdrawal with fire and movement, one covering the other as we moved back to get more ammo.... 4 Yank tanks, Shermans, were to have given us support but refused to move from behind a bank to get the S.P. gun. All they did to help us was to fire 4 shots with their 75 mm at snipers shooting from windows. We were told later they were in for serious trouble and a court martial. I fired 12 bombs at Spandau nests which kept their heads down to allow Vin O'Keefe's section to root them out with tommy guns, grenades, Brens and rifles firing from the hip.... Our Platoon commander, Tom Waetford, was magnificent and an inspiration throughout. He rallied us always, which kept us going. During the attack, he used 8 mags of his own tommy gun, fired 6 mags Bren, 10 rounds rifle and threw 5 grenades into windows and Spandau nests—most of these he took from the boys who were wounded.... spent the rest of the day carrying out wounded. Our Padre did some yeoman work taking out wounded in the jeep over a road under continual shellfire. The speedy evacuation of the wounded saved the lives of many of them.... This hectic day seemed like a week... felt complete physical and mental exhaustion through lack of sleep.'

Prior to the launching of this attack, Colonel Thomas had independently ordered A Company forward to take over [San Martino](#) from B Company. For its advance, A had two troops of A Squadron Divisional Cavalry and 1 Platoon [7 Field Company](#) under command. When Major Hoseit got his company up to B's sector, he found that [San Martino](#) had not fallen as easily as had been expected and that Major Worsnop was planning a heavier assault on it. As both 10 and 12 Platoons had suffered heavy casualties, the two company commanders decided to commit one platoon apiece—No. 7 under Lieutenant [Smylie](#)² from A and No. 11 under Second-Lieutenant [Douglas](#)³ from B—and to secure the maximum support from heavier weapons. The 23rd 3-inch mortars under Lieutenant [Kearney](#)⁴ fired 300 rounds in support of this midday

assault, which was also supported by fifty rounds gunfire from [5 Field Regiment](#). With Major Worsnop in charge of their attack, 7 and 11 Platoons advanced with spirit, inflicted heavy casualties on the defending paratroopers and took the position, but not before they and the men of 1 Troop A Squadron Divisional Cavalry had sustained casualties. Major Worsnop and Second-Lieutenant Douglas were among the wounded. Lieutenant Smylie got a shock when the Staghound on which he was riding into the attack was blown up by a Teller mine. Nevertheless, he and Sergeant Peter [Doak](#)⁵ led 7 Platoon with great determination into the final successful assault.

Captain McArthur now came forward and took command of B Company which, as it had sustained nearly thirty casualties and had been fully engaged most of the night and all morning, passed into reserve in the captured houses while A continued the advance along the ridge towards [Sambuca](#). B and C had cracked the outer crust of opposition and, although some stiff fighting lay ahead, the way forward appeared to be opening up. B Company had taken six more prisoners from II Battalion, 12 Regiment, 4 Parachute Division and C had picked up another two from the same unit as it moved forward alongside B.

A Company's advance in the late afternoon was directed on Point 337 and Casa Ginestra, a small settlement on the road about a mile north of the [Morocco](#) fork. Although the American tanks, which had been supporting the French, were prepared to shoot in support of the infantry, their commander stated that his instructions were 'not to lose a tank or risk one' and, therefore, according to Colonel Thomas, who wanted close tank support for A's daylight advance, the tanks 'would not cooperate'. This made A's task more difficult but the initial infantry assault, though costly, was successful. Second-Lieutenant Alan [McCartney](#),⁶ described by a brother officer as 'one of the fittest men in the whole Division' and certainly one of the most promising subalterns in the unit, was killed as he led his men against well-concealed enemy posts. About half an hour later, that is, about 6 p.m., an enemy force, described by A Company men as 'double our strength', counter-attacked and forced the forward troops to withdraw in some confusion from Point 337.

Ordered by Colonel Thomas to regain the point, Major Hoseit was able to call on 3 Troop of A Squadron [18 Armoured Regiment](#) to assist his renewed attack. Some of the American tanks also joined with the two troops of the Divisional Cavalry in aiding this assault from the right flank. Fifth Field Regiment also laid on supporting fire.

Without the services of those officers and men wounded or killed in the earlier action, A Company was led mainly by its NCOs. Thus the CSM, WO II Bill Tail,⁷ rallied one platoon and led it into the final assault, while Sergeant White⁸ led 8 Platoon in the attack, in which he personally accounted for four Germans. Only by 8 p.m. was A Company, now reduced in numbers to 45, fully consolidated on Point 337. 'We never ever liked daylight attacks and this day's experiences confirmed our opinions,' wrote David Spring later.

Company attacks of this nature were certainly risky affairs, since by their very nature they were normally hurriedly organised and the attacking infantry were often exposed to well-aimed fire from hidden machine guns. As they lack the importance of the larger-scale set-piece attacks, they are normally passed over in a few words, but for the participating infantryman they could involve tougher fighting and more dangerous situations than the bigger attacks. Although no member of the assaulting infantry of A Company has left a detailed account of that day's fighting, Private R. A. Somerville, a signaller at A Company headquarters, kept adding to his diary as opportunity offered on 22 July:

'This morning got up before breakfast as are putting in an attack. Just at breakfast when thought we were in good safety over came a Jerry stonk and wounded Johnny Davies and another chap.... It is about 11 a.m. now and am sitting in a dusty gutter with radio. A SP gun and enemy mortars are giving us hell and [we] will not be able to advance until we get a barrage. Damn tricky attack it will be, although we have Yank Shermans and Stagounds as well as engineers with us.... are due to go into [San Martino](#). Some prisoners have arrived from B Company. Sweating in jersey, so hot.... Moved up to next house. Here saw the padre stretcher-bearing without a helmet. Takes guts and didn't know he had them. All of us formed a new impression of him. Wounded are streaming back 30 from B Coy including OC already. Jim Henessy has his Pl. attached.... Later ... American tanks refused to advance—the bastards. Jerry let our platoons right into their camouflaged positions and chopped them to bits. Our casualties are mounting. Boys started drifting in from ridge disorganised. More prisoners, including a woman. Bloody Goering Paratroopers are pure Germans. 18 NZ Armour came up and pushed on down road in suicide go against the SP. Boss sacked the Yanks and threatened to courtmartial them. 2/Lt. Alan McCartney missing. Sgt. Tony [Deane](#)⁹ also and others. Ordered to retake ridge

and Bill Tait took pl back up. Mortars trying to smash Spandau nests. One of our tanks blown up outside house but others got right in and smashed through silencing SP. It was a mistake but they saved the day.... D came through us and we went on right fork. Dave and I went ahead laying line to ridge.... Tea came up in jeep. Things quietened about 11 p.m. Only our guns going. Covered myself with straw as very cold without a blanket. Got a little sleep in early morning.'

As Somerville's diary has indicated, it was now the turn of D Company to take up the advance from A. While A's attack on Point 337 was being mounted, D Company was waiting to start its advance on [Morocco](#). Colonel Thomas had placed half a squadron of tanks and a troop of sappers under command of Major Grant, D's commander, for a late afternoon or early evening attack on this group of houses. One of Grant's officers, Second-Lieutenant 'Ray' [Street](#),¹⁰ gives a good impression both of his company commander and of the attack in which he participated.

'This information the Major gave to us three platoon commanders as he sat, pipe in mouth, calm and deliberate as always, for I never saw him appear to be worried or rattled, no matter what the situation. "Joe Grim", as the boys in the Coy named him, always with his pipe and slow deliberate speech ... inspired confidence among the men, and made him a popular Coy commander....'

From a three-storied building in [San Donato](#), Grant and his platoon commanders scanned the country ahead and noted the trees and folds in the ground which hid [Morocco](#) from their view. Then, after a meal at 4 p.m., the infantry advanced to their starting point, where some tanks of A Squadron [18 Armoured Regiment](#) were awaiting them. Grant gave his final orders and the advance began. Shortly after 5 p.m., however, the leading troop of tanks was sent to assist A's recapture of Point 337 as already described. A reserve troop came up and, after the more or less inevitable delays, D's advance continued. In Street's words:

'Word was sent back and up came my thirty four men, led by Bill [Yorston](#),¹¹ the Sgt. He brought up the three section leaders—Jack [Pringle](#),¹² [Chook Healy](#) and Doug [Gilmour](#)¹³—and I gave them the dope. The Shermans moved off down the road in single file, we followed in a long line.... The leading tank swerved off the road to get past the crater where the Staghound had lost its wheel and was doing fine when Bang! an almighty explosion sent a cloud of dust and smoke into the air. The tank

stopped with one track damaged.... We changed our deployment. The tanks got off the road, moving forward abreast, but separated by some twenty or more yards, parallel with the road, through long grass and crops and scattered olive trees, and with them went my men, two sections up with the machines and one fifty yards back, all in extended line. The tanks wanted our protection against Jerry offenroers (anti-tank bazookas) and snipers; we wanted theirs against Spandau posts.

'We made excellent progress. The country was gently undulating and we went sweeping forward beneath the scattered olive trees, with farmhouses showing up here and there at the end of lanes running in from the main road and I expected a burst from a Spandau at more than one point but none came.... But there were Jerries thereabouts in several of the houses. We took one prisoner before we had proceeded far beyond the cross-roads. He came out with his hands up to one of the tanks, and I passed him back.... On we went. When a house, appearing through the trees, looked to house the enemy, the tanks blazed away with their 75s as they advanced. The enemy was on the run. Without the armour I don't expect we should have got very far. But those three iron monsters advancing abreast, with guns blazing, and with a strong platoon of infantry moving forward with them, made them think twice about fighting it out. We saw figures making off behind a large farmhouse. The figure of a Hun running down the road sixty odd yards away caught my eye. I gave him a full mag from my Tommy-gun.

'And so we advanced, at a good steady pace, halting only when we breasted a rise in order to see what lay ahead: then down the slope we went towards a large farmhouse showing up through the trees.... Beyond the large farmhouse, now only a short distance ahead, lay a collection of buildings. That must be [Morocco](#), I thought. We advanced as far as the house, two of the tanks going to the right and one to the left. That is as far as this latter one went. A Tiger, camouflaged and hidden among the buildings a little way in front, got in one shot which did the trick. Clouds of whitish smoke came belching from the stricken monster, and out of the smoke came the members of the crew. By a miracle, not one was wounded. We at first thought it had been a bazooka, fired from the bushes behind the house, which had set the tank on fire. I took three of my men and proceeded round the other end of the house where I was met by another of my platoon. "Are any of our tanks camouflaged?", he asked. I answered in the negative. "Well," he went on, "a big tank with olive

branches over it has just moved off among the houses there. We've heard Jerries talking over the wall round the back, too". Bang! Something exploded a few feet above my head. Something struck me in the left leg just below the knee.... a severed artery.... Bill, my Sgt., organized the platoon in case of a counter attack.... I began to wonder what it was that had fired at us. Could it have been one of the Shermans in the troop at the rear of the Coy? Such was the case. We had been mistaken for Jerries, walking about the farmhouse, by one of our tanks further back. They apologized for the mistake.... Just before it grew dark, the jeep with the Padre—H. F. [Harding](#)¹⁴—in charge came up. I take off my hat to our padre....'

Despite the unfortunate incident which ended Street's active service, the co-operation between tanks and infantry had been of a high order. During this successful D Company advance, the houses at Belvedere and [Morocco](#) and a number of prisoners had been captured. Only the misunderstanding on the final objective between tanks and infantry enabled some sixty Germans to make their escape. Once [Morocco](#) was cleared, Major Grant sent one platoon along with 4 Troop A Squadron to drive the enemy from positions in [Figlinelle](#). By 9 p.m. the tanks and infantry had completed this operation.

When he learned of D Company's success, Colonel Thomas concluded that the enemy was on the run and that a breakthrough was imminent. He therefore decided to exploit D Company's success by sending forward C Company with a half-squadron of tanks, together with [Support Group](#), a troop of tank-destroyers, a troop of 17-pounder anti-tank guns, a bulldozer, 'and, in fact, everything we could lay hands on to keep up the impetus'.¹⁵ About 9.45 p.m., carried on seven tanks of A Squadron, C Company moved up the [Morocco](#) road and joined D about Point 336. The combined force advanced with the tanks and about 2 a.m. reached the road junction at Point 325. They took four more prisoners, but soon afterwards they were held up by demolitions which the bulldozer was called forward to clear. The two companies and the tanks therefore laagered for the rest of the night.

Before first light on 23 July, Colonel Thomas gave orders for the taking of La Rocca, a hamlet about a mile along a track to the north. At 4.30 a.m. Captain Coe, with C Company, 1 and 2 Troops of A Squadron and an artillery officer from 142 Regiment, advanced on La Rocca, which was occupied by 6 a.m. Three prisoners were taken, but the majority of the enemy withdrew behind demolitions which held

up the tanks. Although one tank was immobilised by mines, the tanks of 1 Troop supported the infantry when they crossed Route 2 and engaged the enemy in the village of [Strada](#). Sergeant Eric Batchelor again led his platoon in a successful attack and, ably supported by the tanks, the infantry were in occupation of [Strada](#) by 7.15 a.m. In 13 Platoon, Second-Lieutenant [Grant](#) ¹⁶ was wounded by a ricochet off a tank, and Sergeant [Page](#) ¹⁷ took command. But both Page and Corporal P. J. [Robinson](#), ¹⁸ the next most senior NCO, were wounded later in the day.

During the rest of the morning, Captain Coe directed his men on Point 302 and the buildings of Case Poggio Petroio. Assisted by medium gunfire when tanks were located, C Company took this feature about midday. In the afternoon, C was directed on Point 322 and the Villa [Strada](#), but tank and self-propelled gunfire from among the buildings proved too heavy. The Germans were later found to have a Tiger and four Mark IV tanks there and were in too great strength to be dislodged by a single company. After losing 4 killed and 8 wounded, C Company was forced to fall back on [Strada](#) and on Point 302. A few more prisoners were, however, brought in, bringing the total for the two days to 35. Colonel Thomas now ordered C and D Companies to remain fast, but to send a patrol to Point 322 before first light to prepare the way for D to advance along the northern axis.

In the meantime, A had also advanced. At first light, a patrol reported the ground north of Point 337 clear. After Battalion Headquarters had moved to [Figlinelle](#), Colonel Thomas visited A's sector and directed this company to advance along the [Pesa](#) valley to [Sambuca](#) and then to [Fabbrica](#). To assist the advance, he placed under command an additional troop of Divisional Cavalry Staghouads, a platoon of sappers and a section of 3-inch mortars. About 10 a.m., A Company began to advance with many of the men riding on the outside of the Staghouads. Little opposition was met on the ground but enemy shell and mortar fire increased as they approached the western bank of the [Pesa](#) at [Sambuca](#). Private Somerville comments: 'We crossed over two demolitions and were held up by a third. This left us in full view of village and Jerry started to shell and mortar us. Did they and are they laying it in? Shrap flying everywhere past the niche in gully I am sitting in. Damned if I like this at all. Engineers are trying to bridge gap now under very heavy fire. Staghouads are pulling back. They opened up with everything they had when we were trapped. They are at least courageous fighters, our Div Cav.' A Company managed to take

[Sambuca](#) without much fighting and also captured a few more houses a little farther along the road. The company crossed the [Pesa](#) at [Sambuca](#) and in the afternoon was joined again by its Staghounds.

An apparently friendly Italian—and partisans had been consistently passing reliable information—reported that [Fabbrica](#), a somewhat larger village on a hilltop about a mile or more ahead, was free of the enemy. Major Hoseit decided to occupy this village before dark. The armoured cars struck more demolitions but the infantry pushed on, with 8 and 9 Platoons forward and 7 in reserve. The actual advance on [Fabbrica](#) began about 7.30 p.m. and no opposition was encountered until the forward infantry began to move up the open slope to the village itself. Employing the same stratagem they used against B Company at [San Martino](#), the enemy held their fire until the two leading platoons were fully exposed to their view. Then they opened up with Spandaus, rifles and mortars, while artillery fire was directed on the road around Company Headquarters. The A Company men went to ground and remained pinned for some time on the rather open approaches to the village. Word was passed back for a 'stonk' on [Fabbrica](#). Unfortunately, some of the artillery fire fell short and added to the troubles of the infantry, who were able to withdraw to [Sambuca](#) only after darkness fell. The enemy shellfire had scored a direct hit on Company Headquarters, killing Major Hoseit and wounding three of his men. Bill Hoseit was one of the three officers who had been with the 23rd since 1940. Always efficient and renowned for his generosity, he was sadly missed. Later that night A Company was relieved by B Company of the 21st and withdrew to [San Martino](#) for a much-needed rest.

That same night, 23–24 July, the two platoons of C Company on Point 302 were withdrawn to [Strada](#) to enable tanks and infantry to give each other maximum mutual protection. The 23rd carrier platoon also moved into [Strada](#) to reinforce the depleted ranks of the infantry. Early next morning a D Company patrol reported that the enemy were still around Point 322 although their vehicles and tanks could be heard withdrawing. Colonel Thomas called for artillery fire on the area and at 6 a.m. sent D Company forward, with orders to fall back if strong resistance was met. At first, the advance went well under cover of a heavy morning mist, but, when the mist lifted, heavy machine-gun fire was encountered. The tanks were halted by demolitions and before midday D's advance was called off.

Meanwhile a C Company patrol had found that an advance along Route 2 to the [Pesa](#) was possible, and B Company, which had been called forward, was entrusted with this task. With 11 Platoon as vanguard, this company reported on demolitions and on the practicability of a more general advance on that route. This was to be undertaken by others as the 23rd's relief by the 21st was completed soon after dusk that night. The infantry withdrew to 'rest' areas along the [Morocco](#) road, where they received an issue of one bottle of beer per man and some free cigarettes to cheer them up. But, as one sorely tried soldier wrote: 'Issue bottle beer and certainly want it, though a barrel would be too little tonight'. In the advance to date, the 23rd had lost 18 killed, 71 wounded and 7 missing.



the advance to florence

The highlight of this brief respite out of the line was an opportunity of seeing King George VI during his visit to the troops in [Italy](#). On 26 July, 205 men from the 23rd went back in trucks some 15 miles over the very dusty roads to line the roadside until the King, the Eighth Army Commander, General Oliver Leese, General Harding and other notables came along. The King shook hands with Major McPhail and drove slowly past the men. One private wrote in his diary: 'Saw the KING this afternoon. We gave 3 hearty British cheers and I heard one bloke say "Good Day there! George!"'

On 28 July the 23rd passed under command of 4 Armoured Brigade. During the few days the battalion had been out of the line, the advance had been continued by 4 and 6 Brigades: the 4th took [San Casciano](#) on 27 July and the 6th got tanks and

infantry across the [Pesa](#) near [Cerbaia](#) and was beginning to threaten the Germans' [Paula Line](#). On the flanks, both 6 South African Armoured Division and 8 [Indian Division](#) were making good progress. In the 23rd the necessary changes in command were made: Captain Harry Dalton took command of A Company and Lieutenant Roy Karsten was transferred from C to take 9 Platoon. Although their break had been short and they had rarely been far from shellfire, the majority felt improved by the change. Thus one private who had lost good friends the previous week could write in his diary: 'I have my appetite back again and with more regular hours of sleep, feel a different man from a week ago.'

Late on 28 July, the battalion moved into the line on the right flank of 4 Brigade near [Spedaletto](#). A and B Companies relieved two companies of the 22nd in forward positions. C was in the right rear and D in reserve. The forward companies sent out patrols and experienced much more shelling than was pleasant. On the morning of 29 July Captain Dalton was evacuated sick and Captain Dick Duncan took command of A Company. Late that day, the 23rd reverted to its normal brigade command and the 28th came into the line on the left. Fifth Brigade was taking over the Division's right flank from 4 Brigade in order to launch an attack in that sector.

That night both C and A Companies sent out patrols. C's ran into enemy fire and withdrew without important incident; A's, under Lieutenant Karsten, was even less successful. That A Company had been having a trying time will already have been gathered, but an understanding of what follows will be made easier by the underlining of certain facts. In and after [Cassino](#), no company had had more changes of officers, especially of company commanders: in the last week alone, A Company had lost Hoseit killed and Dalton evacuated ill, as well as two subalterns; Duncan arrived from D Company only on 29 July to take command, while platoon commanders in Karsten and Taylor had just arrived from C Company and [Support Group](#) respectively. That the daylight probing attacks had been costly and had been disliked by the men is also clear. That the shelling on 28 and 29 July was much worse than official records indicate and that, combined with other circumstances, it contributed to the development of cases of anxiety neurosis, may be suspected from these extracts from an A Company private soldier's diary:

'28 Jul 44 ... Helluva night after we took over from 22.... was scared out of my

wits ... big mortars shake the house. This war is getting me down for my nerve is all to hell. Just about time I had a spell.... Damn my weak nerve!

29 Jul 44 ... afternoon was a touch of Dante's Inferno. Jerry, who had been stonking for two days on our house and missing, at last found his range and all afternoon he pasted our house with heavy mortars and 105 battery with scarcely a miss ... we were scarcely able to see for dust and smoke at times.... Top of house where were doing arty OPing was a shambles.... I know I am properly afraid of action now and really scared. Darn nuisance but have to face facts. Hope it never gets any worse than this because would be a bit tough on pride.'

Few soldiers analysed their feelings to this degree. Pride in self and sense of duty came to the rescue of this man, and he went through the actions which followed with some credit to himself. Others, however, felt that the limit of their physical and nervous reserves or of what should be asked of them had been reached.

This was the situation in A Company when, about midnight on 29–30 July, Lieutenant Karsten took 9 Platoon across a small gully and up the rise to Sant' Andrea, which was less than 600 yards from the company's FDLs. This village had been earlier reported in mistake to Brigade Headquarters as being already occupied by A Company. Karsten's men were to occupy the hamlet if possible. As they breasted the top of the rise, they came under concentrated fire at short range from several automatics and retired hurriedly and in some confusion, leaving one man wounded. Dick Duncan, who had taken command of the company that day, reports what happened next:

'I reported this repulse to Sandy who said that it was his opinion that the enemy was pulling back all the time and that he was sure that if another PI went out at 0400 they would have no trouble in occupying San Andrea. He also said he would lay on a troop of tanks to help things along. I duly went up to the two fwd pls and saw the comds Ernie Taylor and Karsten who informed me that some of the men were refusing to go up again. Dawn came and neither I nor Taylor could budge some of the chaps. One complete section with its sec leader refused to move, together with one or two others. They were undoubtedly damn tired and the Coy had had a pretty rough spin. Sandy arrived about that time with three Shermans in his hand and

sniffing action, and prepared to help with the men. But even he could not shift them and I sent the remnants of both fwd pls on. Sandy meantime had decided on a route for the tanks who were engaged in firing hell into the opposite bank. He said "H'm! I think this is going to be fun, I think I'll come with you", and off he went, the CO right up in front of a PI patrol. He told me later that he had done it to show the men he would not ask them to do anything he was not prepared to do himself.'

Ewart Hay, the IO, accompanied the CO and these two led the way. The first obstacle was a ditch at the bottom of the gully but this was bridged sufficiently for the tanks with big stones. The tank crews made their machines do the apparently impossible in climbing out of the ditch and up the rough hillside. They had not gone very far before they took two prisoners who had a Spandau trained down on to the road where Colonel Thomas had been talking to the men of A Company. Only the early morning mist had screened them from view. The main enemy forward line was on top of a bank, but the paratroopers there were unable to stand the tank fire and fifteen surrendered after others had been killed or wounded. On reaching the village, Lieutenant Hay was wounded in the thigh and the CO took him back to Battalion Headquarters, where he himself returned to his proper job while Duncan and his men continued with the occupation of Sant' Andrea.

In the village itself, A Company captured a few more paratroopers, but fifty or sixty paratroopers, supported by a Tiger tank which was not at first visible, held out at a large house near the northern outskirts. After passing through and round the cemetery, Duncan reached the church, which stood on a slightly raised triangular piece of ground. Karsten's platoon occupied this church while Taylor's, with Company Headquarters, occupied a nearby house which proved to be the historic house of exile of Niccolo Machiavelli, the Florentine official and political writer. The 23rd men found that the house's modern owner, Count Serrestori, had preserved it as a museum with all the items of Machiavelli's writing room kept as they were in 1513. But this was 1944 and the soldiers had other interests. The supporting tanks of No. 4 Troop of A Squadron [20 Armoured Regiment](#) under Lieutenant [Colmore-Williams](#) ¹⁹ took up positions round the church. From there they covered the main narrow street and the clear area between their positions and a large house about 400 yards to the west.

Duncan now directed Karsten and his platoon to occupy the northern end of the

village, but these men had not gone very far before, to quote Duncan, 'there was a hell of a bang and bits of stone flew everywhere.... Later we found that Karsten had been blown through the street wall into one of the buildings and that no one could reach him as we were fired on when we tried. With one of the stouter hearted Corporals I went down the road myself and was fired on and slightly wounded just when we reached the hole where Karsten had been blown. Shortly after we discovered that at that point a slight curve in the road brought us into view of a Tiger down by the enemy HQ.... Blokes in the top window reported enemy movement. We feared a counter attack. I discussed the matter with the Tk comd who said, "Well, Dick, we're just so much dead meat to a Tiger and should pull back but if you want it I'll stay and work out a plan which may or may not work". His plan was to cover the street by getting a tk behind a slight rise to bob up, fire phosphorus smoke and then pop back again while another tk fired AP.'

No counter-attack came for some hours, not indeed, until about 1.30 p.m. In the meantime, A's commander tried to get M10s (tank-destroyers) up to aid the company in holding its part of Sant' Andrea, but the two M10s sent forward by Colonel Thomas drew a considerable amount of shellfire and were eventually blocked by demolitions. The CO also made strenuous efforts to get anti-tank guns up to A Company, either with the aid of the unit's carriers or A Squadron tanks, but to no immediate avail. Appreciating that the artillery could not fire close enough to the village to break up a counter-attack, Les Kearney, the 23rd's mortar officer, who had already sited his 3-inch mortars well forward, went up to A's headquarters and personally directed mortar fire on the enemy-held houses. The enemy had also succeeded in bringing up an SP ²⁰ gun, which joined in the general shelling and mortaring of A Company's headquarters prior to the launching of an attack. This attack started around 1.30 p.m. with infantry and bazooka teams trying to infiltrate in from the west while the Tiger tank came down the main road.

Duncan says: 'Soon there was a report that the Tiger had started up.... We could not see anything as shells and smoke were thick outside our Hq but the Tk plan worked, and they scored so many hits with our piddling AP that the Tiger pulled back. My blokes shot about 12 counted Jerries from the top windows and really had quite a good time.' The A Company private whose nerve had troubled him before the action even began was able to write in his diary: 'Jerry counter-attacked with Tiger

tank and infantry. Things were crook as they shelled and mortared us heavily to soften us up first. Anyway, despite 3 days and nights of no sleep and low morale, fought them back even when they had got into the house opposite us.'

Despite another probing advance by the enemy later in the afternoon, Sant' Andrea was held. Kearney's mortars, firing on the [Villa Mazzei](#), the main enemy house, probably prevented German reinforcement. For A Company the driving back of the last enemy attack ended the fighting on this disturbingly difficult day, a day which had begun with the defiant refusal to fight on the part of one section but had nevertheless seen the company objective taken, a fair bag of prisoners captured, twenty or more enemy killed, and the way prepared for further advances. A's casualties were surprisingly light for such a day—one officer, Roy Karsten, killed, two officers and seven men wounded. The company's morale rose somewhat with success, but the men were nonetheless glad to be relieved around midnight by C Company, now under Captain J. Garbett.

The enemy was also pulling back from the northern outskirts and did not interfere with the relief, although his shellfire was still annoying. C Company sent out a patrol to investigate some of these houses. With what others had come to recognise as masterly, if not uncanny, timing, Sergeant Eric Batchelor entered one house alone and extracted two snipers who learned too late of his arrival. Twenty-six German graves, later found in the rear of the large house which had served as the German headquarters just outside Sant' Andrea, proved that the fire of the 20th tanks and the A Company infantry had been effective.

Before C Company had completed the relief of A, D had already been committed to an advance behind a barrage in what was a divisional move forward with 5 Brigade on the right and 4 Brigade on the left. In 5 Brigade, the 23rd was on the right and the 28th on the left. The advance began at 10 p.m. on 30 July. Major Don Grant, OC D Company, aided by Captain [Donnelly](#)²¹ of [20 Armoured Regiment](#), organised his force with a platoon of infantry and a platoon of engineers in front, then a troop of tanks, another platoon of infantry, the second troop of tanks, the HQ group, the third platoon of infantry, the rest of the engineers and some anti-tank guns. This force made a successful advance of several hundred yards. Mazzei, its first objective, not far from Sant' Andrea, was easily taken, although one tank fell into a demolition and the others had difficulty in keeping pace with the infantry at night. By

1 a.m. on 31 July the force had taken Point 246, its second objective. Apart from passing through some mortar and shell fire and seeing three enemy tanks, the attacking infantry had seen little of the enemy. They took only seven prisoners from II Battalion IO Parachute Regiment, evidence that the enemy was either weak in numbers in that sector or that he was thinning out prior to a more general withdrawal. Colonel Thomas and Lieutenant [Chapman](#),²² his new IO, arrived up before dawn to examine the position and to arrange for closer liaison with the Maoris who were advancing on D Company's left. As D had also occupied an important crossroads and the whole area was so extensive that additional infantry were required to hold it properly, Thomas ordered 10 Platoon of B Company up to assist D. Prisoners had reported three Tiger tanks on the left flank and the defence was organised accordingly. These tanks probably accounted for the fact that the Maoris were delayed and [Il Pino](#) was not taken until after midday. Apart from shelling and mortaring, D Company spent a quiet day. That night the 23rd was relieved by the [Capetown](#) Highlanders of 6 South African Division and retired to 'The Castle', the grand mansion already occupied by Battalion Headquarters.

While the 23rd had a short rest, the Division moved forward, 4 Brigade taking [La Romola](#) and 6 Brigade San Michele, while the South Africans also made good progress. Preparations went ahead for a final assault on a three-brigade front on the enemy positions south of the [Arno](#). Unfortunately, while he was going forward to visit [28 Battalion](#), Brigadier Stewart went too far and was taken prisoner. His place was taken by Colonel C. L. Pleasants.

On 3 August the 23rd was called to move forward alongside the Maoris. With a squadron of [19 Armoured Regiment](#) under command, the battalion was directed to move to San Cristofano and then to Point 122. B Company was selected to take the lead. At 2 p.m., therefore, Captain McArthur and his men, with nine tanks, moved off, the infantry travelling at first in trucks. After debussing, the infantry continued the advance mounted on the Sherman tanks. As this became a more or less common practice about this time, the description given by Private [McDowall](#)²³ of B Company is worth reproducing. It is an interesting mixture of pleasure and concern: 'Very uncomfortable while on the Shermans for two reasons (1) Sitting on very hot armour, old seat felt as if it was roasting, (2) & most important, would not be able to hear any imports coming in on account of noise of engine. But nothing happened.

Movie cameraman took some shots of some of us. Big headlines! N.Z. Infantry ride into action on tanks??? We piled off the tanks for advance proper.' Soon after the infantry dismounted for the last thousand yards of the move into Cristofano, the leading tank capsized over a bank and another 'brewed up' with its engine on fire. No. 12 Platoon, in the lead, took the wrong turning and ran into the Maoris before being redirected. No. 11 Platoon then led the advance into Cristofano and occupied it about 3.30 p.m. without any real opposition. The other two platoons came up and B Company prepared to advance to the second objective while C was called up to consolidate in Cristofano.

For this second phase of the advance, 11 Platoon again took the lead. Unfortunately, the tanks were held up by mines and demolitions and the infantry went on unsupported. When the men of the leading platoons were moving down a forward slope in the open, the enemy opened fire with Spandaus, mortars and tank guns. No. 11 Platoon soon suffered several casualties. Within a few minutes, all three platoon commanders, Lieutenant Greig, Second-Lieutenants I. G. Hulme²⁴ and Waetford, were wounded. In all, B Company had two killed and nineteen wounded by this fire. Shellfire also killed [Second-Lieutenant Cameron](#)²⁵ and Private [Bradley](#)²⁶ when C Company was consolidating in Cristofano. Despite their inability to advance with the infantry, the 20th tanks manoeuvred into firing positions and, aided by a platoon of Vickers guns under Lieutenant [Hutchinson](#),²⁷ did much to reduce the enemy firing and enable the infantry to reach cover. During this shoot, the tanks fired over 100 rounds of 75-millimetre each and all their Browning ammunition.

B Company was withdrawn and passed into reserve. On the morning of 4 August, a C Company patrol found [Villa Capponi](#) clear of the enemy. C Company and two troops of tanks then proceeded to consolidate there. Obviously, all the enemy had not withdrawn in time as fifteen prisoners were taken. This marked the end of the German rearguard in that locality and the road was clear for the advance to continue.

Now came the mad but exhilarating dash for [Florence](#) itself. Colonel Thomas and his men were anxious to be the first to enter the city. D Company and the reserve tanks were therefore called forward. No. 14 Platoon had gone off to establish contact with the South Africans on the right, but 13 and 15 Platoons and the three D Company platoons mounted Major Hugh Robinson's²⁸ tanks for this advance to

[Florence](#). No. 13 Platoon got diverted to occupying the home of the secretary of the [Florence](#) branch of the Fascist Party but the others went on. Once they had edged their way past a burnt-out Sherman and two knocked-out Tigers, the tanks gathered speed. The CO and Sergeant Garnet Blampied, the 'I' sergeant, travelling in the CO's jeep, caught 'the fever of the chase' and joined the forward elements. Actually the South Africans had already entered the outskirts of the city, but this was not yet known. Fearing the Maoris on their left might take the lead, Colonel Thomas and Major Robinson rushed their force forward in a cross-country dash which was slowed up only for a few minutes by the difficult fording of the River Greve. But this obstacle was soon surmounted: the jeep was towed through by a tank but, in the meantime, Colonel Thomas had taken a seat on the front of Robinson's tank. Through farmyards, across fields, straight through one stone wall and then pell-mell along a secondary road they raced. Blampied describes the roadside cheers: 'Peasants often lined the route and showered the troops with flowers and fruit, while each passing vehicle roused a burst of clapping which was rather embarrassing, although one almost began to feel like a little hero—"Proud Liberators".' Thus the column of one jeep and a squadron of tanks with mounted infantry dashed on. They were slightly disappointed to run into a South African who said that the Springboks had entered the city from another angle. But, encouraged by what Thomas termed 'the uncanny lack of resistance', and still determined to be the first New Zealanders to enter this important city, they pushed on through Marignolle and entered the southern suburbs of [Florence](#) about 11 a.m.

Blampied continues: 'Here the jeep left its position behind the CO's tank and smartly moved to the head of the column and thus had the honour, together with the leading tank, of being the first New Zealanders to enter [Florence](#).... Never has such a welcome been given New Zealand troops as met the boys on this occasion. The streets were packed with madly cheering people—old and young men and "buono" signorinas, all dressed in their Sunday best and with every appearance of genuine pleasure at seeing the troops.'

Colonel Thomas adds: 'In no time there were thousands in the streets, cheering frantically, throwing flowers and fruit onto the tanks. Wine, champagne, and even whiskey were passed up in glasses and bottles. It was a great moment. We approached the [Arno](#) and I called up Brigade on the wireless set and reported our

success—they said “Good Show but withdraw immediately!”

Apparently, an entry into [Florence](#) was not included in the plans for the New Zealand Division. Blampied records that ‘at first this news was a shattering blow to the troops after having come so far, but later events proved the message could not have arrived at a more appropriate time’. Snipers, against whom the New Zealanders had been warned by the Italians, opened fire as the column withdrew. The Spandau fire quickly thickened and shells began to fall on the road. ‘It was a very worrying time for me,’ says Thomas, ‘with all the lads sitting so vulnerable on the top of the tanks. I was sitting astride the 75 gun of Robbie's tank when I was hit—and fell down onto the path of the tank which, thank God, stopped dead’. Fortunately, the Colonel's wound in the wrist was the only one sustained at this juncture and the withdrawal was continued, without further losses, to the area between [Villa Capponi](#) and [Giogoli](#).

On 6 August, with Major Alan McPhail again in command of the 23rd, 5 Brigade moved to a concentration area near Poppiana Nuovo, where preparations were made for taking over part of [8 Indian Division's](#) sector near [Empoli](#). Late on the following night, the 23rd relieved the 6/13 Frontier Rifles Regiment on the south side of the [Arno](#) approaching [Empoli](#). Before the move forward, Padre Harding held a voluntary church parade. The reason for the good attendance is given in Doug Leckie's diary: ‘The Padre is the most respected man in the Bn now, after the good work he did evacuating the wounded under shell fire. The service was excellent and was much appreciated by the big number present’. In this sector the 23rd covered a front of 4000 yards until on 9 August the 26th came up on the right flank and relieved B and D Companies of their wide fronts. On the previous day, 91 reinforcements for the 23rd had arrived at Brigade Headquarters and on the evening of 9 August were distributed as follows: 20 to A Company, 27 to B, 13 to C, 21 to D, 1 to Battalion Headquarters, and 8 to HQ Company. The 23rd experienced some shelling and mortaring but patrols were comparatively successful, taking four prisoners plus two Polish deserters. An A Company patrol under Second-Lieutenant [Eddie](#),²⁹ a C Company one under Sergeant [Dobson](#)³⁰ and Corporal R. Thomas,³¹ and a D one under Second-Lieutenant Bassett³² reconnoitred the railway line and the surroundings of various enemy-held houses. Bassett's patrol located three enemy mortar posts, all covered by Spandaus and rifles. These patrols also reported on the

location of mines and on tank 'going' in preparation for the advance to the [Arno](#), which was required as a preliminary to the crossing of that river by the Americans.

At midnight on 10–11 August the advance began, with the 26th on the right and the 23rd on the left of the New Zealand units, and with the 362 American Regiment farther to the left. The 26th met solid opposition but was in [Santa Maria](#) and [Avane](#) by 7 a.m. The 23rd had easier going. Advancing with A Company (Captain J. R. Harrison) on the right, D (Captain Duncan) in the centre and C (Captain Garbett) on the left, they all came under some Spandau fire, but a low-lying mist which lasted till after dawn enabled them to close on the enemy houses without coming under observed fire. No. 15 Platoon was held up by a strongpoint, but the enemy quickly surrendered when the tanks of A Squadron [19 Armoured Regiment](#) came up. Using the fog and the ditches, getting lost and losing contact on either flank, missing a house or two in the misty darkness, and trudging on, meeting serious opposition only on or near the railway line and at the main groups of houses, the 23rd companies were all on their objective by dawn. Second-Lieutenant W. Dobson and his men had a struggle to reduce one post. Some of his men were pinned down by fire and he himself suffered concussion from a grenade which exploded near him. The rest of the platoon worked round to a flank before charging and killing some of the enemy and taking the five survivors prisoner.

Nos. 10 and 11 Platoons with two Staghounds came forward at first light to mop up the two enemy houses that had been by-passed. Shots from the Staghounds' guns heralded their approach and, as a B Company private wrote in his diary, 'The Huns were very ready to surrender'. No. 11 Platoon then advanced to the river-bank and from there engaged a house across the river from which streams of Spandau bullets were coming. A Piat bomb was shot across and, by lucky chance, entered a window and stopped the fire from that quarter. The whole attack cost the 23rd only three casualties.

The next four days passed quietly, apart from some nebel-werfering and shelling by the enemy and a few patrols to make contact with the Americans or to investigate certain houses. Four men of 17 Platoon were killed on box mines and two of B Company wounded on S-mines. Seventy more reinforcements arrived to join the infantry companies. On the night of 15–16 August, 3 Battalion 338 United States Regiment relieved the 23rd in the line. The battalion moved back to a rest and

dispersal area at [Castellina](#), just north of [Siena](#), whence leave parties to [Rome](#) as well as excursions to the beach at Vada, and to other places of interest, began to operate. For the time being, the campaign was ended. Since it left [Arce](#), the 23rd had lost 35 killed or died of wounds, 112 wounded and 7 prisoners of war. This was, regrettably, the highest casualty rate for any New Zealand unit during this period.

Possibly this high rate of casualties had something to do with the fluctuations in morale which occurred during the period. Many unit and regimental histories tend to give the impression that the unit concerned contained only brave and skilful soldiers, invariably well behaved. In fact, all units have both good and bad soldiers in their ranks, and all soldiers are subject to human weaknesses, even if a few do rise to superhuman heights. The 23rd was still 'the good faithful unit'³³ it had always been, but the incident at Sant' Andrea had served as a reminder that the battalion, like most other units, had its sprinkling of faint hearts who cared little for their own and nothing for the unit's reputation. Actually, most of the men concerned made good in subsequent campaigns and redeemed their honour. The trouble, it is agreed by those who looked into the subject most closely at the time, centred round the section leader, who used his powers of leadership in the wrong way. The many changes in command at all levels since the 23rd entered [Cassino](#), the impossibility of absorbing large numbers of reinforcements during a campaign and of inspiring them with a strong feeling for the unit, the weakening of moral fibre in those who succumbed to the temptations which were so common in [Italy](#)—these were some of the factors which prevented the 23rd from maintaining at its peak the team spirit which had been such a marked feature of its life. But, although the daylight attacking of well-defended posts, with resulting heavy casualties, robbed some men of their confidence in themselves and in what they had been told, the 23rd continued to fight courageously. The one smudge on its record served to show up in higher relief the many bright pages in the unit's story. At the time, the other companies heard only vague rumours of what had happened and went their own way, doing their duty with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

The rest and training period of six weeks which now followed gave the battalion time to build up the unit spirit and to enable the men to get to know one another. Appointments were stabilised with the return of various officers from New Zealand furlough or from hospital or tours of duty. Colonel McPhail reshuffled the company

commands as follows on 18 August: HQ Company, Captain R. A. Boyle³⁴; Support Group, Captain B. Cox; A Company, Captain A. F. Cooper, with Captain J. R. Harrison as second-in-command; B Company, Captain J. W. McArthur, with Lieutenant G. M. Dodds³⁵ as 2 i/c; C Company, Captain H. J. G. Low, with Lieutenant G. L. Lawrence as 2 i/c; D Company, Captain N. Buchanan,³⁶ with Captain R. S. Duncan as 2 i/c; Lieutenant J. A. Bevin became IO, Second-Lieutenant K. Burt, Signals Officer, and Captain J. J. Garbett battalion second-in-command. A few days later the unit was well up to strength with 28 officers, apart from the eight³⁷ who were attached after being recommissioned in the field, and 732 other ranks. The numerical strength was there; with time for training under these leaders, the spirit of the 23rd was bound to reassert itself.

¹ Possibly at this stage of his first campaign since returning from furlough, Colonel Thomas was over-anxious to 'push on', because the GOC's diary for 22 July 1944 records: '23 Bn made some progress but ran into trouble.... We have suffered some casualties, possibly 40 including 4 officers. Policy was not to push on until the tanks were up. Sandy Thomas who is a bit impetuous has been so informed.'

² Lt L. E. Smylie; Weraroa, Levin; born NZ 17 Aug 1918; timber worker, wounded 22 Jul 1944.

³ Lt C. M. Douglas; born NZ 31 Oct 1921; carpenter; wounded 22 Jul 1944.

⁴ Lt L. J. Kearney, MC, MM; born Akaroa, 30 Sep 1919; school-teacher; wounded Mar 1943; deceased.

⁵ Sgt W. P. Doak; Oxford; born Rangiora, 2 Jun 1915; farm labourer; wounded 22 Jul 1944.

⁶ 2 Lt S. A. McCartney; born Portobello, 2 Sep 1919; joiner; killed in action 22 Jul 1944.

⁷ WO I W. J. Tait, m.i.d.; Otahuti, Invercargill; born Port Chalmers, 26 Apr 1910; labourer; wounded 27 Feb 1944.

⁸ Sgt C. A. W. White, MM; Tinwald, Ashburton; born Ashburton, 11 Nov 1918; stablehand; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

⁹ L-Sgt W. A. Deane; Timaru; born Burke's Pass, Fairlie, 5 Jan 1920; farm labourer; p.w. 22 Jul 1944.

¹⁰ Lt R. T. Street; Christchurch; born Seddonville, 22 Aug 1910; school-teacher; wounded 22 Jul 1944.

¹¹ Sgt W. C. Yorston; Lyttelton; born NZ 24 Oct 1920; joiner.

¹² Cpl J. W. Pringle; born NZ 28 Sep 1920; musterer; wounded 6 Jan 1944; died of wounds 31 Jul 1944.

¹³ L-Cpl D. M. Gilmour; Invercargill; born Winton, 9 May 1909; joiner; twice wounded.

¹⁴ Rev. H. F. Harding, DSO, MBE; Christchurch; born Dunedin, 23 Sep 1908; Anglican minister.

¹⁵ Lt-Col W. B. Thomas, cyclostyled 'Letter to the Wounded'.

¹⁶ Lt C. B. Grant; Lower Hutt; born Masterton, 4 Mar 1918; clerk; twice wounded.

¹⁷ Sgt R. H. Page; Nelson; born Nelson, 19 Dec 1909; bank officer; wounded 23 Jul 1944.

¹⁸ WO II P. J. Robinson; born NZ 6 Mar 1912; storekeeper; wounded 23 Jul 1944.

¹⁹ Maj L. W. Colmore-Williams, MC; Auckland; born Dargaville, 15 Nov 1917; school-teacher; wounded 30 Jul 1944.

²⁰ Self-propelled.

²¹ Maj M. P. Donnelly; Sydney; born NZ 17 Oct 1917: student.

²² Lt G. K. Chapman; Nelson; born NZ 25 Oct 1921; clerk.

²³ Sgt J. McDowall; Invercargill; born Glasgow, 21 Nov 1922; shop assistant.

²⁴ 2 Lt I. G. Hulme; Gisborne; born NZ 1 Aug 1914; clerk; wounded 3 Aug 1944.

²⁵ 2 Lt J. H. A. Cameron; born NZ 2 Apr 1913; carpenter; killed in action 3 Aug 1944.

²⁶ Pte E. H. Bradley; born NZ 18 Aug 1917; carpenter; killed in action 3 Aug 1944

²⁷ Capt E. Y. M. Hutchinson, m.i.d.; Manutuke, Gisborne; born Gisborne, 17 Apr 1905; farmer.

²⁸ Lt-Col H. A. Robinson, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Waipukurau; born New Plymouth, 29 Sep 1912; farmhand; troop leader, later 2 i/c, Div Cav 1939–44; CO 18 Armd Regt Mar-Jul 1944; 20 Armd Regt Mar-Oct 1945; twice wounded.

²⁹ Lt A. H. Eddie; Motueka; born NZ 3 May 1910; civil servant; wounded 16 Oct 1944.

³⁰ Capt W. Dobson; Oamaru; born NZ 4 Oct 1922; clerk; wounded 11 Aug 1944.

³¹ 2 Lt R. H. B. Thomas; Hokitika; born Hokitika, 13 Jul 1922; motor mechanic; wounded 14 Dec 1944.

³² 2 Lt D. M. Bassett, DCM; Rakahuri, Rangiora; born [Christchurch](#), 6 Feb 1914; farmer.

³³ [General Kippenberger's](#) description of the 23rd in North Africa. See *supra*,

Chapter 10.

³⁴ Maj R. A. Boyle; born NZ 4 Jun 1916; grocer; killed in action 10 Feb 1945.

³⁵ Maj G. M. Dodds, DCM; Mosgiel; born Mosgiel, 29 Dec 1910; bricklayer.

³⁶ Maj N. Buchanan, MC; born Scotland, 6 Dec 1916; pastrycook; died of wounds 17 Dec 1944.

³⁷ The unit diary for 10 August 1944 gives 'Officers recommissioned— Paterson R. L., Max L. S., Morris W. I., Cameron H. R., Williams W. B., Dobson A. W.' Also attached were 2 Lt A. H. Eddie and 2 Lt G. K. Chapman. W. G. McClymont, for some months a member of the 23rd 'I' section, was also commissioned at this time to be Assistant Archivist, 2 NZEF.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 16 – IESI TO GAMBETTOLA

CHAPTER 16

Iesi to Gambettola

THE stay in the [Castellina](#) rest area was limited to ten days but the time was enjoyably spent. In addition, the war news was cheering: the landings in the south of [France](#), which had taken some of the American and all the French divisions away from [Italy](#), were progressing favourably; in [France](#), too, the Americans were approaching [Paris](#); and good news came from the Russian and [Pacific](#) fronts.

In Italy, it was hoped to break into or through the [Gothic Line](#), the chain of positions across the backbone of [Italy](#) from [Pesaro](#) to Massa which the Germans had begun to prepare in the autumn of 1943. To add weight to surprise, General Alexander now decided to switch the main thrust of the [Eighth Army](#) back to the Adriatic coast. General Leese appreciated that the comparatively flat country north of [Rimini](#) would favour his armour and permit a faster advance than did the central mountain sector. Others feared that the rivers and canals running at right-angles to the axis of advance might aid the enemy in fighting a series of rearguard actions. But appreciations are merely well-founded theories which can be tested only when put into operation. Once it was decided to move to the Adriatic coast, the normal security precautions were taken and the switch was made.

In 5 Brigade, again under Brigadier Burrows, the advance parties moved on 25 August, the Bren carriers on the following day and the main body a day later. The troops saw very little of the country through which they drove as the move was made at night. The convoy travelled via the outskirts of [Siena](#), [Castiglione](#), [Perugia](#), the staging area at [Foligno](#), and Tolentino to the new concentration area at [Iesi](#), about 15 miles inland from the Adriatic port of [Ancona](#). This 220-mile journey took the 23rd over roads whose dustiness made the discomfort of those in the backs of the trucks almost as acute as in dusty desert days. The steep mountainous country also imposed a heavy strain on the drivers. But by the early morning of 29 August, the battalion was settling down in a new area near [Iesi](#).

Here training was resumed. Special attention was given to night exercises: three nights a week were devoted to this training, which was designed to prepare the men either for straightforward infantry night attacks or for variations of the

infantry-cum-armour attacks made in the advance to [Florence](#). To iron out problems that had arisen in these combined tank-infantry attacks, Brigadier Burrows held a series of conferences and exercises under 5 Brigade auspices. In particular, he decided after consultation with those most concerned that the type of country would determine the nature of the operation, and therefore the vexed question of command as between infantry and tank officers.

In the meantime, the [Eighth Army](#) offensive had opened on 25 August with the Canadians and then the Poles spearheading the attack. Later, 3 Greek Mountain Brigade, under command of the New Zealand Division, joined in, as did various British armoured and infantry divisions. The New Zealanders themselves remained in Army reserve in the expectation that they would be used in a fast-moving pursuit role, as after the 'breakout' at [Alamein](#). Private diaries reveal how stimulating the news was to the men in the 23rd. 'The news tonight was great— 20 mile gap torn in [Gothic Line](#). So soon we will be cracking in our original role.... Great events, great days.' ¹ News from other fronts was also good. In Western Europe the Allied armies were on the German border by early September, while farther east the Russians were reported to be streaking across the Rumanian and Hungarian plains. 'Momentous and sensational world news today.... Come on, Joe!' ²

As the [Eighth Army](#) pushed the Germans back past [Pesaro](#), the New Zealanders moved up in the rear to be readily available. Thus, on 6 September, the 23rd moved to near [Mondolfo](#), just south of [Fano](#) on the coast. Morale had definitely risen again during the interval out of the line. The old recipes modified to suit the circumstances produced the desired results—good food, plenty of letter and parcel mail from home, a sensible variation of the themes of rest and training, the resumption of games of rugby football, with a tour of the [United Kingdom](#) by a New Zealand Army team held out as a prospect for the best players, and a variety of entertainments. Cinema shows were common and the Kiwi Concert Party No. 10 show was a great success. 'Pedro the Fisherman was launched on the road of popularity tonight,' wrote one diarist with reference to a particularly tuneful melody. On 1 September Brigadier Burrows addressed the unit on the situation on the [Eighth Army](#) front. He considered the prospects good. Something of the general feeling of growing confidence is seen in Somerville's diary entry for 4 September: '... will soon be on our way in a do or die show. For some reason I am optimistic about whole thing as I believe it will be

successful.'

By this time, too, the 23rd was nearly up to strength again. By 10 September, the 'Strength State' indicated that the unit had 29 officers posted to it, with another 8 attached, together with 716 other ranks. As from 11 September, the infantry company commanders were Major D. G. Grant (A), Major J. W. McArthur (B), Captain H. J. G. Low (C), and Captain N. Buchanan (D). Don Grant had just returned from hospital on 9 September, and his appointment to A Company was designed to restore the discipline and fighting spirit of that company to its former high standard. Even two days before his return to the unit, an A Company man could record in his diary: 'Some of our Coy out shooting up Ities last night for some mad reason... the coy is all to hell. Needs Ian Wilson back again as OC.'

From this stage onwards, the CO, Colonel McPhail, and the IO, Lieutenant J. A. Bevin, and, more occasionally, the company commanders, went forward to suitable OPs in the Canadians' territory to view the country over which they expected to advance and fight in the near future. On 20 September the battalion moved to an area inland from the [Rimini](#) airfield. The Canadians now occupied the major part of the San Fortunato feature, the key to the [Rimini](#) line. The Eighth Army had advanced some 30 miles since the fighting had opened on the Adriatic coast on 25 August, but the attacking forces were nearly exhausted and the New Zealanders were warned to be ready to take their turn in the line. In the absence of [General Freyberg](#), who had been injured when his aircraft crumpled on landing, General Weir discussed various plans with his brigade commanders. After alternative programmes had been considered, it was generally understood that 5 Brigade would either establish or enlarge a bridgehead across the Marecchia River and thus begin the advance across the flat ground to the north. The Canadians secured the first bridgehead over the [Marecchia](#) and, at that point, Brigadier Burrows ordered the 21st on the right and the 28th on the left to take over the advance while the 23rd remained in reserve. On the night of 21–22 September, therefore, 21 and 28 Battalions advanced north of [Rimini](#) up Route 16 and across country to the left of that highway, while 22 Motor Battalion, supported by [19 Armoured Regiment](#) tanks, advanced along the railway line nearer the coast. The 23rd edged forward round the eastern slope of [San Fortunato](#) and then, on 22 September, moved to San Giuliano, where it waited till called upon to join in the attack.

Early autumn rains had already helped the enemy in making successful withdrawals. Now, soaking rains, both earlier and heavier than had been expected, nearly made the [Romagna](#) area return to the swamp from which it had been rescued. Rivers and canals soon became serious tank obstacles. A spectacular fast pursuit was quite out of the question in the conditions now obtaining. Nevertheless, the forward units made some progress—the 21st to the Canale dei [Molini](#) and the 28th to [Orsoleto](#).

The 23rd participated to a very limited degree in the 5 Brigade advance. Soon after midnight on 22–23 September, B and C Companies, under command of Major McArthur, went forward to inland [Viserba](#) to occupy a reserve position and ensure that no pockets of resistance had been by-passed. In position by dawn, they soon reported four prisoners—two from 162 Turcoman Division, one from I Parachute Division, and a deserter from the 88–millimetre flak battery at [Bellaria](#). These two companies returned to the battalion at San Giuliano late on 23 September. In the meantime, D Company had established a strongpoint at a road junction on the Maoris' left flank to give protection against Tiger tanks believed to be moving in that locality. D Company remained there till the Canadians drew level with the Maoris and put an end to the Tiger threat.

Sixth Brigade now passed through the 5th, allowing the latter to pass temporarily into reserve. On the evening of 27 September, however, 5 Brigade again took the lead from the 6th, which had crossed the rivers Fontanaccia and [Uso](#) as well as several canals. On the right, the 21st relieved the 24th and, on the left, the 23rd relieved its sister [South Island](#) battalion, the 26th. By 2 a.m. on 28 September the relief was complete: B, C and D Companies were forward, each with a troop of tanks from C Squadron [18 Armoured Regiment](#) in support, while A Company was in reserve. On the route into their new positions, the men saw several German graves and three abandoned German tanks. 'The Tigers had been pushed off the road by bull-dozers. It was a sight good for morale to see those bare-bellied monsters turned on their sides out of action,' wrote Doug Leckie.

The 23rd's first offensive task was to advance to a lateral road running parallel to the River Fiumicino. B and C Companies sent patrols forward to locate the enemy and, if possible, to reach the river. B's patrol of four men under Lieutenant [Nelson](#) ³

struck two heavy demolitions, one of which was impassable to tanks, while the other required only a small amount of work to make it negotiable by tanks. This patrol was about 1000 yards south of the river when daylight made further progress difficult, if not impossible. C's patrol of three infantrymen, two sappers and a tank sergeant under Second-Lieutenant C. B. Grant, advanced until it came under enemy rifle and Spandau fire at three separate points about 900 yards south of the river. As the 21st patrols had encountered even heavier opposition, the Brigadier considered that a major night attack would be required to dislodge the enemy. But, during the daylight hours of 28 September, patrols made minor advances and, about 10 a.m., Colonel McPhail decided to push his leading companies forward to the river. B and C Companies therefore began to advance, despite the pouring rain which was now worse than ever before during this particular campaign. By 12.30 p.m. C Company reported having reached the lateral road which was marked as its first bound. Shortly afterwards, B was moving forward on to a section of the Scolo Cavaticcia which its morning patrol had reached. The tanks had great difficulty in coping with the mud and water. Once they came up against opposition, the infantry waited for the tanks to come forward to their assistance. Around 2 p.m., the tanks caught up and the advance continued, only to run into fresh and heavy enemy fire. No. 12 Platoon suffered most casualties, Second-Lieutenant [Morris](#)⁴ and two others being killed and six being wounded.

Private J. McDowall of that platoon, whose diary entries were always brief but to the point, gives the only contemporary account of that advance. 'Another daylight attack. Rain pouring down. Sticky show—took objective, pushed back a bit, took up positions round casa, soaked through, cold and miserable. Bill Morris, Jim [Ryan](#),⁵ and Ben [Brown](#)⁶ killed in Pl. Merv badly smacked, Harry, Aussie, Jack, Dick and Bob wounded in Pl. Casualties in other Pls.'

Shortly after mid-afternoon, the tanks with B Company struck slightly better going and temporarily went ahead of the infantry, but those with C Company got bogged down in muddy fields. Knowing that an attack over the [Fiumicino](#) was planned for that night, Colonel McPhail insisted that every effort should be made to reach the near river-bank that afternoon. About 5.30 p.m. B Company reached the bank while, only a little later, C also struck the river at the point where the electric pylon line crossed it. Major McArthur now reported that his men were cold and wet

through and hopefully inquired as to the possibility of a relief. Captain Low reported that his men would have to withdraw to the vicinity of the tanks. By this time the CO had learned that the attack across the river had been postponed on account of the weather and, anxious to have A and D Companies fresh for this attack, he ordered B and C to hold on. B drove back an enemy patrol but, mainly to get some of their men under cover, both companies pulled back about 300 yards from the river. It 'rained like fury in the evening', ⁷ and indeed all through the night, and those who could not be withdrawn to casas had a wretched time.

This weather, with the resulting muddy ground conditions, created many problems, not the least important of which involved the evacuation of the wounded. Doug Leckie, who had transferred to the carrier platoon, gives a graphic account of this task:

'The infantry had a hell of a night. The boys had to lie in their slitties which were full of water all night. Cocky Anderson had his Carrier cut down for RAP work and was driving throughout the show over tracks feet deep with mud that were even impossible for RAP jeeps, Honey & Sherman tanks to traverse. The lives of four seriously wounded shock cases were saved by the warmth given off by the carrier engine. Our section relieved Andy Walker's.... We were flat out day and night carrying out wounded and sick cases, taking up hot food in special containers and more ammunition. Recovery gangs were busy pulling out tanks and ammo trucks stuck in the mud and capsized over banks. I cannot see how another attack can be made while the roads are a mass of mud. It is impossible to get tanks across the canals to support the Infantry. This is imperative because the Boche has been counter-attacking, victoriously supported by Tiger and Mark III tanks.'

Private Leckie was right. No attack could be mounted under the appalling weather and ground conditions of that period. On 29 September, therefore, Colonel McPhail ordered D Company to relieve C on the right and A to relieve B on the left. Some enemy were still holding out on the near bank, but during and after the relief D Company moved closer to the river, killed three Germans and took some prisoners, later identified as belonging to 71 Regiment 29 Panzer Grenadier Division and the Fusilier Battalion of 20 German Air Force Division. A Company also captured a panzer grenadier and fired on other Germans as they withdrew across the river.

Battalion Headquarters was, at this stage, housed, according to Dawson of the 'I' section, in 'A small flimsy house, with its lower storey consisting mainly of a stable occupied by Italians and cattle, and with a smell all of its own.' Communications between this headquarters and the companies were difficult to maintain. The 'exchange in the stable with the oxen' did not function very well and on 29 September Lieutenant Keith Burt, the signals officer, 'Sent up Ron Ritchie and four men to establish a forward Sig centre approx 250 yds from C Coy. Nig Dunlop⁸ also took up 18 set for relay from the forward Coys.'

That night both forward companies sent forward patrols to establish whether or not the enemy still occupied posts in the near bank and to reconnoitre the river. The A Company patrols found only empty dugouts. Two D patrols had a similar experience, but Second-Lieutenant Chapman's from 18 Platoon came under Spandau and other automatic fire when operating on the right of the 23rd sector. Captain Buchanan was thus able to report that the sector immediately forward of the 23rd's occupied houses was clear of the enemy, but that some posts remained on the right flank between the line of electric pylons and the road which marked the inter-battalion boundary and which was known as the Black Diamond route. Heavy and prolonged enemy shelling and mortaring gave the men of A and D Companies a disturbed night. Signallers were out most of the night, fixing breaks in the lines, 'an almost hopeless task with the stonks that are coming over even at this moment'.⁹

Early on 30 September, D Company observers brought down a series of artillery 'murders' on the far bank of the Fiumicino when tracked vehicles were heard moving about, presumably delivering meals and ammunition. A patrol from D Company found the river to be slow running, about knee deep and about 20 feet wide. This patrol also found a foot track, which indicated that the enemy was crossing the river at a certain point. Colonel McPhail ordered the company to establish a post on the bank near this point in order to stop enemy infiltration.

Brigade Headquarters advised that evening that 22 Battalion would relieve the 23rd in the line that night. Shortly after 8 p.m., the 'I' sergeant, Garnet Blampied, began to guide the companies up to the forward areas. He says: 'It was a hell of a trip up the 2 miles—Jerry hammering the fwd positions with mortars and "screaming minnies" ... he fired spandau down the road we took ... we kept to the ditches.' The

relief of D Company proceeded according to plan but, to the sound of much firing, all communications with A Company failed before its relief had begun. Both C and D Companies were instructed to send runners to give A Company details of the relief and to discover the true situation there. These runners were delayed by the heavy fire but eventually got through. After 9 p.m. D Company advised that the excitement on A's front had died down and arrangements were now in train for the relief to proceed. About an hour later, when communications had been re-established, Major Grant reported some details, after assuring the Colonel that the situation was under control and that no assistance was required from any other company. A German fighting patrol of twenty or more men, well supplied with bazookas and apparently on a tank-hunting expedition, had attacked 9 Platoon, under Lieutenant A. H. Eddie. A determined attack had been launched, but an even more determined defence had been offered. In 9 Platoon, Private [Scott](#)¹⁰ was killed and eight were wounded, but heavy casualties were also inflicted on the enemy, so many that the enemy party withdrew more speedily than it had arrived. This incident was succeeded by so much annoying shell, mortar and machine-gun fire that it was deemed necessary to delay the change-over till after midnight, and after the New Zealand artillery had been called upon to silence the enemy. The relief was completed by 2 a.m. on 1 October and the weary troops were glad to move back to houses nearer the Uso.

For the next few days, the 23rd remained in this sector immediately behind the front line. B and C Companies, in fact, remained in the same houses they had been occupying after their relief on the night of 29 September. All the 23rd houses were subjected to spasmodic enemy shelling and D Company's headquarters and two trucks sustained direct hits. On the night of 1–2 October Second-Lieutenant H. [Cameron](#)¹¹ took a covering party for an engineer patrol forward to the [Fiumicino](#), where a careful reconnaissance of a site for a Bailey bridge was made. Otherwise, this was simply a period of waiting for the next move. The men found some compensation for being crowded into poor farmhouses in the livestock the Italians had left behind. 'Pork for tea ... local grown, too.' 'Shelling is terrific but we have escaped so far.... Cooked the turkeys for lunch today and though were boiled quite enjoyed them.' 'Boys killed pig. Had great meal'. These are typical diary entries for men from Battalion Headquarters, A and B Companies. Although 4 October was sunny, the next day was wet and plans for an advance had to be postponed.

On 5 October, therefore, the 24th came up and relieved the 23rd as part of a general brigade relief. The 23rd then moved back to its old billets at [Rimini](#). Apart from the wounded, some men had to be evacuated with boils or jaundice.¹² The 4th Reinforcement officers, Lieutenant Kearney and Second-Lieutenant Bassett, left the unit on 8 October. A small number went on leave to [Florence](#) under a divisional scheme, both at this time and while the battalion was in the line. The change from the miserable life of an infantryman in the mud and wet weather to the comforts of the New Zealand Forces Club was much appreciated. McDowall, the laconic nature of whose diary entries has already been mentioned, possibly spoke for others when he reported on [Florence](#): 'Marvellous city. Great service at hotel. Great meals. Marvellous orchestra in lounge. [Florence](#) girls very beautiful.' But leave was restricted to very small groups. The unit itself had to return to the line on 10 October.

While 5 Brigade was out of the line, the continuing bad weather had prevented any major advance. The brigade now took over a sector to the left or south of that previously occupied, as a consequence of a decision to move the main New Zealand axis of advance farther inland from the coast and closer to the [Rimini- Cesena](#) railway. By this time, 5 British Corps, operating in the drier foothill region, had made such marked progress that the Germans had withdrawn there, and had also pulled back opposite the Canadians and New Zealanders in order to take up a shorter defensive line. This was not known for certain when Brigadier Burrows put the 28th forward on the right and the 23rd forward on the left with orders to patrol vigorously.

In the early hours of 11 October, A and D Companies of the 23rd sent their first patrols out. Both patrols crossed the river and reconnoitred the nearest houses without encountering any enemy. Colonel McPhail now ordered A on the right and D on the left to move a platoon at a time across the river and establish a bridgehead. This was done around 6 a.m., and both companies then began to patrol forward towards the town of [Gatteo](#). Reluctant to see his men committed to any serious engagement in which enemy tanks might be a deciding factor, McPhail did his utmost to get the tanks of C Squadron [19 Armoured Regiment](#), under Major S. J. [Wilson](#),¹³ forward from [Bellaria](#). During the course of the day, the A and D Company patrols found [Gatteo](#) unoccupied, although D took two prisoners, men who were either deserters or who were too slow in making their withdrawal. By early

afternoon, the sappers had completed the bridge over the [Fiumicino](#) and the tanks were moving forward to support the infantry. Two large demolitions in [Gatteo](#) itself and the need to sweep methodically for mines prevented any further advance that day, and a halt was called with the Maoris up to the road line [Gatteo-Sant' Angelo](#) and with the 23rd, plus C Squadron, consolidating in and around [Gatteo](#) itself. The 23rd had taken six prisoners from 20 GAF and 90 Panzer Grenadier Divisions.



THE ADVANCE TO THE SAVIO, OCTOBER 1944

the advance to the savio, october 1944

That night, 11–12 October, both A and D Companies again sent patrols forward. The Pisciatiello River was the next major obstacle, but the smaller waterways, the Rio Baldona, the [Scolo Rigossa](#) and the Scolo Fossalta, might also require bridging for tanks and they were marked as bounds in the advance. Neither patrol reached the Rio Baldona but both were able to report on demolitions and tank obstacles.

At 6 a.m. on 12 October, A and D Companies resumed their advance. Shortly afterwards they heard the noise which accompanied the enemy's blowing of a bridge over the Baldona. Some light shelling, mortaring and machine-gun fire were encountered as they advanced. About 8 a.m. A Company called on artillery support to deal with mortars located to the north-west of the Baldona. About half an hour later, D reached this bound and made contact with the Royal Canadian Regiment on the left and, later, with A Company on the right. The tanks now came up, but some got bogged as soon as they moved off the road. Unsupported at first by the tanks, the infantry made a cautious advance over the Baldona and A Company became involved in some sharp fighting with the withdrawing enemy.

R. A. Somerville at A Company's tactical headquarters recorded that afternoon: 'Headed up the road in bounds.... Got up to canal dodging the shell fire all the time. Crossed over and became involved in 7 Platoon's good show of putting 30 Huns on run and taking 7 prisoners. Plenty excitement for a while. Got into a house and were held up by a sniper who collected Bill [Stewart](#)¹⁴ and others. Got a couple of quid & a clasp knife from the Teds.... Returned to Tac where am writing this in bit of dugout in floor of place. Feel uncommonly confident today. Only 3 p.m. and day seems like a week so much has happened. Sweat and wet with dodging snipers and shells. Maoris and tanks put in attack to help us in afternoon. Nowhere near objective yet but making slow progress.'

At last light, A Company was still two or three hundred yards short of the [Scolo Rigossa](#), while D Company, farther to the left, where the canal curved towards the north and west, was about 600 yards short of it. The going had been slow, largely because of the sodden nature of the fields and the thickness of the vineyards and orchards, which restricted observation and hindered the advance of the armour.

During the course of the afternoon, Colonel Thomas returned to the unit. With Colonel McPhail, he visited the forward companies, acquainting himself thoroughly with the situation before officially taking over the command at 9 p.m. Patrols from A and D Companies reconnoitred crossings over the canal, discovered that bridges were blown, came under a certain amount of fire and took prisoners, which brought the bag for the day to a dozen.

Next morning C Company, under Major Low, and B, now under Captain George Dodds as Major McArthur had been evacuated sick on 10 October, took over the lead from A and D Companies. C and B Companies were ordered to secure a suitable site for a bridge over the [Scolo Rigossa](#) as the first attempt by [28 Battalion](#) to take Sant' Angelo had failed. No. 11 Platoon occupied houses close to the canal, and some men obtained an excellent view of enemy positions from an upper window: three dugouts were spotted, with enemy moving carelessly around, unaware they were observed. A call to the 23rd mortars soon brought mortar fire down with great accuracy on these enemy positions. The Germans quickly realised that the OP house was occupied and retaliated. A clever sniper shot one member of 11 Platoon as he was looking out a window. Shell and mortar fire also caused some B Company casualties. The local

inhabitants also suffered as this diary entry indicates: 'Jerry sent over some close stuff and caught a few refugees in it—wounded "Mama" and the rest had hysterics for a while.' B Company held its ground and continued to bring down mortar and, later on, shell fire on the German-held area.

In the meantime, 13 Platoon had been despatched towards Point 120 and the approach to the [Gambettola](#) bridge site. This platoon, under Lieutenant Bernie Cox, found that the enemy had established a strongpoint which he was determined to hold. Around 11 a.m., the leading sections, advancing one on either side of the road, came under Spandau fire. The section on the south side of the road found itself in the open and had two men killed. The rest of the men were either pinned down by well-aimed fire or managed to dive for cover in a culvert and ditch alongside the railway embankment on their left. The section on the north also went to ground while Cox called up Captain Low on the radio and asked for a troop of tanks to be sent to aid his advance. Hearing of the hold-up, Colonel Thomas urged C Company to bring all available mortar fire down on the enemy, to maintain pressure and, if possible, to get through to the bridge site. He himself promptly arranged for fire on the approaches to [Gambettola](#) from the 4.2-inch mortars of 39 Heavy Mortar Battery and from two platoons of [1 Machine Gun Company](#).

When 13 Platoon resumed its advance shortly after midday, two tanks of 11 Troop, C Squadron, [19 Armoured Regiment](#) were in close support. The third tank of this troop was temporarily left behind until it was discovered whether or not the road and surrounding area were clear of mines. One tank moved on the road and the other behind Corporal Dyne's ¹⁵ section to the north. The commander of the latter tank said, 'vision for my part out in the paddock was very poor to the north towards [Gambettola](#), olive trees obstructed the view and also several stacks of straw.' The tanks gave the infantry greater confidence and enabled them to take prisoner the two Germans manning the nearest Spandau post. The tank on the road was knocked out shortly after this, but the reserve tank was called up and managed to pass its KO'd mate and proceed to the assistance of the infantry. The latter had been temporarily pinned down by Spandau and rifle fire from the roof of one of the houses on the roadside, but some HE shots from the tank to the north of the road soon removed this source of trouble. But, almost immediately afterwards, this tank became bogged down in an asparagus bed and, although able to fire, was unable to

move forward or backward. Using the cover on the north of the road, the infantry continued to advance, but the sections got separated from one another and from their sole surviving tank.

Lieutenant Cox with his platoon headquarters and Corporal Dyne's section now went ahead of the rest of the platoon. Keeping in the pomegranate orchard on the north side of the road, this party tried to cut across the orchard to meet the others following the tank and the road to the corner, which was marked as Point 120 on their maps. But, about 2.30 p.m., as they reached a point about 50 yards south of the Casa Boschetti (this was the house's real name as shown on the Italian map), a Spandau opened fire from the corner. Mortars and automatics from the Casa Boschetti then opened fire, spraying the area all round the 13 Platoon men. Cox was wounded in the leg and, as the party appeared to have run into stronger opposition than it was strong enough to overcome, it withdrew to the nearest house, a large one about 100 yards back, until tank or other aid could be secured. The bogged tank gave some covering fire during the withdrawal but the single mobile tank, out of touch with the infantry and under fire, withdrew to the rear.

Once the 13 Platoon men had occupied their house, it became clear that they would have to withstand an enemy attack. The bogged tank did what it could by Browning and 75-millimetre fire to discourage the Germans but it could not cover more than a small sector. The tank crew then put down smoke and, aware of their inability to deal with bazooka men coming through the orchard, also withdrew. Corporal Laird,¹⁶ however, went forward to the house to inform the infantry of the decision taken by the tank crew. Cox's house had been partially prepared for defence by the Germans as the centre room had a dugout sunk in the floor, with its entrance surrounded by heavy drums. Lookout positions were manned and 13 Platoon prepared to beat off any attack.

Around 2.50 p.m., Major Low, back at C Company headquarters, reported that his infantry were without tank assistance. He was told that no more tanks were available at this time. No. 13 Platoon was thus left to defend itself. Shortly after 3 p.m. enemy mortar, shell and machine-gun fire came down on Cox's house. The German infantry followed up this fire by running in to attack the house: some came from over the railway embankment to the west and others came from the north, but the high hedges and the orchard made it difficult to locate them until they were

close to the house. One German forced an entry, threw a grenade without effect, and fired his machine pistol, the bullet of which grazed the head of a New Zealander, before he was forced to withdraw. From an upstairs window, Lieutenant Cox shot one German at short range. Lance-Sergeant P. J. Robinson and others also engaged the attacking Germans at close quarters and inflicted several casualties. After a time, the white flag went up and stretcher-bearers came forward to remove the German wounded. As the stretcher-bearing party withdrew, a number of Germans, shouting and making a great deal of noise, came over the railway embankment. Robinson gave a lead to his men by opening fire with his tommy gun when the Germans were about 50 yards away. Apparently, this party was not attacking but merely withdrawing to the north, as they sheered off without firing a shot.

No. 13 Platoon remained in the house for the rest of the afternoon. Towards dusk, Private [Isberg](#),¹⁷ who had been half-smothered with dust and debris during the shelling of the house, got through on the radio to Company Headquarters and received orders to withdraw. Despite a few stray shots, the men withdrew unmolested. No. 15 Platoon, under Lieutenant Bill Williams, had been in reserve during the day but now came forward to the KO'd tank to cover the withdrawal. This platoon also supplied a section to help the tank crews guard their immobilised tanks, which were later recovered. Total casualties for this action of 13 October, a minor affair but exciting enough for those involved, were light: 13 Platoon had two killed and three wounded, while the tank crews had two wounded.

But 13 Platoon was not the only one engaged that afternoon. Farther to the north, 14 Platoon, under Lieutenant Alex [Steele](#),¹⁸ sent a patrol of section strength forward across country to the [Gambettola](#) bridge site, with orders to discover whether or not the enemy held the canal bank in strength. The patrol leader, Corporal [Black](#),¹⁹ led his men up a hedgerow alongside the Via Sopra Rigossa and then across a lucerne paddock towards the house nearest to the bridge site. As he reached the yard of this house, Black came under fire from machine guns in a ditch to the left and in the house itself. He dived for cover alongside a haystack, whence he returned the fire with his tommy gun. His men, two of whom were new reinforcements in their first action, were pinned down in the open and could not raise themselves to fire. The enemy kept up a steady fire until they had killed Black and wounded two of his men, who were thus forced to surrender. Yet once again the

dangers for unsupported infantry, advancing on prepared defensive positions, had been revealed.

In B Company, farther to the north-east along the [Scolo Rigossa](#), events took a happier turn. Two tanks from 9 Troop took up hull-down positions behind the canal bank and, aided and abetted by Second-Lieutenant Max ²⁰ and his men of 11 Platoon, they fired their Brownings against the enemy, who could be clearly seen in trenches and dugouts eighty to one hundred yards away. Firing tracer at a haystack, one tank gunner noted that the bullets ricocheted upwards. He therefore engaged the stack with incendiaries which set it on fire, together with the vehicle concealed inside.

With the better weather, fighter-bombers from the 'cab-rank' gave special attention to enemy tanks in the [Gambettola](#) area, while the artillery, despite serious restrictions on the expenditure of ammunition, engaged in counter-battery and counter-mortar shoots. Colonel Thomas strengthened his own front during the day and early evening with more tanks, M 10s (tank-destroyers) and anti-tank guns in case the enemy, who had shown aggressive intentions round Point 120, should use his Tiger tanks against the forward infantry. B Company of the 21st thickened up the line by coming into position between the 23rd and 28th.

The day of 14 October passed comparatively quietly as 5 Brigade concentrated on preparations for the Maoris' attack on Sant' Angelo that night. The Canadians moved up on the 23rd's left towards the railway embankment. To confuse the enemy by making him think that the attack was a general one, coming in along the whole front, the 23rd fired its mortars and other weapons, including its supporting Vickers guns, at selected targets and sent a C Company patrol, just when the artillery concentrations on Sant' Angelo began to create a disturbance, near the houses due south of [Gambettola](#). The patrol found the houses occupied, fired a few Bren magazines into them and, after tossing a few grenades, withdrew without casualty.

The Maoris' attack on Sant' Angelo was highly successful. In addition, an 'intercept' of an enemy radio message indicated that the Germans were about to pull back to the line of the Pisciatello River. Brigadier Burrows therefore instructed Colonel Thomas to send out small patrols before first light on 15 October to test the position on his front. At 5 a.m., Second-Lieutenant J. S. Nelson took 10 Platoon

across the canal, met no opposition and pushed forward to occupy Point 122, the road junction north-east of [Gambettola](#). Some enemy tanks, obviously a rearguard, were seen withdrawing as 10 Platoon approached this road junction.

More or less simultaneously, C Company was also patrolling forward with even greater success. No. 14 Platoon, under Lieutenant Steele, entered [Gambettola](#) at first light and proceeded to clear the town. In the first house it discovered the bloodstained packs of Corporal Black and his men. Splitting into two patrols under Lieutenant Steele and Sergeant Batchelor, the platoon investigated other houses on different sides of the square. Apparently the Germans there were ill-informed as to the extent or method of the withdrawal and both patrols secured bags of a dozen or more prisoners from 2 and 4 Companies of 26 Reconnaissance Battalion. At one house, Batchelor jumped through a window in order to surprise two Germans, one of whom was only partly dressed. 'But their Corporal beat me—I couldn't catch him,' he admitted later. Batchelor's return to the company caused some amusement as he was leading a very young German soldier by the hand. 'He showed me a photo of his uncle who he said was in the USA Navy,' said Batchelor. Keith Burtt refers to this boy in his diary: 'In the morning a batch of 18 prisoners was brought in, many of them very young. One boy of 13 had joined the Army 23 Aug 44 and had been in the line only 3 days. He cried when interrogated and Bill Tait, the RSM, gave him some chocolate'. That the youthfulness or plight of a prisoner could sometimes evoke a kindness in a sergeant-major showed that the latter's parade-ground voice belied his true nature.

Anxious to discover for himself whether or not he should put more troops over the canal, Colonel Thomas went forward with Lieutenant Bevin, picked up Captain Dodds, OC B Company, and followed 10 Platoon's axis of advance. Delayed by the need to attend to certain matters, Colonel Thomas allowed his officers to go on ahead of him. What happened next is best told in his own words:

'As I followed, it suddenly occurred to me that I did not know which road the platoon had taken, but, as things were quiet, I continued not particularly worried until I saw glaring from a door a square helmeted spectacled face and a field grey uniform, and, as my predicament dawned upon me, I saw a Mauser rifle raised ominously in my direction. I rushed my hand under my leather jacket for my revolver. To my horror I discovered that, for the first time I can recall, I had come

away without it. What happened then I don't think I can claim any credit for—it was quite automatic and without thought—I just pointed at him quite fiercely and shouted “Drop that rifle, drop it!” and moved towards him. For a nasty second, the rifle came level with my chest then for no apparent reason (except that he must have expected me to have men with me), he dropped it to the ground and put his hands in the air. At that moment, startled by the shouting, a much more formidable Hun burst through the door, rifle at the ready but totally unprepared to find an English officer shouting at him, and his comrade with his hands in the air. He quickly dropped his rifle too, and lo, I had two prisoners. I dived round behind them and grabbed one of the Mausers. I must say the sheepish look those Huns showed when they saw I was alone and unarmed was one of the experiences of a lifetime.’

With this minor experience behind him, Colonel Thomas rejoined Captain Dodds and sent 10 Platoon towards [Gambettola](#). No. 11 Platoon was ordered forward to hold Point 122 as a right pivot, while 12 Platoon was told to follow 10. B Company continued the advance, with 10 Platoon as the leading sub-unit.

C Company also continued to advance on the left of the town and moved towards the point where its axis of advance crossed the railway line. As the men approached the large cement works beyond the town, they heard and saw the fighter-bombers diving over the cement-works buildings and strafing enemy vehicles concealed there. Brigadier Burrows had counselled caution in this advance, at least until the bridges were installed and the tanks were able to join the infantry. No. 10 Platoon did run into heavy fire at a demolition not far north of [Gambettola](#). But, by 11 a.m., the engineers had by strenuous efforts got the bridge across the canal and the tanks were able to move forward. Within half an hour, one troop of tanks was with B Company and another with C. Second-Lieutenant Nelson, whose diary entries were normally limited to three or four words, was able to record his experience with 10 Platoon: ‘Occupied positions north of town. Had great day as forward platoon, with FOO and three tanks attached. Shot up everything in sight.’

Fifth Brigade advised that troops were not to move beyond the line joining the hamlets of [Bulgarno](#) and [Bulgaria](#), as it was proposed to move the 21st up on the right of the 23rd and then continue the advance on a two-battalion front. The enemy was making something of a stand and firing all his heavier weapons in an attempt to

hold up the advance. Three direct hits by an SP gun crumbled a house in [Gambettola](#) on top of its inmates and eight men were injured. Although a counter-attack seemed most unlikely, Colonel Thomas thickened up the defensive positions taken up by his forward companies by moving up the battalion Bren carriers and telling the tanks to fit into the defences.

Next day, 16 October, the reserve companies were to come forward and take a turn in the lead. But, before this took place, a small patrol from B Company reached the Casa della Chiesa without meeting any opposition. The road appeared to be clear for further advances. A Company then passed through B and, with supporting tanks and engineers, began the advance to [Ruffio](#), a village about 700 yards south of the [Pisciatello](#). On the [Ruffio- Bulgaria](#) road, A Company came under heavy mortar fire and progress was slow. By 10.25 a.m. the leading section of A Company had reached the road junction at Casa Andreoli, three-quarters of a mile south of the [Ruffio](#) crossroads. Enemy fire, including automatic and small arms, intensified. One of the supporting tanks was hit on the track by a 50-millimetre shell but it shot back and knocked the gun out of action. A Company men later captured the gun, its tractor and crew. Further progress was difficult as stronger forces than light rearguards were holding the line they had reached. Colonel Thomas arranged artillery support and warned D Company to be ready to move forward on A's left.

In the meantime, B Company had completed consolidation in the rear of A and had taken fifteen prisoners, 'apparently just waiting to be collected'. The official unit war diary adds: 'Most of them seemed fed up with the war and were keen to give information.'

As A Company was held up and a daylight assault would be expensive, the CO told Major Buchanan to advance with D Company by secondary roads to the west of A and try to come in on [Ruffio](#) from the left. Soon after 1 p.m., D was on its way forward. By early afternoon, however, artillery 'murders' had softened up the enemy in front of A Company, and Major Grant and his men made further limited advances, taking nine prisoners en route. Second-Lieutenant Eddie and four others in A Company were wounded and one man killed during the advance. B Squadron tanks relieved those of C and, with fresh tank support, A Company was able to secure the [Ruffio](#) crossroads. As the 21st was held up on the right, the Brigadier ordered the 23rd to halt until that battalion could conform. On the left, an alteration of boundary

between the New Zealanders and the Canadians resulted in D Company running the risk of coming under Canadian artillery fire. This company was therefore pulled back and directed to cover the left flank of A Company. No further advance was made that day. [General Freyberg](#), back in command, told Brigadier Burrows that his brigade had done an excellent job that day.

That night both A and D Companies sent out patrols. A Company men twice patrolled towards [Ruffio](#) and both times returned with the report that the enemy was still holding his ground and digging in. The patrol, accompanied by an engineer NCO and a tank officer, moved across country to the east of the village, dodged an enemy party and reached the [Pisciatello](#) about 50 yards from a crossing. The tank officer considered that the river was a major tank obstacle, and the patrol also reported that the explosions heard probably meant that the enemy had demolished the bridge.

Next morning, 17 October, at 7.15 a.m., the CO ordered A Company to push on to [Ruffio](#). First, the tanks raked the village with Browning machine-gun fire. As the 25-pounders were limited to forty rounds per gun per day at this time, more use was made of the fire power of the tanks than was customary. This tank fire was effective as, although it was returned by machine guns east of the village, it apparently expedited the withdrawal of enemy rearguards. At any rate, A Company went forward about 8.45 a.m. and occupied [Ruffio](#), according to the official report, 'without much trouble'. Acting on the CO's orders, patrols then advanced towards the river. Around 1 p.m. an A Company patrol reached the cemetery; a bridge over a culvert prepared for demolition with a fuse burning was saved by an engineer moving with the A Company men. The enemy reacted strongly to these advances and sent over many heavy salvos, with the result that the company had 3 killed and 5 wounded.

That night, around 9 p.m., the 23rd was relieved by the 25th as part of a general relief of 5 Brigade by 6 Brigade. The 5th had completed seven days in the line which had been notable, not for any major actions, but for a steady move forward, with companies accompanied by tanks exerting pressure along the front. The 23rd now moved back to houses in [Gambettola](#), where the men spent the next day enjoying hot showers, a rest and good meals. Captain H. Staton, who had succeeded Captain Musgrave as Adjutant, went out on a course of instruction at this

time and was succeeded temporarily by Captain Brittenden.

On the night of 18–19 October, 6 Brigade crossed the [Pisciatiello](#) without much difficulty. On 19 October Battalion Headquarters, B, C and D Companies of the 23rd crossed this river in order to give flank protection to the 6 Brigade bridgehead. By the time the 23rd companies got into position, 4 Armoured Brigade had taken over the advance and there was no need for this flank protection role.

None who saw the demolished houses on the [Pisciatiello](#) will forget the pathetic sight of the homeless Italians who were to be seen grubbing round in the ruins, where they had lost everything, including, in some cases, friends and relations. Colonel Sandy Thomas, such a genuine enthusiast for soldiering that he normally 'loved his war', was so struck by what he saw that he wrote:

'I shall never forget the sight which met our eyes on crossing the [Pisciatiello](#) and where the Hun had withdrawn—a whole village demolished flat on the ground with the weeping mothers and children picking over the wreckage for whatever they might find. They were allowed to take nothing out—the Hun just walked in and filled their houses with explosives quite indifferent as to whether the owners were inside or not, and blew them up. It is horribly cruel to see an old lady of eighty hardly able to walk clambering over the rubble crying silently as she pulls a picture from under the beam, or a tablecloth from that pile of bricks—particularly with the sky gathering black for a snowstorm. Where will she go? Could she walk to the next village? How will she keep herself this winter with only an armful of soiled clothes to represent her whole wealth?... Oh! It makes me sick at times—the same day to see the stream of refugees on the road with children of all ages, seeing swollen German bodies in grotesque positions, the stench of their bodies mingling with that from the horses and cattle which litter the road. What a nightmare! Thank God our people at home are spared that, do not and could never understand what war really is.'

The only good to follow from such distressing sights was a heightened resolution to end the war as quickly as possible. But it was time for the New Zealanders to be relieved and to go back to prepare for another campaign. The 23rd was the first unit to go out, with the task of preparing a road into a divisional concentration area in the [Apennines](#) about 20 miles west of [Iesi](#). On 21 October it moved back to a staging area at [Mondolfo](#). On the following day the battalion moved on to [Cerreto](#), and, a

day later, to houses near the charming hilltop village of [Camerino](#). This part of [Italy](#) had been little affected by the war. As it was to be the home of the New Zealanders for some weeks, strict orders were given that there was to be no looting and that all goods were to be paid for. 'The villagers are very warm in their welcome and are by far the most hospitable yet encountered,' wrote Colonel Thomas in his letter to the wounded of the battalion. This cyclostyled letter described the recent campaign and enabled the CO to express the hope that the men would either recover quickly or would have a speedy return home. It made the 23rd men feel that even in hospital they were still part of the unit. As Colonel Thomas noted later, 'some of them were more than thrilled, took it as a personal note'.

The campaign north of [Rimini](#) had not been as successful as had been anticipated. The weather and the terrain had played into the hands of a determined enemy, and progress from one water obstacle to another was slow. During this period the 23rd had lost 23 killed or died of wounds, 70 wounded, and 3 wounded and prisoner of war. Now, reinforcements had to be absorbed and weary men rested before they entered another battle.

¹ R. A. Somerville, 2 Sep 1944.

² D. Leckie, 3 Sep 1944.

³ [Lt J. S. Nelson](#); born NZ 24 Aug 1920; bank clerk.

⁴ [2 Lt W. I. Morris](#); born NZ 13 Jan 1910; salesman; killed in action 28 Sep 1944.

⁵ [Pte J. T. Ryan](#); born Winton, 2 Dec 1915; fisherman; killed in action 28 Sep 1944.

⁶ [Pte C. H. Brown](#); born 25 May 1910; grocer; killed in action 28 Sep 1944.

⁷ W. D. Dawson, diary, 28 Sep 1944.

⁸ L-Cpl D. A. Dunlop; Invercargill; born NZ 18 Oct 1921; cabinet maker; wounded 11 Apr 1945.

⁹ R. A. Somerville, diary, 29 Sep 1944.

¹⁰ Pte G. V. D. Scott; born Timaru, 19 Dec 1914; musterer; killed in action 30 Sep 1944.

¹¹ Maj H. R. Cameron, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 10 Oct 1912; salesman.

¹² Of the men whose diaries the author consulted, all except one complained of boils.

¹³ Maj S. J. Wilson, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 4 May 1917; public accountant.

¹⁴ Capt W. H. Stewart; Roslyn; born Dipton, 27 Nov 1920; insurance clerk; three times wounded.

¹⁵ 2 Lt H. N. Dyne; Christchurch; born Eketahuna, 30 Sep 1915; company secretary.

¹⁶ WO II R. W. Laird, m.i.d.; Hawera, born Wellington, 4 Oct 1919; shepherd; twice wounded.

¹⁷ Cpl O. A. G. Isberg; Wainuiomata; born Aust., 30 Sep 1918; shoe designer; wounded 13 Oct 1944.

¹⁸ Capt A. Steele; Christchurch; born Westport, 4 Jan 1922; survey cadet; four times wounded.

¹⁹ Cpl J. A. Black; born Nelson, 17 Jun 1922; clerk; killed in action 13 Oct 1944.

²⁰ 2 Lt L. S. Max; born NZ 1 Jul 1910; farmer; died of wounds 30 Dec 1944.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 17 – TO THE SENIO

CHAPTER 17

To the Senio

THE last week of October and the first three weeks of November 1944 constituted one of the happiest months the battalion spent in [Italy](#). The weather was often brilliantly sunny, although on some days it was wet and cold and on 10 November it snowed. The surroundings were lovely in the extreme—a well-cultivated valley with snow-capped mountains on the skyline, trees of various kinds with late autumn leaves red and gold in the sunshine, white oxen drawing the ploughs, houses cleaner and people more welcoming than they had been farther south. Indeed, relations with the local Italians were never better.

Thus, Colonel Thomas could later write. 'November 44 was the most pleasant and comfortable month yet experienced in [Italy](#)—for we met for the first time the Italian of Shelley and Keats, the simple country peasant, generous and for the most part sincere, who welcomed us into his home and played the courteous host. We all had good billets and there were few who did not know of a fire-place where they were welcome to foregather, drink the various wines of the district, and have even an incentive to learn the language. In some cases, indeed, the "incentives" were most attractive, many quite reached the standard of Italian beauty we had learned to expect from prewar fiction.'

The CO reinstated the writing of company diaries at this time and the official diarist of C Company was able to confirm the Colonel's judgment: 'Our stay in [Camerino](#) proved very enjoyable. The local population who had treated us well were very sorry to see us leave: women and children were seen crying when our trucks were pulling out.'

But, of course, the establishing of good relations with the Italians was secondary to training, which was pursued in the mornings with great vigour. An inter-company parade-ground drill and marching competition, won by B Company under Captain Dodds, stimulated interest that might otherwise have been lacking. But even the older hands, who found some aspects of routine training in drill monotonous, were interested in the 'Lifebuoys' and larger flame-throwers on which some training was now given. Members of the signals platoon also found their new 48 sets to be the

best ever. But even route-marching was a pleasure in those days when men were getting fit and able to enjoy the scenery. 'All-day route march, which was quite enjoyable, passing through beautiful country, through village of Seppio, along a hillside road and up a steep rocky gorge to little town of [Pioraco](#). Truck came out to meet us at midday with lunch on board. On way home called in at showers on river below Mecciano.'

¹

Most of the afternoons were devoted to sport, mainly intercompany and later inter-unit rugby matches, although those who preferred other sports were also given every encouragement. On 9 November, all companies played their opposite numbers in 21 Battalion: the games and subsequent parties did much to build up what the CO described as 'a camaraderie between the two units such as we have never been able to attain previously'. The 23rd was well represented at the divisional boxing tournament held at [Matelica](#) on 19 November, when Cyril [McKenzie](#)² won the middleweight title. Leave to [Rome](#), [Florence](#) and [Riccione](#) was rather strictly rationed, but the 21st and the 23rd ran their own private leave scheme in which men took their bedrolls and were billeted in a house six miles out of [Florence](#). This worked very well and over half the battalion enjoyed a few days' leave. Entertainment in [Camerino](#) was also plentiful and good. British ENSA, Canadian and Italian concert parties entertained the troops in the Opera House and films were also shown regularly.

During this period, 8 officers and 113 other ranks joined or rejoined the unit, bringing its strength up to 36 officers and 746 men. Some important changes in command took place: Brigadier Burrows was succeeded in command of 5 Brigade by Brigadier C. L. Pleasants; Lieutenant-Colonel McPhail left the unit to take command of the 21st, a fact which had more than a little to do with the closer relations established between these two units. Major Don Grant now became second-in-command of the 23rd, while Captain Brittenden took command of A Company. Captain T. C. [Buchanan](#)³ became Adjutant; Captain K. M. [Emanuel](#)⁴ became RMO in place of Captain D. B. Robertson, who had rendered excellent service since the unit left [Africa](#).

While emphasis was placed during this training period on physical fitness and mastery of weapons, Colonel Thomas was determined to build up the unit spirit and morale. Each company was encouraged to build up the finest possible company

spirit: men lived and trained together and soon found themselves united as they had not been before. An NCOs' school under Major McArthur was planned for newly appointed and promoted NCOs but its programme was curtailed by the move back to the line. The CO also saw that the officers checked any tendency to slackness in dress and discipline in their men. Battalion parades were held frequently to bring the companies together and to give men the feeling of belonging to 23 Battalion. At the end of this training, the C Company diarist recorded: 'The result has been a definite building of a team spirit and the platoon commanders have at last a personal touch with the men'.

On 24 November the battalion moved in RMT trucks north to the divisional concentration area, which was about 30 miles along Route 9 from Rimini. Since the withdrawal of the New Zealanders from the line, the Eighth Army had been slowly pushing the enemy back. On the coast, 1 Canadian Corps was nearing Ravenna while, on the inland sector, 5 British Corps was touching the Lamone River about nine miles beyond Forli, the large town which was to serve the New Zealand Division as a winter base. After two miserable days in the village of Borello, the 23rd moved into Forli to await its turn in the forward area. By this time, with the addition of the dismounted Divisional Cavalry to 6 Brigade and of 22 Battalion to the 5th, the New Zealand Division had two infantry brigades with four battalions each. The winter war was more than ever a struggle of infantry against infantry. No division could have enough infantrymen.

In 5 Brigade, 21 and 22 Battalions entered the line east of Faenza while the 23rd and 28th remained in reserve. For ten days the 23rd waited in Forli, route-marching in the mornings and having lectures on river crossings and the like. Instruction in the use of assault boats was followed by a 'live' exercise on the Montone River. 'The river was in flood and many anxious moments were spent when things went wrong, but no one took to the drink,' says the B Company diary.

While the 23rd waited in some discomfort to be called forward, the campaign made a distinct advance. Assisted by mock attacks made by 5 and 6 New Zealand Brigades and by 10 Indian Division, 46 British Division, now under General 'Steve' Weir, crossed the Lamone to the west of Faenza on the night of 3–4 December. On 8 December the 23rd was informed that 5 Brigade would relieve 138 Brigade of 46

Division within the next day or two. As events turned out, 5 Brigade had to relieve part of 169 Brigade as well as 138, and the 23rd therefore had to relieve both 6 York and Lancaster and 2/6 Lincolnshire Regiments. This relief was completed by 9 p.m. on 10 December after a most exhausting march into the area. Troop-carrying vehicles were not allowed to use the secondary roads, which were practically rivers of mud, and the men had to march in the mud or along the uneven verges for over ten miles. Owing to the impracticability of moving in any New Zealand tanks for the first few days, the tanks of the Queen's Bays, fifteen in all, remained in position under command of Colonel Thomas. In the 23rd area, B, C and A Companies, from right to left, were forward while D was in reserve. As only one bridge was up to supply 22, 23 and 28 Battalions, the problem of supplying these units, especially after wet weather had made the roads deteriorate still further, was a real one.

Some drivers who had known the Terelle 'Terror Track' declared they preferred it to the one they now had to use to supply 5 Brigade across the Lamone west of Faenza. Whereas at Terelle they could and did move at full speed, this was quite impossible in the mud. Thus, it often took the jeep train with rations twelve hours to get from Forli to 5 Brigade Headquarters. Harassing fire was a trouble but was nothing compared with the condition of the roads. On the night of 12–13 December, for instance, out of a convoy of twenty-six jeeps with trailers, two jeeps crashed over a bank, six trailers had to be temporarily abandoned beside the track and only sixteen won through to Brigade Headquarters. But that was not the end of the journey. All the 23rd companies, except B, which had to be supplied by mule train, had their rations delivered by jeep. If jeeps had accidents, so, too, did mules. The B Company diary or report for December picturesquely describes the mules' reactions to nebelwerfer fire: 'On one occasion just as they reached Coy HQ, the mules decided that they did not like "Minnie" and headed for home and Mother, scattering their loads far and wide'.

Before joining in a large-scale attack, the 23rd occupied this area for four days, days that were full of incident. Enemy guns, mortars and tanks were all very active. The houses, in which the men took turns to rest, were subjected to some severe concentrations. For example, 9 Platoon's casa received six direct hits. Some casualties were sustained but, as 5 Brigade occupied the higher ground and had slightly better observation than the enemy, the Germans suffered more severely. But casualties on

11 December led to two stretcher-bearers and another man from B Company being sent in error to an enemy-occupied house, where they were taken prisoner. This meant that the Germans knew the New Zealanders had re-entered the line and were probably going to be used in an attack. At any rate, the Germans shot propaganda leaflets over the battalion area next day. These leaflets praised the courage of the New Zealanders but declared that whenever the British were held up they employed the New Zealanders to do their fighting for them. 'You may reach [Faenza](#) but every yard towards that town must be paid for with the life-blood of hundreds of New Zealanders.'

As usual, patrolling preceded the attack. The patrol activity was very much a two-way affair. C Company patrols which tried to occupy Casas Magnana and Colombarina came under heavy fire. These houses were consequently hammered thereafter by both tanks and mortars. An enemy patrol into C's area on 11 December led to the firing of DF tasks by artillery and mortars. But it was on B's sector that the enemy concentrated his attention. In the early hours of 13 December, he tried to capture houses occupied by 10 and 12 Platoons. The enemy efforts are fully described in a German 'Report on the Action', subsequently captured and translated by W. D. Dawson of the 23rd intelligence section:

'Cpl. Kaminski's patrol left Company HQ at Fondi di Sotto at 0240 hrs and went on from there to the point of attack at 0300 hrs. The Assault section of Cpl. Kaminski's fighting patrol forced an entrance to the house with Faustpatronen and hand grenades, but fighting developed inside the house, machine pistols and hand grenades being used. The Assault covering section then opened fire with MG and hand grenades but were themselves attacked by MG fire from the rear. The enemy then put in a counter-attack.

'Cpl. Dieselmeier's patrol came forward...and reached the house on the other side. It began firing and attacked immediately. On the open ground in front of the house the patrol leader was hit by MG fire and wounded, as were also the Nos. 1 and 2 on the LMG. In order to get a clear picture of the situation, I ordered a third fighting patrol under Cpl. Ungar to go in from the front, with orders to attack and make contact with the other fighting patrols. Cpl. Ungar's patrol reached the patrol in front of the house with the aid of strong MG and machine pistol fire. They could, however, get no further forward. Ungar's patrol then returned bringing Cpl.

Dieselmeier who had been seriously wounded and another wounded man with them.... After the arrival of Cpl. Ungar and a further three wounded I was able to get a clear picture of the situation. Both fighting patrols had suffered casualties and had been warded off in close in-fighting by the occupants of the house but, above all, by the immediate enemy counter-attack. I sent in a further section to get in the wounded who were crying for help. This section met such heavy fire that I had to recall it and await daybreak.... Three wounded were captured by the enemy.... Losses in men: 1 dead, 9 wounded. Losses in weapons: 2 LMGs, 2 Machine pistols, 1 signal pistol, 1 rifle 41, 5 carbines 98 K and 1 discharger cup.'

The B Company account of this action differed from the German only in explaining that both 10 and 12 Platoon houses were attacked. No. 10 Platoon, under Second-Lieutenant [McIntosh](#),⁵ had taken one wounded prisoner while 12 Platoon, under Second-Lieutenant R. J. Wilson, had killed one and taken three prisoners from I and III Battalions 200 Panzer Grenadiers. About 9.30 a.m. seven German stretcher-bearers approached 10 Platoon area under a [Red Cross](#) flag and were allowed to remove a wounded German from a dugout below an enemy-held house. One outcome of this German setback was a substantial increase in German mortaring and shelling of the area. As Private J. McDowall of B Company recorded in his diary: 'Sat in house and Jerry threw everything at us. As bad as [Cassino](#) the older boys say'.

B and C Company patrols sent out prior to the attack secured the required information concerning 'going' for tanks and proposed lines of approach to enemy houses. Not on patrol but as a sniper in a forward observation post in C Company's area, Private [Bruning](#)⁶ did good work until he was wounded. He was able to claim one 'certainty' and one 'possible', but his good shooting had also discouraged German observers of C Company positions.

By noon on 13 December, eighty New Zealand tanks had crossed the [Lamone](#) and the stage was practically set for a night attack with supporting barrage plus tank, mortar and machinegun fire. This was to be the first large-scale attack of the kind that the 23rd had participated in since December 1943. On this occasion, [5 Corps](#) was to attack on the night of 14–15 December with the New Zealand Division on the right and [10 Indian Division](#) on the left. Farther to the left, [2 Polish Corps](#) was also to join in the attack. Fifth Brigade was the attacking New Zealand formation and

it was committing the Maoris on the right, the 23rd in the centre and the 22nd on the left. On the right of the Maoris, two companies of the 25th were to cover the right flank against an attack from [Faenza](#), which was still held in strength by the enemy. The infantry objective was a series of road and track junctions north-west and north-east of the village of [Celle](#). Once this objective was taken, the tanks of [18 Armoured Regiment](#) were to exploit to the bridge at the crossing of the River Senio by Route 9 and, if possible, establish a bridgehead over the [Senio](#). A consequence of any serious threat to Route 9 was expected to be the enemy evacuation of [Faenza](#). The taking of this town and progress along Route 9 were the expected dividends from the operation. As 90 Panzer Grenadier Division, the successors to the old 90th Light, held the line opposite the New Zealanders, the fighting was expected to be hard, especially as the Germans were understood to have some sixty-four tanks, including nine Tigers, on the near side of the [Senio](#).

The supporting artillery barrage was to be heavy. The economies that had been observed for so long with ammunition had enabled a sufficient reserve of shells to be built up for just such an operation as this was to be. On the whole attacking front were 424 guns of various calibres, made up of the guns of the three New Zealand field regiments, [1 RHA](#), the four field regiments of 46 Division, [1 AGRA](#) and the Polish AGRA.⁷ The barrage on the 23rd's front was to be supplied by 4 and 5 Field Regiments, which were each to cover half the sector, while 1 Regiment 46 Division was to superimpose its fire on the whole sector. The barrage was to lift 100 yards every 7 minutes for the first thousand yards, then halt for 37 minutes while five regiments fired on [Celle](#) and other known enemy positions, and then move forward again at the same rate as before to just beyond the objective. Bofors guns were to mark the inter-battalion boundaries on both flanks of the 23rd by firing tracer in bursts of three rounds every two minutes. The operation orders provided for 7.2-inch guns, heavy mortars and Vickers machine guns to give special attention to [Celle](#).

In view of later developments, it should be specially noted that no tanks were placed under command of the infantry battalions. Although he was pressed by his senior staff officer and requested by Colonel Thomas to place tanks under command, Brigadier Pleasants would not go beyond placing B Squadron [18 Armoured Regiment](#) in support of the 23rd.

In the battalion itself, the plan was for B Company, under Major McArthur, to

attack on the right, while C Company, under Major Low, attacked on the left. Since a 2000-yard advance on a company front, extending at times to 500 yards, was being undertaken over broken undulating ground, and since the enemy was known to be centring his defences around the houses as strongpoints, separate plans were worked out for each platoon. These provided for an advance, not in line as was the standard practice when following a barrage, but according to the ground, and with the definite intention of making for and capturing the various houses in the platoon sector. In his orders, Colonel Thomas named the enemy houses marked on the map and allocated them all to B and C Companies. A Company, under Major Brittenden, was to follow two to three hundred yards behind B. It had to mop up enemy posts by-passed by the leaders, collect prisoners, evacuate wounded and, if necessary, provide a platoon for the final assault on the objective. D Company, under Major Buchanan, was to remain in reserve and be available to assist the 18th tanks in the daylight exploitation role next day.

The attacking infantry in B and C Companies were most carefully briefed: all the information concerning the various houses collected from German prisoners and Italian civilians was passed down to the sections, while the nearer enemy houses were studied from the 23rd FDLs.⁸ All ranks knew the plan in detail, knew where to go and what to do. As one C Company private said afterwards: 'We were so well prepared that we knew each house before we got there and the men knew exactly what to do, which window and which door to go for.' One change in orders was made after 8 p.m. on the night of the attack. No. 12 Platoon, under Second-Lieutenant Bob Wilson, already somewhat reduced in numbers through casualties, was subjected to severe tank and mortar fire. A haystack in its area, occupied as a section post, was set on fire by an enemy tank, and thereafter the whole platoon area was heavily mortared. The platoon, which had entered the line 22 strong, was reduced to seven fit men. Colonel Thomas therefore arranged for 7 Platoon of A Company to replace 12 in B Company's attacking force, while 12 Platoon joined A Company for the time being.



THE BATTLE FOR CELLE AND ADVANCE TO THE SENIO,
14-15 DECEMBER 1944

the battle for celle and advance to the senio, 14–15 december 1944



General McCreery decorates Pte
W. E. Green with the BEM. Green
was the stretcher-bearer who at-
tended Major-General Kippen-
berger on Monte Trocchio

General McCreery decorates Pte W. E. Green with the BEM. Green was the stretcher-bearer who attended Major-General Kippenberger on Monte Trocchio



Outside the battalion RAP, San Donato, July 1944. *From left:*
'Blue' Holdaway, Jim Penberth, Joe Cronin and Ben Rice

Outside the battalion RAP, San Donato, July 1944. From left: 'Blue' Holdaway, Jim Penberth, Joe Cronin and Ben Rice



16 Platoon, on a 19 Regiment tank, enters Florence

16 Platoon, on a 19 Regiment tank, enters Florence



Mr Churchill, wearing topee and accompanied by General Freyberg, drives past 23 Battalion

Mr Churchill, wearing topee and accompanied by General Freyberg, drives past 23 Battalion



Platoon *casa*, Faenza. The officer is Barron Grant

Platoon *casa*, Faenza. The officer is Barron Grant



'Brewing up', Faenza

'Brewing up', Faenza



Looking towards the Senio, just forward of Battalion Headquarters

Looking towards the Senio, just forward of Battalion Headquarters



Bren-gun post, January 1945

Bren-gun post, January 1945



Spring on the Senio, 8 April 1945. *From left:* S. J. McLaughlan, T. O'Brien, D. W. Gray, G. Cumming, R. W. J. Ryder and S. V. Cullen

Spring on the Senio, 8 April 1945. From left: S. J. McLaughlan, T. O'Brien, D. W. Gray, G. Cumming, R. W. J. Ryder and S. V. Cullen



By ferry across the Po
By ferry across the Po



By pontoon bridge over the Adige
By pontoon bridge over the Adige



B Company baby show, Trieste
B Company baby show, Trieste

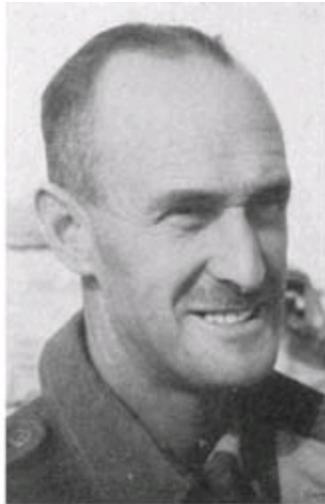


23 Battalion convoy halts in the Fabriano Gorge on the move
from Trieste to Lake Trasimene

23 Battalion convoy halts in the Fabriano Gorge on the move from Trieste to Lake Trasimene



Lt-Col A. S. Falconer
Lt-Col A. S. Falconer



Lt-Col D. F. Leckie
Lt- Col D. F. Leckie



Lt-Col C. N. Watson
Lt-Col C. N. Watson



Lt-Col R. E. Romans
Lt-Col R. E. Romans



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



Lt-Col W. B. Thomas
Lt-Col W. B. Thomas

H-hour was fixed for 11 p.m. on 14 December. About 10 p.m., the forward platoons were withdrawn to provide an adequate safety margin for the artillery's opening fire. The 'Q' staff served a hot meal. Battalion Headquarters moved forward into Casa Ragazzina, which was right on the start line. The night was clear and starry, the ground still muddy from the recent rain. Powerful searchlights beamed on to the 5 Brigade front at H-hour provided 'artificial moonlight', which was some help to the attackers and which the Germans were known to dislike. Promptly to the second at 11 p.m., the opening roar of the guns announced that the attack was on. As the shells were due to fall for seven minutes on the opening line, B and C Companies took their time about approaching the start line. No one wanted the casualties sustained in the attack a year before when so many were wounded before leaving the start line on Sfasciata ridge. As the men of B and C Companies knew the ground to their immediate front so well, they preferred to wait for the barrage to settle down, then to make their first bound at speed, and thereafter try to keep up with the barrage.

The first shells of the barrage showed that the battalion tactical headquarters was certainly sited well forward. 'Trust Sandy Thomas to take a chance!' said one signaller, as he flattened out. This hilltop house was none too robust and it shook as it received several direct hits. Prepared for the worst, most of its occupants 'sat in underground cellar while our barrage started off, shells raining all round the house, and Jerry sent some fierce stuff back too, lasting some hours'.⁹ Fortunately, no one was wounded. For more than an hour, no radio communication was received from the advancing companies and there was some speculation as to whether or not the enemy was jamming the 23rd's messages.

The infantry were, in fact, advancing and taking the houses according to plan. Once they caught up with the barrage, so closely did the men of both companies follow it that the enemy who had taken shelter in the houses had no time to reoccupy slit trenches outside before the South Islanders were upon them. In almost every case, prisoners were taken after more or less torrid exchanges of fire and varying numbers of casualties.

On the right of B Company, 7 Platoon, under Second-Lieutenant Morrison,¹⁰ took its first house, an unnamed casa halfway between the [Celle](#) road and [Casa](#)

Colombaia, after a brisk encounter in which twenty Germans eventually surrendered. Plans went wrong for a few minutes as Maoris, executing a flanking movement on the right, opened fire on 7 Platoon. 'But my fluent command of "French" even surpassed the din of battle and stopped their fun and games before they managed to bump any one off,' commented Major 'Wiff' McArthur later. Nevertheless, what with the fighting and the shell and mortar fire it had struck, 7 Platoon had lost its officer, its sergeant (Frank Fielding), and other NCOs wounded, and was left with only enough men to guard the prisoners. Major McArthur got in touch with Major Brittenden and 9 Platoon was sent forward to take over 7's task in the attack.

In the meantime, the rest of B Company, 10 and 11 Platoons, had continued down the **Celle** road. They encountered quite a surprising number of Germans. Some were already dead, killed by the shells of the barrage. The rest were either shot or forced to surrender. The B Company men cleared the Casas Gavallana and Domenico without much bother but struck opposition as they approached **Celle**. In and around **Celle** itself, the artillery and heavy mortars had wrought frightful havoc, but some determined enemy survived to give fight. B Company was now hard on the heels of the barrage and the noise was such that men 'could not hear one another shout'.¹¹ The softening-up process had its effect, however, and, although 11 Platoon lost some men at this point, **Celle** was occupied soon after 3 a.m.

Major McArthur now left 9 Platoon of A Company in **Celle** to hold the crossroads there while he pushed on northwards to the cemetery with the rest of his force. This was only a remnant by this time, as only fifteen men were left in 10 Platoon, eight in 11, and five in Company Headquarters. This force, scarcely a platoon in strength, reached the cemetery safely. Two Germans came sauntering down the road, probably expecting to join their comrades or to discover from them how the battle was going. They joined their mates 'in the bag'. During the OC's reconnaissance of the area, tanks were heard moving and, shortly afterwards, three tanks and infantry opened fire on the B Company men. Fortunately, perhaps, these tanks preferred to wait till daylight, or until the whole situation was somewhat clearer, before advancing. Leaving the 11 Platoon men to dig in at the cemetery, whence one stalwart had made an unavailing attempt to Piat a tank heard moving some distance away, Major McArthur proceeded to establish a strongpoint with Company Headquarters and 10 Platoon at the farthest forward house on the outskirts of **Celle**.

Only at this stage did McArthur manage to get through on his radio to Battalion Headquarters and report progress. He was pleased to report a good bag of prisoners but was somewhat concerned about the very obvious nearness of German tanks. His need for tank support was equally obvious.

On the left, C Company had also made good progress and taken nearly one hundred prisoners. No. 14 Platoon lost its officer, Second-Lieutenant Steele, on the start line, but the platoon carried on with Sergeant Eric Batchelor giving a good lead. Its first house, [Casa Colombarina](#), was a recognised enemy strongpoint and it certainly gave trouble. Casualties were sustained: Private J. H. [Robinson](#),¹² the wireless operator, was one of the wounded and his 38 set was temporarily put out of action. The ten prisoners, who survived the assault, were sent back with the walking wounded. The platoon took its next house without any bother. The next, [Casa Bersana](#), was easier still as it contained no enemy. Batchelor and his men were advancing to the final objective when they heard two tanks moving quite near and, separated as they were from the rest of the company, they decided that discretion was the better part of valour and withdrew to [Casa Bersana](#) where, somewhat to their surprise, they found a strong patrol of Germans in occupation. Sergeant Batchelor and Corporal [Howat](#)¹³ promptly opened fire and led the attack on this house. They shot two Germans and the rest surrendered. The platoon proceeded to consolidate and to wait word from Company Headquarters.

The capture of each house cannot be detailed but the experience of 15 Platoon, under Lieutenant Bill Williams, in taking the Casa Canovetta was probably reasonably typical of the many platoon attacks launched that night. The shells of the barrage were still hitting the top story when Williams and his men arrived in the yard and fired a few bursts of Bren or Thompson sub-machine gun fire through the windows. Once the barrage had rolled on, Williams strode up to the nearest door, opened it and gave it a vigorous kick. It opened only a few inches but sufficiently far for a German inside to fire a volley through the open crack. Standing with his back to the wall a yard away from the door, Williams drew the tape from a phosphorus smoke bomb, kicked the door open again and pushed the bomb inside. This no doubt caused the nearer enemy acute discomfort but it did not stop the fire which came from most of the windows. Williams's men had taken up positions on both sides of the house according to plan and were returning the enemy's fire, but drastic action

was required to end this fire-fight. Sergeant Ivor [Harvey](#)¹⁴ seized the platoon Piat and dashed forward through the machine-pistol and rifle fire to shoot two bombs through the main front door. The first failed to explode but was later found to have wounded an officer, the commander of I Battalion 200 Panzer Grenadiers. The second bomb exploded and shook part of the building. The platoon of West Coasters dashed in to exploit Harvey's success. Germans began to emerge from a side door but Private 'Cheetah' [McIndoe](#) shot the leaders. Williams and some of his men hurled a few grenades into the house and the attack was all over. The Germans surrendered.

Then followed an interlude with its humorous side. The prisoners were called out and emerged, one at a time. Charles [Monaghan](#),¹⁵ a wag from Southland, halted each man in turn with his Italian request 'Uno momento!' as he relieved them of their machine pistols, Lugers and other weapons, as well as binoculars and other useful items. Two lightly wounded members of the platoon, who lacked both the German and Monaghan's command of Italian, pushed and pulled the thirtynine prisoners into a column of three and marched them away. Inside the house, Williams found ten more dead and wounded Germans. But it was more than time to push on if the barrage was to be caught while it observed the 37-minute 'stander' at [Celle](#). Thus, from house to house, the troops moved, losing a few good men but rejoicing in the number of prisoners taken and in such a sight of dead Germans as few of them had ever seen before.

No. 13 Platoon, under Lieutenant C. B. Grant, also made a good advance. At one house—probably Casa Fondi—Grant sent Corporal P. J. Robinson and his section in search of Germans who had been seen pulling back into a building. While Private R. F. [Thomson](#)¹⁶ pushed a door open with his rifle, Robinson threw a grenade inside. After the ensuing explosion, Robinson walked into what proved to be the cow byre part of the house in which the enemy had constructed an additional dugout or shelter. Robinson says: 'One German was dead, some were shamming, some just scared. In the "dugout" a candle was lit and one cheeky sod spoke in English inviting me in.... Major Low came in and, with his torch, roused the last one from a shelf. Total prisoners here were 16.' As they advanced across some open ground, some of the leaders were pinned down by a Spandau operated from a slit trench. A burning haystack behind the German machine-gunner enabled Private [Litchfield](#)¹⁷ to stalk

him and, after shooting one man, to take two prisoners. Robinson and Private [Thomas](#) ¹⁸ investigated one straw stack which had not been set on fire and hustled five Germans out of it. Inside they found a heavy wireless set. Thus the advance went on to the objective.

Major Low moved his headquarters forward from house to house as his platoons cleared them. Occasionally, he caught up with and got involved in the fighting. But, for the most part, his communications with 13 and 15 Platoons worked so well that he was kept well informed of developments. His chief problem was to find enough men to evacuate the wounded and to look after the prisoners, who could not be thumbed back in those numbers in that country. When he heard over the air of this problem, Colonel Thomas sent Captain Dick Harrison and a detachment of HQ Company men forward to relieve the C Company men of their prisoners. Two or three of C's walking wounded, such as Private [Sinclair](#), ¹⁹ were floundering back across a field of beet when they came up behind enemy posts, still manned but bypassed by the attacking infantry who had concentrated on the houses. Sinclair and his friends thus collected five or more prisoners.

A Company, following in rear of B, found plenty to do. No. 12 Platoon was quickly used up in stretcher-bearing, especially when 7 Platoon suffered so many casualties. With his company reduced to 8 Platoon and Company Headquarters, Major Brittenden decided to consolidate in [Celle](#) itself. As they passed a row of burning haystacks, short of which the tanks of B Squadron [18 Armoured Regiment](#) were halted, these A Company men came under heavy mortar and some sporadic tank-gun and machine-gun fire, but they managed to get forward to [Celle](#). There they could find no sign of B Company. Brittenden had had his own 48 set knocked out and he therefore returned to the tanks, through whom he managed to get in touch with Battalion Headquarters. Colonel Thomas told him that B Company was forward of [Celle](#) and that A should link up with B. After much moving from ruined house to ruined house, collecting a few stragglers and two or three badly shaken prisoners, Major Brittenden and his runner reached Major McArthur. The two company commanders decided to form a firm base in the church in [Celle](#). Here they found 9 Platoon, and a stronger force was built up to hold this key point to the front.

Around 4 a.m. on 15 December, therefore, the attack had run its course. The bulk of the objective was in 23rd hands but Casas Salde and Gessa were still held by

the enemy. The success of the attack could not be assessed in full until the danger of a counter-attack had passed. B Company had already had reason to fear the tanks on its front. Now 11 Platoon came under tank and machine-gun fire. Its men felt that they stood less than a fair chance of fending off the tanks and therefore withdrew to join the rest of the company in the north of [Celle](#). The enemy appeared ready to launch an immediate counter-attack, supported by Mark IV tanks. On its wireless link with Battalion Headquarters, B Company called loudly and clearly for support from the B Squadron tanks.

At about the same time, Major Low was establishing C Company headquarters in Casa Camerini, with one platoon forward of the road which ran west from the junction B Company was holding. C Company could also hear the enemy tanks moving on its front and over to the right in front of B Company. At 4.3 a.m., according to the unit war diary, 'C Coy requested tank support'. Between then and dawn, C Company had tanks at [Casa Gessa](#) firing at it. No. 15 Platoon came under the worst of this tank fire. C Company repeatedly, therefore, asked for tank support. The B Squadron tanks, however, remained down the [Celle](#) road, short of the burning haystacks, and although Colonel Thomas asked the squadron commander to get his tanks forward, and later personally appealed to the tank crews when on his rounds about 6.30 a.m., the tanks did not move up to the infantry in [Celle](#) until 8 a.m.

Just about dawn, Major Low called his platoon commanders into his headquarters at Casa Camerini in order to give instructions. Although 14 Platoon's wireless had been restored to working order, Sergeant Batchelor did not know where the company headquarters was. But, taking Colin [Bisley](#),²⁰ Laurie [Quinton](#)²¹ and Cyril [Neville](#)²² with him, he set out for the house, Casa Salde, which he took to be Major Low's. While still unobserved, they saw a sentry at the door, a German wearing a German helmet. This fellow luckily chose that moment to step inside and the New Zealanders, welcoming the opportunity to increase their bag, moved in to the attack. Batchelor boldly challenged the occupants and, undeterred by their superior numbers, proceeded to shoot all who offered resistance. A German NCO engaged him in a shot for shot duel which Batchelor won. Germans tried to escape from every possible exit, but few got away as Bisley, Quinton and Neville were ready for those who were trying to dodge Batchelor. Five Germans were speedily killed. The rest surrendered and Bisley calmly entered the house to disarm them. Batchelor,

who was accustomed to successes in taking prisoners, writes: 'When I said "Bring out your prisoners" and 19 appeared, I nearly dropped'. As he had run out of ammunition, Quinton seized a German rifle to assist in herding the prisoners back and to beat off the counter-attack which appeared to be developing from the nearest German-occupied house. These signs that the enemy were going to try to rescue their friends made Batchelor hustle them along. Like a sheepdog, he herded the flock along but, instead of barking, he let a round go first to the right and then to the left rear of his flock. At the double they raced back to [Casa Bersana](#), where the total of prisoners held was now brought to forty. Batchelor next went more directly to his conference with Major Low.

Shortly afterwards, 15 Platoon was counter-attacked by enemy infantry supported by tank fire but, aided by fire from 13 Platoon, the 15 Platoon men beat off this assault. Major Low adopted the somewhat desperate expedient of calling down artillery fire on the house occupied by his own men in order to break up the worst counter-attack. The artillery fire arrived in time and ended the threat for the time being. The artillery 'murders' and 'stonks' on targets given by B and C Companies left nothing to be desired, but Low later declared that the direct shooting an FOO could have summoned 'would have yielded a "Hun harvest"'.

At Battalion Headquarters Colonel Thomas could see that from the point of view of the number of prisoners taken—over seventy had passed through by 4 a.m.—the attack had been a great success, but he was worried about the position of the forward companies. At 5.30 a.m., therefore, he told Major Buchanan to have D Company ready to move. When word came that C Company had been counter-attacked and 11 Platoon had been forced to fall back, the CO ordered D Company forward to [Celle](#) to consolidate the position there and between [Celle](#) and C Company. He himself, with Lieutenant Jim Bevin, then went forward to investigate the position on the spot. They were in [Celle](#) when D Company arrived there about 7.30 a.m. to link up with the forward companies. Half an hour later, four tanks of B Squadron arrived in [Celle](#). Two of them took up a position behind B Company headquarters, now in the church, and two pulled in behind the house of a D Company platoon. During the distribution of D's platoons, Second-Lieutenant [Paterson](#)²³ took one section down to the road junction formerly occupied by B Company headquarters and placed men in the houses on either side of the road.

Tanks could be heard moving, and some time after 8 a.m. two Mark IV tanks supported by infantry came down the road. Second-Lieutenant Paterson 'saw a Mk IV tank coming down the road towards him about fifty yards away with the tank commander sitting on top of his tank'. These tanks came right up to the forward houses of his section. His men had no Piats and could not offer fight. Some of them ran back to [Celle](#) as the tanks approached but five remained, lying flat on the floor while armour-piercing shells tore through the walls of their house. One man, Private [Warner](#),²⁴ was captured outside the house. The two tanks next approached the centre of [Celle](#), but artillery concentrations summoned by both Lieutenant Bevin and Major Low when the tanks had been first sighted came down and the enemy infantry were forced to ground and then withdrew.

The major threat had passed, but so long as the tanks remained, as they did, outside [Celle](#) with their guns pointing into it, the 23rd could not feel very happy. As it was, the men felt somewhat aggrieved at not receiving more effective support from the tanks of B Squadron. Thus Colonel Thomas later reported: 'Whilst I was in the village, two Mk IV Specials came in from the North of [Celle](#) and it was extremely disappointing that our tanks were not able to give battle'. Major Low observed the situation in and around [Celle](#) from the left flank and he too referred to the 'most ineffectual and disappointing support' given by the tanks. He wrote: 'Throughout the day, both tanks and infantry moved up and down from Gessa to the cemetery only 350 yds from the buildings in [Celle](#) behind which we could see one of our tanks. At no time did our armour move out to engage the enemy who was dive bombed both morning and afternoon and repeatedly stonked by Mediums and Field whenever we saw him move.... Our troops, who had been halted by the tanks alone, were greatly disheartened at seeing German tanks advance, force back our right flank troops, withdraw and then manoeuvre throughout the day only 300 yds to 500 yds from our positions whilst our armour sat back evidently unable to compete'.

After this action, Colonel Thomas and his senior officers felt strongly that the operation would have been more successful if the armour had been placed under command, as requested.

The enemy tanks withdrew about midday. Major Buchanan and an NCO went forward to collect the five men who had been left in the forward house. They were found to be none the worse for their experience. The rest of the day passed quietly,

apart from vigorous enemy shelling of the forward areas.

The most pleasing features of the day for the 23rd were the size of the bag of prisoners and the warmth of the congratulations received from [General Freyberg](#). By 9 a.m. on 15 December, the battalion had checked 3 German officers and 87 other ranks through its headquarters. Most of these prisoners came from 200 Panzer Grenadiers, who had been specially moved down from [Bologna](#) to stop the [Eighth Army](#) advance. The adjutant, the orderly officer and RSM of I Battalion of this regiment were among the prisoners, one of whom declared that their CO had been killed. During the day, small numbers of prisoners were sent back, and about 7 p.m., when it was dark enough to move them back with ease, C Company sent a party of 1 officer and 37 other ranks back. Again, they were mainly from 200 PGR, but a few were from 190 Artillery Regiment and there were three Russian mule drivers. In the battalion headquarters of I 200 PGR were found many documents and marked maps which were of value to divisional and corps intelligence staffs. One of the less important documents was dated '14 Dec 44 Bn HQ 1/200 PGR' and dealt with a relief and the strengthening of the German positions in the area over which the 23rd attacked that same night. In translation, these orders stated '... The Bn and attached troops will, in the course of relieving 2/200 on 14 Dec 44 (relief to commence at 1700 hrs) take over half the sector.... The Special Duty PI, under comd 2 Lt. Voight, is to take over the present positions of the Assault PI and is to prevent at all costs a break-through of enemy tanks along the road. For this purpose they will receive extra Faustpatronen....'

The fact that this relief had not been completed when the artillery barrage opened was the explanation of the number of dead Germans found on some of the roads and tracks, as well as of the large numbers found in some houses. After his morning visit to the forward companies, Colonel Thomas estimated that there were at least sixty dead Germans in the 23rd sector. Later reports indicated that the number was over eighty.

Late on 15 December, [General Freyberg](#) telephoned Colonel Thomas, congratulating all ranks of the 23rd on what he termed 'a magnificent show', probably the best operation the 23rd had ever performed. Although the Maoris had been pushed out of some of the houses on their objective by enemy tanks, the

operation had gone well for both units on the flanks of the 23rd, and [General Freyberg](#) described it to the Brigade Major of 5 Brigade as 'the best night operation ever carried out in [Italy](#)'.

But perhaps a member of the 23rd who had recently earned his first stripe might be allowed to have the last word on the battle for [Celle](#). Lance-Corporal Somerville, as usual, kept his private diary up to date. He wrote:

'We had fairly heavy casualties, though no idea of total yet. However the Ted ²⁵ got a helluva hiding. Probably will reach the Bn record for the number of prisoners.... The number of Jerry dead in our area alone is estimated at 70 so have come out on the credit side.... Where our stonks hit down there is utter terrible stark destruction.... One corner here has about 10 dead Jerry. This has been the most successful show we have had, I should say, and will go down in history of the battalion.'

On the night of 15–16 December, A and B Companies were withdrawn to the houses they had occupied before the attack and D Company took over [Celle](#). Radio 'intercepts' that night indicated the likelihood of a German withdrawal over the [Senio](#). At 4.30 a.m. on 16 December, therefore, Brigadier Pleasants ordered the advance to be continued along the original axis. The Germans evacuated [Faenza](#) that day and, in the afternoon, blew the Route 9 bridge over the [Senio](#). D and C Companies, supported by tanks of B Squadron [18 Armoured Regiment](#), moved forward to houses recently vacated by the Germans. No. 17 Platoon was still some distance from the bridge but close enough to feel its house shake with the violence of the explosion when it was destroyed.

Towards evening, 15 Platoon saw eight Germans coming down the road towards the house which it had just occupied. The Germans were apparently quite unaware that the 23rd had advanced so far. Private [Ramsay](#) ²⁶ tells the story:

'15 Pl organized a Reception Committee. Sgt. Alexander watched them through his binoculars and described them individually as they crossed a wire netting fence. "The first bastard's got a pair of glasses on him," he said, "they're mine." The platoon took up positions in the lean-to implement shed outside the house. I got bandages and RAP gear laid out on a table for treatment of Jerry casualties. The

boys were all organized when a 13 Pl picket, seeing the enemy within 80 yds of our house and thinking we must have gone to sleep, opened fire. That spoilt the fun, as the Huns bolted. Our boys opened up but out of the party we got only two wounded whom we took prisoner.'

On 17 December both C and D Companies sent patrols forward towards the [Senio](#). C discovered that Casa Ghiarona, shown as a large house on the map, had been demolished by the Germans. Casa Lugaccio had also been demolished. The D Company patrol towards the bridge site came under heavy fire, some of which came from the south-east side of Route 9 on the near side of the [Senio](#). Feeling that the right flank was somewhat exposed, the CO instructed Captain Harrison, OC Support Company, to organise his carrier and anti-tank men as infantry platoons. When this was done they were sent under Lieutenant F. R. Coe to occupy the house Larghe Barbavara. The forward areas were heavily mortared in the late afternoon and Major Neil Buchanan received wounds from which he later died. 'He was a fine chap!' Sergeant Blampied recorded in his diary when news of his death reached him, and never was truer word written. The 23rd had known many gallant officers and men but few of finer character than Neil Buchanan. His command was temporarily taken by Second-Lieutenant Paterson, who later handed over to the company second-in-command, Lieutenant Bernie Cox.

Rationing the troops in these forward areas was a problem. In addition to the sticky roads just forward of the [Lamone](#), there were demolitions which neither tank nor jeep could pass. Captain George Lawrence, second-in-command of C Company, solved the problem by borrowing a bullock and ox-cart which performed admirably across country, although the bullock was too slow for George's liking when machine-gun fire was coming in their direction.

On 18 December a carrier platoon patrol, under Second-Lieutenant 'Scotty' Anderson, tried to reach the bridge site but found the area so strongly held that Anderson considered that it was a task for a full company with tank support. The Support Company men edged forward toward another house on the early morning of 19 December but found the enemy to be holding out in a house only twenty yards away. Under a smoke screen, tanks were brought up and they proceeded to demolish the enemy-held house with AP and HE.²⁷ Later that day, A Company came forward to relieve C. That night the tanks and the 23rd mortars fired in support of a

6 Brigade attack which was successfully directed at right-angles to Route 9. On 21 December the 23rd was relieved by 21 Battalion and all companies moved into [Faenza](#).

The battle for [Celle](#) did much to consolidate what had been begun in the strenuous training of November, namely, the building up of morale and a confident battalion spirit in the 23rd. In war, some measure of success is necessary to prove that training, weapons and leaders are good and sound and that the men are not fighting in vain. In his letter to the wounded, written the day after the unit arrived in [Faenza](#), Colonel Thomas thanked the men for the efforts they had made to uphold the traditions of the 23rd and stressed the decisive character of the battle they had fought. He added:

'I am afraid our casualties over the whole action have been heavy—12 were killed, 3 have died of wounds and 76 of you were wounded. The G.O.C. prior to the action stressed how vital the capture of [Celle](#) was to the Army plan and after the action expressed deep regret at our casualties together with appreciation of our success—after all there is no other Unit that can claim 80 to 100 dead Huns in the area and produce 168 fit with 24 wounded prisoners from a crack German Unit.'

In his private diary, Thomas exulted in the victory and also breathed a sigh of relief. 'It was exhilarating—the success of it. I had been terribly worried, there were many dangerous factors, but the officers and men, particularly I might say Harry Low, did a grand show—you can always rely on the 23rd.'

In confirmation of this view on the stimulating effect of the success, Major Low stated in his report on C Company: 'The successful night operation and the taking of large numbers of prisoners has had an excellent effect, especially with the new men. All ranks are confident of their superior ability in close fighting with German Infantry and have displayed marked aggressiveness since the attack.' After referring to the way in which 15 Platoon had allowed an enemy party to approach it—as described above in Private Ramsay's words—he added: 'Such keenness augurs well for future operations.'

But, for the moment, no one was concerned with future operations. After catching up on losses of sleep, most members of the 23rd concentrated on

preparations for Christmas. The arrival of mail, including parcels, and beer helped to stir the feelings normally associated with the Christmas season. On Christmas Day, Padre Harding had an early morning Communion service and another service at 10 a.m. in which the battalion choir, which had been practising hard both before and after the [Celle](#) battle, distinguished itself. As usual, the officers and sergeants acted as waiters for the men at dinner. C Company's report must suffice for the battalion, although there were many variations of activity and menu. 'The cooks excelled themselves in putting on a wonderful meal, consisting of Tomato soup, [Turkey](#), Pork, fresh potatoes, green peas, Christmas pudding with dressing and cheese straws. Jimmy [Hall](#) ²⁸ was busy issuing each man with four bottles of beer, sweets and chocolate'. Possibly Boxing Day was not quite so happy. Certainly, Lieutenant Keith Burt wrote in his diary: 'Everyone seemed off colour and inclined to be short-tempered', but possibly he was referring to officers only.

Before returning to the line on 29–30 December, all companies did some route-marching and learned something about flame-throwers and kapok bridging. The men were impressed by the converted tank Crocodile flame-throwers, but some of the men in the carrier platoon had doubts about the 'Wasp'. 'One of the carriers has been fitted with a flame thrower known as a "Wasp". "Chopper" [Johnson](#) ²⁹ is on it and declares he is a certain candidate for the posthumous V.C. when he brings it into use. Tried it out in the afternoon with good effect.' ³⁰

On 27 December 54 reinforcements joined the battalion and 22 more arrived a day later. Patrols from A and D Companies went forward to reconnoitre the river-bank that day. They did not meet any enemy, but one jeep was mortared and Second-Lieutenant [Wylie](#) ³¹ and another man were wounded. On 29 December A and B Companies relieved two companies of 2/6 Gurkhas on the right of Route 9 while, on the following day, D Company took over from A Company of the 21st on the left of the road. C Company remained in [Faenza](#) for over a week before going forward to relieve A Company. The unit spent a fortnight in the line on this occasion. As the Germans were showing aggressive intentions and the weather, combined with a serious shortage of ammunition of the heavier varieties, had precluded any possibility of another New Zealand attack for some time, the battalion was put on the defensive. Anti-tank and anti-personnel mines were therefore laid on the immediate front of the forward platoons. Patrols under Second-Lieutenant J. R.

McIntosh and Lieutenant C. B. Grant discovered what use the enemy was making of certain houses and wounded two of the enemy in an unsuccessful attempt to secure a prisoner. As the Germans were using heavy guns to destroy houses, orders were given to strengthen all houses with sandbags, railway sleepers and rails. Even the mortar section in [Casa Spadini](#) in rear of D Company prepared its house against attack or heavy shell. As Private [Berney](#)³² of that section recorded on 5 January 1945: 'Started on "Atlantic Wall" today and have "Fort Spadini" pretty well organized so it should take the whole 29 Pz to take it.' In 15 Platoon, such West Coasters as the two Bannister brothers³³ and [McIndoe](#) were in their element: in each ground-floor room of their house they put a dugout, which they joined by underground tunnels; and no part of the house was without observation, as slit trenches were placed in each corner but sealed off from the rest of the room with sandbags, which were also placed across the windows and doors. Determined that the defence should have an aggressive character, Colonel Thomas ordered each company to undertake each day at least one offensive patrol or shoot with Brens, 2-inch mortars and Piats. He himself went up twice in an Auster aircraft to observe the [Senio](#) banks, the tracks in the snow and other evidence of enemy activity.

On 4 January the GOC visited Battalion Headquarters with Brigadier Pleasants to pass on certain decisions. The Division, he said, could expect to stay in the line for at least six weeks and then withdraw to train for a big spring offensive. Fifth Brigade was to work with two battalions in the line, one in [Faenza](#) and one in [Forli](#). Every effort was to be made to prepare for a long but vigorous defensive.

The winter conditions and the troops' reactions are perhaps best described in the words of Colonel Thomas's private diary.

'6/1/45.... Today jacked up a variety of machine guns for the forward platoons, and so with the wiring and mining we are effecting we should be quite snug. Tonight it is snowing heavily, already it is six inches deep. The fruit trees and grape vines look weirdly beautiful now and the shell-scarred ground is finding that it can still put on, however temporarily, some of its old charm. The Hun shells methodically and we reply with feeling.... 11/1/45. The snow lies thick everywhere now and has quite lost its novelty. It is miserable. The Brigadier called in and we went round the platoons in the snow. The men have done really great work on their defences, especially as this is the first time we have attempted to construct a defensive line in [Italy](#). Casualties

have not been heavy and most of the men have a fire to warm themselves with after pickets and patrols. Everyone seems in grand spirits, despite their discomfort.'

On 12 January 22 Battalion relieved the 23rd which, after collecting gear in [Faenza](#), moved back to [Forli](#) for twelve days of what has elsewhere been described as 'light training and heavy relaxation'. A concert by the [Kiwi Concert Party](#), the arrival of twenty-four reinforcements, training on kapok and other bridging material, the inevitable route marches, vaccinations and inoculations—these were included in the activities of those days.

The 23rd's next period in the line lasted from 26 January till 14 February. C and D Companies moved into the houses they had occupied before. A took over B's old area, while B moved into reserve. Patrolling and exchanges of fire of all kinds continued. The more-important patrols were now directed to obtaining prisoners or setting ambushes, but the frozen snow made silent movement virtually impossible and patrols usually clashed with the enemy without securing a prisoner. Platoon commanders in C. B. Grant, J. P. [Scanlan](#),³⁴ P. W. [Gresson](#),³⁵ W. D. [Williams](#)³⁶ and Sergeant [Kerr](#)³⁷ led the more important of these patrols.

On occasion the amount of shooting was stepped-up. Thus, when [General Freyberg](#) thought the enemy might be thinning-out on the New Zealanders' front, a mock attack or heavy fire demonstration was laid on. On occasion, too, the enemy brought up an SP gun or tank to shoot up the houses occupied by the 23rd. The worst of these occasions was on 10 February, when the Germans managed to collapse 16 Platoon's fortified room and temporarily bury several men. Major Reginald Boyle, OC D Company, hurried forward to assist with rescue operations. Apparently aware that they were on their target, the Germans brought more fire to bear on the house, killed Major Boyle and Private A. B. Stewart and wounded four men. In his private diary, Colonel Thomas referred to Reg Boyle's gallantry and added: 'One of the old originals, young and popular, his death had affected us all, coming so soon after Neil Buchanan's'. Captain Bernie Cox took command of D Company once more.

Although the business of living in the line had been reduced to a fine art, the majority grew weary of the static conditions. Some efforts were made to stimulate interest. For example, tanks of [19 Armoured Regiment](#) were brought forward to

shoot up the enemy-held stopbank and houses—in other words, to give them the treatment they had meted out to D Company. The mortar officer, Lieutenant Laurie Smylie, sometimes went up with the Air OP officer to observe the ranging of his mortars and to get corrections made quickly and accurately. A Company secured three prisoners during this period. Details of all the minor events of those days cannot be given but the unit war diary gives this story about one of the prisoners: 'PW said he had been a member of a fighting patrol 15 strong who had come over to take PW from 8 Pl. The fact that the boot was now on the other foot appeared to be a source of extreme amusement to the PW.'

A major change in policy and establishment within the New Zealand Division took place at this time. Twenty-seventh (Machine Gun) Battalion was converted into an infantry unit and with the Divisional Cavalry, also an infantry unit by now, and 22 Battalion constituted [9 Infantry Brigade](#). The Division once again had three infantry brigades, with a brigade of armour as well. The Vickers guns were allocated to all infantry battalions, and on 2 February Second-Lieutenant [McCracken](#)³⁸ arrived to train part of the carrier platoon as the 23rd Vickers MG platoon. About the same time, Sergeant Batchelor and other NCOs visited [27 Battalion](#) to assist in training its men as infantry. The new emphasis on infantry was the direct result of the type of warfare imposed by the ground and weather conditions in [Italy](#). The desert had been an armoured playground but [Italy](#) was primarily an infantryman's country.

Another important change arose from the replacement scheme. On 2 February, in the Tongariro draft, it took away sixty men, mainly from the 5th Reinforcements and from those who had already been on furlough, and several senior NCOs a little later on. Promotions consequent upon the departure of so many old hands were common. For example, W. D. Dawson replaced Blampied as Intelligence Sergeant. Reinforcements, mainly from [3 Division](#) and therefore with some experience in the [Pacific](#) fighting, came in to make the unit up to strength. The newcomers were to prove good soldiers, but, at first, they could not be expected to have the same feelings for the 23rd as those who had known it as their army home for nearly four years. The latter were delighted to be on their way home, but after a few days away from the battalion they were wondering if ever again they would live with men in such a team and with such a spirit of comradeship. Thus, Sergeant Blampied wrote in his diary a fortnight after leaving the 23rd: 'My keenness for going home seems to

have vanished—have lost enthusiasm—if it wasn't for Mother and Agnes I would sooner remain over here'.

On its relief by the Maoris on 14 February, the battalion marched back to [Faenza](#). Resting, cleaning and checking equipment, and dental inspections preceded some serious training in river crossings. After a day spent in rehearsals, A and B Companies as one group under Major McArthur competed against C and D in crossing the Lamone River in the fastest time. In full battle order, the troops had to get assault boats across first and then lay a kapok bridge on which the rest of the group had to cross to take up battle positions on the far bank. [General Freyberg](#), Colonel [Gilbert](#),³⁹ his senior staff officer, and others came to see this time trial. The group under Major Low took three and a half minutes to complete the crossing as against the four minutes taken by the other group. Everyone was suitably impressed. On 19 February A and B Companies repeated the performance by night and, despite the handicap imposed by darkness, took only five minutes for the assault river crossing.

On 21 February the 23rd returned to the line, relieving 21 Battalion in a sector farther to the east of Route 9 than any previously occupied by the unit. On this occasion, B, D and C Companies, in that order from right to left, were forward and A was in reserve. In these new surroundings, the routine was very much the same as before. The troops had to contend with mud instead of snow, but the unit mortars and machine guns did a considerable amount of shooting.

The war elsewhere in [Europe](#) appeared to be hurrying to a close as the Russians were reported to be within 60 miles of [Berlin](#) and the Anglo-American advance from the Rhine was making good progress. This set off a small propaganda war on the [Senio](#). The New Zealand leaflets asked the Germans the pertinent question: 'The Russians are in [Germany](#)—Why are YOU fighting in [Italy](#)?' The Germans reciprocated by asking what [Britain](#) had to gain from a Soviet victory, apart from finding 'herself faced with a far mightier imperialist colossus' than ever before.

The biggest 'battle' the 23rd fought in this sector was the 'All Time High Chinese Attack', a bigger than ever mock attack launched on 2 March 'to celebrate Egypt's entry into the War'. Colonel Thomas and his officers, 'The Lord High Executioner and Hangmen of 23 Bn', issued special invitations to neighbouring units and various artillery batteries asking them to join in this stupendous shoot. A most

comprehensive operation order, giving the targets to be engaged and the times, indicated that the shoot might serve some useful purposes, apart from alarming and killing some of the enemy. 'Subsidiary intentions (i) To accustom the enemy to violent fire demonstrations in order to achieve maximum surprise for a future attack (ii) To test and plot enemy D/F (iii) To plot hostile guns which reply (iv) To demonstrate to new personnel weapons of [2 NZ Div.](#)' The enemy reaction was marked and did provide some useful information concerning his guns and defensive fire. Of course, some of the older soldiers shared the 'I' sergeant's feelings: 'Very noisy during the show ... not very much to do and not very interesting. Too much like "Playing soldiers".' The real thing was to come a little over a month later.

Included in the new 'personnel' who were being introduced to the war in [Italy](#) were some sixteen officers, ex 3 NZ Division, who were attached to the 23rd at this time. In his diary, the CO wrote: 'We had posted to us last night some officers from the 3rd Pacific Div, including a son of the Leader of the Opposition, [Holland](#).⁴⁰ They seem good types.' Former officers of the 23rd in Captains Fred Marett and Tuan Emery returned after an absence of some months. As Majors Brittenden and Low were sent back to [Camerino](#) to make the necessary arrangements there for the approaching arrival of the battalion, Marett and Emery soon found themselves in charge of infantry companies in the line.

On 4 March the 23rd was relieved by a Polish battalion. This ended the long and rather tedious time of ten weeks in and out of the [Winter Line](#) on the [Senio](#). Next day the battalion was on the road back to that very pleasant rest and training area, [Camerino](#). The three and a half months away from there had seen the unit suffer casualties totalling 21 killed and died of wounds, 95 wounded and 4 taken prisoner of war. All members of the unit, old and new, were confident they were now going to prepare for the last campaign in [Italy](#).

¹ W. D. Dawson, diary, Nov 1944.

² Pte C. N. McKenzie; [Invercargill](#); born [Invercargill](#), 2 May 1924; clerk.

³ Capt T. C. Buchanan; [Waikino](#); born NZ 23 Aug 1907; motor trimmer.

⁴ Maj K. M. Emanuel; Nelson; born NZ 19 Jun 1914; medical practitioner.

⁵ Lt J. R. McIntosh, ED; Greymouth; born Methven, 14 Oct 1913; painter; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

⁶ Cpl M. G. Bruning; Takaka; born NZ 15 Jul 1912; farm labourer; twice wounded.

⁷ RHA, Royal Horse Artillery; AGRA, Army Group, Royal Artillery.

⁸ Forward Defended Localities.

⁹ W. D. Dawson, diary, 15 Dec 1944.

¹⁰ 2 Lt E. J. Morrison; born Te Puke, 19 Sep 1907; school-teacher; wounded 15 Dec 1944.

¹¹ J. McDowall, diary, 15 Dec 1944.

¹² Pte J. H. Robinson; Christchurch; born Hokitika, 20 Jan 1922; painter; wounded 15 Dec 1944.

¹³ L-Sgt O. L. Howat, MM; born NZ 26 Jul 1921; apprentice carpenter; wounded 12 Apr 1945; accidentally killed 9 Jul 1951.

¹⁴ Sgt I. C. R. Harvey, MM; born NZ 25 Sep 1917; horticulturist; wounded 15 Dec 1944.

¹⁵ L-Sgt C. R. Monaghan, MM; Invercargill; born Mataura, 12 Sep 1922; farmhand.

¹⁶ Pte R. F. Thomson; Inchclutha, Kaitangata; born Dunedin, 5 Jun 1920; farmer; wounded 10 Feb 1945.

- ¹⁷ Cpl R. B. Litchfield, MM; Blenheim; born NZ 28 Jun 1916; farmer.
- ¹⁸ L-Sgt J. W. Thomas, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Otaki, 1 Jan 1921; labourer; wounded 16 Dec 1943.
- ¹⁹ Cpl O. S. Sinclair; Gore; born NZ 26 Mar 1920; millhand; twice wounded.
- ²⁰ L-Sgt C. H. Bisley, m.i.d.; Riwaka, Nelson; born NZ 6 Jul 1910; labourer.
- ²¹ Pte L. C. Quinton; Nelson; born Nelson, 20 Aug 1922; electrical apprentice; wounded 30 Sep 1944.
- ²² Pte C. Neville; born NZ 26 Oct 1903; company director.
- ²³ Lt R. L. Paterson; born Christchurch, 27 Dec 1921; State Forest Service cadet.
- ²⁴ Pte G. R. J. Warner; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 5 Jun 1923; biscuit manufacturer; P.w. 15 Dec 1944; escaped.
- ²⁵ Tedeschi, Italian for Germans, abbreviated to 'Teds'.
- ²⁶ Cpl A. T. Ramsay; born NZ 1 Sep 1923; plasterer.
- ²⁷ Armour-piercing and high-explosive shells.
- ²⁸ Pte J. R. Hall; Waimate; born Oamaru, 7 Jun 1914; farm labourer; wounded 23 Oct 1942.
- ²⁹ Cpl B. Johnson; Palmerston South; born NZ 31 Aug 1920; carpenter.
- ³⁰ D. Leckie, diary, 31 Dec 1944.

- ³¹ Lt W. J. Wylie; Edendale, Southland; born NZ 15 Jan 1918; dairy factory assistant; wounded 27 Dec 1944.
- ³² Pte R. D. Berney; Owaka; born Owaka, 5 Dec 1921; tractor driver.
- ³³ L-Cpl D. I. Bannister; England; born NZ 5 Jun 1918; bushman; wounded 15 Dec 1944.
- L-Cpl R. G. Bannister; Christchurch; born Hokitika, 16 Feb 1923; furniture salesman; wounded 10 Apr 1945.
- ³⁴ Lt J. P. Scanlan, MM; Dunedin; born NZ 4 Apr 1917; clerk.
- ³⁵ Capt P. W. St. G. Gresson; born Timaru, 23 Apr 1909; bank officer.
- ³⁶ Capt W. D. Williams; Dunedin; born NZ 26 Aug 1910; schoolmaster.
- ³⁷ Sgt E. L. Kerr; Tauranga; born Benhar, 16 Apr 1909; rubber worker.
- ³⁸ Lt B. S. McCracken; Auckland; born Auckland, 17 Mar 1921; clerk.
- ³⁹ Brig H. E. Gilbert, DSO, OBE, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wanganui, 20 Jul 1916; Regular soldier; BM HQ Div Arty 1941–42; GSO II 2 NZ Div 1942–43; CO 6 Fd Regt Nov 1943–Apr 1944; GSO I 2 NZ Div 1944–45.
- ⁴⁰ Capt E. S. F. Holland, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 28 Jun 1921; bank clerk.
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23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 18 – THE LAST CAMPAIGN

CHAPTER 18

The Last Campaign

AFTER some weeks in a static role on the [Senio](#), men wanted leave and relaxation, but Colonel Thomas made it very clear that the return to [Camerino](#) was primarily to give the battalion time for solid training. The journey back was over well-known roads and the companies were soon accommodated in the same houses as on their previous stay in [Camerino](#) and Mecciano. The local Italians gave a warm welcome to their old friends; several of the women appeared in their 'Sunday best' and the exchanges of hospitality were both numerous and generous.

After two days on light duties preparing billets and improving roads, the battalion settled down to hard training, with a fresh emphasis on discipline and efficiency. First priority was given to the NCOs' 'School' in which seventy-four of the 23rd's NCOs were given a ten-days' concentrated course of instruction by Major McArthur and his staff— [WO I W. J. Tait](#), [WO IIs L. J. Lang](#) ¹ and [N. D. J. Reed](#), ² [Second-Lieutenants J. R. McIntosh](#) and [D. P. Corrigan](#), ³ and, for the latter half of the course, [Lieutenants J. Smail](#) ⁴ and [F. J. Miles](#). ⁵ After the usual speedy revision of the routine phases of infantry training, the 'School' concentrated on problems of the attack in preparation for the push to the Po. Similarly, after some tough route marches and other hardening exercises such as the climbing of Monte Primo, the rest of the battalion concentrated on weapon training, live shoots, river crossings, co-operation with tanks, tank-hunting and night manoeuvres. For many of the new reinforcements, there was an element of freshness about much of this training, and, for all, there was the certainty that what they practised in March they would perform as 'the real thing' in April.

The stress laid on training during this period meant that organised entertainments were on a more limited scale than in earlier periods out of the line. Nevertheless, visits from the YMCA Mobile Cinema, [ENSA](#) and Italian orchestral concerts, and dances such as the one organised for the troops by the Communist Party of [Camerino](#), helped to keep the men from going stale. When there was no night training, most men found pleasant distractions from the more serious business of army life in the homes of their Italian friends. C Company's diary for March 1945 states: 'The hospitality of the local inhabitants greatly compensated for the lack of

entertainment and many were the invitations extended to the men of our Coy to visit their homes. This, together with the many touching scenes on our leaving the area, was conclusive evidence of the excellent behaviour of the troops during the stay and of the esteem in which they were held by the people of the district'.

During this period, the Battalion Headquarters officers' mess was established in the Poggio Maddalena, the country mansion of the Marquise Zucconi. On the occasion of a memorable dinner to [General Kippenberger](#), and again at a lunch for Mr W. J. Jordan, New Zealand High Commissioner in [London](#), the Marquessa placed at the disposal of the officers her dining room, crystal, linen, cutlery and crockery, and even assisted with the floral decorations. [General Kippenberger](#) greatly assisted the Colonel in his efforts to bring the battalion up to the highest pitch of enthusiasm for the coming battles by speaking of the unit's past history, of the grand characters he had known in it—Reg Romans, Peter Norris, Ted Thomson, Herbie Black and others—of the fine team spirit that had always animated the 23rd, and of the fact that he had never known it fail to take its objective. Such an address from such a man was a tonic to all who heard it.

On 18 March Padre Harding conducted a most impressive memorial service for the members of the battalion who had lost their lives in the recent fighting. On 23 March [General Kippenberger](#) took the salute at a full-dress rehearsal for the GOC's parade which was held on the following day. Lieutenant-General McCreery, the Eighth Army Commander, and [General Freyberg](#) inspected the battalions of 5 Brigade on the latter occasion. [General Freyberg](#) told the CO later that he was most impressed by 'your magnificent, truly magnificent 23rd Battalion.'

Colonel Thomas's private diary for this month demonstrates that the efforts to build up the martial qualities and to inculcate afresh the team spirit for which the unit had been famous were markedly successful. It also shows something of the spirit which stirred the commander himself, and through him the officers and the men who came under his influence and leadership.

'19/3/45. On Saturday morning I took the marching-out ceremony for the NCO school and was so impressed with their change in ten days that I could hardly speak to them. The Brigadier was present and inspected them—said they were up to OCTU standard. They really have put their hearts into it...22/3/45. This morning I have

been round the companies, inspecting 'A' in detail and watching 'C' at range practice. The Battalion is in wonderful fettle, the discipline is as good as ever it was and the spirit is old 23 through and through. And to think I once had a terrible apprehension about commanding a battalion—why there is nothing more exhilarating in the whole world! Everything works smoothly, we have a grand team and I am the captain. And I am truly content and grateful. 25/3/45. Yes! I think this month must be one of the happiest of my military life. Everything is going so very well.... the big parade was taken by the commander of the [Eighth Army](#), Genl. McCreery. Ah, but the boys were grand, steady as rocks. Heavens! I was proud of them. Everyone came forward and congratulated me on the 23rd's turn-out. [Kipp](#) in his quiet way, and dear old [Kipp](#) is never effusive, said: "I'm proud of you, my boy. Old Reg would have loved to have seen the Battalion today". So you can see I am really extremely happy.'

Parades, football matches and other engagements all passed into history as the time drew near for the 23rd to live up to the praise given its efficiency and other qualities. On 30 March the CO gave his company commanders their orders for the move up to [Forli](#), which was to precede joining in the grand attack on the [Senio](#). Securing surprise as to both the time and place of this big set-piece attack was highly important, and therefore various refinements of the normal security precautions were introduced: although the departure of the advance party no doubt raised suspicions, the men were not told of the real nature of the move until the 9 a.m. church parade on 1 April, the day on which the move began at 5 p.m. The men were urged to tell their Italian friends in the interests of security what they themselves had previously been told, namely, that they were merely leaving on extended manoeuvres. All company signboards and other evidences of an intention to return were left in the area to be removed some days later by the rear party. New Zealand badges and titles were not removed until the convoy was a considerable distance from [Camerino](#), when the vehicle fernleaf signs were replaced by the quite different 'H' signs and serial numbers of the 'Howe' Division. With these stratagems giving an indication of the importance of the occasion, the battalion returned to the [Forli](#) area on 2 April.

Several officers and senior NCOs had left the unit to take overdue furlough in New Zealand or to take appointments with the Prisoner-of-war Repatriation Unit in England. ⁶ The gaps were speedily filled and all the company commanders for the

forthcoming attack were experienced and well known in the unit. They were Captain Duncan (HQ Company), Major Harrison, later replaced by Lieutenant E. Taylor (Support), Major Marett (A), Major McArthur (B), Major Emery (C), and Major Cox (D).

The strategic situation on the [Senio](#) had scarcely changed since the New Zealanders had last been in the line in early March. The Germans still had twenty-five divisions in [Italy](#), which showed that the long uphill struggle of the Allied forces there had served a useful purpose. Five of these divisions were on the [Senio](#), with [98 Division](#) opposite the sector taken over by the New Zealand Division. The Eighth Army intention was to destroy the enemy forces south of the Po and thus prevent their manning the fortress area in southern [Germany](#). By this time, the Germans had been deserted by their best ally, winter, a force which in January and February had provided conditions highly advantageous to the defending forces, especially on the river lines. Now it was the drier period of spring: in place of mud, tanks would encounter dusty roads and green fields with firm, hard 'going'; the level of the water in many rivers and canals had dropped to depths easily manageable by infantry on foot. No longer was there any serious danger of seasonal rains which might hold up an advance.

The Eighth Army plan was to attack on a three-divisional front with [8 Indian Division](#) on the right, [2 New Zealand Division](#) in the centre, and 5 Kresowa (Polish) Division on the left. Beyond the [Senio](#) lay the even more strongly defended (it was understood) [Santerno](#), and then the Sillaro, [Idice](#), [Reno](#) and Po rivers. The first attack was designed to take the leading troops across the [Senio](#), to establish a bridgehead over the [Santerno](#) and to begin the advance northwards. In the New Zealand Division, the first phase of the attack was to be made with two brigades forward, the 5th on the right and the 6th on the left, and the comparatively new 9 Brigade in reserve. ⁷ In 5 Brigade, now under Brigadier I. L. [Bonifant](#), ⁸ the assaulting units in this first phase were to be the 21st, on the right, and the 28th, on the left, with the 23rd in reserve.

As a consequence of this plan, the 21st and 28th went straight into the line while the 23rd remained back. During the week of waiting for D-day, the 23rd was therefore able to practise various methods of assaulting enemy positions in and behind river stop-banks. In particular, it tried out ways and means of destroying wire

entanglements with bangalore torpedoes and by tearing them down with the aid of light anchors or grappling irons dragged by tanks. Of some importance to other units was the 23rd's experiment in constructing and using ramps from which Wasp and Crocodile flame-throwers were able to shoot their flames across a stopbank. So impressed was [General Freyberg](#) by the demonstration that the battalion's Wasps staged on the [Lamone](#) that he asked that it should be repeated two days later for the benefit of officers from other units. At the repeat performance—to quote Corporal Somerville—‘the place was lousy with Generals and Brigadiers and it was a really impressive sight and awesome to the imagination if one considered himself on the receiving end of the jet of fire.’ The Churchill Crocodiles belonged to an English unit, the commander of which made a wisecrack at the expense of some Support Company men who were struggling with a bogged Wasp: ‘I fail to see how you can keep up your adjectives and your identity as “H Div” too.’

On Sunday 8 April the orders for what was rightly termed ‘the biggest attack ever to be launched in [Italy](#)’ were passed down to the men, but the date of D-day was not revealed. Padre Harding celebrated Holy Communion at 7.30 a.m. and held another church service later in the day. Padre Callaghan conducted a service, with Mass, for Roman Catholics in the early afternoon. Officers of supporting arms attended a co-ordinating conference at Battalion Headquarters and completed plans for co-operation in the different phases of the attack. They included Major [Caughley](#)⁹ and Captain [Thomson](#)¹⁰ from [5 Field Regiment](#), Major W. [Ryan](#)¹¹ from [A Squadron 18 Armoured Regiment](#), Major [Henton](#)¹² and Lieutenant [Steel](#)¹³ of [32 Anti-Tank Battery](#), and Captain [Paddison](#)¹⁴ of the [4.2-inch Mortar Battery](#). So far as preparations for the attack and for all possible contingencies such as routes forward, priorities for vehicles, supplies of ammunition, evacuation of the wounded and the like were concerned, they were as complete as human ingenuity and long experience in battle procedure could make them. The result was a general air of expectancy and confidence which recaptured the atmosphere on the eve of [Alamein](#). But this time, the superiority of Allied equipment, air support, artillery and tanks, was more marked than ever before. The men knew that some 1640 aircraft, from Flying Fortresses and Liberators to modern fighters, were to be used on the [5 Corps](#) front. With wisdom bought at [Cassino](#), the commanders had decided to use 20-pound fragmentation bombs which would do maximum damage to communications, vehicles and enemy morale without cratering roads or creating other problems for

the advancing troops. Nearly 2000 tons of these bombs were to be dropped. The 356 guns on the New Zealand front were to fire 140,000 shells in the initial bombardment and just as many in the subsequent advance. Immediately after the artillery barrage lifted from the [Senio](#) line, the Wasps and Crocodiles were to dash forward and flame the far banks.

Typical of the fighting soldier's outlook on the eve of the great push are the entries for 8 April in Lance-Corporal J. McDowall's diary: 'Went to church. Good service. Major gave us the griff after dinner. Fullscale show—1640 aircraft and the biggest concentration of guns in the war. They hope to break him. 21 & 28 go so far over the [Senio](#) and then 23 Bn takes over from 21. If all goes well, we should have a good time. This should be the last big push in [Italy](#). Pray God everything goes according to plan. Received snaps from Mum. Great looking at them. Snaps are a great tonic, also airletter from Mum and one from May. Busy getting weapons and ammo ready.'

Had morale not been high on this occasion, no excuse could have been offered. The men had been rested out of the line. They were fully and efficiently trained and magnificently equipped. They were taking the offensive again with the odds very much in their favour. All the war news was good: [7 Armoured Division](#), veterans of the mobile war in the desert, were approaching [Bremen](#) and the Russians were also pressing forward into [Germany](#). C Company's diary gives the best contemporary impression of the sanguine outlook of the 23rd. 'Everyone felt extremely confident. Morale was high with the sight of the huge piles of ammunition, the densely populated gun-lines, and the daily moving up of more and more equipment. The OC attended a conference at [Div HQ](#) at which the GOC outlined the OP [operation] order for the initial phase of the attack. The Coy's spirits and confidence were even more increased when they heard of the colossal support, both from the air and the ground, that they were going to receive, when they made the assault.'

Early on 9 April came the word, confirming what every man really expected, that this was D-day. At 9 a.m. all the 23rd companies moved forward and dug in immediately behind the attacking units of 5 Brigade. Final orders were given: B Company was detailed to protect the brigade's right flank after the forward units had crossed the Canale di [Lugo](#) if protection were required; if the CO became a casualty,

Major McArthur was to take command until the arrival of Major Grant, the second-in-command. During the wait for the aerial armada to come over, Colonel Thomas, Padre Harding, Lieutenant Burt, and Second-Lieutenant Pat Gresson (Intelligence Officer) visited all the companies. Thomas noted later: 'We visited each small group in each platoon and gauged their spirit. I had never seen them better. They knew the coming show was well jacked up, the support terrific. I felt extraordinarily proud of them and their spirit, and experienced a thrill of achievement, to see how effective the hard training, discipline and the NCO school had been.' The unit diary described the same spirit in fewer words: 'Everyone in grand heart and "rarin' to go".'

At 1.50 p.m. the bombing programme began. For an hour and a half, the heavy bombers pounded the area between the Canale di [Lugo](#) and the [Santerno](#). Then the fighter-bombers attacked the nearer area from the [Senio](#) to the [Lugo](#). At 3.20 p.m. the artillery bombardment opened. From then till 7.20 p.m., with five ten-minute breaks during which the fighter-bombers engaged the enemy, the bombardment continued. After the flamethrowers had done their work, the attacking infantry began to cross the [Senio](#). By this time, the front was clouded with smoke and the spring freshness of the air destroyed by the acrid smell of cordite and burning oil. Waiting in reserve increased the tension for some, but shortly after 9.30 p.m. the first bedraggled and bomb-shocked prisoners began to arrive at the forward collecting post established at the 23rd's headquarters. Knowing their turn was near, most members of the battalion tried to snatch some sleep before morning.

Only at 4 a.m. on 10 April did the 23rd move forward. The rate of advance was slow on account of the crush of vehicles on the road and using the bridge the engineers had already constructed over the [Senio](#). This did not matter as the orders given had categorically insisted that units should not advance beyond the [Lugo](#) until after 12.30 p.m. on 10 April because the heavy bombers would be employed in softening up the enemy defences on the [Santerno](#) up to that hour. As it moved up to its reserve position behind the 21st, A Company took ten prisoners from positions that had been by-passed. The 21st was held up just after midday and, according to plan, the 23rd passed through the [Auckland](#) companies at 2 p.m.

Colonel Thomas's account of his reconnaissance forward, prior to launching his companies into battle, is noteworthy for its tribute to two of his men. 'Pat Gresson and I moved forward to see how the battle was progressing. The driver of my jeep I

have had since the [Florence](#) days, Pte. Gordon [McKenzie](#),¹⁵ a fearless and willing Scotsman to whom nothing however dangerous is a trouble. When I leave the jeep and go on foot because of the danger, Mac without a question follows with his tommy gun. The other lad is Stan [Gilchrist](#),¹⁶ already recommended for gallantry with a rifle coy, who operates the two wireless sets on the jeep—the 48 set to the companies and the 22 set to Brigade HQ. Stan has not been with us long but it only takes the first day of action to know he is the goods. He just doesn't know fear.'

Conforming with the Maoris on their left, the 23rd attacked at 2.30 p.m., with two companies—D on the right and A on the left—forward. Keeping about 400 yards in rear of the forward companies, B and C Companies began their advance a little later. The bridges over the [Lugo](#) had been blown but the canal was not a serious obstacle to tanks. But one tank was knocked out as it began to cross. Colonel Thomas therefore arranged for the supporting artillery and the tanks with the 21st to fire and cover the crossing of the remaining tanks. This small operation went well and the 23rd, with the tanks of A Squadron [18 Armoured Regiment](#), managed to reach the [Scolo Tratturo](#) without much trouble. Here, however, both companies came up against determined opposition. D's leading platoons, 16 and 17, were pinned down by Spandau and mortar fire, most of which came from the right of the railway embankment. No. 18 Platoon, from farther back, engaged the enemy with Brens and Piats used as mortars and thus enabled the leaders to take cover. Major Cox organised supporting fire, and about 4.30 p.m. D Company launched a determined assault on the enemy strong-point and succeeded in reducing it. The leading sections killed some of the enemy and took six prisoners.



from the senio to the adige, 9–27 april 1945

In the meantime, A Company, with 7 and 9 Platoons forward, had come under tank and small-arms fire against which no progress could be made over the particularly open ground in front of them. Mortar fire caused 8 Platoon, in reserve, five casualties, including Lieutenant [Rodley](#)¹⁷ wounded. Major Marett now tried to continue the advance with the help of the tanks, but no sooner did the leading tank try to cross the canal than it was knocked out by a direct hit and effectively blocked the crossing. Marett and his Company Sergeant-Major, 'Toby' Thomas, reconnoitred the front and found little opposition on the extreme left flank. Colonel Thomas decided to act on this information and to by-pass the enemy strongpoint. Another item of news which persuaded him that to advance on the left would be the wisest policy was secured from one of D Company's prisoners. This man stated that a Tiger tank was concealed behind two houses on A's immediate front. The plan now decided upon provided for D Company to move forward along the railway embankment while A executed a wide left-hook which would bring it back to its axis of advance some distance behind the enemy strongpoint. Both companies began their advance at 9.30 p.m., after the artillery and heavy mortars had softened up the area to be crossed. A Company made contact with the Maoris on the left and then advanced as planned until it ran into a minefield about 200 yards short of the [Santerno](#). Further reconnaissance showed that the enemy covered this minefield with Spandau fire. A's leaders were able, however, to locate and mark a gap in the field. D Company also made good progress and was able to occupy houses just short of the river.

The reserve companies were now ordered forward. C went to support A but attempted to clear the strongpoint en route. After something of a fight, in which Private [Reed](#)¹⁸ displayed conspicuous courage in charging an enemy post, C Company left the enemy to their fate and followed A's route round to the left. The enemy put up a series of flares, some of which called down DF artillery fire, but as this fell harmlessly some distance to the rear of the battalion, it merely caused amusement. Next morning, finding themselves by-passed and cut off, the Germans in this strongpoint, over thirty in number, surrendered under the white flag, some to the 21st and some to the anti-tank platoon of the 23rd. B Company had little difficulty in following D, especially as the railway line marked its right flank. Both B and C Companies took up reserve positions immediately to the rear of D and A. The rest of the night was spent in getting the supporting tanks forward to the companies and in 'marrying them up'. On what had been something, if little, more than an approach march to the [Santerno](#), the 23rd had taken 60 prisoners for the loss of 2 killed and 10 wounded.

In preparation for crossing the [Santerno](#), Colonel Thomas sent out patrols in the early morning of 11 April. Sergeant Eric [Michie](#)¹⁹ of 16 Platoon led the most daring and the most successful of these patrols. Indeed, his was the only one to penetrate the minefields, reach the river and come back with information vital to the planning of the operations of the next twenty-four hours. Michie himself reconnoitred the river and the far stopbank despite the fact that the Germans were periodically mortaring and machine-gunning the area. So severe was their fire at most places along the near bank that other patrols were forced to report their inability to reach the river.

The day of 11 April was spent in completing preparations for the attack which was to go in at one o'clock the next morning. Most of the men rested in houses, some of which had to be cleared of enemy, with the result that the 23rd took forty-seven prisoners for the day. Around 6 p.m. A Company patrols to the river cleared some Spandau posts on their left front. This apparently insignificant success was of more importance than was at first appreciated. These particular posts had been pinning down the Maoris farther to the left and holding up their advance. Now the Maoris probed forward, found a stretch of the river free of mines, and not only crossed in strength but also got two anti-tank guns up to ensure holding this bridgehead. Colonel [Awatere](#)²⁰ rang the 23rd to thank it for its assistance and to

notify it of the position of his men. Colonel Thomas reciprocated by thanking the Maoris for establishing the bridgehead over the [Santerno](#), which he now proposed to use to get two of his companies across without the risks and casualties which would almost certainly attend a frontal assault on a defended stopbank.

Accordingly, at 8 p.m., the CO instructed C Company to cross the [Santerno](#) via the Maori bridgehead, to wheel right and cross the railway embankment. Then, with the aid of the tanks it was hoped to get up to it, the company was to take a group of houses outside the village of [San Agata](#), an important part of its objective. The CO planned to pass A Company with tanks through in the rear of C and swing in behind [San Agata](#) with these two companies while D Company engaged the enemy with a limited frontal assault. The plan was more easily formed than executed.

As C Company approached the river, the enemy shelled the crossing where the engineers were constructing a bridge and the company had two men wounded. From Major [Reedy](#),²¹ the right-flank Maori company commander, Major Emery discovered that the enemy had swung his defences at right angles to the river and appeared to be holding the line of the railway embankment. Accordingly, he attacked towards the railway with 14 Platoon, under Lieutenant [Mosley](#),²² and 15 Platoon, under Lieutenant [Robb](#),²³ while sending 13 Platoon, under Lieutenant Eric Holland, to clear the stopbank of the [Santerno](#) as far as the point where the railway crossed the river. Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons pressed home their attack, killing a number of Germans in the process. They proceeded to dig in on the embankment, with the enemy holding firmly on the far side at some places. No. 13 Platoon quickly completed its task on the stopbank and was now directed to attack and capture the railway station. This it did against light opposition, only one prisoner being taken. The railway station was now held as a firm base for further operations and as a rendezvous for the tanks.

The situation along the embankment was confused for some time. At some points there were lively exchanges, with grenades being thrown by both sides at short range, and tommy guns and pistols were in constant use. At one point, Corporal Charles Monaghan, one of the coolest men in the company, led his section against a trouble spot, crawled up the embankment and pushed, rather than threw, grenades almost into the faces of the enemy. Those Germans not killed withdrew and a 14 Platoon party found a house near the station unoccupied, although the enemy was obviously holding on both sides of the embankment farther along

towards [Massa Lombarda](#).

On his radio, Major Emery inquired from Battalion Headquarters as to the progress of the tanks and whether or not he should attack [San Agata](#). The CO ruled that this attack should not be launched until the supporting tanks were up with the infantry. Emery was in the very act of reporting 'sector quieter now' when two hand or rifle grenades landed at his feet, literally blowing his operator, Corporal [Bluett](#),²⁴ over and indicating that the 'quietness' was only relative. This ended radio contact with Battalion Headquarters for the night.

Major Emery and his Company Sergeant-Major, WO II 'Andy' [Allan](#),²⁵ a man whose sterling qualities had long been a source of quiet inspiration to the company, now proceeded to tidy up the situation on the railway embankment and to prepare for the attack on [San Agata](#). Lieutenant Holland was sent to find a suitable crossing of the embankment for tanks and then to bring up the tanks. Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons, meanwhile, tried to dislodge all enemy posts from the embankment.

No. 15 Platoon crossed the embankment in pursuit of an enemy section but ran into a much larger party of enemy. 'Halt! Who goes there?', called Lieutenant Robb, somewhat to the amazement of his older soldiers. The reply was a hail of bullets which sent 15 Platoon to ground. The enemy was apparently reacting strongly to the threat offered by the establishment of the expanding Maori and 23rd bridgehead and was reinforcing with fresh troops.

Then followed one of those incidents which, even if of no particular military importance, live on in soldiers' memories simply because of their dramatic character. As the enemy fire thickened, Major Emery stood on the top of the embankment, careless of bullets and disregarding the fact that he was clearly silhouetted with the artificial moonlight behind him. Waving his walking-stick, he shouted, 'Surround them, Mr. Robb! Surround them!' Catching something of the spirit of his company commander, Lieutenant Robb took up the call and shouted out, 'Righto chaps! Surround them!' A few men moved out to the flanks and exchanged further shots with the enemy but, as the opposition appeared to be formidable, no very serious attempt was made to complete the encircling process.

Soon after Major Emery had shouted a third time, 'Surround them, Mr. Robb!', a

Tiger tank nosed its way round the corner of a house and began to advance towards the 15 Platoon men. 'Whose tank is that, Major Emery?' inquired Robb. The fearless major, probably by this time more hopeful than certain, replied, 'One of ours, Mr. Robb! Carry on! Carry on! Surround them!' But, as the tank opened fire, and as they had already exhausted their supply of Piat bombs, the 15 Platoon men decided that the reverse slope of the embankment was the only safe place for them and they made a dash for safety. As they approached the embankment, their intrepid commander waved his stick again, shouted, 'Back, C Company! Back!' and pointed to the enemy.

No great damage had been done by the enemy fire. The darkness had saved 15 Platoon. Although it was clear that little progress could be made without tank support, Emery was in no way daunted or discouraged as he joined his men on the reverse slope. That the spirits of the men were not seriously lowered may be briefly illustrated. In a nearby ditch, Private Doug [Smith](#)²⁶ was chuckling away. His neighbour asked, 'What's the joke?' and Smith replied: 'I'm just laughing at old Tuan—how when he was telling us of the thousands of aircraft and hundreds of guns that were going to support our attack, he said, "And if there are any enemy left, we'll bloody well annihilate them", and how when he was telling us how we were to attack down the river instead of across it, he said, "We'll roll the enemy up like a carpet". This is how we're doing it.'

Meanwhile, 14 Platoon had also struck trouble. A large party of enemy had tried to cut the men off from the embankment when they advanced from it. Lieutenant Mosley's men engaged this party in a fire fight which lasted for several minutes before the enemy withdrew. No. 14 Platoon now rejoined Company Headquarters and 15 Platoon on the embankment.

About 1 a.m. on 12 April, in the absence of radio communications, Second-Lieutenant McIntosh arrived at C Company headquarters with a message from the CO concerning the attack to be made by the other companies with the tanks. Half an hour or so later, A Company arrived on the scene. In crossing the [Santerno](#), Major Marett left 9 Platoon behind to provide infantry protection for the tanks of D Company when they crossed by the Bailey bridge and had to be escorted down the river to the point where D made its crossing on foot. This platoon had to wait some time at the bridge and then found it impossible to get the tanks over the railway

embankment. A bulldozer was required to clear a track but none was available for some hours.

In the meantime, 7 and 8 Platoons and C Company again tried to clear the enemy from those points on the embankment they still occupied. The A Company men moved out to the left to take some houses on the road which ran under the railway line and on to [San Agata](#). Partly as a result of the sound leadership and great determination shown by Sergeant James [Russell](#),²⁷ they managed to kill or drive back the first enemy they met. Weight of fire forced them to halt at the first of the houses captured and later Major Marett pulled his men back to rejoin C Company.

Lieutenant Holland had been unable to find any crossing for tanks over the embankment and it seemed that the subway or tunnel under the railway line would have to be used. Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons, with several exchanges of fire with the enemy, managed to reach the subway just before dawn. En route, Privates [Sowman](#)²⁸ and Ramsay fired their Piats from the top of the embankment at the enemy tanks and Lance-Corporal Cliff [Vaux](#)²⁹ led his section in a vigorous local counter-attack.

One of the A Squadron tanks approached the subway but was knocked out by a direct hit. This showed only too clearly that a Tiger tank was covering this route through the embankment. About the same time, Lance-Sergeant O. L. Howat, who had been, with Sergeant McIndoe, one of the principal leaders in the series of short charges on Spandau and other posts, was wounded. Private 'Groppi' [Gilchrist](#)³⁰ raced to his assistance and, despite a second burst of fire which cut Gilchrist's jacket in several places and wounded Howat again, he finished bandaging the wounded man and then coolly carried him to safety. Private Dave [White](#),³¹ one of the most popular men in his platoon, was fatally wounded at this juncture. His wounds were dressed under fire by Private Johnnie [Mayo](#).³² On this and other occasions, both Mayo and Gilchrist displayed the complete disregard for danger and self which many men, especially stretcher-bearers, whose names have not been recorded, showed when comrades were wounded.

After some fruitless attempts to make headway and striking tough opposition, C and A Companies decided to consolidate along the embankment. Colonel Thomas had already decided that his plan for taking [San Agata](#) from the west had failed. As early as 2.15 a.m., he had sent B Company down to the right to cross the river

where 8 Indian Division was reported to have effected a crossing. B Company was then to come in on San Agata from the opposite side to that on which C and A Companies were placed. Major McArthur and his men marched down the near side of the river till they found the Indians, and they also found that the report of a crossing was quite premature. Unfortunately, 10 Platoon, under Lieutenant Warwick Hobbs,³³ came under mortar and SP gun fire and sustained casualties, six men being wounded, including Sergeant W. H. Jones.³⁴ B Company returned to its houses to await further orders.

By now all reports coming into Battalion Headquarters confirmed that A and C Companies were fully engaged along the railway embankment, through or over which they could not pass their tanks. The CO therefore somewhat reluctantly decided to commit D Company to a frontal assault across the Santerno and on to San Agata. Sergeant Michie's earlier reconnaissance now proved of the greatest value and, no doubt, the efforts of C Company had drawn off some of the enemy. In any case, 18 Platoon, under Lieutenant Lee,³⁵ made a vigorous crossing and secured part of the far bank. Major Cox now passed 16 Platoon, under Lieutenant Frank Miles, and 17 Platoon, under Lieutenant Logan,³⁶ through 18 Platoon. This was done successfully. Some Germans, including a few moving back from the river-bank, were taken completely by surprise and the platoons moved straight into San Agata, where they occupied the best of the houses.

Delighted at the more or less unexpected speed of D Company's success, but somewhat worried about its isolated position in 'Tiger' country, Colonel Thomas now despatched B Company to reinforce the position on D's right flank. With 11 Platoon leading, B Company crossed the river at first light without opposition. When a short distance across, the leaders wheeled right and approached a string of German dugouts in the far stopbank from the rear. Spectacularly led in their assault by Second-Lieutenant J. Smail, 11 Platoon raced down the stopbank, whooping like Red Indians and firing their weapons at any sign of German resistance. The surprise gained, both by the direction of the attack and its hearty momentum, speedily reduced the opposition and, within a very few minutes, over thirty prisoners were taken. Seeing Germans making their escape both through the houses to the east of San Agata and through the fields, sections under Corporals Mervyn Staples³⁷ and Jim Tither³⁸ gave chase. Both sections added considerably to the bag of prisoners.

After taking different routes, they joined up on the road about 400 yards away. Somewhat breathless and therefore not in a fit state for accurate shooting, they speeded the fleeing Germans with some rapidly fired shots. No. 10 Platoon, under Lieutenant Hobbs, continued to move down the stopbank, where it captured another five prisoners before consolidating on the right of 11 Platoon in an area where, later in the morning, the Indians came up on their right flank. No. 12 Platoon crossed the [Santerno](#) after the excitement was over and dug in on the left of 11 Platoon and nearer to [San Agata](#). It took two prisoners and found a store of weapons.

When Colonel Thomas made his rounds of the companies in the early hours of daylight, the situation was reasonably good. A and C were still being shelled but the enemy showed no signs of being aggressive. B and D were without tanks or antitank guns. The CO formed the D Company platoons into a triangular defence system in their houses. While in [San Agata](#), he 'witnessed a grand feat of co-operation with our air-force: a Tiger tank, one of those which had worried C and A Companies, suddenly opened fire down the street, horribly close, but a flight of fighter bombers, cruising only a few hundred feet up, saw our plight and swooped into the attack, their bombs falling only some 300 yards from where we stood, and showering us with rubble. We put up a smoke candle recognition signal, just in case, in answer to which the flight leader zoomed low over our heads, wagged his wings, and swung into the attack again.'

Later in the morning, Private [Gunning](#) ³⁹ of 11 Platoon, on forward picket duty, saw a tank approaching slowly. He sent a hurried call back to Company Headquarters and the FOO there quickly brought a 'stonk' down. In addition, the watchful fighter-bombers also bombed the menacing Tiger. Apart from intermittent shelling and mortaring, the companies were left alone by the enemy. The bridgehead over the [Santerno](#) was thus well established and, as the policy was to allow the enemy no rest and no time to reinforce, within a few hours another advance was begun.

As the Indians had drawn level with B Company on the right, the Maoris had reached Ventura on the left, and, farther left again, 6 Brigade was making good headway, Brigadier Bonifant decided to launch another attack at 2 p.m. Zero hour was later postponed till 4 p.m. as 6 Brigade was to join the attack and needed the additional time for reorganising. For the attack the artillery provided a barrage lifting

100 yards every three minutes. The 23rd attacked with two companies forward, B on the right and C on the left, and two back, D on the right and A on the left.

The attack went well. The Tiger tanks which had troubled the battalion during the night and earlier in the day were again encountered as they did their best to delay the advance. They were covering the German evacuation of [Massa Lombarda](#), which had been something of a forward base, headquarters area and supply centre. No. 11 Platoon, leading the B Company advance, had to deploy on several occasions. Second-Lieutenant Smail and Sergeant [Sharp](#)⁴⁰ did good work in keeping the attack moving, and again Corporals Staples and Tither led their sections with commendable determination. When machine-gun fire from tanks held up the leading elements, Private O'Donohue,⁴¹ the platoon wireless operator, quickly got accurate messages back which enabled the heavy guns to shell the area in which the tanks were operating. Unfortunately, at this stage, Corporal Staples was badly wounded by machine-gun fire from a pillbox. Under fire, Second-Lieutenant Smail and Corporal Tither got him into a safe position whence a stretcher-bearing party, which included the Padre and Private [Strathern](#),⁴² got him back to the RAP. The three supporting tanks, under Sergeant Alex [Mowat](#),⁴³ came forward and dealt effectively with the ground opposition. Nos. 10 and 12 Platoons then passed through 11 Platoon and, taking some twenty prisoners, pressed on to the objective, the road line east of [Massa Lombarda](#). In 12 Platoon, when Lieutenant [McMillan](#)⁴⁴ was wounded, Sergeant James R. [Wilson](#)⁴⁵ took over the platoon and, showing initiative and personal bravery of a high order, he led his men in a number of charges on enemy posts just short of the objective. Nos. 10 and 12 Platoons, with their supporting tanks, also left several German dead on their route forward.

C Company had a somewhat similar experience to B's. Profiting by the battalion's earlier experience, the company by-passed a tank which was troubling it and left it to the oncoming tanks. Lance-Sergeant Reg [Edmondson](#)⁴⁶ distinguished himself in wiping out a troublesome machine-gun post at a time when the momentum of the attack appeared likely to be lost. Corporal [Mathieson](#),⁴⁷ who had been particularly active in the operations of the previous night, again showed himself to be aggressive in attack. 'His courage ... did much to maintain the high morale and fighting spirit that enabled the company to successfully withstand the determined enemy counter-attacks at a most critical stage of the general advance,' states the

citation for Mathieson's MM. Until he was shot through the head, Corporal [Bullimore](#)⁴⁸ also led his men in determined fashion. C Company lost contact with B on the right for some four hours but retained touch with the Maoris on the left. The company's tanks also got diverted and did not advance with the infantry, but the tanks with the Maoris played an important part in shooting 13 and 14 Platoons on to their objective. The company diary recorded that 'The Coy was in excellent spirits and a good killing mood and many Germans were killed'. Tiger tanks twice forced the leading section to withdraw somewhat from the objective, but eventually two troops of tanks arrived to assist C Company. About an hour later, after Lieutenant Mosley had established contact with B Company, both companies advanced beyond the objective into an area in which the New Zealand artillery was still conducting harassing shoots.

A and D Companies had comparatively uneventful advances. They both came under some shell and mortar fire: A had two casualties and D one. The repeated moves of Battalion Headquarters gave Lieutenant Burt and his men in the signals platoon plenty of work. Sergeant Ted [Glass](#)⁴⁹ time and again displayed great energy and courage in getting line communications established and maintained.

The Brigadier had planned to resume the attack with another artillery barrage at two o'clock the next morning. This was keeping up the pressure in earnest, especially as many of the men had had no proper sleep for three days. When Colonel Thomas heard about 9 p.m. that the forward companies were beyond the day's objective and meeting no resistance, but were troubled with shells from their own artillery, he promptly got the shelling stopped and secured through Brigadier Bonifant a change in plans, namely, the cancellation of the barrage for 2 a.m., together with permission to press on immediately to the next objective. Consequently, the advance was resumed at midnight. Mainly mounted on the tanks, the 23rd pushed on another thousand yards before bedding down for a few hours' sleep. On 12 April the battalion had taken 112 prisoners for the loss of 4 killed and 20 wounded.

By 6.15 a.m. on 13 April, the Brigadier was receiving reports of successes all along the New Zealand front. The enemy were streaming back across the Scolo Zamolo. The wisdom of pressing on was manifest. He therefore ordered the 23rd to advance to the [Scolo Zaniolo](#). This was digging in the spurs with a vengeance, but no

one objected to further efforts which promised to secure a genuine break-through. By 6.45 a.m., therefore, Colonel Thomas in his jeep was leading the forward companies, mounted on their tanks, along the road. After the CO had pulled into a house where he established his forward headquarters, the tanks went another quarter of a mile along the road before they were fired upon. The infantry jumped off with amazing rapidity and set about engaging the enemy.

In his report, made later that day, Second-Lieutenant Smail, commanding 11 Platoon, described the encounter on his front: 'Cpl Tither was sent round to stopbank on left supported by tank fire. It was discovered that the opposition was at least 3 or 4 hundred yds away and while moving Cpl Tither was wounded. A small party reced house immediately right, taking one prisoner, and a proper appreciation was able to be made. While directing his tp from his turret Sgt. Mowat, who was held very high in the pl's esteem, was fatally shot through the stomach. Major McArthur came up to see trouble and brought 240 rounds gunfire down on the enemy's line, plus smoke. He extended 12 Pl left of us and we advanced, while the tanks gave covering fire on known positions, across open country on the left of the road. The tanks did not move forward with us as they had been under bazooka fire. Unfortunately, the enemy had withdrawn but could be seen running in the distance and 10 Pl took several prisoners and had plenty of long range sniping. This was our objective and the Brigadier refused us permission to advance as we were over the bomb line. We unwillingly consolidated in casas and have been here ever since. Morale of the platoon has been exceptionally high throughout and, all told, we have had only three casualties and three evacuated sick. We have taken over 50 prisoners.'

On the left, C Company, now in touch with 21 Battalion, which had come up to relieve the Maoris, pressed home a vigorous attack with excellent supporting fire from its tanks. Practice in battle drill was producing tank-infantry co-operation of a high order. With two troops of tanks giving the support required, the company took its objective 'despite the enemy who remained and fired to the last. They were all killed, the Coy not being in a mood for prisoners after being fired at until the last minute'.⁵⁰ The battalion's total of prisoners for the day was 48. The casualties could hardly have been smaller for such an advance and such a gain—only one man had been wounded in the 23rd, although, as noted by Smail, the tank sergeant had been killed.

Fifth Brigade now rested for two and a half days while 6 and 9 Brigades kept up the pressure in the advance to establish a bridgehead over the [Sillaro River](#). This rest was most necessary because not even success piled on success could carry men forward indefinitely without a good sleep. The company seconds-in-command had done a good job in keeping hot meals up to the attacking companies. They now got showers as well as bedrolls and clean clothes forward to the weary and dirty men. Thereafter, as C Company diary chronicled, 'Everyone slept, rested, showered and changed clothing and morale was once more 100 per cent'.

By this time, the [Eighth Army](#) was meeting with such success that it was decided to continue pushing forward and to modify the plan whereby the [Fifth Army](#) was to join in to make the break-through. Consequently, while [5 Corps](#) continued to advance along the coast, [13 Corps](#), composed of [2 New Zealand Division](#) and [10 Indian Division](#), was to push across the plains. As [10 Indian Division](#) was still moving down from the mountains, the demands on the individual New Zealand brigades were somewhat reduced by placing 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade under [General Freyberg](#). On the afternoon of 16 April, by which time 6 and 9 Brigades had reached the Scolo Mantanara, orders were given for 5 Brigade to pass through 6 Brigade that night, with the 23rd taking over from the 25th.

With D Company forward on the right and A on the left, the 23rd advanced at 5 p.m. and, without striking any serious opposition, progressed about a thousand yards from 25 Battalion's FDLs. Demolitions and canals held up the tanks and support weapons. The CO called a halt at midnight, by which time ten prisoners had been taken with no loss to the 23rd. At 5.30 a.m. next day, 17 April, with A and D Companies still in the lead, the battalion pushed on and covered another two miles before the tanks were again held up by a canal. The infantry advanced another thousand yards to a line on which they were ordered to halt. On the previous day, Brigadier Bonifant had announced that 999 prisoners had passed through the 5 Brigade cage and he offered a bottle of brandy to the men who brought in the prisoner who raised the total to 1000. Major McArthur and Private [Holloway](#)⁵¹ shared the honour; the bottle was shared more widely. B Company took four prisoners, one of whom was selected to be No. 1000 for the campaign and was hurried off in a jeep to the brigade cage as 21 Battalion was expected to be racing its first prisoner of the day back at the same time. The jeep driver and Holloway met

the Brigade Commander himself and persuaded him to make one job of guiding them back to the cage and picking up their brandy. The 23rd took thirty-one more prisoners that day before a halt was called and the lead surrendered to 9 Brigade and the [Gurkhas](#) somewhat earlier than had been expected.

On the night of 18–19 April, the two forward brigades launched the last set-piece attack of the campaign when they attacked across the Gaiana against [4 Parachute Division](#). That night and until 11 a.m. on 19 April, C Company was under command of 43 Gurkha Brigade and was made responsible for protecting the forward engineers and their bridging equipment. As the left flank was exposed and the paratroopers had concentrated all the guns, rocket-firing projectors, nebelwerfers and other mortars they could secure in an attempt to stop the advance, C Company found, according to its diary, 'the area the most unhealthy of the whole campaign' and suffered casualties of one killed and five wounded. The company RAP men also had a busy time attending to wounded [Gurkhas](#). As the paratroopers emerged from hiding when the attacking force had moved on, C Company had more than once to fight to secure the bridging site for the engineers.

Late on 19 April, 5 Brigade took over from 9 Brigade with the 23rd relieving the Divisional Cavalry on the right and the 21st relieving the 22nd on the left. No fighting took place that night. Intercept messages, however, indicated that [4 Parachute Division](#) and elements of I Parachute Division, with supporting tanks, were pulling back to the Idice River, where the Genghis Khan Line was expected to act as the last and strongest set of defences before the Po. The New Zealand divisional intelligence summary, issued at this time, indicated that a determined resistance could be expected on the [Idice](#). It stated: 'It seems clear now that the enemy is pinning such hopes as he has to a policy of wearing us down in the belief that, if he can once take the momentum out of our thrusts, he will have time to regroup for the defence of the Po.... To our immediate South today, our neighbours maintained pressure and made some progress, while North of [Argenta](#) and in the Mountains below [Bologna](#) satisfactory progress and advances continued. They make the future in our sector all the more vital for, if the enemy cannot hold the [Idice](#) line here, his whole defensive system, not only south of the Po but on the Po itself is affected'.

With this information and determined that the enemy should not be allowed to hold the [Idice](#), the 23rd began to advance at 5.30 a.m. on 20 April with A and D

Companies forward. The German strongpoints in and around [Budrio](#) held up 21 Battalion on the left but, after getting the anti-tank guns to cover that flank, Colonel Thomas pushed the leading companies past [Budrio](#) and up to the banks of the [Idice](#). A Tiger tank emerged from the [Budrio](#) area and fired a few shots at the 23rd men, the foremost of whom were soon a mile past this strongpoint. The by-passing of this enemy defensive position was a complete success since the river stopbanks were reached without any fighting. No. 7 Platoon captured intact, and with a team of five still manning the set, a complete wireless installation. Not to be outdone, 8 Platoon captured five prisoners who were quite unaware that the New Zealanders were anywhere near. By 11.30 a.m., 7 and 8 Platoons reported the near stopbank in their possession. After a quick reconnaissance, Major Marett reported that, although there were mines and wired defences, the enemy was not active and a crossing appeared possible. Colonel Thomas correctly summed-up the absence of enemy fire as due to their belief that [Budrio](#) was still holding out—as in fact it was—and therefore no attack was to be expected that day or night. He therefore decided to gatecrash the line and rely on the effect of surprise. On his instructions, Major Marett ordered Lieutenant O'Sullivan ⁵² to take 9 Platoon across the Idice River while 7 and 8 Platoons continued to hold the near stopbank and gave covering fire when necessary. Although a few sentries woke up in time to fire some shots at O'Sullivan and his men, by 12.10 p.m. 9 Platoon was across the river without casualties and was occupying the nearest houses without any serious fighting. The platoon found two companies of Germans, with stacks of arms and ammunition, but totally unprepared for battle. As was discovered later from prisoners, these German troops had marched for two days from the [Bologna](#) area to take up positions on the [Idice](#), where they were supposed to fight to the last round and the last man. Their march had been rendered more than arduous by the bombing and strafing of the Allied air force. Exhausted, they had arrived that morning an hour or two earlier and, understanding the attacking [Eighth Army](#) troops to be still miles away, they had taken their boots off and were resting in order to be fit to fight that night or the next day. 'They were caught literally with their pants down and boots off,' said the 23rd unit diary. O'Sullivan and his men attacked with vigour, killed 25 and captured 32, and, to quote Major Marett's report, 'shot at and chased Germans too numerous to count—a chance that comes only once in a lifetime.' Farther along the bank, 7 Platoon was sent across to reinforce 9's bridgehead. Its members had a little

difficulty, but within an hour the two platoons were well into the Genghis Khan Line and available to assist D's crossing. A Company's success was the more remarkable as it had no casualties for the taking of forty-two prisoners.

Major Cox anticipated trouble from the Germans now fully alerted along the front. He therefore called up the unit Wasps and a troop of tanks and plastered the far bank with liquid fire and with tank-gun fire before sending two platoons of D Company across at 1 p.m. The leading section of 18 Platoon met heavy small-arms fire from a post that had not been burned out. Corporal [Bell](#),⁵³ the section leader, was wounded but Private 'Tuck' [MacLeod](#)⁵⁴ stormed the post, killed two of the enemy and got his section far enough forward to cover the advance of the other sections.

No. 17 Platoon tackled a large house. Looking through a manhole in the wall of a basement, Lance-Sergeant [Hume](#)⁵⁵ saw men, heavy and stupid with sleep, emerging from a dugout in the floor and joining a milling crowd. He also saw piled weapons in one corner and, when some men moved towards them, he opened fire and shot one. The others panicked and bolted for the back door. [Hume](#) and his mates took three prisoners but most of the Germans got away, although some fell to the Brens which had been quickly mounted upstairs by other members of 17 Platoon. The Bren and tommy-gunners upstairs 'had some great shooting as the enemy ran, not only from this house, but from other houses in the vicinity'.

Within a few minutes, 17 and 18 Platoons took thirty prisoners and killed and wounded several others. The dumps of ammunition, the mortars and other paraphernalia all proved the enemy's intention to make a serious stand on the [Idice](#). Major Cox ordered the destruction of some of these dumps in case the enemy recaptured them.

That the enemy, once roused to action, was not prepared to accept the result of this surprise attack was quickly shown by the amount of shell and mortar fire now directed at the shallow bridgehead. 'During the afternoon, some of the most intense shellfire I have known was directed on us,' wrote Colonel Thomas. This fire was kept up for most of the afternoon. The bridgehead remained shallow as the 23rd companies were ordered not to go more than 100 yards beyond the river as the [Air Force](#) was due to bomb the area in front. This it did, and A Company came in for a

small amount of bombing and strafing because it was so far forward. Enemy parties had been probing during the afternoon. The first of these came marching down the road in single file as if they were quite ignorant of the presence of the 23rd men, who waited to open fire until they were able to shoot up a dozen or more.

According to the unit diary, the enemy launched a strong counter-attack about 6 p.m. ⁵⁶ If this had been a really strong counter-attack, the situation could have been serious as the afternoon's shellfire had prevented the engineers from erecting a bridge over the [Idice](#), and consequently tanks and supporting arms had not reached A and D Companies. Whether or not the enemy seen near a series of dugouts were aggressively inclined, the D Company men proved competent to deal with them. Sergeant Robert Maitland dashed forward, firing his tommy gun, to challenge these Germans. When some took refuge in a dugout, he fired into it and forced the occupants to surrender. His example was followed by his men, who rounded up eighteen prisoners, including two officers, and forced others to flee in disorder. Fires in D Company's area continued to attract enemy shellfire but the company held on. On 20 April the battalion had taken 130 prisoners and had had three men wounded.

Late that day, the Maoris came up on the right of the 23rd while, on the left, the 21st, having mastered [Budrio](#), got three companies across the river at 8.30 p.m. Farther to the left, 6 Brigade had established a bridgehead of its own during the afternoon. In doing so, it had secured the only known ford over the [Idice](#). This was to prove important as 5 Brigade was ordered to extend its bridgehead under an artillery barrage at midnight and needed to use the 6 Brigade ford for getting its armour forward. The 5th's bridgehead was extended to a depth of 1500 yards, the tanks 'married up' with the infantry again and all was ready for the advance to be continued on a broad front at 8 a.m. on 21 April.

The advance did not begin earlier as the bomb-line had been reached. Once it did begin, with the 23rd again in the van of 5 Brigade, B and C Companies moved so speedily that some bridges and canal crossings were captured intact, although they had demolition charges fixed ready for firing. The advance was not entirely unopposed: one Maori company had four tanks knocked out while B Company of the 23rd had one tank 'brewed up' as the result of a direct hit. When 10 Platoon was held up about this time, Private J. J. L. Strathern rushed forward and, single-handed, captured four Germans who had been manning a Spandau post and had succeeded

in wounding a comrade. Later in the day, Strathern successfully directed the fire of a 17-pounder Sherman against a camouflaged enemy tank which was threatening to hold up the advance. C Company met less opposition. Its advance was halted by the Brigadier, who insisted that the flanks had to be tidied up. On this day the battalion took 59 prisoners for the loss of 1 killed and 2 wounded.

That morale may remain high much longer when success is obvious, even despite physical weariness, was shown at this time. The relentless pressing on brought success after success at very low cost in casualties. Men grew more certain that a 'break-through' would be secured, with, soon after, the end of the war in [Italy](#) and in [Europe](#). They were therefore not only willing but anxious to 'push on'. The resting of the reserve companies and the well-handled inter-company reliefs helped to keep the men fit. Thus, after its big day on 20 April when it had led the gate-crashing of the [Idice](#), A Company was in reserve and Major Marett could report: 'Everyone was very cheerful and "Happy in the Service".'

April the 22nd proved to be one of the busiest and longest days of the campaign. About 1 a.m. C Company reported that the enemy had pulled back from its front. B Company confirmed there was no opposition to its patrols forward. Accordingly, at 4.30 a.m., A and D Companies were mounted on tanks and anti-tank portées and passed through the forward companies before 6 a.m. Meeting with only slight harassing fire and, in some places, with only token resistance, they advanced as mounted infantry until they reached what Marett described as 'a very big and dirty canal'. Here the infantry dismounted, waded the canal, and advanced for some distance on foot before the tanks rejoined them. At this juncture the axis of advance took a right-angled turn to the north beyond the point where troops had cut Route 64, the German escape route from [Bologna](#), which had fallen the day before.

A and D Companies rested in the early afternoon while a bad blow in the road was repaired. By 4 p.m., again mounted on their tanks and portées, they advanced again. In the village of [Bentivoglio](#), the Germans had tried to block the road by blowing buildings across it, but, despite the delays caused by demolitions, the companies covered over 20 miles in the day. Battalion Headquarters moved at least eight times that day. The signallers, who had been maintaining communications with remarkable efficiency throughout the advance, gave up the attempt to lay lines to

the companies and relied entirely on radio as in genuinely mobile warfare. The speed and distance of the advance caught the imagination of the men, who knew for certain that the 'break-through' proper had begun.

Sergeant W. D. Dawson, the Intelligence Sergeant, recorded in his private diary: 'Advance continued during day with no Jerry opposition, and morning became one mad scramble to go forward and keep Bn HQ more or less organized.... had a great reception from the civilians on the way.... Everybody in high spirits because Jerry had broken, but all hot and bothered because we were running off our maps, and had to change boards hurriedly and frequently.' Such a thing was unheard of in [Italy](#) and had not happened since the 23rd left North Africa.

When D Company attempted to capture the small town of [San Pietro](#) in [Casale](#) and found it strongly held, Colonel Thomas ordered Major Cox to by-pass it and trust to its surrender once its occupants knew they were completely cut off. This move worked, as it had done a number of times already, and the casualties which would have resulted from a frontal assault were saved. As it was, the battalion had only two wounded for the day while it took twenty-four prisoners, as well as leaving many more to be collected by those following on behind.

By 11.30 p.m., A and D Companies had reached the Reno River. By the time B and C Companies, who were picked up by RMT trucks at noon, caught the leaders, Major Marett and Corporal Anderson had reconnoitred the [Reno](#) and convinced the CO that an immediate crossing would be unopposed. As it was the turn for B and C Companies to take over the lead, A and D, in Marett's words, 'just dropped where we had stopped and slept the sleep of the just'.

At 3 a.m. on 23 April, B and C Companies crossed the [Reno](#) without meeting any opposition. They advanced about 1500 yards and established a firm bridgehead. Describing his early morning visit to the forward platoons, Colonel Thomas wrote: 'The men, of course, were bitterly cold, having been wet through wading waist high, but were making the most of things and were very cheerful and willing. Heavens! But they have done wonders during this show, nothing seems too much to ask of them, yet they often have no sleep for days on end.'

The 23rd took twenty-three prisoners on 23 April and, as if the date and number

were aided by propitious fates, there were no casualties. That day and night the battalion got some sleep as 6 British Armoured Division moved across the 5 Brigade front and flanking formations conformed. Next morning, at half past six, the battalion moved in trucks some 15 miles on good roads through lovely fertile country to the [Bondeno](#) area, where the troops debussed and patrols went forward to the banks of the Po.

Ever since the landing in [Italy](#) in 1943, the Po had always been discussed as being the greatest obstacle the [Eighth Army](#) was likely to encounter in the whole Italian campaign. It was reported to be a quarter to half a mile wide, both deep and swift, with enemy defences of every description prepared on the far bank. A sternly opposed crossing of that river might well have seen the destruction and drowning of several battalions. But, as events were to prove, a natural obstacle constitutes a serious problem only when it is held by a determined enemy. Second-Lieutenant Smail took a reconnaissance patrol of eight men from his own platoon, and one each from C Company, the engineers and the tanks, down to the stopbanks at 11 a.m. They reported back nearly two hours later that they had met no opposition, the near stopbanks were 20 to 30 feet high and would thus hide any movement of troops from the sight of those on the opposite bank, the river itself was about 300 yards wide at this point and the current was slow. Although the patrol had been seen by Germans on the far bank, it had not been fired upon. A 21 Battalion patrol had gone further: it crossed the Po in an assault boat without a shot being fired. Colonels Thomas and McPhail were therefore preparing to make their crossings about 6 p.m. when they received orders to halt preparations and attend a conference at Brigade Headquarters. There, [General Freyberg](#), his chief staff officers and his brigadiers were discussing details for a large set-piece attack to be launched the following evening. Thomas and McPhail managed to convince their seniors that any postponement would give the Germans time to man their defences and, especially as it was understood that [278 Division](#), so soundly beaten on the [Senio](#) and [Santerno](#), was the enemy, that an attack that night would almost certainly succeed.

The attack was finally arranged for an hour after midnight that same night. 'Ducks', amphibious tanks, and assault craft arrived, and the staff at the various responsible levels completed the arrangements for the crossing. On and around the south banks, German convoys had been bombed by the Allied air force and all kinds

of enemy equipment lay scattered in an untidy profusion. A few of the 23rd succumbed to the temptation of the day and turned over the more saleable items to the Italians at a price. But the great majority were too keenly interested in the long-anticipated crossing of the Po to worry about such trading. The attack was postponed till 1.30 a.m. in order to learn how much fire the Guards Brigade encountered farther down the river, but they, in turn, it was understood, were postponing their crossing until they learned whether or not the New Zealanders had run into an ambush. The lack of enemy interest and fire seemed to be just too good to be true.

At 1.30 a.m. on 25 April, B Company crossed the Po in assault boats without a shot being fired by the enemy. C Company followed quickly in 'Ducks'. Second-Lieutenant McIntosh, in charge of the traffic arrangements on the near bank, reported back to a somewhat tensely anxious Battalion Headquarters, 'there is not a sound except our chaps cursing'. A and D Companies, together with the unit's anti-tank guns, were now ferried across in 'Fantails', large boats with outboard motors. It was all very easy and amazingly tame. As Major Marett said: 'After having thought on and off for 18 months of the problems confronting such a crossing, we received the biggest and most pleasant surprise of our lives when the Coy crossed without having a shot fired and were dug in as reserve Coy by 0300 hours 25 April'. No. 10 Platoon, under Lieutenant W. Hobbs, claimed to be the first [Eighth Army](#) infantry to cross the Po, while the 23rd anti-tank platoon held that its guns were the first supporting arms to have the same honour. 'All, expecting the worst, were much relieved to find the crossing more like the [Waikato](#) on Regatta Day,' wrote Lieutenant Ernie Taylor, now OC of the [Support Group](#). In crossing the Po, many men realised an ambition they had cherished for a long time. Only when some owner of a diary mentioned that it was Anzac Day did men recall that it was the anniversary of a very much more costly landing. As it was, Corporal [Shanks](#),⁵⁷ the leader of the first section to land, quickly located some Germans but they just as quickly surrendered.

By 7 a.m. A Company's patrol of the CSM, WO II 'Toby' Thomas, Corporal [Claridge](#)⁵⁸ and Private Wilson was entering the village of [Ficarolo](#), which they reported practically free of the enemy. A Company proceeded to take it, together with the Mark IV tank, the 88-millimetre gun, and two self-propelled guns it contained. In other days, this haul would have been hailed as outstanding but now it

was more or less taken for granted. A and B Companies took a few prisoners from 710 Fusilier Battalion, which apparently contained only young boys or old men. A forward observation officer, who climbed a tower in [Ficarolo](#), reported white flags only and no decent targets within 10,000 yards. There was nothing for it but to get the trucks across and 'push on' again.

Although the engineers completed a strong pontoon bridge and a Class 40 raft, made of several boats, was used for transporting tanks over the Po, it was a few days before the whole of the attached squadron of tanks caught up with the battalion. As the men moved forward through small villages north of the Po, they got a grand reception from the local Italians. Flowers and presents of eggs and vino were all received. 'For lunch that day eggs were on the basis of at least 4 per man,' says the unit diary. D and A Companies advanced to Berguarina, about four miles farther on, and captured some enemy vehicles in good running order.

An early start on 26 April, with the 23rd still in the van, saw B and C Companies breast up to the [Adige River](#), the second largest in [Italy](#). The roads were littered with abandoned German equipment; count of guns overrun was lost; the enemy's organised resistance in that part of [Italy](#) had ended. On the other hand, it was evident that the men of the 23rd were also feeling the strain. Thus, Major McArthur reported: 'At this stage it was very noticeable that the men were suffering from lack of sleep', while Sergeant Dawson noted in his private diary: 'Another advance towards the [Adige River](#) in afternoon but everything seemed disorganised, as everyone appeared to be very tired and not worrying whether show went well or not'. Nevertheless, a C Company patrol under Corporal Charles Monaghan obtained the information required concerning the stopbanks and approaches to the river. When his patrol was grounded by accurate small-arms fire, Monaghan continued alone until he had learned what he wanted to know. Major Emery commented: 'It was a good job of work well done'. [General Freyberg](#) decided that the New Zealand attack over the [Adige](#) that night should be done by 5 Brigade on the right and 6 Brigade on the left. Once the bridgehead was established, 9 Brigade was to pass through and take up the chase. In the 5 Brigade sector, 21 Battalion was to attack on the right and the 23rd on the left. H-hour was fixed for 8.30 p.m.

The 23rd attacked with A Company on the right and D on the left. This attack was supported by tank fire only, Major [Greenfield](#) ⁵⁹ having got nine of his tanks from

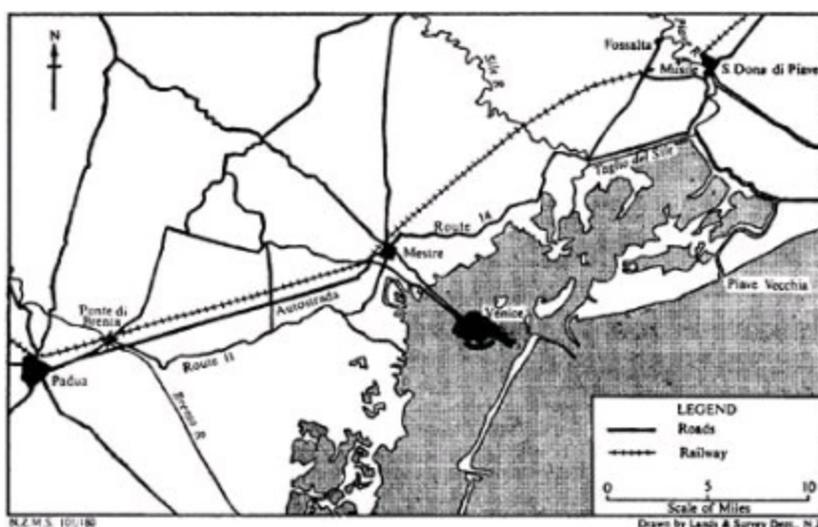
A Squadron [18 Armoured Regiment](#) up in time. Colonel Thomas's account of this last attack of the battalion demonstrates both the commander's pride in his men and the smoothness with which experienced soldiers could execute such an operation. 'First, the tanks let fly for ten minutes—very thrilling to watch as they were using tracer ammunition which crisscrossed and ricocheted in all directions. Then over went the sections in their small canvas boats, quietly but swiftly, no sign of panic, just everybody working as a well trained and confident team.... It really was a grand sight and I felt a thrill of pride to think that men could have done so much and yet do still more so cheerfully and efficiently when the need arose. A and D Companies did a magnificent job and were soon firmly established some 1800 yards over the other side'.

The crossing was virtually unopposed. Some enemy defensive fire came down and D Company had five men wounded. Only slight resistance was met on the northern side and it was quickly overcome. The unit diary records that both A and D Companies claimed the honour of being the first across the [Adige](#). The anti-tank guns were ferried across soon after the two infantry companies. Consolidation proceeded smoothly. The companies took thirty-nine prisoners.

Patrols forward of the objective in the morning established that some Germans were still in position. They captured another seventeen prisoners. In the afternoon of 27 April, 9 Brigade and some armoured cars passed through to exploit. Next morning, the Gurkha Brigade also passed through. The relief was complete. A and D Companies rejoined the battalion in and around [Badia](#) on the south side of the [Adige](#) and the 23rd got some hours of rest.

Although 5 Brigade had passed into reserve, there was still a need to keep up with the advancing troops. On 29 April the 5 Brigade units moved forward in RMT lorries, with the 23rd, for a change, the last battalion of the Division. What a forward move this was! On excellent roads, they passed through town after town, through [Masi](#), [Ospedaletto](#), [Este](#), [Padua](#), and through the [Venetian Line](#), which had once been mentioned as likely to provide tough opposition, at 30 miles per hour. Intelligence reports from [Divisional Headquarters](#) indicated that prisoners were coming in, not in hundreds but in thousands. After midnight, the brigade convoy halted at a concentration area about 20 miles north-west of [Venice](#).

On 30 April company groups from the 23rd were despatched to different villages which had not hitherto been cleared of the enemy, unless by the partisans who were now most active. These operations, originally termed 'mopping-up recces', were later more cheerfully entitled 'liberating moves'. 'Liberating' a village entailed being the first Allied troops to enter, taking a slight risk of stopping a bullet from a sniper who did not know that the war was as good as over in his sector, and, more frequently, receiving the cheers, the flowers, the eggs, the wine and the kisses of the delighted populace. The mixture was not always the same, but the same ingredients were normally there. The war was now touched with elements of an Italian festival, but that it was a war was shown by the forty-nine prisoners taken.



FROM PADUA TO SAN DONA DI PIAVE
from padua to san dona di piave

On 1 May, 5 Brigade moved forward to Ceggia, just north of the [Piave](#). This move was made at a snail's pace, both on account of the traffic jams and the heavy rain which had made the approaches to the [Piave](#) soft and muddy. As it edged forward, the 23rd was told to keep moving until it reached the town of [San Giorgio](#). Only at 11 a.m. on 2 May, after an all-night move in the rain, did the unit reach this destination. Very soon 'liberating' and prisoner-collecting parties were busily engaged. A small Battalion Headquarters party secured the surrender of some 500 Germans who were surrounded by, but refused to capitulate to, Italian partisans. The CO was called away by the Brigadier and Major G. S. [Cox](#),⁶⁰ the GSO II (Intelligence) at [Divisional Headquarters](#), to assist in interposing New Zealand troops between the Chetniks of General Mihailovitch and the partisans of [Marshal Tito](#).

Colonel Thomas witnessed a colourful scene ⁶¹ but was relieved to hear that 6 Armoured Division was taking over the responsibility for this 12,000 strong force of Yugoslav Royalists. This was, however, the 23rd's first introduction to the political volcano which was [Trieste](#) at this time.

On the evening of 2 May the higher command sent word that all German resistance in [Italy](#) had ended that day. Ninth Brigade was busy in [Trieste](#) with the many Germans there who were not prepared to surrender either to Italian or Yugoslav partisans. Back in [Divisional Reserve](#), the 23rd had little to do either with the delicate political situation in [Trieste](#) or with taking over the last of the prisoners. On 3 May the battalion moved to Castle Duino, the most palatial quarters in which the unit was ever billeted. Owned by an Austrian prince married to an American millionairess, this castle had nearly 150 rooms in excellent order. It was a grand place in which to celebrate the end of the European war on 7 May.

In its last campaign or term in the line, the 23rd casualties, totalling nine killed in action and died of wounds and sixty-two wounded, were light when compared with those in earlier campaigns. They were particularly light, too, for the number of battles fought and for the distance covered—225 miles through the wreckage of the German forces in [Italy](#). Colonel Thomas spoke for his men when he said: 'We all feel that the race from the [Senio](#) to here was a glorious and fitting end to the war in [Italy](#)'.

¹ [WO I L. J. Lang](#), m.i.d.; Rakaia; born NZ 3 Apr 1921; farm labourer.

² [WO I N. D. J. Reed](#); [Christchurch](#); born Dunedin, 25 Jul 1922; law clerk; wounded 21 Jul 1944.

³ 2 Lt D. P. Corrigan, MM; [Christchurch](#); born NZ 21 Jul 1908; salesman; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

⁴ Lt J. I. M. Smail, MC; Berwick-on-Tweed, England; born [Christchurch](#), 21 Aug 1920; clerk; wounded 17 Mar 1944.

⁵ Lt F. J. Miles; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 8 May 1917; school-teacher.

⁶ On 4 March 1945 the following officers marched out to Advanced Base: Maj J. A. Brittenden, Capts G. M. Dodds and G. L. Lawrence, Lts L. E. Smylie and C. B. Grant, and 2 Lts H. C. Anderson and J. P. Scanlan. On 3 April Maj H. J. G. Low, Capt A. F. Cooper and 2 Lt D. P. Corrigan left for New Zealand, while Capt J. A. Bevin left for England. On 15 April Maj J. R. Harrison left to become NZ Liaison Officer in Bombay. Senior NCOs to leave in early March included WO I W. J. Tait, the RSM, and WO II Ron Ritchie, CSM of HQ Company.

⁷ 9 Brigade was commanded by Brigadier W. G. Gentry.

⁸ Brig I. L. Bonifant, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; Gisborne; born Ash-burton, 3 Mar 1912; stock agent; CO 25 Bn Sep 1942-Jan 1943; Div Cav Jan 1943-Apr 1944; comd 6 Bde 3–27 Mar 1944; 5 Bde Jan-May 1945; 6 Bde Jun-Oct 1945.

⁹ Maj A. M. Caughley, MC, m.i.d.; Melbourne; born Christchurch, 9 Apr 1916; bank officer; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

¹⁰ Maj P. S. Thomson; Auckland; born Christchurch, 26 Mar 1915; warehouseman.

¹¹ Maj W. H. Ryan, OBE, m.i.d., Order of King George I and Silver Cross (Gk); Mangaia, Cook Is.; born Auckland, 1 Jun 1911; civil engineer; CO 20 Armd Regt Oct-Dec 1945.

¹² Maj E. I. Henton; Singapore; born NZ 4 Sep 1910; insurance manager.

¹³ Lt G. H. Steel; Cheviot; born Christchurch, 24 May 1919; fat-stock buyer.

¹⁴ Capt A. H. Paddison; Wellington; born Wellington, 31 Dec 1920; signwriter's apprentice; wounded 28 Jul 1944.

¹⁵ Sgt G. D. McKenzie; Invercargill; born NZ 26 Feb 1923; farmhand.

¹⁶ Sgt S. V. Gilchrist, MM; Dunedin; born Waikouaiti, 22 May 1921; grocer's assistant; wounded 12 Apr 1945.

¹⁷ Lt A. K. Rodley; Tokoroa; born Picton, 24 Dec 1917; manufacturing chemist; wounded 10 Apr 1945.

¹⁸ Pte R. S. Reed, m.i.d.; Riwaka, Motueka; born Motueka, 29 Dec 1922; orchard hand; wounded 10 Apr 1945.

¹⁹ Sgt E. F. Michie, MM; born NZ 8 Apr 1923; linen-flax worker; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

²⁰ Lt-Col A. Awatere, DSO, MC; Rotorua; born Tuparoa, 25 Apr 1910; civil servant; CO 28 Bn Jul-Aug 1944, Nov 1944-Jun 1945; twice wounded.

²¹ Maj J. C. Reedy, m.i.d.; Ruatoria; born Ruatoria, 16 Jun 1912; store-man; twice wounded.

²² Lt J. S. Mosley; Wellington; born Balclutha, 12 Nov 1921; civil servant.

²³ Lt W. A. Robb, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 12 Oct 1919; butcher.

²⁴ L-Cpl I. J. Bluett; Timaru; born NZ 21 Jun 1920; clerk.

²⁵ WO II A. T. Allan; Mosgiel; born NZ 7 Feb 1913; farmer; wounded 15 Dec 1944.

²⁶ Pte D. D. Smith; Christchurch; born NZ 2 Jul 1923; cabinet-maker.

²⁷ Sgt J. Russell, MM; Geraldine; born Temuka 22 Mar 1920; farmer; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

²⁸ Pte T. J. Sowman; Blenheim; born Blenheim, 20 Aug 1917; fitter;

wounded 25 May 1941.

²⁹ L-Cpl C. Vaux, m.i.d.; born England, 2 Apr 1923; electrical apprentice.

³⁰ Sgt J. A. Gilchrist; Kimbell, Fairlie; born Timaru, 8 Jan 1923; clerk; wounded 18 May 1944.

³¹ Pte J. R. D. White; born NZ 4 Apr 1916; farmhand; died of wounds 12 Apr 1945.

³² Cpl E. J. Mayo, MM, m.i.d.; Lower Hutt; born England, 30 Oct 1922; farmhand.

³³ Capt W. H. Hobbs, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 29 Sep 1920; bank clerk.

³⁴ Sgt W. H. Jones; Kaitangata; born Invercargill, 30 Mar 1922; sawmill hand; wounded 12 Apr 1945.

³⁵ Lt R. S. Lee; Okuti Valley, Little River; born 19 Mar 1914; labourer; wounded 15 Dec 1944.

³⁶ Lt I. M. Logan; Napier; born Napier, 21 Dec 1915; law clerk.

³⁷ Cpl M. G. Staples; Blenheim; born NZ 3 Oct 1922; farmhand; wounded 12 Apr 1945.

³⁸ Cpl J. Tither, MM; Tokarahi, Oamaru; born Riversdale, 9 Jul 1910; labourer; wounded 13 Apr 1945.

³⁹ Pte T. H. Gunning; Oamaru; born Greymouth, 18 Oct 1914; horse trainer.

⁴⁰ S-Sgt S. A. Sharp; Invercargill; born NZ 7 Nov 1919; draper's assistant.

⁴¹ Pte G. V. O'Donohue, m.i.d.; born Naseby, 20 Sep 1919; exchange clerk; deceased.

⁴² Pte J. J. L. Strathern, MM, m.i.d.; Timaru; born Invercargill, 8 Jul 1923; apprentice jockey; wounded 20 Apr 1945.

⁴³ Sgt W. A. Mowat, m.i.d.; born NZ 26 Jun 1922; shepherd; killed in action 13 Apr 1945.

⁴⁴ Lt R. S. McMillan; Auckland; born Auckland, 6 Jun 1911; accountant; wounded 12 Apr 1945.

⁴⁵ Sgt J. R. Wilson, MM; Balclutha; born NZ 17 Dec 1919; orchard hand; wounded 21 Mar 1944.

⁴⁶ L-Sgt R. Edmondson, MM; Takaka; born Takaka, 29 Mar 1922; labourer.

⁴⁷ L-Sgt R. E. C. Mathieson, MM; born Westport, 23 Jul 1919; truck driver; deceased.

⁴⁸ Cpl E. Bullimore; born NZ 4 Nov 1922; dredge hand; killed in action 12 Apr 1945.

⁴⁹ Sgt E. B. Glass, MM; Albury; born NZ 7 Oct 1920; shepherd.

⁵⁰ Major Emery's report.

⁵¹ Pte J. F. Holloway; Invercargill; born NZ 17 Oct 1908; electrician.

⁵² Lt W. M. O'Sullivan, m.i.d.; Reefton; born Pleasant Point, 6 Nov 1916; clerk; wounded 10 Apr 1945.

⁵³ Cpl E. G. Bell; Alexandra; born NZ 10 Apr 1922; factory hand; wounded 20 Apr 1945.

⁵⁴ WO II D. G. MacLeod, MM; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 18 Nov 1923; moulder; p.w. 18 Nov 1943; escaped 27 Nov 1943; safe with Allied Forces 6 Mar 1944.

⁵⁵ Sgt A. M. Hume, m.i.d.; Timaru; born Timaru, 20 Sep 1911; railway employee.

⁵⁶ This is denied by D Company men, who contend that enemy parties merely emerged from dugouts which they had failed to clear.

⁵⁷ Cpl W. Shanks; Ferndale, Gore; born NZ 14 Apr 1922; farm labourer.

⁵⁸ L-Cpl N. C. Claridge, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born NZ 6 Mar 1920; farmer.

⁵⁹ Maj J. R. Greenfield, MC; Napier; born Napier, 29 Apr 1918; accountant; wounded 1 Aug 1944.

⁶⁰ Maj G. S. Cox, MBE, m.i.d.; London; born Palmerston North, 7 Apr 1910; journalist.

⁶¹ For detailed description see G. S. Cox, *The Road to Trieste*, Chap. 28.

23 BATTALION

CHAPTER 19 – MARCHING ON!

CHAPTER 19

Marching On!

ON 7 May 1945 the battalion celebrated the end of the war in [Europe](#) by firing off many coloured flares and with some convivial gatherings enlivened by song and story. Only the shortage of [NAAFI](#) supplies and the somewhat critical situation in [Trieste](#) acted as limiting factors. On the night of 8 May, the officers had a victory banquet which was also a farewell party for Sandy Thomas, who left a few days later to join the New Zealand Prisoner-of-War Repatriation Unit in England. His departure was a sign of the times and an indication that the unit could now look forward to more and more departures of its long-service officers and men.

In a farewell address to all ranks, Colonel Thomas thanked them all for the magnificent spirit they had shown in the last grand advance in which, he insisted, their success and the lowness of their casualties were both due to the wonderful team spirit in the battalion and the resulting cheerful and efficient co-operation by all ranks. He concluded: 'To have commanded the Battalion in its final glorious campaign has made me feel extraordinarily proud and grateful—and, at the same time, very young and humble'.

Thomas had built up a most distinguished record for himself as a soldier and an enviable reputation for the 23rd as a fighting unit. [General Freyberg](#) held that he had become 'one of the most dashing and seasoned Commanding Officers of Infantry in the 2 NZ Division'. As platoon, company and battalion commander, in turn, he had always set his men a splendid example of courage and enthusiastic drive in action. He had initiated or stimulated some of the 23rd's most successful feats of arms. Major Don Grant succeeded Thomas as CO. An officer who had been in practically every action with the 23rd since [Libya](#) '41, he had the confidence of the men, who recognised him as one of the most reliable and quietly determined officers the 23rd had known.

For May and the first week or so of June, a state of tension existed in [Trieste](#) and the province of [Istria](#). [Marshal Tito](#) and his forces were trying to consolidate their historical and political claims to the greater part of [Istria](#) by their occupation of it. At first, the 23rd had little or nothing to do with the Yugoslavs apart from running into

their road-blocks or meeting their troops in outlying villages. But, on 20 May, the unit moved to the [Barcola](#) area about a mile out of [Trieste](#) and came under orders to move to action stations if [Tito](#) carried out certain threats. 'Hell! We've finished one war, only to be pitched into what looks like another,' commented Norman Reed. For a time, the atmosphere was electric and the tension, coupled with the readiness of some Yugoslav soldiers to fire bursts of machine-gun fire on the slightest provocation, was marked. Several alerts and false alarms, operation orders covering the role allotted to the unit in the event of an outbreak of hostilities, an increased sympathy for the Italians and a corresponding antipathy for Yugoslav Communists were features of these days.

Eventually, on 10 June, the Yugoslavs moved out of [Trieste](#) and took up positions to the east. The battalion occupied a forward position near Muggia in close contact with the Yugoslavs on the 'Blue Line'. Tension continued for some time and the situation more than once looked ugly and likely to flare up into something worse. Slowly the tension eased and more friendly relations were established between forces which had been fighting on the same side during the war. The B Company diary for June 1945 gives some idea of the easing of tension:

'B Coy set off for the other side of [Trieste](#) to sit on the "Blue Line". This was a job requiring tact rather than tactics. For us the Blue Line showed up bold and clear in blue chinagraph on a nicely fixed talc over a 25,000 scale map. The Jugs had a rough version inked heavily on a 200,000 scale map. To establish the exact location of the Line on the ground was a far more difficult matter of compromise than was anticipated. Our cheerful and good-natured approach to the whole affair, while it aimed at creating good relations, was as firm as the clearly obstinate stand of the Jugs.... Our men established the block, while the Jugs set up their block opposite ours. Sentries looked at each other across No Man's Land.... Gradually the Kiwis and the Jugs became more friendly with the aid of an interpreter, some of the local "parlare" and cigarettes. It soon became apparent that despite the friendly relations existing between both sets of soldiers each had a "higher authority" to which it looked for orders.... Finally it was agreed to tie up the whole arrangement between the Bn commanders.... The CO, Lt. Col. D. G. Grant, duly arrived per Jeep. The Jug Bn Commander rode a fine horse. Each CO had an offsider in the form of an IO and a sense of humour. The result was a happy compromise which saw the CO riding his

opposite number's horse, smoking his well-known pipe and confirming excellent relations. We remained where we had been all along and they removed their road block altogether. This spirit culminated on 22 June with their insisting that 8 of our men should attend a dance... B Company felt that it had played a part in the settlement of [Trieste](#) and the Blue Line and had a hand in international goodwill.'

Although this tension around [Trieste](#) delayed the post-war relaxation that many had hoped to enjoy, it could not long disguise the fact that in [Europe](#) at least the war was ended. Men realised that the purpose for which the battalion had been created no longer existed. A unit which had lived for so long for one purpose, had trained and fought and trained and fought again, could not readily adjust its outlook to the new conditions. The coming of peace was more than welcome, but it was also something of an anti-climax. As Private Berney wrote in his diary, 'We're sort of out of a job now'; while Major Emery could make the typical comment: 'The news of the cessation of hostilities was taken quietly, it coming rather as an anti-climax. In fact, it almost seems flat after so long at war.'

But, if the stimulus of preparing for another campaign was lacking, most members of the 23rd managed to enjoy themselves to the full during the last few months of their stay in [Italy](#). When not on guard or other duties, they swam and sunbathed by day and danced and drank by night. [Kiwi Concert Party](#) shows, cinema shows, organised sports of various kinds, a trotting meeting at which New Zealand drivers participated and in which Private Tom Gunning was a successful representative of the 23rd, an inter-company harbour swim competition, exchanges of visits with other units and with the Navy and [Air Force](#), all these made the time pass pleasantly.

At intervals as shipping became available, the earlier reinforcements left the unit and returned to New Zealand. During this process the 23rd, along with other units in the Division, moved south, first, at the end of July, for some weeks spent near [Lake Trasimene](#) and, later, in early October, to [Florence](#). The 6th Reinforcements left the unit on 23 May, the 7th on 16 June, the 8th on 6 August, the 9ths on 26 September, and the married men of the 10th Reinforcements on 27 November. The end of the battalion as an organised unit came in early December.

The last few weeks of its life had seen many sporting fixtures. W. [Woolley](#), ¹ W.

Butler² and W. Thayer³ were picked from the 23rd to play in the trials for the 'Kiwi' rugby team to tour the [United Kingdom](#), Woolley being selected. Lieutenant Burt and a battalion group ran the New Zealand Staging Camp at Dijon in [France](#) for all the members of the New Zealand Division going on leave to Britain. This was the last service of note that the 23rd rendered to the Division.

The end of the war with [Japan](#) meant an earlier return home for many men. Nevertheless, a party of 4 officers and 80 other ranks, under Captain Frank [Rennie](#),⁴ went from the battalion to J Force. But the 23rd did not go to [Japan](#) as a unit. Its demise came in [Italy](#), the scene of its last battles.

The war ended and the 23rd passed into history. But its record stands as one to be emulated by those units of the postwar New Zealand Army into which something of its spirit has been instilled. In many respects, that record is unexcelled. No unit of the Division saw more fighting than did the 23rd. Certainly, all the infantry units saw their share of fighting, but, whereas the 6 Brigade battalions missed [Crete](#) and those of 4 Brigade, together with 22 Battalion, missed the North African fighting of late 1942 and of 1943, 5 Brigade went through the fighting of the [Middle East](#) and [Italy](#) without missing a single campaign. This leaves only 21 and 28 Battalions to compare with the 23rd, and neither of these was more fully employed in battles, both defensive and offensive, than the 23rd.

The fact that the battalion was never overrun by tanks in the desert and was not cut off in [Greece](#) or [Crete](#), but always managed to emerge from battle as an organised fighting unit, led to its being termed 'a lucky unit'. But Luck is a fickle jade: no man remains consistently lucky. Luck over a period of years is usually found to have sound foundations. Was luck the explanation of the 23rd's record? Or was it the tightly knit team spirit and the pride in unit which were so strong in the battalion? How much of this luck can be attributed to fate and how much to the indomitable will and tough fighting spirit of the 23rd can be assessed from the record now concluded. The 23rd was certainly lucky in not being decimated in any one major disaster, but, in the main, it made its luck and deserved it.

One fact about the history of the 23rd redounds to its credit without suggesting 'good luck' and that is the number of its casualties. Although it never succumbed to any major disaster, its accumulated casualties were higher than those of most units.

The officer casualties, both in killed and wounded, were the highest for any unit in the Division. This may be taken as a measure of the tough fighting in which the 23rd was engaged and, in particular, of the aggressive leadership in attack displayed by the junior officers of the battalion. In loss of numbers lost as prisoners of war, the 23rd was second only to the [Maori Battalion](#), and yet, in total numbers of killed and wounded, was second highest in the Division. These facts demonstrate something of the hardness and the long duration of the fighting seen by the battalion.

In [Cassino](#) and one or two other places, the battalion was given tasks virtually impossible of full execution. The unit therefore was not able to live up to the proud boast of Colonel Romans that 'The 23rd always takes its objective' but, at least, it always tried hard, and the number of times it held a difficult place in a defensive line or spearheaded a 5 Brigade attack bears testimony to the trust placed in it by the senior officers of the Division.

As has been indicated in this book, morale in war is a highly important factor, especially for infantry soldiers. In the 23rd morale normally ran high, faltering but rarely, and, at certain critical times, as on the eve of an important battle, it reached amazing heights. A staff corps officer, who belonged to another infantry battalion, once told the writer: 'I was lectured on morale and esprit de corps at Duntroon and lectured on them myself at [Trentham](#) and [Burnham](#) but I never really knew what they meant until I met the officers and men of the 23rd Battalion'.

The lifting of the morale of the 23rd to the high pitch which saw it emerge victorious from most of its battles, and which won the appreciative comment of outsiders, was due to the unit's leaders, to its discipline, to the strong unit spirit and the closely knit comradeship within the battalion. 'Morale is, in the first place, based on leadership. Good morale is impossible without good leaders.'⁵ Not only was the battalion blessed with good leaders from Falconer through to Thomas, but there was also a remarkable continuity of command which in itself helps to explain the spirit of the 23rd. No matter how brilliant a commander may be, unless he is known to his men, his influence will remain limited until he has proved his quality in some way or another. The 23rd was never commanded in action by any but original officers of the unit. Probably, the battalion was unique in the Division in this respect, in that while other units had to accept commanders appointed according to the gradation list or

seniority, the 23rd in battle maintained the succession in the 'original line' from Falconer to Thomas.

Falconer laid the foundations for the 23rd on a broad basis and laid them truly. He aimed at building a unit with as fine a spirit and as fine traditions as the Canterbury and Otago Regiments both in the First World War and in the Territorial Army. Leckie, with a narrower but fiercer spirit, instilled more of the Southland-cum-Highland clannishness or partisan spirit into the unit. He helped to generate a genuine pride in the battalion, which in turn made demands on the men to live up to their vaunted 'second to none' record. Watson took over during a campaign and went 'into the bag' before he could impress his personality on the unit to any marked degree. Romans built on the broad foundations laid by Falconer and utilised wisely the spirit instilled by Leckie. The early months of his distinguished tenure of office nearly coincided with General Montgomery's early period as commander of the [Eighth Army](#), a period when reform was very definitely in the air. Romans saw that the discipline of the unit was tightened and the efficiency of the unit improved in the direction of making the 23rd a better fighting instrument. Connolly continued in the Romans tradition and encouraged his men to regard themselves as 'the salt of the earth' simply because they were the 23rd Battalion. He was unfortunate in being given such a tough assignment in [Cassino](#). Morale slumped after the heavy losses suffered there and the setbacks which accompanied the loss of so many good leaders at all levels. McPhail successfully set about the patient and careful rebuilding of the unit and its spirit. Thomas was assisted by the very considerable reputation he had established for himself as a fighting soldier, as well as by his infectious enthusiasm and colourful personality. In him, personal pride and professional ambition were mixed with as genuine a love for the unit as his predecessors had borne. In the last campaign, the 23rd 'pushed on' with a will and with a morale as high as it had known at any earlier stage of its history.

The commanding officers were supported by men of like mind and spirit. Ted Thomson, Peter Norris, Gordon Cunningham made good commanders of platoons and companies—they would have made grand commanders of battalions. Ted Richards, Tom Morten and Alan McPhail, in fact, did go to command other units in the Division. The 23rd was fortunate it could spare them. Officers of the calibre of Bert Thomason, Don Grant, Ian Wilson, Alex Robins, 'Wiff' McArthur, Charlie Mason,

Harry Low, Fred Irving, [Dan Davis](#), Tuan Emery and a score of others kept the confidence of the men in their officers at a high level. That confidence was intensified and increased by the type of discipline which became more or less traditional in the battalion.

In his first address to his officers, Falconer insisted that authority could be exercised quite firmly but in ways other than the tyrannical and blasphemous bullying which had been known in some army units in the past. His requirement that officers should clearly recognise their responsibilities to those under them paved the way for the mutual feeling of confidence which prevailed between officers, NCOs and men. His policy in dealing with crimes and in awarding punishments was not soft, but neither was it lacking in generosity.

If the discipline in the 23rd was not always as severe as it might have been, this may have been due to a policy which Leckie declared had its origins in the officers' mess: 'No efficiency without happiness'. Possibly the accent was occasionally laid too heavily on happiness and too lightly on efficiency, but the 23rd was certainly a very happy battalion and it always maintained a wonderful feeling of comradeship, typical of the citizen-soldiers from the somewhat slow-moving society of the [South Island](#). The comradeship in the unit was not restricted to one level, such as the section or the platoon, but united the great majority of men, irrespective of rank, in a remarkable determination to place the honour of the battalion above personal interests. This comradeship, a most important element in the unit spirit, grew stronger after the unit had been through its first actions. After all, the test of war is the greatest test to which the comradeship of men can be put. Close association in the face of death, one man depending on another, one company trusting its neighbour, the mutual confidence that intensified when men had been put to the test and found dependable—these factors increased the bonds of unity in the battalion. If some of the 'originals', after their eighteen months of being the battalion, were somewhat reluctant to welcome newcomers, that feeling soon disappeared and later reinforcements were quickly made to feel they were being admitted to their permanent 'home' in the Army, to the unit to which henceforth they would belong or form a part. ⁶ They were also given to understand that the 23rd had a very special record which they must aspire to maintain or develop.

Lord Wavell once said: 'I am sure that they [soldiers] fight best of all when they

are part of a good unit, and feel it'.⁷ Lord Moran expressed much the same idea in a slightly different way: 'Loyalty to a fine battalion may take hold of a man and stiffen his purpose'.⁸ The men of 23 Battalion knew or came to know that they belonged to a good unit, a fine battalion, and they responded accordingly. Most members of the 23rd were conscious of belonging to and being possessed by a force much bigger and much more important than themselves. In consequence, with few exceptions, they strove with a deepening loyalty to give of their best to their battalion and to make it the best battalion in the Division. Of course, to its members, each battalion was, or should have been, 'the best battalion ever'. Members of the 23rd will not deny to others what they claim for their own. They know they earned for their unit the reputation of being a first-class fighting battalion. At peak, the 23rd possessed a tremendous spirit, an *élan*, which carried it through the difficult times and enabled it to make a distinguished contribution to the record of the 2nd New Zealand Division.

What has happened to this splendid spirit of the 23rd Battalion? In a general sense, it has returned to the country from which it sprang. In a more particular sense, it continues to provide a bond between its former members. This bond finds its most exuberant expression at 23rd reunions, but it goes deeper than the feelings inspired by periodic meetings with old friends. It goes as deep almost as the bonds of blood and kinship and provides a lasting basis for comradeship between men of different walks of life, between farmer and clerk, between businessman and miner, between high-country shepherd and tradesman, and between wharf labourer and university lecturer.

In the special sphere of army service, the influence of the 23rd has not been without its effect. Just as during the war the battalion provided commanders for other units and staff officers for Divisional and Brigade Headquarters, so in the post-war years it has been well represented in the Regular and Territorial Armies. Sandy Thomas joined the British Army and has seen service with the Hampshires in Kenya, [Malaya](#) and elsewhere. Harry Low was awarded the DSO for his work as commanding officer of the Fijian Battalion for two years in [Malaya](#). Frank Rennie commanded the Special Air Service Squadron of New Zealanders in [Malaya](#). Bob Dawson, Rex Musgrave, John McPherson and Selwyn Jensen, as officers, and 'Tubby' Ramsay and probably others, as senior NCOs, continue to serve in the New Zealand Regular Force. In the Territorial Army, Brigadier 'Acky' Falconer is Colonel of the

Otago and Southland Regiment. [Monty Fairbrother](#) has commanded the 2nd Infantry Brigade, while Alan McPhail and Tom Morten have commanded the 3rd Brigade. Battalion and company commanders have been widely spread and numerous. Dick Harrison has commanded the [1st Battalion](#) of the Hawke's Bay Regiment, Bob Dawson and Carl Watson the 1st Wellington Regiment (City of [Wellington's Own](#)), Ted Richards and Dick Orbell the 1st [Nelson, Marlborough](#) and West Coast Regiment, Tom Morten the 1st Canterbury Regiment, Alan McPhail and [Angus Ross](#) the 1st Otago and Southland Regiment. Some of these and many others, including Bridge Grey, Fred Marett, Andrew Cooper, Lex Reeves, Bernie Cox, Jim Baxter, Toby Thomas, Bob Barton and Fred Irving, have all been company commanders in Territorial units.

In dealing with an intangible such as the spirit of a wartime unit, it is impossible to be precise and definite but it is reasonable to claim that most of the officers named have striven to recreate in their new battalions something of the spirit of the 23rd, the spirit which meant so much to them during the war and which was so largely responsible for their volunteering to serve again in the post-war years. Two items of evidence may be adduced in support of this claim. After a 3rd Brigade commander's inspection of the 1st Otago and Southland Regiment, Brigadier McPhail told the troops a little of the history of the 23rd Battalion and said he was confident that the spirit of the 23rd lived on simply because so many of its officers and NCOs were members of the new Territorial units. In the officers' mess of the same unit, a junior subaltern, who must have been a schoolboy when the war ended in 1945, concluded an argument by saying, 'Well, Fred Marett told us that in the 23rd they always....' That was sufficient. His point was accepted by his contemporaries.

This continuing service of the members of the 23rd is not yet ended. In addition, many members of the battalion are rendering service in other spheres and walks of life. The spirit of the 23rd is not dead! It is marching on!

¹ [WO I S. W. Woolley](#); Mangawhata, [Palmerston North](#); born NZ 26 Nov 1919; farmer.

² [Pte W. G. Butler](#); born NZ 27 Nov 1922; clerk.

³ Capt W. R. Thayer; Gore; born NZ 13 May 1919; farm labourer.

⁴ Maj F. Rennie, MBE, MC, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 9 Aug 1918; Regular soldier; served in Pacific Jan 1942-Jan 1945; Italy, 1945; J Force Sep 1945-Jul 1946; OC NZ SAS Sqn, Malaya, 1955–57.

⁵ Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery, 'Morale in Battle', an address given to the Royal Society of Medicine, and published in British Medical Journal, 9 Nov 1946.

⁶ The unit war diary for 10 October 1945 describes the farewell to those members of the 23rd going to J Force. In his reply, Captain Frank Rennie spoke of the pleasant and happy time that all of them had had with the 23rd and mentioned the warm welcome afforded men from 3 Division (Pacific) on their arrival in the unit.

⁷ A. P. Wavell, Soldiers and Soldiering, p. 121.

⁸ Lord Moran, The Anatomy of Courage, p. 70.

23 BATTALION

ROLL OF HONOUR

Roll of Honour

KILLED IN ACTION

Maj R. A. Boyle	10 February 1945
Maj T. Fyfe	20 May 1941
Maj W. Hoseit	23 July 1944
Maj B. V. A. Jones	30 May 1944
Capt T. F. Begg	15 July 1942
Capt H. C. Black	20 April 1943
Capt M. D. Grant	17 July 1942
Capt C. G. Ironside	15 July 1942
Capt P. L. Lynch	23 October 1942
Capt P. T. Norris, MC	17 December 1942
Capt G. McG. Robertson, m.i.d.	26 March 1943
Lt N. Barker	14 February 1944
Lt R. Karsten	30 July 1944
Lt J. C. Laing	15 December 1943
Lt C. T. Mason, MC	12 July 1942
Lt H. T. Richards	15 July 1942
Lt F. D. Sutherland	23 October 1942
Lt M. C. Tither, MM	7 January 1944
Lt A. A. Torrens	28 June 1942
Lt F. Vernon	23 October 1942
2 Lt B. O. J. Bradley	26 May 1944
2 Lt J. H. A. Cameron	3 August 1944
2 Lt M. E. Cross	7 May 1943
2 Lt W. K. Gale	21 March 1944
2 Lt J. P. Gordon	24 July 1944
2 Lt S. A. McCartney	22 July 1944
2 Lt A. W. Moodie	29 April 1941
2 Lt W. I. Morris	28 September 1944
2 Lt C. W. Welsh, MM	21 March 1944

WO II J. D. Conning	24 May 1941
WO II H. R. Pullar	27 November 1941
WO II J. D. Trotter	17 December 1942
Sgt A. J. G. Attewell	23 October 1942
Sgt W. J. Broughan	23 October 1942
Sgt H. H. Crawley	5 November 1942
Sgt J. P. Cunningham	14 July 1942
Sgt F. C. Dawson	16 December 1943
Sgt A. A. De Vantier	15 December 1943
Sgt J. McN. Greig	14 July 1942
Sgt G. F. Harris	27 February 1944
Sgt N. J. Hosking	24 July 1944
Sgt M. C. Lysons	3 April 1944
Sgt L. A. McGregor	27 November 1941
Sgt D. A. C. McKillop	15 December 1943
Sgt I. Skillen	23 October 1942
Sgt A. McL. Swale	18 August 1942
Sgt B. J. Walsh	17 April 1941
Sgt S. E. Young	26 March 1943
L-Sgt N. R. Elliott	10 April 1945
L-Sgt B. H. Gillies	5 July 1942
L-Sgt A. S. Kearney	23 October 1942
L-Sgt J. F. Leonard	22 July 1944
L-Sgt W. D. H. Lory	20 April 1943
L-Sgt J. R. P. O'Shaughnessy	3 April 1944
Cpl F. Armitage	15 December 1943
Cpl D. D. Bain	15 December 1943
Cpl E. Bullimore	12 April 1945
Cpl J. A. Black	13 October 1944
Cpl L. M. Edgecombe	14 February 1944
Cpl J. E. Gordon	22 July 1944
Cpl J. H. Harris	19 May 1944
Cpl E. P. Healy	24 July 1944
Cpl V. Idour, MM, m.i.d.	27 February 1944
Cpl R. K. Jackson	16 July 1942
Cpl S. Jackson	20 May 1941
Cpl T. Johnston	9 May 1943

Cpl G. M. Lister	20 March 1944
Cpl P. McArthur	27 November 1941
Cpl R. R. McDonald	27 May 1941
Cpl L. W. P. McDowell	20 May 1941
Cpl L. R. McMillan	20 March 1944
Cpl J. McRae	30 May 1944
Cpl F. J. Morris	20 April 1943
Cpl B. A. Newport	22 July 1944
Cpl M. A. Price	27 November 1941
Cpl T. D. Robertson	26 March 1943
Cpl A. Rutherford	23 October 1942
Cpl M. C. Sheehan	27 July 1942
Cpl A. D. Smith, MM	15 July 1942
Cpl J. R. Watts	15 December 1944
Cpl J. Wilson	29 September 1944
L-Cpl C. W. Behrns	23 October 1942
L-Cpl J. R. Brown	15 July 1942
L-Cpl B. Butterfield	15 December 1943
L-Cpl G. J. Clearwater	20 April 1943
L-Cpl G. T. Croft	27 March 1944
L-Cpl L. J. E. Fountain	23 May 1941
L-Cpl G. N. Gale	15 December 1944
L-Cpl J. A. Hepburn	25 May 1941
L-Cpl J. L. Herbert	23 October 1942
L-Cpl O. M. Hoban	9 May 1943
L-Cpl C. J. Hutchinson	3 August 1944
L-Cpl G. A. Kinmont	28 June 1942
L-Cpl H. R. MacDonald	20 May 1941
L-Cpl J. B. Martin	15 April 1941
L-Cpl W. Y. Montgomery	23 July 1944
L-Cpl F. G. Nolan, MM	15 December 1943
L-Cpl W. W. Paterson	15 December 1943
L-Cpl H. K. Payne	23 October 1942
L-Cpl A. J. C. Rennie	28 November 1943
L-Cpl D. C. Sutherland	15 December 1944
L-Cpl C. F. Young	23 October 1942
Pte S. Aitken	24 May 1941

Pte R. Allan	16 December 1943
Pte S. Allen	12 August 1944
Pte L. E. Amer	23 October 1942
Pte B. T. Anderson	15 July 1942
Pte E. E. Anderson	23 July 1944
Pte A. Armishaw	23 May 1941
Pte W. H. Armstrong	28 June 1942
Pte W. F. Ashman	8 December 1943
Pte L. W. Atkinson	20 April 1943
Pte R. R. Bagrie	22 March 1944
Pte V. A. Barrington	22 July 1944
Pte S. M. Bartlett	15 February 1944
Pte J. McN. Bathgate	28 November 1943
Pte M. Bennell	28 June 1942
Pte T. H. Bird	20 May 1941
Pte L. Birnie	26 March 1943
Pte J. Blakie	22 July 1944
Pte G. D. Bone	4 August 1942
Pte R. J. Bown	17 April 1941
Pte E. H. Bradley	3 August 1944
Pte J. McR. Brand, MM	17 December 1942
Pte R. F. G. Brett	27 November 1941
Pte J. S. Brockelbank	15 December 1944
Pte P. F. Brosnahan	20 April 1943
Pte B. G. Brown	15 July 1942
Pte C. H. Brown	28 September 1944
Pte F. R. G. Brown	14 July 1942
Pte G. C. B. Brown	12 August 1944
Pte J. H. Brown	26 March 1943
Pte R. B. Brown	22 July 1944
Pte A. McK. S. Burnett	21 May 1941
Pte A. J. Bryan	8 January 1944
Pte T. J. Chandler	15 January 1944
Pte J. Christie	15 July 1942
Pte N. M. Christie, MM	3 April 1944
Pte G. Clark	9 May 1943

Pte I. J. Clark	26 May 1941
Pte F. W. Clay	5 November 1942
Pte R. E. Clay	16 December 1943
Pte C. S. Clearwater	22 July 1944
Pte W. L. Collins	2 December 1943
Pte R. H. Conner	4 August 1942
Pte J. H. Connolly	26 March 1943
Pte C. Coombe	15 December 1943
Pte R. L. Coombes	18 May 1944
Pte C. O. Cooper	16 December 1943
Pte E. F. J. Cooper	15 July 1942
Pte A. B. Corcoran	15 December 1943
Pte F. H. Crawford	1 September 1942
Pte C. S. Cuthill	23 October 1942
Pte W. J. Davis	15 December 1943
Pte J. L. Day	3 August 1942
Pte N. Dellow	11 July 1942
Pte J. H. Denton	15 December 1943
Pte E. D. De Malmanche	8 May 1943
Pte A. J. Derrick	19 March 1944
Pte W. T. Duff	11 December 1941
Pte A. Duncan	26 May 1941
Pte A. S. Dunn	15 December 1943
Pte G. S. Ellis	12 July 1942
Pte L. W. Ellis	13 October 1944
Pte A. F. Evans	22 March 1943
Pte E. F. Familton	22 March 1944
Pte W. C. Fay	12 April 1941
Pte D. G. Feary	18 April 1945
Pte A. Ferguson	20 March 1944
Pte R. Fletcher	15 July 1942
Pte H. A. Floyd	5 November 1942
Pte K. L. Ford	23 October 1942
Pte A. E. Fowler	28 March 1943
Pte W. D. U. Fraser	27 November 1941
Pte V. P. Froelich	20 May 1941
Pte C. E. Gabites	10 October 1944

Pte D. J. Gardner	20 September 1944
Pte J. W. P. Garside	20 March 1944
Pte D. W. Gibbs	4 August 1942
Pte J. F. Gibson	7 December 1943
Pte D. B. Giles	26 March 1943
Pte J. Going	15 July 1942
Pte G. J. W. Gorton	18 August 1942
Pte J. L. Gould	21 May 1941
Pte C. E. Grace	26 March 1943
Pte I. R. Graham	12 August 1944
Pte J. Graham	12 October 1944
Pte D. Gray	15 December 1943
Pte M. Green	20 May 1941
Pte D. A. A. Griffin	12 July 1942
Pte A. D. Groves	20 April 1943
Pte H. R. Hadfield	22 July 1942
Pte J. Halford	7 December 1943
Pte R. A. Harlow	23 October 1942
Pte R. R. Harper	20 May 1941
Pte N. G. Haslett	15 December 1943
Pte R. J. Hawker	15 December 1944
Pte J. O. Henderson	21 March 1944
Pte J. G. Heslop	15 December 1944
Pte S. C. Hewett	20 March 1944
Pte A. Higham	15 December 1944
Pte H. E. Hogan	20 May 1941
Pte R. G. Hope	16 July 1942
Pte J. H. Horler	28 May 1941
Pte R. J. Hounsell	15 December 1943
Pte R. A. Howie	21 May 1941
Pte J. H. Hunter	5 November 1942
Pte J. A. Illes	23 October 1942
Pte E. E. M. Inwood	16 October 1944
Pte R. W. Jeffrey	27 November 1941
Pte K. J. D. Johannis	4 July 1942
Pte F. Johnson	26 May 1941
Pte R. G. Johnston	15 December 1943

Pte K. N. Johnstone	11 December 1941
Pte W. R. Jonas	4 July 1942
Pte R. E. Jones	22 March 1944
Pte R. H. Jones	28 September 1944
Pte N. E. Joyce	17 October 1944
Pte C. R. Kassey	20 May 1941
Pte A. F. Kean	23 October 1942
Pte A. A. Kemp	22 May 1941
Pte P. J. Kent	23 October 1942
Pte H. J. Kiddey	27 November 1941
Pte H. A. Kitto	2 August 1942
Pte J. A. Kydd	28 June 1942
Pte C. R. Laidlaw	23 July 1944
Pte J. H. Lamb	20 May 1941
Pte W. N. Lane	10 April 1945
Pte E. P. G. Leaning	28 June 1942
Pte J. R. Learmonth	23 October 1942
Pte S. J. Leathem	23 October 1942
Pte J. B. F. Leckie	15 December 1944
Pte H. E. J. Leybourne	23 October 1942
Pte A. A. Lindsay	23 July 1944
Pte J. M. Litten	27 November 1941
Pte F. G. Little	5 November 1942
Pte E. C. Loper	15 July 1942
Pte M. J. McCallum	22 March 1944
Pte J. A. McDonald	12 April 1945
Pte R. G. McDonald	20 May 1941
Pte R. J. MacDonald	12 April 1945
Pte T. McEntyre	28 March 1943
Pte K. J. McEwin	3 August 1944
Pte J. McIntyre	23 October 1942
Pte A. M. McKay	21 March 1944
Pte D. R. MacLaine	7 December 1943
Pte J. R. Maher	20 May 1941
Pte A. M. Marshall	20 April 1943
Pte N. A. Masson	13 December 1944
Pte O. T. Middlemiss	20 April 1943

Pte B. J. C. Mohekey	20 April 1943
Pte G. C. Morris	14 July 1942
Pte R. Mould	11 July 1942
Pte M. W. Munro	15 July 1942
Pte R. A. Murdock	24 May 1941
Pte E. P. Murphy	April 1941
Pte R. W. G. Murray	3 April 1944
Pte E. L. Neville	26 November 1941
Pte H. P. Newton	20 April 1943
Pte G. F. O'Brien	20 March 1944
Pte R. O'Brien	20 May 1941
Pte J. J. O'Connell	15 December 1943
Pte A. L. O'Keefe	23 October 1942
Pte S. Oldham	25 May 1941
Pte F. C. Owen	13 April 1943
Pte F. G. Packer	26 November 1941
Pte R. F. Palmer	5 July 1942
Pte S. E. Pappriill	26 March 1944
Pte S. S. Patrick	25 May 1941
Pte A. Payne	7 December 1943
Pte E. J. B. Pearcy	15 December 1943
Pte J. Peevers	16 December 1943
Pte D. J. Pelham	15 August 1944
Pte R. T. Pope	15 July 1942
Pte A. J. Pratt	20 March 1944
Pte R. W. Prentice	23 October 1942
Pte R. J. Purvis	27 November 1941
Pte P. Rayner	12 July 1942
Pte E. A. G. Read	15 December 1943
Pte C. W. Reddecliffe	20 June 1944
Pte R. Reid	23 October 1942
Pte W. B. Rendall	11 December 1941
Pte R. Richmond	11 July 1942
Pte A. E. Roberts	16 July 1942
Pte A. V. Roberts	11 July 1942
Pte J. K. Roberts	23 October 1942
Pte A. J. Robertson	11 July 1942

Pte L. Rodgers	21 March 1944
Pte F. J. Rohan	26 November 1941
Pte J. T. Ryan	28 September 1944
Pte C. J. Sargent	26 November 1941
Pte W. A. Saunders	13 December 1944
Pte N. F. Saxon	17 April 1945
Pte G. V. D. Scott	30 September 1944
Pte J. C. Scott	13 October 1944
Pte L. N. Scott	15 December 1944
Pte D. E. Seaton	25 May 1941
Pte G. A. D. Simpson	15 December 1943
Pte J. J. Simpson	23 October 1942
Pte F. W. Sloan	20 April 1943
Pte R. M. Smith	22 March 1944
Pte R. T. Smith	23 October 1942
Pte W. T. Spencer	7 December 1943
Pte N. J. Stanley	15 July 1942
Pte S. Starkey	15 December 1944
Pte B. G. Stevenson	15 December 1944
Pte W. R. Stevenson	22 March 1944
Pte A. B. Stewart	10 February 1945
Pte R. Strange	25 May 1941
Pte I. G. Symes	15 July 1942
Pte R. W. Tamblyn	22 July 1944
Pte J. Tannahill	20 May 1941
Pte E. T. Taylor	22 May 1941
Pte H. Taylor	12 October 1944
Pte L. Thomas	18 May 1941
Pte J. E. Thompson	10 July 1942
Pte D. H. Tilson	15 December 1943
Pte L. J. Tobin	21 May 1941
Pte K. R. Todd	4 July 1942
Pte J. A. Triggs	21 April 1945
Pte G. L. Turnbull	8 March 1944
Pte F. G. Turner	12 August 1944
Pte R. M. Tweedie	22 March 1944
Pte L. A. Verdon	22 May 1941

Pte R. W. Walker	28 November 1943
Pte T. N. Walker	23 July 1943
Pte A. J. Waller	20 May 1941
Pte F. W. Waller	23 October 1942
Pte J. Waller	7 January 1944
Pte A. A. Watt	5 November 1942
Pte A. R. Watts	29 September 1944
Pte W. Wekepiri	11 July 1942
Pte B. West	20 March 1944
Pte F. T. Wilks	30 December 1944
Pte O. M. Williams	23 October 1942
Pte W. B. Williamson	8 December 1943
Pte H. Wilson	6 July 1942
Pte O. E. Wilson	22 July 1944
Pte T. M. Wilson	7 December 1943
Pte A. F. Wood	27 March 1943
Pte J. A. Wood	16 December 1942
Pte C. O. Workman	13 October 1944
Pte R. B. Wright	8 December 1943
Pte F. P. Young	8 December 1943
Pte I. A. K. P. Young	28 March 1943
Pte L. A. Young	25 May 1941
Pte S. R. Young	31 July 1944

DIED OF WOUNDS

Lt-Col R. E. Romans, DSO, m.i.d.	19 December 1943
Maj N. Buchanan, MC	17 December 1944
Maj C. A. Slee, m.i.d.	5 April 1944
Maj F. S. R. Thomson, MC, m.i.d.	28 March 1943
Lt D. G. Davis	8 January 1944
Lt I. H. Dillon	14 July 1942
Lt D. S. Harrowell	27 March 1943
Lt R. Lee	20 July 1942
2 Lt G. R. Hargest	30 March 1944
2 Lt L. S. Max	30 December 1944
WO II E. W. Hobbs, DCM	31 August 1942

Sgt J. M. Ballantyne	12 February 1944
Sgt F. Lawton	18 May 1941
Sgt J. M. Mitchell	25 May 1944
Sgt J. E. H. Shatford	24 October 1942
Sgt L. Treleavan	10 July 1942
L-Sgt H. W. R. McGrath	25 May 1941
Cpl C. E. Bennison	18 October 1944
Cpl R. M. Brislane	24 July 1944
Cpl L. I. Higgison	28 June 1944
Cpl K. A. McCabe	4 April 1944
Cpl J. W. Pringle	31 July 1944
Cpl I. A. Scott	23 December 1944
L-Cpl J. A. Cunningham	20 April 1943
L-Cpl D. F. Kay	15 April 1943
L-Cpl A. H. Quinn	17 April 1941
L-Cpl E. A. Waters	17 May 1941
Pte A. H. Adam	6 July 1942
Pte R. E. Broadbent	26 May 1941
Pte C. J. Brown	3 April 1944
Pte J. F. Bruce	18 December 1943
Pte G. L. Burger	8 December 1943
Pte H. Bury	25 July 1942
Pte A. Cabral	26 November 1941
Pte D. C. Campbell	16 December 1943
Pte H. N. Catlow	15 July 1942
Pte F. Churton	23 May 1941
Pte J. D. Clark	14 July 1942
Pte D. R. Coster	3 February 1945
Pte G. T. Craw	9 December 1943
Pte G. W. Cullen	24 July 1942
Pte L. A. Diamond	4 September 1942
Pte G. A. Docherty	16 December 1943
Pte J. W. Duncan	18 July 1942
Pte J. H. Falconer	22 May 1941
Pte P. Ford	28 October 1942
Pte J. F. G. Gensik	25 December 1943
Pte A. S. Gillanders	25 May 1941

Pte J. Gillespie	26 May 1941
Pte R. J. Gurney	15 December 1944
Pte K. W. Hall	18 October 1944
Pte J. C. Harrington	24 October 1942
Pte J. M. Hayles	10 January 1945
Pte J. T. Hesse	12 July 1942
Pte R. I. Hesselin	25 May 1944
Pte L. E. Howard	30 May 1941
Pte A. K. Inglis	29 May 1941
Pte W. J. Johnson	14 October 1944
Pte J. Kelly	31 October 1942
Pte R. A. Kennedy	29 March 1943
Pte R. H. Kerr	23 March 1944
Pte A. L. L. Kingston	11 July 1942
Pte I. H. Lindsay	10 December 1943
Pte G. E. C. Line	24 December 1941
Pte H. S. Lowe	23 May 1941
Pte J. A. A. McCormick	16 July 1942
Pte W. W. McEwan	21 October 1944
Pte L. A. McHardy	26 May 1941
Pte A. McKean	18 December 1941
Pte I. D. McKerchar	7 December 1943
Pte H. A. Manson	30 September 1944
Pte R. I. Marshall	14 July 1942
Pte H. K. Masters	24 May 1941
Pte O. H. Mathias	7 December 1941
Pte G. E. Melrose	17 December 1943
Pte M. J. Mundy	23 July 1944
Pte J. D. Neill	11 December 1941
Pte F. J. Paganini	27 September 1944
Pte W. M. Perry	24 December 1941
Pte B. P. Pope	6 January 1944
Pte C. H. Roberts	28 November 1941
Pte C. J. Seque	22 May 1941
Pte R. Sizemore	2 June 1941
Pte R. Stevenson	14 July 1942
Pte A. Valli	12 December 1941

Pte J. R. D. White	12 April 1945
Pte T. J. Whiting	27 December 1943
Pte H. L. Williams	28 May 1941
Pte J. G. Williams	14 July 1942
Pte L. S. Williams	21 December 1943
Pte L. A. Wilson	16 February 1944
Pte R. C. Wilson	30 May 1941
Pte J. A. Wright	31 July 1944

DIED WHILE PRISONER OF WAR

Sgt D. E. Easterbrook	20 February 1944
L-Sgt J. Templeton	5 June 1941
Cpl L. D. L. Houghton, m.i.d.	5 March 1942
Pte G. E. Elliott	November 1942
Pte J. Hennessy	24 August 1943
Pte D. Jones	26 September 1941
Pte R. R. Lawson	21 July 1941
Pte W. V. Palmer	17 August 1942
Pte J. Ross	8 September 1941
Pte L. S. Wilson	20 February 1944

DIED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

WO II L. H. Kidd	22 April 1943
Sgt H. E. Coombe	14 April 1944
Cpl C. C. Tonkinson	21 October 1942
Cpl B. Winter	2 March 1944
Cpl J. D. Wylde-Browne	6 April 1943
L-Cpl J. S. Donaldson	14 October 1945
Pte J. E. Brook, MM	24 June 1942
Pte J. M. Dougan	22 May 1942
Pte I. B. McCallum	2 June 1942
Pte D. P. McEwing	10 June 1945
Pte E. P. Murphy	April 1941
Pte H. G. Pearce	16 August 1944
Pte W. A. Quirk	15 July 1945

Pte C. K. W. Rochester 14 November 1942
Pte T. J. Ronan 26 November 1941

Pte W. L. Strathern 17 September 1945

Pte A. R. Totman 15 July 1944

23 BATTALION

KILLED IN ACTION

KILLED IN ACTION

Maj R. A. Boyle	10 February 1945
Maj T. Fyfe	20 May 1941
Maj W. Hoseit	23 July 1944
Maj B. V. A. Jones	30 May 1944
Capt T. F. Begg	15 July 1942
Capt H. C. Black	20 April 1943
Capt M. D. Grant	17 July 1942
Capt C. G. Ironside	15 July 1942
Capt P. L. Lynch	23 October 1942
Capt P. T. Norris, MC	17 December 1942
Capt G. McG. Robertson, m.i.d.	26 March 1943
Lt N. Barker	14 February 1944
Lt R. Karsten	30 July 1944
Lt J. C. Laing	15 December 1943
Lt C. T. Mason, MC	12 July 1942
Lt H. T. Richards	15 July 1942
Lt F. D. Sutherland	23 October 1942
Lt M. C. Tither, MM	7 January 1944
Lt A. A. Torrens	28 June 1942
Lt F. Vernon	23 October 1942
2 Lt B. O. J. Bradley	26 May 1944
2 Lt J. H. A. Cameron	3 August 1944
2 Lt M. E. Cross	7 May 1943
2 Lt W. K. Gale	21 March 1944
2 Lt J. P. Gordon	24 July 1944
2 Lt S. A. McCartney	22 July 1944
2 Lt A. W. Moodie	29 April 1941
2 Lt W. I. Morris	28 September 1944
2 Lt C. W. Welsh, MM	21 March 1944
WO II J. D. Conning	24 May 1941
WO II H. R. Pullar	27 November 1941

WO II J. D. Trotter	17 December 1942
Sgt A. J. G. Attewell	23 October 1942
Sgt W. J. Broughan	23 October 1942
Sgt H. H. Crawley	5 November 1942
Sgt J. P. Cunningham	14 July 1942
Sgt F. C. Dawson	16 December 1943
Sgt A. A. De Vantier	15 December 1943
Sgt J. McN. Greig	14 July 1942
Sgt G. F. Harris	27 February 1944
Sgt N. J. Hosking	24 July 1944
Sgt M. C. Lysons	3 April 1944
Sgt L. A. McGregor	27 November 1941
Sgt D. A. C. McKillop	15 December 1943
Sgt I. Skillen	23 October 1942
Sgt A. McL. Swale	18 August 1942
Sgt B. J. Walsh	17 April 1941
Sgt S. E. Young	26 March 1943
L-Sgt N. R. Elliott	10 April 1945
L-Sgt B. H. Gillies	5 July 1942
L-Sgt A. S. Kearney	23 October 1942
L-Sgt J. F. Leonard	22 July 1944
L-Sgt W. D. H. Lory	20 April 1943
L-Sgt J. R. P. O'Shaughnessy	3 April 1944
Cpl F. Armitage	15 December 1943
Cpl D. D. Bain	15 December 1943
Cpl E. Bullimore	12 April 1945
Cpl J. A. Black	13 October 1944
Cpl L. M. Edgecombe	14 February 1944
Cpl J. E. Gordon	22 July 1944
Cpl J. H. Harris	19 May 1944
Cpl E. P. Healy	24 July 1944
Cpl V. Idour, MM, m.i.d.	27 February 1944
Cpl R. K. Jackson	16 July 1942
Cpl S. Jackson	20 May 1941
Cpl T. Johnston	9 May 1943
Cpl G. M. Lister	20 March 1944
Cpl P. McArthur	27 November 1941

Cpl R. R. McDonald	27 May 1941
Cpl L. W. P. McDowell	20 May 1941
Cpl L. R. McMillan	20 March 1944
Cpl J. McRae	30 May 1944
Cpl F. J. Morris	20 April 1943
Cpl B. A. Newport	22 July 1944
Cpl M. A. Price	27 November 1941
Cpl T. D. Robertson	26 March 1943
Cpl A. Rutherford	23 October 1942
Cpl M. C. Sheehan	27 July 1942
Cpl A. D. Smith, MM	15 July 1942
Cpl J. R. Watts	15 December 1944
Cpl J. Wilson	29 September 1944
L-Cpl C. W. Behrns	23 October 1942
L-Cpl J. R. Brown	15 July 1942
L-Cpl B. Butterfield	15 December 1943
L-Cpl G. J. Clearwater	20 April 1943
L-Cpl G. T. Croft	27 March 1944
L-Cpl L. J. E. Fountain	23 May 1941
L-Cpl G. N. Gale	15 December 1944
L-Cpl J. A. Hepburn	25 May 1941
L-Cpl J. L. Herbert	23 October 1942
L-Cpl O. M. Hoban	9 May 1943
L-Cpl C. J. Hutchinson	3 August 1944
L-Cpl G. A. Kinmont	28 June 1942
L-Cpl H. R. MacDonald	20 May 1941
L-Cpl J. B. Martin	15 April 1941
L-Cpl W. Y. Montgomery	23 July 1944
L-Cpl F. G. Nolan, MM	15 December 1943
L-Cpl W. W. Paterson	15 December 1943
L-Cpl H. K. Payne	23 October 1942
L-Cpl A. J. C. Rennie	28 November 1943
L-Cpl D. C. Sutherland	15 December 1944
L-Cpl C. F. Young	23 October 1942
Pte S. Aitken	24 May 1941
Pte R. Allan	16 December 1943
Pte S. Allen	12 August 1944

Pte L. E. Amer	23 October 1942
Pte B. T. Anderson	15 July 1942
Pte E. E. Anderson	23 July 1944
Pte A. Armishaw	23 May 1941
Pte W. H. Armstrong	28 June 1942
Pte W. F. Ashman	8 December 1943
Pte L. W. Atkinson	20 April 1943
Pte R. R. Bagrie	22 March 1944
Pte V. A. Barrington	22 July 1944
Pte S. M. Bartlett	15 February 1944
Pte J. McN. Bathgate	28 November 1943
Pte M. Bennell	28 June 1942
Pte T. H. Bird	20 May 1941
Pte L. Birnie	26 March 1943
Pte J. Blakie	22 July 1944
Pte G. D. Bone	4 August 1942
Pte R. J. Bown	17 April 1941
Pte E. H. Bradley	3 August 1944
Pte J. McR. Brand, MM	17 December 1942
Pte R. F. G. Brett	27 November 1941
Pte J. S. Brockelbank	15 December 1944
Pte P. F. Brosnahan	20 April 1943
Pte B. G. Brown	15 July 1942
Pte C. H. Brown	28 September 1944
Pte F. R. G. Brown	14 July 1942
Pte G. C. B. Brown	12 August 1944
Pte J. H. Brown	26 March 1943
Pte R. B. Brown	22 July 1944
Pte A. McK. S. Burnett	21 May 1941
Pte A. J. Bryan	8 January 1944
Pte T. J. Chandler	15 January 1944
Pte J. Christie	15 July 1942
Pte N. M. Christie, MM	3 April 1944
Pte G. Clark	9 May 1943
Pte J. J. Clark	26 May 1941
Pte F. W. Clay	5 November 1942

Pte R. E. Clay	16 December 1943
Pte C. S. Clearwater	22 July 1944
Pte W. L. Collins	2 December 1943
Pte R. H. Conner	4 August 1942
Pte J. H. Connolly	26 March 1943
Pte C. Coombe	15 December 1943
Pte R. L. Coombes	18 May 1944
Pte C. O. Cooper	16 December 1943
Pte E. F. J. Cooper	15 July 1942
Pte A. B. Corcoran	15 December 1943
Pte F. H. Crawford	1 September 1942
Pte C. S. Cuthill	23 October 1942
Pte W. J. Davis	15 December 1943
Pte J. L. Day	3 August 1942
Pte N. Dellow	11 July 1942
Pte J. H. Denton	15 December 1943
Pte E. D. De Malmanche	8 May 1943
Pte A. J. Derrick	19 March 1944
Pte W. T. Duff	11 December 1941
Pte A. Duncan	26 May 1941
Pte A. S. Dunn	15 December 1943
Pte G. S. Ellis	12 July 1942
Pte L. W. Ellis	13 October 1944
Pte A. F. Evans	22 March 1943
Pte E. F. Familton	22 March 1944
Pte W. C. Fay	12 April 1941
Pte D. G. Feary	18 April 1945
Pte A. Ferguson	20 March 1944
Pte R. Fletcher	15 July 1942
Pte H. A. Floyd	5 November 1942
Pte K. L. Ford	23 October 1942
Pte A. E. Fowler	28 March 1943
Pte W. D. U. Fraser	27 November 1941
Pte V. P. Froelich	20 May 1941
Pte C. E. Gabites	10 October 1944
Pte D. J. Gardner	29 September 1944
Pte J. W. F. Garside	20 March 1944

Pte D. W. Gibbs	4 August 1942
Pte J. F. Gibson	7 December 1943
Pte D. B. Giles	26 March 1943
Pte J. Going	15 July 1942
Pte G. J. W. Gorton	18 August 1942
Pte J. L. Gould	21 May 1941
Pte C. E. Grace	26 March 1943
Pte I. R. Graham	12 August 1944
Pte J. Graham	12 October 1944
Pte D. Gray	15 December 1943
Pte M. Green	20 May 1941
Pte D. A. A. Griffin	12 July 1942
Pte A. D. Groves	20 April 1943
Pte H. R. Hadfield	22 July 1942
Pte J. Halford	7 December 1943
Pte R. A. Harlow	23 October 1942
Pte R. R. Harper	20 May 1941
Pte N. G. Haslett	15 December 1943
Pte R. J. Hawker	15 December 1944
Pte J. O. Henderson	21 March 1944
Pte J. G. Heslop	15 December 1944
Pte S. C. Hewett	20 March 1944
Pte A. Higham	15 December 1944
Pte H. E. Hogan	20 May 1941
Pte R. G. Hope	16 July 1942
Pte J. H. Horler	28 May 1941
Pte R. J. Hounsell	15 December 1943
Pte R. A. Howie	21 May 1941
Pte J. H. Hunter	5 November 1942
Pte J. A. Illes	23 October 1942
Pte E. E. M. Inwood	16 October 1944
Pte R. W. Jeffrey	27 November 1941
Pte K. J. D. Johannis	4 July 1942
Pte F. Johnson	26 May 1941
Pte R. G. Johnston	15 December 1943
Pte K. N. Johnstone	11 December 1941
Pte W. R. Jonas	4 July 1942

Pte R. F. Jones	22 March 1944
Pte R. F. Jones	28 September 1944
Pte N. E. Joyce	17 October 1944
Pte C. R. Kassey	20 May 1941
Pte A. F. Kean	23 October 1942
Pte A. A. Kemp	22 May 1941
Pte P. J. Kent	23 October 1942
Pte H. J. Kiddey	27 November 1941
Pte H. A. Kitto	2 August 1942
Pte J. A. Kydd	28 June 1942
Pte C. R. Laidlaw	23 July 1944
Pte J. H. Lamb	20 May 1941
Pte W. N. Lane	10 April 1945
Pte E. P. G. Leaning	28 June 1942
Pte J. R. Learmonth	23 October 1942
Pte S. J. Leathem	23 October 1942
Pte J. B. F. Leckie	15 December 1944
Pte H. E. J. Leybourne	23 October 1942
Pte A. A. Lindsay	23 July 1944
Pte J. M. Litten	27 November 1941
Pte F. G. Little	5 November 1942
Pte E. C. Loper	15 July 1942
Pte M. J. McCallum	22 March 1944
Pte J. A. McDonald	12 April 1945
Pte R. G. McDonald	20 May 1941
Pte R. J. MacDonald	12 April 1945
Pte T. McEntyre	28 March 1943
Pte K. J. McEwin	3 August 1944
Pte J. McIntyre	23 October 1942
Pte A. M. McKay	21 March 1944
Pte D. R. MacLaine	7 December 1943
Pte J. R. Maher	20 May 1941
Pte A. M. Marshall	20 April 1943
Pte N. A. Masson	13 December 1944
Pte O. T. Middlemiss	20 April 1943
Pte B. J. C. Mohekey	20 April 1943
Pte G. C. Morris	14 July 1942

Pte R. Mould	11 July 1942
Pte M. W. Munro	15 July 1942
Pte R. A. Murdock	24 May 1941
Pte E. P. Murphy	April 1941
Pte R. W. G. Murray	3 April 1944
Pte E. L. Neville	26 November 1941
Pte H. P. Newton	20 April 1943
Pte G. F. O'Brien	20 March 1944
Pte R. O'Brien	20 May 1941
Pte J. J. O'Connell	15 December 1943
Pte A. L. O'Keefe	23 October 1942
Pte S. Oldham	25 May 1941
Pte F. C. Owen	13 April 1943
Pte F. G. Packer	26 November 1941
Pte R. F. Palmer	5 July 1942
Pte S. E. Papprell	26 March 1944
Pte S. S. Patrick	25 May 1941
Pte A. Payne	7 December 1943
Pte E. J. B. Pearcy	15 December 1943
Pte J. Peevers	16 December 1943
Pte D. J. Pelham	15 August 1944
Pte R. T. Pope	15 July 1942
Pte A. J. Pratt	20 March 1944
Pte R. W. Prentice	23 October 1942
Pte R. J. Purvis	27 November 1941
Pte P. Rayner	12 July 1942
Pte E. A. G. Read	15 December 1943
Pte C. W. Reddecliffe	20 June 1944
Pte R. Reid	23 October 1942
Pte W. B. Rendall	11 December 1941
Pte R. Richmond	11 July 1942
Pte A. E. Roberts	16 July 1942
Pte A. V. Roberts	11 July 1942
Pte J. K. Roberts	23 October 1942
Pte A. J. Robertson	11 July 1942
Pte L. Rodgers	21 March 1944
Pte T. J. Ronan	26 November 1941

Pte J. T. Ryan	28 September 1944
Pte C. J. Sargent	28 November 1941
Pte W. A. Saunders	13 December 1944
Pte N. F. Saxon	17 April 1945
Pte G. V. D. Scott	30 September 1944
Pte J. C. Scott	13 October 1944
Pte L. N. Scott	15 December 1944
Pte D. E. Seaton	25 May 1941
Pte G. A. D. Simpson	15 December 1943
Pte J. J. Simpson	23 October 1942
Pte F. W. Sloan	20 April 1943
Pte R. M. Smith	22 March 1944
Pte R. T. Smith	23 October 1942
Pte W. T. Spencer	7 December 1943
Pte N. J. Stanley	15 July 1942
Pte S. Starkey	15 December 1944
Pte B. G. Stevenson	15 December 1944
Pte W. R. Stevenson	22 March 1944
Pte A. B. Stewart	10 February 1945
Pte R. Strange	25 May 1941
Pte I. G. Symes	15 July 1942
Pte R. W. Tamblyn	22 July 1944
Pte J. Tannahill	20 May 1941
Pte E. T. Taylor	22 May 1941
Pte H. Taylor	12 October 1944
Pte L. Thomas	18 May 1941
Pte J. E. Thompson	10 July 1942
Pte D. H. Tilson	15 December 1943
Pte L. J. Tobin	21 May 1941
Pte K. R. Todd	4 July 1942
Pte J. A. Triggs	21 April 1945
Pte G. L. Turnbull	8 March 1944
Pte F. G. Turner	12 August 1944
Pte R. M. Tweedie	22 March 1944
Pte L. A. Verdon	22 May 1941
Pte R. W. Walker	28 November 1943
Pte T. N. Walker	23 July 1943

Pte A. J. Waller	20 May 1941
Pte F. W. Waller	23 October 1942
Pte J. Waller	7 January 1944
Pte A. A. Watt	5 November 1942
Pte A. R. Watts	29 September 1944
Pte W. Wekepiri	11 July 1942
Pte B. West	20 March 1944
Pte F. T. Wilks	30 December 1944
Pte O. M. Williams	23 October 1942
Pte W. B. Williamson	8 December 1943
Pte H. Wilson	6 July 1942
Pte O. E. Wilson	22 July 1944
Pte T. M. Wilson	7 December 1943
Pte A. F. Wood	27 March 1943
Pte J. A. Wood	16 December 1942
Pte C. O. Workman	13 October 1944
Pte R. B. Wright	8 December 1943
Pte F. P. Young	8 December 1943
Pte I. A. K. P. Young	28 March 1943
Pte L. A. Young	25 May 1941
Pte S. R. Young	31 July 1944

23 BATTALION

DIED OF WOUNDS

DIED OF WOUNDS

Lt-Col R. E. Romans, DSO, m.i.d.	19 December 1943
Maj N. Buchanan, MC	17 December 1944
Maj C. A. Slee, m.i.d.	5 April 1944
Maj F. S. R. Thomson, MC, m.i.d.	28 March 1943
Lt D. G. Davis	8 January 1944
Lt I. H. Dillon	14 July 1942
Lt D. S. Harrowell	27 March 1943
Lt R. Lee	20 July 1942
2 Lt G. R. Hargest	30 March 1944
2 Lt L. S. Max	30 December 1944
WO II E. W. Hobbs, DCM	31 August 1942
Sgt J. M. Ballantyne	12 February 1944
Sgt F. Lawton	18 May 1941
Sgt J. M. Mitchell	25 May 1944
Sgt J. E. H. Shatford	24 October 1942
Sgt L. Treleavan	10 July 1942
L-Sgt H. W. R. McGrath	25 May 1941
Cpl C. E. Bennison	18 October 1944
Cpl R. M. Brislane	24 July 1944
Cpl L. I. Higgison	28 June 1944
Cpl K. A. McCabe	4 April 1944
Cpl J. W. Pringle	31 July 1944
Cpl I. A. Scott	23 December 1944
L-Cpl J. A. Cunningham	20 April 1943
L-Cpl D. F. Kay	15 April 1943
L-Cpl A. H. Quinn	17 April 1941
L-Cpl E. A. Waters	17 May 1941
Pte A. H. Adam	6 July 1942
Pte R. E. Broadbent	26 May 1941
Pte C. J. Brown	3 April 1944
Pte J. F. Bruce	18 December 1943

Pte G. L. Burger	8 December 1943
Pte H. Bury	25 July 1942
Pte A. Cabral	26 November 1941
Pte D. C. Campbell	16 December 1943
Pte H. N. Catlow	15 July 1942
Pte F. Churton	23 May 1941
Pte J. D. Clark	14 July 1942
Pte D. R. Coster	3 February 1945
Pte G. T. Craw	9 December 1943
Pte G. W. Cullen	24 July 1942
Pte L. A. Diamond	4 September 1942
Pte G. A. Docherty	16 December 1943
Pte J. W. Duncan	18 July 1942
Pte J. H. Falconer	22 May 1941
Pte P. Ford	28 October 1942
Pte J. F. G. Gensik	25 December 1943
Pte A. S. Gillanders	25 May 1941
Pte J. Gillespie	26 May 1941
Pte R. J. Gurney	15 December 1944
Pte K. W. Hall	18 October 1944
Pte J. C. Harrington	24 October 1942
Pte J. M. Hayles	10 January 1945
Pte J. T. Hesse	12 July 1942
Pte R. I. Hesselin	25 May 1944
Pte L. E. Howard	30 May 1941
Pte A. K. Inglis	29 May 1941
Pte W. J. Johnson	14 October 1944
Pte J. Kelly	31 October 1942
Pte R. A. Kennedy	29 March 1943
Pte R. H. Kerr	23 March 1944
Pte A. L. L. Kingston	11 July 1942
Pte I. H. Lindsay	10 December 1943
Pte G. E. C. Line	24 December 1941
Pte H. S. Lowe	23 May 1941
Pte J. A. A. McCormick	16 July 1942
Pte W. W. McEwan	21 October 1944
Pte L. A. McHardy	26 May 1941

Pte A. McKean	18 December 1941
Pte I. D. McKerchar	7 December 1943
Pte H. A. Manson	30 September 1944
Pte R. I. Marshall	14 July 1942
Pte H. K. Masters	24 May 1941
Pte O. H. Mathias	7 December 1941
Pte G. E. Melrose	17 December 1943
Pte M. J. Mundy	23 July 1944
Pte J. D. Neill	11 December 1941
Pte F. J. Paganini	27 September 1944
Pte W. M. Perry	24 December 1941
Pte B. P. Pope	6 January 1944
Pte C. H. Roberts	28 November 1941
Pte C. J. Seque	22 May 1941
Pte R. Sizemore	2 June 1941
Pte R. Stevenson	14 July 1942
Pte A. Valli	12 December 1941
Pte J. R. D. White	12 April 1945
Pte T. J. Whiting	27 December 1943
Pte H. L. Williams	28 May 1941
Pte J. G. Williams	14 July 1942
Pte L. S. Williams	21 December 1943
Pte L. A. Wilson	16 February 1944
Pte R. C. Wilson	30 May 1941
Pte J. A. Wright	31 July 1944

23 BATTALION

DIED WHILE PRISONER OF WAR

DIED WHILE PRISONER OF WAR

Sgt D. E. Easterbrook	20 February 1944
L-Sgt J. Templeton	5 June 1941
Cpl L. D. L. Houghton, m.i.d.	5 March 1942
Pte G. E. Elliott	November 1942
Pte J. Hennessy	24 August 1943
Pte D. Jones	26 September 1941
Pte R. R. Lawson	21 July 1941
Pte W. V. Palmer	17 August 1942
Pte J. Ross	8 September 1941
Pte L. S. Wilson	20 February 1944

23 BATTALION

DIED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

DIED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

WO II L. H. Kidd	22 April 1943
Sgt H. E. Coombe	14 April 1944
Cpl C. C. Tonkinson	21 October 1942
Cpl B. Winter	2 March 1944
Cpl J. D. Wylde-Browne	6 April 1943
L-Cpl J. S. Donaldson	14 October 1945
Pte J. E. Brook, MM	24 June 1942
Pte J. M. Dougan	22 May 1942
Pte I. B. McCallum	2 June 1942
Pte D. P. McEwing	10 June 1945
Pte E. P. Murphy	April 1941
Pte H. G. Pearce	16 August 1944
Pte W. A. Quirk	15 July 1945
Pte C. K. W. Rochester	14 November 1942
Pte T. J. Ronan	26 November 1941
Pte W. L. Strathern	17 September 1945
Pte A. R. Totman	15 July 1944

23 BATTALION

SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

Summary of Casualties

	Killed or Died of Wounds		Wounded Wounded and PW				Prisoners of War		Died on Active Service		Total
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	ORs	ORs	
Greece	1	8	2	6	—	6	3	27		53	
Crete	1	50	8	121	2	61	—	56		299	
Libya, 1941	—	25	8	60	—	10	—	7		110	
Egypt, 1942	11	104	30	317	1	10	2	60		535	
Tripolitania and Tunisia	6	34	15	184	—	—	—	—		239	
Italy	20	176	45	615	—	1	2	15		874	
									17	17	
	39	397	108	1303	3	88	7	165	17	2127	

Ten other ranks died while prisoners of war.

23 BATTALION

HONOURS AND AWARDS

Honours and Awards

VICTORIA CROSS

Sgt A. C. Hulme

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE ORDER

Lt-Col R. E. Romans

Maj W. B. Thomas, MC and Bar

Rev. H. F. Harding, MBE (Chaplain, attached)

ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Col D. F. Leckie

BAR TO MILITARY CROSS

Maj A. Ross, MC

Capt E. A. McPhail, MC

Lt W. B. Thomas, MC

MILITARY CROSS

Maj W. B. Cox

Maj D. G. Grant

Maj H. J. G. Low

Maj J. W. McArthur

Maj F. S. R. Thomson

Capt F. R. Coe

Capt P. T. Norris

Capt A. Ross

Capt C. N. Watson

Capt R. A. Wilson (NZMC, attached)

Lt A. F. Bailey

Lt G. S. Cooper

Lt L. J. Kearney

Lt R. K. King

Lt A. S. Robins

Lt W. B. Thomas

2 Lt J. M. Hennessy

2 Lt F. C. Irving

2 Lt E. A. McPhail

2 Lt A. C. Marett

2 Lt J. I. M. Smail

2 Lt E. B. Waetford

GREEK MILITARY CROSS

Capt H. M. Smith

BAR TO DCM

Sgt E. Batchelor, DCM

DISTINGUISHED CONDUCT MEDAL

Sgt E. W. Hobbs

Sgt W. J. Smith

Sgt N. Trewby

Sgt R. J. Wilson

Cpl E. Batchelor

Pte S. W. J. Schroder

MILITARY MEDAL

WO I R. E. Buick

WO II F. J. Muir

Sgt L. S. Bain

Sgt I. C. R. Harvey

Sgt S. Herbison

Sgt H. H. McLean

Sgt N. C. McLean

Sgt A. McLennan

Sgt R. Maitland

Sgt E. F. Michie

Sgt J. Russell

Sgt C. A. W. White

Sgt J. R. Wilson

L-Sgt R. Edmondson

L-Sgt E. B. Glass

L-Sgt O. L. Howat

L-Sgt F. P. Sanders

L-Sgt I. R. Taylor

Cpl F. H. Anderson

Cpl A. C. Hooper

Cpl V. Idour

Cpl R. E. C. Mathieson

Cpl C. R. Monaghan

Cpl A. Russell

Cpl A. D. Smith

Cpl E. M. Stoddart

Cpl J. Tither

L-Cpl S. V. Gilchrist

Pte J. McR. Brand

Pte J. E. Brook

Pte W. T. F. Buchanan

Pte E. J. Bullo

Pte A. J. Callanan

Pte C. M. Campbell

Pte L. P. Challis

Pte N. M. Christie

Pte R. H. S. Harper

Pte F. K. Jones

Pte R. B. Litchfield

Pte W. J. McIndoe

Pte D. G. MacLeod

Pte E. J. Mayo

Pte J. Milne

Pte F. G. Nolan

Pte J. J. L. Strathern

Pte A. H. Todd

Pte H. B. Whiteley

Pte R. C. Young

BRITISH EMPIRE MEDAL

Sgt H. D. Parfoot

Pte W. E. Green

UNITED STATES SILVER STAR

Lt-Col W. B. Thomas, DSO, MC and Bar

23 BATTALION

COMMANDING OFFICERS

Commanding Officers

Lt-Col A. S. Falconer	12 Jan 1940–26 Aug 1940
Lt- Col D. F. Leckie	26 Aug 1940–5 Mar 1941
Lt-Col A. S. Falconer	5 Mar 1941–12 May 1941
Lt- Col D. F. Leckie	12 May 1941–21 Jun 1942
Maj R. E. Romans	21 Jun 1942–29 Jun 1942
Lt-Col C. N. Watson	29 Jun 1942–15 Jul 1942
Lt-Col R. E. Romans	15 Jul 1942–20 Apr 1943
Lt-Col J. R. J. Connolly	24 Apr 1943–14 May 1943
Lt-Col M. C. Fairbrother	14 May 1943–23 Aug 1943
Lt-Col R. E. Romans	23 Aug 1943–15 Dec 1943
Lt-Col W. B. Thomas	15 Dec 1943–27 Dec 1943
Lt-Col J. R. J. Connolly	27 Dec 1943–8 May 1944
Lt-Col E. D. Blundell	8 May 1944–16 May 1944
Lt-Col E. A. McPhail	16 May 1944–10 Jun 1944
Lt-Col W. B. Thomas	10 Jun 1944–4 Aug 1944
Lt-Col E. A. McPhail	4 Aug 1944–12 Oct 1944
Lt-Col W. B. Thomas	12 Oct 1944–12 May 1945
Lt-Col D. G. Grant	12 May 1945–10 Sep 1945
Maj D. P. W. Harvey	10 Sep 1945–9 Dec 1945

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