

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

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**The digital edition of this book was sponsored by Mary Weston, daughter  
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Chief of the Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War.**

**All unambiguous end-of-line hyphens have been removed, and the  
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**Some keywords in the header are a local Electronic Text Centre scheme  
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**Corrected transcription error on page 272: McInnes.**

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**Added full TEI header.**

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## ITALY

Volume 2  
THE CHANGE TO COLOUR

by  
R. G. PHILLIPS

WAR HISTORY BRANCH  
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS  
WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND  
1957

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

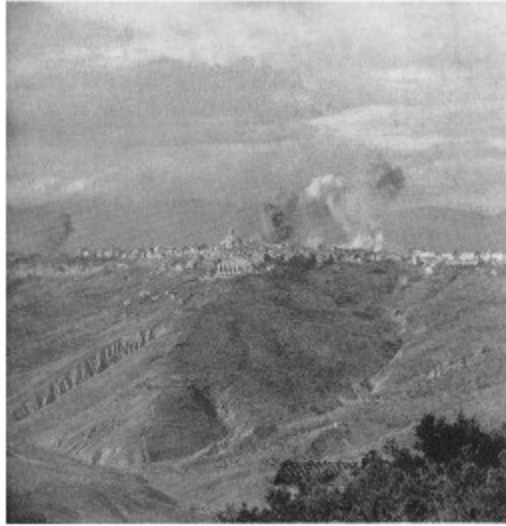
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### *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45*

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

[FRONTISPIECE]



Orsogna being bombed

**Orsogna being bombed**

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

[TITLE PAGE]

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

**ITALY**

*Volume I*

**THE SANGRO TO CASSINO**

**N. C. PHILLIPS**

**WAR HISTORY BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW**

**ZEALAND 1957**

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## PREFACE

### *Preface*

IT was in obedience to a world-wide strategy that the New Zealand Parliament decided in 1943 to leave its 2nd Division in the **Mediterranean** theatre. The aim of that strategy was to bring some relief to the Russians and to distract the enemy from the Second Front then preparing in north-western **Europe** by engaging him in **Italy**.

For the fighting soldier it was a strategy that proved a hard taskmaster: how hard may appear from this account of the Division's fighting on the **Sangro– Orsogna** front and at **Cassino** in the grim winter of 1943–44. It called for attack and renewed attack when mere military prudence would have counselled the defensive; it repaid great effort and high casualties with few visible gains; it implicated the Division in the odium arising from the destruction of a famous religious house; and the grand plan that it served was present to most men of the Division as no more than the doubtful rumour of a guess. Write as one may, the elegiac note keeps breaking in. All this might seem to be a record from which New Zealanders can more easily draw pride than satisfaction. But what is told here is an unfinished story. The days of endurance had their fulfilment, not less in **Italy** than on battlefields beyond the Alps.

Every historian ought to have a theory of what he is doing. Mine has been a form of the saying that 'all history is the history of thought'. The discrepancy between what men intend and what they achieve is often gross, and in war this discrepancy is increased many times by physical accident – the untimely shower, the gun that jammed, the bridge that broke. Yet if any order is to be shaped out of the chaos of battle, it can only be by considering what was going on in the minds of the commanders and the destinies of their intentions. I have continually tried to discover the mind at work in the *mêlée*. 'It was not the Carthaginian army that crossed the Alps, it was Hannibal'.

**This is perhaps unpopular doctrine, and its practice may have a price. I have paid some of that price by writing a book that does less justice than I could have wished to the life of the ordinary soldier, the ranker with a rifle. There is also the danger that too narrow a devotion to command, its plans and their working out will produce in the end not a picture but a map. ‘You shall read this,’ wrote Balzac of a work he projected, ‘as through the smell of powder, and when the book is read, you shall believe you had seen this with your own eyes and you ought to remember the battle as if you had been present’. This, I suppose, is what every military historian secretly hopes for his own work. But it was a novel that Balzac planned, and it may be that the historian must submit to the limitations of his medium and be content to make his map as informative and as accurate as he can, leaving the novelist to set down those bright disordered patches of physical reality by which the senses report the battle and the military life.**

**As official history is sometimes suspect, I should like to emphasise that my official status has been almost wholly advantageous. I owe it to an Editor-in-Chief who has been at once exceptionally scrupulous and exceptionally tolerant, and perhaps to myself, to say that this book contains no more than two paragraphs that I might have phrased a little differently had I been writing in another capacity. With this exception, and with the exception of a certain duty to be comprehensive, I am not conscious of having worked under other restraint than that which any historian, official or unofficial, should impose on himself in discussing that most fallible of human activities, the conduct of battle.**

**One of the pleasures of authorship is the accumulation of friendly debts. My chief debt (it is immeasurably large) is to the staff of the [War History Branch](#). Where all have been courteous and helpful, my only justification for mentioning some by name is that I have made more calls on their time, patience and knowledge. Mr W. D. Dawson wrote the indispensable narrative of events upon which most of my chapters are based and also translated the relevant German documents in the keeping**

of the Military Documents Section of the United States War Department at **Washington**. The narrative for most of the very complicated second battle of **Cassino** was the capable work of Miss Judith A. Hornabrook. In the later stages, the constructive criticism of Mr Ronald Walker helped to remove deficiencies, doubts and errors. **Mr W. A. Glue** went far beyond the normal duties of a sub-editor and Miss Joan Williams prepared the invaluable index. By giving generously of his own time to look after the photographs, Mr John Pascoe has helped (in the old sense of the word as well as the new) to illustrate this volume. For the maps I am indebted to the Cartographic Branch of the Lands and Survey Department, **Wellington**.

The British war historians have given willing assistance. Professor J. R. M. Butler permitted me to see the first draft of John Ehrman's *Grand Strategy, August 1943 – September 1944*. Brigadier H. B. Latham and Major F. Jones, of the Historical Section of the Cabinet Office, put their facilities freely at my disposal; and Major Jones will recognise in **Chapter 9** some of the fruits of his own researches. The excellent grey-bound volumes in the series *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy*, prepared about ten years ago by the British Historical Section, Central Mediterranean, have been a constant source of reference.

The personal evidence of many individual participants has been an essential supplement to the official materials. It would be impossible to make acknowledgment to all, but I have had some help which even brevity may not fail to specify. **Lord Freyberg** in personal discussion and in writing has shown a kindly interest from which I hope I have profited; and **Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger**, Major-General G. B. Parkinson and Major-General C. E. Weir have also read the whole or a part of the book in draft and offered valuable comments. For their aid and hospitality I am deeply grateful. On the German side, my questions were readily answered by **General F. von Senger und Etterlin**, and his personal diary was generously made available by the Chief of Military History, United States Army.

**To the Council of Canterbury University College I gladly express my gratitude for the refresher leave which made it possible for me in the early summer of 1955 to revisit some of the Italian battlefields and see others for the first time.**

**Finally, there are things that only soldiers know. It was my good fortune to learn some of them in **Tunisia** and **Italy** with and from the officers and men of 140 Field (later Medium) Regiment, Royal Artillery. Had I not shared this experience with friends from the British homeland, I could never have attempted to write the history of my own countrymen in a land to which the British, whether of the homeland or of the dispersion, can never be indifferent.**

**CHRISTCHURCH**

**August 1956**



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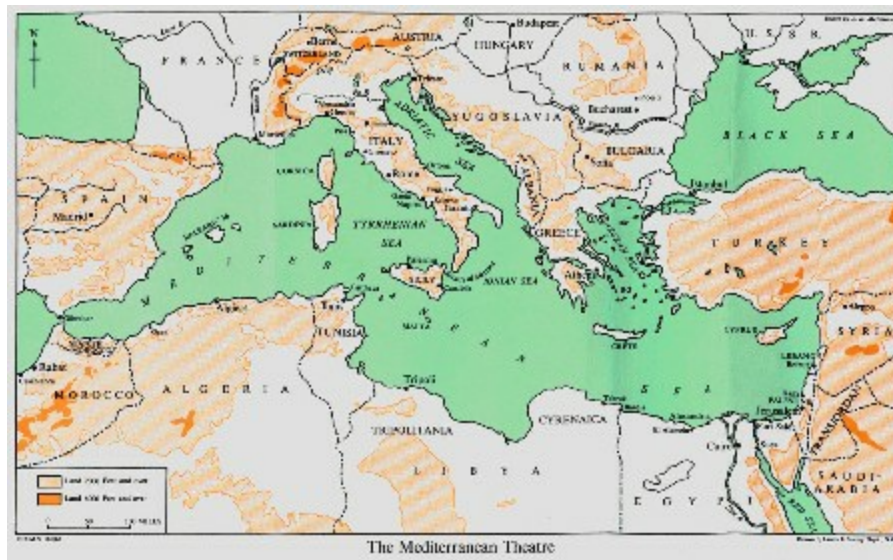
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**The Mediterranean Theatre**



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## I: THE STRATEGIC PRELUDE

### *I: The Strategic Prelude*

(i)

**'YOU have marked out a great battlefield for the future'. So Ernest Renan addressed Ferdinand de Lesseps in bidding him welcome to the French Academy in 1885. <sup>1</sup> It was in defence of the canal which de Lesseps had cut through the isthmus of **Suez** that British troops crossed the Egyptian frontier into **Cyrenaica** on 11 June 1940, the day of **Italy's** entry into the Second World War. As the raiding Hussars drove their armoured cars across the perimeter wire they opened the longest campaign of the war. It was not to end until, nearly five years later, soldiers from New Zealand picketed the streets of **Trieste** and Americans bivouacked in the shadow of the Alps.**

**The war in the **Mediterranean** fell into three phases of unequal duration. First, for twenty-eight months, there was a struggle to survive, to protect the means to ultimate victory – the base area of Egypt and the Canal, behind it the oil wells of the **Middle East**, and eventually the southern supply route to **Russia** – and to prohibit the dreaded junction of the Axis Powers with their Japanese ally. Opened by the battle of **El Alamein** in late October 1942 and the Allied landings in French North Africa, the second phase had for its grand achievement the clearance of the inland seaway for the unhindered passage of friendly shipping. In less than ten months advances from **El Alamein** in the east and **Casablanca** in the west converged in a northward thrust that carried the Allied armies across the **Mediterranean** and through **Sicily** to the Straits of Messina. Yet, though the German tyrant's folly in trying to save **Tunisia** yielded unexpected profits, the **Mediterranean** war was still in its main strategic aims a work of rehabilitation. The invasion of the Italian mainland in early September 1943 brought it to a final, openly offensive**

phase of about twenty months, from the surrender of **Italy** to the German collapse. The slow amputation of the Italian leg was for the Reich a grievous, if not mortal, letting of blood, and for the Allies one of the most toilsome campaigns of the war. It engaged **2 New Zealand Division** for nearly a year and a half

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by André Siegfried: *The Mediterranean*, p. 11.

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in circumstances very dissimilar from those related in the earlier volumes of this series. For if this last phase resembled the first in its duration and the second in its triumphant issue, it was like neither in the severity of its climate and terrain, in the complexity of the problems it presented to the high command, and in the strategic hesitancy that brooded over its beginning and shadowed its course.

(ii)

The friendship of the British and Italian peoples had political roots as deep as the *Risorgimento* of the mid-nineteenth century and cultural roots much deeper; and of the songs about liberating **Italy**, which the realist Cavour complained were too numerous, not a few were written in English. An understanding that rested in large measure upon common respect for parliamentary forms of government was shaken after 1922 when **Benito Mussolini** grasped power in the Italian State, but an open breach was delayed until 1935. In that year the honourable rejection by the British public of the Hoare-Laval plan for awarding Fascist **Italy** a portion of Ethiopia, followed by the application of sanctions by the League of Nations, propelled the Duce into the waiting arms of **Adolf Hitler**, dictator of the other great revisionist Power of **Europe**. Though the fate of **Austria** divided the two countries, the **Rome-Berlin Axis** was made public in November 1936, and after an interval in which they alienated the rest of **Europe** and deceived each other by a series of unlawful aggressions, this unequal and faithless partnership ripened into the more formal alliance of the 'Pact of Steel' (22 May 1939). Despite the

obligation of each ally to give full military aid to the other should it go to war, no one was surprised when, upon the German invasion of **Poland** three months later (1 September 1939), Mussolini, well aware of Italian military unpreparedness, claimed for his country the novel status of non-belligerency.

Nothing in the first few months of the war caused Mussolini to regret a decision that had occasioned him some qualms of honour and some of calculation; but as the sweeping German successes against **Norway** and **Denmark** in April 1940 and the overrunning of **France** and the Low Countries in May threatened to rob him of the emoluments of quick victory, he decided to wait no longer. War he had already resolved upon late in March: <sup>1</sup> now he advanced its date. To his chiefs of staff on 29 May he announced **Italy's** imminent entry into hostilities. Delay, he explained, would only 'give the Germans the impression that we were arriving after everything had been finished, when there was no danger .... We are not in the

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<sup>1</sup> Rear-Admiral Raymond de Belot: *The Struggle for the Mediterranean, 1939–1945* (English translation, 1951), pp. 8–9.

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habit of hitting a man when he is down'. <sup>1</sup> Such was not the world's judgment when on 10 June **Italy** formally declared war on **France** and **Britain**.

Mussolini had always prided himself on being a *tempista* and the timing of this stroke was his and his alone. He gambled on an early French collapse and an early British surrender. These expectations were only partly fulfilled, and therefore his plans wholly miscarried. For **Italy** he purchased a war of less than a fortnight against a prostrate **France**, but the price he paid was a war of more than three years against the British Commonwealth and the allies that came to its side, and when that war was ended the long devastation of his country by invading armies and their air and naval auxiliaries, the overthrow of the Fascist regime and his own death in ignominy.

(iii)

According to the geopolitics of the three totalitarian Powers, **Germany, Italy and Japan**, who celebrated their solidarity in the Tripartite Pact of 27 September 1940, **Italy's** allowance of the world was to be the **Mediterranean**. There, in the chosen field of her ambitions, **Italy** was to be permitted for the time being to pursue her advantages while **Germany** followed up her victory in the West by the subjugation of England.

In the last quarter of 1940, as it became apparent that the *Luftwaffe* had lost the Battle of **Britain**, **Hitler's** interest dwelt temporarily upon the **Mediterranean**, where he contemplated ambitious operations extending from the **Levant** to Gibraltar and even beyond to the Canary Islands. Such difficulties as the naval hazards, General Franco's politic coyness and the hard bargaining of Vichy, however, confirmed his preference for the project of an invasion of **Russia**.

It was therefore defensively, in response to an Italian appeal for aid in **Africa** and in her hapless venture in **Greece**, that about the turn of the year **Germany** intervened in the **Mediterranean** with air forces based on **Calabria** and **Sicily**, the first elements of the *Afrika Korps* in the desert and the invasion of **Greece**. Even after the Axis successes of April and May 1941 in the **Balkans, Greece, Crete** and **Libya**, the Germans, now deep in their Eastern plans, continued to regard the **Mediterranean** as primarily an Italian sphere.

(iv)

If to **Italy** the **Mediterranean** was a field for conquest and to **Germany** an area for resuming the offensive only when all others

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Marshal Pietro Badoglio: *Italy in the Second World War* (English translation, 1948), pp. 17–18; and by Elizabeth Wiskemann: *The Rome-Berlin Axis*, p. 213.

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were closed, to **Britain** it was a vital buttress to her security in the **Middle East**. Its loss would imperil Egypt (to Napoleon the most important country in the world), the **Suez Canal**, the **Red Sea** and the **Levant**, and thence, by the contagion of disaster, **Turkey** and the land bridge between **Europe** and **Asia**. Its mastery, on the other hand, would expose a hostile **Italy** to grave dangers, among them the severance of her supply line to troops in North Africa.

From the beginning of the war these possibilities for good and ill loomed clear in the mind of the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. He insisted, as **Nelson** had successfully argued in the comparable circumstances of 1798, that the **Royal Navy** should hold the **Mediterranean**, even at the risk of crippling losses from air attack and even though it proved necessary for three years after May 1940 for all but some twenty of the most urgent convoys for **Malta** and **Alexandria** to take the long and unavoidably wasteful route round the Cape. After the expulsion of the British Expeditionary Force from the Continent, the **Mediterranean** became the one theatre where British land forces could engage the enemy with some prospect of profit, and **Britain's** scanty resources of war materials and shipping were strained to nourish General Sir Archibald Wavell's **Middle East** forces, and especially those in Egypt.

Upon the fortunes of this desert army pivoted Churchill's plan for the general conduct of the war – a plan adapted to the capacities of a maritime State fighting alone against a continental coalition which presented a tender flank to the sallies of sea power. An early hint of its nature was contained in a directive to the Chiefs of Staff Committee of 6 January 1941 to press on with the study of a scheme for the occupation of **Sicily**, which Churchill saw in October 1941 as ‘the only possible “Second Front” in **Europe** within our power while we were alone in the West’. <sup>1</sup> Soon a definite sequence of operations was being envisaged. After the clearance of **Cyrenaica** and an advance into **Tripolitania**, the **Eighth Army** (as the desert force was now called) would enter French North Africa, with the assistance of the French if it was offered, thus putting the entire North African shore into British or friendly hands; or,

as an alternative to the advance into French North Africa, the army might wheel northward to descend upon **Sicily**.

(v)

The opening phase of this plan was being executed when the Japanese bombs fell on **Pearl Harbour**; and two days after the siege of **Tobruk** had been raised **Germany** and **Italy** declared war on the **United States** (11 December 1941). From this moment the war in the **Mediterranean**, no less than elsewhere, assumed a new character.

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<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill: *The Second World War*, Vol. III (The Grand Alliance), p. 479.

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Its strategic direction would now have to satisfy not only three fighting services but also two great Allies.

Early in their partnership these Allies made two paramount decisions, which the student of the **Mediterranean** war must carefully mark. The first, in logic as in time, was to give precedence to the European theatre and to the defeat of **Germany**, 'the prime enemy'. <sup>1</sup> It was grounded on the classic principle of concentration and the conviction that the fall of **Germany** must be followed by the collapse of **Italy** (if that had not already occurred) and by the defeat of **Japan**. The second great decision proposed the means. At a **London** conference in April 1942 Churchill accepted the American view that the principal Allied attack should be delivered in Western **Europe** across the **English Channel**, though it was not until the QUADRANT conference at **Quebec** in August 1943 that this frontal attack was formally given precedence as 'the primary **United States**-British ground and air effort against the Axis in **Europe**'. Weighty arguments overbore all other solutions – the unrivalled facilities of the **United Kingdom** as a base; the opportunity, available nowhere else, to employ British metropolitan land, sea and air forces in an offensive role; the directness of the route from the Channel coast to the heart of **Germany** and the absence of great natural



obstacles barring the way; the comparative ease with which preliminary air superiority could be won at the point of assault; and the economy in shipping and naval escorts during the long period of preparation as well as in the actual invasion. <sup>2</sup>

To the two master principles of ‘**Germany** first’ and the frontal assault both Allies remained fundamentally faithful, but in the application of these principles there lay scope for conflict of opinion and its reconciliation by compromise. When and in what strength to attack across the Channel, how to engage the enemy until the Channel enterprise was ripe, and at what point subsidiary operations ceased to assist and began to impair the main plan were disputable matters, and disputed they were. Opinion was often divided along professional lines; yet differing conditions of national life and of historic experience tended to foster a distinctively American and a distinctively British view of the place of the **Mediterranean** in the strategy of the war. Whereas British strategy, moulded by a long tradition of maritime warfare, emphasised

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<sup>1</sup> This course had been agreed upon at Anglo-American staff conversations in February 1941, and it was reaffirmed soon after the **United States** entered the war.—Report of United States Joint Army and Navy Board to the President, 21 December 1941, quoted in Robert E. Sherwood: *The White House Papers of Harry L. Hopkins*, Vol. I, p. 449. At the first **Washington** conference, which opened almost immediately afterwards, the staffs agreed that ‘only the minimum forces necessary for the safeguarding of vital interests in other theatres should be diverted from operations against **Germany**’.—Churchill, III, p. 624.

<sup>2</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower: *Crusade in Europe*, pp. 51–2; Sherwood, II, pp. 524–5.

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economy of force, the indirect approach and the flexibility of the empiric, the Americans relied rather on overwhelming weight, directness and strict adherence to a single master-plan. <sup>1</sup>

Whatever indulgence American naval opinion showed towards the **Mediterranean** approach was likely to be discounted by the frank attraction of the **Pacific** war; while American military opinion firmly favoured the most direct thrust at German land and industrial power and welcomed the opportunity to deploy the massive product of American war factories, confident that weight of metal, skilfully managed, could crush the enemy. This was the natural policy of a Power conscious of industrial supremacy and material might but without the experience of the human cost of a wide continental war. It was likewise in harmony with American aptitudes for large-scale planning looking to distant ends. By feeding men and machines into an assembly line and by committing the finished product, trained and equipped armies, to a single, scientifically planned stroke at the heart of the enemy, the Americans would give a new content to the old French phrase, 'organiser of victory'. Any distraction from the Channel invasion was therefore regarded with reserve and sometimes with open misgivings by the highest American military commanders; and when tension existed between the two great Allies, it frequently sprang from American suspicions that the pragmatic British method of waging war meant the dribbling out of resources in a series of ineffectual 'side-shows'.

The British method was a product of the momentum of the past and the imperious facts of the present. Never able to match her armies alone against the conscript masses of the Continent, **Britain** was cool towards heavy land commitments in Western Europe. Historic memories cautioned against the drain of human and material wealth by a second war of attrition, another 1914–18. War once being made, the traditional British formula for frustrating the would-be conqueror of **Europe** had been one of limited, if sometimes decisive, participation in continental warfare, the subsidising of allies whose manpower was greater than their wealth, the weapon of blockade and the exploitation on the periphery of the strategic mobility afforded by command of the seas. The typical expression of this policy was the amphibious outflanking movement, whereby the continental colossus might be wounded in the back and left to bleed.

There is a kind of strategic law of gravity that attracts British effort towards the southern entry into **Europe**, and in her last three great wars **Britain** has sought a 'way round' through each of the southern peninsulas in turn. Against Napoleon it was in the western or Iberian peninsula that eccentric operations found their classic

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion in Chester Wilmot: *The Struggle for Europe*, Chap. VI.

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field. There for six years, from the late summer of 1808 until the spring of 1814, ranging from the Tagus to Toulouse, British armies under Moore or Wellington so stiffened the fierce patriotism of Spanish and Portuguese as almost fatally to sap the strength of the Napoleonic empire. In the First World War entry was sought through the eastern or **Balkan** peninsula in the well-conceived but tragically mismanaged Dardanelles expedition, which was intended to open direct sea communication with **Russia** through the Black Sea, eliminate **Turkey**, and sway other Balkan States towards the Allied cause. <sup>1</sup>

So inexorable is the dominion of history and geography over the strategist that no British mind pondering the means of overthrowing **Hitler's Germany** could have missed the possibilities of the central or Italian peninsula; for there, as in 1808 and 1915, the Daedalus-wings of sea power offered escape from the labyrinth of continental war, and there too, as in the other peninsulas in the other wars, was the homeland of the weak and reluctant ally or satellite. **Britain**, observed **Admiral Raeder** with rueful insight, 'always attempts to strangle the weaker'. <sup>2</sup>

Two other facts predisposed the British towards the indirect approach in general. One was their Prime Minister's refusal to despair. From the superior eminence of the aftermath, it is possible to believe that, at least when the British Commonwealth fought alone, Churchill overrated the capacity of the oppressed peoples of **Europe** to help themselves. He hoped that the eventual return of British troops to the

Continent would be the signal for widespread insurrection. It is this sanguine expectation that seems in part to have led him to contemplate a series of landings in scattered parts of occupied **Europe** in preference to a single frontal attack. A magnificent illusion which kept **Britain** free, it left its mark on his strategic thinking when the turn of the war opened safer courses. Secondly, the autonomy of the **Royal Air Force** encouraged an overestimate of the war-winning potentialities of strategic bombing. In the extreme form of this miscalculation, the task of the army was seen as little more than the occupation of territory and the rounding up of an already stricken enemy. So far as the belief in victory by air power alone was current,<sup>3</sup> it undermined the case for husbanding

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<sup>1</sup> The Salonika expedition of October 1915 was aimed to feed Serbian resistance and belongs in the same strategic category.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by F. H. Hinsley: *Hitler's Strategy*, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> This belief was not unknown in Bomber Command, and even in early 1944 the hope that air operations alone would clear **Italy** was being expressed. Nor was this kind of thought peculiarly British. General Carl Spaatz, who assumed command of the **United States Strategic Air Forces in Europe** on 1 January 1944, 'still privately regarded POINTBLANK [the Allied bombing plan for Western Europe] not merely as a prerequisite to OVERLORD [the code-name for the plan for the invasion of north-west **Europe** from the United Kingdom in 1944] but as a perfectly feasible alternative to it, and regretted the decision of the Combined Chiefs to risk a huge invasion when there existed a possibility of eventually bombing **Germany** out of the war'.— *Army Air Forces in World War II*, Vol. III, p. 26.

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the British armies for a single dash across the Channel. The naval blockade, strategic bombing, the encouragement of clandestine resistance, the arming of civilians against the day of liberation, though by no means incompatible with the straight onslaught upon the enemy's

strongest defences, tended rather towards the mode of indirect approach.

The Mediterranean was not the only region in which the enemy flank lay open to attack, and Churchill was long an advocate of a landing in northern **Norway** to clear the Arctic sea route to **Russia**. Yet the **Mediterranean** was the most obvious choice. The alarming losses of Allied shipping in 1942 made its reopening as a regular convoy route urgently necessary to save the long haul round the Cape. The Japanese threat to **India** deepened the British desire to restore the quickest seaway to the East. Scarcely less influential was the investment **Britain** had already made in the **Mediterranean**. Since the **Dunkirk** evacuation, **Egypt** and **Libya** had been the scene of **Britain's** major war-making by land, and the actions at **Taranto** and **Cape Matapan** had established the moral supremacy of the British over the Italian navy in the theatre. <sup>1</sup> Moreover, the redeployment of the large British forces and their establishments already committed in the **Mediterranean** for tasks elsewhere would have been very costly in shipping, and at a time when it was necessary to bring British military power continuously to bear would have given the enemy a welcome respite. With America as a partner, the northward leap across the sea now seemed a still more desirable sequel to the hard-fought desert campaign, which Churchill was reluctant to see expire in a bathos of minor operations. Nor could any other theatre by the end of 1941 offer strategy such a wide array of choices. <sup>2</sup>

(vi)

The unfolding of the strategy that eventually carried the Allied armies to the Italian mainland was a succession of expedients, and save perhaps in the mind of Churchill, always its great mover, assumes only in retrospect such coherence as it possesses. Once the Allies had decided to embark their main fortunes on the invasion across the Channel, the **Mediterranean** was always potentially a

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<sup>1</sup> It is not possible to speak of British naval supremacy in the **Mediterranean** at this period. **Cape Matapan** was not decisive and

the Italian fleet remained powerful, though it was not aggressively employed. During the period from the outbreak of the war in the **Mediterranean** until 8 September 1943, the Italian fleet lost 193 warships and the British 191.—De Belot, p. 230.

<sup>2</sup> Two other motives – desire to vindicate the **Gallipoli** strategy of the First World War and concern for the political future of the **Balkans** – are sometimes said to have influenced Churchill's interest in the **Mediterranean**; conversely, American caution is attributed to distrust of British 'imperialist' ambitions in southern and eastern **Europe**. These hypotheses call for no comment here beyond the remark that they are not necessary to account for either the British or the American attitude.

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subsidiary theatre of effort and it became actually so by the end of 1943, when preparations in **Britain** for mounting the grand attack moved towards completion. At the **Quebec** conference in August of that year, it was agreed that in the distribution of scarce resources between  
OVERLORD

and the **Mediterranean** theatre, the main object should be to ensure the success of  
OVERLORD

. Though chronologically the second front against **Germany**, the **Mediterranean** was strategically only a secondary front. This fact Churchill himself underlined by calling it, in a speech to the House of Commons after the invasion of **Italy**, the Third Front <sup>1</sup> – a gesture of reassurance to both his American and Russian allies.

Its importance as a theatre of war from April 1942 lay at the mercy of events external to it and beyond the shaping of those who fought there – the state of the war in the **Pacific** and in South-East **Asia**, the progress of the battle against the U-boats, the intensity of Russian pressure for diversionary operations, the range of employments open to Allied troops elsewhere, the turn of politics at Vichy or Madrid or **Rome**, and especially the preparedness of the armies that were to storm **Hitler's Festung Europa**. Until the second front *par excellence* could be

launched, it was better to march forward in the **Mediterranean** than to mark time at home. The Mediterranean, then, became the place where, at first, surpluses might be spent and, later, economies effected; it was the field for interim measures; strategically, it lived from hand to mouth.

Within a fortnight of the American entry into the war, and within a few hours of his arrival at the White House for the first of the **Washington** conferences between the two Western leaders and their staffs, the Prime Minister was pressing on the President an expanded version of his earlier **Mediterranean** projects – a combined Anglo-American expedition to clear the North African coast from the west, while the **Eighth Army** cleared it from the east, with the aim of restoring free passage through the **Mediterranean** to the **Levant** and the **Suez Canal**. Though the President, like the Prime Minister, was a ‘former naval person’<sup>2</sup> and smiled upon the project, the conference broke up without taking a firm decision, and soon heavy misfortunes threw it into jeopardy. In the early months of 1942 blows fell thick and fast upon the Allies. Rommel's advance to **Gazala** and **Tobruk** ended all hope of an early meeting of Allied forces working toward each other along the North African littoral; and spectacular Japanese successes in **Malaya**, **Burma** and the Dutch

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<sup>1</sup> Churchill, Vol. V ( *Closing the Ring*), p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> The pseudonym used by Churchill in his most famous correspondence with Roosevelt, comprising about 1700 letters, telegrams and other communications. Roosevelt was Assistant Secretary of the Navy for seven years (1913–20) during the Presidency of Woodrow Wilson.

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East Indies caused a diversion of shipping to the East which, with mounting losses at sea, forbade for the time being any large-scale seaborne expedition in **Europe**.

It was, nevertheless, in April 1942, while these reverses were still in full flood, that Roosevelt, on the advice of his Chiefs of Staff, sought and obtained British assent to the principle of the Channel attack (ROUND-UP) as the main Allied effort, which was to be launched, if possible, in the spring or summer of 1943. But what was to be done in the meantime? On visits to London and Washington in May and June, V. M. Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister, made strong representations for the early opening of a substantial second front in Western Europe. By now competition was keen among rival plans for filling the interval until ROUND-UP could be mounted. Molotov's visit had not weakened the American preference for the frontal attack on Europe, nor had Churchill's renewed plea for the North African venture and his fresh plea for the liberation of northern Norway allayed American fears of the fruitless dissipation of power where it could achieve no decisive result. Roosevelt, therefore, at the urging of General George C. Marshall, proposed for the late summer or autumn of 1942 a more limited operation in northern France, perhaps at Brest or Cherbourg, where a permanent lodgment might be effected until in 1943 it could be expanded into a wholesale invasion of the Continent; meanwhile it would draw appreciable air forces from the Russian front. A further, though always remote, possibility was the employment of American troops in Egypt with the British or even farther east in Syria or the Persian Gulf.

The second of the Washington conferences (21–25 June) did little to resolve the issues. It was now mid-summer. No final plans for land operations in the West in 1942 had been laid. Russia, after a year of strenuous defence, was still unrelieved. Churchill's forebodings about the toll of the French beaches were causing some Americans to wonder how much longer the Second Front would be delayed; and as their thoughts strayed towards the Pacific the strategy of 'Germany first' was momentarily endangered. In Britain's overcrowded and food-rationed islands an American corps waited for work.<sup>1</sup> Although the United States had been at war for more than half a year, American soldiers were nowhere at grips with Germans, and in early November the mid-term



congressional elections would take place.<sup>2</sup> On 1 July Sebastopol fell to the Germans, just as Rommel reached **El Alamein** and Churchill faced a vote of censure in the House of Commons – another levy upon

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<sup>1</sup> Mark W. Clark: *Calculated Risk*, p. 33. The United States Second Corps began to arrive in England on 12 July.

<sup>2</sup> Clark, p. 51; Sherwood, II, p. 628.

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fortitude already heavily taxed by the misfortunes of the last six months. Above all, the danger of frustration at home in **Britain** and the **United States** and of discouragement in occupied **Europe** and in **Russia** made further delay in opening a land offensive hazardous.

(vii)

It was in these circumstances that Roosevelt resolved to break the deadlock. Hopkins, Marshall and Admiral Ernest King, Commander-in-Chief of the United States Fleet, having failed in **London** to persuade the British that the Channel sortie was practicable in 1942, the President signalled a request for a date not later than 30 October for the combined landings in North Africa. Thus, at last, American might was to re-enter the **Mediterranean**, where in Jefferson's time the **United States** fought against the Barbary corsairs their first overseas campaign, blockading and raiding 'the shores of **Tripoli**'. It has been said that in this choice, largely that of naval minds, Roosevelt, exceptionally, overruled his highest-ranking advisers.<sup>1</sup> Churchill himself described the slow emergence of the decision as 'strategic natural selection',<sup>2</sup> but the historian is at liberty to suppose that the phrase attributes too much to nature.

Apart from the clamant need to seize the initiative, to hit out at the enemy in some direction and to employ and toughen idle troops, the prime strategic objects of torch, as the North African operation was now renamed, were the clearance of the **Mediterranean** for shipping and the

destruction of the Axis army of the desert. It would also forestall (what was now indeed improbable) the German occupation of French North Africa, and when Marshal Stalin was let into the secret by Churchill in **Moscow** he discerned other strategic advantages – the overawing of **Spain**, the threat to **Italy** and the provocation of trouble between French and Germans. A gratuitous gain was the capture of the reinforcements **Hitler** poured into **Tunisia**.

On 23 October the **Eighth Army**, under General B. L. Montgomery, attacked at **El Alamein**; on 8 November the leading elements of the British First Army and the **United States Second Corps**, under the supreme command of the American General Dwight D. Eisenhower, assaulted the beaches near **Casablanca** and Rabat, **Oran** and **Algiers**; and on 13 May 1943 General Sir Harold Alexander, commanding in the field the armies now united in **Tunisia**, signalled the Prime Minister: ‘We are masters of the North African shores’. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sherwood, II, p. 615.

<sup>2</sup> Churchill, Vol. IV ( *The Hinge of Fate*), title of Chap. XX.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 698.

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(viii)

These shores, the Prime Minister had no doubt, were to be ‘a springboard and not a sofa’. <sup>1</sup> Though the possibility had not yet been abandoned, the prolonged enemy resistance in **Tunisia** rendered more doubtful the mounting of the major invasion of northern **France** in 1943, and the reinvestment of **Mediterranean** profits promised richer rewards. The continuing need for relief to **Russia** could be most economically fulfilled in the **Mediterranean**, where formidable strength in men and shipping was assembled. It was still necessary to secure the sea line against aircraft based on the northern shore, and it was

estimated that the possession of **Sicily** as well as of the North African coast would release 225 vessels for use elsewhere. <sup>2</sup> Unremitting pressure would harry the Fascist regime in **Italy** and perhaps break the Axis. At Casablanca (14–23 January 1943) **Sicily** was therefore chosen as the next Anglo-American objective. Americans disturbed by the broadening **Mediterranean** prospect took consolation by reflecting that **Sicily** was a small island which could be inexpensively garrisoned and the occupation of which did not commit the Allies to further offensives in the area.

Yet it was hardly to be conceived that the conquest of **Sicily** would wholly absorb the impetus of Allied exertion. It is true that the third **Washington** conference (12–25 May) gave notice that henceforth the southern theatre must be strategically ancillary to the western: 1 May 1944 was tentatively fixed as the date for the Channel attack ( **OVERLORD**) and from 1 November 1943 seven divisions were to be withdrawn from the **Mediterranean** for the purpose. Equally, however, it was made clear that vital work remained to be done there. To eliminate **Italy** from the war and to contain as many German troops as possible were the two aims set before Eisenhower, as Allied Commander-in-Chief in North Africa, to guide him in planning to exploit success in **Sicily**. He was to prepare suitable operations, and the Combined Chiefs of Staff would decide which to adopt.

Cogent reasons dictated both the choice of ends and the cautious approach to their realisation. The surrender of **Italy** would depress **Germany** and perhaps embolden **Turkey** to offer the Allies bases from which to bomb the oilfields of **Ploesti** and clear the Aegean;

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<sup>1</sup> Churchill, IV, p. 583.

<sup>2</sup> Sherwood, II, p. 672. The following comparative mileages show the saving effected by the reopening of the **Mediterranean**: **London- Alexandria**, via the Cape 11,608 miles, via the **Mediterranean** 3097 miles; **London-Abadan**, via the Cape 11,400 miles, via the **Mediterranean** 6600 miles; **New York – Suez**, via the Cape 12,200 miles, via the **Mediterranean** 5050 miles; **New**

**York** – Persian Gulf, via the Cape 12,000 miles, via the Mediterranean 8500 miles.–De Belot, p. 54; Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond: *Statesmen and Sea Power*, p. 322.

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it would burden the *Wehrmacht* with the replacement of between thirty and forty divisions of Italian garrison troops in the **Balkans** and southern **France** and probably with the occupation of **Italy** itself; it would eliminate the Italian fleet. To contain German troops also by active operations would take some of the weight off **Russia** and would give employment to Anglo-American forces which would otherwise be idle in the long period that was expected to elapse between the conquest of **Sicily** and the opening of

OVERLORD

. This last eventuality Churchill considered to be politically and militarily indefensible. Such aims were clear, but a variety of unpredictable factors counselled the utmost flexibility of method. How well the Italians would fight in defence of their own soil, when and in what circumstances they would surrender, how the Germans would respond to the increased threat to **Italy**, what precautions they would take in **Sardinia**, **Corsica** and the **Balkans**, how well Allied amphibious technique would stand the test of an opposed landing in **Sicily** and what casualties in men and equipment the invaders would suffer: these were secrets which had to be known but which only time would tell.

Since the United States Government vetoed a **Balkan** expedition, the choice lay between **Sardinia**, which had been passed over before in favour of **Sicily**, and the Italian mainland; and early in June 1943 planning for both alternatives began. **Sardinia** and **Corsica** were possible objectives if enemy strength on the mainland forbade invasion with the limited resources available to Alexander, <sup>1</sup> commanding 15 Army Group. Their occupation would at least keep the Allied advance moving and destroy bases for air attack on **Mediterranean** shipping, but it would contain few German troops and would not of itself eliminate **Italy** from the war. It was to the mainland, then, that eyes, and more especially British eyes, were turned. Both at **Washington** with the President and

later at **Algiers** with the Allied Commanders-in-Chief, Churchill argued powerfully for **Italy** as the only objective worthy of crowning the campaign and commensurate with Allied power in the theatre. He even offered a further cut in the British civilian ration to provide the shipping for moving extra divisions to Italian shores.

Facts were more eloquent still. The direct way to strike **Italy** from the war was an invasion of the peninsula, followed, if necessary, by the capture of **Rome**. Even if achieved otherwise, **Italy**'s defection would still require an Allied occupation in order to turn her

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<sup>1</sup> To carry out the strategic tasks pursuant to the conquest of **Sicily**, there were available nineteen British and British-equipped, four American and four French divisions, but of these many were under strength or not fully trained and others were required for garrison duty in the **Middle East** and North Africa. Shipping, especially landing craft, was also limited.

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resources against **Germany**. If the menace of attack detained no more than second-class or foreign and satellite troops in the south of **France** and the **Balkans**, it was confidently expected that the reality of attack in **Italy** would draw the best German troops into the peninsula and discharge, far more effectively than any operations against the Tyrrhenian islands, the policy of containment. Divisions despatched to the south would be an earnest, if not of the Fuehrer's personal loyalty to the Duce, at least of his desire to prop up a kindred political order, and of his habitual determination not to yield ground without a fight; there they would defend German prestige and the war industry of northern **Italy**; and there they would fight to keep Allied air bases as far away as possible from the south German sky <sup>1</sup> and from the oilfields of **Ploesti** and to deny the Allies access to the **Balkans** by way of the Adriatic or the Julian Alps. These advantages, it was hoped, would repay an invasion of **Italy**. Its practicability awaited the verdict of the Sicilian event.

(ix)

The invasion of **Sicily** by the British Eighth Army and the United States Seventh Army began on 10 July. The early news was encouraging. So faint was the resistance of Italian soldiers, so cordial was the welcome of Italian civilians and so light were the casualties of the landing that Eisenhower almost at once recommended the attack on the mainland. On 20 July planning for **Sardinia** by the United States Fifth Army was cancelled. By a seemingly irresistible logic war approached **Italy**. First in May there had been the Allied decision to maintain the pressure in the **Mediterranean** after the fall of **Sicily**; now the pressure was to be applied direct to **Italy**; next would come the decision how to do so. The original intention of a landing in **Calabria**, with the danger of confinement within the narrow toe through the winter, was seen to be too unenterprising and was to be supplemented by operations against the heel of **Italy** or **Naples**.

Into the plain scales of military measurement were now thrown, not unexpectedly, the *imponderabilia* of politics. Mussolini's dismissal was announced on 25 July, and though Marshal Pietro Badoglio declared that 'the war goes on' few were deceived. To both sides the news was a spur to action. The Allied Commanders-in-Chief interpreted it as authorising greater risks, and two days later General Mark W. Clark was directed to prepare plans for an assault landing by the Fifth Army in the **Gulf of Salerno** in order to seize the port of **Naples** as a base for further offensive operations.

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<sup>1</sup> This was 'the important thing' in the opinion of General Siegfried Westphal, *The German Army in the West*, p. 165. Westphal was chief of staff to Kesselring in **Italy**.

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Though every day that passed augmented the German strength in **Italy**, and though the four German divisions engaged in the 38-day campaign in **Sicily** had by 17 August made good their escape across the Straits of Messina, the Allies persevered with the boldest plan. The main

weight was now to be transferred to the more northerly landings. The Eighth Army, with two divisions under the command of **13 Corps**, would cross the straits into **Calabria** between 1 and 4 September, and about the 9th the Fifth Army would land near **Salerno**, with the **United States 6 Corps** and the **British 10 Corps**, commanding for the assault phase three divisions and supporting units.

The opposition to be expected was not then predictable, but it was hoped that Italians would not be among the defenders of **Italy**. On 15 August, the day before these decisions were finally confirmed, a secret envoy of Badoglio appeared at the British Embassy in Madrid bearing an offer from the Marshal that, upon invasion of the mainland, his Government would quit the German for the Allied side.

The Germans had long before resolved to fight for **Italy** and for that purpose had begun to make drafts upon divisions re-forming in **France** after mutilation at **Stalingrad**. At the thirteenth meeting of the two dictators, which was held at Feltre on 19 July, **Hitler**, though distrustful of the loyalty of some Italians, offered up to twenty divisions for the defence of the peninsula, but would not promise to post them permanently farther south than a line from **Pisa** to **Rimini**. News of Mussolini's fall less than a week later shocked but did not paralyse the Fuehrer. The immediate reinforcement of **Italy** was ordered, partly to secure the communications of the German troops fighting in **Sicily**, partly to command without delay the Po valley and the important railway system of the north. From the end of July German troops poured into Upper **Italy** and within a month eighteen divisions were available to man the southern ramparts of the Reich. Six divisions south of **Rome** and two in the general area of the capital comprised the command of Field-Marshal Albert Kesselring. The remaining ten divisions, of which one and a half garrisoned **Sardinia** and **Corsica**, formed Army Group B, under Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel, with command of all forces in **Italy** and Italian-occupied **Slovenia** north of a line from Grosseto to **Rimini**.

Although these forces were so disposed as to dispute any likely

landing save in **Calabria**, the Germans had not yet decided how much of the peninsula they would attempt to hold, nor was it until many weeks had passed that **Hitler's** vacillating mind came to rest in favour of Kesselring's advocacy of holding the invaders as far south as possible. Meanwhile, strategy was fluid. Painful as it was to contemplate yielding without a blow the port facilities of **Naples**, the airfields of the south and the prestige of occupying the Eternal City, two anxieties troubled the Germans. The resistance, passive or active, of mettlesome civilians, such as the inhabitants of the industrial areas were reputed to be, might tie down so many troops that it would be prudent to restrict German territorial responsibilities to the more vital north, particularly in view of the possibility of the sabotage of transport and other public services. A more acute fear was that the Allies, by a silent sweep of amphibious power, would trap the German formations in the south by landings farther up the coast – a grave risk which Kesselring was, and Rommel was not, prepared to accept. <sup>1</sup>

German fears were Italian hopes. The slow progress of the armistice negotiations was primarily due to the Italian desire for an assurance that the Allies would land in such overwhelming strength as to guarantee the rapid success of the invasion and far enough north to safeguard a substantial part of **Italy** and of the Italian army from German reprisals. The preliminary Allied terms were of a military nature. Five or six hours before the main assault the Allied Commander-in-Chief would broadcast the conclusion of the armistice; the Italian Government would simultaneously confirm the announcement, order its forces and people to join the Allies and resist the Germans, despatch its shipping, fleet and air forces to Allied bases and release Allied prisoners. Though the Italian Government made no demur to the terms, it sought an undertaking that at least fifteen divisions would be landed north of **Rome**. Refusing to disclose their much more modest intentions, the Allied negotiators offered the dropping of an airborne division to assist in the defence of **Rome**, made known the Allied determination to proceed with the invasion as planned, and set a date for the acceptance or rejection of their new offer.



Italian hopes of the Allies outweighed their fears of the Germans. Late in the afternoon of 3 September, the fourth anniversary of Britain's entry into the war, the armistice was signed at Alexander's headquarters near the Sicilian village of Cassibile. Early that morning, under a barrage fired from the southern shore of the straits, the Eighth Army had made an easy landing and was already advancing through Calabria.

On 8 September, as the Fifth Army convoys headed northward into the Tyrrhenian Sea before turning towards the Salerno beaches, one last crisis arose. The public announcement of the armistice, timed to precede the landing by a few hours, was to be made that

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<sup>1</sup> Westphal, p. 155; Badoglio, pp. 78–9.

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evening. Now Badoglio sent a message that strong German forces threatened the three airfields near Rome on which the airborne division was to land. The attempt should not be made and he could not therefore announce the armistice until the seaborne invasion had succeeded. It was just possible to cancel the airborne operation, but to Eisenhower's sharp reminder of his engagements Badoglio gave no reply. It was thus with doubt as to their efficacy that Eisenhower, at the appointed time of 6.30 p.m., broadcast the announcement of the armistice. At 7.45 Badoglio's voice confirmed to the Italian people the surrender of their Government.

The next morning upwards of three divisions stormed the Salerno beaches. Though in the end they had to fight bitterly to establish themselves, the invaders were greeted by only one of the eighteen divisions sent to guard Italy.

(x)

The strategy by which war came to Italy is not without interest to every man who fought there. Why men fight is a question not to be answered in military terms; but why they fight here rather than there

and at one time rather than another can be explained, as well as history can ever explain, by uncovering the course of strategy, and the campaign in **Italy** was the conclusion, if not the culmination, of a strategical process that has nothing less than the whole **Mediterranean** war for its context. In all wise war-making, the strategic purpose of a campaign tyrannises over the way it is fought, as means are subordinate to ends. The place of the Italian campaign in the entire curriculum of Allied conquest dictated in large part the resources allotted to it, the tempo at which it was conducted and even the character of the enemy response; thence the demands imposed upon troops, the objectives they were set, the risks they were ordered to bear, the reliefs and amenities they could be afforded, the casualties they sustained, the relations they established with allies in arms and civilians – in short, most things done and suffered. In the last resort, the determinations of high strategy, gathering ever greater particularity as they filter down, are despatched, ill or well, in the orders of the artillery sergeant to his layer or in the pointed finger and breathless word of the section commander.

Earlier pages have shown how halting and tentative was the strategic prelude to the war in **Italy**. Opportunism and improvisation led the way. At every successive step, voices were raised in doubt and heads were turned back towards the Channel coast. With the engagement of the enemy and the deployment of Allied power as major aims, the next advance was frequently valued rather as a movement than as a movement in a preordained direction. ‘We are off to decide where we shall fight next,’ wrote Hopkins on his way to **Casablanca**, where **Sicily** was the choice. <sup>1</sup> ‘Where do we go from **Sicily**?’ asked Roosevelt a few months later when a fresh expedient fell due. <sup>2</sup>

The decision to enter the Italian mainland was taken only six weeks before the event; and the Fifth Army laid plans for four different courses of action. Though it was correctly supposed that the Germans would defend **Italy**, no one knew at what point, and no deep study had been given to the implications of a long campaign in the peninsula. It was known, indeed, that troops and landing craft must in future be strictly

limited. Seven of the most experienced divisions in the theatre (later raised to eight) were already destined for **OVERLORD**, and the agreement of the **Quebec** conference in August on the invasion of the south of **France** in the summer of 1944 could be expected to deprive the theatre of further seasoned troops. No definite geographical objectives were assigned to the planners of the campaign, and though the port of **Naples** and the airfields of **Foggia** were obviously desirable goals, and were often mentioned as such, Churchill himself, the most enthusiastic exponent of the enterprise, had been content to follow the lead of opportunity. <sup>3</sup>

These facts carry in themselves no censure; they simply suggest the extreme fluidity of the political and military situation. In this vexed sea of incalculables – ranging from the state of the weather to the moods of an Italian marshal – the Allied commanders steered on the compass bearing given them in May: the directive to eliminate **Italy** from the war and contain the maximum number of German troops.

When the Fifth Army went ashore near **Salerno**, the first of the two desiderata had been fulfilled: if not positively eliminated from the war, **Italy** had chosen a seemingly auspicious time to leave it. There was some disappointment that **Rome** fell so easily to the Germans and that the resistance of what Goebbels was now pleased to call ‘a gypsy people gone to rot’ <sup>4</sup> was so pusillanimous, but solid achievements remained – the bulk of the Italian fleet rallied to the Allies and, more important, the Germans now had to find substitutes for the lost Italian troops.

The second objective could not by its nature be attained in a single stroke; and it became the continuing purpose of the campaign just beginning, which Alexander was to describe as ‘a great holding



ITALY

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<sup>1</sup> Sherwood, II, p. 668.

<sup>2</sup> Churchill, IV, p. 709.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp. 735–7.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Wiskemann, p. 310.

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attack', <sup>1</sup> to draw as many German divisions as far away as possible from the decisive theatres – the existing front in **Russia** and the projected front in northern **France**. To inflict losses in men and materials and to compel their replacement and the provision of supplies over long, tortuous and vulnerable lines of communication was implicit in this aim. By vigorous action in **Italy**, the Allies would show their unflagging interest in the **Mediterranean**, maintain their threat to the German position in southern **Europe**, and prevent the enemy from relaxing his watch in the south of **France** and the **Balkans**. Finally, the waging of war without pause was one of the few means open to the Allies of cheering the spirits of the peoples in the remoter parts of German-occupied **Europe**.

**These were the reasons why the Allies made a battlefield of Italy's fair and famous land.**

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<sup>1</sup> *The Allied Armies in Italy from 3 September 1943 to 12 December 1944* (Supplement to *The London Gazette*, 6 June 1950), p. 2880.

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: THE LAND OF ITALY

### *II: The Land of Italy*

(i)

Geography, as Uncle Toby assured Corporal Trim, is 'of absolute use' to the soldier. How well did the physical shape of **Italy** fit it for the strategic purposes that the campaign there was intended to serve? **Italy**, to all-comers rich in history, is to invaders poor in geography. Especially is this true of those relatively few invaders who, like the armies of Justinian in the sixth century and the Norman adventurers of the eleventh, have had to fight their way from south to north. From a military point of view the most significant geographical features of the peninsula are the extent of its coastline, its narrow, elongated shape, its mountainous contours and its climate.

Segregated from continental **Europe** in the north by the lofty barrier of the Alps and for the rest by the **Mediterranean** and its two gulfs of the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian Seas, **Italy** has, as Mazzini said, her 'sublime, irrefutable boundary marks'. But the defensive value of these two boundaries, the alpine and the maritime, is very unequal. A water frontier of about 2450 miles gives the Italian mainland the longest coastline of any European State and exposes it dangerously to the thrust of hostile sea power. Except for about 120 miles on either side of Genoa, few considerable natural defences exist to balk an invader, and although their gradients vary and they are in part closely overlooked by hills, numerous beaches, particularly on the west coast, offer suitable landing places. The coasts are too long to be thoroughly fortified and manned, and except at a few selected strongpoints the defence would have to rely on mobile forces held in reserve for movement to threatened localities rather than on permanent garrison troops. Given a sufficiency of assault equipment and imaginative leadership, an invading army by delivering,

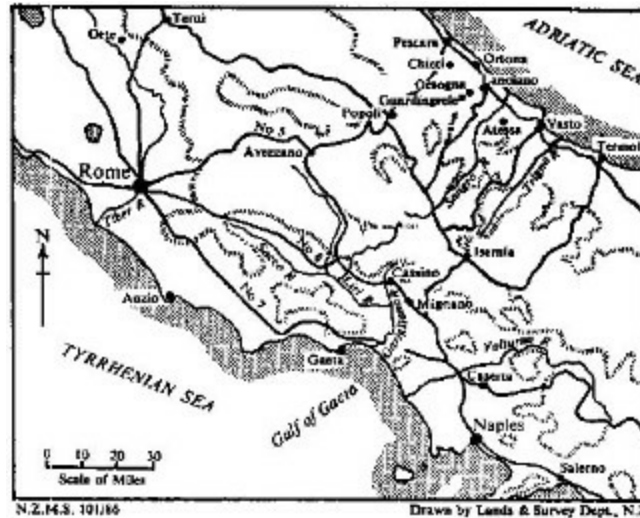
or even simulating, seaborne operations behind both flanks of the enemy's front could compel him to dispose considerable forces in a state of readiness for coastal defence and could, in favourable circumstances, escape from the stalemate which it would be the aim of the enemy to impose.

*(ii)*

The defender, on the other hand, is favoured by the narrowness of the peninsula, which is nowhere wider than 160 miles and which at one point between **Naples** and **Rome** curves inward to a waist only 85 miles across. By stabilising his front at right angles to the north-westerly and south-easterly axis of the peninsula, the defender would effect the maximum economy in troops. In this object he is assisted by the mountain structure. Thrown off from the Maritime Alps in an easterly direction, the chain of the **Apennines** in north-eastern **Tuscany** bears to the south and then conforms to the general trend of the peninsula, forming, as it were, a backbone somewhat displaced in central **Italy** towards the east coast. The spurs and re-entrants running off eastward to the Adriatic from this central spine thus confront the invader with successive ridges and rivers squarely athwart the line of his advance. The rivers draining this massif, both to east and west, are subject to sudden and unexpected flooding, which may disconcert or even thwart the plans of an attacking commander.

The Apennines further ease the problem of defence by effectively closing to the attacker a large proportion of the front from coast to coast. In the Abruzzi, where the peninsula is most mountainous, crests above 3000 feet take in a width of more than half the peninsula. In such tangled country a front of 25 miles can be securely held by a single division. The same mountain barrier, by obstructing lateral movement from east to west, is likely to penalise the attacker more than the defender, since it reduces flexibility and makes it more difficult for the commander to switch the weight of his attack from one part of the front to another. On the other hand, if he achieves surprise and massive

superiority at the point of attack, slowness of communication may well double his success by excluding many of the defending troops from the decisive battle. The division of the front into two distinct sectors also presents the high command with the task of co-ordinating the activities of two forces, each of which is tempted to fight an independent battle. Particularly when



THE NARROW WAIST OF THE ITALIAN PENINSULA

THE NARROW WAIST OF THE ITALIAN PENINSULA

the boundary between two armies runs along the crests there is a lively danger, not merely of a disjunction of effort, but of actual misunderstanding and dissension. Mutual isolation may easily breed mutual grievance. <sup>1</sup>

(iii)

The large area of hilly country makes the tank on the whole a less effective weapon than in most parts of **Europe**, and sets a premium on hardy and skilled infantry trained in mountain warfare. Artillery, while afforded good observation, finds it harder to search broken country where the cover is plentiful, and is likely to see its ammunition expenditure increasing proportionately with the difficulty of supplying it. Though free armoured movement is possible in some areas of rolling country such as that immediately around **Rome**, visibility is often restricted by olive groves and vineyards; and where the land is quite flat,



as in the Po valley, it is intersected by innumerable watercourses and the frequent hamlets

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<sup>1</sup> A classic and extreme example of the hostility that can develop between two forces fighting the same battle in different conditions is provided by the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1. The mutual isolation of **Paris** and the rest of the country during the siege of the capital was a prime cause of the civil war associated with the Paris Commune of 1871.

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offer positions from which the rapid advance of tanks can be hindered.

As a consequence of its mountainous nature, the peninsula has a communication system that is easily disrupted. While the northern plains are served by an intricate network of railways, there were in 1943 only three lines to ‘stitch the boot of **Italy**’ from north to south, all of them, because of the large number of bridges, viaducts and tunnels, sensitive to air attack and capable of swift and efficient disablement by a retreating army. The road system, though often the work of resourceful engineers, would be severely strained by the burden of heavy military traffic in addition to that diverted from the railways.

In such a country the roads were bound to dictate the direction of military effort. Though even in **Italy** all roads do not lead to **Rome**, the capital is certainly the pivot of communications, and for this reason alone its possession confers great tactical advantage. The roads vary in quality. First in importance – for the *autostrade* were then too few to be militarily significant – are the great highways (the nineteen principal *Strade statali*). These are generally wide, easy in gradient and well surfaced, though sometimes very serpentine, and in the event they stood up well to wear-and-tear by army lorries, scarifying by tank tracks, and pitting by shells and bombs. The lesser roads are more liable to break up. They are frequently narrow, steep, or twisting and may run for long distances without affording motor vehicles either turning space or means of access to the surrounding countryside. At the crossing of

rivers, valleys and defiles, in mountain passes and at other critical points, all roads are easy to block and some are hard to clear. In rugged country roads are few. In sum, communications are such as to rob a highly mechanised force of much of the advantage to be reaped elsewhere from superiority in machines, and even in certain circumstances to transfer the advantage to the force that moves on hoofs and feet; and the comparative paucity of capacious roads limits the choice of thrust lines and so the versatility of the attacker.

(iv)

The climate tends to the same result. To the summer visitor a land of warm sunshine and bright moonlight, **Italy** takes on a less hospitable aspect as autumn deepens into winter. The rainfall is abundant, never much below an annual average of 20 inches in the inland south and rising to over 50 inches around Genoa. It is often heaviest in November, and from that month until April the movement of motor transport off roads and other hard surfaces is seriously handicapped. Thick, clogging mud and steep hillsides, many of which are terraced, not only impede the use of tanks but also slow up the pace of infantry and shorten the objectives that can reasonably be set. Though the lighter field pieces can usually be manhandled into the best position, medium and heavy guns must often be sited for convenience of access to roads rather than to satisfy more technical requirements. The eastern slope is drier and sunnier than the western, but by way of compensation it is steeper and therefore more eroded. Even in the northern plain snow and mud may bring an army almost to a standstill in winter. In some parts low-lying areas flood or become very damp and confine motor vehicles to roads running along the top of embankments, which the enemy can readily breach.

Though the sea is never far away from any part of the peninsula, its moderating effect on the climate is offset by the ribbon of highlands, the peaks of which are snow-covered for several months of the year, and the range of temperature is exceptionally great. The mild, equable

**Mediterranean** climate of tourist literature does not survive the test either of statistics or of experience the year round. Temperatures high in summer become in winter bracing to the point of severity. The spread of temperature between the hottest and coldest months at Alessandria in the northern plain is 43 degrees F. and drops to 26 degrees at Palermo on the north coast of **Sicily**, but it is always above 25 degrees – a notable amplitude. <sup>1</sup> The military implications are clear. Even in static warfare the rigours of the Italian winter make heavy demands on the physical and moral stamina of troops in the field; and much more so when strategic necessity calls on them to sustain a steady attack.

The climate and terrain awaiting the New Zealand Division in **Italy** were therefore a contrast to those in which they had trained and fought in the desert. In quitting the battlefields of desert **Africa** for **Italy**, they were exchanging, at least for the time being, heat for cold, sand for mud, flats or mild undulations for hills and mountains, freedom of movement for road-bound restriction, and an arid waste sparsely peopled for a land where the arts of peace had long flourished and where armies had manoeuvred and met since the infancy of **Europe**.

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<sup>1</sup> These figures, like most, assume meaning only by comparison. A New Zealand reader should therefore know that at Alexandra in Central Otago, the place of perhaps the greatest extremes of heat and cold in New Zealand, the temperature range is 25 degrees. At Christchurch it is 20 degrees and at Hokitika only 15.

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## CHAPTER 2 – RETURN TO BATTLE

## CHAPTER 2

### *Return to Battle*

#### *I: The Political Decision*

(i)

**NO inevitable fate but a free Parliament freely choosing between alternatives almost equal in the balance now ruled the destiny of 2 New Zealand Division. It was a choice by democratic process that enabled New Zealand soldiers, returning to Europe after their victorious march along the North African shore, to avenge in Italy the discomfitures of Greece and Crete. The decision to employ the Division in further operations in the Mediterranean theatre rather than to withdraw it for service against the Japanese in the South Pacific issued from an interplay of complex and often conflicting forces – the claims of strategy and politics, of sentiment and the economics of manpower and production, of loyalty towards Great Britain and the United Nations and neighbourliness towards Australia, of ‘logistics’ and humanitarianism.**

**That in the mid-twentieth century no nation could live unto itself as an island and that the seas which divide also join was the unspoken premise of this resolve. The discussions preceding it displayed both the extent and the limits of New Zealand's sovereign status – the extent because in her lay the power to hinder, by abrupt disengagement, the execution of far-reaching war plans, and the limits because her choice was conditioned not solely by her own immediate national interests but also by those of fellow members of the British Commonwealth and the United Nations.**

**It may indeed seem that, in choosing as she did, New Zealand acted not boldly but traditionally. It would be possible to represent New Zealand as still the satellite of Britain, committing her fighting men in the Middle East and Mediterranean because their fathers had fought there, and because there lay a strategic sphere as peculiarly British as**

the **Pacific** was peculiarly American. Such an argument might appear to draw further strength from the recent reallocation of strategic responsibilities within the Commonwealth, whereby New Zealand relinquishes duties in the **Middle East** for duties nearer home. But on the whole this is to suppose that the choice was made in instant and unthinking obedience to a tradition. Nothing could be less true. It may rather be that the historian of New Zealand will see in the torment and self-examination to which it gave rise one of the great maturing moments of the national life and conclude that never did a New Zealand Parliament make a more difficult, a more adult or a less insular decision.

These reflections, however, are not for the historian of the Division, who must be content to submit brief facts as prologue to the swelling act of the military theme.

*(ii)*

The security of the **Middle East** had been the purpose of Churchill's decision in 1940 to denude the homeland of armoured troops for despatch to Egypt, and it was for the same end that New Zealand had maintained the Division overseas even in the most sombre hour of Japanese success in the **Pacific** during the first half of 1942. The advance from **El Alamein** and the Anglo-American landings in North Africa seemed to the **New Zealand Government** an assurance that the **Middle East** was now safe and that the Division ought to be recalled to assist either in repelling a further Japanese offensive or in the Allied counter-attack that must soon be mounted. With the impending departure of 3 New Zealand Division to the South Pacific islands and the requirements of naval and air forces there and elsewhere, the troops available for home defence were fewer than the Chiefs of Staff judged wise. The withdrawal of more than 163,000 men and 5000 women from industry was taxing the efforts of the Dominion to provide food and other essential supplies for export and for the use of American forces under the mutual aid agreement of September 1942 with the **United States** Government. The long absence from home of 2 Division (most of

its men had been overseas for more than two years) and its heavy casualties (18,500 of a total of 43,500 sent to the **Middle East**), together with a natural wish to see these most experienced troops employed in the South Pacific for the defence of New Zealand, were making public opinion restive, or so the Government feared. It was predicted that if the 9th, the last of three Australian divisions in the **Middle East**, were to be recalled, as the urgent request of the Commonwealth Prime Minister (John Curtin) suggested it would be, the agitation for the return of the Division would become irresistible.

As the Division lay outside **Bardia** on 19 November 1942, pausing in the pursuit of the enemy that had begun at **El Alamein**, the Prime Minister (Peter Fraser) addressed these arguments to Churchill, adding the opinion, which was at odds with the assumptions of Allied strategy, that the conflict with **Japan** would be long and difficult, irrespective of success in the war against the two Axis Powers. Twice within a fortnight Churchill telegraphed a friendly objection. It would be regrettable to see the Division 'quit the scene of its glories'; the possibility of large-scale action in the Eastern **Mediterranean** in the early spring would compel the replacement of formations withdrawn from the theatre; and, above all, the shipping needed to move the Division could be diverted only at the cost of denying transport to 10,000 men outward from the United Kingdom and 40,000 men across the **Atlantic** in the accumulation of strength for the invasion of the Continent. The recall of **9 Australian Division**, by weakening our armed forces in the Middle East and straining our shipping resources, made it more necessary to retain the New Zealand Division in its place.

In Washington the Combined Chiefs of Staff, with less reticence of language, found 'every military argument' against the request of Curtin and Fraser. It would reduce the Allied impact upon the enemy in 1943, and by diverting ships seriously dislocate United Kingdom and **United States** movements. To Marshall, it appeared that the move would actually enfeeble the immediate defence of the two Dominions by delaying the reinforcement of **Burma** and the **Far East**; to others, it



would prejudice operations in progress in the **Mediterranean** and unsettle British and Indian troops whose service there had been longer than that of the New Zealanders and Australians.

While Curtin's mind was made up and the transfer of the Australian division proceeded, New Zealand proved to be in no need of the involuntary tuition given by the Combined Chiefs of Staff on the entanglement of one ally's affairs with all the others'. On 3 December, the day before the case was considered at Washington, the House of Representatives in secret session decided, on the strength of Churchill's plea, to leave the Division in the Middle East for a further period, without prejudice to the revival of the question at a more opportune time. There, except for expressions of gratitude by Churchill and Roosevelt and of implied dissent by Curtin, the matter rested for four months. None but the enemy would contend that the Division could have made better use of the time thus won than it did on the road from **Bardia to Tunisia**.

*(iii)*

When the House of Representatives made this temporising decision, Fraser gave a pledge that the Division would not be employed in any other theatre without the approval of the House and promised that its future would be reviewed at the end of the Tunisian campaign. This review was hastened by a proposal of



Organisation, Chain of Command, and War Establishment by Units of 2 New Zealand Division

## Organisation, Chain of Command, and War Establishment by Units of 2 New Zealand Division

mid-April to engage the Division in the assault phase of the coming invasion of **Sicily**. Montgomery wanted to prolong the partnership of the New Zealand and 51 (Highland) Divisions in **30 Corps**, which was his most experienced and highly trained and which worked, in Churchill's words, 'with unsurpassed cohesion'. The Division would have to be moved at once from **Tunisia** to Egypt for two months' amphibious training. The condition of urgency, imperatively necessary since the date for the invasion was less than three months away, caused Churchill's invitation to be declined. Fraser was reluctant to call an early meeting of the House of Representatives for fear of rousing undue alarm and speculation and for security reasons, nor would he anticipate its attitude to the British request. An offer by the New Zealand War Cabinet to permit the Division to be withdrawn for special training subject to parliamentary approval of its actual employment in **Sicily** was unacceptable to the planners, since facilities existed for the amphibious training of only one more division, of whose participation they must be certain.

If the Division was not to assault the Sicilian shores, what of the later **Mediterranean** operations upon which the British had set their hearts? How did their claims compare with those of the **Pacific** war? The choice between the two theatres was becoming exigent. In the fourth

year of war New Zealand could no longer call upon enough men to maintain indefinitely at full strength 2 Division in the **Middle East** and 3 **Division** in the South Pacific, as well as meeting her other commitments by land, sea and air, on the farm and in the factory. Though the home defences were now manned by a mere cadre and industry had been combed for ail fit men, the day of decision could hardly be postponed beyond the end of 1943. Three main options would then arise: one of the two divisions could be withdrawn; the establishments of both could be reduced; or one could be reinforced from the other. Many and eminent were the witnesses cited and grave and double-edged the arguments rehearsed when on 20 and 21 May the House of Representatives, behind closed doors, debated the issue.

*(iv)*

The case for the transference of 2 Division to the **Pacific** theatre rested principally on political, but partly on strategic and humanitarian, grounds. New Zealand, as a party to the setting up of the Allied command in the South-West Pacific area, had accepted the obligation to act on its directives, and these called for the use of all available resources. The strongest possible British representation among the Allied forces that would soon seize the initiative in the **Pacific** was needed to ensure British influence at the peace table; at the existing stage of the war, such representation must largely depend on the exertions of **Australia** and New Zealand. 'The Union Jack should fly here as the standard of British interest in the **Pacific**,' wrote Curtin, whose views were fully placed before the House.

**Australia**, whose great bulk had shielded New Zealand from immediate peril of Japanese attack and which had supplied her with munitions, had claims upon the gratitude, or at least the willing co-operation, of the Dominion. Having recalled three divisions from the **Middle East** to fight in the disease-ridden islands of the **Pacific**, **Australia** might feel that the retention of the Division in the more lenient climate of the **Mediterranean** betrayed scant appreciation of New Zealand's

responsibilities in the **Pacific** and of the charity that should begin at home, and even, should **3 Division** have to suffer reduction, direct defiance of the Commonwealth's appeal for greater energy and resources in the theatre.

It was also argued, if not exceedingly arguable, that, since a holding war was the object of Allied strategy in the **Pacific** until the defeat of **Germany**, by neglecting to replenish the wastage of manpower there, **Australia** and New Zealand might fail in their assigned role and thus bring about the collapse of the whole strategic plan.

To cease to reinforce **3 Division** and allow it gradually to dwindle until its offensive value disappeared would depress the spirits of the men in **New Caledonia**.

Finally, the move of **2 Division** nearer home would conveniently make possible leave, or even relief, for its members who had been long overseas.

(v)

Yet the weight of argument lay on the other side. Strategically, the opinion of the Combined Chiefs of Staff in November had not been outmoded by events in the meantime, and it was now disclosed to the House. So was a more recent expression of the views agreed upon by Churchill and Roosevelt, who were at the time in conference at **Washington**. They regretted the possible loss of the Division to the **Mediterranean** theatre and hoped that means would be found for sustaining both divisions in their existing strength and station, failing which they advised accepting the need, as it arose, for lower establishments. This message left no doubt about the serious hindrance the transport of the Division to the **Pacific** would impose upon the massing of American troops for the continental invasion. Since the **United States** was heavily committed in both theatres, the President's preference for the **Mediterranean** as the right place for the Division was impressive. It now appeared, since the German capitulation in **Tunisia** a

few days earlier, that operations of great potentiality were imminent in **Europe**, while in the **Pacific** the tide of Japanese victory had turned and the threat to New Zealand shores was receding. This was no time to abandon the strategy of ' **Germany** first'.

Of prime importance in determining Parliament's attitude, because it built a bridge between strategic need on the one side and the claims of humanity and the politics of welfare on the other, was the scheme for bringing home on furlough long-service members of the Division. The Minister of Defence (the **Hon. F. Jones**), who visited the Division in **Tunisia** in April and May, discussed its future employment and the return of its long-service members with the General Officer Commanding the Division ( **Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg**). <sup>1</sup> He reported to the Prime Minister that a period of furlough would be welcomed and that, in his opinion, it would satisfy the men. Arrangements were already in train for the return on furlough of 6000 men of the first three echelons, who would sail from Egypt in June and be replaced by reinforcements leaving New Zealand in July by the same ship. Jones thought that, while many men of the Division would be glad to return to it after furlough, there was no enthusiasm for service in the Solomon Islands. This opinion strengthened the case for retaining the Division in the **Mediterranean**, because it was now apparent that it would be easier to reinforce the 2nd from the 3rd Division than the 3rd from the 2nd.

The need for training the replacements of men on furlough and for reabsorbing into the Division 4 Armoured Brigade, which had still not received its full complement of tanks, would prevent the Division from taking part in any European operations until at least October, and the request for its employment as a follow-up division in **Sicily** could not therefore be met. But the repeated applications of Alexander and Montgomery for its services told the House a gratifying tale.

Two other testimonies were heard with the deepest respect. One was volunteered by **General Freyberg**. Writing on the morrow of the German surrender, when the fruits of the long war in **Africa** were being gathered, he naturally recalled the trials and triumphs of his Division, the

inspiration which it had shed, the repute in which it stood, and the confidence with which it would face the future of a European campaign if called on to do so. Between the lines of this message the least acute member of Parliament could not fail to read the pride of a general in his veterans and the desire that they should end together what they had begun and pursued through bad times and good

The other message, solicited for the occasion by the Prime Minister, was of Churchill's composing. As so often before, the British war leader set the magic of his style to the service of a cause. Instructed by a true reading of New Zealand history, he sounded the strain of imperial unity; and to a House the more impressionable from its unfamiliarity with eloquence he addressed sentences resonant with the cadences of Gibbon and ornamented by a reminiscence of Tennyson.

There have been few episodes of the war [he wrote] more remarkable than the ever-famous fighting march of the Desert Army from the battlefields of **Alamein**, where they shielded **Cairo**, to the gates of **Tunis**, whence they menace **Italy**. The New Zealand Division has always held a shining place in the van of this advance. Foremost, or among the foremost, it has ever been. There could not be any more glorious expression of the links which bind together the British Commonwealth and Empire, and bind in a special manner the hearts of the people of the British and New Zealand isles, than the feats of arms which the New Zealanders, under the leadership of **General Freyberg**, have performed for the liberation of the African continent from German and Italian power.

There are new tasks awaiting the British, American, and Allied armies in the **Mediterranean** perimeter. As conquerors, but also as deliverers, they must enter **Europe**. I earnestly trust that the New Zealand Division will carry on with them.... On military grounds the case is strongly urged by our trusted Generals.

Yet it is not on those grounds that I make this request to the Government and people of New Zealand.... It is the symbolic and historic value of our continued comradeship in arms that moves me. I feel that

the intervention of the New Zealand Division on European soil, at a time when the homeland of New Zealand is already so strongly engaged with **Japan**, will constitute a deed of fame to which many generations of New Zealanders will look back with pride....

The discussion, in secret session of the House, on resolutions adopted by a joint meeting of the Government and War Cabinets, though earnest, was neither acrimonious nor long, and only six or seven members dissented from the general conclusion that the Division could be most effectively used in the **Mediterranean** area. Without dividing, therefore, the House resolved that the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force should remain in the **Middle East** and be available for operations in **Europe**. Both the **Mediterranean** and the **Pacific** forces were to be maintained as long as possible with increasingly smaller establishments in accordance with the availability of manpower and, apart from their immediate replacements, no further reinforcements were to be provided until the 6000 men on furlough in New Zealand again became free for service. In choosing independently to describe the decision as farsighted, Churchill and **Freyberg** seem likely to have anticipated the verdict of posterity.

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Gen Lord Freyberg**, VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO and 3 bars, m.i.d., Order of Valour and MC (Greek); born **Richmond, Surrey**, 1889; CO Hood Bn 1914–16; commanded 173 Bde, 58 Div, and 88 Bde, 29 Div, 1917–18; GOC **2 NZEF** Nov 1939–Nov 1945; twice wounded; Governor-General of New Zealand 17 Jun 1946–15 Aug 1952.

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## *II: Rebuilding the Division*

*(i)*

While Parliament debated its future, the Division was making the long eastward journey back from **Tunisia** to the Delta. The arrival at **Maadi Camp**, near **Cairo**, early in June opened a four months' period of

re-equipment, reorganisation and training. The reliefs resulting from the furlough scheme, the return of 4 Brigade as an armoured formation, new equipment and a new mission were the four cornerstones on which the Division was rebuilt.

(ii)

The *Nieuw Amsterdam*, sailing from Egypt on 15 June with the first furlough draft ( RUAPEHU), removed about three-quarters of the veteran troops of the first three echelons – 200 officers and 5800 men.<sup>1</sup> Though few officers above the substantive rank of major accompanied the draft and a high proportion of junior officers, NCOs and technicians had to be retained, an immediate weakening of the Division was inescapable. Fighting units were particularly depleted, since among unmarried other ranks only those with field service were entered in the leave ballot.

By the time the replacements had joined their units at **Maadi**, the Division, considered as a group of men, had been substantially transformed, gaining in freshness but losing in experience. In a typical infantry battalion, few but the commands and technical posts were filled by original members; most of the older reinforcements

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<sup>1</sup> The principles on which the first draft was selected were laid down by the **War Cabinet**, which, after an exchange of views, approved the detailed procedure worked out in the Division. The essence of the problem was that those officers and men whose length of service gave them the strongest title to relief were, as a group, the key members of the Division, and a compromise had to be found between the claims of equity and efficiency. **War Cabinet** readily recognised that to deplete the Division of its most experienced and highly trained troops and its technical experts would be to imperil the lives of later reinforcements; and the recognition of this fact made it easier to find a solution that met with gratifyingly little criticism either at home or in the Division. The RUAPEHU draft comprised men from the first three echelons in the following categories: all married other ranks (including NCOs); two-thirds of unmarried other ranks (excluding NCOs) with field service and a smaller



proportion of unmarried NCOs and technicians, chosen by ballot by arms of the service; all married officers below the substantive rank of major and not in special technical employment; half the technical officers below the substantive rank of major and about fifty unmarried officers of the same rank, chosen by ballot. A small number of senior officers were personally selected for short leave in New Zealand. Return to New Zealand was compulsory for those selected in the ballot. After three months' leave on full pay at home, all ranks medically fit were eligible for return to the Division. The case of only sons was left to be dealt with by the machinery for compassionate leave. The number of doctors and nurses eligible for furlough depended on replacements from New Zealand.

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had found their way to administrative duties, leaving the rifle companies with a sprinkling of men of the 4th to 7th Reinforcements, with three years' to eighteen months' experience, and, for the rest, with the 8th Reinforcements, who had fought in **Tunisia**, and the 9th and 10th, who had only recently arrived from New Zealand. Among the gunners and engineers, who had suffered fewer casualties than the infantry, experienced men were still a majority and, for the same reason, they were even more preponderant in New Zealand **Army Service Corps** and other second-line units.

Continuity of command was well maintained between the Division's return to **Maadi** and its departure for **Europe**. The loss of **Freyberg** from command of the Division, if not of the Expeditionary Force, was indeed at one time a possibility. As early as April 1943 the **New Zealand Government**, in its anxiety not to allow his association with the Division to prejudice his well-earned prospects of promotion, had raised the question of his future with the British Government, and in the last stages of the fighting in **Tunisia** General Montgomery appointed him to temporary command of **10 Corps**. **Freyberg's** own attitude was straightforward: he was 'wholly content' with his existing status, and his personal ambition was to see the war through to its end with the Division he led, though if the wider war effort required him to serve elsewhere he would reconsider the matter in consultation with his

Government. An opportunity for personal discussions arose shortly afterwards. In June **Freyberg**, leaving Brigadier **Inglis**<sup>1</sup> to command in his absence, returned to New Zealand by air, arriving on the 20th and departing again on 10 July. In these three weeks he travelled the country, making many public speeches, as well as conferring with the Government. The result of his consultations was to confirm the *status quo*. Nor, with two exceptions, was it seriously disturbed elsewhere in the hierarchy of command. Brigadier **Parkinson**<sup>2</sup> took over **6 Infantry Brigade** from Brigadier **Gentry**,<sup>3</sup> who returned to

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis**, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Greek); **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 Inf 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.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj-Gen G. B. Parkinson**, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Christchurch**; born **Wellington**, 5 Nov 1896; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1917–19; CO **4 Fd Regt** Jan 1940–Aug 1941; comd 1 NZ Army Tank Bde and 7 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1941–42; **6 Bde** Apr 1943–Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div ( **Cassino**) 3–27 Mar 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div Jun–Aug 1944; comd **6 Bde** Aug 1944–Jun 1945; Quartermaster-General, Army HQ, Jan–Sep 1946; NZ Military Liaison Officer, **London**, 1946–49; Commandant, Southern Military District, 1949–51.

<sup>3</sup> **Maj-Gen W. G. Gentry**, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Bronze Star (US); **Lower Hutt**; born **London**, 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1920–22; GSO II NZ Div 1939–40, AA & QMG Oct 1940–41; GSO I May 1941, Oct 1941–Sep 1942; comd **6 Bde** Sep 1942–Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of General Staff (in NZ), 1943–44; comd NZ Troops in Egypt, 6 NZ Div, and NZ Maadi Camp, Aug 1944–Feb 1945; **9 Bde ( Italy)** 1945; Deputy Chief of General Staff, Jul 1946–Nov 1947; Adjutant-General, Apr 1949–Mar 1952; Chief of General Staff Apr 1952–Aug 1955.

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New Zealand to become Deputy Chief of the General Staff, relieving Brigadier Stewart; <sup>1</sup> and Brigadier Kippenberger, <sup>2</sup> who returned to New Zealand in command of the furlough draft, temporarily relinquished to Brigadier Stewart his command of 5 Infantry Brigade.

(iii)

The conversion of 4 Infantry Brigade ( Brigadier Inglis) to an armoured role and its reunion with the Division, however, had effects far beyond its own ranks. After suffering severe casualties in the Ruweisat Ridge action in July 1942, the brigade had been withdrawn for tank training at Maadi. Equipped with 150 Sherman tanks, it was preparing to provide New Zealand infantry for the first time with New Zealand armoured support. The tactical doctrine of the whole Division had to be reviewed in the light of its new mobility and fire-power; infantry and tanks had to be practised in mutual support and to grow together into a reciprocal fidelity; the field artillery had to be attuned to the tempo of armoured advance with its opportunities for prompt observed fire on fleeting targets; the engineers could foresee heavier wear-and-tear upon roads and more frequent summonses to build bridges; signallers would have to lay their telephone lines more securely beyond the callous reach of steel tracks and be prepared to operate a vastly improved and enlarged wireless network; and to the rearward units tanks which had to be transported, recovered, repaired, refuelled and munitioned were more exacting masters than the marching infantry they had supplanted.

Re-equipment was not confined to 4 Brigade. The Honey tanks and Bren carriers of the Divisional Cavalry Regiment were exchanged for Staghounds, armoured cars mounting a 37-millimetre gun, tough and sturdy but of a somewhat conspicuous silhouette. The infantry were given more striking power by the Piat (projector infantry anti-tank) and the 42-inch mortar, and better means of control by the No. 38 wireless set. The Piat, a one-man weapon firing a rocket projectile of great penetration, soon showed its superiority over the Boys anti-tank rifle. The 38 was a portable wireless set of short range designed primarily for

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

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

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infantry companies and their platoons, and between infantry and supporting arms; despite its limitations where the infantry were dispersed in hilly and wooded country and among buildings, it was a useful aid in the difficult task of keeping touch between and controlling small bodies of infantry, and it gave the platoon a handy means of calling for the help of armour and artillery and of relaying information back to commanders. The 20-pound bomb which the 42-inch mortar fired accurately up to 4200 yards was especially effective against enemy posts in buildings, and was able, with its fast rate of high-angle fire, to reach reverse slopes with heavy concentrations. These weapons were placed at the disposal of the two infantry brigade headquarters. The engineers received additional heavy roadmaking equipment – six bulldozers (where they had previously had two), mechanical shovels, dump trucks and a grader, besides more 3-ton trucks. This material was transferred from 21 Mechanical Equipment Company, which was now disbanded along with the non-divisional railway construction and operating companies.

The bare anatomy of the Division thus reinforced, reorganised and re-equipped may be summarily described. Reconnaissance was the prime function of the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** with its armoured cars. There were three brigades, two of infantry and one of armour. Each of the infantry brigades was made up of three battalions and the armoured brigade of three armoured regiments, one motorised infantry battalion, and its own workshops. The divisional Commander Royal Artillery ( **Brigadier Weir**) <sup>1</sup> had under his command the seventy-two 25-pounders of the three regiments of field artillery, an anti-tank regiment armed with 17-pounders and 6-pounders, a light anti-aircraft regiment of Bofors guns, and a survey battery. Further direct support for the infantry was given by the Vickers machine-gun battalion. The engineers, under the command of the Commander Royal Engineers ( **Colonel Hanson**), <sup>2</sup> were organised into three field companies and a field park company with heavy equipment. The units of the New Zealand Army Service Corps ( **Brigadier Crump**) <sup>3</sup> comprised two ammunition companies,

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj-Gen C. E. Weir**, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born NZ 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO **6 Fd Regt** Sep 1939–Dec 1941; CRA 2 NZ Div Dec 1941–Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div 4 Sep–17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944–Sep 1946; Commandant, Southern Military District, 1948–49; QMG, Army HQ, Nov 1951–Aug 1955; Chief of General Staff Aug 1955-.

<sup>2</sup> **Brig F. M. H. Hanson**, CBE, DSO and bar, MM, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Levin**, 1896; resident engineer, Main Highways Board; **Wellington Regt** in First World War; comd **7 Fd Coy**, NZE, Jan 1940–Aug 1941; CRE 2 NZ Div May 1941, Oct 1941–Apr 1944, Nov 1944–Jan 1946; Chief Engineer, **2 NZEF**, 1943–46; three times wounded; Commissioner of Works.

<sup>3</sup> **Brig S. H. Crump**, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., Bronze Star (US); **Lower Hutt**; born **Wellington**, 25 Jan 1889; Regular soldier; NZASC 1915–19; Commander NZASC, 2 NZ Div 1940–45; comd **2 NZEF (Japan)** Jun–Sep 1947; on staff HQ BCOF and NZ representative on Disposals Board in **Japan**, 1948–49.

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a petrol company, a supply company, two reserve mechanical transport companies, and a tank-transporter company. Three field ambulances, a corps of divisional signals, a divisional workshops, a New Zealand ordnance corps and a divisional provost company completed the establishment. <sup>1</sup>

Here was potentially a most formidable engine of war, second to no other division in the weight of metal it could throw and the equal in fighting power of any two German divisions then in being. Save in high summer, the sun could rise and set while its four and a half thousand vehicles, carrying more than twenty thousand men, drove past a given point in column of route. <sup>2</sup> It was capable of moving fast, of hitting hard while it moved and, as an enemy that forced it to deploy would quickly discover, of hitting harder still when it halted. Its mixed character, neither a purely infantry nor a purely armoured division, fitted it for operations needing adaptability and some measure of independence for, where the terms of battle were at all equal, it possessed within itself the means of breaking into a defensive position, piercing it and exploiting its own success by flooding its armour through the gap. But positional, as distinct from mobile warfare, in which the Division would have to merge its identity into a larger mass, would rob it of these advantages and search out its latent weakness – a shortage of infantry.

(iv)

Without training, the capacities of the Division were potential rather than actual, and training would have to be controlled by its prospective role. Though the date of readiness was changed more than once and proposals to practise outflanking movements by sea were cancelled, **Freyberg** received guidance from his discussions with Alexander and Montgomery in **Sicily** early in August, when the employment of the Division as a mobile striking force was agreed upon. Within a few days of the landings in **Calabria** and at **Salerno, Italy** was revealed to the Divisional Commander as the destination, and on 24 September he was

able to report to the Prime Minister that the deficiencies in the equipment of the Division were being made good – a condition of its committal – and that it would rejoin the **Eighth Army**.

By this time training was far advanced. Of necessity it had begun at an elementary level within units, rising by way of brigade exercises to divisional manoeuvres. The close, hilly, wooded country

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<sup>1</sup> See diagram facing p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> This calculation is based on a road density of 15 vehicles to the mile and a rate of march of 20 miles in the hour.

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which was expected to await the Division in southern **Europe** was nowhere to be found in Egypt, and the best choice that could be made, the Gindali region mid-way between **Cairo** and **Suez**, offered some experience of hills but none of mud, hard going and thick vegetation. The act of battle can never be faithfully rehearsed but the stage properties at hand in Egypt for the Division's purpose were more than usually inadequate.

The last of the divisional exercises was carried out at Burg el Arab on the coast west of **Alexandria** before embarkation. From Maadi, a distance of 100 miles, the entire Division made the longest march on foot in its history – the most gruelling of a series of exertions planned to harden the troops for the rigours of an Italian winter after the languors of an Egyptian summer. In the manoeuvres at Burg el Arab, which culminated in a night attack with live ammunition on 29–30 September, the Division experimented with a technique of its own for forcing a position protected by wire and mines, passing through the armoured brigade and consolidating defensively. An untoward event in an otherwise successful exercise cost the lives of four members of 28 (Maori) Battalion and wounded seven others. Rounds from one gun taking part in the barrage fell short among the advancing infantry of **5 Brigade** for a reason which full inquiry failed to establish.

Finally, the safeguarding of health and of secrecy had their place among preparations for the move. The usual precautions against the malaria of the warm season in **Italy** were ordered before embarkation; and the risk of pestilence during the Italian winter was countered by the issue of warm clothing (two pairs of boots, New Zealand winter underclothing, battle dress and leather jerkins) and bivouac shelters, by inoculation against typhus, and by the provision of mobile laundries and disinfestors. The removal of signs, titles and badges extinguished the most obvious means of identifying the New Zealanders and enforced in the minds of the men the need for security.

A Special Order of the Day signed by the Divisional Commander on 4 October confirmed what rumour had long predicted: the ships lying at anchor in the harbour of **Alexandria** as they waited for the Division to embark were bound for **Italy**. This news the troops were forbidden to convey in their letters; and the Division was put on the security list so that its arrival in **Italy** would not be published. Between 21 and 27 October the censorship was relaxed to allow troops to mention in their letters that they were in **Italy**; but policy had slumbered, for on the 27th permission was withdrawn. Publication of a despatch written by **Freyberg** on the same day to the Minister of Defence was delayed for some weeks at the request of Alexander, and it was not until 23 November that an announcement of the Division's whereabouts was made in the New Zealand newspapers.

### *III: Back in Europe*

*(i)*

The main body of troops made the voyage to **Taranto** in two flights. Each assembled at **Ikingi Maryut**, near **Alexandria**, for drafting into 'ship camps', between which units were split up so that the loss of a transport should not entail the complete loss of a unit. The first flight of 5827 all ranks (if the records are as reliable as they are precise) sailed on 6 October in the *Dunottar Castle* and the *Reina del Pacifico*, reaching



**Taranto** on the 9th; the second, of 8707, on the 18th in five vessels, the *Llangibby Castle*, *Nieuw Holland*, *Letitia*, *Arona* and *Egra*, arriving on the 22nd.

For the soldiers it was a strenuous and uncomfortable mode of travel. As they struggled up the gangways, they were freighted with a blanket roll, winter and summer clothing and personal gear, anti-malaria ointment and tablets, emergency ration, weapon and ammunition, respirator and empty two-gallon water-can, and (between every two men) a bivouac tent. Deposited in the none-too-spacious sleeping quarters, all this impedimenta increased crowding and made men grateful for the fresh air of the open decks and the shortness of the voyage.

Experience in the *Dunottar Castle* suggests that much of the discomfort and the inconvenience that ensued on arrival could have been avoided had Movement Control applied its rules more flexibly. In the empty holds there was room for vehicles, and these could have been unloaded in the ten or twelve hours of daylight available after arrival at **Taranto**, which ships aimed to clear before the attacks of night bombers began. As it was, between 14,000 and 15,000 travelled in these seven ships with no more equipment than they could carry on their persons, together with a few cooking utensils, tents, picks and shovels and carpenter's tools. All the rest of the Division's mountain of equipment followed at an appreciable interval in its vehicles or as general cargo.

The journey was not only smooth and calm, it was also secure. Over seas still blue in the autumn sun, seas which they had helped to make safe, the men of the Division were escorted in accordance with the promise of Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, Commander-in-Chief of Allied Naval Forces in the theatre, that 'every care will be taken of our old friends the New Zealand troops on their passage through the **Mediterranean**'. The first flight had an escort of six destroyers around them and air cover above, and similar protection was given the second.

As the troops of the first flight disembarked on the morning of 9

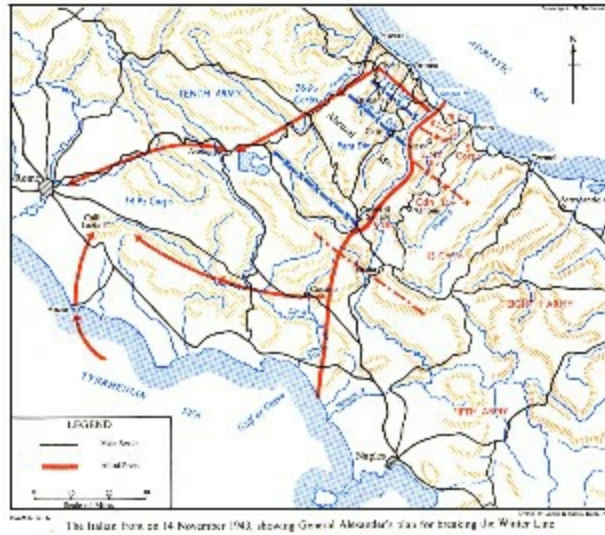
October, most of them were making their first acquaintance with **Europe**. The order was to pile heavy gear on the wharves, and then a march of several miles, accompanied by guides lent by 8 Indian Division, to the bivouac area on relatively high ground north of **Taranto**. Since its arrival ten days before, the divisional advance party, with small means but much help from the Indian division, had worked wonders and no essential arrangements for the reception of the first-flight men had been left unmade. But old soldiers know, and young soldiers soon learn, that the Army rarely excels in welcoming drafts of troops arriving by sea, and that those who step off troopships in far lands often find that the excitement of new scenes is tempered by a deflated sense that something is amiss in the hospitality of the military authorities. The truth is that inconvenience is inseparable from the movement of men *en masse*. This fact was borne in upon the many New Zealanders who had to spend their first night in **Italy** sleeping in the open without blankets because there were too few trucks at **Taranto** to move their gear from the docks to the staging area. By the next night, however, all the bivouac tents had been erected among the olive groves and stone-walled fields—only just in time, for on the 11th the Division experienced its first rainfall since leaving **Tunisia** nearly five months earlier.

(ii)

The more bracing climate, the stimulus of fresh country and the feeling that the end of the war against **Germany** was in sight lent zest and exhilaration to these early days in **Italy**. Leave was taken in **Taranto**; footballs appeared; and the troops were brought to a pitch of physical fitness by route marches and organised sports. Within the limits set by lack of equipment, training could now be more realistic. It was possible to practise tactics appropriate to close country, movement by night through wooded areas, the employment of snipers, the art of camouflage (no longer against the dun of the desert but against the greens and greys of the Apulian countryside), and the operation of the new portable wireless sets over ground screened by vegetation. The drill of patrolling in this close country and of street and village fighting had

also to be mastered. With such ends in view, the infantry carried out section, platoon, company and battalion exercises in the vicinity of the divisional area.

The weather gave fair notice of its inclemency. Frequent showers encouraged units to spend time in constructing tracks and drains



The Italian front on 14 November 1943, showing General Alexander's plan for breaking the **Winter Line**

around their camps and the engineers were engaged for some days in roadmaking. The need for drainage was pressed home on the night of 28–29 October, when a heavy thunderstorm in the evening caused widespread local flooding. The drying out or exchanging of soaked blankets and other personal kit occupied much of the next two days. More heavy rain between 5 and 8 November helped to dispel any lingering illusions about the Italian climate. The New Zealanders, indeed, now found themselves 'with only an exiguous part of the summer left' but without Caesar's solace of a retreat to winter quarters.

Meanwhile the Division's vehicles were following on in the charge of about six thousand men. Camouflaged with disruptive painting and specially prepared for loading, they were divided as equally as possible into four flights in a strict order of priority regulated by the sequence of needs in **Italy**. They were marshalled in parks at **Amiriya** for shipment

from **Alexandria** and at **Suez**, and flights left **Suez** on 16 and 31 October and **Alexandria** on 29 October and 3 November. Since at least the first flight of vehicles would be required to move the Division from **Taranto**, their progress controlled the Division's immediate future.

It had been expected that the Division would remain at **Taranto** until at least mid-November for the arrival of all its vehicles, but in mid-October Eighth Army ordered a move forward to a concentration area at **Altamura**, about 30 miles inland from the port of **Bari**, for further training in Army reserve. Before the first vehicle convoy reached port to enable the Division to carry out this order, it was superseded by one of 27 October, which directed the Division to the vicinity of **Lucera** to take up a role in Army reserve protecting the **Foggia** airfields from the west and guarding against infiltration by the enemy between 5 and 13 Corps.

With the arrival of the first vehicles at **Bari** on 29 October, it was possible for the leading unit on 1 November to begin the move from **Taranto** to **Lucera** along a route marked by the Divisional **Provost Company** with the familiar diamond signs. For three weeks units steadily moved up to the assembly area among farmlands west of **Lucera**, most of them breaking the 160-mile journey by staging overnight about 13 miles north-west of **Altamura**. All this time vehicles were continuing to arrive at **Bari** in flights, some of which had been split up and delayed en route. The last of them did not arrive until 20 November, one stray transport only appeared on the 28th, and it was the end of the month before the last vehicle was unloaded. By now units were scattered far and wide and drivers in the later transports, setting out from **Bari** with imperfect instructions, often straggled back to their units in small groups.

The arrival in **Italy**, therefore, was not a sharp event but a piecemeal process. Nor was deployment much more clearly defined; for as the Division slowly drew up its tail to **Lucera**, it was ordered to extend its head. On 11 November, before half its fighting strength had reached the concentration area, the Division was ordered up to a concentration area between **Furci** and **Gissi**. Eighth Army had changed its plan.

To most New Zealand troops **Lucera** was thus no more than a stage on the road to the front. The old town stands on the edge of the *Tavogliere della Puglia*, the Apulian tableland, and it portends the hills; but it derives its chief interest from the past. Here, seven hundred years before, the Emperor Frederick II settled a colony of Saracens to rid his Sicilian kingdom of turbulent subjects and to harry the Pope. Hence Charles of Anjou set out in 1268 on the journey that led to the death of his enemy Conradin, the young grandson of Frederick and the last survivor of the German house of Hohenstaufen.

On 11 November the first elements of the Division, passing through **Lucera**, turned north towards the German lines.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## I: THE POLITICAL DECISION

### *I: The Political Decision*

(i)

**NO inevitable fate but a free Parliament freely choosing between alternatives almost equal in the balance now ruled the destiny of 2 New Zealand Division. It was a choice by democratic process that enabled New Zealand soldiers, returning to Europe after their victorious march along the North African shore, to avenge in Italy the discomfitures of Greece and Crete. The decision to employ the Division in further operations in the Mediterranean theatre rather than to withdraw it for service against the Japanese in the South Pacific issued from an interplay of complex and often conflicting forces – the claims of strategy and politics, of sentiment and the economics of manpower and production, of loyalty towards Great Britain and the United Nations and neighbourliness towards Australia, of ‘logistics’ and humanitarianism.**

**That in the mid-twentieth century no nation could live unto itself as an island and that the seas which divide also join was the unspoken premise of this resolve. The discussions preceding it displayed both the extent and the limits of New Zealand's sovereign status – the extent because in her lay the power to hinder, by abrupt disengagement, the execution of far-reaching war plans, and the limits because her choice was conditioned not solely by her own immediate national interests but also by those of fellow members of the British Commonwealth and the United Nations.**

**It may indeed seem that, in choosing as she did, New Zealand acted not boldly but traditionally. It would be possible to represent New Zealand as still the satellite of Britain, committing her fighting men in the Middle East and Mediterranean because their fathers had fought there, and because there lay a strategic sphere as peculiarly British as**

**the Pacific** was peculiarly American. Such an argument might appear to draw further strength from the recent reallocation of strategic responsibilities within the Commonwealth, whereby New Zealand relinquishes duties in the **Middle East** for duties nearer home. But on the whole this is to suppose that the choice was made in instant and unthinking obedience to a tradition. Nothing could be less true. It may rather be that the historian of New Zealand will see in the torment and self-examination to which it gave rise one of the great maturing moments of the national life and conclude that never did a New Zealand Parliament make a more difficult, a more adult or a less insular decision.

These reflections, however, are not for the historian of the Division, who must be content to submit brief facts as prologue to the swelling act of the military theme.

*(ii)*

The security of the **Middle East** had been the purpose of Churchill's decision in 1940 to denude the homeland of armoured troops for despatch to Egypt, and it was for the same end that New Zealand had maintained the Division overseas even in the most sombre hour of Japanese success in the **Pacific** during the first half of 1942. The advance from **El Alamein** and the Anglo-American landings in North Africa seemed to the **New Zealand Government** an assurance that the **Middle East** was now safe and that the Division ought to be recalled to assist either in repelling a further Japanese offensive or in the Allied counter-attack that must soon be mounted. With the impending departure of 3 New Zealand Division to the South Pacific islands and the requirements of naval and air forces there and elsewhere, the troops available for home defence were fewer than the Chiefs of Staff judged wise. The withdrawal of more than 163,000 men and 5000 women from industry was taxing the efforts of the Dominion to provide food and other essential supplies for export and for the use of American forces under the mutual aid agreement of September 1942 with the **United States Government**. The long absence from home of 2 Division (most of

its men had been overseas for more than two years) and its heavy casualties (18,500 of a total of 43,500 sent to the **Middle East**), together with a natural wish to see these most experienced troops employed in the South Pacific for the defence of New Zealand, were making public opinion restive, or so the Government feared. It was predicted that if the 9th, the last of three Australian divisions in the **Middle East**, were to be recalled, as the urgent request of the Commonwealth Prime Minister (John Curtin) suggested it would be, the agitation for the return of the Division would become irresistible.

As the Division lay outside **Bardia** on 19 November 1942, pausing in the pursuit of the enemy that had begun at **El Alamein**, the Prime Minister (Peter Fraser) addressed these arguments to Churchill, adding the opinion, which was at odds with the assumptions of Allied strategy, that the conflict with **Japan** would be long and difficult, irrespective of success in the war against the two Axis Powers. Twice within a fortnight Churchill telegraphed a friendly objection. It would be regrettable to see the Division 'quit the scene of its glories'; the possibility of large-scale action in the Eastern **Mediterranean** in the early spring would compel the replacement of formations withdrawn from the theatre; and, above all, the shipping needed to move the Division could be diverted only at the cost of denying transport to 10,000 men outward from the United Kingdom and 40,000 men across the **Atlantic** in the accumulation of strength for the invasion of the Continent. The recall of **9 Australian Division**, by weakening our armed forces in the Middle East and straining our shipping resources, made it more necessary to retain the New Zealand Division in its place.

In Washington the Combined Chiefs of Staff, with less reticence of language, found 'every military argument' against the request of Curtin and Fraser. It would reduce the Allied impact upon the enemy in 1943, and by diverting ships seriously dislocate United Kingdom and **United States** movements. To Marshall, it appeared that the move would actually enfeeble the immediate defence of the two Dominions by delaying the reinforcement of **Burma** and the **Far East**; to others, it



would prejudice operations in progress in the **Mediterranean** and unsettle British and Indian troops whose service there had been longer than that of the New Zealanders and Australians.

While Curtin's mind was made up and the transfer of the Australian division proceeded, New Zealand proved to be in no need of the involuntary tuition given by the Combined Chiefs of Staff on the entanglement of one ally's affairs with all the others'. On 3 December, the day before the case was considered at Washington, the House of Representatives in secret session decided, on the strength of Churchill's plea, to leave the Division in the Middle East for a further period, without prejudice to the revival of the question at a more opportune time. There, except for expressions of gratitude by Churchill and Roosevelt and of implied dissent by Curtin, the matter rested for four months. None but the enemy would contend that the Division could have made better use of the time thus won than it did on the road from **Bardia to Tunisia**.

*(iii)*

When the House of Representatives made this temporising decision, Fraser gave a pledge that the Division would not be employed in any other theatre without the approval of the House and promised that its future would be reviewed at the end of the Tunisian campaign. This review was hastened by a proposal of



Organisation, Chain of Command, and War Establishment by Units of 2 New Zealand Division

**Organisation, Chain of Command, and War Establishment by Units of 2 New Zealand Division**

mid-April to engage the Division in the assault phase of the coming invasion of Sicily. Montgomery wanted to prolong the partnership of the New Zealand and 51 (Highland) Divisions in 30 Corps, which was his most experienced and highly trained and which worked, in Churchill's words, 'with unsurpassed cohesion'. The Division would have to be moved at once from Tunisia to Egypt for two months' amphibious training. The condition of urgency, imperatively necessary since the date for the invasion was less than three months away, caused Churchill's invitation to be declined. Fraser was reluctant to call an early meeting of the House of Representatives for fear of rousing undue alarm and speculation and for security reasons, nor would he anticipate its attitude to the British request. An offer by the New Zealand War Cabinet to permit the Division to be withdrawn for special training subject to parliamentary approval of its actual employment in Sicily was unacceptable to the planners, since facilities existed for the amphibious training of only one more division, of whose participation they must be certain.

If the Division was not to assault the Sicilian shores, what of the later Mediterranean operations upon which the British had set their hearts? How did their claims compare with those of the Pacific war? The choice between the two theatres was becoming exigent. In the fourth

year of war New Zealand could no longer call upon enough men to maintain indefinitely at full strength 2 Division in the **Middle East** and 3 **Division** in the South Pacific, as well as meeting her other commitments by land, sea and air, on the farm and in the factory. Though the home defences were now manned by a mere cadre and industry had been combed for ail fit men, the day of decision could hardly be postponed beyond the end of 1943. Three main options would then arise: one of the two divisions could be withdrawn; the establishments of both could be reduced; or one could be reinforced from the other. Many and eminent were the witnesses cited and grave and double-edged the arguments rehearsed when on 20 and 21 May the House of Representatives, behind closed doors, debated the issue.

*(iv)*

The case for the transference of 2 Division to the **Pacific** theatre rested principally on political, but partly on strategic and humanitarian, grounds. New Zealand, as a party to the setting up of the Allied command in the South-West Pacific area, had accepted the obligation to act on its directives, and these called for the use of all available resources. The strongest possible British representation among the Allied forces that would soon seize the initiative in the **Pacific** was needed to ensure British influence at the peace table; at the existing stage of the war, such representation must largely depend on the exertions of **Australia** and New Zealand. 'The Union Jack should fly here as the standard of British interest in the **Pacific**,' wrote Curtin, whose views were fully placed before the House.

**Australia**, whose great bulk had shielded New Zealand from immediate peril of Japanese attack and which had supplied her with munitions, had claims upon the gratitude, or at least the willing co-operation, of the Dominion. Having recalled three divisions from the **Middle East** to fight in the disease-ridden islands of the **Pacific**, **Australia** might feel that the retention of the Division in the more lenient climate of the **Mediterranean** betrayed scant appreciation of New Zealand's

responsibilities in the **Pacific** and of the charity that should begin at home, and even, should **3 Division** have to suffer reduction, direct defiance of the Commonwealth's appeal for greater energy and resources in the theatre.

It was also argued, if not exceedingly arguable, that, since a holding war was the object of Allied strategy in the **Pacific** until the defeat of **Germany**, by neglecting to replenish the wastage of manpower there, **Australia** and New Zealand might fail in their assigned role and thus bring about the collapse of the whole strategic plan.

To cease to reinforce **3 Division** and allow it gradually to dwindle until its offensive value disappeared would depress the spirits of the men in **New Caledonia**.

Finally, the move of **2 Division** nearer home would conveniently make possible leave, or even relief, for its members who had been long overseas.

(v)

Yet the weight of argument lay on the other side. Strategically, the opinion of the Combined Chiefs of Staff in November had not been outmoded by events in the meantime, and it was now disclosed to the House. So was a more recent expression of the views agreed upon by Churchill and Roosevelt, who were at the time in conference at **Washington**. They regretted the possible loss of the Division to the **Mediterranean** theatre and hoped that means would be found for sustaining both divisions in their existing strength and station, failing which they advised accepting the need, as it arose, for lower establishments. This message left no doubt about the serious hindrance the transport of the Division to the **Pacific** would impose upon the massing of American troops for the continental invasion. Since the **United States** was heavily committed in both theatres, the President's preference for the **Mediterranean** as the right place for the Division was impressive. It now appeared, since the German capitulation in **Tunisia** a

few days earlier, that operations of great potentiality were imminent in **Europe**, while in the **Pacific** the tide of Japanese victory had turned and the threat to New Zealand shores was receding. This was no time to abandon the strategy of ' **Germany** first'.

Of prime importance in determining Parliament's attitude, because it built a bridge between strategic need on the one side and the claims of humanity and the politics of welfare on the other, was the scheme for bringing home on furlough long-service members of the Division. The Minister of Defence (the **Hon. F. Jones**), who visited the Division in **Tunisia** in April and May, discussed its future employment and the return of its long-service members with the General Officer Commanding the Division ( **Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg**). <sup>1</sup> He reported to the Prime Minister that a period of furlough would be welcomed and that, in his opinion, it would satisfy the men. Arrangements were already in train for the return on furlough of 6000 men of the first three echelons, who would sail from Egypt in June and be replaced by reinforcements leaving New Zealand in July by the same ship. Jones thought that, while many men of the Division would be glad to return to it after furlough, there was no enthusiasm for service in the Solomon Islands. This opinion strengthened the case for retaining the Division in the **Mediterranean**, because it was now apparent that it would be easier to reinforce the 2nd from the 3rd Division than the 3rd from the 2nd.

The need for training the replacements of men on furlough and for reabsorbing into the Division 4 Armoured Brigade, which had still not received its full complement of tanks, would prevent the Division from taking part in any European operations until at least October, and the request for its employment as a follow-up division in **Sicily** could not therefore be met. But the repeated applications of Alexander and Montgomery for its services told the House a gratifying tale.

Two other testimonies were heard with the deepest respect. One was volunteered by **General Freyberg**. Writing on the morrow of the German surrender, when the fruits of the long war in **Africa** were being gathered, he naturally recalled the trials and triumphs of his Division, the

inspiration which it had shed, the repute in which it stood, and the confidence with which it would face the future of a European campaign if called on to do so. Between the lines of this message the least acute member of Parliament could not fail to read the pride of a general in his veterans and the desire that they should end together what they had begun and pursued through bad times and good

The other message, solicited for the occasion by the Prime Minister, was of Churchill's composing. As so often before, the British war leader set the magic of his style to the service of a cause. Instructed by a true reading of New Zealand history, he sounded the strain of imperial unity; and to a House the more impressionable from its unfamiliarity with eloquence he addressed sentences resonant with the cadences of Gibbon and ornamented by a reminiscence of Tennyson.

There have been few episodes of the war [he wrote] more remarkable than the ever-famous fighting march of the Desert Army from the battlefields of **Alamein**, where they shielded **Cairo**, to the gates of **Tunis**, whence they menace **Italy**. The New Zealand Division has always held a shining place in the van of this advance. Foremost, or among the foremost, it has ever been. There could not be any more glorious expression of the links which bind together the British Commonwealth and Empire, and bind in a special manner the hearts of the people of the British and New Zealand isles, than the feats of arms which the New Zealanders, under the leadership of **General Freyberg**, have performed for the liberation of the African continent from German and Italian power.

There are new tasks awaiting the British, American, and Allied armies in the **Mediterranean** perimeter. As conquerors, but also as deliverers, they must enter **Europe**. I earnestly trust that the New Zealand Division will carry on with them.... On military grounds the case is strongly urged by our trusted Generals.

Yet it is not on those grounds that I make this request to the Government and people of New Zealand.... It is the symbolic and historic value of our continued comradeship in arms that moves me. I feel that

the intervention of the New Zealand Division on European soil, at a time when the homeland of New Zealand is already so strongly engaged with **Japan**, will constitute a deed of fame to which many generations of New Zealanders will look back with pride....

The discussion, in secret session of the House, on resolutions adopted by a joint meeting of the Government and War Cabinets, though earnest, was neither acrimonious nor long, and only six or seven members dissented from the general conclusion that the Division could be most effectively used in the **Mediterranean** area. Without dividing, therefore, the House resolved that the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force should remain in the **Middle East** and be available for operations in **Europe**. Both the **Mediterranean** and the **Pacific** forces were to be maintained as long as possible with increasingly smaller establishments in accordance with the availability of manpower and, apart from their immediate replacements, no further reinforcements were to be provided until the 6000 men on furlough in New Zealand again became free for service. In choosing independently to describe the decision as farsighted, Churchill and **Freyberg** seem likely to have anticipated the verdict of posterity.

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Gen Lord Freyberg**, VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO and 3 bars, m.i.d., Order of Valour and MC (Greek); born **Richmond, Surrey**, 1889; CO Hood Bn 1914–16; commanded 173 Bde, 58 Div, and 88 Bde, 29 Div, 1917–18; GOC **2 NZEF** Nov 1939–Nov 1945; twice wounded; Governor-General of New Zealand 17 Jun 1946–15 Aug 1952.

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: REBUILDING THE DIVISION

### *II: Rebuilding the Division*

(i)

While Parliament debated its future, the Division was making the long eastward journey back from **Tunisia** to the Delta. The arrival at **Maadi Camp**, near **Cairo**, early in June opened a four months' period of re-equipment, reorganisation and training. The reliefs resulting from the furlough scheme, the return of 4 Brigade as an armoured formation, new equipment and a new mission were the four cornerstones on which the Division was rebuilt.

(ii)

The *Nieuw Amsterdam*, sailing from Egypt on 15 June with the first furlough draft ( **RUAPEHU**), removed about three-quarters of the veteran troops of the first three echelons – 200 officers and 5800 men. <sup>1</sup> Though few officers above the substantive rank of major accompanied the draft and a high proportion of junior officers, NCOs and technicians had to be retained, an immediate weakening of the Division was inescapable. Fighting units were particularly depleted, since among unmarried other ranks only those with field service were entered in the leave ballot.

By the time the replacements had joined their units at **Maadi**, the Division, considered as a group of men, had been substantially transformed, gaining in freshness but losing in experience. In a typical infantry battalion, few but the commands and technical posts were filled by original members; most of the older reinforcements

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<sup>1</sup> The principles on which the first draft was selected were laid down by the **War Cabinet**, which, after an exchange of views, approved the detailed procedure worked out in the



Division. The essence of the problem was that those officers and men whose length of service gave them the strongest title to relief were, as a group, the key members of the Division, and a compromise had to be found between the claims of equity and efficiency. **War Cabinet** readily recognised that to deplete the Division of its most experienced and highly trained troops and its technical experts would be to imperil the lives of later reinforcements; and the recognition of this fact made it easier to find a solution that met with gratifyingly little criticism either at home or in the Division. The **RUAPEHU** draft comprised men from the first three echelons in the following categories: all married other ranks (including NCOs); two-thirds of unmarried other ranks (excluding NCOs) with field service and a smaller proportion of unmarried NCOs and technicians, chosen by ballot by arms of the service; all married officers below the substantive rank of major and not in special technical employment; half the technical officers below the substantive rank of major and about fifty unmarried officers of the same rank, chosen by ballot. A small number of senior officers were personally selected for short leave in New Zealand. Return to New Zealand was compulsory for those selected in the ballot. After three months' leave on full pay at home, all ranks medically fit were eligible for return to the Division. The case of only sons was left to be dealt with by the machinery for compassionate leave. The number of doctors and nurses eligible for furlough depended on replacements from New Zealand.

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had found their way to administrative duties, leaving the rifle companies with a sprinkling of men of the 4th to 7th Reinforcements, with three years' to eighteen months' experience, and, for the rest, with the 8th Reinforcements, who had fought in **Tunisia**, and the 9th and 10th, who had only recently arrived from New Zealand. Among the gunners and engineers, who had suffered fewer casualties than the infantry, experienced men were still a majority and, for the same reason, they were even more preponderant in New Zealand **Army Service Corps** and other second-line units.

Continuity of command was well maintained between the Division's return to **Maadi** and its departure for **Europe**. The loss of **Freyberg** from command of the Division, if not of the Expeditionary Force, was indeed

at one time a possibility. As early as April 1943 the **New Zealand Government**, in its anxiety not to allow his association with the Division to prejudice his well-earned prospects of promotion, had raised the question of his future with the British Government, and in the last stages of the fighting in **Tunisia** General Montgomery appointed him to temporary command of **10 Corps**. **Freyberg's** own attitude was straightforward: he was 'wholly content' with his existing status, and his personal ambition was to see the war through to its end with the Division he led, though if the wider war effort required him to serve elsewhere he would reconsider the matter in consultation with his Government. An opportunity for personal discussions arose shortly afterwards. In June **Freyberg**, leaving Brigadier **Inglis**<sup>1</sup> to command in his absence, returned to New Zealand by air, arriving on the 20th and departing again on 10 July. In these three weeks he travelled the country, making many public speeches, as well as conferring with the Government. The result of his consultations was to confirm the *status quo*. Nor, with two exceptions, was it seriously disturbed elsewhere in the hierarchy of command. Brigadier **Parkinson**<sup>2</sup> took over **6 Infantry Brigade** from Brigadier **Gentry**,<sup>3</sup> who returned to

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis**, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Greek); **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 Inf 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.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj-Gen G. B. Parkinson**, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Christchurch**; born **Wellington**, 5 Nov 1896; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1917–19; CO **4 Fd Regt** Jan 1940–Aug 1941; comd 1 NZ Army Tank Bde and 7 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1941–42; **6 Bde** Apr 1943–Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div ( **Cassino**) 3–27 Mar 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div Jun–Aug 1944; comd **6 Bde** Aug 1944–Jun 1945; Quartermaster-General, Army HQ, Jan–Sep 1946; NZ Military Liaison Officer, **London**, 1946–49; Commandant, Southern Military District, 1949–51.

<sup>3</sup> **Maj-Gen W. G. Gentry**, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Bronze Star (US); **Lower Hutt**; born **London**, 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1920–22; GSO II NZ Div 1939–40, AA & QMG Oct 1940–41; GSO I May 1941, Oct 1941–Sep 1942; comd **6 Bde** Sep 1942–Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of General Staff (in NZ), 1943–44; comd NZ Troops in Egypt, 6 NZ Div, and NZ Maadi Camp, Aug 1944–Feb 1945; 9 Bde ( **Italy**) 1945; Deputy Chief of General Staff, Jul 1946–Nov 1947; Adjutant-General, Apr 1949–Mar 1952; Chief of General Staff Apr 1952–Aug 1955.

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New Zealand to become Deputy Chief of the General Staff, relieving Brigadier Stewart; <sup>1</sup> and **Brigadier Kippenberger**, <sup>2</sup> who returned to New Zealand in command of the furlough draft, temporarily relinquished to Brigadier Stewart his command of 5 Infantry Brigade.

*(iii)*

The conversion of **4 Infantry Brigade** ( **Brigadier Inglis**) to an armoured role and its reunion with the Division, however, had effects far beyond its own ranks. After suffering severe casualties in the **Ruweisat Ridge** action in July 1942, the brigade had been withdrawn for tank training at **Maadi**. Equipped with 150 Sherman tanks, it was preparing to provide New Zealand infantry for the first time with New Zealand armoured support. The tactical doctrine of the whole Division had to be reviewed in the light of its new mobility and fire-power; infantry and tanks had to be practised in mutual support and to grow together into a reciprocal fidelity; the field artillery had to be attuned to the tempo of armoured advance with its opportunities for prompt observed fire on fleeting targets; the engineers could foresee heavier wear-and-tear upon roads and more frequent summonses to build bridges; signallers would have to lay their telephone lines more securely beyond the callous reach of steel tracks and be prepared to operate a vastly improved and enlarged wireless network; and to the rearward units tanks which had to be transported, recovered, repaired, refuelled and munitioned were more exacting masters than the marching infantry they had supplanted.

Re-equipment was not confined to 4 Brigade. The Honey tanks and Bren carriers of the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** were exchanged for Staghounds, armoured cars mounting a 37-millimetre gun, tough and sturdy but of a somewhat conspicuous silhouette. The infantry were given more striking power by the Piat (projector infantry anti-tank) and the 42-inch mortar, and better means of control by the No. 38 wireless set. The Piat, a one-man weapon firing a rocket projectile of great penetration, soon showed its superiority over the Boys anti-tank rifle. The 38 was a portable wireless set of short range designed primarily for communication between

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

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

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infantry companies and their platoons, and between infantry and supporting arms; despite its limitations where the infantry were dispersed in hilly and wooded country and among buildings, it was a useful aid in the difficult task of keeping touch between and controlling small bodies of infantry, and it gave the platoon a handy means of calling for the help of armour and artillery and of relaying information back to commanders. The 20-pound bomb which the 42-inch mortar

fired accurately up to 4200 yards was especially effective against enemy posts in buildings, and was able, with its fast rate of high-angle fire, to reach reverse slopes with heavy concentrations. These weapons were placed at the disposal of the two infantry brigade headquarters. The engineers received additional heavy roadmaking equipment – six bulldozers (where they had previously had two), mechanical shovels, dump trucks and a grader, besides more 3-ton trucks. This material was transferred from 21 Mechanical Equipment Company, which was now disbanded along with the non-divisional railway construction and operating companies.

The bare anatomy of the Division thus reinforced, reorganised and re-equipped may be summarily described. Reconnaissance was the prime function of the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** with its armoured cars. There were three brigades, two of infantry and one of armour. Each of the infantry brigades was made up of three battalions and the armoured brigade of three armoured regiments, one motorised infantry battalion, and its own workshops. The divisional Commander Royal Artillery ( **Brigadier Weir**) <sup>1</sup> had under his command the seventy-two 25-pounders of the three regiments of field artillery, an anti-tank regiment armed with 17-pounders and 6-pounders, a light anti-aircraft regiment of Bofors guns, and a survey battery. Further direct support for the infantry was given by the Vickers machine-gun battalion. The engineers, under the command of the Commander Royal Engineers ( **Colonel Hanson**), <sup>2</sup> were organised into three field companies and a field park company with heavy equipment. The units of the New Zealand Army Service Corps ( **Brigadier Crump**) <sup>3</sup> comprised two ammunition companies,

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj-Gen C. E. Weir**, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born NZ 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO **6 Fd Regt** Sep 1939–Dec 1941; CRA 2 NZ Div Dec 1941–Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div 4 Sep–17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944–Sep 1946; Commandant, Southern Military District, 1948–49; QMG, Army HQ, Nov 1951–Aug 1955; Chief of General Staff Aug 1955-.

<sup>2</sup> **Brig F. M. H. Hanson**, CBE, DSO and bar, MM, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Levin**, 1896; resident engineer, Main Highways Board; **Wellington Regt** in First World War; comd **7 Fd Coy**, NZE, Jan 1940–Aug 1941; CRE 2 NZ Div May 1941, Oct 1941–Apr 1944, Nov 1944–Jan 1946; Chief Engineer, **2 NZEF**, 1943–46; three times wounded; Commissioner of Works.

<sup>3</sup> **Brig S. H. Crump**, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., Bronze Star (US); **Lower Hutt**; born **Wellington**, 25 Jan 1889; Regular soldier; NZASC 1915–19; Commander NZASC, 2 NZ Div 1940–45; comd **2 NZEF (Japan)** Jun–Sep 1947; on staff HQ BCOF and NZ representative on Disposals Board in **Japan**, 1948–49.

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a petrol company, a supply company, two reserve mechanical transport companies, and a tank-transporter company. Three field ambulances, a corps of divisional signals, a divisional workshops, a New Zealand ordnance corps and a divisional provost company completed the establishment. <sup>1</sup>

Here was potentially a most formidable engine of war, second to no other division in the weight of metal it could throw and the equal in fighting power of any two German divisions then in being. Save in high summer, the sun could rise and set while its four and a half thousand vehicles, carrying more than twenty thousand men, drove past a given point in column of route. <sup>2</sup> It was capable of moving fast, of hitting hard while it moved and, as an enemy that forced it to deploy would quickly discover, of hitting harder still when it halted. Its mixed character, neither a purely infantry nor a purely armoured division, fitted it for operations needing adaptability and some measure of independence for, where the terms of battle were at all equal, it possessed within itself the means of breaking into a defensive position, piercing it and exploiting its own success by flooding its armour through the gap. But positional, as distinct from mobile warfare, in which the Division would have to merge its identity into a larger mass, would rob it of these advantages and search out its latent weakness – a shortage of infantry.

(iv)

Without training, the capacities of the Division were potential rather than actual, and training would have to be controlled by its prospective role. Though the date of readiness was changed more than once and proposals to practise outflanking movements by sea were cancelled, **Freyberg** received guidance from his discussions with Alexander and Montgomery in **Sicily** early in August, when the employment of the Division as a mobile striking force was agreed upon. Within a few days of the landings in **Calabria** and at **Salerno, Italy** was revealed to the Divisional Commander as the destination, and on 24 September he was able to report to the Prime Minister that the deficiencies in the equipment of the Division were being made good – a condition of its committal – and that it would rejoin the **Eighth Army**.

By this time training was far advanced. Of necessity it had begun at an elementary level within units, rising by way of brigade exercises to divisional manoeuvres. The close, hilly, wooded country

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<sup>1</sup> See diagram facing p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> This calculation is based on a road density of 15 vehicles to the mile and a rate of march of 20 miles in the hour.

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which was expected to await the Division in southern **Europe** was nowhere to be found in Egypt, and the best choice that could be made, the Gindali region mid-way between **Cairo** and **Suez**, offered some experience of hills but none of mud, hard going and thick vegetation. The act of battle can never be faithfully rehearsed but the stage properties at hand in Egypt for the Division's purpose were more than usually inadequate.

The last of the divisional exercises was carried out at Burg el Arab on the coast west of **Alexandria** before embarkation. From Maadi, a distance of 100 miles, the entire Division made the longest march on

foot in its history – the most gruelling of a series of exertions planned to harden the troops for the rigours of an Italian winter after the languors of an Egyptian summer. In the manoeuvres at Burg el Arab, which culminated in a night attack with live ammunition on 29–30 September, the Division experimented with a technique of its own for forcing a position protected by wire and mines, passing through the armoured brigade and consolidating defensively. An untoward event in an otherwise successful exercise cost the lives of four members of 28 (Maori) Battalion and wounded seven others. Rounds from one gun taking part in the barrage fell short among the advancing infantry of 5 Brigade for a reason which full inquiry failed to establish.

Finally, the safeguarding of health and of secrecy had their place among preparations for the move. The usual precautions against the malaria of the warm season in Italy were ordered before embarkation; and the risk of pestilence during the Italian winter was countered by the issue of warm clothing (two pairs of boots, New Zealand winter underclothing, battle dress and leather jerkins) and bivouac shelters, by inoculation against typhus, and by the provision of mobile laundries and disinfestors. The removal of signs, titles and badges extinguished the most obvious means of identifying the New Zealanders and enforced in the minds of the men the need for security.

A Special Order of the Day signed by the Divisional Commander on 4 October confirmed what rumour had long predicted: the ships lying at anchor in the harbour of Alexandria as they waited for the Division to embark were bound for Italy. This news the troops were forbidden to convey in their letters; and the Division was put on the security list so that its arrival in Italy would not be published. Between 21 and 27 October the censorship was relaxed to allow troops to mention in their letters that they were in Italy; but policy had slumbered, for on the 27th permission was withdrawn. Publication of a despatch written by Freyberg on the same day to the Minister of Defence was delayed for some weeks at the request of Alexander, and it was not until 23 November that an announcement of the Division's whereabouts was made in the New



**Zealand newspapers.**

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## III: BACK IN EUROPE

### *III: Back in Europe*

(i)

The main body of troops made the voyage to **Taranto** in two flights. Each assembled at **Ikingi Maryut**, near **Alexandria**, for drafting into 'ship camps', between which units were split up so that the loss of a transport should not entail the complete loss of a unit. The first flight of 5827 all ranks (if the records are as reliable as they are precise) sailed on 6 October in the *Dunottar Castle* and the *Reina del Pacifico*, reaching **Taranto** on the 9th; the second, of 8707, on the 18th in five vessels, the *Llangibby Castle*, *Nieuw Holland*, *Letitia*, *Aronda* and *Egra*, arriving on the 22nd.

For the soldiers it was a strenuous and uncomfortable mode of travel. As they struggled up the gangways, they were freighted with a blanket roll, winter and summer clothing and personal gear, anti-malaria ointment and tablets, emergency ration, weapon and ammunition, respirator and empty two-gallon water-can, and (between every two men) a bivouac tent. Deposited in the none-too-spacious sleeping quarters, all this impedimenta increased crowding and made men grateful for the fresh air of the open decks and the shortness of the voyage.

Experience in the *Dunottar Castle* suggests that much of the discomfort and the inconvenience that ensued on arrival could have been avoided had Movement Control applied its rules more flexibly. In the empty holds there was room for vehicles, and these could have been unloaded in the ten or twelve hours of daylight available after arrival at **Taranto**, which ships aimed to clear before the attacks of night bombers began. As it was, between 14,000 and 15,000 travelled in these seven ships with no more equipment than they could carry on their persons,

together with a few cooking utensils, tents, picks and shovels and carpenter's tools. All the rest of the Division's mountain of equipment followed at an appreciable interval in its vehicles or as general cargo.

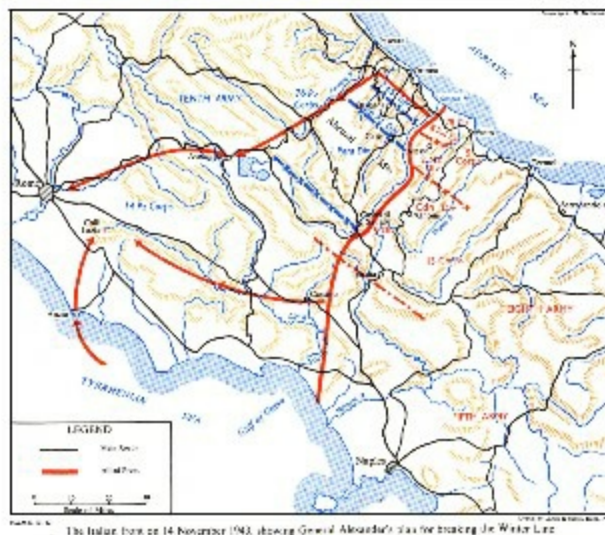
The journey was not only smooth and calm, it was also secure. Over seas still blue in the autumn sun, seas which they had helped to make safe, the men of the Division were escorted in accordance with the promise of Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, Commander-in-Chief of Allied Naval Forces in the theatre, that 'every care will be taken of our old friends the New Zealand troops on their passage through the **Mediterranean**'. The first flight had an escort of six destroyers around them and air cover above, and similar protection was given the second.

As the troops of the first flight disembarked on the morning of 9 October, most of them were making their first acquaintance with **Europe**. The order was to pile heavy gear on the wharves, and then a march of several miles, accompanied by guides lent by 8 Indian Division, to the bivouac area on relatively high ground north of **Taranto**. Since its arrival ten days before, the divisional advance party, with small means but much help from the Indian division, had worked wonders and no essential arrangements for the reception of the first-flight men had been left unmade. But old soldiers know, and young soldiers soon learn, that the Army rarely excels in welcoming drafts of troops arriving by sea, and that those who step off troopships in far lands often find that the excitement of new scenes is tempered by a deflated sense that something is amiss in the hospitality of the military authorities. The truth is that inconvenience is inseparable from the movement of men *en masse*. This fact was borne in upon the many New Zealanders who had to spend their first night in **Italy** sleeping in the open without blankets because there were too few trucks at **Taranto** to move their gear from the docks to the staging area. By the next night, however, all the bivouac tents had been erected among the olive groves and stone-walled fields—only just in time, for on the 11th the Division experienced its first rainfall since leaving **Tunisia** nearly five months earlier.

(ii)

The more bracing climate, the stimulus of fresh country and the feeling that the end of the war against **Germany** was in sight lent zest and exhilaration to these early days in **Italy**. Leave was taken in **Taranto**; footballs appeared; and the troops were brought to a pitch of physical fitness by route marches and organised sports. Within the limits set by lack of equipment, training could now be more realistic. It was possible to practise tactics appropriate to close country, movement by night through wooded areas, the employment of snipers, the art of camouflage (no longer against the dun of the desert but against the greens and greys of the Apulian countryside), and the operation of the new portable wireless sets over ground screened by vegetation. The drill of patrolling in this close country and of street and village fighting had also to be mastered. With such ends in view, the infantry carried out section, platoon, company and battalion exercises in the vicinity of the divisional area.

The weather gave fair notice of its inclemency. Frequent showers encouraged units to spend time in constructing tracks and drains



The Italian front on 14 November 1943, showing General Alexander's plan for breaking the **Winter Line**

around their camps and the engineers were engaged for some days in

roadmaking. The need for drainage was pressed home on the night of 28–29 October, when a heavy thunderstorm in the evening caused widespread local flooding. The drying out or exchanging of soaked blankets and other personal kit occupied much of the next two days. More heavy rain between 5 and 8 November helped to dispel any lingering illusions about the Italian climate. The New Zealanders, indeed, now found themselves 'with only an exiguous part of the summer left' but without Caesar's solace of a retreat to winter quarters.

Meanwhile the Division's vehicles were following on in the charge of about six thousand men. Camouflaged with disruptive painting and specially prepared for loading, they were divided as equally as possible into four flights in a strict order of priority regulated by the sequence of needs in Italy. They were marshalled in parks at Amiriya for shipment from Alexandria and at Suez, and flights left Suez on 16 and 31 October and Alexandria on 29 October and 3 November. Since at least the first flight of vehicles would be required to move the Division from Taranto, their progress controlled the Division's immediate future.

It had been expected that the Division would remain at Taranto until at least mid-November for the arrival of all its vehicles, but in mid-October Eighth Army ordered a move forward to a concentration area at Altamura, about 30 miles inland from the port of Bari, for further training in Army reserve. Before the first vehicle convoy reached port to enable the Division to carry out this order, it was superseded by one of 27 October, which directed the Division to the vicinity of Lucera to take up a role in Army reserve protecting the Foggia airfields from the west and guarding against infiltration by the enemy between 5 and 13 Corps.

With the arrival of the first vehicles at Bari on 29 October, it was possible for the leading unit on 1 November to begin the move from Taranto to Lucera along a route marked by the Divisional Provost Company with the familiar diamond signs. For three weeks units steadily moved up to the assembly area among farmlands west of Lucera, most of them breaking the 160-mile journey by staging overnight about 13 miles north-west of Altamura. All this time vehicles were continuing

to arrive at **Bari** in flights, some of which had been split up and delayed en route. The last of them did not arrive until 20 November, one stray transport only appeared on the 28th, and it was the end of the month before the last vehicle was unloaded. By now units were scattered far and wide and drivers in the later transports, setting out from **Bari** with imperfect instructions, often straggled back to their units in small groups.

The arrival in **Italy**, therefore, was not a sharp event but a piecemeal process. Nor was deployment much more clearly defined; for as the Division slowly drew up its tail to **Lucera**, it was ordered to extend its head. On 11 November, before half its fighting strength had reached the concentration area, the Division was ordered up to a concentration area between **Furci** and **Gissi**. **Eighth Army** had changed its plan.

To most New Zealand troops **Lucera** was thus no more than a stage on the road to the front. The old town stands on the edge of the *Tavoliere della Puglia*, the Apulian tableland, and it portends the hills; but it derives its chief interest from the past. Here, seven hundred years before, the Emperor Frederick II settled a colony of Saracens to rid his Sicilian kingdom of turbulent subjects and to harry the Pope. Hence Charles of Anjou set out in 1268 on the journey that led to the death of his enemy Conradin, the young grandson of Frederick and the last survivor of the German house of Hohenstaufen.

On 11 November the first elements of the Division, passing through **Lucera**, turned north towards the German lines.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

# CHAPTER 3 – APPROACH TO THE SANGRO

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## I: THE STATE OF THE CAMPAIGN

### *I: The State of the Campaign*

**THE Eighth Army had come far and fast in the seventy days since its landing in Italy. From the tip of the Calabrian toe to the heights that overlook the Sangro River from the south, the direct distance across sea, plain and mountain measures 300 miles, a figure that would be almost doubled in the itinerary of a mechanised army making an opposed march. But when, on 8 November, British patrols first saw the Sangro flowing towards the Adriatic in the broad, gravelly bed of its lower reaches, the days of rapid advance were over for a season. Aided by the terrain (ahead lay the Abruzzi) and by the weather (snow was reported on the heights on 10 November), a stubborn enemy was preparing to hold the peninsula from sea to sea.**

**By this time strategic uncertainty had expired, but it had bequeathed a legacy of tactical troubles. The German intentions in Italy remain concealed, and indeed undetermined, until October. For a month the Eighth Army encountered no serious resistance. Progress through Calabria, Lucania and most of Apulia was hindered mainly by demolitions, difficulties of supply and the need to transfer base facilities from the toe to the heel of Italy, where the three ports of Taranto, Brindisi and Bari were quickly occupied after a landing at Taranto on 9 September. Foggia admitted troops of 13 Corps on 27 September and by the middle of October the Eighth Army was disposed along a line Termoli–Campobasso–Vinchiaturo, with 5 Corps in the coastal sector and 13 Corps among the mountains on the left. The last stages of the advance to this line had been sharply contested: hot counter-attack flared up after the landing of commandos and a brigade of 78 Division at Termoli, and the German defenders exacted forfeits from 1 Canadian Division before yielding the important road junction of Vinchiaturo.**

**From the Fifth Army's front came corroboration of the enemy's**

hardening purpose. The effort to throw the invaders back into the sea at **Salerno** had failed by the end of the first week, when the **Eighth Army's** approach forced the enemy to break his encirclement of the bridgehead and seek safety to the north. With the fall of **Naples** on 1 October, four days after the capture of **Foggia**, the Allies had gained their first chief geographical objectives, the indispensable port and the highly desirable airfields. The Germans withdrew from **Naples** in order to defend the line of the **Volturno** River. Here the American **6 Corps** and the British **10 Corps** effected a crossing only with difficulty, and the month was well advanced before these two corps could feel themselves secure north of the river.

As the allegro of September gave way to the slow movement of October, the Allies for the first time had really to face the implications of their presence in **Italy**. They could no longer improvise upon the strength of an unopposed advance. The invasion of **Italy**, as we have seen, was the last of a series of *ad hoc* decisions on **Mediterranean** strategy. Geographical objectives had been left an open question. On the day of the **Salerno** landings Churchill wrote to Roosevelt that, after the fall of **Naples**, 'we are, I presume, agreed to march northwards up the Italian peninsula until we come up against the main German positions'.<sup>1</sup> On 21 September Alexander set his armies four successive objectives for the winter, the last as far north as **Arezzo**, **Florence** and **Leghorn**. But in fact, lacking a long-term plan when they invaded **Italy**, the Allies had made insufficient provision for a rapid pursuit which might have hustled the enemy up the length of the peninsula while he was still shaken by the Italian surrender. Irrespective of enemy interference, the Eighth Army in October had to pause because it had outrun its administrative services.

The German intentions were as opportunist as the Allies'. The enemy had been prepared to fall back even as far as the line of the Po and at best had not contemplated a stand farther south than a line across central **Italy** from Grosseto to **Ancona**. But as time passed, confidence flowed back into his strategic thinking and gave weight to Kesselring's

plea to hold **Rome**. Despite the failure at **Salerno**, he had extricated his forces from the south in good order. The Italian civilians were proving more docile and the Allied soldiers less numerous than he had feared. He was now ready to accept the risk of seaborne outflanking operations – a risk increased by his evacuation of **Sardinia** and **Corsica** but diminished, had he known it, by the loss to other theatres of most of the Allied assault craft.

He had much to gain from a southward stand. From the northern plain, pacified with satisfactory ease, he could spare divisions to reinforce the south, where the line was shorter; he could also release armour to the eastern front, where it was urgently needed, in exchange for infantry; he would win time to perfect successive defensive lines; he would buoy up morale by halting a retreat that had begun at **El Alamein**; he would preserve **Rome** as a capital for the Neo-Fascist Republic and deny its airfields to the Allies. These were no chimerical hopes but strictly practical possibilities, for the approaching winter would impede offensive manoeuvre and go far to neutralise the Allied mastery of the air; and, above all, the lie of the land south of **Rome** offered spectacular advantage to the defender.

From the **Gulf of Gaeta** to **Vasto** the peninsula is no more than 85 miles wide and here it happens to raise a barrier of immense natural strength. So long as its western hinge is held firm, the door may be allowed to swing back for some distance in the east, where the seaward slopes of the **Apennines** undulate in a series of rivers and ridges which can be defended one by one. The western bastion is formed by the **Aurunci Mountains**, moated to the south by the Garigliano River and falling away inland to the one stretch of flat ground in the whole line. But this stretch, the mouth of the **Liri** valley, which leads to **Rome**, is itself closed by the Garigliano and Rapido and commanded by **Montecassino** on its northern angle. Thence, farther inland, rise mountains of heights and contours that are militarily prohibitive until, within a few miles of the east coast, they descend in the spurs that monotonously confront the army working north. Such was the belt, the

**Winterstellung**, defensible in great depth, upon which the Fuehrer in directives of 4 and 10 October ordered his Italian command to detain the Allies throughout the winter. The significance of the lively enemy reaction at **Termoli** and on the **Volturno** lay in showing that the two Allied armies had run against its southern abutments.

By the second half of October the Allied command appreciated the fact. The shortcomings inherent in the strategy of the Italian venture now became apparent. Eleven Allied divisions faced nine German divisions in southern **Italy**, but reserves in the north raised the German strength to twenty-five divisions. The Allied build-up was going slowly and was doubly burdened by the order to return seven experienced divisions to the **United Kingdom** for **O VERLORD** by the end of November and by the decision, which consumed a great deal of shipping space, to transfer strategic bombers to the **Foggia** airfields. Alexander dared not rule out the possibility of a German counter-attack, and neither the **Foggia** airfields nor the port of **Naples** could be secure until protected in greater depth. And he was operating under the overriding instruction to maintain maximum pressure on the enemy as far away as possible from the eastern and the potential western front. **Rome**, which was the hub of Italian communications and whose possession meant prestige, was the obvious objective; but, assuming a shortage of landing craft for an adequate amphibious attack, Alexander concluded that **Rome** could be won only by 'a long and costly advance, a slogging match'.

Nevertheless, emboldened perhaps by a knowledge of Churchill's enthusiasm for 'amphibious scoops', he included a seaborne attack in his revised plan for the winter. This plan, given final form in a directive of 8 November, was that the **Eighth Army**, having secured the high ground north of **Pescara** after crossing the Trigno, **Sangro** and **Pescara** rivers, should swing south-west along the route to **Avezzano**, whence it might threaten the enemy communications. The Fifth Army, having regrouped after breaking into the western end of the winter position before **Cassino**, would then take up the initiative in an endeavour to complete the breach in the enemy's main defences and press on up the **Liri** valley.

When both armies were poised within striking distance of **Rome**, a seaborne force landed south of the Tiber would make a dash for the **Alban Hills**.

Meanwhile it was necessary to edge forward through the outlying defences on both fronts to establish a springboard for the major attacks. Though early in November the Fifth Army reached the Garigliano near the sea, on the right its exhausted divisions were halted in pitiless weather among the heights that block the approach to the river, and by the middle of the month Clark had to order a pause, with his army still only on the fringe of the main defences.

The Eighth Army, which was to deliver the first blow for **Rome**, was able to close up more quickly to the eastern flank of the *Winterstellung*. The first formidable natural outwork was the River Trigno and the hills behind it. The right-hand division of **5 Corps** won a foothold north of the river on the night of 22–23 October but heavy rain delayed the attack on the high ground beyond until the early morning of 3 November. By the 5th both divisions of the corps had confirmed their hold on the ridges over the river, and in four days an advance of 20 miles brought the vanguard of the army to the south bank of the **Sangro** near the mouth. The army now stood with its right wing advanced, resting on the mouth of the **Sangro**, and its centre and left echeloned back in a line running almost north and south as far inland as **Isernia**. Of the two divisions of **5 Corps**, the 78th was on the right in the coastal sector and on the left **8 Indian Division** was still probing forward among the hills south of the river. Further south in mountainous country, **13 Corps** had **1 Canadian Division** on its right and **5 Division**, which had occupied **Isernia**, in contact with the right flank of the Fifth Army.

As he manoeuvred the **Eighth Army** towards the **Sangro**, Montgomery planned to rush the defences and appear on the lateral road from **Pescara** to **Avezzano** before the weather broke and the enemy could reinforce the winter line, still lightly held. Of three possible routes, he chose the coastal road to **Pescara**, though it was the least direct and the most heavily defended, because it alone could support a thrust in

**strength and because it afforded better opportunities for air and naval bombardment. His four infantry divisions, now tired and weakened by casualties, were unequal, in his judgment, to breaking the winter line unaided.**

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**<sup>1</sup> Churchill, V, p. 120.**

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: THE DIVISION MOVES UP

### *II: The Division Moves Up*

(i)

It was in these circumstances that Montgomery ordered 2 New Zealand Division forward to concentrate in an area between **Furci** and **Gissi**. Relinquishing its sector to the New Zealanders, 8 Indian Division would sidestep to the right so as to concentrate **5 Corps** more powerfully for the main drive in the coastal area. For the time being, however, 19 Indian Brigade would mask the advent of a fresh division by continuing to hold the New Zealand sector. As another phase of an elaborate plan to deceive the enemy as to the direction of the impending attack, the Division was forbidden to open wireless communication, the tanks of 4 Armoured Brigade were to be camouflaged in the forward areas and, where possible, units were to move up by night.

These orders found the Division widely dispersed, with some units at **Lucera** and others still at **Taranto** awaiting the arrival of their vehicles. The later units, on their way to the front, staged at **Lucera** to collect the stores they had grounded before leaving Egypt. Every day between 11 and 22 November units left the staging camp for the forward area, travelling by way of **Serracapriola** and **Termoli** over roads that made movement strictly an operation of war. The discipline of mechanised march was put to the test not by the enemy but by steep gradients, dangerously winding routes, narrow verges (or none at all) on which to pull vehicles off the road, and improvised detours where bridges had been destroyed and where now lines of traffic, in mutual frustration, bunched in slow knots which convoy leaders and military police, shouting above reverberant engines, strove to unravel. The roads and deviations were most troublesome to the tanks, and eventually they had to be routed separately by way of minor roads as far as possible. Even so, they

slithered across greasy surfaces into ditches and straggled in to their destination of **Furci** singly or in casual groups.

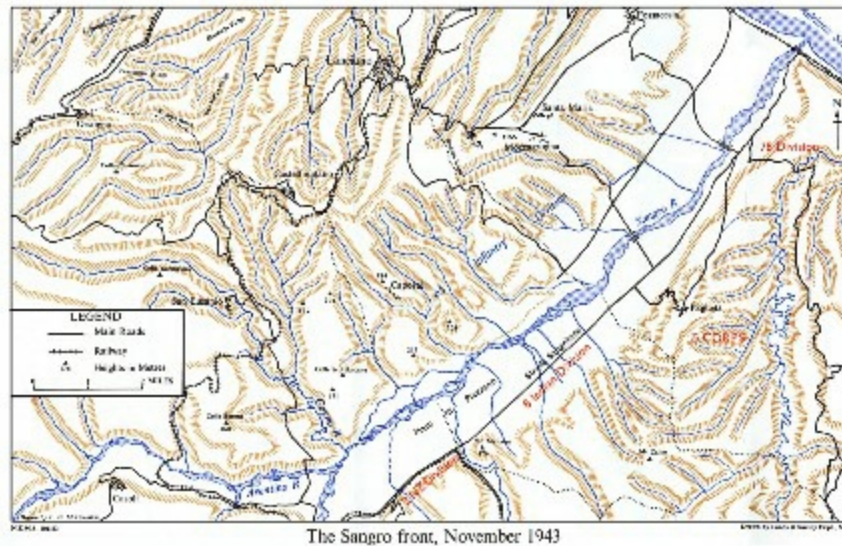
Nearer the front traffic control became even more difficult, notably at a deviation and ford over the River Osento, about three miles east of **Atessa** on the Division's main axis. Here, on the afternoon of 18 November, 6 Brigade arrived to complicate an existing blockage and for a while movement came to a standstill; it was twelve hours before the brigade got clear of the crossing. The next day at the same spot the passage of divisional artillery was slowed up by interloping units, moving the provosts to despair of speeding the traffic through 'short of giving them wings'. On the 17th (to cite a final illustration of the vexations of travel), as a result of congestion and demolitions on both sides of **Casalanguida**, 4 Field Regiment took eight hours to move seven miles to a new gun position.

Such delays elicited special instructions on road discipline from **Divisional Headquarters**, including an order permitting the use of trucks on the roads only on essential business. Off the roads, trucks were of limited utility on any business, essential or incidental, for they would sink with spinning wheels into the mud of the fields. Since gun positions were hard to find, the artillery was given priority in occupying bivouac areas. As he struggled across miry hillsides or along choked roads, many an old soldier must have spared a wistful thought for the dry footholds and the vast vacuities of the desert.

The leaders in this unavoidably ragged deployment were Divisional Headquarters, which established itself on 14 November south of **Gissi**. Support of 19 Indian Brigade was an important motive, and high up in the order of arrival were 2 Divisional Cavalry Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel Bonifant) <sup>1</sup>, 4 and 5 Field Regiments (Lieutenant-Colonels **Philp** <sup>2</sup> and **Thornton** <sup>3</sup> respectively), batteries of 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment ( **Lieutenant-Colonel Kensington**) <sup>4</sup> and units of the engineers and of the medical corps. Close behind came 4 Armoured Brigade, and among the last arrivals were the two brigades of infantry.



At 10 a.m. on 14 November, when most units were still far to the rear, the Division assumed responsibility for its sector between **5 Corps** and **13 Corps**, with command of **19 Indian Brigade** and **3 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery**. In this hilly country, veined with



**The Sangro front, November 1943**

numerous streams and watercourses but with few and tortuous roads, the enemy was able to take his time in retiring upon his winter defences behind the **Sangro**. The line was fluid and ill-defined but conformed roughly to the trend of the river which, in this region, flows north until its junction with the **Aventino**, where it bends to the north-east in its final fall to the sea. **Nineteenth Indian Brigade** was pressing outward with patrols north and north-west of the village of **Atessa** and westward to **Tornareccio**. On the right **78 Division**, which had patrols across the river near the coast, extended its line to the area of **Monte Calvo**, but there was no contact on the left with **1 Canadian Division**, reported at **Agnone**, and the protection of this flank was confided to the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**.

The enemy on this front was not then impressive. The sector from the coast to the confluence of the **Sangro** and **Aventino** rivers, in which the **Eighth Army** was assembling three divisions, was held, though precariously as the event was to show, by **65 Infantry Division**, an unseasoned and ill-equipped formation of mixed nationalities, which had

recently been brought down from the north. On its right, south of the Aventino, was the stronger and completely mechanised *16 Panzer Division*, with fifteen to twenty Mark IV tanks and twenty self-propelled guns in addition to the normal field artillery and two regiments of lorried infantry.

(ii)

The million small deeds by which a military formation moves and has its being are like the separate strokes of the painter's brush, which compose themselves into intelligible purpose and design only when observed from a distance as parts of a total picture. The little strokes of effort that were applied in the first fortnight of the Division's fighting in *Italy* arrange themselves into a picture of preparation for the crossing of the *Sangro* in strength. Four preliminary tasks had to be completed. The enemy had to be evicted from the area south and east of the river; the high ground in the angle formed by the junction of the *Sangro* and the Aventino, commanding the stretch of river across which the attack was to be launched, had to be cleared; the river itself and the enemy territory immediately beyond it had to be reconnoitred for the most convenient fords and bridge sites, for minefields and strongpoints; and the roads and tracks leading to the river had to be cleared of mines, repaired, maintained and even, occasionally, built.

The timetable for the discharge of these tasks lay at the mercy of the weather, inland because a downpour among the mountains would cause the river to rise with disconcerting rapidity and locally because muddy roads and sodden ground almost immobilised the armour and made the movement of supporting arms chancy and unreliable. The weather was already breaking when the first elements of the Division moved into the line, with snow on the peaks and widespread rain and mist, and the original plan for rolling up the eastern flank of the winter position before winter came had to be postponed and finally conceived afresh. It was a time, in the old parlance of the horse gunner, of 'rugs on, rugs off'. As the scowling skies opened and the rivers rose in flood,

the hopes faded of a stolen march, of a comparatively dryshod dash by tanks to the lateral road from **Pescara** to **Rome**. Expectations had to be revised, objectives shortened and methods made more deliberate.

By 20 November the enemy opposite the New Zealanders was back across the river and patrolling across it was in full swing; by the 25th the menacing 'hump' between the rivers on the Division's left was occupied by the Indian brigade and the two New Zealand infantry brigades were in the line; and on the night of 27–28 November the weather had so far relented as to permit a crossing of the river by the two New Zealand brigades and then, with all the meditated force and fraud of a battle by the book, a drive up the slope into the bony knuckles of the **Sangro** ridge, where the Germans proposed to spend the winter. By 3 December the Germans had abandoned this ridge and that morning a company of New Zealand infantry made a brief incursion into the town of **Orsogna**, which the enemy had hurriedly adopted as a fortress. Such are the events which will engage our attention in this chapter and in the next.

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<sup>1</sup> Brig I. L. Bonifant, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; **Gisborne**; born **Ashburton**, 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.

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Col W. D. Philp, DSO, ED; **Palmerston North**; born **Christchurch**, 5 Apr 1905; PWD foreman; CO **4 Fd Regt** Mar–Dec 1943; **6 Fd Regt** Aug 1944–Feb 1945; wounded 22 May 1941.

<sup>3</sup> Brig L. W. Thornton, OBE, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Christchurch**, 15 Oct 1916; Regular soldier; BM **6 Bde** Feb–Sep 1942; GSO II 2 NZ Div Oct 1942–Jun 1943; CO **5 Fd Regt** Jun–Dec 1943, Apr–Jun 1944; GSO I 2 NZ Div 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div 1945; DCGS Apr 1948–Jan 1949; Commandant, Linton Military Camp, Jan 1949–May 1951; QMG Army HQ 1955–56; Adjutant-General Mar 1956–.

<sup>4</sup> **Lt-Col E. T. Kensington, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Auckland, 11 Apr 1903; PWD engineer's assistant; OC 1 Svy Tp Dec 1940–Jun 1941; 36 Svy Bty Jun–Sep 1942; CO 14 Lt AA Regt Jun–Dec 1943; CO 5 Fd Regt Dec 1943–Apr 1944; CO 6 Fd Regt Apr–Aug 1944.**

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## III: THE FIRST CONTACTS

### *III: The First Contacts*

(i)

It fell to the artillery to receive and deliver the first blows of the Division in **Italy**. The 28th Battery of **5 Field Regiment** opened fire in support of the Indian brigade on the afternoon of 14 November and a few men of a sister battery, the 27th, deploying the same afternoon, were slightly wounded by shellfire. Fourth Field Regiment, like the 5th, was allotted a gun area north of **Casalanguida**, and on the 15th 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment sited guns at the crossing of the Sinello and Osento rivers and in the country between, though for several days they had no employment. The fluidity of the front was demonstrated by the orders to a troop of B Squadron of the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** to patrol the roads south of the New Zealand area as far as Castiglione Messer Marino, over ten miles from the left flank, in the hope of meeting the Canadians; and further by the attack of an enemy patrol during the night of 14–15 November on the bridge over the Sinello on the Division's main axis. This bridge was the only one in the area left unblown by the enemy in his retreat – an oversight which he tried to rectify not only by gunfire but also by infiltrating demolition parties, so that A Squadron of the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** had to be detailed to guard it.

As units assembled in the forward area over roads roughened by a growing congestion of traffic and by intermittent rain, the Indian brigade's infantry was edging towards the river with New Zealand support. On the evening of 15 November the guns of 5 Field Regiment by two prearranged bombardments helped the 6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles to a quiet occupation of the hilltop hamlet of San Marco. The **16th Panzer Division**, however, was still in possession of **Tornareccio**, **Archi** and **Perano**, which lay on a road running along the crest of a ridge

to the **Sangro**, parallel with and west of the Division's axis. To release it for a further advance, 1/5 Essex Regiment was relieved on 18 November from the task of protecting from the west the all-important road from **Casalanguida** to **Atessa** by B Squadron of the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** and then, after a few hours, by the vanguard of 4 Armoured Brigade – 22 Motor Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell.<sup>1</sup> The Indians had by now seized hills north and north-west of **Atessa** overlooking the **Sangro** and conveniently placed for attacks on **Perano** and **Archi**.

(ii)

At short notice on the 18th an afternoon attack on **Perano** by tanks of **19 Armoured Regiment** (Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin)<sup>2</sup> and infantry of 3/8 Punjab Regiment was ordered. Success would curtail serious resistance south of the river by compelling the enemy to blow the **Sangro** bridge behind the village after withdrawing his heavy equipment. Since **Perano** was only a German outpost and was believed to be undefended by anti-tank guns, the infantry was to be preceded by the tanks, consisting of four troops under the command of Major Everist<sup>3</sup> – A Squadron plus one troop of C Squadron. The remaining three troops of C Squadron by direct fire were to thicken up the artillery support provided by the British and the two New Zealand field regiments – smoke for twenty minutes to blind,

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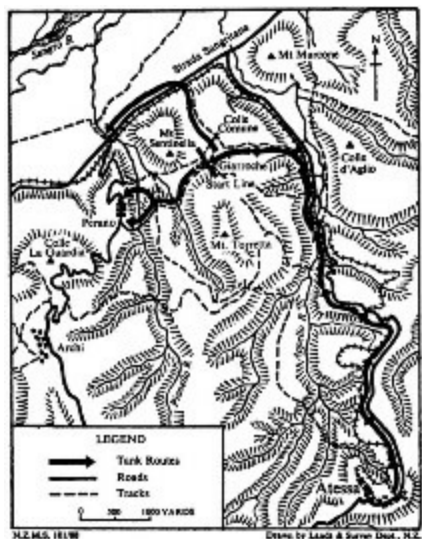
<sup>1</sup> Col T. C. Campbell, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Waiouru MC; born Colombo, 20 Dec 1911; farm appraiser; CO **22 Bn** Sep 1942–Apr 1944; comd **4 Armd Bde** Jan–Dec 1945; Area Commander, **Wellington**, 1947; Commander of Army Schools, 1951–53; Commander, **Fiji** Military Forces, 1953–56; Commandant, Waiouru Military Camp, Sept 1956–.

<sup>2</sup> Col R. L. McGaffin, DSO, ED; **Wellington**; born Hastings, 30 Aug 1902; company manager; 27 (MG) Bn 1939–41; comd 3 Army Tank Bn (in NZ) Mar–Oct 1942; CO 27 (MG) Bn Feb–Apr 1943; CO **19 Armd Regt** Apr 1943–Aug 1944; comd Adv Base, **Italy**, Aug–

Oct 1944.

<sup>3</sup> Lt-Col A. M. Everist, DSO; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 31 Oct 1912; accountant; CO **19 Armd Regt** Aug-Nov 1944, Mar-Dec 1945; wounded 28 Jun 1942.

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19 REGIMENT'S ATTACK ON PERANO, 18 NOVEMBER 1943

followed by high explosive for an hour to neutralise, the enemy in **Perano**.

Hastily called up from **Atessa**, the assaulting tanks formed up on the saddle between Monte Torretta and Monte Sentinella, two hills forming a ridge running roughly north and south and parallel with the more westerly ridge crowned by the roadside houses of **Perano**. Hence, at 3.30, while the smoke canisters of air-bursting shells bounced on the slopes east of the objective, trailing white streamers of smoke through the air, the fourteen Shermans, followed by infantry from the Punjab, advanced to the first tank action ever fought by New Zealanders. The attack was double-pronged. While two troops drove across country to gain the road and enter **Perano** from the south, the other two, in a small right hook, were directed round behind Monte Sentinella to the riverside road called the **Strada Sangritana**, from which branches off southward the road winding up the ridge to **Perano**. The plan was thus to attack the village

simultaneously from the south-east and the north.

**Perano** was a stiff objective, being defended by the panzer troops with greater determination and resources than report had suggested. Continuous shellfire harried the advance. The two right-hand troops of tanks, emerging from behind the lee of Sentinella, one still on the low hills overlooking the **Strada Sangritana** and the other across the road in thick olive groves, ran into murderous fire at short range, probably from self-propelled guns sited near the turn-off to **Perano**. At least four tanks were put out of action, seven of their crews killed and five wounded; and among the Indians on foot losses were heavy. The attack on **Perano** from the northern flank had to be abandoned. The approach from the south and east across country fared better. Here the tanks were troubled chiefly by the terrain. The mile-long route westwards from the start line to the objective was a rough, winding track softened by rain. The tanks had to cross a gully, climb a spur, drop down to ford a stream, and deploy in troops for the actual assault up a steep, wooded hill. Neither these obstacles nor the spite of machine-guns and mortars could prevent four of them from reaching the hilltop. Two tanks of headquarters troop, taking a more northerly route up the hill, were the first into **Perano**, entering the town from the north at 4.40 in time to see other tanks approach from the south. Half an hour later the Indian infantry arrived and with workmanlike expedition, which the New Zealanders admired, consolidated the capture. The Germans, who had escaped before the arrival of our tanks, held on in a cluster of houses about a thousand yards east of the **Sangro** bridge, perhaps fearing an attempt to rush it. Later in the evening, after an escaped British prisoner of war had seen five German tanks, two self-propelled guns, and two anti-tank guns retire hurriedly across the bridge, the charge was blown. Before this broader object of their attack had been achieved, the New Zealand tanks had withdrawn from **Perano**, leaving the Indians in possession.

Success in this action was plucked out of unusual difficulties. The tanks had been on the road for four days previously and the time for preparation was so short that they were not properly stripped for action,



nor was much reconnaissance possible; the plan was founded on faulty information about the enemy; the going was bad; and the control of manoeuvre during the assault was gravely handicapped and the assault probably made more costly by wireless silence and the need to communicate under fire by hand signals. Had the identity of the New Zealanders remained hidden from the enemy, the action would still have published to him the skilful leadership of the opposing commander of tanks and the resourcefulness of crews that were yet novices in armoured warfare. But their identity was in fact revealed by papers belonging to C Squadron found by enemy infantry in one of the knocked-out tanks after our other tanks had withdrawn, though several days elapsed before the Germans confirmed the presence, not merely of a brigade, but of a whole division of New Zealanders.

The **Perano** fight implied that the end of resistance south and east of the river on the Division's front was in sight, and it was followed that night by the withdrawal of the enemy's heavy weapons and transport from **Archi**, the last enemy observation point south of the river, higher up the same ridge; but there was a last sharp clash there between the Indians and an enemy rearguard consisting of a company of infantry and a platoon of engineers with orders to hold the town as long as possible. The Indian attack on 19 November was to have been supported by a troop of New Zealand tanks with direct fire, but the fire plan had to be abandoned early because of thick mist. The Indians spent a day and a night in hard and confused fighting in **Archi** before the Germans retired, the last enemy troops in the sector to fight with their backs to the river.

On the right, the hills sloping down into the **Sangro** valley were found clear on the 18th, and on the 20th the Divisional Cavalry Regiment assumed responsibility for this flank; in the centre the Indians dominated the riverbank on either side of the blown bridge and patrolled across the river; and on the left a patrol of 22 Battalion, entering **Tornareccio** on the morning of the 19th, found mines and booby traps laid by departing Germans a few hours before. Finally, far to the south at the very extremity of the Division's responsibilities, the troop of the

Divisional Cavalry Regiment sent to **Castiglione** to make contact with the Canadians found them at **Agnone**.

*(iii)*

It was now possible to close up to the **Sangro** line for the attack, which was still scheduled for the night of 20–21 November. As part of the general forward movement, **36 Survey Battery** posted its flash-spotters and sound-rangers on an arc of vantage points overlooking the river valley, the better to locate by sight and sound the guns of the enemy, and all three New Zealand field regiments, including for the first time in **Italy** the 6th ( **Lieutenant-Colonel Walter**), <sup>1</sup> deployed along the bed of the Appello, a tributary stream of the **Sangro**.

New Zealand infantry now appeared in the line, 6 Brigade coming forward to occupy the right-hand half of the Indian brigade's sector, between the round hill of **Monte Marcone** on the right and the river junction on the left – the front upon which the Division's assault on the winter position was to be made. The brigade was ordered to put standing patrols on the south bank of the river and to send patrols across on the night of 19–20 November. A ten-mile march on foot, broken by lying up from dawn to dusk on the 19th north of **Atessa**, was a tiring preliminary, especially for the support platoons carrying 3-inch mortars and machine guns. Before midnight the battalions were in position along the line of the Strada Sangritana, occupying a front of less than a mile between the Appello and Pianello streams, with 26 Battalion ( **Lieutenant-Colonel Fontaine**) <sup>2</sup> on the right, the 25th ( **Lieutenant-Colonel Morten**) <sup>3</sup> in the centre, and the 24th ( **Lieutenant-Colonel Conolly**) <sup>4</sup> on the left and with forward companies on the road. Drenching rain sent the troops to the shelter of buildings and even of the bivouac tents so much regretted during the embarkation at **Alexandria**.

When the new day lighted up the scene, it revealed to the men of 6 Brigade a landscape not wholly strange to New Zealand eyes. From their posts at the foot of the hills on its southern edge, the floor of the valley extended before them for nearly two miles – first, for almost half the

distance, a heavily cultivated alluvial plainland (the *Piani di Piazzano*), then three or four hundred yards of riverbed, and finally a narrow flat of marshy land cut by irrigation ditches. The valley ends in an escarpment, and the gaze of our men fell upon two conspicuous grey bluffs, rising abruptly thirty or forty feet. Behind them a country of olive groves and cream-coloured farmhouses, threaded by winding roads and lanes, climbs brokenly 1200 feet to the skyline five or six miles distant – the **Sangro** ridge, where lay the tough core of the German defences. For most of the year a pretty enough rural scene for traveller or *contadino*, in winter it bears to the eye of the assaulting soldier a more forbidding aspect. The upward slope from the river valley is, indeed, of no homeric grandeur. The grandeur of this region belongs to the bare, rocky bulk of the *Montagna della Majella*, a brooding omnipresence

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col C. L. Walter**, DSO, ED; **Hamilton**; born **Christchurch**, 10 Dec 1902; electrical engineer; CO **6 Fd Regt** Dec 1941–Nov 1943.

<sup>2</sup> **Col D. J. Fountaine**, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; **Westport**; born **Westport**, 4 Jul 1914; company secretary; CO **20 Bn** Jul–Aug 1942; **26 Bn** Sep 1942–Dec 1943, Jun–Oct 1944; comd **NZ Adv Base** Oct 1944–Sep 1945; wounded 19 Nov 1941.

<sup>3</sup> **Lt-Col T. B. Morten**, DSO; **Little River**; born **Christchurch**, 30 Sep 1913; shepherd; CO **25 Bn** Jan 1943–Feb 1944; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

<sup>4</sup> **Lt-Col J. Conolly**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Waihi**, 15 Aug 1908; school teacher; CO **24 Bn** Dec 1942–Feb 1944, Mar–Apr 1944; wounded 21 Jul 1942.

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against the skyline, behind which the sun slides in late afternoon. Compared with this 9000-foot eminence, the **Sangro** slope appears almost gentle; but as a military obstacle it is, conservatively speaking, troublesome.

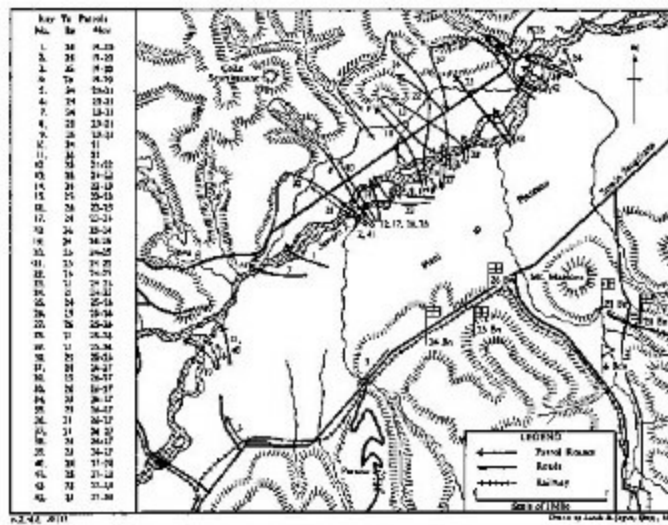
**The Sangro itself, running in several channels between banks of gravel and water-worn boulders, reminded some of our men of the rivers that flow eastwards from the Southern Alps across the Canterbury Plains. Knee-deep in dry weather, as it was when **78 Division** arrived on its southern bank, this baffling river may rise five or six feet in a day after autumn rain and fill the whole riverbed with a flood swirling along at 25 knots. So sudden and incalculable are these changes of mood that a patrol which has waded across with ease may find its return barred by a current too swift to be breasted by the strongest swimmer. Though the stony bed of the river is firm enough to support an improvised roadway, the approaches to it lie across soft, friable soil which is apt to crumble under the weight of motor vehicles. This was the capricious stream that New Zealand infantry patrols were to explore in the coming week, while the attack was deferred, modified and finally recast.**

*(iv)*

**Infantry patrols are primarily the antennae of an army, feeling sensitively forward to flash signals, sometimes of danger, sometimes of opportunity, to the brain; but they serve purposes other than short-range reconnaissance. They may enable a force to grasp and hold the moral and material mastery of no-man's-land; they may be used to keep alive the aggressive spirit, which stagnates so easily in a war of static emplacement; they may, by swift and silent apparition, inflict casualties on the enemy, unnerve him, tire him by the need for vigilance, derange his projects or destroy dumps and installations; they may be employed to mislead him as to the direction of an imminent thrust or to force him to broaden his front; they may protect other troops on specialised missions in areas exposed or disputed; and those patrols also serve that only stand and wait, observing by eye and ear and ready to counter the patrols of the other side. Many of these aims were exemplified in the patrolling of the Division between the night of 19–20 November, when 6 Brigade moved into the line, and the night of 27–28 November, when the **Sangro** was crossed and the heights behind it assaulted.**

**In addition to the standing patrols, the Division sent out during this period forty-four patrols, ranging in strength from two men to a platoon, all but two of them by night. Of this number twenty-six succeeded in crossing the river, five made no attempt to cross, and thirteen tried but failed. Few failed for want of grit and determination: one patrol tried at eight different places before returning cold, wet and frustrated; the officer leading another struggled alone to an island in mid-river, only to see movement on the northern bank that compelled him to rejoin his men on the southern; a third patrol crossed two streams but was foiled in four attempts on the northernmost channel, losing for a few hours one man whom the current swept over to the German side. On different nights the water varied in level from knee- to neck-high, but all the patrols that made the crossing found it necessary to link hands for mutual support, stretching out like the impatient souls in the vestibule of Virgil's hell 'with longing for the farther shore'. Some floundered under the weight of soaking equipment in the quagmire of irrigation ditches north of the river. Only a quarter of the patrols located any enemy by sight or sound, and of this eleven no more than four exchanged fire. The casualties of eight days of patrolling were 13 – five killed, six wounded and two taken prisoner; but six of these casualties occurred in a minefield south of the river and another six in the only two daylight patrols. That is to say, from the twenty-four patrols that prowled the northern bank by night, all members returned unharmed except one wounded officer.**

**As soon as 6 Brigade was in position on the night of 19–20 November, 26 Battalion established a standing patrol on the riverbank**



NEW ZEALAND PATROLS ON THE SANGRO, NOVEMBER 1943

NEW ZEALAND PATROLS ON THE SANGRO, NOVEMBER 1943

and other battalions followed this example, so that finally there were five such permanently manned posts. The tasks of their occupants, who were relieved at least daily, were to observe movement and locate positions across the river, prevent German patrols from crossing, report on the state of the river and provide starting points for reconnaissance and fighting patrols crossing to the northern bank. Nor was there any delay in setting mobile patrols to work. On the night of their arrival, 24 and 26 Battalions each sent out two. Those of 24 Battalion were the first New Zealanders to cross the river; they found the water three or four feet deep and reported the lateral road on the north bank to be in fair condition. Since the attack was due to begin within twenty-four hours, the 26 Battalion patrols reconnoitred approaches to the south bank and a patrol from 25 Battalion gave cover to engineers of **6 Field Company** sweeping for mines on the Piazzano plainland.

When the weather forced the Army Commander to postpone the offensive, he ordered vigorous patrolling in the New Zealand sector to increase pressure on the enemy while **5 Corps**, on the right, expanded its existing bridgehead across the river to accommodate the substantial strength needed to launch a more deliberate operation. The risk of sacrificing surprise was accepted. As if in pursuance of this policy, patrolling on the night of 20–21 November was eventful. One party from B Company 25 Battalion climbed the northern cliffs and penetrated to a

group of buildings a mile beyond the river, where Germans were located. A fighting patrol from 24 Battalion disturbed two enemy parties laying mines across the river and fired on them from the southern bank, and a second fighting patrol had a brush with an enemy outpost on a steep knoll north of the confluence, inflicting casualties. The officer in command himself returned wounded at 6.45 next morning, having been out nearly twelve hours. On the same night of 20–21 November a patrol from A Company 24 Battalion, while protecting engineers clearing mines from our side of the river, lost three men killed and three wounded in a minefield.

On the next day, the 21st, patrols were despatched for the first and last time by day. Whether or not under the eyes of the enemy, they crossed unmolested but ran into enemy positions and had to fight their way out. Of the six members of the patrol from D Company 26 Battalion, only one was unscathed. One was killed, two were captured and two were wounded, including the leader ( [Second-Lieutenant Lawrence](#)), <sup>1</sup> who, having cut a stick for support, made his way back to the northern bank, whence he was brought

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<sup>1</sup> [Capt H. H. Lawrence](#), m.i.d.; Kaikoura; born [Wellington](#), 6 Mar 1921; clerk; twice wounded.

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back across the river on the 22nd by the battalion's standing patrol. The other patrol, supplied by 24 Battalion, comprised three men from A Company, of whom the leader was killed. As a result of these heavy penalties, [Freyberg](#) forbade the crossing of the [Sangro](#) by day.

The level of the river steadily rose and patrols on the three following nights encountered increasing hazards, until on the night of 23–24 November [Sangro's](#) pomp of waters was unwithstood; two patrols turned back from a current which in places foamed neck-high and swept men off their feet. Though the standing patrols reported a drop of a foot in the river level on the 24th, only one of three fighting patrols that night – 18 men from C Company 26 Battalion – reached the far side. There

they searched two houses and drew fire from a third. A three-man reconnaissance patrol farther upstream battled for three hours before getting across.

The Sangro appeared to be at its most obstructive on the night of 25–26 November. It proved too much for each of six parties, including three from 21 and 23 Battalions of **5 Brigade**, which had now come in on the right of 6 Brigade. The speed of the current made it impossible to stand in water up to the hips, and it became clear that ropes would be needed for a full-scale crossing. The only passage of the river that night was made by Major **Bailey**,<sup>1</sup> accompanied by two men of D Company 21 Battalion.

Fine weather was followed by a fall in the river and by redoubled activity after dark on the 26th. Every battalion sent out patrols to test crossings and routes up the cliffs, and in all nine parties visited the northern bank, some of them probing deeply. Second-Lieutenant **McGregor**<sup>2</sup> and a companion from C Company 21 Battalion, exploring for about ten hours, made a wide circuit between two hills where they found buildings occupied by Germans, and another far-ranging patrol from B Company, led by Second-Lieutenant **Swainson**,<sup>3</sup> discovered barbed wire and a trip-wire along the top of the cliffs farther east. Of three reconnaissance patrols sent out by 6 Brigade, that of 26 Battalion was guided by an Italian civilian to a shallow ford. The same battalion provided an escort while Second-Lieutenant **Farnell**<sup>4</sup> and men from **8 Field Company** reconnoitred a route from the proposed Bailey bridge site to the lateral road north of the river.

By now the patrols had done their work. By exerting pressure on the enemy, they had indirectly helped **5 Corps** to gather a strong

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj H. Bailey; Auckland**; born England, 29 Apr 1916; driver; wounded 17 Mar 1944.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Lt O. G. McGregor; born **Papakura**, 23 Mar 1921; student;



**killed in action 19 Dec 1943.**

<sup>3</sup> **Capt E. H. P. Swainson**; Feilding; born Feilding, 19 Nov 1914; farmer; wounded 28 Nov 1943.

<sup>4</sup> **Capt E. Farnell**, MC, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born England, 10 Jan 1921; surveyor's cadet.

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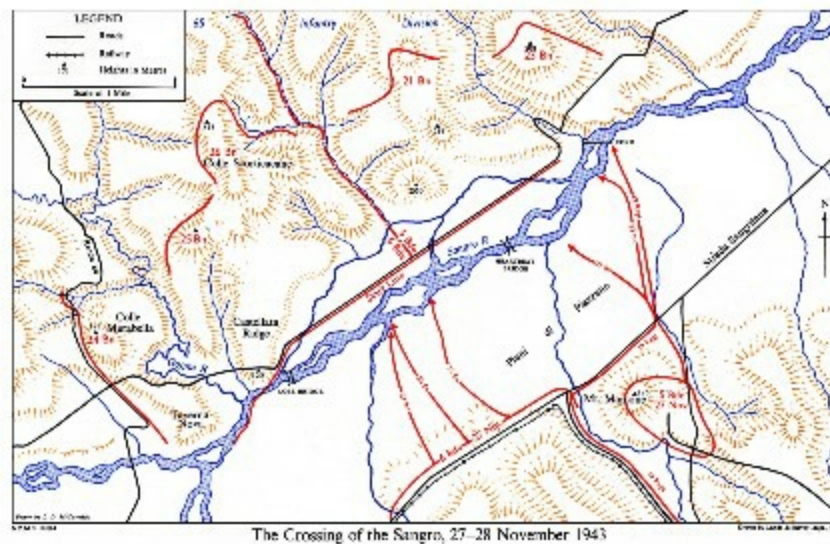
**force in an extensive bridgehead across the river; they had found suitable fords, mineswept approaches and forming-up places and bridge sites; they had shown the need for ropes to assist the infantry to cross, the impassability of the river to wheeled vehicles, and the probability that even tracked vehicles would come to grief on the banks leading down to the water; they had made known that the northern bluffs, though steep and slippery, could be climbed by resolute troops; they had revealed that the enemy was holding the foothills near the river in no great strength; and they had leavened the assaulting battalions with officers and men who knew something of the wiles of the **Sangro** and had roamed its northern banks.**

**(v)**

**Early planning had provided for the capture of the hilly ground in the angle of the Aventino and **Sangro** rivers as an essential part of the major offensive, since a force occupying this ground would enfilade troops crossing in the reach below the river junction. The Divisional Commander seized on the delay imposed by the weather to order the Indian brigade to carry out this preparatory task, involving the capture of the two hilltop villages of Sant' Angelo and **Altino** and a feature called Il Calvario.**

**When, after crossing the river, the 1/5 Essex Regiment and the 3/8 Punjab Regiment closed in for the assault at 4.15 on the morning of 23 November, they were supported by the fire of the three New Zealand field regiments and 3 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery. Under this cover the**

**Essex battalion reached the top of the Sant' Angelo spur and occupied the village in the early afternoon; but it was only two companies strong, the rest of the battalion having been prevented from crossing in the dark by a sudden rise in the river, and thereafter by enemy fire which pinned them to the ground south of the river. On the left, the Punjabis, having crossed by a ropeway bridge, were established on Il Calvario by 7.30, but the bridge by this time had been washed away. Without hope, therefore, of immediate reinforcements or supplies, the two battalions faced vigorous counter-attacks by troops of *16 Panzer Division* and of *1 Parachute Division*, who were carrying out a relief at the time. The Indians had to give up Il Calvario in the early afternoon, when it appears to have become untenable by either side after having changed hands three times, and they were pressed into a narrow bridgehead against the river. That night men trying to swim the flooded river were drowned; some New Zealand engineers attempted but failed to replace the rope bridge and others were equally unlucky with a folding boat. Eventually, the next night supplies were**



**The Crossing of the Sangro, 27–28 November 1943**

**sent over by an improvised way across the ruined road bridge, which **5 Field Park Company** made passable by lashing ladders to the broken masonry.**

**Persistence was rewarded, for on the night of 23–24 November the**

**Germans withdrew across the Rio Secco, a small tributary of the Aventino, towards Casoli; and on the 25th all objectives were firmly in the hands of the Indian brigade. This success was won against miserable weather, a swollen river, steep country and a tenacious and well-sited enemy; and it ensured that the New Zealanders would begin their attack (to borrow a phrase from a different context) with 'no enemies on the left'.**

**(vi)**

**The movement of a mechanised army against mechanically contrived obstructions throws a heavy burden on its engineers, and on the Sangro in these days of deepening winter it was very much an engineers' war. Everyone respects a sapper, for the sapper is everyone's friend, a succouring ubiquity, clearing a track through minefields for the infantryman, tidying up after tanks, passing an accurate orientation to surveyors of the artillery, running a railway, building a bridge, patching a road for supply units or dragging the erring driver from the ditch of his choice. Whether operating a theodolite or a shovel, a bulldozer or a mine detector, the engineer needs most of the soldierly qualities in generous measure – coolness under fire, high technical skill, industry, cheerfulness and infinite patience to do again what has been undone by the force of nature, the malevolence of the enemy, or even the negligence of his own troops. In the fortnight before the attack the engineers of the Division found full employment upon roads, minesweeping and bridge-building.**

**The repair and maintenance of roads in the Division's area was a continuous labour. The surfaces were damaged at the outset by demolitions and shell holes and then by streaming rain and incessant traffic, which churned wet roads into mud and scarred them with deep ruts, especially at the many bends; heavy steel-shod tanks were harsh abrasives, and under their weight and that of ditched trucks the edges crumbled. At all times working parties had to stand by with pick and shovel to make minor repairs on the spot. Though men from other units**

not engaged in operations shared in this work and civilian labour was recruited from the villages, most of it fell to the engineers. Attention was given first to the supply road in the rear of the Division's sector, but when the last of the three field companies arrived on 19 November it was possible to set both **6 Field Company** and **8 Field Company** to work in the **Sangro** valley, with **7 Field Company** (between **Gissi** and **Atessa**) occasionally sending parties to help the forward companies.

It was at detours where the Germans had demolished bridges and culverts that road maintenance was most arduous. The deviations were made by bulldozers, but thereafter (since bulldozers were much in demand) they had to be kept in order mainly by manual toil. So long as they remained unbridged on the Division's routes work on them was never finished. Often steep, uneven and soft, they were danger spots where a single mismanaged truck might halt the flow of traffic, and they were always capable of improvement by levelling, widening, metalling and the filling-in of ruts. The detour over the Osento stream, where so much delay occurred, continued to occupy large parties of sappers until 23 November, when **7 Field Company** built a 150-foot Bailey bridge over it. The demolition of the bridge over the Pianello stream on the **Strada Sangritana**, being in full view of the enemy, had to be worked on by night but the noise of the bulldozers infallibly brought down gunfire, so that the only protection afforded by the darkness arose from the circumstance that predicted shooting is commonly less accurate than observed. All such work done on the **Strada Sangritana** incurred the hostile interest of German gunners.

Roads and tracks had to be made as well as maintained. Sites for bridges across the **Sangro** were selected after reconnaissance on the night of 20–21 November; one was rather less than a mile downstream of the confluence and the other was a mile and a half farther to the right. Both lay at the end of existing tracks across the Piazzano; but the tracks had to be almost totally reconstructed to bear heavy traffic. The task progressed slowly night by night, often in pitch darkness and in stinging rain squalls that blinded the drivers bringing up equipment and

made their journeys a nightmare of anxiety. Engineers cut logs to provide corduroy for laying on the tracks and every night repair materials were brought up to a dump on the **Strada Sangritana**. So the work went on. When the time came to attack, the left-hand route was still no more than an assault track, but on the right there was a firm, wide road, fit for use in almost all weathers.

To make movement not only possible but safe from mines was another aim of the sappers. From 18 November until the eve of the offensive, they swept the road from **Atessa** to the **Strada Sangritana**, the **Strada Sangritana** itself, the tracks across the **Piazzano**, the **Perano-Archi** road and the north bank of the river, as well as removing unexploded charges from several bridges and culverts – work done sometimes by day under fire.

The standard Bailey bridging equipment for a single division proved woefully insufficient for the needs of the divisional engineers, and by steady increments they finally accumulated five complete sets. With this material they built six bridges between the 21st and 27th, one over the **Osemo** and the other five over demolitions along the **Strada Sangritana**. This bulky bridging material was brought into the Division's area by the spacious floats of 18 Tank Transporter Company and thence moved to the sites by 5 Field Park Company. This latter company was the custodian of the engineers' heavy equipment – the bulldozers which moved lesser mountains in filling craters and pushing through detours, the recovery vehicles, and the mechanical shovels which dug the shingle for roads.

No part of the Division was more dependent upon the roadmaking of the engineers than the **Army Service Corps**. To sustain the flow of supplies to the field maintenance centre south of **Gissi**, whence the fighting units drew rations, ammunition and petrol, was no trivial or easy assignment. Drivers using a supply line that stretched back as far as **Altamura** and **San Severo** found the way long and rough; the weather was foul and many vehicles were late in arriving from Egypt; but no one went short of essentials. For the coming attack ammunition companies

**began on the 15th a dumping programme which had made available 700 rounds of 25-pounder ammunition for each gun within a week – 500 on gun positions and 200 in dumps. Between 22 and 30 November the Division handled 795 rounds a gun, a total of more than 76,000.**

**For the first time since May in [Tunisia](#), the New Zealanders were disposed as a division in the field. In a posture of attack, they awaited only the word to go forward.**

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

# CHAPTER 4 – THE CROSSING OF THE SANGRO

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## I: OVER THE RIVER AND UP THE HILL

### *I: Over The River and Up The Hill*

(i)

**WHILE** all these preparations were advancing, the weather was making a mock of tactical planning. The Division was collecting its strength to strike a blow, but when would the blow be struck and what was to be its nature?

Proposed when the weather was dry, the river low and the German defences lightly held, the bold armoured dash by the **Eighth Army** for the **Pescara– Chieti** lateral was to begin on the night of 20–21 November. Simultaneously with **5 Corps** on the right, the New Zealanders were to attack across the **Sangro** with **6 Brigade**, which was ordered to capture heights north of the river and astride the axis road. At the same time the Indian brigade would seize the dominating ground between the two rivers on the left. It was intended that the tanks of **4 Armoured Brigade** should exploit success.

Having issued these orders on the morning of the 20th, **Main Divisional Headquarters** moved forward to a position east of **Atessa**. Rain that day and a rise in the river forced a postponement of forty-eight hours on both **5 Corps** and the Division. Fresh instructions from the Army Commander on the 22nd imposed a second delay until early on the morning of the 24th, but during the 23rd the **Sangro** was in spate – and the deluge bore with it a new tactical conception.

The frisk to **Pescara** by the armour gave way to a more methodical, step-by-step operation, making opportunist use (in the words of Lieutenant-General C. W. Allfrey of **5 Corps**) of ‘whatever clubs were in the bag’. For the Division this meant the cancellation of **6 Brigade's** attack in its old form and a pause for adjustment while the initiative

was retained by intensified patrolling and the bombing of the towns of **Lanciano**, **Castelfrentano** and **Casoli**, and of German gun positions. In place of a stealthy advance by a single infantry brigade, followed by deep armoured exploitation, it was now necessary to plan a more massive and deliberate opening assault, powerfully protected by gunfire and designed to control the five miles of main road running north to the lateral road from Castelfrentano to **Guardiagrele**.

One of the first requirements of the new plan was to bring **5 Brigade** into the line. The brigade moved into its sector on the right of the Appello stream in two stages. On the night of the 24th, 21 Battalion ( **Lieutenant-Colonel McElroy**) <sup>1</sup> occupied the high ground south of the **Strada Sangritana**, with the right-hand company on the forward slopes of Colle Sant' Angelo and the others on and behind **Monte Marcone**. Standing patrols were at once posted on the riverbank. The next night 23 Battalion ( **Lieutenant-Colonel Romans**) <sup>2</sup> came in on the left, establishing itself on the reverse slopes of **Monte Marcone**. With the return of **Kippenberger**, who resumed command from Stewart, <sup>3</sup> the early completion of the signals layout and the sending out of patrols, the brigade quickly settled down to prepare for the attack that was now only hours away.

(ii)

The new orders for the crossing of the **Sangro** on the night of 27–28 November, issued by the Divisional Commander on the afternoon of the 26th, appeared in more favourable circumstances than the earlier. Two days of fine weather had caused the river level to fall and on the 26th all three bridges of **5 Corps** were again in use. The ground was hardening. The sky was open to Allied aircraft. They flew four hundred sorties on the 26th and 483 on the 27th, the vast majority on **5 Corps'** front. Opposite the Division, however, attacks by medium bombers and fighter-bombers on German gun areas reduced hostile shelling which of late had been vexing. Of the enemy aircraft that appeared over the sector on both of these days, one engaged in photographic reconnaissance paid

the penalty. Shot down into the bed of the **Sangro** early in the afternoon of the 26th, its crew was taken prisoner by a standing patrol of 21 Battalion.

During these two days mild aggressive flourishes were made on both flanks of the divisional sector. On the left, between the two rivers, the Indian brigade occupied **Altino** without meeting resistance and pushed patrols forward to **Casoli**. On the right, two 17-pounders of Q Troop, 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, from exposed positions on the flat west of **Monte Marcone**, fired 130 rounds of solid shot across the river at farm buildings suspected of housing Germans who

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<sup>1</sup> **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.

<sup>2</sup> **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.

<sup>3</sup> Brigadier Stewart assumed command of 4 Armoured Brigade, relieving **Brigadier Inglis**, who left on furlough.

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might hold up our assaulting infantry. They caused minor damage to the buildings and gave two escaped prisoners of war, who came running towards the guns, an urgent motive for rejoining the Allies.

Among other preparations for the attack were the establishment of a Tactical Divisional Headquarters in the now populous area behind **Monte Marcone**, the final disposition of the machine-gun companies between the two infantry brigades, and the setting up of advanced dressing stations. When darkness fell on the 27th, the Division roused itself like a giant going on night shift and made busy on tasks that had had to wait until the last moment. Brigade signallers laid telephone lines and transported wireless sets to the proposed bridge sites, and parties of

infantry, wading unmolested through the river at the chosen places, stretched ropes across to the farther side to guide and support their battalions.

The Division was to strike simultaneously with **5 Corps**, which was ordered to advance from its already considerable bridgehead - the plainland lay north of the **Sangro** in its sector - to seize the villages of Fossacesia, Mozzagrogna and **Santa Maria**, nestling in the hills about three miles beyond the river. Unlike **5 Corps**, the New Zealanders had a double assignment - first to establish themselves in strength across the river and then to exploit north and west, as far as possible step by step with **5 Corps**, to force an entry into the *glacis* of the enemy's winter position, preparatory to breaking through the position itself. The first task, it was anticipated, could be carried out silently without enemy interference, and **Freyberg's** orders appointed as the infantry start line the lateral road north of the **Sangro** and, on the left for a few hundred yards, the south bank of the river.

The essence of the plan was a break-in of the infantry, preceded and protected by heavy artillery bombardment and followed by tanks ready to repel counter-attack. Advancing at the rate of 100 yards in five minutes, each of the two infantry brigades was set successive groups of objectives. Fifth Brigade was to take first Point 208, a round hill on the right, and a mile away to the south-west across a valley, Point 217, steep towards the summit; and, second, two heights a mile or so forward of Point 217 on the same feature. The objectives of 6 Brigade were arranged in three stages - first, heights on the lower slopes of **Colle Scorticacane**, about a thousand yards beyond the river, and the ground enclosed by the river, Route 84 and the lateral road, including an area known as **Taverna Nova**; then three points on or near the crest of Scorticacane and Colle Marabella overlooking Route 84; and finally Point 217, which lay forward along the Scorticacane ridge. Thence the brigade was to exploit still farther along the ridge to Point 207 and on the left from Marabella to **Colle Barone**, a prominent hill dominating the high ground west of Route 84. It was also to prevent the enemy from

destroying bridges across this road and the lateral road. The deepest of the objectives, lying about a mile and a half from the start line, would be reached only after a scramble up the cliffs or up the gullies between them and then an arduous climb in clothing and equipment heavy from the river crossing.

Five battalions were to make the assault. Of 5 Brigade's objectives, Point 208 was allotted to 23 Battalion and the rest to 21 Battalion; 28 (Maori) Battalion ( Lieutenant-Colonel Fairbrother) <sup>1</sup> in reserve, was left rather far back at Atesa. In 6 Brigade, 26 Battalion was directed to the main Scorticacane feature, 25 Battalion to its western slopes, and 24 Battalion to Marabella. The third infantry brigade under New Zealand command, the Indian brigade, while taking no part in the actual advance, was to assist by firing on the enemy west of Route 84 after zero hour.

Weapons of many types and calibres were to supply fire support. One hundred guns – those of the three New Zealand field regiments, 3 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, and a troop of 80 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery – were to fire 250 rounds each in a bombardment lasting three hours and a half. Timed concentrations, lifting by prearranged stages on to deeper targets, with 15-minute pauses to indicate successive objectives, were aimed to neutralise enemy fire from areas such as those commanding the more obvious routes between the cliffs. The tracer shells of 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment were to guide the infantry between their boundary lines on to their objectives. A Squadron 18 Armoured Regiment was to fire its 75-millimetre tank guns. One of the four Vickers machine-gun companies was allocated to 5 Brigade, two to 6 Brigade and the other to the Indian brigade, so that each New Zealand battalion might be accompanied over the river by a machine-gun platoon as well as its 3-inch mortars.

After fording the river on the right of the Division's front as soon as the infantry had left the start line, the tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment were to mop up and support the infantry on their objectives. Meanwhile, the armoured cars of the Divisional Cavalry would exploit towards La

**Cerralina on the right flank.**

**It was recognised that to keep up the momentum of the attack and even to hold gains supporting weapons would have to be got across the river without delay, whatever the weather, and the engineers were ordered to begin bridging as soon as possible. On the**

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<sup>1</sup> **Brig M. C. Fairbrother, CBE, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Carterton, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; BM 5 Bde Jun 1942–Apr 1943; comd in turn 21, 23, and 28 (Maori) Bns, Apr–Dec 1943; GSO II 2 NZ Div Jun–Oct 1944; CO 26 Bn Oct 1944–Sep 1945; comd Adv Base 2 NZEF, Sep 1945–Feb 1946; Associate Editor, NZ War Histories.**

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**right 5 Brigade was to be served by a Bailey bridge and, on the left, 6 Brigade by a folding-boat bridge. The engineers were also to clear mines north of the river. The wireless silence which had been maintained since arrival in the line was to be broken at zero hour, fixed in supplementary orders for 2.45 a.m. on the 28th. By that time the infantry were to be over the river and assembled on the start line. They were to carry rations for twenty-four hours, and as a precaution against the failure of the bridging plans a company of Italian muleteers stood by on the south bank to pack supplies across to the far side. All except operational traffic was kept strictly clear of the forward area and even operational vehicles were forbidden forward of the Strada Sangritana until their allotted bridges were ready, whereupon supporting arms would have precedence.**

**(iii)**

**The defences that would meet the New Zealanders as they toiled upwards from the floor of the valley had, as air photographs showed, been under construction for weeks past. In the Adriatic sector the German winter line (locally known as the Siegfried line) ran along the Sangro ridge from Fossacesia through Lanciano to Castelfrentano, along**

the road to **Guardiagrele**, and thence south and south-west along the foot of the Majella massif. The continuous system of trenches near the coast gave way in the New Zealand sector to more scattered strongpoints. These were most formidable along the road from **Castelfrentano** to **Guardiagrele**, where one heavily manned zone guarded the south-eastern approach to Castelfrentano and two others the two main road junctions – a hint of the impending struggle for control of the roads. A belt of wire along the road line linking the three zones was covered by machine-gun and infantry posts and guns had been sited and ditches excavated to defeat tanks. These defences, well dug in and camouflaged, were sited in depth (up to three kilometres in places) so as to prevent penetration at a single stroke and to expose assaulting troops, halted in their midst, to counter-attack. The approach to the main zone by way of Route 84 as it ran north from the **Sangro** was straddled by weapon pits on either side of the road. Ahead of them again were outposts close to the river, consisting of scattered trenches and weapon pits, many of them at the top of the cliffs, and mines were laid on the northern bank.

The potential strength of this elaborate defensive system, however, was never realised for want of troops to man it effectively, and eventually the line so long prepared had to be abandoned for one hurriedly improvised and by nature less strong but held with greater skill and stamina, and in weather more helpful to the defenders. Whipped along by Lieutenant-General G. H. von Ziehlberg's fierce energy, **65 Division** had dug not as gardeners dig but with the intenser zeal of men whose continued welfare must be sought, if at all, below the level of the ground. Kesselring himself, who showed both his foresight and his solicitude by visiting the sector only a few hours before it was attacked, came away feeling that von Ziehlberg had prepared his positions wonderfully well and that everything humanly possible had been done to defeat an attack on **76 Panzer Corps**. Von Ziehlberg himself thought well of his fortifications, and told Kesselring that he had greater confidence in them than in his men. But, as Nicias reminded his Athenians in their ultimate hour in **Sicily** long ago, it is men and not

walls that make the city.

The four thousand front-line troops of *65 Division*, which had been formed in **Holland** in 1942, were still raw and virtually untried in battle. Many of them were Poles, Lorrainers and other non-Germans; and it is probable that the 65th, like similar divisions, suffered in morale from complaints in the letters which the non-Germans received from home of ill-treatment by Nazi party agents. The division's equipment was scanty and it relied wholly on horse-drawn transport. It had only two regiments, the 145th between the coast and **Castelfrentano** and the 146th to the west.

On its right as the New Zealanders assembled for the attack, *16 Panzer Division* was being relieved by *Berger Battle Group*, an *ad hoc* formation taking its name from the commander of its nucleus, *9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, the first arrival of *26 Panzer Division* (Lieutenant-General Smilo Freiherr von Luettwitz). This last division, one of the *corps d'élite* of the German army in **Italy**, was being switched from the defences before **Cassino** and was arriving in small groups at long intervals.

These moves did not imply that the enemy was innocent of Allied intentions but rather that he was hastening to frustrate them. Kesselring substantially penetrated the strategic design, predicting an **Eighth Army** drive on **Pescara** to force the German *Tenth Army* to withdraw reserves from the western sector as a prelude to the advance on **Rome** of the Fifth Army. At least as early as the 24th, when the presence of a whole division of New Zealanders was suspected, Lieutenant-General Traugott Herr, commanding *76 Panzer Corps*, was apprehensive of a three-division attack between the sea and the mountains, and on the evening of the 27th he appreciated that an attack was 'very imminent'. This was a conclusion hardly to be avoided in respect of the **5 Corps** front at least, in view of the obvious closing up of tanks and infantry towards the forward defended localities, the intensified air bombardment of **Lanciano**, the unusually heavy road traffic and the temporary lifting of the bad weather. Fifth Corps did not,



therefore, attain tactical surprise. It is possible that the New Zealand tactics of a silent appearance north of the river in strength caught the Germans unawares; but since they knew that the New Zealanders were present in divisional strength and armed with tanks, and since three new bridges were suddenly to be observed on the **Strada Sangritana** in the Division's sector on the morning of the 27th, the probabilities are otherwise.

(iv)

Like many operations of war, the Division's actual crossing of the **Sangro** held greater discomfort than danger. Eight men of 21 Battalion were killed or wounded by a mine south of the river, but the enemy, perhaps ignorant of the New Zealanders' quiet approach, made no challenge.

Before midnight the battalions filed out over the **Strada Sangritana** and along tracks leading across the Piazzano to the riverbank. Ahead went the reserve companies, whose mission it was to prevent enemy interference at the start line. Then followed the assaulting companies and their attached Vickers gun platoons. At 25 Battalion's crossing the wire snapped and another route was hastily reconnoitred nearby; otherwise no mischance occurred. Some men had cut staves for support against the turbulence of the river; some formed a chain, each man grasping the muzzle of the next man's rifle; others clung to the taut wire. Thus, weighed down with arms and equipment, two thousand New Zealanders waded through the chilly, waist-deep waters of the **Sangro** and silently formed up along the lateral road on the northern bank. Thence, at 2.45 a.m., they advanced under the shielding fire of artillery and machine gun. The German defensive fire came down promptly but harmlessly in the riverbed. The attack by **5 Corps** had begun some hours earlier, on the left the Indian brigade made a demonstration, and now the gun flashes, shell explosions, and slow curves of tracer illuminated the valley from the Aventino to the sea. The advance went well. The climb up the bluffs was slow but it was not until they had gained the

heights that the infantry came under the scattered fire of mortars and small arms.

On the right, 23 Battalion, brushing aside unconvincing opposition, was so promptly in possession of its goal, Point 208, that artillery concentrations on this hill had to be hurriedly cancelled. Before daylight three companies were dug in, with one in reserve, an observation post had been established in a church on the hilltop, the Vickers guns and two 3-inch mortars had been brought forward and nine prisoners had been taken – all at the cost of six wounded.

The second battalion of 5 Brigade, the 21st, advancing on the left of the 23rd, was more stubbornly resisted, and at one stage the battalion asked that 23 Battalion should be ordered to send help, which the Brigade Commander refused to do. B and C Companies were unopposed in seizing the first objectives, Points 217 and 200 respectively, through which D and A Companies were to pass on their way to the final objectives, but the enemy was tenacious and two platoons of C Company, moving up a gully between the two heights, were held up by wire and small-arms fire from a machine-gun post skilfully sited in the cliff-face at the head of the gully. Captain **Horrocks**,<sup>1</sup> commanding C Company, lost his life in trying to silence the machine gun from close range. Coming up under Major **Tanner**,<sup>2</sup> A Company helped to break the deadlock. After a plucky solo reconnaissance, Corporal **Perry**<sup>3</sup> located the Germans and directed two platoons along the gully and over the wire to a sharp encounter which cleared the way for a renewal of the advance. A Company then pushed on along the high ground to its objective. Meanwhile, on the right D Company had passed through B Company and was within 200 yards of its destination when fire from the front forced it to swerve from its course and made it glad of the assistance of a B Company platoon. In the darkness D Company had become dispersed, but when day broke the Germans on the final objective, finding themselves surrounded, gave themselves up. Five other enemy posts, bypassed during the night, were eliminated by B Company and a few remaining Germans in houses between the forward companies

were taken prisoner. Six men of 21 Battalion were killed and 27 wounded, but its tally of prisoners was 74.

The right-hand battalion of 6 Brigade, the 26th, had a deep final objective on the high ground prolonging the Scorticacane feature. One company made its objective on the southern slopes without trouble, but the two companies which passed through it failed to carry out their tasks. C Company, aiming to capture the peak of the hill and then a second height 600 yards to the north-east, progressed to within 300 yards of its first objective, only to be checked when it attacked at dawn. The battalion had 5 killed and 14 wounded and took 32 prisoners. To the left of 26 Battalion, the companies of 25 Battalion set out by two devious but finally converging routes to take possession of the **Castellata** feature south of Scorticacane. A Company, advancing north from the road in order to skirt the cliffs, approached its objective from the east by following up a

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt R. E. Horrocks**, MC; born NZ 9 Sep 1916; clerk; wounded 24 Oct 1942; killed in action 28 Nov 1943.

<sup>2</sup> **Lt-Col V. J. Tanner**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Wellington**, 6 Jan 1916; sales manager; CO Div Cav Apr–Aug 1945; three times wounded.

<sup>3</sup> **WO II F. W. Perry**, MM; **Auckland**; born NZ 23 Jul 1914; grocer; wounded 1 Dec 1943.

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gully, whence it climbed **Castellata**, searching farmhouses as it went. It was overtaken, as planned, by C Company, which went on to consolidate on its allotted heights. D Company went straight along the road to occupy Point 122, between the road and the river. From here, after 24 Battalion had passed through, it swung north-west to capture the ridge between **Castellata** and the **Gogna** stream, while B Company succeeded it on Point 122. All the battalion's companies were thus safely on their objectives by first light. Mines caused more than half the

**battalion's casualties of 5 killed and 28 wounded.**

**Like 25 Battalion, the 24th, on the left flank of the attack, made a successful double thrust. Waiting until Point 122 was firmly in the hands of 25 Battalion, two companies, of the 24th passed through, A Company on the road working westward and D Company south of it. After silencing a machine-gun post covering the road bridge over the **Gogna** stream, A Company continued along the road and then turned north to climb Marabella, a hill in the angle between the lateral road and Route 84. The defenders, having satisfied their military consciences by a formal display of ragged small-arms fire, capitulated as the infantry drew near. One platoon was left to hold Marabella while the rest of the company descended without delay to Route 84, in time to disconnect the charges beneath a road bridge and two culverts. Here the platoons dug in and threw back a small enemy counter-attack, evidently intended to blow the bridge. On the left D Company, followed by C Company, easily occupied **Taverna Nova**, the area bounded by the two roads and the **Sangro**, where enemy troops surrendered without a fight. The battalion took 106 prisoners at the cost of 4 killed and 12 wounded.**

**By dawn the effort by the infantry had put them on all their final objectives except that of 26 Battalion among the hills in the middle of the Division's front. Enemy resistance had been at best sporadic: the young troops of **65 Division** showed but little stomach for the fight. Unnerved by the severity of the bombardment, with their wire defences smashed and some of their mines exploded by shellfire, many of them surrendered as soon as the New Zealanders got to close quarters. First Battalion of **146 Regiment**, which had had to face the assault of five New Zealand battalions, was reported to have lost half its fighting strength in casualties.**

**The fortuitous advantage of feckless opposition does not diminish the merit of the night's work by the New Zealand battalions, which contained many men fighting their first action. Wet-shod and chilled from the **Sangro**, they executed almost to the letter a plan of some**

complexity, finding their way in the dark over steep, difficult and unfamiliar country and rapidly organising to hold their gains against counter-attack. As Lemelsen, commanding the *Tenth Army*, confessed, they had 'got in amazingly soon'. But could the break-in be capitalised into a break-through? The answer to this question depended in large part upon the speed and effect with which supporting arms could be brought to bear in aiding the infantry.

(v)

Most welcome to the tired New Zealanders north of the *Sangro* would be armoured reinforcement, and the tanks of *19 Armoured Regiment* were on the move towards the river within a few minutes of the opening of the divisional artillery bombardment. But between the men in their tanks on one side of the *Sangro* and the men in their slit trenches on the other lay the frustrations of mud and water.

An anxious passage in the dark over the soft soil of the Piazzano ended for the leading tanks of A Squadron when they entered the water shortly after 5 a.m. Of the squadron's tanks, all but one, which was stranded in the first stream, reached the northern side with the help of *5 Field Park Company's* bulldozer, but only three forged a way through to the lateral road that morning. When daylight came eleven tanks were bemired in the ploughlands north of the river, and the bulldozer itself, like a doctor stricken with his patients' disease, rested helpless in the mud. Even the three tanks that reached the road were pursued by ill-luck; they were delayed by demolitions and that night had still not reached the forward troops of *23 Battalion*.

Tanks of the other squadrons, with their commanders reconnoitring a route on foot, found a less treacherous access to the road farther upstream. At 8 a.m., by gingerly and patient manoeuvring, C Squadron had gathered six tanks on the road; they drove westward as far as Point 122 and then up over the hill of *Castellata* to *25 Battalion's* forward positions, where they disposed themselves to fire on the enemy to the north. B Squadron also contrived, though not until the early afternoon,

to get tanks forward to protect 26 Battalion on Scorticacane and 24 Battalion on Marabella – an enterprise made hazardous not only by the steep, slippery going but also by minefields, through which infantry guides picked a safe way. The armoured cars of C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry Regiment found the ford even less negotiable than the tanks. After all but one of the first troop had become stuck in the riverbed, the rest of the squadron was ordered to remain on the south bank.

The attempt to bring armour rapidly forward to enable the infantry to exploit the night's advance was defeated by mud - normally a more difficult obstacle to an army than water. By daylight not a single tank was present in close support of the infantry; by nightfall about fifteen were up with the leading battalions of 6 Brigade, but on the 5 Brigade front none had joined the forward troops. The large element of failure was inherent in the armoured weapon operating in such terrain at the end of a European November; the not negligible element of success was won by persistence and initiative. What stalwart effort could do had been done, and for the first time that day New Zealand infantry lay under the guardian guns of New Zealand tanks.

The 3-inch mortars accompanied, and the Vickers machine guns closely followed, the river crossing and the advance of the infantry battalions, and these weapons were ready for action at daybreak. Anti-tank guns and support vehicles, however, had to await the bridging of the river. As in the days of preparation, so now in the day of assault, the role of the engineers was pivotal. Their task and that of the infantry were mutually dependent – for whereas the engineers had to rely on the infantry to provide them with room to work in and to deny the enemy, as far as possible, a sight of that work, the infantry could not advance far until traffic coursed freely over the river. The fine margin by which Masséna and Lannes staved off disaster at Aspern and Essling with their backs to the Danube stands as a caution to all forces attacking in front of a river insecurely bridged.

At zero hour the working parties of engineers were waiting at the two bridge sites for the sixty trucks loaded with bridging equipment to approach along the taped and lighted tracks. On **5 Brigade's** front, **8 Field Company** set to work with a will about 4.30 a.m. and when, three hours later, German observers peered across the river through the lifting shadows of dawn, there was the bridge and traffic was passing over it. Planned to span 90 feet, this Class 9 Bailey bridge was found on being pushed out to be from 10 to 15 feet short, but ramps erected on the north side filled the gap satisfactorily. Yet no bridge is more useful than its approaches, and the soft and as yet unmetalled track to the lateral road beyond the river robbed this one of much of its value; all heavy trucks had to be winched or towed through the mud, and the rate of traffic across the bridge fell to eight vehicles an hour. From **Colle Barone** on the left the enemy could direct accurate shellfire on to the bridge and the fact gave stress to the name HEARTBEAT with which it had been endowed before birth. In spite of casualties to men and vehicles, most of **5 Brigade's** support vehicles were over by 11 a.m. and with their battalions by the afternoon.

Misfortune befell the platoon of **6 Field Company** detailed to build the folding-boat bridge for 6 Brigade. The recovery of trucks that ran off the track south of the river and the need for towing trucks through the loose gravel of the riverbed cost time and delayed bridge-building until 6.30 a.m., and the work had to go on in the embarrassment of full daylight. At 8 a.m., when only one bay had to be completed, a direct hit by shellfire sank several boats and killed nine and wounded thirteen of the working party. The task was abandoned until nightfall. By 9.15 that night **LOBE** bridge was open to light traffic. Meanwhile a few vehicles of 6 Brigade had been diverted across HEARTBEAT bridge.

For all that the engineers could accomplish many men had still to wade through the waters of the **Sangro** and tramp its stony floor. Though the lightly wounded were treated in regimental aid posts north of the river until they could be evacuated by ambulance or jeep, the more urgent cases had to be carried across by stretcher-bearers, who

were stationed in teams at the riverbank. The one bridge could not be spared for the traffic in supplies on the 28th, and they were entrusted to the company of Italian muleteers. Reserve rations and ammunition for twenty-four hours, transferred from Army Service Corps trucks, crossed the river by mule train when darkness fell, and at the same time carrying parties bore to the forward troops containers heavy with the hot food that cheers. So much had to be committed to the continued good graces of the **Sangro**.

(vi)

The enemy's reaction to the overnight offensive was less vigorous than had been expected. The fact was that the Germans, though not surprised, were still unprepared, in that their troop dispositions had been forestalled, and their resources were unequal to the mounting of a co-ordinated counter-attack. A fighting and disciplined withdrawal to the **Sangro** ridge, punctuated by spoiling jabs to slow down the pursuit, was the most that they could hope to achieve until fresh troops could be rushed forward to restore stability. Even if the communications of **65 Division** had not been disrupted and if its infantry had been more numerous and less easily panicked, its endeavours to form up for a counter-attack would still have been frustrated by the weight of bomb and shell. Even if the German gunners had not been rationed for ammunition, and if the German tanks had been able to manoeuvre freely on the muddy hillsides, they would still have been largely silenced or immobilised by our aircraft and artillery. 'We simply can't do a thing against his shellfire and aircraft,' reported the Chief of Staff of **Tenth Army** to General Siegfried Westphal, Chief of Staff to Kesselring.

The German plight was made the more serious by the severe wounding that afternoon of Ziehlberg, 'the heart and soul of the whole enterprise', as he was called by Kesselring, who said later that had he not become a casualty his division would have stood up to the battering it received. Its recovery certainly proved too much for his successor, Colonel Ernst Baade, to effect, even though he was one of the most



dashing German commanders on the Italian front. During the day, therefore, **65 Division** pulled back three or four thousand yards up the ridge towards the heart of the winter position, and the New Zealand infantrymen were able to consolidate with little distraction, save from local gestures of defiance.

Infantry activity was most marked in 23 Battalion's sector on the Division's right flank. While our forward troops watched enemy movement round buildings to the north, a party of German raiders, in a bold sally made under the cover of a convenient gully, surprised and killed at their posts three men of the battalion holding the defiladed approach. They then suddenly appeared on the forward slopes of Point 208, above and on the flank of thirteen men of a machine-gun platoon, whom they marched off to captivity before a hand could be lifted in protest. Farther west, the men of C Company 26 Battalion were again involved in scuffles for a final objective which continued to elude them; well-aimed machine-gun fire sent them to earth for long periods and about 1 p.m. the artillery was called upon to cover with smoke and high explosive the withdrawal of nine of our men cut off in a house. On the left 24 Battalion also found work for New Zealand gunners. At daybreak enemy infantry debussing on Route 84 were scattered by shellfire and several times during the day concentrations were fired on a height west of the road and on **Colle Barone**, still farther west, both of which overlooked 24 Battalion's positions.

Compared with the active counter-battery and harassing fire of our own gunners, the German gunfire was light, except on the river crossings. Nor did any enemy tanks appear. For the first time, however, enemy aircraft attacked in the Division's sector but, whether directed against the tanks or the bridge, the three raids of the day were fruitless.

They did not disturb our forward troops in their work of reorganising and preparing measures against counter-attack. Except at the inter-brigade boundary – a stream flowing in a deep gully – where 21 and 26 Battalions were in sight of each other without having actual contact, a continuous divisional front was established, and on the right 23

**Battalion was in touch with 6 Lancers, who were patrolling the gap between the Division and 21 Indian Infantry Brigade, the left-flank formation of 5 Corps.**

**As darkness fell on the 28th, the Division was secure on all but one of its objectives and presented a well-knit front to the enemy; behind it one bridge spanned the Sangro and another was nearing completion; a few tanks were forward with the infantry, the forerunners of many to come, and supporting arms and supplies were not lacking; the outposts of the German winter line had been partly overrun and the enemy, weakened by substantial casualties and stunned by the ferocity of our bombing and gunfire, was reeling back to his main defences on the Sangro ridge. In the twenty hours since the first battalion moved off towards the river, the Division had suffered about 150 casualties and had captured well over 200 prisoners, all from 65 Division.**

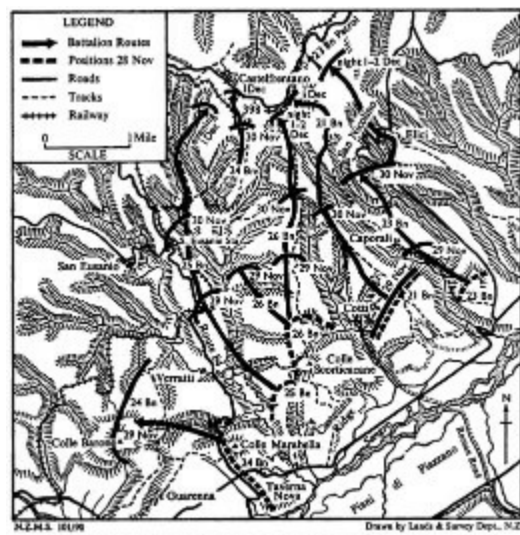
*(vii)*

**Patrols from four battalions on the night of 28–29 November having probed forward unopposed, it was possible on the 29th to contemplate limited advances, though the reinforcement of the existing bridgehead with tanks, anti-tank guns and armoured cars remained a first claim on the Division's energies. The Bailey bridge, though under intermittent shellfire, gave passage to anti-tank guns, but the now too-familiar alliance of mud and gradient delayed their arrival with the battalions, some of which waited until nightfall for their reassuring presence. Typically, a bulldozer towed the guns over the last stages of the journey to 21 Battalion, which meanwhile had manned a captured 50-millimetre anti-tank gun and an 81-millimetre mortar. By early afternoon C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry Regiment, by will and skill, had mustered all three troops on the lateral road, but demolitions checked it on its assignment of protecting the Division's right flank and maintaining liaison with 8 Indian Division. Air support was lavish but, in the well-grounded opinion of our troops, indiscriminating; for although towns, road junctions and enemy gun positions were named as**

targets for the day, bombs fell also among our own men on **Colle Barone**, and twice during the afternoon American fighter aircraft sprayed bullets at the **Sangro** bridge and on gun areas and roads south of the river.

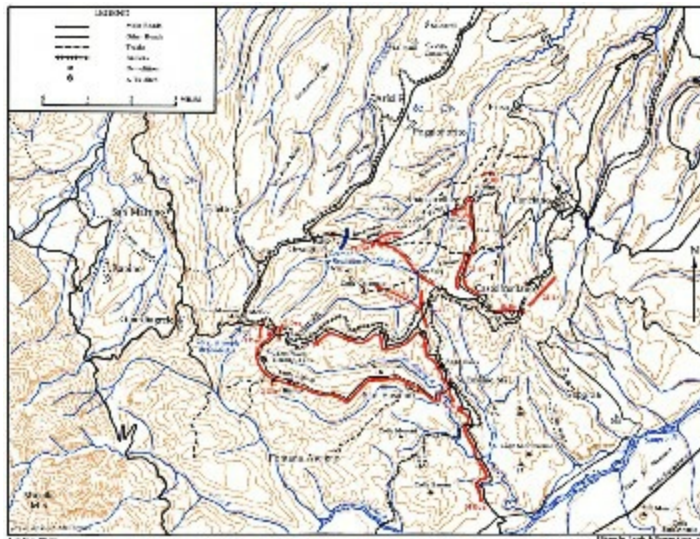
The main advance of the day, on the left flank, was essentially precautionary. Just as the clearing of the delta of high ground between the **Sangro** and the **Aventino** was a necessary preliminary to the river crossing, so the capture of **Colle Barone**, a feature west of Route 84, which commanded the **Sangro** bridges, was an indispensable condition of progress up the slope north of the river. The fatigue of the infantry, the lack of armoured and anti-tank support, and reports that the hill was still held in some strength caused the attack to be postponed from the 28th to the 29th. At 12.30 p.m. three field regiments began their fire plan, in the shelter of which three troops of B Squadron **19 Armoured Regiment**, each followed by a platoon of B Company 24 Battalion, crossed Route 84 to occupy **Colle Barone** and two objectives north and south of it. Within little more than an hour the tanks and infantry had completed their tasks, in the face of only shell and mortar fire and the usual impediment of soft ground, in which some of the tanks had bellied down.

On this occasion, it could hardly be said that the Division fought 'not as one that beateth the air'. As suspected, the artillery support was a waste of effort and ammunition, for the Germans had abandoned the area the night before, leaving behind only a few stragglers who needed no such incentive to surrender. So slight was the contact that the enemy believed the hill to have been captured by **8 Indian Division**. This hill was, indeed, the guiltless cause of much misapprehension, for the false report that it had earlier fallen to the enemy prompted the commander of *Berger Battle Group* to withdraw his outposts more smartly than he would otherwise have done.



ADVANCE TO CASTELFRENTANO, 28 NOVEMBER - 2 DECEMBER 1943

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2 New Zealand Division's operations, 2 December 1943

2 New Zealand Division's operations, 2 December 1943

The other battalions made less demonstrative but useful advances in the afternoon and during the night. Preceded by patrols which reported the way clear, they moved forward distances of more than a mile on 6 Brigade's front and somewhat less on 5 Brigade's, so that when the advance halted in the early hours of the 30th the line ran roughly in a crescent from the outskirts of the village of Caporali on the right, across country to the junction of the railway line with Route 84, and thence to Colle Barone.

(viii)

The 30th was another day of quiet advances during which the infantry often found the upward lie of the land, the clogging mud and the mines sown in it more vexatious than the opposition of Germans. A tiring uphill slog brought the New Zealanders within striking distance of the main defences, into which **65 Division** on the right was hastily, and **26 Panzer Division** on the left more deliberately, withdrawing. Twenty-second Motor Battalion, moving in to hold the left flank, released 24 and 25 Battalions for a main thrust directly towards **Castelfrentano** by 6 Brigade. The brigade's axis, thus deflected slightly to the right, would leave the north-south stretch of Route 84 free for a diversionary attack westward by **18 Armoured Regiment** and 22 Battalion. Fifth Brigade would support the **Castelfrentano** drive from the right, **19 Armoured Regiment** would follow up, and the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** would patrol as usual on the right.

In accordance with this general plan, the infantry battalions, accompanied by tanks of **19 Armoured Regiment**, closed up towards the **Sangro** ridge. A northerly advance of a mile by 26 Battalion was virtually unchallenged, but 25 Battalion had to fight for San Eusanio railway station and a height north-east of it. Patrols had to clear both places before the companies could occupy them, the clash on the hilltop bringing in twenty prisoners at a cost of two killed.

The longest march of the day fell to 24 Battalion. It was withdrawn from its positions west of Route 84 and directed up the eastern bank of the **Gogna** stream to the lower slopes of Point 398, a hill overlooking **Castelfrentano** from the south and within a hundred yards of its outlying dwellings. The march of several miles up steep slopes and over sodden ploughlands ended soon after nightfall, when the leading company settled in across the Guardiagrele- **Lanciano** railway line where it runs round the spur of Point 398. A patrol found the crest of the hill wired and heard enemy movement. Signs that this part of the main (or Siegfried) line was manned – trip-wires, machine-gun fire, flares and the sound of military movement – were also reported by patrols of 26 Battalion exploring towards the main road east of **Castelfrentano**.

While 6 Brigade poised itself to begin a break-through of the winter line, 21 and 23 Battalions after dusk advanced the 5 Brigade front on the right in the steps of patrols that had reconnoitred well forward during the day without meeting the enemy. On the two wings of the Division vigilance was maintained, on the right by the armoured cars and on the left, far to the south-west in a quieter sector, by 2 Machine Gun Company, the successors in that area of 19 Indian Brigade.

Meanwhile, supporting arms steadily accumulated in a bridgehead that was by now outgrowing the name. This reinforcement was hastened by the opening on 30 November, beside HEARTBEAT bridge, of a Class 24 Bailey bridge (TIKI) strong enough for the use of tanks. Raised high above the waters by bulldozed approaches, the new bridge gave proof of its robustness on 4 December, when it was the only one on the Eighth Army front to survive the flooding of the river. All traffic going forward had to cross it and return, first by HEARTBEAT bridge and later by LOBE bridge. In spite of this one-way circuit, convoys still jammed at the crossing and made painful progress through the well-churned mud on the northern bank. Nevertheless, within a few hours of its opening an armoured regiment and the whole of the divisional field artillery had crossed the bridge and rearward communications were secure enough to give no logistic worries to those directing the operations four miles away on the lip of the Sangro ridge. To those embattled heights it is time to turn again.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: CASTELFRENTANO AND BEYOND

### *II: Castelfrentano and Beyond*

(i)

December was only a few hours old when the first infantrymen stood on the crest of the ridge and in the heart of the prepared defences. Starting at 8.45 a.m. from its overnight position about 500 yards from the hilltop, D Company of 24 Battalion led the attack on Point 398. The men of 17 Platoon, working towards the north-east round the side of the hill and up a gully to Route 84, were harassed throughout the day by heavy fire and only one section reached the road, where, like the others, it had to lie low; but the enemy also found movement uncomfortable in this area, failing in four attempts to infiltrate down the gully.

The other leading platoon, No. 16, advanced directly uphill. On the way it disposed of two German posts, of which civilians had given warning, and on reaching the brow of the hill saw and occupied a large building near the main road and on the eastern edge of **Castelfrentano**. Since the approach to the town was swept by mortar and small-arms fire, the platoon was ordered to hold the building, which proved to be a hotel, as a fortress. Two prompt enemy attempts to gain admission were repulsed, but the little garrison, thinned by casualties, needed help. Help it received from 18 Platoon, dashing in under fire. Under Sergeant **Kane**,<sup>1</sup> this force beat off a third and last counter-attack early in the afternoon. Thereafter until dusk the hotel became a target for the German artillery whose many hits on the building forced our men to abandon the vista of the upper stories for the ground floor. Between dusk and one o'clock the next morning machine-gunners of the German rearguard took up the 'hate'. D Company lost three men killed and twelve wounded.

While 24 Battalion fought an action that was the presage of a more

gruelling future, the rest of the infantry, closing in on Route 84, began the investment of **Castelfrentano** from the south. Coming up uneventfully on 24 Battalion's left, 25 Battalion posted its foremost platoons in a position to threaten Route 84 west of **Castelfrentano** and only 400 yards below the town itself, and between 24 Battalion and **5 Brigade** 26 Battalion during the night of 1-2 December approached the railway station 1000 yards south-east of the town.

The success of 24 Battalion in getting a foothold on the ridge promised so well that soon after midday on the 1st the Divisional Commander cancelled a plan for a set-piece night assault on **Castelfrentano** with artillery support. The decision was justified not only by the German failure to dislodge the dogged defenders of the hilltop hotel and by the stealthy progress of the other 6 Brigade battalions, but also by the shock administered to the Germans by **5 Brigade's** night advance, which expedited the enemy's withdrawal from **Castelfrentano**.

Ordered to seize the dominating plateau east of Route 84 where it trends to the north towards **Lanciano**, the two battalions were held up by machine-gun fire about dusk on a precipitous slope half-way to their objective, and resumed their climb after nightfall. The right-flanking battalion, the 23rd, made its ground with little incident, but the leading platoon of the 21st, straying somewhat at large over this rugged country, stumbled into enemy machine-gun nests, attacked them and, aided perhaps by the studiously boisterous approach of two other platoons drawn up by the noise of the affray, captured thirty prisoners. These last two

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt P. J. Kane**, MM; **Hamilton**; born Westport, 16 Mar 1913; school teacher; twice wounded.

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platoons of A Company 21 Battalion, however, had not yet done with the night. As they leapfrogged forward by platoons one of them was fired on from the right, whereupon the other worked round behind the enemy's position, rushed it, and closed in, giving the enemy the



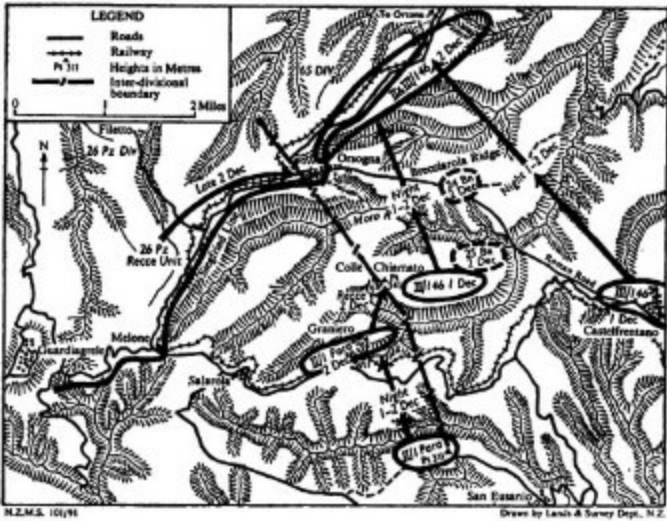
impression, in the darkness, of being encircled. Another sixty Germans gave themselves up.

The success of the infantry brigades, backed up by the Divisional Cavalry Regiment, which kept pace on the right, had been made easier by the subsidiary thrust on the left, where the efficacy of armour as a magnet for shellfire was abundantly demonstrated. Eighteenth Armoured Regiment and 22 Battalion were despatched from the south up Route 84 on 1 December to the junction with the main road from **Guardiagrele**. The tanks were stopped nearly two miles short, however, by shellfire and mines and deployed near the junction with the minor road leading through **San Eusanio** to bring fire on to their objective. There they took considerable punishment from the artillery of **26 Panzer Division** – eight tanks were put out of action – and no further advance up Route 84 was attempted that day. After dark a patrol of infantry and engineers found the road a mile from the main junction blocked by a demolished house, with trip-wires to signal for fire on the junction itself. Behind these delaying devices the right wing of **65 Division** was preparing to withdraw.

By the morning of 2 December the omens were propitious. On the right, the two New Zealand infantry brigades imperilled the German hold on a long stretch of Route 84 on both sides of Castelfrentano, itself a bastion of the main defence line; on the left the diversionary attack was drawing near to the same line; and the Division appeared on the verge of hustling a much-perturbed enemy out of its sector of the *Winterstellung*.

Had the sore straits of the German command on this front been known to the Division, its expectations would have been more and not less roseate. The tattered **65 Division**, stretched out from the coast to an area west of **Castelfrentano**, was in disgrace; one of its regiments had by this time yielded a thousand prisoners, both had had high weapon losses, and the **Tenth Army** commander was soon to order a court-martial inquiry into its conduct. Further, it had permitted **5 Corps** on the New Zealanders' right to penetrate the Siegfried defences.

To this threat of collapse the German response, reduced to its simplest elements, was twofold. First, the front had to be reinforced. It was possible for Herr to do this partly from his own means by gradually transferring fresh and mettlesome parachute units from the relatively impenetrable sector among the mountains of the



WITHDRAWAL OF GERMAN UNITS, 1 AND 2 DECEMBER  
 WITHDRAWAL OF GERMAN UNITS, 1 AND 2 DECEMBER

Majella massif to more decisive sectors nearer the coast; and this redistribution was already proceeding when the storm broke and gave it greater urgency. Command of a battalion of paratroops was inherited on the 29th by the experienced but numerically weak *26 Panzer Division* when it assumed control of the sector on *65 Division's* right and opposite the New Zealanders' left flank. Herr also built up a mobile reserve of infantry and tanks, withholding a large part of *26 Panzer Division* for the purpose. But, as Kesselring recognised, outside help could not be stinted, and he made available *90 Panzer Grenadier Division*, a reincarnation of the Division's old desert foe, *90 Light*, which took over the sector on *65 Division's* left in the first days of December.

Secondly, an alternative had to be found for the original winter line running along the *Sangro* ridge, which could no longer be held in its entirety. The pith of Herr's plan was to stand firm on the Siegfried line

in the mountainous sector west of **Melone**, a road junction a mile east of **Guardiagrele**, and on that pivot to swing back, holding the line of the **Orsogna- Ortona** road to the sea, behind the obstacle of the **Moro River**. Normally such a manoeuvre, even under pressure from troops elated by their capture of long-prepared positions, would not have been fraught with great peril; but the circumstances were not quite normal. To retract the line safely, it would be necessary to concert the withdrawal of the two formations holding it – one of them, **65 Division**, gravely depleted, partly demoralised and thankful to fall back; the other, **26 Panzer Division**, far less roughly handled, unbeaten and determined to retire in good order upon tactical necessity alone.

In the event, the withdrawal was not smoothly concerted. Confusion was thickened by the simultaneous effort of **76 Panzer Corps** to shorten **65 Division's** front by introducing **90 Panzer Grenadier Division** and by side-slipping **26 Panzer Division** to its left as it came back. The manipulation of slender and fluid resources was deemed to entail a copious flow of instructions from corps to the divisions. At a delicate phase of the operation, continual boundary changes and untimely reliefs unsettled the troops and provoked from divisional staffs a rumble of discontent which the war diaries echo. A study of these documents, it must be said, suggests the inexorable military sequence – order, counter-order, disorder.

The worst disorder occurred on the boundary between the two ill-matched divisions. It is now apparent that, by the night of 30 November–1 December, if not earlier, they were out of step in their withdrawal. That night, conforming with the rest of **65 Division**, **146 Regiment** pulled back into the Siegfried line where it ran through **Castelfrentano**, and it was **II Battalion** of this regiment that resisted the New Zealanders on the eastern outskirts of the town next day. The corresponding withdrawal of **26 Panzer Division's** infantry – **9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment** and **II Battalion 1 Parachute Regiment** – brought the bulk of its forces into an intermediate position forward of the Siegfried line, with only about a third of them manning the main

defences in continuation of the line already occupied by *146 Regiment*. The panzer division, expecting a few days' comparative respite until the New Zealanders closed up to the Siegfried fortifications, was perhaps not unduly dismayed to learn, early on the morning of the 1st, that the paratroops in the advanced positions could find no neighbours on their left, but corps promptly ordered a retirement that night to the Siegfried line so as to regain contact with *65 Division*.

The day's orders from corps included instructions for a further withdrawal the same night to the final line from *Orsogna* to *Ortona* by *65 Division* and for a leftward shift in the inter-divisional boundary; *65 Division*'s right wing was to rest on Point 341 on *Colle Chiamato*, and the paratroops manning the Siegfried defences round the village of Graniero were to extend their left to keep touch. These confusing orders, retiring the infantry division upon a new defensive line and the panzer division upon an intact part of the old (between *Melone* and Graniero), overstrained the junction of the two divisions. Here, on the morrow, 2 December, a grave fissure was to open, through which the New Zealanders might pass in pursuit of a fleeting opportunity.

(ii)

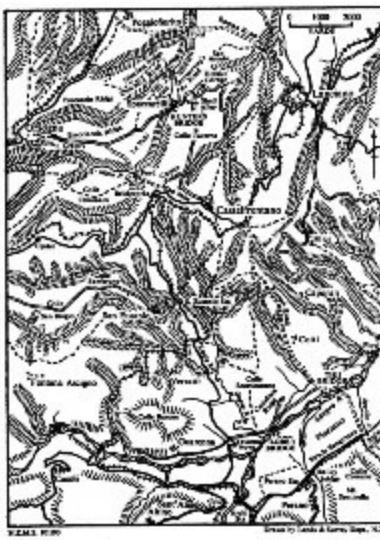
Even in ignorance of their enemy's tribulations, our troops had cause to begin the 2nd in good heart, and the day's events, to right and to left, quickened their hopes. The capture of *Castelfrentano* was the first event in two days of decision. Heralded by strafing attacks from the air, troops of 24 Battalion entered the town at 7 a.m. They were too late to trap the Germans, who had slipped out overnight, quitting the comfort of billets and the safety of commodious dugouts for the bleaker hills east of *Orsogna*; but they were not too early to be greeted by the inhabitants with manifestations of joy and with the festive wines and *pasta* customarily pressed upon the liberators of Italian towns.

There was little time to savour the pleasures of minor conquest, for more significant conquests now seemed to lie within the Division's grasp. The palpable crumbling of the main winter line along the road

from **Guardiagrele** to **Castelfrentano** and the tame evacuation of **Castelfrentano** itself were a spur to the instant follow-up that might tear an irreparable hole in whatever defensive system the enemy could improvise to the rear. The New Zealanders in the last four days had waded through the **Sangro** without having so much as a rifle-shot fired at them; they had brushed aside or into the prisoner-of-war cage a cowed enemy in their climb to the top of the ridge; and now the bastion town of **Castelfrentano** had dropped like a ripe fruit into their hands. In an exultant mood engendered by this retrospect, Montgomery and **Freyberg** agreed that the Division would be in **Chieti** in a couple of days. **Orsogna-San Martino-Chieti** was the axis of advance defined in the divisional orders that morning of the 2nd.

The main task of the day was allotted to 6 Brigade, with armoured support. While **5 Brigade** consolidated in the area of **Castelfrentano**, **6 Brigade** was directed to exploit on the right concurrently with **4 Armoured Brigade's** diversionary thrust on the left. After a forward reconnaissance, **Freyberg** was urgent for a swift drive into what was, in fact, the enemy's final defence line. Parkinson, for 6 Brigade, was ordered to push on day and night to **Orsogna**, and Stewart, for 4 Brigade, to make with all speed for **Guardiagrele** and **San Martino**.

The tanks of C Squadron **19 Armoured Regiment** were under 6 Brigade's command. Having dexterously gained Route 84 after a night spent struggling up greasy, narrow lanes, they were despatched



ROADS AND LANDMARKS IN NEW ZEALAND DIVISION'S AREA

on the right flank to follow a rough track running north to the **Lanciano– Orsogna** road and thence westward to **Orsogna**. Twenty-fourth Battalion was sent straight across country along the hypotenuse of the triangle to cut the **Lanciano** road a mile east of **Orsogna**, and 25 Battalion was to advance westward down Route 84 to meet 4 Brigade's tanks and infantry coming up from the south.

Since 4 Brigade's force was divided into two columns, the Division was pointing five aggressive fingers at the Germans' last line of resistance – a column of tanks and two battalions of infantry making for **Orsogna** from the east, and two mixed columns of tanks and infantry heading towards the vital road junction of **Melone**, whence they might threaten **Orsogna** from the south and **Guardiagrele** from the east. The simultaneity of their actions and of the actions of the enemy opposing them baffles the art of the historian, who, while he unfolds the battle in one part of the field, must stop the clock and freeze the fight in all the others.

For the tanks of C Squadron 19 Regiment, operating on the right flank, it was a day of promise never quite redeemed, and their influence on the day's events, like their physical position, was peripheral. Leaving **Castelfrentano** by the northern road shortly after eleven o'clock, they were checked about a mile out of the town by machine-gun fire. The

stronger force then haled forward by the reconnaissance troop overran several enemy posts, but in the absence of infantry the rounding up of the victims was incomplete and some escaped. During the afternoon, however, our tanks and carriers tidied up the area west of the road. Meanwhile the squadron, firing merrily as it went, hurried north to the **Lanciano– Orsogna** road and then west through the village of **Spaccarelli**, but its career was abruptly halted a few hundred yards beyond the village by the demolition of a bridge across the **Moro** stream. Unable to find a way over or round the obstacle, the squadron had no choice but to prepare a laager for the night; it played no further part in the ensuing action except to subtract from the strength of the infantry, since a company of 25 Battalion was detached to protect it overnight.

The men on their feet advanced with less hindrance. Following the Roman road north-west from **Castelfrentano**, 24 Battalion descended the steep gully in which the **Moro** flows, crossed the stream, climbed to the **Lanciano– Orsogna** road and by mid-afternoon took up positions north of it, with the forward company hardly a mile from the eastern edge of **Orsogna**. A section sent out immediately to reconnoitre drew fire from light anti-aircraft guns on the outskirts of the town; it withdrew, leaving behind two observers. At 4.30 they reported that about seventy Germans appeared to be forming up for a counter-attack. Of this no more was heard. About half an hour later, towards dusk, the defenders of **Orsogna** were again called on to fire, this time against a working party of 25 Battalion. Moving to the left of the 24th along Route 84, 25 Battalion had dug in west of the road where it bears south, and at 4.30 had sent out a patrol to reconnoitre a route for vehicles to **Orsogna** across Colle Chiamato. It was the working party following this patrol that occasioned the second burst of fire as it approached **Orsogna** from the south-east. Its reaction was to send forward a fighting patrol, which returned unscathed with five prisoners.

These exploratory actions were more significant than the men of the two battalions realised. Interpreted as unsuccessful efforts to force an entry into **Orsogna** by surprise, the two slight skirmishes outside the

town rang bells of alarm in the ears of an enemy already disconcerted by the day's developments. At *26 Panzer Division* headquarters Lieutenant-General von Luettwitz had spent an anxious morning. From ten o'clock onwards his infantry in the Siegfried line running east from **Melone** were periodically reporting the minatory movements of 4 Brigade's forces, but an even more acute worry arose from the old trouble on his left flank. There his parachute battalion again reported itself as out of touch with *65 Division's* right wing; he himself went to Point 341, the agreed point of contact, where *65 Division* asserted it had troops, but he could find none, for they had left (so it was reported) at 9.30 without informing their neighbours.

With tanks and infantry battering away towards **Melone** in his front and with his left wing suspended in mid-air, Luettwitz became concerned for the security of the final defensive line from **Melone** to **Orsogna**, and at 12.45 he received permission from corps to call *26 Panzer Reconnaissance Unit* from reserve to man the line as far as **Orsogna**, where it was to link up with *65 Division*, until his infantry should be able to make an orderly withdrawal to the new positions. The summons to his reconnaissance unit went out promptly, but it took time to answer, and in the interval the menace to his left wing loomed larger. At 1.20 the panzer division's war diarist wrote: 'All efforts by the division and corps to establish contact on the left ... failed. A gap remained between the division and *65 Division*, whose right wing could not be located'. Shortly after three o'clock the paratroops reported the enemy pushing round their left shoulder. 'The enemy,' says the diary, 'had evidently found the gap and was taking full advantage of it. If the fire of our three batteries could not halt the enemy, it was likely that the left wing of the division would be outflanked'.

It was the men of 25 Battalion who thus happened upon the rift in the line; but on their right 24 Battalion had likewise found it, and it was the desultory cannonade before **Orsogna** about four o'clock that brought home to the panzer division the extent of its envelopment and steeled Luettwitz's chief staff officer, in the commander's absence, to issue at



five o'clock an order for withdrawal to a ridge in front of the **Melone-Orsogna** road and to instruct the division's reconnaissance unit to take command of **Orsogna** and hold the town at all costs. But it was not until 6.30, long after dark, that the unit's first company reached **Orsogna**. There it assumed control from the remnants of *II Battalion 146 Regiment* who had observed the approaching New Zealanders before nightfall, marvelling perhaps, and certainly thankful, that they had not made more audacious use of their advantage.

*(iii)*

By this time, as its dispositions showed, **26 Panzer Division** was awake to the New Zealand Division's tactics of masking its main blow on the right by a feint, or rather a diversionary attack, on the left; the fact had been sufficiently announced during the afternoon. Yet until that time the progress of 4 Brigade might have appeared to the Germans as the most disquieting of hostile activities, and even later they appreciated the threat to the pivotal road junction of **Melone**, where the new defensive line joined the unbreached part of the old.

In its advance towards this point 4 Brigade was offered a choice of routes. Two lateral roads branched westward off Route 84, one a section of the direct road from **Castelfrentano** to **Melone** and the other leaving Route 84 two miles farther south, passing through **San Eusanio**, and converging with the first about a mile east of **Melone**. Resuming the previous day's advance from the southern of the two road junctions, B Squadron **18 Armoured Regiment**, closely supported by B Company 22 Battalion, reached the northern junction by 10 a.m., just as 25 Battalion was setting out from **Castelfrentano** for this rendezvous. Opposition was confined to shellfire and a ditch across the road, which a bridging tank expeditiously filled in.

When he received his instructions to hasten on to **Guardiagrele** and **San Martino**, Stewart sent 22 Battalion, with B Squadron under command, westward along the northern road from this junction, and a second column comprising 18 Regiment headquarters and C Squadron,

with 1 Motor Company under command, along the southern road through **San Eusanio**. Both columns were preceded by armoured cars of the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**.

The German engineers had prepared four demolitions along the northern road, but it was not until they were half-way to **Melone** that the tanks, though under frequent shellfire, were delayed by cratering. It was by then nightfall, and the Germans who had held the line of the road during the day were falling back. Our own infantry followed hard on the heels of the German rearguards, who stalled off pursuit by a second demolition, by small-arms fire from the cover of village buildings along the way, and by blowing up in the middle of the road a lame tank which had been towed back from the main road junction. Near the village of **Salarola** three Germans tarried too long and fell prisoner. One of them, coolly directing the retreat of his rearguard, was the 27-year-old commander of *I Battalion 9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, by reputation 'the most capable and bravest' battalion commander of *26 Panzer Division*. Still the men of 2 Motor Company pressed on in the darkness and they were nearing the junction of the two lateral roads when a third demolition was blown in their faces, making a hole about forty feet across. This in turn they skirted, only to find the enemy covering the road from posts sited in the prearranged delaying line before the **Melone–Orsogna** road. Not until next morning, the 3rd, did the company confirm the enemy's withdrawal from this position – a hurried withdrawal, it appeared, from the amount of abandoned equipment left scattered about.

By this time the two columns were reunited. The southern road had proved to be poor and steep, but it was not defended by infantry and the principal impediments were shellfire and a cavernous anti-tank ditch. The German artillery was eventually silenced by fighter-bombers called up to assist, and the ditch was eventually made passable by a bridging tank.

Stewart's force was now able to resume its drive for the next road junction. A few straggling roadside houses, hardly worth the

cartographer's notice, gave it the name of **Melone**; a steep bluff behind it gave it defensive strength; and its position on the new line mid-way between **Guardiagrele** and **Orsogna** gave it tactical importance. It was a key to the **Orsogna** ridge, and here, if anywhere, the Germans, who had been spending ground lavishly since 28 November, must stand and fight.

An hour after daylight on the 3rd 3 Motor Company advanced to the assault on the **Melone** road fork while New Zealand artillery bombarded the objective for three-quarters of an hour. The sanguine temper of the New Zealand command at the time is manifested by Stewart's orders to a squadron of armoured cars to push through to the road fork on the right flank and then to exploit northwards to meet 6 Brigade emerging from **Orsogna**. These expectations died at once and on the spot. Heavily shelled as they approached along the road, the attacking infantry were discouraged from the outset, and the support of tanks which climbed a hill south of the road could not abate the fury of fire that started up in **Melone** as some of our men came within sight of it. An hour after their setting out they were recalled from the attack; they were now to hold a firm base for a fresh attempt that night. About midday instructions were issued to occupy the road junction when hostile fire slackened or after dark, and to exploit to **Guardiagrele**. In the late afternoon the battalion was ordered to occupy the position; otherwise no attack would take place. The waters of optimism were evaporating. That night a patrol ascertained that **Melone** was indeed defended, and more strongly than by day. The attack was therefore cancelled. On the left at least, affairs had reached a temporary deadlock, and one phase was ended.

(iv)

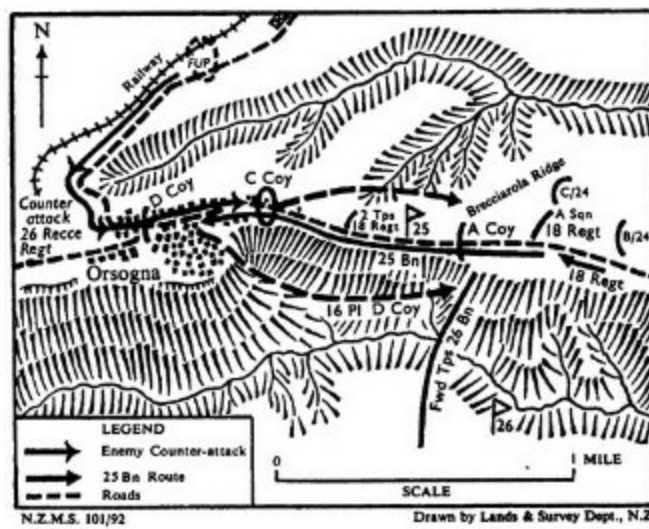
Though falling back hastily, the enemy on the left had not been taken off guard; on the right it had been otherwise, and there the fortune of the day swayed uncertainly. During the night of 2-3 December both sides prepared to dispute possession of **Orsogna**. Dug in a mile outside the town, 24 Battalion was providing the base from which an attack might be launched on the morrow. By 10 p.m. it was

strengthened by the arrival of its mortars and anti-tank guns, brought manfully up despite the difficulties of the Roman road, which crossed the **Moro** in a deep defile. The improvement of this road, which the Germans, with more realism, if less historical sense, called a cart track, was the task of a party from 26 Battalion, which set out after dark. It was a task well worth doing, since on the right our tanks were held up by the demolition beyond **Spaccarelli** and on the left they were soon to be stayed before **Melone**.

Between nine and ten o'clock, while these preparations were going on, Parkinson ordered 25 Battalion to attack at dawn through **Orsogna**. To him the town appeared at most as an intermediate objective, to be overrun in the course of a drive to the final objective, a track a mile to the west, whence the battalion was to exploit to **San Martino**. Thus at this time **Orsogna** was to Parkinson what **Melone** was to Stewart – an early stage of an advance that was expected to sweep far beyond it.

The intentions of these two commanders could not have been stated more succinctly than they were by Luettwitz, who a few hours earlier had made his appreciation: 'Now that the enemy's flanking attack had succeeded in digging the division out of its positions in the **Melone–Graniero** line, he was expected to attack on 3 December, with main thrusts on **Melone** and **Orsogna**, in an attempt to force a break-through at one of these places and prevent us from forming a new line.' His plan, therefore, was to withdraw to the **Melone– Orsogna** line and occupy **Orsogna** in strength.

Even so, no great strength was mustered there overnight, and the report that the New Zealanders were bringing more and more troops into the gullies east and south-east of the town and that tracked vehicles were heard moving about can have been no sedative to the commander of **26 Panzer Division**, who understood, as our commanders



25 BATTALION ATTACK ON ORSOGNA, 3 DECEMBER 1943

25 BATTALION ATTACK ON ORSOGNA, 3 DECEMBER 1943

did not, how much turned upon the action that the morning would surely bring. By midnight his reconnaissance unit had completed its move into **Orsogna**. While the survivors of the battalion of **146 Regiment** took post outside, the town itself was defended by the reconnaissance unit less one company, together with a company of tanks (including a few flame-thrower tanks) and two 20-millimetre four-barrelled anti-aircraft guns.

Such was the opposition against which 25 Battalion advanced on the morning of 3 December. Leaving its positions at 1.30 a.m., it marched on foot along the Roman road and joined the **Lanciano– Orsogna** road on Brecciarola ridge, passing through 24 Battalion's forward positions. At 3.15 Lieutenant-Colonel Morten halted battalion headquarters half a mile from the eastern outskirts of **Orsogna** and ordered A Company into reserve to dig in. The two remaining companies, in wireless touch with battalion headquarters, deployed on both sides of the road and moved on slowly.

The road into **Orsogna** (to the military eye) was paved with premonitions, for at every step the defensive possibilities of the town were further unfolded. Brecciarola ridge, dotted with olive trees, vines and grey farm buildings, has a crest which is nowhere wide and which narrows as it climbs towards the town. Here the gentle, rounded slopes

that rise from the **Sangro** give way to country more deeply gashed by valleys and ravines. To the left of the road, as our men advanced, was a place of plunging gullies, so steep near the town that the buildings appeared to hang on the brink of a precipice. To the right the land fell away less sharply, but the enemy, it was later discovered, had sown it thickly with mines. Manoeuvre was made more difficult by the fact that the houses of the town huddled together on the flat top of the ridge and barely stood aside to allow the road a furtive entry. In this narrow frontal approach lay much of **Orsogna's** strength.

By 6.15 the two companies had reached the edge of the town without awakening resistance. Here C Company disposed itself for all-round defence while D Company pushed on through the narrow gateway. No. 17 Platoon on the right and 18 on the left were directed straight through the town, and 16 Platoon was left to clear the enemy out of the buildings.

The leading platoons were more than half-way through the town before battle broke loose. They were then attacked from the rear by an armoured car that drove down the main street into the main square. In attempting to work round the southern side of the town, they came under heavy fire from infantry posts and took refuge in buildings. Here they were trapped by tanks and infantry coming into the town from the west and both platoons were captured complete. This counter-stroke was delivered by a company of tanks and a company and a half of infantry which formed up for attack in spite of shellfire from a troop of our tanks firing at long range. Then, just as three miles away to the south-west the New Zealand infantry attack on **Melone** had been abandoned, they swept into the town.

In the expectation that our own tanks would arrive, 16 Platoon was instructed to hold on in **Orsogna**; since they did not arrive, the seven survivors of the platoon chose to make good their escape as the German armour approached. Fired on at short range as they ran, they bolted down a street, threw themselves over a bank at the town's edge and scrambled down a gully to safety. C Company, having covered this

breathless disengagement, itself had to scatter down another gully north of the town, and the crews of three supporting Bren carriers had to abandon them in their haste. By eleven o'clock both of the assaulting companies had withdrawn through 24 Battalion. Twenty-fifth Battalion's casualties totalled 83 – 4 killed, 26 wounded, and 53 missing, most of the last being prisoners.

Only now, two hours too late, did the first New Zealand tank make an appearance among the forward infantry. As soon as he heard of the unexpected trouble at **Orsogna** at seven o'clock, Parkinson, in the absence of other artillery, called on a troop of C Squadron **19 Armoured Regiment** to fire in support, and from a position outside **Castelfrentano** three tanks engaged the Germans approaching **Orsogna** with their 75-millimetre guns. At the same time, the commander of A Squadron **18 Armoured Regiment** was urgently ordered forward. The previous night he had been told not to expect orders before 7.45 on the 3rd, by which time 25 Battalion would be well inside **Orsogna**. His tanks, harbouring near Route 84 only a few hundred yards north of the **Sangro**, were eight miles or more from the scene of action, and they arrived to find **Orsogna** already in the triumphant grip of ardent panzer troops, with German tanks venturing out of the town towards them. One of these they were able to damage and the other to repel.

This was an inessential epilogue; for the contest of manoeuvre had been won and lost. Both at **Melone** and at **Orsogna** the Division had been sharply informed that it was no longer possible to scamper through the German defences. Again we may turn for prophecy to the war diary of **26 Panzer Division**, under 3 December: 'Intentions: Fortify and hold positions....'

(v)

In the perspective of the long, grim and futile campaign that followed, the events of 2 and 3 December in and before **Orsogna** have a wistful significance. They provoke questions. Was an opportunity

missed? If so, why was it missed, and what were the consequences?

The facts suggest very strongly that **Orsogna** might have been taken cheaply at any time between dusk and midnight on 2 December. One battalion, the 25th, was within two miles and a half of **Orsogna** by three o'clock in the afternoon. Though wet and tired from the **Sangro** crossing and the climb to **Castelfrentano**, it had not been in heavy fighting, it had not set out until ten o'clock that morning, and it might reasonably have been asked to advance on **Orsogna** and put in an attack by dusk or dark. But the battalion was left to dig in, and it was only at ten o'clock that night that it received orders to attack at dawn.

Twenty-fourth Battalion, astride Brecciarola ridge scarcely a mile from the town, was within even closer striking distance as early as 3.30 p.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Conolly was confident that the enemy had been caught off balance and that **Orsogna** would fall as easily as **Castelfrentano**. His opinion was confirmed when a German officer that afternoon rode a horse down the road from **Orsogna**, blissfully unaware that he was among enemies until a New Zealand rifleman fired at him, whereupon he departed rapidly uphill on foot. Conolly pressed Parkinson to allow the battalion to continue on to the capture of **Orsogna**, but he was instructed to dig in to provide a firm base for 25 Battalion. Even had it waited for the arrival of its support weapons, 24 Battalion might have been at the gates of **Orsogna** well before midnight. At any time before midnight, when the last elements of the German reconnaissance unit reached **Orsogna**, the attacker must have found the defences weak and unorganised. It is highly unlikely that prepared field defences then existed in any strength in and about the town. The spade-work of preceding weeks had been spent upon the Siegfried line, now an object of curious inspection by New Zealand troops.

No one can predict the outcome of a hypothetical attack, but if 25 Battalion (or 24 Battalion) had struck twelve or even seven hours earlier, it seems probable that they could have carried the town and established themselves on its western perimeter. Thence, with artillery support, they would have had excellent command over the counter-attack, and might



have proved as difficult to evict as the Germans did once they had taken full possession.

If one opportunity was missed on the 2nd from lateness, was another missed on the 3rd from lack of weight in the attack? Three points are involved. The actual assault on **Orsogna** was entrusted to a single company of infantry. It was made without armoured support: tanks arrived too late to influence the action. It was made without artillery support: no field guns fired at the call of the infantry in the town. But whether these deficiencies meant the difference between success and failure is a question on which speculation must be very reserved. It is doubtful whether **Orsogna**, in the grasp of determined defenders, would have fallen to frontal attack by a battalion, even supported by armour and artillery – and no stronger bid could have been made at the time. If there is to be a verdict on the lost opportunity, it is ‘too late’ rather than ‘too little’.

Explanation must begin with a reminder of the buoyant spirits of the main actors. The New Zealand commanders believed the Germans to be on the run. They were quite correct in assuming that the defences which they had overrun around **Castelfrentano** were part of the enemy's main winter line; and if he did not stand in them, why should he stand immediately behind, where there was no natural depth and little or no artificial preparation? But the tactics of approaching a town by daylight, sitting down before it all night, and attacking it with inadequate support at dawn next morning could not be repeated with success. Having hit the enemy for six (in the Army Commander's phrase) at **Castelfrentano**, the New Zealanders played the same stroke at **Orsogna** – to a different ball.

**Freyberg** certainly saw the critical importance of **Orsogna**. More than once on the 2nd he urged his brigadiers on, and Parkinson was under orders to make for the town ‘night and day’. Parkinson's pause on the afternoon and evening of the 2nd seems to have been a compromise between caution and optimism. He was cautious enough to halt 24

Battalion to form a firm base for 25 Battalion's attack and to delay that attack (perhaps to rest his tired troops) until next morning. But he was optimistic enough to expect 25 Battalion to take **Orsogna** in its stride as it moved on **San Martino**. The feeble counter-attacks against 24 Battalion on the afternoon of the 2nd showed that **Orsogna** was manned, if only lightly. Next morning it must have been held either strongly or not at all. Parkinson, as can be deduced indirectly from his plan of attack and directly from the language he held, thought it would be defended negligibly, if at all. In retrospect, he can be seen to have taken the German resistance too seriously on the 2nd and too lightly on the 3rd, but at the time the attack by the 25th seemed to him a perfectly normal action for a battalion designated as the advance guard to a brigade, which was in turn the advance guard to a division exploiting a break-in to a defended position.

The scale of the attack on **Orsogna** reflects the optimism that extended upwards as far as the Army Commander and downwards at least as far as battalion commanders. Lieutenant-Colonel Morten thought the Germans were too few to stand at **Orsogna**. He had only three rifle companies – the fourth was committed with 19 Armoured Regiment at **Spaccarelli** – and his plan was to advance into the town with only one company because of the narrow entrance, then to feed in a second company, and finally to move on to **San Martino**. His orders gave him no expectation of armoured support. Parkinson no doubt hoped, when he issued orders, that his infantry would soon be joined in **Orsogna** by tanks of 18 Armoured Regiment coming up from the left – the repulse at **Melone** was not then a solid fact – and perhaps by the tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment from the right. Though no artillery fire plan had been arranged, 6 Field Regiment had a forward observation officer (Major Nolan) <sup>1</sup> with the battalion. Soon after he entered the town, his jeep was shot at by an anti-tank gun and his wireless was put out of action, so that he lost touch with his guns. The infantry wireless link from the assaulting company to the gunners remained open throughout the action but no call for fire was received. The probability is that with German infantry and tanks infiltrating piecemeal into the

town, the fighting developed into a series of

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<sup>1</sup> **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.

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isolated street skirmishes at fairly close quarters in which suitable artillery targets did not present themselves.

If it is right to suppose that any battalion attack on the 3rd was predestined by delay to failure, the detail of its mounting and conduct is irrelevant to the question of lost opportunity – yet it sheds an oblique light on the mentality of the command, which is far from irrelevant. Considering that the operations were fluid and that it was in the interest of the Division, even at some risk, to keep them so, the propensity to think defensively as revealed by its layout, even in the prevalent mood of optimism, seems rather pronounced. Behind the company in **Orsogna** was another at the gates, ready to cushion the recoil. Behind that was the reserve company. All three were superimposed upon the firm base furnished by 24 Battalion. Sixth Brigade in its turn was resting on the firm base of **5 Brigade** in the **Castelfrentano** area. Here was compounded reinsurance, defence in depth with a vengeance. For a lunge forward, there seems to have been disproportionate weight on the back foot. The firmness of the base far exceeded the sharpness of the apex. It was a disappointing action, and when all allowance is made for our inevitable ignorance of enemy disorganisation, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that optimism relaxed when it ought to have stimulated.

As to the consequences, no more than a guess at the probabilities can be attempted. The capture of **Orsogna**, especially in the fluid state of the battle and taken in conjunction with the progress of the **5 Corps** offensive, must have made the Germans' new line behind the **Moro** untenable. Possession of the town would have conferred command of the ridge on which it stands and enabled our troops to roll up the **Moro** line

from the flank and unhinge it at **Melone** and **Guardiagrele**. The enemy, then, must have fallen back along his whole front from the mountains to the sea. But his supply of defensible positions had by no means given out. Behind him lay a possible line which followed the Foro River until the northern foothills of the Majella offered firm anchorage at its western end. Farther to the rear was the broader stream of the **Pescara**. Even had the **Eighth Army** reached and forced the **Pescara**, the subsequent drive south-west towards **Avezzano** lay through a defile, where the hazards of advance in an Apennine winter would have been too terrible seriously to contemplate. If the opportunity at **Orsogna** on 2 December had been seized, the winter battles might have been fought a few miles farther north. Little else on the broad strategic map would have been changed.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

# CHAPTER 5 – ORSOGNA: THE FIRST BATTLE

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## I: PROBING FOR RESISTANCE

### *I: Probing for Resistance*

(i)

**ORSOGNA** is a town for the military manuals rather than for the guide-books. A stranger to beauty or fame, it became for half a year after the New Zealanders first saw it a byword far and wide for stubborn resistance – a **Stalingrad** of the Abruzzi. Of all the hilltop towns of this region, none is of greater natural strength. To the south and east it is aproned by rough slopes, rising steeply from ravines perhaps seven hundred feet in as many yards. It stands upon a watershed ridge, the highest of the parallel ridges that separate the rivers and streams draining the Majella massif into the Adriatic. Rather deceptively – for it is no towering eminence – it commands a broad prospect over the surrounding countryside, which watercourses have deeply engraved.

Along the ridge a good road runs north-east down to the coastal town of **Ortona** and south-west up to **Melone** and **Guardiagrele**. North-east of **Orsogna** it is possible to approach the road from the east by comparatively easy slopes, but round the town itself and southward to **Guardiagrele** the heights are forbidding and form a veritable rampart. The only other road into **Orsogna** is the track from the east along Brecciarola spur, but this is little more than a causeway. Possession of the town would give the New Zealanders use of the **Ortona** road and would permit them greater freedom of movement in the forward areas by depriving the enemy of the best point of vantage. Sooner or later it would have to fall if progress was to be made on this front.

Seen from the east, **Orsogna** was a line of grey stone buildings crowning a long ridge. From the centre rose a tall church tower, and even a fugitive glance – and glances sometimes had to be fugitive – caught an impression of scarred walls and arcaded foundations

surmounting a cliff. The sight was to become familiar to New Zealand eyes.

*(ii)*

Thinking and speaking like men habituated to success, to whom military stalemate was almost contrary to the natural order, the senior officers of the Division, and the Army Commander himself, were reluctant to interpret the rebuff at **Orsogna** as more than a slight flicker of defiance from an enemy intent on escape to safety. The discovery round **Castelfrentano** of very deep dugouts, an elaborate system of communication trenches, wire, minefields and large amounts of abandoned material left no doubt that the winter line had been pierced, and it was too early to conclude that a second line would be held along the **Moro**. Late on the 3rd, General Montgomery thought that the Germans were retreating to **Pescara**, leaving rearguards consisting mostly of tanks – an appreciation that **General Freyberg** qualified only so far as to think that they were holding on long enough to destroy the roads. That afternoon, after Brigadier Parkinson had voiced the same opinion, aircraft and guns were directed on to the **Ortona– Orsogna** road to harass an enemy believed to be evacuating stores and equipment. Patrols that night were instructed to occupy **Orsogna** if the opportunity arose.

Little by little, however, the truth was pieced together, and within two days of the first sally into **Orsogna** the evidence revealed unequivocally that the town and the ridge on which it stands would be yielded only to a large-scale onslaught. Two more days were needed to redeploy the Division, to repair the line of supplies to the forward troops after its interruption by a flood in the **Sangro**, and to open tolerable road communications to those supplies and to supporting arms. On the afternoon of the 7th the attack opened, disconcertingly soon for the reckoning of the Germans, who had employed every hour of the preceding four days in making ready to repel it. Thereupon the experimental skirmishes and the probings for position gave way to a



contest of massed force. The battles for **Orsogna** began in earnest.

(iii)

After the clashes at **Melone** and **Orsogna** on the morning of the 3rd, both sides tacitly acknowledged the importance of the occasion by redoubling their gunfire and air activity. In its anxiety to safeguard **Orsogna**, **26 Panzer Division** not only despatched a company of engineers there to form a reserve for counter-attack, but also took the advice of **76 Panzer Corps** to bring heavy artillery fire on to the approach to the town by way of the Roman road from **Castelfrentano** in order to hinder the arrival of our tanks and other reinforcements. Because of this shelling, **26 Battalion's** transport could not that day reach the fighting companies, which had moved forward into the **Moro valley** south of the other two battalions of **6 Brigade**; and a party from **26 Battalion** working on the steep crossing of the track over the **Moro** became a target for several German batteries. Even the less exposed battalions of **5 Brigade**, facing north-west in the area of **Castelfrentano**, were harassed by gunfire. Three times during the day enemy aircraft bombed and machine-gunned the forward troops, but not without retaliation, in the morning from hovering Spitfires and in the afternoon from the Division's light anti-aircraft guns, which shot one and possibly two raiders out of the sky. So lively was the German reaction that **Freyberg** expressed concern for **Montgomery's** safety next morning on the road to Main Divisional Headquarters, a few hundred yards north of the **Sangro**, and there was jocular talk of sending 'less important people as experiments'.

The New Zealand gunners meanwhile were engaged on a full programme in which enemy gun positions and the roads beyond **Orsogna** received special attention. With the arrival of Headquarters **6 Army Group, Royal Artillery**, and **1 Air Landing Light Regiment** came the first flight of a substantial reinforcement of British artillery. The generous allowance of air support was concentrated on **Orsogna** and **Guardiagrele** and on the gun positions of the panzer division, whose artillery

regiments complained of incessant raids by fighter-bombers.

Intimations of the enemy's plans continued to flow in on the 4th, though the tactical situation was still regarded at Divisional Headquarters as generally uncertain. Widespread artillery fire, which fell with special severity on **Castelfrentano**, and frequent sorties by aircraft presaged a dogged resistance. This hint was strengthened by the patrol reports of all three New Zealand brigades. Two patrols from B Company 24 Battalion, exploring the German defences round **Orsogna** on the night of 3–4 December, saw machine-gun posts east of the town and, at the western end, two guns firing towards **Guardiagrele** and heard vehicle movement. An A Company section returned from daylight reconnaissance of the Sfasciata ridge on the Division's right flank with the news that it was being held in strength for about a mile east of the **Ortona– Orsogna** road. It had left behind in a farmhouse one man wounded in a brush with Germans manning a post on the ridge. Private **Williams**,<sup>1</sup> an orderly of the regimental aid post, volunteered a work of mercy. He went up alone and, hidden in the house from enemy patrols, tended the wounded man and stayed with him until after nightfall, when a stretcher party brought him back. From C Company a patrol eleven strong approached the very walls of **Orsogna** from the east, closing to within fifty yards of an enemy tank before being fired on, but it gave as good as it received and escaped unharmed with a report that the town was very strongly defended, with posts dug in about fifty yards in front of the houses.

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<sup>1</sup> **Sgt R. Williams**, MM; born England, 10 Mar 1922; labourer; wounded 24 Feb 1944.

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The southern defences of the town were tested on the night of 4–5 December by a D Company fighting patrol, which was greeted by bursts of machine-gun fire in exchange for its hand grenades. The expedition was enough to eliminate the gully to the south as a possible entry into the town, for the going was rough and steep.

Though the north-eastern approach to **Orsogna** by way of the broad **Sfasciata** spur was known after 24 Battalion's patrol to be defended well forward of the town, it was left to 25 Battalion to discover just how far the enemy had extended his posts in this direction. When, after a day's rest, the battalion returned to the line on the evening of 4 December, occupying **San Felice** ridge on the right of the 24th, C Company was instructed to establish a standing patrol on the more northerly parallel ridge of **Sfasciata**, about a thousand yards north-east of the enemy post attacked by the 24 Battalion patrol. Its coming was heralded by artillery and Vickers gun fire on the area from 10 p.m. The company (less one platoon), under Major **Webster**,<sup>1</sup> made its way along the **Moro** bed before turning left about 3 a.m. to scale the precipitous eastern face to the top of the ridge. Enemy mortars and machine guns, firing from the forward slopes by the light of flares, harried the advance, but it was not until the company drew near the crest that it was finally halted at 4.30 a.m. **Webster** ordered a withdrawal to the battalion's right flank on **San Felice**. Since the broad back of the **Sfasciata** spur was the best approach to the **Ortona- Orsogna** road, the enemy's presence in strength near the top of the ridge where it drops into the **Moro** was a significant pointer.

**Orsogna**, then, was defended at short range from the east and south and at longer range from the north-east; but could it be bypassed? At this time the Divisional Commander was contemplating as possibly preferable to frontal attack a major thrust farther north and east to compel the enemy by the outflanking threat to vacate his troublesome western defences. But a party from A Company 26 Battalion on the 4th looked in vain for a tank route to circumvent **Orsogna**; and the report of a daring patrol of nine men led by Lieutenant **Emery**<sup>2</sup> of C Company 23 Battalion showed that a drive on the right towards **Poggiofiorito** would be most difficult to supply and support. This last patrol, directed to shoot at traffic and lay Hawkins mines on the **Ortona** lateral some miles north of **Orsogna**, followed the **Moro valley** for two miles north of 25 Battalion's outposts and then struck westwards across a gully and

<sup>1</sup> **Maj J. L. Webster**, m.i.d.; born NZ 24 Dec 1912; agent; wounded 4 Sep 1942; died of wounds 20 Dec 1944.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj T. G. Emery**, ED; **Christchurch**; born NZ 4 Nov 1922; student; wounded Dec 1943; 2 i/c **22 Bn ( Japan)** 1946–47.

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up the slope to a point within a few hundred yards of the busy road. There, about midnight on 4–5 December, fifteen hours after leaving the battalion, the patrol ran into a party of Germans, fired on them, and made off before the enemy could recover from his surprise at being molested behind his own lines. Returning by the same route, the men reached their own area after being out twenty-six hours.

A further tentative on the right wing was made by the Divisional Cavalry, sent to find routes to the main **Ortona** road in the sector held by **8 Indian Division**, but again the result was negative. While armoured cars of a troop of B Squadron met a patrol of **6 Lancers** and Canadian tanks in the village of **Frisa**, a party from A Squadron reconnoitred on foot an old Roman road running westward to **Poggiofiorito** from the **Lanciano– Frisa** road, but turned back half a mile before the track crossed the **Moro** at the north-east extremity of Sfasciata ridge. The next morning, the 5th, the squadron returned to the area in its cars, shelled an offending enemy machine-gun post into silence and forded the **Moro**; but mud and shellfire compelled a withdrawal.

The same disappointment repaid the efforts of another Divisional Cavalry patrol reconnoitring for a route even farther north. With some Canadian tanks, it reached a blown bridge over the **Moro** no more than four miles from the mouth. Here the river could not be forded and the patrol retired under shellfire after an engagement with German infantry, who were numerous in the locality. Each of these patrols yielded three prisoners from *90 Panzer Grenadier Division*. Yet, though they had searched far afield and well beyond the divisional sector, neither had found a practicable route whereby vehicles might skirt **Orsogna** from the

north.

Nor was it otherwise in the south. Fourth Armoured Brigade, whose bid for the **Melone** road fork and **Guardiagrele** beyond it had been challenged from the outset, found enemy vigilance unrelaxed. On the 4th an early morning testing of the German defences by a patrol of 3 Motor Company 22 Battalion, following up an artillery concentration on the junction, drew mortar fire, and gun and machine-gun posts were observed on Martino hill, west of the junction, with concrete works north of it on the road to **Orsogna**. Similarly, an attempt by **5 Field Park Company** to employ its bulldozers in repairing the gaping demolition in the road about a mile east of **Melone** was frustrated by instant enemy shellfire. Not content with treasuring up this old crater, the Germans a few hours later blew another in the same road. It was presumably this party of Germans which a patrol of 22 Battalion saw returning to **Melone** in the early hours of the 5th.

The 22 Battalion patrol was the first of two which found the road junction unoccupied that night. This discovery encouraged the battalion to try to seize it after daylight. For the third time, however, the battalion's infantry was foiled within a few hundred yards of the objective. Despite support from artillery and from tanks of B Squadron 18 Regiment posted on a nearby hilltop, two platoons of 1 Motor Company, as they got to within 300 yards of the empty road fork, came under a storm of fire from mortars and machine guns on the Martino feature. They had no choice but hasty retreat. Eleven men left behind in the rout made their way back to the battalion after dark. All tank movement started the German artillery into action. The paratroops defending this salient were clearly determined to stay there.

From **5 Corps**, on the Division's right, came news to confirm the enemy's stiffening resolve. Though the capture of San Vito and **Lanciano** on 3 and 4 December completed our control of Route 84, the **Moro**, which lay midway between it and the parallel **Ortona- Orsogna** road, was being defended, and it was not until the night of the 5th that **1 Canadian Division**, which had replaced **78 Division** in the coastal sector,

made a crossing. Opposition to the Canadian and Indian divisions composing **5 Corps** was now in the firmer hands of **90 Panzer Grenadier Division**. On coming into the line a few days before, this division had been told that, as a pure German formation, it was expected to give a better account of itself than the hapless **65 Division**, which had shed less of its mixed blood than its casualty figures seemed to warrant.

By this time there was no mistaking the import of the evidence: nothing less than a measured blow with the gathered resources of the Division would loosen the German grip on **Orsogna** and its ridge. At the 7.45 conference on the morning of the 5th, the Divisional Commander initiated planning for a two-brigade attack on **Orsogna**.

(iv)

Long before the detail of the plan was determined and even before the need for a full-scale effort was finally recognised, preparations for a resumption of the advance went on. The opening of supply lines to vehicles was a prime condition of progress. It entailed a struggle to overcome the obstacles thrown by the enemy across the path of his retreat and by nature contriving an awkward combination of weather and land forms. The diligence and almost sardonic ingenuity of the German sappers had free play, and within the competence of their equipment they missed few opportunities of balking their pursuers. In the war diary of **26 Panzer Division** under the date 2 December there is a little compendium of destruction that will serve to typify this kind of mischief-making:

In the course of the withdrawal **93 Panzer Engineer Battalion** had blown 65 demolitions during the last two days, destroyed or mined 52 military installations in the intermediate line, blown eight power plants, laid 1600 booby-trapped mines and blown up several hamlets.

The weather, which for the most part had been mercifully fine, if cold and bracing, since the crossing of the **Sangro**, took a turn for the worse on 4 December. Draining into the river and melting the high

snows inland, a steady warm rain caused the **Sangro** to rise in spate, in places by as much as six feet. Shortly after dark the folding boats of **LOBE** bridge were torn from their moorings, washed some 400 yards downstream, and stranded on a gravel bank. The sturdier **TIKI** bridge alone on the Army front remained undamaged and in place, but the swirling waters swept away part of the northern approach. The **Sangro** was therefore impassable.

By three o'clock the next morning the skies had cleared and the river had fallen sufficiently to allow a platoon of **7 Field Company** to begin repairs. The flood water was dammed back from the approach to the bridge, the track was remade and at 11 a.m., after only sixteen hours, the flow of traffic over the river was restored. **LOBE** bridge was fit only for salvage. It was dismantled and the parts were taken back for repairs in the workshop. Consequently all vehicles crossing the **Sangro** from the north and from the south had to use **TIKI** bridge until another route was provided. Work had already begun on such an alternative – the reconstruction of the blown bridges over the **Aventino** and **Sangro** a few hundred yards upstream of the confluence. The **Archi** bridge over the **Sangro** was built by **8 Field Company** and the northern bridge carrying **Route 84** across the **Aventino** by Canadians of **10 Field Squadron**. Despite the delay caused by the flooding and by the need for removing mines and rubble from the sites, the route was in use on the 7th.

In the right-hand sector of the fighting zone before **Orsogna** communications were peculiarly difficult. This was a sparsely roaded stretch of country, and off the roads wheeled movement at the best of times was impeded by the maze of ridges and gullies that formed the watershed of the **Moro**; now, with the surface soft and greasy from rain, to drive trucks and tanks across country was to invite trouble. Yet this ground had to be traversed and won before the Division could gain the secure communications of the **Ortona** road. The Roman road leading on to **Brecciarola** ridge was quite impracticable as a supply route, if only because of the steepness of the **Moro** crossing; and from the 5th, when **5 Field Company** bridged the **Moro** a mile or more north of the Roman

road, traffic going forward left Route 84 west of **Castelfrentano**, travelled north over the hills known as **Corato** and Taverna as far as the **Lanciano– Orsogna** road, and thence turned west through the hamlet of **Spaccarelli** and across the **Moro** by Hunter's bridge to San Felice ridge. Large convoys were not permitted west of the road junction, where they swung right and returned by way of **Lanciano**. This system of communications sufficed, but it became tenuous at the extremities, especially when fighting developed in the broken, roadless country north of San Felice ridge.

The Sangro flood might have caused more serious dislocation and delay but for two facts. One has been suggested – the speed of the sappers in making repairs and replacements. The other was the foresight of the **Army Service Corps** in beginning on 3 December to establish dumps north of the **Sangro** against just such contingencies as the flood presented. That day and the next stocks of petrol, oil and lubricants, and of ammunition were transferred to areas near Route 84 north of the river and, though the lift was interrupted by the flood, within a few days all units except those south of the river were drawing their petrol and ammunition from the new dumps. Rations and other quartermaster's supplies, being less bulky, were brought up more slowly. The divisional supply point came forward in two stages, first to **Atessa** and then, in the middle of December, to an area near **Archi** station, still south of the river. These moves reduced the need for vehicles from the fighting units to use the **Sangro** bridges and, at least in the short term, the dependence of these units on the moods of the river.

(v)

A curious alarm on the left flank at this time might also have proved a distraction from the business of investing **Orsogna** had not the Divisional Commander firmly declined to be diverted from his main task. Since 1 December, when **2 Machine Gun Company** left, the area south and west of the junction of the Aventino and **Sangro** as far as the **Majella** – a land of mounting foothills and musical place-names – was



unoccupied by the Division. Over this broad expanse the patrols of either side might rove almost at will on missions of petty annoyance; but to both sides the area was chiefly of negative interest, a ground of apprehension rather than of hope. Wonder grows, as the Roman historian observed, where knowledge fails, and the wonder was here magnified, no doubt, by tales of civilian provenance. Certainly the German outposts in the area made reports of British activity which are hard to reconcile with the known movements of our own troops and which suggest a nervous credulity. The enemy feared infiltration behind his **Moro** defences

by way of the Majella massif and posted two battalions of a mountain regiment to picket the road running below its eastern face. Again, on 8 December, after he had thinned out in the mountains to reinforce his coastal sector, the commander of *76 Panzer Corps* (Lieutenant-General Herr) spoke to *Tenth Army* of a thrust on **Pennapiedimonte** as an unpleasant possibility. The New



2 PARACHUTE BRIGADE'S AREA, DECEMBER 1943

Zealanders for their part feared destructive forays from the west against their lines of communication and the inconvenience that could be caused by artillery observation posts overlooking them from a flank, but the demolition of the river bridges put any really dangerous enemy drive out of the question.

On 3 December **26 Panzer Division** ordered **IV Alpine Battalion** to send fighting-reconnaissance patrols east and south-east from its mountain zone, and when next day Germans were reported at **Casoli** and villages to the south **Freyberg** was content to send a fighting patrol as a token of his vigilance. Men of the Divisional Defence Platoon and a troop of B Squadron Divisional Cavalry in armoured cars joined forces for the expedition. They spent a wakeful night at **Casoli**, alert for 200 Germans said to be in the locality, but neither that night nor the next day did they sight the enemy, though they heard demolitions which seemed to confirm civilian reports that the enemy was systematically destroying villages. Aircraft of the **Royal Air Force** therefore dropped bombs on **Torricella**, the village suspected of housing the headquarters directing this work.

More regular provision for filling the gap between the Division's left flank and **13 Corps'** right and for protecting the Division's supply route had been planned before these alarms and excursions showed the need for it; but it was not until the evening of 5 December that **2 Independent Parachute Brigade** (Brigadier C. H. V. Pritchard), which had been placed under New Zealand command, was able to move in. It relieved the New Zealanders at **Casoli** and promptly set patrols to work hunting the enemy. Fourth Parachute Battalion, in the east astride the **Sangro**, and **5 Parachute Battalion**, farther west under the lee of the Majella, despatched long-distance patrols which scoured the country and had skirmishes with enemy parties at widely scattered points. The vigour and watchfulness of the British paratroops freed the Division from the anxiety on its left and allowed it to give undivided attention to **Orsogna**.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: OPERATION TORSO

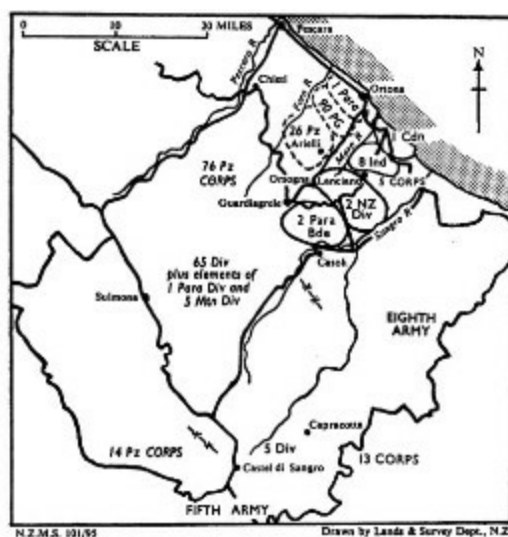
### *II: Operation TORSO*

(i)

The General's decision on the morning of the 5th to launch a divisional attack set in train a regrouping. The right flank was buttressed by machine-gunners who took up positions to the right of 25 Battalion, whence they could harass the enemy across the **Moro** on Sfasciata ridge. The Maoris of **28 Battalion** moved forward to a lying-up area behind the 6 Brigade battalions on the San Felice and Pascuccio ridges, gathered their supporting weapons about them and reconnoitred routes forward for vehicles, only to find that neither Sfasciata nor Pascuccio was negotiable by tracks or wheels. The discovery was of tactical significance, for it dictated the decision to move all the vehicles of both brigades along 6 Brigade's road over Brecciarola and through **Orsogna** – the only passable route on the Division's front. On the left flank, 22 Battalion, which had observed continued enemy activity about the **Melone** road fork, was relieved by **6 Parachute Battalion**. The arrival of fresh British field and medium guns strengthened the artillery. In the drizzling rain of the 6th, the preparations went on. By night the four 17-pounder guns of Q Anti-Tank Troop were with difficulty hauled up the San Felice ridge and dug in to command the **Ortona** road. The Bofors guns of **42 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery** crossed the **Sangro**, leaving protection against air attack south of the river to the **Eighth Army**. Two bulldozers joined 24 Battalion across the **Moro** ready to fill craters on the road to **Orsogna**. In the three or four days before the attack the ammunition point issued 50,000 rounds of 25-pounder ammunition to the field regiments. In such ways the units toiled; and meanwhile the senior officers schemed.

The divisional plan of attack had a long pre-natal existence, and its

career usefully illustrates the way in which broad tactical aims are gradually translated into the precise directions of operation orders. The conference on the morning of the 5th was followed by another in the evening lasting two hours and a half, during which the details of artillery support were debated at length. The plan was reviewed next morning, and after a reconnaissance with his brigadiers the Divisional Commander resolved on a daylight attack the following afternoon (7 December) to give the infantry time to occupy the objectives before dark, while denying the enemy time to counter-attack. Having discussed the outline plan with his staff officers, he visited the Army Commander and, while at Army Headquarters, talked over air support for the attack with the Air Officer Commanding. Back at his own headquarters in the late afternoon, he had to settle a difference of opinion between the two infantry brigade commanders as to the infantry rate of advance before conducting a further conference. That night the divisional operation order was issued. Even so, the General was still considering a preliminary attack the next morning, and he telephoned his brigadiers to discuss the possibility. At 9 a.m. on the 7th the final conference met at 6 Brigade Headquarters, where the General decided to adhere to the operation order issued the previous night, subject to modifications in the artillery and air programmes. Such flexibility of planning demands equal flexibility of execution by subordinate commanders; and the battalion commanders of 5



N.Z.M.S. 101/95 Drawn by Land & Survey Dept., N.Z.

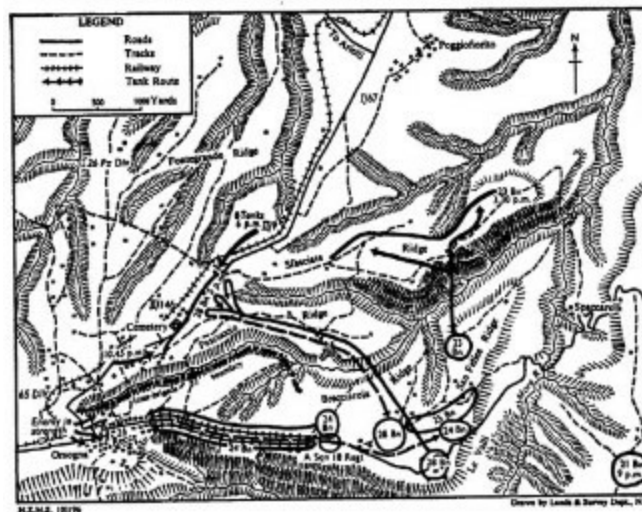
EIGHTH ARMY FRONT, 7 DECEMBER

EIGHTH ARMY FRONT, 7 DECEMBER

Brigade received their orders from **Brigadier Kippenberger** only about two hours and a half before the opening of the artillery barrage.

**Freyberg** had no illusions about the toughness of the task he was setting his troops. When he first decided on a two-brigade attack, he warned the Army Commander that, because of the poverty of communications, he expected the Division to be engaged in heavier fighting than hitherto. Characteristically, Montgomery extracted the most cheerful ingredient from the situation – the lack of depth in the German position, of which Herr was indeed uneasily aware. The hard going forced **Freyberg** to the reluctant choice of a frontal attack, but Montgomery found comfort in the ‘tremendous concentration’ that would accompany it.

In essence, the final plan for operation **TORSO** was for a direct infantry assault on **Orsogna** and a 2000-yard stretch of the ridge



OPERATION TORSO: 5 AND 6 BRIGADES' ATTACK ON 7 DECEMBER

OPERATION TORSO: 5 AND 6 BRIGADES' ATTACK ON 7 DECEMBER

running north-east from the town, with the weighty support of guns and aircraft and with tanks to exploit success. The objectives were to be approached from the east along two parallel spurs, with 5 Brigade on the right advancing along the Pascuccio feature as far as the **Ortona** road and 6 Brigade on the left directed along Brecciarola ridge to **Orsogna** and the high ground behind it. The vital thrust was that to be aimed by 6

**Brigade at Orsogna**; for though it could succeed independently, if it failed all was lost. Fifth Brigade could not be expected to hold its objective against tanks unless 6 Brigade cleared a way through **Orsogna** for its supporting weapons. This weakness in the plan, giving, as it were, only one chance instead of two, was perhaps unavoidable until the **Sfasciata spur** was in New Zealand hands.

The start line ran roughly parallel to the **Ortona** road, rather less than a mile from the objectives on both flanks. The assault on 5 Brigade's front was to be made by **28 Battalion**, and 23 Battalion, moving in under artillery concentrations and smoke, was to occupy part of the **Sfasciata** ridge as right-flank guard. Sixth Brigade gave the task of assaulting **Orsogna** itself to 24 Battalion. Of its other two battalions, the 25th in its existing position would provide the firm base for **5 Brigade** and the 26th would do the same for 6 Brigade by moving into the positions vacated by 24 Battalion after the attack began.

The forming up of the assaulting battalions was to be curtailed by a standing barrage from 4 and 5 New Zealand Field Regiments and 111 Field Regiment, **Royal Artillery**, 300 yards ahead of the start line from 1 p.m. to 2.30. The barrage would then move forward ahead of the infantry, lifting 100 yards in six minutes and finishing on the road 500 yards west of **Orsogna**.<sup>1</sup> For three and a half hours from one o'clock, three troops of medium guns were to shell the town and the road west of it and one troop was turned on to **Sfasciata**, which was also the target for **6 Field Regiment**, firing smoke for twenty minutes and then concentrations until 4.10. To impede the movement of enemy reinforcements, the main road on either side of **Orsogna** was to be shelled by 1 Air Landing Light Regiment, and a counter-battery programme lasting ninety-eight minutes was ordered. In sum, planned support was on the scale of 300 rounds for each field gun and 100 for each medium gun. Air support was to be continuous from 1.30 to four o'clock. First, for half an hour, thirteen squadrons of fighter-bombers would attack **Orsogna**, and then for two hours they would harass roads in the areas of **Arielli** and **Filetto** and the German artillery.

The state of communications limited the use of tanks, but 18 Regiment (less B Squadron) was to enter **Orsogna** along the road from **Lanciano**, and thence one squadron would go through the town to link up with **5 Brigade** on its objective on the right. Two bulldozers were provided to fill demolitions on the **Lanciano– Orsogna** road. Each infantry brigade was assisted by the fire of 27 Machine Gun Battalion as well as by its 4·2-inch mortars. The security of the right flank was in charge of **5 Brigade**, which, as already noted, was to occupy part of Sfasciata ridge, and the left flank was protected by **2 Parachute Brigade**, which would stay where it was.

(ii)

How were the Germans disposed to meet this attack? Not for the first time, they were surprised during a complicated reshuffling of their scanty resources. Herr's first thought, as soon as **76 Corps** had fallen back behind the **Moro**, was to reorganise his corps, rest his hardest-hit formations and order urgent defensive works. Strongpoints, well dug in, wired, and shielded by minefields, were to be organised in depth in a chessboard pattern, and drivers and supply

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<sup>1</sup> The rate of advance of the barrage was fixed after a practice by a company of 21 Battalion in similar country near **Castelfrentano**. **Kippenberger** would have preferred a rate of 100 yards in eight minutes but the cost in ammunition would have been too high.

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troops were called to man the rear portions of the defence zone. While this was being done, he could regroup. Ranging from the sea south-westwards to the mountains, **76 Panzer Corps** had under command **90 Panzer Grenadier Division**, **65 Infantry Division**, **26 Panzer Division**, and **1 Parachute Division**. The sorely-tried **65 Division** was the first to be pulled out. On 3 December its headquarters left the line and its sector and troops were divided between **26 Division** and **90 Division**, which extended their boundaries east and west respectively to

meet on the line **Arielli– Lanciano**.

No sooner had this change been made, however, than a new tactical appreciation forced another. Reports that the New Zealanders were thinning out in the **Melone** area and that their tanks facing **Orsogna** had gone chimed in with evidence of the reinforcement of **5 Corps** near the coast to convince the German command that the British were shifting their weight to the east, where the country was more suitable for tanks. The enemy felt it essential to conform, especially in view of the indifferent showing of the comparatively inexperienced and undertrained *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* in the coastal sector. Herr therefore ordered *26 Panzer Division* still farther east and recalled **65 Division** to the line in the sector between *26 Panzer Division* and the Majella, where it seemed less likely to be overstrained. The new boundary ran through **Orsogna**, as from 4 p.m. on 7 December. At this time, too, consequential reliefs were taking place, for the Germans had calculated that no big attack could come before 8 December.

When the New Zealand attack went in, the **5 Brigade** front was held by the right-hand companies of *9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, which during a short period in reserve had been reinforced to a fighting strength of 930, and by *II Battalion 146 Regiment*, extending to the outskirts of **Orsogna**. The defence of **Orsogna** itself was committed mainly to three companies of *26 Panzer Reconnaissance Unit*, which were about to be relieved by *III Battalion 4 Parachute Regiment*; and these companies had the support of one platoon of engineers and another of infantrymen from *146 Regiment*, 28 machine guns, 4 anti-tank guns, 4 mortars and 10 tanks (including two with flame-throwers). Farther west towards **Melone**, on *65 Division's* new front, the line was held by paratroops, who had gradually been brought over from the untroubled mountain sector.

(iii)

The enemy was thus deceived (or deceived himself) into expecting an attack later and elsewhere. The weather on the day deepened the



deception. The 7th was showery, with poor visibility – ideal for



Embarking at Alexandria for Italy  
**Embarking at Alexandria for Italy**



Going ashore at Taranto  
**Going ashore at Taranto**



Vehicles of the Divisional Cavalry make their way over muddy roads to the Sangro

**Vehicles of the Divisional Cavalry make their way over muddy roads to the Sangro**



Headquarters of the Divisional Artillery in its first engagement in Italy

**Headquarters of the Divisional Artillery in its first engagement in Italy**



A party of New Zealand engineers repairs a deviation by a demolished bridge

**A party of New Zealand engineers repairs a deviation by a demolished bridge**



Brigadier C. E. Weir, Brigadier G. B. Parkinson, and General Freyberg  
Eden da Sangro bank

**Brigadier C. E. Weir, Brigadier G. B. Parkinson, and General Freyberg before the Sangro battle**



Flat land north of the Sangro River cut up by vehicles of 2 NZ Division

**Flat land north of the Sangro River cut up by vehicles of 2 NZ Division**

Manhandling a truck bogged at the Sangro



**Manhandling a truck bogged at the Sangro**



A Bailey bridge over the Sangro River

**A Bailey bridge over the Sangro River**



18 Regiment tanks pass through a minefield after the attack on  
15-16 December 1943

**18 Regiment tanks pass through a minefield after the attack on 15-16 December 1943**



Engineers making a corduroy road up to the Sangro  
**Engineers making a corduroy road up to the Sangro**



Castelfrentano

**Castelfrentano**



Brigadiers Parkinson and Kippenberger and Lieutenant-Colonel R. E. Romans discuss plans for an attack

**Brigadiers Parkinson and Kippenberger and Lieutenant-Colonel R. E. Romans discuss plans for an attack**



General Sir Alan Brooke (Chief of the Imperial General Staff), General Freyberg, and General Sir Harold Alexander, December 1943

**General Sir Alan Brooke (Chief of the Imperial General Staff), General Freyberg, and General Sir Harold Alexander, December 1943**



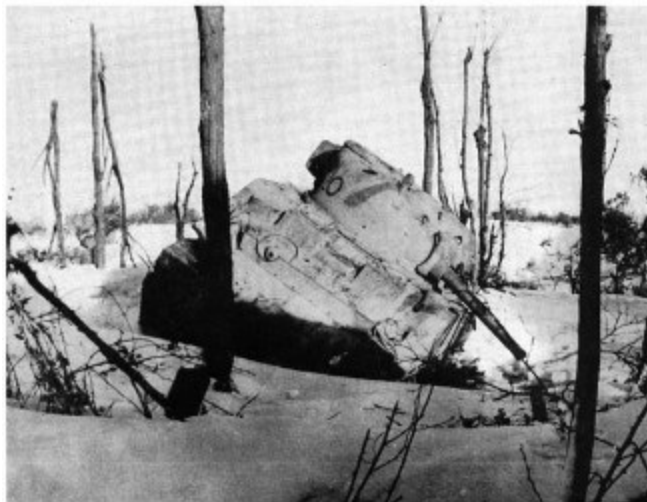
A New Zealand 25-pounder in action at the Sangro

**A New Zealand 25-pounder in action at the Sangro**



Mud near Castelfrentano

**Mud near Castelfrentano**



18 Regiment tank casualty on Cemetery Ridge

**18 Regiment tank casualty on Cemetery Ridge**

Road to the Divisional Signals cookhouse at the Sangro



**Road to the Divisional Signals cookhouse at the Sangro**



The Majella Mountains

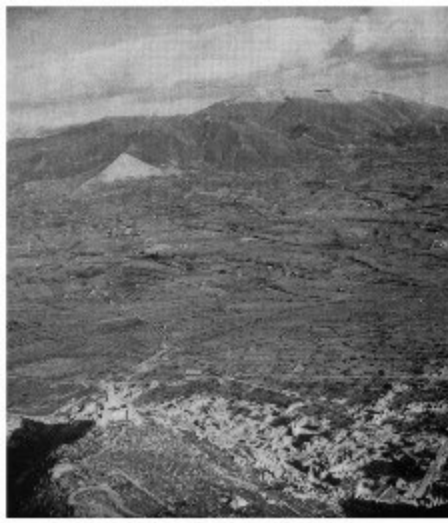
**The Majella Mountains**

Transport in heavy snow



**Transport in heavy snow**





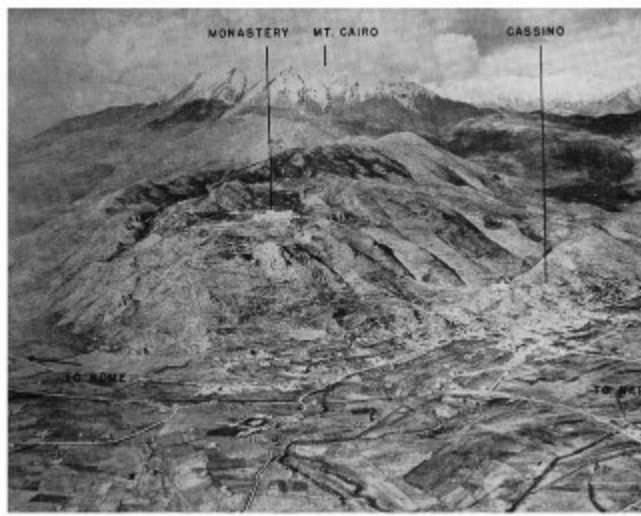
Air view of Cassino looking south-east. Castle Hill is on the left, Route 6 and the convent on the right.

**Air view of Cassino looking south-east. Castle Hill is on the left, Route 6 and the convent on the right**



This photograph makes a panorama when joined with the one on the opposite page. Route 6 is on the left, the railway and the hummock on the right, and Monte Trocchio in the middle distance.

**This photograph makes a panorama when joined with the one on the opposite page. Route 6 is on the left, the railway and the hummock on the right, and Monte Trocchio in the middle distance**



Aerial view of Cassino and Monastery Hill

### Aerial view of **Cassino** and **Monastery Hill**

laying smoke screens but unsuitable for air support, without which the Germans did not think the British would attack. What the Division gained in surprise it lost in weight of metal. Precisely at 1.30, when the first wave of aircraft dropped their bombs west of **Orsogna**, the weather thickened, targets were obscured by cloud and smoke and accurate bombing became impossible. Spitfires patrolled continuously over the enemy lines during the afternoon, but it was too late for the bombers to operate with much success when the weather eventually cleared at four o'clock.

On the ground, however, all went well for a while. Though harassed by the enemy's defensive fire on San Felice, 23 and 28 Battalions suffered few casualties in forming up and moving through 25 Battalion to their start lines. Both battalions had a hard pull to the start line, especially the Maoris, who had to breast the San Felice ridge, plunge down a steep gully, cross a stream and plod up the slippery and in places precipitous slopes of Pascuccio spur, some carrying Piat mortars and anti-tank grenades; but at 2.30, when the barrage began to move forward, the two battalions were ready to follow it into the smoke haze. The 23rd had a comparatively easy advance. There was a stiff climb but the objective was not distant, the only resistance was shell and mortar fire, and the battalion was protected by the fire of **2 Machine Gun Company** and of 25 Battalion from San Felice. By 3.30 the battalion was

firmly established along the crest of Sfasciata. The Maoris now had less cause to look with apprehension over their right shoulder.

The route of **28 Battalion** took them along the razor back of Pascuccio spur to an escarpment rising almost sheer in places to the **Ortona** road, whence the enemy would have commanded the whole feature but for the smoke. On the right, C Company (Captain Wirepa) <sup>1</sup> was harried by machine-gun fire across the valley from Sfasciata and slowed down by minefields, but it brushed aside lightly-held German posts, mainly in buildings, and by five o'clock had gained the road, where it dug in. Farther left, D Company (Captain Ornberg) <sup>2</sup> found itself outrun by the barrage through having to scramble over muddy, broken country. Then came a climb, hand over hand, up the escarpment under fire from enemy machine guns emplaced on the brow. The fight that ensued threatened deadlock until A Company (Captain Henare), <sup>3</sup> following up the two forward companies, worked its way between them and swung round to attack the German posts from the rear. In the gathering darkness D Company resumed the advance, the leading platoon

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj T. Wirepa**; Ruatoria; born Te Araroa, 25 Feb 1916; clerk; wounded 18 Nov 1941.

<sup>2</sup> **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.

<sup>3</sup> **Lt-Col J. C. Henare**, DSO, m.i.d.; Motatau; born Motatau, 18 Nov 1911; farmer; CO **28 (Maori) Bn** Jun 1945–Jan 1946; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

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pressing on across the road to the railway line 200 yards beyond. With some hundreds of yards of the main road in its hands, the battalion had penetrated four or five hundred yards into the German defences and won a lodgment on its objective.

The opening barrage had wrecked the panzer division's communications, leaving headquarters without news for two and a half hours after the attack began. Further, by a not uncommon chance, the Maoris' attack overlapped a formation boundary. On their right they met the sturdy infantry of *9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, but the right-hand company of panzer grenadiers gave ground. Their outposts, either destroyed or dazed by the gunfire, were overrun by the Maoris, who appeared suddenly out of the smoke close up behind the barrage. The gap in the defence was widened, and the partial outflanking of the panzer grenadiers made possible, by the poor effort of *146 Regiment's* left-hand company, which scattered in such disarray that by evening only ten of its men had been rallied.

The Maoris now had to face counter-attack from two flanks – on the right by a reserve company of panzer grenadiers and on the left by a reserve company of *II Battalion 146 Regiment*. The former was the more dangerous; it came earlier, it was made by better infantry and, above all, it was supported by tanks. It was C Company, on the right, that first bore the brunt of the enemy reaction. Aware of its vulnerability to tanks, the company had laid Hawkins mines on the road to the north; but shortly after six o'clock eight Mark IV tanks of *26 Panzer Regiment*, with the panzer grenadier reserve company in support, opened fire on C Company's position. The company was forced back to the escarpment and then downhill on to Pascuccio ridge, where it was reorganised and put in reserve. In its retirement it damaged two of the tanks by Piat fire. It was replaced by B Company (Major Sorensen),<sup>1</sup> which only with difficulty and after some time established itself at the top of the cliff.

Meanwhile the German tanks, without their infantry, had passed on down the road towards the **Orsogna** cemetery. There D Company came under close-range attack and withdrew its foremost platoon across the road to the cliff-top. A Company, however, scaled the cliffs and, moving behind D Company, took up a position north of the road near the cemetery, where it dealt to its own satisfaction with some enemy posts.

Finally, the German tanks returned to their starting point, apparently glad to escape the heavy shellfire.

It was now time for **28 Battalion** to face left. The reserve company of **146 Regiment** had bungled its first counter-attack by getting lost and when, towards eleven o'clock, it came at A Company's

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj C. Sorensen; Whangarei; born Auckland, 5 Jun 1917; school teacher; twice wounded.**

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left flank, near the cemetery, it was repulsed by small-arms and artillery fire. The Maoris counted five distinct thrusts, but each was thrown back in close fighting. 'In one attack,' reported A Company, 'the enemy had the temerity to charge with fixed bayonets, but it fizzled out when the whole company got out of their trenches and accepted the challenge'.

By midnight, then, the Maoris had weathered a succession of counter-attacks and had yielded some of their original gains only on their right to the panzer grenadiers. But all was not well. The ground they occupied was in a saucer, and even after the counter-attacks died down fire poured in on them from both flanks. Their ammunition was running short. Direct help from **23 Battalion** was impracticable: earlier in the evening a patrol of the 23rd had tried but failed to make contact with the Maoris' right flank. Most ominous of all, hopes of the early arrival of tanks and supporting arms were dying. The way through **Orsogna** was not, after all, to be cleared.

As soon as this was obvious **28 Battalion** mobilised every available man to drag two six-pounder anti-tank guns along the route the infantry had followed. They were manhandled over San Felice, but herculean efforts to pull them up the slope of Pascuccio availed nothing. These hard facts drove the Maoris' commander ( **Lieutenant-Colonel Fairbrother**) to the conclusion that when day broke his men's position would be untenable. **Brigadier Kippenberger** agreed; and, having satisfied

himself that the order would not prejudice the operations of 6 Brigade, at twenty minutes past midnight on the 8th he instructed **28 Battalion** to withdraw.

Disengagement was not easy. Despite the cover afforded by heavy artillery concentrations and by B Company in a rearguard role, A and D Companies were sped on their way by shell, mortar bomb and bullet as they straggled back with their wounded and their remaining ammunition. A Company succeeded in breaking off only after repeated calls for fire from the New Zealand guns. The Maoris' withdrawal appears to have coincided with a renewed counter-attack from the north, which may account for its hazards. The six remaining tanks of the panzer company which had attacked earlier returned to the charge with the support of the last infantry that the panzer grenadier company could muster – the remnants of the reserve company and some engineers. They found the cemetery undefended and were able to plug the hole in the line; but two further tanks were damaged. Meanwhile the Maoris retired, and by 6 a.m. most of the battalion was reunited near its forming-up point, grateful after nearly twenty hours for the comfort of hot food.

*(iv)*

The attack on the left by 24 Battalion, which was certain to be decisive for the whole operation, early lost momentum. Defensive fire, minefields and rough ground caused delay. It was five o'clock before C Company (Major Clarke), <sup>1</sup> approaching along the northern slope of Brecciarola ridge, broke into the eastern outskirts of the town, and 5.15 before B Company on the left, having lost its commander (Major Thomson) <sup>2</sup> by shellfire, penetrated the streets. The scraps of evidence from friend and foe for the battle that followed are not easily assembled into a coherent picture. Lucidity after the event would, indeed, misrepresent the real confusion of the event itself.

The advance of the two leading companies through the town was fiercely contested, and the rate of advance reported at one time – 100

yards in quarter of an hour – was, if anything, exaggerated. The Germans were firing automatic weapons from houses to which entry was barred by ‘S’ mines at doors and windows. Fighting developed at close quarters with exchanges of grenades. A flame-throwing tank of 6 *Company 26 Panzer Regiment* was detailed to clear enemy infantry from houses south of the main street. Heavy fire from the **Ortona** road north of the town halted C Company, which was still partly deployed on the hillside below the town; it was now without Major Clarke, who had been wounded. Nevertheless, by nine o'clock the attacking infantry had reached the square in the centre of the town. Here German tanks forced them to take cover and it became clear that further progress was impossible without armoured support.

By this time the New Zealand tanks were engaged in earnest. Working with the infantry of A Company (Major Aked), <sup>3</sup> the leading tanks of A Squadron 18 Regiment (Major Dickinson) <sup>4</sup> were held up by a mined crater at the entrance to the town. A platoon cleared out a pocket of Germans covering the demolition, but the bulldozer that began filling it was put out of action by shellfire. The armour was delayed by a further demolition, east of the first, which was blown just as a second troop of tanks moved up. A detour was found, however, and by dusk seven tanks had banked

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj E. S. Clarke**; born **Auckland**, 18 Jun 1905; school teacher; wounded 7 Dec 1943; died of wounds 20 Dec 1943.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj I. M. Thomson**; born **Auckland**, 3 Jul 1914; accountant; wounded Jul 1942; killed in action 7 Dec 1943.

<sup>3</sup> **Lt-Col E. W. Aked**, MC, m.i.d., Aristion Andrias (Greek); **Tauranga**; born England, 12 Feb 1911; shop assistant; CO **24 Bn** 4–8 Jun 1944; CO 210 British Liaison Unit with 3 Greek Bde in **Italy and Greece**, 1944–45.

<sup>4</sup> **Maj A. H. Dickinson**; **Tauranga**; born **Auckland**, 4 Jan 1917;

civil servant; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

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up behind the first gap in the road. After dark this was repaired by the second bulldozer and the tanks drove on into the town.

Trouble awaited them there. Concealed from our own tanks but commanding their route of advance was a German tank, which it proved impossible to shift. When they tried to dispose of it with Molotov cocktails and sticky bombs, the New Zealand infantry were driven to earth by spandau fire from surrounding houses. Minefields on the right and heavy fire on the left prevented the tanks from making an outflanking move; and all this time the forward companies, trying to clear an exit to the north-east to bring help to the Maoris, were fighting an unequal battle with the German armour.

In a last effort to punch a passage for our own tanks, B and C Companies withdrew on to A Company just outside the town for a concerted attack under cover of tank fire. The two forward companies were now so disorganised that they could collect no more than 4 officers and 39 men, who, with A Company, renewed the assault. Though our fire drove the enemy to the refuge of cellars and was closely followed up by the infantry, and though penetration was achieved, the Germans, now reinforced by paratroops, counter-attacked hotly and claimed shortly after midnight to have restored the position. Thus repulsed, the New Zealand tanks and infantry retired to make a defensive laager for the night near the demolitions outside the town.

At a conference at 2.30 a.m. with **General Freyberg** and Brigadier Parkinson, the battalion commander (Lieutenant-Colonel Conolly) urged withdrawal: his companies were faced with stalemate in **Orsogna**; the ground they precariously held was unlikely to be of use for future operations; and they could only stay where they were at an excessive cost in casualties. By now **28 Battalion** had withdrawn. These considerations led the General to sanction the withdrawal of the 24th; but in addition, he desired to bomb **Orsogna** again by daylight and



believed that 6 Brigade would be able to reoccupy it without trouble the following night. Behind a screen provided by D Company, still in reserve, the tanks and the rest of the battalion withdrew without incident.

(v)

For the second time the Division had failed to capture Orsogna by direct assault. Yet once again the defenders had been hard pressed, and they appear to have conquered confusion only by improvisation. Soon after the attack began, 76 Panzer Corps consented to postpone the relief of 26 Panzer Reconnaissance Unit in Orsogna by III Battalion 4 Parachute Regiment but did not agree to put the paratroops under command of 26 Panzer Division until eight o'clock, when the last infantry reserves in the town had been committed. The parachute battalion was then ordered to send its strongest company (of about eighty men) to Orsogna, where they arrived in time to help repel the New Zealanders' last attack. Corps also embarrassed the defence of the town by refusing, and then agreeing, to postpone the transfer of responsibility for it from the panzer division to 65 Division, and it had been unhelpful towards requests for the return of tank companies from 90 Panzer Grenadier Division on the left. The stalwarts in Orsogna were not pampered.

With charge and counter-charge, the battle in Orsogna swayed this way and that. But the determining cause of the Division's defeat seems to have been the local tank superiority of the Germans. While the New Zealand armour was stalled by demolitions at the entrance to the town, the German tanks took up a commanding position on the high ground, from which they could outgun the attackers and from which they could not be outflanked. Against this handicap the dash of the New Zealand infantry could not prevail, even though, as on 5 Brigade's front, they moved so closely behind the artillery barrage and concentrations that word went round among the Germans that the enemy was firing shells which exploded with a loud noise but without lethal effect.

Operation TORSO cost the Division in casualties about 30 killed or

died of wounds, about 90 wounded, and between 30 and 40 missing.<sup>1</sup> Two tanks had to be abandoned with broken tracks near **Orsogna**. Losses inflicted on the enemy included 14 killed, 40 wounded, and over 50 prisoners, and damage was done to several tanks.

The operation taught important tactical lessons, both general and specific. Among the general lessons, it encouraged a distaste for daylight attacks on prepared defences; it showed the unwisdom of attempting simultaneously to bomb a target from the air and smoke it from the ground; and it underlined (if emphasis was required) the need for bringing up tank and anti-tank support without delay to infantry on their objectives.

From this last general axiom, it was only a short step to deduce a specific application. Both assaulting battalions had been at the mercy of enemy armour. How, then, was armour of our own to find a way on to the main road? The route along Brecciarola ridge was securely stopped by the clustered buildings of **Orsogna**, the route along Pascuccio by the escarpment. In any case, both spurs were so narrow and bottle-necked near the road that they gave no room at all for tanks to deploy and were capable of sustaining the communications

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<sup>1</sup> The battalions' casualties were: 24 Battalion—10 killed, 49 wounded, 19 missing; 28 Battalion—11 killed, 30 wounded, 16 missing; 23 Battalion—8 killed, 14 wounded.

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behind a large-scale attack about as efficiently as an elephant could be fed through two straws. But north of them lay the broader, comparatively flat-topped spur of Sfasciata, offering easy access (topographically speaking) to a long reach of the **Ortona** road. And it so happened that the sole territorial gain of the operation was 23 Battalion's footing on this spur. Henceforth tactical interest shifts to the possibility of exploiting Sfasciata as a springboard for a movement to envelop **Orsogna** from the north.

**This was the tenor of the discussion at the Divisional Commander's morning conference on the 8th. Twenty-third Battalion was therefore ordered to stand firm in its salient. Though exposed, it was in the meantime safe from enemy attack owing to the softness of the ground. Energies were now turned towards finding a route forward for supporting weapons.**

**(vi)**

**Two possible crossings of the Moro were reconnoitred and the choice fell upon the more southerly. From the village of Spaccarelli on the Lanciano- Orsogna road a cart track ran north, dropped down into the Moro near the north-eastern tip of San Felice ridge, wound up the slope of Sfasciata, and ran along the top to join the Ortona road a few hundred yards north of the cemetery. For all but the last thousand yards or so this track lay within the New Zealand lines. Given a spell of dry weather – and the 8th was the first of three fine days – it promised access for tanks to the Ortona road without the necessity of blasting a passage through Orsogna. With machine-gun and artillery fire to drown the din, bulldozers began work on the ford on the night of 8–9 December, improving the approaches for tanks and hauling across the stream and up Sfasciata six six-pounder anti-tank guns. Four guns were sited to protect 23 Battalion, which further reassured itself by laying mines brought up by mules.**

**Freyberg's inclination towards a thrust on the right by way of Sfasciata, which Kippenberger thought the most promising approach, must have been confirmed by events on the centre and left of the Division's front. Orsogna was bombed or strafed no fewer than twenty-three times during the 8th, and two 26 Battalion patrols which inspected the demolition at the entrance to the town that night reported it untouched and found no sign of enemy movement. A 28 Battalion patrol to Pascuccio found that nine wounded Germans who had been left in a house there during the attack had not been claimed and brought them back. But evidence such as this, suggesting that the Germans were**

withdrawing from **Orsogna**, was easily outweighed. Undeniably hostile fire greeted a raid by B Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry towards the **Melone** road fork on the left. Even less ambiguous was the reaction to a provocative gesture by eight tanks of A Squadron 18 Regiment, which on the morning of the 9th stood off at 500 yards to shell **Orsogna**. The Germans demonstrated their abiding interest in the town by surrounding it with a smoke screen, moving tanks forward to its eastern edge to engage our own and bringing down heavy defensive fire. Interpreting this as a reconnaissance thrust, the Germans believed that a renewed attack was imminent in the **Orsogna– Melone** sector. Meanwhile, farther north, where they expected no attack, the Division was preparing one and was building up its strength in the Sfasciata salient.

It was to be launched by **5 Brigade** on the night of 10–11 December, to give time for the ground to dry and for the armour to be moved into position on Sfasciata. With the support of 18 Regiment, 23 Battalion was to advance from Sfasciata under a barrage and cut the **Ortona** road north of the cemetery. At dawn 20 Regiment, with two companies of 21 Battalion and one of 22 Battalion, was to pass through and exploit south-west along the road to the high ground immediately north of **Orsogna**. Sixth Brigade would occupy Pascuccio on **5 Brigade's** left. As part of the necessary regrouping of the armoured regiments, the 18th vindicated the sappers' workmanship on the **Moro ford** (and its own determination) by getting all of its twenty-eight tanks on to Sfasciata by 11 p.m. on the 9th, in spite of pitch darkness and the roughness of the track.

The 10th was a day of oscillating intentions. It began with a decision, announced by the Divisional Commander at the morning conference, to cancel the attack. While the Division was preoccupied with the problem of **Orsogna**, **5 Corps** on its right had embarked on a full-scale offensive of its own. On the night of 8–9 December **1 Canadian Division** established a bridgehead across the **Moro** near the coast, but to the ensuing fluctuations of its fortunes, and those of **8 Indian Division**, the New Zealanders' right-hand neighbours, the Division could not be

indifferent. It was under the influence of a setback to **5 Corps** that the New Zealand attack was cancelled, since it had been intended to keep step with the advance on the right. **Freyberg** now ordered active patrolling to prevent a diversion of enemy troops to the coastal sector.

More cheerful reports of Canadian progress, however, prompted second thoughts, and soon after midday the General was contemplating a silent attack by **5 Brigade**, with the armoured follow-through as planned. Accordingly, 23 Battalion at dusk sent out two patrols, one to the **Moro** river east of **Poggiofiorito** to see if the ground was clear between the Division and the Indians, and another to the **Ortona** road to discover whether it was being defended. If the road was not being held, it would be seized that night so that 20 Regiment might pass through next morning, mop up **Orsogna**, and exploit towards **Filetto** and **Guardiagrele**. The patrol to the **Poggiofiorito** area found it empty, but the other patrol heard movement suggesting that the road was being held in force.

It was finally decided, therefore, to abandon the more ambitious plan; but 23 Battalion's left flank on Sfasciata was reinforced with infantry and anti-tank guns and extended to within 500 yards of the road. These dispositions were defensive and, at the same time, far enough forward to allow tanks to deploy and to emerge on to the road if daylight brought suitable opportunities. Overnight rain made the going sloppy and **5 Brigade** could attempt no aggressive strokes. But in its tanks, well concealed in a position to strike from Sfasciata, it was keeping rods in pickle.

Meanwhile, wet weather and a regrouping of **Eighth Army** confined the Division's active operations for a few days to the routine menaces implied by the Army Commander's instruction to demonstrate against sensitive places. In the mountain sector on the left snow, rain and crumbling roads had ruled out the offensive, and General Montgomery now decided to transfer strength from this sector towards the coast, where he thought that a concentrated blow might yet achieve a breakthrough. Fifth Division, relieved in the mountains by the weaker **78 Division**, would come into the line between **2 New Zealand Division** and

**5 Corps.** The New Zealanders would then join **5 Division** under command of **13 Corps** (Lieutenant-General M. C. Dempsey), giving Montgomery four divisions to mount an attack between **Orsogna** and the sea. It would take some days to complete the move, and in the meantime **17 Infantry Brigade** of **5 Division** (Brigadier Ward) was ordered into the line under New Zealand command to fill the gap between the New Zealanders and the Indians. On the night 12–13 December it occupied the sector between **Frisa** and **Lanciano**, the Division's right-hand boundary having been temporarily extended north-east.

Since **5 Brigade's** attack by way of Sfasciata had been postponed rather than cancelled, C Company continued to deepen **23 Battalion's** salient by edging forward at night, house by house, towards the **Ortona** road. The phrase used to describe this policy – ‘peaceful penetration’ – was a pardonable euphemism, though for a few days and nights patrols from both sides played a cat-and-mouse game among the fields and scattered houses between the battalion's left wing and the road. The Germans laid mines and reconnoitred; our men lifted mines and reconnoitred, reporting traffic on the road so loud that it could be heard from C Company's advanced posts; and the area attracted intermittent attention from the gunners of both sides. All this time bulldozers and men with shovels laboured to improve the track across the **Moro ford**, over which **23 Battalion** had to be supported and supplied.

During this quiet period from 11 to 14 December, when even in the skies there was little activity, **6 Brigade** and **2 Parachute Brigade** were content by night to patrol vigorously at short range and by day to lie low. **Orsogna** was approached by patrols from all directions open to the New Zealand infantry. Their reports left no doubt that it was still held as a fortress and that it was daily becoming more nearly impregnable to frontal assault.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

# CHAPTER 6 – ORSOGNA UNCONQUERED

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## I: OPERATION FLORENCE

### *I: Operation FLORENCE*

(i)

THE fascination which in static warfare a fortress often exerts over the attacker might well have tempted **General Freyberg** once more to pit his strength against **Orsogna**. The town had twice defied him, and among commanders he was the last to allow a *contretemps* to harden into checkmate; but he wisely refused to assault it again from the front. Not **Orsogna** but a way around **Orsogna** was the objective of the coming attack.

The divisional orders for operation issued on 14 December proposed a renewal of the advance from the Sfasciata salient to cut the **Ortona** road and to prevent **26 Panzer Division** from moving towards the coast to oppose **5 Corps'** drive. The main task fell to **5 Brigade**. Of its three battalions, the 21st was to attack north-west across the ravine north of Sfasciata and seize the ridge beyond, some distance short of the main road; 23 Battalion, advancing more speedily over less broken ground, was directed west along Sfasciata to capture a mile of the road north of the cemetery; and **28 Battalion** was to remain in reserve. Once on their objectives, the assaulting battalions were to have the help of the tanks of 18 Regiment in organising against counter-attack and were to seize any opportunity to exploit to the west.

In support of this dash for a bridgehead across the road, 17 Brigade was to move forward south of **Poggiofiorito** and 6 Brigade was to guard the left flank, with 26 Battalion on Brecciarola and 25 Battalion on Pascuccio joining up with 23 Battalion at the cemetery. Barrages, timed concentrations and counter-battery fire by the artillery during and immediately after the attack, and air bombardment of approaches to the battlefield at dawn, were to help the infantry to reach and hold their

objectives. Supporting fire was also ordered from 27 Machine Gun Battalion, whose platoons were reshuffled for the purpose, and the Maoris were to man 5 Brigade's 4.2-inch mortars.

(ii)

Over 160 guns – heavy, medium and field – opened up at 1 a.m. on the 15th and soon afterwards the infantry moved forward in confusing gloom, for the full moon was obscured by cloud. Bitter cold and showers of rain made the night miserable as well as menacing. On the right, 21 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel McElroy) gained its objectives against appreciable but neither fierce nor very costly resistance. The stormiest passage was on the right, where D Company (Major Bailey) was twice held up by the fire of German posts and had trouble in keeping touch on its flanks. In the centre, A Company (Major Tanner) reached the road, swung right, and captured several enemy posts before digging in at Point 332, where the road topped a rise. Loss of direction and brushes with German machine-gunners delayed B Company (Major Hawkesby) <sup>1</sup> for a while, but by about 3.30 it was settled in across the road on A Company's left.

In its westerly attack along Sfasciata 23 Battalion paid heavier penalties. No sooner had it crossed the start line than it lost men from shellfire, and then it ran into the belt of defensive fire on the narrow neck of land which formed the only route for vehicles on to the road. Casualties were so many that the supply of stretchers gave out and some of the wounded had to wait for more to be brought up. Meanwhile the companies pushed on. First to reach its goal across the road was D Company (Major Ross), <sup>2</sup> which was joined in turn by A Company (Second-Lieutenant Edgar) <sup>3</sup> on its left, and on its right by B Company (now, since Captain Kirk <sup>4</sup> had been wounded, under command of Second-Lieutenant Irving). <sup>5</sup> It was a weakened and disorganised battalion that now settled on its objective. In the dark men had strayed from their own platoons and companies; pockets of the enemy overrun on the way forward now started into vicious life by opening fire from the

rear and it was hard to tell friend from foe. Before the battalion could consolidate, it had to drive off repeated enemy efforts to breach D Company's front, and it was under continuous shellfire. Moreover, anxiety was felt for the safety of its left flank. Having lost about 40 per cent of its assaulting strength, the battalion could not extend its left as far as the cemetery and was out of touch with 25 Battalion. A tentative

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj G. H. Hawkesby**, DSO; **Howick**; born **Auckland**, 18 Apr 1915; manufacturer's representative; wounded 28 May 1944.

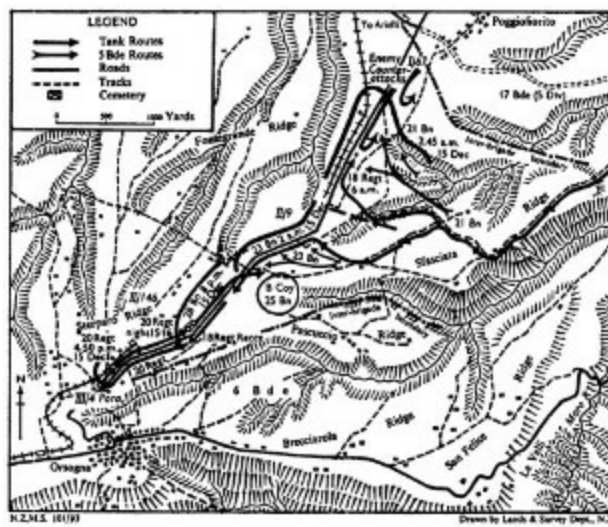
<sup>2</sup> **Maj A. Ross**, MC and bar, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Greek); **Dunedin**; born **Herbert**, North Otago, 19 Jul 1911; university lecturer; **BM 5 Bde Aug–Dec 1944**; four times wounded.

<sup>3</sup> **Capt S. J. Edgar**, m.i.d.; **Tapanui**; born **Tapanui**, 8 May 1913; farm worker; twice wounded.

<sup>4</sup> **Capt V. D. Kirk**, DCM; **Blackball**; born **Blackball**, 17 Sep 1915; winchman; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

<sup>5</sup> **Capt. F. C. Irving**, MC; **Otautau**; born **Invercargill**, 13 Aug 1918; sawmill hand; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped 22 Jun; safe in **Egypt** 28 Aug 1941.

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OPERATION FLORENCE: 5 BRIGADE'S ATTACK ON 15 DECEMBER

OPERATION FLORENCE: 5 BRIGADE'S ATTACK ON 15 DECEMBER

contact was made after daylight, but it was not until 23 Battalion committed its reserve (C Company) in the area in mid-afternoon that it was possible to stabilise the line near the cemetery.

But 'at the other side of the hill' there was no less perturbation. Lieutenant-General Luettwitz, commanding *26 Panzer Division*, was a worried man. He had four battalions in the line between Poggiofiorito and Orsogna, but his one reserve battalion had been withdrawn to stem 5 Corps on the coastal sector and his last tanks had also been ordered east, so that when the New Zealanders attacked he had none between Arielli and Orsogna and had to rely on a strong line of anti-tank guns just behind his forward troops. Nor was the first news very reassuring as it filtered in over severely disrupted communications. The full shock of 5 Brigade's attack fell on the three companies of *II Battalion 9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, which were walled in by gunfire and then, fighting to the last in a tumult, were almost wiped out by the infantry who followed up. The forward German anti-tank and infantry guns and their crews were badly shaken by the bombardment.

Nevertheless, the enemy responded with such reserves as he could find. A few tanks, called up from Arielli, according to the German estimate 'did not go too well in the dark', but they caused some alarm to the New Zealand infantry as they bore down along the road from the

north-east. D Company 21 Battalion was partly scattered, A Company retreated 300 yards behind the road, and most of B Company was temporarily cut off as the tanks moved along the road behind it, firing freely. As yet without anti-tank guns or tank support of their own, the New Zealand infantrymen lay open to the German armour, which swept the forward area with fire until nearly six o'clock, when it withdrew at leisure – and with discreet timing, as it proved, for shortly afterwards the first of 18 Regiment's tanks appeared. So sustained, the infantry companies used the respite to rally and reoccupy their forward positions. Two or three hours later D Company was again disturbed by a second wave of enemy tanks rumbling down from the north-east, but this time 18 Regiment's tanks were there to counter-attack, destroy one and drive the rest back.

The arrival of the tanks in close support of the infantry was an important stage in the unfolding of the New Zealand battle plan. It was, too, a victory for perseverance and ingenuity; for memories of Ruweisat and El Mreir completed the determination of the men of 4 Armoured Brigade never to fail the New Zealand infantry. Within an hour of the opening of the attack the twenty-eight tanks of 18 Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel Pleasants), <sup>1</sup> hitherto concealed on Sfasciata, were struggling painfully in single file along the spur towards the main road. Ahead of them a party of engineers from **7 Field Company** cleared mines from the muddy track and each commander guided his tank on foot. The misadventures of C Squadron (Captain Deans), <sup>2</sup> which was in the lead, were only too typical of the mingled hazards of enemy interference and of rough, confined ground made treacherous by rain. Of its nine tanks, only one reached the road. One slid off the track where it ran along the brink of a steep hillside; two burned out their clutches; three immobilised themselves in churned mud; two missed the track in the confusion caused by enemy fire. The sole survivor of this luckless cavalcade eventually joined B Company 21 Battalion. A Squadron (Major Dickinson) and B Squadron (Captain K. L. Brown) <sup>3</sup> were somewhat more fortunate, though not scatheless. The substantial result of the regiment's effort was that shortly after dawn each infantry battalion had

five tanks in close support and two troops were

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<sup>1</sup> **Brig C. L. Pleasants**, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; 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; Commandant, Northern Military District, 1953–.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj H. H. Deans**; **Darfield**; born **Christchurch**, 26 Jan 1917; shepherd.

<sup>3</sup> **Maj K. L. Brown**, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Greek); **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 22 Nov 1915; salesman.

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in reserve, with perhaps two tanks in the cemetery on the left flank of the bridgehead.

Still, the regiment was now too weak to undertake unaided the task of exploitation towards **Orsogna**. At 8.30 a.m., therefore, 20 Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel McKergow) <sup>1</sup> was ordered to send a squadron to **5 Brigade**. The route presented two difficulties which 18 Regiment, having set out from Sfasciata, did not have to overcome. One was the deterioration of the track above the **Moro** crossing; it was steep and slippery, but the bulldozer at the ford could and did keep it open. The other was that the approach road, especially at the descriptively named 'Hellfire Corner', was exposed to enemy observation from **Orsogna** and **Poggiofiorito**. These two points had to be blinded by the smoke shells of New Zealand guns, and it was mid-morning before C Squadron (Major Barton), <sup>2</sup> fourteen tanks strong, moved off. The smoke cover gave the squadron untroubled passage. Soon after 1 p.m. its two forward troops were on the road with 23 Battalion. By this time the rest of the regiment (less B Squadron), with nineteen tanks, was on the way forward to reinforce the exploitation, masked by smoke already so dense that the gunners had no need to thicken it. Of the thirty-three tanks with which

20 Regiment set out, all but five reached the forward area. So much surer was the going by day.

Insecurity at the boundaries of the two New Zealand brigades was one reason why 18 Regiment had been unable to exploit earlier, as planned. But with the strengthening of this sector and a perceptible slackening of the German fire, **Kippenberger** at eleven o'clock gave 18 Regiment the command to begin the exploitation with a reconnaissance in force past the cemetery to the western exit from **Orsogna**. He hoped to catch the Germans off balance while they were still reeling from their losses and before they could mend the gaps in their line; but he urged caution, directing the tanks to avoid heavy fighting. On arrival at the **Ortona** road, 20 Regiment was to pass through the 18th for the main exploitation, supported, if possible, by two companies of **28 Battalion**, which was being brought up from reserve at **Castelfrentano**. The object was to block the western exit from **Orsogna** and then to advance south-west to the **Melone** road fork. **Orsogna** was not to be directly assaulted unless its defences caved in, but should 20 Regiment enter it from the west 6 Brigade was to be ready to occupy it from the east, and 4 Brigade farther south was to hold itself in readiness

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col J. W. McKergow**; Rangiora; born England, 26 May 1902; farmer; CO 20 Bn Sep–Oct 1942; CO 20 Armed Regt Jun–Dec 1943; wounded 22 Dec 1943.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj P. A. Barton**; **Gisborne**; born **Gisborne**, 29 Nov 1912; bank clerk; Sqn Comd 20 Armd Regt 1942–44; 2 i/c Oct 1944–Feb 1945; CO **20 Regt** 19 Dec 1944–9 Jan 1945.

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to move at an hour's notice on **Guardiagrele** and **San Martino**.

While the New Zealand command anticipated a loosening up of the defences and a mobile phase of battle, the Germans strove desperately to repair the damage done overnight. By midday the foremost German troops north of the cemetery had withdrawn across the first gully north

of the road and were clinging to the next ridge. Holes, one of them a kilometre wide, between the remnants of *II Battalion 9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* and its two neighbours, had been filled by troops hastily scraped together, and the bending back of the line had enabled a continuous, if none too solid, front to be restored. The Corps Commander himself was on the spot, hustling all possible anti-tank guns up from the rear to fight the troublesome New Zealand tanks on the road.

Such, in brief, was the situation when, in the early afternoon, Major Dickinson set out with six of 18 Regiment's tanks along the road towards the cemetery. A few track-lengths beyond it, the leading tank was set aflame by a direct hit from an anti-tank gun. The road forward, save where it dipped into a shallow valley, was open to fire from Orsogna as well as from guns dug in among the olive trees on the right. The remaining tanks therefore took cover behind the high stucco walls that bounded the cemetery, where they replied in kind to the German machine-gun fire.

The main exploitation, by 20 Regiment, began about two hours later under cover of a smoke screen, with C Squadron leading the way. As soon as the first three tanks moved clear of the cemetery they fell to the same anti-tank gun that had already destroyed the 18 Regiment tank, two of them catching fire and one losing a track. The rest of the squadron continued to advance along an avenue of anti-tank and infantry posts, most of them sited in olive groves north of the road. When they reached the crest of the road several hundred yards due north of Orsogna, having broken through the right wing of *II Battalion 146 Regiment*, they were halted by the frontal fire of three German Mark IV tanks. Two of these were knocked out, but C Squadron lost another of its own in the encounter and a fifth which became stuck in trying to cross the railway line and had to be abandoned. With only eight tanks left, with no immediate prospect of the much-needed infantry support and with failing light to hinder it, the squadron was allowed to pull back to the cemetery. The withdrawal cost yet another tank, damaged by



shellfire and abandoned. Fifty men from 23 Battalion, organised by Captain Grant,<sup>1</sup> gave prompt infantry protection to the tank laager.

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<sup>1</sup> Lt-Col D. G. Grant, MC, m.i.d.; Invercargill; born NZ 29 Feb 1908; school teacher, CO 23 Bn May–Sep 1945; wounded Jul 1942; Rector, Southland Boys' High School.

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The party was relieved by the first of the Maoris to arrive. Twenty-eighth Battalion had marched in stages the weary, muddy miles from well beyond the Moro ford. B and C Companies on arrival threw an arc of defensive posts around the cemetery, while A and D Companies, coming up before midnight, dug in below the road east of the cemetery, ready to exploit westwards next morning.

(iii)

At this point, with Fairbrother and McKergow planning the morrow's attack, we may pause to take stock. Fifth Brigade, securely established across the main road for a mile of its length, had driven a shallow salient into the enemy's FDLs. Its right flank, though not wholly firm, was buttressed by 17 Brigade, which had battalions investing Poggiofiorito from both north and south. After the confused scrimmage of the morning, when 23 and 25 Battalions failed to link up satisfactorily and Germans and New Zealanders were intermingled in errant groups, the brigade's left flank was held by a connected line of troops. In the sector round the cemetery both sides had been at sixes and sevens. Thirty-six mobile tanks were in support – 13 of 18 Regiment in the north, ready to exploit towards Arielli and Poggiofiorito, and 23 of 20 Regiment in the cemetery area, under orders to advance again towards Orsogna in the morning. A semi-circle of defensive fire tasks gave further protection. Communications were working well. At the Moro the bulldozer – the most important single vehicle in the Division – was dragging more six-pounders across the ford, as well as speeding the transit of ammunition, supply and medical vehicles. More than a hundred prisoners had been taken. Three of the enemy's none-too-

numerous tanks had been put out of action and five of his anti-tank guns captured.

On the other hand, the brigade had exhausted nearly all its reserves. In fact, two platoons of 21 Battalion were the only infantry not in the line or about to be committed. The tanks were running short of fuel and ammunition, for the state of the tracks made it impossible to maintain reserve supplies on Sfasciata, and there was concern over ammunition for the 25-pounders. Moreover, casualties in men and machines had been punitive, though not prohibitive. Twenty-third Battalion, about 130 under establishment when the battle began, had lost another hundred in killed and wounded, and 21 Battalion, hardly less under strength, had lost about thirty. Since these losses were almost entirely in the rifle companies, fighting strength was more than proportionately diminished. Enemy fire or ground hazards had put twenty-five Shermans out of the fight, though three were to be recovered the next day. The two armoured regiments had also lost nearly thirty men killed and wounded. Among the casualties were two commanding officers – Lieutenant-Colonel Pleasants of the 18th (wounded) and Lieutenant-Colonel Romans of the 23rd, who died of wounds.

Despite these setbacks hopes were buoyant at Divisional Headquarters that night. The enemy was believed to be groggy and about to depart. **Freyberg** had a cheerful appreciation for Montgomery: **Orsogna** seemed ripe to fall and then the chase would be on towards **Filetto** and **San Martino**. For this purpose 6 Brigade was detailed as advance guard.

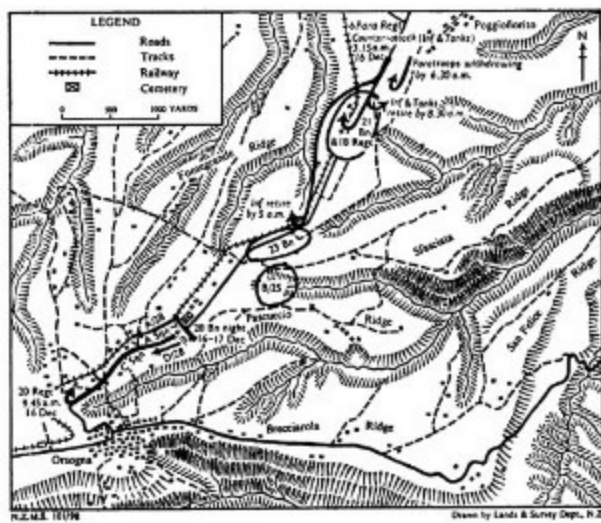
Such thoughts were far from the mind of the German command. There was no disposition to underrate the bitterness of the fighting. Lieutenant-Colonel Berger, commanding *9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, left this record of the day:

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, as they had stuck to their guns for hours under terrible

shellfire and had shot away all their ammunition. We had no men to pick up the dead and wounded, even if the fire had permitted it ....

The presence of the New Zealand tanks on the **Ortona** road roused alarm at all levels up to the highest, bringing Kesselring himself to the telephone with exhortations to employ every possible gun against the armour. Local counter-moves included the transfer of a company of mountain troops from **65 Division** and of engineers to help seal off the New Zealand penetration; but this was not enough. Since **26 Panzer Division's** plight was now officially pronounced worse than that of its neighbouring division on the coast, it was given first claim on the services of **6 Parachute Regiment**, coming up from Army reserve.

Long before the paratroops could arrive the armoured thrust towards **Orsogna** had been beaten off and the Germans considered they had survived the crisis. The time had come, in fact, for a counter-attack, for Herr was adamant that it must not be delayed until next day, lest the New Zealanders should expand their bridgehead in both directions, north and south. To throw the paratroops into the counter-attack at the end of a long journey was not ideal and their committal would use up the Corps' last reserves, but these were disadvantages that had to be accepted. Orders were therefore issued for an attack from the southern edge of **Arielli** not later than 11 p.m. to restore **9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment's** old line. Eleven o'clock had come and gone when the first troops of **6 Parachute Regiment** arrived after a long, tiring journey over wretched roads, and the attack could not be launched until 3.15 a.m. on the 16th.



OPERATION FLORENCE: ATTACKS AND COUNTER-ATTACKS ON 16 DECEMBER

OPERATION FLORENCE: ATTACKS AND COUNTER-ATTACKS ON 16 DECEMBER

(iv)

At that hour two battalions of paratroops, one on each side of the road, advanced with an escort of four Mark IV or Mark IV Special tanks, five or possibly more Mark III flame-throwers and three Italian assault guns, and under an umbrella of heavy artillery fire. For a while they went unchallenged, though the New Zealanders had notice of their approach in the noise of troop movement and simultaneous shelling and machine-gunning. The right-hand battalion, crossing 21 Battalion's front, closed to within a few hundred yards of the cemetery before encountering 23 Battalion's right. In the ensuing fighting the attackers, unaided by tanks, could make no headway against the fire of infantry weapons, the machine guns of 20 Regiment's tanks and the artillery concentrations. By 5 a.m. 23 Battalion, with three killed and three wounded, had cleared its front.

On 21 Battalion's front the engagement was fiercer, more spectacular and more prolonged. At first the German paratroops and tanks co-operated well. From the Arielli turn-off they advanced a kilometre or more, but as soon as they touched off the waiting opposition chaos ruled the scene. As the tanks approached A Company's position firing vigorously, the New Zealand weapons opened up. The two leading Mark IV tanks were hit and left blocking the road. The flame-

throwing tanks, following up, were brought to a standstill and sought escape from the inferno of close-range tank and infantry fire either by withdrawing or by plunging south off the road among the lanes and farm buildings, where they shot curling billows of flame and smoke at likely targets.

There was now no pretence of cohesion in the German attack: the infantry had to fend for themselves and the tanks were exposed to the darting tactics of tank-hunting parties. The defensive fire of the New Zealand artillery, renewed and re-renewed almost a score of times, made terrible massacre among the paratroops. The tanks of 18 Regiment sprayed the area with machine-gun fire and when the Germans tried to infiltrate between A and D Companies, and later between the battalion's right flank and **17 Brigade**, they were sent to ground or dispersed in disorder by artillery, tank and small-arms fire. Though at the peak of the fighting, when the infantry were at close grips, 21 Battalion urgently asked 18 Regiment to send more tanks, those already in support were masters of the field and had broken the back of the counter-attack before the reinforcements appeared. The approach over the rise at Point 332 favoured tanks sited defensively, and in the bright moonlight the gunners could see a target with comparative ease at 300 yards.

In the face of such spirited defence, the enemy's effort gradually flagged. As light began to break a second armoured thrust came in down the road, but the leading tank was again destroyed and blocked the road, and the improvised covering party of engineers melted away to safer places, while the regular infantry stayed in their holes. Before 6.30 a.m. the paratroops had admitted defeat. They were withdrawing, with their wounded, towards **Poggiofiorito** under a hail of fire. So far from restoring the old line, as they at first claimed, they had to be content to fall back as reinforcements on the new, makeshift line of *9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*. At 8.30 the last of the tank commanders gave the order to retire to **Arielli** in small groups at long intervals.

While the action cost 21 Battalion five killed and fifteen wounded, the Germans left nearly fifty dead behind, some of them only a few yards

from the battalion's positions. Among the four German tanks destroyed, two were flame-throwers. These weapons had proved of dubious value to the attackers. One German subaltern wrote for senior eyes a romancing report of enemy infantry scorched out of their trenches and of enemy tanks stalked, surprised and set ablaze, but the happily prosaic fact is that the 150 roaring orange jets of flame of which he boasted were one and all misdirected and harmless.

(v)

As the enemy's hostility spent itself and his pressure on the right wing of the New Zealand salient relaxed, the hour came for the drive to the left towards **Orsogna** and **Melone** which, it was hoped, would release the coiled energies of 6 Brigade. The detailed plans for this attack had been laid the night before by **Fairbrother** and **McKergow** in the discomfort of the battle-swept cemetery. Two squadrons of 20 Regiment's tanks were to advance at 7 a.m. on either side of the road – A Squadron (Major Phillips) <sup>1</sup> on the right, C Squadron (Major Barton) on the left – followed at an interval of three or four hundred yards by **28 Battalion's** A Company and D Company respectively. The other infantry companies were to give covering fire. The German counter-attacks during the night enabled the nineteen tanks at the cemetery to move on to firmer ground in comparative stealth but also raised doubts whether the attack should go on. **Kippenberger**, confident that the German effort would be beaten off, gave the word to proceed. Hence for a while attack and counter-attack overlapped, with New Zealanders and Germans a few hundred yards apart, both attempting to advance south-west along the **Ortona** road.

Once out of the shelter of the cemetery, the New Zealand armour was in sore trouble. The road to **Orsogna** suddenly became a bubbling, steaming cauldron of shellbursts, throwing up lethal fountains; overhead the sky was pocked with the grey puffs of air-bursting shells and rang with the wicked crack of their explosions as they rained down hot metal; and the strengthened line of German anti-tank guns fired furiously. The

infantry, driven to cover, lost touch with the tanks and never regained it during the action. C Squadron moved on unaccompanied, strung out in line ahead along the road. North of the road German anti-tank gunners, concealed among the olives, had the squadron in enfilade, and as the tanks neared **Orsogna** they came within range of weapons in the town. Raked by this double fire, they could do little, and though they fought back at the anti-tank guns they offered a target rather than a threat. Two were hit and set on fire just beyond the cemetery. Another went up in flames farther along the road and a fourth had to be abandoned after being hit twice. The crews of the last two fell captive in trying to make their way back to the cemetery on foot.

No kinder fate awaited A Squadron, part of which, advancing on the right along the railway line, made a bid to take the anti-tank

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj J. F. Phillips**, m.i.d.; **Lower Hutt**; born **Perth**, Aust., 25 May 1913; company manager; three times wounded.

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defences in the flank or from the rear. The leaders were thrown into such confusion that no concerted effort was possible and, since the incessant shellfire forbade successful reconnaissance, the anti-tank guns could not be located. The tale of tanks destroyed mounted – one, two, three, and finally four. The Maoris of A and D Companies tried, in support of A Squadron, to close with the German gunners, but they were thwarted both by enemy observation and covering fire and by the skilful camouflaging of the guns, and the platoons were scattered in the attempt.

One tank managed to run the gauntlet as far as a bend in the road only two or three hundred yards north-west of **Orsogna**: the gesture was magnificent, but it was not effective war. It was necessary to reunite tanks and infantry, and since the infantry could not come forward the tanks had to go back. At ten o'clock **Kippenberger** gave the order for such a reunion, but on second thoughts instructed the tanks to withdraw right behind **28 Battalion**, for it was now obvious that few

gains were to be made west of the cemetery. The two squadrons turned and made their way back before the prearranged smoke screen could be laid and the withdrawal cost another tank. By noon the two forward infantry companies had straggled back to battalion headquarters area, leaving B and C Companies dug in round the cemetery, which was steadily and destructively shelled all day. Though ordered to do so by day if possible, B and C Companies had to wait for the merciful dusk before retiring a few hundred yards behind the cemetery to positions on the railway line and astride the road and in touch with 23 and 25 Battalions on the flanks.

(vi)

Once again a plan to exploit success had gone amiss. The New Zealanders' attack broke on the same rock as that which had destroyed the Germans' – the failure of the men on tracks and the men on foot to think as one, to act in close mutual support and to strike with united force. Liaison was made difficult by the breakdown of the wireless link and perhaps by the absence of an artillery barrage to protect the follow-up of the infantry: the tank commander had not wanted one and 25-pounder ammunition was scarce. The tanks were unable to manoeuvre freely; the anti-tank defences had been thickened up at the urgent behest of the higher German command and they were sturdily manned. Between them the two units had lost ten killed, over thirty wounded, and four prisoners. With ten casualties that morning, 20 Regiment left behind fifteen tanks destroyed or damaged to give practice to the German gunners, who systematically shelled them until they were beyond repair.

Yet all was not debit in the account of operation. The enemy, never flush in men and equipment, had suffered heavily in both, and he had given ground on a defensive line that had always wanted depth. Dented by the armoured thrust, his line, while still embracing Orsogna, had been pulled back north of it to the next ridge beyond the main road, and the New Zealanders' firm grasp of the road gave them a jumping-off



point for further attempts to turn **Orsogna** from the north. The German Corps Commander, indeed, was already contemplating a fighting retreat to the line of the Foro River, five miles to the rear; but at the same time he was instructing his divisions to remain in the existing line until forced out of it, to contest every inch of ground, and not to withdraw without imposing such delay and taking such forfeits from the enemy that he would have to pause before assaulting the Foro. Meanwhile, he was confident enough to announce no more counter-attacks. And the truth was that for the time being the New Zealanders had been fought to a standstill. Late on the 16th, **26 Panzer Division** made an accurate appreciation: 'The enemy's success yesterday and to-day in the **Orsogna** area had cost him heavily, and so he was not expected to attack again in the meantime, even though our withdrawal had left the road open for him'.

(vii)

It was a pause of several days that preceded the next and (as it proved) the last major effort by the Division at **Orsogna** – but it was hardly a lull. For while readjustment and recuperation were necessary, relaxation was not possible. A first readjustment – one of command – occurred in the midst of the battle. At 6 a.m. on the 15th the Division passed from Army to **13 Corps**, which, with 5 British Division also under command, assumed responsibility for the sector from **Orsogna** eastwards. Consequently, Corps took over command of **6 Army Group, Royal Artillery**, from the New Zealanders. Fifth Division completed its move into the line on the New Zealanders' right on the night of 15–16 December and as soon as the German counter-attacks that night had died down **17 Brigade** reverted to its own division. The New Zealand Division, however, preserved something of the international flavour that was typical of the Allied cause in **Italy**, since it retained command of a brigade of British paratroops, a regiment of British field gunners, three squadrons of Canadian sappers and a company of Italian muleteers.

For the hard-pressed 23 Battalion, now tired and dangerously

depleted, rest was imperative. On the evening of the 16th its companies left the line for the **Castelfrentano** area, and **28 Battalion** relieved it by extending D Company to the right to link up with 21 Battalion. Of the two armoured regiments forward with the infantry, the 18th was now to support 21 Battalion and the 20th **28 Battalion**. Using tanks and carriers as load vehicles, the two regiments replenished their fuel and ammunition. The track from the **Moro** crossing to the crest of Sfasciata remained a weak link in the chain of supply; it needed the constant attention of bulldozers and its use had to be severely restricted. The arrival of 37,000 rounds of 25-pounder and 4000 of medium ammunition lifted a worry from the minds of the gunners and permitted them to replace the heavy expenditure of the two previous days.

Though the Divisional Commander did not plan an immediate return to the offensive, neither did he expect a stalemate. He was still hopeful that the enemy would fall back from a sense of prudence, and on the 17th thought it a matter of hours before the enemy quitted **Orsogna**, but he would not risk heavy casualties in the meantime. The German command, on the other hand, while preparing a line of last resort on the Foro, was content to fight stiff delaying actions on its existing line and to remain there if allowed. The Germans were thus willing to sell ground, but only at a price the New Zealanders were not willing to pay. The discovery of this fact gives tactical meaning to the operations of the Division in the following few days, which must now be summarised.

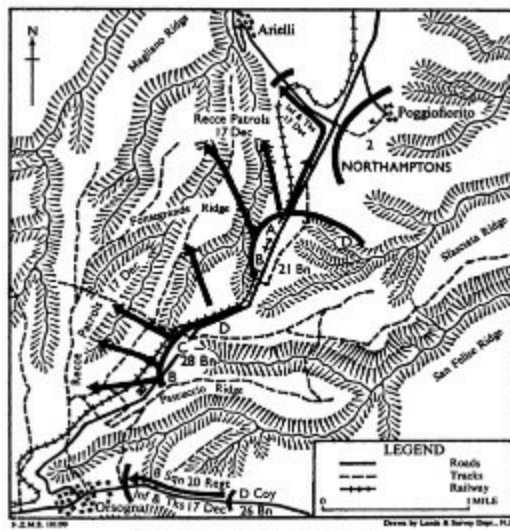
*(viii)*

For the two forward battalions of **5 Brigade**, the night of 16–17 December was disturbed by the sound of enemy movement and digging and by the defensive artillery fire that was brought down on likely enemy forming-up places; but the real cause of the alarm was probably the relief of *9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* by *6 Parachute Regiment*. Reports next morning suggested a general German withdrawal. British troops were out of touch with the enemy on certain parts of the Corps' front; reconnaissance patrols of 21 Battalion found the area empty for

500 yards forward of their line; and 2 Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment, the flanking unit of 5 Division, believed that the Germans had left **Poggiofiorito**. All along the Division's front, then, the 17th brought probing movements to 'test the market'. They were to show that it was as firm as ever.

On the right, a reconnaissance force of 18 Regiment's tanks and a platoon of 21 Battalion was diverted from **Poggiofiorito**, which had already been peacefully occupied by men of the Northamptonshire Regiment, to explore the road to **Arielli** with instructions not to go beyond the village or to persist against opposition. In a sharp encounter on the outskirts of **Arielli** the leading tank stirred up a hornets' nest. From an exchange of fire with an anti-tank post among the houses they returned minus two tanks, which had been bogged, with a third hit but recovered by the driver, and with the satisfaction of having destroyed the chief trouble-maker, an 88-millimetre gun. The evidence of patrols that the enemy had withdrawn beyond the **Arielli** stream, 800 or 1000 yards west of the main road, on 21 Battalion's front seemed to be confirmed farther south by the findings of patrols sent out by the Maoris. Four Maori patrols west of the main road went unaccosted, but two which were sent out in the evening to harass the movement of traffic were sent home by mortar and machine-gun fire before they could reach their destination.

One more trial of the German strength in the town of **Orsogna** was made on the 17th. That it was lightly held was a reasonable inference from the reports of overnight patrols; but the hostile reception accorded that day to two platoons of 26 Battalion and two troops of 20 Regiment which tried to enter the town reversed



5 BRIGADE PATROLS, 17 DECEMBER

5 BRIGADE PATROLS, 17 DECEMBER

expectations. Approaching from the east along the causeway of the **Lanciano** road, the attackers soon lost contact and cohesion and the attack momentum. While the infantry worked forward towards **Orsogna**, the tanks halted at the demolition for fear of mines and the engineers were hampered by shellfire in trying to sweep a path. One mischance followed another. The platoons stumbled into a thick minefield; the commander of the leading troop, separated from the sappers, pushed on to the outskirts of the town, where one of his tank tracks was blown off; later, after the tank had been hit, the crew were machine-gunned as they climbed out and the rescuing tank had itself to be recovered from a bog by the third tank of the troop. The fire from **Orsogna** was too violent for the infantry to hope for further progress and it was decided to retire at nightfall. The tanks stayed forward to bring back the wounded, but in doing so one was set on fire by a mortar bomb. During the night the two derelict tanks were blown up by the Germans before New Zealand patrols could picket them.

Farther west, 4 Armoured Brigade and 2 Parachute Brigade were put on the alert to take advantage of any German weakening. A warning order to 19 Regiment and 22 Battalion to advance towards **Guardiagrele** along the northern lateral road was cancelled when it became obvious that the bid for **Orsogna** had failed. The Divisional Cavalry, given their first task for a week, patrolled the southern lateral, which they found

blown at one point and from which they saw enemy movement. Confirmation that the enemy was still anxious to defend the approaches to **Guardiagrele** was forthcoming from the paratroops: a platoon of them sent to the road junction at **Melone** recoiled before heavy fire.

Ahead of **5 Brigade** lay a closely cultivated area known as **Fontegrande**, flat to the distant glance but in fact wrinkled into a succession of ridges by the headwater gullies of the **Arielli** stream. These spurs, running parallel with the **Ortona** road, formed, as it were, the north-eastern spokes of the wheel that had high **Orsogna** as its hub. As we have seen, it was thought that the enemy had withdrawn to the second of the ridges, which lay behind the stream, but daylight patrols by the two battalions on the foggy morning of the 18th, all three of which drew a brisk fusillade from the wide-awake defenders, indicated that the Germans were holding ground forward of the main stream on the first ridge, with their FDLs probably on a track leading along it to the village of **Arielli**.

Against the protests of **Brigadier Kippenberger**, who rightly suspected that the feature was tenanted by fresh and ardent paratroops, General Dempsey, on a visit from Corps, maintained his opinion that it could be occupied without fighting and ordered an attempt to be made that night. The task was given to three patrols, each twelve strong, who were to advance silently without artillery preparation to establish a line of pickets on the ridge, after which they would be reinforced. The right-hand patrol, from C Company 21 Battalion, made its objective safely, only to find three enemy machine guns sited less than 100 yards away. Calling down gunfire to block the Germans' retreat, the patrol moved to the attack, but the Germans were lying in wait and opened fire, wounding the officer. The route back was found to be held also by enemy posts, and the patrol, now without either officer or sergeant, had to fight its way home. The centre patrol, from the Maoris' D Company, was no sooner on the track running along the ridge than it became the target for at least four machine guns dug in around it. Hand grenades were thrown in the fracas that followed, but there was no question of

dislodging the enemy, who, on the contrary, hunted the patrol back to its own lines after wounding several members of it. The other Maori patrol, from C Company, was lucky enough to avoid being surrounded. While still short of its objective, it was fired on and it fell back before the all-too-obvious strength of the defence.

This ill-judged enterprise cost one officer killed, one sergeant wounded and missing, and seven other ranks killed, wounded or missing, and gave the enemy the maps and papers found on the dead officer. It served only to show that the Germans were in fact where they had been expected and to deepen the suspicion (not confirmed until Christmas Eve) that in this sector the New Zealanders were opposed by paratroops.

*(ix)*

After a month's battle experience some concern was being felt in the Division at the rate of casualties among the tanks. On the 17th it was reported to **Divisional Headquarters** that the Division had forty-six tanks out of action through mechanical defects or bogging but still recoverable, and that of those actually lost only ten had been replaced. 'We are losing tanks in every action,' commented Brigadier Stewart. 'Well,' replied the General, 'it is a desperate show'. With its tanks badly in need of maintenance and not fit for much movement, the apprehensions of 18 Regiment were by no means allayed by the General's decision to make its thirteen mobile tanks available to **17 Brigade** in a stationary anti-tank role covering its new positions on the **Ortona** road. Twentieth Regiment was also affected, having to despatch five tanks to 21 Battalion to replace those of the 18th. After a few uneventful days under command of **5 Division**, 18 Regiment's task was taken over by anti-tank guns and the regiment reverted to 4 Brigade's command and began to reorganise near **Castelfrentano**. It was also possible, by strengthening the anti-tank guns forward with the infantry and by laying minefields, to give relief to one squadron and regimental headquarters of 20 Regiment. Some measure of relief was secured for the infantry of 6 Brigade. As the first move in a scheme to give each

battalion six days in the line and three days' rest at **Castelfrentano**, 24 Battalion relieved 26 Battalion as the brigade's forward unit on the 18th and 25 Battalion rearranged itself in the San Felice area to give added depth to the brigade's defences.

During these dull, overcast days the burden of the offensive on the Army's front was borne by the Indians and Canadians of **5 Corps**, who by a series of premeditated blows were slowly drawing near to **Ortona**. It was no part of the Division's policy to let the enemy take his ease, but for the time being there were limited ways of keeping him disturbed. Low cloud saved **Orsogna** and the enemy gun positions from the full malice of our bombers, but raids were made on most days and on the 22nd bombs caused heavy casualties in a newly-arrived battalion defending the town. The Germans wrote in professional admiration of the perfect co-operation of artillery and air force. The guns fired green smoke just forward of the German positions, and the smoke was followed immediately by the raiders, who dropped their bombs accurately on the defences. On the ground the spasmodic play of artillery harassed the enemy, and infantry patrols continued to probe to the line of resistance. Reports that **Arielli** had been evacuated were shown to be premature, and a Divisional Cavalry thrust in that direction had to be cut short. Patrols of **5 Brigade** prowled and listened, but were unable to discover any German withdrawal. By a kind of tacit agreement the cemetery was left vacant by both sides; being marked on the map, it was especially liable to predicted shellfire. Sixth Brigade trailed its coat before **Orsogna**, eliciting fire and the information that the town was still held. All this time **2 Parachute Brigade** had been patrolling actively in the wide, open spaces on the left flank, where its comings and goings were occasionally varied by clashes with small parties of Germans. One night the paratroops found **Melone** road fork clear, but when a troop of the Divisional Cavalry's Staghounds reconnoitred to within a hundred yards of the fork next morning the outing was curtailed by a prompt burst of shelling and machine-gunning.

With bitter fighting in the streets of **Ortona** and Villa Grande farther

east, the stubbornness of the enemy was now made manifest. It was obvious (to use language that passed muster with Montgomery's men) that the Germans, so far from declaring their innings closed on the **Ortona- Orsogna** line, had every intention of batting on – particularly since the weather could be confidently expected to handicap the attack more and more. It is true that as late as the 20th **General Freyberg** was still hopeful that **Orsogna** would fall without a push; but it was necessary to proceed on the assumption that it would not, and **Freyberg's** continued preference was for a circling move 'north about' with the Division's right. This in turn called for the construction of a route 'to take up the wheels to maintain two brigades'.

From the 18th, therefore, **7 Field Company** worked with a will, not merely on improving the track on the **5 Brigade** axis but on converting it into a metalled two-way road for use in any weather. The stretch from **Spaccarelli** village to the **Moro** became 'Armstrong's Road', and thence up the steep face of Sfasciata and along the spur to the **Ortona** road ran 'Duncan's Road'. Between them, to span the **Moro** beside Askin bridge, the engineers erected a Class 30 Bailey bridge, first named **TIKO TIKO** and then **HONGI** to avoid confusion with **TIKI** bridge. Reinforcements of Canadian sappers were sent up as well as detachments of infantry to wield pick and shovel, all the available bulldozers were engaged and double shifts were worked. At the height of activity 1000 tons of gravel were being scooped from the quarry, transported, and laid on the road each day. The Divisional Commander took a keen and well-rewarded interest in the road, which he hoped eventually to push through to **Arielli**. He looked to it to save hundreds of lives by allowing **Orsogna** to be by-passed.



# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: OPERATION ULYSSES

### *II: Operation ULYSSES*

(i)

'If you can make roads like that, they can't stop you,' Dempsey told **Freyberg**. But pressure could not be relaxed while the road was being completed. No doubt the original Allied plan of a converging movement on **Rome**, with the Fifth Army approaching from the south and the **Eighth Army** along the passes from the north-east, was now incapable of fulfilment as the Italian winter deepened. But the need was as pressing as ever to employ **Italy** – Churchill's 'Third Front' – as a magnet to draw away forces from the First Front in **Russia** and the Second Front, which was already a strategic reality, if not a military fact, in the West. Translated into tactical terms of time and place, this need meant that the **Eighth Army**, already jabbing strongly with its right, would have to bring its left into play again as soon as possible, though skies were murky and the legs of tired infantrymen leaden in the clogging mud.

The fortunes of the mere platoon, often (it may seem) thrown senselessly into battle, must be continually refocused against a background of grand strategy – a task much easier in the retrospect of the historian than it was to the men who, half-blind to the higher issues, fought from the habit of discipline and self-respect and builded better than they knew.

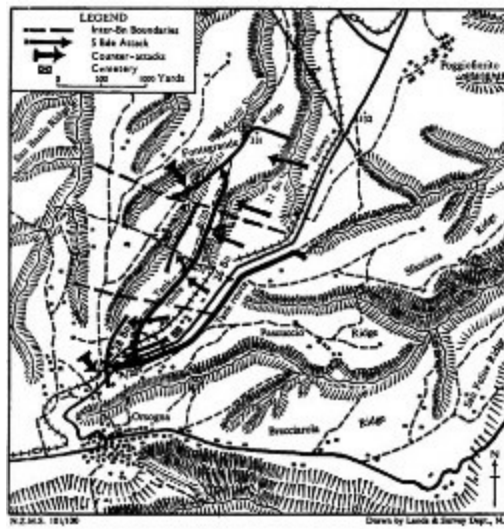
Montgomery planned to reach the **Arielli** stream throughout its length by 24 December. The policy of **13 Corps**, as stated by Dempsey on the 21st, was to clear **Arielli** with **5 Division** so that the New Zealand Division, with a secure right flank, might turn south-west to roll up the German defences. A corps operation order of the 22nd fixed **5 Division's** attack for next afternoon and the New Zealanders' for 4 a.m. on the 24th. The tactical purpose of operation **ULYSSES** was to split the enemy at

the boundary between *26 Panzer Division* and *65 Infantry Division* and to turn the **Orsogna** defences from the north.

The assault was again entrusted to **5 Brigade**, which, strengthened by 26 Battalion, was to advance with three battalions from the **Ortona** road to seize both ridges in the Fontegrande area. Thence it was to exploit with tanks and infantry north-west and west for a mile or more across another system of watercourses to the two ridges known as Feuduccio and **San Basile**. Twenty-first Battalion on the right and 26th in the centre were both given stretches of the first and second Fontegrande ridges as intermediate and final objectives respectively, whereas **28 Battalion** was to take its objective, the important ridge junction north of **Orsogna**, in one bound.

Artillery support was on a lavish scale – 272 guns, including those of **5 Division** and **6 Army Group, Royal Artillery**, for 3500 yards of front, or a gun for every 12 or 13 yards. The field guns were to fire a creeping barrage, finishing with smoke to screen the exploitation, while the mediums were to bring down concentrations ahead of the objectives. After dawn **Orsogna** and the approach roads would be bombed. From its position on Brecciarola 6 Brigade was to help with the fire of its Vickers machine guns and mortars and was to be prepared to send a battalion into **Orsogna** if the Germans left the town.

The role of the armour was partly protection, partly exploitation. Twentieth Regiment, under command of **5 Brigade**, allocated one squadron to 21 and 26 Battalions and another to **28 Battalion**, with orders to support the infantry on their objectives and drive beyond them if possible. Should **5 Brigade** succeed and the battle become mobile, the break-through would be carried out mainly by an armoured force of 19 Regiment and part of 22 Battalion, directed either through or around **Orsogna** to **Filetto** and beyond, and south to



OPERATION ULYSSES: 5 BRIGADE ATTACK ON 24 DECEMBER

OPERATION ULYSSES: 5 BRIGADE ATTACK ON 24 DECEMBER

link up with the British paratroops at **Melone** as one stage on the road to **Guardiagrele**. These paratroops would be assisted by a squadron of 18 Regiment, and they and the Divisional Cavalry were to be ready to lend weight to the exploitation to **Filetto**.

Such plans time showed to be superfluous, for operation ULYSSES began in doubt and ended in deadlock. The opening circumstances were far from happy. Though not exactly in low spirits, many of the troops were jaded after more than a month of hard and comfortless fighting with few and short periods of rest, and there was some bewilderment among officers as well as men that the offensive was being pressed so relentlessly when the commonsense course seemed to be to settle down for the winter. Regrouping for the attack necessitated some fatiguing moves by night, in particular that of 26 Battalion, which had an arduous approach march of several miles. It arrived weary to attack in the dark under a strange command over ground it had never seen. The night itself was cold, wet and misty and was not made any more cheerful by the thought that it was Christmas Eve. Though four or five hundred reinforcements had reached the Division a few days before, all three assaulting battalions were seriously under strength, the Maoris having only about 630 men out of an establishment of 800 and no battalion more than 670. In 21 Battalion, when zero hour drew near, fifteen men of one platoon refused to heed the call to action – a grim example of

**indiscipline without precedent in the Division's history.**

**There were also tactical worries. Since 21 Battalion's right flank was bent back, the barrage had to wheel slightly to the left and the infantry commanders' task of keeping up behind it was more difficult than usual. The two battalions on the right had a more northerly axis of advance than the Maoris, so that paths diverged. The 21st was concerned about a rough gully that lay across its advance and was disturbed about its right flank. The British division's attack on the afternoon of the 23rd was reported to have taken all its objectives – Arielli was found that night to be deserted – but its left wing had not come forward, as arranged, to the stream bed on 21 Battalion's right, and the battalion went into battle with one eye cast anxiously over its shoulder.**

**(ii)**

**The unfamiliarity of some of the troops with the ground, its broken nature and the need to make detours, as well as the proximity in some strength of the defenders, made the attack unusually confused. D Company (Major Bailey), one of 21 Battalion's leading companies, clambered across a gully in the wake of the barrage, clearing German infantry posts en route to its objective, Point 331, on the first ridge, which it reached in little more than an hour. A Company (Major Tanner), going in on the left to share the first objective, was thrown into disorder on the start line by short rounds in the barrage and was more than an hour late in going forward. When it did so, it lost direction in crossing the gully, veering to the right; and when it had gained the ridge beside D Company, it had to work its way back south-west against frontal fire from German posts in houses as well as fire from the north across the Arielli. However, it made its ground on the first ridge and there dug in. The capture of the second ridge had been the assignment of B and C Companies (Majors Hawkesby and Abbott <sup>1</sup>), but B Company was held back temporarily to cover the tender right flank. C Company, instead of plunging straight across the troublesome**

<sup>1</sup> **Maj R. B. Abbott, MC; Ngaruawahia; born Auckland, 16 Feb 1919; insurance clerk; wounded 6 Jul 1942.**

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**gully in front of it, was sent round its head through 26 Battalion on the left. Hence it crossed the Arielli stream and made a lodgment on a spur beyond. Attempts to clear the spur failed, for the crest was swept by machine-gun fire, and the company had to dig in on the reverse slope. The first objective, slightly to the rear, was not very securely held, but B Company sent up two platoons which, after straying somewhat, eventually came in to bolster the line between D and A Companies. The battalion now had three companies side by side on the first objective, and the fourth with a foothold on the final objective but without much prospect of further advance.**

**Twenty-sixth Battalion's plan also provided for a two-company attack on the first objective, with the other two companies to pass through to the second. D and C Companies (Major Molineaux <sup>1</sup> and Captain J. R. Williams <sup>2</sup>), leading the way, became separated in the dark, but both reached the track which was their destination and there managed to assemble most of their men. B and A Companies (Major Smith <sup>3</sup> and Captain Piper <sup>4</sup>) set off behind the leaders but were soon 'out of the picture' because of faulty wireless communication. A Company appears to have swung to the left of the route followed by C Company. When it was finally halted by machine-gun and shellfire and consolidated, it found itself on the same ridge and to the left. How B Company found its way forward remains, like much else in this action, wrapped in obscurity. For two hours and a half it was out of touch with the rest of the battalion, and when it regained touch with battalion headquarters it had lost its commander, was digging in on the reverse slope of the same spur as that occupied by C Company 21 Battalion, and was uncertain where it was. The one certainty was the unremitting hostility of the enemy machine-gunners. Before 8 a.m. the two companies of New Zealanders were in contact on this fireswept and all-but-beleaguered slope, which alone had been wrung from the defenders**

of the final objective.

A hard, slogging effort by the Maoris of **28 Battalion** (Major Young)<sup>5</sup> on the left won a considerable success in the task of seizing the tableland, north of **Orsogna** and south-west of the cemetery, formed by the junction of the gullies. At least partial command of this plateau was tactically indispensable because it gave access to the tracks leading northward along the **Fontegrande** spurs,

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj A. Molineaux; Burnham Military Camp; born NZ 16 Dec 1918; Regular soldier.**

<sup>2</sup> **Lt-Col J. R. Williams, DSO, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 27 Jul 1911; solicitor; CO Div Cav Bn Jan–Apr 1945; three times wounded.**

<sup>3</sup> **Maj R. S. Smith; born New Plymouth, 21 Jan 1916; school teacher; wounded 26 Oct 1942; killed in action 24 Dec 1943.**

<sup>4</sup> **Maj D. C. Piper; Ashburton; born Oamaru, 11 Sep 1910; clerk.**

<sup>5</sup> **Lt-Col R. R. T. Young, DSO; Richmond, England; born Wellington, 25 Jun 1902; oil company executive; CO NZ School of Instruction, Feb–Apr 1943; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Dec 1943–Jul 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; wounded 26 Dec 1943.**

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where the infantry listened hopefully for the clatter of approaching Shermans.

D Company (Captain Matehaere),<sup>1</sup> with the dual role of right-flank guard and mopping-up company, had to fight its way forward, clearing German infantry posts from its path. Before it could cross the head of the **Arielli** to reach its objective, it was held up and dug in along the line of the stream beside 26 Battalion's left-hand company. Meanwhile, in

the centre of the **Maori Battalion**, the progress of B Company (Major Sorensen) was being hotly disputed among the olive groves a few hundred yards west of the cemetery. It, too, found itself checked as it reached the edge of the stream. On the left A Company (Captain Henare) had to battle its way slowly down the main road and the railway line. It succeeded in capturing the junction of the road with the track leading along the first Fontegrande ridge, but just failed to reach a second turn-off leading to **Arielli** by way of the second ridge and the feature known as **Magliano**. Indeed, the later stages of the company's advance were made possible only by the fire of all available arms – artillery, mortars (including 24 Battalion's) and Vickers guns – on to German resistance north-west of **Orsogna**, and smoke had to be fired to screen the company while it dug in.

The Maoris had thus worked their two right-hand companies, firmly linked, to within 300 yards of their objectives, and A Company, though still disorganised, was only 150 yards short of its goal on the left. At all points the battalion was hard up against the enemy defences.

For the infantry entrenched along the first ridge, even more for the eighty or so men thrust forward beyond the **Arielli** in the lee of the second, armoured help could not come too soon. The tanks of A Squadron 20 Regiment lost no time in following **28 Battalion** into the area west of the cemetery, and though gunfire, mines and mud disabled four of them, the squadron manned all its tanks (disabled or not) in helping the Maoris to consolidate. The half of B Squadron under Captain Abbott, <sup>2</sup> ordered to assist 21 and 26 Battalions, made a successful foray along the ridge, and by noon seven of its tanks were deployed in lively support of the two battalions. Their dash gave a heartening touch to a day that was dour and cheerless.

For the hopes of carrying out the plan of exploitation by 4 Brigade gradually ebbed away. About daylight it was decided that bad weather and the insecurity of the infantry forbade an immediate armoured advance, but in the meantime 19 Regiment was ordered

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj J. Matehaere, MC, m.i.d.; Tirau; born NZ 28 Feb 1916; farmhand; three times wounded.**

<sup>2</sup> **Maj R. J. Abbott; Christchurch; born England, 16 Oct 1915; commercial traveller; wounded 18 Nov 1941; now Regular Force.**

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forward to a laager in a handy position on Sfasciata, and 24 Battalion was to be ready at half an hour's notice for its part in the exploitation. **General Freyberg** pondered alternative uses for 19 Regiment – it might, under smoke and harassing fire, complete the occupation of the final objective on the right, or, leaving the first phase of his plan unfinished, he might switch to the second and send the regiment through in a bold sweep north of **Orsogna** to **Filetto** to shatter the German defences. But neither course would be followed unless the enemy showed signs of crumbling; he would not risk his armoured reserve in a tight battle, throwing it upon an undefeated gunline.

By early afternoon, it was clear that the battle remained tight and the enemy unbudging. 'It is not a question of further advance,' remarked the General. 'It is a question of holding on to what we have got'. He had already issued instructions for the relief of the battered 21 Battalion by 25 Battalion that night and for 6 Brigade Headquarters to take over operational command from **5 Brigade** Headquarters, with **28 Battalion** under command. The two battalions on the first Fontegrande ridge were at close grips with the enemy, a training battalion of *6 Parachute Regiment*, throughout the day, and though they had managed to make a solid line they were thankful for the help of 20 Regiment's tanks and for all the supporting fire possible.

The troops across the **Arielli** stream were precariously placed. The bridgehead was held by 27 men of C Company, 21 Battalion, and 58 of B Company, 26 Battalion, and their attempts to expand it were speedily suppressed. During the morning the men of 26 Battalion joined those of 21 Battalion in a cleft near the north-eastern end of the spur to form a



composite company under 26 Battalion's command. Only 200 yards from enemy positions, they were at the mercy of German mortar fire. As casualties grew, **Brigadier Kippenberger** and both battalion commanders became convinced that the cost of holding the position outweighed any advantage it was likely to yield and orders were given to withdraw across the stream; but **Freyberg**, having listened to these opinions, reversed the orders and instructed the troops to hold firm until night, when 25 Battalion would relieve them. After a long approach march over muddy tracks, 25 Battalion (Major Norman) <sup>1</sup> carried out the relief as planned, posting its D Company (Captain Hewitt) <sup>2</sup> in the salient with orders to retire if attacked.

For the Maoris on the left flank, the 24th was a day of danger and discomfort. Since the stream only took its rise on their right

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col E. K. Norman**, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Levin**; born **Napier**, 14 Sep 1916; theological student; served in **Fiji** Nov 1940–Jun 1941; **CO 25 Bn** Dec 1943–Feb 1944, Jun 1944–Apr 1945; wounded 23 Apr 1945.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj S. M. Hewitt**, MC; **Waipukurau**; born **Dannevirke**, 31 Oct 1916; shepherd.

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front, they were for the most part deprived of the natural protection it afforded the other two battalions; immediately before them, swarming with Germans, was a fairly level stretch of country which gave little cover from observation and exposed the battalion to counter-attack. Several times during the day threatening motions, which might have been the prelude to counter-attacks, were checked by urgent fire. From the steady drizzle of German hostility B Company suffered most heavily. For a while in the afternoon its command devolved upon Sergeant Crapp <sup>1</sup> after Major Sorensen and all his platoon commanders had been wounded. By dark the company had been reduced to 38 men and it had to be relieved by C Company as part of a general consolidation of the line.

Christmas Day came in quietly along the whole front. It brought the replacement of **5 Brigade** by **6 Brigade** in operational command and, as the event was to show, a new phase, in which mid-winter struck the offensive from the hands of men.

*(iii)*

The name **ULYSSES**, with its overtones of far-travelled prowess, was a name that the results of the operation belied. For the Division never conquered its initial difficulties. The troops had lost their freshness and their first *élan* had been blunted. The weather was wretched during the attack, miserably cold, with low clouds and frequent rainstorms. The mischance which no planning can eliminate showed its hand in minor ways – one battalion lost the use of a wireless set when a mule fell into the **Moro** and another had to share its frequency with a commercial radio station. Twenty-first Battalion was distracted by concern for its right flank. In their assault the Maoris were troubled by the arrangement of the barrage: when it paused between two bounds on **26 Battalion's** front they were exposed to devastating fire from their open right flank. On their left, the dominant buildings of **Orsogna** housed strong, well-armed detachments of Germans.

The Division gained the whole of its first objective, the Fontegrande ridge east of the **Arielli**, which had formed the outpost line of the training battalion of paratroops and of *II Battalion 146 Regiment*; but it had only a foothold on the final objective, and the Germans' main line of defence in the area was unbroken. The Germans had been expecting an attack, and in spite of a momentary incursion, which was thrown back from the crest of the salient, and some anxiety about roving New Zealand tanks, both battalions rallied quickly and held their prepared positions without exhausting their

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<sup>1</sup> Lt L. T. Crapp; **Whakatane**; born **Whakatane**, 16 Jul 1920; hotel hand; wounded 17 Feb 1944.

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reserves. Their success left the opposing infantry localities only about 300 yards apart – an uncomfortable proximity which earned notoriety as ‘Jittery Ridge’ for the first of the Fontegrande ridges, now firmly in the New Zealanders' possession.

The Division's casualties in the attack numbered 119 – 22 killed and 97 wounded – about half of them in **28 Battalion**. The figures are high, considering that none of the infantry battalions had more than 250 men in its rifle companies when the attack began. The enemy lost 38 prisoners, but the two German divisions admitted only eleven men missing in the evening report of *76 Panzer Corps* on 24 December. It seems likely that the casualties reported at the same time – 5 killed and 32 wounded – understate their losses. They put five New Zealand tanks out of action at a cost of three anti-tank guns destroyed.

If territorially the operation was a disappointment, tactically it was a portent. Since the Division first launched itself at **Orsogna** three weeks before, it had discarded as impracticable a southerly outflanking drive and a frontal assault; it had gradually come to develop a movement ‘north about’, with the infantry penetrating or disconcerting the defences for the armour to exploit. But now the infantry had been brought to a halt with no more than slight gains; and perhaps more significantly, the plan of armoured exploitation had early to be jettisoned. In three weeks winter had closed in; snow, already lying on the heights, could be expected on the battlefield; ways were foul and the sky was being emptied of aircraft. After Christmas the Division, led, trained and equipped for mobility, had to reconcile itself to a static war of emplacement.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

# CHAPTER 7 – ORDEAL BY STALEMATE

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## I: THE WINTER LINE

### *I: The Winter Line*

(i)

**IN his memoirs Macdonald, one of Napoleon's marshals, described the battle he lost on the Katzbach with hardly a reference to the enemy but with exhaustive detail about the mud and the rain. At this point in his narrative the historian of 2 New Zealand Division feels sympathy for the disingenuous marshal. For though the pugnacious spirit of the Germans suffered no one to forget their existence, the weather now became chief arbiter of the field.**

**For more than three weeks after Christmas Day the Division's war was an affair of silent watches and ambuscade, sharp patrol encounters, spasmodic but often highly disagreeable exchanges of fire, anxiety over communications, the discomfort of cold, damp and mud. Unpleasant as it was for all the fighting troops, life was especially miserable and tense for the infantry forward on Fontegrande, where on still nights the two front lines were almost within whispering distance. There, movement by day or noise by night invited the attention of the sniper or the mortar crew. Shelter had to be sought in stone farmhouses. Reliefs had to be frequent. Supplies of all kinds had to come up after dark on the backs of mules. Rain was followed by snow and snow by slush. But the war had to go on, and the New Zealanders' part in it was to prevent the reinforcement of other fronts from theirs. While counterfeiting aggressive aims, they were content to hold the ground they had already won. On 17 January they were relieved to join the Fifth Army for the offensive just beginning west of the **Apennines**.**

(ii)

**If any hoped that the attack of 24 December might have a profitable**

sequel they were quickly disappointed. The ground, soggy from the rain and whipped into creamy mud by the tanks, was too slippery for movement in the fog and cold of Christmas Day. The minefields ahead of **28 Battalion** and the critical state of Duncan's road also discouraged exploitation by the tanks. Christmas Day was the first of the defensive days that filled up the Division's calendar until it left this front.

Little distinguished it from other days for troops in the line, but those in reserve or not on urgent duties, making the best possible imitation of Christmas at home, managed to animate an observance into a festival. Special rations of meat, fruit and beer were supplemented almost everywhere by local supplies of wine, and every man received a Patriotic Fund parcel. To their men assembled at dinner commanding officers repeated the annual wish that this should be their last Christmas away from home and were rewarded with the annual applause, now perhaps more credulous than in the past. Among other ways, jollity found an outlet in the wearing of irregular headdress, and the General took occasion to remonstrate mildly against the appearance of straw hats and hats of purple paper, which, according to his diary, 'did not appear particularly appropriate for **Italy's** winter weather'.

Tactically, the last week of 1943 was an interim. Deadlock on the divisional front was a palpable fact, but not until New Year's Eve was a policy formulated to acknowledge it. As the year drew to its close, General Montgomery recommended a temporary halt in the **Eighth Army's** offensive. Though **Ortona** fell to the Canadians on 28 December, every inch of the advance was as fiercely contested on the coastal sector as on the New Zealanders'. Montgomery feared that if the attack was pressed in conditions forbidding the full deployment of armoured and air support, the infantry would be so depleted as to leave an unbalanced force when spring came. He was also aware that he would leave soon for the **United Kingdom** to take command of 21 Army Group and wished to hand over a tidy front to his successor. General Alexander agreed with this reasoning and planned to transfer the main weight of his armies to the western side of the peninsula, where the country in which the Fifth

Army was fighting promised better progress. In the east it remained for the **Eighth Army** to exert continued pressure.

Accordingly, on 30 December **13 Corps** defined its task. It was 'to contain on its front at least the present number of German formations; to inflict on them as much loss as possible with patrols and artillery fire; and by every possible means to lead them to suppose that an attack is imminent'. The New Zealand Division was to hold its present front and to site its armour and reserves to secure the **Castelfrentano** ridge in all circumstances.

**Freyberg's** instructions of 31 December designated the future policy of the Division as one of 'offensive defence'. To hold its ground, to contain the enemy and to keep up its active spirit, the Division was to patrol and fire aggressively. Static methods of defence, such as the use of wire, were to be avoided if possible. In order to allocate and relieve troops more systematically and to clarify their tasks, the Division's area was divided into four sub-sectors: Fontegrande- **Orsogna**, the main front, then held by 6 Brigade and **6 Parachute Battalion**; **Salarola**, facing the **Melone** road-fork, held by **4 Parachute Battalion**; **Castelfrentano** ridge, the reserve area occupied by **5 Brigade**; and **Bianco-Barone**, the steep south-western flank, lightly held by a company of **5 Parachute Battalion** and two squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry.

Decisions on high policy entailed not only this reorganisation within the Division but also new dispositions on its flanks. On 27-28 December **13 British Infantry Brigade** had relieved **2 Independent Parachute Brigade** of responsibility for the **Aventino River** sector, including **Casoli**, and the New Zealanders were now flanked on both sides by **5 Division**, with its **15 Brigade** on their right in the **Poggiofiorito** sector and **13 Brigade** on their left. The 5th was the first of the British divisions destined to be transferred in Alexander's shift of weight to the west, and early in the New Year it had to be replaced. On the left, the New Zealanders' new neighbour was **78 Division**, which extended to its right in the **Casoli** area and passed from the command of **Eighth Army** to that of **13 Corps**. On the right, however, the New Zealand Division had to fill



the vacancy from its own means. This it did by moving **2 Parachute Brigade** into the sector between **Crecchio** and **Arielli**, where it was in touch with **8 Indian Division**, the left-hand formation of **5 Corps**. The paratroops' commitments on the left were redistributed among New Zealand units. On Brecciarola ridge D Company **28 Battalion** took over from **6 Parachute Battalion**, in the **Salarola** sub-sector **4 Parachute Battalion** was relieved by **22 Battalion**, and on **Colle Bianco** a company of **5 Parachute Battalion** by B Squadron Divisional Cavalry. These adjustments, as tedious in the execution as in the telling, were anticipated and hindered by a great snowstorm.

*(iii)*

The snow set to rest any doubts about the wisdom of coming to terms with the Italian winter. 'General January' turned traitor. For though it had been predicted, the snow caught the Division tactically with its plans only just laid and physically prepared hardly at all. The weather, which had been sometimes wet and always cold for a week past and overcast and threatening on New Year's Eve, broke in the last two or three hours of 1943. A blizzard blew out of the mountains to lay one of the heaviest snowfalls within living memory as a boundary between the old year and the new. On New Year's morning snow lay about a foot deep, with drifts up to four feet deep in places.

'This stops things all right,' wrote the General in his diary, 'and it is a question of existing without worrying much about the war.... We won't use up too much sympathy on the front line troops but ... the joy of occupying a forward weapon pit (with no special rates for rain, or sleet or snow) can be imagined. People in houses last night were lucky. Canvas does not stand snow too well. On the bivvies, indeed on all tents, the snow banked up till they fell on the occupants. There are a lot of wet and bedraggled people about this morning, many with nothing dry at all and that includes blankets.'

Every possible building was requisitioned, and troops already under

the shelter of roofs moved up to make room for the involuntary heroes of the storm.

But many had more pressing duties than the drying of blankets, boots and clothing. Like a man frozen, the Division had first to restore the circulation to its body. The civilian telephone lines which had been adapted for the Division's use collapsed under the ice-loading, dragging the poles down into the snow in a tangle of wires. Field cables had to be laid to replace them. Meanwhile, all wireless links were kept open. Vehicle movement came to a standstill. Roads blocked by snowdrifts had to be cleared by shovel, bulldozer and grader in sleet and snow that continued into the afternoon of the 1st. On Route 84, a mile west of **Castelfrentano**, and the northern **Guardiagrele** road, where the drifts were exceptionally deep, the work after New Year's Day went on by night, since both points were targets for German gunners, **TIKI** bridge was temporarily closed. The slit trenches of the infantry filled with water when the thaw set in. Pits for guns, machine guns and mortars were likewise flooded and weapons had to be moved to new pits or fired from ground level beside the old.

The snow fell on all alike. The Germans, too, had lines down and roads impassable. The men of *146 Regiment*, coming up to replace the paratroops on the right wing of *26 Panzer Division*, arrived wet to the skin and dog-tired after being on the march continuously for about twenty hours. They were in such poor shape and they had lost so many mules by the way that the relief, planned for 4 a.m. on 1 January, was not complete until 9 p.m. on the 2nd.

Except for blizzards on the night of 4–5 January and again on the 6th, the weather was fine and sunny until the Division left the **Orsogna** region. The thaw and the traffic converted roads into channels of mud that could be kept open only by uninterrupted hard work. Off the roads, the snow still lay on the ground, and the Division's last fortnight at **Orsogna** must be pictured against a background of white. Men plugging across country found that at every step they broke through the thin, hard crust into a cold slush that oozed in over their boot-tops. The

weight of battle order or any heavy load drove troops to the surer footing of worn tracks, however muddy.

(iv)

The three weeks after Christmas call for description rather than narration, and for the most part particular events must sink their identity in the general impression. On Fontegrande ridge (to begin with the most important of the four sub-sectors) occasional raids, the continual expectation of them, and constant exposure to short-range fire kept nerves on edge and necessitated frequent reliefs. Brigades were rotated within the Division, companies within battalions and platoons within companies.

Sixth Brigade became complete in the line after dark on 27 December, when 24 Battalion, earlier relieved on Brecciarola by 6 Parachute Battalion, replaced the Maoris in the cemetery area immediately north of Orsogna. The timetable issued with the operational instruction of 31 December envisaged the relief of infantry brigades every eight days. Accordingly, the two brigades exchanged sub-sectors on the night of 2–3 January, 5 Brigade resuming charge of the Fontegrande front and 6 Brigade going back into reserve near Castelfrentano. These dispositions remained unchanged until the Division left the Eighth Army in mid-January, as warning of an early move was received before the next relief was due to be made. Of the three 5 Brigade battalions, the 21st and 23rd went up during 2 January and that night and the 28th the next night to hold the line in that order from the right. During these reliefs telephone lines and sometimes the heavy weapons of supporting units were left in place for the incoming troops.

Opposite the New Zealanders comparative stability succeeded the hectic switchings and the chopping and changing of the German formations before Christmas. With the weather for a staunch ally, the German command no longer had to juggle so desperately with sparse

resources. On the Division's right the tried *26 Panzer Division* received *I* and *III Battalions 146 Regiment* as replacements for *6 Parachute Regiment* on its right flank, extending to about the cemetery, in circumstances already described, but this was the only change. Farther south, *65 Division* gave way at the end of December to *334 Infantry Division*, an inexperienced formation which had recently been re-formed in *France* after being wiped out in *Tunisia*, but which came to win a reputation second only to that of *1 Parachute Division* among German divisions in *Italy*. Profiting from his experience with *65 Division* and *90 Panzer Grenadier Division*, General Herr deliberately allotted this new division the easier sector next to the mountains. Its left flank, which was opposite the forward New Zealand brigade immediately north of *Orsogna*, was committed to one of its own units, *I Battalion 755 Infantry Regiment*, but the town of *Orsogna* remained in the devoted care of *III Battalion 4 Parachute Regiment*. These were finally the only paratroops facing the Division; the rest had been filtered eastwards to the coastal sector, where *1 Parachute Division* gradually assembled.

For the infantry manning the crucial defences in the Fontegrande area, the holding of the winter line was no occasion for relaxing. Neither side essayed any large attack, but if there was no spectacular onset there was a great deal of lethal bickering. The opposing troops were at such close quarters that something like personal venom crept into their exchanges, along with a determination not to be outwitted. Yet even this vendetta was tempered by a soldiers' compact against the weather, and some mutual restraint was observed in the destruction of the buildings that alone made life supportable in the front line.

The siting of the farmhouses and outbuildings largely governed the pattern of the defences. Infantry posts centred on these stone structures were organised to catch the whole of the front in a net of interlocking fire. The houses themselves were fortified. Doors and (where they existed) windows were sandbagged, and loopholes were driven through the walls to open up fields of fire – a precaution all the more necessary since most houses had doors facing east and were blind toward the

enemy.<sup>1</sup> Shelters were dug under the floors to give protection from shells and bombs. Slit trenches and weapon pits, mostly occupied by night, guarded the approaches to houses, and sentries, as statuesque as the cold would permit, kept watch. Tripwires attached to warning igniters were laid but little use was made of barbed wire or mines, those parents of a defensive mentality.

Many platoon posts were open to close enemy inspection, some from the flank by observers in **Orsogna**, others on forward slopes from the front by observers across the gully of the **Arielli**. This fact imposed habits of stealth and immobility – and of inhospitality towards visitors, who were welcome only when they came by covered ways. The penalties of being seen or heard were usually prompt and severe. Snipers, machine-gunners and observers controlling the fire of mortars and guns were posted at vantage points in houses occupied by the Germans, and familiarity with the ground lent accuracy to the fire. By day both sides carried on the war and beguiled their leisure by harassing each other with all the weapons they could command, and by night the guns fired their prearranged tasks and machine guns were laid on fixed lines. Targets were suggested by direct observation, indirect deduction from the study of maps, the reports of patrols and listening posts, and by sheer guesswork.

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<sup>1</sup> *Kippenberger*, p. 346.

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The spur north of the **Arielli** stream which the Divisional Commander had refused to relinquish was of all tenements the most uncomfortable. The Germans knew that it looked into their lines and pounded it with mortar and artillery fire in the hope that it would be given up as not worth the casualties. Day after day ‘the feature 1 km. north of the cemetery’ was noticed by the panzer division's diarist as having been engaged by mortars and artillery. It was also a favourite destination for enemy patrols, and after 27 December sentries had to be posted each night on the flanks. Surprisingly little harm came to the

**New Zealanders on this beaten patch of earth, but about twenty-four hours after their departure the Germans seized twelve prisoners from the relieving force without loss to themselves.**

**'Jittery Ridge' earned its name, and so did the whole of the Fontegrande area, to which the name came to be applied. For war has a kind of Newtonian law, whereby the strain on troops varies directly as the product of the opposing masses and inversely as the square of the distance between them. Fontegrande was a close front and a congested one. The tension of lying in wait for prowlers or listening for the soft sibilance of a mortar bomb in flight became exhausting, for no hour of the day or night would be certainly undisturbed. Supplies came up on mules after dark or before dawn, and for those not on patrol or picket duty there was always work to be done in the strengthening of defences. The scrape and clink of digging heard nightly in the enemy's lines showed that he was doing the same. Life was monotonous without the restfulness that monotony normally implies.**

**Like other occupations, soldiering can be divided into doing and suffering. The suffering of the infantrymen on Fontegrande has been sufficiently indicated. The doing, apart from the firing of infantry weapons, appeals to tank crews and gunners to fire theirs and the construction of defences, consisted mainly in the sending and receiving of patrols. At all times during this static period it was necessary to maintain standing patrols, contact patrols to guard gaps between defended localities and listening posts. Nevertheless, the war of patrols may be said to have passed through three phases.**

**Until the New Year both sides seemed satisfied to explore each other's layout and to follow up the discovery of defences by bombarding them. Patrols from 6 Brigade reconnoitred houses, tracks and likely natural features, and attempts were made to set booby-traps in houses frequented by the enemy. Germans were seen and heard on these excursions and once or twice when they returned the visit; but considering the confined area in which the patrols were working, skirmishes were remarkably few.**

The second phase, in the opening week of the New Year, was more exciting. The unusually spirited patrolling of the Germans won them brief but undeniable mastery of no-man's-land. The New Zealanders took time to digest the implications of the Divisional Commander's instruction of 31 December, the snow brought fighting to a temporary standstill, and the relief of 6 Brigade by **5 Brigade** extended over two nights early in January.

The Germans, too, had been snowbound and on this front they were fresh in the line, but they were quicker to go to work. One reason may have been that they were on their mettle, *I and III Battalions 146 Regiment* with a reputation to repair, *I Battalion 755 Regiment* with one to make. More certainly, they were under orders to patrol strongly from a command that was still apprehensive of an early attack. In an appreciation of 4 January, *26 Panzer Division* noted the movement of troops in the area east and south-east of **Orsogna** and the massing of artillery in the same area. These guns were 'quietly but continuously ranging on our supply routes, headquarters and FDLs. The enemy is keeping his wireless traffic very secure. All enemy patrols are carefully stripped of papers or insignia which might betray their formation. All these indicate an attack in the near future. The division thinks that the main thrust will come along the roads leading north from **Orsogna** and **Guardiagrele**.' The discomfiture of the New Zealanders was therefore due to their success in tactical deception. For five days after coming into the line **5 Brigade** was too intent on securing a firm base to send out reconnaissance or fighting patrols and in that time the enemy held the upper hand.

The first shock of German audacity fell on 15 Platoon 28 Battalion, occupying a house west of the cemetery and only about 150 yards from the enemy line. Snow fell again on the night of 4–5 January, and before dawn twelve or more raiders in white clothing approached with muffled steps under cover of the blizzard. They caught the Maoris asleep and entered the house unchallenged before opening fire. Once awake, the

**Maoris ran smartly back towards the Ortona road for help, giving the alarm to three supporting tanks. Machine-gun fire from the tanks and from neighbouring infantry posts drove the patrol away, and when the Maori platoon returned to the house it found it empty except for one dead German. He belonged to a battalion of 755 Regiment which was already known to be holding the sector. The affray cost the Maoris one killed and two wounded.**

**Next night, though the infantry were alert, it was the turn of D Company 23 Battalion, thrust forward on the spur beyond the Arielli. A house occupied by 18 Platoon was attacked about 2.45 in the morning by a patrol of eight or ten Germans, who, like those the night before, were dressed in snow-suits. They converged on the house from windward, concealed in a flurry of sleet and by the pitch darkness. They exchanged hand grenades with the sentries posted outside and then fired machine carbines into the house. In this way they wounded four men without entering the house and made off before the platoon could organise its defence. These daring and skilful raiders from 146 Regiment apparently crowned their night's work by speedily reporting the location of the house, for immediately after their withdrawal D Company was severely mortared until the New Zealand artillery silenced the fire. The patrol also took back the body of a dead New Zealander, thus fulfilling its main purpose. From the body the Germans were able to identify 23 Battalion and, from the report of the patrol, to fill in some enemy-defended localities on their intelligence maps.**

**The losses inflicted by the two enemy raids led Brigadier Kippenberger to make suggestions to his battalion commanders for the more efficient defending and picketing of posts by night. Instructions were given that the sentries guarding houses should be at least twenty yards away from the buildings and that some means of quick communication between them should be instituted. Doors and entrances were to be barricaded and made secure against sudden entry. Such precautions were far from superfluous, for on the night of 6–7 January – the third in succession – white-clad German patrols were on the prowl**



round the New Zealand lines. A Company 23 Battalion saw about sixteen men moving across its front just after midnight and a little later C Company dispersed a party of eight Germans with a few volleys. It was a night of uneasy vigilance along the Fontegrande front. Vague scuffling noises and shadowy movements announced the presence of German patrols, but the night was so dark and stormy that no direct contact was made. Next morning, however, the fresh footprints of men and dogs were found round some of 23 Battalion's infantry and mortar posts. Rumours having previously circulated that the enemy was using dogs on his patrols, the order was now given to shoot on sight any dog seen on the front.

After passively enduring German provocation for three nights, **5 Brigade** was thoroughly roused, and the night of 7–8 January brought an opportunity for reprisal and for dampening the enemy's ardour. First, A Company 23 Battalion warded off a party of Germans approaching its spur, but it was left to the Maoris to strike a more stinging blow. About half an hour before midnight sentries of 12 Platoon of B Company **28 Battalion** (Second-Lieutenant **Takuraa**), <sup>1</sup> watching from the top story of a house a few

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Lt G. **Takuraa**; born Ruatoki, 23 Jun 1913; lorry driver; killed in action 18 Feb 1944.

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hundred yards forward of the cemetery, observed movement in the moonlit snow. Coming towards them along the railway line from the south-west were seven Germans in extended order. The alarm was given. Two sections manned the top windows and waited in silence until the patrol approached to within 30 yards. At that short range the defenders' bursts of fire killed five of the Germans and appeared to have wounded the two who escaped. About quarter of an hour later mortars and machine guns engaged the house, perhaps in response to the signal flare put up by the Germans when they came under the sudden attack. So heavy was the enemy fire that a Maori sent out to search the corpses

could examine only two which carried no means of identification. The patrol had come, in fact, from *755 Regiment*.

The Maori success was more than a well-managed stroke of vengeance; it helped to swing the tactical pendulum in favour of the Division, for after this reverse German patrols no longer seriously troubled the New Zealand forward posts on the Fontegrande front. The Germans were by no means willing to resign the initiative. On the contrary, they were under the most authoritative orders to maintain it. Even as the ill-fated patrol was leaving on its mission, *Tenth Army* was urgently directing *76 Panzer Corps* to discover the movement of formations on its front. The German High Command (OKW) had called for preliminary reports by 14 January, if humanly possible, and the corps was to patrol methodically and to take prisoners from every enemy division. On the morning of the 9th Kesselring told Vietinghoff that he was certain the enemy had 'got something prepared' north of *Orsogna* and at *Melone*, and received an assurance that strong fighting patrols had been ordered out to take 'a lot of prisoners'.

Yet on the 8th and again on the 11th *26 Panzer Division* affirmed a policy of caution, instructing its regiments to confine their patrolling to observation, to putting out listening posts at night and carefully probing the enemy outpost line. In part (the facts must not be over-dramatised) it was the moon, now nearly full, that determined this decision. 'If the bright nights continue,' read a directive of the panzer division, 'patrolling is to be limited to observation patrols. No strong fighting patrols until the weather changes'. And in its report on the patrol losses of 7-8 January, *334 Division* blamed the deep snow and the brightness of the night. But moonlight does not kill, and it was in part the lively reactions of the New Zealanders, described by the Germans as 'jumpy and alert', that led the two enemy divisions to interpret their orders with such wide discretion.

During the last week before its relief – the third phase of the 'line-holding' on Fontegrande – *5 Brigade* patrolled actively within the limits set by the weather and the somewhat crowded and hugger-mugger state

of the front. Despite General Dempsey's orders to obtain identifications of the German units opposite the Division, the moonlight kept all patrols home for two nights running and on a third night almost caused a serious mishap when a Maori patrol, having postponed its starting time until moonset without notice, was fired on by one of 23 Battalion's posts.

More than once New Zealand patrols, sent to leave observers or booby-traps or to lay ambushes in houses, found themselves forestalled by the enemy. On the forward slope of 23 Battalion's spur north of the **Arielli** there was a house which a German outpost had been seen to occupy nightly at 6.30. At 5 p.m. on the 8th, therefore, six men left A Company to form a reception party for that evening, but instead it fell to them to be received. Thirty yards from the house the patrol was challenged and fired on by three sentries, one of whom was killed in the ensuing exchange. Summoned by a tracer signal, about eighteen Germans in white ran into the house and appeared at the windows. They were greeted by violent fire from the patrol, and in high excitement and some confusion pursued the withdrawal of the New Zealanders with wildly erratic bursts from their machine guns.

(v)

The Fontegrande area, it will be remembered, was only the most active of four sectors facing the enemy on the Division's front. On the other three we may dwell more lightly. The sector on the right between the villages of **Crecchio** and **Arielli** became a responsibility of the Division when **2 Parachute Brigade** relieved **15 Brigade** of **5 Division** there, as noted earlier. The relief took place by stages between the night of 4–5 January and the next evening. The right flank was occupied by **4 Parachute Battalion**, with companies in the hamlets of Salciaroli and Consalvi; the centre by **5 Parachute Battalion**, with its most advanced company pushed forward to within a few hundred yards of the eastern outskirts of **Arielli** village; and the left, neighbouring **21 Battalion**, by **6 Parachute Battalion**, with company positions around **Poggiofiorito**.

The paratroops held their line in conditions similar to those farther south and west. The going was no easier, the peasant's *casa*, as elsewhere, was the nucleus of each system of local defence, the same desultory rain of shell and mortar fire was endured and returned. **Poggiofiorito**, indeed, was more persistently battered by gunfire than any other spot in the New Zealand area. But in one respect life was simpler. Between the Germans manning the **Arielli** stream and the FDLs taken over by the paratroops lay about 1000 yards of no-man's-land. Even after the night of 9–10 January, when all three battalions advanced their forward posts between 200 and 600 yards towards the enemy line, contact was not so oppressively close as on Fontegrande. The paratroops took full advantage of the room they had to work in and gave the enemy a bitter taste of their quality.

Events conformed to the familiar pattern. At first the enemy ruled the front. A raiding party inflicted casualties at Salciaroli before dawn on the 5th and an outpost at Le Piane wounded two and captured six of a fighting patrol of paratroops the following night. After the forward move of the battalions, however, the paratroops had their front firmly under control. The enterprise of their reconnaissance and fighting patrols is well illustrated by their tally of eleven prisoners taken in seven different actions within four days. These captures from *26 Reconnaissance Unit* and *I and II Battalions 67 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* gave a picture, though not quite a complete picture, of the enemy dispositions opposite the brigade. The achievement was the more impressive since **5 Brigade** had not by this time identified the two battalions of *146 Regiment* facing it in the line, nor was it even thought that fresh troops had been brought in to replace the German paratroops, whose departure was known.

(vi)

The **Salarola** sub-sector, on the left of **5 Brigade**, had seen no more than skirmishing for a month past when **22 Battalion** relieved **4 Parachute Battalion** on 3 January. The road junction at **Melone** had

always loomed larger in the German than in the New Zealand mind as a potential point of attack, and the Germans continued to watch over it with a jealous and suspicious eye. The fact was that on this front the Division desired nothing better than to be left alone; and the configuration of the country helped it to have its way inexpensively. Although the sub-sector covered a front of more than two miles from **Colle Chiamato** to **Colle Bianco**, only about 600 yards of it, on either side of the northern **Guardiagrele** road, needed to be held in strength. This road ran along the crest of a watershed, through country impassable to any but small patrols, with steep ravines carrying the headwaters of the **Moro** running away to the north-east on one side, and on the other to the south the rugged gorge of the Sant' Antonio stream.

Consequently, most of the action in these days occurred on the negotiable high ground between the two gorges, where the village of **Salarola** was the pivot of the New Zealanders' defences as **Melone**, with **Colle Martino** behind it, was of the Germans'. Here both sides employed their artillery, mortars and machine guns on harassing tasks. The main enemy line between **Orsogna** and **Guardiagrele** which followed the road linking the two towns, was manned by two battalions of *754 Regiment* and one of *756 Regiment*, all belonging to the new *334 Division*. Twenty-second Battalion had its strength in and around **Salarola**, the forward company being astride the road ahead of the village and about 1000 yards short of **Melone**. Of two long ridges running north-east off the road the nearer, the Piano delle Fanti, was regularly patrolled, and the other was visited by patrols. Most of the houses on the forward ridge were booby-trapped, but one was found to be occupied by Germans, who allowed the patrol to withdraw in peace.

Clashes were the exception on this front. The only casualty certainly inflicted by 22 Battalion was that of a signaller of 111 Field Regiment, **Royal Artillery**, one of a party repairing lines which was mistaken for the enemy as it approached an isolated observation post at dead of night after the post had earlier been put on the alert by a German patrol.

*(vii)*

The last sub-sector, to the south-west of the Division, from Colle **Bianco** to **Colle Barone**, was wild country overlooked by the great white flanks of the Majella, where the Germans sometimes patrolled on skis; but it was more restful than the other fronts. The trade in harassing fire was slack, and no direct encounter with the enemy is recorded, though patrols explored westwards towards the lower slopes of the mountain.

The area was taken over from a company of **5 Parachute Battalion** early in January by a composite New Zealand force of non-infantrymen cast in an infantry role – B Squadron Divisional Cavalry, 34 Anti-Tank Battery and two troops of 33 Anti-Tank Battery, and 7 and 9 Machine Gun Platoons. The main posts were on Colle **Bianco** and at other points on and forward of the southern Guardiagrele road, but some anti-tank men and machine-gunners defended the secluded village of **Fontana Ascigno** to the south, accessible only by rough mountain tracks. On the 6th this post among the snow-covered hills made neighbourly contact with men of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who had come in on the right flank of 36 Brigade of **78 Division** when it relieved 13 Brigade of **5 Division**.

The troops in the **Bianco**–Barone sector had to be supplied by mule trains, which made heavy weather of the journey up over slushy, winding tracks, and it became necessary to clear alternative tracks to the forward posts. A Vickers machine-gunner who helped to carry wire up to **Fontana Ascigno** wrote of ‘an exhausting trip with the bloody mules stumbling and slipping in deep drifts of snow, packs slipping, the Ites yelling and tugging’.

*(viii)*

What of the supporting arms during the winter stalemate? January in the Abruzzi was no time for tanks, and few calls were made on the services of the armoured regiments. Tracked movement was, of course, harsh to road surfaces and difficult or impossible off them. The policy

was therefore to use tanks sparingly in the forward areas and not as a rule in advance of infantry battalion headquarters. Thus as soon as enough anti-tank guns had been deployed on Fontegrande the tanks were withdrawn behind the **Ortona** road. Here, at **Poggiofiorito** on the right, on Brecciarola in the centre and around **Salarola** and **San Eusanio** on the left, elements of the armoured regiments were stationed to support the infantry by the harassing fire of their guns and as an insurance against the unlikely (and unrealised) chance of enemy tank attack. Several of the squadrons used the time to rest and refit, and the work of retrieving disabled and bemired tanks was pressed on with much energy and with little concern for the hindrances of mud, snow and mortar fire. Between 1 and 16 January twenty-five tanks were recovered from the forward areas, some from the upper end of Sfasciata and the **Ortona** road being dragged out of minefields by a tractor. Even so, several tanks stranded in or before the FDLs were made a bequest to the incoming division. The tank strength of the armoured brigade was further restored by the delivery of six new Shermans to the regiments.

However listless and inert a front may be, occupation can always be found for the artillery, provided there is ammunition for the guns. For a week after Christmas supply difficulties in the rear made it necessary to ration 25-pounder ammunition to thirty rounds a gun daily. After receiving 20,000 rounds on 24 December alone, the field regiments had to economise upon no more than 15,000 in the following week, but candour demands the comment that, in supplies of gun ammunition, what was penury to the New Zealanders was often to the Germans fabulous wealth.

The New Year's snow was as uncomfortable for the gunner as for other soldiers, but it presented him in addition with certain technical problems. Guns had to be winched out of snow-filled pits. It seemed more difficult to keep ammunition dry from an insidious thaw of snow than from honest, beating rain; and while damp charges gave shells an uncertain travel, damp primers caused misfires that put guns temporarily out of action. The sleet blinded observation posts or

shortened their vision, and even when the air was clear and the sun sparkled on the snow the obliteration of all but the boldest features of the landscape made observed fire slow and less efficient. Predicted fire suffered too; for it seems that the abstruse and scrupulous mathematics of the command posts was often made futile by changes of temperature swift and extreme enough to invalidate meteor telegrams, range tables and other technical aids.

To crown all, our own troops on the busiest sector, Fontegrande, were no more than a few hundred yards from the enemy, and the fire they called for at short notice was frequently upon 'close targets', which require the most deliberate and meticulous ranging. The worst fear of the gunner is to drop rounds among his own troops, and when this mishap occurred and recurred during this period it must have been small consolation to the New Zealand artillery to know that a curious conjunction made it almost inevitable.

The main tasks of the New Zealand gunners were to fire by day upon opportunity targets and both by night and day to harass **Orsogna** and **Guardiagrele**, the enemy infantry localities and communications. Targets deeper into the enemy lines, including his gun positions, were mostly reserved for the heavier guns of 6 Army Group, **Royal Artillery**, but roving sections of 25-pounders were sited well forward to disturb the enemy as far away as the southern outskirts of **Chieti**. One of these sections dropped its trails among the FDLs of the British paratroops. Though not allowed to fire by day and by night only simultaneously with rearward guns, this section attracted so much notice from enemy mortars that it rejoined its battery after about three nights.

Psychological warfare – the fact if not the name – has long been a function of artillery: the guns have been classic diffusers of the terror. Modern techniques, which were largely evolved in the desert, of rapidly massing the fire of many guns on a single target have tended to confirm this traditional role. **Orsogna** itself during this time was almost a daily target for divisional concentrations. Sometimes the drubbing it received from the ground was accompanied or preceded by the attack of fighter-



bombers. A combined bombardment on the 12th, after an earlier raid in which Kittybombers dropped a new and destructive type of bomb, offered the defenders an impressive show of violence. The same day **26 Panzer Division** forbade all traffic movement by day because of the recent heavy casualties to motor transport. But the Division's artillery did not omit more refined means of sapping the German morale. On 30 December propaganda pamphlets were showered into **Orsogna** by air-bursting shells, and on 2 January, after a day's postponement, the four field regiments gave a display of virtuosity by spelling out the words 'HAPPY NEW YEAR FRITZ' in letters 500 yards high on the snowy slopes west and north of **Orsogna**. To press home the advantage, as well as to burnish their skill, the gunners also fired towards the end of their stay in the line a practice barrage lasting twenty minutes in the area west of **Arielli**.

Air support was unavoidably intermittent. Though a Spitfire patrol was flown daily over the lines, a low cloud ceiling or some other impediment kept close-support aircraft out of the sky on many days. When they could fly they proved the variety of their usefulness by bombing **Orsogna** and **Guardiagrele**, rest and billet areas farther to the rear, gun positions and roads, by strafing traffic and by directing the fire of the New Zealand guns. Especially welcome was their attack on two 170-millimetre guns which, firing from positions about eight miles behind the front line south and east of **Chieti**, had been like two nagging teeth in the head of the Division. One of the guns was hit directly and did not trouble the Division again. German airmen ventured out over this front very rarely. A sharp raid by about twenty fighter-bombers on **Poggiofiorito** on the 11th cost the enemy at least one aircraft, which was hit and exploded in mid-air. The credit for its destruction was officially divided between 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment and a British regiment in the area.

For the engineers the phrase 'static warfare' has only an ironical application to the three weeks after Christmas. Theirs was a dynamic war, with so much to do that Italian civilians again had to be recruited

to help, with ample scope for improvisation and with even more than the usual need to undertake errands of mercy to drivers, tank crews and gunners in distress. Engineers were employed in hauling guns from waterlogged pits and excavating new ones, constructing a landing ground for observation aircraft and erecting Nissen huts, but these were slight drafts on their energies, and almost the whole of their effort went into the road systems, especially after the snowfall. They had responsibility for all roads north and west of Route 84, but not for Route 84 itself. Their most constant preoccupation was with Duncan's road, which, it will be recalled, ran from the crossing of the **Moro** at HONGI bridge up the stiff slope to Sfasciata and along the ridge to the **Ortona** road. The track was formed throughout its length by the end of December, but there was a never-ending struggle to metal the road and keep it metalled. Houses were blown up to provide brick and rubble for the foundations and thousands of tons of metal were transported from a nearby quarry and laid. After it had been softened by weeks of wet weather, snow blocked the road and then flooded it, slips came down in cuttings and the sappers had to stand aside while passing traffic cut deep ruts and buried the hard-won metal and corduroy in the morass.

As the condition of the road varied, so restrictions on its use were imposed and lifted, relaxed and tightened up. On Christmas Day a divisional order confined the road to essential vehicles fully loaded, forbade crowding and halting, instructed front-line troops to use local water supplies where possible, and established a provost post at the **Moro** crossing to check all vehicles using the road. Two days later it was closed for a few hours to virtually all traffic and then reopened to jeeps only. On the 29th it was possible to relax the prohibition in favour of 3-ton trucks carrying essential supplies as far as the turning point on the crest of the ridge. So it went on while the engineers slaved at their unforgiving task, sometimes screened from enemy eyes by draped camouflage nets.

Everywhere roads had to be kept under continuous repair by men wielding shovels, whose patience was sorely tried as thrashing wheel

chains and hissing tyres bespattered them with mud. The blockage of roads by the snow dammed up the stream of traffic and drew shellfire, and the work of clearing them engaged parties of men from nearly all units. The northern **Guardiagrele** road was not fully restored until the 7th, and it was the night of 7–8 January before a bulldozer cleared the last few yards of slush from Duncan's road.

Though on New Year's Day no supply vehicles could leave the Division to bring up supplies because of the snowfall, thereafter **Army Service Corps** convoys maintained their regular services, where necessary deviating from the usual routes. On all three of the front-line sub-sectors mules served the forward troops. Jeeps would bring supplies from unit rear echelons to agreed points as near the front as possible, where the mule packs would be made up. The superiority of primitive means of transport in rough weather was not, however, without exception; and a certain piquancy attends the experience of Lieutenant **Brownlie**<sup>1</sup> and his party of fourteen trucks which was despatched from 4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company on Boxing Day in search of mules. Before they could reach **Agnone**, where the mules were to be loaded, he and his men became snowbound at **Capracotta** and had to be fed from the skies by parachute.

(ix)

The six weeks or more spent before **Orsogna** gave the lineaments of the region time to impress themselves on the minds of the New Zealanders. It is not always the lasting features of a landscape but often those of a very transient nature that soldiers remember, for whenever an army pauses it insensibly works a change upon its environment. It builds new roads and alters the course of old ones, lonely places suddenly become the signposted hub of a busy traffic and fortuitous landmarks appear – the burnt-out tank pushed off the road to rust, the festoons of signal wire, the wayside encampments or dumps of ammunition. Memory may fix upon some such temporary

<sup>1</sup> **Capt J. N. Brownlie; Frazertown, Wairoa; born Hastings, 29 Nov 1918; farmer; wounded 29 Mar 1943.**

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grouping of objects and dub it for ever **Orsogna**. Or it may dwell on more permanent sights – the narrow streets and sharp corners of **Castelfrentano**; the squalor of **Spaccarelli**; the gaunt majesty of the Majella; the grandiose pile of the brickworks, useful to the Division as a source of rubble for roadmaking and to the enemy as a ranging mark; or the thin, tutelary church tower of **Orsogna**, which in spite of all that airmen and gunners could aim at it continued to stand and to sprinkle its chimes indifferently across the snow to soldiers from afar and to peasants born and bred within sound of its bells.

Another part of the subtle interplay between armies and places is the bestowal of names to supplement those on the map, names that begin in utility and end in sentiment, surviving in the traditional lore of an army when the places that bore them have long been left behind. West of **Castelfrentano**, for example, there was the ‘Mad Mile’, a notorious stretch of road that could be viewed end on from **Orsogna**. No one dawdled on this registered target, for the enemy could and often did bring down upon it the almost instant fire of a weapon indubitably large and reputedly a 170-millimetre gun beyond the range of our own artillery. ‘Shell Alley’ was a less frequented but equally hazardous stretch of road between ‘Hellfire Corner’ and **Spaccarelli**. Besides names horrific like these and ‘Jittery Ridge’ and names coined by the mere indolence of the Anglo-Saxon tongue, which corrupted the Italian’s **Archi** into the New Zealander’s Archey, there were names personal (like Armstrong’s road and Hunter’s bridge), names nostalgic (like **TIKI** and **HONGI** bridges), and names arbitrary (like **LOBE** bridge).

**Orsogna**’s *genius loci* expressed itself in its inhabitants as well as in its landmarks, and of these inhabitants the Division saw more than it might have expected. Desert experience supplied no parallel to the incongruous way in which civil and military life went on together cheek

by jowl. In such places as **Castelfrentano** houses were often shared with the families who owned them and were at Once homes and billets. Even farther forward, some peasants preferred the chances of war to separation from hearth and home, accepting danger with an uncomprehending resignation. In such circumstances, when a New Zealand patrol found footmarks in disputed ground near **Arielli**, it could not be known whether they had been made by Germans or Italians.

Civilian movement in the fighting zone was particularly noticeable after Christmas when, with the front stabilised and comparatively quiet, many Italians returned to their farms and villages. Numerous refugees crossed from the German lines, some of them poorly clothed and nourished and suffering from cold and exposure. The New Zealand troops gave them what assistance they could before they were taken back to **Castelfrentano** by the **Field Security Section** for handing over to the Italian civil authorities.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: THE LESSONS OF EXPERIENCE

### *II: The Lessons of Experience*

(i)

War is an expensive tutor, and only folly pays for its lessons without absorbing them. Even before leaving the **Orsogna** front, the formations were asked by **Divisional Headquarters** to reflect on their experience and to summarise its lessons – tactical, technical and administrative – for guidance in future training and operations. Grown to maturity in the desert and transported to the rougher terrain and bitterer weather of **Italy** in winter, the Division on the face of it was an old dog set to learn new tricks. But the proverbial difficulty of its task was lessened by two facts among others: the dog was not wholly old (it had an armoured component for the first time and many of its men did not have to unlearn desert ways) and the tricks were not really new.

For here was the first lesson to be learned by all the fighting arms – the principles advocated in the service manuals were essentially sound in Italian conditions. After the mild tactical heresies that had paid rewards in the African campaigns, orthodoxy stood vindicated once more, and all commanders were agreed on the need for stricter adherence to ‘the book’, which had, after all, been written with continental warfare in mind. More thorough reconnaissance, for example, was shown to be necessary, not only by tank and infantry formations but also by artillery in deployment. Aerial photographs were widely praised as an aid to the preliminary study of the ground and they were sought in larger numbers for distribution down to company and troop commanders. Again, rigid traffic discipline had to be revived to prevent such a heavily mechanised division from choking the roads and immobilising itself from its very surfeit of transport. Large-scale movement was an operational matter, requiring careful control by the

staff; but precise timings had proved impracticable owing to unpredictable delays in getting vehicles on to the roads from muddy ground and off again to disperse, and because of detours at blown bridges, interloping convoys and the like. Other commonplaces that had to be reaffirmed were the need in every man for physical fitness and skill in the handling of personal weapons and in every unit for greater self-reliance in the elements of field engineering, including the lifting of mines and booby-traps, in order to lighten the burden on the overworked sappers.

Besides this general fund of wisdom, each fighting arm had its own experience to consult. Among the most costly and most profitable was that of 4 Armoured Brigade, fighting its first campaign as an armoured formation in conditions the reverse of favourable. At first the limitations of tanks in mud, on steep slopes, in close country and in fording rivers were not fully realised. If mobility was overestimated, vulnerability was underestimated. Casualties, however, soon demonstrated the hazards of sending tanks in to lead an attack, either alone or with infantry support, where there was no room for manoeuvre or where movement was confined to a single road. Anti-tank guns, well dug in and concealed, remained the greatest menace. They could be countered to some extent by the use of smoke and by the skilful fire and movement of tanks in mutual support, but the method best attested by experience was a covering screen of infantry. In other words, success was gained rather by infantry attacks with tank support than by tank attacks with infantry support.

The presence of tanks was shown to be indispensable to infantry consolidating on an objective, and for this reason they should have absolute priority on roads leading forward. At the same time, tanks should withdraw from the FDLs as soon as possible to allow their crews to rest and carry out maintenance. Hitherto, they had been detained forward unduly long because of the infantry's difficulty in bringing up their six-pounders. Once withdrawn into a defensive or counter-attack role, tanks should not be sited forward of battalion headquarters areas.

Here and elsewhere they had found few opportunities for indirect fire.

Because tank movement always attracted fire, it was recommended that in a normal attack tanks should move by bounds on the flanks or in the rear of the infantry and not closer than 500 yards. Nevertheless, liaison could not be too close, and the wireless link was essential. The No. 38 set worked well, provided the tank aerial was kept vertical – a lesson learned in one action in which tanks and infantry had suffered as a result of the failure among trees and buildings of the horizontal aerial used in Egypt. In defence, armoured movement about the front was found to be safest in the half-light periods of dawn and dusk. By night there was the danger of bogging, by day of shellfire, and at all times of mines, which might be concealed in such seemingly innocuous places as standing crops and road puddles. Among the administrative problems of the armoured brigade, the supply of fuel was not the least. In this type of country the ‘worst average’ rate of consumption was estimated at two and a half gallons a mile.

The fate of infantry attacks made one conclusion inescapable – objectives should not be too distant. An advance of 2000 yards was set down as a maximum, with not more than one large natural obstacle on the way. The need for this limit sprang partly from the nature of the ground and partly from the depth of the enemy defences, which commonly stretched back 4000 yards. The Germans, it was admitted, were fighting stubbornly and with skill. Their outposts were held by troops few in numbers but strong in the fire-power of their automatic weapons and of supporting mortars. Then came the main line, where well-camouflaged platoon posts lay usually on the reverse slopes but increasingly on the tops of ridges; hence assaulting troops should aim to capture the high ground. This layout, together with the limited thrust of attacks, meant that it was impossible as a rule to breach the enemy line (or rather his defended zone) in a single operation. Infantry rarely penetrated deep enough to capture the enemy's mortars or to force him to shift headquarters and so disrupt his signals and network of command. Assuming that the initial assault would always be halted in



the midst of the enemy defended localities, it followed that exploitation was work for fresh troops directed to clearly defined objectives. As pockets of resistance were likely to be overrun during an advance, especially by night, it was urged that battalions should attack with two companies up, each on a frontage of 300 or 400 yards, leaving one company to mop up and the fourth in reserve. The recommended rates of advance in fair going – three minutes for 100 yards by day and five minutes by night – were asking a good deal of heavily-loaded infantrymen.

At least in **5 Brigade**, infantry commanders showed an overwhelming preference for attacks by night rather than by day. Silent attacks found little favour anywhere, but it was recognised that, however much the supporting arms might exert themselves, the men on foot must still expect to fight their own way forward. If enemy positions were accurately known, timed concentrations by the artillery were thought to give better results than barrages, particularly in broken country. During consolidation, the direct support of tanks should be supplemented where necessary by the defensive fire of artillery on prearranged tasks.

In defence, the infantry were invited to take a leaf from the German book by holding the FDLs with few men more heavily armed. Only so could frequent reliefs be made within battalions and sub-units and the necessary advantage taken of buildings that offered observation posts and shelter from the weather and enemy fire. Patrolling, infiltration, street fighting and camouflage were technical skills that would call for practice during training. Fighting in **Italy** made severer demands on the physical fitness of infantrymen than in **Africa**, where it had usually been possible to carry the infantry into battle on lorries. It was found, however, that leather jerkins and gas capes made it unnecessary to take the heavier greatcoats and groundsheets into action. Straw, usually plentiful round farmhouses, could be used to give extra warmth. Though mules were satisfactory supply carriers in steep places – seventy was the suggested scale for a battalion – infantrymen could still not neglect to carry hard rations, full water bottles and as much ammunition as

possible.

*(ii)*

The campaign taught the artillery the need for the early and detailed reconnaissance of gun positions, with a special eye to their accessibility. The gunners were aware that they had not been fully effective in neutralising the enemy during the attack and asked for more time in which to prepare their plans and for a delay fuse able to penetrate well-built defences before exploding. Apart from the disturbing effects of the weather, one of the main troubles of the gunners was the poor detail of the Italian maps, which handicapped observers and made map-shooting unreliable.

The Division was happy in its artillery weapon. By this time the 25-pounder gun-howitzer had outlived its novelty and proved its worth and was moving inevitably along the road that leads through familiarity to fame. Given the time that sanctifies, this lovable gun was clearly destined for a legendary prestige to be matched only by that of the French *soixante-quinze*. It had no rival for the loyalty of field gunners, who, a war and a generation earlier, had divided their devotion between the 18-pounder and the 'four-five how'. Its very universality reminded the New Zealand gunners how many allies shared their craft. At any given time some layer would be centring the same bubble with the same deft anti-clockwise flick of the elevating gear, and reporting ready – in some strange tongue or accent. The furniture of the gun and the jingle of the drag-ropes as it bounced round the bend of a road made bonds of alliance. But the prime purpose of the 25-pounder was less to unite friends than to scatter enemies.

For this purpose it combined the usefulness of the gun and of the howitzer. As a gun, firing exceptionally at the highest charge, it could send its shell 13,400 yards, and a range of 11,000 yards was within its normal capacity. Since it was small enough to be sited and concealed well forward, its long reach could be used to harass crossroads or bridges or dumps far behind the enemy's front and to make life a misery for his

supply troops. Perhaps even more advantageous in **Italy** was its ability as a howitzer to deliver a shell of lower velocity and higher trajectory. Problems of crest clearance almost disappeared. This in turn conferred a wider choice of gun positions, permitted the best use to be made of gun areas where batteries were often thick on the ground, and improved the protection of guns by enabling them to be tucked close in under the shelter of hills, which hid their flash and made them difficult to hit. The lobbing flight of the howitzer shell could find targets behind crests and in gullies that were inaccessible to the mere gun, and the steep angle of descent prevented the undue dispersal of the canisters thrown out by the air-bursting smoke shell – no slight asset in a country where the humid atmosphere in winter favoured the use of smoke, where the enemy's excellent observation often made it necessary, and where the deeply wrinkled terrain sometimes required smoke for ranging. The Germans deplored the 25-pounder high-explosive shell for its deafening burst and wide zone of fragmentation, and so high was the rate of fire that they occasionally mistook the 25-pounder for an automatic weapon. Experienced crews knew, indeed, that the five rounds a minute of the drill book was not a maximum. Normally it was an accurate gun, but rapid wear of the barrel in the long spells of firing that were not uncommon in **Italy** could cause rounds to fall short.

In this campaign the field gunners were not called on to kill tanks over open sights. It was therefore possible to dig the guns in or surround them with parapets of sandbags without much fear of obstructing a necessary field of fire. In more mobile operations the circular steel platform carried under the trail of the 25-pounder was a great advantage in the Italian winter, for it enabled the gun to be brought into action quickly and traversed easily on muddy ground. If the moral factor in war is as great as the gunner Napoleon thought, one other virtue of the 25-pounder demands mention: it possessed a shield. This thin plate of armour offered psychological reassurance and perhaps some real protection from flying splinters or bullets. More than that, it offered a flat surface upon which the gunners could inscribe the name of their choice, cocky or sentimental, homely or proud.

From this inventory of virtues, one subtraction must be made, and it springs from the fact that the 25-pounder was the weapon of a mechanised army. Its pneumatic tyres made it fast on the road or on firm ground, but in the mud of the fields it was not such a handy gun to manoeuvre as those carried on the old spoked, iron-shod wheels. Sweaty labours were often needed to manhandle it out of a pit or across sodden ground; the balance which made it easy to traverse on the platform also made it perilously easy to tip muzzle-down in the mud – the most humiliating of sights; the low trailers loaded with ammunition were particularly awkward to move and keep moving; and the winching gear of the gun-tower was not always equal to the strain, even supposing the tower could approach near enough to use it. Gun for gun, the 25-pounder was less well served in **Italy** by its petrol-driven ‘quad’ than the medium guns by their diesel-engined ‘matador’.

*(iii)*

The machine-gunners ruefully contrasted the **Orsogna** country with ‘the limitless vistas of flat desert’. Now their work was extremely strenuous and, with its scope for indirect fire, technically exacting. But they had the satisfaction of knowing that, given the required man- or mule-power, the Vickers machine gun was more easily able to keep up with advancing infantry than other supporting weapons. Nevertheless, in such exhausting terrain men could not be expected to carry their guns more than 1000 yards without temporary loss of fighting efficiency. The usual practice had been to attach two companies of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion to each brigade, one company in close support of the battalions, the other under brigade command to provide harassing fire and support in depth. Machine-gunners in forward posts were wise to reserve their fire for the main counter-attack.

The engineers had so much to do on the **Orsogna** front that no sapper effort could be wasted. Two economies specially recommended were unit self-help and the direct control by the CRE of all engineer resources for as long as possible. Another realistic doctrine that served

the same end was the rule that it was generally better to avoid the nuisance of mines and shellfire by constructing a new route than to court them by taking the obvious and topographically easiest crossing of an obstacle. Though the new heavy equipment had proved itself, experience brought to light fresh needs – the armouring of bulldozers, assault bridging that could be erected more rapidly than the Bailey type, and improved mine-detecting apparatus.

Despite the state of the roads and the weather, the New Zealand **Army Service Corps** was able on the whole to run a smoother supply service in **Italy** than in **Africa**. Distances to railhead and bulk issue depots were shorter, the divisional front was less mobile, and in country of such strongly-marked natural features it was less easy for convoys to go astray. The medical services were also able to bring the whole chain of evacuation posts closer to the front line. Indeed, they had no choice but to do so because traffic congestion often delayed evacuation, though ambulances took precedence on the roads. In view of the difficulty of bringing back the wounded from the front line, a return was made to the practice of having large stretcher-bearer teams in readiness before an attack, sometimes with as many as six men to each stretcher. From the regimental aid post casualties would be carried, usually by jeep, to the advanced dressing station, accommodated well forward in some suitable farmhouse, and thence by ambulance to the more elaborately equipped stations farther back. The primary lesson learned by the medical services was the need for flexibility in the handling of units.

The reports of the various formations were collated at Divisional Headquarters after the New Zealanders had left the **Orsogna** front. Comparison between the materials of the abstract and the abstract itself suggests that to **General Freyberg** daylight attacks were less repugnant than they were to most of his infantry commanders, and that he was by no means convinced of the unwisdom of attacks led by armour. He seems, too, to have been most insistent on the simple infantry virtues of physical fitness, discipline in camouflage and movement, and the skill-at-arms needed to obtain the maximum killing power from every

weapon. This divisional stocktaking was carried out nearly always with thoroughness and sometimes even studiously. It was entirely characteristic of a division that appeared to observers to take a tradesmanlike interest in the craft of war.

(iv)

But – perhaps because it fell within the terms of reference of none of the contributors – one salient topic was omitted from this review of experience: how suitable was the structure of the Division for campaigning in **Italy**? By January it was abundantly clear that in conditions like those of **Orsogna** two brigades of infantry were insufficient. Although the Division had had the assistance at different times of one Indian and two British brigades, it had still to improvise to find enough infantry to hold its front, as the mixed force of Divisional Cavalry, machine-gunners and anti-tank gunners in the **Bianco**–Barone sub-sector testified. Even then, they were weary infantrymen who came out of the line in mid-January. Was it to be the perverse fate of the Division to be under an obligation to others for armoured support in **Africa**, where the race was to the swift, and for infantry in **Italy**, where the battle was to the strong? It is just as easy for soldiers to be efficient in winning the last campaign as in winning the last war. ‘As a result of our experience in **Africa**,’ asked one commander in retrospect, ‘were we not magnificently equipped and organised for the break-out and pursuit phase, but lacked the strength and were overencumbered for the break-in and dog-fight battles?’<sup>1</sup>

The lack of a third infantry brigade becomes more significant in the light of the extremely heavy burden that falls upon the comparatively few men in contact with the enemy. Infantry strength is a subject sufficiently critical to warrant a resort to figures, but it is not a subject

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<sup>1</sup> Brigadier C. E. Weir, in a comment on the preliminary narrative.

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upon which statistical certainty is attainable. Strength returns made during battle are never dependable. Some of the returns have not survived. Calculation is further confounded by the variety of the bases upon which the figures rest. <sup>1</sup> Still, across a bridge of dubious assumption and arbitrary definition, it is possible to arrive somewhere near the truth and certainly to gain a general view of the problem.

About the time of the **Sangro** crossing, the posted strength of all New Zealand units in **Italy** was more than 19,000 and of the seven infantry battalions (including 22 Motor Battalion) about 5200. This last figure agrees closely with the field return of all ranks present with the battalions. By 18 December, however, the battalions had only 4600 men with them, of whom fewer than two-thirds could be counted as assaulting troops – perhaps 3000 in round figures. Thus, about the height of the fighting at **Orsogna**, a force of nearly 20,000 was devoting five-sixths or more of its numbers to supporting and supplying the other sixth. This proportion was by no means exceptional for British troops (or, it seems, for the Germans) <sup>2</sup> but it must be borne in mind if the meaning of battle casualties is to be appreciated. Losses seemingly light – a few score men a day for a week – could soon blunt the cutting edge of the Division, for the losses fell on the fighting infantry with grave disproportion. The New Zealand casualties in the **Sangro- Orsogna** phase totalled about 1600. Of these nearly 1200, or 72 per cent, occurred among the infantry battalions, and overwhelmingly among the assaulting troops. If it were possible to break down casualty figures so as to show

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<sup>1</sup> Four main sets of figures are involved: ( *a* ) The ‘war establishment’—the number of officers and other ranks belonging to a unit, according to its type, when it is at full strength. ( *b* ) The posted strength—the number of all ranks which at any given time the official records show as belonging to a unit, including men on leave. ( *c* ) Strengths based on field returns or daily fighting states, giving the number present with a unit, including those attached to it. ( *d* ) The assaulting strength—the number who actually participate in an assault. This is

sometimes defined to exclude all but the rifle companies. I have extended it somewhat to include the headquarters company. It is arrived at by subtracting from figure ( c) for a whole infantry battalion, the strengths of battalion headquarters and the Regimental Aid Post, B Echelon and those 'left out of battle'. The distribution of a battalion among these categories varied with the circumstances and I have taken the arbitrary figure of 65 per cent as a typical assaulting strength in a battalion. The divisional assaulting strength is the sum of the assaulting strengths of the seven infantry battalions.

<sup>2</sup> Typical strength returns of German divisions in Italy are those for 2 July 1944, for which I am indebted to the Canadian Historical Section. They are as follows:

	<i>Ration Strength</i>	<i>Fighting Strength</i>	<i>Infantry</i>
29 Pz Gren Div	12,889	5,217	1,734
90 Pz Gren Div	11,840	3,954	1,339
356 Inf Div	10,909	3,927	2,269
4 Para Div	9,161	4,050	1,850

Establishments varied for the three types of divisions, but all normally had six infantry battalions. It appears that 'infantry' comprised only men fighting with personal weapons—rifles and light automatics. 'Fighting strengths' included tank, gun, mortar, and heavy automatic crews, engineers and signals personnel. The proportion of 'infantry' to 'ration strengths' varies between 11 per cent and 21 per cent and to 'fighting strengths' between 35 per cent and 56 per cent. This is very much the same as in 2 NZ Division at this time.

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the losses of sub-units, the rifle companies would undoubtedly be found to have suffered losses very much higher than the 25 per cent or so inflicted on the infantry battalions as a whole.

The experience of a single battalion may serve to typify that of all. It so happened that on 28 November 23 Battalion's field strength coincided precisely with that of its war establishment; though slightly oversupplied with officers and undersupplied with other ranks, it had the regulation 783 all ranks. After a fortnight's fighting this figure had

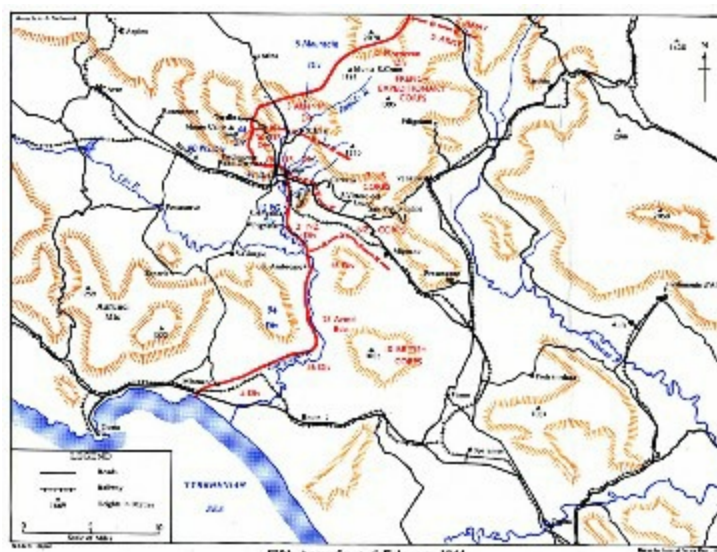


shrunk to 694, and when it went into the attack in operation on 15 December it had about 670 men, of whom only about 400 can have taken part in the assault. On the 15th alone the battalion lost 100 men (28 killed and 72 wounded). It must be assumed, therefore, that its assaulting strength was reduced by about a quarter on this day and its fighting efficiency as a unit by far more. With two drafts of reinforcements, the battalion's field strength recovered to 759 all ranks on 8 January and then declined slightly in its last week in the line. Upon such narrow margins as this brief record reveals lived the infantry battalions, and upon the continued effectiveness of the infantry battalions depended the existence of the Division as a fighting force.

Conditions on the **Sangro** and round **Orsogna** made casualties among tank crews numerically much lighter than among the infantry. Weather and terrain usually prevented the armoured regiments from getting more than half their squadrons into any one action, and the crews often escaped unharmed from disabled tanks. Several individual battalions of infantry lost more than the 143 casualties of all three armoured regiments in this campaign. Yet casualties were severe enough, falling as they did almost solely upon the tank crews, who numbered perhaps two hundred men of the six hundred or so in a regiment. Take away fifteen or twenty of them, and a regiment had lost heavily in skill and leadership, since tanks were manned by highly trained gunners, drivers and wireless operators, with a very high proportion of officers and NCOs.

Apart from the infantry shortage, experience had shown other structural weaknesses. Some parts of the Division which had pulled their full weight in the desert were of greatly impaired usefulness in **Italy**. Reconnaissance, the *raison d'être* of the Divisional Cavalry, could hardly be carried out in armoured cars once the weather had broken and it devolved almost wholly upon infantry patrols. Line-holding as infantry and the guarding of vital points behind the lines became the occupation of the Divisional Cavalry in the latter part of the **Orsogna** campaign. Again, the anti-tank and anti-aircraft gunners were equipped respectively with defensive weapons of a single purpose, and neither of

these purposes was so



Fifth Army front, 6 February 1944

urgent as in **Africa**, on the one hand because large tank battles did not occur, and on the other because the **Luftwaffe's** visits were short and far between.

Whether the most economical use was being made of the fighting troops was thus a pertinent question. Though it was a question not formally asked or answered on paper at this time, the equipment and organisation of the Division were much in the minds of the senior commanders, and the shortage of infantry was discussed. Any substantial reorganisation, however, would have put the Division out of action for months at a time when the reinforcement of the armies in **Italy** was going so slowly as to cause Alexander concern. Besides, the Division's experience at **Orsogna** was partial and limited, and the opportunity might yet arise for using it in the pursuit role for which it was especially trained, equipped and organised. To such a role, indeed, it was now summoned.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

# CHAPTER 8 – CASSINO: THE PRELIMINARIES

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## I: A NEW TASK

### *I: A New Task*

(i)

A CHANGE of plan now brought the Division under the eyes of the world and linked for ever the youthful name of New Zealand with the venerable name of **Cassino**. The task at **Orsogna** was left unfinished for a new and unexpected mission better suited to *a corps de chasse*. At the end of December the intention had been to leave the Division in the line for the next month and then to relieve it for a period of training. But at 4 a.m. on 17 January it relinquished command of its sector to **4 Indian Division**, newly arrived in **Italy**. To understand why, it is necessary to ascend once more the **Olympus** of grand strategy.

It may be recalled that, as the Allied armies felt the stiffening of German resistance across the narrow waist of the Italian peninsula, Alexander superseded his optimistic plan of October by a more carefully deliberated plan of early November. Fifteenth Army Group now envisaged operations for the capture of **Rome** as developing in three phases. In the first, the **Eighth Army** on the Adriatic flank was to advance to **Pescara** and **Chieti** and then strike left-handed through **Avezzano** to threaten **Rome** from the north-east. In the second, the Fifth Army, west of the **Apennines**, was to drive up the **Liri** and **Sacco** valleys to **Frosinone**, approaching **Rome** from the south. In the third, a seaborne force landed south of **Rome** would seize the **Alban Hills**, whence they would descend on the capital, only a few miles to the north-west. The first part of the plan, as we have seen, miscarried, leaving the **Eighth Army** arrested between the **Sangro** and **Pescara** rivers; and by the time the Fifth Army had fought its way as far as the German winter line guarding the entrance to the **Liri** valley, the third stage of the plan, the amphibious operation **SHINGLE**, seemed to have been outmoded by events. The plan to

land about 23,000 men at the twin towns of **Anzio** and Nettuno had presupposed that the Fifth Army would be within supporting distance, but by mid-December it was clear that this condition would not be realised within any predictable period. Operation **SHINGLE** had therefore to be either abandoned or recast.

As the principal exponent of the circular strategy, Churchill could not endure the thought of stalemate in the **Mediterranean**. Convalescence from pneumonia on its southern shores gave him time for inquiry and meditation. He soon made up his mind that 'the stagnation of the whole campaign on the Italian front is becoming scandalous'; <sup>1</sup> no offensive use had been made of the landing craft in the theatre for the last three months. The Mediterranean venture which he had pioneered and protected must not be allowed to grind to a halt in mud-bound deadlock. He was now intent on stirring up fresh devilment for the enemy in **Italy**. The sudden amphibious strike behind the enemy lines, the 'cat-claw', promised alluring rewards – the capture of **Rome**, the destruction of a large part of the German forces in **Italy**, favourable reaction in the **Balkans**, relief for the Russians, further distraction for the Germans, the fullest employment for Allied resources in men and materials and the best possible prelude to **OVERLORD**

Wheels began to hum. Churchill won over every high commander who would come to his bedside. He deputed General Sir Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, who had been one of his visitors, to influence the British Chiefs of Staff. On Christmas Day at Carthage he gathered about him Eisenhower <sup>2</sup> and the **Mediterranean** commanders-in-chief of all three services and before they broke up **SHINGLE** had been revived in a greatly expanded form. The force now to be landed at **Anzio** about 20 January, consisting at first of two assault divisions and eventually of more than 110,000 men, would be strong enough to hold its own in the event of delay in linking up with the main Fifth Army front.

The point of resistance was the shortage of landing craft. The new  
**SHINGLE**

could not be mounted unless fifty-six LSTs, due to return to the **United Kingdom** for

OVERLORD

from 15 January, could be detained until 5 February. Churchill ordered a review of the programme for the fitting out of these vessels for the cross-Channel invasion, with time margins pared to the limit. The result convinced

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<sup>1</sup> Churchill, V, p. 380. But much depends on the point of view. Churchill wrote these words on 19 December 1943. In the previous week **1 Canadian Division** had been engaged in a battle across the **Moro**, of which it was officially written that 'Furious fighting had characterised the operations of the past few days'. On the 21st the Canadians began clearing **Ortona**, street by street. ('The fighting which developed was particularly savage'.) On the 15th the New Zealanders attacked across the **Ortona-Orsogna** road. (See **Chap. 6.**) On the west, the Americans of **2 Corps** were clearing the mountainous outposts of the German winter line before **Cassino**. ('The second battle for **San Pietro** opened on the 15th and succeeded, though at heavy cost in casualties, by the 17th; Monte Lungo was also occupied and, north of the village, we forced our way further along the knife-edge of Monte Sammucro. This was bitter mountain fighting, with great use of artillery and gains in territory small compared with the time consumed and the losses suffered.')

<sup>2</sup> General Eisenhower commanded the Allied Land Forces in the **Mediterranean**. He was succeeded by General Sir H. M. Wilson on 8 January 1944.

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the British Chiefs of Staff that

SHINGLE

about 20 January was not incompatible with

OVERLORD

in May, as promised to Stalin at **Teheran**. But

OVERLORD

still meant to the Americans what its code-name implied; and Churchill awaited with tremulous anxiety the outcome of his appeal to Roosevelt. On 28 December the President telegraphed his approval. Churchill received it 'with joy, not... unmingled with surprise'. 'I thank God,' he answered at once, 'for this fine decision, which engages us once again in wholehearted unity upon a great enterprise'. <sup>1</sup>

While Churchill steered the enterprise between a few last shoals-problems of build-up on the bridgehead and the need for an airborne force – Alexander <sup>2</sup> decided to entrust the assault to one American and one British division under command of **6 United States Corps** (Major-General J. P. Lucas).

In order to draw enemy reserves and attention away from **Anzio** and to burst through the German front on the way to the aid of the seaborne landing, General Mark Clark's Fifth Army was ordered to make a strong thrust towards **Cassino** and **Frosinone** shortly before 22 January, D-day for **SHINGLE**. Alexander wanted to be sure that the Fifth Army had sufficient strength to exploit up the **Liri** valley. It was for this reason that he decided to withdraw 2 New Zealand Division from the **Eighth Army** to the **Naples** area to form an Army Group reserve with which to influence the battle. The Division received warning notice on 9 January, and on the 12th its role was forecast in an Army Group instruction: 'The task of this division will depend on the course of the operations, but it is primarily intended for exploitation, for which its long range and mobility are peculiarly suited. It will be placed under command of Fifth Army when a suitable opportunity for its employment can be foreseen.'

*(ii)*

The relief of the Division by **4 Indian Division** went on for about a week from 13 January, the forward posts changing hands by night without worse mishap than the occasional jostling and straying inevitable when large numbers of troops take over strange positions in the dark. The New Zealanders still in action came under command of the



Indian division when it assumed control of the sector early on the 17th, but by this time nearly half the Division was on the road back, and by the 20th only a few rear parties remained in the area.

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<sup>1</sup> Churchill, V, p. 390.

<sup>2</sup> General Sir H. Alexander was C-in-C Allied Central Mediterranean Force, formerly 15 Army Group and later designated Allied Armies in **Italy**. It consisted mainly of the Fifth (US) Army and the Eighth (British) Army.

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No means were overlooked to confuse the enemy about the Division's movements. The information given to the troops was incomplete and misleading but plausible enough to discourage rumour. In the warning order for the move, issued on the 11th, **San Severo** was named as the destination and four weeks' training as the purpose. All New Zealand insignia were removed from clothing and vehicles, and the Division masqueraded for the time being under the name of SPADGER force. To hide the departure of 4 Armoured Brigade, the exact positions it had vacated in the reserve sub-sector of **Castelfrentano** were occupied by 101 Royal Tank Regiment, a camouflage unit, and the first stage of the New Zealand tanks' withdrawal was shielded from prying enemy aircraft by a standing patrol of Spitfires at 20,000 feet. In order to deceive, if concealment should fail, measures were taken to represent the Division as concentrating at Petacciato on the Adriatic coast. Signboards were erected and a wireless traffic and other incidents of the New Zealanders' presence were simulated while the Division, moving southwards, observed wireless silence. How far these shifts and stratagems would baffle an observant enemy behind the lines is doubtful; and it is also doubtful whether the enemy beyond the lines was deceived. On the 17th, after the capture of twelve men of 1 Royal Sussex Regiment on the notorious spur across the **Arielli**, the German **Tenth Army** reported to **Army Group C** that 4 Indian Division had definitely relieved the New Zealanders. Whatever it was that shook confidence in this intelligence,

later thoughts were more cautious: as late as the 23rd 76 *Panzer Corps* spoke of a relief of the Division as 'not impossible'.

By this time the Division had almost completed its march to the west. Unit advance parties set out together on the 13th. The 4500 vehicles of the main body followed in eleven groups, ranging in size from nearly 600 to just over 200 vehicles. Each group assembled behind the line and travelled by night the 25 or 30 miles to a staging area near **Casalbordino**. Thence, after a halt of two or three hours, it resumed its journey by day to **San Severo**, about 80 miles farther south. The first group, belonging to the **Army Service Corps**, left **Casalbordino** shortly before dawn on the 14th, and the last, the armoured workshops group, precisely a week later. **San Severo** was only a night's halt, and there the men were let into the secret of their mission. The next day's journey took each convoy across the Apennine divide and down into the populous Campanian plain to the area of **Cancello**, about 20 miles east of **Naples**. From **Cancello** it was only a short march on the third day to the divisional training area. The hard knocks of the **Orsogna** campaign had probed the weaknesses in many vehicles, and the recovery trucks that brought up the rear of each convoy were kept busy in giving first aid to stragglers. The tanks of the Division, strengthened by fifty-two taken over from **5 Corps**' reserve, were meanwhile transported by train from **Vasto** to **Caserta** and thence driven to their destination.

The divisional area lay in the prettily wooded valley of the **Volturno** on the downward slope from the Matese Mountains to the northern banks of the river. Known as **Alife** from the grubby walled village that was one of the centres of its peasant life, it was, even in winter, a smiling stretch of country where it was easy to relax, to make good arrears of sleep, and to see to the upkeep of vehicles and weapons. Training programmes were not too rigorous - for infantrymen route marches and rifle-shooting, for the armoured brigade tank maintenance, for gunners gun drill and route marches, for engineers practice in river crossings with Bailey and pontoon bridges, rafts and assault boats. Late in the month 4 and 5 Brigades borrowed the assault boats for brigade

exercises on the **Volturno**. To freshen up personal appearances and corporate morale, most of the formations held ceremonial parades, which the General inspected. Sports were played, daily excursions of no excessive solemnity were made to **Pompeii**, there were concerts and social occasions. Rested and reinforced by the arrival of 600 men, mostly infantry, the Division felt fitter for the trials ahead.

*(iii)*

All this time the Fifth Army's winter offensive was developing, but with such setbacks as to make it less likely that the Division would be employed as a pursuit force. On its main front, the Fifth Army was up against the Gustav line,<sup>1</sup> the southern section of the German winter line, which traversed the narrowest part of the peninsula from **Ortona** to Minturno. Here the mountains bar the way from coast to coast, parting only south of **Cassino** at the mouth of the **Liri** valley to open a gap six or seven miles wide, through which the **Via Casilina** (Route 6) passes on its way to **Rome**, 85 miles distant. Across the mouth of the axial valley of the **Liri** runs a lateral valley, carrying a stream of waters successively augmented and successively renamed. Fed by the mountains north of **Cassino**, the Rapido flows past the town, then out across the **Liri** valley as the Gari, and finally joins the **Liri** itself to become the

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas on the Adriatic side, the 'ridge-and-furrow' country of successive river valleys gave the German 'winter line' numerous defensible positions, two only were available on the other side – the Bernhard line, incorporating Monte Sammucro and the Monte Camino massif, which commanded the eastern approach to the valley of the Rapido and Garigliano, and the Gustav line, on the western side of the valley, with **Montecassino** as its fortress.

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Garigliano, which winds through an alluvial plain to the Gulf of Gaeta. At its junction with that of the Garigliano, the **Liri** valley is not easily forced, for it is flanked on the north by the hills rising steeply from **Cassino** to the topmost peaks of the Central **Apennines** and to the

south by the rough **Aurunci Mountains**, and it is stopped by the waters of the Rapido or Gari. It was a classic battleground over which the Fifth Army now prepared to fight. In 1503 it had witnessed the crushing defeat of the French invaders by the troops of **Spain** and **Naples** and the drowning of a Medici heir as he tried to float his cannon down the river; and it was here in 1860 that the Piedmontese scattered the Neapolitans of the Bourbon regime in one of the culminating battles of the *Risorgimento*.

General Clark's plan of a turning movement on either side of the **Liri** valley and a drive down the valley itself opened on 17 January, when 10 British Corps launched itself across the Garigliano and into the Aurunci foothills. On the 20th, when four enemy divisions were fiercely engaged on the left, **2 United States Corps** began its assault across the Rapido, and a few hours later the French **Expeditionary Corps** brought the right into play by attacking through the mountains to outflank the Rapido defences from the north. Every division of the German *Tenth Army* had been drawn into the task of staving off this threefold offensive when **6 United States Corps** landed at **Anzio** at dawn on the 22nd. Kesselring's response was calm and prompt. Instead of pulling his forces out of the Gustav line for fear their communications should be cut, he ordered them to stand and proceeded to seal off the **Anzio** bridgehead with a force hastily assembled from eight different divisions. All four thrusts of the Fifth Army made some progress and were then halted.

To this threat of deadlock Clark reacted by ordering the attack on the Gustav line to continue. Second Corps' frontal bid across the Rapido having been bloodily repulsed, he decided to envelop the defences from the right. This necessitated fighting in the hills above **Cassino** in order to capture the ' **Cassino** headland', the massive spur running down from **Monte Cairo** and having as its southern tip the commanding eminence of **Montecassino**, sentinel over the mouth of the **Liri** valley. For six days at the end of January, therefore, the Americans and French against stubborn opposition worked their way slowly through the rugged hills around the village of **Cairo**, whence they might turn left to battle

through broken country, over **Montecassino**, and at last down into the **Liri** valley. But this was not to be, and already by the end of the month the strength of the German resistance here and at **Anzio** made it plain to Alexander that the New Zealand Division would need to be reinforced if it was to have a chance of success in its task of exploitation. The task, moreover, required a larger organisation than one division could supply. Hence on 30 January he instructed Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese, the new commander of the **Eighth Army**, to despatch **4 Indian Division** without delay to form part of a temporary **New Zealand Corps** under **General Freyberg**.

At 10 a.m. on 3 February, while the Indian division was still on its way from the Adriatic coast, the **New Zealand Corps** officially came into being and passed under command of Fifth Army. The organisation of the corps called for some slight improvisation. The heads of services in **2 New Zealand Division** assumed a double role, taking up similar duties in the **New Zealand Corps**. The only additional appointment made immediately was that of Colonel **Queree**<sup>1</sup> as BGS, **New Zealand Corps**, while Lieutenant-Colonel L. W. Thornton resumed the appointment of GSO I of **2 New Zealand Division**. To form a common corps pool under centralised control, no apportionment of transport and other facilities was made between corps and division. For a week or so from 3 February the Corps' administrative resources were built up by the attachment of a general transport company, two mobile petrol filling centres and a bulk petrol company, five mule transport companies, a corps ordnance field park company, a provost unit and a pioneer labour company. The artillery was strengthened by **2 Army Group, Royal Artillery**, comprising three field regiments (one with self-propelled guns), five medium regiments and a light anti-aircraft battery, and by three American anti-aircraft battalions. In addition to this formidable increase in fire-power, the corps had the heavy and medium artillery of **2 United States Corps** available for its support throughout the **Cassino** operations. The engineers, the medical corps and the armoured services were also reinforced from British and American sources.

Later in the month, when plans were being matured for a breakthrough by the corps, the American Combat Command 'B' (part of 1 United States Armoured Division) was added as an exploiting force. It was divided into Task Forces A and B, each composed of two tank battalions, a tank-destroyer battalion,<sup>2</sup> and two companies of engineers, and it had four battalions of field artillery in support.

Meanwhile the role of the corps had been the subject of discussion at high levels. In an outline plan drawn up at Alexander's

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<sup>1</sup> **Brig R. C. Queree**, CBE, DSO, m.i.d.; born **Christchurch**, 28 Jun 1909; Regular soldier; Brigade Major, **NZ Artillery**, Oct 1940–Jun 1941; GSO II, 2 NZ Div, Jun–Aug 1941, Jan–Jun 1942; CO **4 Fd Regt** Jun–Aug 1942; GSO I, 2 NZ Div, Sep 1942–Dec 1943, Jan–Jun 1944; BGS NZ Corps 9 Feb–27 Mar 1944; CO **5 Fd Regt** Jun–Aug 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div, Aug 1944–Feb 1945, Mar–Jun 1945; QMG, Army HQ, May 1948–Nov 1950; Adjutant-General Nov 1954–Mar 1956; Vice-Chief of the General Staff Apr 1956–.

<sup>2</sup> A 'tank destroyer' was a high-velocity 75-millimetre gun on a Sherman tank chassis.

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request and after reconnaissance, **Freyberg** put his faith in surprise and weight of metal from aircraft and gun. The clearing of the **Cassino** headland seemed to him the first condition of success in the valley below. That done, the corps on a two-divisional front should cross the Rapido and punch a passage down Route 6 in the wake of overpowering air and artillery bombardment. The Indian division, experienced in mountain warfare, would operate in the hills north of Route 6 and the New Zealand Division in the **Liri** valley.

Hopes were still high that the preliminary conquest of the hills above **Cassino** would be carried out by the troops already fighting there, and **2 US Corps**, much weakened and nearing exhaustion after two months of unbroken combat, was now asked for another effort. While one force attacked the town of **Cassino** from the north, a second would

continue to press forward from hill to hill to take **Montecassino** from the rear. To buttress **34 US Division** in its push through the hills **36 US Division**, holding the line of the Rapido in the throat of the **Liri** valley, would have to be relieved south of Route 6, and on 3 February Clark ordered the New Zealand Corps to detail a brigade for this purpose.

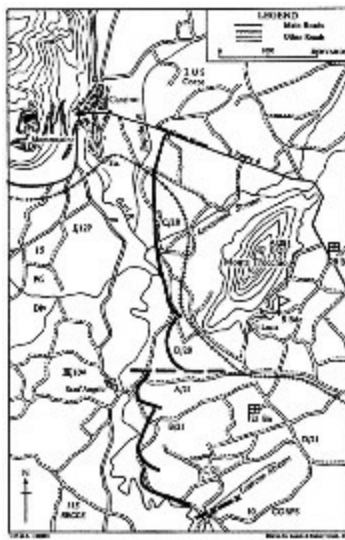
It was in these circumstances that **5 Brigade**, as the vanguard of the New Zealanders, went into the line before **Cassino**. The plan was now for the Americans to move forward along the hilltops so that the New Zealanders might establish a bridgehead across the Rapido and pass tanks across. The Indian division was not to be committed immediately but was to await the outcome of the American attack.

The plan for this attack, like the plans that succeeded it, aroused little enthusiasm among senior commanders, least of all among those directly charged with its execution. It was accepted as a necessary duty. Each new strategic move in **Italy** had involved the Allies in deeper play. Before the New Year there had been no military necessity for aggression against the Gustav line; but, with the force at **Anzio** first contained and then threatened, the necessity became urgent. So long as the bridgehead was in danger, the pressure for action on the **Cassino** front, regardless of weather or terrain, was irresistible. It was a portent that on the day when the New Zealand Corps came into existence the Germans launched their first counter-attack towards **Anzio**. On 8 February Churchill found some consolation for his disappointment in the fact that the enemy was being engaged in such strength so far away from the other battlefields. '... we have a great need to keep continually engaging them, and even a battle of attrition is better than standing by and watching the Russians fight'. <sup>1</sup> A battle of attrition it was to be.

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<sup>1</sup> Chruchill, V, p. 431.

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5 BRIGADE POSITIONS, 8 FEBRUARY 1944

5 BRIGADE POSITIONS, 8 FEBRUARY 1944



# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: ON THE RAPIDO

### *II: On The Rapido*

(i)

The deployment of the corps was a work requiring caution, patience, tact and good humour. The superb command of the enemy over the valley of the Rapido and Garigliano and long stretches of Route 6 confined the movement of convoys in the forward area to the hours of darkness, when drivers had no more luminous guide than the wan beam of undercarriage lighting on the truck ahead. Route 6 was a busy highway running through a rain-sodden and dejected landscape and past the litter of battle and grey stone buildings wasted by war and splashed with mud. It was under the tight control of American military police, models of brisk, or even brusque, efficiency, and the strange driver felt at first like a bucolic drayman plunged into the traffic stream of a metropolis. Owing to congestion on and off the roads, the corps could take forward only essential transport, and this had to be divided into small convoys of not more than thirty-six vehicles each.

Reconnaissance parties were at their wits' end to find suitable assembly areas, gun positions and the like. Except well forward on the floor of the Rapido valley, the demand for flat ground exceeded the supply, most of it having long since been engrossed by earlier arrivals. As it was necessary to disperse vehicles without delay and impossible to evict existing occupants, late-comers had to fit themselves in as best they could, colonising ill-favoured sites and setting to work to make them tenable by sweeping for mines, forming tracks, and digging drains. Overhead the sky was grey, raining or threatening rain, and in many places pools of water lay on the ground. The diverse nationalities that elbowed and jostled each other along and about Route 6 met on a common footing of mud.

While spare vehicles and the men 'left out of battle' (comprising 7½ per cent of the fighting units) remained round **Alife**, the rest of the Division steadily moved into the battle area between 4 and 7 February, leaving **4 Indian Division** to follow later when the result of the contest among the hills above **Cassino** became clearer. The elements most urgently needed were the infantry of **5 Brigade**, who were to relieve **36 Division**, and the artillery, whose fire was to hammer the defences resisting **2 US Corps**.

First into the line was **21 Battalion** (Lieutenant-Colonel H. M. McElroy). It moved up in the heavy rain of the afternoon and evening of the 4th and by an early hour next morning had taken over a 3000-yard front on the Rapido south-west of **Monte Trocchio** from **143 US Regiment**, the left-flanking formation of **36 US Division**. Because of some hitch in the transmission of orders, **28 Battalion** (Lieutenant-Colonel R. R. T. Young) was unable to relieve **141 US Regiment** on the right next day as it had hoped. When it arrived, the Americans had received no instructions to hand over and refused to do so, but instructions came to hand about midday on the 6th and by nine o'clock that evening the relief was complete. Although two American battalions had occupied this sector, they had lost heavily in the attempt to cross the Rapido, and one company of Maoris – **D Company** (Captain J. Matehaere) – was judged sufficient to hold it. Meanwhile, **C Company** (Captain Wirepa) had replaced **91 Reconnaissance Unit** between **141 Regiment** and the divisional boundary on **Route 6**. The brigade's third battalion, the **23rd** (Lieutenant-Colonel J. R. J. Connolly),<sup>1</sup> went into reserve behind **Monte Porchio**, a hill similar in shape to **Trocchio** but smaller and farther to the rear. With its headquarters established in the lee of **Trocchio**, **5 Brigade** was now in position between the Americans of **2 Corps** and the British of **10 Corps**.

Restricted in their choice of gun positions by the number of troops already on the ground, the three field regiments spent the whole of the 5th in deploying in muddy and slightly rolling country behind the infantry. The density of American anti-aircraft defences made it

unnecessary to bring forward more than one Bofors battery, the 41st, which was sited near Porchio to protect the heavy and medium artillery. The flash-spotters of **36 Survey Battery** found an admirable base on the summit of Trocchio.

In accordance with the carefully prepared timings of the Corps' movement order, the remaining New Zealand convoys left the **Alife** area between the 5th and the 7th, dispersing themselves around Route 6 for several miles behind the Porchio feature. Immediate administrative needs were served by the opening of two advanced dressing stations and a casualty clearing station, and of ammunition, petrol, and supply issuing points.

Among the busiest of the supply troops were those of 1 Ammunition Company. It was a long journey back over crowded roads to Teano, **Capua** or even **Nola** to collect their loads, and the tank transporters had to be called on to lend a hand in the dumping programme. The object was to establish forward dumps of 770 rounds for each 25-pounder gun, 490 for each medium gun, and 300 for each 105-millimetre gun in the corps, and to have on wheels 300 more rounds for each 25-pounder gun and 200 for all others. Since the corps artillery numbered 192 25-pounders, 80 medium guns, and 24 self-propelled 105-millimetre guns, it can be calculated that more than 272,000 shells had to be handled, the lighter in boxes of four, the heavier singly, together with the charges and the

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<sup>1</sup> **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.

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fuses that go to make up the complex unit known as a round. The petrol which the mobility of the corps promised to consume in vast quantities came up by varied means – as far as **Sparanise** by pipeline, then to a centre near **Alife** in tank lorries, and finally to the New Zealand petrol point in cans.

With one brigade in the line, with the rest of the New Zealand fighting troops handily disposed and with **4 Indian Division** assembling in the rear, the **New Zealand Corps**, reinforced, fuelled and munitioned, was gathering itself for the break-through and pursuit. At 9 a.m. on 6 February it took over from **2 Corps** command of the Rapido line south of **Cassino**. The northern boundary with **2 Corps** was Route 6 and the southern with **10 Corps** ran along a lane south-west from Colle Cedro to the Gari. The corps area thus broadened out fanwise towards the enemy to form a front of seven or eight thousand yards along the Rapido where it flows south across the mouth of the **Liri** valley.

Here at the meeting of the two valleys, **5 Brigade's** immediate surroundings were desolate, but no one could deny a wild grandeur to the wider prospect or miss the sense of portent in its bold architecture, as though it had witnessed great deeds not for the last time. Behind or to the right of the platoons near the river, the long, sharply-ridged, clean-sculptured shape of **Monte Trocchio** rose abruptly out of the plain and showed an almost sheer western face 1000 feet high towards **Cassino**. From the foot of Trocchio the ground dropped in gentle undulations and then, as it neared the river, became flat and marshy and covered with reeds and brush. The land had been cultivated but already, after three weeks of battle, the willows looked scarred and the vines and small trees spindly and stunted. The lanes and tracks were thick with mud and the numerous farmhouses were becoming dilapidated in appearance and often in fact. As Route 6 skirted the northern shoulder of Trocchio, so the railway line ran round the southern shoulder and then north across the New Zealanders' front to a bridge over the Rapido half a mile south of the main road. Beyond the Rapido the rolling country came down almost to the brink of the river, giving the Germans better covered approaches and allowing them to hold posts actually on the riverbank, whereas the New Zealand outposts were set back between 200 and 400 yards. Midway between Montecassino and the village of Sant' Ambrogio – the two posts, as it were, upon which the double gates of the **Liri** valley swung – lay the village of Sant' Angelo, built on a bluff high above the river and commanding the whole width of the gateway.

Looking over greater distances, the New Zealand infantry saw far to their right the snow sprinkled on the summit of **Monte Cairo** and, disquietingly close, the white range of abbey buildings set four-square on the southern promontory of the **Cairo** massif. At the foot of the abbey hill, facing the New Zealanders, were the grey stone buildings of **Cassino** town; directly in front of them lay the valley that led to **Rome**; and south of it again, far to the left front, the **Aurunci Mountains** stretched away, peak on peak, toward the Tyrrhenian Sea.

(ii)

The German troops on the western side of the Apennine divide belonged to **14 Panzer Corps**, commanded by General F. von Senger und Etterlin, a man of wide attainments who had been a Rhodes Scholar before the First World War and who was known for a cool and clear-headed soldier. The inland mountain sector was held by **5 Mountain Division** and **44 Infantry Division**, the latter on **Monte Cairo**. Between **Monte Cairo** and the **Liri** valley **90 Panzer Grenadier Division** had just been hurriedly brought into the line to stiffen the defence of a vital sector which embraced **Montecassino**, the hills north of it and the town itself. It was commanded with dash, imagination, and close knowledge of the ground by the independent-minded Lieutenant-General Ernst Baade.<sup>1</sup> South of Route 6, in the **Liri** valley itself and opposite the New Zealanders, was **15 Panzer Grenadier Division** (Lieutenant-General Eberhard Rodt), a formation of fairly high quality, well equipped with infantry weapons and presumably heartened by its success in throwing back, with heavy losses, the attempt of **2 US Corps** to cross the river on 20–22 January. The rugged southern sector from the **Liri** to the sea was committed to a single division, **94 Infantry Division**, which, having responsibility also for coastal defence up to **Terracina**, was stretched to danger point.

The terrain occupied by the enemy was renowned for its natural military strength. In the north the high country inland from **Monte Cairo** and in the south the **Aurunci Mountains** – both almost roadless

wastes built on a majestic scale – could be held lightly and without elaborate field defences. Defensive effort was concentrated in the centre, where **Montecassino** dominated the entrance to the **Liri** valley – ‘a classical example of the control exercised by height over terrain.’<sup>2</sup> After years of studying it as a regular tactical exercise, the Italian General Staff believed this position to be all but impregnable even without artificial works. Now the Germans had incorporated it into the Gustav line and for months had been building fortifications.

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<sup>1</sup> Commanded *115 Infantry Regiment* in **Africa** in 1942. See Lt-Col J. L. Scoullar: *Battle for Egypt*, p. 261 *et seq.*

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Col G. R. Stevens: *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 274.

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Nothing that skill could devise or energy execute had been omitted to make it proof against assault. In the summer of 1943 **Cassino** was the headquarters of *14 Panzer Corps*.<sup>1</sup> The corps returned there after the withdrawal from **Sicily** and in September it began to prepare defences in accordance with Kesselring's intention to stand south of **Rome**, which **Hitler** soon confirmed. As the Allied armies drew near work was pressed on by the Todt organisation, assisted by the labour of civilians and prisoners of war.<sup>2</sup> From north of **Cassino** to its confluence with the **Liri** the line followed the west bank of the Rapido, but the very core of the defences in the **Cassino** area lay behind the river in the complex of mountains north and west of the town. Here, in rough, bare country furrowed by deep ravines, the Germans held a series of peaks from which defensive posts could give mutual support and sweep all approaches with fire.

From the key height of **Montecassino** on the tip of the spur observers had an almost uninterrupted panorama over the valleys of the **Liri**, the Rapido and the Garigliano about 1500 feet below. The Rapido line itself was protected by flooding, notably south-east of **Cassino**, by the demolition of roads, tracks and bridges forward of the line, and by wire

and minefields on both sides of the river. North of the town emplacements were dug into steep slopes across the river and were served by concealed communication trenches. Behind anti-tank obstacles, the narrow streets and stone buildings of **Cassino** had been easily converted into a fortress. Attackers would be challenged by machine-gun posts strengthened by concrete, steel, and railway ties, by well-armed snipers at doors and windows, and by self-propelled guns and tanks sited to see without being seen.

Southwards across the mouth of the valley strongpoints powerfully supported by field artillery were established at irregular intervals, with the village of Sant' Angelo as the pivot of the system. All along the line houses had been destroyed and trees felled to clear a field of fire and rob an attack of cover.

*(iii)*

When the **New Zealand Corps** assumed command of the Rapido line south of **Cassino** on 6 February, its future role was shrouded in a mist of contingency. It was still hoped that the Americans would prise open the German defences and allow the New Zealanders to crash through the Rapido line and drive down Route 6. Though these hopes dwindled as each day passed, it would still be

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<sup>1</sup> **F. von Senger und Etterlin**, article in *New English Review*, Vol. II (N.S.), No. 4, April 1949, pp. 250–2.

<sup>2</sup> **Fifth Army History**, Vol. IV, p. 7.

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necessary, in any eventuality, for the corps to establish a bridgehead across the Rapido, and **Freyberg** ordered **5 Brigade** to reconnoitre the river thoroughly to find out its depth, width and speed, the height and nature of its banks, covered approaches, suitable crossing places and routes to them, and all other information of value in planning an assault.

Within a few hours of its entry into the line **5 Brigade** had begun to amass information, but only, unhappily, by the method of exchange. On the night of 6–7 February each of the two battalions despatched two reconnaissance patrols with instructions to return before dawn, not to cross the river and not to lose prisoners, which would disclose the presence of the Division. In the northern part of the front the two Maori patrols, led respectively by Second-Lieutenants **Tomoana**<sup>1</sup> and Asher,<sup>2</sup> spent six hours in unhindered inspection of the river and the approaches to it. They found that, though assault boats could be launched at any of the crossings examined, the tracks leading to the river were soft, muddy or even waterlogged and exposed. Fifth Brigade accordingly advised Divisional Headquarters that bridges could be built across the river provided the engineers cleared the approaches and made them firm.

Farther to the left 21 Battalion spent a less satisfactory night. Both of its patrols clashed with an enemy who in this sector was alert and aggressive. The first, having explored the river near a demolished bridge at the southern entrance to Sant' Angelo, ran into a German ambush on the way back and left two of its men in German hands. The second, under Second-Lieutenant **Fitzgibbon**,<sup>3</sup> returning from a more southerly stretch of the river, was engaged by about a dozen Germans in a creek bed. The arrival of a party of ten men led by Lieutenant **Burton**<sup>4</sup> from B Company reversed the odds and the enemy withdrew, though Fitzgibbon was wounded and it was nearly an hour before all members of his patrol were reunited at B Company's forward posts. The Germans were still on the move in the area. B Company, suspecting that they might try to recover wounded comrades believed to be lying in front of its outposts, eventually sent forward a party which brought back two prisoners.

Meanwhile enemy raiders had found a way between the rather scattered section posts and surrounded the house occupied by C Company headquarters. Doors and windows were slammed fast; Major Abbott recalled his forward platoons to deal with the patrol

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt Te M. R. Tomoana**, MC; Hastings; born Hastings, 16



**Nov 1919; railway porter; twice wounded.**

<sup>2</sup> **2Lt G. A. Asher; born NZ 31 Jul 1914; student; killed in action 18 Feb 1944.**

<sup>3</sup> **Lt R. G. Fitzgibbon, MC; Whangarei; born Whangarei, 25 Aug 1906; transport driver; three times wounded.**

<sup>4</sup> **Maj A. E. Burton, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Christchurch, 24 Sep 1910; departmental buyer.**

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**and telephoned battalion headquarters to fire west of the river. The Germans outside, who overheard the conversation, cheekily summoned him by name to surrender. The invitation was rejected and the Germans faded away towards the river in an exchange of small-arms fire. When calm was restored, one man was found to be missing from outside company headquarters and, after a fruitless search, had to be presumed a prisoner.**

**The loss of three prisoners overnight made mortifying news for the New Zealand command next morning: the fact that the New Zealanders had joined the Fifth Army, hitherto so carefully concealed, was a revelation of strategic proportions. With a shrug for the irrevocable past and a care for the future, **Brigadier Kippenberger** ordered Lieutenant-Colonel McElroy to reorganise his battalion into compact company areas and to send out only strong patrols capable of looking after themselves. Now that the secret was out, it was thought safe to allow the Division on the 10th to resume its signs, titles and badges and to drop the pseudonym of SPADGER force.**

**Strong patrols of Germans continued to venture across the Rapido on the following nights and to explore the brigade's territory until, on the 9th, **28 Battalion** advanced its outpost line to the bank of the river to control the intruders. Twenty-one section posts were set up at 100-yard intervals and, with help from the reserve companies, were manned**

nightly until 5.45 a.m. and left empty by day. From time to time the gunners scored successes in answering infantry calls for fire, but one such success was quite inadvertent. On the night of 10–11 February a green flare lit up the Maoris' front. Whatever it meant in the signal code of the Germans who fired it, to the New Zealanders it meant that the enemy was approaching in overwhelming force. The shellfire that the Germans thus brought down on themselves was severe and found a mark, for the Maoris heard their wounded crying for help.

Twenty-first Battalion, which had suffered no further surprises after adjusting its dispositions, was relieved on this same wet night by the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** (Lieutenant-Colonel I. L. Bonifant) in its now customary role of line-holding infantry. At the same time the brigade's fire-power was strengthened by the deployment of **2 Machine Gun Company** (Captain Aislabie), <sup>1</sup> which opened its programme of harassing Route 6 before it could dig in and paid for its temerity by drawing heavy return fire from the German machine-gunners.

On first going into action, the New Zealand gunners were ordered to refrain from predicted fire as far as possible for fear that their distinctive methods would reveal their presence, but infantry calls

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt W. R. Aislabie; Wellington; born Gisborne, 18 May 1910; civil servant.**

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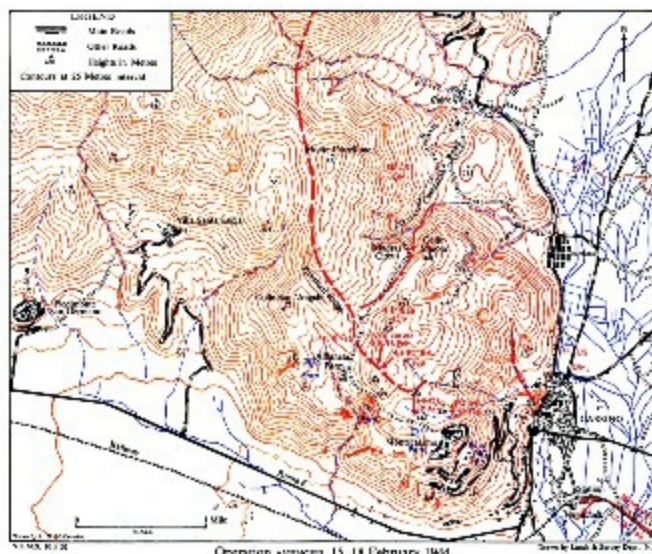
for defensive fire could not be neglected, and soon, in any case, the precaution was unnecessary. Targets were designated nightly in the **Liri** valley and by day some of the observed fire was controlled by air OPs, operating from a landing strip just east of Porchio. Counter-battery fire against the numerous enemy nebelwerfers – *15 Panzer Grenadier Division* alone had seventy-two – was a chief preoccupation for the artillery. These weapons, which sorely troubled the infantry with the shattering and destructive blast of their bombs, were easy to locate because of their brilliant flash and a shower of sparks but they were hard to destroy. Some may have been dug into banks and run out on rails to

fire. Some were certainly manned by crews who, having fired, removed them and bolted for their dugouts before the retaliatory fire came down. To counter these tactics, some New Zealand guns were permanently laid on nebelwerfer positions ready to fire at a word; but the Germans kept one move ahead by shifting the nebelwerfers to a new position each time they fired.

(iv)

To the infantry along the sodden line of the Rapido and to the troops supporting them in more genial surroundings, 11 February was like any other day, but it was in fact decisive. The Division's future was being decided among the heights above **Cassino**. It will be remembered that by the beginning of February 2 **United States Corps**, instructed to maintain the momentum of the winter offensive, had made appreciable gains in a right-about movement of descent upon **Montecassino** and **Cassino** town from the north. Though 36 Division on the left was halted in the northern outskirts of the town, **34 Division**, after capturing the village of **Cairo**, wheeled left and attacked uphill to seize the commanding peak of Monte Castellone. Thence the way lay downhill for two miles across very broken country to **Montecassino** and its monastery, the last great obstacle before dropping down into the **Liri** valley.

By the 6th sheer dogged fighting had brought the Americans within measurable reach of their goal. They held a line stretching from a point on the eastern slope of the massif just north of **Cassino** through Point 445 (only 300 yards north of the monastery walls) and north-west to the embattled Point 593, where no one had more than a slippery fingerhold. But farther than this they could not go. Tired from ten weeks of fighting, gravely depleted (some units fell in the end to 25 per cent of their fighting strength) and exposed to dirty weather, they failed in a renewed attack on the 8th, and what was to have been the prelude to a race by the New Zealand armour down the valley towards **Rome** came to nothing. One final effort was ordered for the 11th.



**Operation AVENGER, 15–18 February 1944**

Reluctant though he was to commit his exploiting force, General Alexander now warned the **New Zealand Corps** to take over the Americans' sector in the event of their failure. **General Freyberg's** plan of the 9th, drawn up with this contingency in view, was the fruit of long study of the ground and of air photographs, of thorough conference and the careful weighing of alternatives. The plan provided for an attack on the night of 12–13 February. Fourth Indian Division would inherit **34 US Division's** forward positions and its objectives. From the Castellone feature it would seize **Monastery Hill (Montecassino)**, cut Route 6, and capture **Cassino** from the west. The New Zealand Division would assist the operation with fire and be prepared to cross the Rapido to help the Indians take **Cassino**. Exploitation towards **Pignataro** and the construction of crossings over the Rapido on Route 6 would be in the hands of United States Task Force B. Meanwhile, **5 Brigade** was ready with plans to follow up an American success above **Cassino** by forcing the river. But these last plans were to be unnecessary.

Not unexpectedly, the attack on the 11th was repelled, and the larger corps plan rose to the top of the agenda. That evening Major-General A. M. Gruenther, General Clark's Chief of Staff, spoke to **General Freyberg** on the telephone. 'The torch is now thrown to you,' he said. 'We have had many torches thrown to us,' **Freyberg** commented later, in the full realisation that the latest would not be the lightest.

The progress of the Americans among the hills had in fact caused General Senger great alarm. Each of his divisions committed in the major battle zone was losing the equivalent of one to two battalions daily and their annihilation was only a matter of time. He believed, moreover, that the penetration by the Americans north of **Cassino** had brought them within sight of Route 6, his indispensable supply line. In these circumstances he proposed, at the risk of his prestige, to withdraw from the **Cassino** front to the 'C' line, a new defensive position behind the **Anzio** bridgehead. The proposal was rejected. <sup>1</sup> These facts might have comforted **General Freyberg**, had he but known them. As it was, he made a cool estimate of the prospects. Asked at Fifth Army Headquarters what he thought the chances of success would be, he answered 'Fifty-fifty', and declined an invitation to improve the odds. <sup>2</sup>

On the same day as the Americans made their last effort, an instruction from Alexander's headquarters envisaged the possibility of a pause between the break-in and the break-through. While

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<sup>1</sup> General Senger's war diary of the Italian Campaign ( **Cassino**), in possession of Historical Division, Headquarters United States Army, **Europe**; English translation, pp. 69–71 of typescript.

<sup>2</sup> **General Freyberg** in oral and written comment to author.

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anxious for an early advance up the **Liri** valley, Alexander directed that it should not be attempted until the ground was dry enough to permit the use of armour off the roads and the weather was suitable for effective air support. Nevertheless, there should be no delay in mounting **4 Indian Division's** attack to clear the high ground north and west of **Cassino** or in establishing a bridgehead over the Rapido near the town. When the **New Zealand Corps** was committed to an attack, all available resources, including the maximum effort in the air, were to be concentrated in its support. The note of urgency in Alexander's directive is to be related to the heavy German counter-attacks then developing at

the **Anzio** bridgehead. They must never be forgotten in any assessment of the coming action.

(v)

The New Zealand Corps, then, could no longer hope to pass through a door thrown open for it; it would have to open the door for itself. Preparations to this end were now accelerated. While, as we shall see, the Indian division laboured to install itself in the hills west of **Cassino**, the New Zealand Division made ready to seize and then to expand a footing across the Rapido. Temporary command of the Division now passed to **Brigadier Kippenberger**, who relinquished **5 Brigade** to Colonel **Hartnell**.<sup>1</sup>

**Kippenberger** gave orders immediately, but it was already found necessary to postpone the attack for twenty-four hours until the night of 13–14 February. **Twenty-eighth Battalion** was then to cross the Rapido with two companies and capture **Cassino** railway station to enable the engineers to bridge the river and allow a squadron of **19 Armoured Regiment** to cross. These tanks, with the rest of **28 Battalion**, would attack **Cassino** from the south, linking up with the Indians, and **23 Battalion** would then pass through to widen **28 Battalion's** bridgehead. The narrowness of the front on which the attack was to be launched was recognised as a weakness in the plan, but it was not to be avoided because of the widespread flooding of the Rapido around Route 6 and the railway line. Indeed, on the 12th, observation from Trocchio and closer reconnaissance left the officers of the two assaulting companies of **28 Battalion** pessimistic. Though infantry could cross the river along the railway line, the area was so wet and marshy, with the fields under an inch of water in places, that deployment would be hazardous and, as digging was nowhere possible, supporting troops could not be employed with safety.

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<sup>1</sup> **Brig S. F. Hartnell**, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; **Palmerston North**; born NZ 18 Jul 1910; carpenter; CO **19 Bn** Oct 1941–Apr 1943; comd **4**

The same morning an engineer report to Corps Headquarters stated that even the infantry could not at present go across country south of the railway because of the ponding up of water, which would probably not subside for four or five days. The operation was therefore further postponed, but **28 Battalion** was to be ready to attack any night. The two other battalions, the 23rd, which was to extend the bridgehead, and the 21st, which was to exploit under command of Task Force B, were put on six hours' notice to move.

The Maori Battalion used the respite to build up its ammunition supply, work on its forward battle headquarters, and improve its knowledge of the ground. Of two patrols after dark on the 14th, one under Second-Lieutenant G. **Takurua** not only probed the enemy's defences at the railway station, as instructed, but prodded them into vigorous life. Challenged by a sentry near the station, the patrol shot two Germans, whereupon at least six spandaus opened fire from all quarters and for three minutes a fight was carried on with machine pistols and grenades. The Maoris escaped unharmed under cover of the railway embankment, leaving the defenders for the next hour or so to shoot their spandaus at shadows. A companion patrol to the hummock, a group of black mounds about 200 yards south of the station, found the ground drier than on the last reconnaissance but remarked on its openness and want of cover. When a party from 21 Battalion saw it the next night, the Rapido was flowing fast, three or four feet deep, between stopbanks eight to ten feet high.

Successive postponements of the attack – on the 13th it was put off again till the 16th – were beginning to tell on the morale of the **Maori Battalion**, and the two forward companies, destined for a reserve role in the attack, were tiring. On the 16th, therefore, relief was arranged. Coming under **5 Brigade's** command, 24 Battalion (Major Pike) <sup>1</sup> deployed A and B Companies (Captain **Schofield** <sup>2</sup> and Major Turnbull), <sup>3</sup> allowing the two forward Maori companies to retire to the Trocchio area. C

Company of 24 Battalion (Major Reynolds)<sup>4</sup> went south to assist the Divisional Cavalry, which, though not hard pressed, had had some brushes with German patrols and was a little anxious about a ragged left flank.

One of the guiding considerations in the choice of the railway station area as an objective of the coming attack was that the railway embankment could be converted into a road for bringing up wheels

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col P. R. Pike**, MC; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 1 Oct 1913; accountant clerk; 2 i/c **24 Bn** Jan 1943–Apr 1944; CO **24 Bn** Apr–Jun 1944; twice wounded.

<sup>2</sup> **Capt S. C. Schofield**; **Auckland**; born NZ 20 Aug 1920; clerk; wounded 18 Mar 1944.

<sup>3</sup> **Maj G. V. Turnbull**; born England, 24 Sep 1907; farmer; NZ military representative, PWX Branch, No. 30 Military Mission to **Russia**, 1945.

<sup>4</sup> **Maj J. W. Reynolds**, DSO; **Hamilton**; born **Hamilton**, 15 Jan 1919; bank clerk; GSO III (Ops) 2 NZ Div Mar–Aug 1943; BM **6 Bde** Nov 1944–Jun 1945; wounded 28 Jun 1942.

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and tracks over ground that would otherwise be impassable. But the Germans had not, of course, left the embankment intact, and the large number of bridges and culverts in this lavishly watered countryside had given their sappers scope for imaginative destruction. Equally, the New Zealand sappers had a prospect of highly concentrated repair work within small-arms range of the enemy on the flat and in full observation of the enemy on **Monastery Hill**, which hung like a hateful tapestry on the wall of the western sky.

Serious engineer reconnaissance began after dark on the 10th. Escorted by a patrol of thirteen men, including minesweepers, from **28**



**Battalion, Lieutenant Faram <sup>1</sup> ( 5 Field Park Company)** examined the railway track as far as the yards, where there was a brief skirmish with grenade-throwing Germans, and returned with a well-documented but doleful tale. In the thousand yards of track short of the station he counted ten demolitions, which he numbered in ascending order towards the enemy. The pithy nature of his report may be judged from a quotation: 'Demolition 7 (86501933) – bridge over Rapido blown – 78 feet gap 8 feet deep – Messerschmitt 109 in gap – can be forded – hard gravel bottom – doze down each side'. Nearly all the demolitions would need bulldozing and some would need new bridges or culverts, but no mines were found and, except at one point, all rails and sleepers had been removed from the thirty-foot-wide permanent way.

This valuable report supplied the factual basis for the programme outlined by the CRE (Brigadier Hanson) at a conference on the 11th, when it had become probable that the Division would have to make an opposed crossing of the Rapido. The schedule of work then laid down, however, proved difficult to fulfil owing to a variety of hindrances that interrupted the career of the three field companies. One night traffic congestion delayed the engineers' arrival on the job; another night heavy rain caused a field company to cancel work; undetected mines at Demolition 3 severely damaged two bulldozers; the affray which **Takurua's** patrol touched off drove the engineers to cover; the western side of Demolition 5 was too steep for the bulldozers to climb; and enemy gunfire was a continual nuisance. In view of such setbacks and disturbances the engineers made satisfactory progress. Thanks partly to the regular protection of Maori patrols and to the covering noise of New Zealand gunfire, the first four demolitions were repaired by the 16th and a negotiable road existed almost as far forward as the outpost line.

That day, after expectancy had begun to flag, the attack was at last firmly fixed for the night of 17–18 February. In order fully to

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj L. F. Faram**, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born Tikokino, Hawke's Bay, 19 Nov 1900; consulting civil engineer; OC 27 Mech Equip

understand the delay – and because the story itself encloses a famous episode of war – it is necessary to turn to the doings of the Indian division.

(vi)

Fourth Indian Division, withdrawn from the **Eighth Army** at the end of January into Fifth Army reserve and then placed under command of the **New Zealand Corps**, completed its move to the **Cassino** area by 6 February. Owing to the illness of Major-General F. I. S. Toker, officiating command of the division – the phrase is Toker's – devolved on Brigadier H. W. Dimoline, the divisional CRA. At **General Freyberg's** headquarters on the 4th he took part in the first of several conferences on the employment of his division. For some days, while the fortunes of **2 US Corps** lay in the balance, no firm decision could be taken, though it was agreed that in any advance up the **Liri** valley the Indians' experience of mountain warfare on the North-West Frontier, in **East Africa, Syria** and **Tunisia** fitted them to fight among the hills north of Route 6 while the New Zealanders fought on the flat. On the 9th, however, it was decided to commit the **New Zealand Corps** should the Americans fail to take their objectives by dark on the 12th, and **Freyberg** warned the Indian division to be prepared to attack immediately after that time. Most of the division was then in its rear assembly area, but **7 Indian Infantry Brigade** (Brigadier O. de T. Lovett), which was to lead the attack on **Montecassino**, moved up on the 10th and concentrated on the lower slopes of **Monte Castellone** near **Cairo** village on the night of 11–12 February, ready to relieve the Americans the next night and to launch its attack the night after.

Final details for the relief of the Americans were arranged between **2 US Corps** and the **New Zealand Corps** on the 12th. It was agreed that **36 US Division** should continue to hold the large Castellone feature against counter-attacks from the west while the Indians attacked southwards

from Points 593, 450 and 445, the limit of the American advance towards **Monastery Hill**. Thirty-sixth Division could muster only 600 or 700 men on Castellone and might have to call on the **New Zealand Corps** for help. Major-General Geoffrey Keyes, the American Corps Commander, wondered how long it could hold on if the Indians did not attack soon. Its boundary with the Indians was a stream running north-east between Castellone and Maiola hills and then bearing east round the northern side of Maiola to join the Rapido near the **Cassino** barracks. The Indians had as neighbours on their left the Americans of **34 Division**, which remained in **Cassino** town with its right flank on the lower slopes of the **Cassino** massif along a line from Point 193 ( **Castle Hill**) to Point 175.

A relief that would in the best conditions have been arduous was made doubly so by mischance. The Indians, expecting to take over a sector solidly held, found it a battlefield. For the Germans refused to give up for lost the ground that the Americans had won at such heavy cost. On 5 February **14 Panzer Corps** commented that 'over a long period the present situation would be intolerable, i.e., the enemy occupying positions west of **Cassino** only two or three kilometres north of the **Via Casilina**'. Early on the morning of the 12th, just as the leading Indian brigade was assembling near **Cairo**, **90 Panzer Grenadier Division** launched two assault groups of **200 Panzer Grenadier Regiment** against Castellone under an unusually heavy barrage. The height fell to the Germans and for a while the American defences were critically disorganised, but all possible troops – cooks and clerks not excepted – were rallied, and the devastating defensive fire of the artillery made the German reconquests quite untenable. By noon the danger was past. Operation **MICHAEL** and the actions that developed simultaneously in the hills to the south cost the Germans well over 300 casualties and won not an inch of ground. Still, **36 US Division** had been further exhausted, and while waiting in the concentration area **7 Indian Brigade** was suffering casualties – at the rate of twenty an hour, according to report. Further, the same afternoon Germans began to infiltrate from the area of **Terelle** and the Indians had to face about and deploy two battalions in support of the Americans on Castellone. This diversion made it

impossible to carry out the relief that night, and a twenty-four-hour postponement of the attack (already the second) followed as a matter of course.

The move of **7 Indian Brigade** into the forward positions began at nightfall on the 13th, but the Indians' troubles were not over. From Cairo it was a steep, strenuous climb of nearly four miles over a tortuous mountain track which had become rougher with the weather, and which was exposed to the fire of enemy guns and mortars throughout its length. The bringing up of supplies over battle-swept trails was then, and later, a feat of physical and moral endurance. Everything had to come up by night about five miles across the Rapido valley from the **Portella** area to **Cairo** village by tracks so deep in mud that the Indians' vehicles were often stranded in the sloughs, and the loan of sturdier American trucks became necessary. Near Cairo the loads were transferred to mules; but as the mules were too few (they numbered about nine hundred) and in part ill-trained and unfit, they had to be supplemented by the equivalent of five companies of porters drawn from units in reserve. Then came the exhausting climb up to the front over tracks which an Indian pioneer company on permanent duty hewed out of the rock by hand. The front line could not be approached by day, the forward posts being overlooked by the enemy from a few yards' distance.

The relief that began at dusk on the 13th could not be completed overnight and it was 6 a.m. on the 15th when **7 Indian Brigade** took over the sector. It deployed 1 Royal Sussex Regiment on Point 593 and 4/16 Punjabis on its left, occupying the ridge of Points 450 and 445. <sup>1</sup> After a sustained show of bravery, the Americans were spent with fighting and weak from the frost and snow. Some who had been lying in their holes with frozen feet had to be carried out on stretchers.

(vii)

By this time **General Freyberg** was beginning to show something less than exasperation but something more than indifference at the continued delays. At Anzio the enemy was obviously on the eve of a

maximum effort to destroy the bridgehead. General Alexander's wish for the earliest possible action at **Cassino** was unmistakable. **Freyberg** could not but transmit this pressure. Moreover, there was a question of prestige: his immediate superior was an American and the Americans whom his corps had relieved had not concealed their belief that fresh troops would be able to complete the task the Americans had begun. On the other hand, **Freyberg** had committed the main attack to an Indian division whose commander was a *locum tenens*. Brigadier Dimoline's problem was to find a firm footing from which to lunge forward in attack.

The situation in the hills west of **Cassino** was much more fluid and the forward posts there were much less secure than had been expected. The Sussex battalion's hold on Point 593, for example, was decidedly tenuous. The hill had already changed hands more than once and now the Germans not only occupied the western side of the feature but were found to be firmly ensconced in the ruins of an old fort on the summit. Only recently, too, Point 569, 100 yards to the south, had been the scene of bitter hand-to-hand fighting between Germans and Americans. The enemy crossfire was so arranged that the

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<sup>1</sup> Stevens's description (p. 285) of conditions on these terrible slopes is accurate and graphic: 'When dawn broke 4/16 Punjabis looked across the intervening falling ground into the rear walls of the Monastery – "almost within touching distance" as one of the officers put it. Every window peered into the Indian lines. The Royal Sussex were even less comfortably situated. Immediately in front of their foxholes and shallow sangars loomed the rocky crest of Point 593, with the ruins of a small fort upon its summit. The slopes were shaggy with great boulders, sharp ledges and patches of scrub. These natural hideouts sheltered German spandau teams and bomb squads. Enemy outposts were less than 70 yards distant. The slightest movement drew retaliatory fire. No reconnaissance was possible, nor was there any method of ascertaining the enemy's strength. There was no elbow room for deployment, no cover behind which to concentrate effectively, no opportunity to withdraw in order to obtain space for manoeuvre. **7 Brigade** therefore was

committed to battle without knowing the lie of the land nor the strength of enemy which held it. Neither artillery nor air could intervene. The infantry must make its way alone’.

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possession of one of his strongpoints could only be ensured by the possession of others. Each singly was a mere redoubt. Thus, just as the ridge of Points 450 and 445 immediately north of the monastery could be made untenable by enfilade fire from Point 593, so Point 593 was largely open to fire from **Albaneta Farm**, 400 yards to the west, and from Point 575, about 1200 yards to the north-west.

Dimoline, rightly or wrongly, thought that his difficulties were not fully appreciated. When at his request **Kippenberger** asked **Freyberg** to receive both of them together, the reply was a refusal to have ‘any soviet of divisional commanders.’<sup>1</sup> Besides his troubles over deployment, though not unconnected with them, Dimoline had the deputy's natural anxiety to hand back his temporary charge in good shape. He can hardly have failed to know that Taker, whom he had been consulting, was concerned to avoid all needless casualties.<sup>2</sup>

After hearing a report from Brigadier Lovett, who had reconnoitred the front, Dimoline was convinced that the attack on **Monastery Hill** could not succeed until Point 593 was cleared of the enemy. He said so as early as the 12th, before his troops were in the line, and he maintained his opinion in the days that followed. **Freyberg** recognised the need for a firm base,<sup>3</sup> but with the lapse of time he became more urgent for action. As the patience of his superiors waned and as the difficulties of the troops on the heights became increasingly apparent, Dimoline was ground between the upper millstone of strategy and the nether millstone of tactics. But on one point no such tension was felt. **Freyberg** and Dimoline were at one in considering the abbey on the hill to be a military objective.

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<sup>1</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 356.

<sup>2</sup> After he had been taken ill, General Toker wrote, in a personal letter to **General Freyberg**: 'I am ever so thankful my division is being looked after by yourself. With you there, I know that no single life will be squandered and that those that are spent will be well spent'.

<sup>3</sup> For example, at a conference at New Zealand Divisional Headquarters **General Kippenberger** said: 'The Corps Commander has laid it down that the first priority is to get established on a firm base to attack from and that the time element is of secondary importance. The Indian Division therefore has to establish itself firmly on the ground from which it is to attack'. This, however, was on the 13th, and at the time **Kippenberger** anticipated a delay of 24 or 48 hours only from the night 14–15 February.

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO



# CHAPTER 9 – THE BOMBING OF THE ABBEY

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## I: HISTORY AND POLICY

### *I: History and Policy*

(i)

*‘BERNARDUS valles, colles Benedictus amabat’*. Thus the poet celebrated the founders of great religious orders. ‘St. Benedict loved the hills’; and upon the hill of **Montecassino**, a site already historic, he established about the year 529 not, indeed, his first monastery but that which was destined to become the mother house and model of his order. Here, and for this abbey, he wrote the Rule that first adapted monasticism, an Eastern institution, to the Western mind. In the decay of Roman municipal life, the gradual spread of communities of black-robed Benedictines helped to save the rural west for Christianity, and in the wild Gothic centuries that followed they offered at their uncorrupted best a haven for religion, learning, industry, and the arts of peace. In the direct transmission of ancient culture to the modern world, the order of St. Benedict holds a unique place, both on its own account and as the exemplar of later monastic orders. At Montecassino many masterpieces of classical literature were transcribed and preserved for a grateful posterity, and its archives alone would warrant the abbey's renown.

St. Benedict sought peace among the hills, but he chose a place of violence. In the entrails of the modern abbey, the visitor may still see mighty remnants of a cyclopean wall, Etruscan in origin, that ran down the hillside to enclose the town of Cassinum when **Rome** was no more than a village. Here on the hilltop was the citadel of the town, and it was on the site of a temple of Apollo, which had survived the sacking of Cassinum by the Ostrogoths a few years earlier, that St. Benedict founded his church. The buildings that grew up around were plundered in turn by Lombards in the sixth century, Saracens in the eighth, and

the imperial troops of the Hohenstaufen Frederick II in the 13th; and the story is told how, in 1503, the great Spanish captain Gonzalo de Cordoba, having surprised the French garrison, spared the abbey from destruction by gunpowder only because a cautionary St. Benedict appeared to him in a vision. <sup>1</sup> With the onset of popular wars, the abbey was

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald de Gaury: *The Grand Captain*, pp. 94–5.

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once more pillaged in 1799 by troops of the First French Republic.

Its buildings arose more splendid, if not more beautiful, from these successive devastations. A young English nobleman, making the Grand Tour in 1779, found the abbey ‘very ugly and only remarkable on account of its immensity’. <sup>1</sup> As the buildings stood in 1944, they were, except for a nucleus formed by the traditional cell of the founder, largely modern, dating from the sixteenth century and thereafter. The whole range of buildings, with the chapel and refectory, the library and college, the courts, cloisters and cells, presented a massive front to the outside world. It had, in fact, been converted into a fortress in the early nineteenth century. In particular, the girdling walls would impress the military eye, now as in the past. They were loopholed, unscaleable and of vast dimensions, and they rose sheer from the rock to a height nowhere less than 15 feet.

(ii)

Ironical though it now seems, **Montecassino** was first regarded in the Second World War as St. Benedict had regarded it – as a refuge. In December 1942 manuscripts of Keats and Shelley were removed from **Rome** and deposited there for safe keeping by a member of the Keats-Shelley Memorial Committee; and immediately upon the **Salerno** landing, 187 cases of art objects were taken there from **Naples** by order of the Italian Ministry. Later in 1943 the German command ordered the latter deposit, as well as the art treasures and precious manuscripts

belonging to the abbey, to be transferred to the **Vatican**. By accident or design, however, this mission was entrusted to a formation which took its name from a notorious connoisseur – the *Hermann Goering Division* – and it was only after many vicissitudes, and then not in its entirety, that the consignment reached its destination. <sup>2</sup> Thanks to an ingenious deception by the Rector of the State Archives at **Montecassino**, the manuscripts of the two English poets were returned to **Rome** by, but without the cognisance of, the Hermann Goering troops and found their way back to the custody of the Keats-Shelley Memorial.

About the same time overtures were opened to preserve the building itself no less than its contents. The Vatican addressed an appeal to the combatants to show all possible consideration to it. With the approval of the Foreign Office, the British Minister to the Holy See (Sir D'Arcy Osborne) proposed to inform the Cardinal Secretary of State that 'if the Germans make use of the Monastery the Allies will be obliged to take whatever counter-measures, aerial

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<sup>1</sup> Ed. Lord Herbert: *Henry, Elizabeth and George*, p. 256.

<sup>2</sup> The contents of some of the cases, which disappeared on the journey between Montecassino and **Rome**, were later recovered from a salt mine at Alt Aussee in **Austria**.

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or other, that [ sic] their own military interests may require'. <sup>1</sup> The German Embassy, however, assured the **Vatican** that the abbey would not be occupied by regular troops. On receiving this message by telephone, the British Minister asked the **Vatican** to inquire into the precise meaning of the undertaking, but he passed it on to the Foreign Office, as requested. <sup>2</sup> Several weeks later, early in February, Osborne had still received no reply to his suggestion that the German assurance should be clarified, and he reminded the **Vatican** that the Allies would have to take counter-measures if the Germans used either the abbey 'or its territory' for military purposes. <sup>3</sup> No Allied engagement made with the

Holy See at this time appears, then, to have gone further than, if as far as, the guarded assurance of President Roosevelt in a letter to the Pope on 10 July 1943 (the day of the invasion of **Sicily**), in which the President stated: 'Churches and religious institutions will, to the extent that it is within our power, be spared the devastation of war during the struggle ahead'. <sup>4</sup>

When the battle approached **Cassino**, Kesselring's attitude was consistent with the undertaking given by the German Embassy. We have it on the evidence of one of his corps commanders <sup>5</sup> that, whatever other mistakes he made, Kesselring did his best to spare sites of religious or historical interest. Not only did he lay it down that the monastery should be respected but he ordered General Senger, in case of retreat, not to defend the small towns of Anagni, **Alatri** and **Veroli** because they were episcopal seats, <sup>6</sup> and later in the campaign he gave instructions to neutralise **Bologna**. In asking Kesselring for a ruling about the monastery on 7 December 1943, the German *Tenth Army* expressed the view that it would be impossible to avoid occupying the abbey grounds, which would be right in the FDLs; and not to do so would be to forgo good observation posts and cover and would be most dangerous 'because when the time comes for a decisive battle the Anglo-Americans are pretty sure to be unscrupulous and to occupy this commanding point, irrespective of whether we refrain from doing so'. Kesselring was unmoved. He drew attention to the promise to the Roman Catholic Church that German troops would not enter the abbey, but added that this restriction applied to the buildings only. This last qualification may explain not only Osborne's failure to elicit a clearer

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<sup>1</sup> AFHQ (Military Government Section) to 15 Army Group, 5 November 1943. It is presumed that Osborne's message was sent to the **Vatican**, though I have no direct evidence that it was.

<sup>2</sup> Osborne to Foreign Office, 7 November 1943.

<sup>3</sup> Osborne to Foreign Office, 11 February 1944. The emphasis

is Osborne's.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in message from Combined Chiefs of Staff to General Wilson, 22 January 1944.

<sup>5</sup> General Senger in a letter to the author, 11 November 1954; and also in his war diary, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> This instruction becomes more significant perhaps when it is remembered that archbishops and bishops in **Italy** number about 270.

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definition of the German guarantee but also the orders from the Fuehrer passed on by *Tenth Army* to *14 Panzer Corps* on 23 December that ‘**Montecassino** is to be included in the defence line and to be fortified’.

Meanwhile, Allied commanders in the field had been ordered to avoid unnecessary damage to works of religious, historical and artistic importance, and on 4 November 1943 AFHQ initiated a list of ‘protected works’, with Castel Gandolfo (the Pope's summer residence in the **Alban Hills**) and **Montecassino Abbey** as the first two serials. But it was made quite clear that protective measures must defer to military necessity. The Allied mind was perhaps best represented by the directive which General Eisenhower addressed from AFHQ to all commanders on 29 December, shortly before he left the theatre for the **United Kingdom**. Since they form a touchstone by which to try much that follows, the first two paragraphs of his directive may be quoted in full:

To-day we are fighting in a country which has contributed a great deal to our cultural inheritance, a country rich in monuments which by their creation helped and now in their old age illustrate the growth of the civilisation which is ours. We are bound to respect those monuments as far as war allows.

**If we have to choose between destroying a famous building and sacrificing our own men, then our men's lives count infinitely more and the buildings must go. But the choice is not always so clear-cut as that. In many cases the monuments can be spared without any detriment to operational needs. Nothing can stand against the argument of military necessity. That is an accepted principle. But the phrase 'military necessity' is sometimes used where it would be more truthful to speak of military convenience or even of personal convenience. I do not want it to cloak slackness or indifference.**

**A test of the Allied attitude towards this dilemma occurred early in February, when Allied bombs dropped in and near the papal estate at Castel Gandolfo, causing casualties and damage. The estate lay in an important area of communications for the German forces besieging the **Anzio** bridgehead. Lieutenant-General Ira C. Eaker, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, acting on his interpretation of earlier instructions, gave Major-General J. K. Cannon, commanding the **Tactical Air Force**, freedom to attack papal property when in his own and General Alexander's opinion it was absolutely necessary to do so. Eisenhower's successor as Supreme Allied Commander, **Mediterranean**, General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, concurred, and both on this occasion and later, when further raids on the papal estate prompted diplomatic complaints, he received the support of the British Foreign Office and the Combined Chiefs of Staff. Though Castel Gandolfo was papal property, and Montecassino Abbey Benedictine, the treatment of the first constituted a valid precedent for the treatment of the second.**

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

### *II: The Sequence of Events*

(i)

The monastery of **Montecassino** was not mentioned in the New Zealand Corps operation instruction of 9 February, but officers of **4 Indian Division** had no sooner heard of their division's part in the coming operations than they began to discuss means of capturing and entering the building. The CRE, to whom the matter was referred on 9 February as a possible engineer task, hazarded the opinion that the only method was 'that adopted at the Kashmir Gate, **Delhi**, in the Mutiny'.<sup>1</sup> A subaltern sent to Fifth Army Headquarters for information about the building returned empty-handed but with 'ideas regarding books, etc., in **Naples**'. Expeditions to **Naples** the next day and on the 11th produced a small library of books on the abbey – four copies of a handsome illustrated publication of the Italian Fine Arts Society, an automobile guide of 1920, and a little work dated 1879 which gave disturbing data about the massive construction of the main gate and the thickness of the walls – said to be 9 metres 40 centimetres – at that point.<sup>2</sup> It was already apparent that more modern appliances than those in use during the Mutiny would be required.

Until the second week in February the Fifth Army had scrupulously tried to avoid firing into the abbey, though undoubtedly some stray shells pitched in and around it. But from the night of 9–10 February the slope of **Monastery Hill** was heavily shelled by day and night without noticeable detriment to the enemy's posts there, but with considerable damage to the top floor of the abbey. Certainly not later than the 11th, and perhaps earlier, the possibility of bombing the abbey from the air began to be discussed. The Indian division's operation instruction, signed late that evening, recorded a request for the intense bombing of



all buildings and suspected enemy posts on and near the objectives, including the monastery; and when he spoke on the telephone to Brigadier Dimoline about the same time, **General Freyberg** made no demur, but on the contrary expressed his willingness to recommend the bombing. He realised that it would be a controversial action, but thought it would be right if it meant saving lives. Shortly afterwards on the same night, his BGS (Brigadier Queree) put out feelers to Fifth Army about bombing the monastery.

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<sup>1</sup> The siege of **Delhi** ended on 14 September 1857, when Colonel Campbell led his column through a breach in the Kashmir Gate, which had been blown in by two lieutenants of engineers, Duncan Home and Philip Salkeld, at the head of a few men with powder bags. Half of their party were killed or wounded in this exploit.

<sup>2</sup> Researches yielded many other details, from among which the Indian engineers' war diary selects the following: 'The college built in the 18th century is a three-story building. Beneath it is [sic] situated the spacious cellars, whose contents may well be surmised'.

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The next day, the 12th, brought an intervention by General Tucker, a most reluctant invalid. <sup>1</sup> After some discussion at 4 Indian Division's main headquarters with Dimoline and his brigadiers, he addressed a communication to **New Zealand Corps** in which he argued forcefully that if further failures at **Cassino** were to be avoided, one of two policies should be adopted – either Monastery Hill should be 'softened' by a thorough air bombardment, or the hill should be turned and isolated. 'To go direct for **Monastery Hill** now without "softening" it properly,' he wrote in summing up, 'is only to hit one's head straight against the hardest part of the whole enemy position and to risk the failure of the whole operation'. Later the same day, presumably after a study of the literature acquired in **Naples**, Tucker returned to the attack with a second letter to Corps Headquarters. <sup>2</sup> He now spoke for the first time of the monastery itself. After rehearsing details of its imposing architecture, he

continued:

5. **Monte Cassino** is therefore a modern fortress and must be dealt with by modern means. No practicable means available within the capacity of field engineers can possibly cope with this place. It can only be directly dealt with by applying 'blockbuster' bombs from the air, hoping thereby to render the garrison incapable of resistance. The 1000 lb. bomb would be next to useless to effect this.
6. Whether the Monastery is now occupied by a German Garrison or not, it is certain that it will be held as a keep by the last remnants of the Garrison of the position. It is therefore also essential that the building should be so demolished as to prevent its effective occupation at that time.
7. I would ask that you would give me definite information at once as to how this fortress will be dealt with as the means are not within the capacity of this Division.
8. .... When a formation is called upon to reduce such a place, it should be apparent that the place is reducible by the means at the disposal of that Div or that the means are ready for it, without having to go to the bookstalls of **Naples** to find out what should have been fully considered many weeks ago.

Such a plea for the bombing of the monastery, addressed to **Freyberg**, was a sermon to the converted. His opinion had already been formed, and it was shared by his senior commanders, including **Kippenberger**, who thought that their duty to their troops was paramount over all other considerations. <sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Toker's

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<sup>1</sup> According to Stevens (p. 279), Toker remained in his caravan, although ill, during the planning stages of the battle of **Cassino** and later revisited his division from hospital. Stevens seems to imply that it was only Toker's indisposition and absence that caused the abandonment of his plan for breaking into the **Liri** valley west of the monastery by making a detour through the mountains to the north from a firm base on **Monte Castellone**. But the shape of the ensuing battle was no doubt already determined in **Freyberg's** mind by his bequest from the Americans. They were too near their goal not to make an effort by fresh troops well worth while.

<sup>2</sup> The letter is actually signed by General Tucker's GSO I, but the authorship is hardly in doubt.

<sup>3</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 355.

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forthright expressions may have toughened still further the resolve of a Corps Commander who was himself no pusillanimous captain.

Whether or not he had then read either or both of Tucker's memoranda, <sup>1</sup> **Freyberg** on the same day submitted his formal request to Fifth Army. General Clark was visiting **Anzio** at the time, but his views were well known to his Chief of Staff, General Gruenther, who was also able to consult him by radio telephone. Gruenther represented Clark's views to both **Freyberg** and Lieutenant-General A. F. Harding, Alexander's Chief of Staff. In the hurried discussions that followed **Freyberg's** request, the Army Commander's reluctance to bomb the monastery was stated and restated. He had been persuaded by earlier conversations with the commanders of **2 Corps** and **34 Division** that the bombing was unnecessary, and he thought that the rubble of the bombed building might even enhance its defensive value. But he did not at this stage give **Freyberg** a firm answer in either sense.

At 3.30 that afternoon Alexander and Harding visited **Freyberg's** headquarters. The same afternoon Harding informed Gruenther of Alexander's decision: the monastery should be bombed if **Freyberg** considered it a military necessity. If there was any reasonable probability that it was being used for military purposes, its destruction, however regrettable, was warranted. <sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, upon Clark's instructions, Gruenther that evening telephoned **Freyberg** with the decision that, if in **Freyberg's** considered opinion the abbey was a military objective, the Army Commander would concur and authorise the bombing. At the same time he reiterated Clark's opinion that the destruction of the building would not necessarily lessen its value as an obstacle. **Freyberg** thought that the

bombing and shelling would damage rather than demolish it. 'The thing is they will soften the people who are there'. Gruenther then advanced Clark's second main objection – the possibility that civilians were taking refuge in the abbey – and added: 'But if your judgment is that you think it should be done it shall be done'. At one point in the discussions, **Freyberg** suggested that a fighter-bomber should be employed to drop a single token bomb on the monastery to warn the defenders of what lay in store for them and to induce them to clear the refugees out. Clark ridiculed the suggestion, insisting that if bombing was to be carried out nothing would do but to bring in Flying Fortresses with delayed-action 1000-pound bombs. <sup>3</sup>

Later on the evening of the 12th, after returning from the bridgehead, Clark recapitulated his arguments in a last personal intercession with Alexander, but to no avail.

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<sup>1</sup> A conversation he had with General Gruenther at 9.30 p.m. suggests strongly that **General Freyberg** had by then read at least the first of the two memoranda.

<sup>2</sup> Clark, p. 317.

<sup>3</sup> **General Freyberg to General Kippenberger, 11 August 1950.**

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At this stage, with the decision to bomb firmly taken, we may consider for a moment the question of responsibility for it. One comment at least may command general assent. However it may be in the abstraction of pure logic, humanly speaking the task of decision is complicated, and responsibility more elusively diffused, in coalition warfare where officers of different nationalities occupy successive tiers of command. To the natural deference sometimes paid to the opinion of men closer to the battlefield is added the deference due to the wishes of allies in arms. Asked to arrange the bombing by a British officer commanding an Indian division, the New Zealand Corps Commander

carried the request, with his backing, to the American Army Commander, who referred it for final decision to a British Commander-in-Chief working under a broad directive drawn by an American Supreme Allied Commander. <sup>1</sup> In the course of his conversation with Alexander on the night of the 12th, Clark remarked that had the request come from an American commander he would have refused it. <sup>2</sup> This attitude was natural, but it did involve him in an equivocal position: he neither killed the request there and then by a firm refusal, nor did he take it to Alexander as his own. Instead, he invited Alexander to settle a difference of opinion between him and his subordinate officer; and when the decision went against him, it was perhaps unavoidable that he should have thought himself the victim of a British encirclement. Despite his absence at **Anzio** at the critical time, it is difficult to show that he was.

Responsibility cannot be passed down the chain of command. It belongs to the senior officer who sanctioned the decision. That officer was Alexander, for there is no evidence that he consulted his immediate superior, General Wilson, and Churchill has explicitly stated that Alexander accepted responsibility. <sup>3</sup> So much at the mere military level. Beyond that the trail leads on to the makers of grand strategy, and we shall not follow it farther. But it is important to remember that the trail does not end at Alexander.

(ii)

One of **Freyberg's** leading arguments for the bombing was that it would stun the defenders. It was thus of the utmost importance that the infantry assault should follow with the least possible delay, so that the Germans, if in fact they held the abbey, might be overrun while still dazed and shaken. But **Freyberg** had one of the trickiest problems of co-ordination that any commander could face:

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<sup>1</sup> The directive was, of course, General Eisenhower's of 29 December 1943.

<sup>2</sup> Clark, p. 318.

<sup>3</sup> Vol. V, p. 442.

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he had to synchronise an aerial bombardment with two separate infantry attacks and to do it quickly and without any mastery of the decisive conditions. The New Zealanders on the Rapido, despite the flooding and the difficulties of the engineers, could have mounted an attack whenever the word was given, and in fact they expected it almost nightly; but of the three parts of the operation theirs was the only one that offered any margin of flexibility, unless, of course, the whole operation was to be postponed so long as to lose much of its strategic purpose. The date of the bombing depended partly on the weather and partly on events at [Anzio](#), which governed the availability of aircraft. The date of the Indian division's attack on the monastery depended on its progress in the gruelling tasks of deployment, bringing up supplies, and clearing a satisfactory starting line. There was little that a commander's fiat could do to control these conditions.

On 13 February [Freyberg](#) visited Army, where the details of a plan 'to smash the monastery at one blow' were discussed. The timing of the attack was left indeterminate, for the deployment of the Indians was going slowly and the New Zealanders welcomed more time for the repair of the causeway. On the afternoon of the 14th, leaflets drafted by the Psychological Warfare Branch of Fifth Army Headquarters were fired into the abbey warning the Italians to leave at once, as 'the time has come when regretfully we must train our guns on the Monastery itself'. The Indians had not yet completed their relief of the Americans, the possession of Point 593 had still to be assured before the monastery could be assaulted, and two battalions of 5 Indian Brigade, which were needed to support [7 Brigade](#) in the attack, were still miles away on the far side of the Rapido valley.

A planning note produced by the Indian divisional headquarters on

the 14th envisaged the bombing of the monastery as late as possible on the afternoon of the 16th and the withdrawal of forward troops to a distance of at least 1000 yards from the monastery on the night of 15–16 February. In a telephone conversation with **Freyberg** late that afternoon, Dimoline appears to have learned nothing to cause him to alter this programme. It was with a shock that he heard from **Freyberg** in the evening that the bombing was to be carried out next morning.

What had happened in the meantime was that **Freyberg** had visited Army. There he learned that the weather forecast for the day read: 'Fair at first, risk of rain tomorrow', and perhaps also that there were menacing motions by the enemy at **Anzio**. It had been decided, therefore, to strike if possible before the rain fell and the enemy counter-attacked the bridgehead.

Dimoline was dismayed. He had been planning to capture Point 593 on the night of 15–16 February, wait a day to consolidate, and put in the main attack on the night of 17–18 February. **Freyberg**, who had battled hard to secure the air mission, attempted to shake Dimoline from this timetable. He pointed out to the Indians' commander that 'the bombing had been put on at their request, that if we cancelled the programme now we would never get the air again and that this delay from day to day was making us look ridiculous'. Dimoline stood his ground: he would not order his division to attack until a firm base had been established. The General asked him to decide within half an hour whether he could withdraw his troops to the thousand-yard safety limit and also to try to advance the infantry assault on the monastery by twenty-four hours. Neither course proved possible. Seventh Brigade, through some failure of liaison, received only a few seconds' notice of the bombing. Brigadier Lovett was told over the telephone but his expostulation was drowned by the roar of bombs falling on **Monastery Hill**. <sup>1</sup>

*(iii)*

The morning of the 15th was fine but cold and windy. Shortly before 9.30 watchers at vantage points heard the drone of approaching aircraft

and soon the crown of **Montecassino**, heaving under the detonations of 2000-pound bombs, was enveloped in billows of smoke and in the dust of powdered masonry. First, until 10.15, 143 Flying Fortresses from 18,000 feet, and then from 11 a.m. to 1.30, 112 medium bombers from 10,000 feet, dropped 576 tons of high explosive on or near the abbey. <sup>2</sup> A dozen bombs or so in the first wave went astray, causing twenty-four casualties among **7 Brigade's** forward troops, who had one company only 300 yards from the target; but nearly all were well aimed and the precision of the mediums earned admiring comment. Before each wave of bombers arrived, every known hostile anti-aircraft position was engaged by the artillery and heavy and medium guns fired into the abbey during lulls in the bombing.

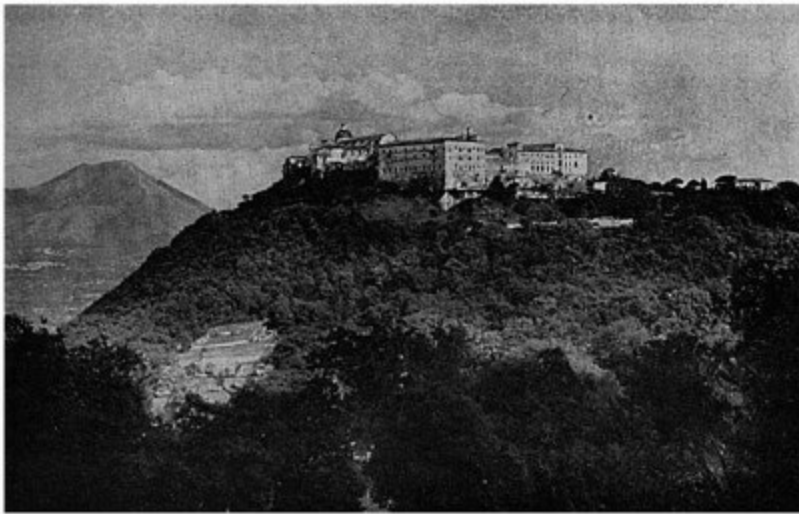
The monastery was left a smoking ruin, the jagged remnants of its walls rising from the crown of the hill like a rotten tooth. Within the precincts were half a dozen monks and a thousand refugees, or perhaps more, from **Cassino** and its neighbourhood. Fifth Army's warning had reached everyone through leaflets which fell outside the walls and were blown into the monastery; but one had doubted their authenticity, another had dismissed them as an idle threat, a third had put his faith in the protection of the buildings, and those who feared the worst had been terrified to step outside



Montecassino and the town

**Montecassino** and the town





The monastery before the war  
**The monastery before the war**

The monastery, May 1944

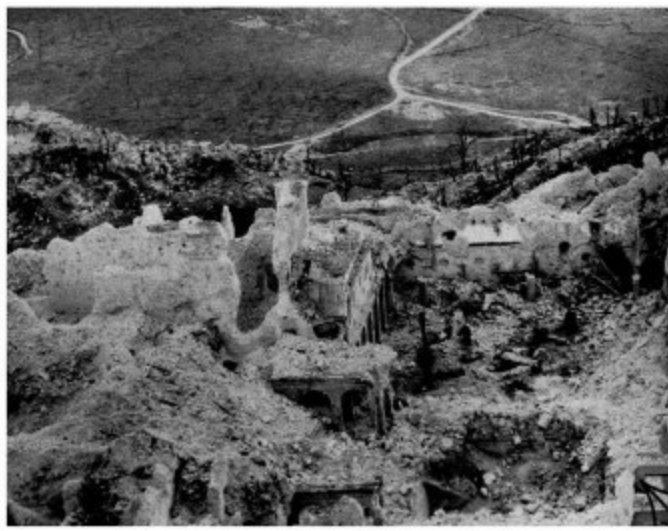


**The monastery, May 1944**



Cassino, November 1943

**Cassino, November 1943**



Cassino Abbey

### **Cassino Abbey**

Attack on Cassino railway station, February 1944; a view from the Maori Battalion's RAP



**Attack on Cassino railway station, February 1944; a view from the Maori Battalion's RAP**



**The first stick of bombs falls on Cassino, 15 March 1944**  
**The first stick of bombs falls on Cassino, 15 March 1944**

Aerial view of the bombing of Cassino

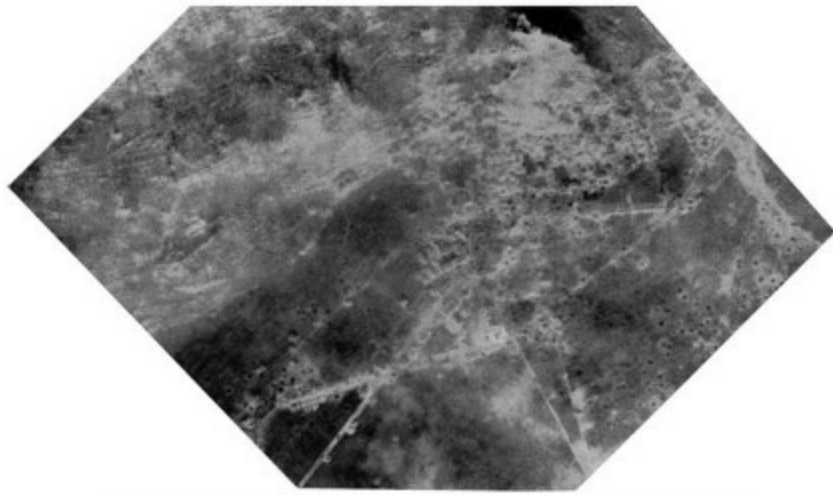


**Aerial view of the bombing of Cassino**



Air photograph issued for operation DICKENS. The road to the monastery winds up towards the top of the picture

**Air photograph issued for operation DICKENS. The road to the monastery winds up towards the top of the picture**



Cassino after bombardment. The photograph was taken from a height of 22,000 feet

**Cassino** after bombardment. The photograph was taken from a height of 22,000 feet



The bombing of Cassino. Castle Hill is on the right

The bombing of **Cassino**. **Castle Hill** is on the right

The convent from the east. This section of Route 6 crosses 'Spandau Alley'



The convent from the east. This section of **Route 6** crosses 'Spandau Alley'



Cassino, twelve months later. Castle Hill in the right background  
**Cassino, twelve months later. Castle Hill in the right background**



The ruins of the Continental Hotel and the castle  
**The ruins of the Continental Hotel and the castle**



Looking across twelve-month-old bomb craters to the wreckage of Cassino  
**Looking across twelve-month-old bomb craters to the wreckage of Cassino**



Wrecked tank in the ruins of Cassino

**Wrecked tank in the ruins of Cassino**



Cave used by 1 Parachute Division as ammunition dump and living quarters, Cassino

**Cave used by 1 Parachute Division as ammunition dump and living quarters, Cassino**



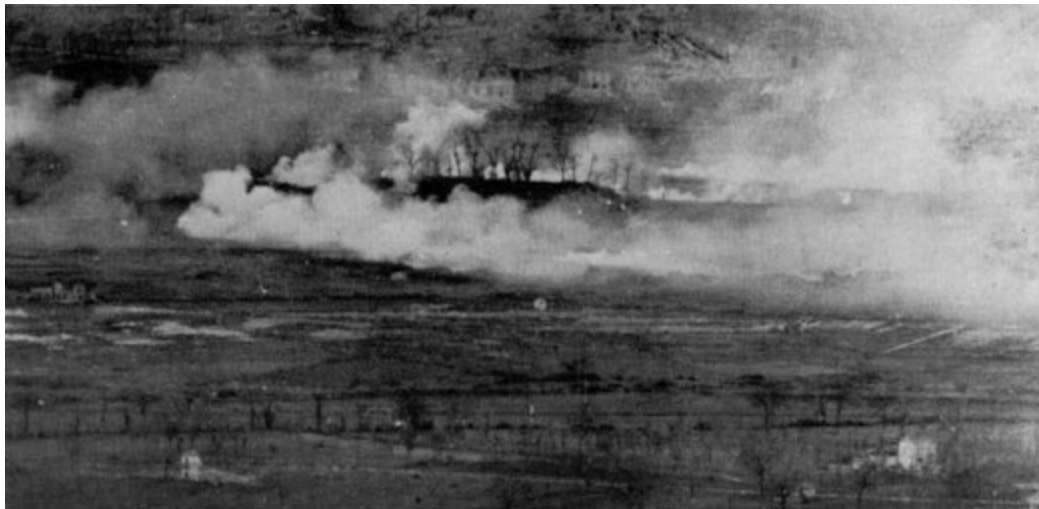
Interior of cave used by 1 Parachute Division

**Interior of cave used by 1 Parachute Division**

Looking out of the crypt, Cassino



Looking out of the crypt, Cassino



26 Battalion attacks under smoke cover

26 Battalion attacks under smoke cover

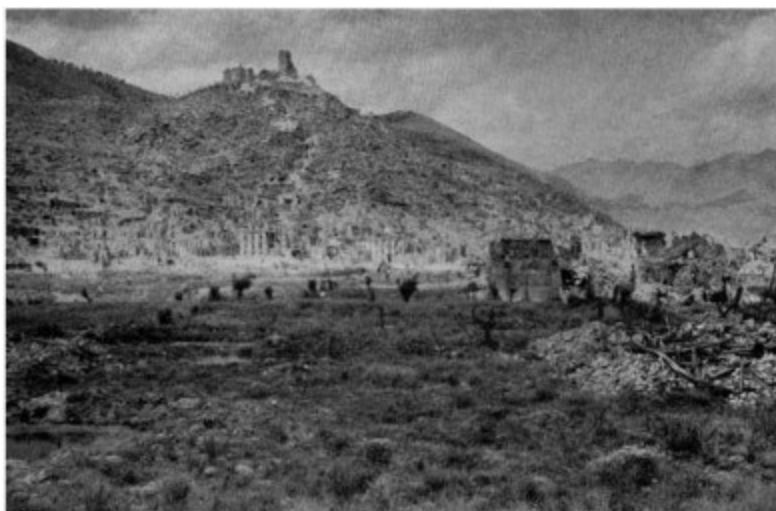


Baron's Palace and the Colosseum from the railway area, Cassino

Baron's Palace and the Colosseum from the railway area, Cassino



Signal wires on Route 6  
**Signal wires on Route 6**



Castle Hill from the railway station, Cassino  
**Castle Hill from the railway station, Cassino**



Maori troops await orders to move  
**Maori troops await orders to move**



21 Battalion mortar team has whitebait fritters for lunch, Monte Trocchio



**21 Battalion mortar team has whitebait fritters for lunch, Monte Trocchio**



Tank gunline, Monte Trocchio

**Tank gunline, Monte Trocchio**

A 5 Field Regiment 25-pounder in position behind Monte Trocchio for 'upper register' shooting

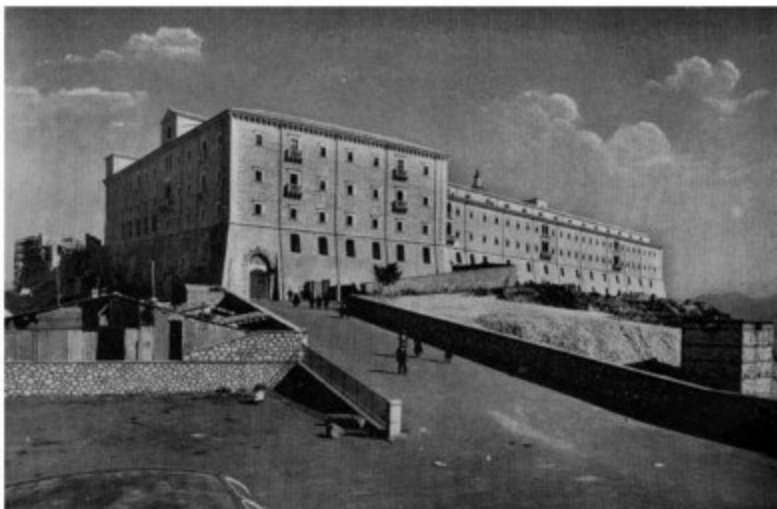


**A 5 Field Regiment 25-pounder in position behind Monte Trocchio for 'upper register' shooting**



Montecassino – the south side of the rebuilt abbey

**Montecassino – the south side of the rebuilt abbey**



Montecassino – the south-west side of the rebuilt abbey

**Montecassino** – the south-west side of the rebuilt abbey

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<sup>1</sup> Stevens, p. 285.

<sup>2</sup> ‘This attack was the first occasion upon which bomber groups from Great Britain struck at an Italian target and continued on to North Africa to rearm for a similar strike on the way home.’—Ibid., p. 286.

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into the open. When the bombs began to fall, some of the occupants displayed a white flag to the attacking aircraft. Both during and after the bombardment people ran out of the building and down the hillside. Between 100 and 300 refugees are said to have perished in the ruins,<sup>1</sup> and the wounded must have numbered many more.

The next day, led by a monk bearing aloft a crucifix, a procession of monks and refugees wound down into the **Liri** valley. Hence the 82-year-old abbot, Bishop Gregorio Diamare, who had been rescued a few hours before from entombment under fallen stonework, was taken by car to General Senger's headquarters north of **Frosinone**. In a radio interview ordered by the **German High Command**, the weary old man declared that at the time of the bombing ‘there was not a single German soldier, German weapon or German military installation in the abbey grounds’. He had already signed a statement of similar import at the request of a

German lieutenant, and he was later importuned in turn by agents of Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda and von Ribbentrop's Foreign Ministry.

<sup>2</sup> Even the diarist of *14 Panzer Corps* noted that 'the bombing of Montecassino was used to the utmost for propaganda purposes'.

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<sup>1</sup> These figures are given by Clark (p. 323), but the truth, which will never be accurately known, may be nearer the higher than the lower figure. The official German figure seems to have been 300. In July 1944 the Bishop of Cara di Tirreni estimated that some 200 dead were still beneath the ruins. Denis Richards and Hilary St. G. Saunders ( *Royal Air Force 1939–1945*, Vol. II, p. 360) say 'between 300 and 400 women and children'; but there were certainly men among the refugees, and it cannot be supposed that the bombs spared all of them.

<sup>2</sup> Senger, article quoted above, p. 15, and war diary, pp. 82–5.

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## III: EVIDENCE AND ARGUMENT

### *III: Evidence and Argument*

(i)

**The echoes of these strident voices may be heard even now. The bombing is still sometimes seen as a wanton act of terror and vandalism. If only for that reason, it has been necessary to swell our narrative at this point to proportions that exaggerate the size of the event as it then appeared to the New Zealand command. It is fair for the journalist, who writes for the day, to strip an episode of its qualifying husk and to display it in the intensity of uncircumstanced isolation. The task of the historian is to reassemble around it the circumstances in which it was embedded. It is still necessary, therefore, to insist on the truth that the bombing of the monastery falls into the essential context of an operation by ground forces, that it was designed to assist a certain body of infantry to capture a certain objective, and that it was upon this aim that the eyes of the military commanders were fixed.**

**Granted that the monastery was a military objective, the decision of the men on the spot to demand its bombing is fairly open to criticism on military grounds alone. But was it a military objective? Or are we confronted with a plea of military necessity when, in Eisenhower's words, 'it would be more truthful to speak of military convenience or even of personal convenience'? If it were possible to prove that the Germans had occupied the monastery for military purposes before 15 February, the answer would be clear; but this has not been proved, though a whole cloud of witnesses has since borne testimony.**

**Evidence for the view that the enemy respected the neutrality of the monastery falls into three classes of unequal value – that of the actual inmates, the later statements of German commanders, and captured German documents. Included in the first class are the findings of an**

exhaustive inquiry made by the **Vatican** into events in the abbey, which General Clark summarises in his book *Calculated Risk*. These findings agree so closely with the evidence of the abbot, Bishop Diamare,<sup>1</sup> and one of his monks, **Father O. Graziosi**, and that of civilian refugees who were questioned by British or American intelligence officers after their escape from the bombed abbey, that all these versions may be consolidated into a single account. According to this story, the Germans established a neutral zone round the abbey and rigidly enforced it. For a time at least, a few German soldiers and later three military policemen picketed the monastery grounds against intruders, at the wish of the abbot; and before the bombing there seem to have been sentries on the gate to prevent the civilians from drawing fire by movement on the hillside under Allied observation. At no time before 15 February did the Germans introduce military material within the walls, and no German entered the abbey for military purposes. Once or twice German medical officers or orderlies went in to treat sick or wounded – the occupants had no medical supplies except a little ointment – and on one occasion two officers and an interpreter were seen conversing with the monks. The Germans did, however, according to Clark's account, establish military installations near the building – dumps for mortar ammunition a few yards from the enclosures of the kitchen garden, observation posts and a mortar battery about 220 yards south of the monastery. Most refugees were vague as to the siting of enemy defences on the slopes of the mountain, but four women reported two light tanks on the road about 300 metres from the building and a mortar behind a funicular station at the foot of the hill.

Of the German witnesses, Senger has given the most detailed

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<sup>1</sup> Apart from his own direct evidence, Bishop Diamare set his imprimatur to a book by Tommaso Leccisotti, *Montecassino*, which substantially confirms the account given in this paragraph.

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evidence.<sup>1</sup> The formation he commanded, *14 Panzer Corps*, had

already established good relations with the monks when it was stationed at **Cassino** in the summer of 1943, before the landings in **Sicily**, and he strongly approved of Kesselring's decision to neutralise the monastery as soon as it came within the battle area. He visited the abbey on Christmas Day, 1943, to attend mass in the crypt, and afterwards satisfied himself that Kesselring's order was being enforced. Senger's testimony is supported on the main point by Kesselring himself, <sup>2</sup> his Chief of Staff, Westphal, <sup>3</sup> and by the commander of the **Tenth Army**, von Vietinghoff. <sup>4</sup>

Captured German documents revealing the enemy reaction to the bombing point in the same direction. These documents are of higher evidential value than the *ex post facto* statements of the German generals, though it is to be remembered that if local commanders were under instructions not to occupy the abbey they had strong motives for representing that the abbey had not been occupied. Certainly they lost no time in putting on record their version of events. Little more than an hour after the first bomb fell on the monastery, the Chief of Staff of **Army Group C** engaged the Chief of Staff of **Tenth Army** in a telephone conversation:

**Army Group:** Anything new down your way?

**Tenth Army:** Only the **Montecassino Abbey** business .... That was pretty foolish, no doubt about that.

**Army Group:** Has it not done us any harm from a military point of view?

**Tenth Army:** No, because we were not occupying it. The enemy was just imagining things ....

An hour and a half later **14 Panzer Corps** passed on to **Tenth Army** a report by **90 Panzer Grenadier Division**:

The commander of the fighting troops in **Cassino** [Colonel Schulz, **1 Parachute Regiment** commander] reports that there were no weapons in

the abbey. The divisional order to bring seriously wounded men into the abbey in case of extreme emergency had never been taken advantage of. Military police had kept continuous guard to prevent any German soldier from entering the abbey. The enemy bombardment was therefore totally unjustified. Ambassador von Weizsacker [the German representative at the **Vatican**] knows the views of the responsible divisional commander [General Baade] on the subject. These have been strictly enforced.

One other German document might be mentioned. It is the cross on the earliest of four soldiers' graves in one of the abbey cloisters. The date it bears is 16 March 1944.

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<sup>1</sup> The article, diary, and letter already cited.

<sup>2</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> *The German Army in the West*, p. 155.

<sup>4</sup> A post-war study written for the United States Historical Division (December 1947), pp. 53–4.

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Evidence apart, reason might also have suggested the probability that the monastery was unoccupied by troops. Intact, it was not a very suitable fire position for infantry weapons. Nor did the Germans need it as an observation post. On the slopes of **Monte Cairo** they could sit as high as they pleased. If on the slopes of **Montecassino** itself they lost something in height, they gained something in proximity, and a great deal more in security, for, as **General Freyberg** himself commented, 'nobody wants to sit on an obvious target', and posts half-way down the hill were more easily concealed than those on the top.

The positive evidence for the German occupation of the monastery is less impressive. General Eaker has testified that when flying at less than 200 feet above it he saw a radio aerial on the building and enemy



soldiers moving in and out. <sup>1</sup> But the efforts of AFHQ to produce proof after the bombing show a steady retreat from confidence. On 4 March the Combined Chiefs of Staff, as a result of Foreign Office inquiries originating with Osborne at the **Vatican**, asked Wilson for material 'describing as precisely as possible the military use which the Germans have in fact been making of the Abbey and which led to your decision to attack it'. <sup>2</sup> The reply, of 9 March, enumerated eleven items of information.

Of these items, which consist mainly of reports by **2 Corps**, five point only to the existence of German defences in the vicinity of the abbey – a tank had been dug in to cover the approaches, small-arms and machine-gun fire were coming from emplacements close to the building, pillboxes had been seen nearby and so on. Three items are inadmissible because they describe events after the bombing. One item was a statement by an Italian civilian, who claimed to have been in the abbey frequently in the month before 7 February, that there were thirty machine guns and about eighty soldiers in the building. Another item was the report of a captured staff sergeant of *III Battalion 132 Infantry Regiment* that its headquarters, the observation post of a parachute battalion, and a battalion aid station were all together in the abbey; but although the **4 Indian Division** intelligence summary from which this item was culled gives the abbey as the site of these posts, the accompanying map reference indicates not the abbey but the **Albaneta Farm** feature. What remains of these eleven items is the report of a battalion commander of 133 United States Infantry Regiment that a telescope had been observed in the middle row of windows on the east face of the abbey

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<sup>1</sup> *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, Vol. III, pp. 362–3. But Richards and Saunders (p. 359) class Eaker among those who shared Clark's doubts.

<sup>2</sup> As stated above, there is no evidence that, as this quotation suggests, the decision to bomb was Wilson's.

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and that enemy troops were moving around the base of the building on the north side.

Wilson's message suggested that the Allied statement should be confined to 'the fact that the military authorities on the spot have irrefutable evidence that the **Cassino** abbey was part of the main German defensive line'. In a message to the British Chiefs of Staff about a week later, AFHQ re-emphasised its view that detailed reasons for the bombing should not be passed to the **Vatican**, 'as it is impossible to obtain definite proof on all points'.

Such is the main evidence. Its tendency is unmistakable. Indeed, it is questionable whether the German case could have stronger corroboration than it receives from the Allied effort to overthrow it. But since a single soldier sitting at a window of the monastery, with or without a pair of binoculars and a field telephone, would constitute a military installation, caution forbids an unambiguous conclusion. It is enough to say that it is no longer possible to affirm with any confidence that the Germans had occupied the monastery for military reasons before 15 February.

(ii)

For the purpose in hand, the inquiry may be thought rather interesting than relevant, for little of the evidence presented above was available at the time to the commanders who made the request to bomb the abbey. What did they in fact know or suspect? The enemy undertaking not to fortify the monastery, even if known at this level, could hardly have inspired conviction among men experienced in the Nazi way with promises. Opinion at the headquarters of the **New Zealand Corps** and the New Zealand Division was divided, but in some minds there was good *a priori* ground for deep suspicion. In **Kippenberger's** judgment, for example, the abbey was so perfectly situated for observation that no army could have refrained from using it. <sup>1</sup> Moreover,

though its narrow windows and level profiles gave no opportunities for grazing fire and made it an unsatisfactory fighting position, it offered ideal protection.

‘I always thought of the Monastery as a suitable shelter for troops who would emerge for counter-attack at a suitable time,’ he wrote later.  
<sup>2</sup> ‘... But it would have been hard to hurt the people inside, even if no more dangerous than a turtle under its shell, and they could always have popped out by egresses we couldn't see, at times convenient to themselves. I should think about a battalion could have been concealed for use in this manner and in addition some fire positions could have been fixed up in the windows and under the walls’

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<sup>1</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 355.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to the author, 9 August 1954.

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The apprehension that the monastery was being used for observation or for shelter could be neither substantiated nor disposed of by the information at hand.

At the conference on 12 February, when **2 Corps** handed over to the **New Zealand Corps**, the commander of **34 Division** did not think that the Germans were in occupation: all the fire against the Americans had come from the slopes of **Montecassino** below the abbey. The intelligence officer of **2 Corps** repeated reports suggesting that the monastery had been used as an observation post and that the Germans had strongpoints close to the walls. Of the 800 enemy infantry believed to be in the town and its environs, he estimated that about 350 would be found on or near the top of the mountain. Though a comparative newcomer to the front, **4 Indian Division** was definite that the building was manned at night, with machine guns and a headquarters there. Civilians questioned before the bombing disagreed – some said that the Germans were in occupation, others that they were not.

**Out of this conflict of evidence, it would be hard to deny that doubt must emerge and that such doubt was reasonable. High commanders in the corps indeed habitually spoke of the monastery garrison. Given the existence of reasonable doubt or justifiable suspicion, responsibility for the lives of their men left commanders no choice. There was only one safe assumption – they had to act as though the abbey was in hostile hands.**

**It is possible to go further. Even if the Germans were certainly known to have observed the neutrality of the monastery, they made it impossible for the Allied troops to do likewise. The hill crowned by the monastery happened to be the commanding feature of the battlefield. The Germans had every right to defend it, and they would have neglected to do so only at the almost certain risk of opening to the Allies the road to **Rome**. But once the enemy had decided to include **Montecassino** in his defensive system the building on its summit inevitably became a legitimate target; <sup>1</sup> for though the mountain might have been defended, it could not have been captured, without attention to its summit. No one now doubts – and the Allies well knew at the time – that military activity was going on in the immediate vicinity of the abbey. Was this activity to claim immunity? If not, the bombing of targets on that steep declivity would have been equivalent in practical effect to bombing the monastery itself. It is the nature of war not to be a game played to the whistle between white lines.**

**Further, even if the enemy had hitherto been punctilious in preserving the abbey as a neutral zone, the past was no sure index**

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 'If it was sacrilegious for the parliamentary general to assault Lichfield Cathedral, so it was for the Royalist army first to have made it a fort'.—Hugh Martin: *Puritanism and Richard Baxter*, p. 89.

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**to the future. There could be no assurance, as Toker noted, that hard-pressed defenders would not fly to its protection in the last resort;**

and in fact we have evidence that the division defending **Montecassino** planned, in extremity, to revise its attitude towards the abbey by using it for the reception of wounded.

Perhaps the most weighty consideration of all, however, was the duty of the commanders to their own troops. What the generals believed was one thing. What the troops believed was another, and, right or wrong, their belief was a substantial fact in the situation. They believed, widely if not universally, that 'Jerry' was sitting in the 'wee white hoose'. They were ordinary men who could not easily be brought to see that human lives, their own or others', should be sacrificed to save a certain disposition of bricks and mortar, however illustrious the building they composed. The building, moreover, they hated. Day and night they had lived under its baleful eye; it was a constant intruding presence; it looked into everything, it nagged at their nerves and became a phobia and an obsession. In the fullness of this knowledge, no infantry commander could have sent his men to storm the mountain with the fear in their hearts that the enemy was waiting for them unharmed at the top. This fact alone made an attack on **Montecassino** unthinkable without an attack on the great edifice that dominated its slopes.

The bombing of the monastery was no crime. Was it a blunder?

(iii)

It may first be asked whether an assault on **Monastery Hill** was necessary. Tuger's alternative proposal of a turning movement on either side of the hill to threaten the garrison with isolation was a shrewd anticipation of the way in which it actually fell in the following May. But to **Freyberg** in February the proposal was hardly relevant. His freedom was narrowly bounded, now as later, by earlier political, strategic and even tactical decisions. There was the political decision not to relax pressure on the enemy throughout the winter. This entailed a strategic decision as to the means of breaching the German Winter Line – a left hook by **10 Corps**, a right hook by the **French Expeditionary Corps** and a punch down the centre by **2 Corps**. This last thrust, directed

at the heart of the enemy defences at the mouth of the **Liri** valley and at **Cassino**, was the one in which Clark chose to persist. Both the politics and the strategy might have been questioned, but their tactical consequences had to be accepted, and it was these that **Freyberg** inherited. A perspective view shows that the **New Zealand Corps** took up a battle already half fought, or more than half fought, by American troops who had shown admirable tenacity and won palpable success. The pith of one German criticism of the bombing of the abbey indeed is that it did not occur until the fighting in the first battle of **Cassino** was already subsiding. <sup>1</sup>

**Freyberg** cannot be blamed for not doing in February what Alexander did in May. The great May offensive was launched on a front of several miles by two armies, with no clear idea where the break would come but only a determination to exploit success. **Freyberg**, on the other hand, in command of a single corps in the depth of winter, had to make the best use of his resources to force a passage through a selected point in the enemy defences rather than wait for a success to turn up and then reinforce it. He could not bring the Allied superiority in men and machines to bear in a process of attrition. In deciding to attack **Monastery Hill**, the lynchpin of the defensive system, he was maintaining the momentum of an American drive which had brought our troops within a few hundred yards of the monastery walls: the next step, the seizure of Montecassino, was all but predestined. He was in fact exploiting a turning movement, but it was the town and not the abbey of **Cassino** that he hoped to turn. The plan finally adopted was that one which survived the critical scrutiny of several plans. And when after its failure **Freyberg** had to rethink the problem, he could still see no means of avoiding the need to capture **Monastery Hill**; what he did vary was the direction from which it was attacked. In the circumstances of early February, his plan offered the best hope of success. But if **Montecassino** was wisely attacked, was it wisely bombed?

Tactically, the bombing was conceived as serving two purposes – to destroy the defensive value of the monastery and to demoralise the

defenders. Whether it enhanced the usefulness of the building as a strongpoint remains in dispute. If it was previously unoccupied by the Germans, and if they had no intention of occupying it, clearly its value to them was increased, for now they undoubtedly took post in the ruins, with their machine guns among the rubble 'and their field kitchens in the cell of St. Benedict'.<sup>2</sup> But even if they had been in the building before the attack, it is still arguable that the bombardment made it a better fortress. An Allied officer who inspected the monastery immediately after its capture in May found much of it 'only a heap of pulverised rubble and dust'. The west end, however, remained standing to the top floor, and other parts escaped total destruction – some of the cloisters, the south wall of the basilica apse, the west end of the refectory. More important, though fissures occurred, the immense outer wall was so solid that no complete breach was made, and the parts left standing provided excellent cover for the defenders.

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<sup>1</sup> Senger, war diary, pp. 77, 81.

<sup>2</sup> Richards and Saunders, p. 360.

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General Senger is no unbiassed witness, but his explicit opinion deserves notice:

It [the monastery] had, indeed, become a far finer defence position than it would have been before its destruction, because as anyone who has had experience of street fighting – as at **Stalingrad** or at **Cassino** – is aware, rubble heaped upon basements and cellars forms defences greatly superior to houses. Houses must be demolished in order to be converted from mousetraps into bastions of defence. So it happened that at a later stage, when the Allied infantry had driven a deep wedge between **Montecassino** and the town, they were compelled to withdraw because they were enfiladed by the many batteries concealed in the ruins of the destroyed Monastery.<sup>1</sup>

The senior officers in the **New Zealand Corps** were perfectly aware, when they asked for the bombing, that buildings are usually improved as forts by demolition. Their expectation was that the abbey would be reduced to dust, offering few firm footings and places of concealment, roofless and open to the fire of guns, mortars, and raids by strafing aircraft or fighter-bombers dropping lighter and more accurate missiles. In the event of heavy bombing it would be a death-trap.

These hopes were not quite realised because pulverisation was incomplete. Much of the abbey, it is true, lost all military value, but enough masonry still stood to afford some cover and weapon emplacements were improvised. Renewed bombing might have made slaughter among the defenders and rendered the ruins untenable, but as it happened bombing was not renewed on any significant scale, and the Germans showed their satisfaction with the new position by manning it at once and defending it to the end. And though now only a gaunt shell in a grey desert, the monastery retained its power to overshadow the minds of men and lie heavy on their spirits.

To **Freyberg** the more important tactical purpose was the 'softening up' of the defenders – but this was not achieved. The paratroops holding the hill may have been unnerved (one was seen sobbing like a child), but they were given time to recover and came out as full of fight as ever. The lack of co-ordination between the air and ground attacks certainly impaired the latter and gave the former a false air of gratuitous barbarism, as though it was a gesture of petulance at previous failures. Yet on the afternoon of the 14th it was in a peculiarly acute form that **Freyberg** had to face that 'option of difficulties' which has been identified with war itself. Convinced that air attack was indispensable, he had to accept what he wanted before he wanted it or risk not getting it at all. The point of contact between the downward pressure of strategic necessity and the upward pressure of tactical necessity was located between him and Dimoline.

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<sup>1</sup> Article already quoted.



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While from a slightly loftier vantage-point **Freyberg's** eye took in most vividly the broader implications of the action at **Cassino**, Dimoline could not forget the plight of his infantrymen on the bare hills above the town.

**Freyberg's** choice found some justification in the event, for after the 15th the Strategic Air Force was no longer at his disposal. When the German counter-offensive broke out in earnest at **Anzio** on the 16th, it dashed any hope that the psychological wound inflicted by the previous day's bombing might be kept open by air attacks on a comparable scale. Three times during the afternoon of the 16th waves of fighter-bombers raised the dust on **Montecassino** but, though Clark did his utmost to help, the heavy and medium bombers, which alone could do the work of siege artillery, could not be spared from **Anzio**. After the 17th, when the fighter-bombers paid a last visit, bad weather saved the ruins from further air attack.

Though the bombing was carried out in an atmosphere of strategic urgency, its success in affording relief to the Allied forces at **Anzio** was at best partial. The bombing cannot be dissociated in its strategic effect from the operation of which it was a part, but there is no evidence that the operation itself caused the Germans to divert ground forces from the bridgehead to the **Cassino** front. On the contrary, *14 Panzer Corps* had to meet the attack out of its own resources.<sup>1</sup> It is possible that the further strengthening of the bridgehead was prevented. Of the two enemy divisions moved from the south of **Rome** to help stem Clark's January offensive, one, *29 Panzer Grenadier Division*, was later withdrawn for the counter-attack on the **Anzio** bridgehead. The other, *90 Panzer Grenadier Division*, was no doubt destined also to be withdrawn, but it had to be detained on the southern front and committed on the **Cassino** sector. This decision, however, was a response to the threat by the Americans working through the hills north of the town before the **New Zealand Corps** assumed command. At best, the New Zealand attack confirmed the decision.

In the war of propaganda the Germans made a clear gain. By radio broadcasts, through the press and by posters,<sup>2</sup> they circulated their story of Allied vandalism. It has even been suggested that they provoked the bombing in order to reap this advantage. From the Vatican Osborne reported, on what seemed to him good authority, that enemy agents were spreading information that certain churches, ecclesiastical property, and cultural monuments were being occupied by the Germans, in the hope that the Allies would bomb them. He wondered whether the trick had been played in this case. 'This would

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<sup>1</sup> General Senger, letter to author, already cited.

<sup>2</sup> 'Streets of Rome and Vienna plastered with posters of destruction of Abbey of Monte Cassino'.—Osborne to Foreign Office, 23 February 1944.

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have served the double purpose of supplying the Germans with admirable propaganda material and of enabling the Germans to use the ruins of the Abbey ... for military purposes'.<sup>1</sup> Our knowledge of the genesis of the bombing allows us to discount this suggestion. But the notion recurs in a different context. In the tale they told to their American interviewer, four Italian women refugees had the following to say:

The afternoon of 14 February some civilians found leaflets near the wall of the Abbey, which were believed to have been dropped by plane. The leaflets warned the civilians to leave the Abbey because it was going to be bombed. When the Abbot read the leaflets he immediately sent word to the Germans asking for advice. Two Germans, who we think were officers, came to the Abbey, staying only for a short time with the Abbot. Seeing that we were all getting restless and afraid and wanted to leave the place, the Abbot sent the monks to us and they told us to keep calm, as the Germans had promised to send a message to the American headquarters in order to avoid the bombing of the Abbey.

**The morning of 15 February, at 0600 hours, we were told by the monks to get ready to leave. A few minutes later two German officers and an interpreter came and informed the Abbot that under no circumstances was any civilian to leave, under pain of being shot. We were also warned not to light any fires. Two German sentries were posted at the gate. At about 0900 hours four-engined planes started to drop bombs on the Abbey ....**

**If this account is true <sup>2</sup> – and two independent reports by refugees agree that the Germans barred the gates – the most obvious inference is that the enemy deliberately sacrificed civilian lives to make propaganda. But the obvious is not necessarily the true. According to one refugee, it had been the habitual practice of the Germans to keep the gates locked – a natural precaution to prevent civilians bringing fire upon themselves and the German defences round the abbey. Further, Baade is known to have thought that the bombing threat was bluff. <sup>3</sup> He doubtless believed that the refugees were safer within the walls by day than if they tried to escape without a local armistice, which there was no time to arrange; and he may have wanted to delay the evacuation until dark, in the expectation that the threatened attack, if it occurred at all, would not occur that day. The charge made at the time that ‘the Germans seized their chance of a real scoop’ <sup>4</sup> is not substantiated.**

**At a different level, the bombing of [Montecassino](#) has been seen as the price paid for the preservation of [Rome](#), in that it reminded**

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**<sup>1</sup> I have combined two messages from Osborne to Foreign Office, one of 21 February and the other of 23 February 1944. The quotation is from the first.**

**<sup>2</sup> The fact that these women reported (what they must have known was unwelcome to the Allies) that the Germans had not occupied the abbey is a *prima facie* ground for trusting their story, but it is certainly erroneous in some details, e.g., the content of the leaflets and the time of the bombing.**

<sup>3</sup> Richards and Saunders, p. 359.

<sup>4</sup> Weekly Review of European Events, No. 17, ACMF.

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the Germans of the Allies' implacable will to wage war. **General Freyberg** was of opinion that two events in the war had a considerable effect on the Germans' mentality: one was the sinking of the French battleships at **Oran** and the other was the bombing of **Montecassino**. The latter, in his view, induced them to heed the appeals to have **Rome** treated as an open city. <sup>1</sup>

(iv)

Whether or not in this devious way **Rome** was saved, no doctrine of vicarious suffering can disguise the fact that for those who actually suffered in the bombing of the abbey it was a calamity and that the world lost something that can never be replaced. A British history declares that 'It is too early to pass final judgment on this melancholy event .... Future generations alone will be able to decide whether the bombing of **Monte Cassino** was a necessity'. <sup>2</sup> Yet surely it is mistaken to suppose that so long as this episode is discussed by men who care deeply about such issues finality will be attainable. The passing of time opens new perspectives and changes historical judgments but it does not lead to finality. The evidence is in, and the historian of this generation must make up his mind, undeterred by the possibility that his verdict, like those of his successors, will be superseded.

It has been argued above that in the circumstances in which it found itself when it fell heir to the battle of **Cassino**, the command of the **New Zealand Corps** had no realistic alternative but to demand the bombardment of the monastery and that the only effectual form of bombardment was by heavy aircraft. Tactically, the bombing was a necessity – and a necessity notwithstanding that it was an almost unmitigated failure. But had earlier decisions been different, the necessity might never have arisen. It is true that **Cassino** abbey stood

guard over the most direct route to **Rome**. It is true, too, that the **Via Casilina** (Route 6), upon which the advance of a great army ultimately depended, passed beneath it. But there was nothing inevitable in the strategy that chose for repeated attack the strongest point in a defensive line of remarkable strength. Another strategy might have saved the abbey of **Montecassino** and some of the lives which its destruction failed to save.

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<sup>1</sup> This view is debatable on at least two grounds. First, the move to have **Rome** declared an open city long preceded the bombing of the abbey. Before the invasion of **Sicily** the Pope and the Fascist Government had raised the question, and on 19 August 1943 the Royal Italian Government in a broadcast declared **Rome** an open city. Efforts to get the combatants to respect this declaration were intensified as the Allied advance neared the city, and the bombing of the abbey no doubt was one of the events that stimulated them. It was on 17 March 1944 that Marshal Badoglio addressed an appeal to the Allies, in which he announced that the Germans had unequivocally accepted the declaration. Second, as we have seen, there is good evidence that Kesselring's policy was to spare cultural monuments, wherever possible.

<sup>2</sup> Richards and Saunders, p. 360.

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(v)

The military operation of which the bombing was only an incident went on. According to plan, the Indians attempted on the evening of 15 February to capture Point 593, the outer bailey, as it were, of the castle that had the monastery for its keep. But no more than one company of 1 Royal Sussex was committed, and it was handicapped by ignorance of the ground, since daylight reconnaissance was impossible with the enemy at such close quarters. Thus, when only about 70 yards from the starting line, the advance was stopped short by a steep gully not marked on the map. Across this natural moat the defenders poured a stream of

fire, and after several attempts to bypass the ravine the company had to retire with about twenty casualties.

When he heard of the failure next morning **Freyberg** urged on Dimoline a change of tactics. He advised making the main bid for the monastery that night with a strong force that would attempt a dash on the left over the short, direct route from Point 445. He questioned whether the capture of Point 593 on the right was the *sine qua non* that Lovett, the brigadier on the spot, claimed it to be. Dimoline carried his point for another attempt on Point 593 that night but was clearly given to understand that in any circumstances the attack on the monastery could not be deferred beyond the next night. Having tactfully sounded opinion at Army Headquarters, **Freyberg** sensed a growing restiveness, which he was determined to allay.

The strength of the whole **Sussex** battalion went into the second attempt on Point 593 and a way had been found round the ravine that balked the first, but the going was such that only one company could be thrown into the assault at a time. Though overlooked by the parachutists established among the ruins on the summit, the leading company stormed the heights and penetrated the defences but twice ran short of hand grenades before the second company appeared. Three times the position was carried, but each time the defenders rallied and regained their ground. When the attack was called off, the casualties numbered 12 officers and 130 men.

With the double failure at Point 593, the Corps Commander would tolerate no further delay in directly assaulting the abbey. The plan favoured by Dimoline and Lovett of first rolling up one by one the German defences on Point 575, **Albaneta Farm**, and Point 593 was now abandoned. The Indians were to attack on the night of 17–18 February with as great a force and on as broad a front as time, terrain and supply would permit.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## CHAPTER 10 – THE FEBRUARY ATTACK



## CHAPTER 10

### *The February Attack*

#### *I: Plans and Dispositions*

(i)

**AT this point, as our narrative reaches 17 February, we must refocus our view on a larger scene. The plan of the Indian division was no isolated effort but part of a concerted corps offensive, and the action of the **New Zealand Corps** has a setting in the fortunes of the Fifth Army.**

**On the morning of the 16th, having massed the strength of six divisions, the German **Fourteenth Army** opened a counter-attack intended to eliminate the **Anzio** bridgehead and recognised for what it was by the Fifth Army. Diversionary pressure on the main front became urgently necessary. The Corps' offensive had been envisaged as far more than a mere demonstration or containing action, but now it could serve a double purpose. Its original aim had been defined in **General Freyberg's** corps operation order of 9 February. <sup>1</sup> Slightly modified, the Corps' intention was now to establish a bridgehead across the Rapido and Gari rivers to permit the deployment of armour in the **Liri** valley. The Indians were to capture the high ground west of **Cassino**, including **Monastery Hill**, and to cut Route 6 at the foot of the hill, while the New Zealanders were to make a bridgehead across the Rapido in the area of the railway station. This was the first phase of an operation which it was hoped would gradually develop momentum in four stages.**

**In the second phase the tanks of American Task Force B, with 21 New Zealand Battalion in support, would cross the second water-line, that of the Gari, and consolidate a bridgehead south of Route 6. In the third phase the task of New Zealand infantry and armour (the fresh troops of 4 and 5 Brigades) was to wheel south from the bridgehead to capture **Pignataro** and Sant' Angelo from the flank and mop up enemy resistance on the west bank of the Gari to enable new bridges and routes**

of advance to be opened up. Finally, the westward advance up the **Liri** valley would begin, New Zealand and American armour (Task Force A) with infantry support moving

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 193.

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by bounds to invest the system of defences which the Germans were known to have prepared across the valley on a line **Piedimonte San Germano– Aquino– Pontecorvo**.

Such were the plans when at last on the night of 17–18 February the two attacks could be synchronised. After days of baffling delays and disappointments, **Freyberg** was understandably concerned – ‘calm but preoccupied’ – about the night's event. His personal aide and a visiting journalist both noted his anxiety, and that night he slept in his clothes.

(ii)

To the best of his ability the enemy was braced to meet the coming attack. Since early in the month he had never ceased to worry about the safety of the **Cassino** sector. On the 5th, General Senger had decided to leave *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* in charge of this part of the front because of General Baade's unrivalled knowledge of the terrain rather than to relieve it at once by *1 Parachute Division*. Baade's command was reinforced by fresh battalions, which were thrown into the line as soon as they arrived with scant regard for the symmetries of text-book organisation, until finally it was a checkered coalition of units from seven different divisions – clear testimony, if any were still needed, of the Germans' ability to survive by makeshift.

Senger was so sure that his danger lay between **Cassino** and **Monte Cairo** that he strengthened his defences there by gravely weakening quieter parts of the front over the protests of his divisional commanders, and at the calculated risk of local Allied penetrations and new crises and of denuding the corps of all reserves. On the 15th he appreciated that

**'the enemy has now regrouped his forces for another major attack on the key-point of the Gustav line, the [Cassino](#) massif'. The Allies' position only a few hundred yards from final success there, the movement of their infantry reserves, the day's bombing and the increasing effectiveness of their observed shellfire all pointed to the imminence of a large-scale attack. The next day Senger was expecting this attack to coincide, for diversionary purposes, with the German effort at [Anzio](#). All steps had been taken to meet the contingency.**

**Though finding no indications of a frontal assault across the water barrier, Senger anticipated that one would follow success at [Cassino](#). He thought it probable that a fresh infantry division was waiting in the Casiline plain to exploit a break-through. A report to corps on the 17th that engineers were bridging the Rapido backwater can only have confirmed an assessment that was, on the whole, remarkably perceptive. The Germans, then, were mentally prepared.**

**Their material preparations appeared rather less adequate, but no one was more aware of the deficiencies than Senger himself. His most pressing anxiety was shortage of infantry. Against fourteen battalions much below the average strength of Allied battalions, he estimated that the enemy had twenty-six in the vital sector and he doubted whether his troops could hold out against another big attack. Casualties and the severe weather were causing a daily wastage of the equivalent of about a battalion, compared with two to two and a half a day in heavy fighting. Exhaustion resulting from the rigours of mountain warfare, insufficient supplies and equipment and lack of relief was increasing, especially at [Cassino](#), where the garrison had been exposed to fourteen days of continuous high-explosive and phosphorous shellfire. Lacking infantry, the corps could not hold positions in depth and had to fall back on linear defence. The artillery counted only 51 pieces against a not inaccurately estimated 292 on the Allied side. Gun ammunition was either short at the dumps or came up from them far too slowly for want of transport. On the 16th, for example, *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* artillery had ammunition for only two hours' full-scale fighting. Whether**

or not spuriously darkened to give point to his plea for help, the picture in Senger's summing up is certainly gloomy.

If the enemy decides to concentrate his artillery, air and infantry in co-operation on a few deciding points ( **Cassino**, **Montecassino**, **Albaneta Farm**, Colle Sant' Angelo), he will probably succeed in his aims. The Corps is no longer able to reinforce the line in the **Cassino** massif without outside help.

The holding of the Gustav line depends on the holding of the last line of heights, which is now in our hands. If this line is lost the situation will be most critical, as there is no other suitable prepared defensive position behind it. The holding of the Gustav line is ... a basic point of general policy in **Italy**. The line cannot be held unless infantry and artillery reserves are placed under Corps command as soon as possible.

Senger asked **Tenth Army** for a fresh division, reinforcements to bring existing formations up to full strength, more battalions of paratroops, heavy artillery, machine guns and, as soon as possible, the transfer of the **Luftwaffe's** weight from the **Anzio** front.

The troops in the line between **Cassino** station and Colle Belvedere when the **New Zealand Corps** attacked included fourteen infantry battalions, two companies of tanks, part of two nebelwerfer regiments, an assault gun battalion, four batteries of field, one of medium and one of heavy artillery, and a battalion and a company of anti-tank guns. Opposite the New Zealanders, **Cassino** station and town were manned by **211 Regiment** (Major F. W. Knuth), with two battalions of its own and a third from **361 Panzer Grenadier Regiment**, and the **Montecassino-Albaneta** sector of the Indian front was in the hands of **1 Parachute Regiment** (Colonel Schulz), comprising four battalions – two of its own, one of **3 Parachute Regiment** and the **Parachute Machine Gun Battalion**.

Reconsidered in terms of infantry actually engaged in launching or

repelling the assault, the odds against the Germans almost shrink away. At those points in the German lines which it had chosen to breach, the **New Zealand Corps** was far from being able to bring to bear a crushing weight of numbers. In the initial heave that was to topple the enemy defences, the Indians enjoyed a superiority in battalions of perhaps four to three, while the New Zealanders fought numerically on about equal terms, so narrow were the attackers' avenues of approach. The gate was strait and in the event the scroll would be charged with punishment.

*(iii)*

The Indian plan for the night of 17–18 February was for 7 Brigade, reinforced by one battalion from each of the other two brigades of the division, to make a double thrust, each by two battalions. At midnight **4/6 Rajputana Rifles**, with three companies of 1 Royal Sussex under command, having overrun or bypassed Point 593, was to advance about 1000 yards along a ridge to Point 444, 300 yards or so from the north-west angle of the monastery buildings. Two hours later **1/2 Gurkha Rifles** and **1/9 Gurkha Rifles** were to pass through **4/16 Punjab Regiment** in position on Points 450 and 445 to assault the monastery ruins directly from the north, and then to exploit down the hill to bring Route 6 under small-arms fire.

All that could be done was done to help the Indians on to their objectives against the vigorous defence that could be expected from the paratroops. The Anzio bridgehead had first claim on air support, but shortly before dusk the abbey was accurately bombed. Artillery preparation was hampered by the proximity of the forward infantry, but the Indians that night shared with the New Zealanders the support of nearly 500 guns, including not only those of the New Zealand Corps and **2 United States Corps** but also of such French and **10 Corps** guns as lay within range. On the Indians' front concentrated shellfire was directed at likely enemy forming-up places and the German artillery was subdued as far as possible by the heavier calibres.

When the preliminary bombardment began, flares in unusual

numbers lit the sky from the monastery south to Sant' Angelo. They hinted that the Germans were alert, and the night's fighting left no doubt. On the right **4/6 Rajputana Rifles** fought at close quarters from midnight until 3.30 to capture Point 593. By then they had lost many men and all but two of their officers, the enemy fire was still devastating, and it proved impossible to clear the forward slopes for the advance to Point 444. Indeed, Point 593 itself was still contested in a hand-to-hand struggle that abated only when daybreak compelled the Indians to consolidate on the ground they held. On the left the night's work was no less grim and hardly less disappointing. Even for **Gurkhas** the precipitous cleft separating their starting line on Point 445 from the monastery was made all but impassable by vicious, thorny scrub throat high which tore at their clothes and equipment, and by an enemy who fired or threw grenades from emplacements at unexpectedly short range. Two companies of **1/2 Gurkha Rifles**, suffering fearful casualties, had been thinned out to a pitiful remnant when the order came to withdraw. Reports that some **Gurkhas** had penetrated to the abbey were, and remain, unconfirmed.

Now that both thrusts were held up, it was decided to send the force on the left to take the objective originally assigned to the right-hand force. The reserve company of **1/2 Gurkha Rifles** and **1/9 Gurkha Rifles** were therefore directed to cross the valley from Point 450 to seize Point 444. This mission was carried out in the face of fierce resistance, and soon after dawn four companies of **Gurkhas** were established within 300 yards of the monastery – the nearest approach the Indians are known to have made. But Point 444 was overlooked from the west by the Germans higher up the ridge on the southern slopes of Point 593; and from the east by those in the rubble of the abbey. A dash for the abbey by daylight would have been suicidal and to avoid fruitless casualties the **Gurkhas** were ordered back to Point 450. Wounded men left in the scrub on Point 444 were carried back the next night.

By 1 p.m. on the 18th **7 Brigade** had shot its bolt. Its battalions were digging in on the reverse slopes of Points 593 and 450, still within

hailing distance of the enemy. Point 445 had been abandoned on the calculation that a position only 400 yards from the monastery walls and 200 feet below them was too costly to hold. Four hundred dead among the Indian battalions were reported by *90 Panzer Grenadier Division*, a figure that most probably represents their total casualties.<sup>1</sup> The Germans themselves admitted to the loss of seventy, including the commander of the fighting troops on **Montecassino**. Their success among the hills is to be attributed to the skill and tenacity of first-class infantry, well sited and well protected in terrain of overriding natural strength. Gunfire had little part in driving off the Indians. The German artillery, after concentrating on the hill sector, later switched to the Rapido, and had in any case exhausted its meagre stocks of ammunition by 4.20 a.m.

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<sup>1</sup> The casualties given by Stevens (pp. 288–9) total 439 all ranks killed and wounded.

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**Freyberg** was under pressure to renew the direct attack on the monastery. On the morning of the 18th, when told by Fifth Army of the critical turn of events at **Anzio**, he remarked that ‘we must do our damndest to make a diversion here’; and that afternoon he put to Dimoline the disadvantages of pausing to reconsider the plan of attack. Dimoline, however, strongly opposed another immediate bid for the monastery. He recurred to the problem inherent in the siting of the defences in the **Cassino** promontory. A series of mutually supporting posts extended in a horseshoe eastwards from Point 575 to the monastery, and to attack without first subduing the westernmost strongpoints was simply to enter a pocket where fire poured in from all sides. Three battalions were needed to secure the existing line and another brigade to make a wide sweep to roll up the defences from the flank. After careful consideration, **Freyberg** agreed that the Indians should pause to reorganise on a two-brigade front.

Meanwhile, on the drenched flats south-east of **Monastery Hill** the New Zealanders prepared for operation **AVENGER**. Their prime object was, as it were, to peg out the **Cassino** railway station and the ground immediately north and south of it so as to hold the enemy in **Cassino** town at bay while armour and supporting infantry were passed along the railway embankment across the Gari and out into the **Liri** valley. So long as the peg was inserted and held firmly in place, the operation could probably prosper, even though the Indians should fail to seize the monastery. In this indispensable preliminary the difficulties crowded thickly, but the crux of the problem is easily stated. Flooded approaches prevented the deployment of more than a small force of infantry, and the need to repair numerous breaches in the embankment entailed a race to bring up heavy weapons in time to sustain the infantry against the almost inevitable counter-attack. And if the peg were to be knocked out, the plan would collapse.

Once a river crossing farther south had been rejected,<sup>1</sup> the Division had to accept the disadvantage of assault on a narrow front. It was contrary to the New Zealand practice in **Africa**, where attacks were launched on the widest front that the guns could adequately support. In flat, open country fire from the flanks made it difficult to consolidate and reinforce narrow penetrations; and even in the closer and more rugged terrain of **Italy** the Division usually preferred to hit the enemy on a front of at least three battalions.

Still, in this case the Division had the warrant of historical analogy and of present example. The analogy that **Kippenberger** had in mind was the tactics that had won **Badajos** in the Peninsular War

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<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 240

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and similar fortresses. While the defence was distracted by feint attacks, a breach was made (or more than one breach) and reserves were poured into the hole. The example was that of existing divisions which



had attacked successfully with single battalions and of the Germans' predilection for the stab rather than the broad blow.



MAORI BATTALION ATTACK ON CASSINO RAILWAY STATION, 17-18 FEBRUARY 1944

And it was hoped to simulate a broad attack by bringing supporting weapons well forward, whence they might keep the garrison of **Cassino** passive and impressed.

The vital assault role, as we have seen, <sup>1</sup> was allotted to the Maoris

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 194.

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of **28 Battalion**. Lieutenant-Colonel Young divided his front between A and B Companies. Setting out from Demolition 1 and crossing the Rapido by the causeway, they would fan out on their taped start line, a lane running south from the railway just beyond the river, with B Company on the right and A Company on the left. The companies would advance at 9.30 p.m., each on a 200-yard front. B Company had two successive objectives – the first the railway station and a large crescent-shaped engine shed known as the Round House, and the second a group of houses 300 yards north-west of the station in the fork of two roads leading into **Cassino**. A Company was to capture the ground for about 300 yards south of the Round House, the most prominent feature of

which was the group of black hummocks. Distances were short: no more than 800 yards for the forward platoons of B Company and hardly 400 yards for A Company. Communication would be by wireless alone, and the wireless silence in force since 12 January was therefore to be broken 30 minutes before zero hour.

The objectives were to be shelled first by heavy and medium guns and then by all available field guns until the infantry advance had been in progress for ten minutes. Counter-battery and harassing fire for two hours after zero hour would complete the prearranged artillery programme. Special targets were also found for machine guns and mortars. Farther south, 24 Battalion and the Divisional Cavalry were to fire heavily across the river during the attack, and after dawn they were to make smoke to screen the newly-won ground. The whole fire plan was intended not only to soften opposition on the objectives and to quieten the enemy in **Cassino** itself but also, as noted, to disguise the vulnerable want of breadth in the front of attack.

In close attendance on the infantry, the engineers were to bridge the main stream and a tributary of the Rapido and to repair four other demolitions in the railway line with bulldozers. It was hoped that they would be up to the station with an open road behind them before dawn so that **19 Armoured Regiment** (Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin) might carry out its task. The regiment was to have a squadron in the station by daylight for defensive purposes, and then by way of exploitation was to send the rest of its tanks to clear the southern outskirts of **Cassino** without penetrating too deeply into the town and to be ready to climb the zigzag road up **Monastery Hill** to help the Indians. In this early exploitation 19 Regiment's tanks would be accompanied by part of 23 Battalion. All going well up to this point, the Division would then put into effect its further plans for exploitation over the Gari and into and up the valley, with **Rome** ahead.

*II: The Maoris' Action*

**(i)**

At 8.45 p.m., hard on the opening of the artillery programme, the two Maori companies left their assembly point on the laborious tramp to the start line. Though it was only about 600 yards away, the Maoris arrived damp and dirty. They had had to plod through the mud of the causeway and flounder across waterlogged fields and through an exasperating system of drains. B Company was further delayed in getting past the engineers and their piles of equipment on the causeway, and it was after 9.30, zero hour, when the company left the start line. The night held a series of unpleasant surprises. Late in starting and slowed down by the heavy going, the Maoris now found that they were advancing across fields sown with mines, and before long mortars and machine guns on the lower slopes of **Montecassino** and the southern edge of the town began to range on them. Men began to fall to the fire and the mines, and the returning trickle of stretcher-borne casualties became a stream. B Company, which had suffered badly on the minefields, took an hour to reach the entrance to the station yards and A Company was moving scarcely any faster.

In the light of flares, B Company saw its way into the yards barred by new wire, with two posts dug in behind it. Closing in, 12 Platoon wavered for a moment before a particularly violent burst of machine-gun fire, but there was an immediate response to Captain Wikiriwhi's <sup>1</sup> call for a charge. As though in training, two men threw themselves on to the coiled wire, and those following leaped over and went to work with bayonet and grenades. The posts were cleared out, and with the dannert wire cut and the rest of the company coming through the gaps the ruins of the station building and the Round House were soon seized from their rugged defenders, men of *III Battalion 361 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*.

It was now about midnight, but further advance would be difficult so long as the machine guns firing from the outskirts of **Cassino** remained untroubled. To trouble them medium and field guns opened an uninterrupted fire, and under its protection B Company resumed its

progress towards the houses of the second objective. Now that the first belt of wire and machine guns had been pierced, resistance eased perceptibly, but as the Maoris neared the houses short rounds falling among them inflicted losses and forced them to take cover in the station. Here they rounded up scattered Germans and began to dig in. After coming forward about 3 a.m. to survey the situation,

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt M. Wikiriwhi**, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; **Pukekohe**; born **Rotorua**, 4 Apr 1918; shepherd; twice wounded.

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Lieutenant-Colonel Young directed B Company again on the houses. One platoon crept close, but finding them strongly held lay low with the intention of rushing them as soon as A Company had seized the hummock and drawn level on the left.

But the time never came. All this while A Company had been held at bay at the foot of the hummock by an obstacle more formidable than had appeared from the air photographs – a swollen creek twenty feet wide and covered by wire and mines. Watchful and accurate machine-gunners ensconced on the hummock made every movement perilous. There was nothing to do but keep up a running fire on the Germans while exploring for a route round the flank. None could be found.

By 6 a.m. the moon and the breaking day were beginning to expose both companies more dangerously than ever. To an inquiry for directions, **General Kippenberger** replied with instructions to the Maoris to stay forward. The houses and the hummock, which between them covered the approach to the Gari, would have to be left for the time being, but the GOC reckoned that the chance, however slight, that the Maoris might hold their gains was worth the risk of casualties. These he hoped to minimise by the use of smoke.

Certainly the success of the Maoris had as a prerequisite the success of the engineers. But it was a frustrating night along the embankment and critical delays defeated the engineers' plan to open the road to the

station before daylight, though only by the narrowest of margins. Sapper tasks were divided between 8 and 6 Field Companies. The former was to bridge the two branches of the Rapido and to repair the demolition between them, and the latter was to work farther forward, from Demolition 8.

The programme lagged from the outset. The 30-foot bridge over the Rapido backwater was almost built by 8.35 p.m., but the platoon working on it retired when the first artillery concentration fell on the station and on resuming work it was hindered by the passage of the Maoris on their way to the start line, and then by the launching of the attack. In the upshot, instead of being open by 9 p.m., the bridge was not open until 11.15. The engineers were then two hours and a quarter behind the clock and the loss of time was never made up.

Meanwhile, in the rear a tide of waiting sappers began to dam up in a procession of unalterable sequence – first the minesweepers, then the bulldozers, and finally the bridge-builders' laden trucks. However, in view of the delay in the first bridging operation, parties went forward on foot, sweeping for mines and breaking down the sides of demolitions as far forward as Numbers 8 and 9. With the first bridge open, four bulldozers went to work on Demolition 6 between the two arms of the Rapido, but it was 1 a.m. before the first truck could pass and nearly another hour before the bridging material reached the main stream of the Rapido (Demolition 7). Here for two hours and a half **8 Field Company** worked under intermittent showers of small-arms and mortar fire, some of it from Germans who sniped from a boat farther up the river; but at 5 a.m. – over five hours late – the bridge was up and the Rapido was no longer impassable to traffic.

Unfortunately it was futile to send tanks and other supporting weapons across because work beyond the river was not far enough advanced to allow them to be usefully employed. Bulldozers, bypassing Demolition 7, had filled the next three breaches in the embankment, and Second-Lieutenant Higginson <sup>1</sup> had crossed the wire to reconnoitre Demolition 11, which he reported could be repaired by a bulldozer.

German mortar fire, however, prevented the bulldozers from following up the reconnaissance. The way to the station was therefore still barred by Demolitions 11 and 12 and no vehicle could hope to find a detour across the quagmire beside the causeway. The unbridged gap was no more than 300 yards.

Since about three o'clock the moonlight had been a boon to German marksmen and enemy interference reached a climax at 5.45, when a sudden burst of mortar and nebelwerfer fire along the whole embankment killed three of **6 Field Company's** men, drove the rest to cover, and threw the work into disorder. At the order of the CRE the parties withdrew to await the effect of the smoke screen. But the mortaring continued so heavily that the smoke was judged to give inadequate cover and the engineers rejoined their companies. Except for a reconnaissance of Demolitions 11 and 12 by Second-Lieutenant Brown<sup>2</sup> of **8 Field Company**, the engineers' work was done for the day. The three killed were their only casualties in the action.

*(ii)*

Now came the Maoris' time of trial. The sun rose on 18 February at 7.6 a.m. and set at 5.47 p.m. For nearly eleven hours between first and last light – if worse did not befall – the two companies, now weakened by about fifty casualties, could expect to face the fury of the enemy with nothing to defend them but the weapons they carried, the fire of the artillery, and an undependable pall of smoke. Tanks and heavy weapons could not now reach them until after dark. In the station they occupied a salient half-circled by enemy defenders in **Cassino**, on the lower slopes of **Monastery Hill** and on

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Lt T. J. Higginson, MM; born NZ 17 Oct 1917; sheep farmer; wounded 26 Oct 1942; died of wounds 30 Mar 1944.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Lt J. Brown, DCM, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born Stoke-on-Trent, England, 13 Jun 1905; engineer; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

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the hummock, and they were overshadowed by the scowling eminence of the monastery ruins. The Germans manned the western environs of the station in strength and, though visibility was less than 100 yards, they could be seen moving about in the haze. Encouraged by their success in defence and at the same time warned against a convergence of the two attacks, they were determined to prevent the blockade of **Cassino**. It was essential to recapture the station by nightfall, before the New Zealanders could throw in reserves. Therefore, as *14 Panzer Corps* reported to *Tenth Army*, 'we are trying to get it back with everything we have'. While the higher commanders, Kesselring and Vietinghoff, were prepared for bad news, the divisional commander, Baade, never wavered in his confidence. Given the replenishment of his gunners' precarious ammunition supply, he believed he could seal off the breach with the troops on the spot and then regain the station.

The German counter-pressure began punctually after sunrise. At 7.15, covered by the fire of an elusive tank, a force was seen forming up at the southern edge of **Cassino**. It was probably of three platoons hastily assembled from *211 Regiment's* headquarters, engineers and reserves from the town. If so, its career as a combined force was brief, for the second of two artillery concentrations called for by the Maoris fell among the Germans as they formed up, caused casualties, and broke up the counter-attack. But the respite was only relative. The single tank was not only ominous of others to come but its continual fire was troublesome enough without prognosticating more. A small aircraft was sent up to observe and eventually the tank was engaged by medium guns. Machine guns and mortars mainly on **Monastery Hill**, fired incessantly and parties of infantry tried to close in on the station. The Maoris had no retort but to ask the artillery for a thickening of the smoke screen, which a brisk southerly wind was dispersing too quickly, and for concentrations of high explosive.

The Maoris were indeed isolated. About 10.15 Lieutenant-Colonel Young again asked for a denser smoke screen to blot out observation

from **Montecassino** while a platoon from C Company reinforced his weary and depleted companies in the station and the wounded were evacuated. But the reinforcing platoon had hardly crossed the Rapido before it lost twelve men from the hail of shells, mortar bombs and bullets that greeted its intrusion into the battle and it was unable to reach the station. Moving in the opposite direction, the stretcher-bearers also suffered casualties.

It was now past midday. The Maoris were still cheerful and their high spirits spread upwards through their battalion commander to **Kippenberger** and **Freyberg**, both of whom treasured the prospect that soon after dark the last gaps in the embankment would be repaired and the waiting armour would be able to pour over the river and expand the bridgehead to safer dimensions.

A crisis of supply arose. **Kippenberger** had to decide whether to concentrate on shelling the German positions and leave the Maoris comparatively open to observation or to obscure them by maintaining the smoke screen at the risk of providing cover for a surprise German counter-attack. He chose the second course as likely to be cheaper in human cost; but the insatiable demand for smoke, as Brigadier Weir warned, rapidly consumed the limited supplies at gun positions and in nearby dumps. At the urgent request of the Divisional Commander, transmitted through Brigadier Crump, 1 Ammunition Company acted without delay. From Teano, where Garibaldi laid his conquests at the feet of Victor Emmanuel, a convoy returned loaded with the green shells to feed the guns, and the smoke screen never failed. More than 9000 rounds of smoke were fired during the day by **4 Field Regiment**, with occasional assistance from the other field regiments and the American artillery. The smoke canisters lit by **5 Brigade's** defence platoon, 24 Battalion and the Divisional Cavalry, and the smoke bombs fired by two 4.2-inch mortars of 21 Battalion added usefully to the protective fog, but a proposal for the dropping of smoke bombs from the air was rejected because it was too late to change the bomb loads on the aircraft.

The early afternoon brought renewed signs of German impatience. A



movement which the enemy seems to have rated as a counter-attack was seen shortly before two o'clock, when troops crossed the Gari by the railway line and approached close to the Maoris in the station. At the same time two tanks moved into **Cassino** from the south-west. Such activities as these prompted the Maoris to ask for continuous gunfire until dark on **Montecassino** and the southern end of **Cassino**. This fire, intensified at the request of the infantry, staved off another threat a little later when the tanks nosed tentatively towards the station.

By mid-afternoon *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* had committed its last local reserves in support of *211 Regiment*, which planned to recapture the station by a pincer movement of infantry attacking from the south-west and tanks from the north. This final effort began about 3.15, under cover of heavy fire from guns, mortars and machine guns. The infantry, coming along the railway line, were too close to be engaged by artillery. The two tanks, reported to be Shermans, were halted for a while on the road from **Cassino** by an artillery concentration, but they came on again irresistibly, forcing their way into the station yards.

The Maoris were helpless. They had neither tanks nor anti-tank guns with them. Caught by the point-blank fire of the tanks, B Company's foremost platoon was overrun. The survivors of the two companies escaped from the station and struggled wearily back under parting volleys which cost them more casualties. As their wireless touch with battalion headquarters had failed during the fighting, the first news of the rout was their arrival back across the Rapido at four o'clock. All were utterly exhausted; many were suffering concussion from the crackling inferno they had just left. Out of a force recently 200 strong, they numbered 66 – 26 from B Company under their sole remaining officer, Second-Lieutenant L. T. Crapp, and 40 from A Company, temporarily under command of Second-Lieutenant Christy.<sup>1</sup> A few stragglers remained to come in. At seven o'clock Major Henare led back the remnants of A Company's headquarters and last of all came Captain Wikiriwhi, who, being unable to walk, dragged himself across the river

the next day.

The final count of casualties among the two companies put them at approximately 130, of whom more than 20 were killed, about 80 wounded, and 24 missing or taken prisoner. The enemy paid quite as heavily. Nineteen Germans were reported killed and 102 wounded in the station on 18 February, and during their attack the Maoris sent back 18 German prisoners.

(iii)

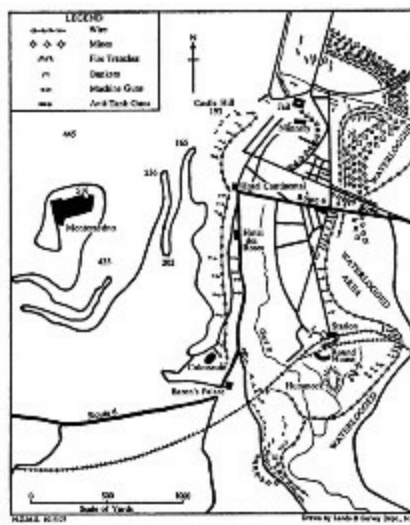
In retrospect it is tempting to dismiss the failure of operation AVENGER as inevitable by definition; for it may be defined as an attempt to penetrate the *glacis* of one of the strongest fortresses of Europe by two companies of infantry with a diversion against the well-nigh unassailable keep. Good strategic reasons existed, no doubt, for General Alexander's directive of 11 February that New Zealand Corps should begin operations without delay to clear the entrance to the Liri valley, and these reasons drew fresh emphasis from the enemy pressure at Anzio; but the fact remains that the strategy frittered away troops in a series of premature and small local operations which had little chance of tactical success. The Maoris, in short, were sent on a forlorn hope.

However persuasive at first flush, the argument needs examination. For one thing, the daunting prestige of the Cassino bastion is largely due to the failure of these very operations and others which followed. Cassino was less renowned then than it is now. Moreover, the margin of failure was by no means spectacular. The railway station was retaken only by releasing 'the last possible reserves' – the words are those of the panzer grenadier division – from other sectors

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<sup>1</sup> Maj B. G. Christy, MC, m.i.d.; Nuhaka, Hawke's Bay; born NZ 11 Jun 1920; labourer; four times wounded.

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GERMAN DEFENCES, CASSINO, FEBRUARY 1944

of the division's front. Had they been beaten off until after dark, the New Zealand bridgehead over the Rapido might have been transformed radically for the better before the next day. Speculation must draw rein here with the comment that this was a possibility that had occurred to the Germans as well as to the New Zealanders.

Finally, the operation appeared plausible to reputable military opinion. The tactical feasibility of the Rapido crossing was thoroughly reviewed by the corps, divisional and brigade commanders during the planning and much time was devoted at commanders' conferences to details of the exploitation. Opinions varied as to the likelihood of success. There were some reservations about the effect of an Indian failure on **Montecassino**, but on the whole it was estimated that a bridgehead over the river could probably be held if it were consolidated in sufficient width and depth.

These hopes may perhaps be waved aside as chimerical, but what is to be said of German fears? In his plea for reinforcements on the 15th, when the New Zealanders were looking forward to a change of tempo and to armour rolling track-free down the **Liri** valley, General Senger gave no indication that he believed his corps front to be impregnable, but quite the contrary. The fact that he could deduce his enemy's intentions with such insight shows them not to have been ridiculous; and to him they

certainly seemed only too realistic. On the 12th the capture of the monastery from the hills above **Cassino** appeared practicable to General Keyes, who spoke out of the American experience: 'We feel that it is a matter of fresh troops, more troops rather than the difficulties that are found up there'. But if the attack on the monastery was a reasonable operation, one would be inclined to argue that *a fortiori* the attack across the Rapido was reasonable. At least there is evidence that the Germans looked on the New Zealanders' threat to the station more seriously than the Indians' threat to the monastery.<sup>1</sup> Thus when reserves became available, it was to relieve *211 Regiment* in the station area that they were directed. And it is perhaps not an over-refinement to draw a similar inference from Kesselring's carefully graduated eulogy of the defenders: 'Convey my heartfelt gratitude to *211 Regiment*, and to *1 Parachute Regiment* not quite so strongly,' he told Vietinghoff. 'I am very pleased that the New Zealanders have had a smack in the nose. You must recommend the local commander for the Knight's Cross'. Kesselring's thankfulness after the event rings no less true than Senger's alarm before it. As it happened, New Zealand hopes were dupes and German fears were liars, but that is no reason for supposing that the New Zealanders carried hope to the point of foolhardiness any more than that the Germans allowed fear to sink into despair.

If this argument is sound, the reasons why the battle ended as it did may be examined. They may be summed up by saying that the attack had to be made against an enemy of high quality holding dominant positions from which he could use his great fire-power to prevent supporting weapons or reinforcements from reaching the forward troops. The narrowness of the front, no more than 400 yards, incurred a double disadvantage – few troops could be deployed, and the enemy could concentrate his fire on what he

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<sup>1</sup> ' **Montecassino** was, once defended, almost impregnable'.— General Senger, letter already cited.

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knew to be the only means of approach. The widening of the front by a simultaneous river crossing farther south, say in the area of Sant' Angelo, was fully considered. Even a local failure might have diverted enough fire from the railway to allow the engineers to clear a route to the station, and a success might have withheld enemy forces from the counter-attack against the Maoris. But the hazards were deemed too great. The swiftly-flowing Rapido was thickly mined on both sides and a crossing was bound to be opposed by troops who were known to be dug in on the far bank, and who could not be effectively neutralised by artillery or small-arms fire. The limited resources of trained engineers and bridging equipment would have to be divided between the two attacks, and it was questionable whether the men and material could be spared to build the tracks necessary to sustain the southern crossing. Similarly, if **Montecassino** remained in German hands, provision would have to be made for the screening of two bridgeheads by smoke. Finally, failure or partial failure would be tantamount to leaving a force isolated and unsupported west of the river, where it would pay heavy penalties, even if it escaped extinction.

The Maoris were pitted against excellent troops. The reputation of *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* as one of the most improved German formations in **Italy** was firmly upheld by *211 Regiment*. The Germans stood imperturbably against gunfire and infantry assault, vexing the Maoris with casualties and delays until they could deliver the final blow. Posts that resisted the attack or lay beyond its reach never let their fire slacken, and the Maoris were harassed relentlessly. By **General Freyberg's** admission, the converging counter-attack that carried the station was 'a well-executed operation'.

The skill of the defenders was matched by the strength of their defences. To the natural advantages of steep hills, the Rapido and the mud, artifice had had time to add deep shell-proof dugouts in the rock and armoured pillboxes, to set complex traps of wire and mines, to demolish all the approach routes and to contrive awkward inundations. To move forward along the causeway, with the impediments of wire,

mines and water under hostile eyes on Monastery Hill, as **28 Battalion** had to do, was like walking a tightrope in a shooting gallery. The Maoris' predicament was the worse because every inch of the ground was covered by crossfire. In spite of, or perhaps because of, distinctly meagre artillery support, the German infantry's fire plan was well co-ordinated and allowed them to deluge the bridgehead with fire from three sides and to deny supporting weapons access to the battle. This was a significant achievement, for it put the tired Maoris at the mercy of an armoured counter-stroke and proved, more than any other single fact, to be decisive.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## I: PLANS AND DISPOSITIONS

### *I: Plans and Dispositions*

(i)

**AT this point, as our narrative reaches 17 February, we must refocus our view on a larger scene. The plan of the Indian division was no isolated effort but part of a concerted corps offensive, and the action of the **New Zealand Corps** has a setting in the fortunes of the Fifth Army.**

**On the morning of the 16th, having massed the strength of six divisions, the German *Fourteenth Army* opened a counter-attack intended to eliminate the **Anzio** bridgehead and recognised for what it was by the Fifth Army. Diversionary pressure on the main front became urgently necessary. The Corps' offensive had been envisaged as far more than a mere demonstration or containing action, but now it could serve a double purpose. Its original aim had been defined in **General Freyberg's** corps operation order of 9 February. <sup>1</sup> Slightly modified, the Corps' intention was now to establish a bridgehead across the Rapido and Gari rivers to permit the deployment of armour in the **Liri** valley. The Indians were to capture the high ground west of **Cassino**, including **Monastery Hill**, and to cut Route 6 at the foot of the hill, while the New Zealanders were to make a bridgehead across the Rapido in the area of the railway station. This was the first phase of an operation which it was hoped would gradually develop momentum in four stages.**

**In the second phase the tanks of American Task Force B, with 21 New Zealand Battalion in support, would cross the second water-line, that of the Gari, and consolidate a bridgehead south of Route 6. In the third phase the task of New Zealand infantry and armour (the fresh troops of 4 and 5 Brigades) was to wheel south from the bridgehead to capture **Pignataro** and Sant' Angelo from the flank and mop up enemy resistance on the west bank of the Gari to enable new bridges and routes**

of advance to be opened up. Finally, the westward advance up the **Liri** valley would begin, New Zealand and American armour (Task Force A) with infantry support moving

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 193.

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by bounds to invest the system of defences which the Germans were known to have prepared across the valley on a line **Piedimonte San Germano– Aquino– Pontecorvo**.

Such were the plans when at last on the night of 17–18 February the two attacks could be synchronised. After days of baffling delays and disappointments, **Freyberg** was understandably concerned – ‘calm but preoccupied’ – about the night's event. His personal aide and a visiting journalist both noted his anxiety, and that night he slept in his clothes.

(ii)

To the best of his ability the enemy was braced to meet the coming attack. Since early in the month he had never ceased to worry about the safety of the **Cassino** sector. On the 5th, General Senger had decided to leave *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* in charge of this part of the front because of General Baade's unrivalled knowledge of the terrain rather than to relieve it at once by *1 Parachute Division*. Baade's command was reinforced by fresh battalions, which were thrown into the line as soon as they arrived with scant regard for the symmetries of text-book organisation, until finally it was a checkered coalition of units from seven different divisions – clear testimony, if any were still needed, of the Germans' ability to survive by makeshift.

Senger was so sure that his danger lay between **Cassino** and **Monte Cairo** that he strengthened his defences there by gravely weakening quieter parts of the front over the protests of his divisional commanders, and at the calculated risk of local Allied penetrations and new crises and of denuding the corps of all reserves. On the 15th he appreciated that



**'the enemy has now regrouped his forces for another major attack on the key-point of the Gustav line, the [Cassino](#) massif'. The Allies' position only a few hundred yards from final success there, the movement of their infantry reserves, the day's bombing and the increasing effectiveness of their observed shellfire all pointed to the imminence of a large-scale attack. The next day Senger was expecting this attack to coincide, for diversionary purposes, with the German effort at [Anzio](#). All steps had been taken to meet the contingency.**

**Though finding no indications of a frontal assault across the water barrier, Senger anticipated that one would follow success at [Cassino](#). He thought it probable that a fresh infantry division was waiting in the Casiline plain to exploit a break-through. A report to corps on the 17th that engineers were bridging the Rapido backwater can only have confirmed an assessment that was, on the whole, remarkably perceptive. The Germans, then, were mentally prepared.**

**Their material preparations appeared rather less adequate, but no one was more aware of the deficiencies than Senger himself. His most pressing anxiety was shortage of infantry. Against fourteen battalions much below the average strength of Allied battalions, he estimated that the enemy had twenty-six in the vital sector and he doubted whether his troops could hold out against another big attack. Casualties and the severe weather were causing a daily wastage of the equivalent of about a battalion, compared with two to two and a half a day in heavy fighting. Exhaustion resulting from the rigours of mountain warfare, insufficient supplies and equipment and lack of relief was increasing, especially at [Cassino](#), where the garrison had been exposed to fourteen days of continuous high-explosive and phosphorous shellfire. Lacking infantry, the corps could not hold positions in depth and had to fall back on linear defence. The artillery counted only 51 pieces against a not inaccurately estimated 292 on the Allied side. Gun ammunition was either short at the dumps or came up from them far too slowly for want of transport. On the 16th, for example, *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* artillery had ammunition for only two hours' full-scale fighting. Whether**

or not spuriously darkened to give point to his plea for help, the picture in Senger's summing up is certainly gloomy.

If the enemy decides to concentrate his artillery, air and infantry in co-operation on a few deciding points ( **Cassino**, **Montecassino**, **Albaneta Farm**, Colle Sant' Angelo), he will probably succeed in his aims. The Corps is no longer able to reinforce the line in the **Cassino** massif without outside help.

The holding of the Gustav line depends on the holding of the last line of heights, which is now in our hands. If this line is lost the situation will be most critical, as there is no other suitable prepared defensive position behind it. The holding of the Gustav line is ... a basic point of general policy in **Italy**. The line cannot be held unless infantry and artillery reserves are placed under Corps command as soon as possible.

Senger asked **Tenth Army** for a fresh division, reinforcements to bring existing formations up to full strength, more battalions of paratroops, heavy artillery, machine guns and, as soon as possible, the transfer of the **Luftwaffe's** weight from the **Anzio** front.

The troops in the line between **Cassino** station and Colle Belvedere when the **New Zealand Corps** attacked included fourteen infantry battalions, two companies of tanks, part of two nebelwerfer regiments, an assault gun battalion, four batteries of field, one of medium and one of heavy artillery, and a battalion and a company of anti-tank guns. Opposite the New Zealanders, **Cassino** station and town were manned by **211 Regiment** (Major F. W. Knuth), with two battalions of its own and a third from **361 Panzer Grenadier Regiment**, and the **Montecassino-Albaneta** sector of the Indian front was in the hands of **1 Parachute Regiment** (Colonel Schulz), comprising four battalions – two of its own, one of **3 Parachute Regiment** and the **Parachute Machine Gun Battalion**.

Reconsidered in terms of infantry actually engaged in launching or

repelling the assault, the odds against the Germans almost shrink away. At those points in the German lines which it had chosen to breach, the **New Zealand Corps** was far from being able to bring to bear a crushing weight of numbers. In the initial heave that was to topple the enemy defences, the Indians enjoyed a superiority in battalions of perhaps four to three, while the New Zealanders fought numerically on about equal terms, so narrow were the attackers' avenues of approach. The gate was strait and in the event the scroll would be charged with punishment.

*(iii)*

The Indian plan for the night of 17–18 February was for 7 Brigade, reinforced by one battalion from each of the other two brigades of the division, to make a double thrust, each by two battalions. At midnight **4/6 Rajputana Rifles**, with three companies of 1 Royal Sussex under command, having overrun or bypassed Point 593, was to advance about 1000 yards along a ridge to Point 444, 300 yards or so from the north-west angle of the monastery buildings. Two hours later **1/2 Gurkha Rifles** and **1/9 Gurkha Rifles** were to pass through **4/16 Punjab Regiment** in position on Points 450 and 445 to assault the monastery ruins directly from the north, and then to exploit down the hill to bring Route 6 under small-arms fire.

All that could be done was done to help the Indians on to their objectives against the vigorous defence that could be expected from the paratroops. The Anzio bridgehead had first claim on air support, but shortly before dusk the abbey was accurately bombed. Artillery preparation was hampered by the proximity of the forward infantry, but the Indians that night shared with the New Zealanders the support of nearly 500 guns, including not only those of the New Zealand Corps and **2 United States Corps** but also of such French and **10 Corps** guns as lay within range. On the Indians' front concentrated shellfire was directed at likely enemy forming-up places and the German artillery was subdued as far as possible by the heavier calibres.

When the preliminary bombardment began, flares in unusual

numbers lit the sky from the monastery south to Sant' Angelo. They hinted that the Germans were alert, and the night's fighting left no doubt. On the right **4/6 Rajputana Rifles** fought at close quarters from midnight until 3.30 to capture Point 593. By then they had lost many men and all but two of their officers, the enemy fire was still devastating, and it proved impossible to clear the forward slopes for the advance to Point 444. Indeed, Point 593 itself was still contested in a hand-to-hand struggle that abated only when daybreak compelled the Indians to consolidate on the ground they held. On the left the night's work was no less grim and hardly less disappointing. Even for **Gurkhas** the precipitous cleft separating their starting line on Point 445 from the monastery was made all but impassable by vicious, thorny scrub throat high which tore at their clothes and equipment, and by an enemy who fired or threw grenades from emplacements at unexpectedly short range. Two companies of **1/2 Gurkha Rifles**, suffering fearful casualties, had been thinned out to a pitiful remnant when the order came to withdraw. Reports that some **Gurkhas** had penetrated to the abbey were, and remain, unconfirmed.

Now that both thrusts were held up, it was decided to send the force on the left to take the objective originally assigned to the right-hand force. The reserve company of **1/2 Gurkha Rifles** and **1/9 Gurkha Rifles** were therefore directed to cross the valley from Point 450 to seize Point 444. This mission was carried out in the face of fierce resistance, and soon after dawn four companies of **Gurkhas** were established within 300 yards of the monastery – the nearest approach the Indians are known to have made. But Point 444 was overlooked from the west by the Germans higher up the ridge on the southern slopes of Point 593; and from the east by those in the rubble of the abbey. A dash for the abbey by daylight would have been suicidal and to avoid fruitless casualties the **Gurkhas** were ordered back to Point 450. Wounded men left in the scrub on Point 444 were carried back the next night.

By 1 p.m. on the 18th **7 Brigade** had shot its bolt. Its battalions were digging in on the reverse slopes of Points 593 and 450, still within

hailing distance of the enemy. Point 445 had been abandoned on the calculation that a position only 400 yards from the monastery walls and 200 feet below them was too costly to hold. Four hundred dead among the Indian battalions were reported by *90 Panzer Grenadier Division*, a figure that most probably represents their total casualties.<sup>1</sup> The Germans themselves admitted to the loss of seventy, including the commander of the fighting troops on **Montecassino**. Their success among the hills is to be attributed to the skill and tenacity of first-class infantry, well sited and well protected in terrain of overriding natural strength. Gunfire had little part in driving off the Indians. The German artillery, after concentrating on the hill sector, later switched to the Rapido, and had in any case exhausted its meagre stocks of ammunition by 4.20 a.m.

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<sup>1</sup> The casualties given by Stevens (pp. 288–9) total 439 all ranks killed and wounded.

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**Freyberg** was under pressure to renew the direct attack on the monastery. On the morning of the 18th, when told by Fifth Army of the critical turn of events at **Anzio**, he remarked that ‘we must do our damndest to make a diversion here’; and that afternoon he put to Dimoline the disadvantages of pausing to reconsider the plan of attack. Dimoline, however, strongly opposed another immediate bid for the monastery. He recurred to the problem inherent in the siting of the defences in the **Cassino** promontory. A series of mutually supporting posts extended in a horseshoe eastwards from Point 575 to the monastery, and to attack without first subduing the westernmost strongpoints was simply to enter a pocket where fire poured in from all sides. Three battalions were needed to secure the existing line and another brigade to make a wide sweep to roll up the defences from the flank. After careful consideration, **Freyberg** agreed that the Indians should pause to reorganise on a two-brigade front.

Meanwhile, on the drenched flats south-east of **Monastery Hill** the New Zealanders prepared for operation **AVENGER**. Their prime object was, as it were, to peg out the **Cassino** railway station and the ground immediately north and south of it so as to hold the enemy in **Cassino** town at bay while armour and supporting infantry were passed along the railway embankment across the Gari and out into the **Liri** valley. So long as the peg was inserted and held firmly in place, the operation could probably prosper, even though the Indians should fail to seize the monastery. In this indispensable preliminary the difficulties crowded thickly, but the crux of the problem is easily stated. Flooded approaches prevented the deployment of more than a small force of infantry, and the need to repair numerous breaches in the embankment entailed a race to bring up heavy weapons in time to sustain the infantry against the almost inevitable counter-attack. And if the peg were to be knocked out, the plan would collapse.

Once a river crossing farther south had been rejected,<sup>1</sup> the Division had to accept the disadvantage of assault on a narrow front. It was contrary to the New Zealand practice in **Africa**, where attacks were launched on the widest front that the guns could adequately support. In flat, open country fire from the flanks made it difficult to consolidate and reinforce narrow penetrations; and even in the closer and more rugged terrain of **Italy** the Division usually preferred to hit the enemy on a front of at least three battalions.

Still, in this case the Division had the warrant of historical analogy and of present example. The analogy that **Kippenberger** had in mind was the tactics that had won **Badajos** in the Peninsular War

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<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 240

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and similar fortresses. While the defence was distracted by feint attacks, a breach was made (or more than one breach) and reserves were poured into the hole. The example was that of existing divisions which

had attacked successfully with single battalions and of the Germans' predilection for the stab rather than the broad blow.



MAORI BATTALION ATTACK ON CASSINO RAILWAY STATION, 17-18 FEBRUARY 1944

And it was hoped to simulate a broad attack by bringing supporting weapons well forward, whence they might keep the garrison of **Cassino** passive and impressed.

The vital assault role, as we have seen, <sup>1</sup> was allotted to the Maoris

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 194.

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of **28 Battalion**. Lieutenant-Colonel Young divided his front between A and B Companies. Setting out from Demolition 1 and crossing the Rapido by the causeway, they would fan out on their taped start line, a lane running south from the railway just beyond the river, with B Company on the right and A Company on the left. The companies would advance at 9.30 p.m., each on a 200-yard front. B Company had two successive objectives – the first the railway station and a large crescent-shaped engine shed known as the Round House, and the second a group of houses 300 yards north-west of the station in the fork of two roads leading into **Cassino**. A Company was to capture the ground for about 300 yards south of the Round House, the most prominent feature of

which was the group of black hummocks. Distances were short: no more than 800 yards for the forward platoons of B Company and hardly 400 yards for A Company. Communication would be by wireless alone, and the wireless silence in force since 12 January was therefore to be broken 30 minutes before zero hour.

The objectives were to be shelled first by heavy and medium guns and then by all available field guns until the infantry advance had been in progress for ten minutes. Counter-battery and harassing fire for two hours after zero hour would complete the prearranged artillery programme. Special targets were also found for machine guns and mortars. Farther south, 24 Battalion and the Divisional Cavalry were to fire heavily across the river during the attack, and after dawn they were to make smoke to screen the newly-won ground. The whole fire plan was intended not only to soften opposition on the objectives and to quieten the enemy in **Cassino** itself but also, as noted, to disguise the vulnerable want of breadth in the front of attack.

In close attendance on the infantry, the engineers were to bridge the main stream and a tributary of the Rapido and to repair four other demolitions in the railway line with bulldozers. It was hoped that they would be up to the station with an open road behind them before dawn so that **19 Armoured Regiment** (Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin) might carry out its task. The regiment was to have a squadron in the station by daylight for defensive purposes, and then by way of exploitation was to send the rest of its tanks to clear the southern outskirts of **Cassino** without penetrating too deeply into the town and to be ready to climb the zigzag road up **Monastery Hill** to help the Indians. In this early exploitation 19 Regiment's tanks would be accompanied by part of 23 Battalion. All going well up to this point, the Division would then put into effect its further plans for exploitation over the Gari and into and up the valley, with **Rome** ahead.



# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: THE MAORIS' ACTION

### *II: The Maoris' Action*

(i)

At 8.45 p.m., hard on the opening of the artillery programme, the two Maori companies left their assembly point on the laborious tramp to the start line. Though it was only about 600 yards away, the Maoris arrived damp and dirty. They had had to plod through the mud of the causeway and flounder across waterlogged fields and through an exasperating system of drains. B Company was further delayed in getting past the engineers and their piles of equipment on the causeway, and it was after 9.30, zero hour, when the company left the start line. The night held a series of unpleasant surprises. Late in starting and slowed down by the heavy going, the Maoris now found that they were advancing across fields sown with mines, and before long mortars and machine guns on the lower slopes of **Montecassino** and the southern edge of the town began to range on them. Men began to fall to the fire and the mines, and the returning trickle of stretcher-borne casualties became a stream. B Company, which had suffered badly on the minefields, took an hour to reach the entrance to the station yards and A Company was moving scarcely any faster.

In the light of flares, B Company saw its way into the yards barred by new wire, with two posts dug in behind it. Closing in, 12 Platoon wavered for a moment before a particularly violent burst of machine-gun fire, but there was an immediate response to Captain Wikiriwhi's <sup>1</sup> call for a charge. As though in training, two men threw themselves on to the coiled wire, and those following leaped over and went to work with bayonet and grenades. The posts were cleared out, and with the dannert wire cut and the rest of the company coming through the gaps the ruins of the station building and the Round House were soon seized from their

**rugged defenders, men of *III Battalion 361 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*.**

**It was now about midnight, but further advance would be difficult so long as the machine guns firing from the outskirts of **Cassino** remained untroubled. To trouble them medium and field guns opened an uninterrupted fire, and under its protection B Company resumed its progress towards the houses of the second objective. Now that the first belt of wire and machine guns had been pierced, resistance eased perceptibly, but as the Maoris neared the houses short rounds falling among them inflicted losses and forced them to take cover in the station. Here they rounded up scattered Germans and began to dig in. After coming forward about 3 a.m. to survey the situation,**

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**<sup>1</sup> Capt M. Wikiriwhi, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; **Pukekohe**; born **Rotorua**, 4 Apr 1918; shepherd; twice wounded.**

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**Lieutenant-Colonel Young directed B Company again on the houses. One platoon crept close, but finding them strongly held lay low with the intention of rushing them as soon as A Company had seized the hummock and drawn level on the left.**

**But the time never came. All this while A Company had been held at bay at the foot of the hummock by an obstacle more formidable than had appeared from the air photographs – a swollen creek twenty feet wide and covered by wire and mines. Watchful and accurate machine-gunners ensconced on the hummock made every movement perilous. There was nothing to do but keep up a running fire on the Germans while exploring for a route round the flank. None could be found.**

**By 6 a.m. the moon and the breaking day were beginning to expose both companies more dangerously than ever. To an inquiry for directions, **General Kippenberger** replied with instructions to the Maoris to stay forward. The houses and the hummock, which between them covered the approach to the Gari, would have to be left for the time being, but the GOC reckoned that the chance, however slight, that the**

**Maoris might hold their gains was worth the risk of casualties. These he hoped to minimise by the use of smoke.**

**Certainly the success of the Maoris had as a prerequisite the success of the engineers. But it was a frustrating night along the embankment and critical delays defeated the engineers' plan to open the road to the station before daylight, though only by the narrowest of margins. Sapper tasks were divided between 8 and 6 Field Companies. The former was to bridge the two branches of the Rapido and to repair the demolition between them, and the latter was to work farther forward, from Demolition 8.**

**The programme lagged from the outset. The 30-foot bridge over the Rapido backwater was almost built by 8.35 p.m., but the platoon working on it retired when the first artillery concentration fell on the station and on resuming work it was hindered by the passage of the Maoris on their way to the start line, and then by the launching of the attack. In the upshot, instead of being open by 9 p.m., the bridge was not open until 11.15. The engineers were then two hours and a quarter behind the clock and the loss of time was never made up.**

**Meanwhile, in the rear a tide of waiting sappers began to dam up in a procession of unalterable sequence – first the minesweepers, then the bulldozers, and finally the bridge-builders' laden trucks. However, in view of the delay in the first bridging operation, parties went forward on foot, sweeping for mines and breaking down the sides of demolitions as far forward as Numbers 8 and 9. With the first bridge open, four bulldozers went to work on Demolition 6 between the two arms of the Rapido, but it was 1 a.m. before the first truck could pass and nearly another hour before the bridging material reached the main stream of the Rapido (Demolition 7). Here for two hours and a half **8 Field Company** worked under intermittent showers of small-arms and mortar fire, some of it from Germans who sniped from a boat farther up the river; but at 5 a.m. – over five hours late – the bridge was up and the Rapido was no longer impassable to traffic.**

Unfortunately it was futile to send tanks and other supporting weapons across because work beyond the river was not far enough advanced to allow them to be usefully employed. Bulldozers, bypassing Demolition 7, had filled the next three breaches in the embankment, and Second-Lieutenant Higginson <sup>1</sup> had crossed the wire to reconnoitre Demolition 11, which he reported could be repaired by a bulldozer. German mortar fire, however, prevented the bulldozers from following up the reconnaissance. The way to the station was therefore still barred by Demolitions 11 and 12 and no vehicle could hope to find a detour across the quagmire beside the causeway. The unbridged gap was no more than 300 yards.

Since about three o'clock the moonlight had been a boon to German marksmen and enemy interference reached a climax at 5.45, when a sudden burst of mortar and nebelwerfer fire along the whole embankment killed three of **6 Field Company's** men, drove the rest to cover, and threw the work into disorder. At the order of the CRE the parties withdrew to await the effect of the smoke screen. But the mortaring continued so heavily that the smoke was judged to give inadequate cover and the engineers rejoined their companies. Except for a reconnaissance of Demolitions 11 and 12 by Second-Lieutenant Brown <sup>2</sup> of **8 Field Company**, the engineers' work was done for the day. The three killed were their only casualties in the action.

*(ii)*

Now came the Maoris' time of trial. The sun rose on 18 February at 7.6 a.m. and set at 5.47 p.m. For nearly eleven hours between first and last light – if worse did not befall – the two companies, now weakened by about fifty casualties, could expect to face the fury of the enemy with nothing to defend them but the weapons they carried, the fire of the artillery, and an undependable pall of smoke. Tanks and heavy weapons could not now reach them until after dark. In the station they occupied a salient half-circled by enemy defenders in **Cassino**, on the lower slopes of **Monastery Hill** and on

<sup>1</sup> 2 Lt T. J. Higginson, MM; born NZ 17 Oct 1917; sheep farmer; wounded 26 Oct 1942; died of wounds 30 Mar 1944.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Lt J. Brown, DCM, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born Stoke-on-Trent, England, 13 Jun 1905; engineer; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

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the hummock, and they were overshadowed by the scowling eminence of the monastery ruins. The Germans manned the western environs of the station in strength and, though visibility was less than 100 yards, they could be seen moving about in the haze. Encouraged by their success in defence and at the same time warned against a convergence of the two attacks, they were determined to prevent the blockade of **Cassino**. It was essential to recapture the station by nightfall, before the New Zealanders could throw in reserves. Therefore, as *14 Panzer Corps* reported to *Tenth Army*, 'we are trying to get it back with everything we have'. While the higher commanders, Kesselring and Vietinghoff, were prepared for bad news, the divisional commander, Baade, never wavered in his confidence. Given the replenishment of his gunners' precarious ammunition supply, he believed he could seal off the breach with the troops on the spot and then regain the station.

The German counter-pressure began punctually after sunrise. At 7.15, covered by the fire of an elusive tank, a force was seen forming up at the southern edge of **Cassino**. It was probably of three platoons hastily assembled from *211 Regiment's* headquarters, engineers and reserves from the town. If so, its career as a combined force was brief, for the second of two artillery concentrations called for by the Maoris fell among the Germans as they formed up, caused casualties, and broke up the counter-attack. But the respite was only relative. The single tank was not only ominous of others to come but its continual fire was troublesome enough without prognosticating more. A small aircraft was sent up to observe and eventually the tank was engaged by medium guns. Machine guns and mortars mainly on **Monastery Hill**, fired incessantly and parties of infantry tried to close in on the station. The

**Maoris had no retort but to ask the artillery for a thickening of the smoke screen, which a brisk southerly wind was dispersing too quickly, and for concentrations of high explosive.**

**The Maoris were indeed isolated. About 10.15 Lieutenant-Colonel Young again asked for a denser smoke screen to blot out observation from **Montecassino** while a platoon from C Company reinforced his weary and depleted companies in the station and the wounded were evacuated. But the reinforcing platoon had hardly crossed the Rapido before it lost twelve men from the hail of shells, mortar bombs and bullets that greeted its intrusion into the battle and it was unable to reach the station. Moving in the opposite direction, the stretcher-bearers also suffered casualties.**

**It was now past midday. The Maoris were still cheerful and their high spirits spread upwards through their battalion commander to **Kippenberger** and **Freyberg**, both of whom treasured the prospect that soon after dark the last gaps in the embankment would be repaired and the waiting armour would be able to pour over the river and expand the bridgehead to safer dimensions.**

**A crisis of supply arose. **Kippenberger** had to decide whether to concentrate on shelling the German positions and leave the Maoris comparatively open to observation or to obscure them by maintaining the smoke screen at the risk of providing cover for a surprise German counter-attack. He chose the second course as likely to be cheaper in human cost; but the insatiable demand for smoke, as Brigadier Weir warned, rapidly consumed the limited supplies at gun positions and in nearby dumps. At the urgent request of the Divisional Commander, transmitted through Brigadier Crump, 1 Ammunition Company acted without delay. From Teano, where Garibaldi laid his conquests at the feet of Victor Emmanuel, a convoy returned loaded with the green shells to feed the guns, and the smoke screen never failed. More than 9000 rounds of smoke were fired during the day by **4 Field Regiment**, with occasional assistance from the other field regiments and the American artillery. The smoke canisters lit by **5 Brigade's** defence platoon, 24**

**Battalion and the Divisional Cavalry, and the smoke bombs fired by two 4·2-inch mortars of 21 Battalion added usefully to the protective fog, but a proposal for the dropping of smoke bombs from the air was rejected because it was too late to change the bomb loads on the aircraft.**

**The early afternoon brought renewed signs of German impatience. A movement which the enemy seems to have rated as a counter-attack was seen shortly before two o'clock, when troops crossed the Gari by the railway line and approached close to the Maoris in the station. At the same time two tanks moved into **Cassino** from the south-west. Such activities as these prompted the Maoris to ask for continuous gunfire until dark on **Montecassino** and the southern end of **Cassino**. This fire, intensified at the request of the infantry, staved off another threat a little later when the tanks nosed tentatively towards the station.**

**By mid-afternoon *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* had committed its last local reserves in support of *211 Regiment*, which planned to recapture the station by a pincer movement of infantry attacking from the south-west and tanks from the north. This final effort began about 3.15, under cover of heavy fire from guns, mortars and machine guns. The infantry, coming along the railway line, were too close to be engaged by artillery. The two tanks, reported to be Shermans, were halted for a while on the road from **Cassino** by an artillery concentration, but they came on again irresistibly, forcing their way into the station yards.**

**The Maoris were helpless. They had neither tanks nor anti-tank guns with them. Caught by the point-blank fire of the tanks, B Company's foremost platoon was overrun. The survivors of the two companies escaped from the station and struggled wearily back under parting volleys which cost them more casualties. As their wireless touch with battalion headquarters had failed during the fighting, the first news of the rout was their arrival back across the Rapido at four o'clock. All were utterly exhausted; many were suffering concussion from the crackling inferno they had just left. Out of a force recently 200 strong,**

they numbered 66 – 26 from B Company under their sole remaining officer, Second-Lieutenant L. T. Crapp, and 40 from A Company, temporarily under command of Second-Lieutenant Christy.<sup>1</sup> A few stragglers remained to come in. At seven o'clock Major Henare led back the remnants of A Company's headquarters and last of all came Captain Wikiriwhi, who, being unable to walk, dragged himself across the river the next day.

The final count of casualties among the two companies put them at approximately 130, of whom more than 20 were killed, about 80 wounded, and 24 missing or taken prisoner. The enemy paid quite as heavily. Nineteen Germans were reported killed and 102 wounded in the station on 18 February, and during their attack the Maoris sent back 18 German prisoners.

(iii)

In retrospect it is tempting to dismiss the failure of operation AVENGER as inevitable by definition; for it may be defined as an attempt to penetrate the *glacis* of one of the strongest fortresses of Europe by two companies of infantry with a diversion against the well-nigh unassailable keep. Good strategic reasons existed, no doubt, for General Alexander's directive of 11 February that New Zealand Corps should begin operations without delay to clear the entrance to the Liri valley, and these reasons drew fresh emphasis from the enemy pressure at Anzio; but the fact remains that the strategy frittered away troops in a series of premature and small local operations which had little chance of tactical success. The Maoris, in short, were sent on a forlorn hope.

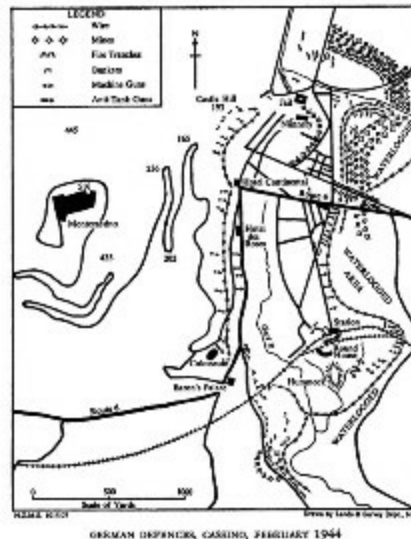
However persuasive at first flush, the argument needs examination. For one thing, the daunting prestige of the Cassino bastion is largely due to the failure of these very operations and others which followed. Cassino was less renowned then than it is now. Moreover, the margin of failure was by no means spectacular. The railway station was retaken only by releasing 'the last possible reserves' – the words are those of the panzer grenadier division – from other sectors



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<sup>1</sup> **Maj B. G. Christy, MC, m.i.d.; Nuhaka, Hawke's Bay; born NZ 11 Jun 1920; labourer; four times wounded.**

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GERMAN DEFENCES, CASSINO, FEBRUARY 1944

of the division's front. Had they been beaten off until after dark, the New Zealand bridgehead over the Rapido might have been transformed radically for the better before the next day. Speculation must draw rein here with the comment that this was a possibility that had occurred to the Germans as well as to the New Zealanders.

Finally, the operation appeared plausible to reputable military opinion. The tactical feasibility of the Rapido crossing was thoroughly reviewed by the corps, divisional and brigade commanders during the planning and much time was devoted at commanders' conferences to details of the exploitation. Opinions varied as to the likelihood of success. There were some reservations about the effect of an Indian failure on **Montecassino**, but on the whole it was estimated that a bridgehead over the river could probably be held if it were consolidated in sufficient width and depth.

These hopes may perhaps be waved aside as chimerical, but what is to be said of German fears? In his plea for reinforcements on the 15th,

when the New Zealanders were looking forward to a change of tempo and to armour rolling track-free down the **Liri** valley, General Senger gave no indication that he believed his corps front to be impregnable, but quite the contrary. The fact that he could deduce his enemy's intentions with such insight shows them not to have been ridiculous; and to him they certainly seemed only too realistic. On the 12th the capture of the monastery from the hills above **Cassino** appeared practicable to General Keyes, who spoke out of the American experience: 'We feel that it is a matter of fresh troops, more troops rather than the difficulties that are found up there'. But if the attack on the monastery was a reasonable operation, one would be inclined to argue that *a fortiori* the attack across the Rapido was reasonable. At least there is evidence that the Germans looked on the New Zealanders' threat to the station more seriously than the Indians' threat to the monastery.<sup>1</sup> Thus when reserves became available, it was to relieve *211 Regiment* in the station area that they were directed. And it is perhaps not an over-refinement to draw a similar inference from Kesselring's carefully graduated eulogy of the defenders: 'Convey my heartfelt gratitude to *211 Regiment*, and to *1 Parachute Regiment* not quite so strongly,' he told Vietinghoff. 'I am very pleased that the New Zealanders have had a smack in the nose. You must recommend the local commander for the Knight's Cross'. Kesselring's thankfulness after the event rings no less true than Senger's alarm before it. As it happened, New Zealand hopes were dupes and German fears were liars, but that is no reason for supposing that the New Zealanders carried hope to the point of foolhardiness any more than that the Germans allowed fear to sink into despair.

If this argument is sound, the reasons why the battle ended as it did may be examined. They may be summed up by saying that the attack had to be made against an enemy of high quality holding dominant positions from which he could use his great fire-power to prevent supporting weapons or reinforcements from reaching the forward troops. The narrowness of the front, no more than 400 yards, incurred a double disadvantage – few troops could be deployed, and the enemy could concentrate his fire on what he

<sup>1</sup> ‘**Montecassino** was, once defended, almost impregnable’.—  
General Senger, letter already cited.

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knew to be the only means of approach. The widening of the front by a simultaneous river crossing farther south, say in the area of Sant' Angelo, was fully considered. Even a local failure might have diverted enough fire from the railway to allow the engineers to clear a route to the station, and a success might have withheld enemy forces from the counter-attack against the Maoris. But the hazards were deemed too great. The swiftly-flowing Rapido was thickly mined on both sides and a crossing was bound to be opposed by troops who were known to be dug in on the far bank, and who could not be effectively neutralised by artillery or small-arms fire. The limited resources of trained engineers and bridging equipment would have to be divided between the two attacks, and it was questionable whether the men and material could be spared to build the tracks necessary to sustain the southern crossing. Similarly, if **Montecassino** remained in German hands, provision would have to be made for the screening of two bridgeheads by smoke. Finally, failure or partial failure would be tantamount to leaving a force isolated and unsupported west of the river, where it would pay heavy penalties, even if it escaped extinction.

The Maoris were pitted against excellent troops. The reputation of *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* as one of the most improved German formations in **Italy** was firmly upheld by *211 Regiment*. The Germans stood imperturbably against gunfire and infantry assault, vexing the Maoris with casualties and delays until they could deliver the final blow. Posts that resisted the attack or lay beyond its reach never let their fire slacken, and the Maoris were harassed relentlessly. By **General Freyberg's** admission, the converging counter-attack that carried the station was ‘a well-executed operation’.

The skill of the defenders was matched by the strength of their defences. To the natural advantages of steep hills, the Rapido and the

**mud, artifice had had time to add deep shell-proof dugouts in the rock and armoured pillboxes, to set complex traps of wire and mines, to demolish all the approach routes and to contrive awkward inundations. To move forward along the causeway, with the impediments of wire, mines and water under hostile eyes on Monastery Hill, as **28 Battalion** had to do, was like walking a tightrope in a shooting gallery. The Maoris' predicament was the worse because every inch of the ground was covered by crossfire. In spite of, or perhaps because of, distinctly meagre artillery support, the German infantry's fire plan was well co-ordinated and allowed them to deluge the bridgehead with fire from three sides and to deny supporting weapons access to the battle. This was a significant achievement, for it put the tired Maoris at the mercy of an armoured counter-stroke and proved, more than any other single fact, to be decisive.**

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

# CHAPTER 11 – AN UNWELCOME INTERLUDE

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## I: THE ORIGIN OF DICKENS

### *I: The Origin of* DICKENS

(i)

**THE failure of operation AVENGER had consequences both tactical and strategic. Tactically, it forced a reappraisal of what was fast hardening into the ‘Cassino problem’. Scarcely more than an hour after receiving the news that the Maoris had been driven back across the river, General Freyberg was revolving fresh ideas for reducing the fortress; and in assuming that he was not to resign the initiative he anticipated the thinking of the higher Allied command. For the defeat at Cassino, coming almost simultaneously with the enemy defeat at Anzio, displayed again the power of the defensive, called up endless vistas of deadlock and prompted a review of strategy in the Mediterranean theatre and of the way in which it could best serve OVERLORD. The relevant conclusion was that the battle of Cassino must be resumed.**

(ii)

**On 19 February General Wilson and General Alexander visited the corps front to see the craggy realities for themselves. Three days later Alexander formally addressed to Wilson an exhaustive appreciation of the situation in Italy and his plan for the future conduct of the campaign. His object was ‘to force the enemy to commit the maximum number of divisions to operations in Italy at the time OVERLORD is launched’, and he argued that it would most probably be fulfilled by a major offensive up the Liri valley, designed to link up with the bridgehead. But in order to attain the necessary local superiority of three to one in infantry, he would need another seven and a half divisions by mid-April to reinforce his existing twenty-one divisions, and he also proposed to regroup. Leaving a single corps on the Adriatic side, he**

would transfer the **Eighth Army** west of the mountain divide to take over the front as far south as the **Liri**. Fifth Army would command the sector from the **Liri** to the sea and the **Anzio** bridgehead, and would mount offensives from both as the **Eighth Army** struck up the **Liri** valley.

The same day, on the strength of these recommendations, Wilson placed his views before the British Chiefs of Staff. He had been under instructions to plan operation **ANVIL** (an invasion of Southern **France** in support of **OVERLORD**) with an assault landing of at least two divisions. He now contended that it would be unsafe to withdraw forces from the Italian battle until the main front had been joined up with the **Anzio** bridgehead, and urged concentration on the campaign in **Italy**, with an amphibious feint, as the best way of keeping the enemy employed. He advised the cancellation of **ANVIL** and sought a fresh directive in more general terms 'to conduct operations with the object of containing the maximum number of German troops in Southern Europe'. Wilson's plea was opportune. It arrived in time to clinch a compromise to which dissensions over **ANVIL** had already given rise. <sup>1</sup>

On the 26th, therefore, he received a new directive giving the campaign in **Italy** priority over all other **Mediterranean** operations until further orders. Alexander's plan of a great spring offensive had in effect been ratified.

Wilson himself was hopeful that the incessant bombing of the enemy's communications would compel him within two months to withdraw at least as far as the **Pisa- Rimini** line, thus limiting the Allied armies to the task of exerting continuous pressure to prevent a cheap disengagement. Alexander, with an eye to the weather, was more reserved about the effect of the air policy. But whether or not the spring offensive became necessary, both commanders were agreed that there must be no appreciable pause in bringing to battle the enemy's eighteen divisions south of the **Rome- Pescara** line and, if possible, in drawing in the four and a half in reserve in the north. The longer the delay the stronger the enemy's prepared defences. Nor could there be much doubt where he must be engaged. On the Adriatic the war was at a standstill.



At Anzio **6 Corps**, having survived, must now pause to recruit its strength. Only the Rapido-Garigliano front remained. Here the choice narrowed itself down to the **Cassino** area. For one thing, Alexander wanted the **Cassino** spur cleared and a bridgehead established across the Rapido as an exit into the **Liri** valley when the spring offensive began, if exploitation was not possible earlier. For another, he had in **Freyberg** a commander on the spot with a plan that his corps was ready to execute.

That four weeks elapsed between its conception and its execution is an example, with a modern twist, of the perennial influence of mud on history – mud, this time, that prevented tanks from leaving the roads and aircraft from leaving the runways. For these four

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<sup>1</sup> Churchill, V, pp. 451–5.

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weeks, until 15 March, the weather tried the New Zealanders and the Indians with a series of frustrating delays that blunted the edge of the enterprise, wasted them with casualties and sickness, drained the nervous energy of infantry at close grips with the enemy and sent all about their duties in fretfulness and wet-footed discomfort.

*(iii)*

When the third attack on **Cassino** failed on 18 February **Freyberg** lost no time in planning another. There was indeed no time to lose, since this was the day of crisis at **Anzio**. **Freyberg's** choice lay among courses almost equally unattractive. Whatever his plan, the stark fact was that he was being asked to launch troops he thought too few on a major offensive at the most difficult time of the year, when river valleys were under water. A mere repetition of the double thrust on the monastery and the railway station would have invited defeat. Two other solutions to the **Cassino** problem lay open to the corps, the one more, the other less, of a turning movement than operation **AVENGER**. The more oblique approach was by a river crossing in the mouth of the **Liri** valley

which might eventually outflank **Cassino** by uniting with an Indian advance descending into the valley from the hills north-west of the monastery. Though this choice would in fact have caused most alarm to the Germans, it did not appear any more attractive now than when, for various reasons, it had been rejected several days before. <sup>1</sup> It had failed at high cost in January. In **Freyberg's** mind the roading required to sustain such an attack was alone prohibitive. **Kippenberger** thought that the operation was feasible and in principle to be preferred to a direct assault on a fortress, but that if it failed it would fail disastrously with the loss of a large part of the Division, whereas failure at **Cassino** or in the hills above it would be only a repulse, not a disaster.

The town itself, then, would have to be cleared. An attack from the east would be terribly exposed to observation – the bridging would have to be done in the open – it would be hampered by flooding and demolitions, and it would encounter the most carefully prepared defences. The least disadvantageous approach was from the north. Here the Americans had won a footing in the outskirts, from which it would be necessary to advance south through the length of the town before the valley could be opened. The stout buildings of stone and concrete might offer some cover against fire and observation from the hillside on the attackers' right flank, but they would also be desperately defended by the German parachutists and, in default of a ruinous house-to-house progress, they would have to be devastated by weight of high explosive and rushed before the

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 240.

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defenders could recover. The best way to deliver the high explosive quickly and in sufficient bulk was from the air. On the late afternoon of the 18th **Freyberg** advocated a careful plan to demolish the town by heavy bombers while the forward troops were withdrawn, and to follow the bombing instantly by infantry assault. Here was the pivot upon which all action turned for the next month.

Nor was action dilatory. After conferring with his own senior commanders **Freyberg** laid his plan before Clark at Army Headquarters on the night of the 18th. The next day he saw Wilson and Alexander, and that evening he returned from Army to Corps Headquarters with the news that 'the attack on the village is on'. Having received general approval for his plan, **Freyberg** hastened to fill in the outlines. Early on the morning of the 20th he gave oral directions to his divisional commanders to start the necessary troop movements and other preparations. On the 21st the air and artillery policies were concerted at a conference attended by representatives of 12 Air Support Command, and late that night the corps' operation instruction was issued. Briefly, <sup>1</sup> operation DICKENS <sup>2</sup> was an attempt to capture **Cassino** and establish a bridgehead over the Rapido by infantry and tanks attacking through the town after it had been pulverised by bombing aircraft used as siege artillery. Immediately after the air bombardment, the New Zealanders, under cover of maximum artillery support, would advance south from the northern outskirts of the town, with the Indians moving along the eastern face of **Montecassino** to guard their right flank. On capturing **Cassino**, they would exploit south to open up Route 6 and east and south-east to clear the enemy between the Gari and Rapido rivers so that crossings might be constructed. The date for the attack would be determined by the air command, but it would not be earlier than 24 February.

The decision to leave the air command to fix the date underlined **Freyberg's** reiterated statement that without a full measure of air support the attack would have to be abandoned. The distinctive and indispensable feature of the plan – the use of the heavy bombers of the Strategic Air Force in a tactical role – was not without

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<sup>1</sup> The plan is described in greater detail below, pp. 263– 6 and Appendix V.

<sup>2</sup> Miss Hornabrook, a member of the staff of the War History Branch, has pointed out that this code-name is a reminder that

Charles Dickens was once a visitor to the abbey, which moved him to reflections not yet outdated. In *Pictures from Italy* he writes: ‘... the monastery of **Monte Cassino** ... is perched on the steep and lofty hill above the little town of [ **Piedimonte**] San Germano, and is lost on a misty morning in the clouds.

‘So much the better, for the deep sounding of its bell, which, as we go winding up, on mules, towards the convent, is heard mysteriously in the still air, while nothing is seen but the grey mist, moving solemnly and slowly, like a funeral procession ....

‘How was this extraordinary structure ever built in such a situation ....? How, being despoiled by plunder, fire, and earthquake, has it risen from its ruins, and been again made what we now see it, with its church so sumptuous and magnificent?’

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precedent, but the circumstances in which the weapon was to be tried were unparalleled in the West. Alexander and **Freyberg** could recall that in **Africa** concentrated aerial bombardment at Djebel Tebaga had been followed by an immediate break-through on the ground. Clark had noticed earlier in the month how close air support encouraged the troops at **Anzio**.<sup>1</sup> But neither of these attacks was by heavy bombers. Twice previously, it is true, heavy bombers had given direct support to the army in **Italy**. Once was at Battipaglia, a crossroads village near **Salerno**, in September 1943, when great damage was done. But the experiment only led the *Royal Air Force Review* to cite the incident as illustrating the hypothesis that all-out bombing attacks on fortified towns were better suited to aid defence than assault. The other occasion, of course, was the bombardment of the abbey – an impressive demonstration of the power of heavy bombs to wreck massive buildings. But neither Battipaglia nor **Montecassino** was a true precedent, partly because of the smaller weight of the attack but mainly because ground troops had not followed up immediately. More apposite was the example of Stalingrad, where the Germans, having reduced the city to ruins by bombing, sent in wave after wave of tanks, only to have them halted by stubborn Russian defenders protected by rubble, the shells of buildings and bomb craters. A British War Office survey of this action concluded that it had

proved to the hilt that ‘the ruins of a city constitute one of the most formidable types of fortifications in modern war’. Though this survey was published a year before the **Cassino** battle, it may not have been received or studied at **Freyberg**'s headquarters in time to be of use. <sup>2</sup> Its main finding was, however, a commonplace of the First World War.

The ‘lessons of history’, military or otherwise, are in any event perilously easy to misapply. The idea of bombing a way through **Cassino** was not a product of diligent search for a precedent, but an urgent response to a practical challenge. It originated with **Freyberg**, who thought it would open up a new situation, and, with some exceptions, gained a fresh imprimatur at each stage upward in the chain of command. Clark had earlier pondered the use of strategic bombers in close battlefield support at **Anzio**, since their attacks on the rear areas for the last six months had not prevented the enemy from moving reserves at will. <sup>3</sup> Alexander, thinking like **Freyberg**, welcomed the plan as a means of varying the tactics of assault. Major-General John K. Cannon, commanding the Tactical Air Force, thought that, given good weather and all the air resources

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<sup>1</sup> *Calculated Risk*, p. 305.

<sup>2</sup> An undated copy in the **2 New Zealand Division** file ‘Lessons from Operations’ is filed after the lessons from **Cassino**.

<sup>3</sup> *Calculated Risk* p. 305.

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in **Italy**, it would be possible to ‘whip out **Cassino** like an old tooth’. <sup>1</sup> **Air Force** officers at the conference on the 21st warned **Freyberg** that casualties might occur from misdirected bombs: this he accepted as the price of close support. To the further warning that bomb craters and rubble would produce perfect tank traps, he replied that if our troops could not use tanks neither could the enemy; he also thought that bulldozers could speedily clear a path. The final air force verdict at this

conference was that a full infantry effort, if generously supported by gunfire and made immediately after the air attack, would have 'a fair chance' of taking the town. On the whole, the ground commanders and the air commanders accustomed to working with them viewed the plan experimentally as a possible way of breaking out of the impasse without risking great loss of life. They were in a mood to try anything, provided it cost materials rather than men.

General Eaker was less hopeful, though the plan was being urged from above as well as from below. For it so happened that about this time in Washington General H. H. Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Forces, was independently coming to the conclusion that the potentialities of mass air assault were not being sufficiently explored in **Italy**. He quoted **Cassino** as a place where the concentration of air power might achieve results if the ground forces could take full advantage of it. This suggestion, after being approved by the American and British Chiefs of Staff in turn, was passed on by the Combined Chiefs of Staff to Wilson, who was able to inform them that just such a plan was awaiting execution. Eaker cautioned Arnold not to expect a great victory because he doubted whether the air strike would wholly neutralise the enemy and whether the ground troops could adequately exploit their opportunity.

<sup>2</sup>The sybil has been less prophetic than this.

(iv)

The New Zealand Corps had several days to regroup for the attack, tentatively fixed for 24 February. The Indians needed a firm base whence to advance along the hillside above the town and check interference with the New Zealanders' right. The preliminaries required of them, therefore, were the capture of Point 445, about 300 yards north of the monastery, and then the construction of positions along a line from Point 450 through Point 445 and eastwards down the spurs to the edge of **Cassino**, so that they could cover with fire the western outskirts of the town and the eastern slopes of **Montecassino**. The New Zealanders were to replace the Americans in the northern part of the town and

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Alexander, p. 2916.

<sup>2</sup> *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, Vol. III, p. 366.

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Route 6 to the east, and so to deploy as to be ready to attack and to engage the enemy with all possible weapons from the east bank of the Rapido. The Americans still in the line north of the Indians were to be relieved by the **French Expeditionary Corps**. Second United States Corps would then form a new Fifth Army reserve.

In the hills above **Cassino** the forward Indian infantry kept cheerless vigil in slit trenches and rock sangars that were difficult to improve because of the close proximity of the Germans. For these troops the harassing fire of machine guns and mortars made movement impossible by day and chancy at any time. Though the porters provided by 11 Indian Brigade were reinforced eventually by three Indian pioneer companies, porters as well as mules remained too few to bring up more than meagre supplies of rations over the steep, rugged tracks. Rain and snow further tested the Indians' fortitude.

The intention to reorganise on a two-brigade front was carried out on the night of 19–20 February, when 5 Indian Brigade took over the eastern half of the sector from **7 Indian Brigade**; but the relief had no sooner been completed than the new corps plan of attack foreshadowed its undoing. Operation **DICKENS** called for a fresh Indian brigade to be held in readiness to join the New Zealanders in the assault on **Cassino**. Seventh Indian Brigade was sorely depleted and **11 Brigade** was dispersed on various assignments. Fifth Indian Brigade was thus the only one available for the assault and would have to be drawn back into reserve. Meanwhile one of its battalions, 1/9 Gurkha Regiment, essayed the preliminary task of seizing Point 445. Its silent attack on the night of 22–23 February ran into unexpectedly strong resistance and recoiled

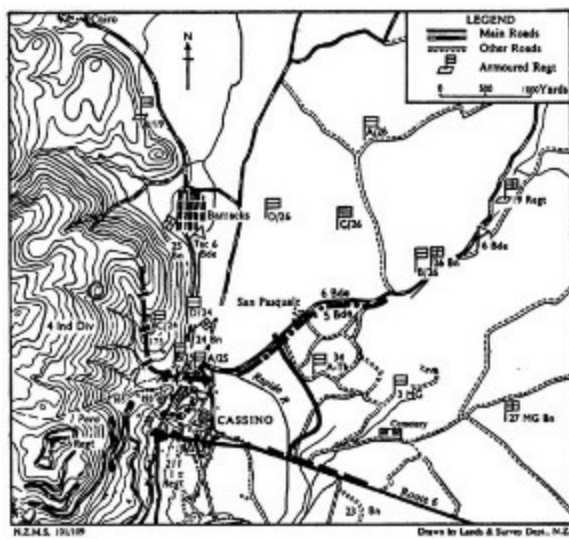
before punishing mortar fire. Thereafter, Point 445 was resigned to the enemy and **7 Brigade** had to adjust the line of the new positions which it now dug and fortified east of Point 450 down the hillside to cover **Cassino** and **Montecassino**.

The relief of **5 Indian Brigade** was scheduled for the night of 23–24 February in the expectation that the attack would begin on the morning of the 24th, but heavy snow delayed for twenty-four hours the relief of **1/9 Gurkhas** by **2/7 Gurkhas**. This last battalion and **2 Cameron Highlanders** (in reserve), both of which belonged to **11 Indian Brigade**, now came under command of **7 Indian Brigade**, which resumed responsibility for the division's sector. With **5 Indian Brigade** back in reserve round **Cairo** village, the Indians had positioned themselves for the corps' offensive.

For the New Zealand Division the interval between the actual end of **AVENGER** and the presumed beginning of **DICKENS** was likewise a period of preparatory reliefs and explorations. The main reshuffle was north of **Route 6**, where **6 Brigade** (Brigadier Parkinson) and elements of **5 Brigade** (Colonel Hartnell) replaced the Americans. On the right, **6 Brigade** took over from **133 United States Regiment** a wedge-shaped sector, with the blade of the wedge forming the 'front', only about 500 yards broad, among the buildings in the northern part of **Cassino**. The western or right-hand boundary lay against the hillside, resting on the positions being dug by the Indians. The left-hand boundary ran away north-east from **Cassino** along **Pasquale** road, so called because it passed through the hamlet of **San Pasquale**. **Caruso** road led almost due north out of the town along the foot of the hill, cutting through a military barracks before trending westward to **Cairo** village. The course of the **Rapido** lay beside **Caruso** road almost as far as the barracks, and east of it again ran **Parallel** road, which merited its name but for a slight divergence to the north-east.

The battalions of **6 Brigade**, moving in under wireless silence on the night of 21–22 February, proved an awkward freighting for the





NEW ZEALAND DISPOSITIONS NORTH OF ROUTE 6, 24 FEBRUARY 1944

NEW ZEALAND DISPOSITIONS NORTH OF ROUTE 6, 24 FEBRUARY 1944

vehicles of 6 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company, which had to carry them over narrow, muddy, devious lanes to debussing points only hundreds of yards from the front line. Though one loaded truck lurched over a bank and capsized, no harm was done to the occupants, and shortly after midnight the infantrymen had all been delivered safely. For the drivers the journey back over the return stretch of the traffic circuit was a waking nightmare. Gun flashes dazzled the men at the wheel, momentarily dispelling the murk of the night and then leaving it more impenetrable than ever. Overhead, branches clutched at canopies and ripped them. Reserve drivers had to walk ahead to pick out the route. Rough tracks and ditched tanks and trucks reduced progress to a crawl, two miles in the hour.

Meanwhile the infantry of 24 and 25 Battalions (Lieutenant-Colonel Pike and Major Norman) had been met at the barracks by American guides and conducted to their positions. The changeover was completed not long after 3 a.m. The brigade's forward area, now occupied by four companies, was five or six hundred yards square, with its extremities at Point 175, a knob protruding from the lower slopes of the hillside, and at the eastern edge of the town 100 yards south of the junction of Parallel and Pasquale roads. From the right the positions were held by C and D Companies of 24 Battalion (Major J. W. Reynolds and Captain Ramsay)<sup>1</sup> and B and A Companies of 25 Battalion (Captain Hoy<sup>2</sup> and Major

Sanders). <sup>3</sup>

The area was sprinkled with buildings which closed up to each other in 25 Battalion's sector to form part of the town. Here the enemy manned posts a street's width away. Almost as near in appearance and by no means remote in fact was Point 193, known as **Castle Hill** from the towered and castellated stone building on its summit. Not so much a hill as the tip of a spur running down from **Montecassino**, Point 193 showed to the north a cliff face dropping sheer into a deep ravine and hollowed into caves and dugouts where machine guns had been emplaced. The obtrusive tactical strength of this feature ensured sooner or later a deadly game to be king of the castle, but for the time being the Germans held possession and with it command over all 6 Brigade's forward positions. Walls and roofs saved the New Zealanders from the worst consequences of this surveillance. More active self-defence was the siting of 3-inch and 42-inch mortars and of six-pounder anti-tank guns and the manning of mined road blocks north of the town. The reserve companies in bivouac areas on the slopes of Colle Maiola, being at a safe distance from the German infantry, were continually harassed by the German guns.

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj A. H. Ramsay; Auckland; born China, 27 Mar 1907; clerk; wounded 19 Mar 1944.**

<sup>2</sup> **Maj K. F. Hoy, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born NZ 5 Sep 1911; civil servant.**

<sup>3</sup> **Maj N. K. Sanders, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Blenheim, 10 Jun 1913; Harbour Board employee.**

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The brigade's reserve battalion, the 26th (Lieutenant-Colonel Richards) <sup>1</sup> scattered its companies in the angle of country enclosed by Parallel and Pasquale roads. The tanks of **19 Armoured Regiment** (Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin), now under command of 6 Brigade, moved

into the same area ready to give weight to the attack through the town.

On 6 Brigade's left, between **San Pasquale** and Route 6, the Americans of 91 Reconnaissance Battalion had already handed over on the night of 20–21 February to New Zealand anti-tank and machine-gunners holding the line as infantry. This improvised force under **27 Battalion** (Lieutenant-Colonel MacDuff) <sup>2</sup> formed the right wing of **5 Brigade**. With **34 Anti-Tank Battery** on the right and **3 Machine Gun Company** on the left, it held a ring of outposts set three or four hundred yards back from the Rapido, which in this area on the eastern approaches to **Cassino** had overflowed its banks and created that most irksome of all military obstacles – a marsh. One of several patrols sent to scout along the river on the night of 22–23 February had to plod through a foot of mud for the last 50 yards and failed to find a crossing.

Another round of reliefs occurred farther south on the front held by **5 Brigade** since 6 February. After the Maoris' withdrawal on the 18th command of the Rapido River sector facing the railway station passed to **24 Battalion**, which redispersed its platoons and brought up anti-tank guns to prevent the enemy from pressing home his success by attack along the railway line. A battalion front of more than 5000 yards was almost equally divided between A Company, from Route 6 to the Ascensione stream, and B Company, from the stream south to the boundary with the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**. The arrangement was short-lived, for on the night of 19–20 February **24 Battalion** was relieved to rejoin its brigade and **23 Battalion** (Lieutenant-Colonel J. R. J. Connolly) took over its commitments. The incoming battalion deployed C Company (Lieutenant Coe) <sup>3</sup> on the right and D Company (Major Slee) <sup>4</sup> on the left of the railway sector and sent B Company (Captain F. C. Irving) to replace **24 Battalion's** C Company, which was guarding the Division's left flank under command of the **Divisional Cavalry**.

Though the Germans did not follow up across the river, they showed every intention of holding what they had. A **24 Battalion**

<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col E. E. Richards**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Nelson**; born Kumara, 6 Dec 1915; civil servant; CO **26 Bn** Dec 1943–Apr 1944.

<sup>2</sup> **Col J. L. MacDuff**, MC, m.i.d.; **Lautoka, Fiji**; born NZ 11 Dec 1905; barrister and solicitor; CO **27 (MG) Bn** Sep 1943–Feb 1944; CO **25 Bn** Feb–Jun 1944; CO Adv Base **2 NZEF** Jun–Jul 1944; Chief Magistrate, **Fiji**.

<sup>3</sup> **Lt F. R. Coe**, MC; born England, 21 Aug 1912; goldminer.

<sup>4</sup> **Maj C. A. Slee**, m.i.d.; born Westport; clerk; died of wounds 5 Apr 1944.

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patrol found them wiring their defences round the station and the hummock. Heavy shellfire fell forward of Trocchio. Efforts were made to block an attacker's routes of approach. Concentrated gunfire on the Bailey bridge erected by the New Zealand sappers over the Rapido scored a direct hit and left the bridge sagging, with holes in both ends of the decking and part of the western end blown away. Nevertheless, it was still judged worth protecting, and 23 Battalion continued to cover it nightly by a standing patrol. About the same time, according to German reports, the commander of a 210-millimetre troop personally ranged his guns on the road bridge and destroyed it, though not so thoroughly as to deter an enemy engineer patrol which fought its way to the bridge and set off another demolition. Repairs to the railway embankment were engaged by the always troublesome German mortar crews.

The enterprise of enemy patrols kept the New Zealand infantry on edge and tempted sentries to fire at shadows. One night, in what the Germans justifiably called 'a bold and skilful assault', a patrol from *I Battalion 129 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* ambushed Second-Lieutenant **Esson**<sup>1</sup> and a sergeant of C Company 23 Battalion on their rounds and spirited them away with such silent efficiency that the mystery of their disappearance was only unveiled after the war.

By the 22nd, when 6 Brigade had relieved the Americans north of **Cassino**, the New Zealand Division was extended to the limit to hold a front that stretched continuously for six miles or more from the slopes of Colle Maiola to the Ladrone stream, the boundary with **10 Corps**. It had had to improvise infantrymen to man this length of line. And it was preparing to participate in a major offensive. **General Freyberg** therefore decided to commit part of his third division on the southern flank of the corps to reduce the New Zealanders' responsibilities.

This new force was 78 British Division (Major-General C. F. Keightley), the last of five to be transferred in recent weeks from the Eighth to the Fifth Army. It crossed **Italy** in the first half of February and came under New Zealand command on the 17th. Since it was to be used if possible only for the pursuit, **Freyberg** assigned it no active part in the coming assault, but it was to be ready with bridging material to cross the Rapido in support of the New Zealanders' exploitation if required to do so. Meanwhile, on the night of 23–24 February, its **11 Brigade** relieved the Divisional Cavalry and B Company 23 Battalion on the Rapido, sending 1 East Surreys forward and keeping the other two battalions (5 Northamptonshire Regiment and 2 **Lancashire Fusiliers**) in reserve.

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt W. K. Esson; Christchurch; born Wellington, 19 May 1910; salesman; p.w. 20 Feb 1944.**

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: WAITING FOR THE WEATHER

### *II: Waiting For The Weather*

(i)

The infantry had now been deployed, the armour was disposed for the assault and break-through, and the artillery had built up the ammunition for its huge programme of supporting fire. All awaited the propitious hour. Such was an hour in which the ground was dry enough at bomber bases as far apart as **Foggia** and **Sardinia** to allow the aircraft to take off, the weather 'flyable' between these bases and the target, and the **Liri** valley firm enough to enable tanks to exploit. The last condition necessitated three fine days before the operation, with the promise of two more to follow; and the whole combination was asking a good deal of a February in Latium. But **Freyberg** was prepared, indeed determined, to wait for it. The 21st and 22nd were fine, bracing days, but the 23rd broke dull and overcast, and soon after midday heavy thunder showers and snow in the high country ruined any prospect that the operation might begin next day. A postponement of twenty-four hours was ordered.

So began the long period of hope deferred, until the code-word **DICKENS** became a symbol for heartsick frustration and the operation it signified a mirage receding with the horizon. Day after day for three weeks the delay dragged on, while the corps stood ready to advance at twenty-four hours' notice. *Taihoa* (by and by) became the watch-word of Maori and pakeha alike. From the 23rd for the rest of the month and well on into the first week of March the wet, cloudy weather persisted, with only an occasional 'drying wind' to give hope a pretext. The 7th was the first of several fine days, but by this time the ground was so saturated that the armoured commanders were unanimous that four days' drying would be needed for the tanks to deploy and another two for them to exploit. Hints from Army Group that a time limit might have to be set caused

**Freyberg** to meditate a more restricted operation which might at least relieve enemy pressure at **Anzio**. By the 9th tracks had hardened so well that the prospects for the next day seemed favourable. Then it became known that bad weather had waterlogged the **Foggia** airfields and that the bombers were earthbound. There was a similar disappointment on the 13th, but the 14th was to be the last day of waiting.

One of the most grievous consequences of the delay was the mood of pessimism that settled down on the corps. None could fail to see that time lost to the attacker was time gained to the defender. The Germans used it to perfect their defences, regroup their forces, and move their best troops into the **Cassino** sector. But once the plans were laid and the troops in position, the New Zealand Corps had no preparations upon which to busy itself. A sense of staleness, physical and psychological, was inevitable. On 2 March, when spirits were beginning to droop, **Freyberg** gathered his divisional, brigade and battalion commanders in conference, explained his plans to them and sent them away with a glow of optimism. At Corps Headquarters so long as General Gruenther's voice came up on the telephone cheerfulness kept breaking in. His sallies about the weather, his studious helpfulness, his encouraging prediction of how the SPADGER terrier would fasten upon the German mastiff and make it squeal – all helped to hold gloom at bay. But enforced idleness gave time to dwell on the difficulties of the operation, and these were nowhere disputed from the highest ranks downward. On 23 February Alexander wrote to **Freyberg**: 'I put great store by this operation of yours. It must succeed....' Yet he was obviously doubtful whether exploitation would be possible. On the 28th Clark said that the New Zealand attack had a 50–50 chance. **Freyberg** himself commented privately on 2 March that he had never been faced in the whole of his military career with so difficult an operation. **Kippenberger** compiled a list of 'Blessings' and 'Troubles' and used it to confound the doubters. <sup>1</sup> At least one brigadier was worrying a good deal. <sup>2</sup> Among the troops the effervescence that bubbled up on the announcement of the bombing programme subsided into flatness.

The promised spectacle was indeed for so long a topic of conversation throughout the corps, in rear areas as well as forward, that security was imperilled. It seemed impossible that warning of the operation should not have reached civilian or even enemy ears. On 2 March an order by **2 New Zealand Division** forbade mention of **DICKENS** over the telephone. Before this, the wireless silence enjoined by the Division's operation order had had to be relaxed because of the frequent cutting of telephone lines by shellfire.

The New Zealand Division was losing about ten battle casualties a day. Sickness was on the increase. The number of men evacuated sick in February was 813, against 693 in January, and during the first half of March the rate continued to rise. Four drafts of reinforcements in late February and early March brought about 950 fresh men to fill the gaps in all arms of the service.

One gap was bound to be seriously felt. On the afternoon of 2 March, an hour after leaving **General Freyberg's** conference, **General Kippenberger** was severely wounded in a minefield on Trocchio, to the great distress of all New Zealanders in the field. He was succeeded in command of the Division by Brigadier Parkinson, and Lieutenant-Colonel I. L. Bonifant took over 6 Brigade.

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<sup>1</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 359.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

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Command of the Divisional Cavalry devolved upon Major **Stace**. <sup>1</sup>

The long pause was unvaried by any notable clash of arms. For the most part it was a trial of patience rather than a provocation to *élan*. Except among the hills north of the monastery and in **Cassino** town, where close contact was always likely to generate combustion, the front was quiet. Forward areas, gun positions and roads were the main targets in the exchanges of artillery and mortar fire that accounted for most of



the daily activity. The deeds of the corps will be most conveniently described sector by sector.

(ii)

On the storm-swept **Montecassino** spur **7 Indian Brigade** suffered most of the torments of a winter war waged against a determined enemy. Joined rather than separated by a no-man's-land that narrowed down to 100 or 50 yards at places, both sides were quick on the trigger and harried one another with mortar bombs and rifle grenades. The Indians steadily lost about sixty men every day from fire on forward posts, reserve areas and supply tracks, and from sickness due to exposure to snow and rain. The German parachutists made at least three raids on the Indian positions around Point 593 and Point 450, but each was beaten off with the help of gunfire. On the evening of 9 March German rifle grenades ignited a dump of petrol in 2 Camerons' area, and before it could be put out the fire caused an explosion of ammunition which wounded nine men. The enemy's ingenuity showed itself more than once. He replied to our own propaganda offensive with shell-borne pamphlets written in Urdu, and on the night of 13-14 March he embarrassed the troops on Point 593 by holding it in the beams of a searchlight believed to be sited at **Aquino**. The Indian brigade was able to afford some relief to its battalions during this period. **1/2 Gurkha Rifles** continued to hold the right flank, but **1 Royal Sussex** and **2/7 Gurkha Rifles** were gradually replaced in the centre and on the left by **2 Camerons** and **4/16 Punjab Regiment** respectively.

To counter the chronic shortage of mules, the Indian engineers put in continuous work during February to make the supply track fit for the use of vehicles. Cavendish road, as it was called, was a steep, winding track that rose 800 feet in a mile and a half. On the top of the rise on the north side of Colle Maiola, at a point known as Madras Circus, it came out on to comparatively level ground, and fairly easy foot tracks led from there to the forward areas. Towards the end of February **General Freyberg** and his chief engineer, Brigadier Hanson, revived an earlier

<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col G. H. Stace**, Order of Phoenix Silver Cross (Gk); **Omaka, Blenheim**; born Blenheim, 26 Apr 1912; farmer; CO Div Cav 4–27 Mar 1944.

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axis for tanks. If Cavendish road could be made wide enough as far as Madras Circus, tanks might achieve such surprise in this seemingly tank-proof country as to capture **Albaneta Farm** and exploit to **Montecassino**. The better-equipped New Zealand engineers were directed to assist the Indians. Daily and all day from 3 to 10 March, save when rain interfered, a party of New Zealand sappers, with their compressors and bulldozers, followed up the Indians working with pick-axes and crowbars, and drilled, blasted and cleared away the rock through which the upper part of the road had to be cut. Exposed stretches of the road were camouflaged with nets in the hope of keeping the tactical secret. By the night of 10–11 March the road was fit for tanks as far as Madras Circus. From that night a force under command of 7 Indian Brigade Reconnaissance Squadron, including 17 Stuart tanks of an American battalion and the 15 Shermans of C Squadron 20 New Zealand Armoured Regiment, stood by to exploit to Albaneta and **Montecassino** as soon as operation

DICKENS

had made some headway. The French Expeditionary Corps, through whose area most of the road ran, readily agreed to allow the Indians to site anti-tank guns along it and to use it for operations if necessary.

Because it was to launch the assault, 6 New Zealand Brigade perhaps chafed more than other formations at the wasteful delay. The infantry companies in the northern parts of **Cassino** had to listen nightly to the strengthening of defences they hoped soon to attack and were powerless to do more than call down artillery fire – at best a temporary remedy. The period of waiting cost 24 Battalion 28 casualties and 25 Battalion 47 from German fire and many more from sickness. Men in the forward

posts led a troglodyte existence under the shelter of stucco, stone and tiles, emerging only at night to stretch their limbs and take a breath of fresh air. Their cramped, insanitary places of refuge and the dank weather threatened an epidemic which only good doctoring and the disinfecting of buildings held in check.

Holding the line inside a town was a new and nerve-racking experience to most of the New Zealanders. The 'line' was as artificial as an electoral boundary, merely the forward edge of the buildings held by the Americans when their last attack lost its impetus, buildings whose size and shape acquired sudden military interest and whose dead architects, having designed thus and not otherwise, ruled men's lives from the grave. Not only from neighbouring buildings but also from the rocky face of **Castle Hill** German snipers, machine-gunners, and mortar crews watched every movement and fired at every target and every suspicion of one.

Communications with the forward posts of 24 and 25 Battalions were patchy. Wireless had often to be used while the signallers carried out the uncomfortable and dangerous work of repairing telephone lines. Those bringing up supplies also had to expose themselves at short range. As motor vehicles could not approach within half a mile of the town, large carrying parties from the companies in reserve had to run the gauntlet of fire every night. In fact, the enemy had the northern environs of **Cassino** so well registered with his weapons that at this time more casualties were suffered on the roads and in the reserve company areas than in the FDLs.

To ease the strain of life in **Cassino** 25 Battalion made frequent reliefs. B and A Companies formed one pair which alternated in the forward positions every three days with D and C Companies (Major S. M. Hewitt and Major Robertshaw). <sup>1</sup> As safety demanded the utmost stealth, companies moved one platoon at a time at long intervals. Being farther from the enemy, 24 Battalion had to relieve only one platoon during this period. Most of the patrolling fell to 24 Battalion, which sent out parties north and south to keep in touch with the Indians and 25 Battalion

respectively. The battalion also posted standing patrols and laid mines against infiltration up gullies to the south and west. Twenty-fifth Battalion had more brushes with the enemy. One was occasioned by the unsuccessful attempt of a German fighting patrol to blow down the wall of a house by an explosive charge, and another by the enemy's too obvious efforts to fortify a nearby school and nunnery. But on the whole both sides in **Cassino** town agreed that there was little scope for mobile patrolling and contented themselves by firing their weapons from permanent positions.

Meanwhile, 26 Battalion performed the task – in every respect more pedestrian – of securing 6 Brigade's rear areas with standing and roving patrols and of protecting and assisting the engineers of **7 Field Company**. The system of roads was reconnoitred and reported on, swept for mines, drained and repaired. A bridge was replaced, a ford was improved, a track giving emergency access to **Cassino** was put in order, the demolition of walls by the Rapido was prepared so as to provide an alternative crossing for tanks; elsewhere a gap in the riverbank was sealed to prevent flooding and a river gauge was installed from which the height of the water was reported each morning. Between 6 and 15 March the Rapido dropped nearly a foot. And thanks to the work of the engineers, 6 Brigade's rear area was in much better shape for the supply and support of the coming attack.

There was little to report from **5 Brigade**, which on 28 February passed from the command of Brigadier Hartnell, who left on

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj P. W. Robertshaw**, OBE, MC, ED; **Porangahau**; born **Palmerston North**, 30 Dec 1911; shepherd.

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furlough, to that of Colonel **Burrows**. <sup>1</sup> Most of the action on this broad front centred on the road and railway crossings of the Rapido east of **Cassino**. Though the marshy ground in front of **27 Battalion**'s sector made patrolling pointless, the blown bridge on Route 6 was inspected, and for the last week of the period 3 Machine Gun Company maintained

a listening post each night at the flooded 30-foot demolition. The Germans were also interested in this spot and several skirmishes occurred. The Bailey bridge at the railway crossing was in the sector held by 23 Battalion until the night of 28–29 February and by the Divisional Cavalry until 5 March, and was finally shared by the two units, with A and B Companies of 23 Battalion on the right and A and B Squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry on the left. On the night of 3 March a Divisional Cavalry patrol led by Second-Lieutenant **Kingscote**<sup>2</sup> shot a German sentry at the bridge, and the next night a listening post was set up in the vicinity. The brisk enemy reaction to probing movements suggests that for nights on end both Germans and New Zealanders had men listening intently on their proper sides of the damaged bridge. Farther south also the Rapido was kept under observation, and the movement of men and vehicles on the far bank was regularly engaged by 23 Battalion and the Divisional Cavalry.

The main engineer work on this front was to bring the railway line into use for vehicles. Reconnaissance by **6 Field Company** revealed about twenty demolitions in the five or six thousand yards short of the point where repairs had begun for operation **AVENGER**. Many of the demolitions were only blown culverts, but there were so many interruptions on account of the weather, the softness of the ground and enemy shelling, that by 14 March the line had been cleared only for about 2000 yards to the point where it passed round the south-western shoulder of Trocchio.

The southern sector of the corps front was held by 1 East Surreys of **78 Division** in country so featureless that its northern boundary was defined as the 17 northing line on the map. The battalion patrolled aggressively but with little luck. Reconnaissance patrols to inspect the river and its approaches, fighting patrols to seek out and strike, engineer patrols to dump bridging material, standing patrols to listen and learn or to protect, ambush patrols to lie in wait, patrols to lift mines, all were sent out but the results were disappointing. Most returned with negative reports and some lost men on

<sup>1</sup> **Brig J. T. Burrows**, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Gk); **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO 20 Bn Dec 1941–Jun 1942; 20 Bn and Armd Regt Aug 1942–Jul 1943; comd **4 Bde** 27–29 Jun 1942, 5 Jul–15 Aug 1942; **5 Bde** Mar 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; **6 Bde** Jul–Aug 1944; Commandant, Southern Military District, Nov 1951–Oct 1953; Commander K Force, Nov 1953–Nov 1954; Commandant SMD, Jan 1955–.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj R. G. F. Kingscote**, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 27 Aug 1922; student; company commander, Indian Army, **Burma**.

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mines or to enemy lurkers. Engineers of **78 Division** spent the period of waiting in improving and draining roads in the forward areas against the day when the division should be called to exploit.

*(iii)*

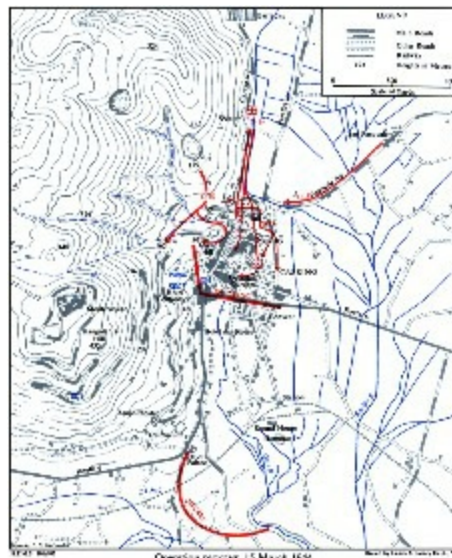
The gunners manning the truly formidable armament of the corps were hardly aware of the existence of a lull. For them nearly every day brought a full day's work, made the more onerous by the greasy mud that turned gunpits into porridge-pots and access tracks into slippery lanes of penance, negotiable only on foot or by jeep. The gunlayer had to leave his sights and lend a hand to pass the ammunition. All possible gun areas on the corps front were so congested that a troop counted itself lucky to find an alternative position as much as two or three hundred yards away. The many troops and batteries unable to move found that with the constant vehicle and foot traffic of two weeks or more their positions became glutinous lakes, and further that enemy shellfire gained in accuracy.

The guns of the **New Zealand Corps** had a glutton's appetite. On two days in late February the New Zealand ammunition point, which catered for all the British field and medium artillery in the corps, temporarily ran out of 25-pounder shells, but for some time thereafter 19,000 rounds

came in every day to 1 Ammunition Company. The heavy expenditure of the previous weeks was abruptly curtailed on 8 March, when the field artillery was rationed to twenty-five rounds a gun daily and the medium artillery to twenty. These amounts were ample for holding the line, especially as by this time the corps had clearly demonstrated its massive ascendancy in gun power. A measure of its superiority may be guessed from two recollections of Brigadier Weir:

Once while observing from the castle on Mount Trocchio I saw a single German emerge from a hole near the Gari just south of the Baron's Castle and walk quietly south. He was engaged by a holocaust of fire, including that of 8-inch howitzers. As he heard the shells arriving he ran and escaped into an underground shelter. Another time I plainly saw a three-gun self-propelled battery emerge from Santa Lucia and go into action north of Route 6. I gave no orders but merely watched. In a matter of a few minutes hundreds of shells arrived and smothered the three guns, leaving them blackened skeletons. <sup>1</sup>

Assembled for a great attack, the artillery at Brigadier Weir's disposal was more than abundant for routine tasks. To the 216 field guns of the three divisions had to be added more than 150 field and medium guns of **2 AGRA**, as well as the medium and heavy artillery of **2 United States Corps**. By a rough division of labour, the



**Operation DICKENS, 15 March 1944**

harassing fire by night and the observed fire by day were shared among the various groups of guns, most of the defensive fire tasks were allotted to the divisional artillery, and most of the counter-battery work to the corps and army artillery.

The harassing policy was not to scatter the fire widely at any one time but to concentrate guns on vulnerable spots such as crossroads and bridges and localities where the enemy had been seen and to change the targets nightly. Good shooting by the heavier calibres gave the Germans a supply problem in the **Liri** valley. A direct hit on the bridge at **Pontecorvo** closed the last crossing of the **Liri** in the forward area, and later the destruction by shellfire of a bridge on the **Pontecorvo–Pignataro** road seriously hindered supply traffic north of the **Liri**. The Germans wryly admired the accuracy of their opponents' harassing fire but were professionally disdainful, if thankful, for their failure to block Route 6 and their repetitious and fruitless tactic of firing heavy concentrations south of the Abbey-Albaneta ridge. Another form of harassing, of which the Germans leave no official record, was the weekly delivery by gunfire of the *Frontpost*, a sheet containing all the news most likely to depress its readers. <sup>1</sup>

Most of the defensive and observed fire fell on **Cassino**, Montecassino and the country near the Rapido. Defensive fire proper was rarely required because the enemy did not threaten attack. Hardly a night passed, however, without a demand from the infantry for defensive fire tasks upon working parties or the movement of vehicles across the Rapido. This abuse of an emergency call disclosed the defensive fire areas and taught the Germans to avoid them. In **Cassino** itself gunfire was often requested for work that infantry weapons could have done more effectively.

But the gunners rarely grudged a round, as the lavish, almost



improvident, scale of their observed shooting showed. Visibility was frequently poor, and it was because it blinded our own observers as well as the enemy's that the experiment of screening our gun areas by laying smoke between Trocchio and Porchio was not repeated. But on clear days no enemy movement escaped the eyes of artillery observers. One result was that movement was rarely to be seen and the front looked as uninhabited as an artillery practice range. To this generalisation there was one exception – ambulances showing a red cross frequently moved up and down Route 6. After repeated reports that these vehicles were discharging and loading troops with arms, Headquarters New Zealand Artillery gave permission to fire on them.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Bourke-White ( *Purple-Heart Valley*, p. 168), writing of a slightly earlier period, relates how the German infantrymen, who had come to rely on *Frontpost* for the news, would grumble when an issue was delivered late.

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Overborne as they were by the volume of gunfire from the New Zealand Corps, the German gunners were an oppressed class. On 20 February **2 AGRA** came under command of the corps to direct the counter-battery programme. The result was immediate. On the 22nd, General Baade, commanding *90 Panzer Grenadier Division*, wrote:

Worthy of note is the fact that the enemy uses two or three rounds of smoke for ranging. Usually the first round is right on the target. Our gun positions are pin-pointed and usually shelled as soon as they open fire. The shelling of our rear areas by heavy guns is extremely accurate and well organised, leading to the conclusion that the enemy has just detailed a special group of guns to engage long-range targets. The enemy has obviously changed his artillery policy.

The high priority given to counter-battery work, which during the rationing period claimed half the ammunition, paid valuable dividends. Of the four main groups of German artillery – round Vallemaio, **Pignataro**, **Piedimonte San Germano** and **Atina** – the second, being in the

**Liri valley, felt the full weight of our metal. Their fire varied with the visibility and was aimed principally at crossroads and bridges on Route 6 and at infantry areas and gun positions. Two types of German gun were very elusive. One was the self-propelled gun, which would use the roads, firing each time from a fresh position. The other was the 170-millimetre gun, whose range of 29,000 yards put it beyond the reach of any artillery in the corps.**

**Most of the German artillery, however, was unprotected by either mobility or distance. It was located by the use of air photographs, ground observation posts, the flash-spotting and sound-ranging of **36 Survey Battery** and – most galling of all to the Germans – the air OPs which continually hovered over their gun areas. The commander of **414 Artillery Regiment** complained bitterly of the lack of air protection in the **Liri valley**:**

**... enemy artillery OP aircraft circle round our positions for hours at a time .... Some of them fly very low and slowly .... They often appear unexpectedly, and it is quite a common thing for some of our guns to be caught firing by one of them, and their exact position thus betrayed. The enemy is able to range undisturbed on our guns, bridges and other worthwhile targets. Losses, casualties and supply difficulties arising from destroyed bridges are daily occurrences, while our artillery is hampered not only by the ammunition shortage but also by the lack of cover from view against these aircraft.**

**This commander found chapter and verse for these complaints in the sufferings experienced by one of his heavy batteries under the plague of air OPs. With two of them overhead, it had taken one troop several hours to range on a Rapido bridge; another troop, observed responding to a call for defensive fire, shortly afterwards lost six men killed and wounded from shellfire and a fighter-bomber raid; finally, an air OP ranged British heavy guns on battery headquarters, which was forced to move by persistent shellfire.**

**A document captured about 23 February admitted the accuracy of**

the counter-battery fire and ordered German gunners to stand by their guns even while they were being shelled. Later, *14 Panzer Corps* had a plan to use captured Italian guns for routine work and to move the German guns to positions as yet undiscovered by the enemy, where they would be reserved for emergencies.

The nests of nebelwerfers at **Pignataro** and **Piedimonte San Germano** were also severely handled whenever they opened fire. Often they came into action only once or twice a day, usually in the evening when the westering sun hindered observation from the Allied side, and sometimes they were silent for days at a time. On 20 March, during the battle for **Cassino**, General Senger reported that 'the whole area round the nebelwerfer positions has been ploughed up and reploughed until it looks like the front lines of the Great War'.

The German mortars were harder to tame, in spite of elaborate programmes for that special purpose. Fifty-five mortars had been claimed as located by 14 March, more than half in the **Liri** valley and the rest in **Cassino** and the hills north of Route 6. These last were almost immune from shellfire, though it was during this time that the New Zealand artillery began to practise shooting in the upper register, that is, at angles over 45 degrees, which gave projectiles a high, lobbing trajectory and enabled them to search steep reverse slopes.

(iv)

The Germans were too battle-wise to construe their victory of 18 February as an augury of peace and quiet, but they welcomed the respite as an opportunity to strengthen their defences and to unravel the tangle of their command. On 4 March Field-Marshal Kesselring noted the transfer of the New Zealand, Indian, and 78 Divisions from the Eighth to the Fifth Army and made the obvious deduction that the attempt to force the **Liri** valley would be renewed. Long before this, on 21 February, *90 Panzer Grenadier Division*, as the formation on the spot, foresaw another attack at **Cassino** and hastened to give depth to its positions. It assembled more assault guns and anti-tank guns just west of **Cassino**,

brought up a fresh field battery to support the troops in the town, and began to replace tired troops by newly-arrived parachutists. By this time Senger was confident that with the paratroop battalions streaming in **Cassino** could be held, but he was doubtful whether the weakened front of *15 Panzer Grenadier Division* could weather a major attack. The artillery of *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* therefore prepared to support its southern neighbour.

On 25 February *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* relinquished its sector to *1 Parachute Division* and retired for a well-deserved rest. The new master of **Cassino**, Lieutenant-General Richard Heidrich, was the aggressive commander of an aggressive division. An officer of machine guns in the First World War, Heidrich had fought against **2 New Zealand Division** in **Crete** as commander of *3 Parachute Regiment* and was known to be strict and ambitious. Now he led one of the *élite* formations of the whole German Army, composed of volunteers, many of whom had made several parachute jumps into enemy territory. As the monks whose abbey they now defended were dedicated to peace, so they were single-mindedly dedicated to war. They were physically and mentally toughened and were trained to perfection. Their steadiness in action was renowned. The division had a ration strength of about 13,000 and a fighting strength of about 6000. It was excellently equipped, particularly with light automatic weapons and anti-tank guns. It at once set to work to construct dugouts in the houses at **Cassino**, strengthening cellars with concrete, and to fortify the hills above. The defences were deepened by siting heavy machine guns behind the front line, positions were prepared for a line of anti-tank guns, and a reserve of supplies was built up for use by the forward troops should Route 6 be cut behind them.

Growing confidence even induced *14 Panzer Corps* to contemplate a pincer movement on **Cervaro** in order to cut off the enemy north of **Cassino**; but the plan had to be postponed immediately for lack of troops to carry it out and indefinitely pending the liquidation of the **Anzio** bridgehead.

The corps made good progress in straightening out its divisions. By 14 March the pattern of command was much tidier. The defenders of the railway station, *211 Regiment*, had been sent to join *71 Division* on the Garigliano. South of **Cassino** *104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* resumed command of all three of its battalions and released the remaining units of *129 (now 115) Panzer Grenadier Regiment* for service at **Anzio**. In the **Terelle-Belvedere** sector to the north, *44 Division* now had none but its own regiments.

The parachute division's sector lay between the mouth of the Ascensione stream on its right and the deep ravine north of Castellone on its left. Its right flank was held by *3 Parachute Regiment* (Colonel L. Heilmann), with *I Parachute Machine Gun Battalion* south of **Cassino**, *II Battalion* in the town and *III* and *I Battalions* on **Montecassino**. In the centre was *4 Parachute Regiment* (Lieutenant-Colonel R. Egger), with *II Battalion* at Albaneta and *III* and *I Battalions* on Colle Sant' Angelo. Among the hills on the left, *I* and *II Battalions* of *1 Parachute Regiment* held Pizzo Corno, facing Castellone, and *IV Alpine Battalion* was on **Monte Cairo**. The garrison of **Cassino** town was estimated at about 500 men.

Although in a general way the German command read the Allied intentions correctly, it went astray in detail. For a reason not yet clear, the New Zealand Division was believed on 8 March to have left the corps front, but the Germans were puzzled and urgently wanted prisoners to confirm the report. Five days later the New Zealanders' whereabouts was still a subject of anxious speculation, and when General Westphal demanded a prisoner he had to be told that 'the fish are not biting there at all'. The timing of the coming offensive also escaped the Germans. The long lull gave at least one advantage to the **New Zealand Corps** – it made last-minute troop movements unnecessary. The German intelligence therefore had no warning by way of regrouping or reinforcement in the forward areas and the patrolling was too light to give any indication of the impending attack.

(v)

The final **New Zealand Corps** plan of attack did not differ materially from the orders originally issued on 21 February. Before dawn on D-day the Indian and New Zealand troops would withdraw to a safety line 1000 yards from **Cassino**. The air bombardment of the town would begin at 8.30 a.m. and last until noon. Ten groups of heavy bombers and six groups of mediums, nearly 500 aircraft in all, would drop more than 1000 tons of 1000-pound high-explosive bombs on a target measuring about 1400 yards by 400. The attack would be delivered by relays of medium, heavy and medium bombers in that order, rising to a crescendo as midday approached. Late arrivals would be diverted to targets outside the town. In the afternoon fighter-bombers would be on call for prearranged targets on the southern edge of **Cassino**.

Zero hour for the ground troops was fixed for midday. At that time 6 Brigade was to advance at the deliberate rate of 100 yards in ten minutes to the capture of Point 193 and the whole of the town north of Route 6. It was to be preceded by a creeping barrage fired by the artillery, escorted by the tanks of **19 Armoured Regiment**, supported on the right flank by the fire of **7 Indian Brigade** from its prepared positions on the slopes west of the town, and protected from frontal fire by the anti-tank guns and small arms of 5 New Zealand Brigade and Combat Command 'B', which were ordered to engage enemy localities in **Cassino** south of Route 6. A battalion of 5 Indian Brigade was to take over **Castle Hill** as soon as possible after its capture. It was hoped to complete this first phase (objective QUISLING) by 2 p.m.



CASSINO TOWN

In the next phase 6 Brigade would continue southward to clear the rest of the town and establish a bridgehead by seizing the road junction near the Baron's Palace, on the southern outskirts of **Cassino**, the railway crossing of the Gari, the railway station and hummock and the country to the south. During the advance to this second objective,

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, 5 Indian Brigade would be exploiting step for step along the eastern slopes of **Montecassino** and turning uphill to capture Hangman's Hill (Point 435), <sup>1</sup> a knoll just below the

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<sup>1</sup> On Point 435 there stood one of the ruined pylons that originally carried the wires of the cable-way running from the cable-car station, near the railway station, to the monastery. The twisted ironwork had all the appearance of a gibbet, hence the name 'Hangmans' Hill'.

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south-eastern crest of the feature. At the same time **7 Indian Brigade** was to keep up pressure from the north on the defenders of the monastery ruins. All this, it was hoped, would be accomplished by dusk on D-day.

That night the New Zealand engineers, with American assistance, would bridge the rivers on both the road and railway routes and clear a

way through **Cassino**. The tanks of Task Force B, with 21 New Zealand Battalion under command, would move into the bridgehead ready to exploit and 5 New Zealand Brigade would close up to the river to assume responsibility for the railway station area. The Indian assault on the monastery would be launched the same night, but whether or not it succeeded the exploitation into the **Liri** valley would open at first light. Task Force B would advance to the first bound, and then 4 New Zealand Armoured Brigade and Task Force A would make the running.

The plan of exploitation was essentially the same as for **AVENGER**, but with two additions. The first was to define the role of 78 Division. On the night of D-day the division would build roads to selected crossings of the Rapido in the area of Sant' Angelo and to the north. On the second night two battalions would cross the river, establish a bridgehead to cover the construction of bridges, and prepare to conform with the New Zealand Division by capturing the high ground west of Sant' Angelo. The object was to help open a wide front as soon as possible to force the enemy to disperse his artillery effort. The second addition was made possible by the completion of Cavendish road. The armoured force under 7 Indian Brigade Reconnaissance Squadron was to debouch from Madras Circus at first light on the second day of the operation to assault the **Albaneta Farm** area and to finish off what it was hoped would be the rout of the defenders of **Montecassino**.

Artillery support was planned on a scale to eclipse all precedent in the history of the New Zealanders. The great variety of the weapons taking part and their occasionally obscure provenance confine us to round figures, but it may be said that during **DICKENS** nearly 900 guns would be available, if both direct and indirect support and both major and ancillary operations are counted. These included not only the commoner calibres of British and American field, medium and heavy artillery, but also American anti-aircraft and tank-destroyer guns and even three Italian 160-millimetre railway guns manned by Italians. **General Freyberg** calculated that in all a quarter of a million shells would be fired. These would weigh between three and four thousand tons.



The actual opening programme would employ more than 600 guns, firing nearly 1200 tons in four hours into the area of the attack. It fell into three parts. In the north the **French Expeditionary Corps** would fire a diversionary programme. Beginning fifteen minutes before zero hour, the French would simulate an attack and fire smoke to screen German observation posts on the high ground from the sight of the New Zealanders forming up in **Cassino**. A counter-battery programme was to be fired by the French and **10 Corps** as well as by **New Zealand Corps**. Every known hostile battery would be engaged when the attack went in, and harassing fire would continue during the afternoon. Finally, there was a programme of close support for 6 Brigade. From zero hour for 130 minutes a barrage by eighty-eight field and medium guns would precede the infantry through **Cassino**, while well over 200 guns fired concentrations on known enemy defences in the town and on the southern outskirts. The harassing of the southern and eastern slopes of **Montecassino** by sixty guns would complete the close-support programme.

If the enemy could be blasted into submission, this was the plan to do it. In seven hours and a half bomb-rack and gun-barrel would discharge upon **Cassino** four or five tons of high explosive for every German in the garrison. And 400 tanks waited to follow up. But all this sound and fury would signify nothing if the infantry failed to win their way through the town, and their difficulties were fully acknowledged. There was the risk that the Germans would reoccupy the northern edge of the town vacated before the bombing. Both the Indians working along the hillside and the New Zealanders in the town had dangerously narrow entries that would prevent them from appearing suddenly in great strength. The whole attack would be overlooked from the hills above **Cassino** and enfiladed by well-protected weapons on the slopes of those hills. The airmen had warned that the bombed ruins might impede tanks. <sup>1</sup> Only the event would show.

Though it was fine on the corps front, the weather forecast on 13 March was bad. On the 14th the indications had improved, and at 10.30 that night Fifth Army confirmed that the operation would begin next day. The long-awaited code-word BRADMAN was circulated through the corps. Those who affected sporting language speculated on the state of the wicket; and the historically minded noted that the morrow was the ides of March.

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<sup>1</sup> [Kippenberger](#), pp. 358–9.

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

# CHAPTER 12 – THE MARCH ATTACK: BREAK-IN

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

I: 15 MARCH

*I: 15 March*

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**THE** bludgeon of air power descended upon **Cassino** town punctually at 8.30 on the morning of 15 March. As they swept across the blue sky toward the target, the medium bombers of the first wave were watched intently by Allied soldiers who had climbed to vantage points and settled down with binoculars to absorb a sight that they expected to remember for the rest of their lives. In the comparative safety of the hills around **Cervaro** the picnic atmosphere was indecent but irrepressible. Here, after many days, was the spectacular promise of release from boredom and deadlock. In the next few hours a whole town would shudder to destruction before one's eyes.

Below the aircraft the northern part of **Cassino** was empty. The forward troops of 24 and 25 Battalions had been coming back since 3 a.m. and were now at a safe distance in the reserve areas north of the town, save for three volunteers manning an anti-tank gun near the quarry on Caruso road. Their going had been unnoticed by the Germans, who went about their business without suspecting that the bombers overhead were the first of about 500 and their freight a foretaste of the 1100 or so tons of 1000-pound high-explosive bombs loaded for delivery in the town.

From his command post at **Cervaro**, where he had the company of Generals Alexander, Clark and Eaker, **General Freyberg** watched the aircraft strike home. 'Flashes of flame from bursting bombs leaped from the buildings and from the slopes above the town, explosions reverberated through the hills and shook the ground under our feet,' he wrote later. Trembling under the shock of the first attack, **Cassino** was momentarily lit with the flame of detonation and then became shrouded

**in swirling eddies of smoke and dust that soon hid it from observation. A continual ripple of air rose from the town and drifted across the sky above the [Liri](#) and Rapido valleys. The bombers followed, wave on wave, the mediums in superb tight formation, the heavies more raggedly. Mistiming occurred in some groups, but it was exactly at midday, as planned, that the last group dropped its bombs squarely into the centre of confusion. None who saw it will forget the terrible one-sidedness of the spectacle: there was an insolent meting out of punishment as the great bombers, unwavering and impeccable, opened their racks upon the suffering earth. The sky had been swept clear of enemy fighters and the bombers were unchallenged except by a nest of anti-aircraft guns south of the [Liri](#), which fired ineffectually as the attackers wheeled away from the target; and even this fire was silenced half-way through the morning.**

**It is estimated that 50 per cent of the bomb load fell within the confines of the town. Near misses scattered some bombs on Montecassino and many on the river flat east of the Rapido. Still less precise and more costly was the aiming that dropped bombs in our own lines. Casualties rising to as many as twenty in a single regiment occurred in British, American and New Zealand artillery areas; fifty men were hit in [4 Indian Division's](#) B Echelon in the upper Rapido valley and forty at a Moroccan military hospital. Some attacks at various points between [Venafrò](#) and [Isernia](#) were wildly astray. One complete group mistook [Venafrò](#) for [Cassino](#), two towns more than ten miles apart but similarly placed in the lee of high hills. One hundred and forty civilians were left dead or wounded. The main offenders were the heavy bombers, whose inaccuracy in aim and timing was shown to be due to several causes – poor air discipline in two new groups, faulty bomb racks, lack of specific aiming points and the obscuring of the target by smoke and dust. <sup>1</sup>**

**Whatever its other shortcomings, the bombing lacked nothing in destructive effect on the town; in that opinion there was unanimity. Already battered from weeks of siege, [Cassino](#) was now utterly laid waste.**

**Not a building stood intact. Those not directly hit were unroofed and shaken to their foundations by the blast. Upper stories collapsed over ground floors and basements, toppling down bricks and mortar, tiles, girders, lumps of concrete, wooden beams, plaster walls. Cratered and buried under mounds of debris, streets lost their identity in a wilderness of whitish-grey rubble, and parks and open spaces became wastes of torn earth and bruised and uprooted trees. What remained was less the semblance of a town than a desolation open to the sky, with here and there a solitary wall rising above the tumbled ruins.**

**The effect on the German defences was more equivocal. No men could fail to be dazed by the ferocity of such an attack sustained over three hours and a half, but the casualties were not everywhere proportionate to the material damage. Weapons in the open or under**

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<sup>1</sup> *Army Air Forces in World War II*, Vol. III, p. 367.

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**light cover were mostly destroyed, and sometimes the violent rearrangement of matter cut them off from their crews. Undoubtedly there were heavy losses among troops inadequately protected. But many men in the garrison, by taking refuge in basements and concrete shelters, survived with nothing worse than a few split eardrums, a thorough dusting and a bad scare. Portable steel pillboxes designed for two men were crowded by as many as six and gave effective cover, though at times tossed about in the tempest.**

**Prisoners' reports varied: some were surprised to learn that other Germans had been taken alive in the town; some had only private experiences to relate as they crawled out of the wreckage just in time to be captured; some reported more chaos than casualties and soon recovered their composure. More Germans seem to have died in the northern part of the town than in the south and west, where, on the rising ground, stouter dugouts had been built. Here the defenders shook off their stupor and were again at their posts, the cocky members of a *corps d'élite*, before the New Zealanders could get at them. Their**

resilience was a measure of paratroop toughness. What flesh and blood could withstand they withstood. It was General Alexander's opinion that no other troops in the German army could have endured such a hammering.

(ii)

At midday, as the last aircraft turned for home, the artillery took up the bombardment. As displays of destructive majesty, there was little to choose between the clean sweep of silver wings as the earth erupted beneath them and the stabbing flashes and rippling fortissimo of drumfire from the massed artillery. Suddenly Monastery Hill was pimped with the grey puffs of exploding shells. In the town the fires were stoked again and more remnants of cover were brought crashing down.

Under such an umbrella, the assaulting infantry of 25 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel MacDuff) approached the town along Caruso road at a brisk walking pace. It was a small band to be so resoundingly heralded. The lead was taken by B Company (Captain Hoy), on the right, and A Company (Major Sanders). They moved in single file, followed by the tanks of B Squadron **19 Armoured Regiment**. Leaving the rest of the battalion in a quarry north of the town, they pressed on into **Cassino** under the cover of the barrage and smoke screen and had no difficulty in regaining the old forward positions. But beyond the line of the jail a challenge awaited them.

Where they had hoped to find no life, rifles and machine guns started up, troubling them from the slopes of **Castle Hill** and the heaped ruins on the flat. Soon the attackers were dissolved into small groups of infiltrators, now separated, now reunited, by the flux of the fighting. Nothing went according to plan. At one o'clock communication with battalion headquarters failed, and for the rest of the afternoon the wireless link was silent. Nor could runners get through: all three who were sent back became casualties, and those sent forward by C Company (Lieutenant Milne), <sup>1</sup> established at the jail, failed to find the leading



troops. The two companies lost touch with the tanks and before long with each other. But they knew they had to keep working southward, with the mountain on their right.

This was not a simple progress. At the best of times a contested advance through a town is a staccato sequence of pauses under cover and dashes for fresh cover. Here in **Cassino** such cover as remained was still mostly in enemy occupation. The way forward to the next breathing space lay over ground that slowed down infantry and exposed them to short-range fire. They had to plunge down cavernous craters up to sixty feet across, scramble over piles of debris or find a way round, get on through churned mud and keep direction under the pall of smoke whose protection alone made advance possible.

The fighting ardour of the German paratroops was roused. Now that they had their enemy at close quarters on ground they knew and had prepared, the terms of combat had turned dramatically in their favour since the morning. They gave ground sparingly and at a price. Fighting closed to hand-grenade range. Mortar bombs fired from **Montecassino** and the railway station area fell among the New Zealanders; nebelwerfers tossed up their fearful cascades of bombs; and finally from about 3.30 German guns in the north began to take the northern end of the town under heavy fire. The New Zealand Corps artillery meanwhile prolonged its fire on the final line of the barrage, 400 yards south of Route 6, for nearly an hour and a half beyond the scheduled time, but even when it ceased at 3.30 it was still too far ahead of the infantry to shield them effectively.

In the western part of the town, where the streets had been narrow and the building most congested, B Company found the prescribed rate of advance – 100 yards in ten minutes – far beyond its reach. As it tackled the obstacles in its path, it was harassed by a steady crackle of small-arms fire from the right flank. Some infantrymen edged away into the middle of the town. At two o'clock the company was still no farther ahead than the nunnery. It had gone about a hundred yards in the last hour or more. By mid-afternoon its movement was more perceptible, but

having reached the shelter of a school it was held there by weapons on **Castle Hill**.

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj R. V. Milne**, m.i.d.; **Kekerangu, Marlborough**; born **Christchurch**, 16 Mar 1912; insurance inspector; wounded 16 Apr 1945.

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It was still no more than half-way through the town, and at least 300 yards short of its objective.

On the left, A Company made a little more headway. Before one o'clock its leading platoons reached the nunnery. They pushed on slowly southward and it was 3.30 before they had fought their way to the northern branch of Route 6. Here the right-hand platoon swung right towards the mountainside, but a hundred yards along the road fierce opposition halted it amid ruined buildings for the rest of the day. Farther east along the same road, headquarters set themselves up in a building which, from sheafs of unused stamps, official forms and telegraphic equipment, they identified as the Post Office. Working through a more open part of the town, the left-hand platoon actually reached the objective at the point where Route 6 was intersected by a road that bounded the town on the east. These men entered a convent at the crossroads but failed to dislodge a party of Germans who were sharing the same abode. Large as the convent was, it was too small to contain both parties with comfort to either. The New Zealanders could make no further ground, they could not be supported and they were in danger of encirclement. Major Sanders therefore recalled them toward company headquarters, reluctantly giving up a base from which a flank attack on the untaken part of the town and the advance to the railway station in the second phase might have been mounted.

At dusk, then, the infantry in **Cassino** seemed to have spent their force. B Company had gone to cover half-way through the town. A Company was somewhat farther forward, holding a line for about 200 yards along the northern branch of Route 6 with a swarming nest of

spandaus formidably close on the right flank. Back at the jail and the nunnery C Company had been attempting for some hours to relay messages between the forward troops and battalion headquarters, but without success. A and B Companies indeed were in touch with each other, but there was no regular contact with the tanks. A small reinforcement – B Company 24 Battalion (Major Turnbull) – was on its way, but it was to be midnight before it reached A Company and settled in nearby. In a last effort to help 25 Battalion on to the first objective, the artillery again fired on the last line of the barrage from 5.30 to 6 p.m. and then concentrated for quarter of an hour on the railway station area in the hope of subduing enemy mortars. No inch of ground was gained. When night fell all thought of advance was given up.

Consolidate was the order at dusk [wrote Lieutenant Milne]. In the maze positions were sorted out, with men milling about, stretcher bearers getting out the wounded and shells falling all over the place. No supplies could be brought in but luckily each tank had carried ammunition, even primed grenades, so there was no shortage.

*(iii)*

The tanks meanwhile had been fighting a separate battle. The plan of a cohesive stroke of infantry and armour was one of the first casualties of the bombing. Nineteenth Armoured Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin) ordered B Squadron (Major Leeks) <sup>1</sup> to escort 25 Battalion on to the first objective, QUISLING, whereupon A Squadron (Major Thodey) <sup>2</sup> was to lead 26 Battalion on to the second, JOCKEY. The assault guns of 392 Self-propelled Battery (98 Field Regiment, **Royal Artillery**) were under 19 Regiment's command to give close support.

Unlike the infantry, the tanks tried two routes forward – Caruso and Parallel roads – but one of the leading troops found the latter impassably cratered and all had to use the Caruso road approach to the town. The other leading tanks, those of 7 Troop, were balked for a while by a bomb hole in Caruso road, but found a detour which enabled them to enter **Cassino** about one o'clock, already half an hour behind the infantry. It

was all to no avail: rubble at this entrance absolutely forbade the troop to continue south under the slope of **Castle Hill**, and there it stayed.

The tanks found, as the infantry had done, that the left flank was slightly more yielding. Here 8 Troop threaded a mazy way round ragged skeletons of buildings, then nose down into pits and nose up over heaps of rubble, like a flotilla headed into a stormy sea. After explorations on foot and behind a screen of smoke from C Squadron in Pasquale road, the troop by two o'clock reached the boundary road east of the nunnery. Ordered to push south-west, Major Leeks went ahead on foot and called for sapper help to clear a path. But the engineers who were standing by outside the town were prevented from entering by the riflemen on **Castle Hill**, and the tank crews, though harassed from the same direction, set to work with pick and shovel at the urgent bidding of their commanding officer. They succeeded in driving on a short distance and, for the first time, in giving direct support to the infantry by engaging enemy posts in the area of the convent. But the road ahead was barred by another crater. Coming up behind, 5 Troop manoeuvred on to the eastern boundary road and moved south along it, on 8 Troop's left. After 400 yards this troop too was baffled by great holes torn in the road. While looking for a bypass, Leeks was wounded by a rifle bullet. **Major McInnes**<sup>3</sup> came forward to replace

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj L. Leeks**; Tamworth, **NSW**; born **Wanganui**, 22 Nov 1914; insurance clerk; twice wounded.

<sup>2</sup> **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.

<sup>3</sup> **Maj D. McInnes**; born **Dunedin**, 6 Oct 1918; audit clerk; wounded 15 Mar 1944; died of wounds 31 Jul 1944.

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him with orders from Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin to 'keep cracking'.

Such an order was wholly in keeping with the spirit of the plan but it was beset with all vexation. The squadron which **McInnes** inherited was now dispersed: one troop, the 6th, had not even forced a way into the town, 7 Troop was halted near the Caruso road entrance and the other two were held up each on a different road, about 200 yards short of the northern fork of Route 6. The help they could give the men on foot was limited by ignorance of the forward infantry positions and by lack of liaison – the only contact was on the ground, and it was at best intermittent and always dangerous. Enemy shelling was troublesome. Even less welcome was the too close support of American fighter-bombers: some bombs fell uncomfortably near the forward tanks, and others blocked the road behind them. **Major McInnes's** reconnaissance towards Route 6 convinced him that further armoured advance was at present impossible. Having so reported, he was sent forward again to explore the ground round the Botanical Gardens between the two branches of Route 6. On this mission he was wounded, and the squadron passed to Lieutenant Carey. <sup>1</sup>

It was obvious that a way would have to be blasted or swept by bulldozer. But when McGaffin again asked for help, the engineer detachment found the shelling too severe to get into the town. Its bulldozer, unarmoured, bulky and obtrusive, was a sure magnet to attract angry metal. Nothing was left now but to face the tanks head-on to the obstructive rubble and charge it. McGaffin gave the order. With grating tracks, roaring engines and much metallic wheezing, the tanks bucked and bounced at the obstacles, but none surmounted them and a few wedged themselves immovably. The tank attack came to a stop.

Not only did three troops of tanks stand foiled or immobilised within **Cassino**, but tanks even more numerous banked up outside, having searched in vain for admission. Two troops of C Squadron approaching along Pasquale road, were directed into the town during the afternoon, but they were defeated by the Rapido. The regular crossing the engineers could not repair because of the small-arms fire from **Castle Hill** and the

shelling, and no other crossing could be found. So these two troops had to be content to sit on the far side of the river and retaliate with their fire upon the defenders of **Castle Hill**. When McGaffin first summoned the engineers, he ordered A Squadron with an attached troop to accompany them. Five more troops thus joined the queue, so that there were three at the Caruso road entrance and four behind the Rapido – until,

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj D. Carey, m.i.d.; Huntly; born Hamilton, 5 Aug 1916; beekeeper; twice wounded.**

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before dark, most of them were recalled from their fruitless errand. The bombing may have won surprise but it blunted the very weapon intended to exploit it.

*(iv)*

To the grim tale of frustration within **Cassino** events on **Castle Hill** (Point 193) furnished a shining contrast. The capture of this eastern promontory of the **Cassino** massif, from which the Germans throughout the afternoon had all but dictated happenings in the town below, was the assigned task of D Company 25 Battalion (Major Hewitt). The company fought a brisk, resourceful action. Since the western outskirts of the town had not been cleared, it turned off Caruso road and up the slope of the mountain, approaching **Castle Hill** along the ravine to the north. While the rest of the company moved round the eastern foot of the hill, 16 Platoon worked south until it was below Point 165, the northernmost hairpin bend on the road to the abbey. From this point a rocky saddle extended a hundred yards or so to the stone fort that gave **Castle Hill** its name. About one o'clock the platoon began to scale the almost vertical cliff. Its climb was unopposed. Two Bren-gunners covered the rest of the platoon as it appeared over the crest and rushed a nearby house, which disgorged two prisoners. The Bren-gunners then lighted upon a pillbox containing an enemy company headquarters and, after exchanging machine-gun fire and hand grenades, forced twenty-three

**Germans to surrender. The platoon occupied Point 165, but when it advanced on the fort from the west, machine-gun fire from the west wall sent it to earth and kept it there.**

**Help came, though not at once. The other platoons, edging their way round the eastern foot of the hill, ran into resistance on the fringes of the town and were pinned down until about three o'clock. Having killed, dispersed or discouraged their assailants, they made their assault straight up the hill. There was no trouble until they neared the summit. Then, as 17 and 18 Platoons made toward the fort, a small party of Germans fired a few bursts and retired through an archway to the inner courtyard. They were soon brought to reason. After occupying the ruined tower of the fort, the New Zealanders had only to silence a single spandau in the courtyard and by 4.45 the fort was firmly in their hands, along with twenty-two prisoners. <sup>1</sup> About nightfall, 16 Platoon was called into the fort from**

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**<sup>1</sup> The total number of prisoners credited to D Company in this action – 47 – may be exaggerated. The situation report of 6 Brigade next morning gave the figure of 36, but it is possible that some prisoners were passed back through [4 Indian Division](#) and not included in the New Zealand claim.**

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**Point 165. This whole spirited episode cost the company 6 killed and 15 wounded.**

**Though it was important to know the situation on Point 193, so that as long as necessary the enemy on the hill might be kept under fire, news of the success was slow in reaching those who controlled the guns. It came finally by one runner from the fort to company headquarters at the foot of the hill and thence by another to battalion headquarters. The relief of D Company by the Indians was so much the longer delayed; and this delay was the capital deposit that grew by compound interest as the operation proceeded.**

(v)

Behind the spearhead of **25 Battalion** and **19 Armoured Regiment**, the heaviest work in the first few hours of the battle fell upon the artillery. Most of it was prearranged – the barrage by 88 guns, the timed concentrations by 262 guns and the counter-battery bombardment by 72 guns in **New Zealand Corps**, together with the guns of 10 British Corps and the **French Expeditionary Corps**.<sup>1</sup> At some points the original fire plan had to be amplified. The final line of the barrage, as we have seen, had to be repeated three times (each of fifteen minutes) before 3.30 and again for half an hour at 5.30. The concentrations on German strongpoints had to be thickened up, particularly on the slopes of **Montecassino** and **Castle Hill** and in the town south of Route 6. The Germans lay so low, where they were not at close grips with our own troops, that the amount of shooting on opportunity targets was negligible. The corps counter-battery fire was effective against the enemy guns on its front, which had been accurately located and which fired little, if at all, during the afternoon. The nebelwerfers were much more of a nuisance, in spite of a constant patrol by air OPs; yet they were by no means left in peace, and one nebelwerfer regiment lost 81 out of 88 active barrels during the day from our observed gunfire. The shellfire that troubled troops in the town came from the guns of 5 *Mountain Division* in the sector of the **French Expeditionary Corps**. Presumably because they were sited in deep mountain gorges, these guns had not been pin-pointed, and even if, according to plan, the French had blinded the enemy observers on this flank, they could still fire by prediction. Fourth Field Regiment, detailed to screen activities in the town from **Montecassino**, had to increase its rate of fire because of a southerly wind that quickly dispersed the smoke and the screen had to be thickened from time to time by fire from the self-propelled guns of 98 Field Regiment and the tanks of **19 Armoured Regiment**.

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<sup>1</sup> For details of the fire plan see above, pp. 265– 6.

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The firing of smoke went on until six o'clock, when night laid the best of all screens.

The engineers passed a vexing and rather profitless day. Four companies, including two of Americans, were given an active role in the attack, but progress in the town was so slow that only one – **7 Field Company** (Major White) <sup>1</sup> – came into action before nightfall. It was placed under command of 6 Brigade to clear routes through **Cassino** from the north. The bulldozers, it was recognised, would have to do vital work, with the sappers clearing mines, blowing demolitions and using picks and shovels. One platoon under Lieutenant Faram filled craters on Pasquale road until it was open to tanks as far as the Rapido. Here the engineers demolished a stone wall and were using rubble to build a causeway across the dry riverbed when shelling and rifle fire closed down the work. First the bulldozer operator and then the men on foot retired to the security that smoke could not afford. The crossing was left unfit for tanks. A second detachment, under Lieutenant Budge, <sup>2</sup> was to sweep a route through **Cassino** for the tanks but it was halted at the outskirts by rifle fire from **Castle Hill**, and here also the bulldozer driver had to quit his machine. Later orders to push through to the aid of the tanks proved futile. Even after nightfall, the utter darkness and the stubborn rubble-heaps so thwarted the two bulldozers working near the Caruso road entrance that the attempt to sweep a tank route had to be abandoned. During the day 7 Field Company had one man wounded.

The other fighting units of the Division either gave the support appropriate to their weapons or stood in readiness to exploit when the battle became fluid. Machine-gunners of 2 and 3 Machine Gun Companies, with targets on **Monastery Hill** and the southern edge of **Cassino**, added their bullets to the great opening bombardment. Other participants in the elaborate orchestration of the battle were 32 and 34 Anti-Tank Batteries, firing a mixture of high-explosive and armour-piercing ammunition from fourteen guns placed well forward. Fifth Brigade's role in this first phase was to bring its support weapons to bear 'as opportunity offers', but it appears that only **28 Battalion** actually

helped the assault with its mortars and Vickers guns. The brigade's main role was to exploit. Twenty-first Battalion moved up ready to accompany Task Force B across the river; 23 Battalion, which was to move with 4 Armoured Brigade, stayed in place; and **28 Battalion** pushed one company forward handier to the railway station area, which it was to make secure after 26 Battalion's attack.

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj D. U. White**, DSO; **Napier**; born Kaituna, 2 Mar 1908; civil engineer; twice wounded.

<sup>2</sup> **Capt I. G. Budge**, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Scotland**, 26 Sep 1919; civil engineering assistant.

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(vi)

When night came, it was a night of almost impenetrable darkness. The clouds that were to obscure the moon began their disservice by bringing rain. For hours after 6.30 it teemed down, chilling the forward troops to the bone and turning into ponds the craters that were already beginning to fill by seepage from the sub-soil. The rain and the darkness commanded a lull, and their coming closed one phase of the battle. It is an opportunity to review the day's doings.

The battle was already seriously behind the timetable. According to the plan, objective quisling should have been in New Zealand hands by 2 p.m. By dusk 6 Brigade should have been lodged on the second objective jockey, well to the south of the town, and 5 Indian Brigade should have been established on Hangman's Hill (Point 435). In reality, about 200 yards and obvious hard fighting lay between the most advanced troops and the first objective, and the Indians had not even begun to move along the face of **Montecassino**. **Castle Hill** was a valuable capture but within the town the infantry were not happily placed. One company was sheltering in a maze of ruins in the centre of the town; another, foremost of all, was being firmly resisted by an enemy hourly recovering poise and confidence and strongly fortified between the two branches of

**Route 6. The forward troops were under very imperfect cover; they were cold and wet through; there was to be no hot food for them that night; their spirits were indifferent; they were denied the reassuring attendance of armour. Nineteenth Armoured Regiment had battled gamely to burst through, but as the tanks could not have the aid of the engineers, the infantry had to do without the aid of the tanks. Communications to the forward companies were working poorly, so that even their locations were in doubt. Their wireless sets were damp and useless. For a brief period that night a telephone line was open to A Company but it was soon cut, and shelling and mortaring were heavy enough to discourage its maintenance. C Company alone remained in touch with battalion headquarters by telephone.**

**All through the afternoon the burden of infantry fighting had been borne exclusively by 25 Battalion, of whose four rifle companies one was in a reserve position. Casualties, it is true, had not been heavy – in the town 11 killed or died of wounds, 29 wounded, and 1 wounded and missing. Still, by four o'clock its inadequacy for the double task of capturing **Castle Hill** and clearing the town as far south as Route 6 was too obvious to escape notice. Quite apart from the evidence of slow progress, enemy riflemen were causing disorganisation out of all proportion to their numbers at the vulnerable joints, so to speak, between mutually supporting arms. At this hour, Major-General Parkinson instructed 6 Brigade to put in more infantry. Having committed the whole of 25 Battalion, Brigadier Bonifant called for a company from 24 Battalion, which had spent the afternoon consolidating in its old forward positions. B Company set out at five o'clock. Before dusk, however, it was decided to reinforce more strongly. At 5.25 p.m. 6 Brigade gave the word of advance to 26 Battalion.**

**By this time it was clear that the effect of surprise had been lost. The corps' intention now stood revealed – to extinguish all life in **Cassino**, drive through it from the north and flow round the headland as a prelude to armoured advance up the **Liri** valley. **General Freyberg** was already saying, 'You must expect it to be slow'. A different type of battle**

was emerging, in which victory in the encounter phase might be so costly in infantry as to leave too few for the break-out and pursuit. It was beginning to look as if within the major premise of operation dickens there lurked two allied miscalculations – an underestimate of mind (for the survivors in **Cassino** were uncowed) and an overestimate of matter (for it was the collapse of bricks and mortar that foiled our tanks).

(vii)

The German outlook at nightfall on 15 March was cautious but not despondent. It was rightly appreciated that **Cassino** was the only immediate object of the attack. This was matter for relief, but the fear was that *14 Panzer Corps* would not be able to sustain a long battle of attrition.

The enemy tactics seemed to be modelled on those of **Alamein** [wrote the war diarist of the corps]. He was banking mainly on his superiority in equipment, and had so far committed a comparatively small force of infantry (estimated at two battalions). It was thought possible that the enemy might be able to gain a victory after several days by sheer weight of material. He would have to smash our troops to pieces first. Experience had shown that a major action would cost us a battalion a day. Corps had at present four battalions available (including recce units) to fill gaps in its front-line units.

If lack of reserves was the ultimate fear, the enemy had plenty of worries more pressing. The replacement of equipment was one. The opening bombardment from air and ground had destroyed eight heavy mortars, five heavy machine guns and several assault guns. The battered *71 Werfer Regiment* had lost nearly all its barrels from gunfire controlled by air OPs, though for the time being they had been replaced by *90 Panzer Grenadier Division's* guns from the second line. The unremitting vigil of air OPs and the frequent air raids were almost crippling the artillery, especially in the **Liri** valley. Within **Cassino** stocks of ammunition were precarious and supplies could only move

along the roads by night. Anti-tank defence was regarded as quite inadequate. The German commanders were not confident that their requests for air support would be heeded.

None the less, the Germans found food for consolation. Their infantry had behaved admirably. Under the full shock of the bombing, *II Battalion 3 Parachute Regiment* had suffered casualties but had rallied to the counter-attack. Some groups of defenders, surrounded in the northern part of the town, had regained their unit, and morale was high. 'With luck,' it was thought, 'the enemy can be pushed out by close-range fighting'. Now that the two sides were locked in close combat, the Allies could no longer safely bomb the short-range defences in the town. The onus of mechanical movement through the choked environs of **Cassino** lay on the Allies – in fact, the **New Zealand Corps** had seen only three German tanks all day – and it was no contemptible advantage to the defenders that the attack had to be brought to them. The weather was the Germans' last reserve. 'Rain would be even better than air support,' General Senger told General Vietinghoff from his headquarters. By that time it was already pouring in **Cassino**.

*(viii)*

The delay in the town caused a major revision in the plans of 26 Battalion. It was to have moved in the early afternoon, to have passed through 25 Battalion on **QUISLING** and, with armoured support, to have seized **JOCKEY** by dusk. Now, however, its move was postponed till nearly nightfall, it was directed to make an attack for which a firm base did not exist, and it was unaccompanied by armour, for though the tanks of A Squadron **19 Armoured Regiment** had been ordered into **Cassino** three hours before, they could not follow the men on foot.

Led by D Company (Major Piper) the battalion entered **Cassino** at the Rapido crossing and, moving in single file, slipped and stumbled along the eastern edge of the town towards Route 6. It was a journey of tense anxiety through a waste land. Darkness soon closed in. At the head of

the leading platoon, Second-Lieutenant Muir <sup>1</sup> probed forward to follow the line of a road no longer easily discernible by day, expecting at every step to be challenged by enemy fire. Behind him each man clung to the battle dress ahead for fear of losing the column. No one was clothed against the rain that began to fall. The path, always devious, now became treacherous; men slid in the mud and blundered into great cavities. Damp wireless

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Lt F. J. Muir, MM; born NZ 8 Feb 1915; clerk; killed in action 15 Mar 1944.

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sets faded and failed. The companies got on as best they could, blindly, in any order and ignorant of each other's whereabouts. The quiet of the night was disturbed only by the noises of physical exertion, whispered colloquys, uncontained oaths and odd bursts from machine guns and mortars.

D Company was the first to reach the northern fork of Route 6. The time was about nine o'clock – it had taken three hours to travel the 650 yards from the Rapido crossing. Lieutenant Muir, still thinking of an immediate advance to the second objective, set off to scout for the road leading to the station. He left his platoon beside the shaggy walls of the Municipal Buildings, where it was soon joined by the rest of the company. From A Company 25 Battalion, whom he had located in the Post Office, Major Piper learnt the disappointing truth. He realised that the attack on the second objective was not yet practicable. By telephone he received instructions from Lieutenant-Colonel Richards that all companies should consolidate along Route 6 until the strongpoint to the west, which had already engaged the battalion, had been eliminated.

One by one the other companies appeared out of the night and sectors were roughly allocated. Two companies set themselves up along the northern branch of Route 6, an alley now bristling with infantry weapons. The two others went into or beside the Municipal Buildings, where they were separated from the enemy by a well stirred porringer of

**mud that had once been the Botanical Gardens. They seem to have made no attempt to occupy the convent where there had been a skirmish in the afternoon, though all four compnies were close to it and though it was the most substantial building in the vicinity and offered the luxury of shelter under a roof only partly demolished. After a gruelling night of wrong turnings and delays, 12 Machine Gun Platoon arrived with its Vickers guns in the early hours of the morning and sited them in ruined buildings near the Post Office. Whatever its terrors, the night had not so far been costly in the number of casualties. Two had been killed – but one of them was Lieutenant Muir – and three wounded.**

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: 16 MARCH

### *II: 16 March*

*(i)*

The day of the 16th advanced the clearing of the town very little. The infantry made one local attack in an effort to renew the rhythm of the battle and restore it to its planned course, but when this had failed they fell back on the defensive. To move from the cover of a crater or a mound was simply to offer a target to the rifles and automatics of encircling Germans; to rush one enemy post was to attract the fire of several others. The break-down of communications made it hard for the forward troops to act in concert and hindered the flow of information to, and of orders from, the rear. When orders did come they were as likely as not to be unrealistic. For example, to order supporting arms on to the first objective, as Division did at 6 a.m. on the 16th, was to command heavy weapons to be taken where individual runners could not go by day. The conduct of the battle passed effectively into the hands of company and even platoon commanders, while headquarters up to Corps itself reconciled themselves, by successive retractions, to the discipline of the achievable.

At 9.30 p.m. on the 15th 26 Battalion asked 25 Battalion to complete the capture of *QUISLING*, but it was past midnight before it was possible (for a short time) to speak to A Company 25 Battalion by telephone. Major Sanders was then ordered to join with B Company 24 Battalion in an attack westward to clear the enemy from north of Route 6. Brigadier Bonifant had given instructions for this to be done by night, but so great were the difficulties of co-ordinating and orienting an attack in the blackness of the night that Majors Sanders and Turnbull decided to postpone their efforts until dawn.

At 6.15 a.m. the two companies advanced on opposite sides of the



**northern branch of Route 6. On the right, B Company 24 Battalion was directed towards the part of the town under [Castle Hill](#) and told to link up with B Company 25 Battalion. On the left, A Company 25 Battalion was to wipe out resistance west of the Botanical Gardens in the area enclosed by the two arms of the road.**

**As soon as 11 and 12 Platoons at the head of B Company emerged from shelter, they were whittled down by machine-gun fire, losing three killed and seven wounded. They cleared one house, which yielded two prisoners, and made a lodgment in another that was better preserved than most of its neighbours. A jagged wall stood in the midst of desolation, and cover could be found in part of the ground floor. This 12 Platoon seized from parties of Germans, who were driven away with casualties. Beneath the new tenants, 11 Platoon got into the basement, where they spent an uncomfortable five hours in deep water until 12 Platoon dug a hole in the floor and helped them through. Though now isolated, the two platoons were ordered by Major Turnbull, during one of the fleeting intervals of wireless communication, to stay where they were. There they stayed for nearly twenty-four hours, beating off German raiders who invited them in English to surrender; but the next night they were recalled to the rest of the company. This attack, then, made little ground, and the few yards gained were given up.**

**On the left A Company 25 Battalion, with a platoon from 26 Battalion, had even less success. Immediately they stirred, the leading platoons were pinned down by fire from the strongpoint they were being sent to destroy. Enemy rifles, machine guns and mortars held them in subjection all through a difficult day. So it was with the rest of the battalion. No contact existed that day between 25 Battalion headquarters and any of its companies, except C Company at the jail, which was in touch by telephone. Runners and linesmen alike found every route through [Cassino](#) barred by enemy small arms**

**In form, 26 Battalion was waiting to have the first objective cleared as a springboard for advance to the second; in fact, there was little to**

distinguish its day from that of 25 Battalion. It had to suffer under the same squalls of German fire, it felt the same annoyance at being unable to hit back more effectively and it was as badly served by its communications. But it did have some armoured support, and, partly as a result, one success came its way. The convent on the south side of Route 6 was recaptured in the early afternoon. Under cover of bullets from nearby platoons and shells from one of 19 Regiment's tanks which had approached along Route 6, two sections of 14 Platoon C Company dashed across 50 yards of open ground, entered the convent and drove out the Germans. Possession of this strongpoint (it was reinforced that night) removed a source of irritation and gave the New Zealanders the largest building and the best unprepared cover in that section of the town. Later in the battle it was to prove its usefulness as a control post.

(ii)

Armoured assistance for the infantry in **Cassino** on the 16th was restricted, like so much else, by the difficulties of ingress. It was only through pluck and persistence that any arrived at all; and it was a judgment on the bombing plan that it came not from the north through the town, where the tanks were only a few hundred yards away, but from the east across the Rapido.

The tanks of B Squadron **19 Armoured Regiment** at the north western entrance to the town and along the eastern boundary road could not improve their positions during the day. Though under continual fire themselves, they gave what support they could to the infantry at **Cassino**, but from lack of regular contact this was little enough. When the squadron was relieved by 11 and 12 Troops of C Squadron in the afternoon, it was found that only three of its tanks could move out of the town. Seven of them, stuck fast or damaged, had to be left behind in the charge of C Squadron until they could be conveniently recovered.

While part of A Squadron was withdrawn to the northern outskirts of **Cassino** to laager, squadron headquarters, 1 and 4 Troops stood by to enter **Cassino** from the east in support of 26 Battalion's assault on the

station. A reconnaissance by American tanks of Combat Command 'B' discovered craters on Route 6 and all four bridging tanks were put at A Squadron's disposal <sup>1</sup> Although the attack on the station had to be postponed Major-General Parkinson ordered 6 Brigade to call up the armour to help the infantry clear Route 6 through the town. Shortly before noon, therefore, 1 Troop (Lieutenant Morrin) <sup>2</sup> crossed the Rapido by the Bailey bridge erected overnight by a company of 48 United States Engineer Battalion and drove on towards **Cassino**. About 150 yards short of the convent it was halted by the first of the craters and waited an hour for the arrival of a bridging tank. When the bridge had been partly laid across the gap, a shell destroyed it and damaged the lowering mechanism of the tank. With difficulty the tank dragged the wreckage out of the crater and backed away, while a second bridging tank came forward, carrying Second-Lieutenant McCormick <sup>3</sup> and two of his engineers from 2 Platoon of **7 Field Company**, who were to sweep for mines.

Meanwhile a junction had been made with the infantry. After failing once, Lieutenant Morrin on his second reconnaissance by foot located 14 Platoon of C Company 26 Battalion, which he helped by the fire of his tank to occupy the convent.

But back at the crater there was more trouble. This time the bridge tilted to one side when it was lowered over the gulf. It took an hour, some hard work by the engineers and tank crews and finally the pull of one of 1 Troop's tanks to right the bridge. A third bridging tank then crossed and spanned another crater 100 yards ahead. The road to 26 Battalion was now blocked by only one more breach in the road, a few yards from the convent crossroads. The two leading tanks of 1 Troop made a deviation and by 3.45 they had joined C Company 26 Battalion by the convent. One tank of 4 Troop, which had been following up, also got through.

These three tanks brought some relief to the New Zealand infantry by engaging enemy posts at their request and, by transmitting messages

by wireless, reopened the link between 26 Battalion headquarters and C Company. The sappers meanwhile made possible further tank reinforcement by repairing the diversion round the last crater and by sweeping the road for mines as far as the convent. This task was made easier by work done the night before by a

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<sup>1</sup> These bridging tanks were Valentines carrying a 30-foot folding bridge. Headquarters 4 Armoured Brigade had five of them. They had first been in action north of the **Sangro**.

<sup>2</sup> Capt T. G. S. Morrin, MC; **Dannevirke**; born **Wanganui**, 26 Aug 1917; stock agent; twice wounded.

<sup>3</sup> 2Lt D. McCormick; **Wellington**; born **Scotland**, 3 Mar 1913; geologist and mining engineer.

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company of American engineers who had lifted Teller mines from the roadway and filled craters west of the Bailey bridge. The arrival of the tanks at the eastern end of

QUISLING

was the Division's most encouraging achievement in a day of few and small successes.

(iii)

Continued activity on Route 6 between the bridge and the convent was practicable only by night or behind a screen of smoke. Now and throughout the battle smoke-making was a main occupation of some infantrymen and gunners, and tank crews were often seconded to the task. Gun and tank shells, mortar bombs and canisters were used to generate a haze that would in particular blind observers on **Montecassino** and in the railway station area and obscure the Rapido bridge from hostile eyes anywhere. On this first full day of the battle, men of the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** and 27 Machine Gun Battalion

humped the ponderous canisters across the Rapido and lit them from emission points on the exposed flats south of Route 6. The screen round the bridge was thickened by the fire of the 4. 2-inch mortars but as soon as noon approached, and with it the time of day when smoke was least protective, the guns of **4 Field Regiment** switched to the same target, and finally the tanks of B Squadron 19 Regiment and the self-propelled guns of 392 Battery were called in. Even so, a freak of the wind would lift the curtain now and then. Not till late afternoon was it judged wise to slacken off the production of smoke. By that time the canister parties by the riverbank, whose location was accurately advertised by the thick white streamers curling from the smoke-pots, had drawn much of the enemy's fire upon themselves.

Smoke was **5 Brigade's** main contribution to the battle on the 16th. Its role was still support of 6 Brigade, and when the attack on the railway station had to be postponed, the Divisional Com mander followed up a suggestion of Brigadier Queree by ordering **5 Brigade** to test its own impression that the station might be empty. D Company **28 Battalion** supplied a patrol of thirteen led by Second-Lieutenant **Smith**<sup>1</sup> and accompanied by a reconnaissance party from **8 Field Company**. In the late afternoon, when the smoke was beginning to linger more protectively, the patrol crossed the Rapido and moved along the railway line into the yards. When 50 yards short of a belt of wire it engaged German troops, who made off into the railway buildings. On this alarm four German machine guns opened up from the yards and the hummock, wounding three New Zealanders, including the engineer commander,

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt R. Smith**; Nuhaka, Hawke's Bay; born NZ 17 Jan 1913; labourer.

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Second-Lieutenant **Whelan**.<sup>1</sup> The patrol withdrew, escorted, whenever there was a rift in the smoke screen, by bursts from machine guns and mortars. Plainly, objective

would have to be fought for. And from the engineers' report it was apparent that the approach along the railway line was again closed to wheels, though the route was not mined: two bridges across demolitions would have to be replaced and three other demolitions needed attention.

For the engineers the 16th was another day of frustration. Each of the three field companies had been allotted an avenue of approach to the infantry objectives – the 7th the northern route through the town, the 6th (with 48 United States Engineer Battalion) the eastern route along Route 6 and the 8th the south-eastern along the railway line. A dawn reconnaissance, which cost a life, convinced 7 Field Company that no feasible route could be found and that it was hopeless to work in **Cassino**. Sixth Field Company stood by to await the southward thrust by 26 Battalion, and 8 Field Company returned to its camp, except for the small detachment which, as we have seen, tested the railway line. Overnight, however, a platoon of 6 Field Company under Major Loudon <sup>2</sup> had the satisfaction of solid work far forward on Route 6. The tank scissors bridge over one crater was replaced by a treadway bridge and relaid over another, and a third crater was filled in. By dawn on the 17th, the tanks at the convent had a clear road behind them.

After firing a programme to help the infantry forward before dawn, the artillery spent most of the day on protective tasks- counter-battery, counter-mortar and smoke shoots. The German artillery reply was desultory and not very harmful. The mischievous nebelwerfers round **Pignataro** got themselves into trouble in the early evening when a retaliatory bombardment by the New Zealand field guns set off an explosion and a fire in their area; and when they came again toward midnight, they provoked a mighty counter-blast (on the scale of a hundred to one in weight of metal) that kept them quiet for the rest of the night.

Air support continued to be generous. The sky over the battlefield was filled for much of the day by aircraft of the **Tactical Air Force**, which made German gun and mortar positions in the **Liri** and **Secco**

valleys their main targets. In all, 172 medium bombers, 24 light bombers and 126 fighter-bombers dropped 307 tons of bombs in 13 flights between about 10 a.m. and 4.30 p.m. Most bombs found their mark, but during the afternoon one wave of six mediums launched theirs fairly into **7 Indian Brigade's** administrative area round **Portella** and **San Michele**. Fifty men were killed or wounded

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt E. L. R. Whelan**, m.i.d.; **Napier**; born **Auckland**, 19 May 1905; builder; wounded 16 Mar 1944.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj B. J. Loudon**, m.i.d.; **Syria**; born **Dunedin**, 1 Jun 1896; civil engineer and surveyor; served **1 NZEF**, 1915–19; twice wounded; **NZ Engrs** 1940–46.

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- 31 Indians, 12 Moroccans and 7 New Zealanders. Mules and vehicles were also lost. It was the latest in the series of distressing incidents that had to be accepted without protest to the air command as the price of close support. The air was never free during the day from Allied fighters on reconnaissance. They patrolled continuously over the enemy's forward areas and at two-hourly intervals farther back. But Allied mastery of the air was not quite complete. At 5.50 p.m. 28 Focke-Wulf fighter-bombers swooped out of the dusk to make a low-level raid on the Bailey bridge over the Rapido on Route 6. The bombs fell wide, mainly east of the river.

(iv)

For several hours on the 16th obscurity almost as thick as the smoke clouds that billowed and drifted about it surrounded the course of the battle on the eastern face of **Montecassino**. Here, against savage opposition, 5 Indian Brigade was trying to exploit along the hillside to keep pace with the New Zealanders in the town. The three battalions of the brigade were given successive objectives. **Castle Hill** and Point 165 were to be taken over from the New Zealanders by 1/4 Essex Regiment, which would hold the doorway for the rest of the brigade. First to pass

through would be **1/6 Rajputana Rifles**, directed on two bends in the road leading to the monastery, the northern at Point 236, the southern at Point 202. From this firm base, **1/9 Gurkha Rifles** would move over the upper slopes to Hangman's Hill, a knoll protruding from the stony hillside only three hundred yards or so from the south-east walls of the monastery. The final assault on the monastery was reserved for the Essex battalion and as many **Gurkhas** as could be spared.

From the beginning the plan fell behind the clock. There was delay in clearing the very threshold to the Indians' battlefield. Because of rain, darkness, steep going and enemy interference, the Essex battalion's relief of D Company 25 Battalion, timed originally for 7.30 p.m., was not complete till after midnight, and as late as 3 a.m. on the 16th the Englishmen were still fighting for Point 165. So unsure was our hold on the doorway that **General Freyberg** contemplated cancelling the exploitation, but decided to let it go on in the hope that the prize of **Montecassino** would yet fall to a sudden thrust.

The next stage in the plan went awry. When the Rajputana Rifles at last advanced about 3 a.m., already depleted by enemy fire, the two companies sent to capture Point 202 were soon scattered. They disposed of some German posts but could not reach the southern bend of the road and fell back, under heavy fire, toward **Castle Hill**. The other companies made ground uphill toward Point 236 and engaged the enemy at close range. This road bend, giving vital command over the **Castle Hill** area, seemed almost within their grasp until shortly before dawn, when casualties, some of them inflicted by our own artillery, caused them to withdraw. The Rajputana battalion was now dispersed and disorganised, its headquarters was out of action from casualties and its losses had been heavy.

This failure ahead of him confronted the commander of **1/9 Gurkha Rifles** (Major G. S. Nangle) with what proved to be a fateful choice. He had either to hold back his battalion or send it forward over intermediate objectives probably not yet cleared. He paid his men the compliment of choosing the bolder course and despatched two of his



companies towards Hangman's Hill. One early fell into an ambush, losing fifteen men in a minute to spandaus. The other, C Company, under Lieutenant M. R. Drinkhall, melted away into the night. Dawn revealed a brigade thrown into much disarray by the night's work. The Essex battalion and two companies of the Rajputanas had a firm grip on Castle Hill and Point 165. The other Rajputana companies were scattered in disorder on the edge of the town. Three Gurkha companies lay in some sort of defensive line behind the castle. Lieutenant Drinkhall's company was missing.

Later in the morning figures were dimly descried moving round the rocky ledge of Hangman's Hill. In the early afternoon, a faint wireless message confirmed that they were the survivors of Drinkhall's company, set squarely where they had been ordered to go. They had been on their narrow platform since just before dawn. Their ascent from the castle area had been an astonishing feat. Lieutenant Drinkhall had led his platoons, under plunging fire from the hillside, unerringly round craters, over hillocks of debris and between gaps in ruined buildings south through the western outskirts of the town. Then he had struck uphill, always skirting German strongpoints which he knew to be unsubdued, and reserving his men for the contest that would be needed to clear his own objective. By the time he reached the foot of Hangman's Hill, parts of his company had strayed; but he did not wait for them to come up. With his leading platoon commander and one rifleman, he climbed the crag, flushed the surprised Germans from their defences with grenades and small-arms fire and seized the hill. When the last platoon toiled to the top, it found Drinkhall going about the task of organising his company on its precarious perch. The Gurkhas had dwindled sadly in numbers, they were all but encircled by the enemy in well-prepared posts not far away and their lifeline back to the castle was extremely tenuous, if it could be said to exist at all. They settled down to take the drubbing which is the enemy's tribute to a successful stroke of daring. This isolated lodgment, clearly to be seen by anyone in the Allied lines who cared to scan the grey hillside, now helped to shape the Indians' battle. Its reinforcement became a main preoccupation of 5 Indian Brigade.

The night of 15–16 March brought forth another exploit on the mountain. An engineer officer, Lieutenant Angus Murray of 4 Indian Field Company, and Sergeant **Morris**<sup>1</sup> of **20 Armoured Regiment** were ordered forward with the attacking troops to reconnoitre a tank route to the top of **Montecassino** so that C Squadron might help the Indian brigade in the exploitation. To these two belongs the distinction of penetrating farther behind the German lines than any other Allied soldiers at **Cassino**. After being held up by shellfire, they set off at 5 a.m. for Point 202, whence they turned downhill to explore routes between there and Route 6. They worked south as far as the amphitheatre at the corner of the valley mouth, but as they returned north they were overtaken by daylight and found themselves in an area populous with Germans. In a building where they took shelter from our own shelling they became embroiled with a small party of the enemy. Sergeant Morris was shot dead, but the officer killed several Germans and in the scuffle made his escape. He outran his hosts, dodged the bullets they aimed after him and reached safety at Point 193. His report was that **Montecassino** was impassable for tanks except by the road.

For the Indian brigade on the bare, boulder-strewn slopes or on the outskirts of the town, the 16th was a day of endurance rather than of achievement. The infantry on Hangman's Hill and **Castle Hill** fired and were fired at from short ranges intermittently all day. It proved impossible to win Point 236. Further attacks were postponed until after dark

(v)

So much had gone amiss in the execution of the plan that it seems natural to conclude rather than to preface a description of the 16th by a reference to the reactions at Corps Headquarters. Early in the day, the intention was to adhere to the original plan of a New Zealand attack on

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to synchronise with an Indian attack on the monastery, followed by a tank thrust up Cavendish road to the rear of the monastery. The time

was to be mid-morning, but when this became clearly impracticable, a conference at 9.30 postponed it until two hours before nightfall. It was not the last postponement. The failure of the New Zealand tanks to get through earlier and the impossibility of working across the face of Montecassino

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<sup>1</sup> **Sgt A. F. Morris**; born NZ 20 Feb 1914; labourer; killed in action 16 Mar 1944.

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by day imposed another. The 17th was now appointed for the Indian bid for the abbey and for the New Zealanders' effort to clear

QUISLING

with tank support and then to assault

JOCKEY

The effect of surprise had now quite expended itself; and the 16th saw inexorably at work a law of diminishing returns. The attack was in danger of stagnation. The day's record did not reveal the **New Zealand Corps** as the force in real command of the battle, nor did the day bring fresh illuminations or inspire new initiatives. A conference at 6 Brigade at 6.30 p.m. prescribed for the morrow the dose as before with a stiffening of iron. After reorganising itself overnight, 25 Battalion should attack again next morning with the same objectives, but this time with the support of A Squadron 19 Regiment. Thereafter, **QUISLING** having been cleared, 26 Battalion would seize the railway station and, on brigade orders, 24 Battalion the area of the Colosseum. From Brigade upward high store was set upon the ability of the armour to break the incipient deadlock. Yet no more than nine tanks were fairly within the town. Of these six were certainly, and the other three probably, incapable of further advance until bomb cavities had been filled and rubbish removed from their path. But Brigadier Hanson was complaining that his sappers could not work very usefully until the infantry had made room for them: they could improve the road behind the tanks but

they could not break the barrier in front of them. So the vicious circle closed again upon the infantry

Three battalions had been thrown against the defences on Montecassino, but in the town only two battalions and one company from a third had been committed. Though perhaps two-thirds of the built-up area of **Cassino** was in our hands, resistance on the rising ground in the south-west, which had a hard core in and around the Continental Hotel, was a serious hindrance to 6 Brigade's designs on the railway station objective. The strengthening of the infantry had been suggested. In the morning the Army Commander advised pouring more infantry across the Rapido bridge, but **General Freyberg** thought he had plenty in the confined area of the town; and in the evening Major-General A. Galloway, who had assumed temporary command of **4 Indian Division**, remarked that he was 'completely convinced that the best way to clear **Cassino** is to put infantry in and go on doing so until it is cleared'.

(vi)

The Germans meanwhile were tolerably satisfied with the progress of the battle: at least irretrievable disaster had been staved off. Senior officers were forward encouraging their men. When General Senger went to *1 Parachute Division* battle headquarters on the afternoon of the 16th, he found that General Heidrich had gone into **Cassino**, where he had been with the fighting troops since the action began. The fear of a repetition of the previous day's air assault clearly emerges from a telephone conversation that day between General Vietinghoff, at **Tenth Army**, and General Westphal, Marshal Kesselring's Chief of Staff.

Westphal: Do you think **Cassino** can be held indefinitely?

Vietinghoff: I can't tell yet. Senger thinks that if he were to turn on another air attack to-day like the one yesterday, our men would be helpless. Everybody was dazed by that bombardment, and before they could snap out of it the enemy was into them ....

**Westphal: The enemy has reported that it was impossible to maintain troops in the town because of the German snipers.**

**Vietinghoff: That is very good indeed .... But Senger told me the aircraft had a terrible effect.**

**Westphal: I bet you are glad you had the paratroops there.**

**Vietinghoff: Yes .... The paratroops will hold on best ....**

**Material reinforcement was promised to the forward troops in the form of *Ofenröhre* and *Faustpatronen*,<sup>1</sup> and *15 Panzer Grenadier Division* was to lend some armoured vehicles to carry supplies and wounded. Senger also agreed to transfer to the parachute division *III Battalion 115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, which would release *I Battalion 4 Parachute Regiment* on Colle Sant' Angelo for service in **Cassino**, where it would fight on familiar ground and beside familiar units. This reinforcement was only a stopgap and there would be an anxious time until a more substantial draft was received. The crisis would come soon. In fact, the Germans expected on the 16th that 'the enemy would make a supreme effort next day to capture the ruins of **Cassino**'. In the enemy reading of the battle, then, the 17th would be a day of destiny.**

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<sup>1</sup> The *Ofenröbr* was similar to the American bazooka and fired a hollow-charge rocket projectile; the *Faustpatrone* was a 44-millimetre recoilless anti-tank grenade launcher.

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

# CHAPTER 13 – THE MARCH ATTACK: ENCOUNTER

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

I: 17 MARCH

*I: 17 March*

*(i)*

**THE sun that brought in a fine day on 17 March rose about 6.20 on a scene which, confused and uncertain as it was, gave the **New Zealand Corps** some encouragement and the Germans some concern; but when it set twelve hours later after a day of close and bitter fighting both hopes and fears were shown to have been exaggerated. Though the Indians reinforced their garrison on Hangman's Hill and the New Zealanders made a thousand yards of good ground by pushing south to the railway station and the hummock, the German stronghold in the south-west of the town held out as doggedly as ever, and the eastern face of **Montecassino** remained to both sides a place of peril. The enemy survived a testing day. The 17th brought us fresh territorial gains, but to all intents and purposes it also defined their limits.**

*(ii)*

**Overnight the main actions had been fought on the hillside. Once more 5 Indian Brigade sent elements of two battalions up the slope. From Point 165 two companies of **1/6 Rajputana Rifles** assaulted Point 236, the knob above the next hairpin bend in the road, and seized and held it against counter-attacks until about dawn, when, their ammunition spent, they had to fall back on their starting point. Point 165 itself now changed hands but the Indians won it back and held it during the day in none too firm a grip. The two other companies of **1/6 Rajputana Rifles** made good their objective, Point 202, and defended it under fire for the rest of the day. Their advance had been made beside three companies of **1/9 Gurkha Rifles**, who were to press on to reinforce Lieutenant Drinkhall's all-but-beleaguered company on Hangman's Hill.**

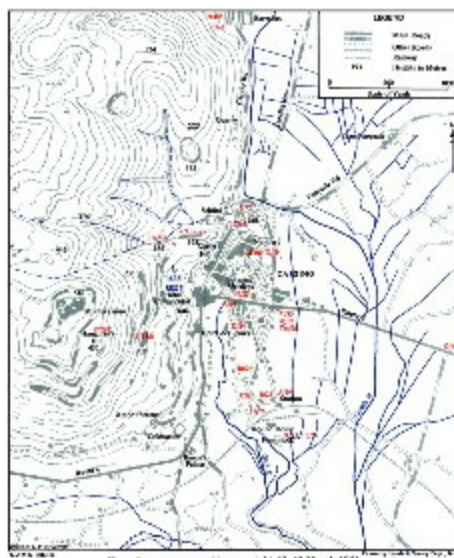


It took the **Gurkhas** eight hours or more to weave through the enemy defences. They arrived not a minute too soon. Their comrades on Point 435 were hard pressed: the Germans had counter-attacked, gained a foothold on the knoll and had been barely kept at bay by the courage of Lieutenant Drinkhall, who, with one leg broken, had propped himself against a rock, fired his pistol at the enemy and inspired his men to hold on. They did, and when the three companies reached them the Germans were put to flight. Still closely hemmed in, the battalion threw a small circle of posts round its position and prepared for a feat of endurance. Drinkhall insisted on retaining command of his company and he did not abandon it until he was evacuated the next day. His bravery, skill and leadership earned him the Victoria Cross.

On the morning of the 17th, then, Point 435 was securely garrisoned by **1/9 Gurkha Rifles**, and below them Point 202 was in the hands of two companies of **1/6 Rajputana Rifles**. There was only shaky contact between these two posts, and with the troops below them none at all. The rest of **1/6 Rajputana Rifles** clung precariously to Point 165, which was besieged by enemy posts, but on **Castle Hill** **1/4 Essex** were more comfortable though still troubled by fire from above and below. At Point 236 the enemy not only interposed himself between the **Gurkhas** and their base but dominated **Castle Hill** and Point 165, held at least a prohibitive command over the road to the monastery and swept with his fire wide areas of the hillside. So long as this situation was not mended the abbey looked safe from any threat based on Point 435, and the garrison there was like an arrow without a bow. But since a reliable route upwards from **Castle Hill** could not be established while **Cassino** was uncleared, the New Zealand infantry came under an urgent incentive to finish the job in the town. **Freyberg** pressed Parkinson to 'put great energy into clearing it up on a broad front'. 'It is essential that we should push through to the **Gurkhas** tonight,' he added. 'Anywhere you can push in tanks, do so'.

(iii)

These instructions were given about 8.30 a.m. By this time 6 Brigade was well launched on the day's work. During the night the troops in the town had got themselves into better shape. Twenty-sixth Battalion, for example, had set up a Regimental Aid Post, received food and replenished its ammunition. The day's programme began with an effort by 25 Battalion, with B Company 24 Battalion under command and 5 Troop **19 Armoured Regiment** in support, to crush the stubborn opposition at the south-west corner of **QUISLING**. The attackers moved west at 6.45, preceded by the fire of tank guns and covered by small arms. The tanks, under Second-Lieutenant **P. G. Brown**,<sup>1</sup> led off towards the Botanical Gardens, using their



Operation **DICKENS**, position on night 17-18 March 1944

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt P. G. Brown; Wellington; born Wellington, 14 Jul 1921; shepherd; wounded 18 Mar 1944.**

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75-millimetre guns and Brownings at point-blank range against dugouts and emplacements to blast a path for the infantry. Visibility was poor and resistance strong, and three tanks were stopped by mud or broken tracks; yet stationary or mobile, their fire began to tell. The infantry fought their way forward under heavy shelling and in some confusion, 25 Battalion probably along the line of the northern Route 6

and B Company 24 Battalion across the gardens. On the right the advance was halted by spandau nests manned by Germans who had sifted back into the town and dug themselves in under **Castle Hill**. On the left the 24 Battalion company, much under strength, came under tornadoes of fire from all quarters, but especially from the Continental Hotel, the very penetralia of the German defences, which stood at the T-junction where Route 6 turned south and commanded three stretches of road. The New Zealanders worked forward across the gardens, clearing buildings as they went, to within two hundred yards of the Continental. Here they took refuge in a house south of Route 6 and near its junction with a sunken road that ran towards the station. Four hundred yards ahead of them, as far as the foot of the hill, lay an uninviting arena – a stretch of ground bomb-torn, waterlogged, denuded of cover.

A pause ensued. But the attack had forced open the door far enough to allow 26 Battalion to pass through towards the second objective. Before 9 a.m. Bonifant reported that he now had enough room to work on both fronts at once. **Freyberg**, who had already that day withstood Clark's pressure for more infantry, had words of exhortation: 'Push on, you must go hard. Task Force B must go through as soon as possible. The limit is the roof – push hard'. Five minutes later he confided to Clark his hopes of 'a certain amount of movement'.

*(iv)*

The launching of the southward thrust was a rough and ragged affair. The failure of communications kept the companies of 26 Battalion in ignorance of details of timings and routes, and they were in part engrossed in supporting 25 Battalion on their right. On brigade orders the artillery concentration opened at 11 a.m., and ten minutes later 4 Troop (Lieutenant Furness) <sup>1</sup> led tanks of A Squadron out of the crypt of the convent and headed for the station, followed by 2 Troop (Lieutenant Beswick). <sup>2</sup> The infantry, however, were not all aware that the advance had begun. Lieutenant-Colonel

<sup>1</sup> **Capt J. G. Furness, MC; Blenheim; born Blenheim, 9 May 1915; reporter.**

<sup>2</sup> **Lt C. C. Beswick, MC; Oamaru; born Oamaru, 9 May 1912; insurance agent; wounded 17 Mar 1944.**

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**Richards and his adjutant (Major Barnett) <sup>1</sup> came up in a tank to spread the word and despatched C Company (Major Williams) on its way. Runners were sent to summon the other companies from the centre of the town.**

**Their forming up on some sort of start line was a frantic and bloody manoeuvre. They had to rush distances of a hundred or two hundred yards under the muzzles of German rifles and spandaus to reach Tactical Headquarters in the convent and the road to the station. The later platoons had to cross ground where they had seen their comrades struck down. Some slipped through almost unharmed by swinging left to shelter behind the stumps of buildings. Others, those of D Company, chose less wisely in veering to the right into full view of the waiting enemy and reached the convent in utter disorder. About twenty-five soldiers of A Company, including Major **Fraser**, <sup>2</sup> failed to get there at all. One who did described his ordeal.**

**... those in the Municipal Buildings knew that their chances of gaining Tactical Headquarters were slim. Not only did the enemy have a sniper watching the only entrance to the building but the ground which the whole company would have to cross was under heavy fire. Enemy snipers and machine gunners had a clear view of the route and each man in the company knew what to expect when he started running .... Nevertheless, section by section the men raced over the open ground. Most of them had only little more than a hundred yards to go, but the enemy snipers on roof tops were waiting and they showed no mercy. Most of those in the building got out safely only to be shot in the back as they ran toward the Nunnery [Convent] entrance. One after another they dropped.**

The wounded crawled to shell craters, others paused to help, only to be hit themselves. Other wounded stumbled, half-crawled towards shelter only to be laid low by another bullet .... The wounded were lying everywhere. Mortar bombs were bursting amongst them. Those who reached the temporary haven of the Nunnery were badly shaken.

For twenty minutes Major **Borrie**,<sup>3</sup> 24 Battalion's medical officer, assisted by Lieutenant **Neale**<sup>4</sup> and Sergeant **Maze**<sup>5</sup> of B Company, worked in the open to succour the wounded till mortar bombs at last drove them to cover.

Within the roofless, barn-like crypt bands of dazed soldiers who had raced to safety began to collect. They threw themselves down in exhaustion or stood doubled up, panting for breath; they swallowed tots of rum and dressed one another's wounds. Those fit to go on gathered themselves into military order for the thousand-yard

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col A. W. Barnett**, MC; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 13 Oct 1913; draper; CO **25 Bn** Apr–Oct 1945; comd (temp) **6 Bde** 19 Oct–1 Dec 1945; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj A. J. Fraser**; born NZ 8 Mar 1905; school teacher; killed in action 17 Mar 1944.

<sup>3</sup> **Maj A. W. H. Borrie**, OBE, MC; Dunedin; born **Port Chalmers**, 10 May 1917; medical practitioner; medical officer **1 Gen Hosp** Aug–Dec 1941; **6 Fd Amb** Dec 1941–Jul 1942; RMO **24 Bn** Jul 1942–Oct 1944; **3 Gen Hosp** Oct 1944–May 1945.

<sup>4</sup> **Lt C. V. Neale**; **Nelson**; born NZ 13 Aug 1922; clerk; wounded 1 Dec 1944.

<sup>5</sup> **Sgt G. L. Maze**; born Rangiriri, 29 Oct 1914; labourer; wounded 29 Jul 1942; killed in action 19 Apr 1944.

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advance to the station, while officers went round calling for volunteers to fill empty places of command.

Meanwhile the attack had gone forward. Between Route 6 and the railway line lay two roads forming a St. Andrew's cross. In spite of an earlier reconnaissance, Lieutenant Furness could now rediscover neither of the two northern arms of the cross, so deep lay the rubble. By exploring on foot, he found a way round the blockage and led his tanks south under fire, with machine-gun bullets 'rattling like hailstones' on their steel walls. About the crossroads half-way to the station a belt of mines caused a hold-up. Furness himself and Corporal Forbes <sup>1</sup> cleared the field while the other tanks covered them with the smoke of shells aimed into nearby piles of debris. Gaining the embanked road which formed the south-east arm of the cross, the tanks brought their guns to bear convincingly on pillboxes and machine-gun posts and all was going well until in quick succession two tanks of 2 Troop were set aflame by an enemy anti-tank gun. The crews made the most of their involuntary infantry role by wading through water waist-deep to capture a house from which machine-gun and mortar fire had been troubling them. From this building and another enemy post they combed out about sixteen prisoners. The tanks of 4 Troop pressed on towards the station and by noon two tanks were there ready to usher in the infantry. Within an hour they were joined by two tanks of 3 Troop (Lieutenant Griggs), <sup>2</sup> the survivors of an adventurous journey from the Bailey bridge over Route 6.

The infantry made their ground much more slowly and arrived at the station not in a single sweep but in driblets, scrambling home like weary runners at the end of a long and deadly steeplechase. At the crossroads C Company, being in the lead, momentarily caught up with the tanks. Thereafter even the semblance of cohesion was lost. From the house near the crossroads where the dismounted tank crews had taken shelter the C Company platoons, already thinned out by shelling and mortaring, made their several ways towards the station. Some sections found a safe passage through a long, wet tunnel running beside a road, and then emerged on to the embankment to face bursting shells and a spray of

machine-gun bullets. Some crossed the embankment and worked in an arc across the flat to the west. Others went farther west still to seek the protection of the sunken road. Eventually, perhaps by 1 p.m., the leading platoons were reunited near the station. They learned from the two tank

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<sup>1</sup> Sgt W. N. Forbes, MM; Silverstream; born Wellington, 14 Jan 1919; painter; wounded 4 Jul 1942.

<sup>2</sup> Capt R. N. Griggs, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Wellington, 12 Dec 1917; mercer; wounded 28 Jul 1944; now Regular Force.

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crews that the station was ours, though the area of the yards was not quite clear of the enemy.

When Major Williams arrived he found that his company had dwindled to about forty men, but he decided to seize the propitious moment and to order the capture of the hummock. This rocky hillock lay 200 yards farther on. To reach it the Round House had first to be taken. It fell without much trouble to Lieutenant Quartermain's <sup>1</sup> 14 Platoon, which found it empty; but when 13 Platoon passed through to the final goal, opposition started up until Lieutenant Hay <sup>2</sup> silenced two posts. He then led his men on to capture the hummock which had defied the Maoris a month earlier, along with six prisoners. The eastern slope was occupied and a post was sited on the forward slope to look across the flooded Gari towards the Baron's Palace and the Colosseum, the origin of so much of the fire that had challenged the advance to the station area and now continued to harass its captors.

The progress of the other companies towards the station was similarly checkered by mishaps and loss and redeemed by the initiative of junior commanders and the doggedness of those who followed them. A few episodes are recorded, and they must do duty for all. Behind C Company came the remnants of A. Second-Lieutenant Lowry, <sup>3</sup> who had taken over command, followed the tunnel route with fatal consequences,

for by now the enemy was covering the exit with machine guns. Sergeant O'Reilly, <sup>4</sup> at the head of two platoons, moved out across the mudflats over ground creased with deep ditches full of muddy water and bespattered with smoke canisters. He searched boldly for C Company and, brushing aside resistance, led the fourteen men still with him to the Round House and thence to the hummock. B Company (Major Harvey) <sup>5</sup> made its way to the station along with the survivors of D Company, now reduced to about platoon strength. They found the embanked road still raked by machine guns and infested by riflemen and when they plunged off it on to the flat the going, in knee-deep water, was slower and only a little less exposed.

On arriving at the station, Major Harvey conferred with Major Williams. The battalion was now too tired and too depleted to expand its gains to the limits of objective JOCKEY, and the decision was to consolidate on a line behind the Gari and its inundations, extending

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<sup>1</sup> Maj W. E. Quartermain, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Doyleston, 29 Oct 1911; labourer; wounded 3 May 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Capt H. B. Hay, MC; Alford Forest, Ashburton; born NZ 27 Apr 1916; sheep farmer; wounded 24 May 1944.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Lt K. J. Lowry; born NZ 9 Oct 1912; stock agent; killed in action 17 Mar 1944.

<sup>4</sup> Lt J. F. O'Reilly, DCM, m.i.d.; Mount Hutt, Rakaia; born Rakaia, 14 Jul 1907; barman; wounded 22 Mar 1944.

<sup>5</sup> Maj D. P. W. Harvey, MC, m.i.d.; Picton; born Havelock, 4 Feb 1918; clerk; CO (temp) 23 Bn Sep–Dec 1945.

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as far north as possible. The two tanks retired a short way to a supporting position from which their guns could at once defend the



station and hummock area and annoy more distant enemy posts. Meanwhile the answering fire from the Baron's Palace did not slacken. The left flank rested firmly enough on a plain that was thickly mined and under the protective machine guns of **27 Battalion** across the Rapido as well as being dominated by the three platoons holding the hummock. The rest of C Company defended the Round House and B Company disposed its platoons north of the station so as to cover it and Route 6 in the region of the Baron's Palace. The remnants of A and D Companies went into reserve around the built-up road. Behind B Company the machine-gun section trained its guns along the railway line to the south-west, using blankets to conceal the flash.

By dusk the New Zealand infantry in the station area numbered about a hundred, and a few stragglers were still drifting in. Not all those missing were casualties – some were badly shaken and had turned back, some had stopped to tend the wounded, some were lying low until dark. But when the cost came to be counted, the battalion's casualties during the afternoon were found to be 33 killed and 58 wounded.

(v)

The capture of the railway station and hummock was to have been the cue for **24 Battalion** (less B Company) to essay the even more ambitious task of rolling up the vital stretch of Route 6 at the foot of the hill between the Continental and the Colosseum. Its failure might have been forecast from the day's reverses in the town. At 9 a.m. **Freyberg** had canvassed the idea of sending tanks to work both ways from the T-junction of Route 6, south towards the Colosseum and north towards the centre of the town. In the event the infantry in **Cassino** spent the day gallantly but vainly battering themselves against the granite defences in the western fringes of the town and along the foot of the mountain, **25 Battalion** under **Castle Hill**, B Company **24 Battalion** at the approaches to the Continental. Consequently, when in the early afternoon **24 Battalion** received the order to advance from the quarry area north of the town, the direct route to its objective was a fiercely

contested battlefield.

A and D Companies, leaving C Company beyond the barracks, found **Cassino**, which they now entered for the first time, a perplexing and dangerous shambles. A Company (Captain Schofield) was pressed out to its left by hostility under the hill, but the pace could not be quickened and it was after nightfall when the company reached the convent. By now it was out of touch with D Company (Captain Ramsay). The centre of the town had proved too much for Ramsay's men also. After being shot at by well-hidden riflemen in a narrow defile where the use of smoke was not feasible, the company probed for another route but in the end pulled back to the northern entrance to the town and thence set out in the dark for the convent by way of the eastern outskirts, arriving about 8.30 p.m. Shortly after nine o'clock A Company made contact with B Company. Major Turnbull's account of his company's repeated repulses by 'the heaviest fire I've ever seen' and his insistence on the need for an adequately prepared attack with armoured support persuaded Schofield to turn back from his objective. D Company likewise paused for the night south of the convent. Thus the two companies inserted themselves between 26 Battalion in the south and 25 Battalion in the centre of the town; but the plugging of this hole seemed to have been a result of accident rather than design. Twenty-fourth Battalion's coming made no real impact on the battle.

By night the roading programme went ahead smoothly on the outskirts of **Cassino**, but within the town, as always, successes were slight and hard-won. The northern approach along Pasquale road was repaired and the ford over the Rapido opened, but enemy fire forbade work on the eastern boundary road and so prevented the junction with Route 6. The Americans almost completed an alternative bridge over the Rapido on Route 6, but farther west in the town the New Zealand engineers with mechanical equipment could clear a route only as far as the Botanical Gardens, so that between an aggressive tank and its most desirable target – the Continental Hotel – three hundred yards of impenetrable wreckage still intervened. Though pitted with craters,

barred by demolitions and liberally mined, the railway route was easier to work. By the morning of the 18th it was open to tanks and jeeps up to the station and to all traffic nearly as far.

(vi)

At dusk on the 17th the situation of the **New Zealand Corps** was ominous but not yet hopeless. It had profited from this day of opportunity, when the enemy resistance was at its lowest ebb, to advance as far as the hummock in the south – a success which gave more room for applying its superior numbers, stretched the German defences and widened the range of tactical choice. The air was almost entirely ours for observation or attack (over 400 sorties were flown this day) and the Germans had good grounds for their complaints about the consequences for their artillery, nebelwerfers and supply routes. The expenditure of our artillery remained vast. From dawn to dusk smoke was being fired or otherwise generated. Three battalions of infantry were fighting in the town with the support of a regiment of tanks, three more on the hillside. But no irreparable damage had been done to the enemy.

By the test of original expectations, the work of a few hours was still incomplete after more than two days. On the slope of **Montecassino**, where there were two battalion groups rather than three battalions, the garrison of Point 435 was poised precariously at the end of a limb which the Germans milling round **Castle Hill** were already threatening to sever at the trunk. Below them neither of the first two objectives was wholly in New Zealand hands. Thanks to the tenacious defence of the western edges of the town, **QUISLING** was only partly taken. Whereas the line of **JOCKEY** was a semi-circle swinging south from the Baron's Palace and then north to the station, no bridgehead had been established there and indeed not a single New Zealander stood west of the Gari.

Judged even by that morning's plans, the day's operations had failed: it had not proved possible to 'mop up the village' and clear the zigzag road as far as Hangman's Hill to relieve the **Gurkhas**. Communications were undependable. Enemy shelling seemed to have increased.

Casualties in men and material were mounting. The Indians were finding the slopes above the town very expensive to hold and on the 17th the New Zealanders lost about 130 all ranks in killed and wounded. Of the fifty or so tanks in the town, the German claim to have destroyed thirteen was exaggerated. At least twelve, it is true, were unserviceable, but the great majority were capable of repair or merely needed to be released from the grip of mud or rubble.

In the conduct of the battle two problems in particular exercised the generals and provoked brisk exchanges of opinion between **Freyberg** and the commanders above and below him. The first was whether the time had come to commit fresh infantry in **Cassino**. Early in the morning **Freyberg** contemplated the alternatives of reconstituting **5 Brigade** to occupy the station and help in clearing **Cassino** and the calling in of a brigade of **78 Division**. Since **5 Brigade** was being held for the pursuit, the first course implied some weakening of the intention or hope of exploiting up the **Liri** valley, and this **Freyberg** was yet unwilling to admit. Nor, for similar reasons, did he like the second course. His decision not to reinforce **6 Brigade** in the town was fully in accordance with the views of Parkinson and Bonifant, but both Clark and Galloway dissented.

A second disagreement concerned the timing of the assault on the monastery. Clark pressed strongly and repeatedly to close the pincers as soon as possible, with an assault on the monastery from Point 435 to be accompanied or closely followed by a tank-supported advance from the hills to the north and north-west. **Freyberg** doubted whether the armoured right hook would achieve much until the monastery could be powerfully attacked from the south and east. As with the **Anzio** landing ('nobody knows this better than you'), the diversion would succeed only when the main front had begun to crumble. To spring the trap too soon would only be to sacrifice surprise; and the monastery could not be attacked frontally, as Galloway insisted, until the supply route to Point 435 was secure. It was Galloway's reiterated conviction that it would not be secure until **Cassino** was clear. Hence **Freyberg's** pressure on **6**

**Brigade. This, like so many *Cassino* arguments, came round in a circle. The two controverted problems were one and indivisible.**

**(vii)**

**At *14 Panzer Corps* headquarters an early alarm gave way during the 17th to rising confidence. In the early stages of the battle news had come in slowly owing to shattered communications, and when the intelligence map was brought more nearly up to date on the morning of the 17th the sight was found disconcerting. Reports of an orderly officer who had returned to *1 Parachute Division* headquarters showed the Allied gains to be more extensive than at first thought, even though they were still short of the truth and were nearly all post-dated. At 10 a.m. *Tenth Army* confessed to *Army Group C* that ‘things are not too splendid here’, expressed anxiety lest the attack should be covering another operation elsewhere, perhaps along the coast, and rested the outcome of the battle on the day's events. The disposition at corps and division was to estimate the threat along the railway line more seriously than that on the hillside, where shellfire would prevent the Allies from forming up in any strength, and the assault on the railway station was correctly forecast. The Germans recognised that the Allied possession of the station and Point 435 exposed them to the danger of an outflanking movement, but when the station fell later in the day they took reassurance from their continued occupation of the western parts of the town and the monastery ruins. Their reports say that paratroops abandoned nothing but heaps of ruins in the town; and the station is said to have yielded only after hand-to-hand fighting, of which the New Zealand records afford no corroboration.**

**By night-time, Heidrich, always in the thick of the fight, was cheerful enough to be quite vexed not to have scored a decisive victory, but to console him he had the Fuehrer's personal approbation and – a more substantial comforter – reinforcements. In the town losses had been critically heavy. One company had sunk to a fighting strength of eight men; *1 Parachute Regiment* was in a bad way. Corps therefore**

placed two further battalions of *115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* at the disposal of the division on the understanding that they should relieve paratroops in the quieter neighbouring sectors. The paratroops hoped to share the honours of **Cassino** with none.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: 18 MARCH

### *II: 18 March*

*(i)*

The clearing of **Cassino** continued to engross the New Zealand Corps on 18 March, another day of fine weather. The Indians on the hillside, supplied overnight after more than one setback, could do little but hang on. The New Zealanders held their ground round the station, but the defence retained the upper hand also in the western fringes of the town, where the Germans threw back assaults from east and west. While the enemy infiltrated back into the town, the view still prevailed at **New Zealand Corps**, though with mounting doubt, that the three battalions already committed were equal to their task. They fought hard through the day without reinforcement but at the end had little to show for their efforts. By then a fourth battalion was on its way forward, the forerunner of a fresh brigade.

The tactics of the enemy and of our own troops on the 18th may be briefly compared before their almost uniform failure is described. The Germans had sufficiently regained their aplomb to be feeling their way towards a general counter-attack. They had planned for the night of 17-18 March to recapture the three points of a triangle which all but enclosed the battlefield – Point 193, Point 435 and the railway station area. As it happened, the first two attacks had to be abandoned, and the third failed; but the design was significant. If Castle Hill could be retaken, the danger to the monastery from Hangman's Hill would wilt away of its own accord. Further, a base would exist from which to drive the New Zealanders out of the town. The railway station was to be seized for the same purpose. Besides, so long as it was in New Zealand hands the fear of being bypassed in **Cassino** would persist.

The New Zealand Corps plan was in essence the converse of this

reasoning. It may be likened to an attempt to close a door with its hinge in the north-west corner of **Cassino**, its handle at the hummock and its jamb at Hangman's Hill. If the door could be closed **Cassino** and the hillside would be sealed against infiltration, and the assault on the monastery from Hangman's Hill could be mounted with a weight befitting its importance and conjointly with the armoured hook over the hills. On the 18th the three battalions pressing against the door in order from the right were the 25th, the 24th and the 26th. Most force was being exerted near the hinge, and we might picture C Company 24 Battalion as sallying out in front of the door to remove, from the area of the Hotel Continental, an obdurate wedge that was keeping it open.

*(ii)*

Twenty-fifth Battalion was once more instructed to root out the enemy who had established themselves in two blocks of about six houses each at the foot of **Castle Hill**. These Germans were in a narrow salient from which they directed their fire into the centre of the town and, even more seriously, up the hillside. They succeeded in restricting the deployment of troops on **Monastery Hill** to the single channel of a well-registered postern in the castle, through which only one man at a time could pass. C Company laboured all the day and into the night to reduce the resistance. From their eyrie on Hangman's Hill, where they were themselves the cynosure of New Zealand eyes, the **Gurkhas** looked down on the stubborn work in the town. Their commander, Major Nangle, wrote:

We watched, in one interval in the smoke, the New Zealanders below clearing one of the streets of **Cassino**. From our detached viewpoint we could appreciate the subtleties of the technique of both sides. The careful approach of the tanks, the searching for them by the German mediums, the blasting of each house in turn, the withdrawal of the Germans from house to house always covered by fire from another or from the street, the quick dashes of the supporting New Zealand infantry and the use of smoke by both sides. <sup>1</sup>



**C Company's perseverance was not unrewarded. At the last of three sorties from different directions, the company succeeded in clearing one troublesome strongpoint, killing 14 Germans and capturing three for the loss of 3 killed and 14 wounded. They were efficiently backed up by the fire of 19 Regiment tanks, mainly those of C Squadron, whose guns, it was claimed, completed the ruin of five or six houses. In such a scrimmage misadventure was not always avoidable: through bad marksmanship or ricochet some of the solid shot from the tank guns brought a wall in the castle tumbling down on some of the Essex battalion's garrison and caused casualties.**

**Other companies of 25 Battalion nearer the centre of the town seem to have been less active, but they were subjected to the same merciless mortaring and small-arms fire as they reorganised and looked after their wounded. Though late that night Bonifant thought that the Germans were being worn down and that the town would be cleared next day, the fact was that the nuisance under Castle Hill was barely abated.**

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<sup>1</sup> Stevens, p. 309.

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**Farther south, 24 Battalion's three companies were holding a line from the Botanical Gardens along the sunken road as far as the right wing of 26 Battalion. They faced, at a respectful distance, the Hotel Continental and its neighbouring bastion, the Hotel des Roses, 200 yards to the south. But B Company early lost two men shot from the rear by Germans who had presumably crept back during the night. Sniping from **Monastery Hill** made movement in the open suicidal. Nevertheless, having rested his men, Major Turnbull was planning another bid for the southward stretch of Route 6 when half his company were rudely disturbed by the collapse of the ceiling of the room where they were sheltering. By the time the men had dusted themselves, patched their wounds and disinterred their weapons, a dive-bombing raid had begun and it was then too late to attack. Such combined dangers and discomforts were the daily bread of the infantryman in **Cassino**, a ration**

more regular than any the quartermaster could send up.

Late on the 17th it was decided to vary the head-on assaults upon the defences at the foot of **Montecassino** by an attempt to come in by the back door while the Germans had their attention fixed towards the Rapido. The plan was for C Company 24 Battalion (Major Reynolds), still in reserve, to come forward through **Castle Hill** to Point 165 and thence to attack south to Point 202 to link up with the Rajputs who held that point. While 14 Platoon worked uphill to keep touch with the **Gurkhas** on Hangman's Hill, the other two platoons from a firm base on Point 202 were to sweep down towards the town to clear the area between Point 202 and Route 6, with 13 Platoon on the right directed on the Hotel des Roses and 15 Platoon on the left on the Continental. Tanks in the town were to give the support of their guns.

Arriving at Point 165 on time at 5 a.m. on the 18th, the three platoons had to fight for a start line amid spandau bursts and in thick smoke, but the first stage of the attack went fairly well. A junction was made with the Indians on Point 202 and even with the **Gurkhas** on the ledge above. But the plunge towards the town failed. The open hillside, swept by machine guns dug in on the slope or mounted at crumbling casements on the edge of the town, craved wary walking. The two platoons' lines of advance crossed: 15 Platoon found itself pinned to earth by fire from a pink house before it could close on the Hotel des Roses, and 13 Platoon could make as little headway. Two troops of A Squadron battered down some pillboxes, but they could not break the deadlock. Lieutenant Klaus <sup>1</sup> succeeded in leading 13 Platoon as far as Route 6, only to be killed outside the Hotel des Roses.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Lt C. D. M. Klaus, MM; born **Waihi**, 20 Oct 1916; freezing-worker; killed in action 18 Mar 1944.

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Towards the end of the day the company, with six killed and five wounded, consolidated on the slope above the town in the rough area of Points 202 and 146. Major Reynolds was ordered to remain in place,

partly to protect the flank of the **Gurkhas** on Point 435 and partly to interrupt as far as possible the flow of enemy supplies and reinforcements up Route 6. But the essential purpose of the action was unfulfilled. The paratroops were no more to be dislodged by the stiletto in the back than by the club in the face.

On the left flank of the Division, 26 Battalion beat off the strongest counter-attack yet attempted on the flat. For the men round the station a night made cheerless by shelling and the want of coats and blankets was succeeded by a cold, grey dawn, and with the dawn came the Germans. About sixty strong, they belonged to the motorcycle company attached to the *Parachute Machine Gun Company*. Their orders were to recapture the station and hummock and then to push north to the crossroads half-way to Route 6. Their coming was heralded by some ill-aimed artillery and nebelwerfer concentrations. Trying to pass themselves off as Indians, they approached across the mudflat and passed between the hummock and the Round House. Though some Germans managed to enter the Round House, the New Zealanders lying in wait opened such a fusillade, notably from the vantage-point of the hummock, that the attack was not pressed. The enemy withdrew under smoke, leaving behind at least ten casualties and perhaps more.

Their defensive success earned the men of 26 Battalion little respite. Sniping, mortars, artillery – the enemy employed the full repertory of harassment against them all day. To make life still less pleasant, our own 25-pounder smoke shells ‘were hissing overhead and bursting above [the battalion] area with a sharp crack [and] sending their canisters humming down to bowl madly all over the place’, while bombs dropped by the **Luftwaffe** burst in the flooded fields in front of the battalion and showered the men in their dugouts. That night there were more welcome visitors with greatcoats and blankets, and before midnight stretcher-bearers brought up a hot meal along the railway line. Since the ambulance jeeps used Route 6, casualties could be evacuated only by a difficult carry of half a mile or more to the convent.

By day the smoke screen was still an important charge on **5 Brigade**,

**the Divisional Cavalry and the artillery. The supply of smoke shells was being consumed at an alarming rate. On this day alone 21,700 rounds were issued to regiments and stocks at Mignano were only saved from exhaustion by a timely journey to Nola by trucks of the Petrol Company. High-explosive shelling was supplemented as usual by aerial bombing, but the plight of the Indians on Point 435 made an unusual call on the services of the fighter-bombers. Porterage on the mountainside was absorbing good troops, it was costly in casualties and it was unreliable in results. General Galloway was anxious to try the dropping of supplies by air, though it was realised that because of the steep slope some were sure to fall wide. During the afternoon forty-eight aircraft, each carrying two containers, made the delivery. Guided by coloured smoke, they came in sliely at about 200 feet. Suddenly the air blossomed into parachutes of many colours. Some of the canisters bounced out of reach down the hill, but the men on Point 435 retrieved enough food, water and ammunition to survive by hard living and to defend themselves.**

**(iii)**

**The Germans' story of the 18th had a ring of confidence:**

**The enemy's fierce assaults continued all day, but the paratroops held firm and kept command of all their positions. The town's battle commandant, Captain Foltin, distinguished himself particularly ... by personal gallantry and sound leadership. The ... artillery again played a great part in the success of the defence, bringing perceptible relief to the hard-pressed infantry with destructive concentrations on the enemy's forming up places.**

**Fresh reserves were brought up to strengthen the very weak garrison of the town.**

**Now that the day of crisis had been overcome, General Heidrich was full of confidence for the future.**

**The Germans were congratulating themselves on having survived the**

17th when, without reserves, the handful of troops in **Cassino** had held off 'a vastly superior enemy force'. Now the garrison had restored a continuous defensive line and was firmly under control. From the observed approach of Allied reinforcements the enemy concluded that the attack was losing its dash. The validity of this deduction may be tested against the tactical thinking in New Zealand Corps.

(iv)

On this disappointing day the debate on the sufficiency of the infantry in **Cassino** continued. Having seen the New Zealanders in the town, General Galloway again suggested that their difficulties were due to shortage of men. **General Freyberg** seemed now inclined to agree. He thought first of committing another battalion; by 7.30 he had almost made up his mind to put in **5 Brigade**; but when an hour later General Parkinson repeated that he had enough troops, **Freyberg** deferred, rather dubiously, to his Divisional Commander. 'You must remember,' he said, 'that the whole operation is being paralysed until **Cassino** is cleared up'. The slow progress in the west of the town was the final argument. At 4.15 p.m. the decision was taken to commit **28 Battalion** to mop up the rest of the town. The Maoris, under command of **6 Brigade** and with the support of **25 Battalion**, were to attack at 3 a.m. the next morning to capture the Continental and the buildings at the base of **Castle Hill**, including a towered watch-house which had been conspicuously troublesome.

Meanwhile plans had been laid for the capture of the monastery itself by a concerted assault. The unfinished state of the battle, whether in the town or on the hillside, was not allowed to act as a deterrent. The Maoris, it was hoped, would have snuffed out the last flame of resistance in the town before dawn. The Indians on Hangman's Hill were considered to be fit to deliver the final stroke against the monastery, both because of the partial success of the supply missions by foot overnight and by air that afternoon and because **5 Indian Brigade** had been able to reorganise – **4/6 Rajputana Rifles**, having been relieved of their portering duties,

had been amalgamated with **1/6 Rajputana Rifles** to form a battalion of full strength. While the Maoris distracted or dislodged the Germans under Point 193, the Essex battalion was to climb the hillside to join **1/9 Gurkha Rifles** on Point 435, and together at dawn the two battalions were to storm the monastery. At the same time **7 Indian Brigade Reconnaissance Squadron**, reinforced by New Zealand tanks, was to make its diversion in the rear. The corps was doing its best to hasten the battle to a climax. Who held the monastery, it had always been thought, held the road to **Rome**. If the great prize could be seized on the 19th, the fifth day of the battle, the chase might still be possible. Three hundred and fifty clean tanks and two fresh New Zealand battalions were ready to exploit.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## III: 19 MARCH

### *III: 19 March*

*(i)*

The promise of the 19th withered early. First, the Germans in the west of **Cassino** refused to leave, even at the urging of the fresh **Maori Battalion**. Next, they turned to throttle the attack on the monastery before it could fairly begin by striking at the Indians' vulnerable lifeline to Hangman's Hill. Finally, the tanks which surprised the monastery garrison by appearing over the north-western hills, being left unaided, ended in discomfiture a sortie that deserved a better fate. Before the full tale of the day's misfortunes could be told the Corps Commander had resolved on a reorganisation that marked the half-way point in the battle because it assigned to the conquest of **Cassino** infantry who had been destined to exploit far beyond.

*(ii)*

At three o'clock on the morning of the 19th 25 Battalion renewed the onslaught against the enemy ensconced beneath **Castle Hill**. A and B Companies at once ran into a tempest of mortar fire, for which our shelling of known positions was a retaliation rather than a remedy. Still, while the darkness lasted almost satisfactory progress was made, but when daylight came the advance flagged and soon ceased. The total achievement was a little ground gained, a 'tidying up' of our positions and a slightly clearer picture of the enemy's defensive scheme.

On the left, C and D Companies of **28 Battalion** (Captains **Reedy**<sup>1</sup> and **Matehaere**), the only Maori companies sent forward, advanced between the two arms of Route 6 towards the Continental area. The Maoris were in good heart and though the battle raged fiercely and D Company, in the lead, had fourteen casualties, including their

commander, they began to make inroads into the defences. The Germans fought from entrenchments under the hill along Route 6 and its northern extension, with the efficient support of two tanks hull-down in or about the hotel ruins. The enemy infantry were for the most part invisible, but the muzzles of their weapons protruded through slits and crannies made by the fall of slabs of masonry, bricks and beams of steel and wood. The tanks of **19 Armoured Regiment** could approach no nearer than two or three hundred yards for rubble and craters, but from that distance they could do some execution and before nightfall they claimed the destruction of the two enemy tanks. A few men of D Company actually reached the foot of **Monastery Hill**, only to find that they had outrun their fellows and that they were surrounded. In the afternoon the Maoris went to work clearing the area north of the Continental, and from a building farther south they took a good haul of prisoners, prodding their first captives in the ribs and persuading them to call on their comrades to surrender. These successes were won against the enemy's outworks only. The main centres of resistance could not be reduced, and indeed it was guessed that under cover of darkness and the distractions of mortar and shell they were reinforced that night to their original strength.

Between Route 6 and the station 24 Battalion's three companies had a passive role until about an hour after dusk, when D Company repelled the first of several counter-attacks that disturbed the night of 19–20 March on that part of the front. Intended to regain ground and not merely as raids, these forays seem to have been made in no great strength and all were beaten off without serious trouble, though not without casualties.

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj J. C. Reedy**, m.i.d.; Ruatoria; born Ruatoria, 16 Jun 1912; storeman; twice wounded.

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OPERATION REVENGE, 19 MARCH

**Both 26 Battalion round the station and C Company 24 Battalion on the hillside occupied areas whose tactical importance invited enemy fire, and both spent most of the 19th with their heads down. The: 24 Battalion men had better opportunities to retaliate – for example, on Point 165 and the yellow house near it, which was a nest of troublemakers – but by compensation they had to suffer from our own loosely aimed shells and from flying smoke canisters, shell cases and base plugs, and only on the rare occasions when wireless communication was open did they shed the sense of isolation and ignorance. The patrol that set off down the hill that night to keep an appointment with the Maoris about Route 6 made no friendly meetings, and, overtaken by daybreak, had to shelter throughout the 20th close to the Hotel des Roses.**

**(iii)**

**Even before the ruins of the monastery showed dusty white again in the dawn of the 19th, the two claws of operation revenge were beginning to close upon them. To the north tanks were making the stiff ascent up Cavendish road from Cairo village; and above Cassino town two companies of the Essex battalion had started out from Castle Hill across the hillside to clear a way for the rest of the battalion to Hangman's Hill, whence with the Gurkhas they would make their dash**

for the crest. About 5.30 as two Rajput companies were relieving the Englishmen at Point 165 and Point 193, the enemy broke in upon these preparations.

Announced by a sharp bout of gunfire and mortaring, a battalion of paratroops (*I Battalion 4 Parachute Regiment*) swept down from the summit of **Montecassino**, engulfed the defenders of the lower hairpin bend and pressed on to the castle. The garrison, numbering about 150, manned the battlements and fought back their assailants, first with their own arms and then with the help of the gunners, who dropped a barrier of shells between the castle and the enemy. Again and again the Germans came on. They had to be shot down as they tried to clamber up the walls. By 8 a.m. the first fury of the assault was dying down, but only three officers and sixty men remained on their feet in the castle. 'Machine gunners had fired more than 8000 rounds and the Essex mortars more than 1500 bombs. Mortar barrels had grown red hot, had curled and bent'. At nine o'clock the attack was renewed from the east. The paratroops savagely machine-gunned the castle from the buildings on the fringe of the town, but when they mounted the slope the defensive fire was so deadly that they sued for a truce to pick up their wounded and for thirty minutes there was peace. During the afternoon an audacious party of Germans blew a charge under a buttress of the northern rampart but as they swarmed through the breach they fell beneath a hail of bullets. This was the last crisis. Point 165 had been lost but the castle was held (though the German headquarters believed otherwise), and if a parachutist who gave himself up was telling the truth, only 40 of the 200 men in the first assault were still fit to fight. <sup>1</sup>

The Essex companies already on their way to Hangman's Hill when the counter-attack began reached their goal about 10.15 a.m. Their journey of five hours, almost entirely by daylight, left them so weak, and the line of supply and reinforcement was now so insecure, that the attack on the monastery, planned to take place at 6 a.m., was postponed.

But if the enemy had dashed the initiative from our hands in one place, he lost it in another. The tank thrust at the monastery from the rear, for which Cavendish road had been developed, <sup>2</sup> was a stroke long meditated, and had originally been timed for the second day of the battle. The armour had been intended merely to complete the rout of an enemy already beaten by an infantry assault from the front. The circumstances of the 19th were much less favourable.

The armoured hook over the hills was to be delivered by a force under command of **7 Indian Brigade** comprising seventeen Honey tanks of the brigade's reconnaissance squadron and from 760 United States Tank Battalion, three 105-millimetre self-propelled guns from Combat Command 'B' and the Shermans of C Squadron **20 Armoured Regiment** (Major Barton). A reconnaissance on the 18th stripped Barton of any illusions that the going might be easy; he was burdened with a difficult task of liaison with the Goums of the **French Expeditionary Corps on Monte Cairo**; his squadron was a small detail in a mixed force directed on to a somewhat vague objective under command of a British artillery colonel without tank experience; and he was so concerned at the total lack of infantry support that he made representations to Corps, but fruitlessly since the Indian brigade, steadily drained of men by weeks of fighting and exposure in the hills, could spare no infantry for the operation.

It was after 7 a.m. on the 19th when the force left its rendezvous at Madras Circus, west of Colle Maiola, and began to rattle along the track leading south-west to **Albaneta Farm**. At this time the outcome of the contretemps round **Castle Hill** was still obscure

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph is based largely on the account in Stevens, pp. 303–5

<sup>2</sup> See above, pp. 254– 5.

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but General Galloway did not despair of the infantry assault on the monastery. In fact, having hastened the two Essex companies on their way, he ordered the **Gurkhas** to attack as soon as they were ready. It was accepted that the planned sequence of the operation would be reversed, with the armoured jab preceding instead of following the onset of the infantry.

On the first stage of their filibuster it was the going that gave the tank commanders their chief worries. They found the trail itself negotiable, but elsewhere the ground was sometimes treacherously soft in spite of the recent fine weather or harsh and rocky. Consequently, some tanks were bogged and others lost their tracks. They passed through one defile without trouble but beyond a second, four or five hundred yards north of the stone farmhouse of Albaneta, opposition rapidly became warmer. The sudden apparition of tanks in this rugged country took the enemy off his balance and agitated wireless messages were overheard. But the men of *111 Battalion 4 Parachute Regiment* rallied quickly. Lacking anti-tank guns, they called down reiterated salvos from the artillery, threw in the vicious deterrent of mortar bombs and, above all, used their small arms with such accuracy and persistence from the cover of scrub and boulders that it was death for the tank commanders to show their heads for more than a moment above the turrets of their tanks. Thus, half-blinded, several tanks trundled into difficulties. Some stranded by mud or mechanical failure were later stalked by aggressive tank-hunters.

The Shermans meanwhile had burst through the thin defensive line and thrust a way between **Albaneta Farm** and the rock-strewn slopes of Point 593, pounding at the blockhouse with their guns. While other New Zealand tanks engaged the enemy infantry, Lieutenant Renall <sup>1</sup> led his troop on round the southern shoulder of Point 593 towards the monastery ruins. The Liri valley was in full view on their right, and the leading crews won to a sight of their goal. The way to the monastery, they reported later, lay open over a good cobbled road, but they had no

infantry to go with them. One by one they came to grief, hit or stuck in the mud; and when the lighter tanks intruded into the arena they drew a storm of fire on themselves. Solid shot and high-explosive shells were pumped into Albaneta house to set up a dust and under its cover two American Honey tanks raced in and rescued some of the crew of a wrecked Sherman. The gallant Renall was killed.

By now it was clear that the day's dash was over. With only about five tanks still running, Major Barton was opposed to further efforts to reach the monastery. The commander of the reconnaissance

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Lt H. L. Renall; born Carterton, 5 Oct 1920; farmer; died of wounds 19 Mar 1944.

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squadron, who could count losses as heavy, shared his opinion. Since no infantry would now be launched against the abbey, further diversion would serve no tactical purpose. The German infantry, sheltering behind sangars or in dugouts on the hillsides, were all but invulnerable to the tanks. When night fell they would take the upper hand. Indeed, the signs were that a counter-attack was already brewing in the **Phantom Ridge** area, which could seriously embarrass the withdrawal. Much earlier, about 1.30 p.m., Galloway had recognised that the thrust had reached its limit—the track forward, he thought, needed the attention of sappers – but it was late afternoon before the last of the tanks were recalled. Speeded by a parting demonstration by German bazookas, the armoured column limped back to laager behind the Indian FDLs at Madras Circus.

Losses had been appreciable. Of the New Zealand tanks alone nine or more were immobilised, and damaged radiators and bogeys made others unfit for battle. Casualties in C Squadron numbered two officers and three other ranks killed and one officer and about eight other ranks wounded. Most of these were inflicted by rifle and bazooka fire.

General Galloway made a just estimate of this enterprise when he said that it had been as successful as he could have expected. To get

tanks behind Point 593, in the heart of the enemy's mountain fastness, was a feat of uncommon skill and determination. Psychologically, it was a victory; materially, hardly so, even though it may have prevented the Germans from thinning out in that area to find reserves for the main battle. <sup>1</sup> From the moment that the attack became a principal instead of a subsidiary operation, it was extravagant to hope that the armour would put the monastery defenders to rout; and if the tactical situation made the issue dubious, the going and the lack of infantry support put failure beyond all question. For it was the going rather than hostile fire that immobilised most of the tanks and together with the configuration of the ground enabled the Germans to defend themselves without tanks or anti-tank guns of their own and with few, if any, minefields. If the tanks had been escorted by infantry, the raid (for such it was) would have been less costly and more destructive, but it would still have been only a raid. <sup>2</sup> By the time it was firmly decided to cancel the attack from Hangman's Hill, the tanks had gone too far to be called back. But it was a pity to expend the surprise for such

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<sup>1</sup> The Germans were not deterred from withdrawing paratroops from this area. The next day *III/4 Parachute Regiment* was relieved by *5 Panzer Reconnaissance Unit* for service in the town.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the New Zealand tankmen believed otherwise, but this view probably sprang from the optimism of good soldiers.

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a small result and, not for the first time at **Cassino**, to close one arm of a pincer on empty air.

(v)

The engineers' day retraced the now familiar pattern – on the outskirts of the town a workmanlike job could be done, but inside the town it was impossible. In the morning and again in the evening fifty men from **5 Field Park Company** tried to clear Route 6 behind the

**Maoris, but roadmending in the thick of the battle was shown on both occasions to be visionary. Reconnaissance alone cost two officers wounded. Improvements to the railway embankment and to the lateral road from Route 6 now gave two quite good routes to the railway station, and American engineers on the night of 19–20 March completed the alternative bridge over the main highway.**

**The artillery duel grew in intensity on the 19th. Besides firing in direct support of the troops in the town and on the slopes of **Montecassino**, the corps guns had recently played with increasing severity on the area around the Colosseum, whence tanks and mortars were believed to be harassing our infantry between the station and the hummock. The Colosseum area merited attention for other reasons: it would certainly act as a dyke to contain any attempt to flow round the cape into the **Liri** valley, it commanded Route 6 south of the Hotel des Roses and it would hold in enfilade any drive by our troops to cross this reach of road in order to link up with Points 202 and 435. Though still outgunned in the proportion of about three to one, the Germans were bringing up more batteries and it was estimated that they now disposed 9 heavy, 50 medium, 120 field and 60 88-millimetre pieces.**

**If their guns fired aggressively and with considerable immunity, it was not because of negligence by our counter-battery organisation, which was unusually alert and inventive. It was rather that the German guns enjoyed exceptional protection from the terrain and the layout of the battlefield. Three of the main enemy gun areas gave good flash cover – the valleys round Piedimonte San Germano, the valleys south of the **Liri** in the neighbourhood of **San Giorgio** and the northern hill country of **Belmonte** and **Atina**. The last two lay almost in prolongation of the line of Monte Trocchio, the New Zealand flash-spotters' base, so that effective triangulation was impossible, and all three profited from the hill echoes which baffled our sound-rangers. Even when gun positions were accurately located, it was therefore not simple to detect which batteries were active at any given time. And even when the active batteries were correctly reported, they were by no means automatically**

silenced, because they were dug in on reverse slopes where only a direct hit would do much harm. The fourth group of guns, on the flat of the **Liri** valley round **Pignataro**, were the most vulnerable. Though they seemed to be using flashless powder, they were constantly worried by our air OPs, and the crews had to get what comfort they could from dugouts. By keeping some guns laid on active positions, the corps counter-battery staff managed to bully the nebelwerfers in the **Liri** valley into a more respectful silence.

(vi)

The armoured hook once stopped, the enemy viewed the day's events with composure, though not with complacency. *Fourteenth Panzer Corps* believed that the counter-attack on Point 193 had isolated Hangman's Hill and that this pocket could be cleared out as a preliminary to tiring the enemy and pushing him out of the town step by step. But any general counter-attack, it was thought, would be madness. The New Zealand tanks were admitted to be 'getting through the craters not badly' and their fire was causing fairly heavy casualties. If the Germans had a real anxiety, it was less for **Montecassino** than for the area of the station – the sole worthy object of a weighty counter-stroke.

For some time **General Freyberg** had been inclined towards a strengthening and regrouping of his infantry in **Cassino**. News of the trouble at Point 193 turned an inclination into a decision. On reporting his setback General Galloway complained that the two battalions in the town were two battalions too few and flatly declared it to be 'a glaring fact' that his division could do little more until the town was cleared. It was agreed that the enemy was stronger in **Cassino** than had been thought. Some of the assaults on Point 193 had come in from the town side, and the New Zealanders were finding that houses cleared once were apt to be reoccupied by the enemy a few hours later. Though Colonel Hanson thought that there was 'an underground **Cassino**' and common speculation honeycombed the town with an elaborate system of tunnels,<sup>1</sup> it had to be assumed that the Germans were filtering back by more



orthodox means – in particular, by the southern stretch of Route 6 and by the steep gully that ran down from Point 445 to Point 193.

**Freyberg** therefore resolved on measures first to garrison the town against interlopers from the south and north-west and then to sweep it clean once and for all north of a line from the station to Point 435. To do this, recourse to **78 Division** was unavoidable. The Indian Division, reinforced by 6 Battalion Royal West Kent

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<sup>1</sup> For reports on tunnels in **Cassino** see **Appendix II**.

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Regiment from **78 Division**, was to establish itself firmly on Point 193 and recapture Point 165. The New Zealand Division was to regroup in greater strength on a narrower front. Fifth Brigade would come into the line in the northern section of the town, bringing with it 23 Battalion and assuming command of 25 and 28 Battalions and **19 Armoured Regiment** (less C Squadron), while **78 Division** closed up on the left to take over some of the Division's responsibilities in the south. It would be the task of **5 Brigade** to comb out the rest of the town and open up Route 6 to the south, so that the posts on Points 435 and 202 should be no longer isolated.

Having made these dispositions, the Corps Commander felt more cheerful, but he did not disguise his sense that time was running out. The Gurkhas and the New Zealanders below them on Point 202 could not hang on in mid-air for ever. In fact, henceforth their supplies and ammunition were dropped by aircraft.

(vii)

Lively enemy gunfire disturbed but did not dislocate the reorganisation on the night of 19–20 March. Among the New Zealanders in the town the relief occasioned much abstruse shuffling of places and there was some marching and counter-marching, but when the 20th dawned a picture of tolerable clarity emerged. The **Royal West Kents** had

taken over **Castle Hill**, allowing the half-battalion of the **Essex Regiment** to go into reserve. East of Castle Hill in the northern part of the town **23 Battalion** was holding the old FDLs of **25 Battalion**, one company of which remained in the town on the northern flank, with the other three back in a rest area along Pasquale road or on the way there. The Maoris remained in position roughly between the two arms of Route 6, but to the south there were new dispositions. **Twenty-fourth Battalion**, reinforced by a company of the **23rd** on the sunken road, continued the line, but it had sent one of its companies to reinforce **26 Battalion** round the station. Finally, on the Division's left flank, **23 Battalion's** sector had been occupied by the Divisional Cavalry, which in its turn had been relieved by two companies of **2 Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers** from **78 Division's 11 Brigade**. The inter-divisional boundary now ran along the **Ascensione** stream from its junction with the **Gari**, across the railway as far as the **19** northing grid line on the map and thence due east to **Route 6**.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

# CHAPTER 14 – THE MARCH ATTACK: DEADLOCK

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## I: 20 MARCH

*I: 20 March*

*(i)*

**'ANOTHER lovely day – climatically'. The half-irony with which **General Freyberg's** diary greets 20 March was apt; for on this sixth day of the battle the note of ultimate doubt sounds for the first time in **New Zealand Corps'** tactical conversations. News converging on Corps Headquarters from above and from below racked it once more between the strategically desirable and the tactically possible. From Churchill at Whitehall issued an inquiry that forced **Freyberg** to consider whether the corps should persist in its attempts to smash through **Cassino** and open up the road to **Rome** or whether it should now be content to secure its existing gains in order to bequeath a goodly heritage to its successors. From the troops, scrambling in the mud and puddles, the rubble and the acrid smoke of the battlefield, came reports that equally faced **Freyberg** with the choice between what he called a hopeful policy and a contemplative one.**

**The contest resolved itself into the question whether the corps could seal off **Cassino** against enemy reinforcement, the Indians by blocking the northern entry round Point 193, the New Zealanders by blocking the southern along Route 6. This effort absorbed every infantry battalion of both divisions and drew 78 Division increasingly into the battle, but it failed. On 23 March failure was acknowledged and the offensive was abandoned, on the night of 24–25 March the outposts on the hillside were withdrawn and on the 26th the **New Zealand Corps** was disbanded. The second battle of **Cassino** ended with most of the town in our hands but with the enemy inviolate on **Montecassino** and across the mouth of the **Liri** valley.**

*(ii)*

The 20th was a barren day. Strengthened by 23 Battalion, the New Zealand infantry still struggled against the defenders of the town between Point 193 and the Continental. On the northern flank, men of 25 Battalion could make no gains in the face of heavy machine-gun fire. Lieutenant-Colonel Connolly, who was shocked with the state of affairs in **Cassino**, had ordered 23 Battalion to attack at first light. His A and D Companies (Captain **Parker**<sup>1</sup> and Major Slee) made some ground at first but, fresh as they were, they soon found themselves as helpless as their predecessors against the barrier of defensive fire. The Maoris on their left even had to yield a few broken walls and the beaten earth they stood on, but they managed to thwart a circling movement by paratroops round their right flank. Both **5 Brigade** battalions were troubled by elusive Germans who after eviction from one ruined building would reappear in another, frequently behind our forward troops. It was for this precise reason that **Freyberg** deplored the partial relief of 25 Battalion overnight: every able man was needed to garrison the town, and he gave strict instructions that 19 Regiment's tanks were on no account to be withdrawn for refuelling or for any other purpose.

Another worry to the infantry in the centre of **Cassino** was the loss of smoke cover, which exposed them to the malice of machine-gunners at the road bends by Points 165 and 236. In part, the lifting of the screen was due to a change in the wind that nullified the efforts of the smoke-canister parties along the Rapido. But it was partly a deliberate decision, for 5 Indian Brigade feared smoke might mask new assaults on Point 193. When later in the day their pleas for smoke were answered, the New Zealand tank crews and infantry felt the benefit.

Communications were still causing anxiety. Wireless to the forward companies gave at best a fluctuating service, and from battalion headquarters to brigade the telephone line was even less reliable. For example, after a section of Divisional Signals had spent a whole night and day laying a wire from **5 Brigade** to Tactical Headquarters **28 Battalion**, it stayed 'in' for a minute and a half. At the end of another

day maintenance on the line was abandoned, but by that time at least three men had been killed in trying to keep it open.

The tanks of 19 Regiment hit out at German strongpoints with such telling effect and so methodically that the enemy described the situation in the late afternoon as critical. He complained that craters and ruins prevented his anti-tank and assault guns from approaching close enough to reply, and he was even contemplating, if his own Panthers could get no closer, the advisability or necessity of handing over the difficulties of the town to the Allies and

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt A. H. Parker**, MM, m.i.d.; **Nelson**; born **Nelson**, 18 Jul 1918; vulcanist; wounded 22 Mar 1944.

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standing on the high ground behind **Cassino**. But the German artillery was certainly taking a toll of our armour. Seven tanks were disabled during the day, though all but one were recoverable. Fourteen were still battleworthy, but their ambit of action was narrow, and there were times when Lieutenant-Colonel McGaffin wondered whether more could be usefully employed.

In the southern precincts, 24 and 26 Battalions were spared the sustained close fighting of the troops in the town. But they received their full quota of hostile fire, and more than once 24 Battalion had to push back paratroops who came probing under cover of darkness or smoke. Near the station the collapse of the Round House roof – a favourite target for gunners – provided acceptable cover for 26 Battalion riflemen who had taken post in the greasing pits beneath.

The men on the open hillside hung on grimly. Two air drops during the day were well aimed. Though no food canisters seem to have fallen within reach of the fifty men of C Company 24 Battalion, they gathered up tins of water and ammunition. Water they did not need, having two good wells in the vicinity, but it was now possible to distribute half a dozen hand grenades to each sangar. Not all that fell from the sky was

so welcome. However, half the company were in dugouts on Point 146 and company headquarters inhabited a cave, in a well hole of which they sheltered sixteen wounded whom it was impossible to evacuate.

*(iii)*

The closing of the battlefield against enemy reinforcements was the grand object of planning on the 20th. To that end a triple attack was fixed for the night of 20–21 March. As a prisoner confirmed what had long been suspected – that Point 445, north of the monastery, was being used to pass troops down the ravine – 7 Indian Brigade was ordered to capture the feature. It could spare only a single company of 2/7 Gurkhas for the task. So as to open wider and to buttress the doorway on to **Monastery Hill** and to prevent the seeping in of infantry round Point 193, the hairpin bends at Points 165 and 236 would have to be retaken. The Royal West Kents, now in the castle, were chosen to make the assault. Porters would try to follow through to Point 435.

Finally, it was necessary to get astride Route 6 south of the town and to link up with the two outposts on **Montecassino**. A wider turning movement based on the station was rejected, because of enemy strength in the area, in favour of a closer envelopment. This mission was entrusted to 21 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel McElroy), which was now detached from Task Force B and reunited with **5 Brigade**. Twenty-first Battalion was directed up the slopes of the hill to join the troops on Points 146 and 202, with a line from Point 202 to the Continental as its objective and with two companies of 24 Battalion following up to occupy the ground won. The New Zealanders' front was to be further narrowed by the relief of 26 Battalion and the Divisional Cavalry on its left flank by **5 Battalion** of the Buffs and 56 Reconnaissance Regiment respectively. Seventy-eighth Division would take charge of the area of the station and extend right as far as the crossroads north of it.

On this same day Churchill signalled to ask Alexander 'why this passage by **Cassino, Monastery Hill**, etc., all on a front of two or three miles, is the only place which you must keep butting at'. Since 'five or



six divisions have been worn out going into these jaws', he wanted to know why outflanking movements were not being made. Alexander's reply was a succinct statement of the difficulties that beset attempts to turn **Montecassino** from north or south. He thought that **Freyberg's** attack had 'very nearly succeeded in its initial stages, with negligible losses to us'. He was meeting **Freyberg** and the Army Commanders the next day to discuss the situation. <sup>1</sup> Early on the afternoon of the 20th **Freyberg** received his summons to the conference. It said:

The slow progress made so far in attacking the town of **Cassino** with the consequent delay in launching the attack on the Monastery, combined with the necessity of preparing the maximum forces for a full-scale offensive in the second half of April makes it essential to decide in the course of the next twenty-four or thirty-six hours whether ( a ) to continue with the **Cassino** operation in the hope of capturing the Monastery during the next three or four days or ( b ) to call the operation off and to consolidate such gains of ground as are important for the renewal of the offensive later. It is also necessary to decide when **Eighth Army** is to take over responsibility for operations on the **Cassino** front and when Headquarters New Zealand Corps is to be dissolved and replaced by Headquarters **13 Corps**. In the Commander-in-Chief's view **Eighth Army** and **13 Corps** should assume responsibility for **Cassino** front as soon as the Monastery has been captured and consolidated, or alternatively immediately it is decided to call off the present offensive, but he wishes to discuss the point with Army Commanders before reaching a final decision ....

(iv)

With this decision in suspense, we may look at front-line opinion on both sides of the hill. Almost throughout operation

DICKENS

expectations at **New Zealand Corps** had oscillated like the needle of an excited seismograph, not only from day to day but almost from hour to hour, but the mean of these oscillations had been

distinctly on the side of optimism. The uncertainty of communications from the front, added to the very real difficulty of fixing locations on the map in a devastated area, helps to explain the alternation between hope and caution. Often the balloon of optimism, inflated by an early fiction, was pricked by a subsequent fact. The Corps Commander, for example, founded a picture of armour accumulating across the Rapido for the break-out on the false report that a tank had reached the southern stretch of Route 6. Even when one disappointment succeeded another, spirits were revived by the thought of uncommitted resources and of the sore straits of the enemy. And every new decision for the conduct of the attack brought its proper flush of hope.

By the 20th illusions were difficult to support. It was recognised that the wastage of the Indian division would soon necessitate its relief. The problem of supplying the men on the hillside was unsolved. The lessons of street fighting, it was freely acknowledged, had yet to be mastered. The step had been taken of committing the last New Zealand infantry. Seventy-eighth Division was already on a broad front. The enemy in **Cassino** was thought to have been reinforced. 'People on the spot are depressed with the situation and we have to take their view,' said the General in discussing the next day's decision. Later that evening Brigadier Burrows had a more cheerful appreciation from **5 Brigade**. Although the Germans were thought to be numerous in the town, our men's morale was high and they were confident that they were wearing the enemy down.

The Germans' resistance at **Cassino** had its limits, but should it end there it would be resumed on the heights beyond, and no general collapse was likely. Even to win the town the Allies would have to persevere for a few more days. So much is clear from an appreciation by **14 Panzer Corps** on the 20th. **Cassino** was proving a steady incinerator of German infantry. The remnants of **3 Parachute Regiment** had lost all

identity as battalions and had become fused into a single group, daily concentrating more tightly in the western edge of the town. One battalion commander had had to be replaced because of exhaustion, but the men were undaunted and their spirits were high. Senger would not hear of replenishing them with second-line troops: to water down the quality of the defence would invite disaster. Even *II Battalion 115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, the one alien body among the paratroop heroes of **Cassino**, had been in part unreliable. 'Only the toughest fighters can fight this battle'. Allied tanks, while not venturing within range of the *Ofenröhre*, had come close enough to be able to destroy the fixed defences piecemeal. To counter them, only one assault gun was left in the town. The blocking of Route 6 as it entered **Cassino** prohibited close support by the tank company of *15 Panzer Grenadier Division* and by a company of Panthers from *4 Panzer Regiment*, but the grouping of the foremost artillery outside the town for the purpose of direct support had produced good results. In the **Liri** valley the German gunners, under the scowling eye of air OPs, were in a miserable plight. As alternative positions were few and, once occupied, soon spotted, the gunners preferred to remain in old positions, where they at least had the protection of dugouts. Around the nebelwerfers, shelling had ploughed the ground into a morass.

Summing up, [wrote Senger] the enemy's air superiority, artillery superiority and ... superiority in tanks all make it improbable that **Cassino** can be held for any length of time. It is likely that the wastage of the infantry in the town will compel us to pull back gradually to the line between the Abbey and the present left wing of the Machine Gun Battalion. The enemy has suffered heavily, but he is not exhausted, as he is only attacking at this one spot and has fresh reserves.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## II: 21 MARCH

### *II: 21 March*

(i)

The double effort of **4 Indian Division** on the night of 20–21 March was unavailing. Separated from the monastery by the steep gully that had foiled other Indians a month before, Point 445 was still strongly held, and the company of 2/7 Gurkhas gave up after two hours of fighting that cost numerous casualties.

Down the eastern slope of the mountain the **Royal West Kents** sallied forth from the castle and occupied the yellow house, half-way to their objective, Point 165, without mishap. Then luck deserted them. While digging in, one soldier of the platoon detailed to hold the house struck a mine. A whole minefield was set off and the upheaval drove the attackers back to the castle to reorganise. The enemy was now alert and when the company tried to leave the castle machine guns trained on the gate penned them in.

Another disappointment for the Indians was the failure of the porters to get through to Point 435. The day's air drop, however, was successful, though the Germans tried to misguide our aircraft by firing green smoke on **Monte Trocchio** in immediate imitation of our indicator on Hangman's Hill.

So far was the division from an offensive success that it had to look urgently to its own security. Raiding Germans about Point 175 and between there and Point 193, 600 yards to the south, touched a tender spot, for this patch of hillside overlooked Caruso road, 5 Indian Brigade's main supply line. Reinforcements and mines were hurriedly brought up in order to make each point firm, to knit them to each other and both to **7 Brigade** on the right in a system of mutual support and to block

**infiltration.**

**While the Indians strove to seal the northern aperture, the New Zealanders were throwing in their last reserves to picket the south of the town. Lieutenant-Colonel McElroy's final orders to 21 Battalion entrusted the operation to D and C Companies (Major Bailey and Major Smith). D Company was to thrust down Route 6 to subdue the strongpoints in the area of the Continental Hotel. C Company would then pass through, clear the slopes up to Point 146 and there link up with C Company 24 Battalion. The rest of 24 Battalion would follow up to strengthen the chain of posts that would swing in an arc running from about the Botanical Gardens to Point 202 and bestriding both arms of Route 6.**

**The two assaulting companies made a slight dent in the defences but no penetration. The men of D Company were hindered by swampy ground, but when a detour brought them within 100 yards of the Continental Hotel they were enmeshed in a deadly crossfire and then counter-attacked. One platoon and most of another went down in the rush. C Company found the battlefield a tangled confusion. It groped forward through promiscuous pockets of Germans and Maoris and by daybreak its platoons lay in unconcerted dispositions vaguely north-east of the Continental, and probably nowhere nearer than 200 yards. Rubble and mud, not to mention a block of well-defended ruins, stood fairly across the way forward. The battalion had lost seventeen prisoners in exchange for about half as many. As its failure to get forward left 24 Battalion without a specific mission, the three companies of the 24th in the town regrouped, A and B Companies coalescing into one of about seventy men under Major Turnbull.**

**The grim work of eroding the stronghold beneath [Castle Hill](#) again occupied 25 and 23 Battalions. The 25th, unable to summon tanks to its assistance, for the most part lay low, but the 23rd, stronger in numbers, fought hard until the solidity of the defence and heavy losses brought it to a halt on a line running about 100 yards from the foot of the hill. Infiltration was especially irksome farther south in 26 Battalion's sector,**

but the battalion was now so reduced in strength – A and D Companies could muster only twenty-three men between them – that it could not garrison all the ruins. Thus surrounded, the platoons dared not venture out of their shelters by day. The tanks of 19 Regiment were finding it discreet to cruise about in order to dodge mortar bombs. It was becoming clear – and the enemy knew it – that the best help they could give our infantry was to knock down points of resistance with their guns; but the going was rough, smoke clouded the gunner's sights and ignorance of our men's whereabouts often restrained his fire. To improve co-operation the tanks began to be fitted with No. 38 wireless sets to be tuned to the infantry net.

By now the New Zealand infantry in **Cassino** were in as much disarray as their adversaries. New arrivals and muddy, stubble-chinned veterans of several days' standing, stretcher-bearers and signallers, 'O' parties from the gunners, straying sappers and dismounted tank crews, section posts and company headquarters – all rubbed shoulders in the press of battle. And Germans often intermingled with them. North of Route 6 in order from the right the New Zealand positions were held by 25, 23, 28 and 21 Battalions, and to the south 24 and 26 Battalions manned a line curving from the sunken road back to the crossroads that marked the Division's left flank. But no tidy picture is possible.

A nest of battalion headquarters in the convent served as a kind of control centre. It could give rough directions to men bringing up the rations, provide primitive shelter while stretchers were loaded on to jeeps, act as a rallying point for lost infantrymen or as a rendezvous for the more aware and even compose the gossip of the battlefield into something resembling a tactical picture. Mere presence in **Cassino** generated among the soldiers a fellowship that was less lasting but not less strong while it lasted than the ordinary loyalties of battalion or regiment, for to enter **Cassino** was consciously to step into a well-defined arena. To this feeling the convent gave a local habitation.

Confusion was not complete, but communications were always

chancy, so that forward troops were often unable to report their positions even when they knew them, and the town was a place of unexpected encounters. One company, for example, was awakened to the presence of Germans in the next room by bazooka fire through the dividing wall. There was one period of three days when more than forty Maoris shared a house with the enemy and only took their departure because their ammunition was spent.

(ii)

The Germans interpreted the corps attacks on the 21st as a desperate effort to force a decision during the day at all costs, and it is true that short of the wholesale committal of **78 Division** tactical inventiveness was beginning to tire. The General still set high store on the drive by 21 Battalion to link up with the men on the hill, who, though hungry, were well supplied with water and ammunition and in good heart. But when the day's reports had been sifted of their wishful thinking the residue was the blunt fact that 'progress today was just a matter of odd buildings'. Before he left for the Commander-in-Chief's conference in the afternoon, **Freyberg** had asked Lieutenant-Colonel McElroy for his frank opinion whether 21 Battalion could get through by night. Back over faulty communications came 'a long answer to say no'. Nevertheless, the conference made a temporising decision: for the time being at least the offensive was to be pressed. This is as Churchill would have wished. On this day he had signalled Alexander his hope that the operation would not have to be called off. 'Surely the enemy is very hard pressed too,' he added.

In **Freyberg's** mind also this was a cause for perseverance. There were other arguments. Our infantry had got to the very edge of the town, and the Germans admitted that only resolute counter-attacks had kept their men in **Cassino** at all. It was believed that by working between 23 and 28 Battalions our tanks could command the southern arm of Route 6 and close by fire what the infantry had so far failed to cordon off. It was hoped too that 21 Battalion would now know its ground and

**would be able to make better progress that night, though the moon,  
which rose only two hours earlier than the sun, was no longer an ally.**



# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## III: 22 MARCH

### *III: 22 March*

As it happened, no blow was struck on the night of 21–22 March. But from first light hard fighting developed and by midday it had risen to a savage intensity unusual even in **Cassino**. The New Zealanders battled with a vehemence born of the knowledge that the sands were running low. As he surveyed the field **Freyberg** was struck by the disparity between the volume and the effect of his corps' fire-power. He determined to pursue his advantage and bring to bear every weapon that would help pummel a fainting enemy into collapse. Tanks in the north of the town were to hammer away at the two hairpin bends of Points 236 and 165, tanks in the station area were to take the southern stretch of Route 6 under fire, tank-destroyers and 17-pounder guns were to step up their campaign of levelling enemy-occupied buildings, trench mortars in the town and on Point 193 were to be thickened up and used mercilessly, **78 Division** was to exert pressure up to and even across the Gari in the south, and artillery and air support were to be fully maintained, with special attention to offending nebelwerfers.

It was the enemy who made the first move. At dawn a company of *1 Parachute Regiment* climbed up towards Point 193 from the wadi to the north, bringing with it a detachment of engineers to throw heavy charges into the castle. The Royal West Kents broke up the attack with vigorous fire, capturing twenty-seven of their assailants and a further eight Germans who came from Point 165 to pick up wounded, and they inflicted perhaps thirty casualties. This was a good beginning, but the rest of the day was only to confirm the ascendancy of the defence.

The main effort of the New Zealand Division was made by a composite force of A Company 21 Battalion (Lieutenant Kirkland) <sup>1</sup> and D Company 23 Battalion, with 25 Battalion demonstrating on the northern flank and several tanks of 19 Regiment engaging strongpoints.

The intention once again was to crush the enemy at the eastern base of **Castle Hill**. That done, the New Zealanders would link up with the garrison of the castle and form a line facing south-west – possibly the line of the stone wall running up the hill – which would close the town from the north and enable some of the troops in northern **Cassino** to be rested. Frontal assaults had cost so much blood and toil that the method chosen was an oblique approach from the school area up the north-eastern ridge of **Castle Hill**, whence the intruders could swoop down upon the Germans from their flank or rear.

The realities were less kind. Efforts to launch the attack seem to have broken down several times – once because of difficulty in making contact with the tanks, then because the men in the tanks could not see through the smoke to shoot, and finally because wounded making their way down from **Castle Hill** obstructed the line of fire. When at last all was set, the attack progressed for a while and a few buildings were cleared, but the manoeuvre was detected and then the fire came down, heavy and accurate and the more deadly because the New Zealanders had to scramble across craggy ground with jutting rocks and sharp precipices that forced them into single file. Nothing remained to be done but to hug the earth until the order to withdraw came late in the afternoon.

It was the tanks that caused the day's crescendo of hope. Their shooting was good both against the strongpoints round Point 193 and farther south. Some of them were conducting a sort of shuttle service between the Bailey bridge on Route 6, where they replenished their ammunition, and the farthest negotiable point west along the road, where they discharged it at the Hotel Continental and the Hotel des Roses. One salvo was reported to have flushed fifty Germans from the latter. From the station area tanks

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt J. H. Kirkland**; born NZ 6 Jan 1914; accountant; died of wounds 29 Jul 1944.

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fired hard across Route 6 at the enemy workings round the Colosseum. **General Freyberg**, confident that the tanks held the key to success, was delighted that fire was being brought down effectively on the southern entrance to **Cassino**. He knew that some prisoners held little hope for the Germans in the town unless they could be reinforced and supplied; those taken in the fighting for Point 193 had had no food for three days and were short of weapons; the corps intelligence officer (Captain Davin) <sup>1</sup> thought that the breaking-point was near. At last it seemed that the steel cordon round **Cassino** was being pulled tight.

Yet with Brigadier Burrows' evening report came the diminuendo. Territorially, in spite of the tanks' good work, there was little improvement. General Parkinson later confirmed this estimate: the enemy still held the day's objectives and there was another day's fighting in mopping up the town. The German view was that there were many more. Heidrich was almost jaunty. He thought that the Allies had lost their dash, and with two battalions now in reserve he faced the future with assurance. The garrison of Point 435 was 'defending itself with the greatest hardihood', but its extinction could easily wait.

The Germans also had reason to take hope from the day's portents in the air. The 22nd was remarkable as the first day on which the enemy flew more sorties than the Allies. Most of our twenty-seven sorties were supply missions. The dropping was not faultless, but the 24 Battalion men by slipping out smartly from their shelters salvaged enough 'K' rations and packs of chocolate to feed themselves for two more days. The enemy aircraft strafed and bombed Route 6 in the forward areas and attacked anti-aircraft emplacements, but on the whole the defence more than repaid the inconvenience, filling the sky with menace and shooting seven victims out of it. Our field gunners were beginning to feel the strain of an arduous week's work. Fourth Field Regiment, the great supplier of smoke, had to borrow thirty anti-aircraft gunners to keep its 25-pounders in action. On this day the regiment fired 7456 rounds of smoke and 570 of high explosive – a typical **Cassino** expenditure of more than 300 rounds a gun.

<sup>1</sup> **Maj D. M. Davin, MBE, m.i.d.; England; born Invercargill, 1 Sep 1913; student; wounded May 1941.**

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## IV: 23-26 MARCH

### *IV: 23-26 March*

(i)

As early as 20 February, after the first New Zealand failure at **Cassino**, General Alexander was planning a major regrouping of the Allied forces in **Italy**.<sup>1</sup> His great strategic purpose was to compel the enemy to commit as many divisions as possible in **Italy** at the time **OVERLORD** was launched. The best method in his judgment was so to destroy enemy formations that they would have to be replaced from elsewhere to avoid disaster. But as a local superiority of at least three to one in infantry was thought to be necessary to penetrate prepared defences in the Italian terrain, his forces would have to be strengthened and then massed at the point of attack. Against 23 or 24 German divisions in the whole of **Italy**, the Allies had 21, which were now to be reinforced to 28 1/2. The overwhelming preponderance of this force would operate west of the Apennine divide. Leaving a corps directly under Alexander in charge of its sector on the Adriatic, **Eighth Army** would move west, as five of its divisions had already done. Its new sector would lie between the existing inter-Army boundary on the right and the Liri River on the left. There it would assume command of most of the British troops in **Italy** except those at **Anzio**, and Fifth Army would concentrate on the southern flank from the **Liri** to the sea, with responsibility also for the **Anzio** bridgehead. This regrouping was to be the prelude to a triple attack – by the **Eighth Army** up the **Liri** valley, and by the Fifth Army on its main front through the **Aurunci Mountains** and from the bridgehead towards **Valmontone**. It would take some time to regroup and mid-April was the earliest date for the launching of the offensive.

On 28 February an Army Commanders' conference agreed to this

plan and in part elaborated it. One decision was to appoint **13 Corps** to relieve **New Zealand Corps** after its attack at **Cassino**, with command over 2 New Zealand, 4 Indian and 78 Divisions. Alexander's message of 20 March foreshadowing an early decision on policy sprang therefore not only (if at all) from Churchill's gentle spur but from a wish not to jeopardise his plans for regrouping by unprofitable delays. Alexander had to balance the timing of his spring offensive against the chance of last-minute success at **Cassino**. On the one hand, the timetable must not lag unduly; on the other, Churchill was known to want results, and the capture of the **Cassino** massif, if only it could be pulled off, would start the offensive in April or May with an immense advantage.

Already on the 20th it was evident that **New Zealand Corps** would have to retrench its original ambitions. It seems probable that at the conference on the 21st operation

DICKENS

was officially decapitated of its pursuit phase, but the corps was given an extension of time to complete the conquest of the town. After

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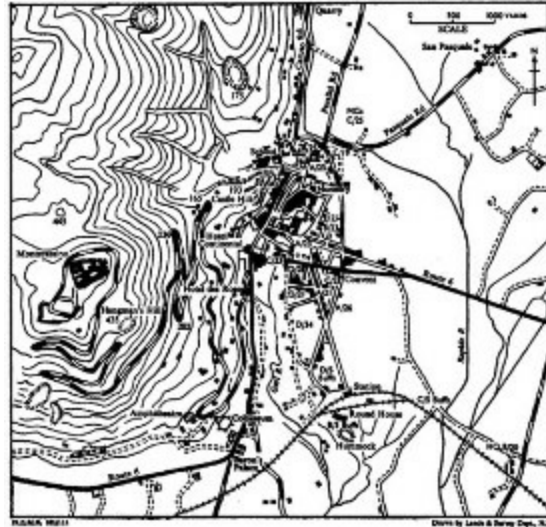
<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 241.

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Clark had visited Corps Headquarters on the morning of the 22nd, **Freyberg** revolved with Keightley the possibilities of an effort by **78 Division** to take the monastery from the hills to the north-west, where the Indians had been repulsed a month before. They agreed that the operation would be hazardous without surprise, but **78 Division** was ordered to prepare a plan.

By the 23rd – a day of wind and light snow – a final decision could no longer be postponed. In the morning **Freyberg** held a council of war with the commander of **13 Corps** (Lieutenant-General S. C. Kirkman), the three divisional commanders, the CCRA and the CE. For two hours or more the whole **Cassino** problem was tossed and turned this way and that and thoroughly worried over. Points of view diverged but they set

out from the same premise – that the New Zealanders had no more offensive action in them. They had made no headway the day before and it seemed to both **Freyberg** and Parkinson that the Division had ‘come to the end of its tether’. The rubble defences had not been overcome. It was equally undeniable that **4 Indian Division** was fought out. Its



CASSINO, NIGHT 23-24 MARCH  
CASSINO, NIGHT 23-24 MARCH

**5 Brigade** had wasted away on **Montecassino**; its **7 Brigade** had been for six weeks steadily losing men in the hills; its **11 Brigade** had been partly broken up to reinforce the other two; and the division had even had to borrow a battalion.

Discussion therefore turned on other questions – whether the corps should commit the rest of its resources in a last endeavour to leave a tidier bequest to its successor, and if so where; or whether, admitting deadlock, it should stabilise the line, and again if so where. The proposal of a **78 Division** attack on the monastery from the area of Point 593 was reconsidered, only to be rejected as too slow to mount, difficult to support with gunfire and condemned by experience.

Two offensive possibilities remained. One, which was canvassed more fully after than during the conference, was to turn the town from the north and west through Point 165. A point in its favour was that prisoners taken from that area were dejected. But Point 165 seemed

**proof against attacks from Point 193 and the alternative approach, from Point 175, was barred by the deep gash of the re-entrant running down from Point 445, which was certain to be strongly defended.**

**That left one chance. An enveloping movement south about to join with the garrison on Point 435 had been broached before: now it was examined. What was envisaged was an advance by a brigade of **78 Division** from roughly the station area across the Gari and Route 6 and up the south-eastern face of **Montecassino**. Tactically, it conformed to **Freyberg's** notion that the way to win the battle was to isolate the enemy from his supplies, though he still harboured suspicions of an underground system. Given food, the **Gurkhas** were prepared to stay on Point 435 for two or three days longer.**

**But the more closely the plan was scrutinised, the larger loomed the difficulties. Any hope of surprise could be discounted. Behind the Gari, which was five feet deep and running fast, lay a belt of strongpoints manned by watchful Germans and the Hotel des Roses, militarily speaking, was as solid as rock. The approach to the objective lay for some distance across flat ground wide open to enemy observation; and when that had been crossed the way was straight uphill frontally into the very jaws of the defence. Nor could the operation be mounted in less than three days. No one enthused over it, but it was the fittest and it survived for higher consideration.**

**Opinion, however, clearly inclined to a pause in the offensive. It would be necessary to recall the troops from **Montecassino**, but there was general agreement that the extremes of the ground securely won – Point 193 and the station area – should be held. To withdraw from them would be a declaration that the battle was over. To defend them would not only keep the enemy extended (the ultimate object of the battle and the campaign) but it would hold the wedge in place until a stronger force could drive it home. Again, no one relished the prospect of dwelling on a line which had not been chosen for its defensive possibilities but which was simply the high-water mark of an arrested attack. **Freyberg** confessed that ‘the troops in the town and the south were in the worst**



military position that he had ever seen troops in'. But the gravest forebodings were those of the Indian division's commander, who repeatedly urged the hazards of holding Point 193 once the battle ended. It could be made defensible only by extensive engineering works and by securing beyond all risk Point 175 and the jail area of the town. Even then he thought it would attract fire that was now dispersed, and a terrible drain of casualties must be expected.

**Freyberg's** decision fairly represented the sense of his commanders. Through General Clark, who concurred, he advised the Commander-in-Chief that the operation should be suspended and the isolated posts withdrawn from the hill. The plan of a 78 Division attack from the south was passed on, but without any positive recommendation.

When Alexander came forward that afternoon to see the ground again and to hear the arguments for himself, he seemed disposed to try the **78 Division** venture as a last chance. Certainly he wanted to question a prisoner from the south, and there were long discussions in **Freyberg's** caravan, from which **Freyberg** emerged with his views apparently challenged but unchanged. Alexander left at nightfall for final conferences at Fifth Army and at 9.30 p.m. his decision was telephoned to **Freyberg**. The corps would stand firm where it now stood and the change of command would take place in a few days.

One last effort to conjure victory out of deadlock perhaps deserves record. On the morning of the 24th, the GSO I of **4 Indian Division** proposed a night attack on the monastery with a fresh brigade. Let the **Castle Hill** garrison strike at Point 165 to take or at least to contain it, while the fresh troops made a mass infiltration uphill to Point 435 and thence to the top. Hangman's Hill was to play **Anzio** to the abbey's **Rome**. Both **Freyberg** and Kirkman warmed to the idea, but Galloway objected and Alexander dismissed it without hesitation. He had come not to revive a corpse but to bury it: planning to reorganise the front proceeded.

(ii)

The decisions of 23 March set in motion a long train of disentanglement and rearrangement. This process occupied nearly a week and its object was not only to allow an offensive to dwindle slowly away but also to give effect locally to Alexander's strategic regrouping. The larger intention may be described first. New Zealand Corps was to be dissolved on 26 March, handing over to **13 Corps**, which would simultaneously come under command of **Eighth Army**. This was one in a sequence of reliefs that by the end of the month would range five corps across the peninsula from the Adriatic to the Tyrrhenian in the order **5 Corps** (directly under the Commander-in-Chief), **2 Polish Corps** and **13 Corps** (Eighth Army), and the **French Expeditionary Corps** and **2 United States Corps** (Fifth Army). Within **13 Corps** **4 British Division** would hold the **Monte Cairo** sector on the right, **78 Division** would relieve **4 Indian Division** in the centre, and on the left **2 New Zealand Division** would continue to hold **Cassino** and extend its left to cover the old **78 Division** sector as far south as the inter-army boundary.

While preparing for this redeployment, **New Zealand Corps** had also to wind up the battle without seeming too obviously to do so. The isolated posts on **Montecassino** would have to be withdrawn; otherwise not an inch of the hard-won gains was to be yielded. The corps' policy was defined in an operation instruction issued on the morning of 24 March as one of active defence with vigorous patrolling. Positions were to be wired and mined and field works were to be employed wherever possible. Plans for counter-attack were to be made ready. The instruction indicated six points which were to be heavily defended as vital to the holding of the line, including Point 193, the north-west part of the town, the area west of the Botanical Gardens, the railway station and the hummock. Tanks already in **Cassino** were to remain there in close support until the reorganisation was complete, when they would be withdrawn into infantry brigade reserve in a counter-attack role. To reduce hostile shelling there was to be no unnecessary movement by day in the forward areas, and active counter-battery fire was to continue. For security reasons the telephone was to be preferred to the wireless.

**Beginning on the night of 25–26 March, the New Zealanders' relief of 78 Division was to be complete by the night of 27–28 March.**

*(iii)*

**One of the earliest tasks of the corps was to disengage its troops on the hillside above the town. Since 18 March they had been supplied exclusively from the air; 194 sorties had been flown for the purpose on seven different occasions. Despite the enemy's trickeries to mislead the aircraft and the resiting of his anti-aircraft guns to harry their run-in, about 50 per cent of the loads fell where our troops could retrieve them. Some days no food was gathered and both parties, Indians and New Zealanders, went hungry; but the only serious shortage was the Indians' lack of radio batteries, most deliveries of which floated wide. Ammunition stocks were abundant. There was plenty of water, for not only did the containers fall luckily, but both parties drew upon local wells until the Indians found a dead mule in theirs. Though there were a few light skirmishes and much sniping, shelling (from friendly as well as hostile guns) was the severest hardship; but perhaps cold and hunger were worse. The German policy was to let these outposts wither from their own isolation. It was not until the 21st that the enemy identified the troops on Point 435 as Indians, and then only from a report by a German NCO who had escaped from them. Major Reynolds's New Zealanders on Point 202 were kept in daily touch with the Indians above them by the visits of a Gurkha officer.**

**To guard the secret, it was decided to transmit the orders for withdrawal by word of mouth. On the night of 23–24 March three officers who had volunteered set out separately across the hillside, each with a carrier pigeon to take back the news of the success of his mission. One officer was intercepted, but the other two reached Hangman's Hill and passed on three prearranged signals – by radio code-word, Very lights or bursts from Bofors guns – any of which would be the order to withdraw. Major Reynolds received the warning to evacuate when he visited the **Gurkhas** early on the morning of the 24th. That**

day's air drop was a spectacular success. A copious shower of food, drink and raiment descended on the New Zealanders – potted meat, 'M & V', sardines, mincemeat, Indian bread, milk, tea, sugar and eight gallons of rum, cigarettes and clothing. The New Zealanders watched their windfall jealously until the light waned, calculating that they would have enough rations for a week, but they had barely begun to collect the canisters when the word came through to withdraw. God's plenty had to be left behind. But they marched out, or rather slipped away, in good order, carrying the standard burden of personal weapons and ammunition and their emergency rations still unconsumed.

Fortune for once favoured the brave. As **General Freyberg** predicted, the evacuation was achieved without a casualty. While our guns thundered and our tanks made distraction in the town, and while the **Royal West Kents** preoccupied the Germans on Point 165 with a diversionary attack, the Indians and New Zealanders in fighting patrols of about platoon strength made good their crossing of the hillside. They went unhindered. Within less than two hours, C Company 24 Battalion was back at the quarry in Caruso road, having passed through the bottleneck by climbing the wall that ran down from **Castle Hill**. Major Nangle described afterwards how the Indians had to work forward between two lines of shells bursting across the hillside:

Between these walls of fire lay the way to the Castle [he wrote]. We continued to move slowly across the face of the hill. The artillery fire quite covered any noise we made as we stumbled over the loose stones. A slight deviation allowed us to give the Brown House [the Continental Hotel] a wide berth as we were uncertain whether it was held or not. No sound came from this ruin and we continued, hardly believing our good luck, to the Castle. We filed up the narrow path and were challenged by the West Kents. <sup>1</sup>

So ended what for some had been a nine days' ordeal.

Three New Zealand officers and 42 other ranks returned from Point 202. From Point 435 the numbers who came back were 12 officers and

255 other ranks, the great majority from 1/9 Gurkha Rifles, but including some from 1/4 Essex Regiment and 4/6 Rajputana Rifles. Eleven wounded – nine New Zealanders, an Englishman and an Indian – were left overnight just north of Point 146 and brought in next morning. According to one account,<sup>2</sup> the last stretcher party was given a card by an enemy patrol stating that in future the German divisional commander would not permit the evacuation of casualties under the **Red Cross**.

The implication – that the enemy command was unaware of the withdrawal – is confirmed by the documents. A puzzling series of entries in the records of **14 Panzer Corps** attributes to the men on Point 435 a desperate defence against fighting patrols on 26 March, nearly two days after they had left; and it is not until 27 March that **1 Parachute Division** claims to have retaken Point 435, where ‘the enemy lost heavily’. The mopping up of stragglers is then said to have begun and its completion is reported on the evening of 30 March, along with a tally of casualties and trophies of war – 165 dead, 11 prisoners, 16 light machine guns, 2 German machine guns, 2 heavy machine guns, 103 rifles, 38 machine pistols, 4 wireless sets, 4 bazookas.

At what level this fantasy originated it is not possible to say with certainty. But a clue may be contained in the story told by a German prisoner many miles away and several months later. On 10 August 1944 troops of **13 Corps** captured Lieutenant-

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<sup>1</sup> Stevens, p. 310.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

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Colonel Egger, commanding **4 Parachute Regiment**, who was run to earth in a **Tuscan** orchard after having escaped once. In an expansive mood he told his interrogator that during the **Cassino** fighting his headquarters was on **Montecassino** – a verifiable fact – and he added that

he himself led the attack upon the **Gurkhas** who had penetrated the positions, and restored the critical situation. <sup>1</sup> Whether or not the offspring of vanity, the reports to **14 Panzer Corps** served the Allied cause by concealing the informative truth that Point 435 had been freely evacuated.

For the Indians and New Zealanders who had held on so staunchly the evacuation was a bitter disappointment. Themselves the curiously passive centre of the last week's fighting, the still pivot on which the battle turned, they were tired and hungry and their limbs were weak for want of exercise. But the faith and fire were still in them, and had the acceptable hour come they would have roused themselves up and crossed the crest of the hill to assault the ruined abbey. When warned for the withdrawal, the **Gurkhas** wanted to know who would relieve them.

(iv)

Meanwhile the New Zealanders were regrouping in **Cassino**. The intention was, without perceptibly diminishing fire-power, to thin out in the town so as to rest troops, to organise a defence in depth and, above all, to expand over a much wider front. A start was made on the night of 23–24 March with the order to battalions to give each company in turn two days in a rest area, for none but internal reliefs could be expected. The defensive role gradually elaborated itself. An *ad hoc* company of 26 Battalion manned the eastern bank of the Rapido about Route 6 as a back-stop, and as a similar buffer in the north 25 Battalion sited anti-tank guns and medium machine guns between Caruso and Parallel roads and prepared a further line of machine guns and mortars in a wider arc from Caruso to Pasquale roads. The indispensable need for security in the jail area, about which General Galloway had been so emphatic, was acknowledged by a liaison between **28 Battalion** and the **Royal West Kents** and Rajputs to establish interlocking defences at the inter-divisional boundary. Minelaying and wiring engaged the nights of forward infantry posts. Anti-tank guns, mortars and machine guns were sited; fields of fire were cleared; communications were improved. The

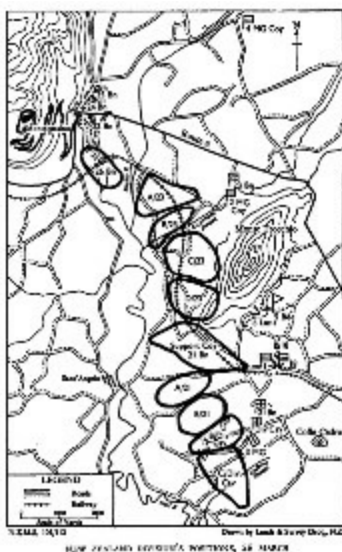
gunners dug deeper pits for their 25-pounders and took the opportunity to stop leaky valves and replace damaged packings. Brigadier Weir could give an assurance

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<sup>1</sup> 13 Corps Intelligence Summary, No. 450.

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that his guns would respond within seconds to a call for defensive fire from the **Cassino** garrison. The smoke screen was maintained.



The tanks of **20 Armoured Regiment** gradually replaced those of the 19th, and in the town they were left in position camouflaged under the increasingly scarce cover, so that the crews but not their vehicles were relieved.

The new divisional front stretched for about five miles and a half, almost to the point where the **Liri** gathered the waters of the Gari and Rapido and turned south to become the Garigliano. The reliefs incidental to the occupation of this sector began on the night of 25–26 March and lasted for three nights. They were carried out at some cost in casualties but without derangement. When they were complete, 6 Brigade held a line from the north-west corner of **Cassino** running west of the Botanical Gardens, by way of the sunken road, the railway station and the

hummock, to the junction of the Gari with a stream about 700 yards south of the station. Fifth Brigade's responsibilities began here and extended to the Division's left boundary, which ran east along the 13 northing (roughly parallel with, and just north of, the **Liri**) as far as the junction of the Rapido with the Ladrone stream and thence to Colle Cedro. In the northern sector 6 Brigade disposed four battalions – the 25th on the right under **Castle Hill**, the 24th between the arms of Route 6, then 22 (Motor) Battalion (now deployed for the first time since the battle began) and 26 Battalion round the station and south to the brigade boundary. Fifth Brigade's battalions were arrayed from north to south in the order 23 Battalion, 21 Battalion and the Divisional Cavalry. The Maoris were in reserve.

The reorganisation did not at once become the battlefield. Our tanks and guns in particular gave the last days of the New Zealand Corps a dying illumination. Though plans were considered for sapping and blowing German strongpoints in the west of **Cassino**, it was left to the armour to hammer away at close quarters and to the artillery to attempt the work of demolition at long range. The two embattled hotels were now sprawling cairns of stone and brick, but they still harboured live paratroops, and they were now, if anything, more dangerous to approach. After days spent in clearing and repairing Route 6 the enemy had succeeded in bringing Mark IV tanks and anti-tank guns into the infantry zone and the New Zealand armour was beginning to feel the impact of the new arrivals.

Because of the continued exchanges in the town and perhaps because he was misinformed as to the true position on Point 435, it took the enemy some days to penetrate the Allied design. And even when he realised that one battle was at an end, movement that the smoke failed to screen led him to predict the imminence of another. On the 24th **14 Panzer Corps** thought that **Cassino** could be held for eight days longer. The four battalions of paratroops in the town varied in strength from a company to a strong platoon, in numbers from 120 to 40. In spite of a wastage of about forty dead a day, the ruins of the town were deemed to



be worth defending if only to prevent the Allies from rolling up the whole Gari line. After two quiet days on the 25th and 26th, the German outlook brightened. On the 27th Senger was able to report to *Tenth Army* that enemy pressure was slackening and that as a result of reliefs by panzer grenadiers in the hills above the town the paratroops now had two battalions in reserve. They would retake Point 193 in their own good time, seize the station if it was evacuated and follow up any withdrawal as a precaution against renewed large-scale bombing. Senger ended with a cautious claim to victory.

The second battle of **Cassino** has ended in our favour. But the enemy will probably launch another major attack in the corps sector very soon. He will hardly lie down under his two defeats, as they represent a loss of prestige for him, and have an undoubted effect on the morale of his armed forces elsewhere and on the international political situation. There is no indication yet just where the enemy plans to strike next.

(v)

Senger was right in predicting that the Allies would strike again, though he misconceived the timing and the weight of their blow. It was in preparation for this blow that **New Zealand Corps** handed over its front to **13 Corps** at noon on 26 March and went out of existence. Its dissolution was therefore not merely the end of an old chapter but the beginning of a new. The story of **Cassino** had not yet run its course. As the days lengthened, the rivers fell and the ground became hard, Alexander massed his forces for the broad-fronted offensive that he had promised Churchill on 20 March. <sup>1</sup>

In the last hour of 11 May his two armies rolled forward in the attack from **Cassino** to the sea. For several days, while the French thrust deeply through the **Aurunci Mountains** and **13 Corps** forced a crossing of the river in the mouth of the **Liri** valley, 2 Polish Corps fought the third battle of **Cassino** among the hills north and west of the monastery. It is no disparagement of the Poles' splendid bravery to say that it availed little until successes elsewhere threatened the defenders

of **Montecassino** with encirclement. Only then, on the morning of 18 May, did the Polish flag and the Union Jack fly above the dusty ruins of the abbey. So at last though the great fortress fell, it was never conquered.

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<sup>1</sup> Churchill, V, p. 450.

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## CHAPTER 15 – CASSINO: A RETROSPECT

## CHAPTER 15

### *Cassino: A Retrospect*

(i)

SO long as men study the art of war the battles of **Cassino** will interest them as a classic contest between the advantages of terrain and of material. By prolonging their resistance for four months or (on a more extensive view) for seven months, the Germans showed that in certain circumstances of ground and weather the offensive may lose the mobility with which modern weapons are sometimes thought to endow it. In some ways **Cassino** was a battle of the First World War fought with the weapons of the Second. When the German Corps Commander walked down the shell-pitted **Liri** valley during the fighting, he found himself carried back in memory thirty years to the **Somme**.<sup>1</sup> The first great lesson of **Cassino** is that when the attacker is drawn into a strait of commanding natural strength, the tank and the aeroplane may easily fail to break the ensuing deadlock. By piling the difficulties of street fighting upon the natural defences of river, marsh and height, the **Cassino** position enabled stout defenders to defy appreciable odds in manpower and vast odds in material. Like a whirlpool, **Cassino** sucked into its vortex all that tried to pass through the strait.

The operation that began on 15 March was one of a series and has been variously described. It is called by Alexander<sup>2</sup> the third battle of **Cassino**, to distinguish it from the first, fought by the **United States 2 Corps** in January and early February, and the second, fought by the **New Zealand Corps** between 15 and 18 February (operation

AVENGER

). On this reckoning there were four battles of **Cassino**, the last being part of the great offensive of May. The perspective of the New Zealand historian tempts him to follow this example. But it seems unreal to deny unity to the American and the first **New Zealand Corps** attacks, which were made almost without a break and on essentially the same plan; and it has therefore seemed preferable in this account to regard

as part of the first battle and

DICKENS

as the second. To

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<sup>1</sup> Senger: Diary, pp. 102–3.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit., p. 2917.

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others, it may appear that operations from January to March constitute a single battle, divided into two only by the chance of bad weather. <sup>1</sup> Finally, the historian of the whole war may see only one battle stretching over seven months from late October 1943, when the Fifth Army began its attacks on the outposts of the Bernhard line, until the middle of May 1944, when **Montecassino** fell. <sup>2</sup> This view has the merit of acknowledging the organic connection between the defence of the Bernhard and Gustav lines, for the time the Allies took to break the former the Germans used to strengthen the latter. Such distinctions and divisions are never quite unimportant to the historian, for as he groups his facts so he weaves his patterns; but here they are mentioned for the sake of clarity and as a reminder of the context of operation

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, the subject of discussion in this last chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> This is in effect the view of the **Battles Nomenclature Committee**, which has decided that there were two battles of **Cassino**, **Cassino I** from 20 January to 25 March 1944, and **Cassino II** from 11 to 18 May 1944. The number of troops engaged is an important consideration in determining the official nomenclature of battles.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. **General von Senger und Etterlin**: ‘Die Cassino-Schlachten’, in *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militär Zeitschrift*, June 1951, p. 409.

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(ii)

Had the issue been different, the odds against the defenders in the second battle of **Cassino** might have been described as crushing. Admittedly, the disparity in infantry strengths was almost modest. To the fourteen battalions under command of *1 Parachute Division* in the critical sector the **New Zealand Corps** could oppose twenty-four—very much less than the three-to-one superiority held indispensable by General Alexander for such operations. But in material the attackers had a huge preponderance. They could count over 600 armoured fighting vehicles – 455 Sherman tanks, 124 Stuarts and 59 armoured cars – though in the event they could deploy only a small proportion, never more than 10 per cent at any one time. The enemy fought through the crisis with only a handful of tanks in **Cassino**, and even in the dying stages of the battle he could have brought in no more than sixteen. He had perhaps eighty tanks waiting in the **Liri** valley.

Our 610 artillery pieces in direct support had by 25 March fired no fewer than 588,034 rounds; to these weapons must be added another hundred or so self-propelled close-support guns of various calibres which Combat Command 'B' held available but did not use. At its greatest strength the German artillery numbered about 240 pieces. In **Cassino** itself during the height of the battle there was a solitary enemy assault gun, which had to be put out of action every night for repairs.

While our aircraft flew 2629 sorties and dropped 2362 tons of bombs, the enemy flew only 214 sorties against vastly superior anti-aircraft defences. The opening bombardment from air and ground dropped on and around **Cassino** high explosives to the weight of about 2500 tons in seven hours and a half, and for the next ten or eleven days, though the bombardment slackened, it hardly ceased. In all, the Allied air force and artillery must have contributed to the second battle of **Cassino** between ten and eleven thousand tons of high explosive.

What was the return for this tremendous expenditure? The territorial result of the twelve-day battle may be briefly stated. Among the hills there was no change, but on the flat the New Zealanders, who had hitherto held only the northern fringes of the town, captured the rest of it but for a belt of strongpoints immediately under the hill. In the south they retook, and this time they held, the railway station. They had secure bridgeheads over the Rapido both on the main highway and on the railway route. Though defensively the new line was certainly uncomfortable, it had better offensive possibilities than the old. A great bite had been taken out of the Gustav line. As on the **Sangro**, the main prepared defences had been breached and the battle of endurance settled down on an improvised line to the rear. Though Senger has suggested that the attackers were halted by their exhaustion in working through the main line of resistance, <sup>1</sup> neither on the **Sangro** nor at **Cassino** does this appear to be true. The capture of the **Sangro** ridge defences did not tire the Division; and in the second battle of **Cassino** territorial gains were hardly expanded after the first fifty hours of fighting, though a fresh brigade was still available. The explanation must be sought rather in the Germans' stubborn response to a crisis.

The gains of March stood as a useful credit in the account of the Allies against the day of the May offensive. It is true that the town of **Cassino** was never again frontally assaulted. In May the local object was to isolate it by a Polish drive through the hills to the north-west linking up with the **13 Corps** advance up the **Liri** valley. But our possession of most of **Cassino** and the railway station helped to protect the right flank of the **13 Corps** troops forming up in the mouth of the valley and making their bridgehead across the Rapido.

**Strategically, operation**

DICKENS

had few and unimportant repercussions within the Italian theatre. It necessitated no great enemy troop movements – only one regiment (brigade) of infantry and a few tanks were sent to help the paratroops, and both were found



<sup>1</sup> Diary, p. 149.

from *14 Panzer Corps*, the parent formation. And the defensive victory (we must not grudge the word) was a tonic to enemy morale and a discouragement to the friends of the Allies throughout *Italy* and even further afield. The simple fact of deadlock or of victory and defeat is always more eloquent than the complex reasons that may lie behind it.

In the main, the battle restated the plain grammar of warfare, but it directed notice to some neglected aspects of it, such as the art of street fighting, and it taught some tactical and technical lessons of greater novelty, particularly on the use of heavy bombers in close support, the tactics of infantry, tanks and engineers in following up aerial bombardment and the dropping of supplies from the air. <sup>1</sup> These lessons flowed into the pool of Allied experience and flowed out again in distant fields, not least in those about to be opened in North-West Europe.

The casualties for the period from 15 March to 26 March were: <sup>2</sup>

Formation	Killed		Wounded		Missing		Total Casualties		
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	All ranks
2 N2 Div	11	104	50	646	2	68	63	818	881
4 Ind Div	9	123	52	740	4	151	65	1014	1079
78 Div	3	16	3	57	0	8	6	81	87
NZ Corps Tps	3	18	3	31	0	4	6	53	59
	26	261	108	1474	6	231	140	1966	2106

The second battle of *Cassino*, then, cost the Allies well over two thousand casualties. The New Zealand casualties during the seven weeks' life of the *New Zealand Corps* were 1392 (206 killed, 1085 wounded, 101 missing).

It is not possible to state the enemy casualties in the second battle

with any accuracy, but an estimate based on the incomplete figures in the German records suggests that they may have been in the region of eleven or twelve hundred.

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<sup>1</sup> For notes on some of the tactical and technical lessons of the battle see [Appendix III](#).

<sup>2</sup> These figures were compiled shortly after the battle and are not strictly accurate, but they are used here because there is no break-up of the revised figures to show casualties during the period of the battle. The final official statement of losses between 1 February and 10 April 1944 is given in [Appendix I](#).

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*(iii)*

Discussion of the strategic rationale of the battle may begin with a general observation. Throughout the Second World War, but especially after Churchill became Prime Minister, the involvement of politics and strategy in the British war effort was peculiarly close. The balance of power between the statesmen and the generals – or more properly between Whitehall and the commanders in the field – will tilt this way or that according to the personalities who fill the offices and the ease of communication between them. Churchill's well-informed interest in the Mediterranean campaign was brought to bear intimately by personal visits to the theatre and rapidly and often by an excellent system of signals. Military discretion was to that extent qualified, the more so because both the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the [Mediterranean](#) and the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Armies in [Italy](#) were British officers. In this situation, the presence of Dominion troops under a commander whose Government had given him an exceptional right of veto over their employment <sup>1</sup> introduced not a persistent, but a potential, nonconformity and an independent critique, healthy or vexatious according to the mode of its exercise. This power came into play at [Cassino](#) in setting a limit to the number of casualties the Division would accept, but [Freyberg](#) was not prepared to go the length of

withholding the Division from the battle. In his view, expressed long afterwards, the New Zealanders could not have it said that they accepted only the easy assignments and left the difficult ones to the British. He asked Alexander whether, if the New Zealand Division refused, some other division would have to carry out the operation. On being told 'Yes', he undertook it, though fully alive to the hazards. <sup>2</sup>

On its military merits alone no competent soldier would have chosen to assault **Cassino** in March 1944. He would have looked askance at the very notion of trying to carry by storm the strongest fortress in **Europe** in the dead of winter by a single corps unsupported by diversionary operations. He would have waited to attack in a better season with larger forces on a broader front, and he would probably have expected the decisive breach to be made elsewhere than at **Cassino**. While the first and third battles were related to a general offensive, the second was a lone enterprise. When **Freyberg** came to plan it after the failure of operation **AVENGER** on 18 February, its purpose was partly to relieve the weight on our troops at **Anzio**, where the counter-attack was reaching its climax. By early March the bridgehead was safe, and the capture of a **Fourteenth Army** order of 4 March directing the resumption of the defensive might have been expected to relax strategic pressure. No such effect followed.

## Operation

DICKENS

, which was in suspense until the weather

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<sup>1</sup> A charter given to the GOC New Zealand Division by the **New Zealand Government** on 5 January 1940 gave him the right, 'in the case of sufficiently grave emergency or in special circumstances, of which he must be the sole judge', to exercise the powers of his Government over the employment of the Division. See *Documents*, Vol. I, pp. 31-2, for the text and **J. L. Scoullar: *Battle for Egypt***, Chap. I, for earlier examples of its invocation.

<sup>2</sup> **General Freyberg to General Kippenberger**, letter of 30 July 1956. See Scoullar, p. 13, for an example of **Freyberg's** application of his 'test question' earlier in the war; and for a critical comment on it the review of Scoullar by Barton Maughan in *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, Vol. 7, No. 26 (May 1956), p. 244.

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should improve, now had little to justify it by way of local military advantage, but it was still believed to be necessary. As we have seen, <sup>1</sup> **General Wilson**, hoping much from the bombing plan, feared that while **General Alexander** regrouped the enemy might disengage, taking refuge north of the **Pisa – Rimini** line and leaving the spring offensive to beat the air. **Alexander** rightly doubted this estimate of the effects of bombing, but in any case he could assure **Wilson** that there would be no lull in the land fighting. The second battle of **Cassino** was thus an interim measure to keep the enemy extended until the well-prepared blow could be delivered in the spring. But behind it also lay the unspoken desire to restore a prestige dimmed by earlier reverses at **Cassino** and to convince the Russians that the Western Allies were pulling their weight – a pledge more necessary now that the Second Front would not open until full summer.

In planning his regrouping in February, **Alexander** was prepared to assume the failure of the impending battle of **Cassino**. <sup>2</sup> In fact, a spring offensive from the existing line might have the advantage of trapping the German forces between the main front and the beach-head, whereas if they were driven from **Cassino** they might be able to economise in troops by holding a single connected line south of **Rome** or farther up the peninsula. **Alexander** was certainly anxious to win a bridgehead across the Rapido and seize the **Cassino** headland, but it is difficult to believe that he had serious expectations of the plan of exploitation. It is regrettable that operation DICKENS was not shorn of its pursuit phase at the outset, for it was taken seriously in **New Zealand Corps** and the intention to carry it out had an unfortunate influence on the conduct of the battle. So it now appears. What is less clear is whether **Alexander's**

doubts (if he had them) of an armoured dash through the winter mud of the **Liri** valley should have absolved him from the commander's normal duty to be ready with a plan to exploit unexpected success.

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 242.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit., p. 2916.

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*(iv)*

**Cassino**, then, was to be attacked again. We have already noted <sup>3</sup> why other alternatives were rejected, but the reasoning behind the plan may bear recapitulation. The long pause between the first and second battles must not mislead. Had **Freyberg** by some gift of second sight been able to foresee that the weather would delay the second battle for three weeks, he might have planned it otherwise. In reality, he had to be in readiness to attack as soon as

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<sup>3</sup> See above, p. 243.

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possible. There was no time to regroup. The tactical possibilities were thereby strictly limited.

Once the river crossing in the mouth of the valley was discarded – itself an operation requiring some time to mount – two courses were left.

<sup>1</sup> One was a renewal of the Indian attack towards the monastery from the north-west; but this would have been folly in the light of recent experience. There remained an assault on the monastery from the town, and the town could be approached either from the east or from the north. At first glance the eastern approach seemed to offer a broader front and shallower objectives. But the ponding of water between the Rapido and the town almost confined the advance, even on foot, to Route 6 and the railway line. Moreover, a river crossing would have to be made; the strongest defences were thought to be in the east; Point 193

could not be attacked until the town had been cleared; and only then could the advance across the flat link up with an attack along or up the hill. The north, where we already had a footing, gave a much better approach on all these counts. A more dubious part of the plan was that which required **4 Indian Division** to exploit along the open hillside step by step with the advance through the town.

In its direction the attack showed little or none of that tactical originality which is commonly called surprise. **Freyberg** therefore sought surprise by varying the method of attack. Hence the summons to the heavy bombers, which he called his secret weapon. He hoped that by razing **Cassino** to the ground they would eliminate costly street fighting and reduce casualties – always to him a very large consideration. Once his infantry had occupied ground beaten into impotence from the air, he relied on his armour to convert the break-in into a break-through. And it probably seemed to **Freyberg**, in his search for a necessary novelty, that the experiment was worth a trial. Known risks he accepted (Brigadier Hanson produced a calculation of the number of bombs likely to fall in the streets and the obstruction they would cause). On the unknown risks he had to take a chance.

The demerits of the bombing plan have been amply published <sup>2</sup> It failed in its purpose of extinguishing all life in the town or of sufficiently intimidating the survivors: the paratroops emerged from their vaults and bunkers to fight in the rubble. It is said on high authority <sup>3</sup> that the bombardment ‘produced better defensive positions

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<sup>1</sup> A third course, a fairly wide turning movement to the north, based on **Monte Castellone** and directed on to Route 6 via, say, **Villa Santa Lucia**, was not a real possibility in the time available, even had the appalling difficulties of supply and the enemy control of the Monte **Cairo** heights not ruled it out.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. by Clark, p. 333; *Army Air Forces in World War II*, Vol. III, pp. 269–70; Field – Marshal Lord Wilson: *Eight Years Overseas*, p. 201. See also **Appendix III**.

than it destroyed'. Above all, craters and rubble blocked the progress of tanks.

These criticisms, while all partly valid, are of unequal gravity. Many paratroops did, indeed, survive; but many were put out of the battle – on General Heidrich's estimate, about half the garrison of the town. The rest were badly enough shaken to prompt General Senger's fervent hope that the attack would not be repeated. The same high authority who thought that the bombing made good defences better also doubted whether any but paratroops could have endured such a hammering. <sup>1</sup>

It is questionable, secondly, whether the bombing actually improved the defences of the town. What it did was often to spare the prepared defences while destroying lighter cover. To this extent it certainly put a premium on defensive works and assisted the Germans who manned them, and it made the control and direction of infantry attack extremely difficult. The organised, set-piece action in which the New Zealanders excelled could not be mounted in the midst of devastation.

The third criticism – that the armour was obstructed – is probably the weightiest and the hardest to rebut, for it exposes a contradiction inherent in the plan. Since the operation was designed to make a penetration on a small front, speed was of its essence. Only tanks could provide this speed. But the very method used to blast a breach for the tanks to pass through made their easy passage impossible. By binding the rubble into the consistency of dough, the rain on the first night intensified this difficulty but did not create it. Craters were already filled or half-filled before the rain began. Tanks, it is true, gradually butted or manoeuvred their way into and through the town, but they came as mobile assault guns in a battle of attrition, not in the swift role of exploitation. Nor is it at all convincing to say that the German tanks were handicapped as badly as ours. The onus of attack, after all, lay on the attacker. Denied the chance of manoeuvre, **Freyberg** fell back upon

mass, but by frustrating its own purpose the bombardment came perilously near to being a *reductio ad absurdum* of weight of metal.

The attack by heavy bombers raised more problems than it solved, but it was not a complete failure. At the end of the day half of the town or more was in our hands at the cost of only 20 killed and 51 wounded. And a plan can only be judged in the light of the rejected alternatives. A silent attack was unthinkable. The only real alternative was the use of lighter bombs <sup>2</sup> or fewer bombs or

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander, loc. cit., pp. 2917–8.

<sup>2</sup> Twenty-five-pound fragmentation bombs were used in the attack across the [Senio](#) towards the end of the campaign, but they were not available at [Cassino](#).

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some form of artillery preparation unaccompanied by bombing. In any of these cases, the destruction in the town would have been less. The attackers would have found better cover. So would the defenders, and their prepared defences would have been comparatively unharmed. The material obstacles to tank movement would have been easier to clear away. The streets might even have retained the likeness of thoroughfares. But the garrison would certainly have been more numerous and their morale would have recovered still more quickly than it actually did. It is impossible to believe that our tanks and infantry, even given greater mobility, would have been permitted to slash through the streets of half-destroyed [Cassino](#) in a quick thrust. The battle would have developed into street fighting of a more orthodox kind, and the enemy (who had in fact expected just such a battle) would have had to be cleared out house by house. This is almost a definition of what [Freyberg](#) was hoping to avoid.

(v)

The plan was one thing, its execution another. The assaulting troops



themselves, as we have seen, <sup>1</sup> had been kept waiting in tense and uncomfortable circumstances too long to be at the peak of military fitness. Yet they cheered as the bombs fell on **Cassino**, and they were wrought up into the excited expectation of a walkover. The truth was therefore the more brutal.

The wounding of the New Zealand Divisional Commander on 2 March caused displacements down the chain of command, leaving his successor and the new commander of 6 Brigade to carry out a plan conceived by others.

At a series of conferences between 22 February and 2 March the commanders' ideas of the battle were thoroughly worked over. **Freyberg** admitted that the plan offended against the principles of war in being an attack on a limited front against a fortress, but he thought that the weight of bombardment and a swift infantry follow-up would give a reasonable chance of success. He spoke of 'an infantry assault without wasting any time at all, using the full moral effect of the air blitz'. **Kippenberger** was even more explicit. The leading battalion, according to his notions, was to enter the town by two roads and press on to its objective. 'Another battalion,' he continued, 'follows on their heels as quickly as it can get on to the road. Assault troops have to be fed in on a narrow front as it is impossible to get on to a broad one. They take over 193 and a third battalion goes through to the final objective'. The Indian division, which also had a narrow entrance to the battlefield,

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 252.

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was to deploy three battalions in a leapfrog fashion. The intention was clear: the attack was to be immediate and in great strength, with six battalions committed by nightfall if all went well.

Our narrative has shown that on the day this plan was not followed. The first wave of New Zealand infantry, starting at zero hour from the barracks, were fed into the town by the single entrance of Caruso road.

**They did not obviously dawdle and within fifty minutes had advanced a mile or so and were well inside [Cassino](#). Two companies pushed through the town towards their objective [QUISLING](#), which was about 600 yards in width, one was diverted to Point 193 and one took up a reserve position in the north of the town. It is possible that the two leading companies did not 'lean on the barrage' as closely as ideally desirable in the early stages. This is not surprising. Obstructions hampered them, and because of the wide lateral fragmentation of rounds fired from the flank they could not approach as close to the shell-line as with the usual overhead barrage. Later, of course, they lost it because of resistance to their advance. It is also possible that the safety margin of 1000 yards might have been reduced so as to speed the follow-up, but the record of the heavy bombers compels a doubt.**

**The assaulting companies were for a long time without tank support, and the need for infantry reinforcement was for that reason the more urgent. Yet four hours elapsed after zero hour before the order was given to send more infantry into the town. The response was to send one company. It was nearly five and a half hours after zero hour before the next full battalion was called forward. Whereas it had been envisaged in the original planning that it would be committed by dusk on the 15th, the third full battalion was not thrown in until early afternoon on the 17th.**

**The conclusion seems inescapable that this delay cost the corps its best opportunity of 'gate-crashing' [Cassino](#). Every hour that passed stiffened the resistance. A company on the 15th was worth a battalion on the 17th. If two companies could reach the northern arm of Route 6 on the first afternoon, five or six might have been able to reach the final infantry objective almost as soon. The tactic of swamping the opposition, of fanning out at once to the objectives and of leaving enemy pockets to be isolated and reduced by later waves, though an orthodoxy of street fighting, was not practised. Whatever the truth later, it seems undeniable that there was plenty of room for more infantry on the 15th. This emerges, for example, from the eviction of the 25**

**Battalion men from the convent, which was to be used two days later as a start line for the advance to the station.**

**This seeming passivity is puzzling, and not less so in the absence of any evidence that **Freyberg** was dissatisfied. One explanation may be that the effect of the bombardment in obliterating opposition was overrated, while the resilience of the defence was underrated—a very venial error in those who had just witnessed the pulverising of **Cassino**. Such was the Germans' interpretation of our comparatively light infantry follow-up. 'The enemy,' says the *1 Parachute Division* diary, 'must have thought his heavy bombing and barrage would result in an easy success ....' If fallacious optimism did exist, it must have been nourished by the reports that filtered back from the leading troops. For some hours it was believed that the advance of both infantry and tanks was meeting with no unmanageable trouble, and it was not until after 5 p.m. that 6 Brigade realised that the engineers could not work in the town. Faulty communications helped to swathe senior commanders in a cocoon of unreality and to render their orders irrelevant.**

**In view of the ignorance of what was going on, it may have been an error of judgment that no battalion headquarters were established in **Cassino** in the first two days of the battle. Comparatively junior commanders, faced with the disruption of an organic plan, were left to improvise as well as they could, for their seniors lacked the knowledge necessary for adapting the plan to the unforeseen mischances. This may account for the sense of sterility that seems to overtake the conduct of the battle on the second day. Indeed, a study of the fighting leaves the impression, strongest of the early phases but never wholly erased, that the senior commanders did not completely grasp the brute physical difficulties of combat in **Cassino**.**

**The rain on the night of 15–16 March was a stroke of ill-fortune. It can be made to carry too much blame, but its effects were serious enough. It denied the New Zealanders the use of the moon for regrouping and resuming the advance and helped to increase the delay of the Indian division in taking over Point 193. It made worse obstacles of the rubble**

and cratering in **Cassino** and, most seriously of all, it gave the enemy a respite in which to reorganise himself and his defences.

It is conceivable that up to the 17th, had infantry been poured in, **Cassino** might have been taken fairly cheaply. Thereafter, with the Germans reinforced, the town might still have been taken, but only by a process of attrition, and it is by no means certain that the monastery would have been included for the price. In retrospect, it seems that up to that day persistence in the original plan was the most reasonable course. The capture of the station and hummock implied that it was still being adhered to, for the principal use of the area was to open up the valley for exploitation. The corps continued to work to the original plan for two days longer. The operations set down for the 19th represent it in a belated and somewhat truncated form. They were forced on before the preliminaries had been completed either on the flat or on the hillside, partly perhaps by pressure from the Army Commander, and partly no doubt from a feeling that it was now or never. Only when they had failed was the battle reoriented. Only now, after four days, did **Freyberg** feel himself free to overrule the advice of Parkinson and Bonifaht, to respond to the pleas of Clark and Galloway and to release the infantry that he had been husbanding for the pursuit. So long did the remote and doubtfully realistic object of the operation hinder the attainment of the nearer and more practicable.

For the **New Zealand Corps** the events of 19 March were a premature culmination of the battle. When the day failed, it was judged necessary to set about finishing the tasks whose completion was the prerequisite of success for the original plan. The fight against infiltration began. But 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**. It may be asked whether this was a wise or necessary policy.

In one sense it was, as we have indicated, a perseverance with an old

plan. But lest we too readily assume a bankrupt inflexibility of outlook, we must look at it in another light. Since 16 March the lodgment on Hangman's Hill, won with high bravery and held at high cost, was a challenge to the whole corps. There it was before them, hoist like a proud standard at the head of an army. Towards this place of honour many men marched. In short, this dramatic foothold, so prominent to the eye and so close to the monastery, constituted almost a moral lien on the efforts of the corps. When General Galloway claimed that it could never be secured until the hillside was worked and that the hillside could never be worked until the town was cleared, it was difficult to deny him. To go to the assistance of the beleaguered **Gurkhas** thus became the object of operations. To this end, the New Zealanders tried to do two things: first, to throw a cordon round the town so that it could be methodically cleared, and secondly, to break through the cordon that the enemy (save for the aperture at Point 193) had thrown round the hill. All the stiffest fighting in the battle took place along the line where these two cordons touched, namely at the western edges of the town.

It might appear, by the 19th at the latest, that the dictate of prudence was to cut our losses in **Cassino** and allow the battle to follow its 'natural tendency', which was to bypass the town and to assume a shape not unlike that of the February attack. Was it, then, only the lodgment on Hangman's Hill that drew the New Zealanders back into the furnace of **Cassino**? At this clarifying and comfortable distance there seem to have been two possible ways of continuing the battle when deadlock in the town became obvious. The first course was to launch **5 Brigade** from the station across Route 6 well south of the town to link up with the **Gurkhas** on the hill. This is the plan which, when suggested late in the battle for **78 Division**, was rejected by the corps and divisional commanders but which caused Alexander to ponder. It was sure to be costly and it was not sure to succeed. At best there was a chance of uniting the two forces and a smaller chance that the union would bring about the capture of the monastery. Its essence was to rupture the enemy cordon on a broader front than was possible at Point 193.

The other possible course, while making use of the railway station base, would have attempted to isolate rather than to burst through on to **Montecassino**. It might have been possible, in spite of the flooding round the Gari, to develop a thrust along the railway embankment and into the **Liri** valley. A German patrol late in the month reported that the ground round the blown railway bridge over the Gari was passable to tanks 'with broad tracks'. But even if the going had been practicable and if the attack had made head against the furious opposition that would have been offered from the area of the Baron's Palace and the Colosseum, it could hardly have succeeded alone. A single pencil-thrust up the valley would have been suicidal except on one condition. The indispensable corollary was a drive by the Indians among the hills north-west of **Montecassino** towards Route 6, so that a junction of the two forces would complete the envelopment of the monastery. But after six weeks in the hills, the Indians of **7 Brigade** were in no condition to mount such an effort.

One of our alternatives, then, was not genuinely a possibility. The other (admittedly at a later phase of the battle) was rejected after careful consideration. The decision to keep battering away inside **Cassino** may now appear in a truer light. The German documents, moreover, authorise the opinion that in the battle of attrition the scales were very delicately poised. On the 21st, in particular, the enemy was momentarily reduced to the slenderest foothold in the town. It is hard to pronounce impossible a plan which, on the German showing, was within an ace of at least limited success.

Criticism, which has ranged over the direction of our effort during the battle, might finally dwell for a moment on the method of applying that effort. It is not to the discredit of the New Zealanders to admit that they suffered from want of experience in the specialised and militarily sophisticated art of street fighting. The commanders were under no illusions. 'It is still the desert army and we have a lot to learn,' remarked General Galloway.

Street righting was not only hard to learn but in the conditions at **Cassino** it especially penalised the New Zealand Division by limiting the exercise of what had always been one of its strongest weapons—the close integration of infantry and artillery. The carefully staged attack, with its taped start lines, precise rates of infantry advance and barrage lifts, was shown on the first afternoon to be all but chimerical, at least where communications were not good enough to permit the assaulting troops to control timings to conform with their progress. There were simply too many physical obstacles for the infantry to remain in the shelter of the barrage.

Yet the contrast between the mighty opening fire plan and the absence of anything like it afterwards invites the query whether the best possible use was made of our artillery. This powerful armament produced smoke, harassing and defensive fire repeatedly and in great volume, it hit hard at opportunity targets with mass salvos and its counter-battery and counter-mortar tasks were discharged with a zeal that approached ferocity. But it is noteworthy that after the first day it was never used in a general, concerted fire plan to help the infantry forward. There was a large-scale neutralisation programme by the name of **DUSTBIN**, but none of the attempts to clear up the western edges of the town was prepared and supported by a carefully devised plan using all available guns and mortars.

It is necessary to insist on the difficulties: for the reason suggested, a creeping barrage might have been impracticable; the shooting would have been close; the lift of the ground in the west would have raised problems of accuracy; our occupation of **Castle Hill** would have had to be taken into account; and special measures would have been needed to give the assault an initial momentum by dealing with enemy posts too near to be neutralised by gunfire. Still, at some stage the experiment might have been worth while of pausing to take stock of the situation and carefully co-ordinating the fire resources of the corps with an attack by fresh infantry. As the battle in the town actually developed, increasing reliance was placed on direct-fire, high-velocity weapons. The

only question is whether by this time the possibilities of indirect fire had been exhausted.

No doubt by struggling for a few days longer the corps could have won the whole town. Even paratroops must soon have resigned possession of the ruins. But **General Freyberg** was not prepared to hazard more casualties. When the **New Zealand Corps** was first formed, he warned General Clark, under the authority he derived from the **New Zealand Government**, that when his casualties had reached a thousand he would abandon the attack unless it had achieved or was about to achieve success. His view was that the Division could afford these casualties, and considerably more, provided that they were incurred in a successful operation, but that to lose more than a thousand men for no substantial military result would so impair the morale of the Division that it would take months to recover. <sup>1</sup> When he attended the Commander-in-Chief's conference on 21 March, **Freyberg** had a return of casualties which showed that the Division had lost 549 men in the second battle, and probably more. Since New Zealand casualties at **Cassino** up to 14 March numbered about 500, the thousand mark was reached and passed. **Freyberg's** determination not to make a **Passchendaele** of **Cassino** is an essential clue to his attitude in the closing stages of the battle, and it may have had its weight with Alexander when he decided on the 23rd to call off the operation.

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<sup>1</sup> **General Freyberg**, oral statement to author, 10 December 1955.

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(vi)

The New Zealanders made mistakes in the second battle of **Cassino**. The most serious was the failure to rush the defences with sufficient weight on the first afternoon. But every battle is a tissue of error, and something must be left to chance. It was for the New Zealand Corps a malevolent chance that pitted *1 Parachute Division* against it. Did infantry ever fight a stauncher defensive battle than the German



paratroops at **Cassino**? They were manning defences three months in the preparation, they had had recent experience of street fighting at **Ortona**, they knew how to exploit every advantage of terrain, they were imbued with utter confidence in themselves and with boundless zeal for their Fuehrer and their toughness and endurance were beyond all ordinary reckoning. It is not to be assumed that other German troops would have equally withstood the assault.

The Germans themselves attributed much of their success to their ability to concentrate their artillery fire rapidly on targets in the town, but the New Zealanders were most impressed by the efficiency of their close-support infantry weapons, especially the mortars. At a somewhat higher tactical level, two other facts deserve a place in the explanation of German success. One was their intelligent control over the counter-attack. They soon found that attacks on any large scale did not repay their cost. Only at Point 193, the Allied sally-port on to the hillside, did they keep returning to the assault. Elsewhere, particularly in the town, they preferred to let the **New Zealand Corps** carry the fight to them, to resist from prepared positions and to confine themselves to small, local counter-strokes. In the second place, their system of command was simple and direct. They fought **Cassino** as a strictly divisional battle. General Heidrich established himself at the headquarters of *3 Parachute Regiment*, which was responsible for the town. He was held on a light rein by his Corps Commander. General Senger was content with a general supervision over the conduct of the battle, he secured and fed in the few reinforcements and made frequent tactical appreciations for the enlightenment of *Tenth Army*.

Our discussion of the battle is ended. It has led into free speculation on the alternatives open to the New Zealand command, in the belief that the decisions that were actually taken can only be understood in the light of those that might have been taken. It may well be that no second assault ought ever to have been launched into the teeth of the **Cassino** fortress, which its commander agreed was almost impregnable when once defended. But the exigencies of strategy decreed otherwise. Where

so much is obscure, it is as clear as day that there was no easy solution to the problems of the attacker. The critic of the solutions that were in fact adopted must first arm himself with better ones; he must then be sure that they were available amidst the confusion, the misinformation, the fluctuating hopes and the sheer worry and exhaustion of the battlefield; and he must finally caution himself against what an English historian has called ‘one of the perpetual optical illusions of historical study – the impression that all would have been well if men had only done “the other thing”’<sup>1</sup>

The commanders may abide our question: the fighting men they led are free. Of the quality of the New Zealand troops who actually came to grips with the enemy, let the enemy himself speak:

The New Zealand soldier [said a *14 Panzer Corps* report on the battle] is physically fit and strong. He is well trained and formidable in close range fighting, and steadier than the Englishman. He does not shrink from hand-to-hand fighting. In many cases strongpoints had to be wiped out to the last man, as they refused to surrender.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Butterfield: *George III, Lord North and the People, 1779–80*, p. 86.

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(vii)

The historian of the battles of **Cassino** who revisits the scene finds no relief from the difficulty of commemorating them in a way that will do justice to the New Zealanders who fought there, but he is impressed anew by the need for making the attempt. For except in its boldest features, the face of the land has changed even in so short a time. To stand on the summit of Point 593 on the tenth anniversary of the peace was to be engulfed in a tranquillity made the more immense by the emphasis of a few simple sounds – the chime of a cowbell, a skylark's glee and, far below beside the new white abbey, the shouts of black-robed novices as they skirmished with a football. Earth heals her own wounds,

**and the husbandry of a thousand peasants has tended the growth of twelve successive springs. Ruins are dismantled and new buildings arise on the sites of the old. Men remember but their memories fade and finally die with them. And of the deeds bravely done and the hardships bravely borne, soon nothing will remain but the imperfect record itself.**

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## (I)

### (i)

SO long as men study the art of war the battles of **Cassino** will interest them as a classic contest between the advantages of terrain and of material. By prolonging their resistance for four months or (on a more extensive view) for seven months, the Germans showed that in certain circumstances of ground and weather the offensive may lose the mobility with which modern weapons are sometimes thought to endow it. In some ways **Cassino** was a battle of the First World War fought with the weapons of the Second. When the German Corps Commander walked down the shell-pitted **Liri** valley during the fighting, he found himself carried back in memory thirty years to the **Somme**.<sup>1</sup> The first great lesson of **Cassino** is that when the attacker is drawn into a strait of commanding natural strength, the tank and the aeroplane may easily fail to break the ensuing deadlock. By piling the difficulties of street fighting upon the natural defences of river, marsh and height, the **Cassino** position enabled stout defenders to defy appreciable odds in manpower and vast odds in material. Like a whirlpool, **Cassino** sucked into its vortex all that tried to pass through the strait.

The operation that began on 15 March was one of a series and has been variously described. It is called by Alexander<sup>2</sup> the third battle of **Cassino**, to distinguish it from the first, fought by the **United States 2 Corps** in January and early February, and the second, fought by the **New Zealand Corps** between 15 and 18 February (operation

AVENGER

). On this reckoning there were four battles of **Cassino**, the last being part of the great offensive of May. The perspective of the New Zealand historian tempts him to follow this example. But it seems unreal to deny unity to the American and the first **New Zealand Corps** attacks, which were made almost without a break and on essentially the same plan; and

it has therefore seemed preferable in this account to regard

AVENGER

as part of the first battle and

DICKENS

as the second. To

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<sup>1</sup> Senger: Diary, pp. 102–3.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit., p. 2917.

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others, it may appear that operations from January to March constitute a single battle, divided into two only by the chance of bad weather. <sup>1</sup> Finally, the historian of the whole war may see only one battle stretching over seven months from late October 1943, when the Fifth Army began its attacks on the outposts of the Bernhard line, until the middle of May 1944, when **Montecassino** fell. <sup>2</sup> This view has the merit of acknowledging the organic connection between the defence of the Bernhard and Gustav lines, for the time the Allies took to break the former the Germans used to strengthen the latter. Such distinctions and divisions are never quite unimportant to the historian, for as he groups his facts so he weaves his patterns; but here they are mentioned for the sake of clarity and as a reminder of the context of operation

DICKENS

, the subject of discussion in this last chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> This is in effect the view of the **Battles Nomenclature Committee**, which has decided that there were two battles of **Cassino**, **Cassino I** from 20 January to 25 March 1944, and **Cassino II** from 11 to 18 May 1944. The number of troops engaged is an important consideration in determining the official nomenclature of battles.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. **General von Senger und Etterlin**: 'Die Cassino-Schlachten', in *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militär Zeitschrift*, June 1951, p.



# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## (II)

### (ii)

Had the issue been different, the odds against the defenders in the second battle of **Cassino** might have been described as crushing. Admittedly, the disparity in infantry strengths was almost modest. To the fourteen battalions under command of *1 Parachute Division* in the critical sector the **New Zealand Corps** could oppose twenty-four—very much less than the three-to-one superiority held indispensable by General Alexander for such operations. But in material the attackers had a huge preponderance. They could count over 600 armoured fighting vehicles – 455 Sherman tanks, 124 Stuarts and 59 armoured cars – though in the event they could deploy only a small proportion, never more than 10 per cent at any one time. The enemy fought through the crisis with only a handful of tanks in **Cassino**, and even in the dying stages of the battle he could have brought in no more than sixteen. He had perhaps eighty tanks waiting in the **Liri** valley.

Our 610 artillery pieces in direct support had by 25 March fired no fewer than 588,034 rounds; to these weapons must be added another hundred or so self-propelled close-support guns of various calibres which Combat Command 'B' held available but did not use. At its greatest strength the German artillery numbered about 240 pieces. In **Cassino** itself during the height of the battle there was a solitary enemy assault gun, which had to be put out of action every night for repairs.

While our aircraft flew 2629 sorties and dropped 2362 tons of bombs, the enemy flew only 214 sorties against vastly superior anti-aircraft defences. The opening bombardment from air and ground dropped on and around **Cassino** high explosives to the weight of about 2500 tons in seven hours and a half, and for the next ten or eleven days, though the bombardment slackened, it hardly ceased. In all, the Allied air force and artillery must have contributed to the second battle of **Cassino** between

ten and eleven thousand tons of high explosive.

What was the return for this tremendous expenditure? The territorial result of the twelve-day battle may be briefly stated. Among the hills there was no change, but on the flat the New Zealanders, who had hitherto held only the northern fringes of the town, captured the rest of it but for a belt of strongpoints immediately under the hill. In the south they retook, and this time they held, the railway station. They had secure bridgeheads over the Rapido both on the main highway and on the railway route. Though defensively the new line was certainly uncomfortable, it had better offensive possibilities than the old. A great bite had been taken out of the Gustav line. As on the **Sangro**, the main prepared defences had been breached and the battle of endurance settled down on an improvised line to the rear. Though Senger has suggested that the attackers were halted by their exhaustion in working through the main line of resistance, <sup>1</sup> neither on the **Sangro** nor at **Cassino** does this appear to be true. The capture of the **Sangro** ridge defences did not tire the Division; and in the second battle of **Cassino** territorial gains were hardly expanded after the first fifty hours of fighting, though a fresh brigade was still available. The explanation must be sought rather in the Germans' stubborn response to a crisis.

The gains of March stood as a useful credit in the account of the Allies against the day of the May offensive. It is true that the town of **Cassino** was never again frontally assaulted. In May the local object was to isolate it by a Polish drive through the hills to the north-west linking up with the **13 Corps** advance up the **Liri** valley. But our possession of most of **Cassino** and the railway station helped to protect the right flank of the **13 Corps** troops forming up in the mouth of the valley and making their bridgehead across the Rapido.

**Strategically, operation**

DICKENS

had few and unimportant repercussions within the Italian theatre. It necessitated no great enemy troop movements – only one regiment



(brigade) of infantry and a few tanks were sent to help the paratroops, and both were found

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<sup>1</sup> Diary, p. 149.

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from *14 Panzer Corps*, the parent formation. And the defensive victory (we must not grudge the word) was a tonic to enemy morale and a discouragement to the friends of the Allies throughout *Italy* and even further afield. The simple fact of deadlock or of victory and defeat is always more eloquent than the complex reasons that may lie behind it.

In the main, the battle restated the plain grammar of warfare, but it directed notice to some neglected aspects of it, such as the art of street fighting, and it taught some tactical and technical lessons of greater novelty, particularly on the use of heavy bombers in close support, the tactics of infantry, tanks and engineers in following up aerial bombardment and the dropping of supplies from the air. <sup>1</sup> These lessons flowed into the pool of Allied experience and flowed out again in distant fields, not least in those about to be opened in North-West Europe.

The casualties for the period from 15 March to 26 March were: <sup>2</sup>

Formation	Killed		Wounded		Missing		Total Casualties		
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	All ranks
2 N2 Div	11	104	50	646	2	68	63	818	881
4 Ind Div	9	123	52	740	4	151	65	1014	1079
78 Div	3	16	3	57	0	8	6	81	87
NZ Corps Tps	3	18	3	31	0	4	6	53	59
	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	26	261	108	1474	6	231	140	1966	2106

The second battle of *Cassino*, then, cost the Allies well over two thousand casualties. The New Zealand casualties during the seven weeks' life of the *New Zealand Corps* were 1392 (206 killed, 1085 wounded, 101

missing).

**It is not possible to state the enemy casualties in the second battle with any accuracy, but an estimate based on the incomplete figures in the German records suggests that they may have been in the region of eleven or twelve hundred.**

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**<sup>1</sup> For notes on some of the tactical and technical lessons of the battle see [Appendix III](#).**

**<sup>2</sup> These figures were compiled shortly after the battle and are not strictly accurate, but they are used here because there is no break-up of the revised figures to show casualties during the period of the battle. The final official statement of losses between 1 February and 10 April 1944 is given in [Appendix I](#).**

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## (III)

(iii)

Discussion of the strategic rationale of the battle may begin with a general observation. Throughout the Second World War, but especially after Churchill became Prime Minister, the involvement of politics and strategy in the British war effort was peculiarly close. The balance of power between the statesmen and the generals – or more properly between Whitehall and the commanders in the field – will tilt this way or that according to the personalities who fill the offices and the ease of communication between them. Churchill's well-informed interest in the Mediterranean campaign was brought to bear intimately by personal visits to the theatre and rapidly and often by an excellent system of signals. Military discretion was to that extent qualified, the more so because both the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the **Mediterranean** and the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Armies in **Italy** were British officers. In this situation, the presence of Dominion troops under a commander whose Government had given him an exceptional right of veto over their employment <sup>1</sup> introduced not a persistent, but a potential, nonconformity and an independent critique, healthy or vexatious according to the mode of its exercise. This power came into play at **Cassino** in setting a limit to the number of casualties the Division would accept, but **Freyberg** was not prepared to go the length of withholding the Division from the battle. In his view, expressed long afterwards, the New Zealanders could not have it said that they accepted only the easy assignments and left the difficult ones to the British. He asked Alexander whether, if the New Zealand Division refused, some other division would have to carry out the operation. On being told 'Yes', he undertook it, though fully alive to the hazards. <sup>2</sup>

On its military merits alone no competent soldier would have chosen to assault **Cassino** in March 1944. He would have looked askance at the

very notion of trying to carry by storm the strongest fortress in **Europe** in the dead of winter by a single corps unsupported by diversionary operations. He would have waited to attack in a better season with larger forces on a broader front, and he would probably have expected the decisive breach to be made elsewhere than at **Cassino**. While the first and third battles were related to a general offensive, the second was a lone enterprise. When **Freyberg** came to plan it after the failure of operation **AVENGER** on 18 February, its purpose was partly to relieve the weight on our troops at **Anzio**, where the counter-attack was reaching its climax. By early March the bridgehead was safe, and the capture of a **Fourteenth Army** order of 4 March directing the resumption of the defensive might have been expected to relax strategic pressure. No such effect followed.

## Operation

DICKENS

, which was in suspense until the weather

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<sup>1</sup> A charter given to the GOC New Zealand Division by the **New Zealand Government** on 5 January 1940 gave him the right, ‘in the case of sufficiently grave emergency or in special circumstances, of which he must be the sole judge’, to exercise the powers of his Government over the employment of the Division. See *Documents*, Vol. I, pp. 31–2, for the text and **J. L. Scoullar: *Battle for Egypt***, Chap. I, for earlier examples of its invocation.

<sup>2</sup> **General Freyberg** to **General Kippenberger**, letter of 30 July 1956. See Scoullar, p. 13, for an example of **Freyberg's** application of his ‘test question’ earlier in the war; and for a critical comment on it the review of Scoullar by Barton Maughan in *Historical Studies: **Australia and New Zealand***, Vol. 7, No. 26 (May 1956), p. 244.

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should improve, now had little to justify it by way of local military advantage, but it was still believed to be necessary. As we have seen, <sup>1</sup>

General Wilson, hoping much from the bombing plan, feared that while General Alexander regrouped the enemy might disengage, taking refuge north of the **Pisa – Rimini** line and leaving the spring offensive to beat the air. Alexander rightly doubted this estimate of the effects of bombing, but in any case he could assure Wilson that there would be no lull in the land fighting. The second battle of **Cassino** was thus an interim measure to keep the enemy extended until the well-prepared blow could be delivered in the spring. But behind it also lay the unspoken desire to restore a prestige dimmed by earlier reverses at **Cassino** and to convince the Russians that the Western Allies were pulling their weight – a pledge more necessary now that the Second Front would not open until full summer.

In planning his regrouping in February, Alexander was prepared to assume the failure of the impending battle of **Cassino**.<sup>2</sup> In fact, a spring offensive from the existing line might have the advantage of trapping the German forces between the main front and the beach-head, whereas if they were driven from **Cassino** they might be able to economise in troops by holding a single connected line south of **Rome** or farther up the peninsula. Alexander was certainly anxious to win a bridgehead across the Rapido and seize the **Cassino** headland, but it is difficult to believe that he had serious expectations of the plan of exploitation. It is regrettable that operation **DICKENS** was not shorn of its pursuit phase at the outset, for it was taken seriously in **New Zealand Corps** and the intention to carry it out had an unfortunate influence on the conduct of the battle. So it now appears. What is less clear is whether Alexander's doubts (if he had them) of an armoured dash through the winter mud of the **Liri** valley should have absolved him from the commander's normal duty to be ready with a plan to exploit unexpected success.

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 242.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit., p. 2916.

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## (IV)

(iv)

**Cassino**, then, was to be attacked again. We have already noted <sup>3</sup> why other alternatives were rejected, but the reasoning behind the plan may bear recapitulation. The long pause between the first and second battles must not mislead. Had **Freyberg** by some gift of second sight been able to foresee that the weather would delay the second battle for three weeks, he might have planned it otherwise. In reality, he had to be in readiness to attack as soon as

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<sup>3</sup> See above, p. 243.

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possible. There was no time to regroup. The tactical possibilities were thereby strictly limited.

Once the river crossing in the mouth of the valley was discarded – itself an operation requiring some time to mount – two courses were left. <sup>1</sup> One was a renewal of the Indian attack towards the monastery from the north-west; but this would have been folly in the light of recent experience. There remained an assault on the monastery from the town, and the town could be approached either from the east or from the north. At first glance the eastern approach seemed to offer a broader front and shallower objectives. But the ponding of water between the Rapido and the town almost confined the advance, even on foot, to Route 6 and the railway line. Moreover, a river crossing would have to be made; the strongest defences were thought to be in the east; Point 193 could not be attacked until the town had been cleared; and only then could the advance across the flat link up with an attack along or up the hill. The north, where we already had a footing, gave a much better approach on all these counts. A more dubious part of the plan was that which required **4 Indian Division** to exploit along the open hillside step

by step with the advance through the town.

In its direction the attack showed little or none of that tactical originality which is commonly called surprise. **Freyberg** therefore sought surprise by varying the method of attack. Hence the summons to the heavy bombers, which he called his secret weapon. He hoped that by razing **Cassino** to the ground they would eliminate costly street fighting and reduce casualties – always to him a very large consideration. Once his infantry had occupied ground beaten into impotence from the air, he relied on his armour to convert the break-in into a break-through. And it probably seemed to **Freyberg**, in his search for a necessary novelty, that the experiment was worth a trial. Known risks he accepted (Brigadier Hanson produced a calculation of the number of bombs likely to fall in the streets and the obstruction they would cause). On the unknown risks he had to take a chance.

The demerits of the bombing plan have been amply published <sup>2</sup> It failed in its purpose of extinguishing all life in the town or of sufficiently intimidating the survivors: the paratroops emerged from their vaults and bunkers to fight in the rubble. It is said on high authority <sup>3</sup> that the bombardment ‘produced better defensive positions

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<sup>1</sup> A third course, a fairly wide turning movement to the north, based on **Monte Castellone** and directed on to Route 6 via, say, **Villa Santa Lucia**, was not a real possibility in the time available, even had the appalling difficulties of supply and the enemy control of the Monte **Cairo** heights not ruled it out.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. by Clark, p. 333; *Army Air Forces in World War II*, Vol. III, pp. 269–70; Field – Marshal Lord Wilson: *Eight Years Overseas*, p. 201. See also **Appendix III**.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander, loc. cit., p. 2914.

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than it destroyed’. Above all, craters and rubble blocked the progress

of tanks.

These criticisms, while all partly valid, are of unequal gravity. Many paratroops did, indeed, survive; but many were put out of the battle – on General Heidrich's estimate, about half the garrison of the town. The rest were badly enough shaken to prompt General Senger's fervent hope that the attack would not be repeated. The same high authority who thought that the bombing made good defences better also doubted whether any but paratroops could have endured such a hammering. <sup>1</sup>

It is questionable, secondly, whether the bombing actually improved the defences of the town. What it did was often to spare the prepared defences while destroying lighter cover. To this extent it certainly put a premium on defensive works and assisted the Germans who manned them, and it made the control and direction of infantry attack extremely difficult. The organised, set-piece action in which the New Zealanders excelled could not be mounted in the midst of devastation.

The third criticism – that the armour was obstructed – is probably the weightiest and the hardest to rebut, for it exposes a contradiction inherent in the plan. Since the operation was designed to make a penetration on a small front, speed was of its essence. Only tanks could provide this speed. But the very method used to blast a breach for the tanks to pass through made their easy passage impossible. By binding the rubble into the consistency of dough, the rain on the first night intensified this difficulty but did not create it. Craters were already filled or half-filled before the rain began. Tanks, it is true, gradually butted or manoeuvred their way into and through the town, but they came as mobile assault guns in a battle of attrition, not in the swift role of exploitation. Nor is it at all convincing to say that the German tanks were handicapped as badly as ours. The onus of attack, after all, lay on the attacker. Denied the chance of manoeuvre, **Freyberg** fell back upon mass, but by frustrating its own purpose the bombardment came perilously near to being a *reductio ad absurdum* of weight of metal.

The attack by heavy bombers raised more problems than it solved,



but it was not a complete failure. At the end of the day half of the town or more was in our hands at the cost of only 20 killed and 51 wounded. And a plan can only be judged in the light of the rejected alternatives. A silent attack was unthinkable. The only real alternative was the use of lighter bombs <sup>2</sup> or fewer bombs or

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander, loc. cit., pp. 2917–8.

<sup>2</sup> Twenty-five-pound fragmentation bombs were used in the attack across the **Senio** towards the end of the campaign, but they were not available at **Cassino**.

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some form of artillery preparation unaccompanied by bombing. In any of these cases, the destruction in the town would have been less. The attackers would have found better cover. So would the defenders, and their prepared defences would have been comparatively unharmed. The material obstacles to tank movement would have been easier to clear away. The streets might even have retained the likeness of thoroughfares. But the garrison would certainly have been more numerous and their morale would have recovered still more quickly than it actually did. It is impossible to believe that our tanks and infantry, even given greater mobility, would have been permitted to slash through the streets of half-destroyed **Cassino** in a quick thrust. The battle would have developed into street fighting of a more orthodox kind, and the enemy (who had in fact expected just such a battle) would have had to be cleared out house by house. This is almost a definition of what **Freyberg** was hoping to avoid.

## (V)

(v)

The plan was one thing, its execution another. The assaulting troops themselves, as we have seen, <sup>1</sup> had been kept waiting in tense and uncomfortable circumstances too long to be at the peak of military fitness. Yet they cheered as the bombs fell on **Cassino**, and they were wrought up into the excited expectation of a walkover. The truth was therefore the more brutal.

The wounding of the New Zealand Divisional Commander on 2 March caused displacements down the chain of command, leaving his successor and the new commander of 6 Brigade to carry out a plan conceived by others.

At a series of conferences between 22 February and 2 March the commanders' ideas of the battle were thoroughly worked over. **Freyberg** admitted that the plan offended against the principles of war in being an attack on a limited front against a fortress, but he thought that the weight of bombardment and a swift infantry follow-up would give a reasonable chance of success. He spoke of 'an infantry assault without wasting any time at all, using the full moral effect of the air blitz'. **Kippenberger** was even more explicit. The leading battalion, according to his notions, was to enter the town by two roads and press on to its objective. 'Another battalion,' he continued, 'follows on their heels as quickly as it can get on to the road. Assault troops have to be fed in on a narrow front as it is impossible to get on to a broad one. They take over 193 and a third battalion goes through to the final objective'. The Indian division, which also had a narrow entrance to the battlefield,

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 252.

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was to deploy three battalions in a leapfrog fashion. The intention was clear: the attack was to be immediate and in great strength, with six battalions committed by nightfall if all went well.

Our narrative has shown that on the day this plan was not followed. The first wave of New Zealand infantry, starting at zero hour from the barracks, were fed into the town by the single entrance of Caruso road. They did not obviously dawdle and within fifty minutes had advanced a mile or so and were well inside **Cassino**. Two companies pushed through the town towards their objective **QUISLING**, which was about 600 yards in width, one was diverted to Point 193 and one took up a reserve position in the north of the town. It is possible that the two leading companies did not 'lean on the barrage' as closely as ideally desirable in the early stages. This is not surprising. Obstructions hampered them, and because of the wide lateral fragmentation of rounds fired from the flank they could not approach as close to the shell-line as with the usual overhead barrage. Later, of course, they lost it because of resistance to their advance. It is also possible that the safety margin of 1000 yards might have been reduced so as to speed the follow-up, but the record of the heavy bombers compels a doubt.

The assaulting companies were for a long time without tank support, and the need for infantry reinforcement was for that reason the more urgent. Yet four hours elapsed after zero hour before the order was given to send more infantry into the town. The response was to send one company. It was nearly five and a half hours after zero hour before the next full battalion was called forward. Whereas it had been envisaged in the original planning that it would be committed by dusk on the 15th, the third full battalion was not thrown in until early afternoon on the 17th.

The conclusion seems inescapable that this delay cost the corps its best opportunity of 'gate-crashing' **Cassino**. Every hour that passed stiffened the resistance. A company on the 15th was worth a battalion on the 17th. If two companies could reach the northern arm of Route 6

on the first afternoon, five or six might have been able to reach the final infantry objective almost as soon. The tactic of swamping the opposition, of fanning out at once to the objectives and of leaving enemy pockets to be isolated and reduced by later waves, though an orthodoxy of street fighting, was not practised. Whatever the truth later, it seems undeniable that there was plenty of room for more infantry on the 15th. This emerges, for example, from the eviction of the 25 Battalion men from the convent, which was to be used two days later as a start line for the advance to the station.

This seeming passivity is puzzling, and not less so in the absence of any evidence that **Freyberg** was dissatisfied. One explanation may be that the effect of the bombardment in obliterating opposition was overrated, while the resilience of the defence was underrated—a very venial error in those who had just witnessed the pulverising of **Cassino**. Such was the Germans' interpretation of our comparatively light infantry follow-up. 'The enemy,' says the *1 Parachute Division* diary, 'must have thought his heavy bombing and barrage would result in an easy success ....' If fallacious optimism did exist, it must have been nourished by the reports that filtered back from the leading troops. For some hours it was believed that the advance of both infantry and tanks was meeting with no unmanageable trouble, and it was not until after 5 p.m. that 6 Brigade realised that the engineers could not work in the town. Faulty communications helped to swathe senior commanders in a cocoon of unreality and to render their orders irrelevant.

In view of the ignorance of what was going on, it may have been an error of judgment that no battalion headquarters were established in **Cassino** in the first two days of the battle. Comparatively junior commanders, faced with the disruption of an organic plan, were left to improvise as well as they could, for their seniors lacked the knowledge necessary for adapting the plan to the unforeseen mischances. This may account for the sense of sterility that seems to overtake the conduct of the battle on the second day. Indeed, a study of the fighting leaves the impression, strongest of the early phases but never wholly erased, that

**the senior commanders did not completely grasp the brute physical difficulties of combat in [Cassino](#).**

**The rain on the night of 15–16 March was a stroke of ill-fortune. It can be made to carry too much blame, but its effects were serious enough. It denied the New Zealanders the use of the moon for regrouping and resuming the advance and helped to increase the delay of the Indian division in taking over Point 193. It made worse obstacles of the rubble and cratering in [Cassino](#) and, most seriously of all, it gave the enemy a respite in which to reorganise himself and his defences.**

**It is conceivable that up to the 17th, had infantry been poured in, [Cassino](#) might have been taken fairly cheaply. Thereafter, with the Germans reinforced, the town might still have been taken, but only by a process of attrition, and it is by no means certain that the monastery would have been included for the price. In retrospect, it seems that up to that day persistence in the original plan was the most reasonable course. The capture of the station and hummock implied that it was still being adhered to, for the principal use of the area was to open up the valley for exploitation. The corps continued to work to the original plan for two days longer. The operations set down for the 19th represent it in a belated and somewhat truncated form. They were forced on before the preliminaries had been completed either on the flat or on the hillside, partly perhaps by pressure from the Army Commander, and partly no doubt from a feeling that it was now or never. Only when they had failed was the battle reoriented. Only now, after four days, did [Freyberg](#) feel himself free to overrule the advice of Parkinson and Bonifaht, to respond to the pleas of Clark and Galloway and to release the infantry that he had been husbanding for the pursuit. So long did the remote and doubtfully realistic object of the operation hinder the attainment of the nearer and more practicable.**

**For the [New Zealand Corps](#) the events of 19 March were a premature culmination of the battle. When the day failed, it was judged necessary to set about finishing the tasks whose completion was the prerequisite of success for the original plan. The fight against infiltration began. But**

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**. It may be asked whether this was a wise or necessary policy.

In one sense it was, as we have indicated, a perseverance with an old plan. But lest we too readily assume a bankrupt inflexibility of outlook, we must look at it in another light. Since 16 March the lodgment on Hangman's Hill, won with high bravery and held at high cost, was a challenge to the whole corps. There it was before them, hoist like a proud standard at the head of an army. Towards this place of honour many men marched. In short, this dramatic foothold, so prominent to the eye and so close to the monastery, constituted almost a moral lien on the efforts of the corps. When General Galloway claimed that it could never be secured until the hillside was worked and that the hillside could never be worked until the town was cleared, it was difficult to deny him. To go to the assistance of the beleaguered **Gurkhas** thus became the object of operations. To this end, the New Zealanders tried to do two things: first, to throw a cordon round the town so that it could be methodically cleared, and secondly, to break through the cordon that the enemy (save for the aperture at Point 193) had thrown round the hill. All the stiffest fighting in the battle took place along the line where these two cordons touched, namely at the western edges of the town.

It might appear, by the 19th at the latest, that the dictate of prudence was to cut our losses in **Cassino** and allow the battle to follow its 'natural tendency', which was to bypass the town and to assume a shape not unlike that of the February attack. Was it, then, only the lodgment on Hangman's Hill that drew the New Zealanders back into the furnace of **Cassino**? At this clarifying and comfortable distance there seem to have been two possible ways of continuing the battle when deadlock in the town became obvious. The first course was to launch **5 Brigade** from the station across Route 6 well south of the town to link up with the **Gurkhas** on the hill. This is the plan which, when suggested

late in the battle for **78 Division**, was rejected by the corps and divisional commanders but which caused Alexander to ponder. It was sure to be costly and it was not sure to succeed. At best there was a chance of uniting the two forces and a smaller chance that the union would bring about the capture of the monastery. Its essence was to rupture the enemy cordon on a broader front than was possible at Point 193.

The other possible course, while making use of the railway station base, would have attempted to isolate rather than to burst through on to **Montecassino**. It might have been possible, in spite of the flooding round the Gari, to develop a thrust along the railway embankment and into the **Liri** valley. A German patrol late in the month reported that the ground round the blown railway bridge over the Gari was passable to tanks 'with broad tracks'. But even if the going had been practicable and if the attack had made head against the furious opposition that would have been offered from the area of the Baron's Palace and the Colosseum, it could hardly have succeeded alone. A single pencil-thrust up the valley would have been suicidal except on one condition. The indispensable corollary was a drive by the Indians among the hills north-west of **Montecassino** towards Route 6, so that a junction of the two forces would complete the envelopment of the monastery. But after six weeks in the hills, the Indians of **7 Brigade** were in no condition to mount such an effort.

One of our alternatives, then, was not genuinely a possibility. The other (admittedly at a later phase of the battle) was rejected after careful consideration. The decision to keep battering away inside **Cassino** may now appear in a truer light. The German documents, moreover, authorise the opinion that in the battle of attrition the scales were very delicately poised. On the 21st, in particular, the enemy was momentarily reduced to the slenderest foothold in the town. It is hard to pronounce impossible a plan which, on the German showing, was within an ace of at least limited success.

Criticism, which has ranged over the direction of our effort during

the battle, might finally dwell for a moment on the method of applying that effort. It is not to the discredit of the New Zealanders to admit that they suffered from want of experience in the specialised and militarily sophisticated art of street fighting. The commanders were under no illusions. 'It is still the desert army and we have a lot to learn,' remarked General Galloway.

Street fighting was not only hard to learn but in the conditions at **Cassino** it especially penalised the New Zealand Division by limiting the exercise of what had always been one of its strongest weapons—the close integration of infantry and artillery. The carefully staged attack, with its taped start lines, precise rates of infantry advance and barrage lifts, was shown on the first afternoon to be all but chimerical, at least where communications were not good enough to permit the assaulting troops to control timings to conform with their progress. There were simply too many physical obstacles for the infantry to remain in the shelter of the barrage.

Yet the contrast between the mighty opening fire plan and the absence of anything like it afterwards invites the query whether the best possible use was made of our artillery. This powerful armament produced smoke, harassing and defensive fire repeatedly and in great volume, it hit hard at opportunity targets with mass salvos and its counter-battery and counter-mortar tasks were discharged with a zeal that approached ferocity. But it is noteworthy that after the first day it was never used in a general, concerted fire plan to help the infantry forward. There was a large-scale neutralisation programme by the name of **DUSTBIN**, but none of the attempts to clear up the western edges of the town was prepared and supported by a carefully devised plan using all available guns and mortars.

It is necessary to insist on the difficulties: for the reason suggested, a creeping barrage might have been impracticable; the shooting would have been close; the lift of the ground in the west would have raised problems of accuracy; our occupation of **Castle Hill** would have had to be



taken into account; and special measures would have been needed to give the assault an initial momentum by dealing with enemy posts too near to be neutralised by gunfire. Still, at some stage the experiment might have been worth while of pausing to take stock of the situation and carefully co-ordinating the fire resources of the corps with an attack by fresh infantry. As the battle in the town actually developed, increasing reliance was placed on direct-fire, high-velocity weapons. The only question is whether by this time the possibilities of indirect fire had been exhausted.

No doubt by struggling for a few days longer the corps could have won the whole town. Even paratroops must soon have resigned possession of the ruins. But **General Freyberg** was not prepared to hazard more casualties. When the **New Zealand Corps** was first formed, he warned General Clark, under the authority he derived from the **New Zealand Government**, that when his casualties had reached a thousand he would abandon the attack unless it had achieved or was about to achieve success. His view was that the Division could afford these casualties, and considerably more, provided that they were incurred in a successful operation, but that to lose more than a thousand men for no substantial military result would so impair the morale of the Division that it would take months to recover.<sup>1</sup> When he attended the Commander-in-Chief's conference on 21 March, **Freyberg** had a return of casualties which showed that the Division had lost 549 men in the second battle, and probably more. Since New Zealand casualties at **Cassino** up to 14 March numbered about 500, the thousand mark was reached and passed. **Freyberg's** determination not to make a **Passchendaele** of **Cassino** is an essential clue to his attitude in the closing stages of the battle, and it may have had its weight with Alexander when he decided on the 23rd to call off the operation.

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<sup>1</sup> **General Freyberg**, oral statement to author, 10 December 1955.

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(vi)

The New Zealanders made mistakes in the second battle of **Cassino**. The most serious was the failure to rush the defences with sufficient weight on the first afternoon. But every battle is a tissue of error, and something must be left to chance. It was for the New Zealand Corps a malevolent chance that pitted *1 Parachute Division* against it. Did infantry ever fight a stauncher defensive battle than the German paratroops at **Cassino**? They were manning defences three months in the preparation, they had had recent experience of street fighting at **Ortona**, they knew how to exploit every advantage of terrain, they were imbued with utter confidence in themselves and with boundless zeal for their Fuehrer and their toughness and endurance were beyond all ordinary reckoning. It is not to be assumed that other German troops would have equally withstood the assault.

The Germans themselves attributed much of their success to their ability to concentrate their artillery fire rapidly on targets in the town, but the New Zealanders were most impressed by the efficiency of their close-support infantry weapons, especially the mortars. At a somewhat higher tactical level, two other facts deserve a place in the explanation of German success. One was their intelligent control over the counter-attack. They soon found that attacks on any large scale did not repay their cost. Only at Point 193, the Allied sally-port on to the hillside, did they keep returning to the assault. Elsewhere, particularly in the town, they preferred to let the **New Zealand Corps** carry the fight to them, to resist from prepared positions and to confine themselves to small, local counter-strokes. In the second place, their system of command was simple and direct. They fought **Cassino** as a strictly divisional battle. General Heidrich established himself at the headquarters of *3 Parachute Regiment*, which was responsible for the town. He was held on a light

rein by his Corps Commander. General Senger was content with a general supervision over the conduct of the battle, he secured and fed in the few reinforcements and made frequent tactical appreciations for the enlightenment of *Tenth Army*.

Our discussion of the battle is ended. It has led into free speculation on the alternatives open to the New Zealand command, in the belief that the decisions that were actually taken can only be understood in the light of those that might have been taken. It may well be that no second assault ought ever to have been launched into the teeth of the *Cassino* fortress, which its commander agreed was almost impregnable when once defended. But the exigencies of strategy decreed otherwise. Where so much is obscure, it is as clear as day that there was no easy solution to the problems of the attacker. The critic of the solutions that were in fact adopted must first arm himself with better ones; he must then be sure that they were available amidst the confusion, the misinformation, the fluctuating hopes and the sheer worry and exhaustion of the battlefield; and he must finally caution himself against what an English historian has called ‘one of the perpetual optical illusions of historical study – the impression that all would have been well if men had only done “the other thing”’<sup>1</sup>

The commanders may abide our question: the fighting men they led are free. Of the quality of the New Zealand troops who actually came to grips with the enemy, let the enemy himself speak:

The New Zealand soldier [said a *14 Panzer Corps* report on the battle] is physically fit and strong. He is well trained and formidable in close range fighting, and steadier than the Englishman. He does not shrink from hand-to-hand fighting. In many cases strongpoints had to be wiped out to the last man, as they refused to surrender.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Butterfield: *George III, Lord North and the People, 1779–80*, p. 86.

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## (VII)

*(vii)*

The historian of the battles of **Cassino** who revisits the scene finds no relief from the difficulty of commemorating them in a way that will do justice to the New Zealanders who fought there, but he is impressed anew by the need for making the attempt. For except in its boldest features, the face of the land has changed even in so short a time. To stand on the summit of Point 593 on the tenth anniversary of the peace was to be engulfed in a tranquillity made the more immense by the emphasis of a few simple sounds – the chime of a cowbell, a skylark's glee and, far below beside the new white abbey, the shouts of black-robed novices as they skirmished with a football. Earth heals her own wounds, and the husbandry of a thousand peasants has tended the growth of twelve successive springs. Ruins are dismantled and new buildings arise on the sites of the old. Men remember but their memories fade and finally die with them. And of the deeds bravely done and the hardships bravely borne, soon nothing will remain but the imperfect record itself.

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## APPENDIX I – CASUALTIES IN 2 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION – 12 NOVEMBER 1943-10 APRIL 1944

### *Appendix I*

### *Casualties in 2 New Zealand Division*

### *12 November 1943-10 April 1944*

THE following lists of casualties for **Italy I** (12 November 1943–31 January 1944) and **Italy II** (1 February–10 April 1944) have been compiled from the **2 NZEF** casualty lists, amended where the lists have shown some doubt (e.g., Missing) from the personal files of the soldiers concerned.

### *Casualties in the Sangro and Orsogna Operations 12 November 1943–31 January 1944*

	Killed in Action		Died of Wounds (incl. 'as PW')		Wounded		Prisoners of War (unwounded)		Total	
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs
HQ 2 NZ Div	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	1	–
Div HQ Prot Tp	–	–	–	–	1	8	–	–	1	8
Div Cav	–	1	–	2	1	12	–	–	1	1
HQ Div Arty	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	1	1
4 Fd Regt	–	10	–	–	1	8	–	–	1	1
5 Fd Regt	–	6	–	1	4	27	–	–	4	3
6 Fd Regt	–	1	–	2	–	13	–	–	–	1
7 A-Tk Regt	–	3	–	3	4	13	–	1	4	2
14 Lt AA Regt	–	1	–	–	–	6	–	–	–	7
36 Svy Bty	–	–	–	–	1	5	–	–	1	5
HQ 4 Armd Bde	–	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	1
18 Armd Regt 2		11	1	4	14	30	–	–	17	4

<b>19 Armd Regt</b>	–	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	–	–	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>20 Armd Regt</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>30</b>	*	–	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>22 Mot Bn</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>14</b>	–	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>54</b>	–	–	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>21 Bn</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>30</b>	–	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>122</b>	–	–	<b>11</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>23 Bn</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>2</b>
						†				
<b>28 Bn</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>168</b>	–	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>HQ 6 Inf Bde</b>	–	–	–	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	–	–	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>24 Bn</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>125</b>	‡	–	<b>2</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>25 Bn</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>
						§				
<b>26 Bn</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>17</b>	–	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>67</b>	–	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>27 MG Bn</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	–	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>34</b>	–	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5 Fd Pk Coy</b>	<b>1</b>	–	–	–	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	–	–	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>6 Fd Coy</b>	–	<b>12</b>	–	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>25</b>	–	–	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>7 Fd Coy</b>	–	<b>5</b>	–	–	<b>2</b>	<b>11</b>	–	–	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>8 Fd Coy</b>	–	<b>1</b>	–	<b>1</b>	–	<b>14</b>	–	–	–	<b>1</b>
<b>Div Sigs</b>	–	<b>1</b>	–	<b>2</b>	–	<b>13</b>	–	–	–	<b>1</b>
<b>ASC</b>	–	<b>1</b>	–	<b>3</b>	–	<b>7</b>	–	–	–	<b>1</b>
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	–	<b>3</b>	–	<b>2</b>	–	<b>7</b>	–	–	–	<b>1</b>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>1063</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>1</b>

\*Includes 2 ORs wounded and prisoner.

†Includes 6 ORs wounded and prisoner.

‡Includes 1 OR wounded and prisoner.

§Includes 9 ORs wounded and prisoner.

***Casualties in Cassino Operations  
1 February–10 April 1944***

	<b>Killed in Action</b>		<b>Died of Wounds (incl. 'as PW')</b>		<b>Wounded</b>		<b>Prisoners of War (unwounded)</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<b>Offrs</b>	<b>ORs</b>	<b>Offrs</b>	<b>ORs</b>	<b>Offrs</b>	<b>ORs</b>	<b>Offrs</b>	<b>ORs</b>	<b>Offrs</b>	<b>ORs</b>
<b>HQ 2NZ Div</b>	–	–	–	–	<b>2</b>	–	–	–	–	<b>2</b>
<b>Div Cav</b>	–	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>34</b>	–	–	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4 Fd Regt</b>	–	<b>11</b>	–	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>29</b>	–	–	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>

<b>5 Fd Regt</b>	-	<b>3</b>	-	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>9</b>	-	-	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>7 A-Tk Regt</b>	-	-	-	-	<b>2</b>	<b>19</b>	-	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>14 Lt AA Regt</b>	-	<b>2</b>	-	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>23</b>	-	-	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>HQ 4 Armd Bde</b>	-	-	-	-	-	<b>2</b>	-	-	-	<b>2</b>
<b>18 Armd Regt</b>	-	<b>1</b>	-	-	-	<b>4</b>	-	-	-	<b>5</b>
<b>19 Armd Regt</b>	-	<b>8</b>	-	<b>3</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>51</b>	-	-	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>20 Armd Regt</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>29</b>	-	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>22 Mot Bn</b>	-	<b>4</b>	-	-	<b>3</b>	<b>35</b>	-	-	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>HQ 5 Inf Bde</b>	-	<b>1</b>	-	<b>1</b>	-	<b>1</b>	-	-	-	<b>3</b>
<b>21 Bn</b>	-	<b>12</b>	-	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>*</b> <b>1</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>23 Bn</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>1</b>	-	<b>16</b>	<b>1</b>
						†				
<b>28 Bn</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>35</b>	-	<b>8</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>‡</b> <b>1</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>HQ 6 Inf Bde</b>	-	-	-	-	-	<b>2</b>	-	-	-	<b>2</b>
<b>24 Bn</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>27</b>	-	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>105</b>	-	-	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>26 Bn</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>37</b>	-	<b>11</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>124</b>	-	<b>1</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>27 MG Bn</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	-	<b>2</b>	-	<b>24</b>	-	-	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>HQ Div Engrs</b>	-	-	-	-	<b>1</b>	-	-	-	<b>1</b>	-
<b>5 Fd Pk Coy</b>	<b>1</b>	-	-	-	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	-	-	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>6 Fd Coy</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	-	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	-	-	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>7 Fd Coy</b>	-	<b>1</b>	-	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>14</b>	-	-	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>8 Fd Coy</b>	-	<b>2</b>	-	-	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	-	-	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Div Sigs</b>	-	<b>3</b>	-	-	-	<b>15</b>	-	-	-	<b>1</b>
<b>ASC</b>	-	-	-	-	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	-	-	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	-	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12</b>	-	-	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>1124</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>1</b>

\*Includes 2 ORs swounded and prisoner.

†Includes 1 OR wounded and prisoner.

‡Includes 4 ORs wounded and prisoner.



# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## APPENDIX II – A REPORT ON TUNNELS AT CASSINO

### *Appendix II*

#### *A Report on Tunnels at Cassino*

**REPORTS** on an underground system of communications in and around the town constitute one of the minor mysteries of the second battle of **Cassino**. These reports gathered interest when it became apparent that efforts of the **New Zealand Corps** to seal **Cassino** were failing to prevent the reappearance of enemy infantry in the town, even in areas thought to have been cleared. Some of the senior commanders in the corps were puzzled to account for the enemy's ability to supply and reinforce his forward troops and were inclined to believe that he was using tunnels. Two of them found their way, as 'reported tunnels', on to a map of **Cassino** overprinted with enemy defences based on air photographs as of 20 March 1944. However, the German corps commander (General Senger), though admitting he had heard of the existence of the tunnels, denied (in a letter to the author dated 11 November 1954) that the Germans had made tactical use of them.

Two Italian civilians who left **Cassino** in September and October 1943 respectively told of the existence of four tunnels, but disclaimed any knowledge of their existing state or the enemy's use of them. The following details were given in the report on their interrogation, which may be conjecturally dated not later than 19 March 1944:

1. Tunnel with entrance in Palazzo Colella (Hotel des Roses). Entrance is through a door on the right of the main entrance passage to the building. The tunnel is approx 3 ft wide and 6 ft high, with a dry, firm bottom and fairly level. Civilian was last in the tunnel on 4 October 1943. He has not been right through but understands that the exit is within the Colosseum and on the northern side.
2. Tunnel with entrance in Monastery. A door on the left just through the main entrance leads down through the rooms of St. Benedict to the tunnel entrance. The tunnel is about 5 ft 6 in high and 4 ft wide,

with a firm bottom. Civilian has been in the tunnel but only for a short distance. He understands that the exit is close to that of tunnel 1.

3. Tunnel from the foot of Pt 193 to the Castle. Entrance is made through two holes in the hillside about 150 metres up the secondary road which runs from the school ... along the northern slope of Pt 193. These holes can be seen from the road and were used as an air-raid shelter. The first exit is at the foot of the cylindrical corner of the castle wall at the east end. From here the tunnel leads on to an exit at the foot of the main tower of the castle. This exit consists of three openings in the terrace floor at the foot of the tower all closed by stones. Civilian had often been through this tunnel as far as the castle wall. It varied in height and width but at the lowest point could be passed in a stooped position.
4. Tunnel from the Monastery to the Castle. Neither civilian had been in this tunnel as it was kept a secret by the monks. The entrance was stated to be through a door in the 'Archivis' of the Monastery library and the exit within the Castle. No details are known of its size, etc.

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## APPENDIX III – SOME LESSONS FROM OPERATION DICKENS

### *Appendix III*

#### *Some Lessons from Operation DICKENS*

**THIS appendix summarises some of the lessons of operation DICKENS. It amplifies those described in Chapter 15 and adds fresh ones omitted from the discussion there as being of rather technical interest.**

#### *(a) Air Bombing:*

**This section and that following it are derived mainly from Training Memorandum No. 5 issued by Allied Force Headquarters on 14 June 1944 and based on the reports of the Air and Ground Commanders.**

- (i) Heavy bombers should not be used in close support when an adequate tactical air force is available. Because of its greater experience in this kind of work, the aircraft of the **Tactical Air Force** gave a better performance, as to both timing and accuracy, and produced better results than those of the Strategic Air Force. Air bombardment by heavy bombers is not sufficiently accurate for general use in the tactical area of land battle.**
- (ii) When it becomes necessary to employ heavy bombers in close support, the following precautions to ensure accuracy should be taken: When practicable, bombers and navigators of leading aircraft should reconnoitre the target from the air previously; bombing altitudes should be specified (there was a tendency to bomb from too high); the run-in should, if possible, be along the line of the forward troops rather than at right angles so as to prevent casualties from 'shorts' and to save cratering on the approaches to the town from the Allied side; intervals between the waves of bombers should be shorter, especially when the wind is strong enough to clear the smoke from the target quickly, since the intermittent attack gave the enemy appreciable periods of rest.**
- (iii) An unmistakable artificial landmark, such as smoke, would assist all aircraft to identify the target, particularly when the approach is made from widely scattered points. (Opinion of the Ground Commander.)**

- (iv) In the **Cassino** attack, some delayed-action bombs would have been useful to penetrate cellars and heavy covered emplacements.
- (v) Alternative targets should be designated for aircraft arriving late.

### *(b) Ground Troops' Exploitation of Air Bombing:*

- (i) 'The follow up of the infantry must be immediate and aggressive, employing the maximum of infantry strength available. The maximum amount of infantry was not employed in this attack, nor was the attack aggressively pushed. Too great reliance was placed on the ability of the bombing to do the task alone'. (From report of Ground Commander.) The first waves must follow close on the artillery barrage, leaving isolated strongpoints and centres of resistance to mopping-up parties.
- (ii) Air bombardment alone cannot be expected to destroy strong defences or determined resistance by infantry well dug in, especially in a fortified town like **Cassino**.
- (iii) Debris and cratering hinder the use of tanks and generally delay the attacker. Hence the tonnage of bombs to be dropped must be carefully considered. The report of the Mediterranean Allied Air Force suggested that such heavy attacks on fortified towns were better suited to defensive operations as at Battipaglia in the **Salerno** battle, than to the opening blow of an offensive, as at **Cassino**.
- (iv) The technique of street fighting needs continued emphasis in infantry training.
- (v) Since close artillery support is not possible in attacking a heavily defended town, mortar crews and tank-destroyer crews must follow the assault closely.
- (vi) In general, the delay in launching the operation clearly illustrated the disadvantages of relying on air force action as an essential part of an army plan in times of the year when the weather is unfavourable.
- (vii) The smooth co-ordination of air and artillery effort showed that when the air force is placed in close support it should be regarded as part of the fire-power available to the army commander.

### *(c) Armour:*

The following points made among many others in a report by 4 Armoured Brigade on operations between 7 February and 30 April 1944

## reflect experience in **Cassino**:

- (i) If armour must be employed in street fighting, a few well-controlled tanks can do all that is necessary.
- (ii) In reasonable going, enemy strongpoints in houses and basements can be destroyed by tanks and infantry kept in close touch by a No. 38 wireless set in the tanks.
- (iii) Where passage must be made through a defended town, a quick thrust by armour in three waves has most chance of success—the first wave to pass through to prevent the enemy bringing up reinforcements and supplies, the second wave to take up positions in the town from which to engage strongpoints, snipers and grenadiers who might impede our infantry advance, and the third to move in with the infantry in close support.
- (iv) Tank crews must be prepared to lay smoke and clear mines and should not rely on close infantry or engineer assistance in street fighting.
- (v) In street fighting strong forces of infantry are essential to mop up and occupy all strongpoints as they go through. An early force of infantry should push through rapidly to join up with the first wave of tanks.
- (vi) 'Available air support [in street fighting] should be used to harass enemy artillery during the time our own artillery is engaged on preliminary barrage of the town. Heavy bombing of town area produces craters and masses of rubble which make tank movement difficult and may, as in **Cassino**, make all streets and routes impassable to tanks'.

## *( d ) Artillery:*

- (i) Maximum support of the attack in street fighting was shown to be very difficult because of the closeness of our own troops. The defensive artillery fire of the enemy in **Cassino** was more effective.
- (ii) The identification of targets was facilitated by the issue to Forward Observation Officers of marked photographs, showing numbered buildings and groups of houses.
- (iii) Our artillery would have been well advised to make a more systematic effort to close Route 6 on the enemy side of **Cassino** by harassing fire. (General Senger's comment.)
- (iv) The use of air OPs in counter-battery work was an outstanding success.

(v) For the use of artillery in producing smoke see below, **Section ( f ).**

**( e ) Engineers:**

- (i) The need for a properly designed armoured bulldozer, already evident from the **Orsogna** battles, was again and even more forcefully demonstrated. In Cassino it was seldom possible to use unarmoured mechanical equipment, and bulldozers drew fire on themselves and on the troops in their locality.
- (ii) The use of standard types of mine detector in clearing large numbers of non-metallic mines was shown to be impracticable under assault conditions. Flail tanks or mine gapping charges were necessary.
- (iii) The erection of Bailey bridges in full view and within close range of the enemy was expensive: some less conspicuous form of assault bridging was sought.
- (iv) Closer liaison between artillery and engineers was believed to be necessary. To give the engineers the protection which they need for special tasks, it was suggested that in certain circumstances the presence of a Forward Observation Officer with a working party of engineers might reduce casualties and save time over the task.

**( f ) The Defensive Use of Smoke:**

These points are derived from a report by Major R. M. Bell, GSO II (Air).

- (i) Conditions of ground were difficult and varied. On the hard, rocky ground round the Amphitheatre and in the west of the town, the containers of smoke shells bounced a long way and caused an abnormal spread round the point of origin. On soft, boggy or waterlogged ground, as near the railway station, they buried themselves and produced little or no smoke. **Monastery Hill** was so steep that more than one screen was needed to blind it.
- (ii) Infantry and tanks agreed that the smoke was helpful in enabling them to approach their objectives, but its value varied according to the time of day. It was usually least effective from about noon to 4 p.m.
- (iii) Smoke was shown to be a two-edged weapon. The enemy reacted by mortaring and shelling the screened areas; by using Route 6, when blinded to our observers, to bring forward reinforcements and supplies; and by counter-battery fire against guns laying the

screen, which, from their regular rate of fire, were comparatively easy for his flash-spotters and sound-rangers to locate.

- (iv) The area to be screened must be clearly defined and co-ordinated with the operations of flanking formations. On occasions 4 Indian Division found the screen highly inconvenient.
- (v) Adequate warning of the period for which smoke will be required must be given to overcome supply difficulties. Unexpectedly long smoke programmes meant that ammunition lorries had to come forward by day and casualties resulted.
- (vi) The smoke screen should be laid as near to the enemy as possible, to cause him the maximum inconvenience and to deny our troops the minimum of observation. This was not always remembered.
- (vii) To reduce wear on barrels and damage to recuperator systems, it is essential to rest one gun per troop or arrange for batteries to relieve each other during smoke programmes.
- (viii) The generators were not able to screen the bridges effectively all day. Their value was principally to reduce the number of hours in the day when the enemy could shell the bridges by observed shooting. The smoke produced by the generators was superior to that of the guns or mortars but the generators were awkward to handle, they absorbed a large number of men in maintaining a screen, they had to be supplemented by artillery smoke when the wind changed and adjustments had to be made, and their emission points were mortared by the enemy, so that the operators needed good cover.

### *( g) Emergency Air Supply:*

- (i) As it was daily hoped that supplies by porter would reach the isolated troops or that they would be relieved, the requests for air supply were invariably made when the aircraft were loaded with bombs and committed to other tasks. The reloading with supplies, the need to brief the pilots again and the packing of the containers often cost valuable flying time. Earlier requisitions were suggested.
- (ii) Standard packs with a single type of commodity were not satisfactory. The loss of one such container could have serious results. Hence composite packs containing ammunition, food, water and medical supplies were soon preferred.
- (iii) Of the two types of container used, the expendable petrol tank, dropped without a parachute, was suitable only for rations, but it fell more accurately from 50 feet. The padded canvas container, dropped

**by parachute, was often carried wide by air currents, but it was easier to locate. It was found that the padding could be advantageously replaced by socks, blankets and warm clothing.**

**(iv) As the troops were isolated for some time and were using local wells, it was found wise to drop radio batteries, rum and water sterilising outfits.**



# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## [SECTION]

**THIS appendix summarises some of the lessons of operation DICKENS. It amplifies those described in Chapter 15 and adds fresh ones omitted from the discussion there as being of rather technical interest.**

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## (A) AIR BOMBING:

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## (B) GROUND TROOPS' EXPLOITATION OF AIR BOMBING:

### *(b) Ground Troops' Exploitation of Air Bombing:*

- (i) 'The follow up of the infantry must be immediate and aggressive, employing the maximum of infantry strength available. The maximum amount of infantry was not employed in this attack, nor was the attack aggressively pushed. Too great reliance was placed on the ability of the bombing to do the task alone'. (From report of Ground Commander.) The first waves must follow close on the artillery barrage, leaving isolated strongpoints and centres of resistance to mopping-up parties.**
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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## (C) ARMOUR:

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## (E) ENGINEERS:

### *( e) Engineers:*

- (i) The need for a properly designed armoured bulldozer, already evident from the Orsogna battles, was again and even more forcefully demonstrated. In Cassino it was seldom possible to use unarmoured mechanical equipment, and bulldozers drew fire on themselves and on the troops in their locality.**
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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## (F) THE DEFENSIVE USE OF SMOKE:

### *(f) The Defensive Use of Smoke:*

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## (G) EMERGENCY AIR SUPPLY:

### *(g) Emergency Air Supply:*

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- (ii) Standard packs with a single type of commodity were not satisfactory. The loss of one such container could have serious results. Hence composite packs containing ammunition, food, water and medical supplies were soon preferred.**
- (iii) Of the two types of container used, the expendable petrol tank, dropped without a parachute, was suitable only for rations, but it fell more accurately from 50 feet. The padded canvas container, dropped by parachute, was often carried wide by air currents, but it was easier to locate. It was found that the padding could be advantageously replaced by socks, blankets and warm clothing.**
- (iv) As the troops were isolated for some time and were using local wells, it was found wise to drop radio batteries, rum and water sterilising outfits.**

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## APPENDIX IV – GERMAN COMMANDERS IN ITALY

### *Appendix IV*

#### *German Commanders in Italy*

**THE following brief biographies of the chief German commanders in Italy have been compiled mainly from personal files held by the German Military Documents Section of the United States War Department, Washington:**

**Lieutenant-General Ernst Baade was an old enemy of 2 NZ Division from North Africa, where he commanded a regiment in 1942. He was one of the outstanding German divisional commanders in Italy – a dashing, independent soldier, one of the ‘bad boys’ of the German Army, who had ideas of his own and often acted with little regard for orders and regulations. He commanded a corps in 1945, and was awarded the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross for the defensive victory at Cassino on 18 February 1944.**

**Lieutenant-General Richard Heidrich was a machine-gun company commander in the First World War. He fought against the New Zealand Division on Crete as commander of 3 Parachute Regiment. Awarded the Oak Leaves with Swords for the defence of Cassino. He commanded 1 Parachute Corps in late 1944. A very keen, ambitious, strict soldier, and a most aggressive commander in action.**

**General Traugott Herr was an outstanding commander of formations of all sizes, from a company to an army; he always earned the highest praise for his steadiness, ability and energy, despite being permanently handicapped by the effects of a head wound. Described as ‘a fine man and an exemplary soldier, full of character’.**

**Field-Marshal Albert Kesselring had a continuous record of service since 1904. He served mainly in artillery field commands and General**

Staff positions until 1936, when he transferred to the **Luftwaffe**. Commanded an air fleet in **Poland**, in the Low Countries, in the Battle of **Britain**, and in **Russia** in 1941, and was in charge of all German Army formations in **Italy** in 1943. An orthodox, sound strategist, but not brilliant – General Alexander thought him much better than the more impetuous Rommel. A master of battlefield tactics and very tenacious. One of the last high-ranking officers to keep on fighting in May 1945. He was sentenced to death (later commuted to life imprisonment) for being a party to the shooting of over 300 Italian civilian hostages in the Ardeatine catacombs near Rome. He was released from prison in October 1952 after an operation, ‘as an act of clemency’.

General Joachim Lemelsen began his career as an artillery officer before the First World War, transferred to the General Staff in 1918, and served later in artillery, infantry and panzer formations, gaining a wide knowledge of all arms. Commanded a panzer division in 1940, a corps until 1943, then an army. He gained high praise for his leadership of the *Fourteenth Army* in 1944.

General Smilo Freiherr von Lüttwitz was a cavalryman who transferred to the panzer troops. He was one of the best divisional commanders in **Italy** until July 1944, then was promoted quickly through a corps to an army command, but failed as an army commander and was relegated to a corps again in 1945. He always had a reputation for leading from in front.

**General der Panzertruppen F. von Senger und Etterlin** was born in Baden in 1892 and was at **Oxford** as a Rhodes Scholar shortly before the First World War, in which he fought as a junior artillery officer. After the war he became a regular officer, transferring to the cavalry, and in 1940 commanded a motorised brigade which took Le Havre and Cherbourg. After service on the Italo-French Armistice Commission in 1940–42, he commanded a panzer division in **Russia**, but returned west to command the German troops in **Sicily** during the Allied invasion and then in **Corsica**. He fought the battles of **Cassino** with *14 Panzer Corps* and took part in the retreat through **Italy**. In April–May 1945 he led the

**German commission which negotiated the surrender of the German forces in [Italy](#) at Fifth Army Headquarters.**

**General Siegfried Westphal joined the German Army at the end of the First World War and spent much of his career as a staff officer. Before the Second World War he was in the Operations Section of the Army General Staff and in the early months of the war served as First General Officer of a division in the West. On the fall of [France](#) he was made a member of the Franco-German Armistice Commission, but in mid-1941 he went to [Africa](#), where he became Chief of Staff to Field-Marshal Rommel. In 1943 and 1944 he was successively Chief of the Operations Section and Chief of Staff to Kesselring in [Italy](#). His war service ended on the western front as Chief of Staff to the Commanders-in-Chief West (first Field-Marshal Rundstedt and later Kesselring).<sup>1</sup> Kesselring thought highly of his abilities, writing (in his *Memoirs*, p. 260): ‘I could not have wished for a better Chief of Staff... He knew my idiosyncrasies as I knew his’.**

**Colonel-General Heinrich-Gottfried von Vietinghoff fought on the eastern and western fronts in the First World War and commanded a panzer division in [Poland](#) and a corps in [France](#) in 1940. He served in [Russia](#) in 1941–42, commanding *Ninth Army* ‘well and confidently ... in very critical defensive battles’. He won praise from Kesselring for his conduct of the defence in [Italy](#) while in command of *Tenth Army*. As Commander-in-Chief South-West he negotiated the surrender of the German forces in [Italy](#) in May 1945.**

**Lieutenant-General Gustav Heisterman von Ziehlberg held a General Staff position at GHQ for several years prior to 1943, when he was transferred to a field command. He commanded *65 Division* from its formation. He was described as an ‘upright, friendly, warm-hearted man with plenty of guts and optimism’. He lost an arm as a result of his wound at the [Sangro](#), but five months later was back commanding a division in [Russia](#). Suspected of implication in the anti-Hitler plot of July 1944, he was tried and shot in January 1945.**

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<sup>1</sup> Source: General Siegfried Westphal: *The German Army in the West*, pp. v and 211.

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## APPENDIX V – OPERATION DICKENS: 2 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION AND 6 BRIGADE – OPERATION ORDERS

### Appendix V

### Operation *DICKENS*: 2 New Zealand Division and 6 Brigade Operation Orders

SECRET

Copy No.

23 Feb 44.

#### 2 NZ DIV OPERATION ORDER No. 41

*Ref Maps*: 1/25,000 Sheets 160/II NE, 160/II NW, 160/II SW, 160/I SE.  
1/25,000 Reproduction of German Map.

#### INFORMATION

1. *Enemy* As contained in NZ Corps Intelligence Summaries.

#### 2. *Own Tps*

( *Fmns* flanking **NZ Corps** are to maintain present dispositions and

a) exert pressure.

( **NZ Corps** is to capture **CASSINO** and adv against the enemy line

b) **PIEDIMONTE- AQUINO- PONTECORVO**.

( 4 Ind Div is to

c) (i) assist ops of 2 NZ Div by neutralising enemy posns on eastern slopes of M **CASSINO** with SA and mortar fire and by harassing enemy mov in **CASSINO** prior to zero;

(ii) after capture of Pt 193 (G854213) by 2 NZ Div, take over and secure the feature;

(iii) in conjunction with the adv of 2 NZ Div, attack south across eastern slope of M **CASSINO** feature;

(iv) maintain pressure in sector NW of the Monastery to prevent the withdrawal of enemy reserves from that area.

( *Arty* of CEF and 10 Brit Corps is to sp ops of **NZ Corps** by carrying

d) out a CB programme in own sectors, and by neutralising enemy OPs in the vicinity of **TERELLE G8127**.

**3. Additional Tps under Comd US CCB remains under comd 2 NZ Div for follow-up ops.**

## **INTENTION**

**4. 2 NZ Div will capture CASSINO and break out into LIRI valley in vicinity of Highway 6.**

## **METHOD**

### **5. General**

( The op will consist of a daylight attack by inf and tks from the  
a) north, following an intense air bombardment, and supported by maximum arty effort.

( The op will be referred to by the codeword 'DICKENS'.  
b)

( After completion of DICKENS, the ops included in 2 NZ Div Op  
c) Instr No. 21 dated 17 Feb (phases INSTEP, COBRA and JOINER) will be proceeded with as soon as possible.

**6. Groupings** Groupings within 2 NZ Div are shown in Appx 'A' att.

### **7. Air Sp**

( Air attacks on CASSINO will begin at approx zero minus 4 hrs,  
a) and will increase in intensity until zero.

( It is expected that 360 hy and 200 med bombers will be available  
b) for the attack on CASSINO, and additional fighter-bombers for subsequent ops.

( The safe bomb-line is shown in Appx 'B' att. NO tps will remain  
c) inside this line during air attacks on CASSINO.

( NO attacks will be made on CASSINO after zero.  
d)

( The following fighter-bomber targets have been prearranged for  
e) the adv from first to second objectives and will be 'called down' by a controller at Tac 2 NZ Div if required:

Rly sta G860201

Amphitheatre G853199

Pt 435 G847206

( For ops by TFB on D plus 1 day, the following targets have been  
f) prearranged, and will be directed by the controller if required: On lower slopes of M CASSINO and along Highway 6 and rly line, behind arty barrage. Area G835205. Wadi G831206. Area G815215.

8. **6 NZ Inf Bde Gp**, with in sp one additional armd regt and 7 NZ Fd Coy if required, will assault and capture **CASSINO** and Pt 193 from the north, then adv to secure a bridgehead into the **LIRI** valley.
9. **Preparation for the Assault** 6 NZ Inf Bde will withdraw all tps to lying-up areas north of safety bomb-line immediately before first light on D day (see Trace in Appx 'B' att).
10. **Assault by 6 NZ Inf Bde Gp**
  - ( Details of arty sp are shown in Appx 'B' att.
  - a)
    - ( 6 NZ Inf Bde will make maximum use of ground smoke to cover
    - b) fwd mov at zero.
    - ( First objective: Incl Pt 193 (G854213) – rd junc 854209 – rd junc c) 860208. Codeword: **QUISLING**.
    - ( Second objective: rd junc 853197 – incl 55 ring contour G8519 – d) R GARI at 858192 – stream junc G861197 – rly at G862201. Codeword: **JOCKEY**.
    - ( Rate of adv: 100 yds in 10 mins.
    - e)
      - ( Action on capture of first objective:
      - f) (i) Reorg on Pt 193, but be prepared to hand over defence of this feature to tps of 4 Ind Div during night D/D plus 1. Codeword for this relief is **CROMWELL**.
      - (ii) Covered by arty 'stonks' for 15 mins, prepare to adv immediately for the capture of second objective.
    - ( Action on capture of second objective: Reorg to hold bridgehead
    - g) **JOCKEY** until the passage of TFB.
11. **Arty: NZA**, with in sp II US Corps arty and 4 Ind Div arty, will
  - ( sp the attack by 6 NZ Inf Bde Gp in accordance with outline task
  - a) table att at Appx 'B';
  - ( sp ops of TFB on D plus 1 day in accordance with 2 NZ Div Op
  - b) Instr No. 21 dated 17 Feb.
12. **Engrs: NZE**, with under comd 48 US Engr Bn less one coy, will
  - ( proceed at last light on D day with the construction of Class 30
  - a) br over R **RAPIDO** at Highway 6;
  - ( clear and mark a route from this br to Highway 6 south of
  - b) **CASSINO**;
  - ( as soon as **CASSINO** rly sta has been captured, clear and repair rly
  - c) route to give access to southern outskirts of **CASSINO**;
  - ( proceed as soon as possible with the construction of a Class 30 br
  - d) over R GARI on rly route and effect junc with Highway 6 in



**vicinity G853917;**

- ( hold 7 NZ Fd Coy with a det mech eqpt in a suitable area east of e) the BARRACKS 8523, to come under comd 6 NZ Inf Bde if required for the clearance of routes through CASSINO.**

### **13. 5 NZ Inf Bde will**

- ( carry out the following internal reliefs during night 23/24 Feb:**
  - a) (i) relief of 2 NZ Div Cav Regt by one bn of 78 Brit Div;**
  - (ii) relief of 23 NZ Inf Bn by 2 NZ Div Cav Regt;**
- ( during night D minus 1/D, occupy fire posns well fwd with all b) weapons;**
- ( from zero to zero plus 40 bring maximum neutralising fire to bear c) on enemy localities in CASSINO south of Highway 6. This will include the destruction of individual houses and suspected strong-points by 17-pr fire;**
- ( be prepared to take over defence of rly sta area, NOT beyond R d) GARI, after capture of second objective. Codeword for this op to commence will be HUNTER. Completion of take-over will be signalled by codeword OTAKI;**
- ( provide immediate cover for engr parties working on RAPIDO br e) at Highway 6 and on rly route.**

### **14. CCB will**

- ( posn TD guns on Western slopes of M TROCCHIO during night D a) minus 1/D, sited to engage enemy localities in CASSINO south of Highway 6 and to harass enemy mov on rds south of the town;**
- ( engage houses, enemy mov and suspected enemy localities in b) these areas from zero to zero plus 40 on D day;**
- ( be prepared to est TC system at two hrs notice from zero hr; c)**
- ( at 1900 hrs on D day, assume a one-hr alert to pass TFB through d) bridgehead JOCKEY for the capture of objective LIBEL as already ordered in 2 NZ Div Op Instr No. 21 dated 17 Feb.**

### **15. 4 NZ Armd Bde will**

- ( hold one armd regt in readiness as from zero to move from a) present area to come under comd 6 NZ Inf Bde Gp if required;**
- ( be prepared to proceed with phase COBRA after success by TFB. b)**

### **16. Pro**

- ( 2 NZ Div Pro Coy will be prepared to est red lights on one fwd a) route from M TROCCHIO to objective JOCKEY at last light on D**

( <sup>day</sup> Codewords for routes will be:

b) **CARUSO: present route to FDLs of 6 NZ Inf Bde via BARRACKS 8523.**

**MILTON: Highway 6.**

**DISNEY: Highway 6 to rd junc 872205, thence by rly route.**

( **APM 2 NZ Div will maintain liaison between Tac 2 NZ Div and TC c) post.**

### 17. *Zero*

( **Zero will be the time at which arty opens on barrage opening line.**

a)

( **Time and date are dependent upon flying conditions but zero will**

b) **NOT be before 1200 hrs on 24 Feb.**

( **It will be promulgated on the evening before the attack by the**

c) **codeword BRADMAN followed by a time and date.**

### ADM

### 18. *Normal.*

### INTERCOMN

### 19. *Bdys*

( **Inter-Div:**

a) (i) **Right with 4 Ind Div: Incl to 2 NZ Div: Pt 175 G854218, Pt 193 G854214.**

(ii) **Left with 46 Div: Excl to 2 NZ Div: CLE CECRO [ sic] sq G9014; RIVOLO LADRON to G877131, line of R GARI to G875126; G864123, thence line of F LIRI.**

( **Inter-Bde:**

b) **Incl to 5 NZ Inf Bde:**

**rd S PASQUALE G868221 to rd and river junc G862216.**

### 20. *Locations*

( **See NZ Corps Location Statement as at 1800 hrs 18 Feb 44.**

a)

( **Tac HQ 2 NZ Div will open G914197 at a time to be notified.**

b)

( c) (i) Tac HQ 6 NZ Inf Bde: G858225. (ii) Main HQ 6 NZ Inf Bde: G885228.

21. *Wireless* All sets in 2 NZ Div will break silence and commence normal working at zero minus two hrs.

22. *Recognition Ground to Ground*

( By day: Rifle held vertically, muzzle uppermost and/or one  
a) RED tracer fired vertically.

( By night: One RED tracer fired vertically.  
b)

23. *Passwords*

Challenge: MOTOR.

Answer: JEEPE.

24. *Codewords*

( a)Codeword for op	DICKENS
( b)Cancellation of op	ALEXANDER
( c)FIRST objective-6 NZ Inf Bde	QUISLING
( d)SECOND objective-6 NZ Inf Bde	JOCKEY
( e)Handover of Pt 193	CROMWELL
( f)Present 6 NZ Inf Bde fwd route	CARUSO
( g)Highway No. 6 through <b>CASSINO</b>	MILTON
( h)Rly route	DISNEY
( i)Zero hr	BRADMAN
( j)Arty tasks	TILDEN
	MAROON
	LENTIL
	TROTSKY
	GHANDI

ACK

L. W. THORNTON

Lieutenant-Colonel

General Staff

2 New Zealand Division

Time of Signature: 0140 hrs

**Method of Issue: Copies 1-4, 21-23 by LO.**

**6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16, 17-20 by Runner.**

**5, 8, 12, 14, 15 by SDR.**

***Distribution:* [List not reproduced.]**

**Appendices 'A' and 'B' not reproduced.**

**6 NZ INF BDE OPERATION ORDER No. 2**

**SECRET**

**23 Feb 44.**

**Copy No.**

**Ref Maps: 1/25,000 Sheets 160/II N.E.**

**160/II N.W.**

**160/I S.W.**

**160/I S.E.**

**1/25,000 Reproduction of GERMAN Map.**

**INFORMATION:**

**1. *Enemy:* As contained in NZ Corps Intelligence Summaries.**

**2. *Own Tps:***

**( 2 NZ DIV is to capture **CASSINO** and break out into **LIRI** valley in  
a) vicinity of Highway 6.**

**( After completion of this operation US CCB and 4 NZ ARMD BDE  
b) are to pass through and commence advance towards line  
**PIEDIMONTE- AQUINO- PONTECORVO.****

**( 5 NZ INF BDE is to carry out the following:**

**c) (i) during night D minus 1/D, occupy fire posns well fwd with  
all weapons.**

**(ii) from zero to zero plus 40 bring maximum neutralising fire  
to bear on enemy localities in **CASSINO** South of Highway 6.**

**This will include the destruction of individual houses and suspected strong-points by 17 pr fire.**

- (iii) be prepared to take over defence of rly sta area, NOT beyond R GARI, after capture of second objective.**

**( Engrs are to carry out the following:**

- d) (i) proceed at last light on D day with the construction of Class 30 br over R. RAPIDO at Highway 6.**
- (ii) Clear and mark a route from this br to Highway 6 SOUTH of CASSINO.**
- (iii) As soon as CASSINO rly sta has been captured, clear and repair rly route to give access to southern outskirts of CASSINO.**
- (iv) Proceed as soon as possible with the construction of a Class 30 br over R. GARI on rly route and effect junc with Highway 6 and vicinity G 853197.**

**( 4 IND DIV is to:**

- e) (i) assist ops of 2 NZ DIV by neutralising enemy posns on eastern slopes of M. CASSINO with SA and mortar fire and by harassing enemy mov in CASSINO prior to zero.**
- (ii) after capture pt 193 (G 854213) take over and secure the feature.**
- (iii) in conjunction with adv of 2 NZ DIV, attack South across Eastern slope of M CASSINO feature.**
- (iv) maintain pressure in sector N.W. of the MONASTERY to prevent the withdrawal of enemy reserves from that area.**

**( CCB is to:**

- f) (i) post TD guns on Western slopes of M. TROCCHIO sited to engage enemy localities in CASSINO South of Highway 6.**
- (ii) engage houses, enemy movement and suspected enemy localities from zero to zero plus 40 on D day.**

### **3. Additional Tps:**

**One NZ Armd Regt to come under comd if required.**

**7 NZ Fd Coy incl det mech eqpt to come under comd if required.**

### **INTENTION:**

**4. 6 NZ Inf Bde will assault and capture CASSINO and Pt 193, then advance and secure a bridgehead into the LIRI valley.**

## **METHOD:**

- 5. Grouping:** One Pl 4 Coy 27 NZ MG Bn will come under comd 26 NZ BN forthwith.
- 6. Routes:** Codewords for routes will be:
  - CARUSO road BARRACKS to CASSINO.
  - PARALLEL route rd junc G863232–rd junc G859216–Highway 6.
  - PASQUALE route rd junc G876223–rd junc G85952160–Highway 6.
  - MILTON Highway 6.
  - DISNEY Highway 6 to rd junc 872205, thence by rly route.

## **7. The op will be carried out in three phases:**

**Phase 1:** Withdrawal of fwd tps behind safety bombline (See 2 NZ DIV O.O. No. 41 Appx 'B' issued separately.)

**Phase 2:** Assault by 25 NZ Bn with under comd one sqn 19 NZ Armd Regt. Reoccupation of high ground by 24 NZ Bn to form firm base.

**Phase 3:** Assault of final objective by 19 NZ Armd Regt (less one sqn) 26 NZ Bn following to take over final objective when captured.

## **PHASE I**

## **8. Withdrawal:**

- ( Fwd Coys 24 and 25 NZ Bns and fwd tp armd Sqn will withdraw
- a) behind safety bombline.
- ( NO move before 2400 hrs D minus 1 day. Evacuation of fwd area
- b) complete by 0600 hrs D day.
- ( Heavy weapons may be left fwd but essential parts will be
- c) removed.
- ( Mines on rds leading into CASSINO will be removed.
- d)

## **9. Rearguard:**

- ( Following will act as rearguard in quarry to cover exits from
- a) CASSINO: One tk 19 NZ Armd Regt. One A Tk gun–25 NZ Bn and will withdraw before bombing starts.
- ( 25 NZ Bn will cover route CARUSO with A tk gun from area
- b) BARRACKS.

## **10. 26 NZ BN:** 26 NZ Bn will occupy area recced between PARALLEL and

**PASQUALE routes on night 23/24 Feb. Tasks:**

- ( a) Lie up in preparation for attack.**
- ( b) Cover Northern exits from CASSINO.**

**11. 7 NZ FD COY: 7 NZ FD COY will move mine clearing and demolition parties and one bulldozer to area BARRACKS, and one bulldozer to vicinity PARALLEL route on night 23/24 Feb.**

## **PHASE II**

**12. Air sp:**

- ( Air attacks on CASSINO will begin at approx zero minus 4 hrs, a) and will increase in intensity until zero.**
- ( It is expected that 360 hy and 200 med bombers will be available b) for attack on CASSINO, and additional fighter-bombers for subsequent ops.**
- ( The safe bomb-line is shown in Appx 'B' to 2 NZ DIV O.O No. 41 c) already issued. NO tps will remain inside this line during air att on CASSINO.**
- ( NO attacks to be made on CASSINO after zero. d)**

**13. Objectives: Incl pt 193 (G854213)–rd junc 854209–rd junc 860208.**

**The codeword for this objective is QUISLING.**

**14. Assault by 25 NZ Bn:**

- ( 25 NZ Bn with under comd one Armd Sqn will capture the a) objective and hold the following:**
  - (i) Western edge of CASSINO and lower slopes MONTE CASSINO between incl pt 193 and incl rd junc 854209.**
  - (ii) Line incl rd junc 854209 to incl rd junc 860208.**
- ( Start Time–Zero. b)**
- ( Start Line approx 1500 yds from opening line of barrage. c)**
- ( Rate of adv to Northern end of CASSINO 100 yds in one d) minute. Thereafter 100 yds in ten minutes.**
- ( Pt 193 is to be taken over by 4 IND DIV after capture. e)**

**15. Arty: See Appx 'B' to 2 NZ DIV O.O. No 41 and BARRAGE trace issued herewith, for barrage and concs.**

**16. 24 NZ Bn: will reoccupy ground evacuated–Start Time: Zero.**

17. **MMG: One Pl 4 Coy 27 NZ MG Bn will come under comd 24 NZ Bn 1800 hrs D minus 1 day to assist in protecting flank 25 and 26 NZ Bns.**

### PHASE III

18. **Objective: Rd junc 853197–incl 55 ring contour G8519–R. GARI at G858192.**

**Codeword: JOCKEY.**

19. **Assault:**

( **19 NZ Armd Regt will move through CASSINO by Eastern routes a) to Highway 6 then assault objective.**

( **26 NZ Bn will follow 19 NZ Armd Regt as closely as possible.**

**b)**

( **Start Time: as ordered by Bde Comd.**

**c)**

20. **Consolidation: 26 NZ Bn will take over ground captured by 19 NZ Armd Regt and consolidate. 19 NZ Armd Regt will remain in close sp.**

21. **Arty:**

( **a) For concentrations to be fired on objectives (see Appx 'B' 2 NZ DIV O.O. No 41).**

( **b) Concentrations: LENTIL**

TROTSKY

GHANDI

**may be repeated at call if required.**

22. **Air: The following fighter-bomber tasks have been prearranged and may be called for if required:**

**Rly sta G860201**

**Ampi Theatre [ sci] G853199**

**Pt 435 G847206**

23. **Engrs: 7 NZ Fd Coy will be prepared to assist adv of Armd Regt through CASSINO with mine clearing party and bulldozers.**

24. **Zero:**

( **Zero will be the time at which Arty opens on barrage opening a) line.**

( **Zero will NOT be before 1200 hrs 25 Feb.**

**b)**

( **It will be promulgated by codeword BRADMAN followed by time**

**c) and date.**



**ADM:**

**25. Sups etc: Normal.**

**26. Medical:**

( ADS A Coy 6 NZ Fd Amb remains present locn (880248)  
a)

( After move fwd of Bn RAPs A Coy 6 NZ Fd Amb will est a CP  
b) at the quarry 855230 to be used until Amb Jeeps and Amb cars can evac direct from RAPs.

( Bns will notify this HQ of move fwd of RAPs in order that  
c) ADS may be instructed to set up EP.

**27. Pro:**

( a) Det 2 NZ Div Pro Coy will be prepared at any time after zero on instrs from this HQ to

(i) picquet any of the following routes into **CASSINO** and through to Highway 6. **CARUSO ROAD PARALLEL ROAD PASQUALE ROAD**

(ii) After last light to light the above mentioned routes.

**28. P.W.:**

( Collecting pt NORTH of BARRACKS 856234.  
a)

( 6 NZ INF BDE Def Pl will supply personnel to take over PWs at  
b) the collecting pt.

**INTERCOMN:**

**29. Bdy:** right with 4 IND DIV: incl to 6 NZ Inf Bde: Pt 175 (G 854218) pt 193, (G 854214). left with 5 NZ Inf Bde: excl rd S. PASQUALE to rd and river junc G 862216.

**30. Locations:** Main HQ 6 NZ Inf Bde will remain at G885228.

**31. Comns:**

( a) Wireless silence will be broken 30 mins before zero hr.

( b) Signal centre will remain old locn, Tac Bde G858225.

**32. Recognition:** Ground to ground:

( By Day: Rifle held vertically, muzzle uppermost and/or one  
a) RED tracer fired vertically.

( By Night: One RED tracer fired vertically.  
b)

**33. Password:** Challenge MOTOR Answer JEEP.

**34. Codewords:**

( a)codeword for op	ALEXANDER
( b)cancellation of op	QUISLING
( c)FIRST objective-6 NZ Inf Bde	JOCKEY
( d)SECOND objective-6 NZ Inf Bde	CROMWELL
( e)Hand over of Pt 193	CARUSO
( f)present 6 NZ Inf Bde fwd route	MILTON
( g)Highway No. 6 through <b>CASSINO</b>	DISNEY
( h)Rly route	BRADMAN
( i)zero hour	TILDEN
( j)Arty tasks	MAROON
	LENTIL
	TROTSKY
	GHANDI

**(Signed) J. P. COOK, Major**  
**B.M. 6 NZ Inf Bde.**

**ACK**

**Time of Signature 1900 hrs**

**Issued by SDR**

***Distribution:* [List not reproduced.]**

# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### *Bibliography*

THE bibliography of this subject does not readily admit of the conventional distinction between primary and secondary sources. It has seemed more natural to use the categories of 'unpublished' and 'published'. 'Published' documents are those which have been made available to the general public: some of the 'unpublished' documents have been published to restricted classes of readers. The list of published works omits those which, though they may have furnished incidental quotations or references, do not bear directly on this military history or its strategic background.

### *I: UNPUBLISHED*

#### *(a) New Zealand*

The documents of **2 New Zealand Division** and **2 New Zealand Expeditionary Force** on which the preliminary narratives for this volume are based are in the custody of the **War History Branch**, Department of Internal Affairs, **Wellington**. They are too numerous to specify individually, but they fall into the following main classes:

**New Zealand Corps**, Divisional, Brigade and unit war diaries.

Miscellaneous reports, records of interviews, eyewitness accounts, signal messages, strength states, casualty lists, sketches, citations.

**Lieutenant-General Freyberg's** diary and private papers.

These official documents have been supplemented by the unofficial material yielded by correspondence and interviews with participants undertaken both by the narrators in the **War History Branch** and by the author.

## ***( b) United Kingdom***

**Admiralty, Naval Intelligence Division: *Geographical Handbook Series, Italy, Vol. I, 1944.***

**British Historical Section, Central Mediterranean: *Operations of British, Indian, and Dominion Forces in Italy. Part I, The Conquest of Southern Italy. Section A, Allied Strategy, Chap. II. Section B, Eighth Army Operations, Reggio to Ortona. Section E, New Zealand Corps at Cassino.***

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# ITALY VOLUME I: THE SANGRO TO CASSINO

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