

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

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**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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**Added name tags around various names of people, places, and  
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1954 Copy of the Report  
to the Committee on the 1953-54

## ITALY

FROM CASINO TO TRUSTS  
BY  
RODIN KAY

OFFICIAL MEDICAL BRANCH  
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20540  
1957

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

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

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## [FRONTISPIECE]



The end of the Eighth Army advance which had begun at El Alamein in Egypt in October 1942: New Zealanders rest beside their gear in the Castello San Giusto of Trieste, in north-east Italy, in May 1945. The war against Germany had been won, but already the 'cold war' had started with the confrontation of the Powers of the West and the East on the frontier of Yugoslavia

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

**ITALY**

*Volume II*

***FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE***

**ROBIN KAY**

**HISTORICAL PUBLICATIONS BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

**1967**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## CORRECTION

### *Correction*

On p. 292, line 9, of *Italy*, Volume I, it was stated that Lieutenant M. R. Drinkhall, 1/9 Gurkha Rifles, was awarded the Victoria Cross for his 'bravery, skill and leadership' throughout the battle for Hangman's Hill at **Cassino**. Lieutenant Drinkhall was in fact *recommended* for a VC but received the DSO. Unfortunately the award finally granted was omitted from the copy of the citation on the **War History Branch** file.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## FOREWORD

### *Foreword*

By **Brigadier M. C. FAIRBROTHER**, CBE, DSO, ED, Editor-in-Chief, New Zealand War Histories

**THE** publication of this volume concludes the record of New Zealand's military operations in **Italy** and her participation in the Second World War.

Thus ended, in Churchill's words, this 'great contention'. It was not, as with the First World War, a sudden ending, leaving a situation for the troops in which little else remained but to return home and resume their interrupted lives. For months after victory was won in **Europe** a further task loomed ahead. The diversion of forces from the European theatre to the **Pacific** for the defeat of **Japan** and the mode of their employment became a priority for politician and soldier alike. That the war in the **Pacific** ended without the need for New Zealand to again deploy her forces there was without doubt the greatest blessing, for the strain on manpower had been severe.

New Zealand in peacetime had displayed no warlike propensities, and her armed forces had been neglected. But twice within 30 years she had provided military forces among the most effective in the world. In the muddy anonymity of the Western Front in 1916–18 this was not always easy to perceive and few but the experts became aware of it – those with access to situation maps, perhaps, or who could discern from enemy dispositions the respect the Germans had for their New Zealand opponents. But in the **Mediterranean** theatre in 1941–42, the whole world could see. More than once, as **General Freyberg** recorded, the 2nd New Zealand Division 'stood athwart the path of history'. The recurrent pressures from **Britain** and **America** to keep the Division in that theatre, when it was plainly in New Zealand's interest that her men should be

**committed against the Japanese, testify to the high esteem in which the New Zealanders were held as fighting men. Similar tributes, too, have been paid to New Zealanders serving with the [Royal Navy](#) and the [Royal Air Force](#).**

**What then gave rise to this effectiveness. First, New Zealanders were mentally and physically well adapted for military life, once committed to it for a just cause. Most of them, even the town dwellers, enjoyed a good deal of country life and open-air living. They were well nourished, sturdy in physique, energetic and capable of great endurance. They were adaptable, resourceful and mentally alert. In these respects they compared favourably with the soldiers from industrial [Europe](#), many of whom had been subjected in civil life to poor conditions and a deadening routine of work.**

**Then too, there were not the social distinctions in the New Zealand forces that were to be found in the forces of older countries. The more senior leaders, it is true, were mostly of good education and thoughtful background. But as the war progressed officers were selected from among those who had shown themselves to be tough and steadfast in battle and to have the capacity for leadership. No account was taken of social status. Once commissioned, if they survived the dangerous subaltern stage and later, their progress depended on results. The opportunity for promotion regardless of social or economic factors had a good deal to do with the effectiveness of the New Zealand soldiers.**

**Recruitment for infantry battalions and companies had a regional basis and their members therefore did not come together as strangers. In most companies officers, NCOs and men alike generally came from the same district, had attended the same schools, travelled in the same trains and lived more or less to the same standards. They were, in a sense, from the same family and shared a determination not to let that family down – or any member of it. Similarly the Division as a whole matched the country as a whole, reflecting its regional variations and also its national characteristics and its strong sense of solidarity. Even many expatriates, when the war came, felt impelled to join the New**

**Zealand forces in England or to make their way back to New Zealand to join. The 'family atmosphere' of the 2nd NZEF was one of its outstanding features.**

**One popular branch of this family was the [Maori Battalion](#), serving as a combatant unit as distinct from the Maori Pioneer Battalion of the First World War. The Maoris were cheerful, light-hearted, willing and full of zest. But they were stern warriors and seldom failed to gain their objectives in an attack. Out of action some of them were a trial at times to the authorities. But on the battlefield at many a crucial point they did great service.**

**Almost all the New Zealanders overseas served in fighting ships or as aircrew, or in combatant formations in the army. Here they often displayed a nonchalance towards parade ground ceremony, and on leave many of them were defiant of any sort of authority. But on the battlefield their brand of discipline showed to good effect. The officers and NCOs proved themselves capable and worthy of respect, and intelligent initiative was not lacking in the men. The spirit and skill which brought success at [Sidi Rezegh](#), [El Alamein](#), [Medenine](#) and at [Tebaga Gap](#) and the doggedness shown in [Crete](#) were impressively sustained throughout the war. Nowhere were they more evident than in the last battles, from the crossing of the [Senio](#) until the fighting ended in [Trieste](#). In this advance the 2nd New Zealand Division, with powerful artillery and air support, overcame a series of strong defensive positions at great speed and with remarkably light losses. This final campaign in itself explained why the New Zealand Government had received a succession of requests to allow the Division with its commander, [General Freyberg](#), to remain in that theatre.**

**In the First World War the shrewd observer could often guess the location of the New Zealand Division on the Western Front by noting the bulge on the published situation maps. This marked the positions of the most advanced troops and was likely to be the New Zealand sector. It was much the same when positional warfare developed in the Second**

World War, as in the ' **New Zealand Box**' period in Egypt in 1942 and again in the **Romagna** in the winter of 1944–45. The thrusting purposefulness of the men of these two Divisions, a generation apart, must have been much the same; but the circumstances of the fighting in the Second World War allowed more scope for speed of movement and versatility.

The war efforts of sovereign states are a measure, as with individuals, of their courage, virility and loyalty, and of their faith in their way of life and their attachment to freedom. New Zealand's war effort was large, manifesting itself not so much in great tonnages of war materials and the conversion of its people to war work, but most impressively in the high proportion of its young manhood drawn into the services and the heavy losses they suffered.

The pattern of the war, as it gradually unfolded, made this effort all the more remarkable. By far the greater number of New Zealand servicemen served in the struggle against **Germany** and **Italy**; yet the only conceivable direct threat to New Zealand came from **Japan**. New Zealanders stood in peril at **Minqar Qaim** and amongst disaster at **Ruweisat Ridge** and El Mreir soon after the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway halted the southward drive of the Japanese. For New Zealanders in the desert in North Africa, or fighting the Battle of the **Atlantic**, or the air war over **Europe**, as for their families at home, those were days of anxiety and anguish.

But the security of a small power in a world of compelling great powers must always give rise to concern. New Zealand by her efforts has earned her place in the League of Nations and the **United Nations**, and her representatives have given full support there to the principle of collective security. Only once, through a happy conjunction of circumstances, has it been put into effect to check aggression: the case of **Korea** in which New Zealanders also served. New Zealand continues to support this principle, but she cannot rely on it. Until she can, she has to have allies and to deal with them loyally as she would like them to deal with her.

**New Zealand's war effort not only made a contribution to her security – and a continuing one – but it also encouraged New Zealanders to regard each other with deeper understanding. As a result New Zealand came to know herself better. Memories of privations, of fortitude, failures and victories, have blurred. But the sense of high achievement lingers and sets the standard for new effort. It is something by which to measure what is done in peace as well as in war. It was a process of self revelation when the country looked on as its sons struggled from **Mount Olympus** to **Trieste**, or skilfully succeeded in combined operations in the **Pacific**, or fought the *Graf Spee* in the southern **Atlantic**, or were reported in air operations over **Berlin** or **Rabaul**. These men who were thus engaged and who impressed themselves in their various ways on the consciousness of the world lived in the same town, even in the same street, as the onlookers before whom the shape of the war gradually revealed itself.**

**The story of their achievements, of the women's services who supported them abroad and of the many others who worked on their behalf at home all for the same cause, these volumes have endeavoured truthfully to record. The successes and the failures, the frailties and the strengths are recounted in a variety of Official Histories from many different authors. These volumes contain a significant and illuminating part of the total New Zealand experience, and should be a prized possession of their country, for the crises of war display more sharply than the dilemmas of peacetime the essence of the national character.**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

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**\* Not yet published.**

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## PREFACE

### *Preface*

**SINCE** the end of the Second World War another generation of New Zealanders has reached adulthood without any personal recollection of the events of 1939–45. For the sons and daughters of most of the men who served with the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force the names of battles such as **Thermopylae, Maleme, Galatas, Sidi Rezegh, Minqar Qaim, Ruweisat, El Mreir, Alamein, Medenine, Tebaga Gap, Takrouna, Orsogna, Cassino, Sora, Monte Lignano, Florence, Rimini**, and of the many rivers in the great Po valley, may mean little beyond the impressions formed by their fathers' reminiscences and photograph albums. Even the memories of the veterans of these battles grow dim, and details of places and incidents become blurred and confused.

The author of this volume, the last of eight volumes covering the campaigns of the New Zealand Division in the **Middle East and Italy**, has endeavoured to give a clear, concise and complete account of the Division's progress during the year between the disbandment of the **New Zealand Corps**, after its unavailing attempt to capture **Cassino**, and the conclusion of hostilities in **Europe**. Originally it was intended that Professor N. C. Phillips, the author of *Italy, Volume I: The Sangro to Cassino*, should write this volume, but unfortunately he was unable to do so because of the demands upon his time and energy as Professor of History at the University of Canterbury.

Many years of most careful and detailed research have gone into the compilation of the 22 volumes of official narrative which form the basis of this history. These were written by Mr Ronald Walker ( **Sora and Florence**), Mr Alexander Protheroe ( **Monte Lignano**, and from the start of the offensive on the Adriatic coast to the Savio River), and myself (from the **Savio** until the departure of the last New Zealanders from **Italy**). The relevant German military documents were translated by the

late Mr W. D. Dawson.

As one who served in the **Middle East** but not in **Italy**, I have had to overcome the lack of first-hand knowledge of the campaign and the country in which it was fought by studying the private diaries, letters and personal accounts of the men who were there. Of these many indispensable sources of information undoubtedly the most helpful has been the diary kept faithfully every day by Major Brian Moss, who was accidentally killed in 1955. Valuable assistance also has been given by Major-General Sir William Gentry and Brigadier F. M. H. Hanson, who have painstakingly checked drafts of the narrative.

Finally I acknowledge my debt to the staff of the **War History Branch**, with whom I have been closely associated since the war. I am grateful to the Editor-in-Chief ( **Brigadier M. C. Fairbrother**) and the Sub-Editor ( **Mr W. A. Glue**) for their advice and tolerance, to Miss Elsie Janes for patiently typing my manuscript, and to Mrs M. Fogarty for the preparation of the index. I am also indebted to the Cartographic Branch of the Lands and Survey Department for the maps.

WELLINGTON

February 1967

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

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*Department of Internal Affairs*

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**ITALY**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## INTRODUCTION

### *Introduction*

IN the autumn of 1943, after the Allied occupation of **Sicily**, the British Eighth Army, commanded by General Sir Bernard Montgomery, <sup>1</sup> landed in **Calabria**, the toe of **Italy**, and advanced along the Adriatic seaboard on the eastern side of the peninsula. Fifth Army, part American and part British, under Lieutenant-General Mark Clark, landed on the **Salerno** beaches—where a German counter-attack might have succeeded but for the overwhelming support given by the Allied naval and air forces—and pushed along the western side of the peninsula. Together the two armies formed the **Fifteenth Army Group**, <sup>2</sup> commanded by General Sir Harold Alexander. The Germans, under Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, Commander-in-Chief South-West, stubbornly withdrew to the formidable defences of the **Winter Line**, which they constructed astride the narrow waist of **Italy** south of Rome. There, in country ideally suited to the purpose, with rivers, valleys and spurs running at right angles to the central backbone of the Apennine Mountains, and assisted by the mud, slush and snow of winter, they halted both Allied armies.

General Alexander's plan for the capture of Rome was in three phases: in the first **Eighth Army** was to break through the Winter Line on the Adriatic coast, advance to a lateral highway (Route 5) which crosses the peninsula from **Pescara** through **Avezzano**, and threaten Rome from the north-east; in the second phase Fifth Army, by driving up the **Liri** and Sacco valleys to **Frosinone**, was to approach Rome through the only gap in the mountains to the south. The third phase, which depended on the progress of the first two, was to be an amphibious landing south of Rome.

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<sup>1</sup> On 1 January 1944 Montgomery, who was to participate in the preparations for the invasion of **France**, was succeeded as GOC

**Eighth Army by Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese.**

**<sup>2</sup> Headquarters Fifteenth Army Group was redesignated Headquarters Allied Central Mediterranean Force on 19 January 1944, and was renamed Headquarters Allied Armies in Italy on 10 March 1944.**

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**Eighth Army, which 2 New Zealand Division <sup>1</sup> rejoined in November, crossed the Sangro River and fought its way into the coastal town of Ortona and reached the outskirts of Orsogna, but was held among the ridges and valleys midway between the Sangro and Pescara rivers. There the Adriatic sector was allowed to become static.**

**Fifth Army, after a succession of costly battles, was confronted by the Gustav Line (the strongly fortified rearward position of the Winter Line west of the Apennines), which followed the lateral Rapido-Garigliano valley across the mouth of the Liri valley, through which Route 6 (perpetuating the ancient Via Casilina), the highway from Naples, led to Rome, 85 miles distant. Cassino, just north of the junction of the two valleys, was the key to the line: Route 6 passed through the town and the railway ran within a mile of it; rising directly behind it was the steep-sided 1500-foot Montecassino, crowned by the fortress-like Benedictine monastery, at the tip of a massive spur descending from the 5500-foot Monte Cairo. From these heights the enemy had an uninterrupted view of every approach.**

**The third phase of the plan to liberate Rome, the amphibious landing behind the enemy's front, had not been attempted because Eighth and Fifth Armies had been balked in their endeavours to break through the Winter Line. The Allies decided upon a revised plan, forcefully and persistently advocated by the British Prime Minister (Mr Churchill). In conjunction with a frontal attack by Fifth Army on the Gustav Line, a force larger than originally envisaged was to be landed on the beaches of Anzio, 35 miles south of Rome, and directed inland on the Alban Hills, which dominated the southern approaches to the city.**

**Fifth Army's attacks on the Gustav Line in January 1944 had the desired effect of persuading Kesselring to reinforce that front with his tactical reserve. The landing by 6 Corps (comprising British and American troops) at Anzio achieved complete surprise and was virtually unopposed, but instead of driving immediately to the Alban Hills, as he certainly could have done, the corps commander (Major-General John Lucas) spent several days building up his beachhead to withstand the counter-attack which he expected. He thus gave Kesselring time to improvise a heterogeneous force with which he was able to block 6 Corps when it eventually did attempt to advance inland. The Germans then massed sufficient troops around the beachhead to counter-attack and force 6 Corps on to the defensive.**

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<sup>1</sup> See N. C. Phillips, *Italy*, Vol. I: *The Sangro to Cassino*, for the New Zealand Division's part in the battles on the **Sangro** and at **Orsogna** in the winter of 1943 and at **Cassino** in the spring of 1944.

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**Fifth Army's thrusts against the Gustav Line made little progress before being halted. On the left of the Liri valley 10 British Corps (Lieutenant-General Sir Richard McCreery) crossed the Garigliano River into the foothills of the Aurunci Mountains, where it was**



THE ITALIAN FRONT, FEBRUARY 1944

checked but retained a bridgehead—this was to be of inestimable value as the springboard for an offensive four months later. In the centre, at the mouth of the **Liri** valley and in full view of the enemy overlooking the valley, **2 United States Corps** (Major-General Geoffrey Keyes) launched an assault over the Gari River, but was repulsed with grievous casualties. On the right General Alphonse Juin's **French Expeditionary Corps** worked its way into the mountains north of **Cassino**. When 2 Corps' frontal assault failed, General Clark tried to envelop the defences from the right by crossing the **Montecassino** spur into the **Liri** valley, but the Americans, utterly exhausted after two months of continual fighting, were finally halted at the outskirts of the town and within a very short distance of the monastery.

The enemy's success in sealing off the **Anzio** beachhead and repulsing the attacks on the **Gustav Line** persuaded General Alexander to reinforce **Fifth Army** at the expense of the Eighth. Three divisions, therefore, were brought from the static Adriatic sector to the **Cassino** front, where the **New Zealand Corps**, consisting initially of the New Zealand Division and 4 Indian Division, joined later by 78 British Division, and commanded by **Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg**,<sup>1</sup> came into being on 3 February under **Fifth Army**.

Urgency was given to the resumption of the offensive at **Cassino** because of the imminent danger of the German effort to drive the **Anzio** beachhead force into the sea. Apparently no advantage could be seen in trying to exploit the bridgehead **10 Corps** had won over the Garigliano, or in trying to outflank **Cassino** as suggested by Juin, by concentrating on the approach through the mountains to the north, where the French already had broken into part of the **Gustav Line**. Instead, another attempt was to be made to crack the line at its strongest point, the town of **Cassino** and the monastery hill.

Taking over the half-fought battle from **2 US Corps**, the New Zealand Corps attacked in February with the object of establishing a bridgehead across the Rapido and Gari rivers to permit the deployment of armour in

the **Liri** valley. The monastery was destroyed by heavy bombers and artillery fire, and its ruins were occupied by the Germans, who deny that they previously had

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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 (Gk); born **Richmond, Surrey**, 21 Mar 1889; CO Hood Bn 1915–17; comd 173 Bde, 58 Div, and 88 Bde, 29 Div, 1917–19; GOC **2 NZEF** Nov 1939–Nov 1945; twice wounded; Governor-General of New Zealand, Jun 1946–Aug 1952; died Windsor, England, 4 Jul 1963.

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used the building as a strongpoint or for observation. <sup>1</sup> The 4th Indian Division failed in its attempt to capture **Montecassino** and cut Route 6 at the foot of the hill, and the New Zealanders were unable to retain a footing across the Rapido in the area of the railway station, just south of the town.

At the same time the Germans, ordered by **Hitler** to eliminate the ‘abscess’ at **Anzio**, launched a powerful counter-attack on the beachhead. At first the issue hung in the balance, but 6 Corps repelled both this attack and another which came at the end of February. The Germans then went over to the defensive on a line round **Anzio**. Before the struggle for the beachhead ended it took a heavy toll of both Allied and German soldiers.

Despite the failure of the **Anzio** landing to break the stalemate and pave the way for a drive on Rome, the British were convinced that a vigorously prosecuted campaign in **Italy** would assist the cross-Channel invasion of Western Europe (an operation known by the codename **OVERLORD**). The Americans, while not opposed to pursuing the Italian campaign at least as far as Rome, believed that a landing in southern **France** (Operation **ANVIL**) should be made at the same time as **OVERLORD**, and that preparations should be continued for this undertaking. General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, who had succeeded General Dwight D. Eisenhower as Supreme Allied Commander in the **Mediterranean**, recommended that priority be given to the Italian

campaign and that ANVIL be cancelled. The Combined Chiefs of Staff compromised by giving the campaign in **Italy** priority over all other operations in the Mediterranean and by postponing ANVIL.

To force the Germans to commit as many divisions as possible in **Italy** at the time OVERLORD was launched, General Alexander planned a spring offensive in the **Liri** valley, designed to link up with the **Anzio** beachhead and capture Rome. For this offensive the bulk of the Allied force was to be concentrated west of the **Apennines**, where **Eighth Army** was to take over the front covering **Cassino** and the entrance to the **Liri** valley, and **Fifth Army** was to retain the flank between the **Liri** and the sea and responsibility for the **Anzio** beachhead. But first Alexander wanted to establish a bridgehead across the Rapido which would give access into the **Liri** valley when the offensive began.

Operation DICKENS, the last attack before the spring offensive, was to be an attempt by the **New Zealand Corps** to capture **Cassino**

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<sup>1</sup> See *Italy*, Vol. I, pp. 211–23, for the evidence and argument about the bombing of the monastery, which ‘is still sometimes seen as a wanton act of terror and vandalism.’ A convincing case against the bombing is made by Rudolf Böhmler in *Monte Cassino: A German View*, but he does not concede that if **Montecassino** had not been the bastion or key point of the German Gustav Line, there would have been no danger of its being attacked.

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and break into the **Liri** valley in the vicinity of Route 6. After the town had been pulverised by bombing, the New Zealand Division was to advance southwards from its northern outskirts, and 4 Indian Division was to guard the right flank by moving along the eastern face of **Montecassino**. When Cassino had been captured, the corps was to exploit by opening up Route 6 and clearing the ground south of the town so that river crossings could be constructed.

The attack was fixed tentatively for 24 February, but it rained day

after day for nearly three weeks, and while the New Zealand and Indian divisions, under the most disheartening conditions, waited for fine weather, the enemy perfected his defences and brought one of his best formations, *1 Parachute Division*, into the sector where he correctly anticipated the attack would come. On 15 March aircraft demolished **Cassino** with nearly 1200 tons of bombs (about half of which fell within the town), but did not attack the ruined monastery which the Germans had converted into a fortress. The New Zealanders, with artillery support on a scale greater than any they had previously experienced, cleared the enemy from perhaps nine-tenths of the rubble defences of the town, but could not drive him from strongpoints on its fringe. On the slopes of **Montecassino** the Indians thrust as far as Hangman's Hill, near the ruins of the monastery, but also could go no farther. When the attack was called off on 23 March, **Cassino** still barred the road to Rome.

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

# CHAPTER 1 – THE BATTLE FOR ROME

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## I: THE ARMIES REGROUP

### *I: The Armies Regroup*

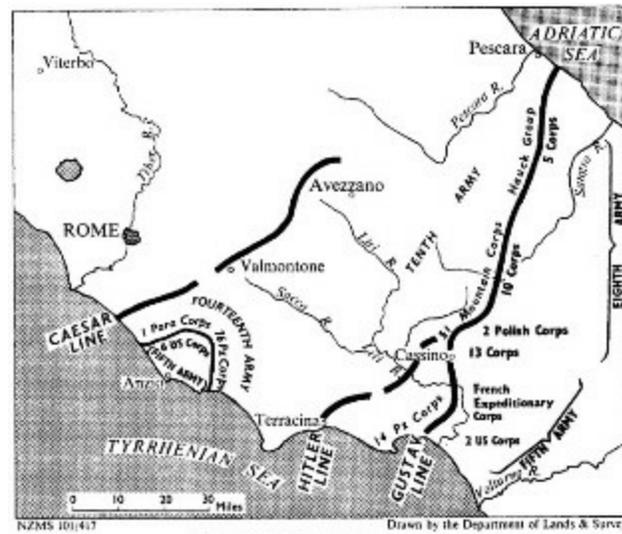
(i)

**THE** New Zealand Corps, having failed in its attempt to capture **Cassino**, was disbanded on 26 March 1944, and in the seven-week pause that ensued, the Allied armies regrouped and assembled a striking force west of the **Apennines** in preparation for a fresh onslaught on the German **Gustav Line**.

The exhausted troops were rested, and vitally necessary reinforcements arrived and were absorbed. The front-line positions had to be held in sufficient strength to withstand a possible enemy counter-attack, and owing to the shortage of reserves, most units had to vacate one position and occupy another after only a brief spell out of the line. Also, because the enemy overlooked much of the front and its approaches, it was practically impossible to relieve a group larger than a battalion; in fact many reliefs had to be made at company or even platoon level. To ease the administration of the two armies, **United States** and American-equipped French formations were retained under the command of **Fifth Army**, and British-equipped formations (except those in the Allied beachhead at **Anzio**), including **2 Polish Corps**, came under **Eighth Army**.

When the regrouping was completed **Fifth Army** had two corps in the line between the Tyrrhenian Sea and the confluence of the **Liri** and **Gari** rivers: the **French Expeditionary Corps** on the right with four divisions (1 Motorised, 2 Moroccan, 3 Algerian and 4 Moroccan Mountain Divisions) and about 12,000 *goumiers* (native Moroccans under French officers and NCOs, especially skilled in mountain warfare), **2 US Corps** on the left with 85 and 88 US Infantry Divisions, and 36 US Infantry Division in army reserve. At the **Anzio** beachhead south of **Rome 6**

**Corps, still under Fifth Army, had six divisions (3, 34 and 45 US Infantry, 1 US Armoured, and 1 and 5 British Infantry Divisions) and 1 (Canadian and American) Special Service Force.**



DISPOSITIONS, 11 MAY 1944

DISPOSITIONS, 11 MAY 1944

In **Eighth Army's** sector, which extended from **Fifth Army's** right boundary north-eastwards across the mountainous centre of the peninsula, the striking force was concentrated on the left, where **13 Corps** held the line from the Liri River to **Cassino** with four divisions (6 British Armoured, 4 and 78 British Infantry, and 8 Indian Divisions); **1 Canadian Corps** (1 Canadian Infantry and 5 Canadian Armoured Divisions) was in reserve in rear, ready when called upon to go into the line or pass through up the **Liri valley**; **2 Polish Corps** (3 Carpathian and 5 Kresowa Divisions) was on the right, poised for the attack on **Montecassino**. The remainder of **Eighth Army's** sector, astride the **Apennines**, was held by **10 Corps**, which comprised **2 New Zealand Division** (reinforced from time to time by British, Canadian and South African formations), and an Italian Motor Group about two brigades strong. The 6th South African Armoured Division, not all of which had arrived in **Italy**, was in **Eighth Army** reserve. On the Adriatic coast **5 Corps**, consisting of 4 and 10 Indian Divisions, was under the direct command of Headquarters Allied Armies in **Italy**.

(ii)

At **Anzio** Mr Churchill 'had hoped that we were hurling a wild cat on to the shore, but all we had got was a stranded whale.' <sup>1</sup> If the Allied amphibious attack had fallen short of fulfilling the Prime Minister's hopes, at least it had placed Field Marshal Kesselring's *Army Group C* in an awkward, extended, two-fronted position, with **Tenth Army** (Colonel-General Heinrich von Vietinghoff-Scheel) on the **Winter Line** across the peninsula and **Fourteenth Army** (Colonel-General Eberhard von Mackensen) around the beachhead perimeter in rear of the line. **Tenth Army's** dispositions resembled those of the Allied armies: on the Adriatic sector **Hauck Group** ( **305** and **334 Infantry** and **114 Light Divisions**), like **5 Corps** opposite it, had only a holding role; **51 Mountain Corps** ( **5 Mountain**, **1 Parachute** and **44 Infantry Divisions**) occupied the line across the **Apennines** to **Cassino** and the Liri River; **14 Panzer Corps** ( **71** and **94 Infantry Divisions**, with **15 Panzer Grenadier Division** in reserve) was between the **Liri** and the Tyrrhenian Sea; **90 Panzer Grenadier Division**, between **Anzio** and the Tiber River, was in army reserve. To contain **6 Corps** at **Anzio** **Fourteenth Army** disposed **76 Panzer Corps** ( **362** and **715 Infantry Divisions**, with **26 Panzer Division** in reserve) and **1 Parachute Corps** ( **4 Parachute**, **65 Infantry** and **3 Panzer Grenadier Divisions**—the last partly in the line); **29 Panzer Grenadier** and **92 Infantry Divisions**, beyond the Tiber, were in army reserve. The **Hermann Goering Panzer Division**, awaiting transport to **France**, was at **Leghorn**—but was later drawn into the Italian battle instead of leaving, as intended, for the western front.

To meet the apparent threat of another seaborne (or an airborne) landing the enemy had spread out his mobile formations well along the west coast. He may have been deceived by an Allied scheme, employing dummy wireless traffic, which was intended to give the impression that an amphibious assault was to be made against the port of **Civitavecchia**, 40 miles north of the mouth of the Tiber.

To back up the forward position of the **Gustav Line** the Germans

constructed an even stronger alternative defence line, on which an attack might be held after the surrender of the intermediate ground. Known to the Allies as the **Hitler Line**,<sup>2</sup> this was hinged on the main **Winter Line** at **Monte Cairo**, crossed the **Liri valley** about eight miles west of the Gari River, and continued through the **Aurunci Mountains** to the coast at **Terracina**. The **Gustav** and **Hitler** lines were designed to block an Allied thrust up the **Liri- Sacco valley**, but because of the presence of the Allied force in their rear at **Anzio**, the Germans began to construct yet another defence line to delay the capture of **Rome**. This, the **Caesar Line**, was supposed to cross the peninsula from the west coast north of **Anzio** to the east coast north of **Pescara**, but was never completed; the most developed portion of it was in the vital area at **Valmontone**, where Route 6 passed through a gap between the **Alban Hills** and the **Prenestini Mountains**.

When the Allies struck at the **Gustav Line** on 11 May, Kesselrings mobile reserves were too far away to give immediate help, and because he apparently still expected a seaborne attack, he committed them tardily and piecemeal. General Alexander, therefore, had the disparity in strength he desired, 'a local superiority of at least three to one', in the battle area: between **Cassino** and the sea four German divisions opposed an Allied strength of more than 13 divisions.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Second World War*, Vol. V, *Closing the Ring*, p. 432.

<sup>2</sup> The Germans first called this line the 'Führer Riegel' (switch-line) but changed its name on **Hitler's** orders after the **Anzio** landing to 'Senger Riegel' ( **General von Senger und Etterlin** commanded *14 Panzer Corps*); before it fell they called it the 'Dora' Line.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## II: THE APENNINE POSITION

### *II: The Apennine Position*

(i)

The transfer of the New Zealand Division from **Cassino** to the Apennine mountain position was accomplished by a complicated process of disentanglement and rearrangement which took some time. After the disbandment of **New Zealand Corps** on 26 March, 13 Corps took over the **Cassino** front with **4 British Division** holding the **Monte Cairo** sector on the right, **78 British Division** relieving **4 Indian Division** in the centre, and the New Zealand Division on the left in the ruined town and extending its flank as far south as the boundary between Eighth and Fifth Armies, near the confluence of the Gari and **Liri** rivers. <sup>1</sup> The New Zealanders' sector thus stretched for about five and a half miles, with **6 Infantry Brigade** holding the line through the town to a few hundred yards south of the railway station and **5 Infantry Brigade** continuing it to the southern boundary.

As the weather improved the German observers on **Montecassino** enjoyed a clear view of the approaches and the positions in and around the town. All activity, therefore, was screened as much as possible with smoke, while the artillery, mortars, tanks and machine guns fired programmes to neutralise as many of the enemy's posts as possible and reduce his interference with the reliefs. Despite

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<sup>1</sup> The Rapido River flows past **Cassino** and then across the **Liri valley** as the Gari River, which joins the Liri River and becomes the Garigliano.

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these precautions, the withdrawal of 5 and 6 Brigades was not accomplished without casualties.

To get the two New Zealand brigades out of the line, **1 Guards Brigade** relieved **5 Brigade**, which in turn relieved **6 Brigade**; **2 Independent Parachute Brigade** relieved the **Guards Brigade**, which then relieved **5 Brigade**. On the night of 7–8 April, when the last of these reliefs was completed, the whole **Cassino** sector came under the command of **6 British Armoured Division**, with the **Guards Brigade** on the right, the parachute brigade in the centre, and **4 NZ Armoured Brigade** on the left.

**Fifth Brigade** (Brigadier Stewart <sup>1</sup>) went back down **Route 6** to the **Mignano** locality and later to **Isernia**, in a peaceful valley east of the upper **Volturno River**; **6 Brigade** (Brigadier **Parkinson** <sup>2</sup>) went to the **Presenzano** area, near the **Volturno** beyond **Mignano**. In pleasant surroundings, where the fresh spring growth in woods and fields was in such vivid contrast to the rubble, bomb craters, shattered tree-stumps, mud and water, and the perpetual smoke pall of the **Cassino** battlefield, the troops relaxed and trained while their units reorganised. Leave parties went to **Naples**, **Bari**, **Pompeii** and elsewhere, and those not on leave were entertained by concerts, films and mule derbies.

**Fourth Armoured Brigade** (Brigadier **Inglis** <sup>3</sup>), still at **Cassino**, came under the command of **6 British Armoured Division** on 8 April, and its **22 (Motor) Battalion** relieved **2 NZ Divisional Cavalry** two nights later in the sector bordering the inter-army boundary, where the cavalry had been in an infantry role. On this section of the front the ground sloped towards the **Gari River** and was overlooked by a ridge on the far side. After several clashes with enemy patrols **22 Battalion** gained control of the whole of its sector east of the river, and its enterprising patrols, swimming the swift-flowing water or crossing in a rubber boat guided by a rope, penetrated a quarter of a mile into enemy territory on the opposite bank

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<sup>1</sup> Maj-Gen Sir Keith Stewart, KBE, CB, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); **Kerikeri**; born **Timaru**, 30 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; **1 NZEF** 1917–19; GSO I NZ Div 1940–41; Deputy

Chief of General Staff Dec 1941–Jul 1943; comd 5 Bde Aug–Nov 1943, 4 Armd Bde Nov 1943–Mar 1944, 5 Bde Mar–Aug 1944; p.w. 1 Aug 1944; comd 9 Bde ( **2 NZEF, Japan**) Nov 1945–Jul 1946; Chief of General Staff, 1949–52.

<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** 3–27 Mar 1944; CRA **2 NZ Div** Jun–Aug 1944; comd 6 Bde Aug 1944–Jun 1945; QMG, Army HQ, Jan–Sep 1946; NZ Military Liaison Officer, **London**, 1946–49; Commander, Southern Military District, 1949–51.

<sup>3</sup> **Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis**, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, VD, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk); **Hamilton**; born **Mosgiel**, 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn, 1915–19; CO 27 (MG) Bn, Dec 1939–Aug 1940; comd 4 Inf Bde, 1941–42; 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; died **Hamilton**, 17 Mar 1966.

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(where they saw equipment which had been abandoned during the Americans' bloody repulse in January) and gathered information which would be of value when the Allies launched their final assault over the Gari.

Some of 4 Brigade's Sherman tanks were retained in the **Cassino** sector in a defensive or counter-attack role. Eight or nine from 20 Armoured Regiment stayed in the town, three of them in the station area, with the Guards Brigade. Unlike those still east of the Rapido River, where they had better fields of fire and could move from place to place, the tanks in the town were immobile and could do little or no shooting; their cover was gradually whittled away by enemy fire, and smoke had to be used increasingly to screen them from view. This was a wretched and monotonous existence for their crews, who could get out

to stretch their cramped limbs only at night.

South of **Monte Trocchio**, the isolated hill which gave observation over much of the front, **18 Armoured Regiment** employed one of its squadrons at a time in an artillery role adopted because ammunition had to be husbanded for the 25-pounder field guns but was more than sufficient for the 75-millimetre tank guns. Among the variety of targets the tanks engaged from their indirect fire positions were enemy guns and buildings, including the front-line village of Sant' Angelo on the ridge across the Gari River. The Germans' retaliatory stonks <sup>1</sup> damaged two tanks and killed five men and wounded others during the three weeks the regiment was employed on this task before handing over to **19 Armoured Regiment**.

The 6th Armoured Division was relieved at **Cassino** by 8 Indian Division, and when 22 (Motor) Battalion had been replaced by 3/8 Punjab Regiment, 4 Armoured Brigade relinquished command of its sector to 19 Indian Infantry Brigade on 25 April, and withdrew to **Pietramelara**, 20-odd miles from the front. The relief of 20 Armoured Regiment's tanks in **Cassino** by 12 Canadian Armoured Regiment was particularly difficult: one New Zealand tank broke a track on the way out and although 'smoked' all the ensuing day was too badly damaged by enemy fire to be of further use; another two tanks, which could not be extricated safely, were left in position for the Canadians.

(ii)

Meanwhile, on 15 April, 2 NZ Division assumed command of the southern sector of **10 Corps'** Apennine position, where the French had originally broken into the **Gustav Line**. This part of the

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<sup>1</sup> Quick defensive artillery concentrations fired according to a prearranged pattern.

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front covered the approaches through the mountains to the **Volturno**

and Rapido valleys from **Atina**, a road junction in the Melfa River valley about 10 miles north of **Cassino**, but was overlooked from the west by the towering **Monte Cairo** and from the north by **Monte Cifalco**, **Monte San Croce** and other Apennine heights still held by the enemy. Already **6 NZ Infantry Brigade** had relieved the Polish 6 Lwow Brigade astride the road at the top of the **Rapido valley**, on the more easterly of the two routes from **Atina**, and had come under the temporary command of **5 Kresowa Division**.

On Easter Monday (10 April) **25 Battalion** had left the **Volturno** valley near **Venafro** and motored up the winding road through steep-sided valleys and small villages to a debussing point near **Cardito**, where stores and equipment were loaded on mules with the assistance of Indian muleteers. Accompanied by Polish guides and troublesome mules, the companies set out on foot in the dark on a track alongside a tributary of the **Volturno** and after two or three miles began climbing very steep, narrow tracks—exhausting for the heavily laden men—on the northern side of the **Cardito – San Biagio** section of the road, where they relieved **14 Polish Battalion** on the extreme right of the divisional sector. Following much the same procedure, **24 Battalion** next night took over positions from **16 Polish Battalion** south of the road and facing the 3500-foot **Monte San Croce**, and **26 Battalion**, after being delayed by a thunderstorm, on the following night relieved **18 Polish Battalion** on the lower slopes of **San Croce** and on **Colle dell' Arena**, a plateau-like feature farther to the left. **C Squadron of Divisional Cavalry** and **33 Anti-Tank Battery**, both under **6 Brigade's** command, were given infantry tasks to thicken up the defence; and the **Vickers guns** of two companies of **27 (Machine Gun) Battalion** were sited where they could make best use of their long range and give enfilade fire in front of the infantry posts. Also in support were **5 Field Regiment**, two batteries of the **Royal Artillery**, an anti-aircraft battery, and a company of engineers.

**Sixth Brigade's** sector was a comparatively quiet one, but as **85 Mountain Rifle Regiment of 5 Division** had excellent observation from **Monte San Croce** and the nearby high ground, it was hazardous to move

in the open in daylight. The rugged terrain made a continuous line of defences impossible; wide gaps existed between the defended localities, which were protected by mines and wire entanglements, and between 6 Brigade and the Italian Motor Group in the next sector. Exchanges of fire were not very frequent, but pickets and patrols kept a vigilant watch to prevent enemy patrols from infiltrating through the gaps. The troops enjoyed the spring sunshine and the clear mountain air, the views down the **Rapido valley** and across the intervening hills to **Montecassino**, visible in fine weather, but found the nights cold, especially in posts which gave little shelter. Occasional storms brought high winds, heavy rain, and snow on the ranges.

The central sector of 2 NZ Division's line in the upper Rapido valley was held by 11 Canadian Infantry Brigade Group, and the **Belvedere-Terelle** sector, on the left, by 28 Infantry Brigade of 4 British Division. The Canadian group, 7500 strong, stayed on this part of the front from 9 April to 5 May, when it was relieved by 12 South African Motor Brigade. In addition to the three Canadian infantry battalions the group included a motor regiment of 5 Canadian Armoured Brigade, artillery and engineer units, and the Italian Bafile Battalion (composed mainly of 1000 sailors from the Italian Navy who had volunteered for land duty after surrendering their ship at **Malta**). The Canadians' sector offered the best opportunity and had the most need of constant patrolling, and sometimes as many as a dozen patrols went out during one night. The Canadians' most formidable problem, shared by all formations in the **Apennines**, was getting supplies to troops in isolated, rocky positions.

After just over a week in the line on the Canadians' right, 6 NZ Infantry Brigade relinquished command of its sector on 20 April to 2 Independent Parachute Brigade (which had been replaced at **Cassino** by a brigade of **8 Indian Division**) and went into divisional reserve in the upper **Volturno** valley not far from **Montaquila**. About the same time **5 NZ Infantry Brigade** left **Isernia** to relieve 28 Infantry Brigade on the Canadians' left.

(iii)

Probably no part of the front was more difficult to reach than the Belvedere- **Terelle** sector, hardly more than a precarious foothold high up on the western side of the **Rapido valley**, about half-way along the route from **Cassino** to **Atina**. From the lofty slopes of the snow-capped **Monte Cairo**, rising directly above and overlooking the position, and also from **Montecassino** to the south and from the mountains to the north, the enemy could observe every access route and direct fire from his guns on it.

Fifth Brigade's convoys followed the narrow, winding roads and tracks through the hills east of the **Rapido valley** to a debussing point near the village of **Portella**. The changeover of each battalion took two nights to complete. The first 5 Brigade troops to arrive, 28 (Maori) Battalion, set off on foot after dark on 19 April on a five-mile march down to the river crossing at Sant' Elia Fiumerapido and to a lying-up area among trees at the foot of the precipitous face of **Colle Belvedere**, where they remained until the following night before taking over from 2/4 Battalion, The Hampshire Regiment. Fifth Brigade assumed command of the sector on the 21st, and during the next two nights 23 Battalion completed the relief of 2 Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, and 21 Battalion that of 2 Battalion, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment. The climb of over 2000 feet to the posts on **Colle Belvedere** and the adjacent **Colle Abate** took three to five hours. Laden with their personal gear, arms and ammunition, the men clambered and scrambled over rock faces in the darkness and stumbled and groped along narrow tracks and ridges.

From the village of **Cairo** in the **Rapido valley** a road zigzagged around 10 hairpin bends up the almost vertical southern face of **Colle Belvedere** and then continued onwards and upwards for about two miles to the enemy-occupied village of **Terelle**, which cleaved to the side of **Monte Cairo**. Fifth Brigade's foremost posts, mostly in rock sangars very close to the enemy, were about midway between the top hairpin bend

and **Terelle**: 21 Battalion was astride the road and holding a salient on the reverse slope of **Colle Abate**, 23 Battalion farther north on **Colle Belvedere** and facing part of **Colle Abate** still held by the enemy, most of 28 (Maori) Battalion near the top hairpin bend, and a company of Maoris, 32 Anti-Tank Battery and a squadron of the **RAF Regiment** (these last two in an infantry role) about half-way down the zigzagging road. It was necessary to hold the flank of the road because there was a gap between the New Zealand sector and the Polish **5 Kresowa Division** farther south, in which the terrain precluded the establishment of a permanent junction post. This gap had to be watched constantly—by standing patrols at night—to prevent enemy infiltration across the lines of supply to the New Zealand and Polish sectors.

A company and a half of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion supported the infantry in the Belvedere- **Terelle** sector, but for most of the Vickers guns the range was absurdly low. A German band could be seen and heard playing in **Terelle**, and the enemy also could be seen stripped to the waist and sunbathing, but it was inadvisable for the infantry or machine-gunners to do any shooting in daylight because so much of their position was overlooked from the north, west and south.

Also in 5 Brigade's sector were seven Sherman tanks, whose crews from 12 Canadian Armoured Regiment had been replaced by men from 18 NZ Armoured Regiment when its A Squadron relieved the Canadian armour in 11 Canadian Infantry Brigade's sector. A few days later A Squadron in turn was relieved by B Squadron of **19 Armoured Regiment**. The changeover at Belvedere introduced petrol-engined Shermans to the New Zealanders, who were accustomed to the diesel-engined type. The tanks, badly in need of an overhaul, were parked in a bend in the roadway, where there was nothing to see or shoot at without going farther forward. Once or twice a tank did go up to a position from which it could fire into a cave or tunnel on which the artillery, owing to the angle of its entrance, could make no impression.

The artillery was deployed well back, among the tangle of hills and narrow valleys on the other side of the **Rapido valley**, where the guns

might be concealed from enemy observation behind ridges, or dug in and camouflaged in sites—sometimes on the very edge of a road—which gave them sufficient crest clearance for defensive fire when requested by the infantry and for counter-battery and counter-mortar work. The divisional front was covered by **5 Field Regiment** and a battery of the 6th in support of 2 Independent Parachute Brigade on the right, 17 Canadian Field Regiment (under New Zealand command) in support of the Canadian brigade group in the centre, and by 4 and 6 Field Regiments (less a battery of the latter) in support of 5 Brigade on the left. The mediums and heavies of 2 Army Group Royal Artillery were available for the assistance of both 2 NZ Division and the Italian Motor Group.

Both sides fired propaganda leaflets, but while the Allied artillery had the advantage of knowing that those in German could be read by the opposing troops, the enemy had first to identify the occupants of any sector and then ensure that the shells containing the leaflets were correctly addressed, for they had prepared special messages for the Poles, Frenchmen (with separate versions for Moroccans and Algerians), Indians, South Africans, Canadians, Americans, New Zealanders, and the men from the **British Isles**. The New Zealanders often received leaflets in Urdu or Polish, or addressed to the depressed lower classes of England; on the rare occasions they received those intended for the ‘Kiwis’ it was obvious that the Germans would have done better to have left their shells filled with high explosive. Nor did the British leaflets appear to have much better effect, although a few men of Russian or south-east European origin came into the lines bearing ‘safe pass’ leaflets.

The Germans raided some of the forward posts in the **Belvedere-Terelle** sector, usually after a preparation of shell, mortar or machine-gun fire, but were driven off with grenades and small-arms fire, and if necessary with artillery and mortar concentrations. During one of several unsuccessful enemy attempts to approach 21 Battalion's posts on **Colle Abate**, two men were captured from a unit of *132 Grenadier Regiment of 44 Division*, whose sector extended at that time from

**Terelle to Monte Cifalco**, north of Sant' Elia. According to a German report 'all our patrols in the central and southern parts of [44] division's sector found the enemy in strength holding a continuous line. The positions were most difficult to approach as the enemy was very alert and opened fire at the slightest sound.'

The bringing up of supplies and the relief of posts in the dark 'bulked very largely in the men's minds at that time, much more than anything they were called on to do in the way of fighting.... the most talked of and dreaded business of each day was the nightly walk down to the collecting point for supplies, or to the nearest well (all taped by Jerry) to fill water-cans.' <sup>1</sup> After weeks of occupation by troops of different nationalities, some of whom were not particular about hygiene, the positions had become most insanitary. On the reverse slope of **Colle Abate** a machine-gun platoon was accommodated in sangars which 'smelt to high heaven & it was difficult to move in darkness without setting up a hell of a clatter among the empty tins that covered the ground .... The infantry sangars were on the brow of the hill as we saw it [the ground rose again just beyond them] .... At the foot of the hill in a fairly sheltered position on our right was a group of 3" mortars. We could almost look down the barrels because of the steepness of the slope.' <sup>2</sup>

Troops were not expected to spend more than 10 days in the Belvedere- **Terelle** sector. Sixth Brigade began to relieve the 5th on the night of 29-30 April, when 25 Battalion took over from the 28th, and next night 24 Battalion relieved the 23rd. On the night of 1-2 May, when 6 Brigade assumed command of the sector and while 21 Battalion was still in the line, the enemy attacked the **Colle Abate** salient. He probably was aware that reliefs were taking place because the opposing lines were so very close, and no doubt wanted to identify the incoming troops. A German patrol, using rifle grenades and flame-throwers, made a determined attempt to break into a house occupied by a section of a platoon of A Company, 25 Battalion, south of the **Terelle** road, but was repulsed. Shortly afterwards 21 Battalion called for defensive fire to cover its posts on **Colle Abate**, where the enemy had infiltrated between

two platoons of B Company. The platoon on the left was out of communication and seemed to have been overrun. A counter-attack was organised, but the enemy withdrew and contact was restored with the platoon, which reoccupied its posts. The New

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<sup>1</sup> **W. D. Dawson** (23 Bn), note to **War History Branch**, 1958.

<sup>2</sup> **A. E. Gladstone**, quoted in *27 (Machine Gun) Battalion*, p. 406. During the reliefs and moves to listening posts at night men wrapped sacking around their boots to deaden the noise.

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Zealanders had about 30 casualties that night. Many of the more seriously wounded who could not be removed before daybreak had to stay in their forward posts until the following night, when 26 Battalion completed the relief of the 21st.

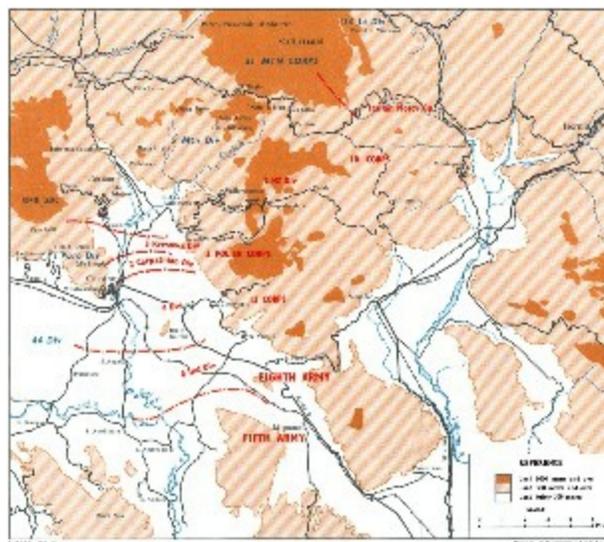
(iv)

The tortuous roads and tracks, by which day-to-day requirements were delivered to the brigades of 2 NZ Division and troops were ferried to and from their mountain sectors, were also used by the heavily laden convoys of **2 Polish Corps** dumping ammunition and stores in preparation for the offensive. All movement on each route, therefore, had to be planned in advance, and great care taken to prevent vehicles and troops being found in daylight in the places where the enemy had observation and could concentrate immediate shellfire. With a chain of provost posts linked by telephone and an efficient breakdown service to remove vehicles which blocked the way, the system of traffic control worked remarkably smoothly.

The New Zealand Division and the Poles both used the narrow, two-way road from the **Volturno** valley (near **Venafro**) to Acquafondata, which was as far as it was safe to go in daylight. From **Acquafondata**, in the basin of an old volcanic crater 2700 ft above sea level, two routes, one north and the other south of a ridge, descended westwards to meet again

at **Hove Dump**, near Sant' Elia Fiumerapido. North Road was the New Zealand Division's axis and **Inferno Track** (the southern route) was the Poles', but in fact they shared both routes.

**North Road** dropped 2000 feet in 13 miles with so many twists and turns—vehicles had to take two swings to negotiate many of its 21 hairpin bends—that although it was theoretically a two-way route it had to be restricted to one-way traffic. The enemy, in places only a mile or two away, could scan almost its entire length. Only single jeeps and ambulances attempted to use it in daylight; the columns of trucks travelled at night and without lights of any kind—and darkness did not always protect them from shellfire. Not infrequently a vehicle went over a bank. Between dusk and midnight westward-bound columns wormed their way down from **Acquafondata** to **Hove Dump**, where they were immediately unloaded; between midnight and dawn they returned to **Acquafondata**. Jeep convoys, working to a timetable which allowed them on North Road when it was clear of the **Acquafondata** columns, left Hove Dump with supplies for units reached by the roads branching off to the north and west through **Vallerotonda** and Sant' Elia. One of the routes from Sant' Elia climbed the **Terelle** 'Terror Track' to the upper of two jeepheads serving the Belvedere- **Terelle** sector, the



The Apennine Mountain Sector, April 1944

**The Apennine Mountain Sector, April 1944**

farthest point (about 20 miles) from **Acquafondata**. From the various

jeepheads the supplies were distributed by mule and man-pack.

**Inferno Track** shortened the distance from **Acquafondata** to **Hove Dump** by six miles and was much less exposed to the enemy's view than **North Road**, but was shelled when daytime traffic raised dust, and was so very narrow and steep, with grades of up to one in four or five, that it was suitable only for one-way traffic and vehicles with four-wheeled drive. A system of control posts, which regulated movement to a bypass area, permitted groups of vehicles to proceed in stages up and down **Inferno Track** day and night, but it was such a slow and difficult route that some of the Polish transport had to be diverted to **North Road** each night.

Although located among the artillery gunlines, **Hove Dump** was considered a safe and convenient harbour for supplies. The ammunition, petrol, rations, and even hay for the mules, were stacked in a clay-walled gully—a dry riverbed said to be an old course of the Rapido—and according to the artillerymen these walls gave immunity from enemy shellfire. Nevertheless, early in May, the Germans managed to land a few shells at the gully's narrow lower entrance, and set fire to a dump of pyrotechnics placed there by the Poles. This was a portent of the calamity which the **Army Service Corps** had been assured could not happen.

German artillery activity increased noticeably on 6 May. Heavy calibre guns began to search out gun and mortar positions and laid several heavy concentrations round some of the headquarters positions and on supply roads and tracks. On the 7th, a fine day, shells began to drop into **Hove Dump**. Eye-witnesses report that 'a shellburst engulfed a jeep and a huge column of black smoke— probably from a load of petrol—spiralled up into the clear sky, a fine marker for enemy gunners. There was sudden, feverish activity. Drivers jumped to their jeeps and self-starters whirred. Trucks and jeeps, some blackened by fire, streamed out of the gully to safety.' <sup>1</sup> Obviously attracted by the smoke, the enemy guns poured shells into the dump, which soon became a blazing inferno,

in which whole stores of petrol and ammunition exploded. 'Viewed from afar by awed onlookers, Hove appeared as a deep gash in the earth from which billowed smoke and flame and with them shuddering explosions. Even stacks of super-heated bully beef were bursting like small-arms fire.'

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<sup>1</sup> P. W. Bates, *Supply Company*, p. 313.

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**Hove Dump** was finished. <sup>1</sup> Stocks of ammunition, petrol, rations, fodder, and many vehicles had been destroyed. The casualties, as far as could be assessed, were about 50, including one New Zealander killed and 26 wounded. Thereafter **Acquafondata** became the most forward New Zealand dump from which the nightly jeep trains distributed supplies.

(v)

During the five months it had been in action in **Italy** 2 NZ Division had suffered over 3200 casualties, nearly half of them (1596, including 343 dead) at **Cassino** between 1 February and 10 April 1944. All its units needed time for training and the absorption of reinforcements who had been arriving in large numbers since the end of the battle at **Cassino**. A complication was the surplus of senior NCOs, who included those returning from furlough in New Zealand, experienced in desert warfare but strangers to conditions in **Italy**, and ex-officers who had voluntarily relinquished their Territorial commissions in New Zealand to come overseas, with less combat experience than those who had served in either North Africa or **Italy**. By this time, also, the **4th Reinforcements**, who had been with the Division since 1941, were due for furlough.

The recent reinforcements were sent into the line soon after their arrival. They could get little exercise and no training while confined in cramped shelters in the daytime and standing-to watching for enemy patrols at night; the men who went out on patrol usually were chosen from among the old hands. **General Freyberg** felt that his infantry had not had sufficient training in mountain warfare and he had no

**inclination to commit them in a frontal assault in such difficult country. It was preferable, therefore, that the Division should not be part of the striking force and that the main assault by Eighth and Fifth Armies be made elsewhere. The Division's immediate role was merely to make a series of simulated attacks to contain the enemy on its front, and to provide artillery and mortar support for the Poles, if required, in their attempt to outflank **Montecassino** from the north. Later, depending on how the battle developed, the Division could expect an exploitation role.**

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**<sup>1</sup> According to German records, observers had seen the constant movement of traffic into and out of 'the gully north of **Portella**'. Presumably because the guns to the north and north-west could not clear the crests, *1 Parachute Division's* artillery in the **Cassino** area was laid on this target on 6 May. A German report next day says that after movement in the gully was shelled '20 explosions were seen, followed by fires which lasted for a long time. Petrol and ammunition had obviously been hit....' This shelling was continued on 8 and 9 May, when more fires and explosions were reported.**

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## III: THE DESTRUCTION OF THE GUSTAV LINE

### *III: The Destruction of the Gustav Line*

(i)

General Alexander's plan for the capture of **Rome** and an advance of 200 miles up the Italian peninsula was defined in an operation order issued by Headquarters Allied Armies in **Italy** on 5 May: 'To destroy the right wing of the German **Tenth Army**; to drive what remains of it and the German **Fourteenth Army** North of **ROME**; and to pursue the enemy to the **RIMINI-PISA** line inflicting the maximum losses on him in the process.' <sup>1</sup>

The offensive was to open with a simultaneous frontal attack by the two armies on the **Gustav Line** on the night of 11–12 May 1944. **Eighth Army** was to force an entry into the **Liri valley** and advance up Route 6, and **Fifth Army** was to drive through the **Aurunci Mountains** and along an axis parallel to that of Eighth Army but south of the **Liri** and **Sacco** valleys. These assaults on the southern front were designed to draw in the enemy's resources and weaken his forces encircling the Allied beachhead at **Anzio**. By the time the enemy's second line of defence, the **Hitler Line**, had been broken, **6 Corps** was expected to be able to break out from **Anzio** and advance inland to cut Route 6 in the **Valmontone** area and thus prevent the withdrawal of the troops opposing the advance of Eighth and Fifth Armies. After the capture of **Rome** **Eighth Army** was to pursue the enemy on the general axis of **Terni- Perugia**, and thereafter advance on **Ancona** and **Florence**, and **Fifth Army** was to pursue the enemy north of **Rome**, capture the **Viterbo** airfields and the port of **Civitavecchia**, and thereafter advance on **Leghorn**.

In **Eighth Army** **13 Corps** (Lieutenant-General S. C. Kirkman) was to make the frontal attack across the **Gari River** south of **Cassino** while **2 Polish Corps** (Lieutenant-General W. A. Anders) was to strike across the **Monte Cairo- Montecassino** spur to turn the line from the north; the

junction of the two corps on Route 6 was to isolate and ensure the capture of **Cassino** and the monastery. The role of **1 Canadian Corps** (Lieutenant-General E. L. M. Burns), in **Eighth Army** reserve at the beginning of the offensive, would depend on the progress of **13 Corps**. Should **13 Corps** succeed in penetrating both the **Gustav** and **Hitler** lines, the Canadians were to pass through and exploit up Route 6 to **Rome**, but if the British corps encountered strong opposition after it had established the initial bridgehead, the Canadians were to cross the Gari and go into action on its left.

Meanwhile **10 Corps** (Lieutenant-General McCreery) was to secure **Eighth Army's** right flank in the **Apennines** and also stage

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<sup>1</sup> Annex No. 1A to *Fifth Army History*, Part V.

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a demonstration in **2 NZ Division's** sector to delude the enemy into expecting an attack against this thinly held part of the line, through which ran the two routes to **Atina**. On the Adriatic coast **5 Corps**, under the command of HQ Allied Armies in **Italy**, was to hold its front with the minimum of troops and pursue the enemy should he retire.

A scheme was devised in **2 NZ Division** to deceive the enemy by simulating a threat along the **La Selva – San Biagio** section of the road to **Atina** on **2 Independent Parachute Brigade's** front. The artillery (**5 NZ Field Regiment**, a South African <sup>1</sup> field battery and a South African medium troop) would fire a barrage for 42 minutes, starting at 2 a.m. on 12 May, on **Monte San Croce** and its western slope, and a troop of heavy anti-aircraft guns would fire on **Monte Carella**. The 4.2-inch and 3-inch mortars and Vickers machine guns were to cover the right flank of the 'attack', and Bren-gunners from one of the parachute battalions were to go forward and engage selected targets on the slopes of **Monte San Croce**. Two troops of **C Squadron**, **18 NZ Armoured Regiment's** tanks were to manoeuvre on the road near **La Selva**. Presuming the enemy would think this 'attack' had failed, the Division was to simulate another thrust towards **San Biagio** on the night of 13–14 May.

For several weeks before the offensive began, the **Mediterranean Allied Air Forces**,<sup>2</sup> taking advantage of a supremacy of nearly 4000 aircraft over the enemy's 700 (about half of which were based in **Yugoslavia** or southern **France**), concentrated on the disruption of the enemy's road, rail and sea communications in an endeavour to prevent him from accumulating stores to increase his resistance to the forthcoming ground attack. The Allied aircraft hampered and strained the German supply and transport organisation, but did not succeed in isolating the battlefield. In fact, both *Tenth* and *Fourteenth Armies* were adequately supplied at the start of the May offensive.

The air forces gave their fullest support during the battle. They bombed headquarters (disrupting *HQ Tenth Army* and *HQ Fourteenth Corps*) and command posts, and attacked the German gun positions across the **Liri valley** and behind **Cassino**.

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<sup>1</sup> By this time 12 South African Motor Brigade, which had recently arrived in **Italy** from **Egypt**, had replaced 11 Canadian Infantry Brigade in the central sector of 2 NZ Division's command. The Canadian brigade returned to 5 Canadian Armoured Division, which was to take part in the offensive.

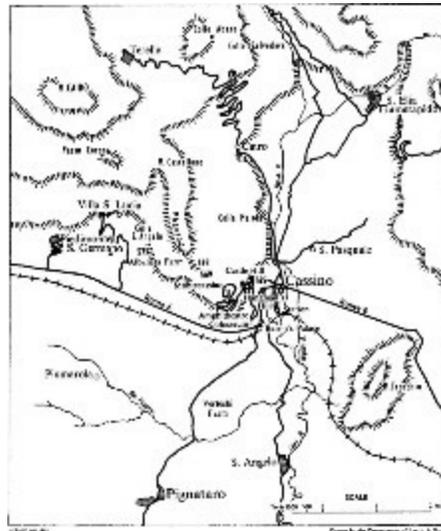
<sup>2</sup> The components of the MAAF were the **Mediterranean Allied Strategic Air Force**, the **Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Force** (comprising the Twelfth Tactical Air Command and the **Desert Air Force**), the Mediterranean Allied Coastal Air Force, and the Mediterranean Allied Photographic Reconnaissance Wing.

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(ii)

With a thunderous roar amplified by the mountain echoes, the Allied artillery opened fire at 11p.m. on 11 May against the enemy's 30-mile front between **Atina** and the sea. Over 1000 guns were employed by **Eighth Army** and about 600 by the Fifth. After 40 minutes' counter-battery fire the bulk of the artillery switched to the corps objectives.

**Fifth Army** began its thrust into the **Aurunci Mountains** south of the **Liri River**; in **Eighth Army** **13 British Corps** forced a crossing of the Gari at the mouth of the **Liri valley**, but **2 Polish Corps** failed in its attack on **Montecassino**.



THE CASSINO SECTOR

General Anders's plan was for **5 Kresowa Division** on the right and **3 Carpathian Division** on the left to capture part of the ridge about a mile north-west of the monastery, which would give observation over the **Liri valley**. The Poles' first objectives included **Phantom Ridge** and **Albaneta Farm**, and their second objectives **Colle Sant' Angelo** (a ridge beyond **Phantom Ridge**) and **Montecassino**.

The benefit of the preliminary 40-minute counter-battery bombardment had been lost when the Poles' advance began at 1 a.m. on the 12th. The enemy guns and crews were well dug in and the damage done to their communications was quickly repaired. Soon their fire regained almost its full intensity. The Poles captured **Phantom Ridge** and also **Point 593** (less than a mile from the monastery) but were exposed to a ring of artillery and mortar fire, and were repeatedly counter-attacked by the Germans (who were in greater numbers than expected because they were carrying out reliefs in the **Cassino** sector that night). Weakened by extremely heavy casualties and unable to go on to their final objectives, the Poles were withdrawn to their starting

point, where they would need time to reorganise.

The German reaction to this attack was confined at first to the Polish sector; except for some light shelling and mortaring, the adjacent New Zealand sector remained quiet. The only noticeable response to the simulated attack on 2 Independent Parachute Brigade's front at 2 a.m. was machine-gun fire on fixed lines and shell and mortar fire on likely forming-up points. The tanks from **18 Armoured Regiment** trundled up the road to the appointed place near **La Selva**, fired shells into the darkness ahead, and returned down the road without one retaliatory shot from the enemy.

The artillery of **10 Corps**, including some of the New Zealand batteries, and the air force supported the Poles throughout the battle. The New Zealand artillery answered numerous calls for counter-battery and counter-mortar fire on **Monte Cairo, Terelle, Belmonte** and **Atina** to lessen the volume of fire the enemy was bringing down on the Polish sector, and also helped to cover the Poles' withdrawal.

Although the Poles' attack inflicted correspondingly heavy losses on the enemy (one of whose relieving battalions was believed to have been practically annihilated by shellfire) and divided the attention of the enemy artillery which might otherwise have concentrated on 13 Corps, it made no tactical gains. 'It is no disparagement of the Poles' splendid bravery to say that it availed little until successes elsewhere threatened the defenders of Monte- cassino with encirclement.... though the great fortress fell [on 18 May], it was never conquered.' <sup>1</sup>

*(iii)*

While the Poles were battling among the hills above **Cassino**, 13 Corps was struggling to establish a bridgehead across the Gari River south of the town. From this bridgehead General Kirkman planned to turn northwards to cut Route 6 and join up with the Poles and isolate **Cassino**. The town was to be cleared of the enemy and the road reconstructed through it. Thirteenth Corps then was to advance up the

## **Liri valley south of Route 6 to the Hitler Line.**

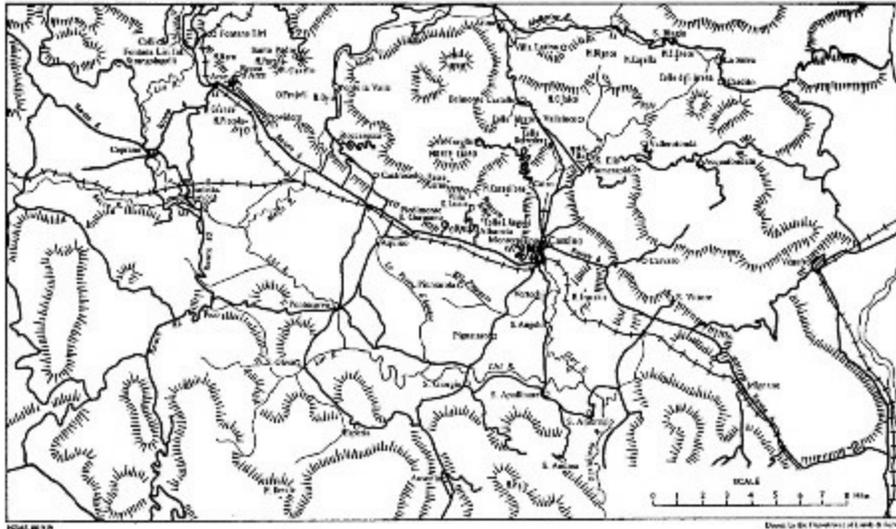
Starting immediately after the counter-battery fire ceased, 13 Corps (unlike the Poles) at first did not have to contend with shellfire, but the swift-flowing Gari capsized many of its assault boats and swept many downstream, German automatic and small-arms fire caused numerous casualties, and the attackers soon lost the benefit of the supporting artillery barrage. On the right, between the **Cassino** railway station and Sant' Angelo, **4 British Division** had not completed a bridge before dawn and was unable to do so in daylight, but although lacking support weapons the division clung to a shallow lodgement on the far bank throughout the day. On the left **8 Indian Division** succeeded in placing two bridges over the river south of Sant' Angelo and was joined by tanks of 1 Canadian Armoured Brigade and some anti-tank guns.

Taken by surprise, the enemy made no co-ordinated counter-attack against 13 Corps on 12 May. Instead he threw in his local reserves piecemeal, and hastily assembled in the rear a battle group (including two parachute battalions) at the disposal of *1 Parachute Division*, whose command was extended southward over *44 Division's* front in the **Liri valley**. A regiment of *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* was despatched to the **Liri valley**, but Kesselring, who still expected an Allied landing behind the front, reserved to himself the decision to commit this formation to action.

A bridge was built over the Gari in 4 Division's sector before dawn on the 13th, and tanks of 26 Armoured Brigade crossed to assist the attack. In the afternoon **8 Indian Division** completed the clearing of the enemy from Sant' Angelo, and 13 Corps' uneasy foothold across the river was converted into a firm bridgehead. Orders were issued for **78 British Division**, reinforced by units from **6 British Armoured Division**, to pass through next day and make contact with the **Polish Corps** (which was to renew its attack)

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips, *Italy*, Vol. I, p. 337.



THE LIRI VALLEY  
THE LIRI VALLEY

on Route 6 on 15 May. A second bridge over the Gari in 4 Division's sector was ready for use on the morning of the 14th, and 19 NZ Armoured Regiment, placed under the command of that division, also crossed the river.

The 19th Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel [McGaffin](#)<sup>1</sup>) left the [Pietramelara](#) area at short notice, travelled about 30 miles 'in stygian blackness'<sup>2</sup> on the night of 13–14 May, during which two tanks slipped off the road, and was refuelled and ready to go into action at dawn. C Squadron crossed the Gari about 8 a.m. and the other squadrons later in the morning, to take up positions in support of 4 Division, which was to act as a pivot for 78 Division's wheeling movement to the north and was to be prepared to move against [Cassino](#) when it was outflanked.

As 4 Division had not yet cleared the enemy from all of its objectives, the GOC (Major-General A. D. Ward) decided to attack on the southern flank to conform with [8 Indian Division's](#) line. About 6 p.m. 2/4 Hampshires of 28 Brigade, with B Squadron in support, set out to take [Vertechi Farm](#). The tanks had difficulty in crossing the [Pioppeto stream](#). A scissors bridge, which had been hit during the day, collapsed when the first tank was half-way over; the second tank just failed to jump an eight-foot-wide gap, and the third rolled over on to its side in

the run-up on the opposite bank. In another place, however, three tanks managed to cross a temporary bridge, constructed mostly of green willow logs, and reached the objective ahead of the infantry. Supported by these tanks and by fire from tanks still on the other side of the stream, the Hampshires were consolidating on their objective by 6.30 p.m.

A and C Squadrons of 19 Regiment stood by on 15 May in readiness to help 4 Division repulse a counter-attack which was expected at dawn but did not eventuate. B Squadron (less two troops supporting the Hampshires on the southern flank, which was still rather exposed) helped **2 Royal Fusiliers** of 12 Brigade clear up a small enemy salient, and claimed the destruction of an *ofenrohr*<sup>3</sup> and its crew and a strongpoint in a house defended by machine guns and mortars, and silenced four machine-gun posts. Tanks from B Squadron accompanied the **Royal West Kents** of 12 Brigade in an attack beyond Vertechi. One was disabled on a mine, but another scored an unexpected success by discovering and disposing of a Mark IV German tank disguised as a haystack.

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<sup>1</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>2</sup> **D. W. Sinclair**, *19 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 402.

<sup>3</sup> *Ofenrohr*: German weapon similar to the American bazooka and firing a hollow-charge rocket projectile.

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By the end of the day 13 Corps had reached the lateral **Cassino-Pignataro** road, and **8 Indian Division** had captured the village of **Pignataro**.

Meanwhile 78 Division was making slow progress through the bridgehead, where it was delayed by traffic congestion, difficulty in crossing the Gari and Pioppeto, and by shellfire. The enemy was able to direct his guns on targets in the **Liri valley** because of his undisturbed possession of vantage points on the Montecassino spur, which would have been denied him if the Poles had succeeded in their attack. The Poles intended to renew their attack on 15 May, but unless 13 Corps was within supporting distance, would have little prospect of holding the ridge if they captured it. It was decided, therefore, to postpone the Polish attack until 13 Corps, still advancing under continuous observed fire, was within striking distance of Route 6.

*(iv)*

While **Eighth Army** was assaulting the best prepared German defences in the **Liri valley** and north of **Cassino**, **Fifth Army** was making sweeping gains farther south, between the Liri River and the sea, through mountainous country which the enemy had believed impassable for a large force.

**Fifth Army** could not advance up Route 7 (the Via Appia), which ran along the coast, without controlling the mountain ridges which dominated the road. It was decided, therefore, to strike directly over the mountains. Against the two German divisions south of the **Liri**, **Fifth Army** employed the four divisions of the **French Expeditionary Corps**, composed mostly of Algerians and Moroccans (with French officers) who were experienced and skilled mountain troops, and the two divisions of **2 US Corps** in the coastal sector, where 10 British Corps earlier had secured a bridgehead over the Garigliano River.

The French quickly penetrated the **Aurunci Mountains**. On 13 May 2 Moroccan Division captured the 3000-foot Monte Maio, key to the German defences overlooking the Garigliano River, and then exploited north-westwards towards the **Liri**. This permitted the French 1 Motorised Division, after clearing the western bank of the Garigliano, to continue

along the southern bank of the **Liri** to **San Giorgio**, which it reached on the 14th. Farther south 3 Algerian Division next day entered the Ausonia defile, through which the road passes to **Pontecorvo**, a nodal point of the Hitler Line. Meanwhile **2 US Corps**, on the left of the French, crossed the road which runs south from Ausonia to join Route 7 near the coast.

Surprised by the strength and speed of **Fifth Army's** advance, the Germans suffered crippling losses in men killed, wounded and captured, and fell back in different directions, *94 Division* along the coast and *71 Division* to the **Esperia** defile, through which the road from Ausonia enters the **Liri valley**. This compelled the enemy to divert to **Esperia** the formation of *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* with which he had intended to reinforce the **Liri valley** front. It arrived in detail and was defeated in detail—which was to be the fate of all the mobile German divisions. Meanwhile, through the gap in the centre, between the retreating *71* and *94 Divisions*, General Juin launched his Mountain Corps, composed of the *goumiers* and infantry of 4 Mountain Division, with orders to cut the Itri-Pico road, far in the enemy's rear. Almost unopposed as they crossed the trackless mountain ranges, the French had reached Monte Revole by 16 May, an advance of some 12 miles from the old line near the Garigliano.

Kesselring's failure to appreciate the strength and momentum of the Allied offensive south of **Cassino** is evident in a directive he issued to *Tenth* and *Fourteenth Armies* in the evening of 15 May, when he ordered that a new line of defence be stabilised from **Esperia** through **Pignataro** to **Cassino**, to permit 'the continued defence of the **Cassino** massif.'<sup>1</sup> By the morning of the 16th 13 Corps was already holding the road this line was intended to follow. In a telephone conversation early that evening Kesselring and von Vietinghoff discussed the necessity of a further withdrawal and agreed they would have to give up **Cassino**. The commander of *Tenth Army* then issued orders for a general withdrawal to the **Hitler Line**.

(v)

Although *5 Mountain Division*, facing *2 NZ Division* in the Apennine sector, was one of the formations from which troops were taken, often by companies at a time, to stem *Eighth Army's* thrust in the *Liri valley*, the Germans clearly intended to hold this part of the front, from *Cassino* northwards, as long as possible.

Acting on evidence from various sources that the enemy was thinning out on the New Zealand front under the cover of strong battle patrols, the Division issued orders for the three brigades to prepare fighting patrols, which were to move out after dark on

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix to *Tenth Army* war diary.

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the night of 13–14 May, lie up in suitable positions to report on enemy movement, and if possible ambush the enemy patrols to prepare the way for a general advance. *Sixth Infantry Brigade*, in the *Terelle-Belvedere* sector, briefed patrols of about platoon strength, one from each battalion, to go out at dusk. The first, from *24 Battalion*, attacked a house on the eastern side of *Colle Abate*, where the enemy had been seen earlier, but came under fire from a number of nearby posts and lost one man killed, seven wounded (one of whom was taken prisoner), and two missing. The Germans laid down defensive fire across the front, through which the patrol withdrew with difficulty. Satisfied that the enemy was still alert and manning his positions, *25* and *26 Battalions* disbanded their patrols.

The same night *2 Independent Parachute Brigade* repeated, with a modified version, its simulated attack in the vicinity of the road that passes through *San Biagio* on the way to *Atina*. Light machine-gun teams went forward under an artillery and mortar barrage on *Monte San Croce* and *Monte Carella*. The enemy showed that he was still in position by laying defensive fire in front of his forward posts. A patrol from *12 South African Motor Brigade*, in the Division's central sector, surprised

**an enemy party of seven men and killed five of them. The dead were identified as being from *1 Battalion, 100 Mountain Regiment*, which indicated that this battalion probably had spread out to cover the withdrawal of the other troops previously known to have been there. Nevertheless the Germans in this sector were very alert, constantly firing fixed-line tracer and Very lights, and severed the brigade's communications with shell and mortar fire.**

**Late in the afternoon of the 14th the New Zealand artillery laid smoke on an area where the *Cassino- Atina* road passes through the defile between Monte Belvedere and *Monte Cifalco*, and in a mixture of smoke and mist the South Africans simulated an attack with machine-gun and mortar fire. Although this brought little immediate response from the enemy, he apparently assumed it presaged a night attack, and after dusk he distributed so much defensive fire of all kinds on the New Zealand front that patrols were greatly hampered and pinned to the ground at times. Enemy aircraft, more in evidence than they had been for some time, bombed *Hove Dump* and the supply roads during the night and next day (the 15th); they returned the following night to bomb the medium gun areas. As the latter night was very still, sound carried a long way. Enemy mule trains and working parties, which could be heard plainly, were fired on by the artillery and mortars.**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## IV: THE CAPTURE OF CASSINO

### *IV: The Capture of Cassino*

(i)

For **Eighth Army's** final assault on **Cassino** General Leese decided to commit his army reserve (the Canadian Corps) and continue the battle on a three-corps front. To isolate the town and monastery the **Polish Corps** and 13 Corps were to strike simultaneously on the morning of 17 May, the Poles south-eastwards over the Monte **Cairo – Montecassino** spur where they had made their previous attempt, and the British north-westwards in the **Liri valley** to cut Route 6 and link with the Poles. Meanwhile the Canadians were to enter the valley, take over from **8 Indian Division**, and continue the westward advance on the left of 13 Corps.

The plan for the second Polish attack on **Montecassino** was much the same as for the first, but the conditions were more favourable: not only had the enemy lost heavily in the first attack (as had the Poles themselves) but *1 Parachute Division* had been compelled to weaken itself further by sending reinforcements to the **Liri valley** in the vain hope of sealing off the Allied penetrations of the **Gustav Line**; in addition, the only way of escape from **Cassino**, along Route 6, was in danger of being blocked.

This time **5 Kresowa Division**, attacking in waves of battalion strength, was to capture in turn the northern part of Phantom Ridge, Colle Sant' Angelo and Point 575 (farther south, overlooking Route 6), and was then to continue the advance downhill and across the highway to meet 78 Division of 13 Corps. Kresowa Division had an unexpected success on the night before the opening of the planned attack. A company, while reconnoitring in force (with supporting fire from 4 and 6 NZ Field Regiments), captured some enemy positions on the northern

end of **Phantom Ridge**, and the remainder of the battalion quickly went forward to exploit this success. The Germans counter-attacked, but were repulsed.

The 17th of May was a day of bitter fighting, much of it hand-to-hand against an enemy who defended his rocky strongholds to the last. In the morning, when the artillery (with the New Zealand guns again participating) fired its programme in support of the attack, a second battalion of Kresowa Division passed through the one already on **Phantom Ridge** and took Colle Sant' Angelo, except for some pillboxes on the western side, but came under fire from **Passo Corno** and **Villa Santa Lucia**, to the north-west. The Germans counter-attacked from some vineyards under the south-western slopes and were twice repelled; but the Poles were running out of ammunition, and in their third attempt the Germans captured the southern peak of Colle Sant' Angelo. Although a third Polish battalion came forward to help restore the losses on Colle Sant' Angelo, the day's fighting had cost Kresowa Division so many lives that it could go no farther.

The primary objectives of **3 Carpathian Division**, which attacked at the same time as Kresowa Division, were two key positions of the German defences, **Albaneta Farm** and Point 593 (a few hundred yards to the east). A battalion, accompanied by engineers, advanced to the gorge north of **Albaneta Farm** to clear it of the enemy and his mines, but as this task took longer than anticipated, **Albaneta Farm** was brought under neutralising fire while a second battalion was committed to an attack on Point 593, which it captured despite a German counter-attack. This battalion then attempted to reach Point 569, just to the south of 593, but was obstructed by the ruins of an old fort and came under mortar fire from the monastery, about half a mile away, and machine-gun fire from Point 575. Although a third battalion joined in the attack, the Poles were unable to take Point 569, and were halted within 200 yards of **Albaneta Farm** by fire from steel pillboxes.

The Carpathian Division took up defensive positions for the night,

with orders to prevent a German withdrawal along the ridge from **Montecassino** to **Albaneta Farm**, and next morning (18 May) finally cleared the enemy from **Albaneta Farm** and Point 569. A patrol of **12 Podolski Lancers** met no resistance from the 30 men, many of them wounded, who still remained in the monastery, where the Polish standard was hoisted over the ruins at 10.20 a.m.

(ii)

The decision to launch the **Polish Corps** attack on 17 May had been taken the previous evening, when 13 Corps had made sufficient progress in the **Liri valley**: 78 Division had pushed north-westwards through the last defences of the **Gustav Line**, while 4 Division had straightened out its line south of **Montecassino**.

B and C Squadrons of 19 NZ Armoured Regiment co-operated with the infantry of 4 Division on the 16th in an attack across the **Pignataro** road to reduce a small salient which divided 10 and 12 Brigades. The advance began at 6.30 p.m. B Squadron and the **Royal West Kents**, on the left, had gone some way towards their objective (a point about 1000 yards south of Route 6) when they met the enemy approaching as if to counter-attack (or perhaps to reoccupy positions vacated earlier), and after some very confused fighting in the failing light—complicated by the infantry's inexperience in the use of the No. 38 wireless-telephony link to keep in touch with the tanks—halted on the ground they had gained. In this engagement the Englishmen had earned the New Zealanders' admiration for their 'sheer guts and unhesitating obedience to orders'.<sup>1</sup> The Germans also had fought with great determination. Their *ofenrohr* crews had lain concealed in the long grass until the tanks were nearly on top of them. B Squadron had two tanks knocked out, two officers killed, and seven men wounded. Next morning 150 enemy dead, all claimed as the victims of tank fire, were counted in the squadron's sector.

On the right C Squadron gained the line of the **Pignataro** road about half a mile from its junction with Route 6, but had outdistanced the

infantry (the Bedfordshires and Hertfordshires), who had halted in the darkness. A strongpoint in a house was disposed of by tank fire, but a storm of mortar and machine-gun fire caused many casualties. A line was stabilised with the tanks in close support of the infantry.

When the **Polish Corps** and 13 Corps launched their concerted attack on 17 May, 78 Division, continuing its wheeling movement to the north-west, at first met sharp resistance, but this began to weaken as the attack progressed. The village of Piumarola, about two miles beyond the **Pignataro** road, was finally captured in the evening after a stiff fight with the garrison of German paratroops.

Meanwhile, on the inner flank, 4 Division conformed with this wheeling movement. In the morning its infantry, supported by tanks of **19 Armoured Regiment**, advanced against negligible opposition to reach Route 6 south of **Montecassino**. B Squadron, having already had several days' hard fighting, was replaced by a troop of A Squadron, which accompanied the **Royal West Kents** beyond the objective of the previous night and gained the highway at the foot of the mountainside below the monastery. A troop of C Squadron crossed Route 6 farther to the east and shot up positions near the junction of the road to **Pignataro**, which allowed the Bedfordshires and Hertfordshires also to reach the highway. A troop of A Squadron covered 2 Duke of **Cornwall's** Light Infantry in an advance which, against light machine-gun fire, reached a point near the railway south of the town. These gains brought **19 Armoured Regiment** into the area of the original New Zealand objective for which the regiment had battled unsuccessfully in March.

By this time the escape route from **Cassino** and the monastery was restricted to the mountainside and, farther west, to the narrow strip of valley between the mountains and the railway running parallel with Route 6. In anticipation of a German attempt to break out that way during the night, Route 6 was patrolled and

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<sup>1</sup> *19 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 410.

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the artillery put down harassing fire, but most of the enemy already had slipped away; only 70 prisoners were taken, many of them medical orderlies. It had been necessary for Kesselring personally to order General Richard Heidrich's *1 Parachute Division* to retire, 'an example,' he says, 'of the drawback of having strong personalities as subordinate commanders.' <sup>1</sup>

On the morning of the 18th 10 Brigade approached **Cassino** with two battalions supported by tanks from A and C Squadrons, and without meeting any resistance—although a few Germans gave themselves up as prisoners—secured the Baron's Palace, the Colosseum and the Amphitheatre. The **4th Division** then made contact with **1 Guards Brigade** in the town and with the Poles. Mines and booby traps were thick on the ground and in the rubble, and great care had to be taken when investigating buildings. The tank crews were warned not to forage among the ruins, and especially not to touch the knocked-out New Zealand tanks still in the town. Having completed its task in the **Liri valley**, 19 Regiment was released by 4 Division.

Shortly after midday **3 Carpathian Division** despatched a patrol down the slopes of **Montecassino** and made contact with 78 Division on Route 6 below **Albaneta Farm**. Nevertheless parties of Germans covering the withdrawal from **Cassino**, and some who had not received orders to withdraw, continued to resist throughout the day, and isolated pillboxes had to be destroyed individually. On **5 Kresowa Division's** front repeated attempts to dislodge the enemy were thwarted by the fire from strongpoints on the southern slopes of Colle Sant' Angelo and from Point 575. By evening General Anders decided that, rather than incur further casualties, <sup>2</sup> it would be better to pin down and exhaust the enemy. A counter-attack from **Villa Santa Lucia**, farther west, was repulsed, and early next day (the 19th) this place was reported clear; but Passo Corno, at a height of about 3000 feet on the side of **Monte Cairo**, remained in German hands.

(iii)

While 13 Corps and the **Polish Corps** were fighting the battle to isolate **Cassino**, the Canadian Corps, entering the **Liri valley** on the left of the 13th, struck towards the **Hitler Line** through country dotted with strongpoints and furrowed by many small streams. The 1st Canadian Infantry Division, after taking over from 8 Indian Division near **Pignataro**, fought its way to the **Forme d' Aquino**, a

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<sup>1</sup> *The Memoirs of Field Marshal Kesselring*, p. 202.

<sup>2</sup> The Poles' casualties were approximately 4000, including 1000 dead.

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stream which straggles across the valley through marsh and gully to join the Liri River near **San Giorgio**. This natural obstacle allowed the enemy to disengage his forces in front of the Canadians on the night of 17–18 May—while farther north he reluctantly retired from **Cassino** through the gap between 13 Corps and the Poles.

Although the enemy had lost **Montecassino**, his northern flank was still secured by his retention of positions on the slopes of **Monte Cairo**, including the small town of **Piedimonte San Germano**, perched on a spur overlooking Route 6. On his southern flank, however, his misappreciation of General Alexander's plan and of the Allies' ability to cross the **Aurunci Mountains** had resulted in his failure to halt **Fifth Army's** drive. The French had taken **Esperia** by 17 May and were less than four miles from **Pontecorvo** the following afternoon. Alexander now ordered **Eighth Army** 'to use the utmost energy to break through the "Adolf Hitler" line in the **Liri valley** before the Germans had time to settle down in it'. <sup>1</sup> He also directed the Poles to press on to **Piedimonte** to turn the line from the north, and the French, after reaching Pico (west of **Pontecorvo**), to encircle the southern flank.

**Eighth Army** almost broke through the **Hitler Line** before the enemy

'had time to settle down in it'. Early in the evening of 18 May the **Derbyshire Yeomanry** Group from 78 Division, advancing rapidly south of the railway, reached the **Aquino** airfield, on the edge of the main defences of the line. A few tanks entered the village of **Aquino**, but were without infantry support so withdrew. An assault was made on **Aquino** at daybreak on the 19th, but when the sun suddenly dispersed the heavy morning mist, the tanks of 11 Canadian Armoured Regiment, supporting a battalion of 36 British Infantry Brigade, found themselves in the open, some of them within point-blank range of German anti-tank guns. Shell and mortar fire compelled the infantry to retire, but the tanks, protected to some extent by a smokescreen, held their ground throughout the day. When the regiment finally withdrew at dusk, it had lost 13 Sherman tanks, and every tank of its two leading squadrons had received at least one direct hit by high-explosive shells.

On the same day 3 Canadian Infantry Brigade, supported by a battalion of the **Royal Tank Regiment**, tried to penetrate the defences farther south, between **Aquino** and **Pontecorvo**, but after emerging into the open from thick patches of stunted oak trees, the infantry were halted by machine-gun and mortar fire, and the tanks by anti-tank gunfire. By this time it was obvious that a major

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<sup>1</sup> *The Allied Armies in Italy*, p. 2925.

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assault would be necessary to break the **Hitler Line** in the **Liri** valley.

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## V: THE BREAKING OF THE HITLER LINE

### *V: The Breaking of the Hitler Line*

(i)

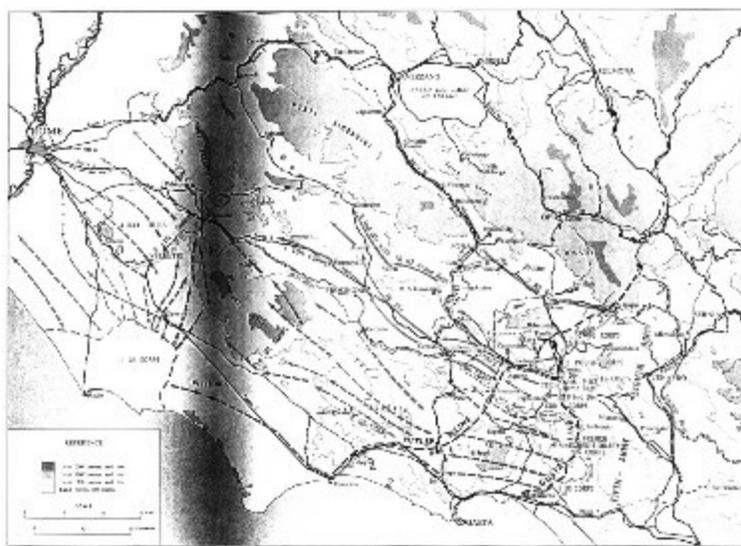
From the hill town of **Piedimonte San Germano** the **Hitler Line** ran southwards across the **Liri valley** to the vicinity of **Pontecorvo** and, after crossing the river, swung south-westwards over the mountains to **Terracina** on the coast. Although far from complete, its defences were even more elaborate than those of the **Gustav Line**; they included armoured pillboxes, reinforced concrete gun emplacements and weapon pits, underground shelters, and minefields and wire to obstruct tanks and infantry. The line's great weakness, however, was that there were too few troops to man it adequately. The *90th Panzer Grenadier Division*, which held the sector in front of the Canadian Corps, had been reduced to little more than a motley collection of units in which men of every arm were intermingled. On its left, opposite 13 Corps, was *1 Parachute Division*, and on the right in the **Pontecorvo-Pico** sector was *26 Panzer Division*.

The French captured Pico on 22 May and began to outflank the **Hitler Line** from the south, but the enemy showed no sign of abandoning it. He defended **Pontecorvo** that day against a Canadian thrust. Early next morning 1 Canadian Infantry Division, with very heavy artillery support, launched its main assault between **Aquino** and **Pontecorvo** and, in a day in which the Canadians experienced their hardest and most costly fighting in **Italy**,<sup>1</sup> succeeded in piercing the line. Nearly 1000 Canadians were killed or wounded, most of them from units on the right flank, which was exposed to fire from **Aquino**. The German casualties included several hundred killed and over 700 prisoners.

The 5th Canadian Armoured Division passed through the breach on the 24th and exploited to the far bank of the shallow, meandering Melfa

River, which crossed the valley about four miles west of **Aquino** before flowing into the **Liri**. A battle group from the infantry division pushed along the road from **Pontecorvo** and next day crossed the **Melfa** just above the junction of the two rivers. By nightfall on the 25th the Canadians' bridgehead west of the **Melfa** extended from the **Liri** to the railway.

The continued presence of the enemy at **Aquino** after the breakthrough had prevented 78 Division of 13 Corps from advancing,



The Advance to **Rome**, 11 May – 4 June 1944

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*, pp. 423–5.

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as planned, on the right of the Canadians on the 24th. It was decided, therefore, that 6 British Armoured Division should take a route through the Canadian sector south of **Aquino**, but as 5 Canadian Armoured Division was not yet clear of this route, 13 Corps' advance was postponed until next day. Early on the 25th patrols found **Aquino** and also **Piedimonte** (which 1 Parachute Division had held against the Poles' attacks) clear of the enemy. Thirteenth Corps then closed up to the **Melfa** with both 6 Armoured Division and 78 Division, while 8 Indian Division, with 18 NZ Armoured Regiment under command, occupied small towns and villages in the foothills on the northern side of the **Liri**

valley.

(ii)

Led by C Squadron, **18 Armoured Regiment** (Lieutenant-Colonel **Robinson** <sup>1</sup>) drove up Route 6 on 25 May to join **8 Indian Division**, commanded by Major-General D. Russell. The New Zealanders wondered at the evidence of the recent fighting. 'For miles the ground was all torn up by shells.' The **Hitler Line** 'looked really wicked.... The boys had never seen anything quite like it, except photos of the Maginot Line away back in the very early days of the war. Even now that those large, cunningly hidden anti-tank guns were tame, the thought of advancing into their muzzles made you feel sick inside.' <sup>2</sup>

C Squadron's tanks followed **6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles** of **19 Indian Infantry Brigade** from Route 6 towards the foothills west of **Monte Cairo**, where the lower slopes were so closely cultivated and wooded that the tank crews could not see far ahead and at times lost sight of the infantry. **Castrocielo** was deserted. The civilians had taken refuge in nearby caves. Some of the Indians pushed on beyond the town to take the craggy peak of Madonna Castrocielo. They were fired on by German machine-gunners sheltering behind large boulders, but with the protection of a smokescreen created by the tanks, closed in and killed or drove off the enemy.

A Squadron of **18 Armoured Regiment** joined **1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders** of **19 Brigade** and set off past **Castrocielo** towards **Roccasecca**, a small town near the Melfa River. During the advance one of A Squadron's tanks fell into a 20-foot well which had been roofed over and covered with earth. <sup>3</sup> Another

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<sup>1</sup> **Brig H. A. Robinson**, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; **Waipukurau**; born **New Plymouth**, 29 Sep 1912; farmhand; Div Cav 1939–44; CO **18 Armd Regt** Mar–Jul 1944; **20 Armd Regt** Mar–Oct 1945; twice wounded.

<sup>2</sup> **W. D. Dawson**, *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 462.

<sup>3</sup> It was hauled out by 4 Brigade's Heavy Recovery Section.

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tank, upon turning a corner of a narrow lane, came face-to-face with a German turretless recovery or maintenance tank, and captured two of its crew. Next morning (26 May) the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders entered **Roccasecca** unopposed. The last of the Germans were cleared from the **Liri valley** east of the **Melfa River**.

(iii)

Meanwhile, on 23 May, **6 Corps** (commanded now by Major-General Lucian Truscott) had opened the attack to break out from the **Anzio** beachhead, and next day **2 US Corps** had occupied the coastal town of **Terracina**. Kesselring had brought the last of his mobile divisions, **29 Panzer Grenadier**, from the **Civitavecchia** area to prevent a breakout from the southern flank of the beachhead and to halt the American drive towards **Terracina**, but it had not arrived in time to accomplish either task.

If **Fifth Army** could succeed in blocking *Tenth Army's* line of retreat by cutting Route 6 at **Valmontone**, there was a chance that a rapid advance up the **Sacco valley** by **Eighth Army** might achieve the encirclement of **14 Panzer Corps**. In the afternoon of 25 May, however, General Clark on his own volition swung the main axis of **6 Corps'** advance to the north-west, away from **Valmontone** to the **Alban Hills**, with the result that the town was not captured until 1 June. This decision and **Eighth Army's** slow progress sacrificed what may have been an opportunity to cut off and destroy part of *Tenth Army*.

General Clark himself says, 'I was determined that the Fifth Army was going to capture **Rome** and I probably was overly sensitive to indications that practically everybody else was trying to get into the

act.’<sup>1</sup> Alexander, however, intended that the Americans should enter **Rome** and that the British and their other allies should bypass it. ‘I had always assured General Clark in conversation that **Rome** would be entered by his army; and I can only assume that the immediate lure of **Rome** for its publicity value persuaded him to switch the direction of his advance.’<sup>2</sup>

Displaying greater defensive capabilities than the Americans had anticipated, the Germans delayed **6 Corps'** advance in the vicinity of the **Alban Hills**. ‘The greatest irony was that if the VI Corps main effort had continued on the **Valmontone** axis... Clark could undoubtedly have reached **Rome** more quickly than he was able to do by the route northwest from Cisterna....

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<sup>1</sup> Mark W. Clark, *Calculated Risk*, p. 357.

<sup>2</sup> *Field Marshal Alexander's Memoirs*, p. 127.

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Ironically, too, when the **Fifth Army** finally broke through the last of *Fourteenth Army's* defences, it accomplished this by a surprise night infiltration along the eastern side of the **Alban Hills** between the hills and **Valmontone**....

‘For at least three days German strength in front of **Valmontone** and westward to the **Alban Hills** was inadequate to have stopped a strong attack by even a secondary effort; even in subsequent days German strength was not sufficient to have halted the main effort of the VI Corps had it been directed in that direction. For more than a week before the capture of **Rome**, the rear and right (west) flank of the German *Tenth Army*, withdrawing slowly toward the **Caesar Line**, were exposed and threatened with a trap which the German commanders feared would be closed, but which was not.’<sup>1</sup>

This argument, however, overlooks the fact that Route 6 was not *Tenth Army's* only way of escape. As **General von Senger und Etterlin**

says, 'it must not be concluded that Alexander's plan to use strong forces from the [ **Anzio**] bridgehead for an attack towards **Valmontone** would have met with success.' <sup>2</sup> **Von Senger's 14 Panzer Corps** fell back along a road which left Route 6 at **Frosinone**—which **Eighth Army** had not yet reached—and passed through the foothills of the **Simbruini Mountains** towards **Subiaco**. Along this road, well to the north of **Valmontone**, 'seven divisions were pulled back in five days and nights. This was achieved despite the fact that the road was practically unusable in daylight because of the enemy's air superiority.... **XIV Panzer Corps** could only have been annihilated if the enemy had then also succeeded in pinning it down at **Frosinone** or alternatively if he had pushed forward beyond **Valmontone** towards **Subiaco**, which would have involved him in major difficulties of terrain.' <sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, on the eve of the British and American cross- Channel invasion of **France**, the Allied armies were fulfilling their professed aim in tying down in **Italy** German troops who otherwise might have been diverted to western **Europe**. The German High Command had consented on 22 May to the transfer of the *Hermann Goering Panzer Division* (which had been earmarked for **France**) from **Leghorn** to the **Rome** area, and to its replacement at **Leghorn** by *20 Luftwaffe Field Division* from **Denmark**. The *Hermann Goering Division*, travelling in daylight and losing heavily from Allied air attacks as it went, did not go into action until

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney T. Mathers, 'General Clark's Decision to Drive on **Rome**', in *Command Decisions*, pp. 362–3.

<sup>2</sup> *Neither Fear Nor Hope*, p. 252.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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the 27th, and its units, like those of the other divisions drawn into the battle, were committed piecemeal in small counter-attacks.



# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## VI: THE FALL OF ROME

### *VI: The Fall of Rome*

(i)

Despite instructions from the **German High Command** that ‘if at all possible, no withdrawal is to be made without the personal concurrence of the Fuhrer’, <sup>1</sup> it was obvious by nightfall on 25 May that a retreat could not be postponed much longer. Plans were made, therefore, for the northern wing of **Fourteenth Army** to hold firm between Velletri (near the **Alban Hills**) and the sea while its left wing fell back with the right wing of **Tenth Army** as slowly and economically as possible to the **Caesar Line**, which Hitler ordered Kesselring to defend at all costs.

The German forces were to retire to a series of lines of defence and inflict ‘such heavy casualties on the enemy that his fighting potentiality will be broken even before the Caesar line is reached’. <sup>2</sup> In **Tenth Army's** zone the first of these lines was near **Ceprano**, where the main **Liri valley** forked into the valley of the upper **Liri**, through which Route 82 led northward to **Sora** and **Avezzano**, and the valley of the Sacco, through which Route 6 led north-westward towards **Rome**. The right wing of **Tenth Army** could use both avenues of escape. On the northern side of the main **Liri valley** Route 6 entered the narrow Providero defile before joining Route 82 at **Arce**, and then turned sharply to the south before crossing the upper Liri River by a bridge at **Ceprano**. Direct access from the **Liri valley** to the **Sacco valley** was blocked by the upper Liri River and by the Isoletta Reservoir, formed by a dam below the confluence of the **Liri** and Sacco rivers. On one route, therefore, **Eighth Army** would have to force its way through a defile; on the other it would have to cross a difficult water obstacle.

In the first of the three stages of **Eighth Army's** advance, 13 Corps on the right and the Canadian Corps on the left were to secure the **Arce-**

**Ceprano** line at the head of the **Liri valley**; in the second the Canadians were to advance some 10 miles along secondary roads south of Route 6, and in the third along Route 6 to link up with **Fifth Army** at **Valmontone**. In the second and third stages, depending on the strength of the resistance, 13 Corps was to be ready to advance either along Route 6 or on a more northerly

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix to *Tenth Army* war diary.

<sup>2</sup> Extract from Kesselring's instructions to his army commanders, in an appendix to *Fourteenth Army* war diary.

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route on either side of the **Simbruini Mountains**. Tenth Corps was given the task of protecting **Eighth Army's** right flank by sealing off the approaches from the east. The Polish Corps, which would be pinched out at **Monte Cairo** between 10 and 13 Corps, was to be withdrawn because of its heavy casualties and lack of reinforcements. The **French Expeditionary Corps** of **Fifth Army** was advancing on **Eighth Army's** left flank.

It had been decided that the honour of taking **Rome** should go to **Fifth Army**. **Eighth Army's** task was to break through the Caesar Line in the **Valmontone- Subiaco** sector (between the **Alban Hills** and the **Simbruini Mountains**) and then exploit northwards along the roads east of **Rome**.

(ii)

The 5th Canadian Armoured Division made slow progress on 26 May from the Melfa River towards the **Liri** above the Isoletta Reservoir. The country was rough and thickly wooded; the enemy had left numerous mines and booby traps, and his shell and mortar fire and snipers were troublesome. The bridges over the **Liri** had been destroyed, but next day the division established a bridgehead above the reservoir and occupied **Ceprano**, which patrols had found free of the enemy. Meanwhile a force

from 1 Canadian Infantry Division, advancing virtually unmolested on the left flank, where the French already had driven off the enemy, sent a patrol across the **Liri** below the reservoir and also across the Sacco.

Thirteenth Corps' advance along Route 6 from the **Melfa** was checked by the German defence of the Providero defile. General Kirkman decided to take advantage of the Canadians' success by passing 78 Division over the **Liri** near **Ceprano** and thus bypass the blocked route. The Canadian engineers' bridge, however, collapsed into the river early in the morning of 28 May and was not ready for traffic until the following evening. This allowed the Germans an extra day in which to make an unhurried and orderly retreat. Thirteenth Corps was given priority in the use of the bridge when it was completed. Meanwhile the Canadians had bridged the **Liri** below the reservoir and also spanned the Sacco, which opened up a detour around the corps' left flank. They despatched a strong force along this route.

In the advance beyond the Liri River 5 Canadian Armoured Division had to contend with thickly wooded ridges, gullies, streams, minefields and shellfire, and also fought a sharp action with German tanks. The Canadian infantry division took over the pursuit on 31 May and closed in on **Frosinone**, the town which commanded the junction of Route 6 and the alternative escape route to the north through **Alatri** and **Subiaco**.

(iii)

After crossing the Melfa River, 6 Armoured Division of 13 Corps drove up Route 6 on 26 May until halted at the Providero defile, about two miles from **Arce**. Troops of *1 Parachute Division*, who occupied the steep and wooded hills on each side of the highway, thwarted for two days the British attempts to burst through to **Arce**. To outflank this rearguard Kirkman ordered **8 Indian Division** into the hills north of the defile, and at the same time directed 78 Division across country to **Ceprano** where (as has been mentioned) the Canadians were bridging the

## **Liri.**

The 8th Indian Division, with 18 NZ Armoured Regiment still under command, had not yet crossed the Melfa River. In the morning of the 26th a column consisting of a squadron of 6 Lancers' armoured cars, a troop of B Squadron's tanks, and a company of infantry was sent up the narrow gorge through which the Melfa flowed into the Liri valley. The column overcame a German rearguard, but could not prevent the enemy from blowing the bridge half-way through the gorge (Ponte la Valle), so therefore returned to Roccasecca.

A ford below the gorge was negotiable to all types of vehicles, and a bridge built by the Germans farther downstream was still intact, but as these were considered inadequate, 8 Indian Division constructed a Bailey bridge near the ford. When this was ready, 17 Indian Infantry Brigade, with a squadron of 18 Armoured Regiment in support of each of its three battalions, was to cross the Melfa and advance over the hills north of Route 6 towards Arce. This country, although marked on the map as 'impassable to tracked vehicles'.<sup>1</sup> did not deter the New Zealand tank crews, who 'were prepared to go anywhere and undertake any task. They took their tanks to seemingly impossible places, up steep mountain sides strewn with boulders and down again.'<sup>2</sup>

B Squadron (in support of 1 Royal Fusiliers) and A Squadron (supporting 1/12 Frontier Force Regiment) crossed the Melfa in the afternoon of 27 May and advanced up a shallow valley between two steep ridges. While the infantry clambered up to the higher ground, the tanks moved in single file along rocky farm tracks on the lower slopes. The Fusiliers met only scattered resistance and in the late afternoon reached their objective, Monte Orio,

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 469.

<sup>2</sup> Dharm Pal, *Official History of the Indian Forces in the Second World War, The Campaign in Italy 1943–45*, p. 197.

overlooking Route 6 about two miles from the river. The Frontiersmen, advancing without opposition from hill to hill on the northern side of the valley, were on their objective, Monte Clavello, in the evening, by which time **1/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles** and C Squadron had crossed the **Melfa** and begun their attack on **Frajoli**, a little village on a saddle between **Orio** and Clavello.

When two companies of **Gurkhas** and a troop of tanks closed in on **Frajoli** in the failing light, the Germans brought down machine-gun and mortar fire from the village and the nearby hillsides. The tanks replied with their 75-millimetre guns and Brownings; the artillery fired in support, and part of B Squadron crossed a ravine to lend a hand. By 9.30 p.m. all resistance in and around **Frajoli** had ceased. Some Germans were dead and over 40 were prisoners. The New Zealand casualties were slight: an officer wounded and one tank damaged.

Now that **8 Indian Division** had secured the hills on the northern side of the Providero defile, 6 Armoured Division renewed the attack on the southern side, and gained the top of two prominent hills during the night. Fierce fighting continued next day.

On 28 May the Frontiersmen and B Squadron advanced beyond Monte Clavello to **Monte Favone**, the highest peak in the locality. On the far side of **Favone** was the town of **Santo Padre**, from which a road led northwards through Arpino to **Sora**, on Route 82 in the upper **Liri valley**. The leading tanks skirted around **Favone** until they were looking across a ravine at **Santo Padre**. 'The town was swarming with Germans, evidently hurrying to evacuate the place, for trucks and cars were pulling out as fast as they could along a road that wound away to the north. Our infantry was nowhere in sight, but down from **Favone** towards **Santo Padre** streamed figures in khaki, unrecognisable at that distance.' <sup>1</sup> Not knowing that these were Germans, the New Zealanders left them alone and concentrated on the transport which came into view at a road bend a mile away. Several vehicles were knocked out, but the rest vanished down the road.

On **Monte Favone** the Frontiersmen were halted by German paratroops who had dug a series of slit trenches on almost inaccessible ledges. Some of B Squadron's tanks made 'superhuman efforts'<sup>2</sup> to get three-quarters of the way up the steep, rocky hillside, where they fired 75-millimetre shells which burst in the trees above the Germans. This drove the surviving enemy over the top of **Favone**. Next morning (the 29th) only a few dead Germans, two light anti-

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 474.

<sup>2</sup> Dharm Pal, p. 196.

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aircraft guns and unopened cases of mines and anti-tank grenades remained.

About the same time as he abandoned **Santo Padre** the enemy surrendered the junction of Routes 6 and 82 at **Arce**. Under the cover of darkness *1 Parachute Division*, having fulfilled its role, disengaged on 13 Corps' front. The Gurkhas entered **Arce** before midday, close behind troops of 6 Armoured Division.

While B Squadron and the Frontiersmen were driving the Germans from **Monte Favone** and **Santo Padre** on 28 May, A Squadron, in support of 1/5 Mahratta Light Infantry of 21 Brigade, was 'inching its way forward over incredible country farther west, occupying the almost vertical rampart of **Monte Nero**',<sup>1</sup> above **Arce**, and pushing on to the next peaks. A and C Squadrons (the latter in support of 3/15 Punjab Regiment, also of 21 Brigade) waited next day on the hills above the town of **Fontana Liri**, from which a road led to the Liri River, while a way down was reconnoitred on foot and by an Auster artillery observation plane, and a bulldozer cut a track. B Squadron, meanwhile, went back from **Favone** to link up with **19 Brigade**, with which it advanced along Route 6 to the **Liri**.

(iv)

Thirteenth Corps' plan for continuing the pursuit beyond the **Liri** was for 78 Division to advance parallel with the Canadians from **Ceprano** to **Frosinone** (which it reached on 31 May) and for 8 Indian Division to take a more northerly route through Monte **San Giovanni**, **Veroli** and **Alatri**.

On 30 May C Squadron, **18 Armoured Regiment**, passed through **Fontana Liri** on the way down to the river at **Fontana Liri Inferiore**,<sup>2</sup> about a mile distant, and waited near a demolished hydro-electric station while 3/15 Punjabs of 21 Brigade covered the building of a bridge. A Squadron went about two miles upstream with the Mahrattas, but eventually crossed next day at **Fontana Liri Inferiore**. B Squadron waited about two miles downstream from **Fontana Liri Inferiore** while the engineers, hampered by shellfire, constructed a Bailey bridge which was ready for traffic that night. B Squadron's tanks, in support of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of **19 Brigade**, were the first to get to the other side. They set off uphill in single file on a narrow road, and about 3 a.m. on 31 May reached the little hilltop town of **Colli**, where they waited for daylight.

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 475.

<sup>2</sup> The lower village.

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From **Colli** the road continued northwards between the Liri River and the town of Monte **San Giovanni**, on top of a sugar-loaf peak, and curved to the north-west around the far side of a large hill, **Colle Lucinetta**. Some armoured cars of **6 Lancers** and a troop from B Squadron, while scouting along this route, encountered a rearguard from **1 Parachute Division** at a road junction. A Sherman tank silenced an anti-tank gun, but another New Zealand tank and an armoured car were knocked out. The column was without infantry support and had no prospect of

dislodging the enemy, so it withdrew. Meanwhile the rest of B Squadron accompanied the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders across country to clear Colle Lucinetta and Monte **San Giovanni**. Its tanks fired at scattered parties of escaping Germans.

After crossing the **Liri** C Squadron advanced with 3/8 Punjab of **19 Brigade** towards the road junction where the German rearguard had turned back the scouting column. The Indians jumped down from the tanks on which they had been riding and approached on foot, but were stopped by machine-gun and mortar fire, and took cover. So heavy and persistent was the subsequent fighting that the tanks' Browning barrels 'were red-hot and their rifling worn away before the day was over.'<sup>1</sup> One Sherman was hit, probably by a bazooka, and set on fire; a member of its crew was killed and the rest wounded.

Traffic, obviously the main body of the enemy, was seen speeding away along a road to the west. Early next morning the rearguard, having delayed the pursuers as long as was necessary, had gone from the road junction; it left behind two anti-tank guns, several spandaus, quantities of ammunition and stores, seven stragglers and about 40 dead.

On 1 June a troop of B Squadron accompanied a squadron of the Lancers on a reconnaissance to **Veroli**, on a hill several miles to the west. The **6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles**, with A Squadron in support, drove from Monte **San Giovanni** through a valley of prosperous farms and orchards. The countryside looked peaceful and free of the enemy, and the Italians who lined the road waved home-made Union Jacks, threw flowers and embraced the liberators.

At **Veroli** a German rearguard waited with machine guns, mortars and light anti-tank guns. When the reconnaissance column drew near, the enemy caught it in the open and quickly knocked out three Humber scout cars. B Squadron's tanks engaged **Veroli** and the nearby hillsides, and called for an artillery stonk, which silenced much of the hostile fire. The Frontier Force Riflemen, approaching by a different route, began climbing the steep slopes below the

village, but were brought to a halt by an intense concentration of machine-gun and mortar fire; the artillery, heavy mortars and A Squadron's tanks covered their withdrawal. The enemy vanished during the night, and the Indians and New Zealanders entered **Veroli** next morning to receive a heroes' welcome.

(v)

By this time 2 NZ Division, having crossed the Melfa River near **Atina**, had cut the **Sora** escape route in the upper **Liri valley** on the eastern side of the **Simbruini Mountains**, and the only way to the north still open to the enemy between 10 and 13 Corps was the **Veroli-Alatri-Subiaco** route, on the western side of these mountains.

From **Veroli** 17 Indian Brigade continued the advance towards **Alatri** on 2 June. The Royal Fusiliers and B Squadron of 18 Regiment took most of the morning to get clear of **Veroli's** narrow streets, which were blocked in places by debris. They then descended a steep, winding road littered with German vehicles knocked out by the **RAF** and the artillery. In the valley ahead was the transport of 78 Division, which had come up from the south and was attacking **Alatri**, on top of another conical hill and at times blotted from view by the dust and smoke of shellfire, bombing and strafing.

The Royal Fusiliers and B Squadron left the road and took to the fields on 78 Division's right. B Squadron ran into country 'worse even than the hills east of the **Liri**. The tanks struggled across a succession of ridges, with steep rises and sharp drops to stream beds, and on every slope vines, vines and more vines. How the crews cursed those endless fields of vines! They seemed to take an age to push through, the Shermans pitching like destroyers in and out of the ditches that paralleled every row, men sitting in front with heavy wire-cutters to hack a passage....' <sup>1</sup> The tanks fired a few rounds at German transport

retreating farther up the road, but it was impossible to see in the haze whether any hits were scored. By nightfall 78 Division had occupied **Alatri**.

B Squadron was still ostensibly in support of the Royal Fusiliers on 3 June, but the going was so difficult that the tanks lost contact with the infantry. The squadron formed a close laager for the night and was on the move again before daylight on the 4th. Its tanks gave covering fire for a patrol of **6 Lancers** reconnoitring towards the next village along the road, **Guarcino**, which 17 Brigade entered the following day.

This was 18 Regiment's last action in the battle for **Rome**. B Squadron rejoined the rest of the regiment, which was replaced

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 486.

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under **8 Indian Division**'s command on 4 June by 12 Canadian Armoured Regiment. When the New Zealanders left **Veroli** on their way south next day, Major-General Russell stood at the roadside to thank them. He wrote to **General Freyberg**: 'I wish you to know how glad I was to have your 18 NZ Armd Regt under my command. They fought well and nothing was too difficult for them to tackle. In fact they got across a large stretch of country which the going map said was impassable to tracks....'

(vi)

While 13 Corps was pursuing the enemy through the hills north-east of Route 6, the Canadian Corps pushed along the highway until halted on 3 June at Anagni, about 30 miles from **Rome**, to allow the **French Expeditionary Corps** to pass through on Fifth Army's right flank. The Canadians then went into reserve and **Eighth Army** regrouped so as to place 6 British Armoured Division and 6 South African Armoured Division, under 13 Corps, in the van of the pursuit to the north.

By this time the battle for **Rome** was drawing to a close on **Fifth Army's** front. The 2nd US Corps, attacking on the eastern side of the **Alban Hills**, had cut Route 6 at **Valmontone** by nightfall on 1 June and closed the northern entrance to the **Sacco valley** next day; it then wheeled to the left and headed towards **Rome**, thus threatening to turn the flank of the German *Fourteenth Army*, which already was being hard pressed by **6 Corps**. *Fourteenth Army* abandoned the **Caesar Line** and pulled out of the **Alban Hills**, leaving Route 7 an open road to **Rome**. *Tenth Army* withdrew to the north of Route 6. General Clark's **Fifth Army** columns converged on **Rome**, where they received a wildly enthusiastic reception on 4 June. Two days later Allied forces under General Eisenhower assaulted the **Normandy** beaches to begin the liberation of north-west **Europe**. The Italian campaign now was of only secondary importance in the global war.

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## CHAPTER 2 – THE ROAD TO AVEZZANO

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## I: THE DIVISION BEGINS TO ADVANCE

### *I: The Division Begins to Advance*

(i)

**WHEN** the last battle for **Cassino** ended on 18 May with the Poles entering the ruins of the monastery and the British 13 Corps occupying the wrecked town, the Germans still held the slopes of **Monte Cairo**, which overlooked the **Liri valley**, and the heights farther north which commanded **10 Corps'** front, on which **2 New Zealand Division** held the sector nearest to the Poles.

After occupying **Montecassino** the **Polish Corps** was ordered to secure 13 Corps' right flank in the **Liri valley** by capturing **Piedimonte San Germano** and the high ground at **Passo Corno**, on the southern slopes of **Monte Cairo**. **Piedimonte** was defended by about 250 Germans, most of them from *1 Parachute Division*, and although a Polish battle group managed to enter its outskirts on 20 May, the town was not finally clear until the 25th. The Poles, supported by New Zealand artillery and mortar fire, captured the crest of **Passo Corno** on 21 May, but made little progress beyond that point until the Germans withdrew from **Monte Cairo**.

Meanwhile the New Zealand Division watched its front for signs that the enemy was preparing to withdraw, and discussed the action it was to take when he did. Plans were mooted, amended, cancelled and revived before it was finally decided that the Division should advance towards **Atina** with its 5 and 6 Infantry Brigades. Both 2 Independent Parachute Brigade and 12 South African Motor Brigade, which occupied the northern and central portion of the Division's sector, were wanted for tasks elsewhere and would have to be replaced.

**Fifth Brigade**, which had begun to relieve 6 Brigade in the Belvedere-

**Terelle** sector on the night of 16–17 May, completed the changeover two nights later, not without incident. About 1 a.m. on the 18th, while 23 Battalion was moving into the line partly on **Colle Abate** and astride the road to **Terelle**, a German patrol attacked the left-hand company (A Company) of 26 Battalion, which had not yet vacated the position, but was driven off with the loss of three men killed and three taken prisoner, at the cost of one New Zealander killed. Next night 23 Battalion staged a 'demonstration' by firing its weapons to see if the enemy was still there, and received retaliatory mortar fire which killed one man and wounded seven others. Brigadier Stewart warned his battalion commanders on the 19th that they were to be prepared for an immediate advance but were to avoid heavy engagements and casualties.

On the night of 20–21 May and the two following nights, 12 South African Motor Brigade was replaced by the composite Pleasants Force.<sup>1</sup> The portion of 2 Independent Parachute Brigade's sector east of the road leading from the **Volturno** valley to San Biagio was relinquished to the command of the Italian Corps of liberation<sup>2</sup> on the night of 21–22 May, when the Italians relieved the parachute battalion in that position. The parachute brigade, having already withdrawn another of its battalions, now held its reduced front with only one unit (5 Battalion), and the road became the boundary between 2 NZ Division and the Italian corps. Sixth New Zealand Infantry Brigade assumed command of the parachute brigade's sector on the morning of the 27th. By that time the Division had begun to advance.

**(ii)**

When the New Zealand Division moved into the **Apennines** from **Cassino** in April, the German *44 Infantry Division* (under *14 Panzer Corps*) held the sector from **Terelle** to **Monte Cifalco**, astride the defile through which the road led from the **Rapido valley** to Belmonte **Castello** and **Atina**; in the line to the north was *51 Mountain Corps*. Shortly before the Allied offensive began on 11 May, the enemy reorganised his front: the boundary between *14 Panzer Corps* and *51 Mountain Corps*

was moved into the **Liri valley**, and **51 Corps** then held its front from south to north with **44 Division**, **1 Parachute Division**, **5 Mountain Division** and **114 Light Division**. **Headquarters 44 Division** took over the forces just south of

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<sup>1</sup> Commanded by Lt-Col C. L. Pleasants, this group included **Wilder Force** (Div Cav dismounted from its armoured cars, with the Italian **Bafile Bn**— ‘more exotic than martial’—under command), **22 (Mot) Bn**, **24 Bn**, **31 A-Tk Bty**, **2 MG Coy**. A battalion from **Eighth Army** reserve (1/5 Essex), placed under **2 NZ Div**'s command, later relieved **24 Bn**, which returned to **6 Bde**.

<sup>2</sup> A few days earlier the Italian Motor Group had been reinforced and given the title of the *Corpo Italiano di Liberazione*.

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**Cassino**, while **1 Parachute Division**, in and around **Cassino**, and **5 Mountain Division** extended towards each other to meet on a boundary about half-way between **Terelle** and **Belmonte Castello**. Still opposite the New Zealanders in the **Terelle** sector, therefore, was **132 Grenadier Regiment** (of **44 Division**) under the command of **1 Parachute Division**, and in the **Belmonte** sector **134 Grenadier Regiment** (also of **44 Division**) under the command of **5 Mountain Division**. The **Monte Cifalco** area was held by **100 Mountain Regiment** of **5 Mountain Division**, and the line from **Monte Cifalco** to beyond **San Biagio** by **85 Mountain Regiment** of the same division. North of the road which passed through **San Biagio** was **114 Light Division**.

On 10 May General Valentin Feurstein, commanding **51 Corps**, gave his opinion to the commander of **Tenth Army** (General von Vietinghoff) that the troops under **44 Division** were not strong enough to hold the **Liri valley** sector ‘against such great enemy superiority’ and that ‘it would be better to evacuate **Cassino** and **Montecassino** and retire to the Senger support line [the **Hitler Line**] before the troops of the division were smashed....’ <sup>1</sup> But Feurstein's superiors did not share this view;

**Cassino** and the present line were to be held as long as possible. Nevertheless **Eighth Army's** attack had been in progress only three days when, on 14 May, the commander of *44 Division* (Lieutenant-General Bruno Ortner) insisted that either his division was reinforced or it would have to fall back on the **Hitler Line**. Reinforcements were provided by transferring troops from *51 Corps'* northern flank. The *90th Panzer Grenadier Division* took over the sector in the **Liri valley** on 15 and 16 May, and *44 Division* went back to a position north of **Terelle**, where it resumed command of *132* and *134 Regiments* in the sector between *1 Parachute Division* and *5 Mountain Division*. By the time this reorganisation was completed, on 22 May, **Cassino** had been evacuated, and the southern flank of *51 Corps*, pivoting on Monte **Cairo**, had fallen back to the **Hitler Line**.

The demands on *5 Mountain Division* for troops to reinforce the formations bearing the brunt of the battle in the south brought the complaint from its commander (Major-General M. Schrank) that he could no longer guarantee to hold his sector under attack. Nevertheless a battalion of *100 Mountain Regiment* was called for on 23 May and had to be pulled out from the **Monte Cifalco** area 'in full view of the enemy'<sup>2</sup> in daylight, and its positions left in the charge of small standing patrols.

In a withdrawal planned for the night of 24–25 May, following

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *51 Mtn Corps*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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the breaking of the **Hitler Line**, *51 Corps* was to conform with the forces falling back on its right by taking up a line running from the confluence of the **Melfa** and **Liri** rivers across the hills north of **Monte Cairo** to the vicinity of **Monte Cifalco**. An order from *Tenth Army* to hold the **Melfa** line 'at all costs for several days'<sup>1</sup> did not reach the corps until midday on 25 May, by which time **Eighth Army** already had crossed

the Melfa River in the **Liri** valley. The British were expected to attack in force next day. 'It was certain that the troops of 90 Pz Gren Div would not be able to stand up to such an attack, as they were dog weary physically and mentally, and their units were split up into makeshift groups.... it was clear that only a withdrawal would save a collapse in this sector.' <sup>2</sup>

The divisions of *51 Corps* were told that the line behind the **Melfa** was to be held on orders from *Tenth Army*. The *1st Parachute Division* was to withdraw its troops to strengthen the **Melfa** front, and *44 Division* was to take over the sector extending eastwards across the northern slopes of **Monte Cairo** to the vicinity of **Terelle**. This line was to be held until further orders—but *44 Division*, *5 Mountain Division* and *114 Light Division* were to prepare to withdraw. Later *44 Division* was told to re-man battle outposts on the **Monte Cifalco** line which it was evacuating.

Shortly before midnight on 25 May *51 Corps* ordered the immediate withdrawal of *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* to a line behind the **Liri** north of **Ceprano** (where it would come under the command of *14 Panzer Corps*), and of *1 Parachute Division* and *44 Division* to a line running eastwards from the **Liri** over the hills to a point of contact with *5 Mountain Division* west of the **Belmonte-Atina** road. Less than four hours later *51 Corps* received orders from *Tenth Army* to retire to a line behind the Melfa River, to which *44 Division* and *5 Mountain Division* were to go as quickly as possible. The Germans covered their retreat by battle outposts left out in front of the new line.

(iii)

Before the enemy began to withdraw, nightly patrol activity on one part or another of the New Zealand Division's front and shell, mortar and machine-gun fire had shown that he was still there, if not in any strength. On the evening of the 23rd, however, the shelling of ground he had previously occupied suggested that he might be preparing to go. That night listening posts heard

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *51 Mtn Corps*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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the noise of much movement, especially in the **Monte Cairo** area. The Poles reported that **Terelle** was clear—they had made similar reports a few days earlier—but their patrols encountered German working parties on the northern side of **Passo Corno** and did not reach **Terelle**. The general impression on the Division's front on the morning of 24 May was that, although the enemy might be preparing to go, he was still present in sufficient numbers to make an advance difficult.

Towards evening the Division came under heavy shellfire, which caused some casualties. The artillery observers were not sure whether the enemy was firing to register his guns in fresh positions or whether he was using up ammunition before he pulled them out from their old sites. In any case it was felt that he intended to cover the withdrawal of at least some of his forward posts, especially as the village of **Valleluce**, which he had held just south of Monte Cifalco, received many of the shells.

Fifth Brigade was directed to follow up any withdrawal but not to make a set assault on German positions. Before the brigade could advance it had to have access to the tracks between its front line and **Terelle**, and **Terelle** itself would have to be clear of the enemy. Brigadier Stewart instructed 23 Battalion (Lieutenant- Colonel **McPhail** <sup>1</sup>) to make a noisy demonstration with all available weapons and, if the enemy did not react, to send out patrols at once to reconnoitre. The demonstration drew little reaction, but the patrols came under machine-gun fire.

The enemy, after firing only intermittently during the night, began to shell the New Zealand positions heavily at dawn on 25 May. Observation posts reported hearing or seeing demolitions in locations which suggested that he already had taken his heavy weapons back or

was abandoning them. Once again the Poles claimed that **Terelle** had been vacated, and by evening they had a patrol of platoon strength on the summit of **Monte Cairo**.

Shortly after midday two of the tanks with 5 Brigade, manned by crews from the Divisional Protective Troop, advanced along the road towards **Terelle**. They had reached a point about a mile from the village when two anti-tank guns opened fire and knocked out the leading tank. The crew bailed out and retired to the second tank, which had halted in cover. Patrols from 23 Battalion were then told not to try to advance until nightfall, but when it was noticed that the enemy was shelling some buildings south of the road, which he had previously held, the battalion was granted

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col E. A. McPhail**, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d.; born **Wanganui**, 31 Dec 1906; bank official; CO 23 Bn May–Jun 1944, Aug–Oct 1944; 21 Bn Oct 1944–May 1945; wounded 9 Apr 1943; died **Ashburton**, 27 Jan 1967.

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permission to investigate. A patrol from B Company, covered by the surviving tank, approached slowly and carefully over very exposed ground. The tank opened fire with its 75-millimetre gun and machine gun on the nearest building, and some men, thought to be Germans, made off hurriedly, but the patrol found no other sign of enemy occupation.

Stewart ordered 23 Battalion to send out more patrols and to be prepared to reinforce them if they met no opposition. At 8.40 p.m. the battalion asked that no artillery fire be laid on its front because its companies were following up its patrols. Soon the battalion reported that it was on the ridge across the road where the original German forward posts had been, without having met opposition, and was sending a patrol north-eastwards along the ridge to make contact on **Colle Abate** with 28 (Maori) Battalion. This patrol was held up by minefields, but the remainder of 23 Battalion, after some hard climbing over the rocky

slopes, took up positions on a line covering the road. About a dozen casualties were sustained on mines or booby traps and from shellfire. 'The bright flash with which one large mine exploded brought enemy shellfire down on the area. Had it not been for the fact that many shells were duds, casualties would have been heavy.' <sup>1</sup>

Fifth Brigade warned 21 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel **McElroy** <sup>2</sup>) to be ready to pass through 23 Battalion with **Terelle** as its objective if the 23rd had encountered no opposition by 11 p.m. About that time mortar shells began to fall across the **Terelle** road, so the battalion was told to wait until counter-mortar tasks could be fired on **Monte Cifalco**, from which the mortaring appeared to come. The mortaring continued intermittently, but as no small-arms fire was reported, Stewart released 21 Battalion shortly after midnight. The leading troops entered **Terelle** before dawn without meeting any Germans, except three who were surprised in a house and surrendered, and others who were rounded up by patrols searching near the village. Altogether about 15 prisoners, mostly of *132 Grenadier Regiment*, were taken. After daybreak guns of heavy calibre began to shell the New Zealand sector, especially the road into **Terelle** and the village itself. Five men were wounded in 21 Battalion before this fire slackened off when the New Zealand artillery bombarded known gun positions between **Belmonte** and **Atina**.

While 5 Brigade was patrolling to **Terelle**, Pleasants Force also sent out patrols, one of which, from 1/5 Essex Regiment <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Angus Ross, *23 Battalion*, p. 350.

<sup>2</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>3</sup> Redesignated 5 Essex in May 1943, but referred to in most records as 1/5 Essex.

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(which had relieved 24 Battalion the previous night), located the enemy on a ridge south of the precipitous **Monte Cifalco**, probably part of the protective screen for the mortars operating there. Another Essex patrol ran into the counter-mortar fire which was being directed on these mortar positions. A patrol from 22 Battalion entered **Valleluce** and found that both the enemy and civilians had gone. While reconnoitring beyond the village the patrol became entangled in mines and booby traps; three men were wounded, and when others went to their assistance, two were killed and two more wounded. The officer who led the patrol died of his wounds two days later.

*(iv)*

Fifth Brigade was instructed on the morning of 26 May to push through to **Belmonte Castello** and **Atina**, provided this could be done 'without getting into too much trouble.'<sup>1</sup> After Brigadier Stewart had examined the situation and the ground, he ordered tanks and carriers to **Terelle**. These vehicles came under heavy shellfire when they appeared on the ridge east of the village. One of the carriers was hit, and one of the tanks, while turning to go back, ran on to a mine on the verge of the narrow track and was lost. The vehicles were then ordered to remain below the ridge until dark, when they were to join 32 Anti-Tank Battery's 'infantry', who were to take over **Terelle** from 21 Battalion.

Both 21 and 23 Battalions were to 'ease forward gradually as opportunity permits'.<sup>2</sup> The 23rd was to use a track leading down a gully north of **Colle Abate** to **Belmonte**, and the 21st a route parallel to the 23rd's but farther west and joining the **Belmonte-Atina** road about midway between those two places. As the tracks were mined, the infantry would be accompanied by sappers from **6 Field Company**.

Sixth Brigade, which was to assume command of 2 Independent Parachute Brigade's sector on the morning of 27 May, was to have the role of covering the Division's right flank and clearing the road though **San Biagio** to **Atina** so that this route could be opened up as a possible

main axis for the Division. The brigade was to dispose of any German rearguards and protect the engineers who were to remove mines and repair demolitions as quickly as possible. B Squadron of **20 Armoured Regiment** was to go under the direct command of 5 Brigade and A Squadron under 6 Brigade. Divisional Cavalry was to revert to divisional command, and its troopers, who

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, HQ 5 Inf Bde.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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had been acting as infantry with Pleasants Force, were to be rejoined by their armoured cars.

**General Freyberg** told Brigadier Stewart, 'Whoever (5 or 6 Brigade) gets to **Atina** first, will go on to **Sora**. The other brigade will follow. Don't get involved, but keep the enemy on the run.'<sup>1</sup> The GOC did not want the Division to get embroiled with a strong German rearguard.

(v)

It was obvious on 26 May that, although his mortars were still firing from **Monte Cifalco** and his large guns from positions back in the mountains, the enemy was on his way out from the New Zealand front. A deserter who came into the **Maori Battalion's** lines at **Colle Belvedere** said his unit (a battalion of *132 Regiment*) had withdrawn two nights earlier and had left his company to demonstrate its presence until the next night, when it also had fallen back. The Maori Battalion came under mortar fire late in the afternoon, which killed two men and wounded two. After counter-mortar fire was directed on the **Monte Cifalco** area, a party of Germans bearing a wounded man on a stretcher and carrying a **Red Cross** flag was seen marching down the **Belmonte** road.

During the night 23 Battalion advanced to some houses beyond **Colle**

**Abate** and down the track to **Belmonte**, which B Company entered without opposition about 6 a.m. on the 27th; 21 Battalion, advancing northward from **Terelle**, secured the high ground beyond **Belmonte**. After exchanging a few shots with a German observation post on **Monte Piano**, A Company of 21 Battalion took four prisoners from *134 Regiment*.

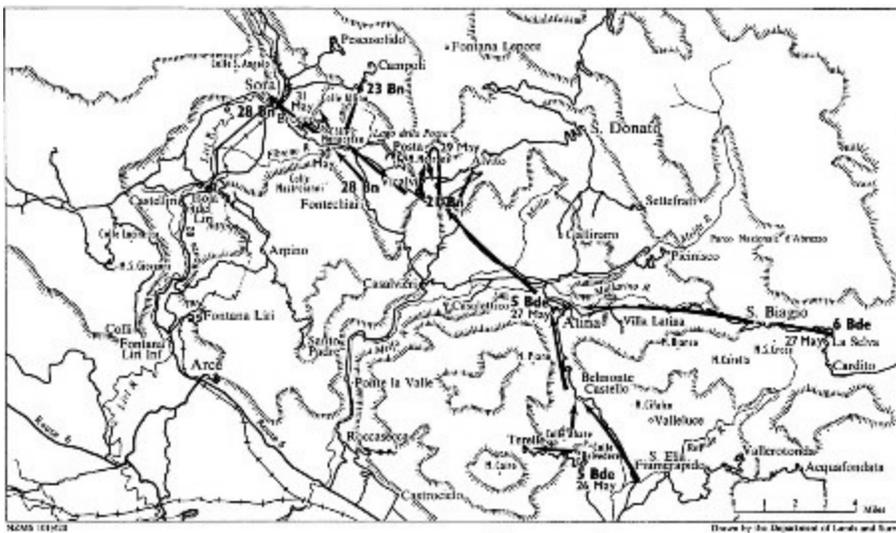
The 23rd Battalion, led by A Company, which took 11 prisoners, continued down the road to **Atina**, the outskirts of which were reached late in the afternoon. The battalion learned from civilians that the enemy had gone back behind the Melfa River, about a mile from the village. Bad demolitions were found on all the roads entering **Atina**, and the bridge over the **Melfa** had been wrecked, but the river was fordable. The 21st Battalion, which had kept pace on the left, also reached the **Melfa**.

Meanwhile Pleasants Force had been advised of the capture of **Belmonte**, and one of its units, the Essex battalion, set out on the task of protecting the engineers under 7 Field Company, including a section with bulldozers, who were to clear the mines, shell damage and demolitions on the road which climbed from the Rapido valley through the defile between **Colle Belvedere** and Monte

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<sup>1</sup> Note by Stewart to **War History Branch**, 1958.

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THE ADVANCE TO SORA, 26-31 MAY 1944  
 THE ADVANCE TO SORA, 26-31 MAY 1944

Cifalco, and then descended beyond **Belmonte** to **Atina**. Patrols of the **Essex** made contact with **23 Battalion** at **Belmonte** early in the afternoon, but a large demolition delayed the engineers short of the village. Next day, however, they opened the road to **Atina**.

Brigadier Stewart ordered the **Maori Battalion** (Lieutenant- Colonel **Young**<sup>1</sup>) in mid-morning on the 27th to move from **Colle Belvedere** to the brigade's concentration area near **Sant' Elia** in the **Rapido valley** and to get ready to advance along the road to **Atina**. The Maoris marched down the **Terelle** track, which no longer offered any terror. Fifth Brigade's support units, which included **32 Anti-Tank Battery** (reverting to its anti-tank role), the detachment of five tanks operated by the **Divisional Protective Troop**, **1 and 3 Companies of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion**, and **2788 Field Squadron of the RAF**, also were ordered to concentrate near **Sant' Elia** in readiness to follow up the infantry. **B Squadron of 20 Armoured Regiment** had arrived during the night; on the way one of its tanks had gone over a bank in the darkness, killing one and injuring two of the crew.

**Sixth Brigade** began its advance from the east towards **Atina** early in the afternoon of the 27th. The **25th Battalion** (Lieutenant- Colonel **MacDuff**<sup>2</sup>) had moved up during the night from the brigade rest area in the **Volturno valley** to the vicinity of **Cardito**, and after **5 Parachute**

Battalion (temporarily under 6 Brigade's command) had patrolled to the road north-east of **Monte San Croce** without seeing the enemy, resumed the advance about 1.30 p.m. No opposition was met, but many demolitions and mines on the road had to be cleared before the tanks of A Squadron, 20 Armoured Regiment, and the support weapons could catch up with the infantry, who reached the outskirts of shell-battered **San Biagio** late in the afternoon. A patrol found the village unoccupied. Some of the demolitions were so bad that it seemed unlikely that the tanks and other vehicles would rejoin the battalion overnight, although sappers of 572 Field Company, **Royal Engineers** (in support of 6 Brigade), proposed to work by moonlight.

In the triangle of hills between the two routes along which 5 and 6 Brigades were advancing, Pleasants Force searched for any Germans who might remain on the Division's front. Patrols from 22 Battalion had seen the enemy on the night of 26–27 May north of **Valleluce** and on **Monte Cifalco**, but after daybreak found only vacated positions, many of them mined and booby-trapped. One

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col R. R. T. Young**, DSO; 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.

<sup>2</sup> **Col J. L. MacDuff**, MC, m.i.d.; born **Wellington**, 11 Dec 1905; barrister and solicitor; CO 27 (MG) Bn Sep 1943–Feb 1944; 25 Bn Mar–Jun 1944; Adv Base, **2 NZEF**, Jun–Jul 1944; Chief Justice of **Fiji**, 1962–63; died **Suva**, 11 Jul 1963.

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patrol pushed to the top of Cifalco, where the enemy had abandoned his defences. The Italian troops in the mountains to the north of the New Zealand Division reached **San Biagio** on the evening of the 27th and occupied Picinisco, a village near the Melfa River north-east of **Atina**, early next day. Farther north the Italians had sharp encounters with German rearguards.



# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## II: THE PURSUIT TO SORA

### *II: The Pursuit to Sora*

(i)

The valley of the **Melfa** 'was bright green, cut by the silver ribbon of the river weaving its way through a carpet of blood-red poppies.' <sup>1</sup> From the far side of the river near **Atina** a road led northward through **San Donato** to join Route 83 at **Opi**, in the upper **Sangro** valley; another led north-westward to join Route 82 at **Sora**, in the upper **Liri valley**. Routes 82 and 83 continued on through the mountains to Alveo del Lago di Fucino, a large oval plain reclaimed from a lake in the nineteenth century. Route 5, which crossed the peninsula from **Rome** to **Pescara**, was joined on the northern edge of the Fucino basin by Route 82 at the town of **Avezzano** and by Route 83 farther east. Other roads led northward again.

After **51 Mountain Corps'** withdrawal on the night of 26–27 May, **1 Parachute Division**, on the southern flank, blocked the junction of Routes 6 and 82 at **Arce**; **44 Division** held a line which extended north-eastwards to the **Atina- Sora** road below **Monte Morrone**, and **5 Mountain Division** continued this line across the **Atina- Opi** road to make contact with **114 Light Division**.

Although **1 Parachute Division** had checked the British advance towards **Arce**, **51 Corps** anticipated a heavy assault on this flank, and as it had few anti-tank weapons and considered the present line unsuitable for prolonged defence, requested **Tenth Army's** permission for a further withdrawal. Army replied by directing the corps to extend **5 Mountain Division** towards the **Sora- Balsorano** valley (part of the upper **Liri valley** through which Route 82 passed on the way to **Avezzano**), so that **44 Division** could release reinforcements for **1 Parachute Division**. The corps therefore ordered **44 Division** to pull out two battalions and send

them to *1 Parachute Division*, which 'would leave a wide gap in 44 Div's FDLs, but that could not be helped.' <sup>2</sup>

In the evening of the 27th *51 Corps* asked *Tenth Army* urgently

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<sup>1</sup> Maj R. T. Familton, quoted in *20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 423.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, *51 Mtn Corps*. FDLs: forward defended localities.

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for anti-tank weapons 'as the enemy tanks... could not be fought off with bayonets', <sup>1</sup> and again requested a withdrawal. Army repeated its order that *5 Mountain Division* should extend farther out to the **Balsorano** valley and directed that 'a large force' of *44 Division* be sent to block Route 82 five kilometres north-west of **Arce**, behind *1 Parachute Division*, against attacks from the north; it also ordered *5 Mountain Division* to hold firm on the **Melfa** line. This division was already behind the river. Although *44 Division* complained that it was unable, with so many troops detached, to hold its 18-kilometre sector in the hills west of the **Melfa**, the two battalions were sent off to their blocking role at **Arce**.

(ii)

Fifth New Zealand Infantry Brigade had received instructions in the afternoon of 27 May that, after the capture of **Atina**, the axis of advance was to be the **Atina- Sora** road. A light force was to lead.

The first of the brigade's troops crossed the Melfa River during the night. Patrols from C Company, 21 Battalion, reconnoitring north of **Atina**, discovered an easy crossing place—it was only a shallow stream—near the wrecked bridge, and after midnight the whole company took up a defensive position on the far side. A small patrol sent to investigate a side road leading towards the village of Gallinaro ran into small-arms fire and withdrew.

The engineers working under 7 Field Company opened the Sant' Elia – **Atina** road for tracked vehicles early on the 28th, and during the morning Staghound armoured cars of C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, under 5 Brigade's direct command, reached **Atina**. Later in the day, when further work on the road made it usable for trucks, 28 (Maori) Battalion motored through from Sant' Elia in a platoon of 4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company's trucks. The convoy drove past **Atina** to disperse near the river. 'The sun shining on the lorries' windscreens heliographed the arrival of the column to the observant enemy. A sighting smoke shell was followed by high explosive and there were a dozen casualties... before the troops scattered.'<sup>2</sup> Several vehicles were hit.

Meanwhile 23 Battalion reconnoitred beyond the **Melfa**. D Company found a bridge on the **Atina – San Donato** road prepared for demolition, and the engineers, who were sent for, quickly removed

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *51 Mtn Corps*.

<sup>2</sup> **J. F. Cody**, *28 (Maori) Battalion*, p. 381. The casualties, including NZASC men, exceeded a dozen.

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the charges. B Company was directed to test out the strength of the enemy rearguard at Gallinaro, but made slow progress because of mines and the shellfire which fell along the road and around **Atina**. The company met and repulsed a German patrol, and encountered fire from Gallinaro itself. Artillery support was called for, and **6 Field Regiment's** 25-pounders and some 5.5-inch guns of 2 Army Group Royal Artillery harassed the village throughout the night. Next day the enemy vacated Gallinaro.

The engineers constructed a ford over the **Melfa**, which was passable by armoured cars and tracked vehicles by about 6 p.m. on the 28th, and began work on an 80-foot Bailey bridge, which they completed during

the night; in addition their mine-clearing parties began sweeping the road towards **Sora**. The 21st Battalion concentrated just beyond the river in preparation for resuming the advance, which did not get under way until late afternoon. Four tanks of the Divisional Protective Troop and armoured cars of C Squadron of Divisional Cavalry followed when the ford was ready, but were hindered by demolitions.

B Company of 21 Battalion, which took the lead, had as its objective the village of **Vicalvi**, on the southern slopes of Monte Morrone, about half-way between **Atina** and **Sora**; A Company was directed on **Alvito**, a mile or two east of **Vicalvi**; D Company was given the task of getting on to **Monte Morrone**, which rose to a height of 3000 feet behind the two villages.

B Company met a German rearguard after crossing the Mollo stream, just beyond the **Melfa**, and took 17 prisoners. The company continued along the **Sora** road until it came under shellfire shortly before reaching the road which branched off to **Alvito**. The men took to the fields, 'where they had to push through shoulder-high wheat crops,'<sup>1</sup> and spent the remainder of the night in a large building. A Company halted below **Alvito** while a platoon reconnoitred to the outskirts of the village without meeting opposition. D Company was pinned down for an hour by shellfire near the turn-off to **Alvito**, and later headed towards Morrone along a track between **Vicalvi** and **Alvito**.

Early next morning (the 29th) A Company entered **Alvito**, but was met by small-arms fire in the upper part of the village, which was situated on two levels. The enemy, however, made a hurried departure when two Staghounds came to the assistance of the infantry. Meanwhile D Company began the ascent of Monte Morrone and, despite some hostile machine-gun fire, reached the crest by 9 a.m. B Company's leading troops came under mortar and machine-gun fire when they turned on to the side road leading

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<sup>1</sup> Cody, *21 Battalion*, p. 342.

to **Vicalvi**. The company halted and called for artillery fire, but owing to poor communications **6 Field Regiment** did not answer this request until midday. When the shelling ceased B Company entered the village unopposed.

In the afternoon D Company's troops on **Monte Morrone** were counter-attacked by about a company of Germans and, as they were running out of ammunition, were obliged to withdraw. Artillery fire was laid on the crest and reverse slopes, but as the enemy appeared to be in strength in a valley north of **Alvito**, no attempt was made to retake Morrone. Four tanks of the Divisional Protective Troop accompanied B Company into **Vicalvi**, and a troop of B Squadron, **20 Armoured Regiment**, followed A Company into **Alvito**. A few tanks and Staghounds covered an advance by this company, reinforced by a platoon from D Company, to occupy high ground above the village. At dusk, however, the enemy had not been cleared completely from houses north of **Alvito**.

On 28 and 29 May 21 Battalion had taken 39 prisoners from units of *5 Mountain Division* and *44 Division*, and had sustained 16 casualties, including three killed. Divisional Cavalry had lost three armoured cars on mines, without casualties to their crews.

**General Freyberg** decided to switch 5 Brigade's attack to the left to bypass the opposition at **Monte Morrone**. The enemy could not be expected to hold this isolated position once his withdrawal route to **Sora** had been cut. Brigadier Stewart therefore ordered 21 Battalion with its supporting tanks, a section of Vickers machine guns and 5 Brigade's heavy mortar (4·2-inch) platoon to establish a defensive line from **Alvito** to **Vicalvi** while **28 Battalion** was brought up to its left to continue the advance to **Sora**.

The topography at **Sora** bore some resemblance to that at **Cassino**: the town was overlooked by a hill capped with a castle, behind which rose a 3000-foot mountain (Colle Sant' Angelo); and through it passed the main road (Route 82) and the railway at the southern entrance to

the steep-sided valley of the upper Liri River.

*(iii)*

While 5 Brigade was occupying **Atina** and thrusting along the dusty road towards **Sora**, 6 Brigade continued its slow progress towards **Atina** from the east. The 25th Battalion paused at San Biagio while the road was cleared of demolitions to permit the tanks of A Squadron, 20 Regiment, and the supporting arms to join the infantry. The 26th Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel **Hutchens**<sup>1</sup>) moved up from the **Volturno** valley and assembled at **La Selva**, where on 28 May it relieved 5 Parachute Battalion of responsibility for its sector. The parachute battalion returned to its own brigade, which was no longer under New Zealand command.

From the rocky hilltop on which **San Biagio** was situated the winding road descended steeply into the valley of the Mollarino stream, which flowed into the **Melfa** near **Atina**, about eight miles distant. The enemy had obstructed the road in so many places by destroying or damaging bridges and culverts, blowing craters and laying mines, that it would take the sappers (parties from 8 Field Company and 572 Company, RE) several days to clear, even with the assistance of other troops from 6 Brigade. **General Freyberg** suggested that, as the road was so badly damaged, the brigade should move back through **Casale** and **Acquafondata** and use the Sant' Elia – **Atina** route. After some discussion this idea was abandoned because the **San Biagio** road, when cleared, would be a valuable alternative route, and because the engineers estimated that it would be cleared in less time than it would take 6 Brigade to go by the other route, which was already in full use by the transport supplying 5 Brigade and might also be wanted for 4 Armoured Brigade.

Pleasants Force, which no longer served a purpose, was disbanded on 29 May: its headquarters staff and 22 (Motor) Battalion returned to 4 Brigade's command, and 1/5 Essex went to reserve under 2 NZ Division's command. Fourth Brigade had been ordered the previous day to bring all

its available units forward to Sant' Elia. Arrangements were made for 534 Tank Transporter Company, **RASC**, to operate a shuttle service over the long and difficult route from **Pietramelara**, and by dusk on the 29th most of the tanks of 19 and 20 Armoured Regiments had arrived. The 20th Regiment (less A Squadron with 6 Brigade) was ordered to join its B Squadron under 5 Brigade's command, and by the morning of the 30th had accomplished the move through **Belmonte** and **Atina**.

(iv)

The start of the Division's advance coincided with a visit from the Prime Minister of New Zealand (Mr Peter Fraser), who had attended the fourth Commonwealth Prime Ministers' conference in

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col R. L. Hutchens**, DSO, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Paris**; born **Hawera**, 26 Nov 1914; civil servant; CO 27 (MG) Bn Feb–May 1944; 26 Bn May–Jun 1944; 24 Bn Jun 1944–May 1945; wounded 21 Jul 1942; High Commissioner for New Zealand in **Singapore**, 1959–62; NZ Ambassador to **France**, 1965–.

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England. Mr Fraser, accompanied by Lieutenant-General Puttick <sup>1</sup> (Chief of the General Staff and GOC New Zealand Military Forces), arrived at **Caserta** on 26 May and was met by **General Freyberg**.

The Prime Minister spent a week with the Division, during which he visited all formations. On 31 May he called at Divisional Headquarters, by that time well beyond **Atina**, 'changed from a jeep to a staghound and with a protective troop went forward with the GOC towards **Sora** which is now in our hands.... Prime Minister spoke to Maoris in the forward area and was within 400 yards of a shell-burst. The last armoured car in the protective troop fired its 2-pdr in error just as the party started off. Fortunately it was pointing skywards.'<sup>2</sup>

(v)

On 28 May the British thrusting up the **Liri valley** threatened to

overrun *1 Parachute Division* near **Arce** and roll up *51 Mountain Corps'* southern flank; the continuous bombing of German supply routes and the destruction of bridges caused traffic jams which prevented the delivery of ammunition; tanks were reported to be appearing north of **Atina**, and a push on **Sora** was expected.

The threat to the line of communication across the front between **Sora** and **Arce** necessitated a change of command in *Tenth Army*: the formations on the southern flank, including *1 Parachute Division* and a large part of *44 Division*, were transferred to *14 Panzer Corps*, which left *51 Corps* with only the troops covering the withdrawal routes through **Opi** and **Sora**. At first *Tenth Army* wanted to put the whole of *44 Division* under *14 Panzer Corps'* command and to make *5 Mountain Division* responsible for *44 Division's* sector covering **Sora** and the valley to the north, but General Feurstein managed to get this altered so that *51 Corps* kept HQ *44 Division* and a few of its units; nevertheless he had to release the units already in *14 Panzer Corps'* sector and a regimental headquarters and another battalion in addition. To defend the **Sora- Balsorano** section of the upper **Liri valley**, through which Route 82 passed on the way to **Avezzano**, *44 Division* retained the headquarters and one battalion of *134 Regiment*, one battalion of *132 Regiment*, a light battery and an engineer battalion.

The rearranging of the front was settled at a conference at midnight on 28–29 May. The *Tenth Army* Chief of Staff (Lieuten-

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<sup>1</sup> Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); **Wellington**; born **Timaru**, 26 Jun 1890; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Bde 1914–19 (CO 3 Bn); comd 4 Bde Jan 1940–Aug 1941; *2 NZ Div* (**Crete**) 29 Apr–27 May 1941; CGS and GOC NZ Military Forces, Aug 1941–Dec 1945.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary. *Divisional Cavalry*, p. 342, says somebody accidentally fired the 37-mm. gun of a Staghound.

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-General Fritz Wentzell) claimed that *5 Mountain Division*, in pulling back to the **Opi** pass, had abandoned and demolished the only road which it could have used to move across to take over *44 Division's* sector. General Feurstein replied that *Tenth Army* had authorised the withdrawal and that when the move had begun Wentzell had given orders to hurry up on the left because of the situation at **Valmontone**. The mountain division, therefore, had reached the **Opi** pass position when the new *Tenth Army* order arrived to hold the **Melfa** line. 'The pulling out of one unit after another from 44 Div, 5 Mtn Div and 114 Lt Div had stretched the rubber band to its utmost, so that it was in grave danger of breaking....' <sup>1</sup>

Although *Army Group C* and *Tenth Army* were continually laying down lines on the map which were to be held at all costs, *51 Corps* could only pretend that it was holding the latest of these lines or admit that it had already withdrawn behind it. The troops opposing the New Zealand advance probably were equivalent to one New Zealand brigade; they had few if any tanks (in any case, if they had tanks, they would have had to keep them well back to avoid getting them cut off by their own demolitions); they were short of anti-tank weapons, transport and ammunition, and were spread over a wide front in positions which often could not give mutual support.

Field Marshal Kesselring probably did the corps less than justice in a conversation with Vietinghoff and Wentzell in the evening of 29 May. 'I get very unhappy,' he said, 'when I think how poor a fight **51 Mtn Corps** has put up.... If the enemy is already getting trucks through past **Atina**, the demolitions there cannot have been thoroughly carried out. In that case I am afraid he will simply barge straight through at **Sora** and **Alvito**.... That sector must be reinforced more....' <sup>2</sup>

*Tenth Army* issued orders on the 29th for *14 Panzer Corps* to prevent a breakthrough in the **Sacco valley** towards **Frosinone** and for *51 Corps* to prevent a breakthrough in the **Sora valley**. The latter corps

was to hold a line running north-eastward from Castelliri (near the Liri River) across the **Atina- Sora** road to a point north of **Alvito**, and then eastward across the **Atina- Opi** road towards the **Sangro River**. The *5th Mountain Division* was given control of the mountains on the eastern side of the **Balsorano** valley, and the adjoining *44 Division* was astride the valley south of **Sora**.

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *51 Mtn Corps*.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, *Tenth Army*.

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(vi)

The commander of **5 NZ Infantry Brigade** (Brigadier Stewart) gave orders in the evening of 29 May that 21 Battalion, with the support of the tanks, mortars and machine guns it already had, was to hold the **Alvito- Vicalvi** line; 2788 Field Squadron, **RAF** Regiment, was to relieve 23 Battalion in the **Atina** area and the 23rd was to concentrate north of the **Melfa** on the **Atina- Sora** road; and 28 (Maori) Battalion was to pass through the 21st and continue the advance towards **Sora**.

The Maori Battalion moved forward in the morning of the 29th to positions astride the **Atina- Sora** road south of the **Alvito- Vicalvi** line. After conferring with the Brigadier, Colonel Young gave instructions for the resumption of the advance in the evening: on the right C Company, followed by A, was to get on to **Colle Monacesco**, the high ground north of the bridge over the deep, silent Fibreno River, which crossed the valley two miles south of **Sora**; on the left D Company, followed by B, was to cover the bridge itself, which was known to have been blown up by the enemy, and occupy Colle Mastroianni, between the village of Fontechiari and the Fibreno. A troop of B Squadron, 20 Armoured Regiment, armoured cars of Divisional Cavalry, and sappers of 8 Field Company were to accompany the battalion.

When it was sufficiently dark on the evening of the 29th the **Maori Battalion** advanced towards the Fibreno River with C and A Companies along the main road and D and B travelling across country and along the road north of Fontechiari. By dawn on the 30th they were almost on their objectives. Men of C Company, who had met some slight opposition after passing **Vicalvi**, waded the waist-deep river and took up positions immediately north of the bridge; the other companies covered the south side.

The enemy had blown an 80-foot gap in the Fibreno bridge and a 60-foot gap in a bridge which crossed a stream at the junction of the roads from **Atina** and Fontechiari just south of the Fibreno. A bulldozer which had been working on the road through Fontechiari (where a cavalry patrol had been investigating an alternative route from **Atina**) came up to help on the Fibreno bridges, where work began as soon as reconnaissance proved that there were no suitable fords for tanks or trucks along this stretch of the river. As the daylight improved the bridges came under mortar and machine-gun fire, which made it difficult for the engineers to lay out their bridging equipment.

Headquarters **28 Battalion** was set up at the road junction south of the river, where the tanks and other vehicles assembled to wait for the completion of the bridging. About 7 a.m. six aircraft with **United States** markings dive-bombed the assembly, causing damage to some of the vehicles and wounding two men. This incident was remarked upon with satisfaction by the enemy: 'In the absence of German aircraft, our hard-pressed troops received support from Allied fighter-bombers, which attacked British troop concentrations in the **Vicalvi** area. Direct hits and fires were seen in tank and MT concentrations.' <sup>1</sup>

As it appeared that the passage of the vehicles across the Fibreno would be delayed until the enemy posts responsible for the mortar and machine-gun fire were driven back from the hill to the north ( **Colle Monacesco**) and from the nearby village of **Brocco**, Colonel Young directed C and D Companies to clear this area while A extended to the

west on the southern side of the river and B protected the headquarters area. C Company gained possession of the hill without opposition, but shortly after midday observed an enemy force forming up as if to counter-attack. About 30 or 40 Germans approached the company but 'a volley from rifles and automatics mowed them down; very few escaped.'<sup>2</sup> Obviously they had not expected to find hostile troops in the vicinity.

D Company, which was on the southern bank of the Fibreno some distance west of the bridge, was unable to find a passable ford, but borrowed a flat-bottomed boat from an Italian and ferried its men across. The company advanced towards **Brocco** 'over stone terraces, through half-grown grape-vines, and around scattered houses. Fire was heavy but wild....'<sup>3</sup> The Maoris suffered a few casualties, but the resistance died away and they entered the village to find that the enemy had left hurriedly.

By 2 p.m. the enemy fire on the bridges and elsewhere had almost ceased. Reports from patrols and civilians gave the impression that the Germans were withdrawing. The sappers (8 Field Company) were able to make fast progress on their bridging and hoped to be able to get the tanks over the river before nightfall.

Patrols from B Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, began to search the **Posta** area, between **Vicalvi** and **Colle Monacesco**, in the morning. Some of the armoured cars entered the village without meeting opposition, but others moving along a track around a small lake (Lago della **Posta**) were fired on from the ridge to the north of the village, and as they continued in an attempt to reach the far side of the Fibreno River, were mortared from the direction of **Campoli**, a village on high ground farther north. The enemy

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, 51 Mtn Corps. *Maori Battalion*, pp. 382–3, says that nearby houses were set on fire. 'Aircraft recognition signals only seemed to annoy, [the aircraft] for they came back and fired some more houses before they left for home.'

<sup>2</sup> *Maori Battalion*, p. 383.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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mortars were quietened by artillery fire, but five of the armoured cars became bogged in marshy ground, and as none could be extricated without help, and no infantry protection was available overnight, the crews walked back to squadron headquarters. The cars were all recovered next day.

A patrol of C Squadron, after negotiating some small demolitions near **Alvito**, drove along the lateral road linking the **Atina- Sora** and **Atina- Opi** roads and entered the outskirts of **San Donato** in the morning of 30 May. The cars were halted by a demolition in a street and experienced some mortar fire. From a few captured Germans and civilians it was learned that the enemy had left **San Donato** earlier in the day on the road to **Opi**. An artillery stonk was called down on an enemy position north of the town. A platoon from 21 Battalion, a few tanks, and machine guns and mortars in trucks were sent to **San Donato** in the afternoon, but when German infantry were reported to be infiltrating back into **Posta** early in the evening, 21 Battalion was told to withdraw these tanks and troops and concentrate on defending **Alvito**.

(vii)

Fifth Brigade's plan for the continuation of the advance was for **28 Battalion** with B Squadron, **20 Armoured Regiment**, in support to advance through **Sora** along Route 82 to where a track led off to **Campoli**. A force of **20 Armoured Regiment**'s tanks was to go up this track and was to be joined by infantry from 23 Battalion who (after having taken over the position vacated by the 28th) were to cross **Colle Monacesco** direct to **Campoli**. In the next phase 23 Battalion and the tanks were to proceed from **Campoli** to **Pescosolido**, another hill village about a mile and a half distant. The Maori Battalion was to assist the tanks up the main road and was to advance until about level with

## **Pescosolido.**

**Fifth Brigade's advance was to be supported by 6 Field Regiment and 2 Army Group Royal Artillery (with 74, 102 and 140 Medium Regiments under command), which were to fire stonks covering Route 82 and the side roads to Campoli and Pescosolido. The medium guns were very suitable for support of this nature; they could leapfrog forward in fewer but longer bounds than the Division's field guns. Seldom if ever was the infantry without artillery support during the whole of 5 Brigade's advance.**

**Towards nightfall on the 30th A and B Companies of 28 Battalion crossed the Fibreno River to assemble on the Sora road. D Company was to hold Brocco until relieved by a company of 23 Battalion; C Company, in reserve, was to follow A and B. B Company was caught by mortar fire while making for the starting line, and had a few men wounded, but re-formed and had begun to advance with A when it was ordered to stop. On learning that the engineers were having more difficulty than expected in bridging the Fibreno, Brigadier Stewart sent urgent orders to 28 Battalion to hold the advance until the supporting arms could cross the river. A and B Companies, therefore, waited where they were on the road, while C, on Colle Monacesco, guarded the right flank.**

**Working in waist-high water and under intermittent shell and mortar fire, the sappers were unable to complete the Fibreno bridges until nearly 11 a.m. on 31 May. When the tanks began to cross to the northern bank, Stewart sent word to the Maoris to begin their advance. By midday 24 tanks of 20 Armoured Regiment, together with the carriers and supporting arms of 28 Battalion, were following close behind the infantry. The vehicles were stopped by a demolished culvert just short of Sora, and while this was being repaired by the sappers, again working under fire, the leading infantry entered the town.**

**A Company, despite mortar and machine-gun fire, pushed on into the streets; B Company met stronger opposition, including anti-tank guns, at the railway station. D Company moved across country to the**

right to cut the **Balsorano** road beyond the town. Tanks of C Squadron, which accompanied the Maoris into **Sora**, fired on numerous targets indicated by the infantry. The Germans manned some self-propelled or anti-tank guns until the last moment. One of the New Zealand tanks was lost to them before the combined action of tanks and infantry disposed of two guns. By late afternoon A and C Companies were in the town, C across the **Liri** River in its western part; B was to the north with the task of covering the junctions of the **Sora- Balsorano** road and the side roads to **Campoli** and **Pescosolido**, and D was a short way up the road to **Campoli**.

The Germans, who overlooked **Sora** from the hills, shelled the town and its environs spasmodically during the afternoon and until dark in spite of many counter-battery tasks fired by 6 Field Regiment and the medium guns on observed or suspected gun positions. Much information, most of it accurate, was obtained from civilians who claimed to be partisans working for the Allied cause; they assisted the observers to pinpoint gun positions, observation posts and enemy movement.

The advance to **Sora** had permitted Divisional Cavalry to be used in its proper role, as 'the ears and eyes of the Division', instead of acting, as had been its experience most of the time since arriving in **Italy**, as infantrymen to thicken up the defences. The Staghound armoured cars were suitable for leading an advance and reconnoitring the side roads and tracks: when one ran over a mine, it might lose a wheel but otherwise would suffer little damage, and its crew probably escaped injury. When a Sherman tank exploded a mine the damage usually was more extensive and the crew badly shaken. On 31 May C Squadron remained in **San Donato**, which the cavalry patrols had been first to enter, A Squadron was responsible for holding **Posta** until relieved by 2788 Squadron, **RAF Regiment**, and B Squadron, overcoming numerous demolitions, worked its way down Route 82 from **Sora** to **Isola del Liri**, where it made contact next day with troops of **8 Indian Division** who had come up from the south.

*(viii)*

While concentrating in a wheat field, where the vehicles were crammed together, near the **Atina- Sora** road, 23 Battalion was shelled for about an hour on 30 May. Two men were killed and several wounded, and 20-odd trucks, most of them 4 RMT's troop-carrying three-tonners, were damaged. The battalion moved to a less exposed position and that night drove up to the Colle Monacesco- **Brocco** area. Next day, about the time that **28 Battalion** was entering **Sora**, the 23rd had begun to advance across country on **Campoli**.

The advance was hampered by lack of communication between the infantry and the supporting tanks of B Squadron, 20 Armoured Regiment, which were to work up the road from **Sora**. A Company claimed that it reached the road west of **Campoli**, but did not make contact with the tanks, which in turn reported that they could find no sign of the infantry. D Company also reported that it gained the road (on the right of A Company), and in doing so had taken 10 prisoners from *134 Regiment*. A possible explanation of the inability of the infantry and tanks to join up may be that the tanks, proceeding in a compact bunch, had passed before the infantry reached the road.

Early in the advance the leading troop of B Squadron had been halted short of the **Campoli** turn-off on the **Sora- Balsorano** road by a German anti-tank gun firing down the line of the road. This and another gun were silenced by the combined action of the tanks and a party of Maoris, but the leading tank was disabled. Subsequently another two anti-tank guns were found abandoned on this stretch of road. Told by Brigade Headquarters that 23 Battalion's men were approaching the **Campoli** road and needed tank support, B Squadron sent up another troop (7 Troop) which, under smoke from the rest of the tanks, rounded the corner and continued up the **Campoli** road until held up towards dusk by a small but determined enemy post about a quarter of a mile from the village. The tanks spread out and brought concentrated fire to bear on this post, which the enemy abandoned, leaving six men to be

taken prisoner. As darkness was falling and more enemy appeared to be ahead, 7 Troop withdrew a short distance to laager. The tank crews, being without infantry protection, provided their own pickets and a guard for the prisoners. The remainder of B Squadron tried to reach the high ground south of the **Campoli** road, where it could support 7 Troop, but could not negotiate a gully in the failing light and therefore laagered overnight near the **Balsorano** road.

Meanwhile C Company, 23 Battalion, directed on **Campoli**, came under some shellfire and was opposed on a hill just south of the village. Civilians informed the company that a strong force of Germans was entrenched ahead of it. Artillery and machine-gun fire was laid down on observed and reported positions before the company resumed the advance after dark. It was engaged on the hill south of the village by small-arms fire and grenades, which wounded two men. By this time it was midnight, and as the men were feeling the strain of the hard going over steep slopes and gullies, the company commander decided to halt and rest until contact could be made with the tanks and a concerted effort made against the enemy.

Because of the uncertainty of the tank support Colonel McPhail ordered C and B Companies to withdraw before dawn on 1 June. The tanks, accompanied by 23 Battalion's carriers, which had joined them during the night, resumed the advance at dawn, overcame some opposition just outside **Campoli** and entered the village about 9 a.m. They collected altogether about 30 prisoners. When this news reached Battalion Headquarters, D Company was told to follow immediately and occupy **Campoli**. The company arrived about midday and the tanks then withdrew to firing positions south of the village.

For the next stage of the advance the infantry was accompanied by tanks of B Squadron, which used tracks from the **Campoli** road to **Pescosolido**. No opposition was met, except some long-range shellfire, and in the afternoon the tanks and D Company occupied **Pescosolido**. After a patrol had ascertained that the nearby village of Forcella was unoccupied, A Company entered it in the evening, and B Company took

up a position on a hill near **Pescosolido**.

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## III: BALSORANO

### *III: Balsorano*

(i)

Kesselring had issued an order late on 30 May that ‘the enemy must be prevented at all costs from breaking into our positions towards **Sora** and entering the valley.’<sup>1</sup> Next day, however, *51 Mountain Corps* had to report that the enemy had brought up fresh forces to the **Sora** sector and ‘launched a 4-battalion attack between **Sora** and Colle Allino [north of **Colle Monacesco**], supported by tanks and artillery. Many of our A Tk weapons were destroyed, and towards evening 3 battalions of the enemy, plus 15 or 20 tanks and some armoured cars, forced a break through just east of **Sora**, losing heavily in men and weapons in the process. By 1930 hrs the foremost enemy troops were on the line 2 km north of **Sora** and 1½ km SW of **Pescosolido**. About a battalion of the enemy crossed the Liri NW of **Sora**.

‘To avoid complete destruction of our forces, Corps gave orders for a withdrawal from the present line and the formation of a blocking line farther north in the **Balsorano** valley to halt the enemy....’<sup>2</sup>

By this time the three divisions of *51 Corps*, reduced to a third or less of their normal strength, were known as *Battle Groups Ortner (44 Division)*, *Schrank (5 Mountain Division)* and *Boelsen (114 Light Division)*. *Schrank Battle Group* was ordered to leave **Monte Morrone** (which the New Zealand Division had passed without capturing) and keep in close contact with *Ortner Battle Group* on its right. Most of the guns of *Schrank Battle Group* and some from *Boelsen Battle Group* were to be moved westward to points where they could be used in *Ortner Battle Group's* defence. *Ortner Battle Group*, which had no reserves and was reported to have had heavy casualties, intended to hold until dusk in the **Sora** area and then fall back on the blocking line south of **Balsorano**,

which was being manned in the meantime by an engineer unit and an anti-aircraft battery.

General Feurstein advised *Tenth Army* in the evening that he had ordered the entrance to the **Balsorano** valley to be held 'to the last man. After that we must not expect **Ortner Battle Gp** to be fit for any more fighting.' The group received permission from Corps on the morning of 1 June to make a fighting withdrawal to the **Balsorano** line and to 'hold it to the last man. Commanders to stay in the FDLs.' <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *51 Mtn Corps*.

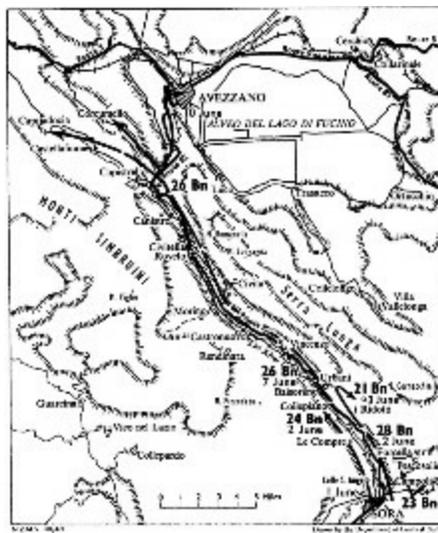
<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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(ii)

The battle was approaching the stage when the Germans would be obliged to evacuate the country north of Route 6. The roads through the mountain valleys still open to the enemy offered easily defended positions where small but determined rearguards could block the pursuing forces. In the New Zealand Division's sector, for example, on the axis of the **Atina- Sora- Avezzano** route, the nature of the terrain limited the operations to the road and its vicinity; there was little or no opportunity for manoeuvre, and a headlong attack might have proved more costly to the attackers than the defenders.



SORA TO AVEZZANO, 1-10 JUNE 1944

SORA TO AVEZZANO, 1-10 JUNE 1944

Beyond **Sora** Route 82 ran for 20-odd miles close to the eastern side of the Liri River through a valley enclosed by two 6000-foot mountain ranges, the **Serra Lunga** on the east and the Monti Simbruini on the west. The railway crossed and recrossed the river several times. At the narrowest part of the valley, near **Balsorano**, a small town some six miles from **Sora**, an abrupt escarpment on the eastern side overlooked the approaches from the south and was ideally situated for the enemy's purpose of blocking pursuit.

**General Freyberg** had advised 5 Brigade on 30 May that, except for light forces which were to probe forward and keep in touch with the enemy, the main body of the brigade was not to proceed beyond the 49 northing, about two miles past **Sora**. The General's policy had been to leapfrog the battalions of 5 Brigade until each had had some action, then to bring in 6 Brigade. By the time the Division had reached **Sora**, 5 Brigade's battalions had all had some share in the little fighting that had occurred.

In the evening of 31 May 6 Brigade, on the GOC's orders, warned its units to concentrate in the area immediately east of **Atina** in readiness to move forward next day. Divisional Headquarters issued instructions that, after 6 Brigade had assembled, the Division was to advance towards **Balsorano** on a two-brigade front, 5 Brigade on the eastern side of the

valley and 6 Brigade on the western side, each with tanks of **20 Armoured Regiment** in support.

On 1 June 24 Battalion (Major **Aked**<sup>1</sup>) relieved **28 Battalion** in **Sora** and began to advance west of the **Liri**, and shortly after midday occupied a small hill just beyond the town without opposition. A strong patrol was sent to Colle Sant' Angelo, where, according to civilians, the Germans still maintained observation posts and some mortar posts. An enemy party, estimated at 200 strong, was seen withdrawing north of Colle Sant' Angelo and was engaged by the artillery and 4.2-inch mortars as well as by some of the tanks on the other side of the river. The patrol was recalled, and B Company, given the task of searching and occupying Colle Sant' Angelo, by dusk had found no Germans but evidence of their recent hasty evacuation of several positions.

Other 24 Battalion patrols reported that, after about three miles, the road on the western bank of the **Liri** became merely a track hardly passable for vehicles. A patrol from A Company reached the village of **Le Compre**, about four miles beyond **Sora**, and was told by the inhabitants that the enemy had left a few hours

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col E. W. Aked**, MC, m.i.d., Aristion Andrias (Gk); **Tauranga**; born England, 12 Feb 1911; shop assistant; CO 24 Bn 4–8 Jun 1944; CO 210 British Liaison Unit with 3 Greek Bde in **Italy** and **Greece**, 1944–45.

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previously. He had abandoned much equipment, including seven ammunition limbers.

In **Sora**, where the enemy had blown two bridges, 7 Field Company built a 160-foot Bailey bridge over the **Liri**. Meanwhile, on the eastern side of the river, 28 (Maori) Battalion advanced along the axis of Route 82, with three tanks of B Squadron, 20 Regiment, in support, and in the late afternoon, having met little opposition except mortar fire, halted about two miles north of **Sora**, roughly in line with 23 Battalion on the high ground to the right.

Fourth Armoured Brigade, less 18 and 20 Regiments, was given the task of protecting the Division's right flank in the Monte Morrone- **Alvito** area against the possibility of enemy infiltration from the **Opi** area, where he was thought to be in some strength. On the morning of 1 June 22 (Motor) Battalion took over the defence of the **Alvito- Vicalvi** area from 21 Battalion. Apart from a brush with a small party of enemy on **Monte Morrone**, 22 Battalion's patrols met no enemy but found recently abandoned positions.

Under divisional command, 25 Battalion stayed in rear of 6 Brigade to protect **Atina** against infiltration from the north and north-east. Two companies covered the road junction north of **Atina** and sent out patrols, but were replaced on 1 June by armoured cars of **12 Lancers**, which became responsible for the route through **San Donato** to **Opi**. The 25th Battalion was then recalled to 6 Brigade and moved to the vicinity of **Sora**.

*(iii)*

The 24th Battalion resumed the advance up the western bank of the Liri River early on 2 June. A Company, on the right, supported by tanks of A Squadron, 20 Regiment, had to contend only with long-range shelling and machine-gun fire; B Company, starting from Colle Sant' Angelo, had a strenuous clamber over steep country. Learning that **28 Battalion** was advancing to another bound, A Company pushed on past **Le Compre** and came under machine-gun fire from Germans in caves in the escarpment near **Balsorano**. The tanks fired on these caves and also on movement in the vicinity of **Balsorano**.

An escaped South African prisoner of war, who had been hiding in this region for some time, came into the lines and gave detailed information about the enemy positions ahead. He said that the Germans were preparing a strong defensive position at **Collepiano**, across the narrow valley from the escarpment near **Balsorano**, and as late as that morning had been carrying ammunition into these positions. This

information proved to be correct. A Company was brought to a halt by small-arms and mortar fire when about a mile from **Collepiano**. The battalion's carriers and D Company went forward to give support, and Major Aked ordered D to pass through A and engage the enemy with fire only, in the expectation that he might retire under pressure. By midnight A and D Companies held a line about half a mile from **Collepiano**, with C in immediate reserve and B south of **Le Compre**. The tanks laagered in rear of the forward companies.

The Maori Battalion advanced steadily all day on 2 June, meeting only light and spasmodic mortaring of the road, and by late afternoon was approximately opposite **Le Compre**. Although hindered by the demolitions on the road, the tanks of C Squadron, 20 Regiment, were up with the forward troops by evening. They accompanied patrols to a major demolition about a mile ahead of the battalion's main position and not far from where 24 Battalion had halted on the other side of the **Liri**.

By the end of the day the Maoris were feeling the strain of continuous marching in such steep and broken country. When Brigadier Stewart was discussing a resumption of the advance, Colonel Young drew attention to the fact that his men were footsore and weary. The Brigadier then directed that next day **28 Battalion** should take up positions on a line which its patrols had reached, while 21 Battalion came up overnight and passed through to continue the advance. Arrangements were made also for 23 Battalion to follow the 21st.

During the night 24 Battalion's forward troops improved their positions and gained some ground, but at daybreak on 3 June were shelled and mortared. Confirmation having been gained of the enemy's strength at **Collepiano**, Brigadier Parkinson arranged for an attack supported by fire from the artillery and heavy mortars and from the tanks on both sides of the **Liri**. Twelve 4.2-inch mortars were sent up to 24 Battalion by 6 Brigade for the purpose, and liaison was established with 5 Brigade's supporting tanks, which had a clearer field of fire across the valley than had those with the 24th. The day was spent in

preparation for the attack, and towards dusk patrols went out to study the ground, but as 5 Brigade was also held up at this stage, the operation was postponed and later cancelled. During the next two days, when heavy rain hampered cross-country movement for vehicles, 24 Battalion watched and engaged the enemy on **Collepiano** and around **Balsorano**. Fire from the tanks and 4.2-inch mortars caused several explosions, thought to be ammunition dumps.

On the night of 2–3 June 21 Battalion embussed from its bivouac area near **Sora** and drove up the road in rear of **28 Battalion**, whose carriers and tanks, covering the sappers who were working well forward at that time, were transferred to its command. Mortar and machine-gun fire had been coming from German positions on the escarpment south-east of **Balsorano**, and snipers were covering the demolitions on the road ahead of the Maoris, which made the engineers' work on this section of the road practically impossible. The first bound of 21 Battalion's advance was just beyond the escarpment, and obviously the battalion's major task would be to clear out the defences along this escarpment.

C Company of 21 Battalion debussed shortly after midnight, set off up the road on foot and then turned off into the hills with a point at the eastern end of the escarpment as its objective; D Company, which followed, turned off on a track leading to the hamlet of **i Ridotti**, and then made north towards the escarpment, which both companies reported they had reached before dawn. Meanwhile a party from B Company relieved the Maoris covering the engineers on the road, and with tanks of C Squadron in support, advanced beyond the demolition where they had been working. They met heavy fire, however, and were forced to fall back. As the light improved the hostile fire also compelled the withdrawal of a bulldozer which had been brought up in the darkness to the demolition.

D Company made its way to the top of the escarpment and found itself among German defences, but appeared to be getting the better of close fighting until other posts in the vicinity opened fire. The company

then fell back with the loss of two officers and three men wounded and two men missing, but with some 20 German prisoners. It was ordered by radio to break contact with the enemy and return to the battalion.

C Company, which was out of wireless touch with the battalion for most of the night, also reached the top of the escarpment and (according to a company report) got within a quarter of a mile of **Balsorano**; but as the light improved the company came under fire from posts ahead of it. It tried to get around the right of these defences, but was forced to ground in inadequate cover.

When he heard of the determination of the German defence, Brigadier Stewart asked **General Freyberg** whether he could prepare a set-piece attack on **KATIPO** (the codename for the bound just beyond the top of the escarpment). The GOC, however, did not give an immediate decision because he felt that the enemy resistance was only temporary, but permitted Stewart and Parkinson to start planning for a concerted attack by the two brigades. When these plans were prepared the General still withheld his decision. The brigades therefore had to be content to continue with small probing attacks.

In the evening of 3 June D Company, 21 Battalion, with A following, led the way back to **i Ridotti**, and shortly before midnight A passed through D in an attempt to get around the eastern flank of the defences on the escarpment, while the artillery shelled the positions which had been observed during the day. A Company met men of C Company about 3 a.m. and, acting on their report of the strength of the enemy defences, both companies returned to **i Ridotti**.

(iv)

On 3 June the three New Zealand field regiments were taken to a comparatively flat piece of ground on the floor of the valley about two miles north of **Sora** where, it seemed to a machine-gunner, they were too audacious in digging in so far forward in daylight. 'A troop of guns is about 100 yards behind us and nearly stun us when they fire.... A Jerry

shell collapsed a wall and killed five out of six [artillerymen] standing behind it.’<sup>1</sup> The 6th Field Regiment, which was worst hit by the German shellfire, was ‘bombarded with accurate and heavy concentrations’.<sup>2</sup> The field and medium guns shelled enemy guns and mortars, which had observation posts well forward on the commanding heights, and the fighter-bombers also attacked some of these targets, but the New Zealand regiments were blitzed mostly by mountain guns which had been manhandied or mule-packed into the ranges by *Schrank Battle Group of 5 Mountain Division*.<sup>3</sup> Altogether the Divisional Artillery had over 100 casualties, including 11 killed, during 3–5 June.

The 23rd Battalion, on the eastern side of the valley, sent a special ‘mountain’ platoon of volunteers with mules and muleteers to clear out the German observation posts on the heights. On 4 June, however, the platoon, apparently mistaken for an enemy party, was fired on by the New Zealand artillery and tanks, and was ordered to return. The same day 34 Anti-Tank Battery was deployed as

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<sup>1</sup> Diary, B. C. H. Moss. This was a troop of **4 Fd Regt**, which was on the western side of the Liri River; 5 and 6 Fd Regts were on the eastern side.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, **6 Fd Regt**.

<sup>3</sup> A report by *5 Mtn Div* claims that on 3 June its artillery ‘fired heavy concentrations of observed fire in support of **Ortner Battle Gp**. Results were seen to be very good. Among other things, 2 troops of enemy guns were hit by very destructive fire as they moved into position. Supply traffic as far back as **Isola del Liri** engaged. 40 trucks immobilised, 10 guns in open firing positions silenced, ammunition dumps exploded. A concentration of 100–120 MT was thrown into panic stricken confusion....[Next day] 18 guns silenced, 1 gun immobilised....’ These claims, probably exaggerated, can not be substantiated or disproved by New Zealand records.

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infantry to search the hills on the eastern side of the valley, but was also fired on by 'friendly' guns, which severely limited the extent of its reconnaissance. The enemy, therefore, still had observation next day.

Meanwhile 25 Battalion, which had just moved into **Sora**, sent B Company, with Italian guides, mules and muleteers, to search for German troops reported by the Italians to be on the high ground on the western side of the valley. The company climbed 3500 feet in an approach march of about six miles along narrow tracks, and on the way was drenched by a thunderstorm. A dawn patrol on 5 June captured four Germans who were still asleep. The company attempted to encircle an enemy party, but a German gave the alarm. Three of the enemy were killed, eight including an officer were caught, and an estimated dozen escaped. On the way back to **Sora** another German was added to the company's prisoners.

(v)

The New Zealand Division had been brought to a halt on 4 June. Fearful of an outflanking movement on his left, the enemy kept up his fire around **i Ridotti**, without doing much harm to 21 Battalion, which was in the vicinity. His shelling, mortaring and sniping of the main road prevented the engineers from clearing demolitions and patrols from working farther forward. Fifth Brigade's 3-inch and 4.2-inch mortars fired on the escarpment and paid special attention to a strongpoint from which most of the fire on **i Ridotti** seemed to come. Close liaison had been arranged between the tanks with 6 Brigade, which had the clearer field of fire across the **Liri** on the escarpment, and those with 5 Brigade, which had good observation on **Collepiano**.

The two brigade commanders expressed their opinion at a midday conference that the enemy showed no sign of falling back, and suggested that their plan for an attack on **Balsorano** should be timed for that night (4-5 June). The plan was abandoned, however, because news was received that the Americans had entered **Rome**, and a message came

from **10 Corps** directing **8** and **10 Indian Divisions** and **2 NZ Division** to form a pursuit force under its command. As soon as he received warning of this plan the GOC ordered **5** and **6 Brigades** and the armour to withdraw from the **Balsorano** front and concentrate in readiness for the new role.

The front was taken over temporarily by **Wilder Force**, which was renewed under Lieutenant-Colonel Wilder's <sup>1</sup> command and

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col N. P. Wilder**, DSO; **Waipukurau**; born NZ 29 Mar 1914; farmer; patrol commander LRDG; CO **2 NZ Div Cav**, 1944; wounded 14 Sep 1942.

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comprised Divisional Cavalry, A Squadron of 20 Armoured Regiment, D Company of 24 Battalion, C Company of 25 Battalion, **6 Field Regiment** and detachments of machine-gunners and engineers. B and C Squadrons of Divisional Cavalry relieved 5 Brigade in **Pescosolido** and **Campoli**, and A Squadron patrolled towards **Balsorano**. The two infantry companies, each supported by tanks, occupied positions about two miles from **Balsorano**.

The artillery, tanks, mortars and machine guns all participated in a programme of harassing fire on observed enemy posts on the escarpment at **Balsorano** and on **Collepiano** during the night of 5–6 June, and after daybreak the tanks laid another concentration on the defences while a patrol from C Company, 25 Battalion, accompanied by armoured cars of A Squadron and by carriers, probed along Route 82. The infantry entered **Balsorano** unopposed on 6 June, but the numerous demolitions prevented the vehicles from getting into the town that day. D Company, 24 Battalion, found that the enemy had vacated his heavily mined defences on **Collepiano**.

(vi)

General Ortner (commanding *44 Division*) claimed on 4 June that

the **Balsorano** line 'was laid out in the most favourable position possible, tactically well sited, and adequately prepared beforehand. The division... brought all its persuasion to bear to instil into the troops the idea that this was to be the final and only line on which the enemy was to be halted indefinitely. Our obstacles forward of the line and our rearguards took the edge off the enemy drive for long enough to organise the defence of the **Balsorano** line thoroughly. This preparatory organisation, the ... insistence on the policy of "holding firm", were the cause of the troops' splendid achievements in this line.... So far they have beaten off all attacks despite the terrific shellfire accompanying them. Unfortunately, heavy casualties have been suffered.... Even in the pauses between attacks, the troops have been exposed to continual shell and mortar fire on their positions and supply routes.... The position on the Army's right seems to make another withdrawal inevitable.' <sup>1</sup>

In the late afternoon of 3 June *Tenth Army* had given *51 Mountain Corps* permission to withdraw, and the corps had begun to retire in bounds that night. Light rearguards were left to cover the engineers, who blew some 37 prepared demolitions between **Balsorano** and **Avezzano**. Along the New Zealand Division's line of

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<sup>1</sup> Appx to war diary, *51 Mtn Corps*.

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advance from Sant' Elia Fiumerapido to **Balsorano** the Germans had laid 18 minefields and blown two tunnels, 18 bridges and 30 other demolitions.

(vii)

Sixty parachutists were dropped behind the enemy's lines on 1 June with the object of compelling him to withdraw through the **Sora-Avezzano** valley so quickly that he would be unable to complete his demolitions. The force was to come under the command of the New Zealand Division on landing, with orders to continue operations until joined by land forces or to infiltrate back to Allied lines.

The men chosen for this undertaking were drawn from 6 Battalion (Royal Welsh) of 2 Independent Parachute Brigade; they included signals and medical detachments and were equipped with two wireless sets linked with sets at HQ 2 NZ Division, HQ 2 Independent Parachute Brigade, HQ **Eighth Army** and HQ Allied Armies in **Italy**; they also had eight pigeons to carry messages. The parachutists were dropped by three of 11 DC47s, escorted by Spitfires; the other eight DC47s released dummies in the vicinity of the dropping zone, which was about half-way along the road between **Collelongo** and Trasacco, in a valley south of the Fucino basin and separated from the upper **Liri valley** by the **Serra Lunga** range.

New Zealand troops saw the aircraft pass overhead in the evening of 1 June, and later that night the Division was in wireless communication with the parachute force, which reported that the drop had gone according to schedule. Next day, as a result of the change in **10 Corps'** plans, the Division advised the parachutists that it was discontinuing its operations north of **Sora**. The instructions seem very casual: the parachute force was to act on its own discretion and was expected eventually to join the Division.

The commander of the force (Captain L. A. Fitzroy-Smith), with another man, walked into the Division's lines on 6 June, when the New Zealanders were cautiously entering **Balsorano**. He had watched from cover while German motor-cyclists ignited fuses to demolitions on the road, but had been unable to prevent them because at that stage he had no arms or ammunition. He reported that his force, after landing, had been attacked and scattered by what was estimated to be a company of Germans. Some of the parachutists had been brought in on the evening of 4 June by 22 Battalion's patrols in the **Alvito** area, and others were brought in later.

The German reaction had been prompt and adequate. As early as 1.50 p.m. on 1 June, *5 Mountain Division* had reported to **51 Mountain Corps** that it had intercepted wireless messages indicating the likelihood

of a parachute landing in the Fucino basin. The corps had ordered the preparation of 'alarm units' and the siting of anti-aircraft guns. The mountain division then reported that at dusk 200 parachutists had been seen dropping in the **Collelongo** area. Several straw dummies were found early next day, and it was assumed that only a few saboteurs had landed. By midday, however, Italian civilians had informed the Germans that 800 men had dropped and moved off to the north-west. According to another story, the force was 200 strong and had requisitioned mules and horses.

Patrols were sent out by the German divisions in the vicinity, and one of these encountered a party of about 30 parachutists and took two prisoners, who did not deny the Italian reports that 800 men had been dropped. Already *Tenth Army* had directed that an armoured car squadron be sent out to assist the patrols, but on receipt of a report that another 200 men had landed (or through confusion of the earlier reports), *Army* ordered *51 Mountain Corps* to use its main reserve, a battalion of *3 Brandenburg Regiment*, because the corps was apprehensive that its left wing might be cut off. As a further precaution a makeshift force was formed, apparently to protect the line of communication against airborne landings. In subsequent encounters with the parachutists the patrols from the German divisions and the Brandenburg battalion claimed a total of 33 prisoners, more than half the original force. The Brandenburg battalion was recalled to the main road to act as rearguard for *Ortner Battle Group*, whose retreat from **Balsorano** was covered by demolitions, which it had been the object of the parachute force to prevent.

The failure of this enterprise was a bitter disappointment for the parachute brigade, which had waited long for employment in the role for which it had trained.

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## IV: AVEZZANO

### *IV: Avezzano*

(i)

Separated from the New Zealand Division by the intervening Monti Simbruini, **8 Indian Division** pursued the retreating enemy along the road which linked Route 6 with Route 5 by way of **Alatri**, **Guarcino** and **Subiaco**. On 6 June **10 Corps** ordered **8 Indian Division** to advance at speed, first to the **Arsoli** area on Route 5 (the **Rome- Avezzano** highway) and then to the Rieti area, about 40 miles north-east of **Rome**; the New Zealand Division was to be prepared to pass through **8 Indian Division** at 48 hours' notice. In the evening of the 6th, however, HQ 2 NZ Division received confirmation of earlier news of a change in plan: the Division was to advance as rapidly as possible to **Avezzano** and clear Route 82 as an alternative way forward. Arrangements were made, therefore, for **6 Infantry Brigade** to take under its command the units of **Wilder Force** and continue the advance from **Balsorano** to **Avezzano**.

Near **Balsorano** the Monti Simbruini rose almost vertically from the Liri River to the peaks of Pizzodeta and Viglio, the latter over 7000 feet, and at the foot of this great mountain wall most of the culverts and stone bridges, which occurred every few hundred yards along Route 82, had been demolished by the enemy. Except for the infantry, therefore, the rate of advance depended on how quickly the engineers could construct bridges and detours at these obstacles. While the leading troops of 6 Brigade (26 Battalion) came up the valley from the south, Divisional Cavalry continued its patrolling and the engineers their work of clearing mines and demolitions. A Squadron's armoured cars passed through **Balsorano** and by dawn on 7 June were about a mile beyond the town, where they were held up by an obstruction. The wrecked German guns and the many shell craters around them testified to the

**effectiveness of the New Zealand artillery's retaliation for the punishment it had received farther down the valley.**

**Sappers from the three field companies of the New Zealand Engineers and mechanical equipment of the field park company, including five bulldozers, were employed on Route 82 lifting mines (with the assistance at times of the infantry), repairing culverts, filling in craters and bridging the larger gaps. Mines and booby traps were found in houses, around demolitions, and even under cherry trees which were in fruit.**

**The Division did not regain contact with the enemy, but was so hindered by the demolitions and minefields that it took three days to reach [Avezzano](#), less than 20 miles from [Balsorano](#).**

**When the trucks of B Company, taking the lead in 26 Battalion, encountered obstructions which they could not pass until trimmed by the engineers' bulldozers, the infantry debussed and set out on foot to catch up with the armoured cars, which by that time, 8 a.m. on the 7th, were stopped by a demolition three miles north of [Balsorano](#). B Company lifted mines on the verges while the sappers cleared the road. The company passed Castronuovo and halted for the night about seven miles beyond [Balsorano](#). The rest of the battalion, which followed as the road was opened to vehicles, lagged not far behind B Company. The same day 25 Battalion concentrated in the village of Urbani near [Balsorano](#).**

**The advance was resumed early on 8 June, when A Company, 26 Battalion, passed through B to take the lead. The engineers continued to work 'at top pressure' so that the armoured cars, tanks and lorries could follow the infantry. Only A Squadron of Divisional Cavalry and one troop of tanks went ahead; the rest of Divisional Cavalry and A Squadron, 20 Regiment, moved into San Vincenzo, a little town among terraced hillsides which rose to the rocky heights east of the [Liri](#). A Company of the 26th made steady progress, despite the mines and booby traps which wounded seven men during the day, and covered eight miles before halting near Capistrello, only four miles from [Avezzano](#). The rest of the**

battalion stopped overnight between **Civitella Roveto** and Capistrello, and the transport, after being held up by bad demolitions farther south, also passed **Civitella Roveto** before stopping to laager. Some delayed-action explosions on the road during the night cut signal communications to the rear.

Another early start was made on 9 June, when C Company took over the lead from A and advanced to within about two miles of **Avezzano**. A two-man patrol went on ahead over low hills to enter the town, where the mayor and citizens had turned out in force to welcome the Allied troops but waited all day in vain. The two men were treated royally. A very bad demolition blocked the road just south of Capistrello, but the troop of tanks managed to get over a saddle and catch up with the infantry. Half-way up the last hill before **Avezzano**, however, they were held up by yet another demolition—the last one.

Early on 10 June C Company and the troop of tanks were on the Capistrello- **Avezzano** road, D Company and a troop of armoured cars on the road which linked Route 82 with Route 5 west of **Avezzano**, and the rest of the battalion in the vicinity of Capistrello. The 24th Battalion had arrived the previous day at Castronuovo, and the 25th was still back near **Balsorano**.

By this time, however, **10 Corps** had advised the Division that Route 82 would not be needed. Sixth Brigade was ordered not to deal with any more demolitions but to continue searching the **Avezzano** area with reconnaissance parties. The GOC drove up to 26 Battalion in the morning and, together with Brigadier Parkinson, went to a point overlooking **Avezzano** and the Fucino plain. He told the Brigadier to hold his present positions and to send a strong patrol to reconnoitre Route 5 westwards from **Avezzano** and make contact with **8 Indian Division** troops reported in **Arsoli**.

A patrol composed of two troops of armoured cars, two scout cars of the engineers and a platoon of infantry in 15-cwt trucks set out along Route 5 in the afternoon of the 10th, but was delayed by a series of

demolitions. Two days later it met armoured cars of **12 Lancers** at **Carsoli**, six miles from **Arsoli**.

A platoon of C Company, 26 Battalion, and other troops entered **Avezzano** on the 10th. During the next few days patrols reconnoitred the side roads and villages around the Fucino plain, where 'wild flowers of every colour grew in profusion and the squares and rectangles of cultivated land gave the appearance of being painted on a canvas.'<sup>1</sup> The evidence obtained from civilians and the numerous escaped Allied prisoners of war who came into the lines confirmed that the enemy had gone quickly from this region, leaving only small rearguards to blow the demolitions. Many reports were received of the presence of parties of Germans, but only a few were rounded up. Most of them seemed to be marauders intent on reprisals against the Italians or the gathering of loot before they departed.

For A Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, whose patrols explored the villages near **Avezzano**, the next few days were 'a long riot of German prisoners, escapees, signorinas and vino, Fascist spies and partisans.... The beauty of the countryside, the affection of the people and the lack of any and all restrictions and restraint together with the zest of chasing the odd Fascist spy is, in many respects, an ideal existence.'<sup>2</sup> Among the Germans collected was 'a very smelly bunch of ragamuffins' from *85 Regiment of 5 Mountain Division*, whom the partisans had locked in a house while working themselves up to murder pitch.

Many of the escaped Allied prisoners were reluctant to leave the Italian families with whom they had been sheltering. 'Some came alone, some brought wives, and a few their wives and children.'<sup>3</sup>

The New Zealanders in the valley north of **Sora** visited **Castronuovo**, **Rendinara** and other villages on the lower slopes, among fields of wheat, barley, maize, clover and vines. The Italians said the Germans had brought the wheat seed from **Russia** and that it had been sown by Allied prisoners, but the enemy had departed before he had time to harvest or destroy the crops. The grain was not yet ready. The hungry Italians who

clustered around the New Zealand camps were willing to do anything for bread or any kind of food; they brought cherries, eggs and wine, and offered to wash clothes. 'Though it's strictly against regulations, the chaps gave them odd tins of bully, or cheese or ... a few other items of rations which are not popular and pile up. At each meal we have a large audience

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<sup>1</sup> Eye-witness account quoted in *20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 439.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, Div Cav.

<sup>3</sup> *F. D. Norton, 26 Battalion*, p. 405.

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of kids mostly, all equipped with some sort of tin or billy and waiting for scraps. The boys scrape their plates into the kids' tins and if anything is left in the dixies, L—shares that among them too.' <sup>1</sup>

(ii)

While the two infantry brigades had been advancing in the valley north of **Sora**, 4 Armoured Brigade had continued to protect the Division's right flank in the **Monte Morrone – Alvito** area.

Brigadier Inglis gave instructions on 3 June for the formation of a mixed patrol to search north of **Alvito** to see if there was a way into the hills by which assistance could be given to the paratroops who had been dropped near **Collelongo**. A force under the command of Captain **Saxton** <sup>2</sup> and consisting of the Reconnaissance Troop and a troop of Shermans of A Squadron, 19 Regiment, together with a platoon of 2 Company, 22 Battalion, in trucks, started out the same day and reached the village of Fontana Lepore, about four miles from **Alvito**. Saxton's force did not make contact with the retreating enemy 'but must have been hot on his heels.' <sup>3</sup> Civilians said he had left only that morning, with mules and

mountain guns. The country beyond Lepore was too difficult for the tanks. They engaged what appeared to be German observation posts in the hills to the north-east, and received in return a heavy bout of shelling. As the result of the general revision of the Division's role, Saxton's force was recalled on 4 June.

The tanks of A Squadron, 19 Regiment, apart from those with Saxton's force, took up firing positions near **Alvito** to engage suspected enemy observation posts and gun positions in support of the armoured cars of **12 Lancers** which, with the assistance of 1/5 Essex, were advancing on the **San Donato- Opi** road. Patrols of the Essex had entered **Opi** by the morning of 6 June, by which time the country between **Sora** and **Opi** was clear of the enemy.

*(iii)*

The New Zealand Division's task had ended with the occupation of **Avezzano**. **Eighth Army** had sufficient troops deployed forward for the immediate operations against the still retreating enemy, and the congestion of the roads demanded that only essential transport should be allowed to follow the leading formations. At

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<sup>1</sup> Diary, B. C. H. Moss, 27 (MG) Bn.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj C. K. Saxton**, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Kurow, 23 May 1913; commercial traveller.

<sup>3</sup> *19 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 419.

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midday on 11 June the Division passed from the command of **10 Corps** to **Eighth Army** reserve. Orders were issued for Divisional Cavalry to hold the **Avezzano** sector with one squadron, 6 Infantry Brigade to withdraw on to 4 and 5 Brigades, and the whole Division then to go to a rest area at **Arce**.

Advance parties left on 12 June and the Division moved back during the next two days, **Divisional Headquarters**, **Divisional Artillery** and **5 and 6 Infantry Brigades** to the **Liri valley** west of the junction of Routes **6 and 82** at **Arce**, and **Divisional Cavalry (less A Squadron)** and **4 Armoured Brigade (less 18 Regiment)** a mile or two north of **Fontana Liri**. The **18th Armoured Regiment** remained a few miles away in a valley below **Veroli**. A Squadron, **Divisional Cavalry**, was recalled from the **Avezzano** sector on 16 June, when Canadian engineers arrived with orders to dismantle all Bailey bridging equipment for use elsewhere.

The remainder of June and part of July were spent in training and recreation near **Arce**.

(iv)

The New Zealand Division's casualties in April, May and June, during the occupation of the Apennine position north of **Cassino** and the advance to **Sora** and **Avezzano**, were 121 killed and died of wounds, 600 wounded, and two prisoners of war, a total of 723. The Division had covered about 60 miles in a fortnight. The policy had been not to run headlong into opposition and incur needless casualties. Had the advance been pressed vigorously regardless of casualties, heavier losses might have been inflicted on the enemy, especially in prisoners – altogether the Division collected just over 300 – but little more of tactical value would have been achieved.

The German tactics during the withdrawal on the Division's front were designed to prevent a force breaking through to the **Liri River** south of **Sora**, which might have cut off a large body of troops. The **51st Mountain Corps** therefore spread its troops over as wide a front as possible and tried to slow down the pursuit with rearguard actions and demolitions. Once the main weight of **Eighth Army** had passed **Arce** and crossed the **Liri River**, nothing further was to be gained by holding south of **Sora**; all that remained to be done was to delay the pursuit below **Balsorano** in the upper **Liri valley** long enough to allow the left-flank

troops of **51 Corps** time to fall back through **Avezzano**. This the enemy succeeded in doing.

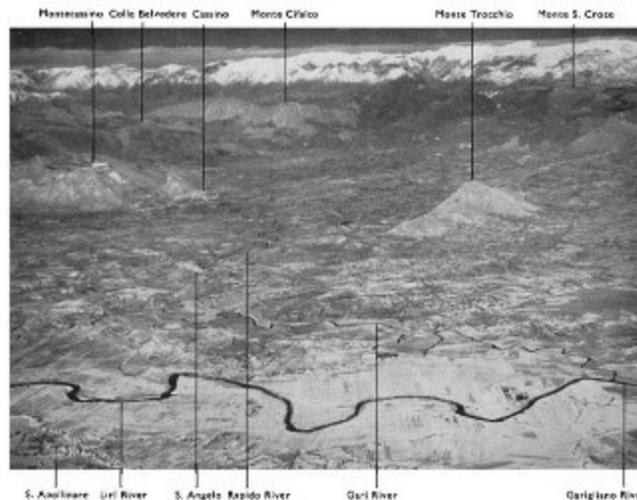
The **New Zealand Division** made as much speed as it reasonably could under the circumstances. Demolitions were very largely



The snow-clad Monte Cairo towers above the monastery and town of Cassino as they were before their destruction in February–March 1944

The snow-clad **Monte Cairo** towers above the monastery and town of **Cassino** as they were before their destruction in February–March 1944

Looking north to the Apennines from the junction of the Liri and Rapido valleys



Looking north to the **Apennines** from the junction of the **Liri** and Rapido valleys



Acquafondata, the village from which convoys took supplies to the distributing points in the Apennine mountain sector

**Acquafondata, the village from which convoys took supplies to the distributing points in the Apennine mountain sector**

A hairpin bend on the Inferno Track



**A hairpin bend on the Inferno Track**



An aerial view of the road zigzagging up the southern slope of Colle Belvedere and over the shoulder of Colle Abate towards Terelle. On the other side of Colle Belvedere is the entrance of the pass through the mountains to Atina.

**An aerial view of the road zigzagging up the southern slope of Colle Belvedere and over the shoulder of Colle Abate towards Terelle. On the other side of Colle Belvedere is the entrance of the pass through the mountains to Atina**



Guns bombarding the Gustav Line

**Guns bombarding the Gustav Line**

Hove Dump before it was shelled by the Germans



**Hove Dump** before it was shelled by the Germans



The ruins of the monastery

**The ruins of the monastery**

The devastation of Cassino



**The devastation of Cassino**



Tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment and British infantry enter  
Cassino, 18 May 1944

**Tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment and British infantry enter Cassino, 18 May 1944**

Italian refugees return to their homes while the New Zealand Division  
advances beyond the Gustav Line



**Italian refugees return to their homes while the New Zealand Division advances beyond the  
Gustav Line**



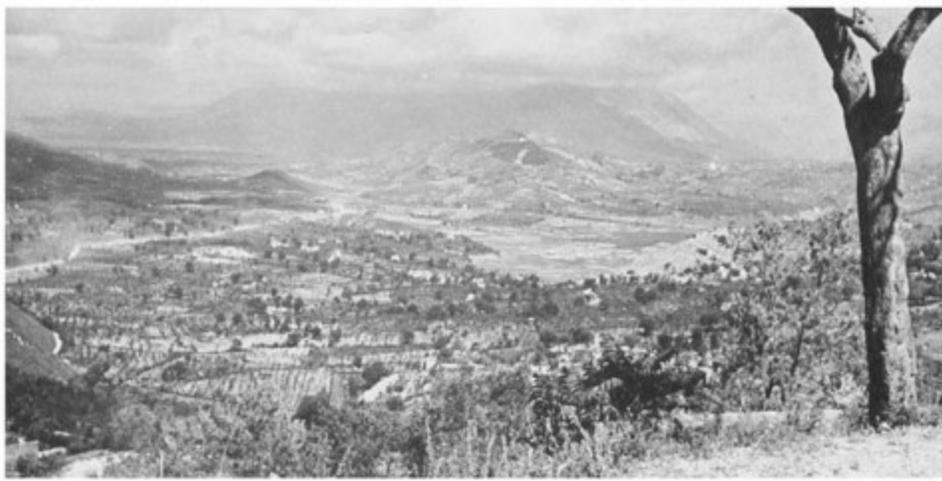
In conference at Headquarters 5 Brigade: an American military attaché, Brigadier K. L. Stewart, Brigadier C. E. Weir, Colonel R. C. Queree, General Freyberg and Brigadier G. B. Parkinson

**In conference at Headquarters 5 Brigade: an American military attaché, Brigadier K. L. Stewart, Brigadier C. E. Weir, Colonel R. C. Queree, [General Freyberg](#) and Brigadier G. B. Parkinson**



General Freyberg and the Prime Minister, Mr Peter Fraser, at Headquarters 5 Infantry Brigade near Sora

**[General Freyberg](#) and the Prime Minister, Mr Peter Fraser, at Headquarters 5 Infantry Brigade near [Sora](#)**



Looking towards Sora from Vicalvi. The upper Liri valley disappears in the distance on the right

**Looking towards Sora from Vicalvi. The upper Liri valley disappears in the distance on the right**

In the upper Liri valley beyond Sora



**In the upper Liri valley beyond Sora**

**responsible for delays, especially at the crossing of the Melfa River near Atina and the Fibreno River south-east of Sora. The infantry got across quickly, but as the commander of 5 Brigade has since said, ‘I would not let them go far until we had supporting arms (i.e. wheels) across the rivers. Had we taken the risk of exposing our inf to tank attack, we might have taken**

**SORA**

**a day earlier than we did.’<sup>1</sup>**

**It was not known whether the enemy had tanks. Traces of tracked**

vehicles had been seen at **Atina**, but these might have been self-propelled guns. There is no indication in German records that either *44 Division* or *5 Mountain Division* disposed of any tanks, but they had a few self-propelled guns and towed anti-tank guns, which of course did not have much mobility in such hilly country and in any case had to be withdrawn behind the demolitions or abandoned.

The enemy made the most of his excellent observation from the high ground overlooking the roads along which the pursuit came, and employed his field and medium guns effectively, but perhaps his best artillery work was done by the mountain guns in the hills east of the **Sora- Balsorano** valley; these were the guns which inflicted so many casualties on the New Zealand artillery. The enemy also held up the advance at times with his mortars and automatic weapons, the crews of which sometimes maintained their fire until their ammunition was exhausted.

The advance to **Avezzano** was in pursuit of an enemy who was retreating. If it had little influence on the manner of his going, it at least did something for the morale of the New Zealanders who participated: for the first time in **Italy**, after the series of rebuffs, if not defeats, at **Orsogna** and **Cassino**, they had the enemy on the run. After months of wallowing in mud and snow and the other discomforts of static warfare, they found it exhilarating to be on the move again. It was reminiscent of the war of movement they had mastered in the Desert.

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<sup>1</sup> Maj-Gen Stewart to **War History Branch**, 1958.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## CHAPTER 3 – THE PURSUIT NORTH OF ROME

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## I: AFTER THE FALL OF ROME

### *I: After the Fall of Rome*

(i)

**SOUTH of Rome**, where the **Apennines** occupy nearly two-thirds of the width of the peninsula, the terrain had favoured the Germans in their defence of the Winter Line. North of the city, however, the peninsula widens, but the mountain backbone narrows towards the Adriatic coast and gives way in the west to comparatively open, rolling country little suited to the German purpose of blocking the Allied advance. North of **Lake Trasimene** the country becomes more rugged again, and beyond the **Arno River** the northern **Apennines** turn back towards the west to span the peninsula and block the approaches to the plains of the River Po in **Lombardy**. Apart from the few roads which thread their way through deep valleys and over high passes, the only gap in this great barrier is the narrow corridor of foothills along the Adriatic coast south of **Rimini**.

It seemed unlikely that Kesselring would attempt a protracted defence until his depleted armies reached the **Arno River** and the **Gothic Line**<sup>1</sup> in the northern **Apennines**. He strengthened his right flank, which in the open country west of the Tiber River was in greater danger than the sector nearer the **Apennines**, by reinforcing with fresh but inexperienced formations, moving **14 Panzer Corps** west of the Tiber to join **1 Parachute Corps in Fourteenth Army**, and replacing **14 Panzer Corps** by **76 Panzer Corps** on the right of **51 Mountain Corps in Tenth Army**. Kesselring gave orders for a gradual fighting withdrawal to the **Gothic Line**, but Hitler was

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<sup>1</sup> Described at first by the Allies as the **Pisa- Rimini** line, the **Gothic Line** was originally called the 'Apennine position' by the Germans, then the '**Gothic Line**' (*Gotenstellung*) and from 16 June the 'Green Line' (*Gruene Linie*).

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suspicious that he might want to fall back to this position without offering serious resistance and demanded that 'After reorganisation of the formations the Army Group will resume defence operations as far south of the **Apennines** as possible.' <sup>1</sup> On 14 June, therefore, the German commander-in-chief ordered that the **Gothic Line** was to be built up sufficiently to resist an Allied attempt to break through to the plains of the River Po, and to gain time for these preparations the Army Group was to 'stand and defend the Albert- Frieda Line', <sup>2</sup> which crossed the peninsula from coast to coast and passed just south of **Lake Trasimene**.

*(ii)*

At first the Allied armies made rapid progress in pursuit of the Germans north of **Rome**. **Eighth Army** drove up the **Tiber valley** with two armoured divisions of 13 Corps, 6 South African Armoured Division along Route 3 west of the river and 6 British Armoured Division up Route 4 east of it; on the left **Fifth Army** advanced with **2 US Corps** on Route 2 and 6 US Corps on Route 1 up the coastal flank. The Americans seized the port of **Civitavecchia**, 40 miles north-west of **Rome**, on 7 June and the **Viterbo** airfields on the 9th. Although the port had been extensively damaged, it was open to Allied traffic in less than a week.

Meanwhile the enemy also began to fall back along the Adriatic coast and **5 Corps** <sup>3</sup> started to follow up on 8 June. **Orsogna** – which had withstood the New Zealand Division's repeated attacks six months earlier – was entered next day, and **Chieti** and **Pescara** were occupied and the **Pescara** River crossed on the 10th, the day the New Zealanders arrived at **Avezzano**.

General Alexander calculated that the enemy, despite the reinforcements he was known to have received, was not strong enough to hold the **Gothic Line** against a really powerful attack. In an appreciation to General Wilson (Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean) on 7 June he wrote of the Allied armies: 'Neither the

**Apennines** nor even the Alps should prove a serious obstacle to their enthusiasm and skill. <sup>4</sup> He proposed to continue to press the pursuit up the centre of the peninsula and over the northern **Apennines**. If his armies were held in force he 'would mount a full-scale attack on **Bologna** not later than 15th August. I would then establish a firm base in the area of **Bologna** and **Modena** for

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, Commander-in-Chief South-West.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix to war diary, Commander-in-Chief South-West.

<sup>3</sup> **5 Corps** now comprised 4 Ind Div and the Italian Liberation Corps. The two divisions of the opposing German *Hauck Group* had been drawn into the battle west of the Apennines and replaced by *278 Inf Div*.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander's Despatch, *The Allied Armies in Italy*, p. 2931.

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the development of further operations either westwards into **France** or north-eastwards into **Austria** according to the requirements of Allied strategy at that time.' <sup>1</sup> Such a plan would be possible only if the existing Allied forces were retained in **Italy**.

Alexander ordered **Eighth Army** to advance with all possible speed to the general area of **Florence**, **Bibbiena** and **Arezzo**, on the middle and upper reaches of the **Arno River**, and **Fifth Army** to occupy the region of **Pisa**, **Lucca** and **Pistoia**, at the northern extremity of the **Tuscan** plains; he authorised the two army commanders to take 'extreme risks to secure [these] vital areas ... before the enemy can reorganise or be reinforced.' <sup>2</sup>

To carry out these orders both armies regrouped. In Eighth Army **10 Corps** (6 British Armoured and 8 Indian Divisions, with **10 Indian Division** in reserve) assumed 13 Corps' responsibilities east of the Tiber River, and 13 Corps (78 Division and 6 South African Armoured Division, with 4 Division in reserve) continued its northward drive west of the

river. On the Adriatic coast **2 Polish Corps** replaced **5 Corps**. The **Canadian Corps** was still in reserve. The **French Expeditionary Corps** relieved **2 US Corps** on **Fifth Army's** right and **4 US Corps** took over the coastal sector from **6 US Corps**.

The pursuit continued against stiffening resistance. Tenth Corps entered **Perugia**, east of **Lake Trasimene**, on 20 June, and was then checked in the hills beyond the town; **13 Corps** was halted near the south-western shore of the lake. The Allied armies were up to the Albert-Frieda (or Trasimene) Line, where the Germans had established a coherent defence across the Italian peninsula. Only after hard fighting was **13 Corps** able to break this line west of the lake and continue its advance. Between **Lake Trasimene** and **Arezzo**, its next objective, **13 Corps** was halted again; it did not enter **Arezzo** until 16 July, after it had been reinforced by the New Zealand Division.

*(iii)*

While the Allied armies were making these gains in central **Italy**, Generals Wilson and Alexander were vainly striving to retain for the Italian campaign priority over all other operations in the **Mediterranean**. The Combined Chiefs of Staff had agreed in April that ANVIL <sup>3</sup> (the invasion of southern **France**) should be deferred so as not to interfere with the offensive which was to

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander's Despatch, p. 2931.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander's Despatch, p. 2931.

<sup>3</sup> Later known by the codename DRAGOON.

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accomplish the capture of **Rome**, but also had directed Wilson to plan for the 'best possible use of the amphibious lift remaining to you either in support of operations in **Italy**, or in order to take advantage of

opportunities arising in the south of **France** or elsewhere....' <sup>1</sup> Wilson therefore warned Alexander on 22 May that he intended to mount an amphibious operation not later than mid- September, either in close support of the Allied Armies in **Italy** or elsewhere.

The Combined Chiefs of Staff informed Wilson on 14 June that 'they were firm in the decision to mount and launch an amphibious operation of the type and scope planned for Southern **France**', <sup>2</sup> but a choice might be made between a seaborne assault on the south or the west coast of **France** or at the head of the Adriatic Sea. 'All such plans were contingent on the completion of the ground advance to the **Pisa- Rimini** line and the ultimate selection of an operation was dependent on the general strategic situation....' <sup>3</sup> Wilson informed Alexander of this decision and directed him to prepare for the release of American and French divisions from **Fifth Army** for assignment to **Seventh Army**.

Wilson recommended a course favoured by Alexander: the continuation of the Italian offensive into the **Po valley** and thence, supported by an amphibious assault on the Istrian peninsula, through the **Ljubljana Gap** (in **Yugoslavia**) into **Austria** and **Hungary**, which would threaten **Germany** from the south-east. General Eisenhower, however, wanted the operation against southern **France**. He believed that the Allies could support only one major theatre in the European war, which was in **France**. An important consideration was that an additional port was needed for the introduction into **France** of some 40 to 50 divisions waiting in the **United States**.

Wilson received a directive from the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 2 July that he was to carry out the operation against southern **France**, on the target date of 15 August if possible. He informed Alexander on the 5th that the new operation must receive priority over the Italian campaign but assured him that not more than four French and three American divisions were to be taken from his command; they were to be replaced by 92 US (Negro) Infantry Division and a Brazilian infantry division. Alexander's task was to continue the destruction of the German

forces in **Italy**; he was to advance through the **Apennines** to the **Po River** and thereafter to a line from **Venice** through **Padua** to **Verona** and **Brescia**, on the northern edge of the plains.

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<sup>1</sup> Combined Chiefs of Staff directive to General Wilson, 19 April 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Report by the Supreme Allied Commander, **Mediterranean**, on the Italian Campaign, Part II, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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Alexander realised that, with the loss of 6 US Corps, the French Expeditionary Corps and a large part of the Allied Air Force, the penetration into the **Po valley** before the winter set in was most unlikely. He therefore gave permission for the bombing of the Po bridges, which previously had been spared because of the engineering problems that would be involved in rebuilding them.

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## II: THE DIVISION AT ARCE

### *II: The Division at Arce*

*(i)*

While the Allied armies were continuing their advance north of **Rome**, the New Zealand Division rested and trained alongside the Liri River near the village of **Arce**. The men settled in tents under trees, in the vineyards or on gentle slopes near the river, in a peaceful countryside well suited to the open-air life. The fine weather, however, was interspersed with occasional showers and sudden thunderstorms, the worst of which drove the men hurriedly and frantically to dig drains around their bivouac tents.

The **Eighth Army** commander (General Leese) advised **General Freyberg** on 16 June that he did not see any role for the New Zealand Division in the immediate future. After discussions with Generals Alexander and Leese the GOC passed on the information to the Division on the 20th that it would not be needed for operations for 30 days.

The New Zealanders and Canadians were left out of the advance north of **Rome** because Fifth and Eighth Armies were both limited to those forces which could be supplied along the available roads. It was hoped that the two armies, so constituted, would be able to push the Germans back to the **Pisa- Rimini** or **Gothic Line**, while the forces left in reserve rested and reorganised in preparation for the breakthrough into the northern plains of **Italy**. This plan, however, had to be modified because of the demands for troops to take part in the landings in southern **France**, and also because of the unexpectedly determined German resistance south of the **Arno** River. Consequently the New Zealand Division's promised 30-day stay around **Arce** was cut short.

*(ii)*

**General Freyberg** had taken steps immediately after the fall of **Rome** to secure a suitable building there to serve as a New Zealand forces club, and also had made a personal approach to General Alexander for permission to send men on daily conducted tours of the city. The Division took over one of **Rome's** best hotels, the Quirinale, in the Via Nazionale. Leave was not generous and the decision that other ranks were not allowed to stay overnight (only a limited number of officers, nurses and VADs could do so) was not at all popular. Every man was keen to get to **Rome**, and more succeeded in getting there than were supposed to do so under the scheme of daily leave apportioning.

An officer describing his first visit to the city says that ‘the Catholics all made a beeline for St. Peters where the Pope was giving mass to 4000 members of the Allied forces, and Mac and I started off on a sight seeing tour.... We walked up the via Nazionale, looking into shops and watching the passers-by. The people of **Rome** are a different stamp from the Neapolitans and many of the women are really lovely. They are very happy to have their city liberated from the Tedeschi and posters and banners across the streets welcome the Allied soldier. Like all Italians though, they are not above making money out of the troops, and prices of everything are high. Half the trouble as usual is caused by the Yanks with their wads of lucre and their willingness to pay any price for an article they want. They shove the prices up wherever they go.... We dropped into a bar which must have been a first class place in peace time, with mirrors all over the walls, fine glassware and elegant furnishings. We sampled some of the famous Sarti cognac, a thimbleful costing L25. It was rare stuff, almost like whisky.’

The Quirinale had not yet been opened as a New Zealand club. ‘We were thinking of going to the **NAAFI** for a cup of tea and a sandwich when we were accosted by an old man who asked us in broken English if we wanted lunch. We were surprised because there are no “ristorantes” open in **Rome**, Jerry having taken most of the foodstuffs, but we decided to see what he had up his sleeve. He led us for a couple of blocks [adding several Americans and Englishmen to the party on the way] and then

turned suddenly into an inconspicuous doorway in the Street of the Twentieth of September.... We went up six storeys and were then ushered into the dining room of a well-to-do private home. While the lady of the house set the table we looked around the carpeted and well furnished room. An expensive radio stood in a corner and through the doors of glass fronted cabinets we could see shelves of crystal & glassware, some of it inlaid with gold. As the Yank major said— this guy musta been a Fascist to have kept all this from the Tedeschi. The meal consisted of macaroni and vegetable soup with a roll of white bread, beefsteak and beans, and cherries for dessert, so it was obviously a black market feed. The price was 150 lire but any civilian who can turn on a meal with bread and meat can name his own price....' <sup>1</sup>

*(iii)*

Excursions were made to the **Cassino** battlefield. The ruins of the town had changed little in two months, except that 'the rims of the craters on the outskirts are overgrown with weeds, and poppies and daisies are flowering about the place....The air is still heavy with a fetid stench from decomposing bodies and the sour taint of the phosphorus shells.... most of the town is just a flattened chaos of stone rubble, shattered beams and severed girders, all jutting at grotesque angles and torn and twisted by high explosive. We entered the town from Caruso Rd and the first grisly exhibit was a partially intact building, heaped inside to a depth of eight feet with unidentifiable portions of human bodies.... All over the town bodies lay where they had been struck down.... Numbers of New Zealanders were working among the ruins, recovering mates whose uniforms alone kept them in one piece....

'We left the town and went hand over hand up a rope trailing down the precipitous mine-free track up **Castle Hill**. Outside the castle wall, rusting weapons and shrap-riddled equipment mark the scene of many a savage counter attack made by Jerry from Pt 165 in attempts to retake the Castle.... From the Castle we gingerly picked our way to the zig-zag road which was formerly a walled and bitumen surfaced track. Now the

wall is breached every few feet and not a square yard of surface is clear of boulders and loose rocks which have been dislodged from further up the hillside. From foot to summit, **Montecassino** hill is strewn with the casings of the countless 25 pr. smoke shells which blinded the Abbey for two months.... Because of the mine and booby trap danger we walked carefully the whole way up, stepping cautiously over a few dead Jerries....

‘Behind Hangman's Hill the little flat is churned, by hundreds of overlapping shell holes, into an earthy mass like a potato patch which has been dug over. Between Hangman's Hill and the Abbey there was originally a terraced garden with little stone walls and fruit and olive trees. Not a vestige of the walls remain... and the softer-wooded trees are also gone. Only the sturdier olives remain, and they are just tortured trunks.... Fanning out from the front of the monastery, like the shingle slide at the foot of a crumbling rock face, is a great cascade of dust, mortar and shale—formed

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<sup>1</sup> Diary, B. C. H. Moss.

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from the shattered walls.... No earthquake could have so ruthlessly razed the towers and domes and battlemented walls as did the bombing....’ <sup>1</sup>

(iv)

The Division organised leave and trips to places other than **Rome**. Through the courtesy of the **Royal Navy**, parties were able to spend three days on the Isle of **Ischia** in the Gulf of **Naples**. Parties also went to **Sorrento**, **Salerno** and Amalfi, and elsewhere on the coast. Units held organised picnics at the lovely Lake Albano, in the **Alban Hills**, and along the banks of the fast-flowing Liri River. Concerts were given by the immensely popular Kiwi Concert Party and a British ENSA <sup>2</sup> party; films were shown by the **YMCA** mobile cinema, and programmes given by the brigade bands. Units staged race meetings and organised games of

cricket, baseball, basketball, athletics, swimming, and aquatic carnivals on the [Liri](#).

The weather was so hot that exertion made men sweat. The atmosphere was still oppressive at 7.30 p.m., when anti-malarial precautions, which included the covering of bare limbs, had to be taken. The flies were also very annoying, 'not only being persistent like the desert variety, but biting hard as well.' <sup>3</sup>

Only part of the time was taken up with leave, sport and entertainment. The usual routine was training in the mornings and exercises on many afternoons. 'This "rest" business you hear about is really only a lot of hard work for us, training, etc. They never leave you alone for long.' <sup>4</sup> Units were on route marches, sometimes up steep, zigzag roads to hilltop villages; they held NCOs' and snipers' courses and lectures, were instructed in minelifting, attended demonstrations by other arms, and carried out shoots with their own.

In a series of exercises in co-operation between armour and infantry, various combinations from regiments and battalions reached a sound basis of understanding. In one such exercise the companies of 26 Battalion advanced with tanks accompanying each platoon. 'Guided to their targets by the infantry, the tanks did a lot of shooting which added to the reality of the scene. Radio communication between tanks and infantry was still not very successful, but when the radio failed use was made of the telephone fitted to the rear of each tank.' <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Diary, B. C. H. Moss.

<sup>2</sup> Entertainments National Services Association.

<sup>3</sup> Diary, B. C. H. Moss.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Jim Henderson in *22 Battalion*, p. 303.

Because the anti-tank gunners had been employed as infantrymen in the recent operations and were likely to be so again, 7 Anti-Tank Regiment trained in infantry tactics and in the use of infantry weapons. The regiment received an issue of nine M10s, the new self-propelled anti-tank guns, <sup>1</sup> which were allotted to 31 Battery. There was little time for instruction with these weapons before the Division left **Arce**, but as many men as possible were sent to 4 Armoured Brigade for short courses in driving, wireless operating, gunnery and maintenance. The M10 was much more vulnerable than the Sherman tank, and its crew therefore needed no less skill than was demanded of the tank crew. The conversion of 4 Brigade from an infantry to an armoured brigade had taken a year, but the men of 31 Battery were in action with their M10s three weeks after they first set eyes on these 'tank destroyers'.

For about three weeks in June and a week in July the New Zealand **Army Service Corps**, assisted by men and vehicles from the artillery and the armoured brigade, was very busy carrying ammunition, petrol and supplies for **Eighth Army** from depots in or near the **Volturno** valley to dumps at **Alatri**, **Valmontone**, near **Rome**, and **Narni** (43 miles north of the city), and from **Anzio** to **Narni**. 'Moving ammunition and supplies with a rush involved platoons [of the transport] in heavy work over long hours, and although drivers stood up well to the strain of long hours and the choked and often dusty roads, an avoidable annoyance was poor administration at some dumps, together with some double-talk of orders and counter-orders which led to a certain amount of confusion, waste of time, and ripe cursing.' <sup>2</sup>

(v)

The **Eighth Army** Chief of Staff (Major-General G. P. Walsh) telephoned HQ 2 NZ Division from HQ Allied Armies in **Italy** on the night of 7-8 July to say that he had an urgent operational role for the Division and wanted it to begin moving to a forward concentration area south of

**Lake Trasimene** next day. This order was quite unexpected because **General Freyberg** had been told by HQ **Eighth Army** on the 6th that there was no forecast of a move for the Division for some time. The task to which the Division was summoned was to reinforce 13 Corps, whose resources were considered inadequate for an attack on the German positions

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<sup>1</sup> The **7 A-Tk Regt** narrative describes the new weapon as a 3-inch American naval gun mounted in a Sherman tank chassis.

<sup>2</sup> Henderson, *RMT*, pp. 321–2.

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dominating the approach to **Arezzo**, about 20 miles beyond Lake Trasimene.

The GOC immediately called the GSO I (Colonel Thornton <sup>1</sup>) the AA & QMG (Colonel **Barrington** <sup>2</sup>) and the Commander NZASC (Brigadier **Crump** <sup>3</sup>) to confer with him on arrangements for the move. It was decided that the NZASC should start next day by sending vehicles to **Civita Castellana**, a town on Route 3 north of **Rome**, where the Division was to stage en route to Lake Trasimene, and that the first brigade— **6 Infantry Brigade** (Brigadier **Burrows** <sup>4</sup>) was selected—should move from the **Arce** rest area on the night of 9–10 July. Formations were warned of the move by telephone.

The move was to be secret: all fernleaf signs and unit signs were to be obliterated from vehicles, and hat badges and shoulder titles removed. But these security measures did not deceive the Italians, who identified the ‘neo-zelandesi’ as they travelled northward.

The sudden call to the Division imposed much organising and travelling on the NZASC, many of whose vehicles were still carrying ammunition and supplies for **Eighth Army**. All load-carriers were ordered to return immediately to **Arce**, and company headquarters and workshops were to go to **Civita Castellana**. On the 8th the troop-carrying

vehicles of the two RMT companies joined the battalions of 5 and 6 Infantry Brigades; other transport picked up ammunition, petrol and rations and went to Civita Castellana. Next day the NZASC convoys completed the second stage of the move.

The Division made the 200-mile journey to **Lake Trasimene** in six groups. The first convoy, **36 Survey Battery**, left **Arce** in daylight on 9 July and was followed that night by HQ 2 NZ Division and **6 Infantry Brigade** group, and on the next three nights by **5 Infantry Brigade** group, a divisional troops group, and 4 Armoured

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<sup>1</sup> Lt-Gen Sir Leonard Thornton, KCB, CBE, 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; QMG 1955–56; Adjutant-General 1956–58; Chief of SEATO Military Planning Office, 1958–60; Chief of General Staff, 1960–65; Chief of Defence Staff, Jul 1965–.

<sup>2</sup> **Brig B. Barrington**, DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; born Marton, 2 Oct 1907; insurance inspector; BM 6 Bde May 1941–Jan 1942; AA & QMG **2 NZ Div** Nov 1942–Dec 1944; died **Wellington**, 17 Apr 1954.

<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.

<sup>4</sup> **Brig J. T. Burrows**, CBE, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Gk); **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO 20 Bn May 1941, Dec 1941– Jul 1942; 20 Bn and Armd Regt Aug 1942–Jun 1943; comd 4 Bde 27–29 Jun 1942, 5 Jul–15 Aug 1942; 5 Bde Mar 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; 6 Bde Jul–Aug 1944; Commander Southern Military District, 1951–53; Commander K Force, 1953–54; Commander, SMD, 1955–60.

**Brigade group. The convoys took about seven and a half hours to make the run by Routes 6 and 3 to the staging area at Civita Castellana, where the troops spent a day resting, and about the same time to cover the remaining half of the journey by way of Route 3 to Narni, from there to Orvieto, and on Route 71 to the south-west side of Lake Trasimene.**

**The first part of the journey was made over good roads and was uneventful except that it gave many men their first glimpse of Rome as they passed through its outskirts at daybreak. On**



ARCE TO LAKE TRASIMENE

**Route 3, beyond the city, the New Zealanders saw the unmistakable evidence of the enemy's hasty retreat under attack from the air and ground forces. The highway had been cut in many places by bombs and was dotted with wrecked German vehicles. At the Division's staging area hundreds of vehicles and guns were parked nose-to-tail and 'a single enemy fighter plane could have brewed up dozens of them. That such a risk can be taken, and the fact that we can move a convoy of any size in daylight is a tribute to the air supremacy maintained by the DAF and MAAF. The day was hot and a strong wind blew steadily all afternoon making the place about as comfortable as Amiriya in a khamsin....' <sup>1</sup>**

**At Narni, a town in a gorge, 'yawning gaps had been torn in three**

huge arched bridges by the Jerry engineers but most of the road damage had been caused by our own bombing. At least once in every mile or so the road and railway had been straddled by sticks of bombs which had breached the highway and cratered the surrounding area.... every few hundred yards lay the burnt-out rusting skeletons of Jerry transport.... the total of wrecks must have run into four figures. Quite a number of tanks and S.P. guns were among the victims, and every now and then small groups of railway rolling stock sat drunkenly athwart the rails, with peppered sides and blackened ribs.... In one place a whole double column of Jerry transport had been caught hiding in a tree-lined side road and every vehicle shattered. The Hun has been using a considerable amount of civilian transport, particularly buses and Fiat cars, to try and make up his losses....' <sup>2</sup>

With the arrival of 4 Armoured Brigade's convey on the 14th, the whole of the wheeled portion of the Division was assembled by **Lake Trasimene**. The heavy tracked vehicles travelled on tank transporters, which completed the journey three days later. Camp sites were established under oaks and pines in a pleasant rural locality, which was found to be appreciably cooler than the **Liri** valley. Much of the lake was surrounded by mud and reeds, but where it was accessible for swimming the water was pleasantly warm. Some units, however, were able to make only the briefest acquaintance with **Lake Trasimene** at this time, for 6 Infantry Brigade was committed for operations on the **Arezzo** front on 12 July, the day after its arrival. The Division was placed under the command of 13 Corps (Lieutenant-General Kirkman) at midday on the 11th.

Some units, therefore, continued northward along Route 71, past **Castiglione** on a promontory on the western shore of the lake, and

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<sup>1</sup> Diary, B. C. H. Moss. **Amiriya** was a transit camp near **Alexandria**.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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**beyond an airfield crowded mostly with Spitfires. At a railway station a little farther on 'a whole concentration of locomotives and railway rolling stock had been beaten up by the RAF. Numerous craters were squarely in the middle of the tracks and the rails were bent back like baling wire.... One or two [locomotives] had been ripped open like tin cans.... Most of the coaches and trucks were burnt out while others were shattered by the explosion of their contents....' <sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> **Diary, B.C.H. Moss.**

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## III: MONTE LIGNANO

### *III: Monte Lignano*

(i)

The Allied armies were checked right across **Italy** before they reached the ports of **Ancona** on the east coast and **Leghorn** on the west, and in the middle of the peninsula, the road and rail centre of **Arezzo**.

A broad and fertile valley, the Val di Chiana, leads northwards from the western side of **Lake Trasimene** towards **Arezzo**, a town four miles from the **Arno River**. Route 71 runs at the foot of the mountains on the eastern side of the valley and joins Route 73 (the **Siena- Arezzo** highway) at a defile less than three miles from **Arezzo**. **Eighth Army** advanced from the Trasimene Line with 13 Corps in the **Chiana valley** and the hills to the west, and with **10 Corps** in the broken country of the **Tiber valley** to the east.

On 13 Corps' right 6 British Armoured Division, which had taken over from 78 Division, found the enemy defending the mountain heights east of Route 71, from which he had observation over the **Chiana valley**. The armoured division succeeded in gaining a foothold on **Monte Lignano**, due south of **Arezzo**, and on **Monte Castiglion Maggio**, farther to the south-east, but failed to clear the enemy from the crests. In the corps' centre 4 British Infantry Division and on the left 6 South African Armoured Division were unable to break through the hills west of the **Chiana valley** and so reach the **Arno valley** west of **Arezzo**. A major action would be necessary to dislodge the enemy and capture **Arezzo**, and for this 13 Corps would need reinforcement. It was decided, therefore, to bring up 'the most readily available formation,'<sup>2</sup> the New Zealand Division. The attack was postponed until 15 July to give the New Zealanders time to move up to the front from the **Liri valley**, and in the meantime a heavy preliminary artillery and air assault was made on

the German gun positions.

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander's Despatch, *The Allied Armies in Italy*, p. 2937.

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LAKE TRASIMENE TO AREZZO  
LAKE TRASIMENE TO AREZZO

It was 13 Corps' intention to attack the enemy in his positions west and south-west of **Arezzo** and continue the advance to **Florence**. The 6th Armoured Division was to capture the high ground south-west of **Arezzo**, cut the roads north and west of the town, secure crossing places over the **Arno River**, and occupy the town when the chance occurred. The British armoured division's right flank was to be protected by the New Zealand Division, which was to relieve a group named Sackforce <sup>1</sup> and occupy the heights from **Monte Castiglion Maggio** to **Monte Lignano**; on the left, west of the Chiana canal, 4 Division was to give supporting fire.

Sixth New Zealand Infantry Brigade group <sup>2</sup> was ordered to relieve Sackforce on the night of 12–13 July. Brigadier Burrows instructed 25 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel **Norman** <sup>3</sup>) to take over the positions of 1 King's Royal Rifle Corps on the south-western slopes of **Monte Lignano**, and 26 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Fountaine <sup>4</sup>) to relieve 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders on the slopes of **Monte Castiglion Maggio**. These peaks, together with **Monte Camurcina** and **Poggio Cavadenti**, which lay between them, rose about 2000 feet above the **Chiana valley** and gave

excellent observation of 13 Corps' activities to the west as well as commanding the approaches to **Arezzo**.

The convoy carrying 25 and 26 Battalions and their supporting machine guns and mortars left the south-western side of Lake Trasimene early in the evening of the 12th, drove up Route 71 to **Castiglion Fiorentino** and halted for half an hour until darkness fell. The 25th Battalion's vehicles then went to a debussing point three miles farther up the road, where the machine guns and other equipment were loaded on mules. Shortly before midnight the battalion, using the mules and jeeps, set out to climb to the positions occupied by the KRRC on **Monte Lignano**. The relief was completed by 4.30 a.m. without casualties, despite some shelling and mortaring. Meanwhile, by midnight, 26 Battalion had relieved the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in the **Monte Castiglion Maggio** sector.

(ii)

The defence of the German position in the mountains south of **Arezzo** was chiefly the responsibility of *305 Infantry Division* of *76 Panzer Corps*, but the western slopes of **Monte Lignano** and the ground extending north-westward to the main road were held by *115 Regiment of 15 Panzer Grenadier Division*. The *305th Division*,

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<sup>1</sup> Sackforce, under command of **6 Armd Div** for right-flank protection, comprised KDG, 1 KRRC, a battery of 5 Med Regt, a self-propelled anti-tank battery and a platoon of engineers; it was strengthened on 8 July by 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders temporarily detached from 8 Ind Div.

<sup>2</sup> At this stage 6 Inf Bde had under command two troops of 17/21 Lancers, B Sqn Div Cav, **33 A-Tk Bty**, 43 Lt AA Bty, 39 Mortar Bty less two troops, 5 Inf Bde Hy Mortar Pl, **8 Fd Coy**, **2 MG Coy**, a detachment of **2 NZ Div** Provost Coy, and **5 Fd Amb**, and in support 5 and 6 Fd Regts.

<sup>3</sup> **Lt-Col E. K. Norman**, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Wellington**; born **Napier**, 14 Sep 1916; theological student; CO 25 Bn Dec 1943–Feb 1944, Jun 1944– Apr 1945; wounded 23 Apr 1945.

<sup>4</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 26 Nov 1941.

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which was very weak although reinforced by troops from **94 Infantry Division**, occupied a front running south-eastwards over a wide stretch of mountains.

**Tenth Army** had ordered **76 Panzer Corps** to hold its existing line but to swing back its left (east) wing. It had been intended that **44 Infantry Division** of **51 Mountain Corps** should occupy Monte Favalto, a high peak about eight miles east of Monte **Lignano**, but this had not been done. Instead, troops of **4 Indian Division** ( **10 Corps**) reached the slopes of Monte Favalto on 12 July. The commander of **76 Corps** (General Herr) then told **Tenth Army** that **305 Division's** left flank was 'in an untenable position, and must draw back and lose control of the commanding heights. That may mean that the Corps cannot hold on for long in the rest of the sector....' <sup>1</sup> **Tenth Army** gave orders that **305 Division's** right was to hold firm on **Monte Lignano**, and the rest of the division could take up a line extending over Monte Camurcina and towards Monte Favalto.

The capture of Monte Favalto by **4 Indian Division** was a threat to **Arezzo** from an unexpected direction, and also placed the left flank of **305 Division** in a dangerous salient, from which it began thinning out on the night of 12–13 July. **Monte Castiglion Maggio**, at the southern tip of the salient, was abandoned completely. Thus **10 Corps'** advance assisted **13 Corps**.

(iii)

At dawn on 13 July a three-man patrol from A Company, 26 Battalion, climbed to the top of **Monte Castiglion Maggio** and found it unoccupied. The patrol pushed along a high saddle for about a mile to **Poggio Cavadenti** without meeting any enemy. There was more activity in 25 Battalion's sector on the slopes of **Monte Lignano**, which the enemy shelled and mortared. At least two of the houses the battalion was using received direct hits. That night 24 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Hutchens) moved into the line on the western slopes of **Monte Camurcina** to fill the gap between 25 and 26 Battalions.

The same night 26 Battalion had its first encounter with the enemy since taking over from the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Two platoons of B Company left about 5 p.m. to spend the night as a standing patrol on **Poggio Cavadenti**, which had been found unoccupied in the morning. On the summit the leading platoon (10 Platoon) met an enemy patrol of about 10 men. 'Surprise was mutual but the New Zealanders were the first to

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix, war diary, *Tenth Army*.

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6 BRIGADE'S ATTACK, 14-16 JULY 1944

6 BRIGADE'S ATTACK, 14-16 JULY 1944

recover. One German was killed and three taken prisoner; two of those who escaped were believed to be wounded. The two platoons dug in along the crest. Later in the night they were subjected to heavy mortar fire which slackened off towards morning. Only one man was hit....'<sup>1</sup> The prisoners were from a unit of *94 Infantry Division* under the command of *305 Infantry Division*.

As he felt that the enemy already was beginning to withdraw, Colonel Fontaine ordered C Company, 26 Battalion, to occupy **Poggio Spino**, about two miles north of **Monte Castiglion Maggio**. The company set out about 1 a.m. on the 14th and had much trouble

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<sup>1</sup> *26 Battalion*, p. 412.

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in keeping direction because of the darkness and the nature of the ground. When it had gone about two miles its commander (Major Williams<sup>1</sup>) ordered his men to rest until daylight, when he would be better able to determine his position. At daybreak, however, it was evident that the company was still some distance from its objective. Williams decided to rest his men until early afternoon.

When C Company approached Point 671, the nearer of the two peaks of **Poggio Spino**, it came under fire from a farmhouse. A forward observation officer from **6 Field Regiment** who was with the company put through a call on his wireless to the guns, which laid a heavy concentration on the enemy-held position. No. 14 Platoon charged in after the concentration, and the enemy retired down the reverse slope. The other two platoons took up position on the other peak (Point 691), which they found deserted. The company was still digging in at nightfall when, following a mortar concentration, the enemy counter-attacked 14 Platoon and forced it back about 80 yards from the farmhouse. The other two platoons stayed on Point 691 and returned the enemy's fire. The artillery FOO called down another concentration, which fell in the company area. This, or possibly simultaneous enemy fire, caused four casualties, including two men killed. The enemy made no attempt to

press home his advantage, and 14 Platoon later reoccupied its position on Point 671 without opposition.

**Monte Camurcina**, like **Poggio Spino**, had twin summits: the main peak (Point 846) and Colle de Luca (Point 844), farther west, were joined by a low saddle. C Company, 24 Battalion, had taken over a position from a platoon of 25 Battalion at Podere Rigutinelli, a group of farmhouses less than a mile to the south-west of Colle de Luca. The commander (Second-Lieutenant Crawshaw <sup>2</sup>) of 15 Platoon, which was occupying this position, had been informed by the commander of the platoon he had relieved that Colle de Luca was either unoccupied or very thinly held. He set out at 5.30 a.m. to discover whether or not it was clear of the enemy. The platoon advanced cautiously with a section on each side of a ridge, scouts out in front, and the third section some way in the rear. One of the scouts was fired on 200 yards from the summit. Crawshaw ordered the two leading sections to make an encircling movement, but they were fired on from newly disclosed positions and sent to ground. The reserve section, going to assist, was also pinned down.

Concluding that the position was too strong for a single platoon

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<sup>1</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>2</sup> 2 Lt K. S. Crawshaw; **Auckland**; born NZ 14 Aug 1921; student teacher.

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to assault, Crawshaw reported to Company Headquarters and was told to await the arrival of 14 Platoon. Second-Lieutenant **Lloyd** <sup>1</sup> set off with 14 Platoon at 7.30 a.m. and made contact with 15 Platoon, but also came under fire and consequently withdrew down the ridge and reported to Company Headquarters. He was told to consolidate, and while he was doing so, 15 Platoon came down the ridge to the vicinity of his

position. Crawshaw's men had been counter-attacked by the enemy with grenades and automatic weapons and had beaten off the attack, but with the loss of two men killed and five wounded. He then gave orders for the withdrawal, in the course of which three more men were killed and one wounded. The two platoons held their positions below Colle de Luca for the rest of the day.

Some of the opposition encountered by C Company had come from spandau posts on **Monte Camurcina**, Point 781 (between Monte Camurcina and **Monte Lignano**) and **Poggio Altoviti** (to the south-east). C Company estimated there was a company of the enemy on Colle de Luca, and reported three machine guns in the saddle between the twin peaks. Lieutenant-Colonel Hutchens decided that A Company should relieve C Company and capture both peaks of **Monte Camurcina**. That night A Company advanced about the same time as 25 Battalion made its attack on **Monte Lignano**.

*(iv)*

The plan to break through the German defences at **Arezzo** was for **1 Guards Brigade** of 6 British Armoured Division, supported by the tanks of 17/21 Lancers, to capture the high ground at the head of the **Chiana valley**, south-west of the town, after which 26 Armoured Brigade was to pass through into the **Arezzo** plain and capture crossings over the **Arno River**. Concurrently with the first phase of this attack, **6 NZ Infantry Brigade** was to clear Monte **Lignano** and protect the right flank of the Guards Brigade.

The orders for 6 Brigade's part in the attack stated that 25 Battalion, with one platoon of 2 MG Company and two troops of 17/21 Lancers under command, was to capture **Monte Lignano** (Point 838) and then Point 650, about 1200 yards north-west of the summit of **Lignano**. The three New Zealand field regiments, which were located in the **Castiglion Fiorentino** area, were to support the attack by firing concentrations on the two objectives and other targets. A British medium battery also was to support the attack. The 4.2-inch mortars were to put down timed

concentrations along a line east of **Monte Lignano** and in the area of **II Palazzo**,

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj D. H. Lloyd**; **Dunedin**; born **Dargaville**, 29 Mar 1922; clerk.

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north-east of the feature. After the capture of **Monte Lignano 6** Brigade was to reorganise on the high ground running from **Poggio Spino** to **Monte Camurcina** and **Lignano**.

‘It was recognised that the precipitous nature of the country made the task of the artillery very difficult....’ <sup>1</sup> The field regiments were warned that care was to be taken in the computation of correct angles of sight for individual guns during the fire plan.

There was a thunderstorm about midnight. The artillery bombardment on the New Zealand front and in support of the Guards Brigade's attack on the left opened at 1 a.m. on the 15th, and 25 Battalion's advance began 40 minutes later. A and C Companies had orders to capture **Monte Lignano**, and D Company to take Point 783, 500 yards to the north-west, and then clear the ridge running 700 yards westward to Point 650; B Company was to occupy the positions vacated by C Company on the southern slopes of **Lignano**. C Company moved off first, followed at 10-minute intervals by A and D Companies.

All three companies followed the same route, up a fairly narrow ridge. ‘The terrain was such that the start line could only be reached by scrambling on hands and knees in single file,’ a member of 15 Platoon said later. <sup>2</sup> C Company was held up some distance from the summit by shellfire which was believed to be from the supporting artillery, but it deployed and moved on when the barrage lifted at 2 a.m. ‘We ... commenced to move forward up the steep face of the main feature. It was terribly rocky and often it was a case of helping one another over the obstacles.... First opposition was from a Jerry fox-hole, but we silenced it and pressed on over the rocky terrain, until we encountered

the next opposition. Another Jerry strongpoint was left in silence.... We made the crest on which was a very badly shattered building and we occupied it.... Prisoners were now being taken.... We wirelessly back that the position had been taken and to lift the barrage, but it continued to whittle away at what poor protection we had....'<sup>3</sup>

A Company encountered very little opposition on the way to the summit. Two or three spandau posts were silenced. Some mines with trip wires attached caused no casualties because the wires were too slack to explode them. D Company passed through on the way to its more distant objective, where it overcame a more stubborn resistance than the enemy had offered on **Lignano**.

In case the enemy should counter-attack, Colonel Norman at 4.45 a.m. asked for the tanks of 17/21 Lancers to come up and support the forward companies. The difficult going prevented them

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Edward Puttick, *25 Battalion*, p. 451.

<sup>2</sup> Eye-witness account by **Pte J. M. Shinnick** recorded in September 1944.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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from getting close to the high ground held by the infantry, but they took up a position where they could deal with an enemy attack. By daybreak 25 Battalion was firmly established, with A Company on the summit of **Lignano**, C a little to the south-east, D holding the line of the ridge from Point 783 to Point 650, and B in reserve on the southern slope of **Lignano**. The battalion's casualties on 15 July were 12 dead and 27 wounded; it had killed an estimated 20 of the enemy and taken 19 prisoners, most of whom were from *115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*.

'The only serious trouble encountered in the attack by 25 Battalion was the shellfire reported on many occasions, and from several sources,

as coming from the supporting artillery.’<sup>1</sup> A report from the battalion gives 14 instances on 15 July of the shelling of A, C and D Companies by the supporting guns, which caused 16 casualties. On six occasions, from 2.25 a.m. to 3.25 a.m., the shells fell on the summit of **Lignano**, which was the target for concentrations timed to end at 2 a.m. There should have been no fire after that hour on the peak, but despite the battalion's attempts to rectify this, the shells continued to fall there.

The guns believed to be responsible were reported to be on a bearing of 155 degrees, which passed through the area occupied by the supporting artillery and, if projected beyond the summit of **Monte Lignano**, ran through one of the artillery target areas 750 yards north-west of the peak. It appears, therefore, that either the guns firing the concentrations on **Monte Lignano** failed to lift at 2 a.m. as they should have done, or those that were to have fired concentrations on targets 750 yards beyond **Lignano** shelled that peak instead. Nevertheless, the bearing cited by 25 Battalion as the source of the shelling, if extended in the opposite direction, passed through the site of a German battery just west of **Arezzo**. It is quite possible, therefore, that this battery or some other German long-range guns were responsible for at least some if not all of the damaging fire while the attack was in progress. ‘The German artillery had the area well surveyed... and [was] easily able to bring down fire on the ground over which the New Zealanders attacked.’

2

The Guards Brigade, attacking at the same time as 25 Battalion, met stubborn resistance along the lower north-western slopes of **Monte Lignano**. A battalion of the Grenadier Guards captured Stoppiace, less than half a mile from Point 650, after a short fight, but a company directed to Point 575 (north-east of Stoppiace) was counter-attacked and forced back 300 yards from the crest, and a

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<sup>1</sup> *25 Battalion*, p. 459.

<sup>2</sup> *W. E. Murphy, 2nd New Zealand Divisional Artillery*, p.

squadron of 17/21 Lancers which went to the company's assistance at dawn was engaged by anti-tank guns. Later in the morning a battalion of the **Coldstream Guards** captured Point 575, but a company which reached a hill farther to the north-west in the afternoon was immediately counter-attacked and forced to withdraw. The **Coldstream Guards** attacked again and recaptured the hill. The enemy made no further attempt to recover it.

(v)

The loss of **Monte Lignano**, the dominant peak in the **Arezzo** defence system, meant that the Germans would have to withdraw. **Tenth Army** reported to **Army Group C** during the morning of 15 July that 'we have lost M. **Lignano**. From there the enemy has a view of **Arezzo**. Therefore we cannot remain there much longer.... A counter attack would be very costly and is out of the question....' Field Marshal Kesselring agreed that 'with M. **Lignano** in the hands of the enemy we must withdraw.'<sup>1</sup> Permission was given for **76 Panzer Corps** to make a delaying withdrawal, lasting two days, to the **Arno River**.

Although the Germans had been compelled to yield **Monte Lignano**, they still held **Monte Camurcina** and other points on the high ground in the New Zealand sector. The previous evening (14 July) Hutchens had ordered A Company, 24 Battalion, to relieve C Company on the slopes of Colle de Luca and take first that peak and then the other peak of Camurcina. A Company had moved up during the night and passed through C Company, but had been brought to a halt by machine-gun fire at the locality where C Company had been engaged on the morning of the 14th. A Company attempted no further action on the 15th. Much enemy activity was observed on Colle de Luca in the afternoon and, at the company's request, the artillery fired on the peak.

Less than a mile south-east of Colle de Luca an eight-man patrol

from B Company of 26 Battalion (which was occupying **Poggio Cavadenti** with two platoons) clashed with Germans on **Poggio Altoviti**. The patrol set out just before dawn and, on reaching the crest of Altoviti, its leader (Corporal Brick <sup>2</sup>) and another man tripped over a spandau post. Brick opened fire before the enemy gunners recovered from their surprise. One German was killed and two others wounded and taken prisoner, and although other spandaus in the vicinity began firing, Brick and his men, driving their prisoners before them, raced back across

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *Tenth Army*.

<sup>2</sup> Lt W. Brick, MM; Putaruru; born Ashburton, 20 Sep 1921; clerk; wounded 24 Dec 1943.

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open ground to **Poggio Cavadenti**, which they reached without casualties.

Brigadier Burrows decided to stage an attack on the remaining features in the New Zealand sector believed to be still in enemy hands, and gave orders in the afternoon of the 15th for an attack which was to begin at 2 a.m. next day: 26 Battalion on the right was to capture **Poggio Altoviti**, and 24 Battalion on the left was to take Colle de Luca and the main peak of **Monte Camurcina**. The 23rd Battalion, having passed temporarily to 6 Brigade's command, was to be in reserve.

The three field regiments were to support this attack with a series of concentrations on the objectives and other targets. The 4.2-inch mortars also were to give support by firing on Point 812 (north of Colle de Luca) and at dawn were to carry out observed bombardments of the valleys north of the objectives.

The artillery opened fire on **Poggio Altoviti** at the appointed time (2 a.m.). B Company of 26 Battalion, led by 7 Platoon (attached from A Company), advanced to the peak and found it deserted. Soon afterwards the company came under what was believed to be 25-pounder fire.

**'Frantic messages were relayed back to the gunners and the firing soon ceased, but not before two men had been killed and two wounded.'**<sup>1</sup> It is again possible that the German artillery, which was well placed to fire on this peak, may have been responsible. The enemy could have judged from the New Zealand shelling how the attack was progressing and where to place his fire to best advantage.

Before the bombardment began A Company, 24 Battalion, withdrew 400 yards from Colle de Luca, and half an hour after the guns opened fire, moved forward again unopposed. D Company passed through and found Camurcina deserted. The two companies were ordered to send out patrols at daybreak to search for any enemy who might be lying low. Supplies and equipment, including machine guns, were taken up to **Monte Camurcina** by a mule team. A patrol from A Company made contact with 25 Battalion on Monte **Lignano**, and also took two prisoners. Mines and several enemy dead were found.

*(vi)*

While 6 Brigade was driving the enemy off **Monte Lignano** and the adjacent peaks, a column consisting of B Squadron of Divisional Cavalry, two troops of C Squadron, **18 Armoured Regiment**, and D Company of 26 Battalion was making its way through the hills

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<sup>1</sup> *26 Battalion*, p. 414.

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to the south-east, along a narrow winding road which linked **Castiglion Fiorentino** on Route 71 with Palazzo del Pero on Route 73 five miles from **Arezzo**.

The column made slow progress on 14 July, being delayed at several places by mines and demolitions, and was halted in the afternoon by a large crater at the junction of a side road which led round the northern face of **Poggio Spino** (the peak occupied by C Company, 26 Battalion, that afternoon), about two miles from Palazzo del Pero. Enemy shell and

mortar fire prevented the sappers of 8 Field Company from repairing the road, and as the shelling had not stopped next morning (the 15th), it was decided to bulldoze a bypass, which was completed before midday. An armoured car patrol then advanced without opposition to the road junction at Palazzo del Pero, where it found more mines and demolitions and came under fire from enemy guns. The tanks, which also moved to Palazzo del Pero, engaged with harassing fire small distant parties of the enemy, who appeared to be pulling back through the hills.

Meanwhile troops of 4 Indian Division, of **10 Corps**, which planned to cross Route 73 east of **Arezzo** and capture the Alpe di Poti, the high ground dominating the east and north-east of the town, came through the mountains south-east of Palazzo del Pero, and early on 16 July—when C Squadron's tanks had just started off along Route 73—the New Zealanders were recalled from what was now **10 Corps'** sphere of operations.

*(vii)*

The enemy had broken contact on the New Zealand front; he had also gone from 6 Armoured Division's sector, on the left, where a battalion of the **Welsh Guards** moved unopposed on to the Agazzi hills, across the highway leading to **Arezzo**. The 26th Armoured Brigade drove through the gap in the hills, occupied the town and crossed the **Arno**.

The occupation of **Monte Camurcina** and **Poggio Altoviti** had ended the New Zealand Division's part in the battle. The Division went into reserve, and orders were given for the withdrawal of 6 Brigade. Equipment was loaded on mules and the various companies came down from the high ground to the road, where they were picked up by the transport which took them back to the brigade's B echelon area, west of **Cortona** in the **Chiana valley**.

The New Zealand casualties in the battle for **Arezzo** totalled 116, including 37 killed or died of wounds; 66 of these (22 killed and 44 wounded) were incurred by 25 Battalion.

Immediately after 6 Brigade's return **General Freyberg** held a conference of formation and unit commanders to announce the **New Zealand Government's** policy on furlough. Already most of the men who had left New Zealand with the First, Second and Third Echelons had been granted furlough; the Ruapehu draft of over 6000 had left **Egypt** for New Zealand in June 1943, and the Wakatipu draft of over 2500 in January 1944. But the 4th Reinforcements, who included men who had fought in **Greece, Crete** and North Africa, were still serving with the **2 NZEF**.

The GOC issued a special order on 17 July stating that replacements were being sent from New Zealand to relieve the 4th Reinforcements, a proportion of whom would be withdrawn forthwith and the remainder later in the year after the arrival of the replacements. The first group, numbering 1500, was to include all the married men of the **4th Reinforcements** and a proportion of the single men selected by ballot; and also officers of the first three echelons who had not yet had furlough (except a few in key positions) but no officers of the **4th Reinforcements**.

Celebration parties for those who were going—and to drown the sorrows of those who were not—were staged before the departure of the Taupo draft on 20 July. Several weeks later, when the GOC found it necessary to draw the attention of formation commanders to breaches of discipline, he listed as one example of 'unrestricted consumption of intoxicating liquor' the occasion when 'troops from certain units turned up at the parade of 4th Reinforcements in a hopelessly drunken condition, and had to be kept off the parade ground. Numerous men of this draft were in possession of large quantities of liquor which was taken on the trucks with them.'

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## CHAPTER 4 – THE ADVANCE TO FLORENCE

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## I: A CHANGE IN PLAN

### *I: A Change in Plan*

(i)

**THE capture of Arezzo by 13 Corps on 16 July was followed by other successes: 2 Polish Corps broke through to Ancona on the Adriatic coast on the 18th and 4 United States Corps entered Leghorn on the Ligurian coast next day. These advances gave the Allied armies possession of two vital ports of supply—both of which had to be cleared of extensive demolitions before they could be used—and in Arezzo an administrative base for the planned offensive against the Gothic Line. The next objective was Florence, which was wanted as an operational base for such an offensive.**

**Thirteenth Corps' sector offered the easiest terrain for an advance to Florence—north-westwards from Arezzo down the valley of the Arno River. This valley, however, was dominated from the east by the rugged and almost unroaded Pratomagno massif and from the west by the comparatively gentle ridges of the Monti del Chianti. The corps advanced on a front of three divisions, with 6 British Armoured Division in the Arno valley, 6 South African Armoured Division on the western side of the Chianti mountains, and 4 British Infantry Division keeping contact between them. It soon became apparent that the enemy was determined to resist strongly in the Arno valley, where he had concentrated some of his best troops.**

**The widening of Eighth Army's front, when the French Expeditionary Corps of Fifth Army departed to prepare for the ANVIL expedition, gave another possible approach to Florence: west of the Chianti mountains. Thirteenth Corps, extending westwards, took over the French Corps' sector on Fifth Army's right flank, astride Route 2, which led northwards from Siena through Poggibonsi (captured by the**

French on 14 July) and **San Casciano** to the city. It was a region of rolling hills and many secondary roads and tracks, and according to Intelligence reports and the experiences of the French, was not as strongly defended as the **Arno valley**.

To take advantage of the expected lighter resistance in this sector, therefore, General Kirkman moved the weight of 13 Corps' attack westward. On the corps' right flank 6 Armoured Division was to continue its thrust down the eastern side of the **Arno** valley and 4 Division was to push down the western side of the lower slopes of the Chianti mountains; these two divisions were to contain the enemy facing them, maintain constant pressure and be prepared to take advantage of any opportunities. The 6th South African Armoured Division, which earlier had the subsidiary role of making down the valley of the River Greve (a tributary of the **Arno**), an outflanking move to assist the attack down the **Arno**, was now to take part in the major assault, with the **Arno** west of **Florence** for its objective. After the New Zealand Division and 8 Indian Division had relieved the **French Expeditionary Corps**, the New Zealanders were to share with the South Africans in this assault, and the Indians were to conform with the advance and cover the left flank.

The New Zealand Division was to relieve 2 Moroccan Division and pass through the leading troops as early as possible after dawn on 22 July; it was intended to thrust northwards from **Castellina** in Chianti (east of **Poggibonsi**), cut across Route 2 by **San Casciano** and occupy the **Arno** crossings at **Signa**, six or seven miles west of **Florence**. The Division's sector was only about three miles wide; it led north-north-westwards and included the secondary road running in that direction from **Castellina**, a short stretch of Route 2 and a network of minor roads and tracks beyond San Casciano.

In instructions issued on 21 July to the five divisions of 13 Corps General Kirkman directed that every effort should be made, with the help of Italian partisans where available, to secure bridges intact over the **Arno**, form bridgeheads north of the river, and even take advantage

of any opportunity given by the enemy's weaknesses or disorganisation to penetrate the **Gothic Line**. He thought it more likely, however, that the enemy would withdraw in orderly bounds and be found firmly deployed in prepared defences in the **Gothic Line**. The corps commander also said that it was not his intention to become involved in serious street fighting in **Florence**, but to bypass the city if necessary. **Florence** was not to be shelled without sanction from Corps Headquarters.

*(ii)*

General Kirkman informed **General Freyberg** in the afternoon of 20 July that the New Zealand Division would be called on for the assault on **Florence**. Orders were given and preparations made for the move of the Division's 4855 vehicles to **Castellina**, a distance of about 60 miles. The Division was divided into 14 convoys which, with the exception of 150 tracked vehicles of 4 Armoured Brigade, went by a route from **Castiglione Fiorentino** past **Siena** to **Castellina**; the tracked vehicles' route was from **Castiglione del Lago** past **Sinalunga** and **Siena**. The first convoys left on 21 July and the last two days later; they completed the journey with few mishaps. The usual security precautions were taken of not displaying New Zealand badges, titles and fernleaf signs, and wireless silence was enforced.

It was mid-summer. During the journey a man who had served in North Africa declared that 'never before in all my life have I travelled over such a dusty road. The endless stream of vehicles had ground the surface into a light feathery dust which was six inches deep in places. There was little wind, and although the road wound up and down over broken hills and was only visible at scattered points, its whole length could be traced by the pall of dust hanging over it. Vehicles and occupants were covered with a chalky grey powder which gave them a ghastly unnatural appearance. Occasionally we had to drop to crawling speed because the swirling clouds limited visibility to the end of the bonnet. The route took us through the foothills of the Chianti mountains which were thickly wooded at first, later becoming barren

and wind eroded as we made towards **Siena**.' The convoys drove round the high, massive brick wall of the town, 'but over the top we could see several domes and spires and some large buildings. A little further on we turned off the main route ... down a side road to our new bivvy area, on the estate of some Italian count....

'We have the trucks parked along a line of white mulberries bordering a lucerne paddock in the characteristic setting of wheat and maize patches crisscrossed by grapevines supported on topped maples.... A very striking thousand yard avenue of upright Italian cypresses runs from the main gates up to the residence.... The long line of sombre dark green spires forms a striking contrast with the yellow brown background of rolling hills. The final two hundred yards leading to the house is flanked on either side by groves of fine old ashes, beeches and maritime pines.... The place has been very pretty but is now in a state of neglect.'

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<sup>1</sup> Diary, B. C. H. Moss.

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*(iii)*

**Divisional Headquarters** issued an operation order in the evening of the 21st which said the intention was to advance and capture crossings over the River Arno at **Signa**. Fifth Brigade was to relieve 2 Moroccan Division and then advance against the enemy as early as possible next day. The remainder of the Division was to remain south of **Castellina** on three hours' notice until called forward. Three Royal Artillery regiments came under the Division's command—70 and 75 Medium Regiments and 142 Army Field Regiment <sup>1</sup> (self-propelled)—and in support was B Flight of 655 Air Observation Post Squadron. The Division also took over temporarily some armoured and artillery units which had been supporting 2 Moroccan Division.

On the night of 21–22 July 5 Brigade relieved two battalions of 2 Moroccan Division five or six miles north-west of **Castellina**, with 23

**Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas <sup>2</sup>) on the right at San Donato in Poggio and 28 (Maori) Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Young) on the left between the Castellina – San Donato road and Route 2. Each battalion was supported by two platoons of medium tanks and one of light tanks from 757 US Tank Battalion; in addition, 23 Battalion had two troops of A Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, and a platoon of 7 Field Company under command, and 28 Battalion had one troop of A Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, a platoon of 7 Field Company and 5 Brigade Heavy Mortar Platoon. The 5th Field Regiment was deployed two and a half miles north-west of Castellina.**

**The 23rd Battalion completed the relief of 2 Battalion, 8 Moroccan Infantry Regiment, before midnight and sent out patrols, one of which met opposition on a ridge (Point 337) a mile and a half to the north along the road to Sambuca. The Maori Battalion, whose sector was farther from the road, took until dawn to complete the relief of 2 Battalion, 5 Moroccan Infantry Regiment.**

**The codeword ( SKEGNESS) for the start of 5 Brigade's advance was circulated by Divisional Headquarters by a signal timed 1.30 p.m. on 22 July; this allowed units operationally engaged to use their wireless sets, and also permitted the display again of New Zealand titles, badges and fernleaf signs.**

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<sup>1</sup> **142nd Royal Devon Yeomanry Field Regiment, with 105-mm. howitzers on tank chassis.**

<sup>2</sup> **Brig W. B. Thomas, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d., Silver Star (US); Germany; born Nelson, 29 Jun 1918; bank officer; CO 23 Bn 1944–45; 22 Bn ( Japan) Oct 1945–Nov 1946; wounded and p.w. 25 May 1941; escaped Nov 1941; returned to unit May 1942; twice wounded; British Army, 1947–; comd 12 Inf Bde, Germany, 1964–.**

When the New Zealand Division went into the line for the assault on **Florence**, the **Polish Corps**, in the Adriatic coastal sector, had crossed the **Esino River**, between **Ancona** and **Senigallia**, and was steadily pushing the enemy back towards the main defences of the **Gothic Line**, the eastern flank of which rested on **Pesaro**. In **10 Corps'** mountainous sector armoured car patrols were operating on a wide front east of **10 Indian Division**, which was working its way northward along the **Tiber valley**, and **4 Indian Division** was in the rugged country north-east of **Arezzo**.

On **13 Corps'** right flank **6 British Armoured Division**, advancing in a north-westerly direction from **Arezzo** to clear the eastern side of the **Arno valley**, had not progressed far beyond the southern end of the **Pratomagno massif**, and **4 British Division**, on a narrow front extending into the foothills of the **Monti del Chianti**, was less than half-way along **Route 69** (the road from **Arezzo** to **Florence**).<sup>1</sup> Farther west **6 South African Armoured Division** was clearing the defences on the main features of the **Monti del Chianti** to permit an advance along a secondary road to **Greve**, south of **Florence**. **Thirteenth Corps'** front continued westward through the **New Zealand Division's** sector to where **8 Indian Division** relieved **4 Moroccan Mountain Division**, which had reached a line stretching north-westwards along the **Elsa River** to **Castelfiorentino**. The command of the part of the front taken over by the **New Zealand** and **Indian divisions** passed from the **French Expeditionary Corps of Fifth Army** to **13 Corps of Eighth Army** at midnight on **22–23 July**.

**Fifth Army**, reduced to a front of four divisions to release troops for the landing in southern **France**, penetrated over **Route 67** (the road from **Florence** to **Pisa** and **Leghorn**), entered the southern part of **Pisa** on **23 July**, and began to regroup along the **Arno**.

(v)

The enemy held a line across the peninsula south of the **Gothic Line**

defences, with *Fourteenth Army* (comprising *75 Corps*, *14 Panzer Corps* and *1 Parachute Corps*) on the right (west) and *Tenth Army* (*76 Panzer Corps* and *51 Mountain Corps*) on the left. *Seventy-fifth Corps* disposed one division around the mouth of the **Arno River** and on the Ligurian coast to the north, and another in the **Pisa** area; *14 Panzer Corps* was along the **Arno** to the confluence with its tributary, the Elsa, with two divisions

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<sup>1</sup> Route 69 joins Route 67 at Pontassieve, about eight miles east of **Florence**.

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ward

and one in reserve; from Castelfiorentino on the Elsa eastwards across the hills south of **Florence** to the Monti del Chianti—the part of the front to which the New Zealand and Indian divisions were transferred, alongside the South Africans—was *1 Parachute Corps* with three divisions, *29 Panzer Grenadier* on the right, *4 Parachute* in the centre and *356 Infantry* on the left.

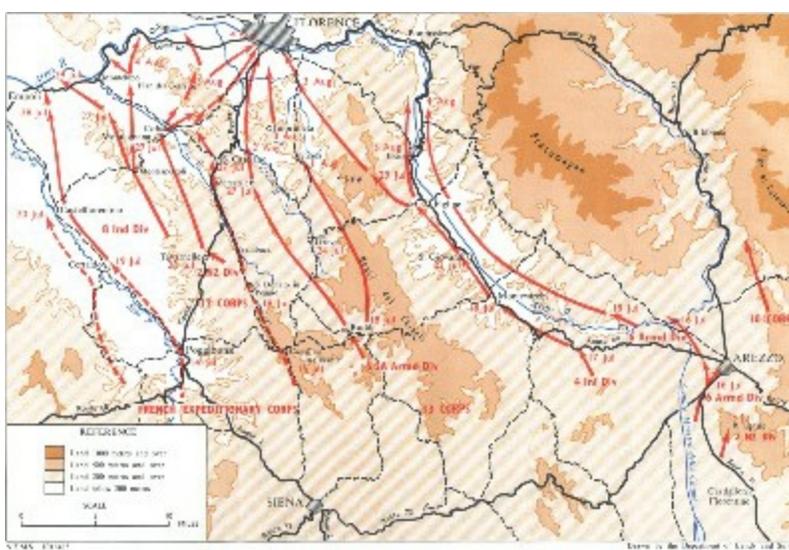
East of the boundary between the two German armies, *76 Panzer Corps* held the line from the Monti del Chianti across the **Arno** valley between **Florence** and **Arezzo** with seven divisions, one of which was in the process of relieving the *Hermann Goering Division*, destined to leave the Italian front, and another (*1 Parachute Division*) was to be withdrawn to **Rimini** on the Adriatic coast. The line from the **Tiber valley** through the mountains to the coast was held by *51 Mountain Corps* with four divisions.

The enemy had few reserves behind the front line he could call upon if necessary. North of **Pisa** two **German Air Force** divisions were being converted into one formation. **Spezia**, on the Ligurian coast, was garrisoned by a fortress brigade; the coast east and west of Genoa was covered by a German division, and another was guarding the Franco-

Italian frontier with the Italian *Army Liguria*. *Tenth Army* had one division in reserve at **Bologna**. A Turcoman division of doubtful reliability was watching the Adriatic coast south of **Ravenna**, and *1 Parachute Division*, as it was withdrawn from the **Arno valley**, went into position south of **Rimini**, in rear of the Adriatic flank of the **Gothic Line**. The **German High Command** was still apprehensive of seaborne landings behind the front.

Field Marshal Kesselring knew from experience that the mobility of the Allied armies enabled them to attack with little warning at widely separated parts of the front. His own *Army Group C*, on the other hand, was handicapped by its lack of transport and the continual interruption of communications by the almost unopposed Allied bombing, and therefore had difficulty in transferring formations rapidly from one sector to another. To guard against a breakthrough which might cut in behind and encircle part of his forces, he had to cover as wide a front as possible and fall back evenly across that front. As he could not expect to receive sufficient reinforcements for use as a mobile reserve or as a counter-attack force, his tactics could be only a step-by-step withdrawal under pressure to keep his line intact.

Hitler had given orders to hold the line south of **Florence** as long as possible. The placing of *Tenth Army's* main strength across the **Arno valley** south-east of the city had influenced **13 British Corps** in its decision to change its line of assault to a sector farther



The Advance to Florence, 14 July - 4 August 1944

west. *Fourteenth Army* intended to hold the Heinrich-Paula <sup>1</sup> line, which ran along the lower **Arno River** from the coast to **Montelupo** and then eastwards through the hills about five miles south of **Florence**. In *Army Group's* opinion this line was too close to the city, and orders were given, therefore, that a line farther south should be reconnoitred and prepared.

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<sup>1</sup> The German withdrawal towards the **Arno** was based on a series of phase lines known by girls' names, which included Irmgard, Karin, Maedchen, Nora, Olga and Paula. These were not connected areas of fortified or even dug-in defences, but merely lines of withdrawal marked on the map where the topography seemed to offer advantageous delaying positions. The **Heinrich Line** appears to have been the name given to the line of the **Arno River** from the sea to about the Elsa River confluence; later, when it was extended eastwards across the north of **Florence**, it was referred to as the Heinrich Mountain Line.

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## II: THE PESA VALLEY

### *II: The Pesa Valley*

(i)

The New Zealand Division was now in the Chianti country, famous for its wine, a closely settled region of undulating ridges, slopes and gullies, where thickly wooded land alternated with olive groves, vineyards, crops of wheat and cereals, and where innumerable stone-built farmhouses and hamlets were interspersed with handsome villas. Many of these buildings were to become strongpoints for defence and targets for attack.

This became known as the ‘Tiger country’ because of the many German Tiger (Mark VI) 60-ton tanks encountered there. The Sherman was considered no match for the Tiger.<sup>2</sup> ‘From the moment the Tiger appeared it became a kind of bogey, and the air was full of rumours of more and more Tigers lying in wait just ahead; just as in the desert every German gun was an “eighty-eight”, so here every tracked vehicle heard over in German territory was a Tiger. The natural result was that, quite suddenly, the New Zealand tanks became more cautious than they had ever been before.... The high mutual regard of New Zealand tanks and infantry was in danger.’<sup>3</sup> The Chianti country appeared to offer no advantages for the attacking armour: it was intersected by shallow watercourses and narrow roads which could be obstructed by mines and demolitions. Much of the advance would have to be made across country, where the tanks would have to grope almost blindly among the trees and vines.

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<sup>2</sup> Although twice the size of a Sherman and armed with an 88-mm. gun, the Tiger had its disadvantages. In *Neither Fear Nor Hope*, pp. 263–4, **General von Senger** says that ‘dozens of these monsters had fallen out of the fighting because even when only

slightly damaged we had no means of dragging them away.... If a Tiger became temporarily immobile, it could only be towed away by another Tiger. Such targets were very conspicuous to the enemy with his good air and artillery observation and were soon under fire, which inevitably caused further damage to their propelling mechanism....'

<sup>3</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 521.

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(ii)

Fifth Infantry Brigade was to start the New Zealand Division's advance towards the **Arno**. The intention was that on the right 23 Battalion was to follow the axis of the secondary road leading north-west from **San Donato** in Poggio into Route 2, and from **Sambuca** was to continue on the eastern side of the Pesa River; on the left 28 (Maori) Battalion was to take the side road which turned off westward just south of **San Donato** and swung north-westward to join Route 2 by **Tavarnelle** in Val di **Pesa**, and was to follow Route 2 as far as **Strada** and then turn left on to the side road which ran north-westwards along the west of the **Pesa** valley.

The first objective (codename **BUFFALO**) was about three miles north of **San Donato**, the second ( **MONTREAL**) another mile and a half, and the third ( **QUEBEC**) a further mile and a half. <sup>1</sup> These were phase lines rather than objectives; they were intended to indicate the rate and extent of the advance. Both battalions were to keep in contact with the enemy and force him to continue withdrawing; until they met a strong defence needing a set-piece attack, they were to conduct their own advances, with Brigade Headquarters co-ordinating times and objectives. Until relieved by 18 NZ Armoured Regiment, the tanks of 757 US Tank Battalion were to stay in support of 23 and 28 Battalions. Provision was made for the field and medium artillery to move forward as required in support.

At daybreak on the 22nd troops of 23 Battalion prepared to advance

against the enemy posts identified by patrols the previous night, and the artillery was asked to fire on Point 337, a mile and a half beyond **San Donato**, and to harass all likely defences on the route to **Sambuca**. The 5th Field Regiment began firing at 6.20 a.m.

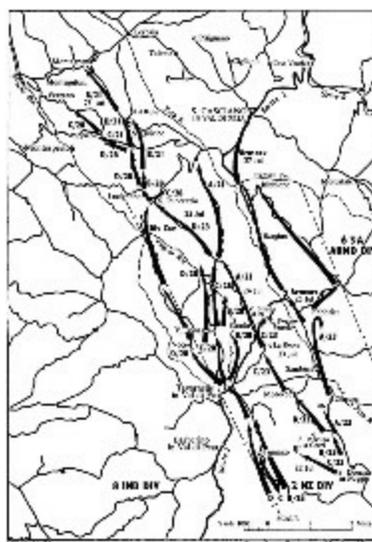
C Company pushed westward along a ridge towards Point 357, which a platoon quickly occupied, and took a few prisoners from **4 Parachute Division**. B Company had a more difficult task. About a mile north of **San Donato** a side road led off to the north-west towards **Morocco** and **Tavarnelle**, and near the road fork the settlement of **San Martino a Cozzi** would have to be occupied before the battalion could advance up either the road to **Sambuca** or the road to **Morocco**. Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas therefore ordered B Company to capture **San Martino**.

Attacking without tank support, B Company's men were caught at close range by devastating fire and had to retire when their

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<sup>1</sup> The codenames of subsequent objectives of 5 Bde's advance were SAVANNAH, CONCORD, DOUGLAS, HAMILTON, VANCOUVER, OMAHA.

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5 BRIGADE'S ADVANCE, 22-27 JULY 1944

ammunition ran low. About midday the company commander (Major **Worsnop**<sup>1</sup>) arranged a stronger assault, supported by artillery and mortar

fire, and with covering small-arms fire from Divisional

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

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Cavalry armoured cars. **San Martino** was captured, but by this time B Company's casualties were nearly 30 (including five men taken prisoner).

This action was considered invaluable in permitting the later advances on 23 Battalion's front, but it had not been intended that the infantry should attack without tank support. <sup>1</sup> Several American Sherman tanks were in harbour close to **San Donato**, but their commander had been unwilling to become involved in 23 Battalion's attack as he was waiting for the New Zealand tanks to take over. He said his instructions had been 'not to lose a tank or risk one.' <sup>2</sup> Later, however, the Americans ignored these instructions.

While B Company was dealing with **San Martino**, A Company did not go beyond the road fork. Its objectives were Point 337 and the settlement of Ginestra, farther along the road to **Sambuca**. A Company, also without tank support, captured Point 337, but was counter-attacked and forced to withdraw. Thomas ordered the company commander (Major **Hoseit** <sup>3</sup>) to regain the point. Some of the American tanks, a troop of New Zealand tanks and two troops of A Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, went forward to assist, and **5 Field Regiment** gave supporting fire. By dusk A Company had retaken Point 337 and occupied some of the houses at Ginestra.

When D Company, accompanied by two troops of A Squadron, **18 Armoured Regiment**, started an advance to **Morocco**, the leading troop of tanks, either by mistake or through receiving a request to help A Company, continued along the **Sambuca** road instead of turning on to the **Morocco** road and took part in the counter-attack which regained Point 337. These tanks then wheeled left across country to join the

other troop of tanks with D Company on the **Morocco** road.

D Company and the tanks spread across the fields bordering the **Morocco** road and made excellent progress. 'The country was gently undulating and we went sweeping forward beneath the scattered olive trees, with farmhouses showing up here and there at the end of lanes running in from the main road.... When a house, appearing through the trees, looked to house the enemy, the tanks blazed away with their 75s as they advanced. The enemy was on the run. Without the armour I don't expect we should have got very far,' says one of the platoon commanders. <sup>4</sup>

Fire was exchanged with the enemy in **Morocco**, and on request **5 Field Regiment** laid down a 'murder' <sup>5</sup> on the centres of resistance.

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<sup>1</sup> The GOC's diary says: 'Policy was not to push on until the tanks were up.'

<sup>2</sup> *23 Battalion*, p. 362.

<sup>3</sup> **Maj W. Hoseit**; born **Oamaru**, 5 Dec 1911; manufacturer; killed in action 23 Jul 1944.

<sup>4</sup> **R. T. Street**, quoted in *23 Battalion*, p. 365.

<sup>5</sup> Codename for a method of fire in which each gun was laid against a pin-point target with the object that each round should hit the target.

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The infantry and tanks closed in on the village and, although some Germans were seen in retreat, the houses had to be cleared one by one. A Sherman tank was set alight by a tank or self-propelled gun which subsequently managed to withdraw. D Company collected about 60 prisoners, but owing to a misunderstanding, one of the supporting tanks

opened fire on the house where the prisoners were held under guard, and most of them escaped in the confusion.

When Thomas heard of D Company's success, he changed the plan he had made for C Company with tanks and engineers to attack up the **Sambuca** road through A Company next morning, and ordered C with all available support to go immediately to **Morocco**. C Company was relieved at Point 357 by a platoon from **28 Battalion** and, travelling on seven of A Squadron's tanks and other vehicles, set off to join D Company. The combined force advanced to a road junction a short way beyond **Morocco** and laagered overnight. The engineers cleared the road through **Morocco**, which had been partially blocked by demolitions.

Meanwhile, during the morning of 22 July, **28 (Maori) Battalion** concentrated on the road which led westwards from just south of **San Donato** and then north-westwards towards **Tavarnelle**. In the afternoon patrols, reconnoitring the ground over which the battalion was to advance, exchanged fire with parties of the enemy, took a few prisoners, and reported that the enemy was occupying the village of **Tignano**, less than two miles from **Tavarnelle**, but apparently not in any strength. Before the advance began **5 Field Regiment** laid down fire on positions where the enemy had been observed.

The Maoris set off shortly after 7 p.m. with B Company covering the right flank east of the road, C in the centre, D west of the road, and A in reserve. Half of B Squadron, **18 Armoured Regiment**, joined C Company; the other half was in reserve. Machine-gun and mortar fire was met on rising ground leading to **Tignano**, but under cover of fire from the tanks and mortars, C Company converged on the village, overcame the opposition and took a few more prisoners. B and D Companies passed on each side of **Tignano** and converged on Spicciano, farther along the road, where they stopped after dislodging small groups of the enemy. The sappers of **7 Field Company** cleared a passage for the tanks past demolitions and mines.

The Germans had observed on 21 July that the Allies were bringing up reinforcements on *1 Parachute Corps'* front, particularly in the area south of **Tavarnelle**, and next day that the Allied preparations had increased still further. Guns and many vehicles could be seen, especially in the area east of the **Poggibonsi- Florence** road. Statements by prisoners of war indicated that a new formation, 'presumably **2 NZ Div**',<sup>1</sup> had come into the line. *Fourteenth Army* ordered *1 Parachute Corps* to hold the Nora Line ( **Strada- Fabbrica**) until at least the evening of 23 July.

On the 22nd *4 Parachute Division* extended its front eastwards by taking over part of *356 Division's* sector, an alteration which brought the New Zealand Division's line of assault exclusively against the parachute division. *Fourteenth Army* reports describe the attacks on *1 Parachute Corps'* front, including those south and south-east of **Tavarnelle**, where 'after fierce fighting our battle outposts withdrew to the FDLs.'<sup>2</sup> The 23rd Battalion of the New Zealand Division was identified by the capture of five men from B Company.

(iv)

C Company of 23 Battalion, accompanied by half of A Squadron, 18 Regiment, left the road junction near **Morocco** at 4.30 a.m. on 23 July and within an hour and a half had occupied the hamlet of La Rocca. Beyond La Rocca the enemy withdrew behind demolitions, one of which he blew little more than 100 yards in front of the leading tank. C Company crossed Route 2 to the village of **Strada**, on a secondary road leading to the north-west. There the defence included spandau, mortar and *ofenrohr* fire, but the tanks 'hammered the buildings with all their weapons while the infantry moved in, and Jerry fled, abandoning one of his bazookas.'<sup>3</sup> C Company was in possession of **Strada** by 7.15 a.m., and another group of buildings called Case Poggio Petroio about midday.

The artillery engaged a German tank reported at Point 322, by Villa **Strada**, a large house (known to the New Zealanders as the Castle) not

far to the north of **Strada**. One of A Squadron's tanks was hit by an anti-tank shell from somewhere near Villa **Strada**, and burst into flames before the crew could get clear. Early in the afternoon C Company was directed on Point 322, but was forced to fall back. So intense was the fire from this locality that it was decided not to renew the attack that afternoon.

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *Fourteenth Army*.

<sup>2</sup> *Fourteenth Army's* diary says on 22 July that the 'enmity of the Italian civilian population in the forward areas was observed to be greatly increased; it showed itself mainly in support given to the enemy—guiding patrols, giving away our positions, etc. In one divisional sector 26 Italians were shot as a reprisal.'

<sup>3</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 504.

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The Maori Battalion resumed the advance from the **Tignano** area at 5 a.m. on the 23rd and in a little over two hours entered **Tavarnelle** without opposition. It was then learnt that 23 Battalion, by attacking **Strada**, had crossed 28 Battalion's axis of advance (Route 2). Brigadier Stewart therefore directed the Maori Battalion to take a road north of **Tavarnelle** instead of Route 2, with **Villa Bonazza** as its immediate objective. After some delay caused by machine-gun fire and mines, C Company moved up this road, followed by half of B Squadron, 18 Regiment, with B Company keeping level on the right. Both companies were fired on by guns and mortars located mostly in the Villa **Strada** area, where tanks were also seen.

From the direction of **Villa Bonazza** 'fast tank shells came whistling down the road.... [B Squadron's tanks] began to shoot up the villa and its grounds, but this brought on a savage reaction from Jerry, and a Tiger tank beside a little cemetery on the right flank hit and burnt two Shermans in quick succession.' <sup>1</sup> A third troop of B Squadron came up to join in the battle with the Tiger, which left the cemetery and, while

heading across a gully towards Route 2, was damaged beyond repair and finally blown up by its crew. This was the first Tiger tank claimed by the New Zealand Shermans.

During the day 18 Regiment's padre (Captain Gourdie <sup>2</sup>) pulled the men out of two burning tanks, and repeatedly exposed himself to shell and machine-gun fire to take carrier loads of wounded men back to the RAP.

On 28 Battalion's left flank D Company advanced up the road through the village of Noce, which was across a gully from Villa Bonazza. The hostile fire increased beyond Noce, and by 6 p.m. D Company, as well as B and C, had come to a halt. Later, however, the Maoris charged Villa Bonazza. Sergeant Patrick, <sup>3</sup> of D Company, says 'a spandau was firing from one of the windows and there was a fair amount of activity in the trees.... We fixed bayonets and went down the gully and up the other side pretty well worked up too.' But the enemy must have seen the Maoris coming, 'for they left their defences and scampered back to the building. The trees seemed alive with running men, and the yelling of the Maoris added to the din created by the shouting of the Jerries. We killed a few but the rest disappeared and we presumed they had entered the casa. We searched but found no one

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 508. Dawson gives the regiment's casualties for the day as six killed and 11 wounded.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. R. McL. Gourdie, DSO, ED; Shannon; born Ashburton, 21 Apr 1913; Anglican minister; SCF J Force Nov 1945–Jun 1946.

<sup>3</sup> Lt P. W. Patrick; Auckland; born Waerenga, 15 Nov 1921; clerk.

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in it. It was a tremendous building and I remember a beautiful

(v)

Brigadier Stewart gave 23 Battalion orders in the morning of 23 July to occupy **Sambuca**, but not to continue beyond the bound MONTREAL (the junction of the **Sambuca** road and Route 2). Also, Divisional Cavalry's armoured cars were to establish contact with 6 South African Division's troops on the right flank. Lieutenant- Colonel Thomas therefore instructed A Company to continue to **Sambuca** and **Fabbrica** with supporting arms and an additional troop of A Squadron of Divisional Cavalry under command.

This force came under increasing shell and mortar fire as it approached the western bank of the **Pesa**; it found that the bridge had been destroyed at **Sambuca**, but took the village, crossed the river, and continued towards **Fabbrica**, a village on a hillside more than a mile to the north. The impression was gained from Italians that the enemy had left **Fabbrica**,<sup>2</sup> and this seemed to be confirmed when no fire came from the village.

The vehicles were held up at a demolition where the road crossed a stream, but about 7.30 p.m. the infantry continued to the foot of the hill on which **Fabbrica** stood, where they were within easy range of the buildings overlooking them. At this point mortars and machine guns opened fire on the men in the open, who went to ground, and artillery fire was directed on the road around Company Headquarters. A request was sent back for a stonk on **Fabbrica**, but some of the artillery fire fell short. The house in which Company Headquarters had been set up received a direct hit by an enemy shell, which killed Major Hoseit and wounded several of his men. Orders were given for the company to withdraw, which it did with the assistance of covering fire from the Staghounds.

(vi)

Field Marshal Kesselring expressed the opinion to General Joachim Lemelsen <sup>3</sup> on 23 July that a major Allied attack was imminent, with its main weight on *Fourteenth Army's* left flank and possibly to a less extent on *Tenth Army's* right flank. It appeared to him

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<sup>1</sup> *28 (Maori) Battalion*, p. 393.

<sup>2</sup> The Italians may have given false information because of the threat of German reprisals, but there is no proof of this.

<sup>3</sup> General Lemelsen had replaced General von Mackensen as the commander of *Fourteenth Army*.

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that there was evidence that the Allies had decided against a landing in southern **France** so as to add all possible weight to the attack in **Italy**, perhaps supported by a landing on the Ligurian coast or in the Adriatic. The immediate objective would be **Florence**.

Late on 23 July *Fourteenth Army* issued orders that *1 Parachute Corps* was to delay the Allies as long as possible after they had launched their expected attack on **Florence**. To enable the Paula Line south of the city to be prepared for a prolonged defence, *1 Parachute Corps* was to hold another line (the Olga Line) several miles farther south until the evening of 25 July at the earliest.

*Fourteenth Army's* evening report on 23 July states that the New Zealand and South African divisions had attacked the centre and left of *1 Parachute Corps* in strength. 'Very hard fighting took place, in which 4 Para Div particularly distinguished itself. Both sides lost heavily. All attacks were beaten off, and a decisive success was gained....' In a discussion with Lemelsen, General Alfred Schlemm (commander of *1 Parachute Corps*) reported that 'Terrible fighting was in progress on 4 Para Div's front; the division had New Zealanders opposite it.' <sup>1</sup>

On the morning of 23 July **General Freyberg** was so satisfied with the way the advance was developing that he anticipated a speedy collapse of the German defences. He therefore decided not to bring 6 Brigade into the attack at that stage, but instead to send Divisional Cavalry through 5 Brigade when it had reached the bound **QUEBEC** (about 12 miles in a straight line from **Florence**) with the intention of driving to the **Arno** to try to save some of the bridges. Later in the day the reports of the opposition on 5 Brigade's front indicated that there was no immediate prospect of Divisional Cavalry accomplishing this task.

Nevertheless the GOC continued to be hopeful of the enemy's early withdrawal behind the **Arno**, and he wished to be fully prepared to follow up such a withdrawal as closely as possible. He considered bringing up 22 (Motor) Battalion and an armoured regiment with Headquarters 4 Armoured Brigade on the right, but it was felt that until 5 Brigade got further ahead there would not be enough room.

It could be seen that the right flank would present many obstacles. Route 2, being a main road, was likely to be well covered with fire; the many ditches and streams which passed under it to drain into the Pesa River gave the enemy ample scope for  
demoli-

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *Fourteenth Army*.

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tions

, and the river itself would hinder lateral communications across the front. On the other hand, the road running to the north-west from **Strada**, mostly along the higher ground of the divide between the **Pesa** and the **Virginio stream**, might give greater opportunity for deployment and outflanking movements. It was decided, therefore, to exploit 23 Battalion's success.

In the evening of 23 July Stewart arranged with Thomas that 23

Battalion's D Company at **Strada** should send a patrol at 3 a.m. to Point 322 (near Villa **Strada**), where the enemy had resisted most strongly, to discover if he was still there. If he appeared to be thinning out, D Company was to stage an attack. If not, 21 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel **Thodey**<sup>1</sup>) was to pass through the 23rd with fresh tanks and take up the advance.

D Company's patrol reported that enemy troops were still around Point 322 but vehicles and tanks had been heard withdrawing. Thomas called for artillery fire on the objective, and about 6 a.m. sent D Company forward. The infantry infiltrated across country under cover of a heavy mist, and tanks of A Squadron, 18 Armoured Regiment, followed along the road. When the mist lifted the company came under machine-gun fire. The tanks encountered demolitions, and two were blown up on mines. Mortar and artillery fire swept the road. The attack was called off, and arrangements were put in hand for 21 Battalion to relieve the 23rd, which was to go back to the vicinity of **Morocco** to rest. This relief was completed late in the evening of the 24th.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile a patrol from B Company, 23 Battalion, reconnoitred along Route 2 from **Strada** to the Pesa River and found that the highway had been much damaged by demolitions. As might be expected, the bridge over the river had been blown.

*(viii)*

The Maori Battalion, having gained the bound MONTREAL, resumed the advance north of **Villa Bonazza** on the morning of 24 July, with C Company on the right, D on the left and B in reserve, and with two troops of B Squadron, 18 Regiment, in close support. A platoon from A Company (which was at **Tavarnelle**), two Staghounds and some Bren carriers worked along the road north of Noce to protect the left flank, where **8 Indian Division** had not yet drawn level.

The Maori Battalion made better progress on the left than on

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<sup>1</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>2</sup> **The 23rd Bn's total casualties during the three days 22–24 July were 94, including 21 dead.**

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**the right. Early in the afternoon, when Brigadier Stewart learnt that D Company had reached the line of the bound**

**QUEBEC**

**, he instructed Lieutenant-Colonel Young to halt his men and wait until 21 Battalion was ready to support a further advance on the right. D Company was about two miles beyond Villa Bonazza, but C Company was well back, and B farther back still. The Shermans with C Company clashed with a Panther, <sup>1</sup> 'which blazed defiantly away from the Strada road and effectively scotched the advance on the Maoris' right.' <sup>2</sup> But the enemy, after some 'nasty persistent shellfire', withdrew during the night, and C Company advanced before dawn on the 25th to secure the crossroads on the Strada – San Pancrazio road about two miles from Strada. The Maori Battalion then took the route north-westward towards San Pancrazio.**

**A Company of 21 Battalion, having relieved D Company, 23 Battalion, after dusk on the 24th, set off along the road from Strada, supported by two troops of C Squadron, 18 Regiment (which had replaced A Squadron), and with C Company following in a reserve role. The leading infantry was reported on the line of the bound QUEBEC about 2 a.m. As 28 Battalion was cutting in ahead on the Strada – San Pancrazio road, 21 Battalion was directed on to the road leading off to the north from the crossroads secured by the Maoris. A Company followed this road down a long spur towards the Pesa River. Mines and demolitions had to be cleared to allow the tanks through, and in the afternoon the company was brought to a halt by enemy in buildings near the end of the ridge, from which the road descended to a bridge, already demolished, on the Pesa. Route 2, on the other side of the river, turned at right angles not**

far from the wrecked bridge to climb a spur to **San Casciano**.

A Company laid on an attack which at first went well, but as the infantry and tanks approached the river they came under mortar and artillery fire, mostly from the **San Casciano** spur. A Sherman was knocked out. The infantry took up positions along the road leading to the demolished bridge, and stayed there next day.

The Maori Battalion continued its advance north-westward on the road along the ridge between the **Pesa** and the **Virginio** on the morning of 25 July. D Company and tanks of B Squadron, 18 Regiment, were held up about midday at **San Pancrazio** by a mined demolition covered by anti-tank fire. Staghounds of A Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, which had joined the battalion, and others of B Squadron, which had taken over the task of protecting the

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<sup>1</sup> The Panther (Mark V) tank weighed about 50 tons and mounted a 75-mm. gun.

<sup>2</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 512. Dawson says 'A self-propelled "tank buster" [an M10] from 7 Anti-Tank Regiment had a crack at it but was knocked out.' There is no mention of this in *7 A-Tk Regt's* records.

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left flank by driving along the road from **Noce** to **San Pancrazio**, assisted in clearing the village, where 13 prisoners were collected. Beyond **San Pancrazio** many mines, real and dummy, were lifted, and D Company took 23 prisoners in a sharp fight near **Lucignano**.

(ix)

Meanwhile changes took place on the Division's right flank, east of the **Pesa** River. A Company of 23 Battalion, after being repulsed at **Fabbrica**, was replaced on the night of 23–24 July by B Company, 21 Battalion, which in turn was withdrawn next night when 21 Battalion

relieved the 23rd at **Strada**. The front east of the **Pesa** was then taken over by a composite force called **Arm cav**, under the command of Major H. A. Robinson <sup>1</sup> and comprising A Squadron of 19 Regiment, C Squadron of Divisional Cavalry, 2 Company and a section of carriers from 22 (Motor) Battalion, a troop of M10s, detachments of engineers, machine-gunners and signalmen, a bridge-layer tank and a bulldozer.

**Arm cav**, under 5 Brigade's command, was to follow up the enemy's withdrawal on Route 2 and maintain contact with the South Africans on the right. It was hoped that, with 5 Brigade advancing fast on the western side of the **Pesa** and the South Africans pressing forward on the east, the enemy holding across Route 2 would fall back under the threat of encirclement.

Early on the morning of 25 July **Arm cav** occupied a deserted **Fabbrica** and reached the road junction near the Route 2 crossing of the **Pesa** without opposition. While the main part of **Arm cav** continued northward along Route 2, a detachment including armoured cars took a more easterly route through the hills from **Fabbrica**. The main part of the force entered Bargino on Route 2 about midday, but was delayed in the afternoon by demolitions and mines and came under long-range shellfire. The bridge over the Terzona stream (which flowed into the **Pesa**) had been blown, and movement in the vicinity before nightfall brought shell and mortar fire from German positions at **San Casciano**.

(x)

The *1st Parachute Corps* had withdrawn during the night of 23–24 July to an intermediate line south of the Olga Line, and had been ‘followed up sharply’ by forces which at daybreak were already close to the forward German positions. ‘Throughout the day the enemy continued his attacks in strength against 4 Para

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson had relinquished command of **18 Armd Regt** on 18 July.

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Div, with heavy artillery and tank support. He made several local penetrations, all of which were sealed off....' <sup>1</sup> On the night of 24–25 July **4 Parachute Division** and **356 Division**, holding the centre and left wing of **1 Parachute Corps'** sector, withdrew to the Olga Line, and the following night **29 Panzer Grenadier Division**, on the corps' right wing, also went back to this line. **Fourteenth Army** then held the **Heinrich Line** from the west coast to **Empoli** (on the southern bank of the **Arno River** about 15 miles west of **Florence**) and from there the Olga Line eastwards through **Montespertoli** (on **8 Indian Division's** front), **San Casciano** (on the **New Zealand Division's** front) and **Mercatale** (on **6 South African Armoured Division's** front). Heavy attacks, 'as expected', <sup>2</sup> were launched in **1 Parachute Corps'** sector on 25 July. By the end of the day **6 South African Armoured Division** and **2 NZ Division** were facing squarely up to the Olga Line.

(xi)

**Sixth New Zealand Infantry Brigade**, having fought in the **Arezzo** sector, had been held in reserve during the initial stages of the advance to **Florence**, but had been kept well forward so that, when required, it could pass through **5 Brigade** and maintain the impetus of the advance. **Divisional Headquarters** issued orders at 7 p.m. on the 25th that **5 Brigade** was to continue the advance during the night to a line running through **Montagnana** to a bridge over the **Pesa** west of **Cerbaia**. When this objective had been secured, and at a time to be decided by the two brigade commanders, **6 Brigade** was to pass through the **5th**, establish a bridgehead over the **Pesa** in the vicinity of **Cerbaia** and advance northwards to a line west of the **Pian dei Cerri** hills <sup>3</sup> and about half-way to **Signa**. On the same night **Armcaav** was to capture **San Casciano** and remain responsible for the protection of the Division's right flank. Next day (the 26th) **5 Brigade** was to patrol to the north-west and **4 Armoured Brigade** was to be prepared to operate to the east and north-east of **6 Brigade's** objective.

When the GOC told the corps commander, during a telephone

conversation in the evening of the 25th, that the Division was putting through another brigade to attack in the direction of **Signa**, General Kirkman wondered whether it would not be better for the Division to direct its attack on to a bridge in **Florence** as he appreciated that it would be less likely to capture the **Signa**

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *Fourteenth Army*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Pian*: small plain or plateau. *Cerri*: **Turkey** (southern European) oaks. The name is loosely applied to the group of wooded hills in the vicinity of the **Pian dei Cerri**.

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bridge intact. Next morning **Divisional Headquarters** issued fresh orders which provided for the possibility of capturing both the **Signa** bridge and a bridge in **Florence**. After passing through 5 Brigade, 6 Brigade was to form a bridgehead over the **Pesa** between **San Casciano** and **Cerbaia** and advance north-eastward on to the **Pian dei Cerri** hills. **Arm cav** was to capture **San Casciano**, if the opposition was not too strong, and protect 6 Brigade's right flank. If **San Casciano** was not captured, **Arm cav** was to continue to threaten the town from the south and south-east. Divisional Cavalry was to advance on the left of 6 Brigade to the **Arno River** eastward from and including the **Signa** bridge. Fourth Brigade was to be prepared to pass through 6 Brigade's objective on the **Pian dei Cerri** hills, and taking **Arm cav** under command, advance to the **Arno** westward from and including the westernmost bridge (Ponte della Vittoria) in **Florence**.

(xii)

As 5 Brigade's front was gradually narrowing between the **Pesa** River and the Division's western boundary, Brigadier Stewart decided to let 21 Battalion alone continue the advance while **28 Battalion** protected the

axis road from the west until 8 Indian Division drew level on the flank.

Shortly after midnight on 25–26 July B and D Companies of 21 Battalion were sent up (on foot, because 6 Brigade's transport, now on the way forward, had priority on the road) to relieve the leading troops of 28 Battalion. The enemy counter-attacked the Maoris that night, and Major Awatere<sup>1</sup> therefore decided to leave his men forward with 21 Battalion's. A platoon from the 21st and one of C Squadron's tanks went along the road to the north-west and soon met strong opposition. Three enemy machine-gun posts were silenced, but fire from mortars and what was claimed to be a Tiger tank forced the party to retire with half a dozen casualties.

The GOC gave orders that there was to be no infantry attack in daylight on the 26th. The forward positions were shelled and mortared throughout the day. A Company, 21 Battalion, still near the demolished Pesa bridge, was under fire from the San Casciano spur. This slackened towards evening, but when three of C Squadron's tanks attempted to reconnoitre a possible ford, they were caught in a fresh outburst of shelling; all three were hit and one was set alight.

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<sup>1</sup> Lt-Col A. Awatere, DSO, MC; Rotorua; born Tuparoa 25 Apr 1910; civil servant; CO 28 Bn Jul–Aug 1944, Nov 1944–Jun 1945; twice wounded. Lt-Col Young was forced by illness to relinquish command of 28 (Maori) Bn on 25 July and was succeeded by Awatere.

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The fire from San Casciano was sufficient to prevent Armcav from making any progress beyond the Terzona stream, about a mile and a half south of the town. Reports were received that Tiger tanks and anti-tank guns were defending San Casciano, which was shelled and twice raided spectacularly by fighter-bombers. Patrols sent out eastward in the afternoon met South African patrols and learnt that the enemy was still holding strongly in the Mercatale area.

General Freyberg, feeling that he should not leave the Division at

this time, deputed Brigadier Inglis on 26 July to receive His Majesty the King when he passed through the New Zealand sector while visiting the troops in **Italy**. Only men from the units not in action, which included part of 4 Brigade and 23 Battalion, were available to line a road about 20 miles from **Florence** to cheer King George, who sent the General a message that he was sorry he had not been able to see him but quite understood.

*(xiii)*

Fifth Brigade's plan for the night of 26–27 July was for 21 Battalion to continue the advance north-westwards to the village of **Montagnana**, while 28 (Maori) Battalion guarded the western flank until **8 Indian Division** drew level.

With strong artillery support, D Company of 21 Battalion, accompanied by some 17-pounder guns and sappers with a bulldozer, and joined later by tanks of C Squadron, 18 Regiment, led the advance along the road past **San Quirico** to where it forked about a mile and a half from **Montagnana**. B Company, without support, went along tracks and across rough country to the nearby village of **La Ripa**, which it reached unopposed. Word was sent back immediately that the way was clear for 6 Brigade.

When troops of 26 Battalion, coming up for the attack across the Pesa River, reached **La Ripa**, it was decided to pass B Company, 21 Battalion, through D Company to continue the advance to Montagnana. B Company was joined by a party of tanks, 17-pounders and engineers, and set off before dawn on the 27th. The enemy offered little resistance, but left freshly-blown demolitions and mines, which kept the sappers busy clearing a passage. As the light improved the company found that it was following a road along a spur in full view of the enemy on the high ground across the **Pesa**. Although several salvos of shells were directed on the road, the German gunners appeared to be more concerned with the 6 Brigade troops gathering near the river. A report that Tiger tanks were in **Montagnana** was found to be incorrect, and B

**Company entered the village without opposition.**

**The havoc in a large mansion in [Montagnana](#) suggested that its owner might have incurred reprisal for pro-Allied sentiment, 'for everything possible, furniture, glass, earthenware and oil paintings had been destroyed, presumably by the enemy. Even the wine casks in the cellar had been broached.'<sup>1</sup> In the neighbouring village of [Montegufoni](#), however, a property owned by the English family of Sitwell happily had escaped this fate. None of the family was in residence and the house had been taken over by the Italians to store a priceless collection of paintings. Apart from being structurally suitable for storage, it was situated in a hollow unlikely to be a defended position, which no doubt helped to preserve its treasures.**

**Two Divisional Cavalry men discovered that the only occupant of the Sitwell's house 'seemed to be a gentle old Italian with the air of a Major Domo. We felt rather like Barbarians in this house with its aristocratic atmosphere and we in our common army boots. Stacked around the walls were dozens of pictures and the largest of all was leaning against a table. This huge dark canvas commanded our attention.... I'm no art connoisseur, but I knew that this was Botticelli's Primavera. We were rather awestruck. Naturally we didn't know that UNRRA<sup>2</sup> were waiting to take care of the place, but we knew it should be reported immediately.'<sup>3</sup>**

**(xiv)**

**The occupation of [Montagnana](#) brought 5 Brigade to its final objective, the bound OMAHA.<sup>4</sup> The Maori Battalion occupied positions along the open western flank. Because 6 South African Armoured Division had been unable to keep pace on 5 Brigade's other (eastern) flank, it was necessary for the New Zealand Division to clear Route 2 and make a frontal assault on [San Casciano](#) while 6 Brigade exploited 5 Brigade's success and crossed the [Pesa](#) to make a left hook round the north-west of the town. The enemy was expected to resist stubbornly at**

**San Casciano**, which was a centre of communications on commanding ground.

**Arm cav**, driving up Route 2, had been held up on 26 July at the Terzona stream. Early next morning an armoured car patrol managed to cross farther upstream and reach a road junction near **Mercatale**, but was halted by mines on the **Mercatale – San Casciano** road. The main body of **Arm cav** also crossed the Terzona and advanced along Route 2. The tanks and other vehicles were delayed

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<sup>1</sup> *21 Battalion*, pp. 357–8.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.

<sup>3</sup> R.C. **Cotterall**, quoted in *Divisional Cavalry*, p. 358.

<sup>4</sup> 5Bde had taken 136 prisoners during the advance.

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by demolitions, but shortly before 10 a.m. infantry of 22 Battalion entered **San Casciano** unopposed except by some sniper fire.

The town, at the junction of several roads, had been abundantly mined and booby-trapped, and the roads badly blocked by a combination of British bombing and shelling and German demolitions. When one of 22 Battalion's carriers following the infantry struck a mine, two men were killed and three wounded. A house-to-house search by infantry and tanks cleared the town of snipers. The engineer detachment from **6 Field Company**, with a bulldozer, worked hard to make the road passable up to and through the town, but this work became extremely hazardous about midday, when the enemy laid shell and mortar fire on the roads and their junction in the town. Much of this fire came from the east.

On the occupation of **San Casciano Arm cav** passed from 5 Brigade's command to 4 Armoured Brigade, which was to take over this sector and

continue the advance. When tanks of 20 Armoured Regiment and the rest of 22 Battalion reached San Casciano, **Arm cav** was disbanded.

Fourth Brigade sent out strong patrols, including armoured cars or tanks (or both), to reconnoitre the roads radiating from San Casciano. They found that movement north of the town was hindered by shelling and numerous demolitions and mines. B Squadron of 20 Regiment and 3 Company, 22 Battalion, attempted to go along the road leading north-westward through **Talente** to **Cerbaia**, but were halted by a bad demolition about a mile from **San Casciano**. One of B Squadron's tanks was set alight by shellfire, another damaged on a mine, and a third halted by mechanical trouble.

**Florence**, about 10 miles to the north, was visible from a tower in **San Casciano**.

(xv)

Sixth Brigade had received orders on 26 July to pass through 5 Brigade with the task of forming a bridgehead over the **Pesa** between **San Casciano** and **Cerbaia** and continuing the advance. After 5 Brigade had occupied **La Ripa**, 26 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Fontaine) was to advance to the **Pesa** and establish a bridgehead as close to **Cerbaia** as 5 Brigade's advance would allow. After crossing the **Pesa** this battalion was to attack objectives on the high ground to the north. It was to have under command C Squadron (less a troop) of **19 Armoured Regiment**, a platoon of machine guns, a troop of six-pounder anti-tank guns, a section of 17-pounders, and a detachment of engineers. The 24th Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Hutchens), with a similar supporting force, was to follow hard on the heels of the 26th into the bridgehead and was to attack on its left. The 25th Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Norman), in reserve, was to form a firm base in the bridgehead.

The three battalions had been brought up to positions along the road south of **San Pancrazio**. A Company of 26 Battalion took over **La Ripa** from 21 Battalion at 3 a.m. on the 27th.

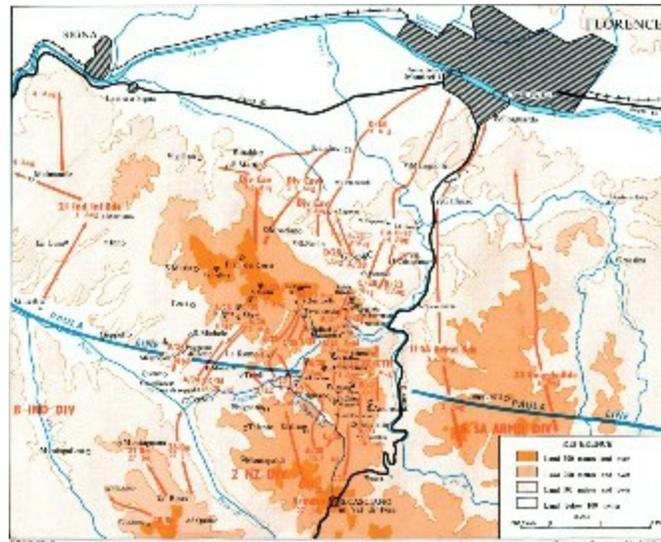
At the start of 26 Battalion's advance the artillery, which had been firing on targets ahead of 21 Battalion, turned its attention to previously selected targets in the area of the proposed bridgehead and eastwards from **Cerbaia** to **La Romola**. The tanks and other supporting vehicles were unable to get past a mined demolition on the edge of **La Ripa** until a way had been cleared by the sappers of 8 Field Company. As dawn began to break the infantry and tanks came under shell and mortar fire from across the **Pesa**. The infantry reached the bank of the river about 7 a.m. and soon discovered that a heavy explosion heard earlier had been the demolition of the bridge.

No enemy was found on the western side of the river, so the tanks were called forward to assist the infantry to cross and attack **Cerbaia**, from which machine-gun fire was being directed at the men on the bank. A small bridge over a stream collapsed under the weight of the leading tank, which rolled over into the stream, but a bulldozer made a crossing for the other tanks, which engaged in a duel with enemy guns on the high ground behind **Cerbaia**.

A patrol investigated the demolished bridge, which had so dammed the **Pesa** that the fording of it appeared feasible. A Company's commander (Major **McKinlay**<sup>1</sup>) decided about 8 a.m. to attack across the river. C Squadron's leading tanks tried to cross where the slope of the bank offered a route, but two ran on to mines, and the others temporarily withdrew to cover while the sappers bulldozed a track in an unmined area. Meanwhile the infantry crossed and found that the enemy had gone from **Cerbaia**.

The remainder of 26 Battalion came forward on the western side of the **Pesa**, as also did 24 Battalion, which was intended to move across the rear of the 26th to a base at the nearby village of **Castellare**, also vacated by the enemy; there the 24th was to take over the left-hand sector of a two-battalion attack by 6 Brigade against the **Pian dei Cerri** hills. The tanks of B Squadron, **19 Armoured Regiment**, under 24 Battalion's command, crossed the **Pesa** at a shallow place discovered

east of **La Ripa** and advanced to **Talente**, where they engaged enemy gun positions, but apparently



**San Casciano to Florence, 27 July – 4 August 1944**

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj A. R. McKinlay; Lawrence; born Lawrence, 21 Mar 1914; assistant company manager.**

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did not make contact with the 4 Brigade patrol attempting to reach **Talente** from **San Casciano**.

The New Zealand Division had been able to occupy **San Casciano** and **Cerbaia** without opposition and reach its final objectives west of the **Pesa** on 27 July because *1 Parachute Corps* had withdrawn the previous night, as planned, to the **Paula Line**. The Division now was about to embark upon the final and hardest-fought stage of its advance to **Florence**.

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## III: THE PIAN DEI CERRI HILLS

### *III: The Pian dei Cerri Hills*

(i)

The Paula Line, the last of the enemy's planned delaying positions south of **Florence**, followed an eastward course from **Montelupo**, at the confluence of the **Arno** and **Pesa** rivers, across Route 2 towards the **Arno valley** between **Florence** and **Arezzo**. When *1 Parachute Corps* withdrew to the **Paula Line** on the night of 26–27 July, the adjacent left wing of *14 Panzer Corps* went back to the same line, and the point of contact between the two corps was moved eastward (to about two miles west of **Cerbaia**) to give *1 Parachute Corps* a smaller sector, which enabled the enemy to thicken the concentration of armour, artillery and infantry opposing the two divisions—the New Zealand and South African—most closely approaching **Florence**.

As a result of this contraction of *1 Parachute Corps'* front the New Zealand Division, which had been opposed from the start of the advance by *4 Parachute Division*, now faced its western neighbour, *29 Panzer Grenadier Division*, whose sector included the high ground of the **Pian dei Cerri**. From the crest of these rolling wooded hills, rising in places over 1000 feet, both the **Pesa** valley to the south and the **Arno valley** and **Florence** to the north could be dominated by fire.

The New Zealand Division's front had widened sufficiently to permit a two-brigade attack against this high ground. **General Freyberg** was confident early on 27 July that an advance over the **Pian dei Cerri** would drive the enemy back and clear the way to **Florence**. He discussed plans for the opening of a New Zealand club in the city. By the evening, however, it was obvious that the Division had run up against more determined opposition than it had yet encountered in the campaign, and that something more in the nature of a set-piece attack would have to

take the place of the probing advances by single companies which had succeeded up to this stage. The plan for that night, states the GOC's diary, was 'modified and qualified and modified again in the usual manner.' Finally it was decided that 4 and 6 Brigades should make independent attacks with limited objectives.

On the left of the New Zealand sector **8 Indian Division** had entered **Montespertoli** unopposed on the morning of 27 July and, before the day ended, had drawn level with 5 NZ Brigade, whose role of protecting the New Zealand Division's left flank therefore was no longer necessary. On the right of the New Zealand sector 6 South African Armoured Division had found **Mercatale**, south-east of **San Casciano**, vacated by the enemy, but had been able to advance only a short distance beyond the village against stiffening resistance and under fire from guns on the high ground around **Impruneta**, and also had come up against strong enemy positions on Poggio Mandorli, south of **Strada**. Thus, until such time as the South Africans should draw level, 4 NZ Armoured Brigade, which was proposing to push north from **San Casciano**, had an unprotected right flank and was exposed to counter-attack and to fire from the guns around **Impruneta**.

(ii)

The plan on which 2 NZ Division acted on the night of 27–28 July evolved from the earlier orders, which had given less importance to the occupation of **San Casciano** than to the formation of the bridgehead over the **Pesa** by 6 Brigade. After establishing the bridgehead 6 Brigade was to have occupied the line **La Romola – San Michele** (this bound being given the codename ATLANTA) and then the crest of the **Pian dei Cerri** hills ( BROOKLYN). <sup>1</sup> As **San Casciano** would have been untenable by the enemy once 6 Brigade was on these heights, the capture of the town had been left to **Arm cav**. Fourth Brigade's original role had been to pass through 6 Brigade on the capture of BROOKLYN and make a dash to the **Arno** in three bounds, while Divisional Cavalry made a similar advance on the left flank. Because all three brigades of the Division would have had to

use the single route gained by 5 Brigade's advances west of the **Pesa**, precise priorities had been allotted for the movement of fighting and maintenance vehicles.

The enemy's early and scarcely expected withdrawal from **San Casciano**<sup>2</sup> caused a change in plan. The advantages of occupying the town were recognised before **Arm cav** had entered it. Instructions issued at 9.30 a.m. on the 27th gave 4 Brigade a new thrust line, northwards from **San Casciano** to **Giogoli** and then by the three

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<sup>1</sup> Many codenames were given for bounds and objectives in subsequent plans, which eventually involved all three brigades of the Division. The objectives denoted by **ATLANTA** and **BROOKLYN** were cancelled on 29 July.

<sup>2</sup> At divisional conferences on 29 and 30 July the GOC said he could not understand why the enemy had given up **San Casciano**.

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bounds to the **Arno**. This would ease the Division's supply lines by widening the front and using Route 2 to **San Casciano** and the roads to **Giogoli**, and also would allow 4 Brigade's tanks to avoid the more formidable of the **Pian dei Cerri** hills.

When it was realised that the South Africans were unlikely to keep pace with the New Zealand advance the scope of the plan was modified by a message sent by **Divisional Headquarters** at 7.35 p.m., by which time 4 Brigade had absorbed **Arm cav** and 6 Brigade had tested the opposition on its front. Fourth Brigade now was given the task of attacking the eastern portion of the objective **BROOKLYN**, from a road fork south of Poggio delle Monache to **La Poggiona**, and 6 Brigade the crest of the **Pian dei Cerri**, which it was to gain in three stages.<sup>1</sup> The two brigades were to attack independently. A further modification, issued at 10.40 p.m., limited 4 Brigade's objective to the high ground from north of **Faltignano** to **La Romola**, and 6 Brigade to its first

objective (Poggio Cigoli to Torri). Divisional Cavalry was made responsible for the road leading north-east from **Geppetto**, on the left flank.

Sixth Brigade, in a message issued at 11.30 p.m. on the 27th, instructed its units <sup>2</sup> that the 'intermediate objectives' were to be attacked that night, Poggio Cigoli (Point 281) by 26 Battalion and La Liona (Point 261) by 24 Battalion; the advance to the 'final objectives', Poggio Valicaia (Point 382) and La Sughera (Point 395), would not be carried out until 4 Brigade had 'completed tasks on right flank'. <sup>3</sup> This second phase was expected to take place on 28 July. The 25th Battalion was to remain in reserve and protect the bridgehead over the Pesa River and the left flank.

Several roads led into the hills from the vicinity of **Cerbaia**, one north-eastward along a ridge to **La Romola** and beyond to join the **San Casciano – Giogoli** road; another from **Castellare** up a ridge to **San Michele** and over the **Pian dei Cerri**; and another, also from **Castellare**, up a ridge between **La Romola** and San Michele. Sixth Brigade's first objectives (Points 281 and 261) were on this middle ridge.

C Company, which was to take 26 Battalion's first objective (Point 281), crossed the **Pesa**, passed through A Company at **Cerbaia** before midnight, and was joined by two troops of C Squadron,

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<sup>1</sup> Although the orders from HQ **2 NZ Div** gave 6 Bde three successive objectives, the brigade orders refer only to two: the 'intermediate objectives' to be attacked in the first phase and the 'final objectives' in the second phase, short of the final objective of the divisional orders.

<sup>2</sup> Under 6 Bde's command, in addition to the three infantry battalions, were **19 Armd Regt** less one squadron, **33 A-Tk Bty**, **39 Hy Mor Bty**, **2 MG Coy** and **8 Fd Coy**; a troop of M10s of **31 Bty** was in support. The artillery was under the direct command of the CRA, but 5 and 6 Fd Regts were given tasks in support of 6 Bde, and 70 and 75 Med Regts also were to assist.



THE PIAN DEI CERRI HILLS  
THE PIAN DEI CERRI HILLS

**19 Regiment.** A section (two Vickers guns) of 6 MG Platoon was loaded on to the tanks, and anti-tank guns were hitched on behind some of them. Just before 1 a.m. C Company reached its start line on a side-track (from **Cerbaia di sopra**<sup>1</sup>) linking the **Cerbaia – La Romola** road with the road on the middle ridge. B Company followed C into **Cerbaia**, while D waited west of the **Pesa** until called forward; B and D were to occupy the second objective (Point 382).

A Company, which was to take 24 Battalion's first objective (Point 261), crossed the **Pesa** after dark; B and D, which were to occupy the second objective (Point 395), waited on the other side. C Company covered Battalion Headquarters, which was set up in **Castellare**. A Company was delayed by shellfire while crossing the

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<sup>1</sup> Upper **Cerbaia**.

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river and, instead of passing through **Castellare** as it should have done, eventually found itself in **Cerbaia**; it then followed the route taken earlier by C Company, 26 Battalion, to the start line, and was at least an

**hour and a half late in starting.**

**The tanks of B Squadron which were to support 24 Battalion did not arrive until much later. As soon as dusk obscured enemy observation, they left the **Talente** area (south-east of **Cerbaia**), where they had arrived earlier in the day, but could make only slow progress because of demolitions, mines, scattered fire and mechanical troubles. About 10 completed the journey, the leaders reaching **Castellare** not long before dawn on the 28th.**

**(iii)**

**C Company, 26 Battalion, advanced up the road from **Castellare** on the middle ridge (between **La Romola** and **San Michele**), but owing to the difficulties of the going and the need to sweep for mines, the infantry soon outdistanced the tanks. As early as 2 a.m. the company reported back that it had covered the two miles to Poggio Cigoli (Point 281) and was beyond that point, but had not been able to make contact with 24 Battalion on its left flank. Brigade Headquarters learnt at 3.30 a.m. that C Company's leading men were on the road some 500 yards north of Point 281, but the tanks, having been held up by a demolition, were well to the rear.**

**The Vickers guns were unloaded and the anti-tank guns unhitched, and while two tanks returned to bring up more guns, five managed to get past the demolition and push on to join the infantry. They overtook part of the reserve platoon (14 Platoon), which had been given the task of covering the sappers and guiding the tanks, and about daybreak were in a position from which they could cover the infantry ahead.**

**As the light improved, C Company, which had dug in hastily on both sides of the road, came under mortar and shell fire, and by the time the tanks arrived the whole area was under constant fire from almost all quarters. Obviously the company had penetrated well into the enemy's lines. Anti-tank guns were firing from the **La Romola** ridge, almost due south, and other fire came from the north-west, west and south-west**

along the **San Michele** ridge.

In fact C Company had gone farther than had been intended,<sup>1</sup> probably because it had appeared at that stage that the enemy had

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<sup>1</sup> The GOC's diary says that 6 Bde's commander (Brig Burrows) reported at 8.30 a.m.: 'Right well forward beyond original objective .... further forward than meant.' 26 Bn's war diary suggests that the CO (Lt-Col Fountaine) on his own volition had decided on a deep unsupported exploitation; it reports at 4.30 a.m. that he ordered a strong platoon of B Coy to move to C Coy's 'original objective Pt 382' (Poggio Valicaia) and C Coy to 'exploit to Point 395' (La Sughera—24 Bn's final objective).

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either withdrawn or was withdrawing. The OC (Major **Kain**<sup>1</sup>) apparently had felt at liberty to exploit as far forward of the first objective as he could get. It had been demonstrated during 5 Brigade's advance west of the **Pesa** that single companies forging ahead almost independently had made great gains on the heels of a retreating enemy, and it was not yet fully understood that the Division had come up against the **Paula Line**, which was to be stubbornly defended. The thought of being the first into **Florence** was in everyone's mind.

A detachment from B Company of platoon strength followed in C Company's tracks but did not get as far as Point 281; it met men of 24 Battalion about dawn and remained with them. Meanwhile A and B Companies of 25 Battalion joined the 26 Battalion troops at **Cerbaia**.

A Company, 24 Battalion, after getting away to a late start along the route on the ridge taken by C Company of the 26th, found a house occupied by five Germans, who were taken prisoner, and released two men of 26 Battalion who had been captured by this party. Continuing its advance, A Company met men at the tail of C Company who had just overcome a German machine-gun post near the road, and also stopped and captured an enemy truck which had driven through C Company. As dawn approached, A Company was well short of its objective, Point 261,

which was separated from the road by a wooded gully. The OC (Major **Howden** <sup>2</sup>) then gave orders for a defensive position to be taken up with two platoons covering the road and the third with Company Headquarters in a house. The company made contact with C Squadron tanks and was joined by the machine-gun section which had been carried on them. Three of B Squadron's tanks reached A Company's house just as day was breaking; others took up positions farther back to cover the **San Michele** and **Gepetto** roads.

Evidently 6 Brigade's advance had penetrated into a thinly held sector of the German defences between the strongpoints at **La Romola** and **San Michele**. Shortly after dawn on the 28th the enemy, who appeared to have a large concentration of guns and heavy mortars on the **Pian dei Cerri** hills, brought down heavy fire on the salient and the roads to the rear. He had often used shellfire to cover his withdrawal, and as he had not seriously counter-attacked for some time, the New Zealand commanders apparently were expecting him to fall back, as he had been doing during the last few days. They therefore took little immediate action to ease the isolation of the two companies in the salient.

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj G. T. Kain**; Geraldine; born Dunedin, 20 Sep 1917; farmer.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj I. G. Howden**; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 27 Dec 1914; broker; QM 24 Bn, 1943.

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There were signs, however, that the enemy was preparing to counter-attack from the high ground to the north, where movement was observed and on which the fire of the New Zealand guns was directed. The tanks of B Squadron in the salient were finding it difficult to avoid the fire of enemy self-propelled guns or tanks on the **San Michele** ridge, while those of C Squadron were exposed to fire from tanks and anti-tank guns on the **La Romola** ridge. Of the seven C Squadron tanks supporting C Company, 26 Battalion (the original five plus the two which had gone

back to bring up more anti-tank guns), two were knocked out and four damaged. Those mobile enough to avoid the fire from **La Romola** withdrew down the road past Point 281, which left C Company without support.

Under fire from three sides, C Company's men gathered in the house north of Point 281 where Company Headquarters had been set up. A Company of 24 Battalion also drew in its platoons and concentrated around a house south of Point 281. About 10 a.m. German infantry began to close in on C Company's house. Kain ordered his men to drop back by sections, well dispersed, which they did, taking their wounded with them. On the way they were joined by some men of C Squadron whose tanks had been immobilised. At A Company's house the combined group (which also included the platoon from B Company, 26 Battalion) took up positions.

Having forced C Company to withdraw, the enemy seemed to pause in his counter-attack, but maintained steady fire across the whole front. The three tanks of B Squadron which had gone to the support of A Company, 24 Battalion, were knocked out or badly damaged, and one or two more of the same squadron were put out of action on the left flank. Late in the morning the tanks of B and C Squadrons still in running order retired down the ridge to refuel and replenish, evacuate the wounded and reorganise their crews. All the surviving tanks of the two squadrons were then placed under the command of B Squadron, and went back up the road.

Early in the afternoon the enemy appeared to be renewing the counter-attack from the north under shell, mortar, anti-tank and machine-gun fire, but was held off by 6 Brigade's infantry, artillery, tank and heavy-mortar fire. The tanks engaged in duels with enemy tanks. The artillery shelled Points 281 and 261 and **San Michele**, as well as targets in the **La Romola** area, where the enemy appeared to be forming up as if he intended to counter-attack from that direction.

The German activity steadily increased towards evening, and about 7

p.m. A Company, 24 Battalion, was attacked from the north and north-west. The enemy came close to the road (he may have crossed it) south-west of A Company, but did not threaten C Company and the platoon of B Company, 26 Battalion, on the eastern slope of the ridge. A Company reported at 7.15 p.m. that it was 'completely surrounded', and two minutes later that it was 'in good strategical position. We will do our best....' At 7.50 p.m. the company was 'still fighting hard, posn a little easier, tanks engaging SP gun and MG posts.' <sup>1</sup>

Other enemy troops probed westward from the **Tattoli** area (about midway between **La Romola** and **Cerbaia**), and in an encounter with a platoon of A Company, 26 Battalion, which had taken up a position near **Cerbaia di sopra** covering the road to **La Romola**, captured two New Zealanders and wounded three.

Headquarters 24 Battalion received a message from A Company at 10.10 p.m. that the position was 'still grim' <sup>2</sup> but by that time other troops of 6 Brigade were on their way forward to renew the advance.

(iv)

Whatever success 6 Brigade might gain, it was unlikely that resistance on the Division's right flank would lessen until the South Africans assaulted **Impruneta**. A long exposed flank would be too much of an imposition on 4 Armoured Brigade's only infantry, 22 (Motor) Battalion, which would have to carry out both an assaulting and a protective role, even if the armoured regiments managed to break through the **Paula Line**. Brigadier Inglis therefore had asked for a battalion from 5 Brigade to guard this flank, and 23 Battalion, which the GOC agreed should be on temporary loan for the task, was waiting south of **San Casciano** early in the morning of 28 July.

Fourth Brigade's role was to maintain pressure on the right flank to assist 6 Brigade's assault on the left. After the various modifications of the Division's plans on the evening of the 27th, 4 Brigade's objective was an east-west line about two and a half miles north of **San Casciano** and,

at its western end, some 300 yards south of **La Romola**; an intermediate objective was just over half-way to this line. <sup>3</sup>

The attack began at 1 a.m. on the 28th, with 2 Company of 22 Battalion and A Squadron, 19 Regiment, taking the road to

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, 24 Bn.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> At that time 4 Bde had at its disposal 20 Armd Regt (with A Sqn of 19 Regt under command), 22 (Mot) Bn, C Sqn of Div Cav, 31 A-Tk Bty, **3 MG Coy**, and detachments of 39 Hy Mor Bty and **7 Fd Coy**. Direct artillery support was available from **4 Fd Regt** and **142 Army Fd Regt**.

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the north past **Casa Vecchia**, and 3 Company, 22 Battalion, and B Squadron, 20 Regiment, the **Pisignano** road to the north-west— towards **La Romola**.

The force advancing northward met no direct opposition, but came under machine-gun, mortar and shell fire in the vicinity of **Casa Vecchia**. The infantry reached the intermediate objective near **Spedaletto** well ahead of the tanks, which had to contend with demolitions. Although the leading infantrymen were reported at one stage to have penetrated much farther to the north, 2 Company's ultimate positions were not beyond **Spedaletto**.

The force on the left also was delayed by demolitions. The infantry, going on ahead of the tanks, met opposition beyond **Pisignano** and withdrew about 400 yards to rejoin the tanks near the village, which was on a ridge overlooking the deep valley of the **Sugana stream**, on the far side of which was the **La Romola** ridge.

Before daybreak 4 Brigade was under the impression—as was 6 Brigade—that the enemy was withdrawing. On hearing about 5.30 a.m.

of 26 Battalion's almost unopposed advance up the Poggio Cigoli road, 4 Brigade instructed 3 Company and B Squadron to push on in an attempt to draw level with 6 Brigade's right flank. At the same time orders were given for the formation of two parties, each of a troop of A Squadron, 20 Regiment, and a platoon of 1 Company, 22 Battalion, to search and mop up areas missed in the advance.

To investigate the route beyond **Pisignano** a troop of B Squadron and a section of infantry descended a steep track into the Sugana valley directly below **La Romola** and stopped short of a huge hole in the road which ran along the valley. About 7 a.m. all three tanks were set alight by shells thought to come from a self-propelled gun or Tiger tank. 'Suddenly like a broadside from a huge battleship, the whole hillside opened fire simultaneously— 88 mms, mortars, spandaus, small-arms fire—everything seemed to come out at once from the whole area of the hill opposite.' <sup>1</sup> The hostile fire continued 'intermittently heavy or light almost without let-up' all that day and night and the next.

Meanwhile, early on the morning of the 28th, the mopping-up parties entered the area between **Spedaletto** and **Pisignano** without opposition; one drove up the road through **Cigliano** to the crossing of the **Borro Suganella**, a creek which flowed into the Sugana stream below **La Romola**, but as it was then daylight and the tanks were exposed to fire coming along the valley from the direction of **La Romola**, they withdrew to cover.

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<sup>1</sup> E. B. Paterson, quoted in *22 Battalion*, pp. 312–13.

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The enemy did not counter-attack immediately—as he did on 6 Brigade's front—perhaps because 22 Battalion actually had not penetrated the main positions of the **Paula Line**, but during the day he shelled, mortared and machine-gunned the forward positions, and heavily shelled **San Casciano** and the roads north of the town. Counter-battery fire, directed on the sources of this fire when they could be located, 'occasionally caused diminution'. <sup>1</sup> Nearly a dozen 'murders' or

'stonks' were laid on **La Romola** and its immediate approaches by 4 and 142 Regiments, which also engaged targets elsewhere on the front and east of the Greve River.

In mid-afternoon 2 Company asked for defensive fire to the north-east because of the likelihood of a counter-attack. Such an attack, supported by a self-propelled gun, appeared to be in progress at 3.45 p.m., but 'the situation was well in hand' <sup>2</sup> after some well-directed defensive fire by 4 and 142 Regiments and the engaging of the self-propelled gun by tanks of A Squadron, 19 Regiment.

(v)

The enemy undoubtedly was pleased with the performance of **29 Panzer Grenadier Division** on 28 July. *Fourteenth Army* reported in the evening: 'Fighting was extremely hard and confused, particularly on 29 Pz Gren Div's front, where the enemy forced a penetration this morning at **Cerbaia**. All further attacks ... were beaten off with heavy casualties to the enemy. We committed our last reserves. This evening the FDLs were still in our hands all along **1 Para Corps**' front....' <sup>3</sup>

At 10 a.m. **15 Panzer Grenadier Regiment** (on **29 Division's** right facing **6 NZ Infantry Brigade**) counter-attacked north of **Cerbaia** and 'came up against fierce defence by the New Zealanders and extremely heavy shellfire, <sup>4</sup> but attacked again and again and pushed the enemy back with very heavy casualties and equipment losses. After 8 hours of fighting in tropical heat the FDLs were completely in our hands once more....' In the sector where **71 Panzer Grenadier Regiment** faced **4 NZ Armoured Brigade**, attacks 'were beaten off after stubborn fighting ... with heavy casualties to the enemy.'

The claim was made that **29 Division** 'has thus gained a complete defensive success against an enemy much superior in numbers. Its

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<sup>1</sup> Report in HQ 4 Armd Bde's war diary.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> War diary, *Fourteenth Army*.

<sup>4</sup> General Freyberg's diary records the expenditure of 17,900 rounds by the medium and field guns under the Division's command during the 24 hours to midday on 28 July.

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artillery and tanks (129 and 508 Pz Bns) gave it excellent support in the actions....' The division was commended for 'the staunchness and fanatical stubbornness of every man.' <sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless the commander of *Fourteenth Army* (General Lemelsen) reported to *Army Group C* that, despite the successful defence, *1 Parachute Corps* 'could not continue to hold its present line unless it received fresh reserves, which Army did not have. ... The high ammunition expenditure of the last few days was also causing ammunition to run out, as petrol was so scarce that ammunition could not be brought up in adequate quantities.' <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Fourteenth Army* report, which claims that on 28 July *29 Pz Gren Div* knocked out 18 tanks and five troop-carriers, captured two tanks and a gun, and blew up three guns. 'All the knocked-out vehicles are inside our lines.'

<sup>2</sup> War diary, *Fourteenth Army*.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## IV: SAN MICHELE

### *IV: San Michele*

*(i)*

Neither 4 nor 6 Brigade had fully gained the first objectives of the New Zealand Division's plan for capturing the high ground of the **Pian dei Cerri**, and much of the armour, instead of being kept in reserve for exploitation when the high ground had been secured, had joined in the battle. For the New Zealand commanders 28 July was a day of conferences and the issuing of fresh directives, mostly verbal, for continuing the offensive.

**General Freyberg**, having earlier given permission for 23 Battalion to provide flank protection for 4 Brigade, agreed to Brigadier Inglis's proposal that this battalion should hold on the right of the brigade's sector while 22 Battalion closed to the left, with the purpose of thickening up the infantry screen on the brigade's front so that much needed armoured reliefs could be carried out. The General, who visited both 4 and 6 Brigades in the afternoon, approved plans for limited attempts to gain the first objectives that night. Fourth Brigade was to get into **La Romola** if possible, and 6 Brigade was to attack **San Michele**.

*(ii)*

Sixth Brigade's advance to **San Michele** was to be made by a company of 24 Battalion in two stages, the first to a German strongpoint at **Mezzocolle**, about half-way along the **Castellare – San Michele** road, and the second to the straggling village of San Michele itself. The artillery was to support this advance with timed concentrations from 1 a.m. to 3 a.m. on 29 July.

That night 6 Brigade relieved some of the troops in the salient, and

strengthened its right flank. A Company, 24 Battalion, stayed forward, about half-way along the road between **Castellare** and Poggio Cigoli (Point 281), but the survivors of C Company, 26 Battalion, were relieved by B Company of the same unit and withdrew across the river. D Company, 26 Battalion, with mortars and anti-tank guns in support, took up a position astride the **La Romola** road less than a mile from **Cerbaia**, and D Company of 25 Battalion set up a strongpoint with a platoon each of infantry, machine guns, 4.2-inch mortars and carriers in the Montepaldi area (farther to the south-east than was intended). About midnight C Squadron of **18 Armoured Regiment** arrived at **Talente** and came under the command of 19 Regiment for operations in 6 Brigade's sector.

Headquarters 24 Battalion moved back across the **Pesa** to the vicinity of the headquarters of 25 and 26 Battalions south of Montagnana, but left a tactical headquarters under Major E. W. Aked at **Castellare** to keep in close touch with the advance to **San Michele**. D Company (Major **Macdonald**<sup>1</sup>) was given the task of capturing the village, and 12 Platoon (Lieutenant **Rawley**<sup>2</sup>) of B Company came under Macdonald's command to take the intermediate objective.

Rawley's men had little difficulty in occupying **Mezzocolle**; they killed two Germans and captured five. D Company passed on the right of **Mezzocolle**, and at some houses ( **Poggetto di sotto**) well forward of **San Michele** 16 Platoon (Lieutenant **Lea**<sup>3</sup>) took the enemy by surprise and in a brief struggle killed six and captured six for the loss of three men wounded. The company entered San Michele without opposition, capturing one or two more Germans, and completed its occupation about 3.15 a.m. Lea's platoon made strongpoints in three houses at the southern end of the village; two sections of 17 Platoon (Sergeant **Dynes**<sup>4</sup>) held a three-storied building known as the school in the centre, and Company Headquarters and 18 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant R. N. Smith<sup>5</sup>) a church at the northern end. The third section of 17 Platoon had been left at **Poggetto di sotto** to guard prisoners and care for the wounded.

When D Company was reported on its objective, Major Aked sent 7 Troop of B Squadron, 19 Regiment, up the road with a

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col K. H. Macdonald, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 25 Nov 1916; clerk; 2 i/c 24 Bn Feb–May 1945; CO 24 Bn May–Jul 1945; wounded 26 Mar 1943.**

<sup>2</sup> **Maj L. Rawley; Wellington; born NZ 3 Jan 1915; Regular soldier; wounded 25 Nov 1941.**

<sup>3</sup> **Maj F. J. Lea, MC, m.i.d., Silver Star (US); Waitakere, North Auckland; born England, 27 Apr 1921; clerk; twice wounded.**

<sup>4</sup> **S-Sgt B. W. Dynes; Thames; born Thames, 17 Jun 1921; schoolteacher; wounded 11 Apr 1945.**

<sup>5</sup> **2 Lt R. N. Smith; Hamilton; born Hagley, England, 17 Apr 1919; farmer.**

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party of sappers, followed by a section of 4 MG Platoon, four six-pounder anti-tank guns and two 3-inch mortars. One of the tanks was disabled on the way; one went into position behind the church and one farther back in the village. Two anti-tank guns were sited near the church, one near the school, and one with 16 Platoon. The two Vickers guns joined 17 Platoon at the school, and the two mortars 12 Platoon at Mezzocolle.

The occupation of **San Michele** had been accomplished with surprisingly few casualties, but two men from D Company, the driver and the five prisoners taken by 12 Platoon were all killed and an officer wounded when their grossly overcrowded jeep ran over a mine on the way back to **Castellare**. This happened after the road had been searched for mines.

As dawn broke on 29 July activity began across the whole front.

Shortly after 7 a.m. D Company of 26 Battalion called urgently for fire on Il Monte, a small hillock on the northern side of the **Cerbaia – La Romola** road, where, it was later realised, the enemy had set up a strongpoint which included mortars and machine guns and probably dug-in tanks or self-propelled guns. Although the New Zealand artillery was asked repeatedly to fire on this point, and several of the concentrations were observed to fall right on the target, Il Monte remained a troublesome spot throughout the next two days.

**San Michele** was heavily shelled and mortared, and movement on the roads and tracks north of the village warned that a counter-attack was impending. D Company, 24 Battalion, called for defensive fire, which was directed on tanks, self-propelled guns, mortar positions and vehicles. At first the Shermans in the village and the artillery discouraged the approach of the German tanks, which probably numbered no more than three or four. The mortars at **Mezzocolle**, although under fire themselves, helped to thicken up the defensive fire, while A Company, 24 Battalion, and the section of 6 MG Platoon across the gully to the east assisted with fire and with observation of the enemy.

As the church commanded the northern entrance to **San Michele**, the enemy concentrated much of his fire on it and launched infantry and tank attacks against it. The German infantry came right up to the building, but were repelled by 18 Platoon and the crews of the two anti-tank guns. By mid-morning at least one German tank had worked its way very close to the northern edge of the village and infantry had infiltrated into the southern part. Much of the hostile fire came from the ridge to the west of **San Michele**, where the enemy appeared to have self-propelled guns or tanks. The German effort began to weaken, however, and by 10.45 a.m. D Company could report that ‘We are quite happy at the moment.’ <sup>1</sup>

The enemy became more aggressive again about midday, and at 12.30 p.m. **5 Field Regiment**, firing on the directions of one of the tanks in **San Michele**, was laying its shells in the northern end of the street. By this time there were so many gaps in the walls of the church that

**‘the only method of defence left was to build a parapet from the rubble at the rear of the long chapel and cover the gaps with Brens and rifles. This effectively stopped the Germans from entering the church.’<sup>2</sup> The wounded were placed with Company Headquarters in the crypt, which was ‘practically 100 per cent safe’.**

**Another troop (No. 5) of B Squadron, 19 Regiment, was ordered from 26 Battalion's sector to reinforce the two tanks of 7 Troop in **San Michele**. Two tanks of 5 Troop arrived in the southern part of the village in time to assist 16 Platoon, some of whose men had been pinned in a barn by German infantry who were occupying the loft above them. One of the tanks overturned down a bank while manoeuvring into position to engage the loft. Nevertheless Lea's men got clear of the barn, and the whole platoon set up a strongpoint in one house. The other tank blasted the loft off the barn. Lea sent a patrol to clear another building so that the tank could take up a position there to support his platoon. The patrol overcame slight opposition and took three prisoners, but as soon as the tank arrived at the building it was knocked out by a self-propelled gun.**

**The fire from German self-propelled guns, tank guns and mortars, and shells from the New Zealand guns which fell short, were gradually reducing buildings in **San Michele** to rubble. The anti-tank guns were disabled, and the vehicles parked in the street were either destroyed or immobilised. Late in the afternoon the hostile fire died down, but shortly after 5 p.m. much movement was observed to the north and north-west, and a renewal of the attack was anticipated. The artillery and heavy mortars fired on numerous targets, and fighter-bombers twice attacked the **Santa Maria** area, over a mile to the north. By 7.20 p.m. the enemy had approached so close that D Company called for artillery fire on the northern edge of the village.**

**In the school building 17 Platoon's strongpoint ‘was engaged by self-propelled guns and tanks from almost point blank range. During this attack enemy infantry were moving towards the village from the**

and attempted to cross the road by the school and gain entrance to the building. For two and a half hours the platoon

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, 24 Bn.

<sup>2</sup> Report by R. N. Smith.

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and attached personnel engaged the enemy with Tommy, Bren, Vickers guns and grenades....' <sup>1</sup> The Germans were unable to reach the school.

The only two Sherman tanks in the village still in running order, having sustained damage which rendered their guns useless, withdrew to the rear. Two German tanks entered the village, and when one of them came to the rear of the church, 18 Platoon took cover in the crypt. D Company's three strongpoints were no longer in touch with each other. When Lea saw the two Shermans retreating past 16 Platoon's house, he decided to make his way to Company Headquarters and find out what was happening. 'As the position looked hopeless at this moment,' says Macdonald, 'I decided to withdraw the company from the village and instructed Mr LEA to rejoin his platoon and get them away to safety.' <sup>2</sup>

Lea managed to leave the church, but could not reach the house occupied by 16 Platoon because it was covered by a German tank. He therefore continued on to a rendezvous at **Poggetto di sotto**, where the section of 17 Platoon had remained, and where he expected to find the rest of the company. Smith had started to lead 18 Platoon out of the church, but only he and one other man got away; the third man to emerge was hit and captured, and the remainder stayed in the building. Smith and his companion also reached the rendezvous, and after waiting there for a while, returned with Lea and the section of 17 Platoon to Tactical Headquarters at **Castellare**.

Macdonald realised that it was impossible to get the remainder of his men out of the church and 'decided to fight it out to the end, ordering everyone back to their posts both in the crypt and on the first floor.'<sup>3</sup> The German tank had moved off into the village. German infantry made another attempt to get into the church, but were beaten back with the assistance of machine-gun fire from 17 Platoon's strongpoint. Again the tank came in close to the church. Private **Swann**,<sup>4</sup> although suffering from the effects of concussion, took a Piat<sup>5</sup> gun within a few yards of the tank and fired four shots, which forced it to withdraw. Nevertheless the tank continued to fire at the church, and the German infantry made two more attempts to enter. Eventually the front of the building collapsed and barricaded the entrance.

The enemy must have decided about this time to abandon further

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<sup>1</sup> Report by B. W. Dynes.

<sup>2</sup> Report by K. H. Macdonald.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Pte **A. G. Swann**, MM; **Te Aroha**; born **Frankton**, 8 Aug 1914; wounded 30 Jul 1944.

<sup>5</sup> Projector, infantry, anti-tank.

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attempts to drive the New Zealanders out of **San Michele**.<sup>1</sup> His tanks and infantry withdrew, and after 11 p.m. the tanks could be heard moving around north of the village. About the same time 16 Platoon, believing that D Company's other positions had been overrun, pulled out from the southern part of the village.

Meanwhile plans were being prepared for the relief of D Company. B Company, 25 Battalion (Major **Finlay**<sup>2</sup>), placed under 24 Battalion's

command for the purpose, assembled near **Castellare** with a supporting force including nine tanks (one troop each from B and C Squadrons of 19 Regiment and A Squadron of 18 Regiment), and began to advance shortly before the artillery and heavy mortars opened fire at 1 a.m. on 30 July.

The artillery's target for the first half hour was just north of the church, and for the next half hour the road north-west of the village. As the guns were shooting from ground lower than the village, many of their shells either skimmed the buildings or exploded among them. Headquarters D Company and 18 Platoon were given some protection from shells falling short by the ruins of the church above the crypt, but 17 Platoon's building, 'after about ten minutes of almost continual pounding ... commenced to collapse. For the next fifty minutes we were kept busy extricating men from the fallen debris....' <sup>3</sup> Two men died before they could be released from the rubble.

B Company, 25 Battalion, reached the southern edge of San Michele about 1.30 a.m., and during the next hour or so searched the village and its immediate environs without finding the enemy. The tanks and several anti-tank guns took up positions for defence, and the infantry covered the northern entrance to the village. Macdonald withdrew with the survivors of D Company of the 24th, and their place in the village was taken by 10 and 11 Platoons of B Company, 24 Battalion. Later in the morning two more troops of A Squadron, 18 Regiment, replaced the two troops of 19 Regiment, which was relieved by the 18th under 6 Brigade's command and withdrew to rest and refit.

The New Zealand casualties in the fighting for **San Michele** on 29 July may have been about 30, and the enemy losses greater. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A German report that '12 more enemy tanks and some fresh infantry entered the village from the south' before orders were given to evacuate **San Michele** is disproved by the New Zealand records.

<sup>2</sup> Maj J. Finlay, MC; Feilding; born NZ 31 Jan 1916; clerk.

<sup>3</sup> Dynes's report.

<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to give exact figures. On 29 July 24 Bn's casualties were 4 killed, 18 wounded and 3 prisoners; 19 Armd Regt's were 1 killed and 13 wounded; and 27 (MG) Bn's were 2 killed, 3 wounded and 1 prisoner; but these did not all occur in San Michele. A German report gives 29 Pz Gren Div's total casualties on 29 July as 4 killed, 29 wounded and 22 missing. Maj K. H. Macdonald's report says: 'During the action it was difficult to estimate the number of Germans killed, but three weeks later one of my men was in SAN MICHELE and counted 47 German graves. Our [presumably D Coy's] casualties were 2 killed, 15 wounded, and 2 missing.'

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(iii)

Throughout the day of 29 July A Company, 24 Battalion, had remained well forward on the Castellare – Poggio Cigoli road, with B Company, 26 Battalion, to its right rear; they had assisted in the defence of San Michele and had come under much fire themselves, but had not been directly threatened by the enemy. D Company, 26 Battalion, on the Cerbaia – La Romola road, had been kept constantly alert by enemy activity to the east and also at the Il Monte strongpoint. To replace the tanks which had gone to San Michele from the right flank, extra anti-tank guns were sent to B and D Companies of 26 Battalion. Mines were laid across the road on D Company's front and also across the Castellare – Poggio Cigoli road, where B Company of the 26th relieved A Company of the 24th in the evening of 30 July.

The two B Companies, of 24 and 25 Battalions, were firmly established in San Michele on the morning of the 30th. When HQ 24 Battalion asked, 'Can you give any indication that yesterday's programme is likely to be repeated', B Company of that battalion replied 'Not likely.'<sup>1</sup> This surmise proved correct. Although San Michele

continued to be the target for the enemy's guns and mortars, he did not counter-attack the village again.

Several times during the day British fighter-bombers strafed the high ground to the north of **San Michele**. Anti-tank mines were laid on the village's northern approaches. At 6 p.m. B Company, 25 Battalion, reported two German tanks about half a mile to the north. Artillery fire directed on this target fell short, and many rounds landed in the company's positions. The range was lifted and further concentrations landed in the right place. One of the tanks was set alight either by shellfire or by fighter-bomber attack. B Company again reported enemy tanks—a false alarm, it was discovered afterwards—and again the requested artillery fire fell on the company's positions. Later in the night B Company, 25 Battalion, was relieved by C Company, 24 Battalion.

Patrols of armoured cars and tanks probed on 6 Brigade's western flank without much success. No suitable places to cross the **Pesa**—except by bulldozing, which would have been impossible because of the shellfire such activity would attract—could be found between **Cerbaia** and **Geppetto**, about two miles downstream. West of the river B Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, kept in touch with 8 Indian Division; on the other side A Squadron of the Cavalry and half

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, 24 Bn.

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of C Squadron, 18 Regiment, <sup>1</sup> were impeded by machine-gun posts and infantry who took advantage of the excellent cover among the rows of grape vines by holding their fire until the last possible moment. At such close range the lobbing of hand-grenades from the turrets of the armoured cars was an effective form of attack.

A demolition prevented progress beyond the junction of the road to **Geppetto** and the road which led up the ridge west of **San Michele**. A German strongpoint on this ridge at Point 136, about 1000 yards to the left rear of **San Michele**, was a constant source of trouble. Fire from self-

propelled or tank guns in this locality knocked out or disabled several of the New Zealand tanks on the **San Michele** ridge. On the morning of 30 July a patrol of armoured cars and tanks tried to work across country towards the road leading to Point 136, but a Staghound was hit by a shell which killed two and wounded two of its crew, and two of the Shermans ran on to mines. Before the tanks could be recovered, one of them was set alight by an armour-piercing shell. The patrol then withdrew.

Probably because of the tenacity of the defence and the lack of infantry to hold any ground gained, the patrols made no further attempts to advance on the left flank that day or the next. C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry relieved A Squadron, and the half-squadron of 18 Regiment went back across the **Pesa** to harass the enemy from the far side, where on 31 July it 'had a good view over the valley, and at first had a wonderful time, but this was no healthy spot, for soon Jerry opened up with everything he could muster.'<sup>2</sup> Two tanks were 'sitting shots' at a crossroads where one of them had run on to a mine, and both were knocked out by anti-tank shells.

The German strongpoint at Point 136 was still active at dusk on 31 July, having survived heavy shell and mortar fire. It was proposed that B Company, 24 Battalion, should send a patrol to investigate the locality after dark, but before the patrol set out, a man from 17 Platoon who had been cut off in enemy-held territory since D Company's attack on **San Michele**, rejoined the battalion with information about the strongpoint. From a close hiding place he had observed a self-propelled gun, three tanks, three mortars and two machine-gun posts in action, and had seen one of the tanks set on fire by a direct hit. Later that night a patrol saw the self-propelled gun withdrawing in the moonlight. Next day (1 August) Point 136 was found to be clear of the enemy.

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<sup>1</sup> The other half was at **Talente**.

<sup>2</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 527.



# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## V: LA ROMOLA

### *V: La Romola*

(i)

At the end of July 6 Brigade was still hemmed in in its bridgehead across the Pesa River. No longer was the enemy fighting rearguard actions and falling back as he had done previously when the main body of the attackers approached his positions; he seemed prepared to stand on the **Paula Line** and fight it out for some time. His counter-attacks, first down the Poggio Cigoli road and then against **San Michele**, were the first real counter-attacks met by the New Zealand Division in the advance on **Florence**. It looked as if further progress in this sector could be achieved only by a set-piece attack.

Nevertheless, with the forces of 13 Corps arrayed in such strength against him, the enemy was bound to withdraw. With British, South African, New Zealand and Indian divisions ranged side by side, there was a spirit of competition in the drive to the **Arno** and **Florence**. The 6th South African Armoured Division was not yet ready to make a concerted thrust with the New Zealand Division, but **General Freyberg** apparently was reluctant to mark time— or to lose the lead in the race to **Florence**—and already had decided to keep up the pressure on the New Zealand front by switching the weight of the attack to the right flank, the direct route to the city and the flank on which the two divisions could best assist each other.

The new plan envisaged 6 Brigade containing the enemy in its sector and exploiting it if and when possible, while the rest of the Division advanced on the left of Route 2, across the eastern edge of the **Pian dei Cerri** and then direct on **Florence**. It had been intended that 5 Brigade, having led from the start of the advance until 6 Brigade passed through on 27 July, should have a spell for rest and reorganisation while

carrying out a protective role on the western flank, but now that **8 Indian Division** had made this role unnecessary, it was logical to transfer 5 Brigade to the other flank, where it would be in a better position to join in a major advance. The lack of protection on the eastern flank until the South Africans drew level, the increased resistance and the threat of counter-attack on 22 Battalion gave urgency to this redeployment.

The 23rd Battalion, which had been placed at 4 Brigade's disposal to guard this flank, was warned on the morning of 28 July that it might have to take over part of 22 Battalion's front. At midday 4 Brigade was advised that the GOC had decided to bring the whole of 5 Brigade to this flank and that 23 Battalion would then revert to 5 Brigade's command. Later in the day, however, permission was given for 23 Battalion to be brought forward to reinforce 4 Brigade, on condition that it was not to be used by that brigade in an assault.

After nightfall 23 Battalion moved north through **San Casciano** to take over from 2 Company the right-hand half of 22 Battalion's front, with A Company on the right, B on the left, C in right rear protecting the open flank, and D in reserve, and with A Squadron, **20 Armoured Regiment** (which relieved A Squadron, 19 Regiment) in support. The 22nd Battalion reorganised its sector south of **La Romola** with 1 Company on the right, 3 on the left and 2 in reserve, and with C Squadron of 20 Regiment (having relieved B Squadron) in support. Anti-tank and Vickers guns were sited with both battalions.

During the night patrols and listening posts reported the presence of tracked vehicles in and about **La Romola** and (on 23 Battalion's front) troop and vehicle activity along the road through Sant' Andrea. A stonk was called for on the latter locality, and this immediately brought enemy retaliation with shell and mortar fire.

The enemy continued to harass 4 Brigade's salient. He obviously enjoyed good observation in daylight from the high ground to the east across the River Greve. He shelled and mortared buildings and roads, and

laid concentrations on any movement in the forward areas and occasionally in the rear, chiefly on the roads around San Casciano. Movement along the **San Casciano – Casa Vecchia – Spedaletto** road drew shell, mortar and machine-gun fire. Positions in the **Pisignano** area, facing the **La Romola** ridge across the valley of the **Sugana stream**, were continually and accurately bombarded. A request was made for an air strike on **La Romola** when 22 Battalion reported increasing movement there. The village was bombed and strafed with ‘good results ... though the number of planes (6) was disappointingly small....’ <sup>1</sup>

A liaison officer from 6 South African Armoured Division arrived in 23 Battalion's lines and reported that the nearest South African troops, apart from patrols, were to the south-east, held up by enemy fire and the difficult going caused by a number of streams that ran into the Greve. Later 23 Battalion's outposts made contact with South African patrols.

Early on 29 July **General Freyberg** discussed the situation with Brigadier Inglis, who advised against an attack on 23 Battalion's sector because he considered heavy casualties would result. The enemy there could be covered by fire from the east until the high ground on the South African front was taken. The GOC said the attack would have to be at night. He planned with the CRA

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, HQ 4 Armd Bde.

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(Brigadier Parkinson) for mortars and ammunition to be brought well forward for use when the high ground north of 23 Battalion could be occupied. His idea was to bring in 5 Brigade on the right to gain a firm hold of this high ground, which would provide a base for a further advance and would give observation to ‘paste the other side of Route 2’ (which ran alongside the Greve) and, together with 6 Brigade's operations farther west, ‘pinch out La **Romola**.... I cannot see any way of getting him out except by a series of night attacks along that ridge.’ <sup>1</sup> The same morning the GOC discussed the plan with the commanders of 4 and 5 Brigades at Divisional Headquarters. The commander of 6

**Brigade was absent because the situation at [San Michele](#) demanded his attention.**

**A divisional operation instruction issued later that day set out the plan. At first it directed that on the night of 30–31 July 5 Brigade would begin the operation supported by feint attacks by both 4 and 6 Brigades, and next night 4 and 6 Brigades were to make a combined attack; but this was quickly changed to a combined 4 and 5 Brigade operation on the first night, followed by 6 Brigade attacking alone on the second night. Fourth Brigade was then to drop back for reorganisation while 5 and 6 Brigades made the final assault to break the [Paula Line](#) on the night of 1–2 August. Both 4 Brigade and Divisional Cavalry were to be ready ‘to debouch at first light’<sup>2</sup> on 2 August.**

**(ii)**

**Fifth Brigade assumed responsibility for the Division's right flank in the evening of 29 July, when 23 Battalion and 20 Armoured Regiment (less C Squadron, with 22 Battalion) came under its command, and the transfer of 21 and 28 Battalions from the left flank was well on the way. The 21st, in reserve, took up a position on the right flank near [San Casciano](#); the [Maori Battalion](#) moved into the line between 23 and 22 Battalions south of [Faltignano](#), where C Company on the right and A on the left completed the relief of B Company, 23 Battalion, about midnight; the other two companies of [28 Battalion](#) and B Company of the 23rd were in reserve.**

**Patrols sent out by 5 Brigade's three battalions—23, 28 and 22—during the night confirmed the enemy's presence at various points on the front. A platoon from A Company, 23 Battalion, went along the road from [Spedaletto](#) to see whether the enemy had withdrawn**

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, G Branch, HQ [2 NZ Div](#).

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from Sant' Andrea, which was less than 600 yards from the company's foremost positions. The platoon crossed a small gully, and as it topped the rise before reaching the village, 'came under concentrated fire at short range from several automatics and retired hurriedly and in some confusion....' <sup>1</sup>

It was proposed that A Company should put in a dawn attack on Sant' Andrea. A few of the men apparently 'felt that the limit of their physical and nervous reserves or of what should be asked of them had been reached' <sup>2</sup> and refused to go. The CO (Lieutenant- Colonel Thomas) personally led the way 'to show the men he would not ask them to do anything he was not prepared to do himself.' <sup>3</sup>

The artillery fired a stonk on the village, and A Company attacked with a troop (three Shermans) of A Squadron, 20 Armoured Regiment, in support. A blown culvert over a ditch blocked the road in the gully, but a way across for the tanks was found and improved by men working with shovels. A few prisoners from *10 Parachute Regiment* <sup>4</sup> were taken on the other side of the gully, and the tanks and infantry went on to the village. Thomas returned to Battalion Headquarters while the company commander (Captain **Duncan** <sup>5</sup>) and his men continued with the occupation of the village, from which about 50 or 60 Germans had withdrawn only a few minutes earlier.

The enemy, however, was still in the proximity of Sant' Andrea, and from **Villa Mazzei**, about 300 yards to the north-west, commanded its southern access. He shelled and mortared the village, and it was anticipated that he would counter-attack. Strenuous efforts were made to get support weapons to A Company, but wheeled vehicles could not pass the demolition on the road from **Spedaletto**, which the engineers were unable to repair because all movement on the road in daylight drew fire; their bulldozer had to be driven hastily into cover. When a Tiger tank was observed working its way towards Sant' Andrea, two M10s were despatched to support A Company, but were halted by the state of the

road. Mortars, sited well forward, were directed on **Villa Mazzei** and other targets considered too close for the artillery.

The enemy counter-attacked about 1.30 p.m. His infantry infiltrated through corn and olive trees while the Tiger came along

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<sup>1</sup> *23 Battalion*, p. 373.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372.

<sup>3</sup> R. S. Duncan, quoted in *23 Battalion*, p. 373.

<sup>4</sup> The boundary between *4 Para Div* and *29 Pz Gren Div* was approximately half-way between **La Romola** and Route 2. Reports differ as to how many prisoners were taken at Sant' Andrea, but the number probably was small.

<sup>5</sup> **Capt R. S. Duncan; Nelson**; born **Nelson**, 21 Mar 1911; company secretary; wounded 31 Jul 1944.

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the road from the north. The tanks with A Company, commanded by Lieutenant **Colmore-Williams**,<sup>1</sup> raked the olives with their machine guns and 75-millimetre guns, firing into the trees for air-burst effect. A bazooka team was wiped out within a few yards of the troop commander's tank, and afterwards 15 German dead were counted in the vicinity. The Shermans also kept the Tiger at bay. A bend in the road allowed it to approach within 100 yards before it came into view, but each time it ventured round the bend 'it was blinded by a round or two of smoke and chased back into cover, tail first, with six or seven armour-piercing and high-explosive shells buzzing around its ears.'<sup>2</sup> Finally it withdrew altogether.

Late in the afternoon enemy infantry attacked again, but did not dislodge A Company. 'My blokes shot about 12 counted Jerries from the top windows and really had quite a good time,' says Duncan.<sup>3</sup> The New

**Zealand casualties at Sant' Andrea that day were very few and included only one killed.**

*(iii)*

**The Division's officers, down to CO level, assembled at **Divisional Headquarters** in the morning of 30 July to hear the situation and new plans explained. **General Freyberg** told them that he intended to mount three attacks, the first that night, the second next night and the third when certain factors, including the ammunition supply, were favourable. He explained that the Division could either continue operations on the left or transfer its strength to the right flank, which offered the shortest route to **Florence** and the opportunity of assisting the South Africans, who had been held up by strong enemy positions covering the line of the Greve River. He had chosen the second alternative and 'in the normal way one would feel inclined to advance in one [bound] but for the fact that he [the enemy] is putting tiger tanks in his objectives. We have therefore to clear up the road and get M.10's forward or 17-pounders. This being so the only way is to do limited objective attacks which we dislike because they don't displace the enemy trench mortars.'** <sup>4</sup>

**The commanders of 4 and 5 Brigades gave outlines of their plans, Brigadier Inglis stating that at this stage his 'was somewhat nebulous'.<sup>5</sup> That night 5 Brigade was to advance with two**

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj L. W. Colmore-Williams, MC; Auckland; born Dargaville, 15 Nov 1917; schoolteacher; wounded 30 Jul 1944.**

<sup>2</sup> **D. J. C. Pringle and W. A. Glue, *20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 455.**

<sup>3</sup> **Quoted in *23 Battalion*, p. 375. Ross says that 26 German graves were later found at a house just outside Sant' Andrea.**

<sup>4</sup> **GOC's diary.**

battalions: **28 Battalion** was to occupy the high ground to its immediate north, and **23 Battalion** to conform on the right flank; **4 Brigade** was to attack **La Romola** with **22 Battalion**. **Sixth Brigade** was to advance next night, and then the situation was to be reviewed. The GOC stressed the need for getting 17-pounder guns in behind **La Romola** and **5 Brigade's** objective for defence against counter-attacks supported by Tiger tanks.

**Fifth Brigade's** first objective was on the high ground north of Sant' Andrea and **Faltignano**, its second on the ridge about a mile north-east of **La Romola**, and its third bestride the valley between Poggio delle Monache and **La Poggiona**. **Fourth Brigade's** objective was just beyond **La Romola**. **Sixth Brigade's** first objective took in Poggio Cigoli, La Liona and the ridge north of **San Michele**; its second was about midway between Poggio Cigoli and Poggio Valicaia, and its third on the northern side of Poggio Valicaia.

**Fifth Brigade's** advance to its first objective was to start at 10 p.m. on 30 July, and **4 Brigade's** advance to **La Romola** three hours later. **Fifth Brigade** instructed **28 Battalion** to send a small force, supported by artillery concentrations, to capture Casa del Carpione (midway between **Spedaletto** and **Faltignano**) before the start of the main attack, in which **23** and **28 Battalions** were to be supported by a barrage creeping in 100-yard lifts every four minutes; this was to be fired by the three New Zealand field regiments and **57 Field Regiment, RA** (from **6 British Armoured Division**), and in addition **70** and **75 Medium Regiments** were to lay concentrations on observed and suspected enemy positions. Each battalion was to have half of **A Squadron, 20 Armoured Regiment**, and a platoon of **1 MG Company** under command; the **23rd** also was to have two **M10s** of **31 Anti-Tank Battery**. Two troops (eight 4.2-inch mortars) of **39 Heavy Mortar Battery** were given tasks in direct support of both battalions. For protection against enemy tanks on the objective, **32**

**Anti-Tank Battery** was to provide a troop (four 17-pounders) for **28 Battalion** and two troops (eight six-pounders) for the 23rd; these guns and two six-pounders of each battalion's anti-tank platoon were to follow the tanks in the advance. The sappers of 7 Field Company (a detachment with a bulldozer accompanying each battalion) were to open the routes forward immediately for the support weapons and were to be ready to lay mines in front of the newly won positions.

(iv)

The plan for 23 Battalion, finalised early in the evening of the 30th, was to secure a line from Sant' Andrea through **Villa Mazzei** to Point 246 (Palastra), about 1000 yards north-west of Sant' Andrea. C Company was to relieve A at Sant' Andrea, and D was to advance to **Villa Mazzei** and Palastra. For this purpose the OC D Company (Major Grant <sup>1</sup>), assisted by Captain **Donnelly** <sup>2</sup> of 20 Regiment, organised his force in several groups: a platoon each of infantry and engineers and a troop of tanks were to go direct to **Villa Mazzei** and another platoon of infantry and troop of tanks to Palastra; the headquarters group, the third platoon of infantry, the rest of the engineers and the anti-tank guns were to follow.

C Company completed the relief of A at Sant' Andrea after midnight. Meanwhile Grant's force passed through **Spedaletto** and followed the barrage. The opposition was slight, but the tanks had difficulty in keeping up with the infantry and on the way 'flushed two Tigers' which fired their machine guns 'but for some reason or other—including the obvious one that they may have run out of ammunition—did not follow up their tracer with armour-piercing shells.' <sup>3</sup> By 2 a.m. both **Villa Mazzei** and Palastra had been occupied, and seven prisoners taken from *10 Parachute Regiment*.

No contact had been made with **28 Battalion** on the left, and enemy fire was coming from the direction of **Il Pino**, to the left rear of D Company, which was reinforced by a platoon from B and protected by 10 six-pounder anti-tank guns towed forward by tanks or jeeps. As the light improved it became evident that Palastra was dominated by higher

ground on at least three sides. When further information was gathered of the limits reached by **28 Battalion**—still south of **Il Pino**—and of the presence of Tiger tanks, it was decided to make D Company's main position a bend in the road east of **Il Pino**, where there was better cover and observation.

Much hostile fire and activity on the eastern flank gave warning that the enemy might counter-attack down the road to Sant' Andrea, but apparently he was deterred by defensive fire from the tanks and the artillery.

(v)

The Maori Battalion's objectives were on the high ground north of the **Borro Suganella**. Half an hour before the start of the attack a platoon of C Company crossed the Suganella and, meeting little opposition, occupied **Casa del Carpione**. This had the undesirable effect of bringing the enemy farther north to the alert with

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col D. G. Grant**, MC, m.i.d.; **Invercargill**; born NZ 29 Feb 1908; schoolteacher; CO 23 Bn May–Sep 1945; wounded Jul 1942.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj M. P. Donnelly**; **Sydney**; born NZ 17 Oct 1917; student.

<sup>3</sup> *20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 456.

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mortars and machine guns. The other two platoons of C Company advanced about 10 p.m. with a troop of A Squadron, 20 Regiment, whose tanks were halted by an impassable stretch of the Suganella. Some men were left with the tanks while the rest carried on and were rejoined by the platoon from **Casa del Carpione**. By this time they were well behind the barrage, and the enemy's fire was causing casualties. They entered the village of **Faltignano** about midnight and also occupied Villa Zaira on the right flank, but could make no further progress without their

support weapons. There were enemy tanks, possibly two or three Tigers, on the immediate front.

On the left A Company and a troop of A Squadron took the **Cigliano-Faltignano** track, but ran into fire as they approached the **Borro Suganella**, where a demolition proved impassable for the tanks and no alternative crossing could be found. One platoon was left with the tanks while the engineers began work on the demolition; the rest of the company went on beyond the Suganella, but had lost the barrage and encountered mortar and machine-gun fire, and for some time had no communication with Battalion Headquarters because of radio interference.

As it was impossible to get tanks across the **Borro Suganella**—the sappers estimated that it would take six hours to complete the crossing on the **Cigliano-Faltignano** track—Brigadier Stewart directed that A Squadron's tanks should withdraw and take the roundabout route through **Spedaletto** in 23 Battalion's sector, and arranged for a troop from B Squadron to go along this route at once to join C Company. He also instructed **28 Battalion** to send a reserve company forward to thicken its front.

The support weapons were brought back with the tanks, except one 17-pounder left to cover the demolition, where work was to continue as fast as possible. The three tanks of 5 Troop, B Squadron, reached C Company, and together they pushed forward in daylight. As soon as they moved on to the stretch of road between **Il Pino** and a cemetery just beyond **Faltignano**, they were met by machine-gun fire and armour-piercing shot from a tank or self-propelled gun, and one of the Shermans was set alight. Artillery support was called for, and the medium guns laid fire on the area from which the enemy was shooting. A 17-pounder in 23 Battalion's sector assisted, at a range of 2400 yards, by scoring three direct hits out of six shots fired at what was thought to be a Tiger,<sup>1</sup> which was also treated to smoke and armour-piercing shot from the two surviving tanks of 5 Troop. The German tank withdrew and the

defensive fire diminished, which allowed C Company to resume

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<sup>1</sup> This is reported to be the first time gunners of **7 A-Tk Regt** had used a 17-pounder against a tank in **Italy**.

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its northward progress before midday.

In an exhilarating advance C Company, ably led by Captain **Baker**,<sup>1</sup> and supported by the two Shermans, killed at least 20 of the enemy, captured a German RAP and several prisoners, and by 1.30 p.m. was at Point 250 (Torrebianca), about 1000 yards north of **Faltignano**, where it was joined later by tanks of A Squadron which had passed through 23 Battalion's sector.

For most of the day the situation of A Company, **28 Battalion**, was obscure. It was without tank support, anti-tank guns and observers for the artillery, and was understood to be pinned down for some hours by a suspected Tiger in the vicinity of its objective, Point 204 (Casa Ralli), about 1000 yards north-west of **Faltignano**. This tank probably had retired by midday, when it appeared that the enemy was moving back from 5 Brigade's front. Late in the afternoon it was confirmed that A Company was close to Casa Ralli.

Meanwhile a fresh plan had been prepared for **28 Battalion**: it was to continue to push for its original objectives during the day and the night of 31 July – 1 August and if practicable carry on further to a line from Point 250 (Torrebianca) on the right to Point 227 (almost due east of **La Romola** across the valley of the **Sugana stream**) on the left. By the time this plan was issued in printed form (at 2.35 p.m.), part of it had been completed: C Company had reached Point 250 (Torrebianca), which the battalion had understood to have been its original objective.<sup>2</sup>

Assisted by artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire, A Company began a northward advance at 7 p.m. and gained Point 227 within the hour. C Company also pushed farther north, beyond its intended objective, and

by 9.30 p.m. was at **Villa Balbani**, about a mile from **Faltignano**. A troop of tanks from A Squadron, 20 Regiment, was with each company, and anti-tank guns moved up in support. C Company placed a standing patrol on Poggio Montauto, on the eastern flank, and A Company sent a patrol northward along the road and creek (a tributary of the **Sugana stream**).

On hearing of these successes **General Freyberg** told Stewart, 'You must push on', but the Brigadier felt that the two companies of **28 Battalion** might be 'caught bending'<sup>3</sup> unless they were given an opportunity to reorganise and get the anti-tank guns and other

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj J. S. Baker**, MC and bar, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born Makaraka, **Gisborne**, 16 Jul 1918; civil servant.

<sup>2</sup> There are two Points 250 within a mile north of **Faltignano**, at Torrebianca and Villa Balbani, and in addition a 250 contour is shown on the 1:25,000 map at Villa al Leccio. The orders issued on 31 July give Villa al Leccio as the original objective, but a trace issued with 5 Bde's operation order on 30 July shows the objective RIPON at Torrebianca, farther north.

<sup>3</sup> GOC's diary.

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weapons in position to withstand a possible counter-attack. He said he would get on at dawn. He therefore warned Lieutenant-Colonel Awatere that his reserve companies (B and D), which were waiting near **Faltignano**, should be sent through C and A as soon as possible to carry the advance to the main heights ahead, Poggio delle Monache and **La Poggiona**; he also ordered 21 Battalion to concentrate near **Il Pino** as soon as possible after dawn, ready to pass through the Maoris on these two objectives.

To reach its objective, a line cutting the ridge just beyond **La Romola**, 4 Brigade faced the formidable task of crossing the steep-sided valley of the **Sugana stream**, into which the enemy had observation and could direct the fire of his artillery, tanks, self-propelled guns, mortars and machine guns from the front and both flanks.

The plan for the attack, which was to start at 1 a.m. on 31 July, was that 22 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel **Donald**<sup>1</sup>) was to advance under a series of timed artillery concentrations fired by 4 and 6 Field Regiments and 70 and 75 Medium Regiments, and was to have the support of C Squadron of 20 Regiment, 31 Anti-Tank Battery (minus all except one section of its M10s and one troop of its six-pounders, but with a troop of 17-pounders from 34 Battery), 3 MG Company (whose 12 Vickers were to 'thicken'<sup>2</sup> the artillery barrage) and detachments of **6 Field Company**. The attack was to be made by 1 Company on the right, 3 on the left and 2 in close support, each with a troop of tanks and a party of sappers.

Reconnaissance the previous night below **La Romola** had found the stream and the sunken lateral road obstacles for tanks, but just before the attack began a report was received that the 'river crossing was OK'<sup>3</sup> for tanks. Patrols had been sent out in daylight and at night to investigate reports from civilians that the enemy had evacuated **La Romola**. These reports were proved false, at the cost of casualties to both patrols.

The enemy, brought to the alert by 5 Brigade's attack on the flank, filled the Sugana valley with defensive fire. 'The noise, dust and smoke was terrific and hardly seemed to increase when our own barrage opened up since it had already about reached the ultimate limit.'<sup>4</sup> The shell or mortar fire caused casualties and some confusion

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col H. V. Donald**, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Masterton**; born Masterton, 20 Mar 1917; manufacturer; MP 1963–; CO 22 Bn May–Nov 1944, Mar–Aug 1945; four times wounded.

<sup>2</sup> That night 1 and 3 MG Companies fired 108,000 rounds.

<sup>3</sup> War diary, 22 (Mot) Bn.

<sup>4</sup> Comment by a platoon commander quoted in *22 Battalion*, pp. 316–17.

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at the start. <sup>1</sup> The poor visibility of a dark night was reduced almost to nil by the fog of smoke and dust. Communications failed, mostly because of wireless interference, between Battalion Headquarters and the companies and between company headquarters and the platoons, some of which broke up into small isolated groups of men. The tanks were parted from the infantry early in the advance. 'The wonder is how the attack succeeded at all, and how **La Romola** fell...' <sup>2</sup>

The officer commanding 1 Company (Major O'Reilly <sup>3</sup>) was wounded in the head near the start line, and Captain **Turner** <sup>4</sup> was given command of the three platoons (6, 7 and 8) which made straight for **La Romola**. O'Reilly, after regaining consciousness, refused to go back to the dressing station but joined 5 Platoon, which was to accompany the tanks to the village.

No. 3 Company (Major **Sainsbury** <sup>5</sup>) was hard hit before it left the start line: 14 Platoon was reduced to a handful of men, and the reserve platoon (No. 16) was brought in to fill the gap but had not gone far before its commander (Lieutenant **McNeil** <sup>6</sup>) was killed. Sergeant Eades, <sup>7</sup> who then took control of 16 Platoon, won the DCM and an immediate commission in the field in recognition of his courage and leadership in the next few days.

First to reach **La Romola** was 15 Platoon (Lieutenant **Thomas** <sup>8</sup>) of 3 Company. This platoon broke contact in the middle but somehow managed to link up again in the darkness and, after destroying at least two machine-gun posts, occupied a two-storied building on the fringe of the village, where it was joined about 3 a.m. by 13 Platoon (Lieutenant

**Paterson**<sup>9</sup>), which had been severely shelled and was only 11 strong. A small group of 14 Platoon also arrived and took charge of some prisoners. At dawn 3 Company penetrated the village.

On the way up to **La Romola** the platoons of 1 Company under Turner's command had to force their way through thickly planted grape vines on tightly strung wires. Veering a little to the left, 6 Platoon lost contact with 7 and 8, which entered the eastern outskirts of the village about dawn and were joined by 5 Platoon and

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<sup>1</sup> Some reports attribute casualties on the start line and during the advance to shells from the New Zealand guns falling short.

<sup>2</sup> *22 Battalion*, p. 318.

<sup>3</sup> Lt-Col A. W. F. O'Reilly, MC, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born Dunedin, 24 Apr 1906; schoolteacher; CO 22 Bn Nov 1944–Mar 1945; twice wounded.

<sup>4</sup> **Capt L. O. Turner**; Feilding; born Feilding, 23 Apr 1921; saddler.

<sup>5</sup> **Maj G. S. Sainsbury**, m.i.d.; Frankton Junction; born NZ 30 May 1909; solicitor.

<sup>6</sup> **Lt J. H. McNeil**; born NZ 2 Jan 1920; labourer; killed in action 31 Jul 1944.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Lt A. E. Eades, DCM; Woodville; born Pahiatua, 10 Jun 1917; labourer.

<sup>8</sup> **Lt I. L. Thomas**, MC; Ruatoria; born **Christchurch**, 30 Apr 1917; fat-stock buyer; twice wounded.

<sup>9</sup> **Capt E. B. Paterson, MC; Howick, Auckland; born Edinburgh, 3 Jun 1911; company managing director; wounded 8 Aug 1944.**

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the wounded O'Reilly; later 6 Platoon 'drifted in by sections.' <sup>1</sup>

While searching some houses Second-Lieutenant Woolcott <sup>2</sup> and a small party from 5 Platoon unexpectedly came upon a Tiger tank which appeared to be abandoned. Lance-Corporal **Dillon** <sup>3</sup> began climbing on to it, 'when up comes the lid. Before I could surrender, the German did, with three or four others....' <sup>4</sup> Later the tank, in perfect order, was driven towards the rear, where its unheralded approach caused alarm.

Meanwhile 2 Company (Major **Hutcheson** <sup>5</sup>), after being severely mortared in the Sugana valley, advanced on to the ridge farther west to cover the left flank and the **La Romola - Cerbaia** road. Company Headquarters was established at a 'sort of palace [ **Tattoli**] ... full of terrified civilians,' <sup>6</sup> and the platoons went on to their objective on top of the ridge about half a mile from **La Romola**.

Because of the extremely bad going the supporting tanks had been unable to keep up with the infantry. One of 12 Troop's tanks (with 1 Company) dropped out with mechanical trouble early in the advance, another got stuck on a narrow track, and only one reached **La Romola**. All three tanks of 9 Troop (following 3 Company) got through to the village shortly after daybreak, and one of them was transferred to 12 Troop so that both 1 and 3 Companies would have two in support. On the way to 2 Company's positions 11 Troop had to wait for several hours while a bulldozer made a deviation past a large demolition on the road in the valley, and one of its tanks shed a track. The crippled tanks were repaired and on the road again by afternoon.

Strenuous efforts, including the repairing of two large demolitions by the engineers under fire, were made to get anti-tank guns up to **La Romola**, in case the enemy should counter-attack with Tiger tanks in support. No such attack developed, although the enemy shelled and

mortared the forward positions throughout the day. One M10 was sited to cover the northern approaches to the village, and three 17-pounders were disposed in or near the village. When one of the 17-pounder gun positions came under fire, the crew retired into nearby houses, which permitted an audacious German patrol to render the gun useless and drive away the gun-tower.

The reserve troop (No. 10) of C Squadron, 20 Regiment, 'did

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<sup>1</sup> *22 Battalion*, p. 323.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Lt A. H. Woolcott; **Wellington**; born Havelock South, 26 Oct 1911; mechanic.

<sup>3</sup> L-Cpl E. T. K. Dillon; **Wellington**; born **Greymouth**, 4 Apr 1908; clerk; wounded 21 Sep 1944.

<sup>4</sup> *22 Battalion*, pp. 324–5.

<sup>5</sup> Maj K. R. Hutcheson; born **Wellington**, 25 Jan 1914; schoolteacher; wounded 24 Sep 1944; died 1956.

<sup>6</sup> *22 Battalion*, p. 324. Later Tac HQ 22 Bn also was set up at **Tattoli**.

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one good shoot' on positions suspected of harbouring enemy observation posts and 'got a proper plaster' <sup>1</sup> in return. In the afternoon this troop reinforced the two at **La Romola**. Allied aircraft strafed two groups of 22 Battalion's carriers and an artillery observation post south of the village, fortunately without doing any serious damage.

By evening on 31 July 22 Battalion was firmly established in **La Romola** with two companies of infantry closely supported by three troops of tanks, and was in contact with 6 Brigade on the left flank. The

battalion reported that its casualties in the attack on the village were eight killed, 22 wounded and two missing; it had taken 21 prisoners and killed an estimated 40–50 of the enemy.

The night in **La Romola** was eventful. A stray shell set off some engineers' explosives in a house, and caused several casualties in **6 Field Company**. Later a more severe explosion brought down a house in rubble which blocked the main street. This building had been occupied by gunners of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, 10 of whom were killed and others wounded by the explosion and falling masonry. The house was so badly wrecked that the engineers had to use a bulldozer for 'corpse extrication'<sup>2</sup>—to clear the rubble and recover the bodies. The explosion was thought to have been caused either by a delayed-action demolition or by a shell detonating a heap of enemy explosive stacked in the house. An immediate search of other houses revealed a heavy demolition charge with a time fuse, which was disarmed, and subsequently the sappers removed several charges from culverts in or near the village and disarmed three booby traps in houses.

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, 20 Armd Regt.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, **6 Fd Coy**.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## VI: BREAKING THE PAULA LINE

### *VI: Breaking the Paula Line*

(i)

‘Terrific fighting took place,’ the German *Fourteenth Army* reported on 29 July. ‘The enemy ... was stopped at the village of S. Michele by a series of counter attacks by our last local reserves.... Army advised Army Gp that the days of hard fighting, the heavy casualties and extreme exhaustion of the troops had considerably decreased the fighting value of **1 Para Corps**, particularly 29 Pz Gren Div. The Army was not in a position to give the Corps any more relief by narrowing down its sector any more, as **14 Pz Corps**’ sector was now so thinly held that any attack there could not be held without help from Army Gp or ... **10 Army.**’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> War diary, *Fourteenth Army*.

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*Army Group C* therefore gave orders for the transfer of a sector on *Fourteenth Army*’s eastern flank to *Tenth Army*, which was to take over about three kilometres from *1 Parachute Corps*. While the Germans were making this boundary alteration on the night of 29–30 July, **4 British Division**, advancing on the east of 6 South African Armoured Division, fought its way to the crest of the 2500-foot Monte Scalari, which it held against counter-attack. This caused *Fourteenth Army* to pull back its left wing ‘a few kilometres’ and to instruct *1 Parachute Corps*, ‘without prejudicing the orders to hold the **Paula Line,**’<sup>1</sup> to reconnoitre a support line about five kilometres behind the present point of contact with *Tenth Army*.

During the night of 30–31 July ‘the enemy fired a very heavy preliminary barrage’ on *1 Parachute Corps*’ positions. ‘Before and during the attack about 50,000 rounds were counted in 29 Pz Gren Div’s and 4

Para Div's sectors. This even surpassed the weight of the fire during the heaviest days of the **Cassino** fighting. Very early this morning the enemy attacked 29 Pz Gren Div and the right wing of 4 Para Div, supported by tanks. The attacks came in waves, and were beaten off for the most part, but the enemy took the village of **La Romola** and gained some ground at S. Andrea....

‘A large-scale battle of attrition was inevitable if our troops held on any longer in their present positions, and so during the night 31 Jul – 1 Aug the left wing of **14 Pz Corps** and the whole of **1 Para Corps** withdrew to a new line between the old one and the **Florence** bridgehead position. At the same time **14 Pz Corps** took over about 1 km from the western flank of 1 Para Corps....’<sup>2</sup>

After this withdrawal *1 Parachute Corps* still held the dominating heights of the **Pian dei Cerri** hills on the New Zealand Division's front and at **Impruneta** on 6 South African Armoured Division's front. The main task specified by *Fourteenth Army* was to prevent a breakthrough to **Florence**, although orders already had been given to prepare the bridges in the city for demolition. The Ponte Vecchio alone was to be spared ‘for its artistic value’,<sup>3</sup> but houses were to be blown up at each end to block its approaches.

(ii)

**General Freyberg** decided against a major assault on the night of 31 July – 1 August, chiefly to permit the accumulation of an adequate supply of ammunition for the artillery. His decision may

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *Fourteenth Army*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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have been influenced by the uncertainty over **28 Battalion's** position early on the 31st, but in any case he told 13 Corps in the afternoon, 'No ammunition, no attack.'<sup>1</sup>

The expenditure of ammunition was very high. In three days, 29–31 July, the New Zealand ammunition point at **Strada** (on Route 2, five or six miles south of **San Casciano**) issued more than 100,000 rounds for the 25-pounder guns, as well as the requirements of all other weapons. As 13 Corps' normal ammunition supply system would not be able to keep the New Zealand guns fed and also bring up a reserve of 600 rounds for each gun demanded by the CRA (Brigadier Parkinson), arrangements were made for New Zealand transport to assist. All the vehicles that could be spared—210 3-ton trucks from NZASC,<sup>2</sup> artillery and other units—were despatched on 31 July to a corps dump east of **Lake Trasimene**, over 100 miles away, and returned next day with 38,640 rounds of 25-pounder ammunition. This, in addition to the loads hauled daily by NZASC convoys, provided the Division with a more than sufficient reserve.

Meanwhile, on the night of 31 July – 1 August, a South African battalion group (The First City/The Cape Town Highlanders, with a Sherman squadron of the Prince Alfred's Guards, a machine-gun platoon of the Royal Durban Light Infantry and a troop of M10s) came temporarily under New Zealand command to guard the right flank until such time as the South African division should have advanced sufficiently to make flank protection unnecessary. By midnight the South Africans had relieved 23 Battalion, which retired to the **Casa Vecchia** area.

When he heard shortly after midnight that **28 Battalion** had a standing patrol on a road junction about half a mile beyond **Villa Balbani**, **General Freyberg** said, 'He [the enemy] has hooked it. Get bulldozers up.'<sup>3</sup> He told the AA & QMG (Colonel B. Barrington) to organise provost control for the bridges over the **Arno**. The South Africans were to go through **Florence** and the New Zealanders round it.

At dawn Brigadier Stewart set out to visit his forward troops. As his own car was under repair, he used a scout car borrowed from 20 Regiment and driven by Trooper **Dickie**.<sup>4</sup> He went up the road past the turn-off to **Villa Balbani** (on a short side road) without seeing any sign of **28 Battalion**, and apparently continued past

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> Not available were 4 and 6 RMT Companies, which for three weeks (21 July–10 August) carried petrol and ammunition for **Eighth Army** to the **Arezzo** area from dumps about 200 miles farther south.

<sup>3</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>4</sup> **Tpr S. W. Dickie**; Ferndale, Gore; born NZ 18 Jan 1922; farm labourer; p.w. 1 Aug 1944.

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the point where the standing patrol was reported to have been. He realised he had gone too far, and was about to turn back when he noticed some high ground from which he decided to reconnoitre. There he was held up at short range by Germans with a bazooka, and as there were no weapons in the car, he and his driver surrendered. Some time later the German wireless announced that Stewart was a prisoner. He had been unable to prevent some information from falling into German hands. The commander of *1 Parachute Corps* (General Schlemm) told the commander of *Fourteenth Army* (General Lemelsen) that 'a marked map had been captured with the commander of 5 NZ Bde, showing the directions of the enemy thrusts. The Corps had formed main points of resistance to meet these.'<sup>1</sup>

Fifth Brigade's intention was that D and B Companies of **28 Battalion** were to pass through A and C at dawn on 1 August and advance to Poggio delle Monache and **La Poggiona**, on the line of the

brigade's final objective; 21 Battalion was to be ready to pass through the Maoris on this objective, which it was hoped they would have reached by midday.

D and B Companies, supported by two troops of A Squadron, 20 Regiment, began to advance after 8 a.m. and soon met stiff resistance. A detour was found for the tanks around a demolition and trees which had been felled across the road, and D Company continued towards **Villa Treggiaia**, about 500 yards from the objective. A Tiger tank—there probably were at least two Tigers and one or two other tanks on the battalion's front—set fire to one of the Shermans, whose crew took shelter with some Maoris in a house near **Villa Treggiaia**.

B Company cut north-westward across country towards La Poggiona, and was counter-attacked about 1000 yards from this objective. The artillery helped to beat off the enemy, but the company was unable to make any further progress. Colonel **Pleasants**<sup>2</sup> (who was given command of 5 Brigade when no trace could be found of Brigadier Stewart) told **28 Battalion** to halt B Company until further orders and to get D Company on to **Poggio Issi** (Point 243, alongside Poggio delle Monache) if possible. Later, at 3.50 p.m., he ordered the battalion to consolidate on a line approximately 300 yards short of **Villa Treggiaia**. About this time D Company was counter-attacked; some men in a house were surrounded but managed to get away. The artillery brought down

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *Fourteenth Army*.

<sup>2</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; Commander, Northern Military District, 1953–57; Central Military District, 1957–60; Senior NZ Army Liaison Officer, **London**, 1964–65.

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fire in support of the company, whose ammunition was running low,

and tanks and carriers went to its assistance. Soon the position was reported to have been restored.

Before nightfall fighter-bombers strafed and bombed the Poggio delle Monache – La Poggiona line in front of **28 Battalion**.

*(iii)*

**General Freyberg** asked to be kept closely in touch with developments on 1 August as he had set 6 p.m. as the deadline when he would have to make his decisions for the final breakthrough plans. When encouraging reports were received of the Maoris' progress, it seemed that it might not be necessary to make a set-piece attack, or that in any case heavy artillery concentrations instead of a barrage would be sufficient to support the advance. Later, however, it was obvious that the enemy intended to hold the high ground still ahead of the Division.

At a conference at **Divisional Headquarters** at 6 p.m. plans were coordinated 'for a rather complicated series of attacks... a sort of three-brigade attack on a three-battalion front at different times with different artillery programmes.' <sup>1</sup> The plan for 5 and 6 Brigades to converge on the **Pian dei Cerri** ridge and squeeze out 4 Armoured Brigade in the centre was replaced by what was to be in effect a partial right-wheel for the Division, pivoting on 5 Brigade on the eastern flank, to bring the front to face north along the line Poggio delle Monache – **La Poggiona** – Poggio Valicaia, the three eastern crests of the hills, possession of which would open a short and indefensible route to **Florence**.

Fifth Brigade on the right would need to advance slightly over 1000 yards, 4 Brigade in the centre 2000 yards, and 6 Brigade on the left nearly 3000 yards. The method outlined in the divisional operation order was for 6 Brigade, joined shortly afterwards by 4 Brigade, to advance to the first objectives and after a short pause continue to the second objectives; after another pause all three brigades were to advance side by side to the final objectives. This operation was given the codename **PLONK**.

From standing artillery fire just ahead of each start line all phases of the advance were to be supported by creeping barrages, lifting 100 yards every five minutes, and a heavy defensive-fire programme was to cover consolidation on the final objectives. These tasks called for continuous fire from 11 p.m. to 3.45 a.m. on the night of 1–2 August. The three New Zealand field regiments, each

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

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assisted by a battery of 57 Field Regiment, RA, were responsible for the barrages, and 70 and 75 Medium Regiments were to fire concentrations on selected targets in or near the line of advance. At the same time an extensive counter-battery programme was to be fired by other guns in 13 Corps under the direction of **1 Army Group Royal Artillery**.

Although the divisional operation order was signed at 4.45 p.m. on 1 August, and divisional and brigade conferences revealed to commanding officers the general outline of the plan, the really important details—the traces showing the areas and timings of the artillery barrages, the preparation of which was a complicated, lengthy task—did not reach the battalions until after 8 p.m., when copies had to be sent hurriedly to companies. The fire plan was one of the most complicated devised by the New Zealand Artillery. The constant changes in the reported locations of friendly and enemy troops caused many alterations in the plan, some of them after it began.

(iv)

Sixth Brigade, which was to be the first to advance, listed its objectives in an operation order signed at 8 p.m.: the first objective was to be the Points 281, 282 and 261 (Poggio Cigoli – La Liona), the second Point 337 (about half-way between Poggio Cigoli and Poggio Valicaia), and the third Point 382 (Poggio Valicaia). The first step of the advance was to be made by 25 Battalion on the right (Points 281 and 282) and 26

**Battalion on the left (Point 261), while 24 Battalion guarded the left flank; 25 Battalion alone was to go on to the second and third objectives.**

**C Company, 26 Battalion, had relieved B Company during the previous night (31 July – 1 August) in positions along the **Castellare – Poggio Cigoli** road, and subsequently had occupied houses farther along the road, after artillery fire had been brought down on them, and had taken 19 prisoners. Plans to capture another group of buildings still farther along the road were cancelled when preparations were begun for the attack that night. The artillery traces showed that C Company's foremost positions were over the opening line for the barrage and would have to be evacuated.**

**The guns opened fire at 11 p.m. and on their first lift 20 minutes later 25 Battalion sent off its companies in line along the road. Shortly after midnight, when A Company, in the lead, was closing on Point 281 (Poggio Cigoli), the supporting tanks of B Squadron, **18 Armoured Regiment**,<sup>1</sup> were halted by a minefield on the road. While the sappers were clearing the mines, the tanks fired on a house at Point 282 (just to the north-west of 281) and other posts which were preventing the infantry from occupying the first objective. D Company of 26 Battalion, advancing on the left against slight opposition, occupied Point 261 (La Liona).**

**C Company of 25 Battalion passed through A (which soon reported Points 281 and 282 clear), occupied the second objective (Point 337) and captured about 30 prisoners;<sup>2</sup> D and B Companies, carrying on towards the third objective, met vigorous resistance from a house close by the road. The enemy withdrew under fire from the tanks, and the two companies moved on to the slopes of Poggio Valicaia, where they met little opposition. One post holding out in a building withdrew when the tanks approached. By 5.30 a.m. D Company on the right and B on the left were in possession of the final objective with a troop of tanks in support; C Company and another troop were at Point 337, A Company**

and a third troop at Point 282, and a reserve troop on the road south of Point 281 (which was occupied next night by A Company, 26 Battalion).

There had been a sharp earthquake during the advance, at 2.33 a.m. As the light improved on the morning of 2 August the men digging in on the objective came under fire, mostly from mortars; this was especially annoying on Poggio Valicaia, where it seemed to come from La Sughera and **Poggio al Pino**, to the north-west. When the artillery laid concentrations of smoke on these two hilltops, the accuracy and volume of the mortaring diminished, which permitted the anti-tank guns to be sited. An M10, a 17- pounder and four six-pounder guns were placed well forward, the Vickers guns and 4.2-inch mortars some distance to the rear.

Signs of enemy activity presaged a counter-attack. When a German tank approached, the 17-pounder sited to cover the road near Point 337 was quickly manned by two of its crew who had been sheltering from the mortar fire in a nearby building. Their first shot 'hit just below the turret which was thrown about 6 feet in the air and the tank split open, then a sheet of flame enveloped the lot, followed by the explosion of the ammunition.'<sup>3</sup> German infantry

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<sup>1</sup> Under 6 Bde's command were **33 A-Tk Bty**, a troop of M10s of 31 A-Tk Bty, two troops of 39 Hy Mor Bty (in addition to the brigade's own heavy mortar platoon), **2 MG Coy** and **18 Armd Regt**; **6 Fd Regt** and a battery of **57 Fd Regt**, RA, were in direct support; **8 Fd Coy** also was in support.

<sup>2</sup> *Fourteenth Panzer Corps* reported on 7 August that 'during the heavy fighting on 2 Aug 6/15 Pz Gren Regt (35 men) was cut off by the enemy at **Pian dei Cerri** and has not returned since....'

<sup>3</sup> **H. C. G. Gordon**, quoted in *25 Battalion*, p. 468. This was the first and only German tank definitely known to have been knocked out by one of **7 A-Tk Regt's** guns in **Italy**. German records say it was a Tiger, New Zealand records that it was a

**Mark IV camouflaged to resemble a Tiger.**

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**observed near [Santa Maria](#), farther west, were dispersed by small-arms and artillery fire.**

**During the day (2 August) the artillery harassed all observed enemy movement, and 25 Battalion received similar attention from German guns and mortars. Allied fighter-bombers attacked targets at [Santa Maria](#) and [Pian dei Cerri](#). The hostile fire increased in the evening (the 17-pounder anti-tank gun was knocked out by mortar fire) and then gradually died away.**

**(v)**

**While 6 Brigade, on the Division's left flank, gained its objectives with unexpected ease, <sup>1</sup> the assaulting troops of 4 and 5 Brigades were surprised by the determined resistance they encountered, and took longer to gain their objectives. Sixth Brigade, therefore, was directed by [Divisional Headquarters](#) to hold its positions during the night of 2–3 August and until such time as the centre and right brigades should reach a line from which the final breakthrough could be staged.**

**On the night of 31 July – 1 August 22 Battalion, in the centre, sent a patrol to search the road leading along the ridge from [La Romola](#), with orders to occupy Point 305, about 1200 yards to the north-east, if not too strongly defended. The patrol, 29 men altogether, was met by machine-gun and mortar fire when close to Point 305 and was ordered to return. The following afternoon a section of carriers led an infantry platoon and two tanks along the road, while other tanks of C Squadron, 20 Regiment, and Vickers guns of 3 MG Company gave supporting fire, but this party also came under fire and withdrew. Plans to make a third attempt on Point 305 during the night of 1–2 August were amended to fit in with the divisional plan for Operation PLONK.**

**Fourth Brigade's start line was just north of [La Romola](#), its first objective short of Point 305 and the next just beyond; the attacking**

troops then had to swing to the left to face up to the final objective, **La Poggiona**. The artillery barrage was to open at 11.35 p.m. and stand for 20 minutes about 300 yards ahead of the infantry start line before creeping forward; it was to stand for an hour from 1.55 a.m. just beyond the second objective and then lift again and finish beyond the infantry's final objective at 3.45 a.m.

The 22nd Battalion advanced with 1 Company and a troop of C Squadron, 20 Regiment, on the right, 3 Company and a troop on the left, and 2 Company and the rest of the squadron in reserve.

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<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless 25 Bn's casualties on 1 and 2 August were nine dead and 30 wounded.

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While 1 Company headed across country east of the road to Point 305, 3 Company kept to the road as far as **Podere Tavernaccia** (north of Point 305) to continue northward through La Querciola to **La Poggiona**. Wireless communication was poor, and the little information that reached Battalion Headquarters came through the tanks. The night was dark and visual contact almost impossible; woods, patches of scrub and many ridges and steep-sided gullies made the going difficult.

At the start 1 Company suffered casualties from what were thought to be shells falling short from the supporting artillery, but which might have been the result of overrunning the barrage. 'Though scattered and dazed and also hampered by wire—grapevines strung across the line of attack—the survivors pushed on' <sup>1</sup> to Villa Tavernaccia on Point 305, cleared the building on the hill, and were joined there by 2 Company.

After advancing in good order about half a mile along the road from **La Romola**, 3 Company was on a small ridge north of Point 305, where the shells from the supporting guns seemed to be hitting the treetops and bursting. The company halted to allow the barrage to lift clear of the trees, but after resuming the advance was held up by fire from a group of houses. These were captured, with assistance from 10 Troop of

C Squadron, and a few prisoners taken. By this time dawn was approaching, the barrage had stopped, and **La Poggiona**, across about 400 yards of open ground, was still in enemy hands.

Nevertheless two platoons (16 and 13), accompanied by the tanks, which kept up a continual fire against many targets (including a nest of four spandaus, which were silenced), advanced in an extended line across the open ground. Half-way, as arranged, the tanks stopped and laid down a barrage under which the infantry continued through **La Querciola** and up the steep slope, shooting as they went, to the top of **La Poggiona** and some distance down the other side, where the Germans were called on to surrender and began to do so. One of them started to walk towards the New Zealanders with his hands up, when ‘unfortunately a youngster who had not long before joined the company lost his head and fired a burst of tommygun through the German's stomach at short range. The rest turned and ran down the hill while we in turn ran back to the top of the hill and started digging.’<sup>2</sup> The enemy swiftly rallied and assaulted the hill. He was twice repulsed but in the third attempt threatened to surround 3 Company, which was

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<sup>1</sup> *22 Battalion*, p. 326.

<sup>2</sup> E. B. Paterson, quoted in *22 Battalion*, p. 331.

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running out of ammunition and therefore withdrew.<sup>1</sup>

The GOC approved a plan to renew the attack on **La Poggiona** at 6 p.m. on 2 August by 2 Company under a short but heavy concentration of fire from the artillery, tanks, Vickers guns and mortars. To give the infantry close support, 9 Troop of C Squadron was to take over from 10 Troop; 11 and 12 Troops also were to assist the attack and protect the right flank.

When two platoons of 2 Company were assembling on the start line, ‘we were subject to one of the bitterest shellings I have ever

experienced,' wrote Major Hutcheson. 'Someone said they were our own shells and indeed it seemed to be true.... my two platoons came staggering back, shocked and disorganised, and with heavy casualties....'

<sup>2</sup> The men may have arrived on the barrage line as the guns opened fire, or may have been shelled by German artillery. On the right flank some 12 Platoon men, under Corporal **Tsukigawa**, <sup>3</sup> not knowing that the others had retired, set out across a gully towards the objective, came under spandau fire and pulled back into cover in the gully while Allied aircraft attacked the ridge in front.

Encouraged by the news of the advance by Tsukigawa's section, other 2 Company men were gathered together by Hutcheson and led towards the objective. At the foot of the hill they met Tsukigawa, who said **La Poggiona** was clear of the enemy. By this time, however, the barrage had stopped, and apparently the enemy had returned. Hutcheson's men climbed the hill under machine-gun fire, and were mortared when they probed over the top; they dug in, 24-strong, just behind the crest. When it was learnt some time later that **La Poggiona** had been captured, two platoons of 3 Company were rushed up to reinforce Hutcheson's party, followed by tanks of 9 Troop. The enemy still held posts on the northern side of the hill, and a counter-attack at dawn was thought possible.

When daylight arrived on 3 August and the morning mists dispersed, almost all local firing ceased, and the men on **La Poggiona** found themselves looking down on a magnificent view of **Florence**.

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<sup>1</sup> The German battalion at **La Poggiona** (*III/71 Pz Gren Regt of 29 Pz Gren Div*) was recommended for 'Mention in Armed Forces Report'. On 2 August this battalion was claimed to have 'faced 5 attacks by strong forces of infantry and armour, with heavy artillery support, launched by **2 NZ Div**. It beat off all attacks and inflicted terrible losses on the enemy, thus foiling the enemy's intention to break through to **Florence**.'

<sup>2</sup> *22 Battalion*, p.332. The battalion's casualties on 1 and 2

August were two dead and 39 wounded. **W. E. Murphy** says in the Artillery history that several allegations by the infantry battalions that 25-pounders were firing short were investigated and no evidence was found to support them.

<sup>3</sup> **L-Sgt S. N. Tsukigawa**, MM, m.i.d.; Balclutha; born Balclutha, 21 Jul 1918; printer; twice wounded.

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(vi)

On the Division's right **28 Battalion** had been brought to a halt on 1 August while attempting to drive to Poggio delle Monache and **La Poggiona**, and it therefore fell to 21 Battalion, which already had received orders to pass through the 28th, to carry out 5 Brigade's share of Operation PLONK.

Fifth Brigade's barrage was to begin at 2.15 a.m. with a 20-minute concentration on the start line, then creep forward and finish with a 15-minute concentration to cover consolidation on Poggio delle Monache. After dark on 1 August **28 Battalion** withdrew its men clear of both 4 and 5 Brigades' barrage areas. A platoon (No. 16) was sent forward from D Company, 21 Battalion, to cover the start line, astride the road by the junction near Podere Nidiaci. After the advance began this platoon occupied houses at Massanera, on the right flank, and subsequently was replaced by a platoon from **28 Battalion**, whose role it was to guard this flank (north of the positions held by The First City/The **Cape Town Highlanders**) until progress by the South Africans made this no longer necessary.

The 21st Battalion attacked with two companies: A Company's objective, **Poggio Issi** (Point 243), was just to the south-east of C Company's objective, Poggio delle Monache. The troops of B Squadron, 20 Regiment, were in support.

The attack, like **28 Battalion's** the previous day, did not succeed. There were several reasons. <sup>1</sup> The late arrival of the plan and artillery

task traces and the movement of **28 Battalion**'s men and tanks to the rear delayed the arrival of 21 Battalion's troops on the start line, where the two companies did not assemble until 2.40 a.m., 25 minutes after the artillery fire began. They began to advance 10 minutes later. The artillery and infantry start lines did not coincide: the right-hand end of the infantry's line was set only 100 yards behind the artillery opening line, but the left-hand end was some 500 yards short. The late arrival of the artillery traces apparently did not allow time for this variation to be noted and corrected by moving C Company closer to the opening concentration. This prevented the infantry from being close enough behind the barrage to catch the enemy disorganised; the short time lag of a few minutes permitted him to get into action. Moreover, ground on both flanks, including **Poggio Montanino** on the right, was missed by the barrage.

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<sup>1</sup> The reason given in *21 Battalion*, p. 360, seems to be in error. This is that the Maoris' foremost troops were reported to have reached a line a kilometre farther north than they actually did, and as a result of this 21 Bn's attack 'did not succeed because the barrage started behind the enemy lines'. Such a major error in map reading would have been discovered when artillery shoots were called down for 28 Bn during the day.

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Undoubtedly the enemy—even if he had not seen the marked map captured with Brigadier Stewart—was bound to fight a strong delaying action on the twin hills which were 21 Battalion's objective, for these were the last hills covering one of the principal roads on which he could withdraw his tanks and transport. Beyond Poggio delle Monache the road led through **Giogoli**, across the River Greve at Gora, and joined Route 2 about two miles from **Florence**.

In a divisional plan arranged so that all three brigades should start together on the last leg of the advance (when 5 Brigade began its attack), it probably was unavoidable that some hours should elapse between the time when **28 Battalion** began to call in its men and when

**21 Battalion advanced to the area where the Maoris' leading posts had been. The enemy must have been aware of the Maoris' withdrawal and had time to occupy the positions they vacated.**

**A Company, 21 Battalion, advanced in extended order about 10 minutes behind the lifts of the barrage until its right flank came up against the creek bed of the **Borro di Tramonti**, which curved around the southern side of **Poggio Montanino**. The company closed up to the left to avoid this obstacle and continued on a narrow front until forced to ground by fire from the lateral road leading eastward from just short of **Villa Treggiaia** to Villa Benvenuti. To avoid this fire the company drew farther to the left and on to the main north-south road, where the men encountered machine-gun and shell fire from a tank shooting straight down the road.**

**On the left of the north-south road C Company advanced well behind the barrage but met only scattered fire until the leading men approached the road to **Podere Tavernaccia**, where they came under fire from the front, the left (western) flank and the left rear.**

**By dawn on 2 August most of A and C Companies had fallen back to defensive positions in the vicinity of the start line. With the half squadron of tanks and anti-tank guns in support, they spent the rest of the day under light but consistent shell, mortar and machine-gun fire. A Tiger tank was seen on the road in front of Poggio delle Monache. A concentration from the medium guns forced the crew to leave it, but they returned and drove it into cover. Later this or another tank appeared at the same place and was attacked by fighter-bombers.**

**(vii)**

**Thus, on 2 August, 6 Brigade had gained its objective, Poggio Valicaia, but its sector was not considered suitable for a major breakout, and opposition still came from the north-western hills of the **Pian dei Cerri**; 4 Brigade had reached its objective, La Poggiona, but had been forced off it and intended to make another attempt that night; 5 Brigade**

had failed to take Poggio delle Monache. Methods of continuing the advance were considered, and the plan finally chosen was for 22 Battalion to complete the occupation of **La Poggiona** (which it did), and for 21 Battalion to advance at 10.30 p.m. on Poggio delle Monache; this would secure the final objectives of Operation **PLONK**. Then **28 Battalion** was to pass through 21 Battalion and carry on to **VINO**, a line running north-westwards from **Giogoli** to a road junction a mile and a half north of Poggio delle Monache. When **VINO** had been secured, it was intended that 23 Battalion, under 4 Brigade's command, should pass through the 28th. As the advance progressed the FC/CTH was to move up and continue its role of guarding the right flank.

The two reserve companies of 21 Battalion (B and D) passed through A and C and advanced under a modified repeat of the previous night's barrage. B Company cautiously negotiated the narrow strip between **Borro di Tramonti** and the road (down which a tank or 88-millimetre gun was firing) without meeting opposition, and waited south of **Villa Treggiaia** until D Company, which had been delayed at the start by mortar fire, drew level. The two companies then advanced in extended order on both sides of the road and, meeting little resistance (a small enemy party was overcome at **Villa Treggiaia**), reached the objective close behind the barrage. B Company occupied **Poggio Issi** and D Company Poggio delle Monache. The two hills had been prepared for defence with numerous weapon pits and sites for dug-in tanks and guns. Enemy dead, casualties of the barrage, were lying among the pits. <sup>1</sup> Fresh tank tracks were observed, and the sound of a tank or tanks withdrawing had been heard. The general impression was that the enemy had been caught by the barrage and the rapid advance of the infantry and had left hurriedly. By 2 a.m. on 3 August the two companies had consolidated on the objective with tank and anti-tank support.

*(viii)*

The New Zealand Division's capture of the eastern crests of the **Pian dei Cerri** hills 'was the turning point of the battle' <sup>2</sup> for **Florence**.

<sup>1</sup> *21 Battalion*, p. 362, says that 30 prisoners were taken and 60 German dead buried, but there is no official confirmation of these figures. 21 Bn's casualties on 2 and 3 August were six killed and 26 wounded; most of these were incurred during the battalion's first attack.

<sup>2</sup> *The Allied Armies in Italy*, p. 2939.

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On 2 August *1 Parachute Corps* told *Fourteenth Army* that it would have to withdraw that night. 'The terrific shellfire during the attacks of the last few days had caused heavy casualties.... Some of the battalions had only 10 or 15 men per company.... No more counter attacks could be mounted to clear the penetrations, because of the casualties they would cause....' <sup>1</sup> After consulting *Army Group C*, *Fourteenth Army* gave orders for *1 Parachute Corps* to withdraw to a small bridgehead south of **Florence**, and for the left wing of *14 Panzer Corps* to withdraw in conformity. Strong rearguards were to be left behind, and the left wing of *14 Panzer Corps* was also to hold a bridgehead south of the **Arno** as long as possible.

East of Route 2 the South Africans crossed the River Greve and entered **Impruneta** without opposition. By the morning of 3 August the Germans were in retreat on almost the whole of 13 Corps' front: the New Zealanders and South Africans were driving towards **Florence** on the heels of the enemy; on the right flank **4 British Division**, and on the left **8 Indian Division**, were also advancing.

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *Fourteenth Army*. A message from *1 Para Corps* on 2 August says that in two and a half hours 18,000 rounds were estimated to have fallen on **La Poggiona**.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## VII: DOWN TO THE ARNO

### *VII: Down to the Arno*

(i)

The capture of Poggio delle Monache by 21 Battalion and the occupation of Poggio Montanino on the right flank by the First City/Cape Town Highlanders permitted 5 Brigade to continue the advance towards Florence on the morning of 3 August.

General Freyberg told the corps commander by telephone at 6.37 a.m.: 'We pushed him off the top of the hill last night and we are now pushing through into the valley. In an hour's time I will tell you whether he has gone.'<sup>2</sup> Both generals were of the opinion that the enemy had gone. Already the GOC had given orders for Divisional Cavalry to be ready to move forward at 7 a.m. and the reserve armour of 4 Brigade an hour later; troops of 6 Brigade were to follow on wheels through La Romola. At 6.45 a.m., however, a message was received from 5 Brigade saying that it would have to fight for its bridgehead.

The Maori Battalion passed through 21 Battalion with C and A Companies in the lead, each supported by a troop of B Squadron, 20 Regiment. From Poggio delle Monache the tree-lined road

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<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

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to Giogoli, a small village about a mile distant, and thickly wooded valleys descended to the flat country along the Arno River. Lieutenant-Colonel Awatere gave the two companies Point 205 (by Villa Bombicci) as their intermediate objective, and

VINO

(the line from Giogoli to the road junction about 2000 yards north-

west <sup>1</sup>) as their final objective.

They made steady progress against only light opposition, mostly from the right flank, where the tanks dealt with machine-gun posts. The leading tanks and infantry were at Villa Bombicci by 8 a.m., and as they went on ahead, Tactical Headquarters was set up there and B and D Companies took up positions forward of this point. C Company swung to the right on the road to **Giogoli**, and A took a track leading towards the north-western end of VINO.

The GOC was eager for information about the advance. When Brigadier Pleasants gave him the latest known situation at 9.15 a.m., he asked, 'Why are they not getting on?' Pleasants said the country was not easy, and was urged, 'You have to push on.' He replied, 'I AM pushing Sir. I am going as fast as I possibly can.' <sup>2</sup>

As they approached **Giogoli** C Company and the tanks of 6 Troop came under strong fire from the ridge at **Villa Capponi**, about half a mile farther to the north-east, where the enemy had tanks, anti-tank guns, mortars and machine guns. The attacking force went beyond **Giogoli** to a place where there was better cover and where fire could be brought to bear on the enemy. When his tank was hit, the troop commander (Lieutenant Heptinstall <sup>3</sup>) alone managed to get clear; his crew of four were killed. Later, armed with a tommy gun, he took prisoner two Germans manning a light machine gun by the side of the road.

C Company made no further progress that day, although the tanks, the artillery and other weapons engaged the enemy pocket. Heptinstall's troop was reinforced by two more tanks from B Squadron, followed by two M10s, one of which was soon knocked out; two of its crew were killed and two injured. The other M10, because of the crew's inexperience, was ordered to the rear. Subsequently it was found that two Tiger tanks had been destroyed, probably by the artillery.

A Company and 7 Troop's tanks made slow progress in very difficult country. By mid-afternoon the infantry was on the objective, but the

tanks were held up short of it by fire from what was believed to be an 88-millimetre gun. The infantry occupied

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<sup>1</sup> Various map references were given for the western end of VINO. It may have been intended that the objective should be an orthodox east-west line from Giogoli, but whether it was an error or whether it had been decided that the line should run from south-east to north-west, this was accepted by 28 Bn as its objective.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>3</sup> Capt W. Heptinstall, MC; Victoria, B.C.; born Canada, 14 Aug 1910; Regular soldier.

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buildings at i Cipressi, just beyond the north-western end of VINO.

As a wide gap had developed between A and C Companies, Awatere ordered his reserve companies forward. Before nightfall B Company had reached the road north-west of Giogoli and occupied two villas without opposition.

By this time both 28 Battalion and Divisional Cavalry had been instructed to attempt to cross the Vingone stream north-west of Giogoli and move on Florence through Scandicci and a bridge over the Greve River about two miles north of Giogoli. D Company of 28 Battalion, with tanks of A Squadron, 20 Regiment, was directed to advance between B and A Companies. The infantry made good time and by 6.30 p.m. were passing A Company's position at i Cipressi, but the tanks were held up in a traffic tangle with armoured cars of B Squadron, Divisional Cavalry.

Fifth Brigade had directed the armoured cars to go through on the left and reconnoitre the route through Scandicci to see if the Capponi 'pocket' could be outflanked. Given priority over the tanks, they overtook D Company and searched for a crossing over the Vingone. A

shell, probably from an anti-tank gun, set fire to a car, killing two and gravely wounding two of the crew. This blocked the withdrawal of five cars which had gone ahead, but apparently the enemy gun could be depressed only far enough to fire a shot which damaged the top of another car. The crews baled out and were pinned to the ground by machine-gun fire until D Company came through and overran the enemy position.

D Company then occupied Villa Franceschi, between the Vingone stream and **Scandicci**.

(ii)

News of 6 South African Armoured Division's progress on 2 August indicated it would soon draw level with 2 NZ Division's front, in which case protection of the Division's right flank was no longer needed. The First City/ **Cape Town Highlanders** group, therefore, was ordered to return to its parent command; it crossed the Greve River and joined up with other South African forces on Route 2 next day.

In the evening of the 2nd 23 Battalion had been informed that, if 21 Battalion's attack that night broke the enemy's line and he fell back on **Florence**, it (the 23rd) was to embus and give chase. As **28 Battalion** already had been given the role of passing through 21 Battalion, this task of exploitation by 23 Battalion was additional, apparently based on the assumption—or wishful thinking—that the enemy might disappear across the **Arno** and abandon **Florence** overnight. But if 21 Battalion's attack should fail to induce the enemy to do this, 23 Battalion was to replace the 22nd under 4 Brigade's command.

Early on 3 August it was understood that 23 Battalion was to pass to 4 Brigade when **28 Battalion** reached VINO (the **Giogoli** line). Later in the morning, however, Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas was called urgently to join Brigadier Pleasants at Poggio delle Monache and was instructed to move his battalion on the right flank. By that time **28 Battalion** had come up against the Germans at **Villa Capponi**. The 23rd, with A

**Squadron, 19 Regiment, under command, was to go to San Cristofano (east of **Giogoli**) and then to Point 122 (nearer the Greve), where it was to 'hold fast. Deny the right flank, bring pressure and fire to the front'<sup>1</sup> (the **Villa Capponi** ridge).**

**Thomas directed B Company, with half a squadron of tanks, to lead the advance, take both objectives and consolidate at Point 122, and C Company to follow with the other half-squadron and consolidate in San Cristofano. B Company left Poggio delle Monache about 2 p.m., and after some delay caused by taking a wrong turning, occupied the crossroads at Cristofano without opposition. The tanks were held up by breakdowns in the leading troop, which blocked the road. The infantry carried on unsupported towards Point 122, but after going only a few hundred yards were pinned down in the open on a forward slope by machine-gun, mortar and tank-gun fire, mostly from the Villa Capponi ridge, across a gully to the north. Among about 20 casualties were all three platoon commanders, who were wounded. The tanks found a way around the road blockage, but were halted again by a mined demolition. Meanwhile C Company and the other half of A Squadron arrived at San Cristofano.**

**Fifth Brigade ordered that every attempt should be made to reduce the **Villa Capponi** 'pocket', and instructed 1 MG Company to send forward some Vickers guns to assist. About 5.30 p.m. Thomas called for another effort to gain Point 122, but the tanks could not get past the demolition, and despite supporting fire from the battalion weapons, tanks and Vickers guns, B Company could make no further progress. As the company was under fire on open ground and suffering casualties to no purpose, Thomas obtained permission from Brigade Headquarters for it to move back to a less exposed position.**

**Thus, at the end of 3 August, 5 Brigade's advance had been checked about three miles from **Florence** by the enemy on the high ground north-east of **Giogoli**, part of the bridgehead held**

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, 23 Bn.

by **1 Parachute Corps** to cover the withdrawal of troops and vehicles across the **Arno**. The enemy was fighting a delaying action on the Ema stream, which crosses Route 2 at **Galluzzo** and joins the Greve at **La Gora**, less than a mile from **Villa Capponi**. The South Africans, whose tanks were seen by the New Zealanders on the far side of the Greve, were halted about a mile from **Galluzzo**.

*(iii)*

Meanwhile 4 Brigade (except for the tanks of 19 and 20 Regiments supporting 5 Brigade) and 6 Brigade remained in reserve.

The 22nd Battalion, after ascertaining that the enemy had gone from the northern slope of **La Poggiona**, was withdrawn by 4 Brigade and bivouacked with C Squadron, 20 Regiment, between **La Romola** and **Cerbaia**, where they were rejoined later by two platoons of 3 Company and a troop of tanks which had been left in occupation of **La Poggiona**.

In 6 Brigade's sector hostility had ceased except for sporadic long-range shelling. Armoured cars of C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, struggled over narrow roads, on which the enemy had left many mines and demolitions, and found that he had gone from **Santa Maria** and **Pian dei Cerri**. Patrols from 25 Battalion also encountered mines, booby traps and demolitions but no enemy. It was possible to move freely between **San Michele**, **Cerbaia** and **La Romola** without drawing fire. Everywhere the Italians were returning to their homes.

Divisional Cavalry assumed responsibility for this part of the front while 6 Brigade concentrated, 24 Battalion in **Castellare** and 25 and 26 Battalions and 18 Regiment in or near **Cerbaia**, together with NZASC transport ready to carry the three battalions should 6 Brigade be called upon to continue the advance.

This concentration of troops was almost complete when, about 4.30 p.m., shells began to fall on **Cerbaia**. The shelling continued with hardly

a break for two and a half hours, although the medium guns and fighter-bombers were directed on the places from which it was thought to come. Casualties in the crowded village were not as heavy as they might have been, probably because most of the men, on arrival, had sought out shelter in the buildings in which to sleep. An officer was killed and about 30 men wounded; six vehicles and a six-pounder gun were destroyed, and a dozen or more trucks damaged. At **Castellare** 24 Battalion escaped the shell-fire.

(iv)

The Germans claimed on 3 August that the Allied forces 'ignored the fact that **Florence** is an open city' <sup>1</sup> and shelled the Piazza Museo Instituto d'Arte (south of the **Arno**), the Ponte della Vittoria (the westernmost of the city's six bridges) and the south-western suburb of Bellosguardo. They also claimed that Allied aircraft attacked the piazza and streets in the southern part of the city. 'Considerable damage was caused to buildings.' <sup>2</sup>

When he heard an Italian report on 3 August that the enemy had prepared the **Arno** bridges for demolition and intended to hold the other side of the river, **General Freyberg** said, 'He is a dirty dog. Knowing that we won't shell it [ **Florence**] he's used it as a billet and now he sits there and hopes we will knock it down.' <sup>3</sup> Next morning the GOC noted in his diary that the enemy had snipers in the south of **Florence**, and that 'he is said to have announced that we are shelling the city which is not true.' Later in the day, when Brigadier Pleasants said that his troops were being shot at from **Florence**, the General replied, 'I can't help it', and confirmed that **Florence** was not to be shelled or mortared.

*Army Group C* gave permission for the withdrawal of *1 Parachute Corps* during the night of 3–4 August to the Heinrich Mountain Line, on the northern outskirts of **Florence**, and also authorised the demolition of the bridges, except the **Ponte Vecchio**, which was to be blocked by the demolition of houses at both ends. The main body of *1 Parachute Corps* withdrew during the night 'according to plan', but very early in the

morning of the 4th the rearguards left south of the city 'were attacked in strength. To avoid fighting in the town, which might well have resulted in the rearguards being cut off among the maze of houses and lanes, they were withdrawn across the **Arno**.... The enemy followed up fast, guided by civilians through the obstacles and minefields at the entrance to the city. The prepared demolitions in **Florence** were blown according to orders.... Partisans cut the fuzes leading to the houses south of the **Ponte Vecchio**, but they were repaired, and when the houses blew up the partisans were buried among the ruins.' <sup>4</sup>

Later in the morning Field Marshal Kesselring demanded an explanation of why his order that *1 Parachute Corps* was to leave three battalions south of **Florence** when it withdrew had been disobeyed. He was told that if the battalions had stayed where

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *Fourteenth Army*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>4</sup> War diary, *Fourteenth Army*. New Zealand observers reported explosions, which must have included the demolition of the bridges, from about 2 a.m. onwards on 4 August.

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they were they would have been cut off, and if they had tried to get back in daylight they would have been badly mauled because of the Allies' good observation from the ridges south of the city.

The South Africans were the first Allied troops to enter **Florence**. The **Imperial Light Horse** crossed the Ema at **Galluzzo**, on Route 2, and patrols going on foot through the southern outskirts of the city reached the **Arno** at dawn on 4 August; they found that five of the six bridges had been demolished and that the approaches to the **Ponte Vecchio**—

which in any case was too weak except for the lightest traffic—had been blocked. As the South African Division closed up to the river, German snipers and machine guns opened fire from the north bank.

The New Zealanders arrived later in the morning. C Company, 23 Battalion, discovered that the enemy, except for 15 men who were taken prisoner, had gone from **Villa Capponi**. One platoon crossed the Greve at **La Gora** to make contact with the South Africans; another platoon of this company and the three of D, mounted on the tanks of A Squadron, 19 Regiment, forded the Greve and raced ‘through farmyards, across fields, straight through one stone wall and then pell-mell along a secondary road....’<sup>1</sup> Determined to be the first New Zealanders in the city, they pushed through Marignolle and entered the southern suburbs about 11 a.m.

‘In no time,’ says Colonel Thomas (who was riding on Major H. A. Robinson's tank), ‘there were thousands in the streets, cheering frantically, throwing flowers and fruit onto the tanks. Wine, champagne, and even whiskey were passed up in glasses and bottles. It was a great moment. We approached the **Arno** and I called up Brigade on the wireless set and reported our success—they said “Good Show but withdraw immediately!”’<sup>2</sup> This ‘was a shattering blow to the troops after having come so far, but later events proved the message could not have arrived at a more appropriate time’.<sup>3</sup> As they retired, the tanks with the infantry still sitting on them came under sniper, machine-gun and shell fire. Thomas, wounded in the wrist by a shell burst, was the only casualty. The withdrawal was continued to the area between **Villa Capponi** and **Giogoli**.

Men from the **Maori Battalion** may have entered the southern suburbs of **Florence** about the same time as Thomas's column, if not earlier.<sup>4</sup> D Company, **28 Battalion**, with tanks of A Squadron,

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<sup>1</sup> *23 Battalion*, p. 379.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> G. R. Blampied, quoted in *23 Battalion*, pp. 379–80.

<sup>4</sup> The records do not give the time of arrival of the first Maoris, but one platoon of D Company had reached the **Arno** at Ponte della Vittoria by 11.30 a.m.

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20 Regiment, and armoured cars of B Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, probed forward before dawn on 4 August, and soon found that there was no enemy ahead. The infantry climbed on to the tanks, which set off along the road through **Scandicci**, only to find that the nearby bridge over the Greve had been demolished. Battalion Headquarters gave permission to go ahead. The men crossed the river and, after a ford had been bulldozed, the tanks caught up and carried them along the road towards the Ponte della Vittoria. When they ventured into the open to examine the bridge (already blown), they were met by machine-gun fire from the far bank of the **Arno**.

After 23 Battalion discovered that the enemy had gone from **Villa Capponi**, C Company of 28 Battalion advanced beyond **Giogoli** and also crossed the Greve. Unable to contact Battalion Headquarters by radio, Captain Baker decided on his own initiative to carry on to **Florence**—which was in accord with the wishes of his men, who made a triumphant entry into the southern suburbs. Their progress, however, was cut short when Colonel Awatere ordered the company to concentrate by **Monticelli**, on a road to the west.

The Maori Battalion was instructed to consolidate on the south bank of the **Arno** west of the Ponte della Vittoria and to act as a firm base through which engineers and patrols from other units were to reconnoitre possible crossing places in preparation for continuing the advance. At nightfall, therefore, the battalion was disposed with B and D Companies near the river bank and A and C in reserve. Tanks of A

**Squadron, 19 Regiment, completing the relief of the 20th (which returned to 4 Brigade), supported the forward companies.**

**The enemy shelled the positions near the river and movement on the roads during the afternoon and into the night; his machine-gun posts continually swept the south bank and its approaches.**

**The 21st Battalion, instructed to reconnoitre the bank and crossing places with a view to establishing a bridgehead across the river, went into position behind 28 Battalion in the evening. A patrol of an officer and 10 men from B Company waded across and went about 100 yards beyond the river without meeting the enemy, but while returning was fired on by South African posts farther upstream. Another patrol of the same size, from D Company, found a good ford for tanks a short distance downstream from the Ponte della Vittoria, and saw Germans digging defensive positions in a park on the far bank.**

**(v)**

**Meanwhile Divisional Cavalry patrols swept the low ground near the river on the Division's left flank, while farther west 8 Indian Division approached the suburban area of Lastra a Signa, opposite Signa.**

**B Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, which had been ambushed while attempting to cross the Vingone the previous night, forded this stream and the Greve on 4 August. Some of its cars accompanied the Maoris and tanks to Florence; some made contact with South African patrols and helped comb the southern suburbs for any enemy who might still be there.**

**C Squadron made slow progress northwards from Pian dei Cerri and Santa Maria because of demolitions and the many trees which the enemy had felled across the road. After fording the Vingone the squadron's cars engaged the enemy in houses by Route 67 (the highway from Florence to the west), from which he was not dislodged until shelled by the artillery.**

Next day A and B Squadrons investigated the river bank west of **Florence**, engaged snipers and machine-gun posts on the far side, and reported several places where the river could be crossed; C Squadron covered the Division's left flank and made contact with patrols from **8 Indian Division** working towards **Lastra a Signa**, where German patrols were still active.

(vi)

The New Zealand Division's destruction of the German defences on the hills commanding the city's southern approaches had been the turning point of the battle for **Florence**.

‘At times the enemy fought almost fanatically,’ wrote the Eighth Army Commander (General Leese). ‘They had, apparently, been ordered to hold on south of **Florence** at all costs. Eventually, the general advance came to a halt about 5,000 yards south of **Florence** and the River Arno. Owing to the necessity to take over the French front, 13th Corps was very extended. It was doubtful whether we could break into the defences until we had brought up more reserves. However, determined attacks by the New Zealand Division against the **Poggio al Pino** and **Poggiona** high ground S.E. of **Florence** gained the day. The New Zealand Division fought magnificently over a period of four days. If it had not been for their effort it would have been necessary to check along the whole front until we could bring in fresh divisions. In conformity with the New Zealanders, progress was made all along the line....’<sup>1</sup>

‘Now that we have entered **Florence**,’ said the corps commander (General Kirkman), ‘I should like to say how much 13 Corps owes to 2 NZ Division during its recent fighting. In the battles for **Arezzo** and **Florence** your troops as always fought magnificently, and gave us the extra punch that was necessary to eject the enemy from his chosen positions in the very difficult country south of the River Arno....’<sup>2</sup>

When the commander of 6 South African Armoured Division (Major-

General W. H. E. Poole) told **General Freyberg** in the evening of 4 August that 'You have done a magnificent job,' the latter replied, 'It had to be done. We had a better chance than you did. It has probably saved you a lot of casualties.'<sup>3</sup>

The previous day **Freyberg** had sent a short report to New Zealand giving the Division's known casualties at that stage. He felt 'this was necessary in view of rather horrific picture of stern actions being fought by the New Zealand Division south of the **Arno**.'<sup>4</sup> During the Division's advance of over 20 miles which began on 22 July, its casualties were almost a thousand: 214 were killed or died of wounds, 710 were wounded, and 29 became prisoners of war, a total of 953.<sup>5</sup> While the Division remained on the south bank of the **Arno** (until the night of 15–16 August) a further 34 were killed and 107 wounded, which brought the total to 1094. Between 22 July and 16 August, also, 52 of 4 Armoured Brigade's tanks, the strength of one whole regiment, were put out of action, many of them permanently.

*(vii)*

The Division undoubtedly had grown in efficiency. Co-operation had improved between infantry, armour, artillery, engineers and the other arms. Without such co-operation there could have been little or no progress at times. For example, the Division would not have been able to get on as it did without the sappers' skill and speed in erecting bridges, trimming demolitions and clearing the way through minefields.

German records acknowledge the effectiveness of the artillery fire. Indeed the gun teams were kept very busy, and the expenditure

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<sup>1</sup> Report on **Eighth Army** operations from the capture of **Rome** to the entry into **Florence**.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>3</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. By the 'rather horrific picture' the GOC meant the impression that might have been given by BBC reports on the Italian campaign. The figures he quoted in the cable were 126 killed, 575 wounded and 39 missing.

<sup>5</sup> In the same period, according to incomplete reports to *Fourteenth Army, 1 Parachute Corps'* casualties were about 1700 killed, wounded and missing; *29 Pz Gren Div* and *4 Para Div* each had at least 500 casualties.

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of ammunition was enormous. Occasionally the infantry criticised the gunners' 'short shooting' which inflicted casualties among their own men, but the artillery had to contend with great difficulties: the preparation of complicated programmes in support of attacks at very short notice, and the problem of crest clearance in hilly, wooded country where the similarities in heights and place-names on the map were confusing.

The Division, with one armoured and two infantry brigades, was better constituted for the mobile warfare it had known in North Africa in 1941–43 than for the type of fighting which it now encountered in Italy in 1944. It did not have enough infantrymen; the two infantry brigades could not find the rested and fresh troops to relieve those in need of respite. Consequently, instead of being employed as the motorised unit of an armoured brigade, for which it had been specially trained, 22 (Motor) Battalion went into the line alongside the infantry units.

This handicap was reduced in the winter of 1944–45 by changing each of the two infantry brigades from three to four battalions, which was accomplished by converting Divisional Cavalry and 22 (Motor) Battalion to infantry. Before the offensive in the spring of 1945 the infantry strength of the Division was further increased by converting the machine-gun battalion to infantry and forming an extra brigade.

**The Division then had an armoured brigade of three regiments, and three infantry brigades, each of three battalions.**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

# CHAPTER 5 – THE GOTHIC LINE

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## I: A STRATEGIC BLUNDER?

### *I: A Strategic Blunder?*

(i)

ON 15 August 1944, 11 days after the first Allied troops entered the southern suburbs of **Florence** and nine weeks after the cross-Channel invasion of north-west **France**, the Seventh US Army (part American, part French), under General Patch, landed on the French Mediterranean coast; within a month it had driven up the valley of the Rhone and linked up with General Patton's Third US Army. 'There was no development of that period,' General Eisenhower has stated, 'which added more decisively to our advantage or aided us more in accomplishing the final and complete defeat of the German forces than did this secondary attack coming up the Rhone Valley.'<sup>1</sup> But among those who take the very opposite view are Churchill, Alexander, Mark Clark, and a host of military journalists and historians.

**General von Senger und Etterlin**, who commanded *14 Panzer Corps* at the time, says that 'the many setbacks of the Allies in the **Cassino** battles and the frustration of their plan to destroy the German army group after the May breakthrough in many respects prejudiced their designs in Central Europe, even if they anticipated an early victory after **France** had been invaded. The immediate consequence of the delays on the Italian front was that operation "Anvil" started too late. It should have preceded "Overlord" or at least have occurred simultaneously, in which case it would have attracted the German reserves and thus facilitated the main landings in **Normandy**. That indeed is the object of all secondary offensive operations, whether they originate on land or from the sea.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Crusade in Europe*, p.294.

Another German, Rudolf Böhmler, <sup>1</sup> asserts that the invasion of southern **France** ‘accomplished exactly nothing.... Hitler at once withdrew all German forces from south and south-western **France**; and most of the ports <sup>2</sup> in western **France** were already in Allied hands before the Franco-American forces ... had reached Lyons. The German First and Ninth Armies extracted themselves so skilfully that General Patch had little prospect either of surrounding any major formations or of exercising any influence at all on the operations in northern **France** or **Belgium**.’ <sup>3</sup>

‘Whatever value the invasion of Southern **France** may have had as a contribution to the operations in North-western **Europe**,’ wrote General Alexander, ‘its effect on the Italian campaign was disastrous. The Allied Armies in full pursuit of a beaten enemy were called off from the chase, Kesselring was given a breathing space to reorganise his scattered forces and I was left with insufficient strength to break through the barrier of the **Apennines**. My Armies, which had just been built up into a strong, flexible and co-ordinated instrument, inspired by victory and conscious of their own superiority, were reduced once more to the shifts and improvisations which had marked the previous winter and faced again with the problems of overcoming not only the difficulties of the Italian terrain and the stubbornness of the enemy's resistance, but also the lack of manpower on their own side.’ <sup>4</sup>

This argument is supported by **von Senger**: ‘German resistance in the **Bologna** area [where **Fifth Army** attempted to debouch from the northern **Apennines** into the plains] in the winter of 1944/45 could not have been so effective if several Allied divisions had not been withdrawn.’ <sup>5</sup>

**Fifth Army** had been deprived of the French Expeditionary Corps—whose mountain troops ‘were expected to repeat in the **Apennines** their feats in the Aurunci mountains’ <sup>6</sup>—and 6 US Corps, altogether seven of its best divisions, which were inadequately replaced by one American

division (the 92nd Negro) and the 25,000-strong inexperienced **Brazilian Expeditionary Force**.

Had Alexander's armies been capable of breaking through the **Gothic Line** and entering the **Po valley** at this stage, the gains to the Allies might have been of inestimable value: possession of the

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<sup>1</sup> Colonel Böhmler was a paratroop officer who fought in **Holland, Crete, Sicily and Italy**, and who was responsible for the defence of the monastery during the battle of Montecassino.

<sup>2</sup> The need of an additional port for introducing American divisions into **France** had clinched the argument in favour of the invasion of southern **France**.

<sup>3</sup> *Monte Cassino: A German View*, p. 295.

<sup>4</sup> *The Allied Armies in Italy*, p.2930.

<sup>5</sup> *Neither Fear Nor Hope*, p. 323.

<sup>6</sup> *The Allied Armies in Italy*, p. 2930.

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**Po valley** would have facilitated the strategic bombing of the war industries which had been transferred to eastern **Germany**; it is not inconceivable that a thrust through the **Ljubljana** gap in **Yugoslavia** might have opened the way for an advance to **Austria** or **Hungary** and the Danube valley, which would have deprived the enemy of the raw materials from south-east **Europe** vital to his war effort. Success in such a venture, however, would have depended on the capacity of the Allied armies to penetrate what Churchill had given the misnomer of the 'soft underbelly' of **Europe**, actually a 'hard-shelled back' <sup>1</sup> of rugged country not very suitable for armoured warfare.

The opinion that an Anglo-American drive into south-east **Europe** might have prevented some countries from falling into the Russian sphere of influence has been expressed by General Clark, who succeeded Alexander as commander of the Allied Armies in **Italy** (redesignated **Fifteenth Army Group**) in December 1944 and later was Military Governor of **Austria**. He claims that 'a campaign that might have changed the whole history of relations between the Western world and Soviet **Russia** was permitted to fade away, not into nothing, but into much less than it could have been. ... the weakening of the campaign in **Italy** in order to invade southern **France** instead of pushing on into the **Balkans** was one of the outstanding political mistakes of the war.... I am firmly convinced that the French forces alone, with seven divisions available, could have captured Marseilles, protected Eisenhower's southern flank, and advanced up the Rhone Valley to join hands with the main **OVERLORD** forces. The VI American corps, with its three divisions, could then have remained in **Italy**. The impetus of the Allied advance in **Italy** would thus not have been lost and we would have advanced into the **Balkans**.... I later came to understand, in **Austria**, the tremendous advantages that we had lost by our failure to press on into the **Balkans**.... Had we been there before the Red Army, not only would the collapse of **Germany** have come sooner, but the influence of Soviet **Russia** would have been drastically reduced.' <sup>2</sup>

Southern **France**, says Böhmler (his vision enhanced by hindsight), was 'an area that Hitler could afford to evacuate without undue loss from either the military or the economic point of view.... he was far readier to strengthen the front in **Italy** than to put up a fight for the possession of Provence and south-western **France**.... Anvil was an unmistakable indication of Allied intentions. Hitler knew that he need not worry any more about **Italy**

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Matloff, *The Anvil Decision: Crossroads of Strategy*, in *Command Decisions*, p. 398.

and the **Balkans**.... Anvil not only made nonsense of the whole Italian campaign, but also threw the whole Allied strategy in western **Europe** out of gear; and both these repercussions were to have tragic consequences for **Europe**. They presented Hitler with a chance to stabilize the Western Front and to sacrifice his last strategic reserves in his ill-fated Ardennes offensive—those reserves which, a little later, would have been able to hold up the Red flood from the east. And in that case, it would have been Eisenhower and not Zhukov who marched in **Berlin**. Then again, had not Anvil snatched the spear from Alexander's hand, it would most probably have been the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes that would have flown victoriously over the Ballhausplatz in Vienna.’<sup>1</sup>

Thus Böhmler, like Clark and others, presumes that an Allied offensive beyond the Italian frontier would have succeeded. Nevertheless the Allied armies might have been checked—as they had been in the peninsula south of **Rome**—and it might have become necessary to divert part of the Allied effort from north-west **Europe**. ‘That the Allies were not diverted from the northern campaign may even have been England's salvation. For otherwise, Hitler might eventually have pulverized **Britain** with V-2 projectiles from launching platforms in the Low Countries.’<sup>2</sup>

(ii)

The Anglo-American decision to invade southern **France** had been influenced by the Soviet ally: it had grown out of the discussions between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at the **Cairo- Teheran** conferences of November–December 1943. Until that time no firm agreement had been reached by the Big Three on how, when and where to defeat **Germany**. The British had wanted to strike at German-occupied **Europe** from the edges of the Continent, especially from the **Mediterranean** theatre, and to launch a cross- Channel invasion when

the enemy already had begun to collapse. This policy of attrition and opportunism was opposed by the Americans, who ‘wanted to concentrate forces early at a selected time and place to meet the main body of the enemy head on and defeat it decisively.’ The Russians ‘wanted a second front, they wanted it soon, and they wanted it in the West. Each Anglo-American postponement of this second front added fuel to the fire.’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Monte Cassino: A German View*, p.297.

<sup>2</sup> *The Anvil Decision*, p. 398.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385.

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The stand taken by Stalin at **Teheran** finally fixed Anglo- American strategy: he promised that the Soviet Union would intervene in the war against **Japan** as soon as **Germany** was defeated; he declared that **OVERLORD** (the cross-Channel invasion, the opening of the Second Front) should be the ‘basic’ operation for 1944, and he favoured the attack on southern **France**, in support of **OVERLORD**, above all other undertakings in the **Mediterranean**. Despite the British Prime Minister's eloquence and persuasiveness, therefore, the Americans gained the decision they had desired. Nevertheless Churchill opposed the **ANVIL** operation (which became known by another codename, **DRAGOON**) until a few days before the launching of the invasion. He pleaded with Roosevelt: ‘Our first wish is to help General Eisenhower in the most speedy and effective manner. But we do not think this necessarily involves the complete ruin of all our great affairs in the **Mediterranean**, and we take it hard that this should be demanded of us....’<sup>1</sup>

The President's reply affirmed that he would not deviate from the strategy proposed at **Teheran**: ‘The exploitation of “Overlord”, our victorious advances in **Italy**, an early assault on Southern **France**, combined with the Soviet drives to the west—all as envisaged at **Teheran**—will most surely serve to realise our object— the unconditional

surrender of **Germany**.... I am mindful of our agreement with Stalin as to an operation against the south of **France**, and his frequently expressed views favouring such an operation and classifying all others in the **Mediterranean** as of lesser importance to the principal objectives of the European campaign.... I cannot agree to the employment of **United States** troops against **Istria** and into the **Balkans**, nor can I see the French agreeing to such use of French troops.... For purely political considerations over here, I should never survive even a slight setback in “Overlord” if it were known that fairly large forces had been diverted to the **Balkans**.’ <sup>2</sup>

Churchill has denied that anybody ‘involved in these discussions had ever thought of moving armies *into the Balkans*; but **Istria** and **Trieste** were strategic and political positions, which, as he [Roosevelt] saw very clearly, might exercise profound and widespread reactions, especially after the Russian advances.... On military grounds he [Stalin] might have been greatly interested in the eastward movement of Alexander's army, which, without entering the **Balkans**, would profoundly effect all the forces there, and ... might produce the most far-reaching results. On a  
long-

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<sup>1</sup> *The Second World War*, Vol. VI, *Triumph and Tragedy*, pp. 55–6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 662–4.

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term

political view he might prefer that the British and Americans should do their share in **France** in the very hard fighting that was to come, and that East, Middle and Southern Europe should fall naturally into his control.’ <sup>1</sup> Churchill apparently had not seriously considered ‘the question that so frightened the U.S. staff—the ultimate costs and requirements of an operation in the **Balkans**.... the **Balkan** question was

never argued out in full and frank military or political terms during World War II.’<sup>2</sup>

Should Roosevelt have committed troops to a campaign in the **Balkans**—or south-east **Europe**—as well as in **France** and **Italy**, he most likely would have jeopardised his chances of re-election as President in November that year. The much-publicised Second Front and the liberation of **France**—which had helped the American colonies in the war for independence—were acceptable even to those who thought the war against **Japan** should have priority over the struggle for **Europe**, but Roosevelt judged that the American people would react differently to the diverting of United States forces to the **Balkans** or elsewhere in south-east **Europe**. There was some suspicion of British intentions in the **Balkans**, and public opinion had not yet been awakened to the Communist threat in eastern **Europe**.

The decision to invade southern **France** has often been described as one of the worst blunders of the Second World War. The post-war critics of American strategy presume that had the Allies entered south-east **Europe** the Russians would have been held in check. But it is by no means certain that they could have achieved this result; instead they might have become so involved in this region that they would have had to divert forces from the western front, which might have permitted the Russians to advance farther into **Germany**, perhaps all the way to the Channel. Had the western Allies entered the **Balkans** in the face of the advancing Red Army, ‘there is also no assurance that new embroilments might not have been begun then and there as the Americans feared. With the traditional balance of power upset, Great Britain growing weaker, the Russians intent on pushing their strategic frontiers westward, and the **United States** determined to leave **Europe** soon, more drastic measures than the temporary diversion of some Western military power—largely U.S. power at that—would seem to have been required to check the Russians and assure the peace of **Europe**.’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Triumph and Tragedy*, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> *The Anvil Decision*, p. 398.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 400.

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(iii)

When the decision to invade southern **France** extinguished British hopes of an advance beyond the northern frontier of **Italy**, the need for an assault on the **Gothic Line** lost its urgency. An argument put forward by Mr Churchill in 1943 was still valid: because of the anticipated requirements of **OVERLORD** he had proposed an alternative to advancing beyond the narrow part of the Italian peninsula: 'I should like it to be considered whether we should not, when we come up against the main German positions, construct a strong fortified line of our own, properly sited in depth. Italian labour could be used on a large scale for this purpose. Italian troops could naturally take part in defending the line. Thus, by spring, we should be able in this theatre either to make an offensive if the enemy were weak, and anyhow to threaten one, or on the other hand stand on the defensive, using our air power, which will in the meantime have been built up, from behind our fortified line and divert a portion of our troops for action elsewhere either to the West or to the East.' <sup>1</sup>

If this policy had been adopted in the summer of 1944, most likely the Germans would have retained large bodies of troops in northern **Italy** because Hitler would not have allowed a withdrawal across the plains of **Lombardy** to the Alps. 'But the directors of Allied strategy fell between two stools.' <sup>2</sup> They neither agreed to an offensive into the **Balkans** (or south-east **Europe**) nor called a halt in front of the **Gothic Line**; instead they ordered Alexander, with weakened forces, to advance over the northern **Apennines** and close to the line of the River Po, where he was to secure the area from **Ravenna** on the Adriatic coast through **Bologna** and **Modena** to the Ligurian coast north of **Leghorn**; and should the situation then permit, he was to cross the Po to the line **Padua- Verona-**

**Brescia** at the northern edge of the plain. It was hoped that these advances, together with the invasion of southern **France**, would cause the enemy to withdraw from north-west **Italy** and thus make an offensive in that direction unnecessary.

While it cannot be denied that the Italian campaign, by achieving its object of containing 'the maximum number of German forces' in the peninsula, contributed to the general victory in **Europe**, it can be argued that the same result might have been accomplished more economically had Allied strategy taken a different course.

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<sup>1</sup> Record of Proceedings, 'Quadrant', Annex to Minutes of Meeting, 9 September 1943, quoted in *The Canadians in Italy*, p. 680. Churchill made this statement at a White House meeting following the 'Quadrant' Conference at **Quebec**.

<sup>2</sup> *The Canadians in Italy*, p.680.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## II: ON THE BANKS OF THE ARNO

### *II: On the Banks of the Arno*

(i)

When the South Africans and New Zealanders entered the triangular portion of **Florence** south of the **Arno** on 4 August, the enemy had retreated to the Heinrich Mountain Line, which passed through the northern outskirts of the city, but had left outposts on the north bank of the **Arno**. He intended to continue holding the **Heinrich Line** along the river on each side of **Florence**, even if the Allies broke into the Heinrich Mountain Line north-west of the city, where he expected a thrust to be made and planned to seal off a penetration.

The Allies, who had proclaimed their desire to avoid fighting in **Florence**, seem to have hoped that the Germans would evacuate the city as soon as 13 Corps threatened to cross the **Arno** and envelop it. The corps was prepared to attempt a bridgehead up to the time that its troops reached the southern suburbs. The New Zealand Division's intended role was to advance on the west of the city: 5 Brigade group was to occupy a bridgehead as far as the **Mugnone stream**, which passed through the northern part of the city. The 1st Canadian Division was then to take over this sector and the New Zealand Division was to sidestep westward to 8 Indian Division's sector to screen the deployment and preparations of 2 US Corps for an attack over the river.

The first part of this plan depended on a reasonably easy crossing of the river against little German resistance. At 6 p.m. on 4 August Brigadier Pleasants reported to **General Freyberg** on 5 Brigade's prospects: 'I do not think it is on tonight. The time factor is against me. If we could have [crossed] it might have had a surprise value. He has spandaus on top of the houses in the town.' The General replied: 'It is not on unless he is out of the town. I would not shoot at the town.' Later

he told the corps commander that the plan for that night 'would not be on as it is really an operation to get across. They will try with patrols.... Sappers say doing a low level crossing will be difficult and the other [way] is a 200 feet span [bridge]. Canadians will take over the situation as it is....'<sup>1</sup>

The immediate occupation of **Florence** would have brought the Allies an excellent propaganda victory, which would have been good for the morale of their troops and the Italian civilians; it also would have denied the enemy control of the system of roads that converged on the city and thus hindered his moving troops and stores for the Heinrich Mountain Line; and it would have saved

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

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much suffering among the Florentines, who lived most wretchedly while besieged between the two armies.

The Allied troops in the **Florence** sector had to contend not only with aggressive German patrols day and night, but also with Italian fascists, who wore no recognised military uniform and sniped from the upper storeys of buildings. German artillery and mortar fire inflicted casualties, but no retributory shellfire could be directed against the city. The Germans, unable to cope with the provision of food, water and sanitation for the city's large population, withdrew their rearguards behind the Mugnone on 10 August, and next day patrols from **8 Indian Division** (which had replaced **1 Canadian Division**) penetrated as far as this stream. The engineers made a ford across the **Arno** and opened the **Ponte Vecchio** for light vehicles, which permitted the Allied Military Government to deliver provisions to the Florentines, many of whom had gone without food, water, gas, electricity and sanitary services for several days. German raiding parties, usually with one or two tanks or armoured cars, clashed with the British and Indian troops garrisoning the city.

The 8th Indian Division handed over its commitments in **Florence** to 1 British Division on 16 August, and a day or two later the Germans, again because of their inability to feed the part of the city still in their hands, withdrew to the Heinrich Mountain Line. Meanwhile, in the loop of the **Arno** east of **Florence**, 4 British Division, after a hard fight, drove the enemy across the river, and some 15 miles west of the city 2 NZ Division cleared the south bank in the vicinity of **Empoli**. From **Pontassieve** to its boundary with **Fifth Army** west of **Empoli**, **Eighth Army** then stood on the line of the **Arno**.

(ii)

When the New Zealand Division replaced 8 Indian Division in the **Lastra a Signa – Empoli** sector, its role was to screen the deployment and preparation of 2 US Corps, which proposed to take part in a co-ordinated attack by Eighth and Fifth Armies to force the enemy back to the **Gothic Line**. The New Zealanders were to clear the south bank of the **Arno** before the Americans crossed to secure Monte Albano. Although the Americans did eventually take over this sector, the attack was cancelled because of a change in the Allied armies' plan.

In the **Florence** sector the **Maori Battalion** was relieved by the Loyal Edmonton Regiment and the Divisional Cavalry patrols by Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, and 5 Brigade handed over command to 2 Canadian Brigade on 5 August. As it was unnecessary to hold a brigade in reserve to meet a counter-attack in the **Lastra a Signa – Empoli** sector, all three New Zealand brigades, replacing those of 8 Indian Division, went into the line along the river, 4 Brigade on the right, 6 Brigade in the centre, and 5 Brigade on the left flank facing the German pocket holding **Empoli** and the ground in the fork of the **Arno** and **Elsa** rivers.

The roads in this sector were extremely poor, narrow and dusty, and those near the river could be watched by the enemy. The changeover on 6 and 7 August, therefore, was arranged so that the New Zealand units

went into position and the Indian units came out with the minimum of congestion and observation by the enemy. Prisoners taken in the next few days claimed that the enemy had known or suspected that a relief was taking place and had accepted the opportunity to relieve some of his own front-line troops at the same time. Nevertheless the Germans reported a week later that **Empoli** was being attacked by Indian troops.

Fourth Brigade, with a narrow front, had only 22 (Motor) Battalion forward; 6 Brigade, with a much wider front, placed 26 Battalion on the right, 25 in the centre and 24 on the left; 5 Brigade went into position with 21 Battalion forward on the right, 23 on the left and 28 in reserve. The foremost infantry posts were anything from half a mile to two miles from the **Arno**. The no-man's land on the south bank contained German strongpoints in buildings, as well as many Italians still living in their houses, refugees, partisans, fascists, and sympathisers and agents for both sides.

The commander of a machine-gun platoon attached to 3 Company of 22 Battalion about 3000 yards from the **Arno** near Lastra a **Signa** says his men shared with an infantry platoon, an artillery observation post, and the Italians who were still in residence, a house combined with a church on the highest part and another house on the reverse slope of the nearest range of hills to the river. 'The accommodation is somewhat cramped.... However, any roof is welcome as the weather is showery at present. We are combining our usual role with that of infantry posts as a protection to the hill against possible patrols....

'We have a wonderful panorama from our positions, of the **Arno** plains and the mountains of the Gothic line beyond. The Arno runs through olive groves and cultivated ground to where it disappears into the sprawling suburbs of **Florence** on our extreme right. On the far side of the plain Prato is visible guarding the mouth of one of the passes through which runs a main road to **Bologna**. Straight out in front, across the river from Lastra, is **Signa**, still held by Jerry....

'Most of the roads round here run along the tops of a series of

parallel ridges and large stretches are under observation.... Consequently only jeeps can use the road in daylight and even they have to idle along to avoid raising dust. We had done about a mile down the exposed part when Jerry started putting down a stonk about 500x <sup>1</sup> short of the road.... half a minute later there was a screech and he dropped a clutch of three squarely over us....' Miraculously unscathed, the men in the jeep forgot about the dust 'and put the accelerator down through the floor....'

Later the same machine-gunners found themselves in 'quite the most luxurious place we have ever scored so far in **Italy**, being a modern three-storeyed building, with eight or nine rooms on each floor. The owner is in England and part of it is occupied by Italians but we have plenty of room.... Someone leaning too heavily on a panel this afternoon accidentally exposed a secret cache which on being investigated yielded two large stone jars of about 3-gallon capacity, each full of preserved eggs, about twelve pounds of fine white sugar and a dozen or so bottles of assorted vermouth, spurmanti, vino santo and a peach liqueur....' <sup>2</sup>

*(iii)*

The enemy strongly held the town of **Empoli**; farther west, where the Americans of **Fifth Army** had not advanced much beyond Route 67, he still controlled the ground bounded by the **Arno**, the Elsa and this highway. As 5 Brigade had been given too large a sector to hold comfortably while attacking **Empoli**, a group called Steeleforce, <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> x: yards.

<sup>2</sup> Diary, B. C. H. Moss.

<sup>3</sup> Steeleforce comprised HQ 27 (MG) Bn, 4 MG Coy, C (later B) Coy 25 Bn, a troop of C Sqn 19 Regt, a troop of 39 Hy Mor Bty, a detachment of **8 Fd Coy**, and two companies ('infantry') of men of **7 A-Tk Regt** in an infantry role. The three brigades then consisted of the following units:

**4 Armd Bde: 22 (Mot) Bn, 18 Armd Regt, B Sqn Div Cav, 4 Fd Regt, detachments of 31 and 34 A-Tk Btys, half-battery of 39 Hy Mor Bty, 41 Lt AA Bty, 3 MG Coy, 6 Fd Coy, A Coy 4 Fd Amb, and (in reserve) 20 Armd Regt.**

**5 Inf Bde: 21 Bn, 23 Bn, 28 Bn, 26 Bn, 19 Armd Regt (less C Sqn), C Sqn Div Cav, 5 Fd Regt, 32 A-Tk Bty, L Tp 39 Hy Mor Bty, 42 Lt AA Bty, 1 MG Coy, 7 Fd Coy, and B Coy 5 Fd Amb.**

**6 Inf Bde: 24 Bn, 25 Bn (less one company), Steeleforce, A Sqn Div Cav, C Sqn 19 Armd Regt, 6 Fd Regt, 33 A-Tk Bty, troop 39 Hy Mor Bty, 43 Lt AA Bty, 2 MG Coy, 8 Fd Coy, and A Coy 6 Fd Amb.**

**(The 17-pounders of 7 A-Tk Regt stayed in the line but the six-pounder troops were withdrawn and turned into 'infantry'. The two M10 troops were sent back to the rear for intensive training still considered necessary after their performance during the advance to Florence.)**

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**by Lieutenant-Colonel Steele,<sup>1</sup> relieved 26 Battalion under 6 Brigade's command, which allowed the 26th to go into position between 21 and 23 Battalions in 5 Brigade's sector on the night of 9–10 August. Two companies of 23 Battalion, relieved by the 26th, moved over to the western flank near Osteria.**

**During the Division's stay in this sector 5 Brigade's occupation of the town of Empoli and the country to the west as far as the Elsa River brought most of the fighting; 4 and 6 Brigades were able to edge most of the enemy across to the north bank of the Arno by patrolling and by stepping up their forward posts until they were in control of the south bank.**

**Some patrols accompanied American engineer parties whose task was to reconnoitre the river and its approaches for the proposed crossing. The small town of Montelupo was found deserted and was occupied by a company from 25 Battalion. The enemy had mined many of the roads and tracks and had felled trees across some of them; he also had left cunningly designed booby traps in buildings. Clashes between**

**New Zealand and German patrols caused casualties on both sides. Strict control had to be exercised over the many civilians moving about the countryside, and a curfew imposed. Italians reported that German patrols wore civilian clothes to pass over the river in greater safety.**

**An advance to the river was planned to start on the night of 10–11 August. Fourth and 6th Brigades were scarcely involved; 5 Brigade was to clear the ground between **Empoli** and the Elsa River, an operation which would outflank the town and, it was hoped, induce the enemy to withdraw. The chief obstacle, apart from the enemy himself, was the railway embankment carrying the main line to the west. The only crossing places were on the **Osteria- Santa Maria** and the **Osteria- Marcignana** roads, and both would need attention from the engineers before tanks could use them.**

**On the right of a north-south irrigation ditch about a quarter of a mile west of **Empoli** 26 Battalion advanced northward with two companies on a narrow front. Both soon ran into fire from machine-gun posts along the railway embankment. On the right C Company overcame this opposition, crossed the embankment and occupied its objective, the village of **Santa Maria**, about half a mile west of **Empoli**. The neighbouring village of **Empoli Vecchio** was taken by a platoon of B Company under C's command. On the left D Company came up against more determined resistance**



New Zealand signalmen near Castiglione during 6 Infantry Brigade's attack on Monte Lignano

**New Zealand signalmen near [Castiglione](#) during 6 Infantry Brigade's attack on [Monte Lignano](#)**

New Zealand infantrymen return to their transport after driving the Germans off the high ground around Monte Lignano



**New Zealand infantrymen return to their transport after driving the Germans off the high ground around [Monte Lignano](#)**



The first Tiger tank knocked out by New Zealand tanks was claimed by 18 Armoured Regiment during 5 Brigade's attacks on Villa Bonazza and Villa Strada in the Pesa valley

**The first Tiger tank knocked out by New Zealand tanks was claimed by 18 Armoured Regiment during 5 Brigade's attacks on Villa Bonazza and Villa Strada in the Pesa valley**

Headquarters 23 Battalion in temporary occupation of a palatial villa during the advance to Florence



**Headquarters 23 Battalion in temporary occupation of a palatial villa during the advance to Florence**



A New Zealand 25-pounder gun crossing the Pesa River

**A New Zealand 25-pounder gun crossing the Pesa River**

A New Zealand 'tank buster' (M10) passing through San Casciano shortly after the enemy had withdrawn from this keypoint in his defences south of Florence



**A New Zealand 'tank buster' (M10) passing through San Casciano shortly after the enemy had withdrawn from this keypoint in his defences south of Florence**



The Pian dei Cerri hills rise above the village of Cerbaia, on the bank of the Pesa River. Half-way up the ridge to the left is the village of San Michele

**The Pian dei Cerri hills rise above the village of Cerbaia, on the bank of the Pesa River. Half-way up the ridge to the left is the village of San Michele**

The front of the church in San Michele, where D Company of 24 Battalion withstood several counter-attacks



**The front of the church in San Michele, where D Company of 24 Battalion withstood several counter-attacks**



The Tiger tank captured intact by 22 Battalion at La Romola stands alongside one of 4 Armoured Brigade's comparatively small Sherman tanks

**The Tiger tank captured intact by 22 Battalion at La Romola stands alongside one of 4 Armoured Brigade's comparatively small Sherman tanks**

A medium gun of the Royal Artillery in support of the New Zealand Division during the advance to Florence



**A medium gun of the Royal Artillery in support of the New Zealand Division during the advance to Florence**



Colonel B. Barrington is introduced to King George VI by General Leese during the King's visit to the New Zealand sector south of Florence. Brigadier L. M. Inglis is on the other side of the car

**Colonel B. Barrington is introduced to King George VI by General Leese during the King's visit to the New Zealand sector south of Florence. Brigadier L. M. Inglis is on the other side of the car**

Florence remained virtually in no-man's land for some time after Eighth Army reached the south bank of the Arno River



**Florence remained virtually in no-man's land for some time after Eighth Army reached the south bank of the Arno River**



One of 20 Armoured Regiment's tanks which accompanied the first New Zealanders into Florence

**One of 20 Armoured Regiment's tanks which accompanied the first New Zealanders into Florence**

Italian partisans greet the Allied troops as they enter a Florence suburb south of the Arno



**Italian partisans greet the Allied troops as they enter a Florence suburb south of the Arno**



General Freyberg with Mr Churchill and General Alexander shortly after the capture of Florence

**General Freyberg with Mr Churchill and General Alexander shortly after the capture of Florence**

'It is now impossible to know when going along the roads whether a man is an Italian or a New Zealander,' General Freyberg complained at the end of the Florence campaign



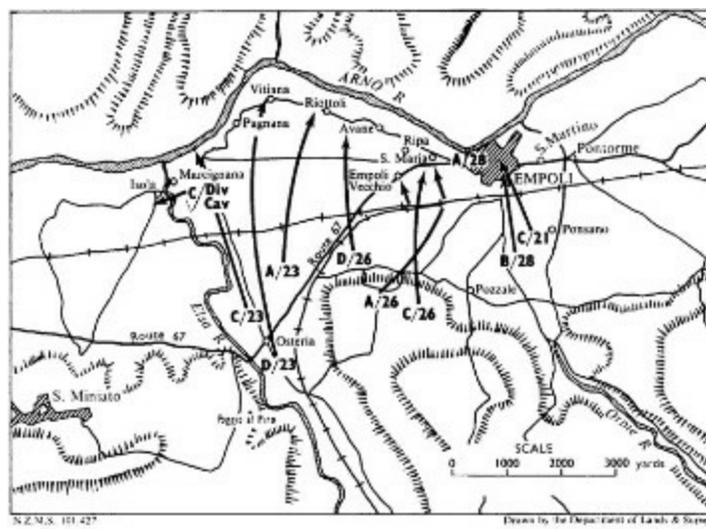
**'It is now impossible to know when going along the roads whether a man is an Italian or a New Zealander,' General Freyberg complained at the end of the Florence campaign**

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col D. G. Steele, OBE, m.i.d.; Rotorua; born Wellington, 22 Mar 1912; farmer; OC A (NZ) Sqn LRDG 1941-42; CO 22 (Mot) Bn Apr-May 1944; 27 (MG) Bn May- Nov 1944.**

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**from mortars and machine guns sited to cover the railway crossing on the Osteria – Santa Maria road. These posts were not sub-**



THE EMPOLI SECTOR, 10-13 AUGUST 1944

THE EMPOLI SECTOR, 10-13 AUGUST 1944

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until a number of Germans had been killed and six taken prisoner. D Company then advanced rapidly northward until the leading men reached the objective, the village of **Avane**, about a mile along the road from **Empoli**. When D Company occupied the western end of the village, the enemy fell back into houses on the east and stubbornly resisted all attempts to drive him out. The New Zealanders waited for tank and artillery support.

Damage to the road from **Osteria** and mines slowed the progress of the tanks (two troops of A Squadron, 19 Regiment). By 4.15 a.m. the sappers with a bulldozer had cleared the road as far as the railway and levelled a demolition at the crossing, but the Shermans had gone only 200 yards beyond this when they came to a large demolition thickly sown with mines. As the clearing of a way past this obstruction would take several hours and it was nearly daybreak, Brigade Headquarters ordered some of the tanks supporting 23 Battalion to try to cross the front to help the infantry at **Avane**.

With a wider sector to cover, 23 Battalion advanced with three companies forward. A and D Companies, on the right and in the centre respectively, reached their objectives in a bend of the **Arno** practically unhampered by the enemy. Well before daybreak A was in the village of

**Riottoli** and **D** in **Vitiana** and **Pagnana**. **C** Company, on the left, moving up the road to **Marcignana**, was followed by **C** Squadron of Divisional Cavalry (with a platoon of **B** Company attached), two troops of **A** Squadron, **19** Regiment, and the support weapons. There was a demolition south of the railway crossing, where the embankment had been blown and mined, and another demolition on the other side. As the infantry mounted the embankment they came under machine-gun fire from a nearby house. The tanks brought their guns to bear on the house while the infantry assaulted it. The enemy gave in quickly, yielding five prisoners, and **C** Company continued without further opposition to the turn-off to **Marcignana**, where its men drove back another enemy post.

By dawn **C** Company was in **Marcignana** and in control of the road to a demolished bridge on the **Arno**. The company was joined by **C** Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, which had much difficulty in negotiating the narrow lanes but eventually found a suitable ford over the **Elsa** River.

The sappers cleared the demolitions at the railway crossing on the road to **Marcignana**, and one troop of tanks worked its way to the vicinity of **Pagnana**, while the other troop turned eastward along the road leading to **Empoli** with the intention of joining **A** Company of **23** Battalion at **Riottoli**. In response to the request for tank support at **Avane**, this troop continued past **Riottoli**, but was halted by a large demolition.

An unexpected action had occurred during the night when **A** Company, **26** Battalion, moved up in rear of **C** to guard against a counter-attack from **Empoli**. A platoon sent to take a position on the railway embankment encountered an enemy party marching from the direction of **Empoli**. A brisk skirmish ended when other men from **A** Company came to assist. Seven of the enemy were captured and the rest driven off. The prisoners revealed that their party, about **60** strong, was to have taken reliefs and supplies to posts along the railway.

**Fifth** Brigade now held positions on three sides of **Empoli**, and hoped

that the enemy would pull out of his own accord. A patrol from A Company, 26 Battalion, approached the town from the west but was forced back by machine-gun fire. A small patrol from B Company, 28 Battalion, entered the town from the east, but the enemy appeared in its rear and cut off retreat, so it continued on through the town to C Company, 26 Battalion, at Santa Maria. Another patrol from A Company, 26 Battalion, worked its way along the railway and entered the town by the station, on the south side; it proceeded unmolested as far as the main square, but came under fire when it approached some men in civilian clothes, so took cover and also found its way out to Santa Maria.

B Company, 28 Battalion, supported by artillery fire, entered Empoli from the south in the evening of the 11th, and broke into groups to deal with small parties of the enemy. C Company, 21 Battalion (which was east of the town) was sent to reinforce the Maoris, some of whom had reached houses overlooking the river, and sappers began to clear a route for tanks of B Squadron, 19 Regiment, two troops of which arrived before dawn. The enemy shelled and machine-gunned the town and its approaches at daybreak, and several clashes occurred when daylight disclosed the locations of opposing troops. Many German dead were found unburied in the streets and houses. One gruesome discovery was four bodies, believed to be of partisans, with their heads severed and the skin flayed from the soles of their feet.

While Empoli was being cleared on the night of 11–12 August, D Company of 26 Battalion waited for tanks to get through to help it clear the eastern part of Avane. Apparently the company was apprehensive of a counter-attack, for it called upon the artillery for numerous defensive-fire tasks, but when patrols set out to investigate, the enemy had gone. The engineers cleared the road from Osteria as far as Empoli Vecchio, but when they tried to work along the road from Santa Maria towards Empoli they came under fire from buildings to the north. After a short concentration on these buildings by the artillery and tanks, a platoon from C Company set out to clear them, but met such determined resistance that it had to call off the attack.

Except on the immediate west of **Empoli**, 5 Brigade's front was comparatively quiet by the evening of the 12th. A, C and D Companies of **28 Battalion** were brought up to relieve 21 Battalion in the town and in some small villages to the east of it. An assault on the strongpoint between **Empoli** and **Santa Maria** was delayed while attempts were made to get tanks of A Squadron, 19 Regiment, over the irrigation ditch. This proved too much of an obstacle in the dark, and while the tanks were still west of the ditch, A Company of 26 Battalion attacked with two platoons supported by the artillery. The platoon on the right ran into fire from machine-gun posts and lost two men killed and 11 wounded. Meanwhile the tanks were guided over the ditch and fired on the buildings. The other platoon closed in, only to find that the enemy had gone, abandoning his weapons and equipment. As the light improved, however, fire came from positions farther east, apparently from men in civilian clothes.

Brigadier Pleasants ordered the Maoris in **Empoli** to wipe out this opposition. In the afternoon of the 13th A Company, 28 Battalion, with sappers and five tanks of B Squadron, 19 Regiment, in support, advanced from the vicinity of the railway station along the western side of the town. They encountered enemy posts where the **Santa Maria** road entered the town, and these the tanks shot up at point-blank range. About 25 of the enemy were killed and five surrendered. The searching of buildings absorbed so many men that a platoon was sent from B Company to assist.

That night *spandaus* and *nebelwerfers* fired continuously from the north bank, probably to cover the retreat of any troops who had been left south of the river. By daybreak on the 14th all organised resistance on the south bank had ceased.

While **Empoli** was being occupied, patrols of C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, reconnoitred west of the Elsa River, but were restricted in their movement by shelling from American artillery. On the morning of the 13th contact was made with a patrol from 91 US Division who stated

that the village of **Isola** was to be occupied that evening. Before the American troops moved in, **Isola** and the area occupied by C Company of 23 Battalion were showered by propaganda leaflets fired from **2 US Corps** guns, which also distributed them on **4 Field Regiment's** area farther east next day.

*(iv)*

As soon as the south bank of the **Arno** was under Allied control and the Americans' preparations completed, **2 US Corps** was to extend into 13 Corps' sector by taking over from 2 NZ Division. The enemy still had a few posts west of **Lastra a Signa**, but apparently these were considered of little significance after **Empoli** had been occupied. Although it was known by this time that the Americans' projected advance north of the river had been cancelled or postponed, 85 US Division relieved 4 and 6 NZ Brigades on the night of 14–15 August and 5 Brigade the following night. Several German patrols approached during the relief, and one overran an American machine-gun post in a position from which 22 Battalion men were withdrawn.

The New Zealand Division assembled in the **Castellina** area, about 10 miles north of **Siena**, and came under the direct command of **Eighth Army** on 17 August.

## III: MORALE

### *III: Morale*

(i)

The weather was good, the countryside interesting and varied, and the New Zealanders felt that the war was progressing well. Nevertheless **General Freyberg** was displeased. He had come to the conclusion that very strict action would have to be taken against looting and improper dress. 'People were getting more interested in what they were going to get out of the advance than anything else. This struck at the very root of morale. Another thing was hats. It is now impossible to know when going along the roads whether a man is an Italian or a New Zealander.' <sup>1</sup>

When war passed through a closely settled and almost feudal region like the Chianti, it was inevitable that works of art should be destroyed. The Italians were permitted by the Germans to remove many of the treasures of **Florence** to isolated villas outside the city, and the owners of the villas themselves often possessed collections of great value. Where these villas escaped the ravages of war the responsible Allied authorities took charge of their contents for safe keeping. Undoubtedly, however, many items found their way into the hands of New Zealand (and other) troops, some to be damaged, lost, or sold to civilians, others to be kept with care and sent or taken home.

Officers were as culpable as other ranks, if not more so, possibly because they had a greater appreciation of values and better opportunity of getting parcels past the censor. But some troops had no compunction in blowing open a bank safe (as happened in San Casciano), looting the art treasures of a large villa, freely helping themselves to the contents of a wine cellar, or to a pig or some fowls from a small homestead. Some units looted systematically, justifying their actions by the excuse of the communal good; their acquisitions then included what might be used by

the unit, such as stocks of wine, china, cutlery, musical instruments, clothing, and even articles which could be sold to bolster regimental funds. Many of the officers' messes were soon equipped with rare and valuable china and cutlery.

The other cause of concern was the almost irresistible urge of some men to add variety to their clothing, a trend which had first manifested itself in North Africa. During the advance to **Florence** they took to civilian clothes, probably as a release from the dull sameness of army uniform, or perhaps because civilian life seemed closer than for some years. Men could be seen carrying out their duties, eating, resting or sightseeing (possibly with an eye to looting) in oddly assorted garments. The Maoris, with their innate sense of humour and greater lack of self-consciousness, were perhaps the worst offenders. For example, when a jeep took a meal to a company close to the banks of the **Arno** and only a few hundred yards from the enemy, one of the cooks wore a black bell-topper and his assistant a light brown bowler hat; in the queue several men

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary, 5 Aug 1944.

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wore Borsalino or ordinary felt hats of different shades; others kept the hot sun from their faces with women's straw hats, some of them embellished with fruit and flower motifs; one man was clad in a bright pink shirt and the tie of an exclusive **London** club. The food was served in receptacles ranging from standard army dixies to plates with embossed ducal arms and borders of cherubs.

This urge to dress with distinction was not confined to the Maoris. A pakeha tank crew brewing tea behind their Sherman included a trooper wearing a beautiful fawn bowler; another (rather unnecessarily in the heat) had a well-cut black overcoat with wide astrakhan collar negligently thrown around his shoulders; they were eating from a set of china plates which probably would have fetched about a year's army pay in a peacetime antique shop.

In the villages and the suburbs of **Florence** shellfire and demolitions had scattered goods from deserted shops and houses, and men picked up what took their fancy. **Tavarnelle** yielded a shop of piano accordions which attracted a procession of Maori and pakeha musicians or would-be musicians. These cumbersome instruments were carried through the Division's subsequent advance; some were discarded, others sold, but for a long time there was a background of tremolo wheezings at convivial gatherings. A few accordions eventually reached New Zealand.

Most of the men just took what appeared deserted and unwanted-goods spilled from demolished buildings where they soon would have been ruined by the weather and the passage of the army. Nevertheless a few keen professional looters searched for easily transportable articles, such as jewellery and ornaments, or cut pictures from their frames, with the thought of how much they could get for them in **Rome** or back home. Among this group were some senior officers who should have set a better example. The knowledge among the other ranks that their officers were trafficking in loot made the enforcement of regulations on this practice almost impossible.

*(ii)*

The General spoke about discipline at a conference of brigade staffs and the heads of divisional services on 8 August. He said an analysis showed that about three-quarters of the Division's casualties were from shell or mortar fire, and the total casualties in the latest operations were one-fifth of the force exposed to the enemy. 'The shellfire was not heavy. If the German battle discipline was the same as ours their forces under our shellfire would have been annihilated. There seems to be a slackness of leading and a slackness of battle discipline.'<sup>1</sup> A definite battle routine in the occupying of a position should give cover from shell and mortar fire. 'You don't mess about in the open.... I cannot help but think that casualties are due to lack of experience of junior leaders and the absence of battle drill. When you see a force going forward you see it

straggling and not under command. You don't see any proper battle formation and I don't think in a lot of cases that the men are properly under control.' The General, however, qualified these strictures by saying 'we have taken every objective and the men have fought magnificently. What I am worried about is the large number of casualties we have had in the last operation from shellfire.' <sup>2</sup>

He then spoke about dress and drink. He had 'a great deal of evidence' against units which made him certain that battalion, company and platoon commanders were 'not doing their job. Isolated instances are funny but they are far too frequent now and they are getting the Division a very bad name.... There are dozens of cases of vehicles moving all over the country in search of either loot or drink.... I take a very serious view of it.... I want you to get this question of drink, this question of pillage, this question of dress under control. If you explain to the men the very bad impression that we are giving to South Africans, Canadians and British, I am sure they will realize it must be taken in hand.' <sup>3</sup>

**Divisional Headquarters** issued over **General Freyberg's** signature a very strict memorandum on discipline, which quoted cases of misbehaviour with wine, women and loot, and threatened that a charge of neglect of duty might be brought against the officer or NCO who had authority over the offender. A tightening up of discipline reached down through the units. The Maori Battalion, for example, drew attention in routine orders to the high alcoholic content of Italian wine and the restriction on the carriage of liquor in army vehicles, and forbade the wearing of unauthorised headgear at all times, the wearing of any item of clothing not part of the uniform, and the wearing of tan boots or shoes of any colour by other ranks. The indiscriminate firing of arms was to cease. All men were to get rid of any loot they possessed, but 'requisites, furniture, such as radios, or tables or chairs which in the sincere opinion of the COMPANY COMMANDER (and no one else) would be of worth or value to the COY as a whole may be retained.' <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> War diary, 28 (Maori) Bn.

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*(iii)*

The decision that other ranks could not stay in **Rome** overnight was causing so much dissatisfaction that **Divisional Headquarters** issued an apology and explained that this decision had been taken on the level of the President of the **USA** and the Prime Minister of Great Britain. The GOC had made representations to have this decision altered so that other ranks could stay overnight at the New Zealand Forces Club. It was understood that the reason for the restriction was diplomatic, as well as the difficulty in finding suitable accommodation in **Rome** for all members of the Allied forces in **Italy**. Complications might arise if permission was granted to New Zealanders and not to British, American, Canadian, South African, Indian and Polish troops.

Two officers who shared a double bedroom and a bathroom at the Quirinale Hotel agreed that **General Freyberg** 'must have done a smart piece of work in securing it as an exclusive New Zealand Club.... It was the most palatial place we had ever stayed in.... The main lounge downstairs is circular, with a domed glass roof supported by marble pillars, and luxurious furniture. A special stage is occupied at lunch and dinner times by a first rate Italian orchestra.... It is a wonderful atmosphere to eat a meal in.... There are three spacious dining rooms, a wine bar, hairdresser's shop, canteen, tea garden and many small services such as parcel-wrapping, guides to the city, information, etc.

'Our four day stay including board and meals cost us 650 lire or

32/6. Morning and afternoon tea with cakes was provided free and NZ icecream could be bought for 5 lire a carton. Every morning and afternoon the club arranged conducted tours to places of interest in the city. Twenty men in a 3-tonner with a genuine Italian guide constituted each party, and each tour would be to a couple of places—the Pantheon and St. Peters or the Sistine Chapel and Raphael's art gallery or perhaps the Castel San Angelo and the Foro d'Italia....' <sup>1</sup>

New Zealanders on six-day leave who could not stop overnight in **Rome** could stay at an **Eighth Army** rest camp seven miles outside the city. If they were too late to catch the last bus they would have to walk this distance—or else stay in **Rome** and risk being caught by the military police. A New Zealand rest camp was set up at **Civita Castellana** (on Route 3 north of the city) for four days' leave and an organised day trip to **Rome**. In addition a day-leave scheme was started to take as many as 1100 men to **Siena**, where the South Africans had opened their officers' restaurant, warrant officers' club and other ranks' club to New Zealanders.

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<sup>1</sup> Diary, B. C. H. Moss.

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Some New Zealanders even managed to take what they thought might be their only chance of seeing **Florence**, where 'there was still a little shelling and partisan versus Fascist encounters. While we were there a few shells went overhead to the south side of the river and others crashed into the northwestern approaches.... Almost all the troops in the city were armed and patrols of four or five armed with rifles and tommy-guns were still walking round. Partisans were scattered over the city but though ready to go into action seemed to be going about their everyday business. Their "uniforms" consisted of a mixture of civilian and army clothing and each one wore a large red, white and green neckerchief for identification. Some were armed with pistols sticking out of their hip pockets while others had rifles or beretta tommy-guns. They were a motley, unorganised looking mob, but they are undoubtedly a great

worry to the hun, and a help to the allies in locating the Fascists....' <sup>1</sup>

As the Allied armies advanced into northern **Italy** the partisans increasingly hindered the enemy and contributed to his defeat.

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<sup>1</sup> Diary, B.C.H. Moss.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## IV: THE RIMINI CORRIDOR

### *IV: The Rimini Corridor*

(i)

An army approaching the 200-mile-long **Gothic Line** from the south was confronted on its left wing by a coastal belt too narrow to offer it passage, across the centre by a cordon of heights rising to over 6000 feet and nowhere much less than 50 miles deep, and on the right by an alternation of ridge and river as the **Apennines** spread their tapering fingers towards the Adriatic. On this natural barricade the Germans had begun to develop their defensive system in the autumn of 1943 in the expectation of abandoning **Italy** south of this line, but when Kesselring's bolder strategy prevailed the work languished and it was not until early June 1944, with the fall of **Rome** imminent, that it was strenuously resumed at Hitler's orders. Although nowhere completed in accordance with the lavish plans of the High Command, by the end of August fortification had become formidable in parts of the line, especially in the western coastal strip, in the passes through the central mountains and on the Adriatic, where the cliffs between **Pesaro** and **Cattolica** gave protection against amphibious threats. On this flank an anti-tank ditch from the sea to the foothills, wire entanglement, minefields and tank turrets emplaced in concrete and steel had been hastily prepared, and along the beaches kiosks which once had sold ice cream now concealed spandaus and anti-tank guns.

Unless the Allied armies could burst through the **Gothic Line** before winter, the enemy might stand there as he had stood the previous winter on the **Gustav Line**. If, however, the Allies could reach the plain beyond the **Apennines** before the rains came, their mobility and fire power might carry them to the River Po or even beyond to the southern threshold of the German Reich. Thus, as autumn succeeded summer, General

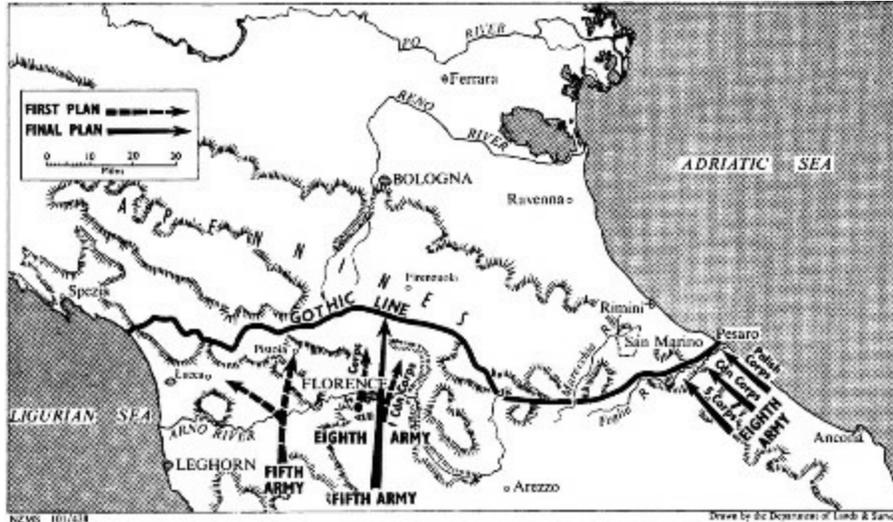
Alexander's problem became a race against the seasons. His hopes of an irruption into the northern plain were sobered but not destroyed by his waning strength in the Italian theatre. By mid-July he had lost seven divisions— more than a quarter of his forces—to southern **France**, while the enemy had gained the equivalent of four divisions. This deterioration of comparative strength encouraged him to hasten the attempt to breach the **Gothic Line**.

Alexander could attack through the mountain defile leading from **Florence** to **Bologna** or along the Adriatic coastal corridor which opened out into the plain at **Rimini**. His original plan had aimed to save time. Since the advance to **Florence** had gathered the strength of the Allied armies mostly in the centre of the peninsula, it would have been quicker to assault the **Gothic Line** through the mountain passes. He therefore had ordered the two armies to attack on a 30-mile front east of **Pistoia**, with the main weight on their inner, adjoining wings.

General Leese, however, had second thoughts about this plan, and at **Orvieto** airfield on 4 August, as they sheltered from the sun under the wing of a Dakota, he explained his doubts to Alexander. The invasion of southern **France** had removed from **Italy** the Allies' best mountain troops—the French Corps—and Leese had no abounding confidence in the ability of his **Eighth Army**, untrained and ill-equipped for mountain warfare, to pierce the central Apennine position. On the eastern coastal sector, on the other hand, it would be fighting in more familiar terrain, where it could exploit its advantage in tanks, guns and aircraft without the distraction of another army fighting beside it for the same objective and sharing the same system of rough, winding and inadequate roads. These military and psychological arguments won the day.

Moreover, the eastward shift of **Eighth Army** would permit Alexander to employ a double thrust—one prong towards **Bologna**, the other towards **Ravenna**. This would divide the defence and lessen the enemy's superiority in lateral communications which might have enabled him to block off a single penetration by the rapid switch of his reserves.

Conceived in great secrecy and for some time sparingly committed to paper, Alexander's new plan was elaborated by his



PLANS FOR ATTACK ON THE GOTHIC LINE  
PLANS FOR ATTACK ON THE GOTHIC LINE

headquarters on 16 August. The intention was to 'drive the enemy out of the Apennine position and to exploit to the general line of the Lower Po, inflicting the maximum losses on the enemy in the process.' The major effort was to be **Eighth Army's** drive through the Adriatic defences into the plain, with exploitation up to and over the Po at **Ferrara** and north-west along Route 9 (the Emilian Way) to **Bologna**. **Fifth Army** was to be ready to strike north on the **Florence- Bologna** axis when Alexander judged that, in order to stem **Eighth Army's** attack, the Germans had sufficiently weakened their centre.

Now Leese could hope to deploy his mechanised might and avoid a tedious grinding progress through the mountains. Eighth Army would concentrate for the attack ten divisions, 1200 tanks and about 1000 guns, and would fall upon the enemy with the weight of three corps: the Poles, the Canadians and **5 Corps**, in that order from the sea inland, would strike simultaneously. A weak **10 Corps** was to hold the quiet mountain sector flanking Fifth Army. The New Zealand Division would be in reserve.

By a prodigy of organisation and engineering skill **Eighth Army**

transferred itself and all its impedimenta eastwards across the **Apennines** in eight days—a vast lift in which NZASC units played their part. Travelling by night over twisting, dimly-lit roads, it passed about 11,000 vehicles every 24 hours across the mountain divide and took with it 1,000,000 shells and 12,000,000 gallons of petrol. The offensive opened on 25 August.

(ii)

While these preparations were going forward, the New Zealanders were taking life easily in their rest area among the wooded Chianti hills. Those who were not on leave in **Rome** or at the beaches of western **Tuscany** could explore the narrow streets and handsome squares of the old hilltop town of **Siena**. The day before **Eighth Army** launched itself towards the **Gothic Line** the New Zealanders lined a hot, dusty road to greet ‘a very important personage’. From the back of an open car a bulldog figure wearing a khaki drill uniform splashed with orders, a topee and sunglasses, waved or gestured the ‘V’ sign: it was Winston Churchill's fourth visit to the Division. <sup>1</sup>

By this time the Division was under orders to move. With the ultimate object of taking up the pursuit across the northern plain,

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<sup>1</sup> His previous visits were to the **Second Echelon** in England in 1940 and to the Division at **Alamein** in 1942 and at **Tripoli** in 1943.

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it was directed to a concentration area near **Iesi**, about 15 miles inland from the Adriatic port of **Ancona**. All round the clock through the last week of August New Zealand tracks and wheels stirred the dust along the 220-mile route. Most of the tanks in three main convoys, and the 3500 wheeled vehicles in six, spent a day or a night at **Foligno**, where some of the tanks were loaded on to transporters for the last stage to **Iesi**. Throughout the move security was served once again by the removal of all insignia, a ban on wayside visitations, wireless silence,

and by a bogus wireless traffic at **Castellina**.

These early September days around **Iesi** were a time when it was good to be young and a soldier in **Italy**. Trees and vineyards offered shade from a sun that sometimes drove the Fahrenheit thermometer up to the hundred mark. The land gave up its autumn yield of peach and pear and tomato; football posts overtopped the olives; and not far away, across tracks white with dust, the Adriatic lazily washed its long beaches, a sea no less deeply blue than the sky it mirrored.

*(iii)*

At the request of the **Greek Government** and with the approval of the **New Zealand Government**, 3 Greek Mountain Brigade was placed under the aegis of the New Zealand Division. The brigade was composed mainly of men whom war had made exiles; it had been recruited from the reliable elements of two brigades of the Greek Royal Army which had mutinied for political reasons while stationed in the **Middle East**. It comprised three battalions of infantry (each of three companies only), a regiment of field artillery and attached troops, but had neither armour nor engineers. Of its 3000 or more officers and men, some had seen action in **Albania** and at **El Alamein**. **General Freyberg** inspected the brigade at **Taranto** on 17 August and was much impressed by the Greeks' bearing. The brigade joined the Division a few days later and did an exercise under New Zealand supervision to familiarise its officers with methods of co-operation of all arms and to test its organisation and communication.

The Greek commander, Colonel Thrassivoulos Tsakalotos, appealed to **General Freyberg** on 31 August for permission to march through **Rome**: '... from the time the Greek Expeditionary Force ... had set foot on Italian soil I felt the soldiers' desire to pass through **Rome** in order not to avenge but to efface an abominable action of the Italians in **Athens**, i.e., the sacrilege of the **Acropolis** by the hoisting of the Italian flag, action achieved with the complicity of the Germans.... For the moral satisfaction of the whole of **Greece**, the Army Commander and

yourself are kindly requested to consent to take the salute of a March Past in **Rome** itself, of a Greek detachment of officers and men, made up of representatives from all units, and exclusively from those who fought in **Albania....**' <sup>1</sup>

**General Freyberg** tactfully replied that 'while sympathising with your natural feelings in this matter, we as New Zealanders would also have liked to march through **Rome** but it was not allowed.' <sup>2</sup> He was certain **General Alexander** would not agree to the suggestion. This **Tsakalotos** accepted without further ado.

As well as taking a brigade of foreign troops under command, the Division absorbed reinforcements and a new hierarchy. Officers and men of the **4th Reinforcements** (except a few in key positions who could not yet be spared) were replaced by newcomers and by veterans returning from furlough to begin their second tour of service with the Division. On the morning of 3 September, the fifth anniversary of the outbreak of war, **General Freyberg** was landing in his reconnaissance aircraft on the airstrip at HQ Eighth Army when a sudden gust of wind tipped over the light machine. Painfully injured in the right side, the General had to undergo an operation the same afternoon, and was expected to be unfit for duty for six or eight weeks. On his recommendation the New Zealand Government appointed **Brigadier Weir** <sup>3</sup> to temporary command of the Division. On **Brigadier Inglis's** departure for home a few days later, the command of 4 Armoured Brigade devolved upon **Brigadier Pleasants**. Command of the other two brigades already had changed hands. On relinquishing the post of CRA to **Brigadier Queree**, <sup>4</sup> **Brigadier Parkinson** took over 6 Brigade from **Brigadier Burrows**, who assumed command of the 5th.

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Maj-Gen Sir Stephen Weir, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; **Bangkok**; born NZ 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO **6 Fd Regt** Sep 1939–Dec 1941; CRA **2 NZ Div** Dec 1941– Jun 1944; GOC **2 NZ Div** 4 Sep–17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944–Sep 1946; Commander, Southern Military District, 1948–49; QMG, Army HQ, 1951–55; Chief of General Staff, 1955–60; Military Adviser to NZ Govt, 1960–61; NZ Ambassador to **Thailand**, 1961–.

<sup>4</sup> Brig R. C. Queree, CBE, DSO, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Christchurch**, 28 Jun 1909; Regular soldier; Brigade Major, NZ Arty, Oct 1940–Jun 1941; GSO II **2 NZ Div** Jun– Aug 1941, Jan–Jun 1942; GSO I **2 NZ Div** Sep 1942–Jun 1944; BGS **NZ Corps** 9 Feb– 27 Mar 1944; CO **5 Fd Regt** Jun–Aug 1944; CRA **2 NZ Div** Aug 1944–Jun 1945; QMG, Army HQ, 1948–50; Adjutant-General 1954–56; Vice-Chief of General Staff 1956–60; Senior Army Liaison Officer, **London**, 1960–64; Director of Civil Defence, 1965–.

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(iv)

From the southern bank of the Metauro River, the starting point of **Eighth Army's** offensive, to the Marecchia River, the south-eastern boundary of the north Italian plain, the corridor between the sea and the Etruscan Apennines undulates for about 30 miles in a succession of spurs and watercourses. The **Gothic Line**, behind the Foglia River, lay only a dozen miles or so from the Metauro, and it was the hope of the Allied command that by its unexpected appearance on the Adriatic flank **Eighth Army** would be able to startle the enemy out of these prepared defences before they could be fully manned. General Leese conceived the battle as a rolling offensive that would catch the Germans off balance by surprise and keep them so by unremitting pressure.

Crossing the Metauro in the last hour of 25 August, the five assaulting divisions of the Polish, Canadian and **5 Corps** led off into something of a vacuum. The enemy in this sector, **76 Panzer Corps**, had chosen this moment to regroup and withdraw upon the out-works of the **Gothic Line**. Missing the full weight of the opening thrust, the Germans

remained in ignorance of **Eighth Army's** secret concentration, and it was not until late on the 28th, after a copy of General Leese's message to his troops had fallen into their hands, that they awakened to the disagreeable reality. Though they reacted by the immediate transfer of two divisions of **76 Corps**, it was too late to save the **Gothic Line**. The Canadians and the British corps were across the Foglia on the 30th and were soon biting deep into the long-prepared but still incomplete and barely-manned defences. Many minefields were found still set at safe, some Panther turrets had not been mounted and lay where they had been dumped, and enemy tanks and infantry coming up hurriedly were defeated in detail. By 3 September the enemy had taken refuge behind the next obstacle, the Conca River; and the Canadians, swinging right to the sea at **Cattolica**, allowed the Poles, as planned, to be withdrawn into army reserve. As General Alexander afterwards remarked, **Eighth Army** 'had swept through a fortified line... almost as though it were not there.' <sup>1</sup>

The New Zealand contribution to this success was confined to a few hundred 25-pounder rounds. When the possibility of a deliberate assault on the **Gothic Line** was foreseen, **Eighth Army** decided to strengthen its artillery cannonade. From the seaward side it called in the aid of two naval destroyers and a gunboat, which thickened the bombardment on the coastal sector. From its own resources, it appointed, among other gun groups, the New

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<sup>1</sup> *The Allied Armies in Italy*, pp. 2946–7.

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Zealand field artillery—5 and 6 Regiments to **1 Canadian Division** and 4 Regiment to 46 British Division of **5 Corps**. The collapse of the German defences, however, made the services of the three regiments almost redundant. A few tasks were fired by 5 and 6 Field Regiments, which were deployed between 31 August and 2 September in hilly country between the Metauro and Foglia rivers; and **4 Field Regiment**, which went into action on 2 September a few miles farther inland, fired

little if at all. The swift advance soon outran the range of the guns. But sterner battles lay ahead.

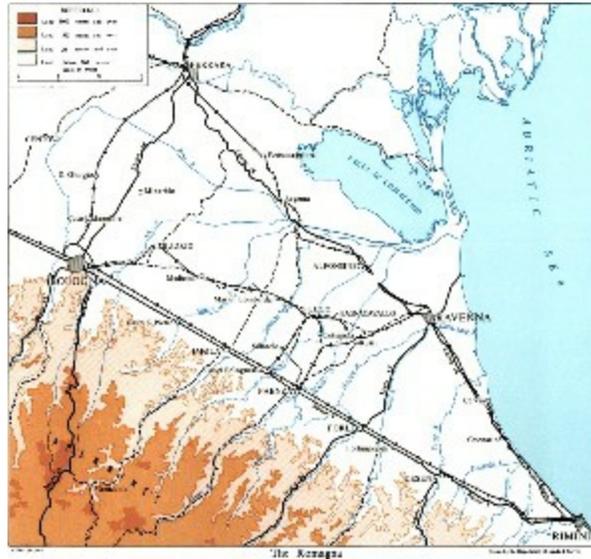
Beyond the Conca men, terrain and weather checked Eighth Army. The men were the reinforcements Kesselring had switched from his right and centre. The terrain was the stiff spur taking its name from the village of **Coriano** and thrusting out from the hills to **Riccione**. The weather was the torrential rain that fell from the 5th to the 7th, turning dust into mud. Its impetus lost, **Eighth Army** now had to pause for a set-piece assault. Judging that the enemy's centre was now as weak as it ever would be, Alexander decided to unleash **Fifth Army** for its attack through the mountains towards **Bologna** and the plain. A new and fierce phase was to open on the night of 12–13 September.

While **Eighth Army** regrouped, General Leese made plans that promised work for the New Zealanders. In proposing to launch his two strong corps against the last series of obstacles before **Rimini**, he relied on the Canadian Corps to make the decisive breach on the coastal sector while **5 Corps** kept pace on the left and prevented the enemy on the inland heights from pouring fire down upon the Canadians' exposed flank. Accordingly, the Canadians were strengthened by taking over **4 British Division**; and on 13 September the New Zealand Division, which had been under Canadian command for planning since the 4th, came under operational command.

With this order of 10 September there began for the Division a regime of fluctuating intention and provisional plans, during which it made piecemeal moves to the coast behind the advancing battle line. The prime cause of this suspense was uncertainty whether the divisions already in action could complete their task unaided or whether the New Zealanders would have to help them to force an entry into the plain before pressing on to exploit it. In the event, the door was to be pushed open for the New Zealanders.

Meanwhile General Weir designated **6 Brigade** as potential leader of the pursuit across the **Marecchia**. For this purpose Brigadier Parkinson's

three infantry battalions were grouped with their supporting arms—a British regiment of self-propelled guns and New Zealand armoured cars, tanks, anti-tank guns, mortars,



The Romagna

machine guns and engineers. <sup>1</sup> Leaving the rest of the Division at **Fano**, the brigade group moved forward on the 12th to **Gradara**, a castled hamlet near the seaside town of **Cattolica**. There it organised itself into two battle groups, with 24 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Hutchens) and 25 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Norman) as their respective nuclei, and a reserve.

(v)

The renewal of the offensive by **Eighth Army** on the night of 12–13 September, followed a few hours later by the opening of **Fifth Army's** drive among the mountains of the centre, began one of the heaviest week's fighting of the war in **Italy**. The doubling of the enemy's strength on the Adriatic front by the transfer there of the equivalent of five divisions clearly showed his anxiety to keep control of an area that would be vital to him if he were driven off the **Apennines**; for in that event, to avoid being penned against the Swiss and French frontiers, he would have to retract his line to the north-east, pivoting on the **Rimini** sector. Between **Eighth Army** and its immediate goal the main

obstructions were the Corianc ridge, the Marano River and the recently improved **Rimini** line. This last line ran from the north-east boundary of the minute but mountainous Republic of **San Marino** to the **Marecchia** and the sea at **Rimini** and incorporated the Ausa River and the ridge of **San Fortunato**, the last of the innumerable spurs thrown by the **Apennines** across a coastal advance.

**Coriano** ridge fell early to converging thrusts by the Canadians on the right and **5 Corps** on the left, the **Marano** was crossed and by 15 September the bridgehead had been rapidly expanded. The enemy reserved his most desperate resistance for **San Fortunato** ridge, the key to **Rimini** and the plain beyond, and it yielded only after a struggle lasting three days.

Though the New Zealand Division had no large share in these hard-fought actions, the gunners and some of the infantry did contribute. While most of the Division prepared and waited, the gunners were summoned into the line, and under skies which the Bofors guns of 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment helped to keep clear, the three field regiments first fired a prearranged plan in support of the Canadian and British troops in their capture of **Coriano** ridge. Then from a series of deployment areas inland from the coastal highway (Route 16), they brought their guns to bear at successive stages of the Army's advance—the **Marano** crossing, the

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<sup>1</sup> The order of battle was: HQ 6 Inf Bde, 24 Bn, 25 Bn, 26Bn, 20 Armd Regt, B Sqn Div Cav, **6 Fd Regt**, 24 Army Fd Regt RA, 31 A-Tk Bty, **33 A-Tk Bty**, 39 Mortar Bty less two troops, **2 MG Coy**, **8 Fd Coy**, 6 Bde Hy Mortar pl, and A Coy 6 Fd Amb.

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fight for the heights beyond and the bitter contest for the San Fortunato feature—firing now and then at opportunity targets, but engaged for the most part on planned harassing, concentrations and smokescreens.

In the first day of the **San Fortunato** battle the three field regiments fired an average of more than 1000 rounds an hour; and at its height 6 Regiment alone fired 13,301 rounds (more than 550 a gun) in 24 hours. The men of 5 Regiment, now the Division's specialist purveyor of smoke, worked long hours in screening the advance. Troops fighting on the more level seaward sector were always liable to outstrip those farther inland, and so it was often necessary to obscure a coastal salient from enemy observation on the heights. All gunners and guns, however, were put to the test. More than once a crisis loomed. Ammunition stocks dwindled, but by hasty borrowings from other regiments or urgent errands to ammunition points they were replenished in time. Guns developed mechanical faults, but the artificer's skill and judicious resting kept enough of them in action. Therefore no task went unfulfilled.

That the fury of **Eighth Army's** artillery and bombing offensive did not expend itself in vain is evident from Vietinghoff's complaints. The commander of **Tenth Army** had a sorry tale for Kesselring on the morning of the 15th: 'He [the enemy] is attacking behind an absolute wall of shellfire. He is ploughing up the whole countryside and carpeting us with bombs.... Our casualties are even higher than at **Cassino**. There the men sat in houses and if a house was knocked down they were quite happy in the cellar. But here on the Adriatic I can dig in quickly in the soft ground, but am comparatively easily shattered by shelling. The MDS also report that a big percentage of their patients have been suffering from concussion, completely bewildered and apathetic.' <sup>1</sup>

No other members of the New Zealand Division played a more fatiguing part in the battles of the **Rimini corridor** than the field gunners, but 3 Greek Mountain Brigade and the New Zealand troops who fought beside them made closer contact with the enemy. Coming temporarily under the command of the Canadian Corps (but still administered by the New Zealanders), the Greek brigade, with the support of Canadian mortars, machine guns and anti-tank guns, was sent into action to gain battle experience. <sup>2</sup> By a perversity of fortune,

these mountain troops were committed

<sup>1</sup> *Tenth Army* reports. MDS: main dressing station.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to **Maj-Gen B. Nesbitt** of the AFHQ Liaison Section on 28 October **General Freyberg** explained that as a result of his aircraft accident he was away when the Greeks went into the line. He had not intended them to be used offensively until they had had some further training. 'They were put into a battle which was not properly laid on and they had 100 killed.'

on the coastal flats, where they relieved a brigade of 1 Canadian Division (Major-General C. Vokes) on a front of about 2000 yards inland from **Riccione Marina**. In this country of vineyards and closely tilled fields, the Greeks were pitted against the men of *1 Parachute Division*; but, though suffering many casualties, they gave a good account of themselves in the sharp patrol clashes that disturbed the nights in this sector.



THE ADVANCE TO RIMINI  
THE ADVANCE TO RIMINI

As a preliminary to the crossing of the **Marano**, the Greek brigade was ordered to clear the approaches to the river on its front. An attempt in the early hours of 14 September to capture two clusters of houses

known as **Monaldini** and **Monticelli** on a lateral road south of the river met with a costly repulse, the Greeks losing more than a third of the troops engaged since the action began. The episode prompted second thoughts. The 22nd NZ (Motor) Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Donald), supported by the 17-pounders of a troop of 33 Anti-Tank Battery, already had been sent forward to a reserve position behind the Greeks. Although it was not intended originally for an active role, General Vokes now instructed the battalion to detach a task force of at least one company to go with all speed to the 'moral and physical support' of the Greeks. Donald sent 1 Company (Major O'Reilly). At the same time Major E. W. Aked (of 24 Battalion), now commanding 210 British Liaison Unit, was tactical adviser to the Greeks; he appreciated at once their need for armoured backing, and within a few hours B Squadron of **20 Armoured Regiment** (Major **Clapham**<sup>1</sup>) joined the task force.

Thus strengthened, the Greeks returned to the assault on the evening of the 14th. In what a New Zealand officer described as 'a copy-book attack with close support fire from tanks', Greek infantry occupied **Monaldini** and New Zealand infantry the neighbouring settlement of **Monticelli**. Unaccustomed to tank escort, the Greeks needed a little coaxing, and one New Zealand tank commander directed the disposition and digging in of the Greeks on their objective, but it was a happy experiment in partnership. Not only did Greek officers make grateful speeches to New Zealand tank men but General Weir was formally thanked for having sent the brigade, in Aked, 'an experienced warrior'.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the **Marano**, which they crossed on 15 September, the Greeks began to broach the problem of **Rimini** airfield, a rectangle a mile long and 1200 yards wide, copiously sown with mines and easily swept by fire from damaged hangars and other buildings around its perimeter. They could still rely on New Zealand help, though now C Squadron, 18 Regiment, replaced the squadron from the 20th, and it was decided to allot to each of the three Greek battalions one tank troop accompanied by a platoon from 22 Battalion. The Greeks maintained the pace set by the Canadians on either side of them. By the 16th, after capturing 20

paratroops and killing perhaps twice as many on the way, they had disposed of nuisances at the south-eastern end of the airfield and were lining the edge of it.

Next day they began to work a battalion down each of the two long sides of the perimeter. Here the Germans had shrewdly sited a 75-millimetre gun so protected by earthworks that only the piece protruding from the Panther turret in which it was mounted showed above the ground. Attempts by several aircraft to bomb it into silence and by **4 Field Regiment** to destroy it by gunfire were

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj L. B. Clapham**; Opunake; born Tokomaru, 10 Jul 1917; motor mechanic; wounded 20 May 1941.

<sup>2</sup> In his letter to Maj-Gen Nesbitt on 28 October **General Freyberg** said, 'Aked has really been Chief of Staff to Tsakalotos, and as such has saved them hundreds of casualties.'

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unavailing. The task now passed into the eager hands of an officer (Lieutenant **Collins** <sup>1</sup>) of C Squadron, 18 Regiment. He led his tank on foot out of the Greek infantry area, and while 4 Field Regiment's guns smoked the Panther turret, he struck out through machine-gun and mortar fire to a house about half-way along the south-western perimeter of the airfield. When the smoke cleared his tank opened rapid fire. His gunner's second shot hit the turret and the gun barrel dropped. He waited long enough to score six more direct hits, to spray the turret with his machine guns and to witness the flight of the German gun crew, who now had nothing worth manning; and then he withdrew under his own smokescreen.

Next day (18 September), during the fight for the Ausa crossing, the Greeks completed their encirclement of the airfield and extended their right wing to the sea to relieve the Canadian armoured car regiment which had fought its way through the ribbon of seaside villas and hotels along the coastal road. The 19th, a day of decisive battle on the **San**

**Fortunato** ridge, was for the Greeks, assisted by C Squadron of 19 Regiment, a day of easy progress towards the outskirts of **Rimini**.

The Allies used searchlights to aid the movement of their troops at night. This 'artificial moonlight' had an unsuspected effect on the enemy. The *Tenth Army* chief of staff (Major-General Fritz Wentzell) told the *Army Group* chief of staff (Lieutenant-General Hans Roettiger) on the 19th: 'Last night he did the weirdest thing I ever saw. He lit up the battlefield with searchlights.... He turned on a display like Party Day in Nuernberg.... It is a great worry to the boys to be lighted up and blinded and not to be able to do anything about it....'<sup>2</sup> The searchlights, sited out of the range of the German guns, hampered the movement of their troops, reliefs and the bringing up of supplies, 'which were almost impossible except at night. Our men, already depressed by the enemy's superiority in equipment, became even more so by their feeling of helplessness against this new technical weapon.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt P. L. Collins**, MC, m.i.d.; Hastings; born **Wellington**, 1 Jan 1917; warehouseman; four times wounded.

<sup>2</sup> *Tenth Army* reports.

<sup>3</sup> *Tenth Army* diary. In *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 559, Dawson describes the tank crews' impression of an attack under searchlights: 'It certainly helped you to see where you were going, ... but at the same time it made you feel rather naked and visible.'

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## V: THE CAPTURE OF RIMINI

### *V: The Capture of Rimini*

(i)

The Greeks had more fighting on 20 September against elements of both *1 Parachute Division* and the much less warlike *162 (Turcoman) Division*, but at the end of the day the battered old town lay only a mile ahead.

By this time the Germans had reluctantly decided that they could no longer hold the **San Fortunato** feature and with it the **Rimini corridor**. That morning General Traugott Herr, commanding *76 Panzer Corps*, asked Vietinghoff's permission to withdraw his artillery across the **Marecchia River** as a preliminary to a general withdrawal. Kesselring, anxious to buy time for an orderly retirement all along the line and fearful that 'the open country' beyond **Rimini** would cripple the defenders, at first withheld his assent but acquiesced in the early afternoon. He was disappointed to hear that evening that instead of defending **Rimini** house by house, in order to enfilade the Allied advance, the paratroops would leave only rearguards behind in the town. He insisted, as a condition of holding the **Viserba** canal, two miles north-west of **Rimini**, that tanks should be put into the line. *Tenth Army* was given permission to withdraw on the left wing during the night of 20–21 September, 'thereby breaking off the Battle of **Rimini** before their own formations south of the **Marecchia** have become exhausted and incapable of preventing a breakthrough to the plains.' <sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile the New Zealand Division had been making ready to take advantage of just such a collapse. An order of 18 September instructed the Division to break through the enemy defences immediately south-west of **Rimini** and to pursue and destroy all enemy forces between **Rimini** and **Ravenna**. The planning for the first phase proved to be too

pessimistic. In a series of four alternative plans, it was contemplated that at best 5 Brigade group would be needed to establish a bridgehead across the **Marecchia** for 6 Brigade to exploit, and that at worst 5 Brigade would have to capture **San Fortunato**, 6 Brigade establish the bridgehead and 4 Armoured Brigade pass through in pursuit. As it happened, the Canadian Corps' battle for **San Fortunato** went so well that it became possible on 20 September to assume that the New Zealanders would have the entry into the plain forced open for them.

The revised plan was for **1 Canadian Division** to cross the **Marecchia** west of **Rimini** and expand its bridgehead to the line of the **Rimini-Bologna** railway. Passage through this bridgehead as soon as possible after first light on the 21st would be made by 5 Brigade, which had been advanced to the head of the waiting Division with a view to other work but which would now be directed to the first objective along the Black Diamond route to **Ravenna**. To a Division so long pent among the hills, the plains

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *Tenth Army*.

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now beckoned. Catching the spirit of the occasion, a staff officer had chosen for the pursuit a codename with a jingle of movement: the striking troops of the Division, queued up in their three brigade groups back along Route 16, awaited the opening of Operation

CAVALCADE

(ii)

It remained only to occupy the ground vacated by a beaten enemy as he drew back across the **Marecchia**. While on the left the Canadians breasted up to the river, the Greek brigade moved on **Rimini** itself, whose capture, though tactically a mere aftermath, would be a symbol of **Eighth Army's** victory. **Rimini** fell because the loss of **San Fortunato**

made it untenable. Except for sniping, sporadic bursts of spandau fire and occasional shelling from the western environs, the entry of the Greeks and their attached troops was uncontested. The Germans had thought better of their overnight plan to leave a strong rearguard.

Soon after dawn on the cold, blustery morning of 21 September two New Zealand subalterns, Second-Lieutenant **Cross**,<sup>1</sup> of 19 Regiment, and Second-Lieutenant **Maurice**,<sup>2</sup> this regiment's liaison officer with the Greeks, walked towards the apparently deserted ruins of **Rimini** along Via Venti Settembre, a street named for the anniversary of the previous day.<sup>3</sup> They were looking for mines and demolitions. At the Ausa River, which bounds the city to the east, they found the bridge only partly demolished and still offering men and light vehicles access to the old quarter. After reconnoitring a route for tanks into the main square, Piazza Cavour, they called up 11 Troop and its infantry escort, 8 Platoon of 22 Battalion. By 6.30a.m. the men on foot had entered Piazza Cavour. The tanks, by mutual aid, managed to ford the river, but since rubble blocked the direct route to the centre of the city, they made a circuit of its southern ramparts. About seven o'clock they clattered into the main square from the west, drove up the steps of the Palazzo dell'Arengo and parked under the portico. A few minutes later Greek infantrymen began to appear in the square. With a proper respect for protocol, a civilian who announced himself as the Mayor of **Rimini** produced a document drawn up in English, Greek and Italian and prepared to hand over his city to the latest of its many conquerors.

The modern quarter of **Rimini** between the railway and the

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<sup>1</sup> Lt **C. G. E. Cross**, m.i.d.; **Papakura**; born England, 1 Apr 1911; bank clerk; twice wounded.

<sup>2</sup> Capt **A. H. M. Maurice**; **Kimbolton**; born Wales, 5 Jul 1909; farmer.

<sup>3</sup> The unification of **Italy** was completed on 20 September

sea already had been occupied by the Greeks. Less thorough than usual, the German engineers had left the Ausa bridge leading into **Rimini** Marina still negotiable, and the tanks of 9 and 10 Troops crossed it to follow the Greeks into the seaside suburb. The Greek flags that were soon flying from the Town Hall and other prominent mastheads signalled a success won by 13 days of rugged fighting and at a cost of 314 casualties. Although inexperience and the language barrier had prevented it from making full use of the supporting New Zealand tanks, the Greek brigade had secured the coastal flank and conformed to the main advance inland, and its first battle honour was well deserved.

First as a port and railway junction and then as the eastern anchor of the German Apennine defences, **Rimini** (with a normal population of 30,000) had been attacked by Allied bombers since the end of 1943. As the battle approached, it had come under fire from Allied naval and field guns. The Germans had levelled large areas and more recently had blown bridges and collapsed buildings to block **Eighth Army's** progress.

One venerable bridge, however, was spared, the Ponte d'Augusto, a stone arch that since the time of Tiberius has spanned one of the channels by which the sprawling **Marecchia** flows to the sea past the western edge of the old city. Whether saved by German policy or oversight, <sup>1</sup> it gave the New Zealand tanks and infantry a quick route westwards to a second branch of the **Marecchia**, where the Route 16 bridge had been completely destroyed. Here German machine-gunners lay in wait for rash pursuers.

While the **Marecchia**, the last obstacle before the plain, thus stalled the New Zealand advanced guard, farther upstream infantry of 2 Canadian Brigade made good their crossing. Drenched by an overnight rainstorm, a company of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry pressed on over the swollen river and by 9.50 a.m. was established across Route 9. It was a simple, prosaic piece of infantry routine: a few men

walked cautiously across a road and began to dig in. Yet it marked the end of an era far more aptly than the flaunting of flags above the rubble of nearby **Rimini**. Behind lay the memorials of **Eighth Army's** past— **San Fortunato** and the **Gothic Line**, **Florence** and the **Paula Line**, **Cassino** and the **Gustav** and **Hitler** lines, **Orsogna** and **Ortona**, and farther back still, beyond the many rivers and hills, the toe of **Calabria**, where the army had first touched **Italy** one year and 18 days ago. Ahead lay the vast continuity of the **Lombard** plain.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a conflict of evidence as to whether charges were laid under the bridge.

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(iii)

Field Marshal Kesselring recommended to the German High Command that he should withdraw his forces behind the major obstacle of the **Po**, where he could regroup while employing every possible delaying device south of the river. A timed programme for this movement—given the codename **AUTUMN FOG** (*Herbstnebel*)— had been worked out at a conference at *HQ Tenth Army* on 30 August. The scheme was submitted to Hitler by the *Army Group C* chief of staff (Lieutenant-General Roettiger) on 23 September, but as might be expected was flatly rejected; Kesselring received orders the same day to adhere to the basic intentions of defending the northern **Apennines** and western **Alps**.

On 27 September he again asked Hitler for authority to initiate **AUTUMN FOG**. He based his plea on the continued Allied pressure on his southern front, the possibility of amphibious landings on the **Riviera** and along the **Adriatic** coast, and the growing threat of an Allied breakthrough in the **Bologna** area. But he was told on 5 October that ‘the Fuehrer, for political, military and administrative reasons, had decided to defend the **Apennine** front and to hold upper **Italy** not only until late autumn, but indefinitely.’ <sup>1</sup>

Roettiger, after his return from **Germany**, quoted Hitler as having said that ‘a withdrawal of the front behind the Po might be too much of a shock for the German people.’ The wartime production of industrial northern **Italy**, still working at high pressure, could not be sacrificed, and ‘the loss of the Po plains would have a most deleterious effect on the food situation, as it would mean that the food supplies for the forces committed in **Italy** would have to come from **Germany**.’<sup>2</sup>

Before Kesselring made his second appeal to Hitler, Vietinghoff had ordered the corps and divisional commanders of **Tenth Army** ‘not to relinquish one foot of soil to the enemy without inflicting heavy casualties.... The enemy's reserves are not inexhaustible. Heavy casualties in particular would press very heavily on him. The battles of **Ortona** and **Cassino** have demonstrated this....’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maj R. P. von Schramm, *The Italian Theatre of War, 1 Apr–31 Dec 1944* (Narrative based on war diary of **German High Command**).

<sup>2</sup> Appendix to war diary, *Tenth Army*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## CHAPTER 6 – INTO THE PLAIN

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## I: THE ROMAGNA

### *I: The Romagna*

(i)

**THE Romagna**, the south-east portion of the great plain of the **Po valley**, spread its snares before **Eighth Army**. Half-seen through the fine drizzle of 21 September, it offered a dreary prospect of flat, watery and charmless land, receding monotonously towards a grey horizon. It owed its existence to the fact that for thousands of years the rivers had spilled their sediment there, and for 800 years men had laboured to reclaim it from the sea. Its alluvial origins made it a heart-breaking winter battleground for troops entitled to a better reward for their long advance over hill and valley.

A double disillusionment awaited **Eighth Army** as it broke into the edge of the great plain and prepared to move forward to a line from **Ferrara** to **Bologna**. The battle to get there had tired most of its formations, except the New Zealand Division: nearly 500 tanks had been put out of action, half of them irrecoverably, and so heavy had been the drain on infantry that the battalions from the **United Kingdom** had to be reduced temporarily from four to three rifle companies. But it was not only fatigue and wastage that threatened to cheat the army of its due. The heavy rain that began on 20 September—a fortnight late, the anxious Germans observed—fell upon a terrain that was soon to dispel the dream of mobility regained.

The popular belief—or delusion—was that the **Po valley** was an armoured playground where tanks could sport at will. In fact it was essentially still a swamp whose major watercourses had been canalised between floodbanks rising in places 40 feet above the plain. Thirteen such rivers and many more smaller watercourses <sup>1</sup> ran into the Adriatic across the path of an Army advancing to **Ravenna**, and the low-lying

land between the embankments was intricately patterned with ditches and canals, many of which could be drained only by pumping. As fords were few, the larger streams were tank obstacles and might even baffle infantry; nor could tanks always cross the smaller watercourses. The roads offered little compensation. Half a mile west of **Rimini**, at the village of **Celle**, the two highways, raised safely above the flood level, went their separate ways, Route 9 (the **Via Emilia**) beside the Apennine foothills direct to **Bologna**, and Route 16 (the **Via Adriatica**) beside the coast to **Ravenna**. Between these diverging highways the axial roads were of limited use: they were ill-formed and narrow and usually cut short by the main rivers. The lateral roads were superior in number and condition, many of them running along the tops of floodbanks, but they were subject to cratering. The roads were as important as they were inadequate, for off them the soil and sub-soil were of clay, which rose in dust in dry weather and in wet weather became first greasy and slippery and then so soft and clinging that men could move only with difficulty, and vehicles, including tanks, hardly at all. The bad going obviously cramped the inventiveness of the **Eighth Army** planners. In the whole Romagnuol delta, with **Rimini** for its apex and the Adriatic coast and the **Apennines** for its sides, only the comparatively firm and high belt of ground on either side of Route 9 could sustain a major thrust in weather even moderately wet.

The numerous farm buildings and hamlets gave the enemy a gratuitous defence in depth, blockhouse upon blockhouse. The infantry sections or snipers who occupied them had to be driven out in detail; they could not easily be shelled out *en masse*, for the collapse of stonework only made strongpoints still stronger. Around these buildings the vineyards made it hard to see and move. The vines were trained on wire between pollarded mulberries or other fruit trees, planted about every 10 feet in rows about 30 yards apart and growing to a height of perhaps 15 feet. In autumn, when vine and tree were in full leaf, the tank commander peering from his turret could see no farther than the next row ahead; and after breaking through two or three trellises a tank might be brought to a stop with track locked or its driver unsuspected by

trailing festoons of vines and wire. Since the trees were planted parallel with the streams and therefore across the general line of advance, the enemy could enfilade successive rows with machine guns and anti-tank guns.

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<sup>1</sup> These were named *fossa* or *fosso* (ditch), *scolo* (drain), *canale* (canal), *rio* (stream), *torrente* (mountain torrent) or *fiume* (river).

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In this inauspicious terrain at this late season, therefore, all the odds were against swift advance: water obstacle and easy demolition, high banks, mud and dust, stone barn and leafy vineyard. Only larger numbers of men and heavier weight of metal could help to redress the balance of tactical advantage. As troops tired and the skies became closed to aircraft, nothing but shellfire could be expected to keep the campaign in motion. Ahead of **Eighth Army** lay dour, leaden fighting in what came to be called 'the battles of the rivers'. Only in January, after nearly four months, would the army resign the offensive until the return of spring. Meanwhile for the New Zealanders, as for their allies, there would be a grim routine of water crossings, sharp actions fought around farmhouses, dangerous scuffling amid vineyards, quixotic charges against stopbanks, a steady drain of casualties, and nearly always an oppressive sense of slow progress. But on 21 September 1944 all this was locked in the future.

(ii)

Once the **Rimini** line had been forced, the time had come to execute **Eighth Army's** plans for the pursuit into the plain. On the right **1 Canadian Corps** was to thrust out two armoured spearheads: one of them, **2 NZ Division**, after passing through the bridgehead formed by **1 Canadian Division**, was to drive along the coastal route towards **Ravenna**, 32 miles distant from **Rimini**; farther inland **5 Canadian Armoured Division** was to advance through **4 British Division's** bridgehead towards Castel Maggiore, a few miles north of **Bologna**. Meanwhile, on the left, **5 Corps**, wheeling to the north-west, was to

make for **Bologna** astride Route 9.

The enemy's intention was to delay these plans as long as possible. His great strategic need was to maintain in the east a pivot upon which he could, if necessary, withdraw his *Army Group C* to a line guarding the exits from **Italy**. This pivot would not be endangered in the coastal sector until he fell back as far as the lagoons of the Valli di Comacchio, north of **Ravenna**. He therefore had ground to sell, but having forced the Allies to consume the late summer and part of the autumn in reaching the edge of the plain he could now expect to ask a high price, for he could count on the attrition of numerous river crossings in weather that would quickly deteriorate. General Herr, whose *76 Panzer Corps* held the line opposite **1 Canadian Corps**, assured his immediate superior, General Vietinghoff, on 21 September that his corps was 'trying to hold firm as far forward as possible for as long as possible'. Vietinghoff ordered the corps to 'strain every muscle to get depth in its dispositions and avoid everything being smashed up in the front line.'<sup>1</sup>

Herr had only motley resources at his disposal. His Adriatic flank, facing the New Zealanders and astride Route 16, was held by the renowned *1 Parachute Division* (Lieutenant-General R. Heidrich), but the coastal front itself, although under paratroop command, was in the nervy hands of *236 Reconnaissance Battalion* and *303 Grenadier Regiment*, both remnants of *162 (Turcoman) Infantry Division*. Although well armed with automatic weapons, this division was known by the Germans to be untrustworthy; it had a name for desertions, and the Turcomen who did not desert seem to have been stirred into half-hearted activity only by their German officers and NCOs. In order on the paratroops' right were *29 Panzer Grenadier Division* (Major-General Dr F. Polack) and *26 Panzer Division* (Major-General E. P. Crasemann), the latter strengthened by three battalions of *20 GAF Field Division*. Both were seasoned formations of good repute, but the panzer grenadier division, much below establishment, was hardly more than a battle group, and the panzer division was without either of its infantry regiments. Herr's main problem—a shortage of infantry and anti-tank

weapons—was in part eased by the existence of field works covering water crossings and built-in defences such as Panther turrets at other strategic points.

When the Greeks and New Zealanders entered **Rimini** on the morning of 21 September, 4 Brigade group was lying up behind **San Fortunato** ridge waiting to move into the **Marecchia** bridgehead and thence to launch Operation CAVALCADE, the advance to **Ravenna**. Bridging troubles at the Canadians' crossing, however, delayed 5 Brigade's start until well after the planned time of dawn. General Weir was anxious, too, about the muddy tracks over **San Fortunato** and was thinking of diverting the brigade group through the outskirts of **Rimini**. When Brigadier Pleasants sought permission for 4 Armoured Brigade to exploit the capture of **Rimini** by pushing on over the **Marecchia**, Weir therefore agreed readily. By opportunism and flexibility the Division would make its entry into the plain not through the Canadians' bridgehead but through its own. Reinforced by a machine-gun company and a platoon of sappers, 4 Armoured Brigade during the 21st assembled 19 Armoured Regiment and 22 (Motor) Battalion in the **Rimini** area ready for the chase; and at 6.15 p.m. it superseded 3 Greek Mountain Brigade in command of the sector from the coast to Route 16, with orders to establish and develop a bridgehead across the westerly branch of the **Marecchia**.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tenth Army* reports.

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As early as 7 p.m. the motor battalion opened a silent attack between the sea and Route 16, sending 2 Company up the coastal flank and 1 Company up the left. Many of the seaside villas on 2 Company's route were fortified and protected by minefields against a landing from the sea, and the men of the Turcoman regiment, if lukewarm, were more numerous than the New Zealanders. The area of **Celle** and Route 16 bristled with dug-in Panther turrets mounting 75-millimetre guns, machine-gun posts and infantry strongpoints, all formidably manned by

paratroops. The New Zealand companies' objective was the **Fossa Turchetta**, a watercourse about 1500 yards beyond the **Marecchia**. Once the engineers had cleared a ford across the river, the tanks of C Squadron of 19 Regiment would go forward in close support.

In the pitch darkness of a cloudy evening both companies crossed the river in safety, 1 Company, choosing a point where the water was nowhere deeper than two feet, in comparative comfort. Men could walk across without wading, and by jumping from boulder to boulder could even keep their feet dry. On the right, between two railway bridges, the men of 2 Company made for a point where the concrete retaining wall was breached and made negotiable by bombing, only to find that the same bomb had torn a hole in the riverbed, where they suddenly floundered in water up to their armpits. Having rounded up two spandau teams on the northern bank, 2 Company pressed on quickly towards its objective, overrunning enemy posts in fortified houses or leaving them to be mopped up in daylight. As 10 Platoon lost two men killed and seven wounded in a minefield, Major K. R. Hutcheson halted his company 200 or 300 yards short of the **Fossa Turchetta**, whence they could dominate the objective without risking further casualties on mines.

On the left 1 Company also was challenged at the stopbank, but cleared the way with a brisk charge. After a skirmish with Germans about 200 yards short of **Celle**, the company understandably opened fire on a tracked vehicle stealthily approaching the crossroads along Route 9. Happily the crew made a smart escape, for the vehicle was found to be a Canadian carrier. A more troublesome hindrance was a concrete gun emplacement, surmounted by a Panther-type turret, which began to pour fire into the left flank of the advance. Posting his section to give covering fire, Corporal Reeve <sup>1</sup> of 7 Platoon charged over open ground towards the German defenders and got so much the better of an exchange of grenades that they fled into the night, offering Reeve and his section vacant possession of their bunker. This he could not accept because the advance had to go

<sup>1</sup> 2 Lt M. N. Reeve, MM; **Te Puke**; born NZ 20 Sep 1920; farmhand; wounded 21 Oct 1944.

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on. Germans later drifted back, reoccupied the emplacement and began to make more trouble. By this time Reeve's platoon had reached its objective, but his section was at once despatched as a fighting patrol to put an end to the nuisance. Again Reeve led his men to the assault, and once more—this time for good—the paratroopers turned tail, except six who surrendered. By early morning 1 Company was in position along or near its stretch of the Fossa Turchetta. Its tally was 30 prisoners and the same number of spandaus; its own casualties were two men killed and eight wounded.

Two more tasks completed a satisfactory night's work: three troops of C Squadron, 19 Regiment, crossed the **Marecchia** ford and came up in support of the infantry; and the 48th Highlanders of 1 Canadian Brigade, on the motor battalion's left, took possession of **Celle**. But the **Marecchia** exacted one more exertion: the Route 16 bridge had been so wrecked by the demolition that the stretcher-bearers had to form a kind of human rope to cross dry-shod, hauling themselves up like gymnasts from the near bank and easing themselves down to the farther.

While 22 Battalion was exposing its flank in a shallow salient, 5 Brigade's group <sup>1</sup> was moving into 1 **Canadian Division's** bridgehead. Its orders were to take two successive water lines—the **Scolo Brancona**, about two miles beyond the **Rimini- Cesena** railway, and the **Rio Fontanaccia**, half a mile or more farther on. Capture of the first objective would be the signal for 6 Brigade group to begin moving forward to pass through the 5th. Brigadier Burrows's brigade was first to enlarge the bridgehead with 21 Battalion group (Lieutenant-Colonel Thodey) on the right and 28 (Maori) Battalion group (Lieutenant-Colonel Young) on the left, and then to launch them by two bounds to the **Scolo Brancona** and finally to the **Fontanaccia**, where 6 Brigade would take up the running.

Occupation of the bridgehead was a slow and untidy operation because of delays in starting, miserable weather, enemy shelling (which caused tanks and infantry to separate and communications to waver) and uncertainty about the state of affairs beyond the river. After more than one postponement, the move from the laager area east of the Ausa began in the late afternoon on the 21st. The two leading companies of each battalion travelled on 18 Regiment's tanks—21 Battalion with B Squadron, the 28th with A—until shelling and mortaring forced them to dismount. The tracks across **San Fortunato** surprisingly gave the tanks little trouble and the **Marecchia**, still spanned by a stout wooden bridge, was no obstacle. Because of the confusion of friend with foe, movement within the

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<sup>1</sup> HQ 5 Inf Bde, 21 Bn, 23 Bn, 28 (Maori) Bn, **18 Armd Regt**, **5 Fd Regt**, **32 A-Tk Bty**, **1 MG Coy**, **7 Fd Coy** and company of **5 Fd Amb**.

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bridgehead had to be less carefree, but before the night ended 5 Brigade, and indeed the whole Division, was in position to open the main advance.

Fourth Brigade had expanded its bridgehead on the coastal front as far forward as the **Fossa Turchetta**, and 19 Regiment's tanks were moving to its support. West of Route 16, 5 Brigade had four companies of infantry across the **Marecchia**—C and A Companies of 21 Battalion on the right between the river and Route 9, and A and D Companies of **28 Battalion** on and around Route 9—as well as two squadrons of 18 Regiment. South of the river the two reserve companies of each battalion and the third squadron of the 18th waited to support the advance. Fifth Brigade's reserve battalion, the 23rd, had been instructed to pass into the bridgehead near the coast. Sixth Brigade and Divisional Cavalry were to concentrate south of **Rimini**. Having completed its work of breaching the **Marecchia**, **1 Canadian Division**, with 3 Greek Mountain Brigade under command, relinquished its sector to the New Zealand Division at 8 a.m. on 22 September and reverted to corps

command. The concern which the New Zealand command had felt for the security of its left flank lessened as the situation became known. By the night of the 21st **4 British Division** had cleared its front up to the **Marecchia**, although it still had to cross the river and release **5 Canadian Armoured Division** for its drive across the plain.

*(iii)*

The opening of Operation CAVALCADE on 22 September was an exercise in disillusionment. At the end of a day of hard fighting the codename was seen to be a deceiver: there could be no light-hearted scamper across the **Romagna**. Handicapped by the ground and cover, the Division did well to carry its front forward a mile or more to the **Canale dei Molini**, though this was only the nearer of two report lines on the way to 5 Brigade's first main objective, the **Scolo Brancona**. The main burden of the day was borne by 21 and 28 Battalions, but the 22nd, setting out from its overnight position on the **Fossa Turchetta**, kept the line moving on the seaward flank. Originally given no role in the advance, the motor battalion was not provided for when boundaries were allotted, and it now had to make room for 5 Brigade by contracting its front so as to extend only about 600 yards from the coast. On this narrow sector, what was to have been an armoured dash slowed down to a systematic infantry advance. In the heavily built-up area of **Viserba**, 2 Company on the right and 3 Company on the left soon found that they had to precede their supporting tanks, C Squadron and A Squadron respectively of 19 Regiment.

All buildings and strongpoints had to be thoroughly searched on foot, and the tanks followed up in bounds of about 800 yards on being signalled that each bound was clear of anti-tank weapons. The troops continued past **Viserba** against the yielding front of the Turcoman regiment until by late afternoon they halted just south of the **Canale dei Molini**, where a squall of mortar and anti-tank fire foretold a hardening of resistance and probably announced the arrival of paratroops hurriedly switched to the coastal strip. The enemy complaint that the Turcoman

regiment had been 'more or less scattered to the four winds' <sup>1</sup> has some statistical support: the day's count of prisoners was 123, mostly Turcomen taken in mopping-up just beyond the **Marecchia**; and perhaps another 30 had been killed in the advance. Since crossing the **Marecchia** 22 Battalion had lost six killed and 24 wounded, and 19 Regiment one killed and one wounded.

Fifth Brigade had been battling forward farther from the coast. The stiffest task fell to 21 Battalion, which advanced along both sides of the obvious and therefore heavily defended axis of Route 16. Drains and ditches, many of them deep and interconnected like a ready-made trench system, and clustered vines, farm buildings and houses along the highway offered unlimited weapon sites; and these, easily missed by the first wave of attackers, often came to life at unexpected times and places. Both infantry companies—C on the right of Route 16 and A on the left—and the supporting tanks of B Squadron were so fiercely opposed that for most of the morning they lagged behind the flanking units. Paratroops and Turcomen had to be driven off embankments, flushed out of cellars, attic windows and trenches. To blot out an observation post a tank gun was used to decapitate a tall church tower.

The Germans, resisting mainly with mortars, machine guns and small arms, gave ground grudgingly, sometimes only in the face of acts of individual bravery. Sergeant **Hunt**, <sup>2</sup> of B Squadron, venturing up Route 16 in his light reconnaissance tank without escort, startled about 40 Germans out of their slit trenches with the fire of his weapons. As they ran away, he manoeuvred his Honey tank into their midst, wounded a few and dismounted to take 20 prisoners. Hunt disarmed his captives; enemy mortar bombs and small-arms began to cause casualties among them, but he carried on undeterred and ordered them into a ditch, where he covered them with his tank until New Zealand infantrymen came to his aid.

By early evening of 22 September both companies of 21 Battalion

<sup>1</sup> *Tenth Army* reports.

<sup>2</sup> **Sgt C. Hunt**, MM, Bronze Medal (Gk); **Pukekohe**; born England, 9 Jan 1909; farmer; wounded 3 Aug 1942.

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had consolidated beyond the canal objective. It was not a cheap success, the battalion's casualties numbering 49, but 77 prisoners had been taken.

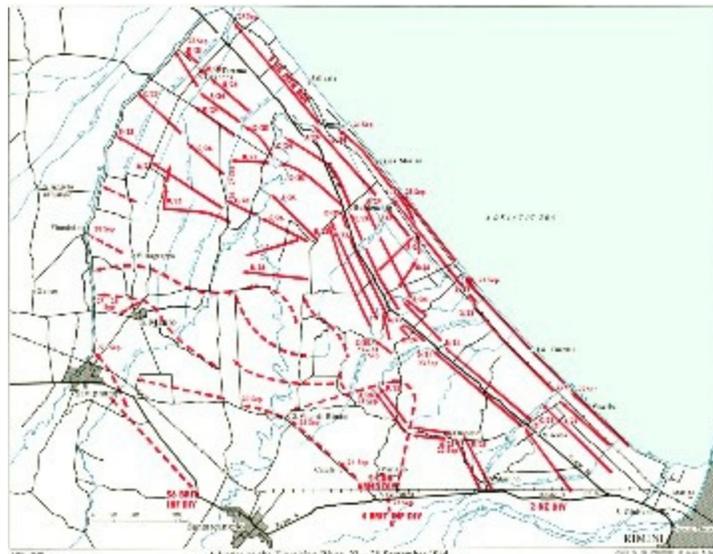
The Maori Battalion, using D Company on the right and A on the left, and supported by tanks of A Squadron, 18 Regiment, had a less difficult advance. On this inland flank there were fewer houses to give defence a refuge, the distance to the objective was shorter, and the enemy made an orderly withdrawal by firing his spandaus until the Maoris drew near and then pulling back to open up again at longer range. Sergeant McCowatt's <sup>1</sup> tank 'stumbled into a nest of bazookas just short of **Orsoleto**, and had a close-range running fight which ended in the Germans departing in a hurry.' <sup>2</sup> At this stage, however, the Maoris began to take real punishment from persistent and accurate shell and mortar fire. Two Tiger tanks entered **Orsoleto**, a hamlet about half a mile beyond the **Canale dei Molini**, and began to shoot up the houses occupied by the Maoris, whose casualties at the end of the day were five killed and 25 wounded. The 10 prisoners taken were fewer than on other fronts, but brought 5 Brigade's tally for the day to 92 and the Division's to 215.

Although the day had been strenuous and costly, the Division had done little more than nibble at the edge of the enemy's **Po valley** defences. The imperturbable Heidrich was bringing up reserves to give depth to *1 Parachute Division's* positions and was confident of being able to seal off the penetrations in the coastal sector. Senior German officers, more anxious than the men on the spot, expected a major attack, 'a push to the Po basin', but were not sure when it would come. The comparative weakness of the Allies' gunfire and the need for more

time to deploy their artillery pointed to a few days' respite; but reports of heavy traffic movement that evening inspired thoughts of greater urgency. The truth was that **Eighth Army**—and the New Zealand Division at the right of the line—being ignorant of where the enemy would stand, was content to press forward until compelled to fight a set-piece battle.

(iv)

Major-General Weir's immediate response to the Division's progress on 22 September was to set the **Rio Fontanaccia**, 4000 yards ahead, as the next bound, which was to be attempted that night. But on the left **4 British Division** was still hardly across Route 9, and presumably concern for an exposed flank caused the GOC to revise his original aim and order the attack to halt at an inter-



Advance to the Fiumicino River, 22 - 28 September 1944

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<sup>1</sup> **WO I J. A. McCowatt, MM; Auckland; born Auckland, 18 Mar 1911; iron moulder.**

<sup>2</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 557.

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mediate drain, the **Scolo Brancona**. Again the main assignment was

given to 5 Brigade group, but 22 Battalion was to conform beside the sea. The divisional artillery, concentrating its fire on 5 Brigade's front, was to beat out a path for the infantry and tanks with a barrage lasting nearly four hours, as well as engaging hostile artillery and making diversion on the left. Once on the objective, the infantry was to keep the roads clear to allow 6 Brigade group to pass through at dawn on the two main axes—Route 16 on the right, and the more devious Black Diamond route which followed secondary roads on the left.

The night held fewer terrors than the preceding day, and 5 Brigade made its ground with little trouble. Advancing at midnight astride Route 16, with B and D Companies now in the lead, 21 Battalion had covered the 2700 yards to the **Scolo Brancona** by 2.40 a.m. without suffering a casualty or even meeting a German. The Maori Battalion was less fortunate. D and A Companies, which were still leading the advance, made a good start but later lost direction. They had no straight road such as Route 16 to guide them in the dark and they were temporarily disorganised by the loss of both company commanders, Major Te Punga<sup>1</sup> (D Company) and Major **Mitchell**<sup>2</sup> (A Company), who were together surprised and killed by spandau fire from a house apparently reported by civilians to be free of the enemy. The Maoris dealt promptly with the occupants and moved on slowly against opposition, but it was not until after Colonel Young had come up to redirect them that they reached the Brancona.

With the British division far outrun and a tank alarm on the left, Young appealed for precautions on his open flank. An anti-tank strongpoint was established in the Maoris' rear near **San Martino**, 32 Anti-Tank Battery contributing two 17-pounders, 23 Battalion four six-pounders and D Company, and the sappers a supply of anti-tank mines. Brigadier Burrows also sent A Squadron of Divisional Cavalry to guard the Maoris' left wing. By this time, however, the neighbouring formation was beginning to conform. The 5th Canadian Armoured Division (Major-General B. M. Hoffmeister) replaced **4 British Division** in command of the sector and began to push troops forward of Route 9. Fifth Brigade

was ordered to stand firm on the line of the Brancona, where 6 Brigade was to take the lead at dawn.

Fifth Brigade's right flank already had been secured by the progress of 4 Brigade. Four platoons of 22 Battalion and two troops

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj H. P. Te Punga**, m.i.d.; born **Lower Hutt**, 27 May 1916; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj H. M. Mitchell**; born NZ 24 Aug 1914; Regular soldier; wounded 16 Dec 1941; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

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of A Squadron, 19 Regiment, met such light opposition on the way to the Brancona line that Colonel Donald had to be restrained from continuing on to the **Rio Fontanaccia**. When General Weir gave the word at 5 a.m. on the 23rd to move on again, the advance went cheerfully for an hour and then recoiled. Beside the coast the way was barred by vigorous spandau and mortar and bazooka fire, which set one tank ablaze and drove the other tanks and the infantry of 2 Company back to shelter in houses about 700 yards short of the objective. In a similar setback on the left, beside the railway line, A Squadron lost two tanks and their crews and 3 Company several casualties to the Turcoman defenders of a house mistakenly thought to be empty. Sergeant Windsor,<sup>1</sup> trapped in the house with other infantrymen and tank crews, who were taken prisoner, escaped, capture only by feigning serious injury. Thus halted, 4 Brigade used the enforced respite to turn the fire power of its tanks and machine guns on to the ground ahead of 5 Brigade where spandaus were causing annoyance.

This was the area into which the fresh troops of 6 Brigade group now advanced. Organised originally to exploit the breakthrough into the plain, the group had been held back during the probing advances of 4 and 5 Brigades. Now it was launched on 5 Brigade's front in two highly mobile forces: 24 Battalion group or Red Force (Lieutenant-Colonel R. L. Hutchens) on the right and 25 Battalion group or Green Force

(Lieutenant-Colonel E. K. Norman) on the left. <sup>2</sup> The **Rio Fontanaccia** was the immediate goal. Operating on the Route 16 axis, 24 Battalion group by dark had established itself within easy reach of the Fontanaccia east of the main road, but not so far forward on the west. Following the roundabout Black Diamond route, 25 Battalion group had passed its forward company through the Maoris and occupied the ground a few hundred yards north of the Brancona.

The gains of the day were modest. The need to bridge the Brancona delayed the arrival of the supporting tanks; the slow advance of the Canadians unmasked the left flank, and from there and from the front the enemy made persistent and punishing use of his artillery, mortars and machine guns. More than once the attackers were sent reeling back by paratroops and Turcomen, who exploited the defensive possibilities of house, ditch and plantation. Early in the day, for example, 25 Battalion's vanguard, veering inadver-

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<sup>1</sup> **Sgt W. C. Windsor**, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 2 Oct 1917; butcher and driver; twice wounded.

<sup>2</sup> Red Force: 24 Bn, C Sqn 20 Armd Regt, platoon **2 MG Coy**, platoon **8 Fd Coy**, 6 Bde Hy Mortar Sec, 105-mm. battery 24 Army Fd Regt (SP) RA, troop M10s 31 A-Tk Bty. Green Force: 25 Bn, A Sqn 20 Armd Regt, platoon **2 MG Coy**, platoon **8 Fd Coy**, troop 17-pdrs **33 A-Tk Bty**, two troops 39 Mortar Bty, 105-mm. battery 24 Army Fd Regt (SP) RA, troop M10s 31 A-Tk Bty.

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tently towards Route 16, nosed into a nest of Germans, losing two tanks and closing to such a short range that the carriers had to be run up on to logs so that the mortars could be fired at the required elevation. In the same locality later in the day a tank supporting 24 Battalion was destroyed and three of its crew were killed and the other two wounded. One of the 11 Tigers in this sector, poking its 'ugly snout' round the corner of a house, had to fire only a single shot to set the Sherman aflame.

**The *1st Parachute Division* could count the day well spent. It still held a continuous line, despite strong pressure by tanks and infantry and shellfire which it rated as of 'barrage intensity'<sup>1</sup> — a comprehensible description of the 20,406 rounds fired by the New Zealand field regiments in the 24 hours. Even the *Turcomen of 236 Reconnaissance Battalion*, sustained between two paratroop battalions, won Vietinghoff's praise for a sturdy showing against 4 Brigade on the coast. The enemy had resolved to hold on doggedly to the line of the Fontanaccia. The limited withdrawals already made persuaded Vietinghoff to tell Kesselring on the morning of 24 September that *76 Panzer Corps* needed reinforcements 'because the situation in its centre is not very flash.' Kesselring said he had been told that *1 Parachute Division* had withdrawn, but Vietinghoff replied, 'That was a trifle.... There was a penetration of 700 metres in the centre, but the wings are still holding firm....'<sup>2</sup>**

**The enemy had shown his determination during the night, when 25 Battalion and its supporting tanks, ordered to square up to the Fontanaccia south-west of Route 16, had had only partial success. On the right A Company reached a lateral road 200 yards or so from the objective, and two patrols were successively driven back from the stream; on the left C Company, having consolidated in houses short of the stream, was harassed by snipers who seemed to be everywhere.**

**Early intelligence on the morning of the 24th confirmed the enemy's intention. A patrol from 22 Battalion beside the coast observed movement on the northern bank of the Fontanaccia. Inland B Company of 24 Battalion got two of its platoons across the Fontanaccia, which proved to be an irrigation canal 12 to 15 feet deep, but once among the vineyards on the far side they had to shelter from spandau fire in a house and in the ditch itself. Withdrawal was slow and costly. One section, running into an enemy post in the ditch, killed at least two Germans but itself lost three killed and one wounded. The survivors were hemmed in by German posts and had to wait to make their escape. Despite smoke and covering fire, it was not until early afternoon that**

<sup>1</sup> *Tenth Army* reports.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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the two platoons could withdraw by wading and crawling through the water in the ditch, while a barking dog advertised all their movements; and it was not until dusk that two sections isolated beyond the Fontanaccia rejoined the company.

The Division's loss of five tanks and of more than 50 casualties on 24 September was sufficient testimony of the enemy's liveliness and alertness along the front. In the evening *1 Parachute Division* claimed to have beaten off 27 attacks in strength in the last 36 hours. Even if this was an exaggeration, it confirmed what was now evident, that the jabbing, unconcerted attacks of the last two or three days had exhausted their usefulness, and that the time had come for an assault by the collected strength of a brigade.

(v)

Weir's plan for that night was to launch the two forward battalions of 6 Brigade with tank support behind an artillery barrage in an attack across the Fontanaccia that would take them 2000 yards forward and about half-way to the River Uso (probably the **Rubicon** of classical history <sup>1</sup>), which meandered north across the plain in many loops before flowing into the sea at **Bellaria**. The objective was a 25,000-yard stretch of the lateral road running north-east to the coast through the village of **Bordonchio**. While 22 Battalion conformed in the narrow strip beside the sea, 24 Battalion was to advance along and east of Route 16, and 25 Battalion on the left flank between lanes to be indicated by tracer from the Bofors guns of 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment.

Twenty minutes before zero hour at 8 p.m., the three New Zealand

field regiments and 17 Canadian Field Regiment were to lay the opening line of their barrage along the Fontanaccia and then lift their fire ahead of the infantry, who were set the fairly brisk pace of 100 yards in five minutes. Concentrations would be fired by 4 Medium Regiment in support of 6 Brigade and by 24 Field Regiment, RA, in support of 22 Battalion. The silencing of the enemy batteries was to be the work of the Canadian Army Group, **Royal Artillery**. The assaulting battalions were to construct tracks forward for their tanks and the engineers were to clear Route 16 for wheels as soon as possible.

One problem remained. Although they had captured **Casale**, crossed the Fontanaccia and approached **San Vito di Rimini** from the east, the battalions of 12 Canadian Infantry Brigade had not yet drawn level with the New Zealanders, and a further advance therefore would dangerously uncover the Division's left flank. The task

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<sup>1</sup> Some maps show the Fiumicino River as the **Rubicon**.

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of protecting it was assigned to B Squadron of 20 Regiment and D Company, 26 Battalion.

Sixth Brigade was set an advance of about 3000 yards in two and a half hours. If not entirely vindicating the plan, the brigade showed that it was far from illusory. The enemy seems to have been taken unawares: on one part of the front the attack disturbed a relief of troops, and a ration truck, a doctor and his orderly, and an 'elderly soldier' delivering mail in a horse and buggy in turn drove blithely into captivity. The darkness—only imperfectly dispersed by artificial moonlight—grape vines, undergrowth and ditches, and the occasional failure of a wireless set made it difficult for the assaulting companies to keep in touch; in some places the enemy was well dug in along the Fontanaccia, and machine-gun posts, disposed in depth, fought back from time to time throughout the advance; but they could often be bypassed by the first wave, and the Tiger and Panther tanks prowling among the defences showed on the whole more anxiety to retire to safety than to risk a

**short-range surprise coming out of the night.**

**The 24th Battalion, attacking along and east of Route 16, found the going harder and slower than did 25 Battalion on the inland flank. A Company led off on the right and C Company on the left, with D and B Companies respectively mopping up behind them. After advancing unopposed for 600 yards, A Company lost the shelter of the barrage through having to delay to clear out strongpoints. Besides harrying the company with small arms and gunfire, the enemy was leaving a few troops behind to send up signals calling for mortar fire as soon as the New Zealanders approached. The company had to patrol to right and left for reassurance about its flanks, but just before daylight it was within 200 yards of the objective, where it dug in, in the face of stiff resistance on the right, to await the assistance of the supporting tanks.**

**By this time C Company was established in neighbouring posts on the left, also about 200 yards from the lateral road through [Bordonchio](#), having had bloodless encounters with three Tigers on the way there. The two mopping-up companies had to crush spandau posts bypassed by the leading companies before consolidating about half-way to the objective. The tanks of C Squadron, 20 Regiment, followed up, successfully negotiating the waterway, and soon after dawn one troop made a welcome junction with A Company, which it helped to evict a German platoon from a high-walled graveyard in [Bordonchio](#).**

**Three companies were used by 25 Battalion on its front west of Route 16. There, in spite of an early flare-up on the Fontanaccia, where both sides lost men, the pace was swifter. D Company (on the right), moving beside the highway, was on its objective by 10.20 p.m., still close up behind the barrage. It was joined 40 minutes later by A Company (in the centre), and with the arrival of a weakened B (on the left) about 3.50 a.m. the battalion was in firm possession of its goal, the road running south-west from [Bordonchio](#), and had thrown out some posts beyond it. The presence of tanks of A Squadron, 20 Regiment, strengthened its hold.**

Meanwhile 6 Brigade's open left flank was being screened, and by dawn the combined force of infantry and armour, disposed in groups composed of a platoon and a troop, was filling part of the gap between 25 Battalion and the Canadians to the south-west. The advance had cost 6 Brigade 57 casualties, all wounded infantrymen.

In its conforming attack on the coastal strip, 22 Battalion, with tanks from B Squadron of 19 Regiment, met stiff resistance and was brought to an abrupt halt a few hundred yards beyond the Fontanaccia and about 2500 yards short of the objective, the southern half of the seaside village of **Igiea Marina**. Spandaus and mortars concealed in the low sandy ground north of the Fontanaccia troubled 1 Company on the right and 3 Company on the left from the outset. Without the benefit of an artillery barrage they made slow progress to the stream, and not far beyond it were pinned down by steady fire. Nor could the tanks give much help, for enemy infantry posts were hard to locate and the mines laid on the coastal road were covered by fire, which frustrated the efforts of engineers to lift them. Two plans for speeding up the advance were suggested during the night. One was reinforcement by 26 Battalion, and the other the diversion of 1 and 3 Companies through 6 Brigade so that they might attack farther north from the left flank rather than continue their frontal pressure. More cheerful reports, however, caused both plans to be abandoned and by the time the hard truth was known it was too late.

The total result of the Division's attack on this night of confused fighting on 24–25 September was to thrust 6 Brigade forward in a salient 2000 yards deep. At the tip of this salient the brigade was on its objective (the lateral road through **Bordonchio**) on the left and very near it on the right. The long right flank which the brigade showed towards the sea was due to the check which had arrested 22 Battalion a short distance beyond the Fontanaccia. The left flank was being watched by a small force of tanks and infantry, while farther to the south the Canadians were still probing towards San Vito and the Uso.

The obvious next move was for 4 Brigade to square up so that the

Division's right flank should rest entirely on the sea. The sound of explosions in **Igiea Marina** and reports by civilian refugees drifting southwards suggested that the enemy, having held his ground stubbornly overnight, was now on the morning of the 25th retiring upon a new line along the **Uso**. When 1 and 3 Companies of 22 Battalion and their supporting tanks resumed their advance up the coast about 8.30 a.m. this seemed to be the case, for they advanced unchallenged. Ahead of them fighter-bombers, favoured for once by the weather, bombed and strafed; the artillery bombarded key points; and by early afternoon, after some delay in crossing the **Rio del Moro**, the infantry were on the southern edge of **Igiea Marina** and had drawn level with 6 Brigade's front.

The time had come to relieve 22 Battalion. Temporary relief was given by A and B Companies of 26 Battalion, which had been launched that morning in an attack across the line of advance to seize a length of the embankment on the inter-brigade boundary between the **Fontanaccia** and the **Moro**. From there they went forward to the railway line, before wheeling left to come up behind 22 Battalion. The relief was completed by late afternoon, but the two 26 Battalion companies were themselves replaced two or three hours later by D Company, 24 Battalion, released from its mopping-up task on the left. The whole of the Division's front, stretching 2000 yards inland from the southern limits of **Igiea Marina**, was now in the hands of 24 and 25 Battalions, with support from 20 Armoured Regiment. The only other New Zealand troops in even spasmodic contact with the enemy were the left-flank protection force, which had had brushes with German tanks and infantry during the day, and patrols of the Divisional Cavalry still farther south.

The penetrations by 6 Brigade were causing concern, but not panic, in the German command. Early in the evening of 25 September Vietinghoff admitted to Kesselring that 'the situation on *1 Parachute Division's* front is critical and is worrying us.'<sup>1</sup> Heidrich was complaining that his new reinforcements were 'not like his old people'.

His casualties during the last two days—35 killed, 83 wounded and 156 missing—were at least twice as heavy as the New Zealanders'. Both the paratroops and their right-hand neighbours, *29 Panzer Grenadier Division*, were committed to the last man. The final portent of gloom was the expectation of a new major offensive, which was deduced from the arrival of fresh formations,<sup>2</sup> the reconnaissance thrusts, the methodical ranging by the artillery and the systematic destruction of lines of communication by enemy aircraft. The policy of *76 Panzer Corps*, as defined by Herr, was 'to

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<sup>1</sup> *Tenth Army* reports.

<sup>2</sup> A prisoner from 6 NZ Inf Bde seems to have given German intelligence the impression that a new division – 6 NZ Div – had arrived from *Egypt*, in part or *in toto*.

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give up as little ground as possible, but to get back without unnecessary casualties....'<sup>1</sup> To this end the foremost positions were to be held strongly enough to seal off reconnaissance patrols but not so strongly as to have too many troops 'pounded to pieces' by the artillery prelude to a main attack. To give the defence the depth which all agreed was essential, most troops would be reserved for the second line, where the Tiger tanks and heavy anti-tank weapons would be concentrated.

(vi)

As the New Zealand intelligence had predicted, defence of the *Uso* was no part of the German plan, and of all the many watercourses that confronted the Division, few were less obstructive than this circuitous stream. Barely opposed advances during the day and night of 26 September took the New Zealanders across the *Uso* in two places with bridges behind them, so that, in conformity with the Canadians on their left, they were ready on the 27th to strike towards the next main obstacle, the Fiumicino River.

A swift breakthrough to the **Uso** on 25 Battalion's front early on the 26th strengthened the evidence of an enemy withdrawal, and Weir instructed Parkinson to push his brigade up to the river with all speed. The 26th Battalion was brought in on the left of the brigade, between 25 Battalion and the Canadians, and was to press on to the **Fiumicino**. At the same time, so as to keep one battalion in reserve, 3 Greek Mountain Brigade would come into the line on the coastal sector, relieving 24 Battalion.

On the seaward flank three companies of 24 Battalion had closed up to the river by early afternoon, with hardly more hindrance than a minefield in the centre. C Squadron's tanks were soon in attendance and the battalion's left wing rested comfortably on 25 Battalion's right. Stray enemy soldiers were coaxed into the prisoner-of-war cage, 20 from the Turcoman division by D Company and 14 by Italian partisans. Civilian and partisan reports of German departures, a show of white flags in houses across the river and the discovery of a steel bridge still intact at the southern entrance to **Bellarria** all called for rapid pursuit. A patrol from C Squadron of Divisional Cavalry drove its Staghounds across the bridge into the town, but demolitions blocking the main street prevented it from engaging the small enemy rearguard and, as night was falling, it withdrew south of the river. The relief of 24 Battalion was completed soon after midnight. The Greek brigade group, again under New Zealand command, deployed one battalion along the **Uso** in the forward

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<sup>1</sup> *Tenth Army* reports.

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positions vacated by 24 Battalion, with its boundary a short distance west of Route 16.

Meanwhile 25 Battalion was on the move. Preceded by patrols which reported that the way was clear, D Company made a dash to the **Uso** and reached it before 8 a.m. A patrol which explored 300 yards beyond the river found no enemy. A thousand yards farther south, A Company was

slower and was not in position on the river before early afternoon. The infantrymen were escorted by two troops of A Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, and by tanks from A Squadron, 20 Regiment. Just as the commander of one of the troops of armoured cars joined a group of a dozen infantry and tank men conferring beside the river bank, a shell fell among them, killing an officer and seven men—a costly lesson in the need for dispersion.

In compliance with brigade orders to establish a bridgehead across the **Uso** overnight, 25 Battalion made its crossing under the protecting fire of field and medium guns and of heavy mortars. The guns also fired to drown the noise of 8 Field Company's bulldozer, which was assisting in the erection of an Ark <sup>1</sup> bridge to enable the tanks to cross to the western bank. The night brought no setbacks, and by dawn on the 27th D, C and B Companies were about 1000 yards beyond the river along the next ditch, the Fossa Vena, guarded by the tanks.

On the southern side of a line of electric power pylons which ran in a north-westerly direction and served as an inter-battalion boundary, 26 Battalion also made satisfactory use of the day and night. In the wake of B Squadron, 20 Regiment's tanks 'beating up anything that looked suspicious', <sup>2</sup> first C and then B Company closed up to the **Uso**, and each pushed two platoons across the river. Mortars and snipers then imposed a halt, but the advance was resumed by moonlight and the battalion was soon on its objective along the line of the Fossa Vena. The sappers bulldozed a ford under fire and the tanks crossed the **Uso** before daybreak.

*(vii)*

Thus, by 27 September, the Division had reached the low-lying, ditched, vine-clad land between the **Uso** and the **Fiumicino**, about eight miles north-west of **Rimini**. General Burns expected his corps to exert steady pressure so as to prevent the enemy from stabilising his front. The advance was to go on by day and night, and in order to keep contact his two divisions (the New Zealand and the 5th

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<sup>1</sup> A turretless Churchill tank to which were attached fore and aft American treadway tracks. The Ark was used to span narrow water passages with deeply cut banks by driving it into the bed of the stream and opening out the tracks to reach both banks.

<sup>2</sup> 26 Bn report.

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Canadian) were to cross river lines in sufficient strength to penetrate deeply. If supporting arms could not make an immediate crossing, the assaulting infantry was to push ahead without them, especially at night, when the defence would be handicapped in using its close-support weapons.

Burns's assumption that the Germans were making a general withdrawal covered by rearguards was a little too sanguine. The enemy had every intention of holding his ground, or at the worst of exchanging it only for satisfactory payments in time, men and material. Vietinghoff told Kesselring on the morning of the 27th that 'the rear units in the main defence zone will hold.'<sup>1</sup> Boundaries had been moved north to reduce divisional sectors; 100 tons of high explosives were on the way for demolition work; and in the meantime bridges, culverts and roadways could be wrecked by the improvised use of aerial bombs and shells as demolition charges. The declared intention of *76 Panzer Corps* to hold the present line and Kesselring's anxiety about the adequacy of its reserves showed a determination to stand firm.

General Weir, fully in accord with General Burns, was impatient to press on, and that day ordered an advance to the **Fiumicino** on the whole divisional front. At dawn on 28 September 5 Brigade group would pass through 6 Brigade and, with the Greek brigade conforming on the right, would make for the next objective, the road linking the coastal town of **Cesenatico** with the Route 9 town of **Cesena**. Fourth Armoured Brigade would follow up along the Black Diamond route, prepared to refuse 5 Brigade's left flank against any threat from the inland sector.

First, however, the ground had to be cleared up to the **Fiumicino**, through the buildings of **Bellaria** and the vineyards west to Route 16. Two companies of Greeks on the coastal strip worked methodically. Like the two troops of Staghounds which went ahead, they were harassed by skilful delaying tactics. Having blown culvert, bridge or stopbank, often by obsolete or improvised explosives, the German rearguard would surprise attacking troops with mortar or small-arms fire as they came forward to inspect the demolition—a ruse which made the advance a canny, probing business. In the afternoon of the 27th the infantry and armoured cars got within 700 yards or so of the **Fiumicino**, but there they had to halt. From its mouth inland to the railway the river was protected by prepared obstacles— a concrete pillbox, ‘dragon's teeth’, anti-tank rails and wire—and these in turn were screened by watchful defenders, only 100 or 200 yards ahead of the Greeks' foremost positions. The day's advance had cost the Greeks 23 casualties.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tenth Army* report.

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Farther inland 6 Brigade, with the support of 20 Regiment's tanks, felt a similar hardening of opposition when making for its objective, a road running almost parallel with the **Fiumicino** and from 700 to 1000 yards short of it. On the right 24 Battalion, passing through the 25th, attacked with three companies and supporting arms, but in a dusk made lurid by burning haystacks the lateral road was still approximately 300 yards ahead of them. The way forward had been hotly contested by Germans manning spandaus in houses used as strongpoints and by persistent shellfire.

An Italian and his wife wormed their way under shellfire along a ditch to report that the Germans had withdrawn from a house which was said to be sheltering 100 civilians. When the New Zealanders occupied the house and converted it to their own use, it came under artillery and mortar fire, which wounded soldier and civilian alike.

**South of the power line 26 Battalion had to contend with spandaus and the fire of mortars or guns controlled sometimes by observation posts mounted on pylons. The enemy retired only under pressure, hindering the advance with heavy automatic fire and then falling back two or three lanes of vines to caches of ammunition, where he renewed his defiance. By dusk C Company, in the centre of the three attacking companies, was the only one in 6 Brigade to reach the lateral road before the order was given to consolidate.**

**The casualties in 24 and 26 Battalions were eight killed and 34 wounded. The armoured regiment also paid a price: A Squadron, for example, had lost nine killed and nine wounded; four tanks had been set on fire and another destroyed. It was an enervating kind of warfare, nagging in its demands and niggardly in its rewards. In this typical day's work the Division had made another mile of ground. When General Weir heard at 5 p.m. that 6 Brigade had not taken its objectives, he ordered the battalions to consolidate for the coming relief. The initiative passed to 5 Brigade.**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## II: FROM THE FIUMICINO TO THE PISCIATELLO

### *II: From the Fiumicino to the Pisciatello*

(i)

Fifth Brigade was to patrol to the **Fiumicino** and try to secure a bridgehead, but if strongly opposed on the river, was to prepare for a set-piece attack. The 21st and 23rd Battalion groups, <sup>1</sup> which relieved 24 and 26 Battalions, were instructed to advance to the **Cesenatico- Cesena** road, some three to five miles beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> Each group included the battalion's infantry, a squadron of **18 Armd Regt**, a troop of **32 A-Tk Bty**, a platoon of **1 MG Coy**, a platoon of **7 Fd Coy** and half of **39 Mortar Bty**.

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**Fiumicino**. Because the gap between the New Zealand Division and 5 Canadian Armoured Division had been greatly reduced, left-flank protection was no longer considered necessary.

After patrols from 21 and 23 Battalions had failed to reach the **Fiumicino** during the night of 27–28 September, the two commanding officers (Colonels J. I. Thodey and E. A. McPhail) agreed that it would be necessary to clear the east (near) bank before the attempt was made to cross the river.

Thodey ordered B and D Companies of 21 Battalion to advance in the morning of the 28th to the lateral road which had been the objective of the earlier attacks, and then to the river. The two companies had to cross ground under observation by the enemy occupying houses on the near side of the river, and consequently came under fire as soon as their movement was noticed. By midday, however, the leading men of B Company were at Casa la **Torretta** o Cagnona, on the lateral road. D

**Company was held up by shell and mortar fire at the Fosso Matrice, a ditch about 300 yards short of the lateral road. Both companies were supported by tanks of B Squadron, 18 Regiment.**

**McPhail also decided that morning to push his leading companies towards the river. C Company of 23 Battalion reached the lateral road, and B Company, on the left flank, continued on towards the Scolo Cavaticca, a drain about half-way between this road and the river. The supporting tanks of C Squadron, 18 Regiment, had difficulty in making their way over ditches and past demolitions.**

**Meanwhile, at midday, General Weir held a conference at Headquarters 5 Brigade to plan the attack over the **Fiumicino** for the coming night. It was decided that the two battalions should try to clear the enemy from the near side of the river in the afternoon as a preliminary to the attack. Beyond the river 4 Brigade was to take over from 23 Battalion the part of 5 Brigade's front south of the electric power pylons and was to provide left-flank protection for the Division. The 5th Canadian Armoured Division, on that flank, was to attack at the same time.**

**It was appreciated that the weather might cause the cancellation of these plans. A 40-mile-an-hour gale from the sea brought torrential rain, which soon made the ground sodden. The tanks did their best to keep up with the infantry, who struggled through the deepening mud, but their tracks became clogged, and they slithered and bogged down. Communications failed, tanks and infantry lost each other, and at one stage some tanks were out in front unprotected. Gunpits were flooded and the guns had to be pulled out of them. The rivers rose rapidly, and the engineers were impeded in their work on roads and bridges. Under such conditions it was no mean achievement for 5 Brigade to reach the **Fiumicino** late in the afternoon, but the attack which was to have been made across the river that night had to be cancelled.**

**It was a wretched night for men without shelter. Many of the houses had been shot to pieces, and slit trenches filled with water. Vehicular**

movement was extremely difficult and in places impossible. Most of the tanks were bogged, and even jeeps were hopelessly stuck. The evacuation of casualties, including men suffering from exposure and exhaustion, and the delivery of food and ammunition to the forward troops demanded the most strenuous effort.

Machine-gun and mortar fire had prevented B Company, 21 Battalion, from advancing beyond Casa la **Torretta** o Cagnona, but A Company had gone ahead on the left of D, which had reached the river bank. A few enemy still remained on the near side of the river on 23 Battalion's front, but most of them departed next day, when A and D Companies relieved B and C. On the coastal flank the Greek brigade, supported by tanks of C Squadron, 20 Regiment, and the Staghounds of C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, still faced fixed defences including pillboxes. After an artillery stonk on a building on Route 16 a patrol found that two of three machine-gun posts had been knocked out; the third 'had no fight left, and the Turcomen were only too glad to give themselves up.' <sup>1</sup>

The Canadians also cancelled their planned assault over the **Fiumicino** because of the rain. The previous night (27–28 September) a company of the Irish Regiment of **Canada** (a battalion of 11 Brigade) had waded across the river, but had been surprised not far beyond it by a superior force of German infantry and tanks, and had lost nine men dead and 50-odd taken prisoner. This disaster 'taught a useful lesson: not again in **Italy** in the 11th Brigade was a company dispatched to take a battalion objective.' <sup>2</sup> The New Zealanders were to learn a similar lesson three months later, when a platoon of 25 Battalion was lost on a stopbank of the **Senio River**.

It would be impossible to resume the advance until the ground dried out sufficiently to allow the tanks to move again. General Weir conferred with Brigadiers Pleasants (4 Brigade), Burrows (5 Brigade) and Queree (CRA) and Lieutenant-Colonel **Anderson** <sup>3</sup> (CRE) in the afternoon of the 30th, and the outcome was a decision to abandon the plan made on the 27th to continue the attack along

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, Div Cav.

<sup>2</sup> *The Canadians in Italy*, p. 572.

<sup>3</sup> Lt-Col J. N. Anderson, DSO, m.i.d.; Te Awamutu; born Okaihu, 15 Apr 1894; civil engineer; OC 19 Army Tps Coy May–Jun 1941; 5 Fd Pk Coy Sep 1941–Oct 1942; 6 Fd Coy Oct 1942–Jul 1943; CRE 2 NZ Div Sep 1942, Apr–Jul 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; CO Engr Trg Depot, Maadi, Jan–Aug 1945.

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the Black Diamond axis and to advance instead along the axis of Route 16 because of the engineering difficulties created by the weather on the secondary roads the Division had been using.

The fighting developed into a slogging match with guns, mortars and machine guns, in which each side tried to knock down the houses the other was occupying, destroy his weapons and vehicles, and harass him as much as possible. 'By 30 September the Fiumicino farms were already beginning to look like a Flanders scene in 1917.' <sup>1</sup> A brief improvement in the weather permitted Allied fighter-bombers to attack targets beyond the Fiumicino; and on a moonlit evening two German Junkers 88s dropped bombs before they were chased away by the anti-aircraft barrage. That night (30 September–1 October) 28 Battalion relieved the 21st and 22 Battalion the 23rd, and A Squadron replaced B Squadron of 18 Armoured Regiment.

(ii)

Eighth Army planned to regroup and continue the advance into the broadening plain on a three-corps instead of a two-corps front, with the Polish Corps on the coastal sector (where it was to take the place of the New Zealand Division, which would go into reserve), the Canadian Corps in the centre and 5 Corps on the left. The move forward of the Poles, however, was delayed by the worsening weather.

At this stage General Sir Oliver Leese relinquished command of **Eighth Army** to head the Allied Land Forces in South-East Asia; he was succeeded on 1 October by Lieutenant-General Sir Richard McCreery, who had commanded **10 Corps** since the landing at **Salerno**. McCreery modified the plan for regrouping: he decided to transfer the Poles to the mountainous left flank with the intention of passing them down one of the river valleys to outflank the enemy opposing the main body of **Eighth Army** in the plain. It was 17 October before the Poles were ready to begin this manoeuvre. Meanwhile, during the first 10 days of the month, the stalemate continued on the Canadian Corps' front, where plans for an assault across the **Fiumicino** were made and cancelled because of further heavy rain.

The first of these plans called for a crossing during the night of 1–2 October by 5 NZ Brigade on the axis of Route 16, but because of the flooding seen from the air on the enemy's side of the river and the obvious strength of the defences where it was proposed to attack, it was decided to strike in a more westerly direction towards Sant' Angelo in Salute. In preparation for this the Division moved farther to the left: the Greek brigade extended to take over

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 564.

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the **Maori Battalion's** front—which temporarily left only 22 Battalion holding 5 Brigade's sector—and next night 21 Battalion relieved the Perth Regiment, the right-hand battalion of 11 Canadian Brigade (which 5 Canadian Armoured Division then replaced with 12 Brigade).

Apart from the persistent harassing fire and the bombardment of selected targets (the accuracy of the enemy's fire suggesting that he knew the locations of reserve units and headquarters as well as of forward posts), the main activity on both sides was patrolling, which often led to clashes and casualties. The aim of the New Zealand, Canadian and Greek patrols was to learn as much as possible about the

river and its banks (which were mined) and the enemy's positions and habits, in the anticipation that an improvement in the weather might permit the resumption of the offensive. In expectation of their second winter in **Italy**, the troops were issued with battledress and winter clothing.

General McCreery prepared for a two-corps attack along an axis parallel to Route 9. His plan was for **5 Corps** to capture the town of **Cesena** on Route 9 and cross the Savio River south of the highway, and for the Canadian Corps to cross the **Fiumicino**, the Rio Baldona and the **Scolo Rigossa** and then exploit north-westwards.

The New Zealand Division, which was to make the assault alongside 5 Canadian Armoured Division, began to relieve 5 Brigade with 6 Brigade on the Fiumicino River front. Because of the 'untankable'<sup>1</sup> state of the ground and the nature of the fighting, the Division had more tanks and armoured cars than it could employ but needed more infantry. An *ad hoc* battalion called **Wilderforce**,<sup>2</sup> therefore, was brought into the line under 6 Brigade's command and in the evening of 5 October took over from 22 Battalion on the right, while 25 Battalion relieved the 21st on the left. During the next two nights 25 Battalion was replaced by the other two battalions of 6 Brigade, which then held the river front with, from right to left, **Wilderforce**, 26 Battalion and 24 Battalion, and with 25 Battalion in reserve and **19 Armoured Regiment** in support.<sup>3</sup> About the same time 5 Canadian Armoured Division replaced 12 Brigade with the 11th.

Brigadier Parkinson reported that his brigade was ready to begin the assault on the night of 7–8 October—despite torrential rain the previous night. General Burns, who appreciated that there was little

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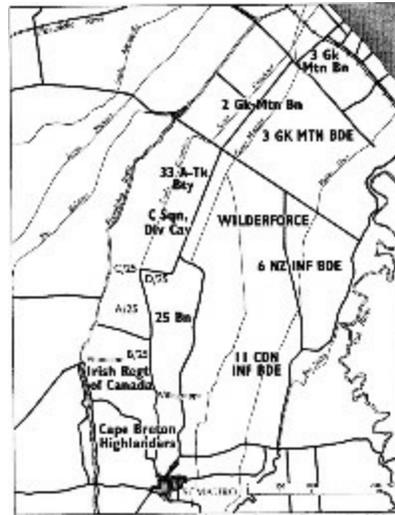
<sup>1</sup> War diary, **18 Armd Regt**.

<sup>2</sup> Commanded by **Lt-Col N. P. Wilder** (CO Div Cav) and comprising two infantry companies formed from B and C Sqns,

Div Cav, a third from **33 Bty, 7 A-Tk Regt**, and a platoon each of Vickers guns and heavy mortars.

<sup>3</sup> In addition 6 Bde was to command 24 Army Fd Regt (SP) RA, 31 A-Tk Bty, **2 MG Coy, 8 Fd Coy**, and A Coy 6 Fd Amb, and was to have in support 20 Armd Regt (less one squadron) and a squadron and troop of 1 Assault Regt RAC/RE.

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6 NEW ZEALAND INFANTRY BRIGADE AND 11 CANADIAN INFANTRY BRIGADES, NIGHT 5-6 OCTOBER 1944

6 NEW ZEALAND INFANTRY BRIGADE AND 11 CANADIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE, NIGHT 5-6 OCTOBER 1944

hope of an immediate improvement in the weather, discussed with General McCreery the possibility of continuing either with the existing 'dry weather' plan or of employing a modified 'wet weather' plan, which would involve a more limited advance in shorter stages determined by the difficulty of bringing forward the supporting arms. The attack was then fixed for the night of 8-9 October, but more rain made conditions even worse, and Burns decided that the attack could not start that night even on the 'wet weather' plan.

Once again the Canadian Corps' crossing of the Fiumicino River was postponed.

(iii)

The enemy had abandoned the whole of his **Gothic Line** defences

(except on the unimportant extreme western flank), but had prevented **Fifth Army** from debouching from the northern **Apennines** on to the Lombard plain. In the central mountainous sector, however, **Fifth Army's** penetration towards **Imola** and **Forli**, two towns on Route 9 south-east of **Bologna**, forced apart the inner wings of *Fourteenth* and *Tenth Armies* and threatened to cut off *76 Panzer Corps* (of *Tenth Army*) on the Adriatic flank. To meet this threat *Fourteenth Army* was reinforced and absorbed the reserves which might have been available to the hard-pressed *Tenth*.

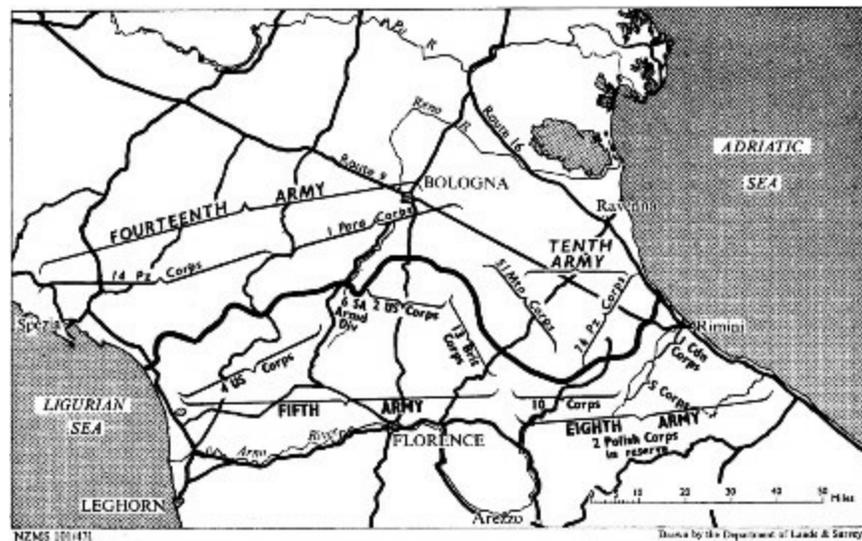
In the Adriatic sector the enemy's withdrawal across the **Fiumicino** River had been just in time; in fact the crossing had been 'indescribable. Some guns were practically washed away. We even lost some men by drowning....' <sup>1</sup> The copious rains, which prevented **Eighth Army** from exploiting its earlier success, gave *Tenth Army* a breathing space which emboldened it on 3 October to view the resumption of the offensive on the Adriatic front 'more confidently than before, as the weather has allowed the divisions there some time to build up their strength and improve their positions indepth....' <sup>2</sup> Next day, however, it was pointed out that, as all the reserves had been passed over to *Fourteenth Army*, 'it would be necessary to adopt a mobile policy if the enemy renewed his attacks on the Adriatic.' <sup>3</sup>

On Route 9 the Germans were able to move troops to the part of the front where assistance was needed most urgently at any time. They succeeded in re-establishing cohesion south-east of **Bologna** and prevented **Fifth Army** from breaking through to Route 9; south of the city they stopped the very strong thrust by 2 **United States Corps** along the axis of Route 65, the highway from **Florence** through the Futa Pass. **Fifth Army** continued to exert unrelenting pressure, but the German tactics of blocking all the routes which descended the valleys to the plain and of holding the dominating heights between the valleys, combined with the bad weather and the exhaustion and shortage of men, compelled General Clark to suspend the offensive on 27 October.

Meanwhile, early in October, the Germans had a correct

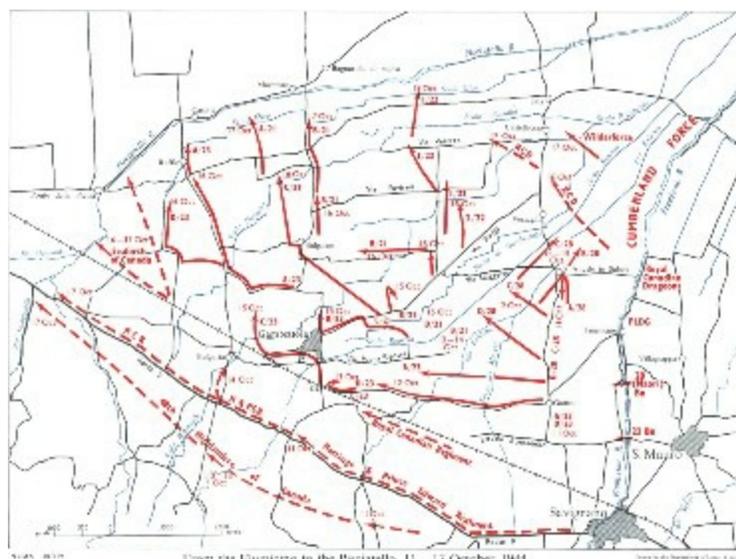
appreciation, at least in part, of **Eighth Army's** intentions: 'The rain had

- 1 *Tenth Army* report.
- 2 *Tenth Army* war diary.
- 3 *Ibid.*



THE FRONT, 8 OCTOBER 1944

THE FRONT, 8 OCTOBER 1944



From the Fiumicino to the Pisciatello, 11 - 17 October 1944

soaked the ground in the Adriatic sector and raised all streams to a

very high level, so that the enemy had no chance of resuming his large-scale offensive there. It was thought likely, however... that the enemy might launch a full-scale attack east of the upper **Savio** valley and make a landing in the **Ravenna** area.' <sup>1</sup> *Tenth Army* therefore gave orders on 6 October for the assembling of 'sufficient reserves' in these places.

Although **1 Canadian Corps** had been obliged to postpone its attack across the **Fiumicino** River because of the weather and the state of the ground, **5 Corps** had begun to advance in the foothills south of Route 9, where the rains had been less damaging. During the night of 6–7 October troops of **10 Indian Division** on the corps' left wing crossed the **Fiumicino** and in darkness and pelting rain next evening took the 1600-foot Monte Farneto, overlooking the valley of the Savio River south of the town of **Cesena**. The rest of the Indian division and **46 British Division** (on its right) crossed the **Fiumicino** and joined in the process of outflanking the enemy on the line of the river. On the 10th **46 Division** captured Longiano, a town about two miles south of Route 9 overlooking the **Scolo Rigossa**. The *90th Panzer Grenadier Division* therefore withdrew along the highway from the **Fiumicino** to the Rigossa. The same day **56 British Division** crossed the **Fiumicino** at Savignano (on Route 9) and its engineers bridged the river.

**Fifth Corps'** progress thus confirmed General McCreery's appreciation that during the rainy season the foothills and the going astride Route 9, from the **Rimini- Cesena** railway southward, offered better opportunities than the sodden plain, and that as crossings were secured over the upper reaches of the rivers the enemy would be forced to retire in the plain. McCreery therefore directed the **Canadian Corps** to take over Route 9 from **5 Corps** and thrust along the highway while **5 Corps**, with two divisions, continued the attack through the foothills. On 9 October General Burns assigned to his divisions their roles in the new plan: **1 Canadian Infantry Division** was to relieve **56 Division** (which had suffered many casualties in the recent fighting) and continue the advances along Route 9, while north of the **Rimini- Cesena** railway **2 NZ Division** was to relieve **5 Canadian Armoured Division** and form a strong

guard for the Canadian infantry division's right flank. Burns wrote in his diary that the divisional commanders 'pointed out the very bad going and expressed the opinion that we might be drifting into the carrying on of an offensive in similar conditions to those of last autumn and winter, where the hard fighting and numerous casualties resulted in no great gain.'

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, *Tenth Army*.

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The regrouping gave the Canadian Corps a front extending eight miles from the sea to 1000 yards south of Route 9. To permit the concentration of the corps' effort on the left wing, an aggregation called **Cumberland Force** was organised to hold the line of the **Fiumicino** from the coast for three and a half miles inland; commanded by Brigadier I. H. Cumberland, it was composed initially of Headquarters 5 Canadian Armoured Brigade, 3 Greek Mountain Brigade, the New Zealand Wilderforce, the dismounted Royal Canadian Dragoons (armoured car regiment) <sup>1</sup> and supporting Greek, New Zealand and Canadian arms. The New Zealand Division was in the central sector, with **5 Infantry Brigade** forward on the northern side of the railway. It was intended that 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade should take over from a brigade of 56 Division on Route 9, but when it was learned that the enemy on that part of the front was withdrawing, it was decided that the Canadian brigade should push through—instead of relieving—the British brigade and advance in bounds along Route 9 until it re-established contact.

The first encounter was just short of the **Scolo Rigossa** late in the afternoon of 11 October. A battalion of 1 Canadian Brigade drove the enemy back across the canal and next day secured a bridgehead 500 yards deep. As **5 NZ Infantry Brigade** at this stage was about two and a half miles behind their foremost positions, the Canadians sent another battalion forward between the road and the railway to protect their lengthening right flank.

(iv)

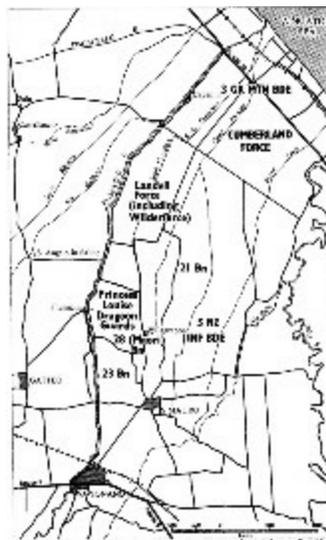
By the evening of 10 October 5 NZ Brigade had completed the changeover with units of 5 Canadian Armoured Division on the Fiumicino River front, with 28 (Maori) Battalion on the right and 23 Battalion on the left. Patrols from these two battalions and from the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards (of 12 Canadian Infantry Brigade), which was protecting the Division's right flank, found that the enemy had fallen back from the river, which 5 Brigade proceeded to cross on the morning of the 11th. Sappers of 6 Field Company finished erecting a 100-foot Bailey bridge on the San Mauro – **Gatteo** road shortly after midday, and farther north 7 Field Company began to work on the approaches to a bridge site at **Fiumicino** village.

Brigadier Burrows issued orders for an advance in four bounds to the Pisciattello River, which was also the Canadians' first objective. The infantry had no difficulty in reaching the area of the start line, the lateral road between **Gatteo** and Sant' Angelo in Salute, about

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<sup>1</sup> The Royal Canadian Dragoons and **Wilderforce** were known as **Landell Force** until 13 October.

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5 INFANTRY BRIGADE, NIGHT 10-11 OCTOBER 1944

5 INFANTRY BRIGADE, NIGHT 10-11 OCTOBER 1944

three-quarters of a mile beyond the **Fiumicino**, but the tanks of **19 Armoured Regiment**, of which B Squadron was to support **28 Battalion** and C Squadron the 23rd, were delayed by mines and demolitions after crossing **6 Field Company's** bridge. The Brigadier therefore ordered both battalions to halt on the start line for the night and to bring up their supporting arms. <sup>1</sup> Shelling and mortaring caused casualties among the waiting troops and hindered the sappers working on the bridge at the **Fiumicino** village, which they did not complete until late next morning (12 October).

By that time 5 Brigade had advanced against negligible opposition to the **Rio Baldona**, a small stream which ran diagonally across the front about a mile and a half from **Gatteo** on the left and through Sant' Angelo on the right. The enemy blew up the bridge over the Baldona at Sant' Angelo—but later replaced it with a footbridge. The Maoris, taking 11 prisoners on the way, reached the stream in little over an hour without loss to themselves; and a little later 23 Battalion, which had farther to go, also had men at the stream and in contact with the Royal Canadian Regiment on the left flank. The supporting tanks, coming up in rear, found that the ground still was not hard enough for movement off the roads.

At the **Rio Baldona** C Company of **28 Battalion**, on the right flank, suffered casualties from shell and mortar fire. Lance-Corporal **King** <sup>2</sup> courageously led his section in charges which destroyed two German strongpoints. Although part of D Company crossed the stream, the Maoris made no immediate attempt to go farther. On their left A and D Companies of 23 Battalion also crossed but were at once brought to a halt by shell and mortar fire.

The brigade nevertheless resumed the advance in the afternoon towards the **Scolo Rigossa**, a large drain which flowed between stopbanks eastwards past the small town of **Gambettola** before curving to the north-east. The enemy held the ground in front of this obstacle only with small isolated groups. The Maoris, who did not have far to go, took

16 prisoners at a cost of a dozen casualties and occupied several houses near the drain. D Company of 23 Battalion, which had much farther to go, worked its way along the road from **Gatteo** until less than half a mile from the bridge over the Rigossa at **Gambettola**. The tanks which followed on the road used a bridge the enemy had left intact over the **Rio Baldona**. A Company went across country north of the road until within

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<sup>1</sup> Also included in each battalion group were a troop of **32 A-Tk Bty**, a troop of 104 Cdn A-Tk Bty (M10s), a platoon of **1 MG Coy** and a platoon of **7 Fd Coy**.

<sup>2</sup> **L-Cpl G. D. King**, MM; Taumarunui; born Taringamotu, 19 Mar 1922; millhand; twice wounded.

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350–400 yards of the drain. During this advance 23 Battalion had half a dozen casualties and took 10 prisoners.

Fifth Brigade's progress created a salient south-west of Sant' Angelo, which the enemy still retained as a strong outpost for his front along the **Scolo Rigossa**. This hamlet commanded a network of roads to the north, south, east and west, and the positions of the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards which were protecting 5 Brigade's right flank; it was also directly in front of the Royal Canadian Dragoons of **Cumberland Force**, on the other side of the Fiumicino River. The enemy had allotted this part of his line to two battalions of *20 German Air Force Division* under the command of *26 Panzer Division*; on their left were troops of *1 Parachute Division* (whose front ran to the sea), and on their right a battalion of *26 Panzer*. <sup>1</sup> It was presumed that the enemy was holding Sant' Angelo to protect *1 Parachute Division's* right flank for a further night, if possible, while the paratroops withdrew behind the Scolo Rigossa or the Pisciatello River. <sup>2</sup> Brigadier Burrows ordered 28 Battalion to attack Sant' Angelo.

A Company was given the task, with the support of a troop of tanks and with a platoon from B Company in reserve. The artillery began a

half-hour programme of concentrations on the Sant' Angelo area at 2.30 a.m. (13 October). As soon as the Maoris began their 500-yard advance, their commander (Captain **Christy**<sup>3</sup>) was wounded by shellfire, and as there was no other officer with the company at the time, Second-Lieutenant **Ransfield**,<sup>4</sup> of the attached platoon from B Company, assumed command. The guns laid on another stonk to prevent the expected reinforcement of the Germans holding the hamlet.

The Maoris made a fresh start at 5 a.m. They came under machine-gun and mortar fire after going about 300 yards, but continued to a house by the road from Sant' Angelo to the **Fiumicino**. The enemy concentrated mortar, bazooka and machine-gun fire on this house and around it. Realising that the position could not be held without strong support, Ransfield withdrew his men to the troop of tanks, which had been halted by a demolition on the **Gatteo** – Sant' Angelo road.

Colonel Young informed Brigade Headquarters at 8 a.m. that

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<sup>1</sup> *29 Pz Gren Div* had been pulled out of the line between *1 Para Div* and *26 Pz Div* to strengthen *76 Pz Corps'* right wing south of **Cesena**, and then had been transferred to *Fourteenth Army* to stiffen the resistance against the American drive on **Bologna**.

<sup>2</sup> The **Scolo Rigossa** and **Pisciatello River** come together before reaching **Route 16** and flow into the **Fiumicino River** at the highway.

<sup>3</sup> **Maj B. G. Christy**, MC, m.i.d.; Nuhaka, Hawke's Bay; born NZ 11 Jun 1920; labourer; four times wounded.

<sup>4</sup> **Capt J. Ransfield**, m.i.d.; **Rotorua**; born **Rotorua**, 24 Dec 1905; truck driver; twice wounded.

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more than one company would be needed to capture Sant' Angelo. The casualties, however, had not been heavy—one killed, seven wounded

and two missing. Of the five German prisoners taken, two were from *20 GAF Division* and three from *1 Parachute Division*, which apparently had moved troops to Sant' Angelo. The presence of paratroopers 'provided an excellent reason for the savage resistance encountered there.' <sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile patrols from *23 Battalion* made several unsuccessful attempts during the night to reach the bridge over the *Scolo Rigossa* at *Gambettola* with the object of holding it if it was still intact. Eventually the enemy blew the bridge when a patrol was about 200 yards from it. He held *Gambettola* with a battalion of *9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, *26 Panzer Division*, and had an outpost at Point 120, a road junction and railway crossing about 400 yards south of the town.

Early on the morning of 13 October Major-General Weir ordered *5 Brigade* to 'tidy up' its front, which was two miles wide, and to bypass Sant' Angelo when it resumed its advance, but to hold one company back to face up to the hamlet. Brigadier Burrows told his battalion commanders that the brigade might be required to attack across the *Scolo Rigossa* that night, and gave instructions for *28 Battalion* to secure a line covering both Sant' Angelo and the German positions beyond the *Scolo Rigossa*, the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards to protect the brigade's right rear, *23 Battalion* to get up to the *Scolo Rigossa* and reconnoitre for bridge sites, and *21 Battalion* to be prepared to relieve both forward battalions if necessary.

B and C Companies of *23 Battalion* relieved A and D, and C Company despatched *13 Platoon* (Lieutenant Cox <sup>2</sup>) to the Rigossa. Before they reached Point 120, the leading men of this platoon were pinned down on open ground by machine-gun fire. All available weapons harassed *Gambettola* before *13 Platoon*, now supported by two tanks, resumed the advance. One tank was knocked out on the road, the other bogged in soft ground, and the infantry retired under machine-gun fire to a large house about 150 yards from Point 120. The Germans shelled, mortared and machine-gunned the house, and came close to capturing it. When

13 Platoon withdrew at dusk, the action had cost two men killed and five wounded, as well as the temporary loss of the two tanks. A patrol from 14 Platoon was sent without support towards the **Gambettola** bridge site but was caught by machine-gun fire, with the result that the leader was killed and three of his men wounded and captured.

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<sup>1</sup> **2 NZ Div** Intelligence summary, 13 Oct 1944.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj W. B. Cox**, MC; born NZ 17 May 1909; salesman; wounded 13 Oct 1944.

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Two tanks, in hull-down positions with B Company, near the bank of the **Scolo Rigossa** farther downstream, used their Browning machine guns against Germans who could be seen in trenches and dugouts only 80–100 yards away. A tank gunner saw tracer bullets ricocheting from a haystack so fired incendiaries which set it alight, together with the vehicle concealed in it.

Appreciating that the situation was not favourable for pushing on to the **Gambettola** bridge site that night, Burrows told 23 Battalion not to go any further, and strengthened the front by bringing B Company of 21 Battalion into the line between 28 and 23 Battalions.

An improvement in the weather permitted fighter-bombers of the **Desert Air Force** to attack German tanks, guns and other targets. The 'cab-rank' aircraft, on call from 'Rover Paddy', <sup>1</sup> were very effective. Apart from this air activity and exchange of fire by the artillery (despite stringent restrictions on the expenditure of ammunition), tanks, mortars and machine guns, however, there was little activity on 14 October, except south of the railway, where 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade captured the village of **Bulgaria**, about three-quarters of a mile west of **Gambettola**. This gave the Canadians a substantial bridgehead across the **Scolo Rigossa**, but the enemy was still up to the line of the Rigossa on 5 NZ Brigade's front and the Fiumicino River on **Cumberland Force's** front.

(v)

**General Freyberg**, who resumed command of the New Zealand Division from General Weir on 14 October,<sup>2</sup> gave first consideration to the situation at Sant' Angelo, which the enemy held as an outpost on 5 Brigade's right flank. He told General Burns that the Division was prepared to take Sant' Angelo with a battalion attack that night. Another battalion could then be brought up to get a crossing over the Rigossa west of the hamlet; the Rigossa could be bridged and the GOC could then decide whether to relieve the battalion in the bridgehead or to send 6 Brigade through.

Again the task of capturing Sant' Angelo was given to the Maori Battalion, which was to employ two companies and was to have

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<sup>1</sup> 'Rover Paddy', 'Rover David', etc., were the names given to air support control detachments which operated in forward observation positions with wireless links to aircraft in the air or to airfields, and with line communication with divisional or brigade headquarters, and sometimes in contact with forward battalions, companies or squadrons. A 'cab-rank' was a group of fast aircraft—usually three to six Kittyhawks—on call through one of these detachments or the air staff captain at a divisional or corps headquarters. The 'cab-rank' aircraft were in the air over the front for a specific time (e.g., 20 minutes).

<sup>2</sup> Maj-Gen Weir officially relinquished command of 2 NZ Division on 17 October and was appointed to the command of 46 British Infantry Division on 4 November.

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more supporting fire. The Canadians assisted in the artillery programme, in which four field regiments and one medium regiment participated. The guns opened fire at 8 p.m. and a quarter of an hour later B and C Companies left their start line, south-west of Sant' Angelo. They met no resistance except light shell, mortar and small-arms fire and took their objectives at a cost of one man killed and eight wounded.

The sappers began work as soon as they could on the opening of a route from **Gatteo** to Sant' Angelo, where a party from 8 Field Company started to build a 60-foot bridge over the **Rio Baldona**. The bridge-building was interrupted by shelling, which wounded three men, but after daybreak six Spitfires silenced a self-propelled gun which probably had been the cause of the trouble. The bridge was completed shortly before midday.

The Maoris' attack on Sant' Angelo had coincided with a withdrawal forced upon the enemy by **5 Corps'** continued outflanking successes in the Apennine foothills south of Route 9. The enemy's ability to hold the line of the **Scolo Rigossa** in the plain had depended on his retention of a ridge south of **Cesena** and east of the Savio River valley. By 14 October **5 Corps** had captured the commanding heights on this ridge. The previous day *Tenth Army* had ordered *76 Panzer Corps* to withdraw into reserve west of **Cesena** a regimental group of *90 Panzer Division*, which was defending the sector astride the railway and Route 9 south of **Gambettola**, but the corps commander (General Herr) told General Vietinghoff on the 14th that the attacks on Route 9 (by 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade) had made this impossible without withdrawing the whole line. Vietinghoff then authorised a fighting withdrawal to the Pisciatello River. Although the units of *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* and *26 Panzer Division* began to retire from the Scolo Rigossa between **Gambettola** and Sant' Angelo, no immediate withdrawal was made by the regiments of *I Parachute Division* whose front extended forward of the Rigossa to the **Fiumicino** River on the corps' left flank.

An 'intercept' of a German radio message revealed that the enemy was pulling back to the line of the **Pisciatello**. Brigadier Burrows suggested to Colonel Thomas (23 Battalion) that he should test his part of the front with small patrols just before dawn on the 15th to ascertain whether or not the enemy was still there. The patrols found that he had gone. B Company established a platoon at a road junction on the northern edge of **Gambettola**, while a platoon from C Company entered

the town from the south and took 15 prisoners. The first opposition was met by B Company when its leading platoon was pinned down by machine-gun fire only a short way along the road to the north; but C Company men reached the railway west of the town without hindrance.

Burrows decided that it was time to replace **28 Battalion** with the 21st and continue the advance to the **Pisciatello** with 21 and 23 Battalions. But first it was necessary to bridge the Rigossa and bring up the supporting arms. Because there was so much to do, sappers from 6, 7 and 8 Field Companies and **5 Field Park Company** were employed on opening routes: they lifted mines, cleared demolitions and bridged the **Scolo Rigossa**; they installed a 'scissors' bridge <sup>1</sup> at **Gambettola** in time for the tanks of C Squadron, 19 Regiment, to cross and join 23 Battalion before midday; they had to postpone the erection of a 70-foot Bailey bridge because of persistent shellfire, but built a drum culvert which vehicles could use alongside the scissors bridge and placed an Ark bridge about a mile downstream from **Gambettola**. West of Sant' Angelo the tanks of A Squadron, 19 Regiment, forded the Rigossa.

B Company of 21 Battalion, <sup>2</sup> which had gone into the line the previous day, was restored to its parent unit and, together with C Company, crossed the Rigossa in the afternoon of the 15th. The two companies formed up on the Via Staggi, a road running north-eastward from **Gambettola**, where they were joined by A Squadron's tanks. They began to advance about 4.30 p.m. but had gained only a few hundred yards when they came under mortar and machine-gun fire from houses to their north. One tank was set on fire by a bazooka. It was decided that both 21 and 23 Battalions should go no farther that night.

From prisoners—24 of whom were taken by the Division on the 15th—and other sources of information a picture was built up of the enemy's defence on 5 Brigade's front. His rearguards had fallen back to positions about half-way between the Rigossa and the **Pisciatello**, and as usual he had blown demolitions on the roads and tracks which passed over numerous streams and ditches. His tanks and self-propelled guns still south of the **Pisciatello** were shelled by the artillery and bombed by the

**Desert Air Force.** With fine weather the fighter-bombers had a good day against these targets and houses occupied by the enemy.

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<sup>1</sup> A bridge carried on a Valentine tank with mechanism to unfold it (like a pair of scissors) and lay it in place.

<sup>2</sup> 21 Bn (like 23 and 28 Bns) was organised as a 'battle group' which included A Sqn of 19 Regt, a troop of **32 A-Tk Bty**, a troop of 104 Cdn A-Tk Bty (M10s), a platoon of **1 MG Coy** and a platoon of **7 Fd Coy**.

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(vi)

Now that both 1 Canadian Infantry Division and 2 NZ Division had troops across the **Scolo Rigossa**, the Canadian Corps applied itself to the next stage of the advance, to the **Pisciatello River**. While 1 Canadian Brigade was to make all speed along Route 9, 5 NZ Brigade was directed to a stretch of the river between **Macerone** and **Ponte della Pietra**, north-west of **Gambettola**. Fifth Brigade was to advance with 21 Battalion on the right and 23 on the left, and with 22 (Motor) Battalion (from 4 Brigade) protecting the flank between the **Rigossa** and the **Pisciatello**. The Royal Canadian Dragoons (of **Cumberland Force**) relieved the Maoris at Sant' Angelo.

Although the sappers were unable to construct a Bailey bridge at **Gambettola** until next day, the supporting arms were able to cross the **Rigossa** by way of the drum culvert and the Ark bridge. Fifth Brigade resumed the advance on the morning of the 16th. C Company of 21 Battalion entered the village of **Bulgarno**, three-quarters of a mile north of **Gambettola**, and the battalion then waited for further orders, as it had been instructed to do. A Company, 23 Battalion, headed along a road north-west of **Gambettola** until halted by mortar fire about a mile from the **Pisciatello**.

German troops in the vicinity of **Ruffio** and in the village itself,

between A Company and the river, were bombarded by the artillery. One of the supporting tanks was immobilised by an anti-tank gun, but scored a direct hit on its assailant, and later the infantry captured the gun, its crew and tractor. Elsewhere B Company came upon 15 Germans who were 'apparently just waiting to be collected'.<sup>1</sup>

On 5 Brigade's right the **Royal Canadian Dragoons** and Wilderforce discovered on the morning of the 16th that the enemy had fallen back beyond the Rigossa on most of the front, but *1 Parachute Division* still held firmly on the **Fiumicino** line opposite 3 Greek Mountain Brigade, nearer the coast. A 12-man patrol from A Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, was unexpectedly counter-attacked at the Rigossa by about 40 paratroopers, who drove them out of a house by knocking it down with bazookas. The patrol leader (Second-Lieutenant Purchase<sup>2</sup>) and his men held out in another house until the counter-attack was broken up by artillery and machine-gun fire. Six of the patrol were wounded, and two of the wounded captured. The Germans returned with a horse and cart, under a **Red Cross** flag, to collect their own casualties, who were thought to be more numerous.

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, 23 Bn.

<sup>2</sup> Lt G. W. R. H. Purchase, MC; born NZ 21 May 1911; telephone mechanic; twice wounded.

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(vii)

The enemy was expected to hold the **Pisciatello** as a main line of resistance, with outposts in front of it. **General Freyberg's** plan was to direct 5 Brigade on **Macerone** (a village on the far bank of the river north of **Bulgarno**) and on the crossing by **Casone** (farther upstream, north of **Ruffio**). If the enemy was not holding this line strongly, 5 Brigade was to secure a bridgehead over the river that night (16–17 October). Fourth Brigade was to bring 18 Armoured Regiment from the coast and, rejoined

by 22 Battalion, was to give 5 Brigade right-flank protection east of **Bulgarno**—or was to exploit north if required. Sixth Brigade's task would be to pass through 5 Brigade's bridgehead over the **Pisciatello**.

The boundary with the Canadian division was to be adjusted to run approximately north from **Bulgaria** through **Ruffio** to the **Pisciatello**. The Canadians intended to push along Route 9 with 1 Infantry Brigade and to bring in 2 Infantry Brigade on the right to seize a frontage on the **Pisciatello** which included the crossing by **Ponte della Pietra**, formerly in the New Zealand sector.

Early in the afternoon of the 16th 21 Battalion set off northwards with the object of reaching the **Scolo Fossalta**, about half-way between **Bulgarno** and the **Pisciatello**. B and C Companies made fairly slow progress under shell and mortar fire, and when within range of the German outposts, about three-quarters of a mile from the **Pisciatello**, were held up for some time by small-arms and machine-gun fire. Towards evening C Company closed up to a lateral road just beyond the **Fossalta**, but B Company did not get quite so far. Infantry of 22 Battalion and tanks of A Squadron, 18 Regiment, were established at various points north of the Rigossa to protect 21 Battalion's right flank.

The enemy seemed to be preparing to counter-attack down the road from **Ruffio**, but a 'murder' shoot by the artillery and fire from the tanks put an end to the aggressive intentions he may have had against A Company, 23 Battalion, which was on the **Ruffio** crossroads by nightfall. Meanwhile Colonel Thomas had decided to send D Company on an outflanking movement along roads west of the **Bulgaria- Ruffio** route. This took the company unintentionally into the Canadians' sector—which was realised when the roads ahead were shelled by Canadian guns. The company removed itself to the **Bulgaria- Ruffio** road. During the day 21 and 23 Battalions took over 70 prisoners; their own casualties were two killed and 10 wounded.

**General Freyberg** told General Burns that 5 Brigade expected to be on the line of the **Pisciatello River** that night (16–17 October) and that 6

**Brigade would cross the river next day. It was his aim to establish a bridgehead with the infantry so that the armour could go through.**

**The New Zealanders, however, did not reach the [Pisciatello](#) that night, although 21 Battalion made some progress towards it. D Company, on the road leading north from [Bulgarno](#), was brought to a halt by mortar and machine-gun fire from German outposts south of the river, but pushed on again when this fire diminished, and not long before dawn approached the Scolo Olca, a drain within half a mile of the river, where it again came under fire. Seven men sent to examine a house were surrounded by a more numerous enemy, who killed an NCO, mortally wounded another man and took the rest prisoners. A Company, on a secondary road farther west, reached the Scolo Olca and captured two Germans who were unaware of the New Zealanders' approach. About 6.30 a.m. Brigadier Burrows told Colonel Thodey that 21 Battalion was not to attempt to go any farther at this stage. The two companies therefore consolidated, with the enemy still between them and the river. They had taken a dozen prisoners.**

**On 23 Battalion's front patrols from A Company found that the enemy was very alert in the [Ruffio](#) area and despite an artillery 'murder' was still there in the early hours of the 17th. A patrol from D Company bypassed [Ruffio](#) without being detected and reached the [Pisciatello](#) about 50 yards from the crossing north of the village. The river appeared to be a major obstacle. This was confirmed by patrols from 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade, whose leading troops by morning were up to the [Pisciatello](#) between its junction with the Rio Matalardo (a tributary) and [Ponte della Pietra](#), west of 5 Brigade's sector.**

**(viii)**

**General Burns told [General Freyberg](#) on the morning of 17 October that he and General McCreery were anxious to get a bridgehead over the [Pisciatello](#) as soon as possible because the fine weather was expected to break within 24 hours. [Freyberg](#) asked Burrows (5 Brigade) and Parkinson (6 Brigade) whether they could establish a bridgehead. They were both**

doubtful because the enemy was 'still fighting back', <sup>1</sup> but the GOC urged Burrows to try to get across and to hand over to 6 Brigade on the other side. It was intended that 6 Brigade should establish a bridgehead for 4 Brigade to pass through and then consolidate the ground behind 4 Brigade's advance.

Fourth Brigade's objective was to be the line of the **Rio Granarolo**, a stream lying north of the **Cesena- Cervia** road and about half-way

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

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between the **Pisciatello** and the **Savio**. The advance was to be made by **18 Armoured Regiment** on the right and the 20th on the left; **22 (Motor) Battalion** was to support the two regiments.

A Company of **23 Battalion** occupied **Ruffio** on the morning of 17 October, after three tanks had raked the village with their Browning machine guns for some time. The bridge over the **Scolo Olca**, between **Ruffio** and the **Pisciatello**, although prepared for demolition was still intact, but the enemy reacted to an advance beyond **Ruffio** with shell, mortar and small-arms fire. Fifth Brigade reported to **Divisional Headquarters** that there was 'a shooting war' on its front. The tanks of **19 Regiment** and the artillery engaged many targets—guns, mortars, machine guns and occupied houses— and the **Desert Air Force** also was very busy. Reconnaissance aircraft reported that all the bridges over the **Pisciatello** between **Route 9** and the sea had been blown.

In the afternoon **1 Company** of **22 Battalion** approached to within a few hundred yards of the river on **5 Brigade's** right flank. Sergeant **Palmer** <sup>1</sup> led a platoon assault on **Casa Casalini**, between the **Scolo Fossalta** and the **Scolo Olca**, with such dash that two machine guns were overrun and the rest of the enemy put to flight; five Germans were killed and four captured. Another platoon took possession of **Casa Fossalta**, farther to the east.

When rain began to fall at 2.30 p.m. prospects did not look too bright for continuing the advance with tanks. The road in 22 Battalion's sector became almost impassable for tracked vehicles, and 4 Brigade began to fear a repetition of the bogging it had experienced during the stalemate on the Fiumicino River. Nevertheless, **General Freyberg** ordered the brigade to proceed with the planned advance, providing that 6 Brigade was able to establish a crossing over the **Pisciatello**. Already **18 Armoured Regiment** had come forward to the **Gambettola** area; and the 20th moved in heavy rain from the coast to the vicinity of the **Uso River**.

Fifth Brigade ended its seven-day spell in the line in the late afternoon and evening of 17 October, when 24 and 25 Battalions took over from the 21st and 23rd; 26 Battalion was in reserve in the **Bulgarno** area; A Squadron of 19 Regiment supported 24 Battalion and B Squadron the 25th. It was decided that 6 Brigade should not attempt to establish the bridgehead over the **Pisciatello** that night, but should send out patrols to reconnoitre for crossing places.

After a patrol from A Company, 25 Battalion, had gone unopposed along the road from **Ruffio** to the demolished bridge near **Casone**, the whole of the company moved to the vicinity of the

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<sup>1</sup> **Sgt G. H. Palmer**, DCM; **Dannevirke**; born **Christchurch**, 27 Aug 1916; shepherd.

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river; and on the right D Company took up positions between the river and a lateral road east of **Ruffio**. A Company, 24 Battalion, waded the river at a crossing between **Casone** and **Macerone** without meeting the enemy, and established a platoon on the bank.

Farther west the enemy was more lively. B Company of the 24th twice attempted to patrol to a crossing place between **Macerone** and **Bagnarola** and was driven back each time by machine-gun and small-arms fire. The foremost troops of 22 Battalion (1 Company), on the

Division's right flank, were exposed to fire from Sala and **Castellaccio**, villages to the east and south-east where Cumberland Force had not drawn level. The battalion was warned that attacks could be expected on 1 Company's positions, which were strengthened by a platoon from 3 Company.

The first attack came against the **Royal Canadian Dragoons**, farther south, who were forced back some distance, but were reinforced and regained their position. After a heavy bombardment about 50 paratroops attacked 1 Company's position at Casa Fossalta, held by two infantry sections under Second-Lieutenant **Bassett**.<sup>1</sup> Using bazookas, grenades and automatic weapons, the Germans tried for four hours to break the defence. They retired at dawn but returned soon afterwards and were surprised and dispersed by tanks (from A Squadron, 18 Regiment) coming from the west and by infantry from the south. At least eight Germans were killed, many wounded, and six captured from *1 Parachute Division*. The New Zealand casualties were seven wounded.

**Wilderforce**, the New Zealand component of **Cumberland Force**, sent out patrols between the **Scolo Rigossa** and Pisciatello River at dawn on the 18th. A patrol from 33 Anti-Tank Battery entered **Castellaccio** and killed four Germans, but withdrew (with one man wounded) because the village was strongly held and ammunition was running low.

The enemy still held the coastal strip at the Fiumicino River, where the belt of wire, mines, concrete 'dragon's teeth' and pillboxes, originally designed to repel a seaborne attack, gave him strong defence against 3 Greek Mountain Brigade. The Greeks ended their campaigning in **Italy** on 18 October, when their relief in this sector was completed. Accompanied by the New Zealander (Aked) who had served them well as liaison officer, they returned to their homeland, from which the Germans already had begun to withdraw. At the same time as the Greeks departed, **Wilderforce** returned to the New Zealand Division from **Cumberland Force**, which was left with three dismounted armoured units in an infantry

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt G. M. Bassett, MC; Palmerston North; born Wellington, 23 Jul 1914; farmer; wounded 18 Oct 1944.**

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**role—the Governor General's Horse Guards (Canadian) on the right, 27 Lancers (British) in the centre and the Royal Canadian Dragoons on the left—supported by the road-bound tanks of the British Columbia Dragoons.**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## III: FROM THE PISCIATELLO TO THE SAVIO

### *III: From the Pisciatello to the Savio*

(i)

Field Marshal Kesselring and General Vietinghoff agreed on 16 October that the loss of the areas east of the Savio River (which flows northwards through **Cesena**) would be 'unpleasant but not tragic'.<sup>1</sup> Next day, for reasons which included the possibility of an Allied breakthrough to **Bologna** or to Route 9 south-east of the city, the necessity of thinning out on the coastal flank to strengthen the central front, and the Canadian advance along the axis of Route 9 towards **Cesena**, *76 Panzer Corps* proposed a withdrawal in a north-westerly direction to avoid possible encirclement, but *Army Group Headquarters*—under strict orders from the German High Command not to yield ground in any sector—refused consent and demanded that **Cesena** be held. This meant that in order to hold ground in an unimportant sector the whole *Army Group* was being placed in jeopardy. Commanders and chiefs of staff harped on this point in telephone conversations<sup>2</sup> on 18 October. Vietinghoff insisted that the sector east of the **Savio** should be given up and finally Kesselring, being of the same opinion, on his own responsibility authorised a fighting withdrawal.

This coincided with the Canadian Corps' planned advance to the **Savio**. General Burns's immediate intentions were to establish crossings over the **Pisciatello** on the New Zealand and Canadian divisions' fronts and to push on with both divisions and capture crossings over the **Savio**. The Canadian Division was to extend its bridgehead over the **Savio** to link up on the left with **5 Corps** and co-operate with it in clearing **Cesena**. **Cumberland Force** was to protect the right flank of the New Zealand Division.

While **6 NZ Infantry Brigade** patrolled to the **Pisciatello** on the night

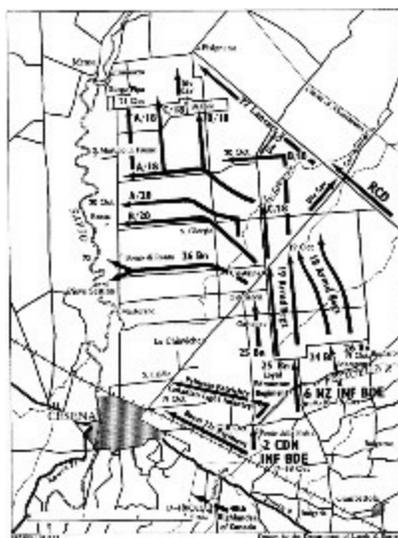
of 17–18 October, 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade, on the left, succeeded in gaining a small bridgehead over the river by the railway crossing, and 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade gained another over the Donegaglia, a tributary south of Route 9. In the afternoon of the 18th the Canadians enlarged their lodgement north of the railway and cleared **Ponte della Pietra**.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tenth Army* report.

<sup>2</sup> The record of this day's telephone conversations takes up 31 pages.

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ADVANCE TO THE SAVIO  
ADVANCE TO THE SAVIO

The bombardment for the New Zealand attack, which began at eleven o'clock that night, was 'quite impressive'. <sup>1</sup> A creeping barrage by the three New Zealand and two Canadian field regiments lifted 100 yards every five minutes for nearly two hours; anti-aircraft guns fired tracer along both flanks and on a centre line to guide the

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

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infantry; British and Canadian medium guns and New Zealand heavy

mortars performed counter-battery and counter-mortar tasks, and the machine guns gave harassing fire. Although the enemy had begun to retire, this was not entirely a waste of ammunition: the bombardment caught *26 Panzer Regiment* while withdrawing 'and casualties were very heavy.' <sup>1</sup>

The New Zealanders, 24 Battalion on the right and 25 on the left, met practically no opposition—thanks to the artillery having 'done the usual good job.' <sup>2</sup> B and A Companies of 24 Battalion crossed the **Pisciatiello** with little difficulty and worked their way forward to a lateral road half a mile or so beyond it. D Company, following B on the right flank, cleared **Macerone**, from which most of the enemy had gone. D and A Companies of 25 Battalion, and B following A to protect the left flank, crossed the river near **Casone**. Soon after 2 a.m. both battalions were on the objective; they had taken about 50 prisoners, and their own casualties, mostly caused by mines or shellfire, totalled 44. The engineers went to work as quickly as they could bridging the **Pisciatiello** so that the tanks and other support weapons could go into the bridgehead. A Valentine tank installed a scissors bridge at 24 Battalion's crossing, which A Squadron of 19 Regiment (which was to support 24 Battalion) and 18 Regiment intended to use, but the first tank to cross damaged the bridge so that no other could follow. Another bridge-layer was called up, but the sappers considered that the banks were too soft for it, and therefore began to build a 40-foot Bailey. Until this could be used, all traffic was diverted to an Ark bridge which had been placed at 25 Battalion's crossing near **Casone**. B Squadron of 19 Regiment crossed the Ark to join 25 Battalion before daybreak and A Squadron's tanks followed to get to 24 Battalion. By 7.20 a.m. 20 Regiment also was across, ready for 4 Brigade's advance. Rain, which had begun at 4 a.m., softened the roads, which were churned up by the heavy vehicles. Although delayed by the traffic ahead, 18 Regiment completed the crossing by 9.40 a.m. The enemy had not interfered with the passage of troops and vehicles into the bridgehead; he did not shell the bridges.

Because a crossing place a little farther downstream, between

**Macerone and Bagnarola**, had a much better approach road than those already in use, Brigadier Parkinson ordered 26 Battalion to capture **Bagnarola** so that a bridge could be put there. The village was found to be completely free of the enemy. Before midday 7 Field Company had a 70-foot Bailey bridge ready for traffic

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<sup>1</sup> *Tenth Army* report.

<sup>2</sup> 24 Bn newsletter.

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next to the Ark at **Casone**, and late in the afternoon 6 Field Company completed a 110-foot Bailey at the **Bagnarola** crossing.

*(ii)*

When both 18 and 20 Regiments had formed up in 6 Brigade's bridgehead over the **Pisciatello** on the morning of 19 October, 4 Brigade was ready to launch its armoured drive to the **Savio** River. This was to be 'a swift advance at tank speed' over a course of about four and a half miles, a more ambitious undertaking than any previously attempted. In the past the Division had advanced with infantry supported by artillery and armour, but this time the tanks were to be in front and the infantry's function was to protect them against the assaults of enemy infantry. 'Indeed, for the first time the 4th Armoured Brigade was operating as a brigade, instead of having its regiments placed under infantry brigades in support of infantry advances. Now each regiment was itself supported by a company of the 22nd Battalion....' <sup>1</sup>

At 9.50 a.m. Brigadier Pleasants 'gave the order that the whole Brigade had been waiting for throughout the Italian Campaign: the order for the two Regiments and the Motorised Battalion to attack.' <sup>2</sup>

The first objective was a section of the **Cesena- Cervia** road in the **Osteriaccia- Calabrina** area and part of the secondary road running east from the **Calabrina** crossroads. This was actually part of the enemy's

'Doris' defence line, to which *26 Panzer Division* and *1 Parachute Division* had retired during the night. In flat farmland criss-crossed with narrow lanes, the more substantial *Cesena- Cervia* road could be seen from some distance, lined with tall trees and with small clusters of houses at its many crossroads.

The two armoured regiments, the 18th on the right and the 20th on the left, <sup>3</sup> set off in a northerly direction and made satisfactory progress until they came within range of well-sited guns, mortars and machine guns in the *Doris Line* and were impeded by the drains and deep ditches which bordered the lanes running across their line of advance. A gun firing armour-piercing shell from near the crossroads east of *Osteriaccia* hit and set on fire a Sherman and a Honey reconnaissance tank in 20 Regiment. Other tanks which were stranded in ditches or bogged were hauled out by Sherman bulldozers, or assisted by the engineers or the regiment's recovery

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<sup>1</sup> *One More River* (Army Board campaign survey), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> *4 NZ Armd Bde – Ops in Italy, 13 Sep – 22 Oct 44.*

<sup>3</sup> 18 Regt had B Sqn on the right, C on the left, A in reserve on the right of 20 Regt, and was supported by 2 Coy 22 (Mot) Bn; 20 Regt had B Sqn on the right, A on the left, C deployed in the rear, and was supported by 3 Coy 22 (Mot) Bn.

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team. The tanks tried to subdue the strongpoints at *Calabrina*, where they got close enough to shoot up machine-gun and sniper posts in some of the houses, and at *Osteriaccia*, from which they were forced back by gun and mortar fire. Two more Shermans were knocked out by gunfire.

While advancing towards the *Cesena- Cervia* road, 18 Regiment shot up machine-gun and bazooka posts in ditches and farmyards, but in the increasingly soft fields the tanks 'bellied in the mud. ... some of them were running out of ammunition at awkward moments.... Some troop

commanders were asking for infantry to come up and help dislodge the paratroopers, but this could not be arranged at a moment's notice.' <sup>1</sup> A self-propelled gun—or perhaps more than one—firing from buildings at a crossroads caught all three tanks of a B Squadron troop in the open and set them on fire, and paratroopers with bazookas set alight a tank stuck in the mud. Two of three self-propelled guns—probably those which had ambushed the three tanks—were knocked out while hastily trying to get away.

While 4 Brigade was still making promising progress in the morning, orders were given to reconnoitre crossings over the Rio **Granarolo** with the intention of continuing the advance to San Giorgio. <sup>2</sup> Sixth Brigade, which had been assigned the task of taking over the ground and mopping up in rear of the armour, was to establish all-round defensive positions at **Osteriaccia** and **Calabrina**, and 5 Brigade was to move into the area vacated by the 6th. The enemy's retention of the **Osteriaccia-Calabrina** area, however, prevented the Division from piercing the **Doris Line** that day.

B and C Companies of 25 Battalion, each supported by a troop of B Squadron, 19 Regiment, and anti-tank guns, were directed to **Osteriaccia**, and the battalion's other two companies and supporting arms went to the south-east of the village. B Company, leading off early in the afternoon, met solid resistance from *26 Panzer Division's* troops in and near **Osteriaccia**, and although the tanks drove the German outposts back into the village, the infantry, whose casualties included all the NCOs in one platoon, could go no farther because of the accurate shellfire. C Company was also brought to a halt. Brigade Headquarters ordered the battalion to stay where it was—still east of the **Cesena-Cervia** road—and to dig in.

The 24th Battalion's advance towards **Calabrina** stopped because the accompanying tanks of A Squadron, 19 Regiment, were attracting

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 573.

<sup>2</sup> **San Giorgio di Cesena** was near the southern bank of the more northerly of the two branches of the **Rio Granarolo**.

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heavy concentrations of shellfire. Sixth Brigade formed a firm base on the line of an east-west road, with 26 Battalion on the right, 24 in the centre and 25 on the left; north of this line the tanks of 18 and 20 Regiments, withdrawing slightly, harboured for the night with their protecting infantry of 22 Battalion. In the rear 21 and 23 Battalions had crossed the **Pisciatello**; the **Maori Battalion** was still on the other side of the river.

The Division's neighbours on the left had met negligible opposition. The Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (of 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade), after crossing a newly completed bridge over the **Pisciatello** at **Ponte della Pietra**, headed towards the **Cesena- Cervia** road, while battalions of 3 Brigade made their way along the railway and Route 9 towards **Cesena**. By evening the Germans had withdrawn from the town, which Canadian patrols entered unopposed from the east and troops of 46 British Division (of **5 Corps**) from the south. On the New Zealand Division's other flank **Cumberland Force** took advantage of the enemy's retirement from the **Rigossa- Fiumicino** region by pushing through the mud to the **Pisciatello**. On the coast, however, the enemy was still holding out close to the **Fiumicino River**, but his retreat inland would compel him to evacuate this narrow, strongly fortified strip of land.

(iii)

During the night of 19–20 October, when *76 Panzer Corps* withdrew to the **Savio River**, the enemy covered his departure from his **Osteriaccia- Calabrina** positions with heavy shell and mortar fire and with demolitions—13 of which were heard exploding. At dawn patrols from 22 Battalion, sent out to test the ground ahead of 18 and 20 Armoured Regiments, reported no sign of the enemy. The two regiments thereupon resumed their advance.

At this time **General Freyberg** felt that the Division's front was becoming 'rather a salient with its attendant disadvantages.'<sup>1</sup> He therefore ordered Brigadier Parkinson to try to link 6 Brigade with the Canadians on the left, and instructed Divisional Cavalry to go through on the right. Fourth Brigade was to direct its thrust towards the river through **San Giorgio**.

The two armoured regiments made very slow progress because of the demolitions— 'Jerry had made a horrible mess of the roads, with mines and huge craters'<sup>2</sup>—and the swampy ground from which many tanks had to be extricated. Again the Sherman-dozers and the engineers were kept very busy. It took most of the morning to go only a mile to the **Rio Granarolo**. This narrow stream, with steep,

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 575.

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slippery floodbanks, and with every bridge blown, was impassable until Valentine bridge-layers provided crossings for both regiments.

Much was happening elsewhere on the front. In Cumberland Force's sector the Governor General's Horse Guards crossed the Fiumicino River on the coast and found the seaside town of **Cesenatico** clear of the enemy; farther inland **27 Lancers** and the **Royal Canadian Dragoons**, having crossed the **Pisciatello**, were making their way towards the **Cesena- Cervia** road, which the Dragoons passed later in the day. On the New Zealanders' other flank the Canadians were just short of the Savio River, the far bank of which was held by the enemy in strength. South of the Canadian Corps the two divisions of **5 Corps**, 4 British Infantry Division (which had replaced the 46th) and **10 Indian Division**, had troops across the **Savio**.

After crossing the **Rio Granarolo** the New Zealand armour swung west towards the **Savio**, A Squadron of 18 Regiment going along a road

west of **San Giorgio**, and A Squadron of the 20th along a track between these two roads, each squadron followed by infantry of 22 Battalion. As they approached a north-south road parallel with the river, they came under fire from German rearguards. They enjoyed 'some good shooting' and took 20 prisoners, but most of the enemy 'just melted away'. <sup>1</sup> This ended the day's advance, achieved without the loss of a single tank.

When they harboured for the night the tanks were disposed over a wide area, in which 22 Battalion could provide only light protection for each group. In compliance with the GOC's orders, Divisional Cavalry had set out on the right flank to get contact with the enemy between 4 Brigade and **Cumberland Force**. This had brought into use the regiment's Staghound armoured cars, without which it had served as infantry with **Cumberland Force**. The Divisional Cavalry men had shared the delusion that the country in which the Division was fighting would be ideal for the use of their vehicles. 'How different proved the reality. We hacked down trees to fill ditches. Axle deep we just got up the very slight inclines beyond, and ahead was another ditch to cross.... The lanes were very muddy, and with a wheel touching a ditch on either side it was a strenuous day.' <sup>2</sup> Near where the tanks had swung west towards the **Savio**, C Squadron had cars at two crossroads, at both of which were large demolitions, and at the more northerly of these they had a brush with the enemy. The armoured cars could go no farther on this flank, but Brigadier Pleasants told the GOC that 4 Brigade would be able to look after itself.

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 576.

<sup>2</sup> *Diary, R. Pinney, Div Cav.*

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On the other flank, where there was a gap of about one and a half miles between 20 Regiment and the nearest Canadian troops (the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry), 26 Battalion, with C Squadron of 19 Regiment in support, advanced without opposition other

than light shell and mortar fire until its leading companies (C and A) were close to the river.

Towards evening two companies of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry attacked across the river about a mile north of **Cesena**, in an attempt to gain a footing from which other Canadians were to advance and cut the road running north from **Cesena** to **Ravenna**. The enemy, in unexpected strength, 'greeted the Patricias with a hail of mortar bombs and machine-gun bullets.' <sup>1</sup> Only one and a half platoons of one company reached the opposite bank, and these withdrew after dark. Seventeen men of the other company got across and, joined by a dozen stragglers during the night, clung to a narrow strip on the far bank all next day.

(iv)

By this time General McCreery had decided to take the New Zealand Division into **Eighth Army** reserve and to put 5 Canadian Armoured Division in its place. The Canadian Corps had intended that both 1 Canadian Infantry Division and 2 NZ Division should establish crossings over the **Savio**. The Canadians had gained a small lodgement on the far side, but so far the New Zealanders had not been instructed to secure a bridgehead in their sector; on the night of 20–21 October they were committed only to patrolling to the river.

The Division's right flank was vulnerable. Brigadier Pleasants told **General Freyberg** that there definitely were enemy troops to the north of 18 Regiment that night, and the GOC instructed him to square up to them in the morning and drive them back. Freyberg advised General Burns that he was going to advance to the area opposite **Mensa** (about six miles north of **Cesena**) and added that the going was very bad: the dotted red roads on the map were 'just mud tracks. Rain for two hours would stop further progress.' <sup>2</sup> Burns said 1 Canadian Infantry Division was going to make a further bridgehead attack over the **Savio** that night (21–22 October) and asked the New Zealand Division to create the impression that it was also attacking.

The GOC conferred with his brigade commanders and gave orders for the actions they were to take. Fourth Brigade, using 18 Regiment,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Canadians in Italy*, p. 585.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

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was to turn north and clear the ground east of the **Savio** to a road opposite **Mensa**; 6 Brigade was to broaden its front from one to three battalions and take over most of 4 Brigade's sector; the Division was to support the Canadian attack with all its guns and create a diversion by shooting on its own front—four and a half miles long—with all available tanks, mortars and machine guns. The Division's relief by 5 Canadian Armoured Division and departure for the **Fabriano- Camerino** area, in the **Apennines** south-west of the port of **Ancona**, was to begin next day (the 22nd).

(v)

Fourth Brigade's northward advance was begun about mid-morning on 21 October by C Squadron, 18 Regiment, supported by a platoon from 22 Battalion, and with Staghounds from B and C Squadrons of Divisional Cavalry on the right flank. Although the engineers accompanied both tanks and armoured cars, the heavily cratered tracks and soft ground still made progress slow. When about half the distance had been covered, the tanks joined battle with German rearguards equipped with bazookas, spandaus and small arms. The opposition was stronger and more numerous than had been expected, and although Lieutenant-Colonel **Ferguson**<sup>1</sup> sent his other two squadrons to assist, the tanks could not go much farther. The armoured cars came under fire from the village of **Pisignano** (east of **Mensa**), which **27 Lancers of Cumberland Force** reported was still held in strength by the enemy.

In its advance that day 18 Regiment was substantially helped by the

air observation post, which gave early warning of German dispositions and demolitions, and by the fighter-bombers, which scored hits on gun positions and movement—including that of horse-drawn guns. On one occasion ‘the Kitty Bombers laid their eggs only 300 yds from A Sqn. Close support?’<sup>2</sup>

Sixth Brigade took over ground cleared by 18 Regiment as well as that already occupied by the 20th, and assumed command of a sector facing the **Savio** with 25 Battalion on the right (next to the 22nd), the 24th in the centre and the 26th on the left. The three New Zealand field regiments went into positions where they could shoot on call and were issued with ammunition in anticipation of the assistance they were to give the Canadian attack across the river.

Late in the afternoon it began to rain and the **Savio** rose rapidly; at one place the water gap expanded from 45 to 300 feet. Across

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<sup>1</sup> Lt-Col J. B. Ferguson, DSO, MC; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 27 Apr 1912; warehouseman; OC **7 Fd Coy** May 1941; CO **18 Armd Regt** Dec 1943–Jan 1944; **20 Armd Regt** Jan–May 1944; **18 Armd Regt** Jul 1944–Feb 1945; wounded 6 Dec 1943.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, **18 Armd Regt**.

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the river the little group of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry still clung to its precarious foothold at the edge of the water, although low in ammunition and food and under accurate mortar and artillery fire. Farther upstream **4 British Division** strengthened its bridgehead on the southern edge of **Cesena**. On the other flank **Cumberland Force** made further progress towards the **Savio** and the coastal town of **Cervia**, which was found free of the enemy next day.

An impressive bombardment, in which the New Zealand artillery and tanks fired in simulated support of an assault in their own sector, began at 8 p.m. on 21 October. At first there was an increase in hostile fire on

the New Zealand front, but this died away as the Canadians developed their attack. Seventy-one tanks of 18 and 20 Regiments fired about 9000 rounds in a barrage which lasted 75 minutes; 4, 5 and 6 Field Regiments were engaged on their tasks until the early hours of the 22nd and altogether fired more than 13,000 rounds of high explosive. The leading troops of 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade were on the far bank of the **Savio** within an hour of the start of the attack, and despite the strength of the German resistance the reserves of the two assaulting battalions crossed shortly after midnight. When repelling a counter-attack a company of the Seaforth Highlanders, without supporting tanks and anti-tank guns, knocked out two Panther tanks, a half-tracked vehicle, a scout car and two self-propelled guns, and captured intact a Panther which had bogged down in a ditch—an action which won one Canadian the VC and another the DCM.

By mid-morning the Canadians had a bridgehead a mile wide and nearly a mile deep at one point, but the river in spate made bridging impossible, and there was no hope of getting tanks and supporting arms across that day. It was a temporary stalemate, but many enemy had been killed or wounded by the artillery fire, and the Canadians' success was causing the German commanders much uneasiness.

During the night of the attack the main New Zealand activity was providing diversionary fire, but in addition 22 Battalion sent out patrols in the northern part of the Division's sector. One of these patrols, a platoon from 1 Company under Sergeant G. H. Palmer, occupied a house in the vicinity of the hamlet of La Rosetta, arriving there just ahead of about 20 men of *4 Parachute Regiment*, who made several determined but unsuccessful and costly attempts to drive out the New Zealanders. On the morning of 22 October La Rosetta, **Pisignano** and other villages in the neighbourhood were clear of the enemy, who appeared to have gone from both sides of the **Savio** near **Mensa**.

Thus the New Zealand Division completed the tasks it had been set in this stage of the campaign. The withdrawal of the Division— except the field regiments of the artillery—began the same day, when 11

**Infantry Brigade of 5 Canadian Armoured Division began the relief of the New Zealand units on the Savio River line. Next day (the 23rd) the Division relinquished command of the sector. Its departure—into army reserve, which initiated a programme of resting and regrouping the formations of **Eighth Army**—ended an association of seven weeks with **1 Canadian Corps**.**

**During this, its second spell on the Adriatic front, the Division suffered 1108 casualties, nearly as many as the number incurred during the **Arezzo** and **Florence** battles in July and August. These casualties included 228 killed, 857 wounded and 23 captured. Moreover, in September and October 1944 there were 1079 cases of infective hepatitis or jaundice, a total nearly as high as that for September and October 1942—before and during the battle of **Alamein**—when there were 1137 cases of this disease among the New Zealanders in the **Western Desert**.**

**In the month of disillusionment, wastage and fatigue which had followed the crossing of the Marecchia River, the Division had penetrated less than 20 miles in the south-east corner of the great plains of the **Po valley**.**

## IV: THE DIVISION IN RESERVE

### *IV: The Division in Reserve*

(i)

The BBC broadcast on 22 October that the ‘New Zealanders on the coastal sector made rapid advances over the salt pans and flooded country, using all kinds of transport; the commander of one detachment even urging his men on from a punt.’<sup>1</sup> Shortly after hearing this astonishing announcement **Divisional Headquarters** asked 4 Brigade for a report ‘on the quantity of salt to be obtained from the pans we had been in and also a return of all punts, pumps and waterwings held on WE [war establishment].’<sup>2</sup>

The New Zealand Division's departure from the Savio River front began the same day. The troops of 4 and 6 Brigades in the line were relieved by 11 Infantry Brigade of 5 Canadian Armoured Division, and the command of the sector passed to the Canadians on the morning of the 23rd. The New Zealanders went back to billets in the **Fabriano-Matelica-Camerino** region, in the **Apennines** south-west of the coastal town of **Ancona**. On the way they passed notices

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, HQ 4 Armd Bde.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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erected by the Canadians to bid them a generous farewell: ‘Cheerio, Kiwis all—Nice having worked with you.’

The Division's withdrawal into **Eighth Army** reserve was completed on 26 October with the arrival of the three field regiments, which fired a programme in support of an attack by **4 British Division** before they

came out of action.

**General Freyberg** had advised the Prime Minister in June 1944 that if necessary the Division 'could carry on and add fresh honours to its record.... [but] the inevitable effect of fierce fighting over a long period, on even the best troops in the world, is becoming apparent. There is no doubt in my mind that the high-water mark of our battle-worthiness was reached at **Sidi Rezegh** and **Belhamed** in November 1941. In that campaign, and in the other costly **Western Desert** battles which followed, many of our best men became casualties, and gradually the keen fighting edge of the Force was blunted. For a period the gradual reduction in offensive spirit was offset by the increased efficiency of the divisional machine and the ever-increasing battle experience of our commanders. Time has gone on. Another long campaign in **Italy** has followed. I know the great stress of battle which large numbers of men have been through, and we cannot disregard its effects, especially on battle-weary leaders. Signs are not lacking now that many of the old hands require a prolonged rest. I feel, therefore, that if there is to be heavy fighting throughout 1945 a replacement scheme would be required for all long-service personnel. Such a change-over would not be easy, but I feel it would be essential in the interests of the efficiency of the Force. That being so, and taking into consideration your manpower difficulties and probable future commitments in the war against **Japan**, I have come to the conclusion that the time may well be opportune for the complete withdrawal of the 2nd NZEF.' <sup>1</sup>

By September, however, the Government had decided 'that New Zealand land forces... can be of the greatest use in **Italy**, and that the 2nd Division should remain overseas until the conclusion of the Italian campaign, after which its future role will again be examined.' <sup>2</sup> Men from 3 NZ Division who had served in the **Pacific** were to be available for posting to the Division in **Italy**, where a scheme was to be introduced for the replacement of those who had been overseas three years or longer by those who had not yet had an opportunity to serve or who had had only a short period

<sup>1</sup> *Documents*, Vol. II, pp. 348–9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361. Mr Fraser announced this decision in Parliament on 21 September. He had received from Mr Churchill a summary of the decisions made a few days earlier by the British Prime Minister and the President of the **United States** at the Quebec Conference; one decision was to continue the offensive in **Italy** and to withdraw no major units from that country until the outcome was known.

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of service overseas. This decision meant that 2 NZ Division was to be the only original division of the British **Eighth Army** still with it at the end of the war in **Europe**.

(ii)

The Division's immediate task upon arrival in the rest area in October was reorganisation to reduce some of its defensive equipment and administrative units, and at the same time to increase its infantry strength. The changes proposed would enable the long-service men to be replaced earlier than would have been possible otherwise, and would result in fewer reinforcements being required from New Zealand. In a cablegram to the Minister of Defence (Mr F. Jones) on the 22nd the GOC said 'our organisation was designed for desert conditions, for which it was ideally suited. It was hoped that the Division would be used in a mobile role in **Italy**, but as you know this has never been possible. Instead we have been used as an infantry division, and as such all the fighting has been done by two instead of three infantry brigades. At present there is a shortage of infantry ... while at the same time there seems to be more armour than can be employed...' <sup>1</sup>

A short-term policy of reorganisation was adopted in anticipation of operations with **Eighth Army** in the winter: this included increasing the strength of the two infantry brigades from three to four battalions each by adding Divisional Cavalry (converted to infantry) to 6 Brigade and 22

**(Motor) Battalion (reverting to a normal infantry battalion) to 5 Brigade, the disbandment of 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment and a few **Army Service Corps** units, and changes in the composition of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, 36 Survey Battery and several other units. If the war were to continue into 1945, further reorganisation was to be considered.**

**To mark the close of the anti-aircraft regiment's career a passing-out ceremony was held on 26 October for the GOC, who noted in his diary that he had never seen a finer parade. The unit's war diary ended with the claim that in the two and a half years since its formation the regiment had destroyed 671/2 enemy aircraft, one tank, one naval craft, and an unknown number of vehicles. Now that the Allies had full protection from the air, the Division no longer needed its own anti-aircraft guns. More than 150 bombardiers and gunners from the regiment were selected by ballot to join the new Divisional Cavalry Battalion.**

**When the men of the Divisional Cavalry were told of their fate, they 'were bitterly disappointed and for a few days their behaviour**

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<sup>1</sup> *Documents*, Vol. II, pp. 372–3

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**reflected this.... They sold personal gear, looted gear, army gear, anything—before the Staghounds were taken away for good to the Ordnance depot at **Senigallia**.... and most of them got very, very drunk.... But good food, clean clothes, dry billets and rest soon prevailed over these few days' depression and in next to no time everybody had settled down again, determined to become riflemen as good as any....' <sup>1</sup> The Staghound armoured cars, issued to the regiment when the fighting in North Africa had ended, would have been excellent in the Desert, but were unsuitable for Italian conditions; they were a hindrance on the narrow and poor roads.**

**The new battalion retained the old cavalry regimental designations (such as squadron instead of company) and the men their title of**

**'trooper' and their distinguishing head-dress and shoulder flash. They and the former anti-aircraft gunners trained under the supervision of instructors from 6 Brigade— 'dour old warriors'—in the usual infantry drill, route marches and patrolling, in the use of the No. 38 wireless set, 2-inch and 3-inch mortars, Bren, Piat and tommy guns; they held exercises in the forming of a bridgehead, in attacking houses and in other manoeuvres.**

**The decision to reorganise 22 (Motor) Battalion as a normal infantry unit was received 'with great regret, but there was no alternative.'<sup>2</sup> The difficult terrain of **Italy** had hampered the use of the motorised battalion in its proper role of working with the armour, and only one real breakthrough—beyond the **Pisciatiello** River—had been achieved in this role. The 22nd had left New Zealand with the **Second Echelon** in May 1940 as a battalion of **5 Infantry Brigade**; it had joined 4 Armoured Brigade in November 1942 and had been redesignated 22 (Motor) Battalion; after reverting to a normal infantry battalion it returned from 4 Brigade to the 5th in November 1944.**

**At the time of the reorganisation 7 Anti-Tank Regiment consisted of one battery of two troops of M10s and two troops of six-pounder guns, three batteries each of one 17-pounder troop and two six-pounder troops, and one battery of four troops each with four 4·2-inch mortars. Now 34 Anti-Tank Battery, which had been formed by New Zealanders in England at the outbreak of the war, was disbanded (one of its troops went to Divisional Cavalry Battalion as its anti-tank platoon), but its designation was preserved by changing the heavy mortar battery's title from the 39th to the 34th. All six-pounders were withdrawn and the regiment then comprised three batteries, each of a troop of four M10s and a troop of four 17-pounders, a battery of four troops each of four 4·2-inch mortars,**

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<sup>1</sup> *Divisional Cavalry*, pp. 381–2.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, 22 Bn.

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and a survey troop (to which **36 Survey Battery** had been reduced).

Drastic changes were made in the NZASC organisation: 6 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company, 18 Tank Transporter Company and 1 Water Issue Section were disbanded; 1 Petrol Company and 1 **Ammunition Company** were both reduced from four to three platoons. In the medical corps the second company was eliminated from each of the three field ambulance units; an enlarged headquarters was to be available as a main dressing station when required, and one company was to be attached permanently to a brigade as an advanced dressing station. In addition the Divisional Protective Troop was disbanded.

*(iii)*

The news that the furlough scheme was to give way to the replacement scheme was very well received, as might be expected. Among those who were to be replaced were other ranks of the first three echelons who had rejoined **2 NZEF** after furlough in New Zealand, other ranks of the **5th Reinforcements**, other ranks who had come to the **Middle East** after service in **Fiji**, and a proportion of the officers and NCOs of these categories who could be spared. As further replacements arrived from New Zealand, the scheme was to be continued in stages which would include men who had joined **2 NZEF** after the **5th Reinforcements**. Selected officers and NCOs were to retain the ranks they had held in 3 NZ Division, but this was not to prejudice the rights of officers and NCOs of 2 NZ Division or promotion from the ranks.

The intention was to relieve 600 officers and 9300 other ranks in three drafts. **General Freyberg** was perplexed about the number and class of officers to be replaced: the entire top and middle strata of officers of **2 NZEF** were within the categories entitled to go. His definition of the principle governing the changeover of officers was that 'at all times we must have serving with fighting units and sub-units, i.e., battalions, regiments, companies, batteries, & c., commanders and seconds-in-

command capable of laying on any class of battle, and no officers will go until their reliefs are considered fully competent to take over.’<sup>1</sup>

(iv)

The region to which the Division had withdrawn was ‘among quiet, unscarred villages in the heart of the **Apennines**.... There had been no pitched battles there, for the main highways through

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<sup>1</sup> *Documents*, Vol. II, p. 375.

which the fighting had flowed months before gave them a wide berth. They were typical backwater “sleepy hollows”.... Yet these places will be remembered with undiluted affection....’<sup>1</sup> The Italian peasants and townsmen were hospitable and friendly as soon as their initial doubts about the New Zealanders’ intentions were dispelled. ‘We all had good billets and there were few who did not know of a fireplace where they were welcome to foregather, drink the various wines of the district, and have even an incentive to learn the language....’<sup>2</sup> The New Zealanders appreciated this kindness and shared with the Italians their cigarettes, chocolate and foodstuffs.

The three battalions of 6 Brigade were allotted quarters in large unfinished barracks erected by the Italians about a mile from **Castelraimondo** to house Allied prisoners of war, and which at first made a most unfavourable impression, but the men quickly set to work to make the hutments weatherproof and habitable and in about a week ‘wrought great changes in the appearance of the camp.’<sup>3</sup>

The New Zealanders spent about a month in the **Apennines**. The usual daily routine was training in the morning (except on Sundays) and organised sport in the afternoon. The training, sensibly based on the possibility of holding a long front in winter, included exercises at night, route marches—according to one infantry company, ‘a pleasure amidst the picturesque countryside’<sup>4</sup>—precision drill, lectures, instruction in

the use of flame-throwing equipment, the lifting and laying of mines and booby traps, and practice in house and village fighting.

Fourth Brigade received instruction from members of the Royal Armoured Corps on some recently acquired Sherman tanks equipped with 17-pounder guns, and did shoots with this weapon as well as with the normal 75-millimetre gun; its programme also included courses in wireless, driving and maintenance, route marches and lectures. The engineers did much road maintenance work, demonstrated and trained with Bailey bridging, and instructed the infantry in the building of strongpoints.

The first snowfall of the winter carpeted the countryside on the night of 9–10 November. Despite rain, frost and snow, however, Rugby football was organised ‘on a grand scale that had not previously been possible since the desert days.... and from playing areas of varying sizes and muddiness ... have emerged winning teams in battalion and regimental competitions to play off for the

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<sup>1</sup> *One More River*, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, 23 Bn.

<sup>3</sup> War diary, 24 Bn.

<sup>4</sup> War diary, 23 Bn.

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Freyberg Cup....’<sup>1</sup> But it was not possible to complete the competition for the cup before the Division returned to the front. Divisional amateur boxing championships were held and softball, basketball and Association football played. The Kiwi Concert Party and Canadian, British and Italian parties entertained, and the troops also organised their own dances and concerts.

Leave parties went to **Rome**, but other ranks still were not permitted to stay overnight—they could visit the city by day from the **Eighth Army** rest camp seven miles distant and from the Division's own rest camp at **Civita Castellana**, which accommodated 400 men. Both officers and other ranks were able to spend six days in **Florence**, where they stayed at the New Zealand Forces Club in one of the hotels. The New Zealand **YMCA** operated a leave centre at **Riccione**, on the Adriatic coast, and 6 Brigade had its own rest camp in a disused wing of the university at **Perugia**.

The return to the line came all too soon; it was with real regret that the New Zealanders left the towns and villages where they had been billeted, and the Italians were sorry to see them go. Women and children were weeping when the truckloads of men departed.

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<sup>1</sup> *NZEF Times*, 27 November 1944.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

# CHAPTER 7 – THE DRIVE TO THE SENIO

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## I: FROM THE SAVIO TO THE LAMONE

### *I: From the Savio to the Lamone*

(i)

**DURING** the absence of the New Zealand Division, Eighth Army continued its advance beyond the Savio River to the **Ronco**, which crosses Route 9 about two miles short of the town of **Forli** and flows northward across the **Romagna** plain alongside Route 67 to join the Montone River a mile or two from the city of **Ravenna**, near the coast. The army crossed the **Ronco** on 31 October, but because of bad weather did not enter **Forli** until seven days later. In the week of fine weather which ensued the enemy was driven back to the line of the Montone River, north of Route 9, and to the **Rio Cosina**, its tributary south of the highway. This advance permitted **Eighth Army** at last to open Route 67 (the **Florence- Forli- Ravenna** highway), which gave better lateral communication with **Fifth Army**.

By 16 November **5 Corps** (Lieutenant-General C. F. Keightley) was brought to a halt. Reconnaissance north of Route 9 showed that the high stopbanks between which the Montone flowed, the very muddy approaches and the enemy's preparations for defence combined to form an obstacle which could be overcome only by a set-piece attack. South of Route 9 the enemy re-established himself in strong defensive positions, supported by tanks and self-propelled guns, with good fields of fire across country that was too muddy and soft to allow **46 British Division** to manoeuvre its tanks.

(ii)

An appraisal of the Allied armies' situation at this stage was not encouraging. Headquarters Allied Armies appreciated on 10 October 'that active operations with all available forces should continue as long as the

state of our own troops and the weather permitted in the hope that by then we should have at least succeeded in driving the enemy back to the general line of the **Adige** [a river north of the Po] and the Alps and in clearing up north-western **Italy**. Secondly, when full-scale operations ceased, there should be a period of active defence during which the minimum forces would be committed against the enemy and the maximum attention paid to rest, reorganisation and training of all formations in preparation for a renewal of the offensive as soon as the weather should permit.’ <sup>1</sup>

During the next fortnight **Fifth Army** failed to capture **Bologna**, and the exhaustion of the troops and the shortage of replacements, both British and American, began to be felt. No longer could it be assumed that there was any likelihood of pushing the enemy back to the **Adige** before it became necessary to halt the offensive. The immediate objectives, therefore, were limited to **Bologna** and **Ravenna**. It had been proposed that **Eighth Army** should continue its offensive at least until 15 November to take **Ravenna** and draw off the enemy from **Fifth Army**, which went over to the defensive on 27 October to rest and prepare for a final attack on **Bologna**. ‘If this plan was unsuccessful,’ wrote General Alexander, ‘then we should have to accept the best winter position that could be managed....’ <sup>2</sup>

General McCreery, commander of **Eighth Army**, did not think three weeks would be long enough to rest the American divisions or to lull the enemy sufficiently into a sense of security on the **Bologna** front; he therefore suggested that the date be postponed a week or two, which also would allow his army to complete its programme of rest and regrouping. Shortly after the New Zealand Division was taken into reserve, the problem of resting the whole of **1 Canadian Corps** was solved by making **5 Corps** responsible for its immediate right flank protection, putting **12 Lancers** in the place of 1 Canadian Infantry Division, and assigning the rest of the Canadian Corps front as far as the coast to **Porterforce** (consisting mainly of dismounted armoured regiments). Consequently **Eighth Army**, which now disposed only **5 Corps** and **2 Polish Corps**,

would be in a better position to undertake the task assigned to it towards the end of November, when three fresh divisions—the two Canadian and the New Zealand—would again be available. It was anticipated that these divisions would be capable of fighting until mid-December.

After consulting both McCreery and Clark, therefore, Alexander decided that the date for terminating the offensive should be postponed to 15 December, that **Fifth Army's** final attempt to capture

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<sup>1</sup> *The Allied Armies in Italy*, p. 2954.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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**Bologna** should be delayed until about 30 November, and that **Eighth Army** should be ready to launch an attack on **Ravenna** by the 30th. These offensives, however, were to be launched only if the weather was favourable and there appeared to be a good chance of success.

McCreery's immediate intentions at the end of October had been that **5 Corps** and the **Polish Corps** should continue the attack in the better going on the left of the **Eighth Army** front, with the object of attracting German formations from the **Bologna** front and, if possible, of capturing **Ravenna** as well as **Forli**; at the end of November the three fresh divisions were to be thrown into the fortnight's all-out effort to take **Ravenna**, if the city had not fallen already.

The feasibility of this plan was questioned, however, when the allotment of artillery ammunition for November was known. **Eighth Army** had been obliged from the middle of October to scale down its expenditure to a basic rate of 40 rounds a day for each field gun, 30 for each medium, and 20 for each heavy. Now that the forecast for November and December threatened a further reduction to 25 rounds for field guns and 15 for mediums and heavies, there was doubt whether the reserves would be sufficient. McCreery reported to Alexander that if the operations planned for November were carried out, there would not be

enough ammunition for the more important programme planned for December. Nevertheless he was told that the offensive was to go ahead as planned. A world survey of artillery ammunition had revealed that the supply was greater than had been expected. The allotment for December might be increased, but in any case every economy was to be practised, and **Eighth Army's** apportioning to its corps was to be cut drastically to build up the essential reserves.

*(iii)*

**Eighth Army** gave instructions on 18 November for the final phase of the battle in which it was engaged. **Faenza**, the next town beyond **Forli** on Route 9, and the high ground to the south-west and on the west bank of the Lamone River were to be secured as a starting point. The objective was not more than eight miles distant, but the terrain was no easier than that already traversed.

**Fifth Corps** planned to advance in three phases: in the first 4 and 46 Divisions were to seize crossings over the Cosina stream (about midway between **Forli** and **Faenza**); in the second they were to continue the advance to the **Lamone** (which crossed Route 9 immediately in front of **Faenza**), and **10 Indian Division** was to be committed on the right or left of 4 Division according to the demands of the situation; and in the third phase, for which detailed orders had not yet been issued, the corps was to cross the **Lamone** and capture **Faenza**. The corps was to be given the greatest possible support by medium bombers of the **Tactical Air Force** and light and fighter-bombers of the **Desert Air Force**, whose programme would allow for the vagaries of the weather.

**Fifth Corps** also was to have additional artillery support, which included the three New Zealand field regiments. The New Zealand artillery group, totalling 430 vehicles, left the Division's rest area in the **Apennines** on 17 November, followed the familiar Route 16 to **Rimini** and continued north-westward along Route 9 to a staging area near **Cesena**. The guns, now under **5 Corps'** command, were disposed within a mile or two to the north and west of **Forli**. They were to fire a barrage to

**assist in an attack on a mile-long stretch of the Cosina between Route 9 and its confluence with the Montone north of the highway.**

**A strong German raid shortly before the attack was about to start (at 2 a.m. on 21 November) prevented the left-hand battalion (2 Cornwalls) of 10 Brigade, 4 Division, from approaching the stream on the route chosen for it, and by dawn only one company had reached the objective on the far bank north of the railway. With the help of the artillery this company beat off several counter-attacks by infantry and tanks and captured some prisoners. The assault by the other assaulting battalion (1/6 Surreys) of 10 Brigade was broken up by minefields and machine-gun and mortar fire, which caused many casualties. Keightley therefore called off the attack. The company of Cornwalls was withdrawn from its isolated position across the stream under cover of artillery smoke.**

**Fifth Corps made a fresh plan: 4 and 46 Divisions were to clear the German outposts east of the Cosina on the night of 21–22 November, and if the resistance weakened, 46 Division was to cross the stream, with 4 Division protecting its right flank; otherwise (if resistance had not weakened) both divisions were to attack the following night. On the right of 4 Division, **10 Indian Division** was to relieve **12 Lancers** and prepare to cross the **Lamone** north of **Villafranca di Forli**.**

**The clearing of the ground inside a loop of the Cosina south of Route 9 was completed during the night of the 21st–22nd, and the attack across the stream succeeded next night. A bridge was captured on 46 Division's front before the enemy could demolish it, an Ark gave an additional crossing, and the tanks joined the infantry on the far side. Mud and the enemy's artillery and machine-gun fire did not prevent 4 Division from also getting both infantry and tanks across. The New Zealand Artillery supported the attack during the night and next day.**

**By nightfall on the 23rd the left wing of **5 Corps** thus was firmly established across the Cosina on a front of three miles south of Route 9, and the **Polish Corps** had made some progress on the higher ground in the foothills of the **Apennines**. These successes, and an improvement in**

the weather which gave better going for the tanks, left the German **26 Panzer Division** with no choice but to pull back to the shelter of the Lamone River, which meant that **278 Division**, on the banks of the Montone, had to protect its exposed right flank, three miles in length, between the two rivers.

The **4th Division** turned north on 24 November to begin the destruction of the German forces between the Montone and the **Lamone**. General Keightley ordered **10 Indian Division** to cross the Cosina on Route 9 and also advance northward, on 4 Division's right. This advance was expected to secure the early capture of the **Casa Bettini** bridge over the Montone about five miles north of **Forli**. **Porterforce** was to screen the Canadian Corps' approach to the Montone north of this bridge.

The New Zealand Division was to relieve 4 Division, which was to hand over its specialised equipment, including 'Wasps', 'Weasels' and 'Littlejohns', <sup>1</sup> to the New Zealanders and Indians.

The 46th Division advanced almost unopposed to the west bank of the Marzeno River, which joins the **Lamone** just south of **Faenza**. The Route 9 bridge over the **Lamone** at the entrance to the town and a bridge spanning the Marzeno above its confluence with the **Lamone** had been demolished, but an Ark was placed in the Marzeno, and by the evening of the 24th two battalions of 128 Brigade were across this river. While the brigade was preparing to cross the **Lamone** on the 26th, however, steady rain began to fall. The single Ark over the Marzeno was incapable of carrying heavy traffic, and the route beyond it soon became muddy and treacherous. Meanwhile 4 Division advanced on the north side of Route 9 to the **Lamone**; **10 Indian Division** began to clear the west bank of the Montone towards **Casa Bettini**, but was thwarted by German strongpoints in houses short of the bridge.

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<sup>1</sup> *Wasp*: device which threw an ignited jet of inflammable liquid 70 or 80 yards from a Bren carrier. *Weasel*: an amphibian developed from an American light cargo carrier originally designed for use in snow; its light construction and wide tracks

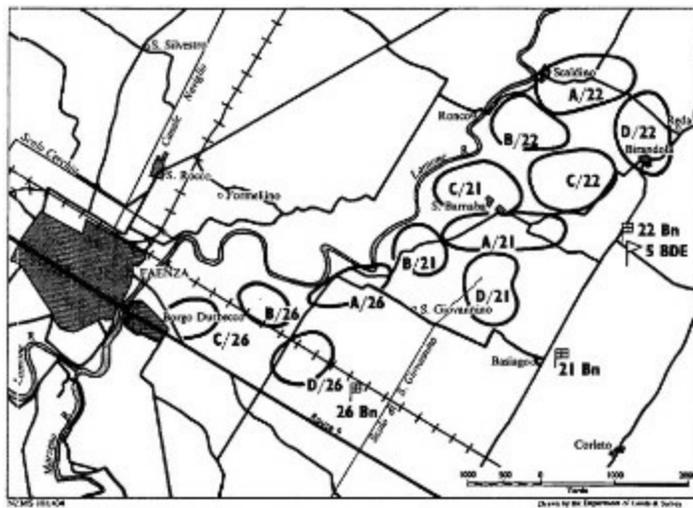
made it suitable for swampy ground, but its low freeboard made it unsuitable for navigation in other than calm water. *Littlejohn*: 2-pdr anti-tank gun with a tapered bore to increase its muzzle velocity; its mobility and high penetrating power made it particularly suitable for river-crossings.

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(iv)

Fifth Corps intended to capture **Faenza** and continue the advance along Route 9. In the first phase, which was expected to last until about 1 December, 46 Division (on the left) was to cross the **Lamone** south of **Faenza**, the New Zealand Division (in the centre) was to cross this river north of the railway line, which ran through the northern edge of the town, and **10 Indian Division** (on the right) was to secure the bridge over the Montone at **Casa Bettini** and also cross the **Lamone**. At the conclusion of this phase 1 Canadian Corps would take over the whole of **10 Indian Division**'s sector. In the second phase, which was to last five or six days, **10 Indian Division** was to relieve the 46th (which was to pass to the command of **10 Corps**) and complete the capture of the **Pergola- Pideura** ridge, south-west of **Faenza**; the New Zealand Division was to extend its left on to Route 9 and continue the advance. From 5–6 December **5 Corps** proposed to keep going on both sides of Route 9, with the New Zealand Division on the right, **56 British Division** in the centre, and **10 Indian Division** on the left.

**General Freyberg** held a conference of senior New Zealand officers on 19 November, and told them that the Division was to attack northward from the **Lamone** to the town of **Lugo** (between the **Senio** and **Santerno** rivers). 'It looks as if we are going with the



DISPOSITIONS, 27 NOVEMBER 1944

DISPOSITIONS, 27 NOVEMBER 1944

grain of the country.... We are to push until the weather breaks—then close down for the winter....’,<sup>1</sup>

The Division came from the Apennine rest area in two stages, the first to the vicinity of **Cesena**, and completed the relief of 4 Division on the night of 26–27 November, with 5 Brigade on the right and the 6th on the left. The Division's sector extended about 6000 yards along the Lamone River, from the vicinity of the village of **Borgo Durbecco** (on Route 9, separated from **Faenza** by the river, over which the bridge had been demolished) to **Scaldino**. The **Lamone** wound in a series of bends in a general easterly direction across 6 Brigade's front and then took a more northerly course across 5 Brigade's front. Sixth Brigade placed one battalion (the 26th) in the line, and kept the other three (24, 25, and Divisional Cavalry) back at **Forli**; 5 Brigade had 22 Battalion (on the right flank) and 21 in the line, and 23 and 28 Battalions in reserve. The infantry was given the usual support of tanks, anti-tank guns, mortars and machine guns.<sup>2</sup> The New Zealand artillery returned from **5 Corps** to the command of the Division.

The two brigades sent out many patrols at night to obtain information about the stopbanks along the **Lamone**—which varied from 15 to 25 feet in height—the width, depth and current of the water, and suitable crossing places. The enemy had made a stronghold in the

hamlet of **Ronco**, just over the river on 22 Battalion's front.

Along the river both sides brought down harassing and defensive fire, limited on the New Zealand side by the meagre supply of artillery, mortar and machine-gun ammunition. Because the 25- pounders were not allowed to exceed 10 rounds a gun each day, their shooting was augmented by tank gunlines provided by 18 and 20 Armoured Regiments.

The engineers had the most important task of keeping open a two-way road leading from Route 9 into the New Zealand sector, and roads and tracks giving access to the troops in the line. 'What a mess,' wrote an engineer officer. 'The roads here are all sunken with deep drainage ditches down both sides and they act as a drain for all the surrounding country. Of course with shell fire and tanks chewing across ditches the drainage is all messed up and

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the four infantry battalions 5 Bde had under its command **18 Armd Regt** (which also supported 6 Bde), **32 A-Tk Bty**, 150/93 A-Tk Bty (SP) RA, **1 MG Coy**, and a company of **5 Fd Amb**; in support were 142 Fd Regt (SP) RA less a battery, half of 34 Hy Mor Bty and **7 Fd Coy**. The additional troops under 6 Bde's command were **33 A-Tk Bty**, **2 MG Coy** and a company of **6 Fd Amb**, and those in support were 18 Regt, half of 34 Hy Mor Bty and **8 Fd Coy**. The 20th Armd Regt was in divisional reserve and 80 Med Regt, RA, and A Flight of 651 Air OP Sqn were in support.

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the rain water just flows straight into the road.' <sup>1</sup> The sappers were helped by tip-trucks and armoured dozers from British units, and by some 60 men of 240 (Italian) Pioneer Company who cut trees for 'corduroy'. <sup>2</sup> The rubble of brick houses which had been knocked about in the fighting was used as road metal. 'Undamaged houses conveniently situated were evacuated and demolished for the same purpose'. <sup>3</sup> On the

night of 29–30 November, when the road to 5 Brigade's sector became flooded and a wide gap eroded in it, the commander of 7 Field Company (Major **Lindell**<sup>4</sup>) quickly organised a bridging party, which—although two of its loaded vehicles were knocked out by the enemy—completed an 80-foot bridge in time for ammunition to be taken forward before dawn.

Fifth Corps and the **Polish Corps** were both holding the east bank of the **Lamone** on a front which extended about four miles north-east of **Faenza**. The crossing of the river had to be postponed because of the heavy rain which began to fall on 26 November. By the evening of the 27th the rivers and canals had risen to a dangerous level, and at the end of the month the ground was still too soft and the **Lamone** too swollen. This of course gave the German **278 Division** and **26 Panzer Division**—the latter depleted to a fighting strength of less than 1000—time to reorganise and consolidate on the other side of the river, while **305 Division** closed the gap created on the right of **26 Panzer Division** by its hasty withdrawal across the **Marzeno**.

(v)

Plans for the resumption of the offensive by both Allied armies were agreed upon at an army commanders' conference on 26 November. After **Eighth Army** had crossed the **Santerno River**, which it was expected would not be before the end of the first week in December, because the **Lamone** and **Senio** rivers had to be crossed before the **Santerno**, the two armies were to launch a combined offensive to capture **Bologna**, the Eighth by a westerly thrust north of Route 9, and the Fifth by a northward push along Route 65.

General McCreery planned that **Eighth Army** should attack with the **Canadian Corps** on the right, **5 Corps** on Route 9, and the **Polish Corps** in the Apennine foothills on the left. He would be able to employ all three corps on a broad front because a suitable

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<sup>1</sup> Lt J. M. H. O'Reilly, quoted in *New Zealand Engineers*,

<sup>2</sup> A method of covering unmetalled lengths of road with timber to provide a platform for the passage of wheeled vehicles.

<sup>3</sup> *New Zealand Engineers, Middle East*, p. 655.

<sup>4</sup> Maj G. A. Lindell, DSO, OBE, ED; Wellington; born Taihape, 26 Nov 1906; engineer; Adjnt, NZ Div Engrs, 1941–42; SSO Engrs, Army HQ, 1943–44; OC 7 Fd Coy, 1944–45.

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axis of advance between Routes 9 and 16 was provided by a secondary road which left the **Ravenna- Faenza** road near **Russi** and ran westward through **Bagnacavallo**, **Lugo**, **Massa Lombarda** and **Medicina** to **Bologna**. This was allotted to the Canadian Corps, which was to take **Russi**, cut Route 16 north-west of **Ravenna** to ensure the capture of that city, and then go through **Lugo** to establish a bridgehead over the **Santerno** in the **Massa Lombarda** area.

At this stage the Germans faced **Eighth Army** from behind a water barrier which began along the Lamone River and ended at the Fiumi Uniti (passing just south of **Ravenna**), and which was broken only by a five-mile switch-line between **Scaldino** (by the **Lamone**) and **Casa Bettini** (on the Montone). An attack by **10 Indian Division** on 27–28 November failed to secure the bridge site on the Montone at **Casa Bettini**, which was needed to enable the Canadian Corps to move up on the right of **5 Corps**.

The original intention that the Canadians should relieve the whole of **10 Indian Division** was modified to avoid a wide dispersal of their effort. Now they were to take over only the right portion of the Indian division's sector, and consequently **5 Corps** was to retain a front that would include a bridge (Ponte della **Castellina**) over the **Lamone** about five miles from **Faenza** and one built by the Germans at **Gubadina**, about a quarter of a mile upstream from **Ponte della Castellina**. When **10**

**Indian Division** resumed the attack, the **Casa Bettini** bridge site was still its primary object, but it was also to try to take the **Gubadina** bridge intact and cross the **Lamone**. In addition the New Zealand Division was to send a force northward along the east bank of the **Lamone** and attempt to seize the same bridge (at **Gubadina**) and cross the river.

On 30 November the Indian division captured **Albereto**, the centre of the enemy's resistance between the Montone and **Lamone** rivers, and loosed his hold on **Casa Bettini**. This opened the way for the Canadians to start crossing the Montone at dawn on 1 December, and they took command of the front from **Albereto** to the coast in the evening. The Indian division made strenuous efforts to reach the **Lamone** bridges at **Gubadina** and Ponte della **Castellina**, north-west of **Albereto**, but when men from 20 Indian Infantry Brigade closed up to them on the afternoon of the 2nd they found both bridges demolished.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Actually air observation the previous day had revealed that the **Castellina** bridge had been destroyed.

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(vi)

A small force from **5 NZ Infantry Brigade**, advancing northward along the eastern bank of the **Lamone**, had reached **Gubadina** ahead of the **Gurkhas** from **20 Brigade**.

During a telephone conversation in the evening of 29 November General Keightley told **General Freyberg** that **10 Indian Division's** attack did not depend on 5 Brigade's action 'but would be very much helped if it went well.' The corps commander added that the New Zealand Division 'has the effect of attracting all Bosche troops round them like a magnet. He has every reason to know that when the NZ Division comes in something usually happens.'<sup>1</sup>

D Company (Major G. S. Sainsbury) of 22 Battalion and C Squadron (Major Laurie<sup>2</sup>) of **18 Armoured Regiment**, supported by artillery, mortar

and machine-gun fire, were given the task of capturing a line from Casa di mezzo to Casa di sopra (about midway between **Scaldino** and **Castellina**) and exploiting to Ponte della **Castellina**. At a conference presided over by Lieutenant-Colonel O'Reilly it was decided that the force should capture **Scaldino di sotto** (north of **Scaldino**) and Casa di mezzo, and then, depending on how successful it had been, push on to the **Castellina** bridge.

At 8.30 a.m. on the 30th the infantry and tanks began their advance from the road east of **Scaldino**. The 25-pounders of 5 Field Regiment fired over 2000 rounds during the attack with good effect: Germans taken prisoner said the shelling had inflicted serious casualties. Although the ground was sodden, especially on the left flank, where the enemy resisted vigorously from the stopbank, the tanks gave excellent support to the infantry, who took **Scaldino di sotto** and, with the three platoons working independently, continued towards the scattered farm buildings of **Rombola**, Casa di sopra and Casa di mezzo.

On the right Second-Lieutenant E. B. Paterson's platoon steadily approached Casa di mezzo, which was protected by a crossfire from spandaus spaced at intervals, and by bazooka, mortar and artillery fire. The tanks raked the spandau pits with their Brownings and blasted the building with their 75-millimetre guns, and the 25-pounders brought down a stonk almost too close for the comfort of the infantry, who made a frontal assault. They took the last 30 yards at a run, and a section sprinted round to the back to cut off escape. The platoon killed 11 of the enemy in the vicinity of the house and took nine prisoners (among them a company commander from *278 Infantry Division* who yielded a rich haul of documents, including the current password, some marked maps and

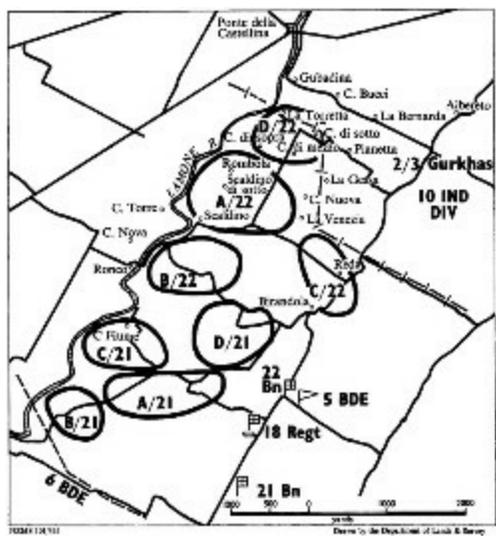
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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> Maj E. C. Laurie, MC, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born NZ 9 Jul 1908; commercial traveller.

a minefield trace), and went on without much trouble to Casa di sotto, where it spent the rest of the day.

D Company's centre platoon met misfortune in a minefield. Near a disabled tank one of two approaching German prisoners trod on an S-mine and escaped injury himself, but five New Zealanders fell wounded or severely shaken, and two of them died. This platoon and the one on the left cleared the ground between Casa di sotto and the river bank, completing an advance of 1200 yards, and by nightfall D Company was in possession of La Torretta and Casa di sopra as well as Casa di sotto, towards which a party of engineers opened a road. While clearing a booby-trapped road block two sappers were wounded, one of them fatally. D Company's casualties were three killed and five wounded. One of C Squadron's tanks had been knocked out on the minefield, and two immobilised by mechanical troubles; two casualties had occurred in a tank crew.



DISPOSITIONS, MORNING 2 DECEMBER 1944

DISPOSITIONS, MORNING 2 DECEMBER 1944

The tanks withdrew and M10s helped the infantry consolidate on the freshly won ground.

That night 22 Battalion patrolled from La Torretta and Scaldino to the Lamone and to Gubalina without making contact. After a three-man

patrol had scouted to **Gubadina**, 16 Platoon occupied a large house close to the river, and at daybreak on 1 December 'unsuspecting Germans directly across the road stretched and settled comfortably around three spandau pits and strolled round a small house.' <sup>1</sup> The platoon trained its Bren guns on the spandaus, and when two Gurkha scouts came up the road from the direction of **Albereto**, opened fire on the enemy while a section charged out to seize the house and five of its occupants. Apparently the German survivors of 22 Battalion's attack had retreated across the **Lamone** by a wooden bridge at **Gubadina**, but a party had returned to act as a battle outpost.

A Gurkha battalion relieved 16 Platoon later in the day, when 20 Indian Infantry Brigade took over **Gubadina** and the New Zealand and Indian divisions redistributed their troops.

A Squadron of **18 Armoured Regiment** shelled the towers and belfries of **Faenza** which, it was suspected, sheltered German observation posts. A large tower collapsed 'like an avalanche' <sup>2</sup> in the afternoon of 1 December; another was destroyed the following afternoon, and others were damaged. During the shooting an elderly woman stood in the command post weeping and crying repeatedly, ' *la mia bella Faenza*'. **Faenza**, a town with a history of sieges and sackings dating from 390 BC, was to be the centre of much of the New Zealand Division's activities in the winter of 1944–45.

(vii)

From the jumping-off place secured by **10 Indian Division** at Casa Bettini the Canadian Corps continued the northward clearing of the German switch-line positions between the Montone and **Lamone** rivers. On the left 1 Canadian Infantry Division captured **Russi** and turned westward towards the road and railway crossings of the **Lamone** on the way to **Bagnacavallo**. The Germans had withdrawn across the river, but 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade's attempt to seize a bridgehead was harshly repulsed by the German *114 Jaeger Division*.

The 5th Canadian Armoured Division made more satisfying progress on the right flank, where it cleared the west bank of the

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<sup>1</sup> *22 Battalion*, pp. 389–90.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, **18 Armd Regt**.

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Montone and cut the **Russi- Ravenna** railway and road. Meanwhile patrols of the 27th Lancers and Popski's Private Army <sup>1</sup> cross the Fiumi Uniti south of **Ravenna**. 'Spurred on by this competition', <sup>2</sup> two squadrons of the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards, accompanied by a squadron of 9 Canadian Armoured Regiment, drove rapidly eastward along the **Russi- Ravenna** road. The tanks were stopped by a demolished bridge a mile from the city, which the infantry entered on 4 December to join hands with the Lancers.

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<sup>1</sup> A small scout force of **Eighth Army** commanded by **Lt-Col V. Peniakoff**, a Russo-Belgian officer who had sometimes worked in association with the **Long Range Desert Group** in North Africa.

<sup>2</sup> *The Canadians in Italy*, p. 620.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

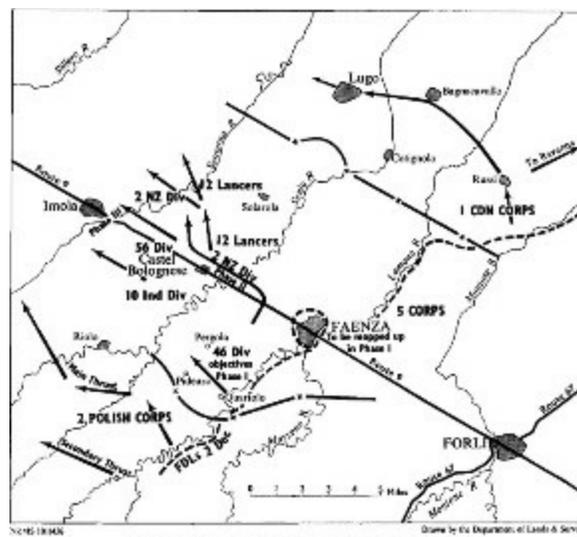
## II: THE CAPTURE OF FAENZA

### *II: The Capture of Faenza*

(i)

Because the Lamone River downstream from **Faenza** flows between stopbanks rising 15 feet above the level of the surrounding country, where the approaches deteriorate rapidly in bad weather, it was decided to launch **5 Corps'** attack over the upper reaches of the river, where the stopbanks are smaller and the water channel is comparatively narrow. **Quartolo**, about four miles from **Faenza**, is about the most southerly point from which the **Pideura** ridge, descending from the **Apennines** west of the **Lamone**, could be climbed fairly easily; farther south the high ground is broken by steep escarpments. The very narrow sector of reasonably favourable ground over which the attack could be made, therefore, was limited on the right by the difficulty of crossing the river near the enemy-occupied town and on the left by the rough country farther upstream. There was no permanent road bridge in this sector; in fact the only bridge for several miles south of **Faenza** was within a few hundred yards of the town and completely dominated by it.

The enemy was expected to appreciate that **Quartolo** was the only place near **Faenza** where a crossing of the **Lamone** could be made without difficulty, but **5 Corps** hoped to deceive him into thinking that crossings might be attempted elsewhere. In the first phase of the corps plan 46 British Division (commanded by the New Zealander, Major-General C. E. Weir) was to capture a bridgehead at (or near) **Quartolo** and the high ground at **Pideura**, drive north to cut Route 9 north-west of **Faenza**, free the town of the enemy, and clear a site for a Route 9 bridge across the **Lamone**; at the same time the New Zealand Division was to be ready to capture a bridgehead in its own sector, just north of the town, either to contain the enemy's reserves or to take advantage



PLAN FOR OFFENSIVE, DECEMBER 1944  
 PLAN FOR OFFENSIVE, DECEMBER 1944

of any thinning out of his forces there; **10 Indian Division** was to patrol across the river to simulate an attack, cross it if the enemy thinned out, or stage a dummy attack, co-ordinated with the New Zealand Division, if he remained firm.

In the second phase of the corps plan the New Zealand Division was to pass through 46 Division and cross the **Senio River** on Route 9 to **Castel Bolognese**, a small town about four miles beyond **Faenza**, and then swing north; **10 Indian Division** and 56 British Division were to relieve the 46th. In the third phase it was intended that the corps should advance with the New Zealand Division north of Route 9, 56 Division astride the highway, and **10 Indian Division** south of it; all three divisions were to be prepared to swing to the north once **Castel Bolognese** had been captured.

(ii)

Low cloud and fog obscured the battlefield on 3 December, and the visibility was so poor in the afternoon that the tanks of A Squadron, 18 Regiment, had to stop shooting at the towers of **Faenza**. At 7 p.m., when 128 Brigade of 46 Division began to cross the **Lamone** at **Quartolo**, 169 Brigade (from 56 Division but temporarily under the command of the 46th) began a feint towards **Faenza** from the south, and simultaneously

the New Zealand Division and 43 Indian (Gurkha) Lorried Infantry Brigade simulated attacks across the river north of the town. The New Zealanders were to deceive the enemy with tank and infantry movements, artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire, bogus wireless traffic, and by assembling bridging material and smoking bridge sites if necessary.

These feints provoked an immediate and satisfying response, and for some time 128 Brigade advanced almost without opposition. In answer to the barrage the enemy brought down concentrated defensive fire, not only on the New Zealanders' side of the river, but also on his own bank where assaulting troops might be expected, and most violently in the vicinity of the **Ronco** bridge site on 5 Brigade's sector. One of 22 Battalion's outposts complained 'most bitterly' of smoke shells (fired by a New Zealand battery) landing among its positions. Divisional Cavalry, which had relieved 26 Battalion in 6 Brigade's sector on the 2nd, threw large stones into the river to give the impression that assault boats were being launched.

The German Commander-in-Chief reported to **Berlin** that 'the enemy tried to cross the **Lamone**, both north and south of **Faenza**,' <sup>1</sup> and the **Berlin** radio proudly announced that 'strong attacks opposite and just North of **Faenza** were beaten off with heavy losses to the enemy, including losses of AFVs and trucks.' <sup>2</sup>

As the night wore on the enemy's reaction to the feint abated and he turned his attention more to 46 Division's front. The New Zealand Division, therefore, repeated its diversionary programme early in the morning of the 4th, and again the enemy took the bait: he threw a very heavy bombardment into the area screened by smoke on the approaches to **Faenza** and the **Ronco** bridge site. Obviously **Ronco** would have been an unhealthy place to have attempted a crossing of the **Lamone**.

Better visibility on 4 December allowed the Allied aircraft to support **5 Corps'** offensive: fighter-bombers attacked German gun and mortar positions, strongpoints on 46 Division's front, and targets north of Route

9—where 22 Battalion admired excellent strafing by rocket-firing aircraft on the opposite bank of the **Lamone**—and medium and light bombers also concentrated on gun and mortar positions. The German artillery fire dwindled under this onslaught.

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<sup>1</sup> *C-in-C SW Daily Report to Oberkommando des Heeres, 3 Dec 1944.*

<sup>2</sup> **2 NZ Div** Intelligence summary, 4 Dec 1944.

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After crossing the **Lamone** in the vicinity of **Quartolo**, where only scattered German outposts were met, 128 Brigade came up against the main line of resistance on the bare ridges south-west of **Faenza**, and could get no farther during the day. The New Zealand Division made another feint in the afternoon, and again the enemy reacted vigorously on 22 Battalion's front, especially in the **Ronco** area, but only for five or 10 minutes.

By this time, however, the feints had served their purpose. The enemy, having sited his main positions back on the ridges above the river instead of along its winding bank, with the intention of counter-attacking as soon as he located the main Allied bridgehead, had hesitated in concentrating his reserves, with the result that 46 Division had driven a salient on to the high ground beyond the river before he was ready to counter-attack. On 7 December the British captured **Pideura**, the dominating village on the ridge.

(iii)

Although 46 Division's crossing of the **Lamone** threatened **Faenza** and the German positions along the lower reaches of the river, the capture of the town and the breakthrough to the **Senio River** had not yet been achieved. Communications within **5 Corps'** bridgehead were tenuous and in danger of being severed by a rise in the **Lamone**, and the roads south-east of the river were not capable of carrying more than a

few tanks and self-propelled guns. After four days' fighting 46 Division was tired. The corps plan, therefore, would have to be modified, but without departing from the original intention.

The capture of **Faenza** was still to be 46 Division's task before the New Zealand Division (on the right) and **10 Indian Division** passed through, but 25 Indian Infantry Brigade was to relieve a brigade of 46 Division immediately, and **5 NZ Infantry Brigade** was to be ready to move two battalions into the bridgehead at six hours' notice if the capture of **Faenza** proved difficult. If General Weir considered he had sufficient troops, he was to attack **Faenza** with 25 Indian Brigade and 169 British Brigade, but if he needed additional troops, he was to use the two battalions from 5 Brigade. The New Zealand Division was to bridge the **Lamone** into **Faenza** as soon as the situation allowed. The 43rd Gurkha Brigade, which had been made responsible for the right of **5 Corps'** sector on 4 December, was to extend its front progressively southward to relieve the New Zealand units as they were required.

On the night of 7–8 December 25 Indian Brigade relieved 128 Brigade, and 169 Brigade moved completely into the bridgehead. A battalion ( **2/10 Gurkha Rifles**) of 43 Brigade took over from 22 NZ Battalion next day, and the latter, now in reserve, went back to billets in **Forli**. Preparations were begun for assembling 23 and 28 NZ Battalions in 46 Division's sector over the **Lamone**.

At this stage, however, the enemy counter-attacked. Having decided where the greatest danger to his defence lay, he prepared to break into **5 Corps'** bridgehead south of **Faenza**, where he had brought the British to a halt. On 46 Division's right 169 Brigade was unable to close in on the town; in the centre, south of the hamlet of **Celle** (about two miles west of **Faenza**), 138 Brigade was confronted by strong concentrations of German tanks and infantry; on the left 25 Indian Brigade could gain no ground beyond **Pideura**.

On 9 December the enemy began 'one of the heaviest bombardments of the winter' <sup>1</sup> and attacked along the whole of 46 Division's front, with

his main weight against 138 Brigade south of **Celle**, where *200 Regiment of 90 Panzer Grenadier Division* 'attacked with tanks and infantry and high hopes and pressed forward regardless of loss'.<sup>2</sup> Fifth Corps' artillery, including New Zealand guns, 'put down an unceasing curtain' of defensive fire, and Allied aircraft bombed and strafed the German concentrations. The British inflicted 'extremely heavy losses'<sup>3</sup> on *200 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*.

The enemy reported to **Berlin** that 'after hand-to-hand fighting fiercer than any yet seen we succeeded in reoccupying a considerable tract of ground.... Our losses were considerable. The enemy ... had enormous casualties.'<sup>4</sup> The counter-attack, however, had failed: the enemy reverted to the defensive, with the regiments of *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* deployed on the northern and western sides of **5 Corps'** bridgehead and *305 Infantry Division* around **Pideura**.

(iv)

It was now apparent that 46 Division alone could not accomplish the first phase of **5 Corps'** plan, the capture of the whole of the ridge at **Pideura** and the cutting of Route 9 west of **Faenza**, with the object of taking the town and reopening communications along the highway; also, the relief of 46 Division could be postponed no longer. The offensive was halted, therefore, while the remainder of **10 Indian Division** and part of the New Zealand Division were brought into the bridgehead.

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<sup>1</sup> *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy*, Part III, Sec. C, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> *C-in-C SW Daily Report to Oberkommando des Heeres*, 9 Dec

1944.

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While **Faenza** was still in German hands and Route 9 closed to traffic, the maintenance of the troops on the far side of the **Lamone** was most difficult. A seven-mile one-way track, known as the ' **Lamone road**', between Route 9 and 46 Division's crossing at **Quartolo** so far had proved adequate only because of the great exertions of the British and New Zealand (8 Field Company) engineers who had built it and daily repaired it, but obviously was incapable of coping with any additional traffic.

It was decided, therefore, that **5 Corps** should operate a road circuit with an 'up' track from Route 9 over a bridge across the Marzeno River to the **Lamone** and a 'down' track in the opposite direction over another bridge, and that traffic on the circuit should be regulated by a series of control posts. Because of the slowness of movement on this circuit, however, the New Zealand Division decided to maintain its troops in the bridgehead by a jeep train using a small part of **5 Corps**' 'up' track and another route opened by the Division's engineers over the Marzeno and **Lamone** rivers.

Consequently, on the night of 9–10 December, 7 Field Company built a 100-foot Bailey bridge over the Marzeno close to a brickworks about a mile south of **Faenza**. This task took over nine hours, of which five were spent in carrying the components the last 60 yards to the site. 'It was a cold starlight frosty night and the clanking of the Bailey parts probably caused the stonk [by *nebelwerfers*] –the enemy was rather close to us and we had ... a covering party dug in around the bridge site.' <sup>1</sup> Poplar poles were stuck in the ground to help conceal or camouflage what became known as the 'Brickworks bridge' and its approaches.

Fifth Brigade entered the bridgehead on the night of 10–11 December, the night after the Brickworks bridge was completed, and on the same night **6 Field Company**, with an **RASC** platoon under command, assembled the components for a bridge in Cardinetta village, about two miles from **Faenza**, preparatory to constructing access for

vehicles to 5 Brigade. A platoon under Lieutenant **Hunter**<sup>2</sup> built a 110-foot Bailey with two sets of timber cribbing (for eight-foot piers) in daylight under the cover of smoke supplied by the artillery.

‘I selected an approach road site and kept all traffic off it,’ Hunter wrote, ‘got the bridging to the site and we got stuck into it by mid morning.... Had a straight go with only the occasional shell none of which landed too close to stop the job. Used half a dozen Itie haystacks for the wheeled vehicle road ... and covered it with reinforced mesh ... and put [demolished] houses

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<sup>1</sup> Maj G. A. Lindell, quoted in *New Zealand Engineers, Middle East*, p. 656.

<sup>2</sup> Capt A. G. Hunter, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 11 Sep 1918; civil engineer; wounded 6 Apr 1945.

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on top of the mesh. ... we plugged along and finished it late in the evening. ... A heavy day's work for my gang and I can't speak too highly of my platoon. <sup>1</sup> Hunter's bridge earned **General Freyberg's** commendation.

The sappers toiled with corduroy, debris from houses and road netting laid on straw to make the two-mile track between the Brickworks and Hunter's bridges ‘into something resembling a road’,<sup>2</sup> which was used by the jeep train and later by tanks. In spite of these efforts, however, the jeep drivers were not favourably impressed. ‘Some drivers who had known the **Terelle** “Terror Track” declared they preferred it to the one they now had to use to supply 5 Brigade.... Whereas at **Terelle** they could and did move at full speed, this was quite impossible in the mud. Thus, it often took the jeep train with rations twelve hours to get from **Forli** to 5 Brigade Headquarters. Harassing fire was a trouble but was nothing compared with the condition of the roads. On the night of 12–13 December, for instance, out of a convoy of twenty-six jeeps with trailers, two jeeps crashed over a bank, six trailers

had to be temporarily abandoned beside the track and only sixteen won through to Brigade Headquarters. ...' The supplies were then delivered to the companies by mule train or jeep. 'If jeeps had accidents, so, too, did mules.' <sup>3</sup>

This road also made a strong impression on the New Zealand tank crews when they moved into 5 Brigade's sector: 'All up and down **Italy** the Division had struck all types of roads, some good, some indifferent, some downright dreadful; but this road to the **Lamone** was the champion of the lot. It startled even the oldest hands. In a desperate, urgent effort to keep supplies up ... the engineers had hacked the road out of cattle tracks, fields and river marshes. They had blown down houses and dumped tons of brick and rubble on top of the mud; they put down hundreds of tree trunks; they had built Bailey bridges under Jerry's nose. They had shored up the ditches beside the track, and still these caved in under the weight of passing trucks. Sappers had to toil continuously to keep the road open.' <sup>4</sup>

(v)

The regrouping of **5 Corps** was planned to take place in three stages: in the first 5 NZ Brigade was to enter the bridgehead, relieve 138 Brigade and part of 169 Brigade, and pass temporarily



The Gothic Line in September 1944: a dug-in German tank

The **Gothic Line** in September 1944: a dug-in German tank

The coastal plain south-east of Rimini, where Eighth Army broke the Gothic Line



The coastal plain south-east of **Rimini**, where **Eighth Army** broke the **Gothic Line**



One of the first tanks to enter Rimini was this Sherman of  
19 Armoured Regiment

One of the first tanks to enter **Rimini** was this Sherman of **19 Armoured Regiment**

A German gun emplacement on the Adriatic coast at Viserba,  
north of Rimini



A German gun emplacement on the Adriatic coast at **Viserba**, north of **Rimini**



Refugees making their way along the beach near Viserba

**Refugees making their way along the beach near Viserba**

Artificial moonlight from searchlights to assist a night advance  
on the Adriatic front



**Artificial moonlight from searchlights to assist a night advance on the Adriatic front**



The Bailey bridge over the Scolo Rigossa on the way into Gambettola

**The Bailey bridge over the Scolo Rigossa on the way into Gambettola**

Every man lends a hand to extricate a vehicle from the mud near Gambettola



**Every man lends a hand to extricate a vehicle from the mud near Gambettola**



Crossing the Lamone River into Faenza

**Crossing the Lamone River into Faenza**

Germans from 90 Panzer Grenadier Division captured in the vicinity of Faenza



**Germans from 90 Panzer Grenadier Division captured in the vicinity of Faenza**



An Ark (a tank with ramps for bridging canals and ditches) on Route 9 between Forli and Faenza

**An Ark (a tank with ramps for bridging canals and ditches) on Route 9 between Forli and Faenza**

Men of 28 (Maori) Battalion going into position near the Senio River



**Men of 28 (Maori) Battalion going into position near the Senio River**



Evacuating civilians from the battlefield

**Evacuating civilians from the battlefield**

A mortar crew in action close to the Senio stopbank



**A mortar crew in action close to the [Senio stopbank](#)**



On the eastern stopbank of the Senio River

**On the eastern stopbank of the [Senio River](#)**



New Zealanders playing 'two-up'

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<sup>1</sup> *New Zealand Engineers, Middle East*, p. 657.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *23 Battalion*, p. 409.

<sup>4</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 592.

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to the command of 46 Division; 43 Gurkha Brigade and the New Zealand Division were to sidestep to the left. In the second stage the New Zealand Division was to take over 46 Division's right sector (by resuming command of 5 Brigade) and **10 Indian Division** its left sector; in the third stage 169 Brigade was to relieve the Gurkha Brigade.

On the night of 10–11 December, therefore, 28 (Maori) Battalion relieved a battalion of 169 Brigade, 56 Division, on the right, and 23 Battalion relieved two battalions of 138 Brigade, 46 Division, in the centre; next night 22 Battalion relieved the third battalion of 138 Brigade on the left. Meanwhile 21 Battalion was replaced north of Route 9 by the **Gurkhas** and went back in reserve to billets in **Forli**.

The Maoris, 'muffled to the ears' on a cold winter's day, were put

down from their trucks near the Marzeno and marched two miles across muddy creeks and the **Lamone** to the headquarters of 2/5 Queens, in a large building, where they stayed until night. They completed the changeover 'with some care and in extreme silence for, according to the guides, "Jerry was very trigger happy and at the slightest sound they would know all about it." It was a matter of crawling to the most forward *casas* and, as the ground was very muddy, some of the Maoris soon got careless and began to walk. A stream of tracer about waist-high decided for them that perhaps crawling was the better method.' <sup>1</sup>

The battalion was disposed in the vicinity of a road junction— which became known to the Maoris as 'Ruatoria'—a little more than a mile from the outskirts of **Faenza**. Two roads and a railway led into the town and a third road north-westward to the hamlet of **Celle**. Houses occupied by the enemy were only 150 yards away. Sergeant **Cullen** <sup>2</sup> took a patrol of 11 men of 8 Platoon to investigate one of these houses, and discovered 'a real hornets' nest. Three well-hidden tanks were behind the building. The patrol was detected and a battle royal ensued in the darkness while the patrol withdrew with four wounded. The medium and heavy mortars were turned on to the locality and the tanks were heard moving back towards **Faenza**, whereupon Cullen returned with his patrol and killed six Germans who were still in the house.' <sup>3</sup> The Maoris were preparing to settle in when the tanks returned and shelled the house. Again the patrol withdrew, this time with four more wounded.

The 23rd Battalion debussed less than two miles from **Faenza** and marched 10 miles in five hours on muddy road verges to take

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<sup>1</sup> *Maori Battalion*, p. 435.

<sup>2</sup> **Sgt R. Cullen**, MM; **Paeroa**; born NZ 5 Jan 1920; carpenter; four times wounded.

<sup>3</sup> *Maori Battalion*, p. 436.

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over from 6 Lincolns and 6 York and Lancasters in positions on the left of the **Maori Battalion**. As the New Zealand armour was not expected to arrive for several days, 15 tanks of the Queen's Bays stayed in the bridgehead.

Harassing fire and patrols caused a few casualties. Two stretcher-bearers and another man, sent to collect four wounded from B Company of 23 Battalion, went in error to the wrong house and were taken prisoner. This might have been the enemy's first evidence of the New Zealanders' presence. Later *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* fired into 5 Brigade's lines shells containing leaflets which proclaimed how the 'boys of the 2nd NZ Division' invariably were needed 'when the going becomes rough.... Now, on the eighth day of the Battle for , after the British 56th Division failed with tragic losses, you are called to save the situation. You may reach , but every yard towards that town must be paid for with the life blood of hundreds of New Zealanders....' <sup>1</sup>

The enemy in slit trenches and dugouts at **Casa Colombarina** could be seen clearly by C Company of 23 Battalion from the **Ragazzina ridge**, and was harassed by artillery, mortars and snipers. 'It was rather unique for us to hold the high ground from the outset, and from an excellent O.P. a murderous fire was directed on this strongpoint,' Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas wrote. 'The Hun sustained casualties, stretcher bearers and ambulance being seen from our O.P.' <sup>2</sup>

The relief of 2/4 King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry by 22 Battalion, on the left of the 23rd, was completed on the evening of 11 December. In this position most of 22 Battalion could look across a steep, bush-covered descent to a sharp rise, near the top of which 'stood the pocket-fortress of **Casa Elta**.' <sup>3</sup>

While 5 Brigade replaced 46 Division in the bridgehead west of **Faenza**, 6 Brigade side-stepped to the left on the other (south-eastern) side of the **Lamone**. On 10 December its boundary with 43 Gurkha Brigade was brought southwards to the railway, which placed two squadrons of Divisional Cavalry immediately opposite **Faenza**, D between

the railway and Route 9 and C near the confluence of the Marzeno and **Lamone** just south of the town and the highway. The other two squadrons were farther back. On the left of Divisional Cavalry, 24 Battalion replaced 44 Reconnaissance Regiment (under the command of 46 Division but from 56 Division) between the Marzeno and **Lamone**.

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<sup>1</sup> After the capture of **Faenza** a pamphlet in reply was fired into the lines of *90 Pz Gren Div*. It referred to the surrender of its predecessor, *90 Lt Div*, to **2 NZ Div** in **Africa**.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, 23 Bn.

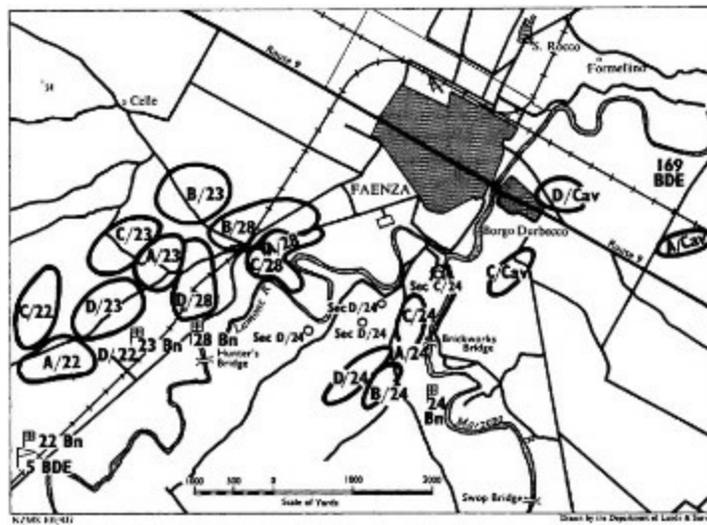
<sup>3</sup> *22 Battalion*, p. 395.

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The tanks of **18 Armoured Regiment** and A Squadron of 20 Regiment entered the bridgehead and came under 5 Brigade's command on 13 December. They were weighed down with extra ammunition and fuel, and 18 3-ton lorries also carried fuel. The move took all day. 'The convoy crept along at walking pace, past dozens of trucks lying forlornly with wheels in the air, past gang after gang of workers ... for at the soft places every tank left its quota of damage. By the **Lamone**, where the road came into Jerry's view, the unit went through a smoke screen specially laid for it, a thick grey fog that blotted everything out except the few yards immediately round you. Not a shell came near throughout the move, and everyone breathed freely again, for that road had an evil reputation.' <sup>1</sup>

The anti-tank batteries brought forward M10s, 17-pounders and heavy mortars. The artillery was able to support both brigades. Three companies (36 Vickers guns) of 27 (MG) Battalion were placed where they could harass the enemy at night.

The relief of 46 Division was completed on the morning of



DISPOSITIONS, 12 DECEMBER 1944

DISPOSITIONS, 12 DECEMBER 1944

**12 December, when the New Zealand Division took command of the right sector of the bridgehead, occupied by 5 Brigade; 10 Indian Division had resumed command of 25 Brigade on the left sector**

<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 592.

**the previous day. The final stage of 5 Corps' regrouping was the relief of 43 Gurkha Brigade by 169 Brigade of 56 Division on the 13th, when the Gurkas withdrew into reserve. That day, therefore, 56 Division held the line of the Lamone from the corps' right boundary to the railway, 2 NZ Division extended across Route 9 and straddled the Lamone south-west of Faenza, and 10 Indian Division held the remainder of the bridgehead across the river on the left.**

*(vi)*

**Fifth Corps was now ready to begin the second phase of its offensive, which had for its object the capture of crossings over the Senio River south of the Rimini- Bologna railway and about three and a half miles beyond the Lamone River. Faenza, the objective of the first phase, was to be cut off and secured as the advance progressed.**

**The corps' plan was to attack with the New Zealand Division on the**

right and **10 Indian Division** on the left. The first objectives, which were to be captured by dawn on 15 December, were for the New Zealand Division Point 54, 1000 yards north-west of **Celle**, and for the Indian Division the ridge and road 1000 yards north of **Pergola** and the high ground nearly a mile north and north-west of **Pideura**. Both divisions, after taking these objectives, were to cross the **Senio**. At the same time **56 Division**, on the right flank was to simulate an assault across the **Lamone** in the vicinity-of the **Ronco** bridge site. On the other flank the **Polish Corps**, co-ordinating its attack with **5 Corps**, was to strike for the rising ground beyond the **Senio** west of **Riolo del Bagni**, about six miles north-west of **Castel Bolognese**.

The plan for the capture of **Faenza** depended on whether or not the enemy still firmly held the town after the New Zealanders had reached their objective beyond **Celle**. If necessary, a **Faenza Task Force** (43 Gurkha Brigade with tank, artillery and engineer support) was to cross the **Lamone** and clear the town while the New Zealanders continued their thrust towards the **Senio**.

**General Freyberg** discussed the Division's part in the operation with the brigadiers and heads of individual services on the morning of 13 December. The GSO III (Intelligence), Major Cox, <sup>1</sup> estimated that the maximum enemy strength on the Division's sector was 1085 men, 112 guns and up to 60 tanks (of which a third might be Tigers). If 700 Germans were holding the front, the Division would

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<sup>1</sup> Maj Sir Geoffrey Cox, CBE, m.i.d.; **London**; born **Palmerston North**, 7 Apr 1910; journalist; editor, Independent Television News, **London**.

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have an advantage of two to one. The GOC told the conference that 'the basis of our plan is surprise.' It was hoped to show no more than normal activity until zero hour, 11 p.m. on 14 December, when 'we will open with everything we have, hit him a crack and go as hard as we can and try to take advantage of any surprise we can gain by the rapidity of

our blow.... We want to hit him when as many of his troops as possible have their boots off and have gone to sleep....' <sup>1</sup> The high ground that the Indian division was attacking was very important because it overlooked the whole area, which included the German gun positions. **Celle** would be the key to the New Zealand sector.

A divisional operation order issued in the evening of the 13th said 5 Brigade was to advance at the rate of 100 yards in seven minutes to the first objective, and then continue to the bridge over the **Senio** on Route 9 and the high ground overlooking the river farther west at **Casale**. Sixth Brigade was to take over the sector held by **28 Battalion** and protect the right flank during 5 Brigade's advance. If the enemy remained firm in **Faenza** in spite of the attack, the **Faenza** Task Force was to clear the town. The engineers were to construct a bridge over the river in the vicinity of **Faenza**.

Fifth Brigade's first objective was a shallow inverted V about two and a half miles in length, which began on the right at a road and rail crossing near the outskirts of **Faenza**, passed north of **Celle** to a road and track junction about half a mile beyond the hamlet, and then continued south-westward to the junction of a lateral road ascending the ridge west of **Celle** and a road running north from **Pergola**. The Maori Battalion, on the right, was to attack with half of A Squadron, **18 Armoured Regiment**, in support, and would have to fan out slightly to reach its objectives; 23 Battalion, in the centre, supported by B Squadron, would be attacking where the enemy was expected to be the strongest—the hamlet of **Celle**, the flat ground beyond it and the edge of the ridge, 22 Battalion, on the left, with the other half of A Squadron in support, would be attacking in the most difficult country, where its objectives would be on the lateral road on the ridge west of **Celle** and (in co-operation with the Indians) the high ground on the left flank.

A Squadron of 20 Regiment was to assist the advance by fire on the right flank in the direction of **Faenza**, and was to be prepared to support 6 Brigade. C Squadron of the Queen's Bays also was to assist with fire, and was to be prepared to support 22 Battalion on the left flank. Tasks

were allotted to the mortars, anti-

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

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tank guns, machine guns and engineers. <sup>1</sup> From zero hour onwards artificial moonlight (searchlights) would be used over the battlefield.

On capture of the objective 5 Brigade was to consolidate, M10s were to take over from the tanks of 18 Regiment in 28 and 22 Battalions' sectors, and 23 and 28 Battalions were each to release a company to support 18 Regiment, which was to be prepared to exploit at dawn to the bridge at the crossing of Route 9 over the **Senio** and establish a bridgehead over the river. For this purpose an Ark bridge, an armoured bulldozer and other mechanical equipment were placed under the regiment's command. When a bridgehead had been established, **28 Battalion** was to be prepared to cut Route 9 and protect the right flank. The 22nd Battalion was to continue its advance northward to the high ground south of **Casale**.

Sixth Brigade's orders were for two companies of 25 Battalion to cross the **Lamone** by Hunter's bridge and relieve two companies of **28 Battalion** on the evening of the 14th. Other troops were to simulate a crossing south of **Faenza**. After 5 Brigade's attack, the 6th was to adopt one of three courses. The first of these was for 25 Battalion to complete the crossing of the **Lamone** and prepare to take over **28 Battalion's** bridgehead, and for 24 Battalion to cross and, together with the 25th, to attempt to outflank **Faenza**; the second plan was for 6 Brigade to clear **Faenza** with Divisional Cavalry, 24 and 25 Battalions, if the enemy vacated the town; the third plan was for 6 Brigade to advance north-westwards from 5 Brigade's bridgehead, if the enemy defended **Faenza**, while the **Faenza** Task Force took over on the right flank and assaulted the town.

A total of 256 guns <sup>2</sup> on the New Zealand Division's front and 180 on **10 Indian Division's** front were to be available for the attack. The

barrage in support of 23 and 22 Battalions' advance was to be fired by the three New Zealand field regiments and a regiment from 46 Division, and in support of **28 Battalion** by two regiments from 46 Division. Other tasks for the field, medium and heavy guns were concentrations, counter-mortar fire, and pre-arranged defensive fire. In addition 290,000 rounds of Mark VIII<sup>3</sup> ammu-

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<sup>1</sup> Units under 5 Bde's command for the attack were the Bays, **18 Armd Regt**, half-squadron of **9 Lancers**, **32 A-Tk Bty**, 151/93 A-Tk Bty RA, half 34 Hy Mor Bty, **6 Fd Coy**, detachment 1 Aslt Regt RAC/RE, 4 MG Coy, and a company of **5 Fd Amb**; in support were **5 Fd Regt** and 27 (MG) Bn less two companies. Units under 6 Bde's command were one squadron of 20 Regt, **33 A-Tk Bty**, half 34 Hy Mor Bty, **2 MG Coy** and a company of 6 Fd Amb, and in support **6 Fd Regt**, one squadron of 20 Regt and **8 Fd Coy**.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the regiments of **2 NZ Div Artillery**, 1 RHA was under command, and four regiments of 46 Div, 1 Army Group RA, one Polish medium regiment and 40/14 Lt AA Regt RA were in support. The Bofors of 40/14 Regt were to mark boundaries by firing bursts of tracer.

<sup>3</sup> With a range of 4500 yards, compared with the 2800 yards of Mark VII ammunition.

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nition were released for the Vickers guns of 27 (MG) Battalion, two companies of which were to harass roads into **Faenza** and the known enemy positions, while a third company was to shoot with the artillery barrage and harass the ground over which the infantry was to advance.

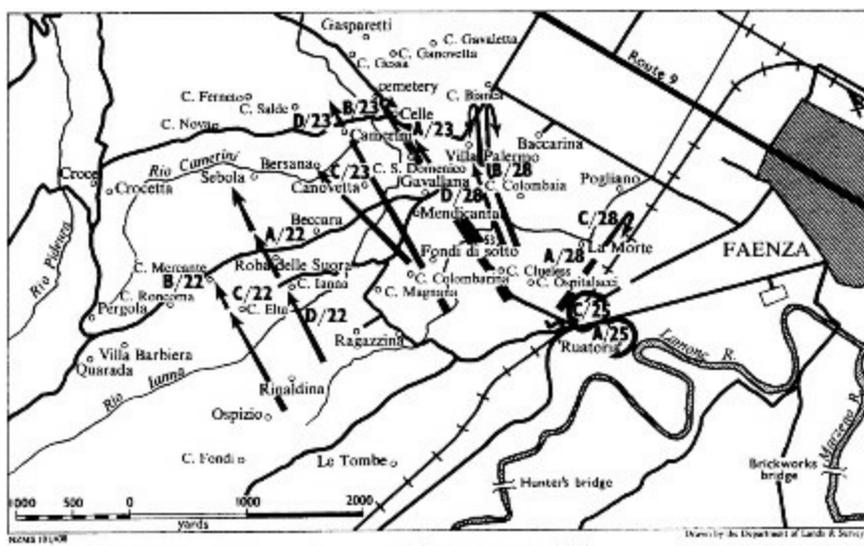
The planning also provided for aircraft to attack defined targets and to co-operate with the ground forces. If the weather permitted, in fact, **5 Corps** was going to do everything in its power to capture **Faenza** and cross the **Senio River**.

At zero hour (11 p.m.) 'to a second, the horizon behind us blazed with the flashes of the artillery.... Looking back towards the gunlines you see the skyline dancing with flashes—fan shaped radiances from the decrested guns and the intense white spots of those whose actual muzzle flash is visible. They flicker back and forth so swiftly they leave you bewildered. ... The shells whizz overhead, not whining or whistling at this stage, but cracking in the air like whiplashes as they hurtle upwards towards the top of their trajectories. The air literally vibrates with the passing of each projectile and ... every loose shutter and window pane rattles continuously. Where the shells are bursting, if it is visible to the observer, he sees myriads of winking pin pricks of light, looking very small and insignificant, but in reality each one an expanding shower of deadly splinters. If the shells are bursting well ahead, the explosions all blend into an insistent rumbling like distant thunder or the boom of surf when heard inland from the beach. Even miles back from the barrage, the earth is continually shivering with tremors from the hundreds of explosions....

'When the barrage lifts and begins to creep forward the infantry come to grips and then all the smaller signs and sounds begin. Wavering yellow flares hover briefly over the front, necklaces of tracer curve through the blackness, single red sparks of our own red recognition climb vertically, red globes of Bofors speed out and then slow down before finally winking out, haystacks here and there become lit and blaze brightly for an hour or so illuminating the smoke above them and then smoulder redly for the rest of the night. Pauses in the barrage are generally filled by the insistent chattering of the Vickers guns, and here and there at scattered intervals one hears the smooth even

**BURRRR**

of the spandau, nearly always followed swiftly by a short stutter of bren or the clicking of tommy gun. Grenades pop, tank engines are roaring, Jerry mortar and shellfire crunches down, and every now and then the giant retching



5 BRIGADE, 14-15 DECEMBER 1944

5 BRIGADE, 14-15 DECEMBER 1944

of the nebelwerfer is heard, followed by the moaning of rockets before they explode in rapid succession.’<sup>1</sup>

That was how the attack on the night of 14-15 December appeared to a New Zealander near the Lamone River.

(viii)

Lieutenant-Colonel Awatere's plan for the **Maori Battalion** was to attack some houses within a triangular area between the railway (the branch line from **Faenza** through ‘Ruatoria’) and the road to **Celle**: C Company, on the right, was to capture **Pogliano** and another locality near the road parallel to Route 9; D Company (with a platoon of B under command), on the left, was to capture Casa Bianca and other houses north-east and north of **Celle**, and Villa Palermo (short of **Celle**); A Company, in support of C, was to seize buildings about midway to C's objectives; B Company, in support of D, was to occupy houses near ‘Ruatoria’.

‘The great and unavoidable weakness of the Maori position ... was the lack of an axis road; on the right was the embanked railway line, but on the left the only road was in 23 Battalion's area and that was useless until **Celle** was cleared.’ Awatere warned his officers that ‘the presence of enemy armour might influence the fortunes of the attack. Provided

the tanks and anti-tank screen could get forward at the earliest possible moment, he considered the Maoris need have no fear of the outcome.’<sup>2</sup>

From the steeple of the church at ‘Ruatoria’ Awatere had a final look over the flat country towards **Celle** and **Pogliano**. Small, fallow paddocks were separated by single rows of mulberry and poplar trees, which in season would support the trellised grape vines. The rows of trees ran in the same direction as the advance and would have been no obstacle to the passage of tanks if the ground had been firm—but it was not firm. Awatere's descent from the church tower was hastened by shells, the third of which brought down the whole structure.

When the attack began, two platoons of C Company had little trouble in approaching to within a few hundred yards of **Pogliano**; they waited in a small house near the railway for the arrival of the rest of the company before the start of the final assault. A patrol sent to investigate **Della Cura**, between the railway and **Pogliano**, crawled along a ditch until within a few yards of two Tiger tanks and some Germans. The Maoris had no suitable weapon for attacking tanks. Lieutenant **Mahuika**<sup>3</sup> (who had taken charge

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<sup>1</sup> Diary, B. C. H. Moss.

<sup>2</sup> *Maori Battalion*, pp. 438–9.

<sup>3</sup> **Capt N. Mahuika**; Tikitiki; born NZ 30 Jul 1913; labourer; twice wounded.

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a few days earlier when the company commander was wounded), arrived with the other part of C Company, and called for stonks on **Della Cura**, but none fell on the target. The German tanks began to shell the building in which the Maoris were sheltering.

Meanwhile D Company sent two platoons (including the one attached from B) to **Casa Bianca**, and the other two to Villa Palermo, and

by 2.30 a.m. held both places. At least 20 or 30 Germans were killed at **Casa Bianca**. German tanks could be heard moving along Route 9, and later a number of them appeared to be about to counter-attack from a road junction about half a mile north-east of **Casa Bianca**. Although the medium and heavy guns fired 'murders' and the field guns brought down several defensive stonks on this target, the Maoris, who were isolated and had no tanks or anti-tank guns at **Casa Bianca**, were compelled to withdraw to **Villa Palermo** when the enemy counter-attacked.

A Company discovered that **La Morte**, which had not responded to fire from C Company's men when they passed it half-way to their objective, was occupied by the enemy, but captured it after negotiating a minefield. B Company took possession of the empty Case Ospitalacci, a short way along the road to **Celle**.

The Maori Battalion's left flank was now on the 'Ruatoria'– **Celle** road, but its right flank was most insecure. Mahuika decided to withdraw C Company. The men of 13 Platoon (Lieutenant **Hogan** <sup>1</sup>), told to go first, crawled along a ditch by the railway until they thought they could safely leave its shelter, but walked into a minefield. Some mines were exploded, and the enemy opened fire from the railway embankment; he was aided by the light of two haystacks which began to burn. Very soon there were not enough men to carry away the wounded. The survivors made for **La Morte**, though not sure whom they would find there; Hogan went forward alone and when within hailing distance identified himself in Maori. As **La Morte** was overcrowded, he took his men to Casa 'Clueless', near Case Ospitalacci. A party went back to bring in the wounded men who had been left behind.

Before 14 Platoon of C Company withdrew from the house near **Della Cura**, Mahuika was wounded, and Second-Lieutenant Paniora <sup>2</sup> succeeded to the command. In the vain hope that the supporting tanks might arrive or that the enemy might depart, Paniora decided to stay. Two more German tanks joined the two at **Della Cura**, and after daybreak all four turned their guns on the house and blasted a corner off

it. 'An infantry attack ... then came in but

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<sup>1</sup> Lt **W. Hogan**; born NZ 6 May 1911; stock agent; died Ruatoria, 18 Mar 1947.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Lt **S. Paniora**; born NZ 18 Feb 1918; labourer; three times wounded; killed in action 15 Dec 1944.

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the range was suicidal and the survivors retired.' <sup>1</sup> Paniora was killed and Sergeant-Major **Wanoa**, <sup>2</sup> who next took command, decided that there was nothing to be gained by staying any longer with only a handful of men, so called for a smoke screen and defensive stonks, under which the survivors, carrying their wounded, safely reached Casa 'Clueless'.

**Villa Palermo** and **La Morte** were now **28 Battalion's** foremost positions. The Maoris' casualties during 14–16 December were 24 killed, 57 wounded, and two captured.

(ix)

The attack on **Celle** 'brought to an angry head the feud between the senior officers of 18 Regiment and 23 Battalion that had been simmering since **Florence**.' <sup>3</sup> This time the squadrons of the regiment were not under command of the battalions of 5 Brigade, but in support, 'a change welcomed by squadron and troop commanders after their experiences at **Florence** and the **Rubicon** [**Fiumicino**]. Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas of 23 Battalion, in particular, was said to demand impossible feats from his tanks, forgetting that their crews were not superhuman or the tanks lightweights like jeeps.' <sup>4</sup> Thomas and his company commanders, on the other hand, 'felt strongly that the operation would have been more successful if the armour had been placed under command, as requested.' <sup>5</sup>

The battalion was required to advance about 2000 yards on a two-

company front over broken, undulating ground on which the defences centred on houses. The plan was for B Company to attack on the right and C on the left; A Company was to follow 200–300 yards behind B and mop up posts bypassed by the leaders, collect prisoners, evacuate wounded, and if necessary assist in the final assault on the objective; D Company was to be in reserve and available to assist the tanks in the exploitation next day.

Before the attack began, 12 Platoon, which had entered the line 22 strong, came under severe tank and mortar fire, which reduced it to seven fit men; it therefore was replaced in B Company's attacking force by 7 Platoon of A Company. The first shells of the barrage fell on 23 Battalion's tactical headquarters—sited right on the start line—in a hilltop house which shook as it received several direct hits, but no casualties occurred among its occupants, most of whom sheltered in an underground cellar.

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<sup>1</sup> *Maori Battalion*, p. 442.

<sup>2</sup> **WO II A. H. Wanoa**; Tolaga Bay; born Tikitiki, 27 Aug 1918; labourer; twice wounded.

<sup>3</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 597.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 594.

<sup>5</sup> *23 Battalion*, p. 423.

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The battalion captured the houses more or less according to plan. On the right of B Company, 7 Platoon, after a brisk encounter, took 20 prisoners at its first house, half-way between the **Celle** road and **Casa Colombaia**, but was left with only enough men to guard the captives, so was replaced by 9 Platoon of A Company. The rest of B Company (10 and 11 Platoons) saw a surprising number of Germans on the **Celle** road.

Some were already dead, killed by the barrage; the others were either shot or forced to surrender. Near **Celle** ‘the artillery and heavy mortars had wrought frightful havoc, but some determined enemy survived to give fight. B Company was now hard on the heels of the barrage.... The softening-up process had its effect.... **Celle** was occupied soon after 3 a.m.’ <sup>1</sup>

The company commander (Major **McArthur** <sup>2</sup>) left 9 Platoon in **Celle** (which was a church with a few houses clustered around it) to hold the road junction, and pushed on with the rest of his force—about 28 men—to a cemetery, which they reached safely. Two Germans unsuspectingly sauntered down the road and were captured, but three enemy tanks and some infantry soon opened fire. McArthur left eight men (from 11 Platoon) to dig in at the cemetery and established a strongpoint with the remainder of his party at the northernmost house in **Celle**.

C Company, on the left, also made good progress. The officer commanding 14 Platoon was wounded at the start, but Sergeant **Batchelor** <sup>3</sup> led the assault on the first house, **Casa Colombarina**, which was recognised as a strongpoint. The 10 Germans who survived were sent back with the walking wounded. Batchelor's men took two more houses and were approaching the final objective when they heard two tanks close at hand and, as they were separated from the rest of the company, decided it would be wise to withdraw. They were surprised to find Germans in **Casa Bersana**, west of **Celle**, but promptly attacked and occupied it.

The shells of the barrage were still hitting the top storey of Casa Canovetta, south of **Celle**, when 15 Platoon attacked it. The first of two Piat bombs fired through the front door failed to explode but wounded the commander of *1 Battalion, 200 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*; the second bomb exploded and shook part of the building. Some of the platoon dashed inside while others shot or captured the Germans who emerged. Thirty-nine prisoners were marched away; about a dozen dead or wounded Germans remained.

**'Thus, from house to house, the troops moved, losing a few**

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<sup>1</sup> **23 Battalion, p. 416.**

<sup>2</sup> **Maj J. W. McArthur, MC, m.i.d.; Alexandra; born Clyde, 3 Sep 1906; schoolteacher; wounded 12 Apr 1945.**

<sup>3</sup> **Sgt E. Batchelor, DCM and bar, m.i.d.; Waimate; born Waimate, 29 Aug 1920; milkman; twice wounded.**

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**good men but rejoicing in the number of prisoners taken and in such a sight of dead Germans as few of them had ever seen before.'** <sup>1</sup> After taking 16 prisoners at one house 13 Platoon crossed open ground, where some of its men were pinned down by spandau fire from a slit trench. In the light of a burning haystack Private **Litchfield** <sup>2</sup> stalked the gun, shot a German and took two prisoners.

A Company, reduced at this stage to 8 Platoon and Company Headquarters, passed a row of burning haystacks short of which some tanks of B Squadron of 18 Regiment were halted, and came under mortar, tank-gun and machine-gun fire, but managed to get into **Celle** and link up with B Company. A Company's commander (Major **Brittenden** <sup>3</sup>) and Major McArthur decided to form a firm base in the church, where they found 9 Platoon.

By 4a.m. on the 15th 23 Battalion had gained **Celle** but was still nearly half a mile from the final objective. At the cemetery just beyond the hamlet the eight men of 11 Platoon came under tank and machine-gun fire and, realising that they would be unable to fend off the tanks, withdrew to rejoin the rest of B Company in **Celle**. About this time Major **Low** <sup>4</sup> was establishing C Company's headquarters in Casa Camerini, on the road west of **Celle**, and his men also could hear tanks moving out in front. Tank-gun fire came from **Casa Gessa**, north of **Celle**, and the enemy appeared to be ready to launch a counter-attack. Both B and C

Companies, therefore, called for tank support.

Batchelor (14 Platoon) set out from **Casa Bersana** with three men to find C Company headquarters, which he thought Low might have established at Casa Salde, farther north, but this house was still held by the enemy. Undeterred by or unaware of the occupants' superior numbers, Batchelor and his companions attacked, killing five and capturing 19 Germans. Batchelor located the company headquarters at Casa Camerini. Shortly afterwards 15 Platoon was counter-attacked by German infantry supported by tank fire, but beat off the assault. Low 'adopted the somewhat desperate expedient of calling down artillery fire on the house occupied by his own men in order to break up the worst counter-attack.'<sup>5</sup>

When word reached Battalion Headquarters that C Company had been counter-attacked and 11 Platoon forced back to **Celle**, Colonel Thomas ordered D Company forward to consolidate the

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<sup>1</sup> *23 Battalion*, p. 418.

<sup>2</sup> **Cpl R. B. Litchfield**, MM; **Blenheim**; born NZ 28 Jun 1916; farmer.

<sup>3</sup> **Maj J. A. M. Brittenden**; **Wellington**; born Tinwald, 28 Mar 1914; artist; wounded 5 Jul 1942.

<sup>4</sup> **Col H. J. G. Low**, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Nelson**, 27 Apr 1919; clerk; wounded 5 Nov 1942; Director of Plans, Army HQ, 1957–59; Director of Recruiting, 1959–61.

<sup>5</sup> *23 Battalion*, p. 422.

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position between the hamlet and C Company, and went forward himself to investigate. D Company arrived about 7.30 a.m. to link up with the forward companies, and half an hour later four tanks from B

**Squadron of 18 Regiment also arrived. Two of the tanks took up a position behind B Company's headquarters (in the church) and two behind a house occupied by a D Company platoon.**

**Second-Lieutenant Paterson <sup>1</sup> took a section of D Company to the northern end of Celle, from which McArthur had withdrawn his B Company men. After 8 a.m. two German Mark IVs, accompanied by infantry, came down the road. Paterson's men had no Piats or other anti-tank weapons with which to offer a fight. Some ran back into the hamlet, but five men remained flat on the floor of a house while armour-piercing shells penetrated the walls. One man, caught in the open, was captured. The enemy approached the centre of Celle, but was forced to ground by artillery concentrations and then withdrew.**

**As long as German tanks remained outside Celle, 23 Battalion could not feel secure. Colonel Thomas, who asked the B Squadron commander (Major E. C. Laurie) 'to get his tanks forward, and later personally appealed to the tanks crews,' <sup>2</sup> reported that 'it was extremely disappointing that our tanks were not able to give battle.' <sup>3</sup> Major Low also referred to their 'most ineffectual and disappointing support. ... At no time did our armour move out to engage the enemy who was dive bombed both morning and afternoon and repeatedly stonked by Mediums and Field whenever we saw him move.... Our troops, who had been halted by the tanks alone, were greatly disheartened at seeing German tanks advance, force back our right flank troops, withdraw and then manoeuvre throughout the day only 300 yds to 500 yds from our positions whilst our armour sat back evidently unable to compete.' <sup>4</sup>**

**It is debatable whether B Squadron could have contributed more to the battle by making greater sacrifices. Although 23 Battalion 'felt somewhat aggrieved at not receiving more effective support from the tanks', <sup>5</sup> it was satisfied with its own performance in taking well over 100 prisoners, mostly from *200 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*. One of the documents captured from the headquarters of a German battalion revealed that a relief had not been completed when the artillery barrage**

opened, which might account for the many dead found on some of the roads and tracks as well as in the

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt R. L. Paterson**; born **Christchurch**, 27 Dec 1921; cadet, NZ Forest Service.

<sup>2</sup> *23 Battalion*, p. 421.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

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houses. Over 80 enemy were killed in 23 Battalion's area. The battalion's own casualties on 14–16 December were 12 killed and 48 wounded.

(x)

Of 5 Brigade's three assaulting battalions, the 22nd (Lieutenant-Colonel O'Reilly), on the left, had the most difficult country to cross: to reach its objective west of Ferneto, in the vicinity of the road running westward from **Celle**, it had to descend into the valley of the Ianna stream, climb the steep ridges on which stood Casa Ianna and **Casa Elta**, and descend again to the **Camerini stream**, beyond which the ground rose once more. **Casa Elta** was a two-storied farmhouse on a spur flanked by steep gullies and protected by many well-placed machine-gun posts and thickly-sown minefields; Casa Ianna was in a similar position about a quarter of a mile to the east.

The advance began with A Company on the right and C on the left, supported by D and B respectively. The enemy reacted almost immediately to the barrage with artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire.

The right-hand platoon of A Company (No. 7) suffered so many casualties, first from shellfire and then in a minefield, that its place had to be taken by the reserve platoon (No. 8). The left-hand leading platoon of A Company (No. 6) passed safely through an undetected minefield in front of Casa Ianna and was in possession of the house by 3 a.m. Corporal **Clark**<sup>1</sup> silenced a spandau post with hand grenades and tommy-gun fire. The platoon set alight the nearby haystacks, which drove out the enemy who were occupying pits underneath, and altogether captured 17 Germans.

As radio contact had been lost with A Company early in the attack, 16 Platoon was sent from D to follow A and keep in contact with C on the left by radio. This platoon found A Company in possession of Casa Ianna, and the rest of D was then guided to the house. The two companies investigated other houses in the vicinity and, while D was left in occupation, A went on to **Sebola**, near the **Camerini stream**, which brought it into line with 23 Battalion on its right.

**Casa Elta** did not fall to C Company until 4 a.m. The left-hand platoon (No. 15) lost its officer, who was wounded on the start line, and two sergeants, killed in minefields. The platoon split into small groups, one of which, led by Private Dixon,<sup>2</sup> captured two defended localities, took a few prisoners, and joined in the assault

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<sup>1</sup> Lt **A. G. Clark**, MM; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 20 Dec 1920; optical mechanic.

<sup>2</sup> Cpl **R. H. Dixon**, DCM; born **Wellington**, 22 Jun 1922; machinist.

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on **Casa Elta**. The other two platoons of C Company (13 and 14), which had fewer casualties but also lost touch and became scattered, converged independently on the house. One group was held up by machine-gun fire until Private **McIvor**<sup>1</sup> stalked a spandau post and silenced it with his tommy gun, and then wiped out a second spandau

post with a grenade when his weapon jammed. Lance- Sergeant **Seaman**<sup>2</sup> led a party uphill on the left flank and around to the rear of the house, where he rallied his men before leading a charge into the strongpoint. Although severely wounded, he refused aid until he had disposed his men against counter-attack. About 20 Germans were captured and 15 killed, and seven machine guns were among the equipment seized.

B Company, having passed through C Company's area before the capture of **Casa Elta**, climbed a steep ridge slightly behind and to the west of it, and had casualties while the men were silhouetted on the skyline by the artificial moonlight. After a sharp engagement the company captured **Casa Mercante**, which yielded 40 prisoners, soon after dawn. Five tanks from A Squadron of 18 Regiment helped to consolidate.

There was no threat of a counter-attack on 22 Battalion's front, where a quiet day ensued, marred only by the bombing and strafing of Battalion Headquarters by 'friendly' aircraft in the afternoon. As well as killing many of the enemy, 22 Battalion had taken over 100 prisoners, most of whom were from *361 Regiment of 90 Panzer Grenadier Division*. The battalion's own casualties were seven killed and 30 wounded.

(xi)

The members of 23 Battalion who were so critical of the support given by **18 Armoured Regiment** (Lieutenant-Colonel J. B. Ferguson) probably had little idea of the appalling difficulties the tank crews had to contend with that night.

Half of A Squadron had been placed in support of **28 Battalion** and half in support of the 22nd; the whole of B Squadron was in support of 23 Battalion because **Celle** was expected to be strongly defended and German Mark IV and Mark VI (Tiger) tanks had been seen there. The New Zealand tanks were expected to be on the objectives with the infantry at daybreak, about 7 a.m.; then C Squadron, with infantry following the tanks, was to go through and charge the **Senio River** crossing. 'This idea

had a suicidal sound about it. ... However, C Squadron could drag some

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<sup>1</sup> Cpl H. McIvor, MM; Hastings; born **Scotland**, 16 Feb 1919; labourer.

<sup>2</sup> L-Sgt **L. F. Seaman**, DCM; Raetihi; born Ohakune, 17 Jun 1921; butcher; wounded 15 Dec 1944.

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comfort from the news that, as soon as it was light enough, the **Air Force** was to lay on a massive assault with all the planes it could produce....

‘ **Celle** ... looked a potential bottleneck, for 28 and 23 Battalions' tanks would all have to go that way before fanning out to join the infantry. It was on C Squadron's road forward too. More than that, the whole regiment had only one road to move up, and a mere lane at that, winding up and over a [Ragazzina] ridge and diagonally down to the flat below, then coming out on to another road that ran dead straight for **Celle** church. Those who had been up to the top of the ridge for a cautious look reported that this lane (what they could see of it) looked churned up and exposed and generally undesirable.’ <sup>1</sup>

Both B Squadron, which went first, and A Squadron began badly. The troop of tanks leading up the **Ragazzina ridge**, west of ‘ **Charing Cross**’ (known to the Maoris as ‘Ruatoria’), ‘was at once caught in a torrent of shells, apparently ours.’ <sup>2</sup> An officer was killed, a tank was damaged, and it was some time before any could move. Another B Squadron troop took a wrong turning and had to back along a narrow road. A Squadron's commander (Captain **Passmore** <sup>3</sup>) was wounded, and when a 17-pounder tank was hit and went over a bank, three of its crew died. The tanks edged around a large crater in the road half-way up the ridge, and slowly groped ahead in single file, while their commanders, despite the shellfire, walked ahead to show the way. They kept strictly to the lane because the fields were boggy and mined.

From the crest of the ridge the route descended to join the road from 'Ruatoria' (or 'Charing Cross') at Gavallana, less than half a mile from Celle. The head of B Squadron was on the final straight leading to the hamlet about 3 a.m. Second-Lieutenant McMaster's <sup>4</sup> 6 Troop (only one tank, two having been put out of action by shellfire) was followed by Second-Lieutenant Kendall's <sup>5</sup> 8 Troop. 'But now came the worst check yet. Not 200 yards from the church the road was lit up by blazing haystacks on both sides, right under the muzzles of a nest of German tanks or anti-tank guns that were pumping shells straight down the road, just clearing the Shermans.' <sup>6</sup> The 23rd Battalion in Celle was calling by wireless for help, and Headquarters 5 Brigade and Divisional Headquarters were urging the tanks to go. McMaster reconnoitred on

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 594.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 595.

<sup>3</sup> Maj C. S. Passmore, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 21 Jul 1917; bank clerk; four times wounded.

<sup>4</sup> Capt H. A. McMaster, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ 6 Feb 1909; salesman.

<sup>5</sup> Capt W. G. Kendall; Kerikeri; born Napier, 8 Apr 1916; storekeeper.

<sup>6</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, pp. 595–6.

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foot and was convinced that once the leading tank got between the haystacks it would 'be potted like a sitting duck' and would block the road; after he and an NCO had explored the ground on both sides of the road, he decided 'it was *not* possible for tanks to negotiate it.' <sup>1</sup>

When the fires in the haystacks died down about dawn, the tanks

continued on to **Celle**, where McMaster's pulled in behind the church. Kendall's went past it, but suddenly came face-to-face with a German Mark IV, which fired a round or two into the air and then hastily retired along a side road and behind some trees. Kendall's troop pulled in behind a ruined house.

Two Mark IV tanks, accompanied by German infantry, came towards **Celle** and fired into the houses. 'The Sherman crews knew nothing of this until it was all over.... Our guns were still thundering, wireless reception was bad, there were buildings in the way, German shells were dropping, battle smoke hung over **Celle**.' <sup>2</sup> When McMaster finally learnt of the presence of the German infantry, he moved his tank round the church and 'knocked big chunks off a house at the far end of the village, striking some panic into the enemy, who left smartly. About the same time the Mark IV tanks went too, urged on by a huge artillery "stonk" that fell just in the right place.' <sup>3</sup>

The enemy did not counter-attack again, but continued to shell **Celle**. A direct hit immobilised McMaster's tank. Towards midday three tanks of 5 Troop went through the hamlet to the cemetery and in the afternoon B Squadron's 17-pounder tank also came through and joined 23 Battalion's leading platoons. By this time, however, there was not much for the tanks to do, 'except just to be there. The Air Force was all over the sky, swooping on any movement in the enemy lines. A house 500 yards past the cemetery [probably **Casa Gessa**], which had been the headquarters for Jerry's counter-attacks, was "done over" by the 17-pounder tank, and the Kittybombers came down and bombed it almost to the ground. This support was a bit close for the boys' liking, but they appreciated it later, when a self-propelled gun, burnt out and still smoking, was found in the ruins.' <sup>4</sup>

While B Squadron of 18 Regiment was held up at **Celle** early on the morning of 15 December, A Squadron was extended in single file back along the lane leading down from the **Ragazzina ridge**. Maori guides tried to direct their half-squadron (2 and 4 Troops) to their company positions, but the tanks could not get across

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 596.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 596–7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 597.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 598.

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the paddocks and ‘might as well have saved their fuel. Once off the lane they could not move five yards. One got bogged down hopelessly, the rest gave up trying. They could only wait until the way through **Celle** was open.’<sup>1</sup> It was mid-morning before they could go through the hamlet and double back towards **28 Battalion**, and by that time of course the Maoris had been counter-attacked and had lost much of the ground they had gained during the night. The Shermans went into position wherever they could find cover. No Tiger tank was seen, but a Mark IV scored a hit on a Sherman. An A Squadron 17-pounder tank then knocked out the Mark IV.

The other half of A Squadron did not have to go through **Celle** because the route to **22 Battalion** turned off near **Gavallana** and climbed another ridge rising westwards. ‘This was a road only by courtesy, narrow and nasty like all the others, sown with mines along the edges, but farther from the storm centre, and not such a favoured target for Jerry’s shells.’<sup>2</sup> By dawn 1 and 3 Troops were well along this ridge and ‘married up’ with **22 Battalion**. They were followed by 10 Troop of C Squadron, to add extra fire power from a position which gave a commanding view into enemy territory beyond **Celle** as far as the **Senio River**. Enemy activity intensified in that region as the day progressed; he tried to get his tanks and other vehicles away to the north but was hampered by the ever-watchful **Air Force**. A Mark IV tank which appeared on a low rise ahead was promptly knocked out by some of A

Squadron's Shermans, and from time to time they engaged vehicles beyond **Celle** which B Squadron, although much closer, apparently could not see. One of their more successful shoots finished off a self-propelled gun.

*(xii)*

Fifth Brigade's attack had dented but had not breached a strongly defended line. It was clear before daybreak on the 15th, therefore, that C Squadron of 18 Regiment would not be able to burst through, as intended, to the **Senio River**.

Early in the afternoon, however, **General Freyberg** advised 5 Brigade that there were indications that the enemy was withdrawing from **Faenza**. Brigadier Pleasants told 23 Battalion that the enemy was expected to retreat across the **Senio** that night, and warned the battalion to be ready to advance along the road, which crosses the **Celle** stream beyond the hamlet, to the junction with Route 9 near **Pieve del Ponte**, where the highway crosses the **Senio**.

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 598.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 599.

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The New Zealand Division was to advance north-westward with 6 Brigade on the right and the 5th on the left. Already 43 Gurkha Brigade (Brigadier A. R. Barker) and 48 Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment, had been placed under the Division's command, and **20 Armoured Regiment** and a troop of Crocodiles (flame-throwers) of 51 Battalion, RTR, under 6 Brigade's command. Sixth Brigade was to extend its left flank north of the Lamone River that night. Fifth Brigade was directed to the Route 9 crossing of the **Senio**, and also was to be responsible for opening the road from 'Ruatoria' through **Celle** to Route 9 for the passage of 20 Regiment. A battalion (2/10 Gurkhas) of 43 Brigade was to come under 6

Brigade's command for the clearing of **Faenza**, and the remainder of the **Faenza Task Force** was to be at three hours' notice to leave its base at **Forlimpopoli**.

That evening A and B Companies of 23 Battalion were replaced at **Celle** by D Company; B Company of 28 Battalion left Case Ospitalacci and dug in near the **Celle** church to reinforce D Company of the 28th at **Villa Palermo**; B and D Companies of 25 Battalion were to be prepared to move up to Route 9, and 24 Battalion was to be ready to cross the **Lamone River** and close up on the right flank of the 25th. With Route 9 as the axis of advance, 6 Brigade was to face up to the **Senio River** with 24 Battalion on the right and the 25th on the left; both battalions were to have a squadron of tanks in support.

When the moves and reliefs were completed on the night of 15–16 December, four battalions held the New Zealand bridgehead, the 25th on the right flank from the **Lamone River** through **La Morte** to the vicinity of **Casa Colombaia**, the 28th at **Villa Palermo** and **Celle**, the 23rd westwards from **Celle** to **Casa Bersana**, and the 22nd on the left at **Sebola**, **Casa Mercante** and **Casa Elta**.

West of the New Zealand bridgehead 10 Indian Division's role had been to clear the ridge from **Pideura** to **Pergola** and the high ground farther to the north. The attack by 10 Indian Brigade towards **Pergola** made little progress at great cost, but farther west 25 Brigade captured houses just short of 5 Corps' objectives and at dawn beat off a counter-attack. The **Pergola** ridge, therefore, was threatened on both sides—by 5 NZ Brigade on the east and 25 Indian Brigade on the west—and the enemy's withdrawal was inevitable. Consequently 90 Panzer Grenadier Division pulled back towards the **Senio River** while 26 Panzer Division prepared to evacuate **Faenza** and form a switch-line between the **Lamone** and **Senio** rivers north of the town.

Thus the enemy had suffered a decisive defeat. Fifth Corps had attacked in greater strength than he had expected; evidently he had not appreciated that such a build-up of forces could be achieved in a short

time on the atrocious road system south of the **Lamone**. The fighting had fallen mostly on five battalions of **90 Panzer Grenadier Division**, three of **305 Division** (west of the **90th**) and on one battalion of **26 Panzer Division**. By the end of 16 December the New Zealand Division had taken 300 prisoners, killed at least 200 Germans, and wounded many more, while its own casualties were about 200. <sup>1</sup> In addition **10 Indian Division** had taken nearly 100 prisoners and probably killed and wounded a greater number, but its own casualties were not light.

*(xiii)*

**General Freyberg**, having decided at 3 a.m. on 16 December that his men had had sufficient rest, told 5 Brigade to get moving again. Brigadier Pleasants therefore ordered 23 and 22 Battalions to continue their advance towards the **Senio River** and the 28th to push out towards Route 9.

Before dawn D Company of 23 Battalion sent a platoon along the road beyond **Celle** to the crossing of the **Celle** stream, where it appeared that a Bailey bridge would be required. German tanks were seen milling about near the road junction on the far side. Shortly after 7 a.m. an explosion was heard at the Route 9 crossing of the **Senio**. Air observation confirmed that the bridge there, as well as two over the **Celle** stream, had been demolished. The infantry of 23 and 22 Battalions and the tanks of 18 Regiment made some progress towards the **Senio** during the day, but the General directed that no attempt was to be made to cross the river, although patrols were to reconnoitre for suitable places and other information.

The engineers repaired and cleared the roads of mines, including the road from ' **Charing Cross**' (or 'Ruatoria') to **Celle**, which opened the way from Hunter's bridge for support weapons and supply vehicles. The M10s followed the tanks through 22 Battalion's sector and deployed not far from the loops of the **Senio** south of **Castel Bolognese**.

On the right flank B and C Companies of **28 Battalion** were

unopposed in their advance to Route 9 north of **Celle**. The Maoris saw the enemy making for shelter across the highway. Lieutenant- Colonel Awatere, no doubt eager to carry on to the **Senio**, reported to Brigade Headquarters shortly before 2 p.m.: 'Give us engineers to clear mines, get tanks up and we will go after the enemy.'<sup>2</sup> He

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<sup>1</sup> 5 Bde's infantry losses were 43 killed and 138 wounded; **18 Armd Regt** had four killed and five wounded; other units had few casualties.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, HQ 5 NZ Inf Bde.

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was told that the engineers would clear the mines and the tanks give support, but his battalion was not to go beyond a point almost a mile from where Route 9 crossed the river.

Sixth Brigade's sector had been shelled, mortared and machine-gunned during 5 Brigade's attack on the night of 14–15 December, with such effect that two or three houses had to be evacuated, but subsequently this sector was quiet. It appeared to 25 Battalion's troops near **Faenza** that the enemy had gone before dawn on the 16th. An attempt to draw fire brought no response. Brigadier Parkinson told the battalion commander (Lieutenant-Colonel E. K. Norman) to send A and C Companies along the roads leading into the town from the west. The two companies entered isolated houses, capturing a mere handful of Germans, and continued as far as a cemetery just outside the town. Meanwhile B Company patrolled to **Pogliano** (one of the **Maori Battalion's** objectives during 5 Brigade's attack), and D Company to a more distant house; these two companies, B on the right and D on the left, then pushed onward to Route 9 north-west of **Faenza**.

Divisional Cavalry Battalion, facing **Faenza** across the **Lamone** River, heard the movement of vehicles in the town shortly after midnight on the 16th, and explosions an hour or two before dawn. Sergeant **Flynn**<sup>1</sup> of C Squadron crossed the river on an improvised

footbridge, went into the town on his own, and brought back a prisoner from whom useful information was obtained. Flynn then led a fighting patrol into the town to capture several snipers.

After daybreak B Squadron men on the stopbank of the **Lamone** saw civilians waving white flags from houses on the other side. Divisional Cavalry crossed the river on the debris of the Route 9 bridge, and entered the town without opposition, except from a house which was soon demolished by fire from M10s. There was little evidence of mining and booby-trapping, which might be explained (as it was by a prisoner) by the explosion of a large dump of mines outside a church by artillery fire. The bombing and shelling of the town before the enemy's departure had resulted in the exodus of most of the population, some to the south but most to **Castel Bolognese** or **Lugo** and the surrounding district beyond the **Senio**. Only an estimated 4000 remained of the original 40,000 inhabitants, and most of these had spent the last few days in cellars, where they had taken food and clothing; they had had comparatively few casualties. The Germans, however, had looted **Faenza** thoroughly. No fighting occurred in the streets, but some sniping and mortar fire came from the direction of the railway station, on the northern fringe of the town.

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<sup>1</sup> **Sgt P. J. Flynn**, MM; born NZ 15 Jan 1905; miner; wounded May 1941.

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Some time before the German withdrawal 7 Field Company had been advised that it was to bridge the **Lamone** at the entrance to the town. The water gap was known to be from 60 to 70 feet wide, and the shelving banks were bounded by high stopbanks between 150 and 200 feet apart. The bridge was to be 350 yards south of Route 9, at one of two sites selected from a study of aerial photographs; an estimate had been made of the equipment and materials required, and careful thought given to the loading of the 40 trucks of the bridging column so that there would be the least possible delay.

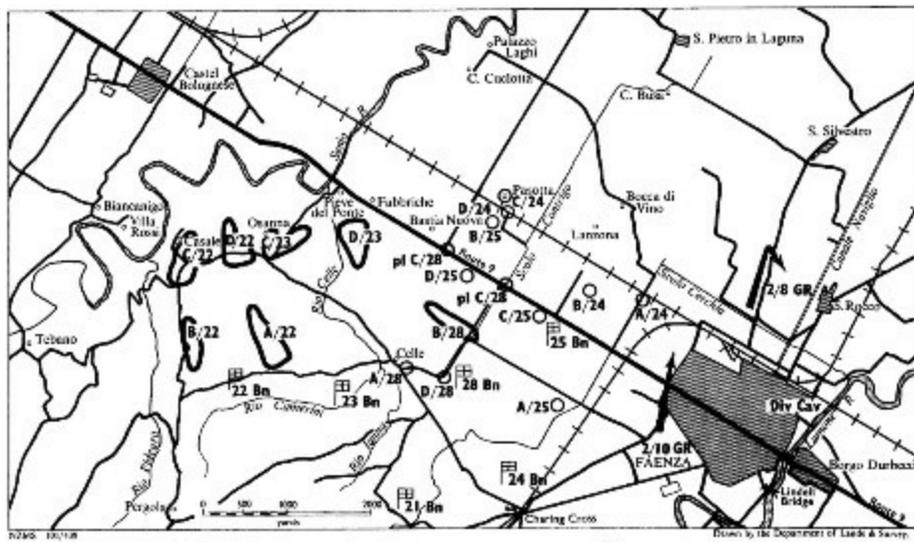
The engineers began work soon after Divisional Cavalry began to enter **Faenza**. Their tasks included the construction of a 30-foot and a 100-foot span, the clearing of mines and the preparation of the approaches to the site, the filling of two bomb craters, the erection of a crib pier on one bank and a crib abutment on the other, and the demolition of a three-foot-thick brick wall and a house.

The bridge was opened to a long line of traffic about midday on 17 December, by which time 27 Mechanical Equipment Company had bulldozed a route through **Faenza**, despite the damage done by the Allied bombing and enemy demolitions. The total time taken for the completion of the bridge was 16 hours, which included less than 11 hours for the construction of the 130-foot of Bailey bridging. This, the **Lindell bridge**, carried all the traffic into **Faenza** during the next eight days while a high-level bridge on Route 9 was being constructed.

*(xiv)*

New Zealand patrols reached the **Senio** south-west of Castel Bolognese on 16 December, but in some places the enemy was still on the near side of the river, especially in the vicinity of the Route 9 bridge site. He showed no intention of falling back to the **Senio** on the right flank, where he had reacted vigorously to 56 Division's deception scheme and had resisted all attempts to cross the **Lamone** north-east of **Faenza**. The intention of securing a bridgehead about a mile downstream from this town had been abandoned.

Divisional Cavalry had entered **Faenza** with little difficulty on the 16th, but 2/10 Gurkhas, under 6 Brigade's command, encountered strong defensive positions on the northern outskirts. The Gurkha battalion reverted to the command of 43 Brigade next morning, when that brigade became responsible for clearing the last of the enemy from **Faenza** and capturing road junctions and



DISPOSITIONS, 17 DECEMBER 1944

DISPOSITIONS, 17 DECEMBER 1944

crossroads to the north. Divisional Cavalry patrolled to the railway at dawn on the 17th and later occupied positions in the northern part of the town. The Gurkhas were stopped from advancing northward along the road to **San Silvestro** by a counter-attack, and at nightfall had not passed the **Scolo Cerchia**, a wide drain about a quarter of a mile beyond the railway.

Early on the morning of 17 December **General Freyberg** visited **Faenza**, where it had been decided to move **Divisional Headquarters** from **Forli**. The headquarters offices were set up in the centre of the town in the afternoon, probably little more than half a mile from the enemy, who was presumed to be farther away. About 4 p.m. 'British tanks supporting **Gurkhas** passed through Div HQ ... and came into action from the area marked Visitors Car Park. We are at least thankful for a good solid casa.... GOC insists upon sleeping in caravan which [is] on Route 9, the only place we could get. A considerable flap in the evening owing to reports of counter-attack on **Gurkhas** which appears to have driven them back from the Scola [ **Scolo Cerchia**] to the railway. Certain amount of shellfire in the town and tracer to be seen above the buildings. Much tommygun and machine-gun fire to be heard. Div HQ spent what might be called a somewhat disturbed night. Alarums and excursions increased later in the evening and we passed to the 18th in a state of disquiet.' Next morning people were 'astir early owing to

apparent proximity of machine-gun fire. ... As Div HQ really too far forward, decision was taken to move it back across the river to the outskirts of **Faenza**.... New buildings not nearly so luxurious, but adequate, it is hoped.' <sup>1</sup> Divisional Headquarters was then located in **Borgo Durbecco**, but re-entered **Faenza** on the morning of the 20th.

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## III: THE HALT AT THE SENIO

### *III: The Halt at the Senio*

(i)

By 17 December **5 Corps'** spearheads had reached the **Senio**. The New Zealanders patrolled to the river, but the enemy still held positions on the near bank, especially in the vicinity of the Route 9 bridge site. The 10th Indian Division secured small bridgeheads farther upstream, but was compelled to withdraw when they were counter-attacked. This division could make no further progress until the supply situation improved and the enemy was cleared from the environs of **Faenza**.

The first New Zealanders to reach the bank of the **Senio** were members of a patrol from D Company, 22 Battalion, who approached the winding river south of **Castel Bolognese** unopposed in the evening of 16 December. That night and subsequently patrols from 23 Battalion were prevented by machine-gun, mortar and artillery fire from getting close enough to examine the Route 9 crossing of the river. B and C Companies of 22 Battalion, in the **Casale- Osanna** area, were consistently and at times heavily shelled and mortared, and had to vacate several houses which were badly hit. Patrols reported that the river near **Casale** was some 30 feet wide and swift-flowing between 12-foot banks; they did not find suitable sites for bridges.

Contact was made with **10 Indian Division** on the left flank. On 5 Brigade's other (northern) flank **28 Battalion** occupied positions between Route 9 and **Celle**. In the afternoon of the 18th 7 Platoon of A Company, accompanied by three tanks, occupied a house across the highway without opposition. German infantry and tanks counter-attacked a few hours later, but were driven off by accurate artillery and mortar fire after coming within 200 or 300 yards of the house.

Meanwhile 6 Brigade continued its north-westward advance on the right of 5 Brigade. The two leading companies of 25 Battalion (B and D), after reaching Route 9 beyond **Faenza**, were intended to wheel left and carry on towards the **Senio** between the highway and the railway; the other two companies were to be relieved near the cemetery by 2/10 Gurkhas. B and D Companies killed or captured a few Germans but were hampered by rows of grape vines and by small-arms, mortar and shell fire; even with the support of tanks from A Squadron, 20 Regiment, they were unable to get closer than about 1500 yards of the **Senio** during the night of 16–17 December.

The 24th Battalion, which was to advance on the right flank, crossed the Lamone River in the afternoon of the 16th and continued north-westward around the rear of the 25th. By nightfall its B and D Companies were between Route 9 and the railway and the other two companies south of the highway. B Company's right-hand platoon crossed the railway but came under fire and withdrew. A Company was held up at a road and railway crossing less than half a mile from the outskirts of **Faenza**. B and D Companies pushed on north-westward and captured **Pasotta**, a group of buildings about 100 yards over the railway and 2000 yards from the **Senio**. Two platoons (13 and 15) remained at **Pasotta**, where for the time being they were the only New Zealanders north of the railway. Like 25 Battalion, the 24th (supported by tanks from B Squadron of 18 Regiment) could go no farther towards the **Senio** because of the German defensive fire.

Sixth Brigade was then directed north-eastward beyond the railway and thus parallel with the south-east bank of the **Senio**. A Company of 24 Battalion cleared the railway crossing where earlier it had met the German strongpoint, but met further opposition in some houses about 300 yards away. B Company crossed the railway on the left of A and reached a group of buildings at Lanzona. The advance was continued in the early hours of the 18th, with the support of tanks, artillery, mortars and machine guns. A Company reached Bocca di Vino, at a road and track junction about half a mile beyond the railway, and B Company a

house about a quarter of a mile farther north-west.

Unfortunately the tanks, from B Squadron of 20 Regiment, were delayed by mines and were not in a position to assist the infantry when the enemy counter-attacked at 6.45 a.m. A Company's commander (Major I. G. Howden) reported that German tanks 'proceeded to blast the houses, but our troops held on in the hope that tank support would come....' By 7.30 a.m., however, the company was compelled to retire from Bocca di Vino. Some men of 9 Platoon, several of them wounded, had to be left behind; four of the wounded were recovered, but six men, including an officer, were taken prisoner. Meanwhile B Company had found that the house it was supposed to capture was a pile of rubble, so was obliged to return to Lanzona.

The same night (the 17th–18th) the enemy counter-attacked **Pasotta**, but was beaten off while burning haystacks lit up the scene. This illumination prevented the defenders (13 and 15 Platoons) from withdrawing—had they wished to do so. A Tiger tank surprisingly did not open fire, perhaps because the enemy expected to recapture the house intact. Some German infantry returned at dawn and began digging slit trenches close to **Pasotta** without troubling to ascertain whether anybody was there. The New Zealanders opened fire, killed an officer (upon whose body was found a key to codewords, maps marked with enemy positions, and other useful documents) and wounded two men; the rest escaped.

The 24th Battalion now held a line which was a north-westward prolongation from the **Scolo Cerchia** (which turned south just beyond **Faenza**). The enemy brought down intense shell and mortar fire: 70 mortar bombs were counted in the vicinity of **Pasotta** in an hour.

(ii)

West of **5 Corps**, the **Polish Corps** had crossed the Sintria River and reached the **Senio**; the Canadian Corps, on the seaward flank, had crossed the Lamone River and the **Canale Naviglio**, which runs north-

eastwards from **Faenza**, but had made little progress in very hard fighting north of **Bagnacavallo**. **Eighth Army**, therefore, was still some distance short of the **Senio** between Route 9 and the coast.

Meanwhile some important changes had taken place in the Allied command. Field Marshal Alexander became Supreme Allied Commander **Mediterranean** on 12 December in succession to Field Marshal Wilson, who was to lead the British Joint Staff Mission in **Washington**, and Lieutenant-General Clark left **Fifth Army** to take Alexander's place at Headquarters Allied Armies in **Italy**, which was redesignated Headquarters **Fifteenth Army Group**. Lieutenant-General Truscott, who had commanded the US **6 Corps** at **Anzio** and in southern **France**, assumed command of **Fifth Army**.

Clark intended to continue the existing pattern of the offensive: he instructed the **Eighth Army** Commander (General McCreery) to 'proceed with current operations with the object of launching an attack to force a crossing of the **Senio River** in conjunction with the **Fifth Army's** attack', <sup>1</sup> which he hoped to deliver against **Bologna** shortly before Christmas.

**Eighth Army's** pressure on the Adriatic flank had shown results: the enemy had brought *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* from reserve to aid *305 Infantry Division* and on 9 December had thrown it into battle against **5 Corps** south-west of **Faenza**; shortly after the Canadian Corps' attack over the Lamone River, he had taken *98 Infantry Division* from **Fifth Army's** front and rushed it across to bolster *356 Infantry Division*; he had also committed *29 Panzer Grenadier Division* to relieve *26 Panzer Division* on the New Zealand Division's front north-west of **Faenza**. Thus he had been compelled to relieve two of his divisions opposing **Eighth Army** and bring in an additional division at the expense of the front south of **Bologna**, where evidently he had discounted the possibility of an offensive by **Fifth Army** in the prevailing bad weather.

The enemy might have been holding the long switch-line between the **Lamone** and **Senio** rivers because his only good bridge (at **Felisio**)

between Route 9 and the small town of **Cotignola** (where the two rivers curve towards each other) was being harassed by **5 Corps'** artillery—or because Hitler had ordered positions east of the **Senio** to be held at all costs. **Fifth Corps'** immediate task was to

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<sup>1</sup> Clark to McCreery and Truscott, 20 Dec 1944, in *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy*, Part III, Sec. B, Appx 1–2.

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break through this switch-line and close up to the **Senio** north of Route 9. The 56th Division had attempted without success to cross the **Lamone** east of **Faenza**. As long as the 56th and New Zealand divisions were short of the **Senio**, an advance beyond it farther south was out of the question: **10 Indian Division** would invite disaster if it crossed with an open right flank.

It had been intended that **Fifth Army** should open its offensive against **Bologna** when **Eighth Army** had seized bridgeheads over the **Santerno River**, but it was now decided that the Fifth would have to attack when the Eighth was on the **Senio** instead of on the **Santerno**. **Eighth Army**, therefore, was to resume the offensive on the night of 19–20 December to secure the east bank of the **Senio** between Route 9 and the sea, and **Fifth Army** was to be prepared to launch its attack on **Bologna** three or four days later. After crossing the **Senio**, **Eighth Army** was to drive the enemy beyond the **Santerno**; it was to develop its main effort from **Imola** (on Route 9) towards **Budrio** (north-east of **Bologna**), and was also to make a strong secondary effort (which might become the primary one if the situation developed in its favour) farther north through **Lugo** and **Argenta** to **Ferrara**, on Route 16.

(iii)

**Fifth Corps'** immediate plan was for the New Zealand Division to attack north-eastwards to clear the enemy from the ground between the Naviglio Canal and the **Senio River**, and for 56 Division to cross the

Lamone River and clear the ground on the New Zealanders' right between the **Lamone** and the Naviglio.

At an orders group conference at **Divisional Headquarters** on 18 December the commanders of 6 Brigade (Brigadier Parkinson) and 43 Gurkha Brigade (Brigadier Barker) said they would be ready to attack on the night of the 19th–20th. **General Freyberg** told his officers that if the ammunition was available and the guns could be deployed, ‘we are considering withdrawing to the line of the railway to get onto a straight line and putting in a full-scale attack as a surprise.... We know the enemy is holding on a line of strong posts; 6 Brigade is against them already.’<sup>1</sup> The difficulty was that if the Division attacked with its left flank on the road parallel with the **Senio**, the enemy defences along the banks of the river would be able to shoot into this flank. ‘If we leave things weak there the enemy will be in a position to come in and cause a certain amount of trouble in our rear.... However, we have very good roads ahead and we have three regiments of tanks. As long as the

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

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country is dry we might be able to do a full-scale attack and then exploit in the direction of the [ **Felisio**] bridge which must carry most of his maintenance....’<sup>1</sup>

Details of all phases of the attack were discussed at this and another conference in the evening. The General indicated that in the event of 6 Brigade ‘getting well through’, the 5th might have to take over on its left, and **10 Indian Division** would then be asked to relieve 5 Brigade. ‘We want to ensure that if 6 Brigade gets a bridgehead we can consider going over. In the meantime the only thing we have promised to do is clear Route 9....’<sup>2</sup>

The Division's orders, issued that evening, stated that its intention was to attack north-eastwards with 43 Gurkha Brigade on the right and 6 Brigade on the left<sup>3</sup> to open up Route 9 west of **Faenza**. The infantry

was to advance at the rate of 100 yards in six minutes, for about 2500 yards on the **Gurkhas'** front and 3000 on 6 Brigade's.

The artillery barrage was to open at 9 p.m. on 19 December, pause for 36 minutes at 10.40 p.m. and finish at 12.50 a.m. on the 20th. Ten field regiments and four and a half medium regiments—more than 300 guns altogether—were to participate in the bombardment; their tasks, in addition to the barrage, were to fire timed concentrations on known enemy locations and a counter-battery and counter-mortar programme. <sup>4</sup>

Sixth Brigade's object was to secure a line extending about 2500 yards south-eastwards from the **Senio River** near **La Palazza** along a lateral road through **San Pietro** in Laguna towards **San Silvestro** (in 43 Brigade's sector), with 24 Battalion on the right, 25 in the centre and 26 on the left.

(iv)

On the night of 18–19 December patrols from 56 Division still were unable to cross the Lamone River because of enemy activity, and there was no sign of a withdrawal on the New Zealand Division's 8000-yard front. German infantry and tanks counter-attacked a house held by 7 Platoon of **28 Battalion** just west of **Bastia Nuova**, between Route 9 and the railway about 1000 yards from the **Senio**, but were repulsed by the artillery and heavy

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to its own infantry units, 43 Bde had under command 48 R Tks, 82 A-Tk Bty RA and 3 Ind Lt Fd Amb, and in support 23 Army Fd Regt RA and 221 Fd Coy RE; 6 Bde had under its command 20 Armd Regt, **33 A-Tk Bty**, **3 MG Coy** and a company of 6 Fd Amb, and in support **6 Fd Regt**, 34 Hy Mor Bty and **8 Fd Coy**.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the New Zealand regiments, 1 RHA and 23 Army Fd Regt were under command, and 4 Med Regt RA, three field regiments of 56 Div, two field regiments of 10 Ind Div, 1 Army Group RA, one Polish medium regiment and 40/ 14 Lt AA Regt RA were in support.

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mortars. The enemy was very sensitive to movement in the vicinity of the Route 9 crossing of the river, where he brought down defensive fire on the slightest provocation.

About dawn on the 19th, however, reports from civilians and the sound of demolitions indicated that the enemy was withdrawing from his positions north of **Faenza**. Divisional Cavalry heard 20 or 30 explosions in the direction of the Naviglio Canal. The Gurkha Brigade, without opposition, occupied San Rocco and by evening had troops within half a mile of **San Silvestro**. Despite the many mines in the vicinity, the engineers completed a bridge over the **Scolo Cerchia**.

On 6 Brigade's front the enemy appeared to have vacated some of his foremost houses and to be on approximately the line of a track scarcely half a mile north of the railway. Support Company of 23 Battalion took possession of an empty house at Fabbriche, between the **Senio** and the Maoris' houses near **Bastia Nuova**, and the enemy abandoned another house at Fabbriche when it was demolished by tanks of C Squadron, 18 Regiment. The tanks also engaged **Pieve del Ponte**, closer to the river, but the enemy did not give up this locality, although some of his men ran from houses there.

Despite the reports of the German withdrawal on the **Gurkhas'** front, **General Freyberg** decided not to cancel the attack that night. After visiting the three infantry brigades he declared that the enemy was 'holding very tight on the left. Battle is on.'<sup>1</sup> At a divisional conference in the afternoon it was resolved not to alter 6 Brigade's plan 'by a single gun', but to start the barrage for 43 Brigade about 400 yards ahead of the line it was on already. The GOC said that at a certain stage he would

tell **5 Corps** he had 'reached his limit'; **56 Division** was then to go up on the right, and **43 Brigade** go into reserve. Later the **New Zealand Division** might cross the **Senio** on its own front or do a 'left hook' through **10 Indian Division**.

General Keightley telephoned in the evening to say that he had seen General McCreery, who had agreed that the attack was to go on. **Freyberg** commented that he did not really know whether the enemy was 'falling back now or not, but at any rate it was too late to do anything.' Keightley thought it might be 'a very big thing if we caught him on the move.' <sup>2</sup>

(v)

**Sixth Brigade's** advance on the night of 19–20 December cut diagonally across the boundary between **278 Division** (north and

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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north-east of **Faenza**) and **29 Panzer Grenadier Division** (near and along the **Senio**) and captured over 180 Germans. Prisoners, when interrogated, said that the barrage had not killed or wounded many men because of the protection given by houses and slit trenches, but the closeness with which the New Zealanders had followed the shelling had had a very great effect on morale.

**Fifth Brigade**, whose role was to support the attack with neutralising fire on the far side of the **Senio** and on strongpoints in advance of the barrage, used its mortars, M10s and 18 Regiment's tanks. Two companies of **27 (MG) Battalion** put down harassing and defensive fire across the river, and a third company fired on the roads parallel with **6 Brigade's** line of advance; altogether the **Vickers** guns fired nearly 100,000 rounds. The enemy reacted vigorously to the artillery barrage

and 5 Brigade's demonstration, especially with shell and *nebelwerfer* fire in 23 Battalion's sector near the Route 9 crossing.

During the attack 24 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel R. L. Hutchens), farthest from the **Senio River** in 6 Brigade's sector, advanced with D Company on the right and C on the left, followed by A and B. Each company had a troop of tanks of B Squadron, 20 Regiment, in support, and C also had a troop of M10s. Shortly after crossing the start line 17 Platoon of D Company ran into a minefield and shellfire, which caused 15 casualties, including its commander killed; it was replaced by the reserve platoon (No. 18), and the company was on its objective by 1 a.m. C Company was opposed at Casa Busa, about midway between **San Silvestro** and the **Senio**, but was ordered to leave this place for B Company and continue on to its objective; it consolidated in and around **San Pietro** in Laguna at 1.30 a.m. A self-propelled gun caused some concern until the supporting tanks knocked down the house from which it had been firing. B Company, following C, took Casa Busa, and A Company mopped up pockets overrun by D. Altogether the battalion's casualties on 19–20 December were seven killed and 21 wounded.

In the centre of 6 Brigade's sector, 25 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Norman) attacked with three companies—A, D and C from right to left—and with the fourth (B) in a mopping-up role. At the start C Company was caught at the railway crossing by heavy fire,<sup>1</sup> which caused casualties and delay while the survivors were regrouped, but continued the attack under Major **Taylor**<sup>2</sup> 'armed with a walking stick'.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile A and D Companies made good pro-

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<sup>1</sup> Reports differ as to whether this was from 'shorts' in the barrage, enemy concentrations, or both.

<sup>2</sup> Maj C. W. Taylor, ED; **Gisborne**; born **Gisborne**, 19 Jan 1912; clerk; twice wounded.

<sup>3</sup> *25 Battalion*, p. 555.

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gress and were on their objectives shortly after 1 a.m.; they were an hour and a half ahead of C, which had incurred about two-thirds of the battalion's casualties of 13 killed and 49 wounded. A bulldozer filled in a demolition which had blocked the road near the railway crossing; this enabled the tanks of A Squadron, 20 Regiment, to be with the infantry before dawn.

The 26th Battalion ( **Lieutenant-Colonel Fairbrother** <sup>1</sup>), on the left flank, was set the difficult task of holding a long front: its objective was from the crossroads at **La Palazza** (about two miles north-east of Route 9) to the **Senio** stopbank 250 yards away, and then south-westward along the winding river to just south of the railway. **Fairbrother** decided to commit all four rifle companies: C (on the right) and D (left) were to go about half-way; B was then to pass through and advance to the objective in the vicinity of **La Palazza**; two platoons of A were to follow C and D in a mopping-up role, and the third was to protect the engineers who were to clear the road to **La Palazza**. The supporting arms, excluding the Mortar Platoon, which was to go into position behind the start line, were to stay at **Faenza** until called forward when the road was open. At first it was intended that the companies, after reaching their objectives, should wheel left and advance on to the stopbank, but shortly before the attack began 'the Colonel learned that the eastern stopbank of the river was extensively mined; acting on orders, he told his company commanders to stop short of the river bank.' <sup>2</sup>

The battalion motored from **Forli** to **Faenza** early on the 19th, and marched along Route 9 to the start line in the evening. Within a few minutes of the beginning of the attack the battalion came under artillery and mortar fire, which caused most of its casualties, but it met little opposition on the ground. C and D Companies were in position about 12.30 a.m., and B an hour later. Each turned to face the river, which placed B on the right, C and A in the centre, and D on the left. They did not close up to the stopbank. The tanks of C Squadron of 20 Regiment arrived before dawn. The 26th Battalion's casualties were 12

killed and 45 wounded.

When Brigadier Parkinson reported the situation as he knew it to **General Freyberg** at 1.45 a.m., the GOC said that if the tanks could get through he wanted to direct 6 Brigade on the **Felisio** crossing of the **Senio**: 'Now is the time for energy. Push on those tanks and push hard. I think you are just about up to him and I

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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; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories.

<sup>2</sup> *26 Battalion*, p. 472.

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believe you can get your armour through by daylight where it will be able to move across the open.' <sup>1</sup> A few minutes later, when Brigadier Barker reported that the tanks were with the battalions of 43 Brigade, the GOC told him, 'Now is the time when the enemy is disorganised and you can get your tanks forward in the dark. Push on as fast as you can but you must have your tanks up.' <sup>2</sup> The General also discussed with Brigadier Queree the movement of the guns north of Route 9, where the problem would be to anticipate the direction of future attacks.

When he heard about 6 a.m. that the tanks were with 6 Brigade's infantry, the GOC said it was most important that the brigade should get the **Senio** crossing: 'The Gurkhas are on the way now. Push on as hard as you can....' The policy was for 6 Brigade to go to **Felisio**, and 43 Brigade for Casanigo (farther east) and Sant' Andrea (near the Naviglio Canal). The crossing of the **Senio** that night (20–21 December) 'might well save another operation.' <sup>3</sup>

The Division, however, was unable to exploit 6 Brigade's gains. In daylight on the 20th the enemy was able to prevent any further

northward advance. A platoon from B Company of 24 Battalion and a troop of tanks could not conform with what was intended to be a thrust by 25 Battalion. A patrol from A Company of the 25th was despatched to a road junction about 1000 yards beyond **La Palazza**, to occupy it if unopposed and then continue on to the **Felisio** bridge; the rest of the company was to be ready to follow. The patrol was pinned down by machine-gun fire well short of the road junction and returned without several men who were wounded. Two of the wounded came back later to report that their officer was dead; another man died of wounds while a prisoner of war.

Any chance of seizing the **Felisio** bridge intact had long since gone: the Divisional Artillery had reported at 9 a.m. that observation from the air had found it demolished.

A party of engineers from 8 Field Company who set out in a scout car to remove a demolition charge was ambushed by some Germans in a ditch alongside the road between **La Palazza** and the road junction which had been the 25 Battalion patrol's first objective. The driver and a wounded corporal escaped, but a sergeant and four sappers were taken prisoner. The car contained codes and marked maps.

In the afternoon Colonel Norman advised Brigadier Parkinson that, because his men (25 Battalion) were tired and the enemy apparently still present in some strength, he thought further advances

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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in daylight were out of the question; instead he favoured an advance at night after the men had rested.

To close a small gap on 25 Battalion's left flank D Company established a standing patrol in a house between **La Palazza** and the **Senio**. Already **28 Battalion** had moved troops into the area between Route 9 and the railway to link 5 and 6 Brigades and thus give the Division a continuous four-mile front near the south-east bank of the river. The Gurkha Brigade, by occupying **San Silvestro** and other positions between **San Pietro** in Laguna and the Naviglio Canal, completed the Division's north-eastern front of about two and a quarter miles between the **Senio** and the Naviglio.

Meanwhile 167 Brigade of 56 Division had crossed the **Lamone** River not far from **Faenza** and taken up a line between that river and the Naviglio Canal east of **San Silvestro**. By the end of 20 December, therefore, **5 Corps'** line north of Route 9 ran from the **Lamone** near **Ronco** to the **Senio** near **La Palazza**.

(vi)

The attack by 6 NZ Brigade on the night of 19–20 December, according to a German report, 'wasted an enormous amount of ammunition.'<sup>1</sup> On the 18th *15 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* of 29 *Panzer Grenadier Division* held a narrow bridgehead forward of the **Senio River**, but that night adopted a new grouping in great depth; next morning most of *15 Regiment* was in defensive positions on the west bank of the **Senio**, 'with *battle outposts* in about battalion strength left in the bridgehead, accompanied by an artillery OP.'

'The orders given to these battle outposts were to cover and screen the adoption of the new positions in depth; to keep up plenty of activity and vigorous fire and deceive the enemy into thinking the bridgehead was held in strength; and to make a fighting withdrawal by groups over the **Senio** if attacked by a superior force....' In the evening of the 19th the 'terrific fire' of the barrage (three-quarters of which was on 29 *Division's* sector, the rest on *278 Division's*) 'led to the certain conclusion that the enemy imagined our bridgehead to be strongly held,

and planned to cut off and destroy this large force forward of the **Senio**. Taken by and large, his thrust was wasted. The battle outposts offered stubborn opposition, but the night was so pitch black that the enemy was able to penetrate the line and attack the company HQ

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<sup>1</sup> Report by *29 Pz Gren Div* on fighting against **2 NZ Div** in the **Faenza** area, in *Preparations for Defensive Campaign in 1945*, issued by C-in-C SW. The GOC *29 Pz Gren Div* (Gen Dr Fritz Polack), when interviewed in August 1945, said, ‘we counted 94,000 shells in hours’ on the night of 19–20 December.

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and Bn HQ while the forward outposts were still reporting “No sign of the enemy yet”. The heavy shellfire cut all the telephone lines very soon, and wireless communication failed about midnight, so that from 0100 hrs on it was impossible to co-ordinate the operations of the outposts. Each outpost was therefore forced to act on its own initiative, in accordance with the orders previously given. After many adventures, including some magnificent feats of valour by individuals, the greater part of the outpost garrison succeeded in making its way through the curtain of fire and our minefields to the FDLs west of the **Senio** by midday on 20 Dec. Early that morning several of our forward outposts could still be heard firing their MGs, although completely cut off. They must have continued to fight against overwhelming odds until their ammunition ran out....’

(vii)

General Clark informed the commanders of Fifth and Eighth Armies on 20 December—five days after the deadline set by General Alexander at the end of October for the cessation of the offensive—that ‘the time is rapidly approaching when I shall give the signal for a combined all-out attack....’ <sup>1</sup> General McCreery was to be prepared to assault across the **Senio** at the same time as **Fifth Army** struck northward at **Bologna**.

The Canadian Corps had begun an attack towards the **Senio** on the

same night (the 19th–20th) as the New Zealand northward attack, and had overrun **Bagnacavallo** and reached the river on the 21st, but the enemy still held a salient east of the **Senio** between the Canadians and **5 Corps** and another north of the Canadians.

The further continuation of the advance was considered at a conference at the New Zealand Divisional Headquarters on the morning of the 20th. The scheme was to face north with 56 Division, 43 Gurkha Brigade and the New Zealand Division, get the guns into position north of **Faenza**, reconnoitre the **Senio**, and cross the river north of Route 9. The CRE (Colonel **Hanson** <sup>2</sup>) pointed out that this would present a considerable bridging problem for the engineers. The plan might take four days because work would have to be done on the roads and bridges, and troops would have to be relieved. The alternative was to cross the river south of Route 9, on **10 Indian Division's** front.

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<sup>1</sup> *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy*, Part III, Sec. B, Appx 1–2.

<sup>2</sup> **Brig F. M. H. Hanson**, DSO and bar, OBE, MM, ED, 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** 1941–46; Chief Engineer, **2 NZEF**, 1943–46; three times wounded; Commissioner of Works, 1955–61.

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**General Freyberg** told **5 Corps** that the enemy was ‘pretty firm on the ground. If he does not go back it will need another operation to push him.’ <sup>1</sup> In the afternoon Corps confirmed orders that the operation to clear the enemy between the **Lamone** and **Senio** was to continue in two stages, the first a northward advance to a line between **Borgo Sant' Andrea** and **Felisio**, and the second to the corps' northern boundary, which crossed the Naviglio Canal at the village of **Granarolo**, 3000 yards south of the town of **Cotignola** (on the opposite side of the **Senio**).

Because of the length of the Division's front, about six miles, the

GOC wanted to readjust his dispositions as a precaution against counter-attack. Fifth Brigade was to relieve the troops of the 6th south of the railway that night (20–21 December), carry out internal reliefs, and hold its sector with two battalions while the other two rested in **Faenza** and **Forli**. It was intended to resume the advance next day, with 6 and 43 Brigades directed on the line between Sant' Andrea and **Felisio**.

During the night, therefore, 21 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel E. A. McPhail) relieved 23 and 28 Battalions between the railway and 22 Battalion. A and B Squadrons of 18 Regiment withdrew to **Faenza**, but C Squadron's tanks remained where they could support 21 Battalion if necessary against infiltration at the Route 9 bridge site or elsewhere. Seventeen-pounder anti-tank guns were sited where they could shoot down Route 9.

A mobile reserve called **Campbell Force** (under Colonel Campbell <sup>2</sup>) was formed on 21 December for defence against counter-attack in the vicinity of **Faenza** and to protect the Division's flanks if necessary. It comprised Headquarters 4 Armoured Brigade, 19 Regiment, an anti-tank battery, two machine-gun companies, and a battalion of 5 Brigade (at this stage the 23rd, billeted at **Faenza**— the 28th was at **Forli**); and was in touch with the artillery.

**General Freyberg** warned the officers attending a divisional conference on 21 December that they would 'have to be teed up' for the proposed combined attack by Fifth and Eighth Armies, and to plan for its starting on the 26th. In the meantime he wanted 'to rest as many people as possible and at the same time to look at the task of getting the enemy back behind the **Senio**. I think myself he will go.' <sup>3</sup> Brigadiers Parkinson and Barker, however, did not think the enemy was going, at least not at that stage.

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> Brig T. C. Campbell, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**;

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; Commander, Northern Military District, 1958–59; Southern Military District, 1963–66.

<sup>3</sup> GOC's diary.

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The minefields near the river presented difficulties in crossing north of Route 9. <sup>1</sup> When the GOC suggested to General Keightley that it might be better to go south of the highway because of the difficulties to the north, the corps commander replied that he would much prefer the Division to do so. Finally, after Keightley had discussed the matter with McCreery, the decision was taken to go to the south, and 6 and 43 Brigades were advised accordingly.

The 43rd Brigade, which was to have a rest, was relieved by 167 Brigade on 22 December. The boundary then followed a northerly line from **Faenza**, west of **San Silvestro** and east of San Pietro in Laguna, to the Sant' Andrea – **Felisio** road. In the New Zealand sector 6 Brigade's role was to hold its front without going any farther towards **Felisio**, but it was to try to get the enemy off the **Senio** stopbank if it could.

A New Zealand attack in conjunction with but after one by 10 Indian Division was considered at a conference on the 22nd. Further information was required on approaches to the **Senio** and its crossing places south of Route 9, and plans would have to be made for assembling a force to attack in a south-westerly direction. Two or three battalions and two squadrons of tanks might be required. Each brigade was to produce a small reserve of tanks and infantry, and 6 Brigade's front was to be held by two instead of three battalions.

The 25th Battalion expanded to the right to relieve 24 Battalion, which went back to billets in **Forli**; the 25th's sector then ran south-eastward from **La Palazza** approximately along the road through **San**

**Pietro** in Laguna. Thus the Division held its front with one battalion facing north between the **Senio** and the boundary with 56 Division, and three towards the **Senio River**, the 26th between **La Palazza** and the railway, the 21st from the railway to the **Osanna** locality, and the 22nd on the left flank in the vicinity of **Casale**.

In the evening of 21 December a patrol from 21 Battalion had been prevented by machine-gun fire from getting a clear view of the river near the Route 9 bridge site, but before dawn another patrol went through a minefield gap south of the highway and discovered that little bridging would be necessary to provide a crossing for tanks and infantry. Next night 21 Battalion's patrols encountered gun, mortar and machine-gun fire, which caused several casualties but did not stop the search for crossing places on both sides of Route 9. Patrols from 22 Battalion found one or two suitable sites for a bridge farther upstream, but much work would have to be

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<sup>1</sup> Colonel Hanson pointed out during this discussion that although **Eighth Army** in North Africa had patented the Scorpion (a tank fitted with flails for threshing a lane through a minefield), none of these machines was in **Italy**; they all went to **France**.

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done on the approaches before they could be used by wheeled vehicles.

The enemy set fire to haystacks at night to hinder the patrols from 26 Battalion from reconnoitring the minefields and the banks of the river north of the railway. A German patrol which fired a bazooka at a house was driven off by the New Zealand occupants, but left two deserters who gave information about their company's positions (on the near bank of the river) and defences. Harassing fire by the artillery and mortars periodically checked the sound of digging which could be heard on the stopbank at night, but the enemy, apparently determined to get on with his work, replied with what was claimed to be equally heavy fire

on the houses occupied by the New Zealanders.

The information gathered by the patrols was discussed at a divisional conference on 23 December. Brigadier Parkinson said 6 Brigade had been unable to get anybody closer to the **Senio** than the minefields, and was directed by the GOC to get to the river next night. Brigadier Pleasants reported on 5 Brigade's patrolling, and Colonel Hanson amplified the information from 22 Battalion, whose patrols had been accompanied by engineer officers. Two routes to the loop of the river west of **Casale** were merely muddy, narrow tracks which would require several days' work on them, and this was impossible by day or night on the more southerly route because it came under gunfire; the other crossing would require 100 feet of bridging and probably would take 16 hours to complete.

The GOC pointed out that when Fifth and Eighth Armies attacked, the New Zealand Division's operation would depend on communications and the state of the river; instead of conforming as planned with **10 Indian Division's** flanks, therefore, the Division might have to establish a bridgehead at a place which would be more likely to stand up to bad weather. 'We have to consider going north as well as south of Route 9. This operation would mean that we finish up with a bridgehead unrelated to the main attack that is going in in the south.'<sup>1</sup> This was a question which would have to be decided by the Army Commander.

*(viii)*

There was a light fall of snow on 23 December. The enemy, who increased his mortar and small-arms fire on 26 Battalion, particularly on the northern part of its sector, where any movement drew fire, would have to be driven off the near stopbank to deny

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

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him observation. Brigadier Parkinson, who had been urged to get to the river, ordered an attack in the vicinity of a prominent bend near the

demolished **Palazzo Laghi**. A platoon of A Company (to be reinforced later if possible) was to make the assault before dawn on the 24th, and was to be accompanied by a section of another platoon to reconnoitre the river and its banks; 5 and 6 Field Regiments were to support with a barrage during the advance and were then to engage selected targets; mortars, machine guns and B and C Companies' infantry weapons were to give flanking fire on both sides of the objective.

Although this supporting fire had been designed to saturate the enemy's defences—2200 shells were shot into the target area in a short time—it did not drive him out. No. 8 Platoon (Second- Lieutenant Rogers <sup>1</sup>) and a section of 9 Platoon followed a track towards **Palazzo Laghi**, which the company commander (Major **Murray** <sup>2</sup>) proposed to use as a control post. Before the men reached the house they were seen in the light of German flares and came under mortar fire. From the house the sections, two heading north-eastward and two westward, made their way as fast as they could along ditches to the stopbank. They were met by fire from posts in front and on the flanks, but climbed the bank and fought the Germans at close quarters. They won several hundred yards of the bank, but the enemy prevented them from consolidating by tossing grenades across the river and shooting with small arms at those who attempted to dig in on the crest.

The enemy brought enfilading fire to bear from both flanks and began a bombardment with field guns, mortars and *nebelwerfers*. Almost half the attacking party became casualties: three were killed and 11 wounded. Rogers advised Murray at 8.15 a.m. that he could hold his gains on the stopbank no longer. Under the cover of smoke laid by the mortars, and carrying as many of the wounded as possible, his men returned direct through the minefield because the routes by which they had approached the river were now under fire. Private **Prattley**, <sup>3</sup> who had taken charge when his section leader had been wounded and also had silenced a spandau crew with hand grenades on the stopbank, went ahead cutting trip wires so that his companions could get back quickly and safely.

Although 8 Platoon had been unable to retain any part of the stopbank, the section from 9 Platoon completed its reconnaissance in the bend in the river. Sergeant **MacKenzie**,<sup>4</sup> a strong swimmer,

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt J. W. Rogers**; Montalto; born NZ 21 Mar 1922; farmer.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj G. A. Murray**, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Gore, 3 Feb 1915; shop assistant.

<sup>3</sup> **Cpl J. F. Prattley**, MM, m.i.d.; **Temuka**; born NZ 8 Jun 1923; labourer; wounded 17 Mar 1944.

<sup>4</sup> **Lt B. E. MacKenzie**, MM; **Christchurch**; born NZ 21 Oct 1921; survey draughtsman.

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had lowered himself into the water, which was running high between snow-covered banks 20 to 30 feet apart; he submerged to determine the depth (five feet near the edge and eight feet in the middle), climbed the far stopbank and surveyed the reverse slope and the defences along the crest. A shout from a German in a dugout only a few feet away warned him that he had been seen, so he quickly slid back into the water and returned to his own lines.

Later in the morning stretcher-bearers went to the foot of the near stopbank, where several of the wounded had been left. They found that German stretcher-bearers, despite fire from both sides, had bound up the New Zealanders' wounds and moved them to a safer place. After an exchange of cigarettes and some discussion, the Germans allowed the New Zealanders to remove their wounded to 26 Battalion's lines.

This was not 6 Brigade's only attempt to establish a platoon on the stopbank of the **Senio**. An attack by 25 Battalion five or six weeks later also failed and incurred more numerous casualties.

Late on 23 December a Gurkha battalion (2/6) of 43 Brigade relieved D Company of 26 Battalion and D Company, 21 Battalion, in the sector between the railway and Route 9. The Gurkhas reported that the **Senio** was unsuitable for crossing by raft, Ark or tank in this sector, and Bailey bridging would be very difficult; also that crossing places on the southern side of the highway would be impracticable because the ground was thickly wooded and the stopbanks and adjacent areas sown with mines. Farther upstream, however, patrols from 21 Battalion found no mines near the river, which flowed between easily sloping banks (not stopbanks) 12 to 18 feet high, and saw a suitable place for launching kapok bridging.

At a divisional conference on 24 December, a bitterly cold day when patches of snow lay on the ground and roofs, the brigade commanders and the CRE reported in detail on the reconnaissance of the river. **General Freyberg**, who had attended an Army Commander's conference at **Forli** that morning, gave an appreciation of the attacks to be made by other corps of the Allied armies and the possible timings for **5 Corps'** assault. His plan was to attack with one battalion of 43 Brigade on the right and two battalions of 5 Brigade on the left at 7 p.m. on 27 December. <sup>1</sup> The attack, however, was not to begin unless the **Air Force** could give it full co-operation; and if it was not under way within four days, it probably

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<sup>1</sup> The report of the discussion of this plan does not indicate where the **Senio River** was to be crossed.

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would be postponed until early in January. Late in the afternoon of the 24th the GOC told the commanders of 5 and 6 Brigades and the CRA by telephone that the date of the attack was 'plus four days'.

(x)

On Christmas Eve carol singing was heard from many quarters. The General, in a special order of the day, sent greetings to all ranks of the **2**

**NZEF in Italy and the Middle East.** ‘May this be the last Christmas that we spend away from our homes....’

Christmas Day was overcast and very cold, with snow still lying thinly on the rooftops, and for most men was exceptionally quiet. Those in the foremost positions were prevented from celebrating or from attending church services, except perhaps in small groups, because of the danger of moving about in daylight, but wherever possible the senior officers visited their men. Some Christmas dinners were postponed until the unit was out of the line, but many cooks prepared meals which marked the day as being one out of the ordinary. ‘As a result of recent expeditions organised by all ranks,’ **5 Field Regiment**—which could not have been alone in this—had ‘an abundance of poultry ... which, helped out by additional grants from **NAAFI**, provided everyone with a simply magnificent Christmas Dinner....’ <sup>1</sup>

‘With great restraint’ most men had ‘accumulated a small hoard of beer from recent **Naafi** issues, and this together with a generous distribution from the **National Patriotic Fund Board**, provided a fairly adequate supply of Xmas cheer to observe Xmas Eve in traditional style....’ <sup>2</sup> At least one dinner ‘evoked praise from even the most hardened critics of army cooks.’ <sup>3</sup> The menu for an NZASC company included roast turkey, chicken and pork, roast and creamed potatoes, roast pumpkin, cauliflower and white sauce, oranges, nuts, beer, wine and cigarettes.

The following night the *Luftwaffe* raided the **Faenza** region three times; a large bomb struck the roof of the house in which the GOC's caravan was located, penetrated a floor and the outside wall, and came to rest on the roadway outside without exploding. Apparently no casualties occurred among the New Zealanders in **Faenza** during these air attacks, but the remaining civilians were not so fortunate.

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, **5 Fd Regt.**

**<sup>2</sup> War diary, HQ 4 Armd Bde.**

**<sup>3</sup> War diary, Div Cav Bn.**

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

# CHAPTER 8 – THE WINTER LINE

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## I: THE OFFENSIVE ABANDONED

### *I: The Offensive Abandoned*

(i)

IT was still **Fifteenth Army Group's** intention that **Eighth Army** should cross the **Senio River** and **Fifth Army** strike towards **Bologna**. The date for launching the attack had not been settled, but the opinion was growing at **Eighth Army's** headquarters that, with the exhaustion of its troops and the heavy drain on its reserves of ammunition, its contribution to a combined offensive could be only on a limited scale.

General McCreery wrote to General Clark on Christmas Day asking that the timing of the two-army attack be reconsidered. He pointed out that **Eighth Army's** fighting during the last half of December had used half a million rounds of 25-pounder ammunition, and the availability of only 612,000 rounds during the next five weeks would not permit a major operation other than the forcing of the **Senio** and advance to the **Santerno**. The original target date for the attack by **Fifth Army** was to have been on or about 7 December. The three weeks of fighting which **Eighth Army** had completed since then had reduced by that length of time its capacity to conduct a simultaneous offensive with the Americans. Consequently, if a joint attack were launched, **Eighth Army's** effort possibly might be expended by the time **Fifth Army** most urgently needed assistance.

Meanwhile planning went ahead for **5 Corps'** attack: in the first phase the New Zealand Division on the right and 10 Indian Division on the left were to establish bridgeheads across the **Senio**, and in the second they were to link in a firm corps bridgehead; they were then to advance northward or north-westward to the **Santerno River**. The 56th Division, which was to protect **5 Corps'** right flank and be prepared to relieve New Zealand troops on both sides of the **Senio**, was ordered to

advance to the river as rapidly as possible. An adequate roading system was to be constructed for the Indian division, and a conference to co-ordinate the objectives of the Indian and New Zealand divisions was held on the morning of 27 December. In **General Freyberg's** opinion this 'wasted a lot of time.... All plans put forward were found to founder in the ammunition shallows.'<sup>1</sup> It was no surprise when Corps advised the New Zealand Division in the evening that the attack across the **Senio** was cancelled.

A German offensive launched on **Fifth Army's** front on the 26th disrupted the Americans' deployment for the two-army attack. It had become evident shortly before Christmas, Field Marshal Alexander later wrote, that the enemy was planning an attack down the valley of the Serchio River, which debouches into the **Arno** basin at **Lucca**, near the west coast. 'There had been no activity on this front for a very long time, since it was quite impracticable for the Allies to attempt a crossing of the mountains at this point; and for this reason it had been treated by both sides as a quiet sector....'<sup>2</sup> It was lightly held by 92 US Division, a Negro formation.

By the evening of the 27th the German *148 Division* and troops of the newly-formed fascist *Monte Rosa* and *Italia* divisions had penetrated five miles down the valley. An attack by a force of this size might not have been serious, but 10 days earlier the enemy had launched his vastly greater Ardennes counter-offensive on the Western Front, and the possibility of a similarly desperate effort in **Italy** could not be ignored. If the enemy could exploit across the **Arno River** and seize **Leghorn**, 'it would be a major disaster for the whole Allied front since through that port came all the supplies for **Fifth Army** and in its neighbourhood there were very large dumps of military stores.'<sup>3</sup> Therefore 1 US Armoured Division and two brigades of **8 Indian Division** were diverted to the threatened sector, and by the end of the month had completely restored the situation. On the 28th, however, General Truscott ordered 'a further postponement of planned operations pending clarification of the situation on the west flank.'<sup>4</sup>

Although **Fifth Army** had had comparatively little fighting in the last two months, its shortage of ammunition was almost as serious as **Eighth Army's** because reduced allocations to the Italian theatre had prevented the accumulation of a substantial reserve.

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary. **Eighth Army** could have ill afforded the large quantities of ammunition expended on the New Zealand Division's attack on the night of 19–20 December.

<sup>2</sup> *The Italian Campaign, 12th December 1944 to 2nd May 1945*, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *Fifth Army History*, Vol. VIII, Annex 1- 'D'.

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Consequently Field Marshal Alexander, realising how very poor were the prospects of reaching **Bologna** that winter, decided on 30 December to abandon the plan for the Allied offensive and 'to go on the defensive for the present and to concentrate on making a real success of our Spring offensive.'<sup>1</sup>

(ii)

Two days before this decision was reached, **5 Corps** had advised the New Zealand Division that there would be no attack across the **Senio** before 7 January. **General Freyberg** presented a short-term and a long-term policy to an orders group conference on 28 December. He said that if **Fifth Army** attacked there would be two operations on **Eighth Army's** front: the Canadian Corps was to clear out the pocket of enemy still east of the **Senio**, and at the same time **10 Indian Division** was to cross the upper reaches of the river. The 43rd Gurkha Brigade was to pass from the New Zealand Division to **10 Indian Division**. The chance of the New Zealand Division participating in the Indian Division's operation might

occur four days later (not before 11 January).

The short-term policy was one of holding the ground already gained until it might be necessary to regroup and push a brigade through to occupy a position on the flank of the Indian division and burst out west of **Castel Bolognese**. The GOC described the Division's disposition for defence against counter-attack. 'Nobody can tell but the enemy may be encouraged by the move of divisions to **Greece** and the knowledge that there is very little behind us, to have a go at **Faenza**.' <sup>2</sup> Each of the two infantry brigades would have two battalions in the line; the 5th also would have one battalion at **Faenza** and one at **Forli**, and the 6th two at **Forli**. The reserve group, **Campbell Force**, was to protect **Faenza** and the gun positions north-west of the Lamone River, and was to link up with 6 Brigade; it might be required to hold on the line of the **Scolo Cerchia** if the enemy counter-attacked from the '**Senio** pocket'. Although the Division was on the defensive, the GOC insisted that 'we should be offensive on the patrolling front and use our tanks.' <sup>3</sup>

Sixth Brigade continued to patrol the approaches to the **Senio** and gather information about the German defences and the river. A raid early on the morning of 27 December on a house occupied by a platoon of 26 Battalion had been repulsed without loss except to the enemy. 'The upstairs pickets had hardly had time to give the others warning of the Germans' approach before three bazooka

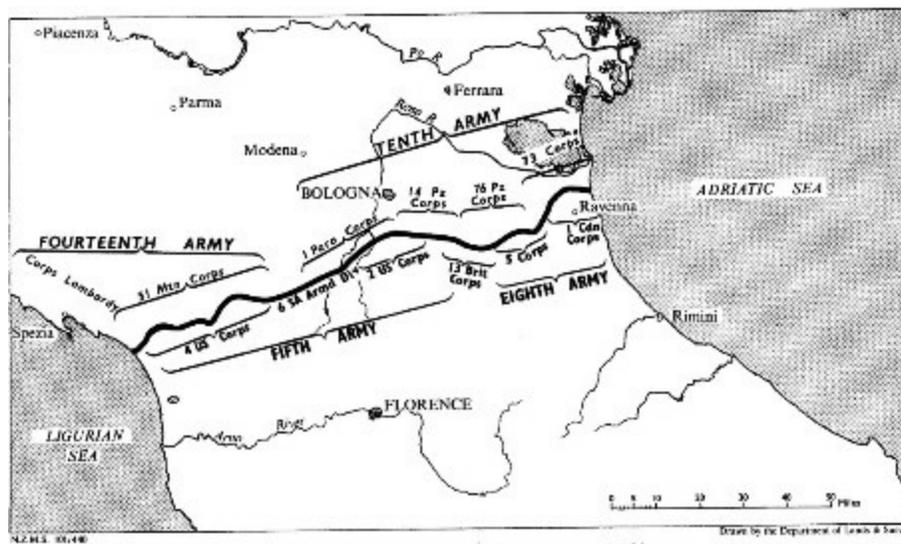
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<sup>1</sup> *The Italian Campaign*, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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THE ITALIAN FRONT, 31 DECEMBER 1944  
 THE ITALIAN FRONT, 31 DECEMBER 1944

**bombs exploded inside the building. This was the signal for the enemy to rush the back door, but two men on duty there opened fire and killed the leading German. Everyone inside the house was firing by this time and the Germans were forced to vacate their positions near the house. Grenades were tossed into the out-buildings, and the whole area was brought under intense LMG fire which induced the enemy to retire.’**<sup>1</sup> A quickly laid artillery stonk caught the Germans as they recrossed the stopbank. ‘Subsequently it was learned that the patrol consisted of 45 men, equipped with blankets and spare ammunition; its intention had been to occupy the house as a strongpoint. The stonk had caused many casualties.’<sup>2</sup>

**Divisional Cavalry Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel N. P. Wilder) relieved 26 Battalion in the late afternoon and evening of the 27th, and was told that the enemy protected his front with minefields and occupied the near slope of the stopbank. The 26th had been making use of trip flares and listening posts, and it was essential to have tanks in the area. The following afternoon and evening 25 Battalion was relieved by the 24th, which took over the positions along the line running approximately south-eastwards from **La Palazza** through **San Pietro** in Laguna.**

**On the night of the 26th–27th 28 (Maori) Battalion completed the**

relief of 22 Battalion in 5 Brigade's southern sector. The 2/6 Gurkhas of 43 Brigade, whose patrols had clashed with the enemy in the vicinity of Route 9, were relieved on 29 December by two companies of 23 Battalion, which came under 21 Battalion's command until that battalion was relieved by the 23rd next day. The 21st then took over 23 Battalion's role with **Campbell Force** in **Faenza**. Replaced by **19 Armoured Regiment** (less a squadron in close support of the infantry in the vicinity of Route 9), 18 Armoured Regiment went back to **Forli**.<sup>3</sup>

**Forli**, the B Echelon town about seven miles from **Faenza**, 'half ruined and bulging at the seams with a very mixed collection of soldiers, was no more attractive than **Faenza**. It was the same flat, ugly industrial town. Certainly there were more ways of killing time there. There was a **NAAFI** canteen and a picture theatre, both always overcrowded with Tommies and Kiwis.... There were

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<sup>1</sup> *26 Battalion*, pp. 481-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 482.

<sup>3</sup> When the various reliefs were completed, the groupings on 30 December were: 6 Bde with under its command 20 Armd Regt, a crocodile troop of 51 R Tks, **33 A-Tk Bty**, **2 MG Coy**, and a company of 6 Fd Amb, and in support **6 Fd Regt** and 34 Mor Bty; 5 Bde with under its command one squadron of **19 Armd Regt**, **32 A-Tk Bty**, 1 MG Coy, and a company of **5 Fd Amb**, and in support **5 Fd Regt**, 34 Mor Bty, and a squadron of **19 Armd Regt** in an indirect fire role; 4 Armd Bde ( **Campbell Force**) with under its command **18 Armd Regt** and **19 Armd Regt** less a squadron, **31 A-Tk Bty** and 27 (MG) Bn less 1 and 2 Coys, and with 21 Bn and a company of **4 Fd Amb** on call, and 4 Fd Regt in support.

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New Year parties, farewell parties for the "old hands" leaving for New Zealand, and parties to celebrate nothing in particular except the existence of a big wine factory up the road, full of stocks that needed drinking up before they got too old or someone else beat you to them.

There were occasional dances ... for, unlike **Faenza**, this place was full of civilians. But all these pleasures had no sparkle. Outwardly and inwardly, this was the depth of winter indeed.' <sup>1</sup>

The engineers 'carried on with the never-ending task of keeping communications open in spite of snowstorms, frozen slush and thaws.' <sup>2</sup> In **10 Indian Division's** sector 7 Field Company, assisted by an Indian pioneer company, widened and metalled a road along a ridge near **Pideura** and formed a way down towards the **Senio** River. This was known as Armstrong's track because of the work done by the **Mechanical Equipment Platoon** <sup>3</sup> under Captain Armstrong. <sup>4</sup> The track was in view of the enemy-held village of Cuffiano and therefore had to be constructed at night and carefully camouflaged with netting before daybreak.

*(iii)*

Although the offensive had been abandoned for the winter, it was still necessary for **Eighth Army** to secure a line which could be readily defended and which would serve as a jumping-off place for the spring offensive. This line, on both **5 Corps'** and the Canadian Corps' fronts, became 'inevitably, and not disadvantageously,' <sup>5</sup> the **Senio River**, which was scarcely half the size of the **Lamone**, the **Savio** and other water obstacles already crossed.

The enemy, according to information gathered by Intelligence, had seven battalions east of the **Senio**, of which five or six were on the New Zealand Division's front. An attack by 6 Brigade to the north probably would meet at least three battalions with an average strength of 200 men.

**General Freyberg** told General Keightley on 30 December that he thought 'it should be a big crack. I think 56 Div should come in with us,' <sup>6</sup> and also that the attack would use a good deal of ammunition. Keightley replied that he would be pressed by the Army Commander to use as little ammunition as possible, and

<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 604.

<sup>2</sup> *New Zealand Engineers, Middle East*, p. 665.

<sup>3</sup> The Mechanical Equipment Platoon was originally attached to **5 Fd Pk Coy** but became **27 Mechanical Equipment Company** on 10 January 1945.

<sup>4</sup> **Maj G. K. Armstrong**, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born NZ 4 Feb 1915; civil engineer; OC **27 Mech Equip Coy** Jan–Jun 1945.

<sup>5</sup> *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy*, Part III, Sec. C, p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> GOC's diary.

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suggested using tanks as much as possible; he also wanted to choose a day when the **Air Force** would be able to give its support. **Freyberg** conferred with Brigadiers Parkinson and Queree, and then told Keightley, 'There is a body of opinion that we should waste as little time as possible, start tomorrow and use tanks. The amount of ammunition required will be 2000 to 3000 rounds.' The corps commander agreed to this, and the GOC concluded: 'We shall go ahead then, and test the market.' <sup>1</sup>

Patrols sent out by **24 Battalion** during the night of 30–31 December met no enemy, and before daybreak the battalion and tanks of **A Squadron**, **20 Regiment**, without opposition, occupied houses half a mile or so north-east and north of **San Pietro** in Laguna. Fine weather during the day permitted the **Air Force** to attack many targets close to the enemy's forward positions, including houses just across the river from **Divisional Cavalry Battalion**. Probably because of this fighter-bomber activity **6 Brigade** had a quiet day.

After hearing of 24 Battalion's gains early in the morning, the GOC told the corps commander that he considered the enemy could be expelled from the north without any trouble, but would continue to hold a bridgehead east of the **Senio** until forced out; he also said, 'we can't go to the north and then go to the south afterwards. If they say the latter is on I would rather stay where I am.'<sup>2</sup>

It was decided to continue northward. Orders were issued in the afternoon for the Division to be prepared to clear the enemy salient east of the **Senio** in conjunction with an attack southwards by the Canadian Corps. Sixth Brigade was to be directed on **Cassanigo** (beyond the Sant' Andrea – **Felisio** road), and 5 Brigade was to be responsible for the protection of the left flank; 56 Division was to advance northward in conformity with 6 Brigade's right flank.

The CO of 24 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Hutchens) held a conference on New Year's Eve to define the battalion's objectives and the artillery, mortar, machine-gun and tank support. It appeared at the time that all enemy vehicles and heavy weapons had gone back across the **Senio** and only an infantry screen had been left on the battalion's front.

The sounds of revelry as the enemy celebrated the New Year were heard on many parts of the front. While waiting for the start of their attack, the 24 Battalion men 'witnessed a really splendid sight.... along the whole front, as far as the eye could see, streams of tracer bullets, light anti-aircraft shells and coloured flares weaved across the midnight sky.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *24 Battalion*, p. 302.

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The 24th Battalion's advance, in bright moonlight, necessitated a swing round of its front from north-east to north-west. On the left flank, therefore, 7 Platoon of A Company had the shortest distance to its objective at **Casa Galanuna**, about half a mile along the road from **La Palazza** to **Felisio**. The platoon came under fire from Galanuna and also from **Villa Pasolini**, near the road junction about a quarter of a mile away, but captured eight or nine Germans and killed and wounded others, at a cost of six men wounded. Apparently the enemy at Galanuna was caught during a New Year party, for which food and wine were set out on a table with a Christmas tree in the centre.

While advancing towards **Villa Pasolini**, B Company came under severe machine-gun fire about 300 yards from its objective. Four men were killed and three wounded, one of them mortally. The company commander (Captain Pirrie <sup>1</sup>) consulted Battalion Headquarters and was ordered to withdraw.

D Company also ran into trouble. When 17 Platoon was within 30 yards of its objective, a house about 200 yards short of Palazzo Toli, the enemy, who was dug in in front of the house, opened fire in a semi-circle. The platoon was compelled to retire; it brought out six wounded men and left three dead. Meanwhile 18 Platoon rushed **Palazzo Toli** (600 yards north-east of **Villa Pasolini**) and gained possession, but was practically surrounded and in a precarious position. Accompanied by tanks of A Squadron, 20 Regiment, 16 Platoon moved in close and opened fire with all weapons, which forced the enemy either to lie low or withdraw while 18 Platoon, carrying its wounded on improvised stretchers, evacuated the house.

When it became evident that the attack had failed, 7 Platoon was withdrawn from **Casa Galanuna**, and before dawn on New Year's Day the whole of 24 Battalion was back in its former positions. Brigadier Parkinson reported to the GOC that the enemy 'was in every place we attacked. He was expecting an attack.'<sup>2</sup> The 24th Battalion had had eight men killed and 20 wounded and had taken eight prisoners and

killed 'a good few'. The GOC told the corps commander how the battalion had been opposed, and said, 'I am very much against these little attacks which don't succeed.' <sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile 25 Battalion had relieved two companies of the London Irish of 167 Brigade, 56 Division, and placed two of its own companies in the line on the right of 24 Battalion. The two battalions rearranged their dispositions on the night of 1-2 January

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<sup>1</sup> Maj R. Pirrie, MC, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Scotland**, 10 Mar 1914; male nurse; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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so that each had two companies forward, one in immediate reserve and one farther to the rear. The same night 5 Brigade side-stepped to the right (north) when a battalion from **10 Indian Division** replaced 28 (Maori) Battalion in the sector south of Route 9, and the Maoris took over from Divisional Cavalry (which went back to **Forli**) north of the railway. The 23rd Battalion continued to hold the sector astride the railway and highway.

By the afternoon of 2 January it was obvious that the enemy had gone from his positions immediately to the north. The London Irish, on 6 Brigade's right, reached the crossroads near **Cassanigo Vecchio** (about half a mile south of **Cassanigo**) without opposition. South of the Sant' Andrea - **Felisio** road, 25 Battalion discovered that Casa Nuova and Fondo **Cassanigo** were unoccupied, and 24 Battalion found only two or three stray Germans at **Palazzo Toli**. Next day 25 Battalion took Palazzo in Laguna and 24 Battalion **Villa Pasolini**, a nearby wine factory and **Casa Galanuna**, all of which had been vacated by the enemy.

The commander of 1 Canadian Infantry Division (Major-General H.

W. Foster) had discussed with **General Freyberg** timings and other details of attacks by the two divisions to clear the enemy from the pocket between them. A plan was decided upon for 6 Brigade to continue its northward advance, but later this was cancelled, and on 3 January the GOC told a divisional conference that 56 Division would try to push the enemy out of his salient east of the **Senio** and thus link up between the New Zealanders and Canadians.

In case the enemy should attempt a counter-attack, which **Freyberg** thought might be possible, the New Zealand Division had taken 'completely adequate defensive measures. There are 100 tanks distributed in depth right back to **Forli**; also plenty anti-tank guns. If we wanted him to do his war effort harm we would want him to come in on our position here. If we are properly prepared and our plans are co-ordinated then he will take a pretty hard knock....' <sup>1</sup> The Division's policy, although defensive, was to make the enemy's tenure on the near side of the river as unpleasant as possible, but the ammunition supply was getting 'tighter and tighter every day.' <sup>2</sup>

(iv)

The enemy was still holding on the south-eastern side of the **Senio River** in two places, north of **Ravenna** (which the Canadians

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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had captured on 4 December) and south of **Bagnacavallo**. He would have to be cleared from both before **Eighth Army** could establish a satisfactory winter line.

The more northerly of the enemy's two salients covered the southern shore of the Valli di Comacchio, the great lagoon near the coast, which gave him a potential base from which to launch an attempt to recapture

**Ravenna.** By cutting the embankments of the Comacchio on one side of Route 16 and the high banks of the Reno River on the other, he had flooded wide areas west of the lagoon and thus created a narrow and easily defensible defile through which the highway passed at **Argenta**, 15 miles beyond **Alfonsine** (where Route 16 crosses the **Senio**, which flows into the **Reno**).

The possession of the southern shore of the Valli di Comacchio by **Eighth Army** would make it possible to launch flanking amphibious attacks in support of an advance along Route 16 through the ' **Argenta Gap**' when the Allies resumed the offensive. This could be an alternative to the succession of frontal assaults on the numerous river lines which would have to be faced in a westward drive farther inland; in any case it could accelerate the advance. The **German High Command** was aware of this possibility. General von Vietinghoff was told not to regard the Valli di Comacchio as impassable terrain where he could economise in deploying the troops of **Tenth Army**. The Allies had employed amphibious vehicles with success in **Belgium** and **Holland**, but apparently the enemy did not know of the shortage of such equipment in **Italy**.

In five days (2–6 January), when the frozen ground allowed tanks to be used with greater freedom, 5 Canadian Armoured Division, with strong support from the **Desert Air Force**, advanced to the Reno River (the northern bank of which lay close to the shore of the Valli di Comacchio) and the Adriatic coast, and in the process so alarmed the enemy that he made a violent and costly counter-attack. The Canadians took 600 prisoners, killed 300 enemy and wounded many more; their own casualties were less than 200.

At the same time 1 Canadian Infantry Division and 56 Division of **5 Corps** eliminated the other German salient, between the **Senio** River and the Naviglio Canal south of **Bagnacavallo**. It had been decided that **5 Corps'** forces already north of Route 9 between the **Lamone** and the **Senio** had little prospect of overrunning the enemy by the methods already employed. A fresh approach presented itself, however, when frost hardened the ground so that tanks could cross it and avoid the thickly

mined roads, and a new type of equipment, the Kangaroo, could be tested. Turretless tanks modified to carry infantry, the Kangaroos were 'designed to enable them to accompany tanks across country swept by bullets and artillery fire and arrive together on their objectives.'<sup>1</sup> They had not been used in the Italian theatre. The success of the project would depend on its completion before a change in the weather started a thaw.

The Canadians made a diversionary sally to the **Senio** stopbank west of **Bagnacavallo**, on the northern side of the German pocket, in the afternoon of 3 January. Before the noise of this had died down, they began an assault across the Naviglio Canal at **Granarolo** (half-way between **Bagnacavallo** and **Faenza**), and by daybreak had secured the village and reached the Fosso Vecchio about half a mile beyond it.

Fifth Corps began its attack early on the morning of the 4th, and 'the whole plan worked with extraordinary smoothness.'<sup>2</sup> Accompanied by the Kangaroos (a squadron of **4 Hussars**) carrying infantry (2/6 Queens), 7 Armoured Brigade, under 56 Division's command, passed through 24 NZ Battalion and set out from La Palazza on a mile-wide sweep along the bank of the **Senio**. To mop up the enemy cut off by this 'left hook', 167 Brigade advanced north-eastward farther to the right. Bombing and shelling almost silenced the enemy's artillery, and the new method of attack took him by surprise. By midday 167 Brigade had made contact with the Canadians at the Fosso Vecchio, and before the end of the day the east bank of the **Senio** was clear as far as **San Severo**, between the river and **Granarolo**. That night the enemy gave way all along the front. The Canadians crossed the Naviglio north of **Granarolo** and on 5 January reached the **Senio** opposite **Cotignola**. At a cost of few casualties, 56 Division had taken over 200 prisoners and the Canadians well over 100; many Germans had been killed or wounded.

To conform with 56 Division's northward advance, 6 NZ Brigade redispersed its troops to face the **Senio** on the night of 5–6 January; this brought 25 Battalion up on the right of the 24th.

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<sup>1</sup> *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy*, Part III, Sec. C, p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## II: OFFENSIVE DEFENCE

### *II: Offensive Defence*

(i)

When reporting on 8 January 1945 to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on his decision to go on to the defensive for the time being and to concentrate on making a success of an offensive in the spring, Field Marshal Alexander explained why he had modified his previous intentions and plans: **Eighth Army** had not been as successful as had been hoped because of the difficulties of terrain and weather; the enemy had developed his defences round **Bologna** into a strong fortress area, from which **Fifteenth Army Group** would be unable to drive him in winter with the forces available; the enemy had formed a reserve of four divisions to meet an Allied offensive or launch a counter-offensive, while **Fifteenth Army Group** was unable to create an equivalent reserve; **Eighth Army** was in urgent need of re-organisation, for which some divisions would have to be withdrawn from the line; the artillery ammunition available to **Fifteenth Army Group** would allow an offensive for only about 15 days. 'If that period was to be extended, I should be unable to carry out my primary mission; indeed, until stocks could be built up again, **Fifteenth Army Group** would be unable to follow up an enemy withdrawal with any chance of a decisive success.' <sup>1</sup>

Alexander had decided, therefore, 'to pass temporarily to offensive defence in **Italy**. I intend to carry out minor offensive operations in order to keep the enemy on the alert and improve our positions. Plans will be made for the resumption of the offensive and will be concerted with Eisenhower.' <sup>2</sup>

By this time the enemy was on the line of the **Senio River** along the whole of **Eighth Army's** front except near **Alfonsine**, on Route 16, where he continued to hold a small but strong salient east of the river. He had

reacted to the Canadian Corps' drive towards Valli di Comacchio by strengthening his Adriatic flank. By the middle of January he opposed **Eighth Army** with what amounted to eight and a half divisions; at the beginning of December he had had only six.

General McCreery held a conference of the corps commanders of **Eighth Army** on 9 January to discuss the possibility of an enemy counter-attack and to lay down a defensive policy. An attack down the axis of Route 16 might result in the loss of **Ravenna** and permit the enemy to continue to **Forli**, cut Route 9 and close Route 67, but the German reserves appeared to be too weak to arouse anxiety over this possibility. The policy decided upon, therefore, was to defend the existing line and prepare to resume the offensive.

Already General Keightley had ordered the divisions of **5 Corps** to prepare their positions nearest to the **Senio** as forward defended localities, to lay minefields and wire, and to prepare the bridges on the Lamone River and farther west for demolition. The corps' intention was to hold a defensive position along a line east of the **Senio** with **56 Division**, **2 New Zealand Division**, **10 Indian Division**

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<sup>1</sup> *The Italian Campaign*, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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and **5 Kresowa Division** (from the **Polish Corps**) from right to left in that order. The divisional commanders were to decide when they could finally clear the enemy from the eastern bank of the **Senio**, and in the meantime were to keep a sufficient reserve forward of the **Lamone** to be able to resist a German attack for 24 hours without additional support. A corps reserve of an infantry brigade and an armoured regiment was to be ready to go to the threatened sector if an attack developed.

The corps was to prepare for the resumption of the offensive by continuing the construction of roads, and by allowing as many troops as

possible to rest and train. Defensive works were to be hidden and dummy tracks, leading towards the river where no crossing would be attempted, were to be built in full view of the enemy.

Headquarters **2 Polish Corps** was withdrawn on 7 January, and **5 Kresowa Division**, complete with its supporting arms, the Army Group Polish Artillery and other Polish units passed to the command of **5 Corps**, which thus became responsible for the left sector of **Eighth Army's** front. At the same time the corps' right boundary was moved northward along the **Senio** to about a mile south of **Cotignola**. The New Zealand Division, whose units south of Route 9 already had been relieved by **10 Indian Division**, took over the left of **56 Division** at **Felisio**, and the 56th replaced the Canadians on the right of **5 Corps'** front, which was now about 17 miles long. The corps had the equivalent of five infantry brigades in the line, a sixth in reserve, and the rest of its troops resting in rear, ready to move up again at 48 hours' notice.

The 56th Division, two brigades strong, was responsible for a relatively narrow sector on the right, while the New Zealand, Indian and Polish divisions occupied progressively broader sectors in the centre and on the left. The troops in reserve, quartered around **Forli** or farther back near **Cesena**, were in country which closely resembled that which **Eighth Army** would have to cross when it resumed the offensive; they were able to train, therefore, in realistic circumstances, and were close enough to the front to hurry back if the enemy attempted a counter-offensive.

Civilians, reluctant to leave their homes, were evacuated from localities overlooked by the enemy, from buildings housing headquarters, and from a zone about 3000 yards deep behind the main defences. This was justified on humane grounds as well as those of security, because the enemy's guns and tanks systematically destroyed all houses and farm buildings which might be used as strongpoints and observation posts. The Italians still in **Faenza** were not compelled to leave, but no more were allowed to enter the town. A few contrived to stay in the forward zone, but most were evacuated; they made off slowly in long

columns of trucks and farm carts. The New Zealand Division provided transport to assist in the removal of an estimated 1000 people and 500 cattle, as well as rabbits and other animals, from its sector.

Snow began to fall in the afternoon of 6 January and continued at intervals next day, covering the ground to a depth of about six inches. After a heavy frost the snow was frozen hard, which made silent movement on it almost impossible. Frosty nights and fine cold days followed until towards the middle of the month, when there was a spell of rain and misty weather, which in turn was succeeded by more frosty, fine weather during which the thaw reduced the roads to a very bad state. Daybreak on the 25th unexpectedly revealed a fresh snowfall four or five inches deep, but this also began to thaw.

There was little activity on the front. The enemy did not relax his hold on the stopbanks on both sides of the **Senio**, but showed no sign of launching an attack. North of Route 9, where the high stopbanks dominated the surrounding country, 56 Division and the New Zealand Division occupied positions about 500 yards from the near bank and based on houses and farms which they converted into strongpoints with mines and wire. Although white snow suits were worn, it was virtually impossible to reach the river in daylight, and although patrols did occasionally penetrate to the stopbank at night, they were unable to stay there.

South of Route 9 the stopbanks were comparatively low, vanishing altogether in some places, and therefore did not dominate the countryside. Immediately south of the highway the enemy still held positions east of the river, while farther south, towards Tebano, **10 Indian Division** had control of the near stopbank and had outposts on the river line; farther upstream, beyond Tebano, the Indians were able to patrol across the river because the main German positions were on rising ground and only outposts remained in the river valley. On **5 Kresowa Division's** front, on **Eighth Army's** extreme left, where both sides occupied high ground some distance from the banks of the **Senio**, the Poles patrolled deep into no-man's land.

**(ii)**

The New Zealand Division held its sector, which extended about 6000 yards north-eastwards from just south of Route 9, with 6 Brigade on the right and 5 Brigade on the left, and with an *ad hoc* brigade group in **Forli** as divisional reserve. Each of the two forward brigades had two battalions in the line and one in reserve at **Faenza**; they had under command an armoured regiment, an anti-tank battery (with 17-pounders and M10s) and a machine-gun company, and in support a 4.2-inch mortar battery and a field company of engineers. The divisional reserve consisted of Headquarters 4 Armoured Brigade, two infantry battalions, an armoured regiment, an anti-tank battery and 27 (MG) Battalion less two companies. The artillery and engineers functioned under the centralised command of the CRA and CRE respectively. Tank support for 5 Brigade was provided by 19 Regiment and for 6 Brigade by the 20th, each with one squadron close to the forward infantry, one on a gunline, and one in reserve. From time to time the infantry battalions changed places so that each in turn had a spell in the line and in reserve at **Faenza** or **Forli**. The tank squadrons exchanged positions in each regiment, and the anti-tank batteries and machine-gun companies were relieved the same way.

The defences were organised to withstand or repel a major attack. To cope with the possibility of an enemy penetration, 6 Brigade was to be prepared to attack northwards from **Faenza** to recapture the **San Silvestro** – Sant' Andrea area, and 5 Brigade westwards to recapture **Celle** and the high ground between it and the **Senio**. In case the enemy should succeed in penetrating so far, defences were based on the **Scolo Cerchia** for the protection of **Faenza** and the bridges in the vicinity.

The patrolling policy was to dominate the near banks of the **Senio**, discover and clear gaps in the minefields, and reconnoitre enemy defences and possible crossing places of the river. The enemy outposts were alert and sensitive to the movement of patrols and working parties;

the enemy also patrolled vigorously. The following incidents typify this activity.

Early one morning the **Maori Battalion** saw some Germans heading towards **Palazzo Laghi** from the river, and sent a patrol to investigate. The patrol brought back six prisoners, who were interrogated by two Jewish officers (attached to **28 Battalion** for experience). The Germans had been sent out to take prisoners, and had gone to **Palazzo Laghi** unaware that Allied troops were in the vicinity. They were expecting a runner at 6 p.m. with news of their relief. The Maoris waited for the runner and enticed him into captivity by using the German codeword. He had orders for the German patrol to return to its headquarters, so the Maoris pretended to be that patrol with the object of reconnoitring the river for crossing places. Seven of them set off towards the stopbank, but they were met by small-arms fire and forced to withdraw with three wounded.

One evening three Germans, whose snow clothing was said to be so white that it could be easily detected, appeared with a dog in front of a house occupied by a platoon of **23 Battalion** near the railway. When the New Zealanders engaged these men, another enemy party, estimated to be six strong, opened fire with automatic weapons at close range. They were all driven off by machine-gun and mortar fire.

A standing patrol from **26 Battalion** at Galanuna was attacked next evening by eight Germans wearing white clothing and snowshoes; they gained a foothold in the outbuildings and fired a bazooka and grenades at the house, but were repelled by artillery, mortar, machine-gun and small-arms fire, which wounded three of them.

Three men dressed in snow clothing approached at night to within 100 yards of a Vickers platoon's gunline near **San Pietro** in Laguna, but retired when challenged. The enemy reappeared about two hours later, but again withdrew after exchanging small-arms fire with the machine-gunners. In their flight they set off a trip flare, which attracted fire from other troops in the neighbourhood. At dawn two bazookas and a

**Schmeisser**<sup>1</sup> were found abandoned near the machine-gunners' position.

This was one of several small German patrols armed with bazookas (or *Panzerfausten*) which approached the Division's lines about this time; it was thought their object was primarily to reconnoitre, but they also were to attack any good target that offered. Usually they were chased away before they could do any damage.

A patrol from 26 Battalion set out before daybreak on 29 January for the stopbank west of **Casa Claretta**. Three men, covered by the others who stayed at a demolished house nearby, went on to the bank, but were conspicuous in their white clothing on the snow-free crest and were forced off by small-arms fire.

A patrol from 23 Battalion, with the intention of ambushing the enemy, set out one evening to cross the river near the railway, but found a dannert-wire fence on the far side of the stopbank, which dropped steeply to the ice-covered water, 25 to 30 feet wide. The patrol, which had brought with it two 15-foot ladders, did not try to cross.

A patrol from the **Maori Battalion** made three attempts one night to reach the stopbank from **Palazzo Laghi**, but encountered minefields and machine-gun fire and was compelled to withdraw each time. The following evening another Maori patrol, probing its way and crawling through a minefield, arrived at the stopbank a little farther upstream, went along the bank to the bend in the river

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<sup>1</sup> *Schmeisser*: German machine carbine.

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north of **Palazzo Laghi**, and reported that the watercourse was 30 to 35 feet wide and about five feet deep. The exploding of two mines, of which there were many on the bank, was the signal for German machine guns to open fire. The Maoris fought the enemy on the opposite side of the bank with grenades before withdrawing under covering fire.

**(iii)**

‘Last night's fog carried a very unusual noise into our lines from the enemy side of the river—the sound of a train,’ stated the divisional Intelligence summary on 15 January. Reports from 5 Brigade suggested that the noise, which was heard on four or five nights, came from the railway between **Castel Bolognese** and **Solarolo**, roughly parallel with the **Senio** and behind the German front. Men of 22 Battalion claimed that twice before midnight on the 15th they heard ‘the sounds of puffing, the click of wheels passing over rails, the sound of a slow-moving train travelling just across the river in enemy territory. Men heard definite sounds of wheels going over jointed tracks.’ <sup>1</sup>

No train was heard on the railway between **Solarolo** and **Lugo**, opposite the sector held by 56 ( **London** ) Division, most of whose troops ‘must have grown up with **London** expresses roaring in their ears.’ <sup>2</sup> Aerial reconnaissance and photograph interpretation threw no light on the mystery. No engine or wagons were seen, and the line to both the north-east and north-west of **Castel Bolognese** was in such a state that it could not be used. The road system in the enemy's rear was adequate for the bringing up of supplies; there was no apparent reason why he should go to the trouble and risk of repairing and keeping the railway in working order.

The Division found no satisfactory explanation for the ‘ghost train’. After hostilities had ceased in **Italy**, General Dr Fritz Polack, who had commanded **29 Panzer Grenadier Division** at the time, said there had been no train running in the vicinity of Castel Bolognese. ‘No such sounds were heard by our forces. The only suggestion I can make is that it was the noise of long supply columns.’ <sup>3</sup>

**(iv)**

From 10 January the 25-pounder ammunition was restricted to five rounds a gun each day. One battery in each field regiment took its turn in occupying an alternative harassing fire position from

<sup>1</sup> *22 Battalion*, p. 415.

<sup>2</sup> *2 NZ Div Intelligence summary*.

<sup>3</sup> Statement to an officer of Archives Section, *2 NZEF*, in an interview on 16 Aug 1945.

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which it did all the shooting; the other batteries (which were to fire only if an attack developed) remained silent so that the enemy could not register the main gun position.

To keep up the volume of fire in spite of the limitation on ammunition for the artillery and tanks, the infantry battalions made greater use of their own weapons, including six-pounder anti-tank guns and Piats; Browning machine guns were sited along the front; the M10s of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment gave defensive fire on call at night; the 4.2-inch mortars of 34 Battery covered the front for defensive and harassing fire. Because of the shortage of ammunition the Vickers guns of 27 (MG) Battalion seldom fired more than 15,000 rounds a day, often fewer; they were permitted to shoot only on call by the infantry and on special defensive-fire tasks.

Among the targets engaged by the artillery, tanks, M10s, mortars and machine guns were the German defences on the stopbanks of the *Senio*, working parties and patrols, vehicles, guns, mortars and occupied houses.

Normally quiet days, especially if Allied fighter-bombers were flying, followed nights of harassing fire, patrolling and much digging. Some of the enemy's harassing fire was provided by self-propelled guns, which could be heard moving about beyond the river. Air photographs indicated that they were hidden by day in houses in the rear and brought forward by night to shoot. Although sought out by the artillery, M10s and fighter-bombers, they were not prevented from doing some damage.

The enemy seized the opportunity during a fog which blanketed the front in mid-January to strengthen his defences; his working parties could be heard hammering, digging, sawing wood and making other noises usually heard only at night. Whenever located, these activities were harassed and silenced, but they often started again after the shooting stopped. Some of the sounds were interpreted as coming from bridge-building. Air observation, however, disclosed on 22 January that there were fewer bridges after a spate in the river; a few days later none could be seen in front of the 56th and New Zealand divisions, but before the end of the month the enemy had replaced some and was preparing to replace others.

Observation of the enemy's activities had aroused the suspicion that he might be thinning out preparatory to withdrawal. His mortars, *nebelwerfers* and rockets—all weapons which could be moved easily—were still in use at night, but he had discontinued his artillery harassing programme. Although he obviously still had men on the stopbanks, no recent contact had been made with his patrols. More tracked-vehicle movement than usual was heard on the night of 24–25 January. The explanation, that a changeover had been taking place, came the following night, when two men were captured from the newly arrived **4 Parachute Division** which had relieved **29 Panzer Grenadier Division** north of Route 9.

To test the strength of the German defensive fire and detect any sign of his thinning out, 5 Brigade put on fire demonstrations (or 'Chinese' <sup>1</sup> attacks, as they were called) after nightfall on 26 and 29 January, but stirred up very little response. After the later performance the enemy was seen reoccupying his positions on the stopbank.

**General Freyberg** gave instructions on 31 January for the Division to prepare to resume offensive operations; it was to implement immediately a policy which included reconnaissance and patrolling, the occupation of the near stopbank of the **Senio** as soon as possible, and the clearance of minefield gaps to permit the passage of tanks and the assembly of

infantry for an attack across the river. In addition, the infantry brigade commanders were to examine two river-crossing operations, one from the Division's present location and the other together with, and on the left of, a crossing by 56 Division between **Cotignola** and **Felisio**. The decision as to which course was to be adopted was to be reached at a conference on 2 February.

On the night of 31 January – 1 February it was 6 Brigade's intention that 25 Battalion should establish a fighting patrol of platoon strength on the stopbank about half a mile north-east of **Felisio**, and that 26 Battalion should secure a lodgement on the bank west of **La Palazza** and occupy a nearby house; at the same time 5 Brigade was to send out patrols to reconnoitre routes to the bank, lift mines and capture prisoners.

(v)

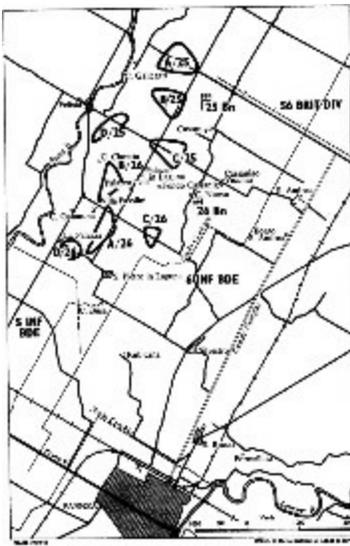
Having been instructed to take and occupy a 200-yard stretch of the stopbank south-west of Casa **Gallegati**, 12 Platoon (Second- Lieutenant **Wilson**<sup>2</sup>) of B Company, 25 Battalion, set out about 6.30 p.m. on the 31st. Probably warned by the noise of the men approaching over the encrusted snow, the enemy opened fire with spandaus from both flanks, but surprisingly stopped after a few minutes. Although Wilson's men tripped the wires which fired two flares, they crossed open ground unchallenged and began to dig in on the stopbank. Strong opposition was expected from the left flank, where the Germans were known to be covering the road

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<sup>1</sup> This appellation probably derived from the Chinese addiction to fireworks. It was several years before the Korean war demonstrated what a genuine Chinese attack was like.

<sup>2</sup> **Capt G. E. Wilson**, MC; **Sydney**; born **Palmerston North**, 8 Nov 1914; schoolteacher; wounded and p.w. 1 Feb 1945; principal, Scots College, **Sydney**.

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6 INFANTRY BRIGADE, 31 JANUARY 1945

from **Cassanigo**, but apparently they thought they were being attacked by a larger force than one platoon; they abandoned their positions and weapons, dived into the river or made off to the left.

Four surrendered without a fight, and at least three were killed while trying to escape.

The enemy did not organise any opposition on the left flank for several hours, but brought increasingly heavy fire to bear from the front and the right. 'Throughout the 15–16 hours we occupied these positions,' Wilson later wrote, 'enemy arty and mortar fire was extremely heavy with occasional relief. Our position on the stop-bank was difficult to hit. It was apparent that the enemy was consistently dropping his range on the advice of forward troops.... Eventually, he reduced his range to such an extent that one heavy mortar "hate" dropped among his own troops with some effect if the groans and outcries were an indication of casualties.' <sup>1</sup>

The 3-inch mortars, responding well to 12 Platoon's requests, made it hazardous for the enemy to venture on to the flat ground between the river and the far stopbank, which the platoon already covered with small-arms fire. The Germans who managed to cross the river in front of the platoon became the victims of their own mortar fire. 'They lay or stumbled about as though wounded or "bomb happy" between the river

and our positions and were the target of our fire and grenades.... The enemy, however, soon appreciated the position and commenced to cross the river to our right and left. Darkness made visibility poor, but it was at times possible to disperse troops attempting to cross on our left. To the right, however, the bend in the stopbank obscured fire and enemy could cross unhindered except by mortar fire.

‘The difficulties of our position were very obvious at this stage. It was apparent that the enemy could cross in large numbers and attack from either flank. Positions to our right on the stopbank would enfilade us from the right rear. I did not foresee that he would later occupy Gallegati in strength and so cover our rear.’<sup>2</sup> The enemy's persistent supporting fire and sniping from the right made the bringing up of ammunition and the evacuation of casualties most difficult. Communications were improved when the company commander (Major J. Finlay) brought up a telephone and two lines, but very soon the lines were cut in many places by shellfire. After the platoon's No. 38 set received a direct hit by a stick grenade, the only wireless communication came from an enemy set which ordered the platoon in English to surrender.

The enemy worked his way to within 50 yards, but Wilson felt that as long as his men had plenty of ammunition they could hold out and inflict more casualties than they themselves might suffer. Before dawn ‘a strong force attacked from the front and

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<sup>1</sup> Report dated 13 May 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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both flanks with stick and rifle grenades which were employed with great accuracy. The only weapon of much use to us was [No.] 36 Grenades of which we threw between 150 and 180 in our period on the bank. With daylight, the enemy moved most effectively. From Gallegati

and the stopbank to our right and from across the river he kept up persistent sniping and spasmodic bursts of Spandau while a large party operated with grenades on both flanks from in front.' The section on the right ran out of ammunition and therefore could no longer hold off the enemy, who 'with much daring ... worked right up to our central positions, suffering considerable casualties in doing so. He seemed to possess an unending supply of stick grenades and it was common during the last two hours to see up to two dozen in the air above us at the same time.' <sup>1</sup>

By mid-morning the platoon was practically out of ammunition and had no communication with B Company. Wilson reluctantly decided to withdraw and sent two men back at intervals to ask for smoke to cover the thinning out. Before this could be arranged, however, the enemy, sensing the platoon's predicament, charged and overran the position. 'It was extremely unpleasant to be taken so ignominiously.... It is some consolation to record the enemy's known casualties.... I can record definitely that 11 of the enemy were killed, 15 wounded and 4 were taken PW. Others of my platoon claim to have seen further dead.... It is possible that 40-50 casualties were inflicted.... After the action had concluded, I was able to see within a 500 yard radius of my positions at least 500-800 enemy troops.... The frontal attacking party I put at 80-100.... I calculated that the enemy had been alarmed by the move and had expected it to be a prelude to a larger attack, and had consequently reinforced heavily.' <sup>2</sup>

The 25th Battalion's casualties on 31 January and 1 February were four killed, 10 wounded and 22 missing. Among the missing were Wilson, twice wounded, and two others wounded. The prisoners were taken some 15 miles behind the German lines and interrogated, apparently without divulging any information of value to the enemy; eventually they all succeeded in rejoining the Allied forces.

Wilson's platoon had been given an absolutely impossible task. A raid to take prisoners, inflict casualties and obtain information about the enemy dispositions might have succeeded if the platoon had withdrawn

before the enemy could counter-attack in strength. But the platoon was required to hold part of the near stopbank,

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<sup>1</sup> Report, 13 May 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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about 400 yards in advance of the battalion's foremost posts, while the far stopbank and the river (proof against tank attack until bridged) afforded the enemy defensive positions where he could reinforce for attacks on the platoon's front and both flanks.

(vi)

On the left of 25 Battalion the 26th had a similar task that night but adopted different tactics: only one section was sent to the stop-bank, and it withdrew when the German reaction showed there was no hope of success.

The plan was for 16 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant [Brent](#)<sup>1</sup>) of D Company to secure a position with one section on the stopbank west of [La Palazza](#), one section at a demolished nearby house, and one section and platoon headquarters at [La Palazza](#). To create a diversion A Company's outpost at [Casa Galanuna](#) and some tanks fired on the stopbank north of D Company's objective, which was taken without much opposition. Very soon, however, Corporal Cocks's<sup>2</sup> section on the stopbank came under fire from the farther bank and both flanks. One Bren gun was hit and put out of action and another damaged; two tommy guns jammed after a few rounds. The digging was exceptionally hard in the frozen ground, and the men had done little more than scratch the surface when the enemy attacked from the right. Concentrated fire from the section's still serviceable weapons killed two Germans and drove back the others. The 3-inch mortars and the field guns fired concentrations when the enemy was seen to be preparing for

another counter-attack. Nevertheless eight or ten Germans succeeded in crossing the river. Enemy mortars ranged on the section's position and, as Cocks's men were running out of ammunition (all the grenades had been used), Brent gave the order to withdraw. The section, which had had one man killed and one wounded, brought back two wounded Germans, who said they had been only three weeks in **Italy**.

Fifth Brigade patrolled as intended in the evening of 31 January. Three-man patrols from the **Maori Battalion** (one each from B, C and D Companies) with mine detectors reconnoitred routes towards the stopbank in the vicinity of the river bend north-east of Palazzo Laghi and south-west of Casa Cuclotta without finding mines. Two of these patrols were prevented by machine-gun fire from reaching the stopbank; the third did not see the enemy.

The more northerly of 23 Battalion's two fighting patrols (nine men from A Company) went from a house near **Paganella** to the

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt A. H. Brent; Christchurch**; born Dunedin, 14 Jan 1922; clerk; wounded 18 Mar 1944.

<sup>2</sup> **WO II W. J. Cocks**, m.i.d.; St. Andrews, South Canterbury; born Waimate, 16 Aug 1923; farm labourer.

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other side of the stopbank, but because of the noise made walking on the snow, recrossed it before approaching the railway. The patrol then heard sounds of digging and stake-driving, and threw a phosphorus grenade at two Germans who had a spandau, wounding one of them, but this attracted the attention of others in the vicinity who fired spandaus and attacked with rifle grenades. the patrol therefore withdrew.

The other 23 Battalion fighting patrol (12 men from D Company) carried an assault boat to the stopbank on the southern side of the railway, but could not lower it into the water because it was too heavy and the banks too steep, ice-bound and slippery. Neither fighting patrol,

therefore, succeeded in taking prisoners.

Obviously an attack by a much larger force than a platoon would be necessary to gain and hold a lodgement on the stopbank. A revised policy was announced at the conference on 2 February: the Division was to continue patrolling and lifting mines on its front, but was to occupy no permanent positions in front of the existing forward localities; it was to maintain standing patrols where possible on the stopbank during the hours of darkness. A river-crossing operation on a corps basis was being considered: this was to be done by one brigade group of 56 Division on the right and two brigades of the New Zealand Division on a front of about 3500 yards on the left, and was to take place between **Cotignola** and **Felisio**, with an axis of advance to the north-west. It was expected that there would be 10 days' notice before any such' attack.

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## III: EIGHTH ARMY REGROUPS

### *III: Eighth Army Regroups*

(i)

The possibility of a German counter-attack on **Eighth Army's** front could be almost ignored by the beginning of February; the enemy had lost his best opportunity when **Eighth Army** changed from the offensive to the defensive in January. Taking into account his losses in eastern **Europe** and the failure of his Ardennes offensive in the west, the enemy had nothing to gain by a doubtful venture in **Italy**; he had little reason to deploy large forces on an unnecessarily extended front there when he needed them elsewhere. It seemed, therefore, to be the logical course for the German High Command to choose the most suitable moment to disengage and withdraw across the River Po to a shorter line in north-east **Italy**.

The line where the German armies stood in the winter of 1944–45 was largely gratuitous; it had no particular strategic significance; it was where the Allied offensive had come to a halt because of the troops' exhaustion, the bad weather, the lack of ammunition, and the need for regrouping. Between the Adriatic and the **Apennines** it crossed the **Romagna** on the line of the **Senio** River; it continued along the last northern ridge of the mountains south of **Bologna** and to the coastal plain where the Germans still held, in front of Massa, a remnant of the **Gothic Line**.



GERMAN DEFENCES SOUTH OF THE RIVER PO

GERMAN DEFENCES SOUTH OF THE RIVER PO

On this coast-to-coast line the enemy had fortified his positions as best he could. There had been little real activity since December except in the **Romagna**, where **Eighth Army** faced beyond the **Senio** more river lines, named by the enemy **Laura** (on the **Santerno**), **Paula** (on the **Sillaro**) and **Genghis Khan** (on the **Idice** and anchored in the flooded country west of **Lake Comacchio**).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The line on the **Senio** was called **Irmgard**.

These lines ‘were designated to cover **Bologna** from the south-east; at their northern end a line based on the **Reno River** gave depth to the defence of the **River Po**, especially in the region near the coast. This was the essential element of any plan of defence: the eastern flank of the German front must hold firm to allow the west to swing back toward the northwestern passes into Germany and the line of the **Adige**.’<sup>1</sup>

For some months the enemy had been hard at work on what was known as the **Venetian Line**, based on the **Adige River** and the hills between the Adriatic at **Chioggia** and **Lake Garda**. Beyond the **River Po** and the already formidable defences of the **Venetian Line** was the **Prealpine Defence Position** ( *Voralpenstellung*), protected by the ‘almost impregnable barrier of the Alps.’<sup>2</sup> To prepare these defences the

**Inspector of Land Fortifications South-West (General Buelowius, who had won Rommel's praise while serving with the Axis forces in **Africa**) had under his control 5340 German engineer specialist and construction troops, but most of the work was done by thousands of Italians and other foreign labourers conscripted into the **Todt Organisation**.**

**Since the autumn the Germans had a plan of withdrawal (which they had given the codename *Herbstnebel*—autumn fog), but Hitler had persistently refused permission to put it into effect. Had General von Vietinghoff been able to withdraw his *Army Group C* behind the Po in good time, his chances of manning and holding the **Venetian Line** and the Prealpine Defence Position would have been immensely greater. But he was even forbidden to make small withdrawals to stronger positions south of the Po.**

**The commander of *Tenth Army* (General Traugott Herr) had prepared a plan for a 'false-front' manoeuvre: he wanted to fall back, under the cover of a heavy artillery barrage, from the **Senio** to the much stronger line of the **Santerno** the day before he estimated **Eighth Army** would renew its offensive. Such a plan would have nullified **Eighth Army's** elaborate scheme of air and artillery support for an attack on the **Senio** line; the ground yielded by *Tenth Army* would have had negligible strategic value, and **Eighth Army** would have been obliged to attack the main German defences farther west without the same preparation.**

**Herr pleaded for the adoption of this plan with Vietinghoff, who told him, 'I quite agree with your appreciation of the situation. I am absolutely of your opinion, but I have to tell you that it just won't do. It has been forbidden.'** <sup>3</sup> This provoked the commander

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<sup>1</sup> *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy*, Part IV, Sec. G, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

of *76 Panzer Corps* (General Gerhard Graf von Schwerin) to ask Herr how long was the Fuehrer to be allowed to 'interfere in tactical situations of which he knew nothing.' <sup>1</sup>

The commander of *29 Panzer Grenadier Division* (General Polack) shared his superiors' views on the use of the *Senio* as the winter line. After the defeat of the German armies he told a New Zealand interviewer that it might have been better to have withdrawn to the *Santerno*, 'but strict orders came from the High Command "Stay! Stay! Halt!" "Defend every metre." Once it was seen that we could hold at the River *Senio* then orders came from above to do so.... We had instructions to build up lines behind the front "just in case". That is all right if sufficient troops are available. If troops and supplies are short the situation then becomes dangerous; if one line is lost it is very difficult to get workshops etc back in time.... It was impossible to win the war therefore we should have withdrawn in greater bounds.' <sup>2</sup>

(ii)

The Allied commanders, on the other hand, appreciated that if the enemy chose the right time to disengage on the *Senio* front, he might catch *Eighth Army* at a disadvantage. It was important that *Eighth Army* should attack before the enemy succeeded in disengaging, but the preparations for meeting such an eventuality were complicated by the reduction of *Eighth Army's* fighting power by the removal of the Canadian Corps from the Italian theatre at the end of February. It would take time for the remaining corps and divisions to regroup to fill the gap left by the Canadians. Moreover, while the divisions which were to take part in the offensive were resting and training, sections of the front were held by comparatively weak Italian combat groups. <sup>3</sup>

*Eighth Army*, therefore, planned so that a proportion of its forces was always ready to turn to the offensive at fairly short notice, and

regrouped in a way that did not interfere with the plan. General McCreery ordered the **Polish Corps** to take command of the left sector and relieve **5 Corps** as far north as Route 9. If the enemy began to withdraw in February, **5 Corps** was to attack in its sector north of Route 9 and the Canadian Corps was to attack on its right; they were to be assisted by a feint by the **Polish Corps** on the left.

It was anticipated that, as a prelude to a withdrawal, the enemy would reduce to about two divisions his forces between Route 9

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Statement to an officer of Archives Section, **2 NZEF**, on 16 Aug 1945.

<sup>3</sup> The Cremona, Folgore, Friuli and Legnano Combat Groups were raised by the Italian Government to fight on the side of the Allies.

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and the **Russi- Lugo** railway, where the main thrust was to be made. The **5 Corps'** plan of attack provided in the first phase for the capture of a bridgehead across the **Senio** in the northern part of the sector, between **Cotignola** and **Solarolo**, by 56 Division and the New Zealand Division; in the second phase, the capture of a bridgehead over the **Santerno** by the New Zealand Division and if possible also by 56 Division; in the third phase, an advance northwards through the bridgehead over the **Santerno** by 5 and 78 British Divisions, which it was intended should augment **5 Corps**.

The **3rd Carpathian Division** transferred from the **Polish Corps** to **5 Corps** on 5 February, and in the next few days relieved **10 Indian Division** south of Route 9; the Friuli Combat Group replaced **5 Kresowa Division** farther to the left. The 38th Irish Brigade of 78 Division arrived from 13 Corps to take over the role of **5 Corps'** reserve from 43 Gurkha Brigade, which passed to 56 Division's command. The first stage of

**Eighth Army's** regrouping was completed on the 13th when Headquarters **2 Polish Corps** took command of the sector occupied by the Carpathian Division and the Friuli Group (south-westward from a point on the **Senio** 300 yards above the Route 9 bridge site). Fifth Corps' sector (from the point near Route 9 to the **Russi- Lugo** railway) was then held by 56 Division on the right and the New Zealand Division on the left, with the Irish Brigade in immediate reserve.

The next phase of the regrouping was the relief of the Canadians, which was delayed while **8 Indian Division** was brought from Fifth Army. Fifth Corps took command on 16 February of the Canadians' sector from the **Russi- Lugo** railway to the Adriatic coast at the south-eastern tip of Lake Comacchio. The Cremona Combat Group, next to the coast, passed directly under **5 Corps'** command, and on the 25th **8 Indian Division** completed the replacement of 1 Canadian Infantry Division.

The 5th Canadian Armoured Division had been withdrawn in mid-January, and with the departure of the infantry division the Canadians completed 20 months' service with **Eighth Army** in **Sicily** and **Italy**.<sup>1</sup> They were denied a share in the final victory in **Italy**, after having fought in the costly battles of **Ortona**, the **Liri** valley, the **Gothic Line** and the **Romagna**, but left a theatre recognised as secondary in importance to North-West Europe, where 1 and 2 Canadian Corps were reunited in First Canadian Army for the march on **Berlin**.

The transfer of **1 Canadian Corps** to **France** was not the only reduction of the Allied forces in **Italy**: two fighter groups of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Canadians in Italy*, p. 681, gives their casualties: of 92,757 who served in the Italian theatre, 5,764 died, 19,486 were wounded and 1004 taken prisoner, a total of 26,254.

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Twelfth US Air Force were also ordered to **France**. These losses, however, were compensated by the steady weakening of the enemy. When winter brought the Italian campaign temporarily to a standstill,

the Russian front claimed any division which could be spared from **Italy**. Three <sup>1</sup> were despatched.

The enemy's difficulties were multiplied early in March when the American 10 Mountain Division, which had recently joined **Fifth Army**, attacked Monte Belvedere, south-west of **Bologna**, and in three days captured this key position with a thousand German prisoners. By the end of the month the German reserve in **Italy** had been reduced to two divisions, and with few exceptions the divisions in the line were unrested; Hitler's orders to 'defend every metre' had prohibited their withdrawal to positions where they could more hopefully oppose 'the inevitable offensive of two well rested Allied Armies, superior in equipment and morale, and almost every other respect.' <sup>2</sup>

*(iii)*

In mid-February, however, the enemy was still in undisputed possession of the **Senio** stopbanks, from which no attempt had been made to dislodge him since 25 NZ Battalion's minor abortive assault at the end of January. After **5 Corps'** move farther to the right into the **Romagna** plain, control of the near stopbank—a prerequisite of the crossing of the **Senio**—was preferred about the centre of the front rather than on the comparatively unimportant sector held by the New Zealand Division on the left. An attack, therefore, was begun in the evening of 23 February by 56 Division (raised from two to three brigades by the inclusion of 43 Gurkha Brigade), with substantial help from the air force.

The Gurkhas gained most of their objective and beat off several counter-attacks between the **Lugo- Russi** railway and **Cotignola**, and also made contact with 167 Brigade south of this small town. The 1st London Irish reached the top of the stopbank at several places but failed to clear the Germans from a weir north-east of San **Severo**, while on the left 1 **London Scottish** did not reach the objective. On 3 March 2/7 Queens of 169 Brigade, using flame-throwers and supported by 40 fighter-bombers, drove the enemy from the stopbank in the locality of

the weir. Although the enemy still held the bank at **Cotignola** and other isolated points, 56 Division now dominated it at several places.

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<sup>1</sup> *16 SS Pz Gren Div, 356 Inf Div and 715 Inf Div.*

<sup>2</sup> *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy, Part III, Sec. C, p. 159.*

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Meanwhile the Italian Cremona Combat Group, <sup>1</sup> together with the partisans of 28 Garibaldi Brigade and the tanks of the North Irish Horse, supported by British artillery and fighter-bombers, attacked the German positions guarding the spit of land between the east shore of Lake Comacchio and the Adriatic coast, with the object of securing a hold on the narrow tongue a few hundred yards wide between the River Reno and the sea. The enemy, who was carrying out a relief at the time, was taken by surprise. Over 200 Germans and Turcomen were captured. The ground was to form the base for an advance on the rest of the Comacchio spit.

In the first week of March, when the attacks by 56 Division and the Cremona Group ended, **Eighth Army** completed its regrouping. Since the departure of **1 Canadian Corps**, **5 Corps** had been responsible for a front of over 30 miles, and within its sector were the three major routes forward: Route 16 on the right, the road through **Lugo** and **Massa Lombarda** in the centre of the **Romagna** plain, and Route 9 on the left. The final stage of **Eighth Army's** plan was to concentrate **5 Corps** opposite the northern and central roads, and to bring **2 Polish Corps** on to Route 9.

The Kresowa Division assumed command of the front along the **Senio** as far downstream as a point just south of **San Severo**, and thus relieved the New Zealand Division and the troops of 56 Division south of the new boundary between **5 Corps** and the **Polish Corps**. By 8 March the New Zealand Division was in **Eighth Army** reserve.

<sup>1</sup> **The Cremona Combat Group, equipped by [Britain](#), comprised two regiments, each of three infantry battalions, and four batteries of field artillery.**

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## IV: THE DIVISION GETS READY

### *IV: The Division Gets Ready*

(i)

**General Freyberg** announced a revised policy at the conference on 2 February. The Division was to patrol and lift mines on its front, but was not to occupy permanent positions forward of those already held; where possible it was to keep standing patrols on the **Senio** stopbank during the hours of darkness. A river-crossing between **Cotignola** and **Felisio** by one brigade group of 56 Division on the right and two brigades of the New Zealand Division on the left was being considered. It was expected that 10 days' notice would be given before any such attack.

Meanwhile the brigades were to practise river-crossing with assault boats and kapok bridging under conditions which resembled as closely as possibly the part of the **Senio** where the attack was to be made. The time taken in these practice assault crossings would assist in drawing up the supporting artillery programme for the actual operation.

Except for one day (the 9th) of steady rain, February was fine; occasional thick mists, especially along the river, limited visibility to no more than a few yards, but usually dispersed before midday. The continuation of the thaw early in the month made the ground soft and muddy. The roads were almost unusable until they began to dry out; later they became dusty.



advanced as to the purpose of the gap: it was to flood the low-lying land when the river rose with the spring thaw; it was to be an aperture through which a self-propelled gun was to fire; it was intended to be a bridge site. <sup>1</sup>

The rain on 9 February occupied the enemy's attention for 24 hours. Observers reported that the river had risen until it was from eight to ten feet from the top of the stopbank—with no apparent effect at the breach on 26 Battalion's front. The noise of hammering and chopping indicated that the enemy had found it necessary to strengthen some of his bridges; and in at least one locality German slit-trench dwellers spent most of the night baling water.

After concentrated machine-gun fire and a bazooka bombardment, an enemy party believed to be at least a dozen strong, unobserved in the fog before dawn, approached an outpost which 23 Battalion had occupied on the stopbank about 200 yards north of the railway. The New Zealanders claimed that they inflicted several casualties on the enemy with grenades, but had to withdraw when more Germans arrived. The enemy prevented a patrol from reoccupying the outpost in the evening and engaged later patrols with tank and mortar fire. One patrol was ambushed and had to fight its way out with two men wounded.

The enemy swept 21 Battalion's front with machine-gun, mortar and shell fire for three minutes and then engaged platoon and out-

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<sup>1</sup> According to a divisional Intelligence summary the purpose was to flood the New Zealanders' side of the river. Other gaps had been made some time earlier, it was believed for the same reason.

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post buildings with self-propelled guns, which scored direct hits on four houses. Two buildings collapsed, but the men, who sheltered in covered dugouts, were extricated later. During the harassing fire a German six-man patrol approached an outpost at Palazzo Laghi under

the cover of smoke, but withdrew when engaged by infantry weapons and mortars.

Three deserters who came into the lines of 56 Division (on the New Zealanders' right) on the night of 19–20 February were from *26 Panzer Division*, which apparently had replaced *278 Division* the previous night. The *26 Panzer* had withdrawn from **Faenza** after the New Zealand attack on 15 December and had been resting and rehabilitating north-west of Lake Comacchio. Five deserters, all from the same company of 9 *Panzer Grenadier Regiment* of this division, gave themselves up to 26 Battalion during the next two nights; they said others of their company would do the same were it not for the danger of the minefields. Of the five, one was a young Soviet national of German stock who had fought with three different armies—the Russian, the German, and the Italian partisans; he had been caught up in the *Wehrmacht* again after being wounded with the partisans. Of the other deserters, one was a Reich German and three were Poles.

Deserters also came from *4 Parachute Division*, which was astride Route 9 between *90 Panzer Grenadier Division* on its right and *26 Panzer Division* on its left. Of the 73 enemy who passed through 5 **Corps'** prisoner-of-war cage between 26 January and 25 February, 51 were deserters; more than half of these were Poles, Alsations and Yugoslavs who were unwilling to go on fighting for the Germans. The fear of reprisal against the deserter's family ceased to be a deterrent when **Poland** and Silesia were 'liberated' by the Russians.

The German's traditional upbringing had taught him that desertion was dishonourable, but many who realised that the war had been lost but was being continued for the sake of the Nazi leaders were anxious to save their own lives. Only a fanatical minority had any hope of an outright German military victory, but propaganda had sustained in others the vain hope that if they stuck it out long enough a satisfactory compromise could be achieved. After the defeat of the German counter-offensive in the west and the failure to stop the Russian drive in the east, German prisoners admitted that morale had slumped badly and

many were waiting for a chance to desert. Nevertheless, throughout the German divisions a hard core of tough and experienced men was still prepared to fight to the end.

*(ii)*

February in the Division's sector followed much the same pattern as January. The artillery did very little shooting because of the stringent restriction on the expenditure of ammunition; there was little or no activity among the guns during the daylight hours and usually only light harassing fire at night. They engaged self-propelled guns, mortars, machine guns, buildings and dugouts, vehicles, patrols and working parties. The lack of ammunition prevented the M10s, 17-pounders and 4.2-inch mortars from attempting all the tasks requested by the infantry. The tanks <sup>1</sup> were called upon to shell enemy positions and other targets. When some fired along the stopbank north of **Palazzo Laghi**, the infantry saw the shells penetrate the bank in three places and explode on houses 200 yards beyond it.

The 'Chinese attacks' were repeated, usually for a quarter of an hour at a time, to test the enemy's reaction. In the evening of 3 February the heavy mortars smoked an area across the river north of **Palazzo Laghi** and **5 Field Regiment**, **19 Armoured Regiment**, the mortars and the **Maori Battalion's** infantry weapons brought down fire on selected targets and suspected positions on the stop-bank and across the river. The enemy retaliated with heavy shell, mortar and machine-gun fire. His reaction to a similar 'Chinese attack' by 26 Battalion four evenings later was described as violent: he fired flares and harassed the front with machine guns and mortars, and employed heavy mortars and medium guns in well-placed defensive shoots on crossroads and open approaches to the stopbank. A demonstration by the artillery, tanks, M10s, mortars and **Maori Battalion's** weapons before dawn on the 19th, however, produced only harassing fire from mortars and small arms.

Sixth Brigade staged a 'Chinese attack' in the evening of the 23rd to

assist 56 Division's attack north of the New Zealand sector. This provoked the enemy to put up flares and bring down artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire for about an hour. Fifth Brigade mounted probably the most spectacular demonstration of all on the evening of 2 March with fire from the artillery, tanks, mortars and 23 and 28 Battalions' weapons. Again the enemy replied with shell, mortar and machine-gun fire, much of it directed on the roads.

Usually the German harassing fire was light, but occasionally concentrations caused casualties. The German self-propelled guns on the roads beyond the river, especially in the vicinity of **Felisio**, continued to be troublesome. A very thorough programme was

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<sup>1</sup> 18 Regt replaced 20 Regt in 6 Brigade's sector; 19 Regt remained with 5 Bde.

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organised so as to concentrate fire, including air-burst by anti-aircraft guns, on each self-propelled gun as soon as it went into action, usually with the result that it moved away quickly after firing only a few shots.

Shells containing propaganda leaflets were fired by both sides. Some which landed among 21 Battalion described methods of producing symptoms of diseases and claimed that it was 'better a few days ill than all your life dead'. Propaganda was also broadcast by loudspeakers, including invitations to the enemy to desert. Among those who did were Poles who subsequently found themselves back in the line with the **Polish Corps**. A news commentary in German and two musical recordings ('J'Attendrai' and 'Vienna Blues') were broadcast from the church at **Pieve del Ponte**. The enemy appeared to listen attentively and was noticeably less active until the programme ended.

*(iii)*

On the **Lamone** north of Route 9 the battalions of 5 Brigade

practised river-crossing with assault boats and kapok bridging; Wasps and Crocodiles demonstrated flame-throwing against the defences on the far bank; the engineers experimented in bridging the river between high stopbanks in which gaps were cut by explosives and bulldozers so that they could be negotiated by tanks and other vehicles.

On 3 March, a brilliantly sunny day, the Division demonstrated its river-crossing and bridge-building techniques to a very large number of spectators, including visitors from Corps and other divisions, who were addressed by the GOC. There were, he said, two ways of forcing a canalised river where the enemy held both banks: to attempt to take both banks in 'one bite' under a heavy bombardment, or alternatively to 'take two bites' by first securing the near stopbank and then the other by going through far enough to allow the bridging of the river for the supporting arms. The second method was preferred 'because you cannot get surprise in the fullest sense by doing one attack. If you make only one attack then heavy equipment has to be assembled at least 400 yards back from the near stopbank and it must take about ten minutes to get all this forward, and by that time the enemy will have had ample opportunity to hold the far bank in strength.'<sup>1</sup>

The General announced that the Division was going out of the line for a month's training for the next battle. If the enemy still was on the near stopbank when the Division returned to the line, he

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

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was to be pushed off 10 days before the attack.<sup>1</sup> The Division was to attack on a two-brigade front, and each brigade was to have a two-battalion front. The frontage of the battalion depended on the strength of the enemy positions; the policy was to attack with two and a half times the number of men the enemy had.

The General emphasised the importance of timing and surprise. On the night of the attack, without any warning at all, the infantry was to

go over the near stopbank as quickly as possible. At that stage there was to be no artillery fire. 'From experience we know that you cannot get infantry across to the far bank under a minute and we are arranging that the first wave will go over the near stopbank and down into the river before the guns fire. The shells will be timed to arrive on targets ... [beyond the far stopbank] two minutes after zero hour, which means that the gun flashes will be visible one minute ten seconds after the infantry advance.'<sup>2</sup> After crossing the river in assault boats or by kapok bridges the infantry were to go straight through the minefield on the far stopbank and mop up the enemy from the rear. Because the assaulting infantry would be lightly equipped, the supporting arms were to be across the bridges built by the engineers by 5 a.m.

When the infantry had advanced beyond the first river and the tanks and supporting arms had arrived, the Division was to push the enemy off the near bank of the next river and bring up a fresh formation with tanks, supporting arms and equipment for an assault crossing and bridges over that river.

Before 21 Battalion began a demonstration of an assault crossing, the CO (Lieutenant-Colonel McPhail) described the method of attack, which was to be divided into two phases. The two companies making the assault crossing were to be supported if necessary by fire from the other two companies already in position on the near stopbank. Each assault company was to cross with two platoons by boat (four boats for each platoon were to be tethered to both sides of the river) and the third by a kapok bridge. These two companies were to occupy the far stopbank and throw a light screen forward 60 yards.

In the second phase the covering companies were to pass through the assault companies, form up behind the artillery barrage and continue the advance when it lifted. 'The essence of surprise will be the main factor in the success of the initial attack, the first 10 seconds being the most important, as in that time, all assault

<sup>1</sup> It was not possible to clear the enemy from the near stopbank of the **Senio** as long as 10 days before the attack.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's papers.

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parties should be below the vision of the dug-in enemy. It is  
NOT

expected that the covering companies will be called upon to fire as the assault companies should be on top of the enemy in one and a half minutes.' <sup>1</sup>

In the demonstration the two assault companies of 21 Battalion crossed the **Lamone** from stopbank to stopbank in 75 seconds, and the battalion was completely across in four and a half minutes.

Before the engineers began their bridging demonstrations, the CRE (Colonel Hanson) said there seemed to be no alternative to the orthodox Bailey bridge for the type of river they had to cross. Frequently there was not sufficient space between the stopbank and the natural river bank to build and launch a high-level bridge. Along the greater part of the **Senio** it would be necessary to completely gap the stopbank and make enough space in which to build the bridge. A large amount of spoil had to be removed, and explosives had to be used to do this quickly. The bulldozers would then come forward and clean up the gap, and at the same time the bridging vehicles could move up and be unloaded, and the bridge would be pushed ahead. The whole operation of gapping the near stopbank, launching the bridge on rollers and making a road over the far stopbank would take six to eight hours. The clearing of mines beyond the river would go on simultaneously with the building of the bridge. A site had been selected to build a high-level bridge on the **Lamone** resembling many sites which occurred on the **Senio**.

Colonel Hanson also described the method which had been devised for crossing the river by a low-level bridge: this was erected at the

bottom of the steep river banks, which then were blown and bulldozed to give a graded approach and an exit which could be negotiated at first by tanks and probably later by wheeled vehicles. This type of bridge would be completed in half the time required for the high-level bridge and seemed to offer the best solution to the problem of getting the tanks up to support the infantry; but at the same time the high-level bridges should be pushed ahead to provide crossings safe from floods and to allow the rapid and free flow of brigade and divisional transport. One field company could quite well build both a high-level and a low-level bridge and clear the routes beyond the river. In a divisional attack on a two-brigade front, two high-level and two low-level bridges would be a reasonable plan.

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

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In the demonstrations that followed 8 Field Company built a 100-foot double-single <sup>1</sup> high-level bridge through a gap blown and bulldozed in the 22-foot stopbank in six hours 20 minutes. The 6th Field Company built a 50-foot single-single low-level bridge on the site, using a bay of folding-boat equipment as a floating building platform, and finished in just under two hours. The banks were blown at both ends of the bridge, the approaches bulldozed, and tanks and supporting weapons crossed over just under four hours from the time of the infantry assault. The construction of the other low-level bridge took longer than was intended. The 7th Field Company assembled this 60-foot single-single bridge one bay at a time and launched it out on a pier constructed on a floating bay section of folding-boat equipment. The jamming of a roller caused the pier to tip during the launching, which swamped one of the boats. It took five and a quarter hours to complete the work, including the blowing and bulldozing of the approaches through the stopbanks, but it was estimated that, without hold-ups, the bridge should have been open for traffic in about three and a half hours.

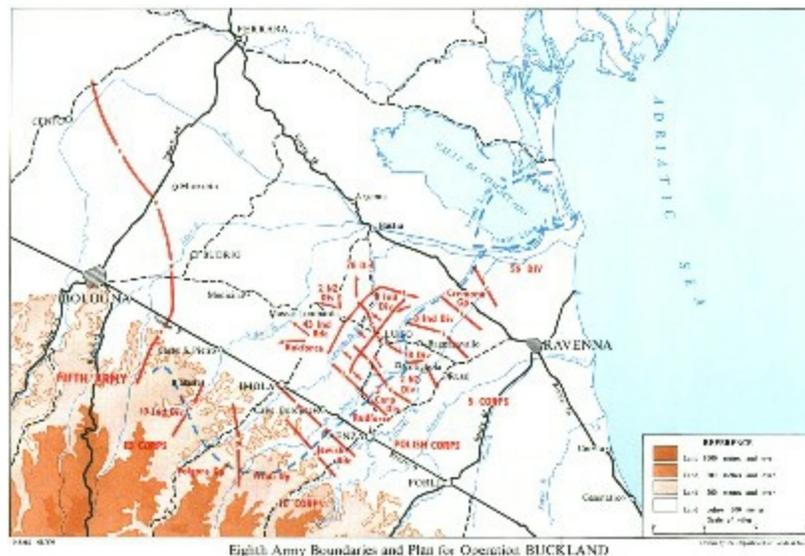
Unfortunately these demonstrations did not persuade the visiting

engineer officers to adopt the methods developed by Colonel Hanson and his officers. During the crossing of the **Senio** and subsequent advance the flanking divisions therefore often used the bridges built by the New Zealanders.

(iv)

The Division underwent some fundamental changes in its composition and organisation in February. Long-service men were withdrawn to return to New Zealand with the Tongariro draft, and were replaced by men who had served with 3 NZ Division in the **Pacific** and by other reinforcements. The infantry strength of the Division was increased by the formation of **9 Infantry Brigade**.<sup>2</sup>

The Government had decided in September 1944 to substitute a replacement scheme for the furlough scheme, and had announced that the Division was to remain overseas until the conclusion of



**Eighth Army Boundaries and Plan for Operation BUCKLAND**

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<sup>1</sup> In *New Zealand Engineers, Middle East*, p. 495, J. F. Cody defines the terms used in this type of bridge construction: ‘The panel is the basic member of a Bailey bridge and might be likened to a heavy steel farm gate 10 ft by 5 ft 1 in., strengthened by diagonal bracing. Panels are easily connected to

form a continuous girder in multiples of ten feet. The strength of the girder may be increased by bolting together up to three connected panels side by side (known as trusses) and two panels on top of the trusses (known as storeys). The “truss” and “storey” is generally omitted in description, so that a “single single” is the lightest combination possible and a “triple triple” the heaviest .... The span lengths and strengths for a Class 30, or Sherman tank, bridge range from 50 feet of single-single to 200 feet of triple-triple.’

<sup>2</sup> A 7 Inf Bde had been formed while the **Second Echelon of 2 NZEF** was in the United Kingdom in 1940. The two infantry brigades of **3 NZ Div** in the **Pacific** were 8 and 14.

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the Italian campaign—after which its future employment was to be reviewed. Men who had served overseas three years or longer were to be replaced. **General Freyberg** had discussed the scheme with Mr Fraser during the latter's visit to the Division in June 1944. A programme had been submitted to the Government in October, based on the estimated time of arrival in **Italy** and the numbers available for the 12th, 13th, 14th, 15th and 16th Reinforcements. Adherence to this programme, it was anticipated, would enable a completely reorganised division to take the field in April 1945 and all long-service men up to and including the 7th Reinforcements (a total of about 9900) to be released.

Because of the manpower demands in New Zealand, however, the provision of the replacement drafts had to be restricted, which meant that the relief of the **7th Reinforcements** had to be postponed; but the Division was still able to complete the major part of the reorganisation. The policy of replacement had been announced to all ranks of **2 NZEF** on 25 October: the relief of long-service men would depend on the arrival of replacements in **Italy**, and the first of these were expected in December or early January. The first draft to be released was to comprise other ranks of the first three contingents who had returned from New Zealand after furlough, other ranks of the **5th Reinforcements**, other ranks who had come to the **Middle East** after serving in **Fiji**, and a

proportion of the officers and NCOs of these categories who could be spared.

At the end of October a cable from **Wellington** had warned that, because of the difficulty in arranging shipping, the departure of the **14th Reinforcements** would be delayed, and three weeks later it was confirmed that the draft would not leave New Zealand before the beginning of January, which meant a postponement of nearly two months. Later the expected times of departure of the 15th and 16th Reinforcements had been postponed by two or three months (to mid-April and mid-July respectively) from the dates given in October. Despite these delays it had been decided that the Division should release the Tongariro draft of long-service men as soon as the **13th Reinforcements** were available in **Italy**, because it was felt that any further delay would have an adverse effect on morale.

Censorship reports revealed much unfavourable comment about the replacement scheme in soldiers' letters home. The Government's inability to find replacements quickly in New Zealand was criticised: 'We are sick and tired of waiting.' 'It is about time they started doing something more than talk about replacing the three year men.' 'It appears Peter Fraser's Replacement Scheme is just so much hot air.'

The **13th Reinforcements** (about 2100 men) arrived in **Egypt** on 5 November, and the 14th (3675, including 2115 from 3 NZ Division) on 29 January. The Tongariro draft (about 5700) embarked at **Suez** for New Zealand on 19 March. In six months, therefore, 9700 men departed for New Zealand (about 4000 in the Taupo furlough draft had left in September), and about 5900 arrived in the 13th and **14th Reinforcements**, which represented a net loss to **2 NZEF** of nearly 4000.

The diversion of reserve divisions from **Italy** to **Greece** had prevented the release of the New Zealand Division from an operational role as early as had been expected, but **Eighth Army's** regrouping made it possible to withdraw the Division in March to rest and train. If the Division had been required to fight in February after the departure of the Tongariro

men, it would have taken the field about 1500 below strength and with no pool of reinforcements, but with some 3000 reinforcements training in **Egypt**. By the end of March, however, the Division was expected to be up to full strength again, with a reinforcement pool of 1500 (less any losses it might suffer before then). When the 15th Reinforcements (3500 due in May) arrived, the **6th Reinforcements** (1400) would be released for return to New Zealand, which would be a gain of 2100, and it was anticipated that the 16th Reinforcements would merely replace the 7ths without altering the position. Should the war in **Europe** continue as long as that, heavy casualties or losses from sickness possibly could render the Division inoperative.

(v)

The first step towards reorganising the Division to meet the demands of the Italian campaign had been the increasing of its infantry component in November 1944 by enlarging both 5 and 6 Brigades from three to four battalions. The next step towards relieving the strain on the front-line infantry was the formation of a third infantry brigade by incorporating 22 Battalion, Divisional Cavalry and 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion as infantry battalions in **9 Infantry Brigade**, the headquarters of which became a unit of **2 NZEF** on 20 January 1945. The 22nd and Divisional Cavalry Battalions had been converted to infantry in November and employed with 5 and 6 Brigades; 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion became 27 Battalion on 10 February.

The conversion of machine-gunners into riflemen was deplored by veterans of the battalion, some of whom contended that it would not have happened if the Vickers medium machine gun's capabilities of concentrated, indirect, overhead and enfilade fire had been fully appreciated, and if it had been used more often to the best advantage. Whatever the merits of this argument, it could not be denied that the Division needed more infantrymen for an offensive in northern **Italy**. The Vickers gun—which was to survive two world wars—was to be retained among the weapons of the Division's nine infantry battalions: a

medium machine-gun platoon equipped with four Vickers guns became part of the headquarters company of each battalion. <sup>1</sup>

The organisation and equipping of Headquarters 9 Brigade began at **Forli** on 20 January; 27 Battalion, Divisional Cavalry Battalion and 22 Battalion joined the new formation in the next fortnight, and Brigadier Gentry <sup>2</sup> assumed command on 10 February. The brigade assembled in the **Fabriano** region, inland from **Ancona**. The departure of the Tongariro men left many gaps, especially among the senior NCOs; officers were retained until replacements arrived. By the end of February 30 officers and 40 NCOs from 3 NZ Division had been absorbed, and large groups of reinforcements had arrived, but the brigade still was not up to full strength.

(vi)

At a commanders' conference at **Divisional Headquarters** at **Matelica** on 4 March the GOC announced that the Division was to plan for being out of the line for a month, but was to be prepared to return earlier if necessary. When it returned to the line, it was to push the enemy off the near stopbank. 'To do this we shall withdraw a bit—hammer the bank with bombardment—and then get on it, dig in, secure lateral contact and make absolutely sure that no Boche get across the river. Then after ten days we shall do a full-scale attack on a 4,000 to 5,000-yard front and exploit to the next river with a view to jumping that too. I think he will go back during the next attack and we want to be able to go over water obstacles ourselves, relying on our own resources and without outside help, right to the Po.' <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The revised war establishment for an infantry battalion, as from 4 February 1945, provided for battalion headquarters, headquarters company (comprising company headquarters, 1 Signal Platoon, 2 Medium Machine Gun Platoon, 3 Mortar Platoon, 4 Carrier Platoon, 5 Anti-Tank Platoon, 6 Administrative Platoon) and four rifle companies (each of company headquarters and three platoons of three sections). The

total strength was 32 officers and 744 other ranks (plus one medical officer, one man from NZOC and four from NZEME attached).

<sup>2</sup> Maj-Gen Sir William Gentry, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), 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 1940–41; GSO I May 1941, Oct 1941–Sep 1942; comd 6 Bde Sep 1942–Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of General Staff 1943–44; comd NZ Troops in **Egypt**, Aug 1944–Feb 1945; 9 Bde ( **Italy**) 1945; Deputy Chief of General Staff, 1946–47; Adjutant-General, 1949–52; Chief of General Staff, 1952–55.

<sup>3</sup> GOC's papers.

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The programme of rest and training while out of the line was planned to bring the Division to the peak of readiness for battle. After four or five days for rest and cleaning-up, there was to be a period of physical training, including ‘at least three good solid marches’, and ceremonial parades. The GOC wanted the training to embrace the ‘complete **Alamein** technique’—mine-lifting and all the other requirements of a set-piece attack under a barrage— ‘so that everybody knows how to do these attacks the way we do them and we can be completely confident that everyone understands.’ <sup>1</sup>

The relief of the New Zealand Division by **5 Kresowa Division** began on 4 March and was completed on the 6th, when command of the sector passed to the Polish division. Except for 4 Armoured Brigade, which went only as far as the **Cesenatico** area, north of **Rimini**, the New Zealanders made their way south to the more peaceful and pleasant surroundings of the **Fabriano** region on the Adriatic side of the central **Apennines**. The Division's casualties since returning to the line in November were 194 killed, 804 wounded and 18 prisoners, a total of 1016.

At **Cesenatico**, ‘not far from those horrible **Romagna** battle fields’,

the men were billeted in houses that were 'draughty shells of their former comfort.... The beach was ruined by barbed wire and little forts and rows of ugly concrete "dragons' teeth". There were mines everywhere, even in the water. There was a busy airfield almost next door, which seemed to spawn planes by the dozen all day and most of the night....

'Keeness and morale had to be dragged up little by little out of their winter depths. The baleful **Senio** had cast a general listlessness over the war-tired Division....'<sup>2</sup> As the weather improved, however, 'morale began to flicker again. A series of warm summery days helped enormously. The afternoons were given over to sports, the flat ground around **Cesenatico** sprouted goalposts....' Enthusiasm for work grew more gradually; by the end of March 'even the tanks were once more regarded with affection....

'But the most effective step towards restoring the old spirit was one which, at the time, vexed the boys most. Beyond doubt formal discipline had grown pretty slack, attire round the camps had become startlingly informal, parade smartness had gone out of fashion. Now an organised effort was made to straighten up the whole of 4 Brigade.... There was a good deal of drill, and hours of practice for big parades for Colonel Campbell of 4 Brigade and **General Freyberg**, both late in March.... The second parade was a marathon which lasted a good four hours and left everyone

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, pp. 609–10.

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jaded; but **General Freyberg** was heard to murmur approval again and again, and everyone felt a little proud of himself, though nobody would have admitted it.'<sup>1</sup>

Fifth and 6th Infantry Brigades trained in assault tactics, such as mine-lifting, tank-hunting, tank and infantry co-operation (with the

assistance of tanks from **20 Armoured Regiment**), and also did route-marching and river-crossing exercises. Brigadier Gentry published a special order on 12 February in which he welcomed 'the three well-trying, veteran units' which formed **9 Infantry Brigade**. 'We have NO time to lose for in the few weeks available for us to complete our reorganisation and to train, we have to learn to work as a Bde team and to become technically and tactically fit to take our place with the Division in any type of operation. The best of luck to all of you.'

From individual and section training the units of 9 Brigade progressed to platoon and company training and then to battalion exercises, which included tank-infantry co-operation (with tanks from 20 Regiment) and fighting in built-up areas; they were instructed in kapok bridging, the use of Bangalore torpedoes, Wasp flame-throwers, and so on. The brigade practised a silent night attack and a battalion relief in pitch darkness, which gave the battalions and headquarters staff experience in working together.

On 24 March the divisional artillery demonstrated for 9 Brigade stonks and murders by the 25-pounders, and anti-tank fire by 17-pounders against a German Panther. At night two field regiments, exercising great care because many of the infantrymen had no previous experience of advancing under a barrage, fired a separate barrage for each of the three battalions moving at a rate of 100 yards in three minutes. **General Freyberg** and Mr W. J. Jordan (the High Commissioner for New Zealand in the **United Kingdom**, who was visiting the Division) were among those who watched the exercises.

The first of the ceremonial parades was 9 Brigade's, which took place near **Fabriano** on 10 March. The GOC expressed his appreciation in a special order of the day: 'It fills me with great confidence in Allied strength that in the sixth year of war such magnificent units as **2 NZ Div Cav Bn**, **22 NZ Inf Bn** and **27 NZ Inf Bn** should exist. A General requires inspiring as much as his men and I feel greatly inspired by the splendid bearing of all troops who took part in this parade.'

Sixth Brigade's parade at **San Severino** on 16 March 'was exceptionally good.'<sup>2</sup> At a parade of nearly 2000 officers and men of the NZASC units near **Fabriano** on the 19th, **Major-General**

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, pp. 610–11.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

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**Kippenberger**,<sup>1</sup> who was visiting the Division for the first time since he had been wounded a year earlier, took the salute; he was also among those who attended the divisional artillery parade at Lanciano Barracks on the 22nd, and 5 Brigade's parade near Castelraimondo on the 24th. **General McCreery**, who inspected the troops and presented the honours and awards (which included the DSO, the MC, and the Bar to the MC to Lieutenant-Colonel W. B. Thomas) at 5 Brigade's parade, was 'obviously impressed'. The last ceremonial parade was 4 Armoured Brigade's at **Cesenatico**.

After a week with the Division **General Kippenberger** broadcast his impressions to New Zealand: '... It was a delight and to some extent a surprise to see the Division so obviously at the top of its form at the end of a long and hard campaign, after more than four years in the field and at a time when a great many old hands have left. I have seen several parades, finishing this morning with a parade by my own old [5] Brigade. The officer commanding this parade<sup>2</sup> joined the [20th] Battalion in September 1939 as a private. The Battalion commanders were subalterns in 1940. Very few other officers in the battalions were there when I left twelve months ago. This is the position throughout the Division which has really gone through a rejuvenating process. The commanders have the perfect combination of youth and experience. The junior leaders, although a good many have not seen much fighting, are obviously well trained and zealous, and the men appear to me as fit and hardy and keen as ever I have seen.

**‘... With the recent changes there are comparatively few people left who served with me and an Africa Star is a rarity and only among the senior officers are any who remember our early tribulations in **Greece** and **Crete**. I was once more impressed with the smoothness with which everything runs in the Division, and enjoyed things such as the perfect punctuality which is one of its characteristics....**

**‘I think the people in New Zealand and all those who in past times have served with the Division would be proud of the condition in which it obviously is at present. I have never seen it look better. If it has to play a part in the decisive victory that now appears to be close ahead, I am sure it will be an outstanding part. I will leave with very great regret.’**

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**<sup>1</sup> Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); 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; comd 2 NZEF Prisoner-of-War Reception Group ( **UK**) Oct 1944–Sep 1945; twice wounded; Editor-in Chief, NZ War Histories, 1946–57; died **Wellington**, 5 May 1957.**

**<sup>2</sup> The parade was under the command of Lt-Col E. A. McPhail because **Brig I. L. Bonifant** was ill at the time.**

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

# CHAPTER 9 – THE SPRING OFFENSIVE

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## I: THE PLAN

### *I: The Plan*

(i)

AT the end of March 1945 **Fifteenth Army Group's** front ran across the Italian peninsula from just south of Massa on the Ligurian coast to Valli di Comacchio on the Adriatic. On the left **Fifth Army** (Lieutenant-General Truscott) held a zigzagging line across the northern **Apennines** to **Monte Grande**, about 10 miles south-east of **Bologna**; on the right **Eighth Army** (Lieutenant-General McCreery) continued the line south-eastwards from Monte Grande over the Sillaro and **Santerno** rivers and north-eastwards along the southern banks of the **Senio River** to the southern shore of Lake Comacchio and the Adriatic coast. This was the line on which the Allied winter offensive had been brought to a halt by bad weather, lack of ammunition, exhaustion, and the need for regrouping.

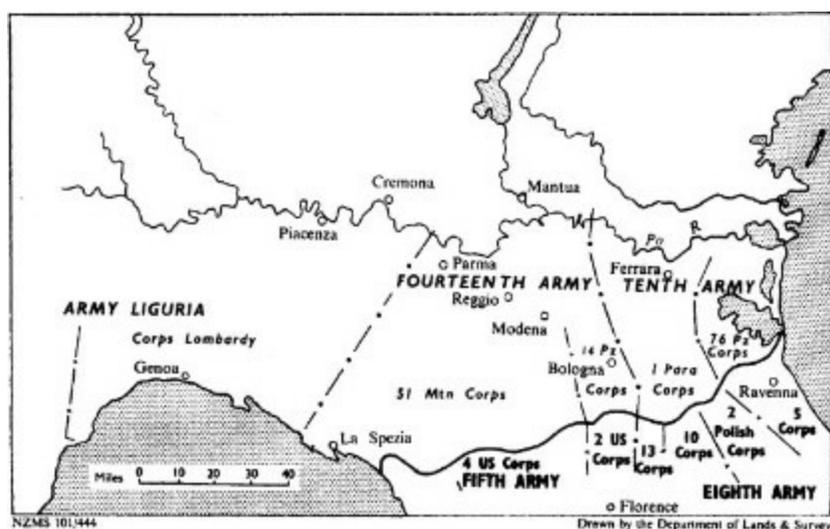
There had been little change on **Fifth Army's** front since the conclusion of the offensive. The enemy's sudden attack down the Serchio River valley in December had been blocked and the line restored. In February and early March the newly arrived 10 US Mountain Division, together with 1 Brazilian Division, had captured several heights and advanced a few miles to improved positions on each side of Route 64 (the **Bologna- Pistoia** highway). Thirteenth Corps had passed from **Fifth Army** to **Eighth Army** on 18 January, which left 1 Brazilian Infantry Division, 6 South African Armoured Division and 8 Indian Infantry Division as the only non-American formations, other than the Italian Legnano Combat Group, in **Fifth Army**.

In both **Fifth** and **Eighth Armies** the divisions rested, reinforced and replenished. The reorganisation in **Eighth Army** included the expansion of the New Zealand Division already described, and of 56 ( **London** )

Division and the two Polish divisions each from two to three infantry brigades, and the provision of flame-throwing tanks (Crocodiles), amphibious carrier-tanks (Fantails), infantry-carrying tanks (Kangaroos), and other types of new equipment.

Planning for the spring offensive was well advanced when the decision was taken to withdraw to western Europe 1 Canadian Corps and two groups of the Twelfth US Air Force, as well as three British divisions (1, 5 and 46 Infantry Divisions) from Greece and the Middle East. Eighth Army's loss, however, was compensated by a reduction in German strength to meet the demands of other fronts and by the transfer of 8 Indian Division from Fifth Army. <sup>1</sup>

Command of *Army Group C* passed on 11 March from Field Marshal Kesselring, who had been appointed Commander-in-Chief West, to General von Vietinghoff, who had at his disposal 21 German and four Italian divisions and various minor formations, against an Allied force of 17 divisions and four Italian combat groups plus six armoured and four infantry brigades. Opposing Fifth Army was the German *Fourteenth Army* (General von Senger) with 51 *Mountain Corps* on the west and 14 *Panzer Corps*



THE ITALIAN FRONT, 9 APRIL 1945

THE ITALIAN FRONT, 9 APRIL 1945

on the east; opposing Eighth Army was *Tenth Army* (General Herr)

with *1 Parachute Corps* on the west, *76 Panzer Corps* on the east, and *155 Infantry* and *29 Panzer Grenadier Divisions* in army reserve north of the River Po; in *Army Group* reserve south of the Po was *90 Panzer Grenadier Division*. Other German and fascist

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<sup>1</sup> See [Appendix VII](#) for order of battle of [Fifteenth Army Group](#) on 9 April 1945.

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formations were dispersed in northern [Italy](#) between the French and Yugoslav frontiers. The *Corps Lombardy*, on the coast of the Gulf of Genoa, and *75 Corps*, on the French frontier, formed the *Army Liguria*.

<sup>1</sup> Altogether Vietinghoff commanded 599,514 men (439,334 Germans, including approximately 45,000 anti-aircraft and police troops, and 160,180 Italians), of whom about 108,000 'of extremely doubtful value' <sup>2</sup> came under the supreme SS <sup>3</sup> and police command. They faced 616,642 men (including 70,468 Italians) in Fifth and Eighth Armies.

On [Eighth Army's](#) front it was calculated before the offensive began that the Allied infantry strength was 57,000 (of whom 10,500 were in the Italian and Jewish formations), and the enemy's was 29,600; the Allied forces had 1220 artillery pieces of all kinds and the enemy 665, and in armour (tanks, assault guns and self-propelled anti-tank guns) the enemy was outnumbered by 1327 to 400.

The enemy's position was weakened by his lack of air support, although he had strong anti-aircraft artillery, especially on the eastern flank. Aircraft of [22 Tactical Air Command](#) of the Twelfth US Air Force and the [Desert Air Force](#) almost continuously attacked his transport and lines of communication, including railways, roads, bridges and supply dumps, as far north as the [Brenner Pass](#) and the north-eastern corridor through the Julian Alps. The bridges over the River Po had been destroyed in the autumn of 1944, and pontoons and alternative methods of crossing were attacked repeatedly. Consequently the enemy became so short of motor vehicles and fuel that he was obliged to rely increasingly on horse and ox-drawn transport and on farm carts and

civilian cars. On the other hand the comparative inactivity of the winter months did not make heavy demands on his stocks of ammunition, food and clothing.

The enemy's difficulties of holding the broad territory of northern **Italy** were aggravated by the sabotage and harassing tactics of an estimated 50,000 organised partisans. 'Large sections of the Italian people had rebelled against their former ally,' says General von Senger. 'The route we used for the withdrawal [from the Gothic Line] ran for 100 kilometres across bleak and coverless pass roads into the plain of the Po, which we were unable to dominate. Raids were a daily occurrence, and it was difficult to capture the guerrillas, who roamed about the high mountains. Some were under Communist leadership, others under the British. At first one could distinguish the so-called patriots from the Communists. Thus it might

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<sup>1</sup> See **Appendix IX** for order of battle of *Army Group C* on 9 April 1945.

<sup>2</sup> *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy*, Part IV, Sec. G, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *SS: Schutzstaffel*, a Nazi political semi-military élite force.

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happen that our trucks would be intercepted by bourgeois partisans who respected their **Red Cross** markings; they would be allowed to proceed after being warned of a Red partisan ambush farther along the same road.

'The justifiable anger that was generated by these raids, especially when the situation was critical, and the fact that the perpetrators were not caught, led to reprisals by the German troops. But the guerrillas evaded these counter-measures, which unfortunately fell too often on innocent people, thus producing the opposite effect to that intended. Consequently the Germans were hated by more and more people....

**‘The development of the situation had robbed the Fascist-Republican Government of its last support from the Italian people. The government-sponsored Blackshirt Brigades were probably more loathed by the population than were the German occupying troops or the Allied liberators, or the guerrillas of whatever political colour. The compulsory co-operation with the Blackshirts, far from easing the task of the German armed forces, made it more difficult, for it meant that the Germans were put in the same category with the most hated section of the population...’<sup>1</sup>**

**In Bologna, says von Senger, ‘there had been serious excesses by the German troops.... little realising that in the end they are piling up trouble for themselves.’ The partisans ‘were the underworld and the gangsters who ruled the town. Before I took over the sector, they had made an armed raid on the leading hotel, firing indiscriminately on the guests in the hall, most of whom were German officers or Italian Republican Party adherents. Our own security service came to the conclusion that it would not be possible to arrest any large number of partisans in the town, since they could always go underground again....**

**‘In the Bologna area the partisans became especially dangerous through their close contact with the increasing number of German deserters from the colours. These gave the partisans first-hand information on conditions in the Wehrmacht, which was useful to them since they were working as spies for the Allies. We knew about this through occasionally catching some of these spies. Nor could we trust our own spies, who seemed to be moving about much too freely on the enemy's side, and were probably taking money from both sides.’<sup>2</sup>**

**(ii)**

**General Clark's plan for Fifteenth Army Group's spring offensive was similar to that which had been drawn up in December. The**

<sup>1</sup> *Neither Fear Nor Hope*, pp. 269–70.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 285–6.

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object was to form in the **Po valley** a bridgehead which would include **Bologna** and **Ferrara** to facilitate the regrouping and building-up of supplies before the continuation of the operations. If the situation permitted, however, there was to be no pause on this line.

The operations were to be conducted in four phases. In the first **Eighth Army** was to force a crossing of the **Senio River** and advance to the **Santerno River**. In the second it was to cross the **Santerno** and advance to the **Sillaro River**, and at the same time launch an amphibious operation on the right flank directed on **Argenta**, while **Fifth Army** was to undertake some preliminary operations west of Route 64. In the third phase **Eighth Army** was to direct its main effort to the capture of **Budrio** (north-east of **Bologna**) and at the same time develop a strong secondary thrust towards **Argenta** (the importance of these two thrusts might be reversed), while **Fifth Army** was to open its main offensive west of Route 65 (the **Florence- Bologna** highway) with **Bologna** as its objective, and was to make a secondary attack through the high ground west of Route 64 (the **Pistoia- Bologna- Ferrara** highway) to the north-west. In the fourth phase the two armies were to establish the Po valley bridgehead around **Bologna** and including **Ferrara** and the River Panaro.

Thus an attack by **Eighth Army** was to be followed by one by **Fifth Army**, with the object of securing a large bridgehead in the **Po valley** as the first stage of an advance into north-eastern and north-western **Italy**.

When **Fifteenth Army Group** issued the directive for this plan on 24 January, **Eighth Army** comprised nine divisions, three Italian combat groups, two independent infantry brigades and six independent armoured brigades. **Eighth Army's** plan for its part in the offensive was to attack with two corps (six divisions) between Routes 9 and 16 and establish a

bridgehead over the **Santerno** River. A third corps (three divisions) would then mount an amphibious and airborne attack against **Argenta** across the flooded areas; this thrust was to be supported by advances towards the north and west by the troops in the **Santerno** bridgehead. No drastic revision of this plan was necessary when General McCreery was told of the decision to withdraw to western **Europe** the Canadian Corps, the three British divisions from **Greece** and the **Middle East**, and 200 American fighter-bombers.

In the original **Eighth Army** plan the Canadians were to have been responsible for the attack on the northern flank, the amphibious operations across Lake Comacchio, the pursuit and the further semi-amphibious operation involved in crossing the Po, which would have left **5 Corps** and the **Polish Corps** free to concentrate on the main attack farther inland. Headquarters 13 Corps was responsible for looking after the extended left flank south-east of **Bologna**, and Headquarters **10 Corps** was still in **Greece**. With the departure of the Canadian Corps, therefore, **5 Corps** became responsible for the right flank as well as the right of the main attack in the centre.

To bring the greatest possible weight to bear on the front of the assault General McCreery allotted the larger proportion of his forces to **5 Corps**, which then comprised 56 and 78 British, 8 Indian, and 2 New Zealand Divisions, 2 and 9 Armoured Brigades (the latter including the Fantail force and sufficient Kangaroos to carry two infantry battalions), **21 Tank** Brigade, 2 Parachute Brigade, 2 Commando Brigade, Cremona Combat Group, and the Jewish Brigade (later transferred to **10 Corps**). Fifth Corps' tasks were to establish bridgeheads over the **Senio** and **Santerno** rivers, to be prepared to exploit rapidly on the axis of **Bastia-Argenta- Ferrara**, and to mount an operation with Fantails across Lake Comacchio with a view to seizing the **Argenta** Gap (not before the bridgehead had been established over the **Santerno**).

The Polish Corps, comprising 3 Carpathian and 5 Kresowa Divisions, 2 Polish and 7 British Armoured Brigades, 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade, Friuli Combat Group (later transferred to **10 Corps**) and **7**

**Hussars** (with **Kangaroos** to lift one battalion), was to establish bridgeheads across the **Senio** and **Santerno** rivers south of and in conjunction with **5 Corps**, and was to be prepared to exploit rapidly on two axes, towards **Medicina- Budrio** and **Castel San Pietro**. **Thirteenth Corps** ( **10 Indian Division** and **Folgore Combat Group**) was to hold **Eighth Army's** left flank, advance towards **Route 9** when the **Polish** gains gave the opportunity, and eventually go into army reserve. The **6th British Armoured Division** was in reserve at the start of the battle.

**Eighth Army's** plan, therefore, was for a frontal assault by two corps on parallel axes north of **Route 9** and towards **Massa Lombarda**, and an amphibious thrust against **Argenta**; subsequently the main weight of the army was to be directed northwards through **Argenta**, while the **Poles** continued the advance westwards on **Budrio** and **Bologna**. **General Clark** approved of this plan—if the advance through the **Argenta Gap** was considered feasible— but was of the opinion that it did not provide sufficiently for thrusting westwards; he desired that **Eighth Army** should be equally prepared to thrust either westwards or northwards after establishing a bridgehead over the **Santerno River**. He also doubted whether **13 Corps' sector**, which included **Monte Grande**,<sup>1</sup> was held strongly enough. To comply with his wishes, **5 Corps' tasks** were revised, **13 Corps' strength** was increased by one battalion, and when it became known that **Headquarters 10 Corps** would be available, it was given a sector (to be held by the **Jewish Brigade** and **Friuli Combat Group**) between **13 Corps** and the **Poles**.

**Fifteenth Army Group** issued directions on **12 February** for the conduct of the battle after the fall of **Bologna**. The capture of a large bridgehead, including **Ferrara**, in the **Po valley** would accomplish the immediate object of the initial battle as defined in the directive on **24 January**. The army group's intentions then were the 'development'<sup>2</sup> of the **Po** and **Adige** river positions with the object of capturing **Verona**. After **Eighth Army** had crossed the **Adige** it was to capture **Padua** and **Venice** as quickly as possible. The army group axis of advance was to be from **Bologna** to **Verona**, and the capture of the latter town was intended

to seal the main escape route and make major operations in north-west Italy unnecessary.

The day was rapidly approaching, General Clark wrote on 7 March, when **Fifteenth Army Group** ‘must contribute its full share to the final offensive which will crush the German armed forces.’<sup>3</sup> He directed that plans be completed, movements made and preliminary operations executed to permit the main attack to be launched on 10 April. **Eighth Army** was to be prepared to attack from three to five days before the Fifth. The situation was to be reviewed on 1 April, when the opening date would be finally decided.

Sufficient Fantails would be ready by 10 April to carry only one infantry brigade, which meant that an amphibious operation with **Argenta** as its objective would be beyond the capacity of the forces available. The next most valuable objective would be the bridge over the Reno River at **Bastia**; if this were secured, it would clear the approaches to **Argenta** from the south and give **5 Corps** freedom to manoeuvre, so that it could be directed either north or west from **Massa Lombarda**; and it would cut off the line of retreat of the two German divisions opposing the corps' right flank. Parachutists (from 2 Parachute Brigade) might join the amphibious force, but were not to be dropped south of **Argenta**—to avoid the anti-aircraft defences of the **Bastia** area.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The loss of this most critical feature’, Clark wrote to McCreery, ‘would ... abort all our carefully prepared plans for the offensive.’

<sup>2</sup> In American military phraseology ‘to develop a position’ means to square up to and make all necessary preparations for assaulting it.

<sup>3</sup> Headquarters **Fifteenth Army Group** letter.

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After considering methods of ensuring that **5 Corps** should be able to

throw into the northerly thrust sufficient weight to break the **Argenta Gap** and at the same time retain sufficient in the westerly thrust to satisfy the army group's requirements—for which the **Polish Corps** alone was not thought adequate—General McCreery decided that it might be possible to release 10 Indian Division from its task of holding **Monte Grande** in 13 Corps' sector in time for it to reinforce the Poles' drive towards **Bologna**; also, if **5 Corps'** progress was slow in exploiting northwards, the New Zealand Division might be required to continue on the **Budrio** axis in conjunction with the **Polish Corps**.

Thus the **Eighth Army** plan was for **5 Corps** and the Polish Corps to attack across the **Senio River** and secure bridgeheads across the **Santerno** (the codename for this operation was BUCKLAND), and for **5 Corps** to exploit northwards towards **Bastia** and **Argenta**—with the possibility of the New Zealand Division continuing westwards to **Budrio**. Fifth Corps also was to undertake preliminary operations on Lake Comacchio, and was to be prepared to mount amphibious operations which might include capturing crossings over the **Reno** at **Bastia** or in the vicinity, exploiting the capture of the Spit round the north and east of Lake Comacchio and turning or capturing the **Argenta Gap** in conjunction with 2 Parachute Brigade.

(iii)

In Operation BUCKLAND **5 Corps** directed **8 Indian Division** on the right and the New Zealand Division on the left to attack across the **Senio River** on the corps' front and converge to meet beyond the town of **Lugo**; 78 Division, situated between these two divisions, was not to advance until later. The first objective was to be the line of the **Canale di Lugo**, short of the **Scolo Tratturo**, the enemy's intermediate prepared position between the **Senio** and **Santerno**. On the second day of the offensive the Indian and New Zealand divisions were to advance side by side to the **Santerno** and secure a large bridgehead. Then 78 Division was to go forward, pass through the Indian division and strike northwards towards **Bastia** and **Argenta** with the object of linking up

with the amphibious forces. The pocket of enemy cut off south of the Reno River was to be cleared by **8 Indian Division** and the Cremona Combat Group. After crossing the **Santerno** the New Zealand Division's task would be either to protect 78 Division in its drive northwards, or to continue westwards towards **Budrio**.

The preliminary artillery bombardment was to consist of five distinct bombardments separated by intervals, and during the fifth



5 CORPS' PLAN TO CROSS THE SENIO RIVER  
5 CORPS' PLAN TO CROSS THE SENIO RIVER

interval, when it was hoped the enemy would have been deceived by a series of false alarms, the infantry was to attack across the **Senio**. The foremost troops were to be withdrawn from the stopbanks during the barrage and were to return and form up when the artillery lifted in the final false alarm, which was to be followed by an intensive flaming of the enemy positions on the far bank along the whole corps front by all available Crocodile and Wasp flame-throwers. After the assault the river was to be bridged rapidly.

The Polish Corps (on the left) decided to attack with 3 Carpathian Division, less the new infantry brigade but reinforced by 6 Lwow Brigade from **5 Kresowa Division**, and with 7 Armoured Brigade under command. Because the two new Polish infantry brigades lacked training and experience, they were placed under an improvised headquarters called

**'Rudforce' with the task of holding the Route 9 sector, where no assault was to be made.**

**Although the Polish Corps was about half a mile from the near stopbank of the Senio, and 5 Corps was close up to it, they were to attack at the same time, 7.20 p.m. on 9 April, so that both could get the maximum air and artillery support. The Poles anticipated greater difficulty and therefore delay in crossing the Senio, but as the distance between the Senio and the Santerno was less on their front than on 5 Corps', it was expected that the two corps probably could reach the farther river together.**

**The plans for the air and artillery support were closely integrated. On the afternoon of 9 April approximately 800 heavy bombers of the Strategic Air Force were to 'carpet' with thousands of small fragmentation bombs an area of about two and a quarter square miles in front of the Polish Corps and one of about nine square miles in front of 5 Corps, with the intention of paralysing the enemy's reserves and disrupting his communications without making large craters which might hinder progress later (as the bombing had done at Cassino). About 120 medium bombers of the Tactical Air Force were to attack three gun areas opposite the Poles' front, and 48 medium bombers of the Desert Air Force a gun area opposite 5 Corps' front. About 500 fighter-bombers of the Desert Air Force and 200 of 22 Tactical Air Command (which normally supported Fifth Army) were to attack hostile batteries, strongpoints, mortar positions and headquarters on the frontage of the attack and all movement on the roads approaching the battle zone.**

**During the intervals between the five 'false alarm' artillery bombardments preceding 5 Corps' assault crossing of the Senio, fighter-bombers were to bomb and strafe the far bank of the river; later they were to blitz the stopbanks in front of the Polish Corps. A hundred night light bombers were to combine with the artillery in a counter-battery programme, and 100 night heavy bombers were to attack the Santerno defences in front of both corps. In daylight on 10 April the normal fighter-bomber support was to be provided, and the heavy bombers were**

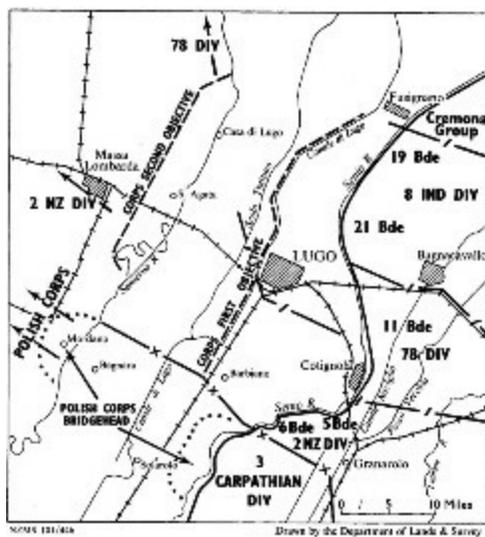
to saturate with small bombs a strip of country of about 10½ square miles immediately beyond the **Santerno**.

The allotment of artillery in **Eighth Army** (excluding anti-aircraft, anti-tank and infantry guns) was 678 pieces for **5 Corps**, 339 for the **Polish Corps**, 96 for **10 Corps**, and 160 for **13 Corps**, a total of 1273 field, medium and heavy guns. The enemy was believed to have only 187 field and medium guns and 36 *nebelwerfers* deployed in positions from which they could engage the assault. The artillery ammunition supply was much better than had been thought possible, and the programme was prepared with the knowledge that reserves were plentiful.

(iv)

Although the attacks across the **Senio** and **Santerno** were expected to destroy a large part of the German forces, it was still necessary to plan for the completion of the enemy's destruction south of the Po and for the rapid crossing of that river to forestall the occupation of the **Venetian Line** and the delaying positions south of it. The Allied Air Forces could not be expected to completely block the enemy's withdrawal; consequently **Eighth Army** would have to organise a pursuit.

If **5 Corps** broke rapidly through the **Argenta Gap**, it would have to undertake simultaneously the crossing of the Po and the



5 CORPS' PLANS

5 CORPS' PLANS

destruction of the enemy south of it; but if **5 Corps** failed to penetrate the **Argenta** Gap quickly, it would have to press on in as great strength as possible westward towards **Budrio** and **Bologna**. In the former contingency the solution would be to relieve **5 Corps** of the responsibility for the Po crossing by bringing Headquarters **10 Corps** up on the right to assume command of the forces that had taken part in the northern operations, plus one other division from **5 Corps** and most of the available amphibious vehicles. This force would then cross the Po rapidly wherever opportunity offered, while **5 Corps** continued the drive north-westwards towards **Bondeno**—which would not preclude **5 Corps** also forcing a crossing of the Po if the opportunity should arise.

If **5 Corps** failed to penetrate the **Argenta** Gap quickly, the weight of the westward drive was to be increased by continuing the New Zealand Division's advance towards **Budrio** and by bringing **10 Indian Division** forward to join it, with both divisions commanded by **13 Corps**. As General **McCreery** believed that this contingency was the more likely, he warned the commander of **13 Corps** (Lieutenant-General Sir John **Harding**) to be ready to assume control at short notice.

(v)

‘Whenever we attacked the Germans in **Italy** we took them by

surprise,' claims Field Marshal Alexander. 'A particularly successful example was the May, 1944, offensive when we managed to persuade them that we were going to make another landing at **Civitavecchia**, north of the Tiber, to meet which Kesselring dispersed his reserves well away from the real point selected for the attack. We decided that the only cover-plan which was possible in our present circumstances was another version of the same story. The threat this time was to be directed against the Adriatic coast north of the Po. In fact, according to my naval advisers, an assault landing in this area was a physical impossibility but we hoped that the enemy, who was very ignorant in matters of amphibious warfare, would not have the benefit of such expert advice. We took steps to foster the deception by ostentatious activity in the port of **Ravenna** and hoped that **Eighth Army's** preliminary operations up the coast would help to confirm it. In the event ... our hopes were completely justified.' <sup>1</sup>

To allow **Fifth Army** to capture **Bologna** and thrust northwards with as little delay as possible, **Fifteenth Army Group's** plan was designed to draw enemy troops away from that sector without



After the prolonged bombardment of the enemy's defences and the flaming of the stopbanks, the infantry move forward for the assault crossing of the **Senio**

After the prolonged bombardment of the enemy's defences and the flaming of the stopbanks, the infantry move forward for the assault crossing of the **Senio**



Dazed by the bombardment, the enemy surrenders to New Zealanders who have crossed the Senio River

**Dazed by the bombardment, the enemy surrenders to New Zealanders who have crossed the  
Senio River**

German guns abandoned among the havoc caused by the  
Desert Air Force



**German guns abandoned among the havoc caused by the Desert Air Force**



Italians who had stayed in Barbiano throughout the bombardment greet the New Zealanders as they pass through the village

**Italians who had stayed in Barbiano throughout the bombardment greet the New Zealanders as they pass through the village**

9 Infantry Brigade ready to go into action for the first time. Men of 27 Battalion wait in Kangaroos before crossing the Senio



**9 Infantry Brigade ready to go into action for the first time. Men of 27 Battalion wait in Kangaroos before crossing the Senio**



Germans captured by the  
New Zealanders near Massa  
Lombarda

**Germans captured by the New Zealanders near Massa Lombarda**

The enemy's side of the stopbank of the Gaiana River, where the New  
Zealand Division fought its last set-piece battle



**The enemy's side of the stopbank of the [Gaiana River](#), where the New Zealand Division  
fought its last set-piece battle**



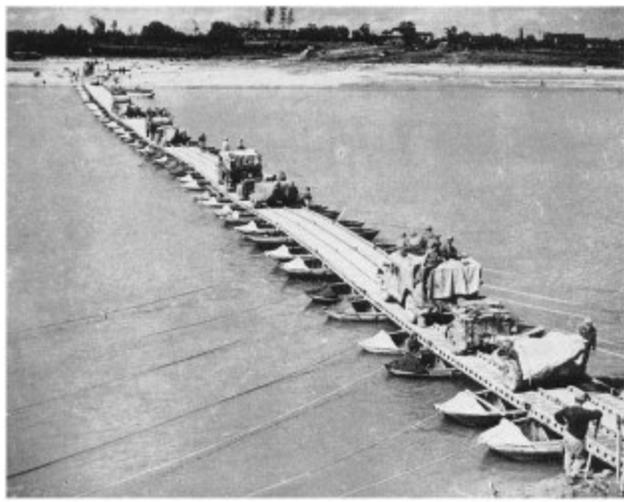
German transport bombed and abandoned south of the Po River

**German transport bombed and abandoned south of the Po River**

A ten-barrelled *nebelwerfer* also abandoned by the enemy



**A ten-barrelled *nebelwerfer* also abandoned by the enemy**



Artillery crossing the New Zealand Engineers' folding-boat equipment bridge on the Po River

**Artillery crossing the New Zealand Engineers' folding-boat equipment bridge on the Po River**

The pontoon ferry on the Adige River



**The pontoon ferry on the Adige River**



Partisans with a captured German truck

**Partisans with a captured German truck**

Germans who have surrendered to the partisans

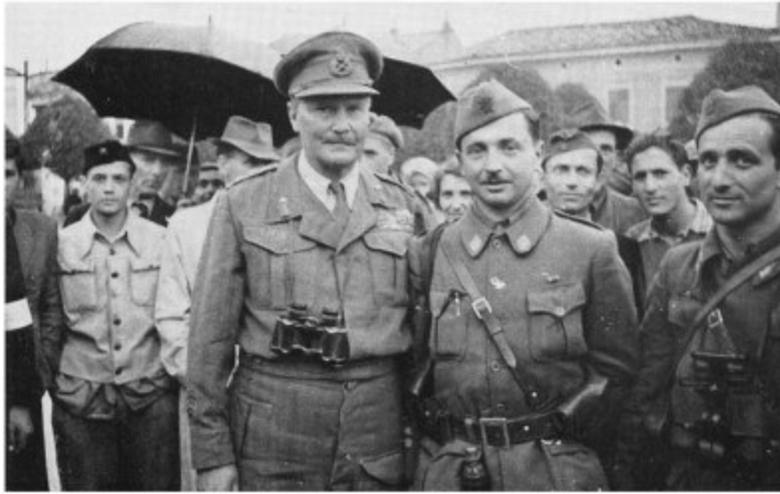


**Germans who have surrendered to the partisans**



Ninth Brigade enters the crowded streets of Monfalcone

**Ninth Brigade enters the crowded streets of Monfalcone**



**General Freyberg confers at Monfalcone with the commander of 9 Corps of the Fourth Yugoslav Army**

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<sup>1</sup> *The Italian Campaign*, p. 37.

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attracting too much attention to **Eighth Army's** front. The object, therefore, was to suggest an imminent threat to the coast at the head of the Adriatic Sea.

The enemy <sup>1</sup> apparently appreciated that the first blow would be struck by **Eighth Army**, which would direct its main effort on the axis of Route 9, and that there would be a seaborne and airborne landing farther along the Adriatic coast. Vietinghoff therefore retained **29 Panzer Grenadier Division** well north of the River Po. The commander of **76 Panzer Corps**, when taken prisoner, confirmed that this division had been held in readiness for an expected landing in the **Gulf of Venice**, and declared that it was committed too late in the battle for the **Argenta Gap**.

Because the enemy expected the main offensive to follow the usual pattern of attacks up Route 9, **Tenth Army** was unprepared for **Eighth Army's** assault on its left flank which outflanked the river lines, and consequently its three most powerful divisions, astride and south of Route 9, were unable to take an effective part in the battle until it was too late. Similarly, **Fourteenth Army** was occupied with a diversionary

attack on its right flank when Fifth Army began its main offensive in the centre.

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately no German records of the formations opposing **Eighth Army** (except reports on the fighting by *29 PZ Gren Div* on 16–20 December 1944 and by *98 Div* on 9–13 April 1945) are available after October 1944.

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## II: THE SENIO STOPBANK

### *II: The Senio Stopbank*

(i)

A conference of the senior officers (lieutenant-colonels and above) of the New Zealand Division in the mayor's office at San Severino on 18 March 'packed the old, square, high-ceilinged room, like an audience at a theatre. But no theatre audience ever gave more concentrated attention than did these men to **General Freyberg** on that spring morning. They sat on rows of chairs facing a small dais, where stood the high-backed carved chair of the mayor, and his desk, between two tall windows whose shutters had been pulled together to keep out the blinding sunshine. Behind the dais hung three big diagrams. It was of these that the General was speaking, and it was on these that the eyes of every man in the room were fixed with that intensity which fighting, or the planning of fighting, gives to those whose lives are directly affected.'<sup>2</sup>

After stressing the importance of security—only those attending the conference were to know the facts in the meantime—the GOC outlined the plan of attack, which was to be in four phases: in the

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Cox, *The Road to Trieste*, p. 12.

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first (after the occupation of the near stopbank) the Division was to seize a bridgehead over the **Senio** on a front of 3200 yards, with 5 Brigade on the right and 6 Brigade on the left, erect high- and low-level bridges, and pass the armour and supporting arms across; in the second phase the Division was to advance to the **Santerno**, in the third it was to establish a bridgehead over that river, and in the fourth it was to exploit from this bridgehead.

Orders were issued for the Division to take over a sector on the **Senio** front between **Cotignola** and **Felisio**, where 5 and 6 Brigades were to relieve a brigade of 78 Division; 9 Brigade was to be in reserve in a bivouac area. After reconnoitring with the GSO I (Colonel **Gilbert** <sup>1</sup>) the sector the Division was to take over, the GOC held a conference of formation commanders and senior staff officers at **Divisional Headquarters** on the 28th to discuss the return to the line and further planning. The GSO II (Intelligence), Major G. S. Cox, gave the latest information available about the enemy, who was thicker on the ground than previously 'because he has put almost everything he has got forward along the river. ... We calculate that he has now got one man to every 5 yds of the 4000 yd front we are taking over.' <sup>2</sup> His only local reserves, however, were a small assault section for each company, except on the extreme right, where he had two companies forward and one in immediate reserve.

The GOC announced that **8 Indian Division** was going to attempt both stopbanks in the one assault, which he considered 'a tough proposition.... they are prepared to risk it and to depend on the bombardment.' <sup>3</sup> Because the sector in which the New Zealand Division was to attack was some distance downstream from the positions it had occupied near Route 9 during the winter, it would be necessary to reconnoitre and locate the enemy's wire, bridges, posts and minefields, and ascertain his habits, so as to be able to determine the layout for the assault, crossing places, wire and minefield gaps, fire positions, and ramps from which the Wasps and Crocodiles would flame the far bank.

Colonel Gilbert outlined the plans to conceal the Division's return to the line and **Eighth Army's** preparedness for an attack by creating the impression with dummy wireless traffic and other means of deception that the Division was in **10 Corps** south of Route 9, and that **5 Corps** was to do a seaborne landing.

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<sup>1</sup> **Brig H. E. Gilbert**, DSO, OBE, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Wanganui**, 20 Jul 1916; Regular soldier; BM HQ Div Arty 1941–

42; GSO II 2 NZ Div 1942–43; CO 6 Fd Regt Nov 1943–Apr 1944; GSO I 2 NZ Div 1944–45.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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The GOC said he had been very much impressed by all that he had seen during his visits to units. 'Morale is right on top. We have highly trained leaders, and none of the troops themselves are battle-tired. I consider that the period of preparation before the attack is of very great importance.... you must get a fierceness into patrolling that we seem to have lost during the last year. I am certain that really active patrolling and sniping in the preparatory period will greatly reduce casualties in the actual attack—you can get on top of the Hun in that way.' <sup>1</sup>

(ii)

The New Zealanders' move from the **Fabriano** region to Eighth Army's front, a distance of about 130 miles, began in the evening of 30 March. From assembly areas near **Forli** the units were directed to their allotted positions, which had been reconnoitred by advance parties. The Division came under the command of **5 Corps** on 1 April and completed the relief of 11 Infantry Brigade, 78 Division, the following night. On the right 5 Brigade took over from 5 Battalion, Northamptonshire Regiment, with 21 and 28 Battalions right and left respectively and the 23rd in reserve behind the Lamone River; on the left 6 Brigade relieved 2 Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers, with 25 and 24 Battalions right and left respectively and the 26th in reserve between **Granarolo** and the **Lamone**. Each forward battalion had two companies in the line and the others in reserve. The troops—including the Maoris—had sewn 78 Division flashes (yellow battleaxes) on their battledress in an attempt to disguise themselves as Englishmen.

The precautions and subterfuges to keep secret the Division's move

into the line were futile. The New Zealanders' impending departure from the **Fabriano** region was a common topic among the Italians from about 25 March, and on the way to the front they were greeted as 'kiwis' and 'Neo Zelandesi', which was to be expected 'considering that a number of officers and OR's had omitted to take down badges or titles and that the "secret" departure of Main Div [Headquarters] and other convoys unfortunately synchronised with the time set for the opening of a Grand Easter Procession in **Matelica** with the result that NZ vehicles made a spectacular exit through a lane of admiring citizens assembled on the streets of the town.' <sup>2</sup>

The Field Security Section kept a close watch on all roads and bridges during the period the Division was in the line before the

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, **2 NZ Div** Provost Coy.

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attack, and as far as possible sealed off such places as **Faenza**, **Russi** and **Ravenna**, which were out of bounds. Nevertheless some Italian families in **Faenza** were aware that New Zealand troops were in the vicinity of **Russi**, and the New Zealanders' identity was soon known to the Italians in the **Granarolo** area, many of whom had acquaintances among them dating back to the time of the fighting around **Faenza**.

A document headed *289 Grenadier Regiment*, dated 7 April and captured during the advance a few days later, stated that recently part of 78 Division had been replaced by the New Zealand Division. 'A major enemy offensive must be considered possible any day now....' <sup>1</sup> Three New Zealanders had been taken prisoner by a German raiding party on the evening of 5 April.

(iii)

Ninth Infantry Brigade, in divisional reserve, trained with assault

bridging equipment on the Montone River north of **Forli**, and with Kangaroos of C Squadron, **4 Hussars**. Fourth Armoured Brigade arrived from **Cesenatico**; 18 Regiment came under the command of 5 Brigade, the 19th under 9 Brigade, and the 20th under 6 Brigade. C Squadron of 51 Battalion, **Royal Tank Regiment**, provided a troop of Crocodile flame-throwers each for 5 and 6 Brigades.

The artillery of 78 Division continued normal firing tasks, but only one battery each of 5 and 6 NZ Field Regiments was allowed to join in; the remainder of the New Zealand 25-pounders and the heavy mortars, M10s and 17-pounder anti-tank guns had to remain silent so that they would not disclose their positions to the enemy.

The engineers were to remain under the control of the CRE (Colonel Hanson) so that he could deploy them most effectively for the bridging and other tasks they would be required to do during the advance. A new unit, 28 Assault Squadron, was formed to work where 'soft-skinned' bulldozers and other appliances would be vulnerable to fire. Its headquarters and two troops were composed of men from the armoured corps and the engineers, and their equipment—some of which did not arrive until shortly before the attack—included Sherman dozers (tanks with bulldozer blades attached), Churchill AVREs (armoured vehicles to carry sappers and fascines for use in soft ground), Churchill Arks (mobile bridges), Valentine bridge-layers (Scissors) and Kangaroos. This squadron and E Squadron of 1 Assault Brigade, RAC/RE, were

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, G Branch, HQ **2 NZ Div**.

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to clear a path for the tanks hurrying forward to support the infantry when the sappers had bridged the river.

The engineers loaded in the correct order on trains of vehicles the materials needed for the bridges they proposed to erect, for which purpose additional transport was provided by 309 Company, **RASC**, and the NZASC; they searched for mines, reconnoitred and improved roads,

cut timber for corduroy, felled trees to improve the artillery's observation, and completed their preparations for the assault.

(iv)

The New Zealanders' immediate task was to winkle the enemy out of his positions on the near stopbank and dominate it. In the centre of the Division's sector this was comparatively simple, but on both extremities there was ugly, close-range fighting.

Seven Germans had left their outpost on the stopbank to surrender to the Northamptonshire battalion on 1 April, and four men of A Company, 25 Battalion, had dug a tunnel through the bank and occupied the deserted post. When a German relief party, unaware of what had happened, approached about 5 a.m. on the 2nd, the New Zealanders wounded three men and took a prisoner. Later four German stretcher-bearers, with a **Red Cross** flag, clambered down a ladder on the far stopbank and crossed a footbridge to attend to a wounded man who was out of sight of the post. The New Zealanders, still wearing 78 Division flashes, left the post and tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Germans to desert; they also took advantage of the opportunity to study the river, which was about 15 feet wide, and the banks, which were steep but climbable.

A two-man patrol from 21 Battalion was prevented in the evening of the 2nd from reaching the river by the wire the enemy had erected on the reverse slope of the stopbank. Farther upstream, however, four three-man patrols from **28 Battalion** gained the far side of the stopbank, and two of them went to the water's edge; they gathered much information about the wire entanglements, the river and its banks. A patrol from 25 Battalion reconnoitred to a weir and reported that the approaches were good, and a patrol from 24 Battalion succeeded in crossing the river about a quarter of a mile above the weir, where the water was four and a half to six feet deep.

Although the enemy still had posts on the stopbank in 21 and 24

**Battalions' sectors, at both ends of the Division's front, work was begun on clearing lanes free of mines to the bank and along its base, digging camouflaged bays for the assault boats and bridging equipment, and constructing ramps for the Wasps and Crocodiles.**

**A bend in the river permitted the enemy to enfilade part of the bank in 21 Battalion's sector where C Company, on the right flank, made two unsuccessful attempts to secure a footing on 3 April. B Company completed a tunnel through the bank and found the reverse slope covered with wire entanglements; the enemy crossed footbridges quickly to and from his posts dug into the bank only a few yards from the New Zealanders, and grenades were thrown by both sides. Without any such opposition, however, two Maori patrols waded the river, each at three different places, and had no difficulty in reaching the far bank. The water was about waist deep.**

**A and B Companies of 24 Battalion, on the left flank, attacked the stopbank in the evening of the 3rd and dislodged the enemy from several posts, with the result that by dawn 6 Brigade was on the bank along the whole of its sector. But the enemy opposite 24 Battalion still held the other side at a distance of only a few yards. Because their grenades rolled down the bank and exploded harmlessly in the water, the New Zealanders removed the pins of two or three at a time and tossed them over in a bag to make sure that they exploded among the enemy dugouts.**

**As the Poles had not reached the stopbank on the left of the New Zealand Division, 24 Battalion was exposed to enfilading fire and attack from that direction. The enemy attempted twice to regain control of the bank on the battalion's sector, but was repelled each time. Shells from a tank of A Squadron, 20 Regiment, penetrated the bank where it had been weakened by tunnelling, and destroyed some German dugouts. The battalion had to remain constantly on the alert. 'The strain of living cheek by jowl with the enemy was beginning to tell upon the men of A and B Companies when C and D took over the line on 6 April, to continue fighting at close quarters right up to the moment of**

withdrawal before the general barrage. Each forward company ... used on an average 1000 grenades every 24 hours.' <sup>1</sup>

On the other (right) flank 21 Battalion infiltrated on to the stopbank and began to prepare defensive positions, but was hindered by a strong enemy post near the railway bridge site on 78 Division's front. A counter-attack at night from that direction forced part of C Company to withdraw from its half-completed positions to previously prepared ones at the foot of the bank. A and D Companies relieved B and C on the morning of 5 April. During the night Second-Lieutenant **Kirkcaldy** <sup>2</sup> and Sergeant **Leech**, <sup>3</sup> of

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<sup>1</sup> *24 Battalion*, p. 313.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Lt **R. B. Kirkcaldy**; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 15 Aug 1919; farmer; wounded 20 Apr 1945.

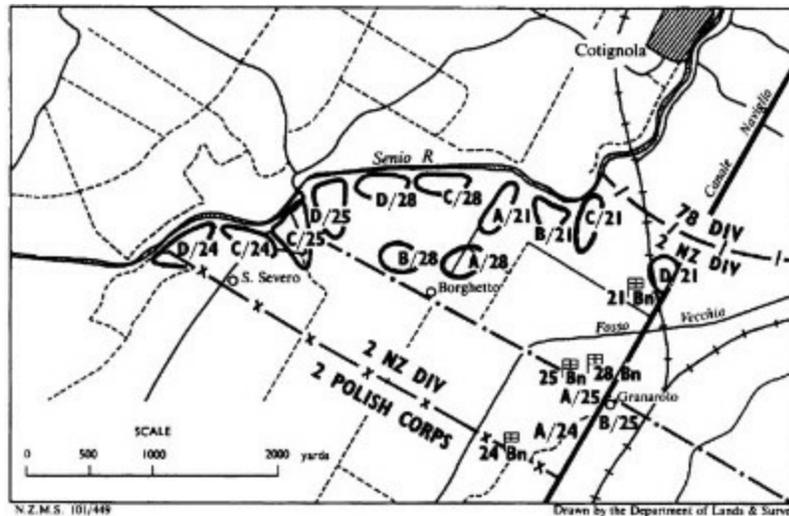
<sup>3</sup> **S-Sgt A. A. Leech**, DCM; **Waikiekie**; born **Westport**, 16 Mar 1913; farmer; wounded 9 Apr 1945.

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7 Platoon, had gone forward to reconnoitre. Kirkcaldy blew a track through the enemy wire with Bangalore torpedoes, which enabled Leech to go down to the water, wade to the other side and return without drawing fire.

In the evening of the 5th a German raiding party took three prisoners from 18 Platoon. Sergeant **Gardyne** <sup>1</sup> and others from the same platoon dug through the stopbank and emerged above an enemy post, from which they took five prisoners. Next morning Major **Fleming** <sup>2</sup> led four volunteers (Sergeant **Rae** <sup>3</sup> and Privates **Griffiths**, <sup>4</sup> **Tolich** <sup>5</sup> and **Stephens** <sup>6</sup>) from D Company in an audacious dash across open ground to the enemy post near the railway bridge site, where they captured 10 Germans and two machine guns. Early in the afternoon five more Germans surrendered to 21 Battalion after waving a white flag at the

exit of a tunnel they had cut through the bank for the purpose. The prisoners and deserters gave invaluable information about the enemy dispositions and defensive-fire plans. On 7 April the Surreys took charge of the part of the stopbank D Company had cleared in 78 Division's sector.



DISPOSITIONS AT 6 A.M. ON 9 APRIL 1945

DISPOSITIONS AT 6 A.M. ON 9 APRIL 1945

<sup>1</sup> **Sgt A. J. Gardyne**, MM; Gore; born Gore, 25 Jan 1916; farmer; three times wounded.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj Y. K. Fleming**, DSO; Auckland; born Dunedin, 6 Oct 1912; plastering contractor; wounded 22 Apr 1945; Area Officer, Invercargill, 1947–51; DAQMG, NMD, 1953–57; Area Officer, Whangarei, 1957–60.

<sup>3</sup> **WO II C. D. Rae**, DCM; Ohinewai; born Southbridge, 24 Jul 1910; clerk.

<sup>4</sup> **Pte M. W. Griffiths**; born Whangarei, 12 Nov 1921; storeman; killed in action 10 Apr 1945.

<sup>5</sup> **Pte I. Tolich**, MM; Te Awamutu; born Yugoslavia, 6 Nov 1922; restaurant assistant; wounded 6 Apr 1945.

<sup>6</sup> **Cpl A. P. Stephens**; Whatawhata; born **Papakura**, 12 Dec 1922; dairy farmer.

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By this time the New Zealand Division had gained the stopbank along the whole of its front. After about a week in the line the casualties totalled 132, of whom 93 (including 10 killed) had been sustained by 21 and 24 Battalions in their efforts to get on to the bank.

(v)

Abruptly at 10.55 p.m. on 6 April the German artillery began a bombardment of **Eighth Army** between the Adriatic and Route 9. 'It was a beautiful clear night, and hour after hour the shelling went on, the flashes lighting the western sky, seeming to rip and tear it apart, and the shells wailing and whistling in towards us. ... It was months since the enemy had given us such a doing over.... This could mean one of two things. The enemy was preparing to withdraw, and was firing off his dumps before he went. Or he expected us to attack, and was shelling us first.' <sup>1</sup>

The bombardment, which decreased sharply after 1.30 a.m., seemed to be directed mostly against the gun areas and places where troops might be expected to concentrate ready for an offensive. The New Zealand guns had not been located by the enemy and therefore attracted no attention. The only damage reported was to an M10. The infantry experienced intermittent harassing fire, and 21 Battalion bore the brunt of it. Without hindrance seven patrols from 25 Battalion reconnoitred crossing places.

The bombardment raised apprehensions that the enemy might slip away before **Eighth Army** began its onslaught, which therefore might be wasted on empty ground. The enemy no doubt had reasons to expect an attack. His photographic reconnaissance aircraft might have detected the fresh gun positions and dumps and other signs of preparation. He would have identified as New Zealanders the three men captured from 21

Battalion, and probably recognised the Division's return to the line as a warning of imminent action. On the other hand there had been none of the usual sounds of a withdrawal. Although the German commanders must have appreciated that the **Santerno** was a better line to defend, they were not likely to risk the consequences of advocating a withdrawal when Hitler had ordered them to stay.

It seemed to the senior New Zealand Intelligence officer, Major Cox, that 'we must assume the enemy to be still on the **Senio** until he was definitely proved to be gone.... we came to the conclusion that 98th Division was still holding the **Senio** in strength, and that the attack would hit him all right.' <sup>2</sup> Cox put this opinion

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<sup>1</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, pp. 57–8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 59.

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forward at a meeting which the GOC called on the morning of 7 April. Later, when they again went over the arguments for and against the enemy having gone, the General said, 'Don't forget— we won't get those quarter of a million shells back if we fire them into an empty bank.' <sup>1</sup>

Three deserters from *289 Regiment*, taken by the **Maori Battalion**, were brought in on 8 April and, 'to our relief, confirmed that everything looked normal on the far side.' <sup>2</sup> The enemy was still on the **Senio** line. General Keightley told **Freyberg** during a telephone conversation in the evening that 56 Division and **8 Indian Division** also had found the enemy still there.

When General von Schwerin, commander of *76 Panzer Corps*, was taken prisoner on 24 April, he revealed that the bombardment on the night of 6–7 April had been planned originally to cover a German withdrawal to the **Santerno** 24 hours before **Eighth Army** was expected to attack; the withdrawal had been cancelled on orders from the **German**

**High Command**, but the artillery programme had not. The result was a ‘Chinese attack’, from the other side for a change; it achieved very little except a brief stimulus to German morale.

(vi)

While the New Zealand Division was gaining control of the near stopbank on its sector and making final preparations for its part in the assault on the **Senio** line, other forces began attacks on the extreme eastern and western ends of the front, preparatory to the opening of the Allied offensive.

The first blow was struck by 2 Commando Brigade in the early hours of 2 April on **Eighth Army**'s right flank, on the isthmus known as the ‘Spit’ which divides Lake Comacchio from the Adriatic Sea. The Fantails which were intended to convey the commandos to the western shore of the Spit stuck during the night in the mud close to the southern shore of the lake, and the men and their equipment were transferred to stormboats, which were hauled through the glutinous shallows in the dark. Although it was impossible to reach the Spit before daybreak, the commandos, landing behind a barrage and curtain of smoke, took the enemy completely by surprise and by the 4th had secured their objective as far as the canal south of Port Garibaldi. A squadron of the Special Boat Service captured the islands in the lake next day.

Should **5 Corps**' main thrust, after crossing the **Senio** and **Santerno** rivers, continue on a northward axis towards **Argenta**, it was to be

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<sup>1</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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supported by a series of ‘right hooks’ on the south-western shore of Lake Comacchio designed to outflank the narrows at **Bastia** and **Argenta**. First it was necessary to capture the two-mile-wide ‘Wedge’ between the

**Reno River and the lake. The 167th Brigade of 56 Division crossed the Reno on the night of 5–6 April and in the next two days accomplished this task. The attacks on the Spit and the Wedge killed and wounded many of the enemy and captured well over 1000, mostly from 162 *Turcoman Division* (half of them Germans), and much equipment.**

**At the western end of the front *Fifth Army* began a diversionary attack against Massa on 5 April. This task was entrusted to 92 US Division, in which 442 (Nisei—Americans of Japanese ancestry) and 473 (formerly anti-aircraft) Regiments had replaced two regiments which had been detached to the Serchio valley. The enemy abandoned Massa when it was outflanked from the east, but reacted more energetically than was expected to the American advance, which did not aim at a vital objective. General Lemelsen called upon his small reserves in a futile attempt to retrieve the position.**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## III: THE ASSAULT ON THE SENIO LINE

### *III: The Assault on the Senio Line*

(i)

**Fifth Corps sent out the order late in the evening of 8 April: 'subject to last minute changes timings for BUCKLAND will be as follows. D day 9 Apr. H hr 1920 hrs.'** At daybreak it was obvious that there would be no postponement because of the weather: the sky was bright and almost cloudless; there was a light breeze from the west. The ground was dry and firm after weeks unusually free from rain. And there had been sufficient activity on the far bank of the river during the night to confirm that the enemy was still there.

**The great fleet of four-engined heavy bombers, 242 Flying Fortresses and 583 Liberators, came into view shortly before 1.50 p.m. and during the next hour and a half 'carpeted' their target areas in front of the Polish Corps and 5 Corps with 5171 100-pound and 143,385 20-pound fragmentation bombs. Subsequent investigation revealed that this blitz did not inflict many casualties on the enemy because of the shelter given by his well prepared positions, but it disrupted his communication system. The medium bombers of the Tactical Air Force concentrated on the areas near Route 9 where guns might interfere with the Polish Corps' assault, and later in the afternoon medium bombers of the Desert Air Force attacked a gun area north of Lugo, opposite 5 Corps. Fighter-bombers strafed a wide variety of targets west of the Senio.**

**The inaccurate bombing of Cassino the previous year had caused hundreds of casualties among Allied troops and civilians, many of them far from the town. Some aircraft had bombed Venafro, 10 miles from Cassino but similarly situated near high hills. To guard against the repetition of such an error (for the Lamone River might be mistaken from the air for the Senio), and also because there was a very narrow**

margin of safety between the target areas and the foremost troops, **Eighth Army** employed navigational aids for the bombers, such as ground indicators and bursts of anti-aircraft fire over prearranged points. Nevertheless a Polish battalion was bombed, and 40 men killed and 120 wounded. On **5 Corps'** front most of the bombs were dropped as intended, between the **Santerno River** and the **Canale di Lugo** (about two miles from the **Senio**), but at least one aircraft released its load on the wrong side of the **Senio**, in the New Zealand sector. The 'explosions thumped and thundered just down the road behind us.... As it happened, the bombs, though they fell right in our dumping area, caused no casualties and did very little damage.' <sup>1</sup>

The bombing beyond the **Senio** raised a thick cloud of yellow dust. At 3.20 p.m., when the troops had moved back from their positions near the river, the artillery and fighter-bombers began their elaborate timed programme to neutralise the foremost enemy defenders and their supporting weapons. 'We prepared our ears for the guns, but before we heard them the patch of the stop-bank ahead seemed to be lifted in the air. Black earth, grey smoke, yellow dust, red and ochre flames suddenly rose along its edge. Then, and then only, came the sound of the guns, roaring and baying and clamouring one after another, until the whole eastern horizon was solid sound....' <sup>2</sup>

During the four-hour preliminary artillery programme, which was divided into five bombardments varying in duration from 20 to 31 minutes, with intervals varying from 21 to 32 minutes, the Division disposed six field regiments and two 5.5-inch medium regiments for the frontal attacks on the **Senio**, as well as field, medium and heavy guns, anti-aircraft guns and mortars for counter-battery, mortar-neutralisation, enfilading and harassing tasks. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, pp. 77–8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to 4, 5 and 6 NZ Fd Regts and 7 NZ A-Tk Regt, the Division had under command three self-propelled regiments (1 RHA, 11 RHA and **142 Army Fd Regt**) and 78 Div's 17, 132 and 138 Fd Regts; in support was 2 AGRA with three 5.5-inch gun-howitzer regiments (5, 74 and 102 Med Regts) and two 4.5-in. gun regiments (73 and 76 Med Regts); also in support were **307/55 Hy AA Regt**, **195/52 Lt AA Regt**, and eight 81-mm. mortars of 1 Sp Gp Kensingtons. The artillery operation order was the most complicated prepared by the NZA during the war.

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The guns firing the frontal bombardment used a technique known as the 'Dragnet', designed to deceive the enemy by simulating a creeping barrage behind which infantry might be advancing. When the shelling had lifted beyond the far bank, the enemy might be expected to raise his head to look around and perhaps get out of his shelter to see if an infantry assault was coming. The guns then switched their fire back to his positions on the bank.

For the first 10 minutes of each interval between the bombardments all the guns were silent while the fighter-bombers raked the stopbanks with bombs and cannon and machine-gun fire. During the remainder of each interval the enfilading guns fired along the line of the stopbanks so that their shells fell upon the weapon pits and shelters dug in the reverse slopes which escaped most of the fire from the guns shooting frontally, and other guns harassed the defences and ground beyond the river. Supplementing them were mortars, tanks (C Squadron, 20 Regiment) and machine guns. The enemy replied with spasmodic shell and mortar fire, with a lack of co-ordination which gave the impression of weapons shooting in isolation.

In the last few minutes of the fifth bombardment the artillery fired smoke on a line beyond the river, and for the next two minutes (7.20–7.22 p.m.) all guns were silent while the fighter-bombers, flying low along the river without strafing and bombing, simulated a repetition of their previous attacks to keep the Germans down in the trenches during the critical interval between the lifting of the artillery bombardment

clear of the objective and the arrival of the assaulting troops. Already, shortly before 7.20 p.m., the Crocodile and Wasp flame-throwers and the leading infantry with their boats and kapok bridging, their rifles, shovels, packs and all the gear they carried, had come as close to the river as the bombardment would allow.

While the fighter-bombers were making their dummy run the flame-throwers and infantry surged forward to the river. 'And then, quick and red and evil, came the first streak of flame, like a whip-lash between the trees, a streak of red marked in abruptly on a green canvas. The first Crocodile was hosing the stop-bank. The black smoke of burning oil rose straight up against the pale sky. Then another to the right, and others, and others—brief as the spurt of a match but, even at this distance, full of awe. One by one, like funeral pyres, the smoke rolled up. Then the orchards shook again, and the noise of the guns came back. The protective barrage was going down.... It marked the start of the infantry assault....'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, pp. 84–5.

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(ii)

While the New Zealanders rushed to the water with their boats and kapok bridges, the troops of **8 Indian Division** on their right stormed the near stopbank. The advantage of having already cleared the enemy from the first bank enabled the New Zealanders to get across the water and among the warren of defences on the far bank within five minutes. Meanwhile the artillery barrage stood for 10 minutes on a line 400 yards beyond the river and conforming with the shape of its course, and for the next 15 minutes on a similar line 500 yards beyond the river.

Technically the flame-throwers had been only partly successful. Because the bombardment had destroyed the prepared ramps from which they were to direct their flame, many of the Wasps had to fire at a high angle and consequently failed to reach their target. Where the flame did

not come into contact with the far bank, however, the ground was charred. This did not inflict many casualties on the enemy who sheltered in dugouts on the reverse slope, but coming as it did after the **Air Force** and artillery bombardment, the flame-throwing seemed utterly to demoralise him. He offered little resistance other than scattered grenade-throwing and machine-gun fire. The use of flame-throwers, in fact, 'provided the junior leaders with soldierly excuse for surrendering. Who could resist in the face of such attacks? Again and again the N.C.O.s asked as that question.' <sup>1</sup>

The Division attacked with four battalions, the 21st and 28th of 5 Brigade and the 25th and 24th of 6 Brigade, in that order from right to left. <sup>2</sup> In the first stage—the assault crossing of the **Senio** and mopping up of resistance as far as the start line for the set-piece advance, 300–600 yards beyond the river-21 Battalion had three companies forward, while the fourth company and also the Surreys of 78 Division gave covering fire; the other battalions had two companies forward, covered by men on the near stopbank.

D Company of 21 Battalion, on the right flank, was opposed by a German post which had survived the bombardment and the flame-throwing, but it was silenced by Second-Lieutenant **Boys**, <sup>3</sup> who attacked at point-blank range with a Piat. B Company, in the centre, lost two officers at the outset: while leading his men towards a German footbridge which miraculously had escaped damage, a

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<sup>1</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> For the attack 5 Inf Bde had under command **18 Armd Regt**, a troop of C Sqn 51 R Tks (Crocodiles), **32 A-Tk Bty**, a company of **5 Fd Amb**, and in support **5 Fd Regt** and half of **34 Mor Bty**; 6 Inf Bde had under command **20 Armd Regt**, a troop of C Sqn 51 R Tks (Crocodiles), **33 A-Tk Bty**, a company of **6 Fd Amb**, and in support **6 Fd Regt** and half of **34 Mor Bty**.

<sup>3</sup> Lt D. G. Boys, MC; Auckland; born Dargaville, 31 May 1922; farmhand; wounded Jan 1944.

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platoon commander was wounded; so also was the company commander (Major Butler <sup>1</sup>), who hastened forward to supervise the use of the bridge. Meanwhile, on the left, A Company lost contact with the rest of the battalion but cleared the enemy from some buildings and a strongpoint beyond the stopbank.

A and B Companies of 28 Battalion, the same two companies of 25 Battalion, and C and D Companies of 24 Battalion (one of whose platoons found a footbridge intact) all swiftly crossed the Senio and, meeting little resistance—none in places—gathered prisoners on the far side. They had remarkably few casualties.

While the infantry closed up to the start line for the set-piece advance, the artillery lifted to the straight opening line of the barrage, 600–900 yards from the river. At 8.5 p.m. this barrage, in which eight regiments—one 25-pounder to every 15 yards—participated, began to lift forward at the rate of 100 yards in five minutes; an hour later it paused for 35 minutes 300 yards in front of the infantry's intermediate objective, and after lifting at the same pace for another 50 minutes, stood for 25 minutes (until 10.55 p.m.) on a line 300 yards beyond the final objective, approximately 3000 yards from the river. The barrage was augmented by concentrations from five medium regiments and a heavy regiment, and by counter-mortar tasks by a 25-pounder regiment, a 105-millimetre self-Propelled regiment and two troops of 3.7-inch heavy anti-aircraft guns. During the first 24 hours of the attack the New Zealand field artillery fired 42,886 rounds of 25-pounder ammunition, which was easily the largest number fired by these three regiments in that length of time.

The artificial moonlight of the searchlights and the tracer fired by the Bofors guns to mark boundaries were so obscured by the dust and smoke that, despite the constant use of compasses, the infantry found it

hard to keep direction in the north-westward advance which diagonally crossed roads and vineyards instead of following the grain of the country.

In this phase 21 Battalion's intention was for D and A Companies to take the lead, followed by C and B. Houses cleared by D Company, on the right, had to be cleared again by C, probably because the Germans attempted to counter-attack on that flank. Nevertheless D Company collected about 150 prisoners. B Company, on the left, arrived at the final objective ahead of both D and A. A Company had lost touch on both flanks and with Battalion Headquarters, 'and was in a maze of grape-vine wires, ditches, and unoccupied

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<sup>1</sup> Maj V. C. Butler, ED, m.i.d.; **Whakatane**; born **Auckland**, 11 Sep 1907; schoolmaster; wounded 9 Apr 1945.

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enemy pits. Progress was depressingly slow and Major **Bullock**,<sup>1</sup> convinced that he was behind the rest of the battalion, formed the company into column of route with 9 Platoon the right, 8 the centre, and 7 the left-hand file. In this novel formation they covered a mile without meeting friend or enemy.'<sup>2</sup> At a road thought to be the final objective the company seemed to be surrounded by parties of enemy roaming about aimlessly. Some 90 of them were taken prisoner and many killed before the situation was under control. A Company made contact with B about an hour before dawn.

The leading companies of **28 Battalion** (A and B) met only scattered fire. During the pause at the intermediate objective they occupied a schoolhouse, with sections dug in around the building. Rather than reduce their fighting strength by providing escorts for the many prisoners they had collected, they disarmed them and locked them in the school—where the Germans probably did not remain very long.

C Company of **28 Battalion**, following A, had to contend with resistance on the right which had not been eliminated by the leading

infantry. Corporal **Rakena**,<sup>3</sup> who took control of 15 Platoon when its commander and several others were wounded, charged two spandau posts and killed both crews single-handed, and also killed the crew of a bazooka. C Company took some 60 prisoners, and together with D Company, which had a comparatively easy passage following B on the left, stopped at the school where the two leading companies had paused on their way to the final objective.

D and C Companies of 25 Battalion, followed by A and B, advanced against negligible opposition. When armoured vehicles were heard approaching, several C Company men took up a position at an intersection on the **Barbiano- Lugo** road. 'After a wait of a couple of minutes the first two 88 SP guns came out of the mist nose to tail followed by a Tiger tank. For a few tense moments we thought they were going to spin round the corner but to our relief they passed straight by within 3 feet of us. When the Tiger had passed us about two yards L/Cpl **Parker**<sup>4</sup> squeezed the trigger of the Piat but to our amazement nothing happened. He squeezed again and still nothing happened. He suddenly realised the safety catch was still applied... By that time the tanks had disappeared in the mist so L/Cpl Parker picked up the Piat and went charging down the road after them. As soon as he caught sight of the rear

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj T. A. Bullock**, m.i.d.; **Lower Hutt**; born NZ 9 May 1921; clerk; wounded 20 Apr 1945.

<sup>2</sup> *21 Battalion*, p. 422.

<sup>3</sup> **Sgt P. Rakena**, DCM; Mangamuka; born NZ 6 Sep 1918; labourer.

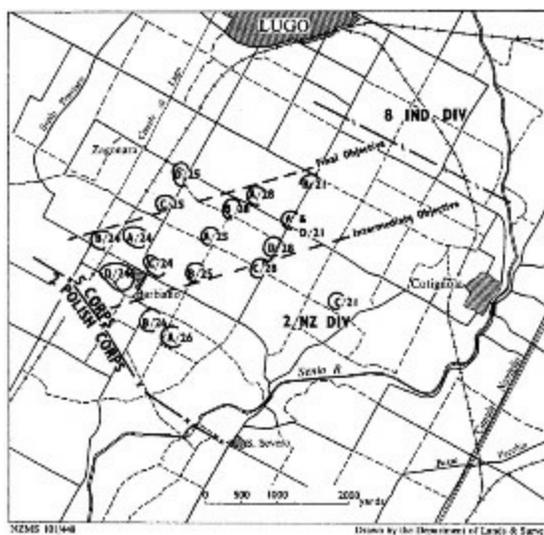
<sup>4</sup> **Cpl R. J. Parker**, m.i.d.; Porirua East; born **Wellington**, 2 Apr 1923; company representative; wounded 23 Sep 1944.

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of the end tank he got down and let a shot go, which hit the Tiger and put it out of action.’<sup>1</sup> When a Panther tank rushed and overran one of C Company's platoons, Lance-Sergeant **Begley**<sup>2</sup> and his Piat gunner gave chase and at a range of eight yards scored three direct hits, which forced it into a ditch.

The leading companies of 24 Battalion (A and B) had such difficulty in keeping direction that they changed places without colliding with each other before they reached the intermediate objective. They took up their correct positions during the pause before going on to their objective, close to the **Canale di Lugo**. Patrols found the canal undefended and its bridges intact.

Although the village of **Barbiano** had appeared to be deserted when the leading troops of 24 Battalion passed through its outskirts, D Company, following B on the left, saw three tanks emerge from it. The Piat gunners waited alongside the road and fired into



SITUATION SHORTLY BEFORE DAWN ON 10 APRIL 1945

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<sup>1</sup> Eyewitness account quoted in *25 Battalion*, p. 593.

<sup>2</sup> Sgt **P. J. Begley**, MM; Hastings; born Hastings, 19 Dec 1916; butter maker; wounded 11 Apr 1945.

the rear of each tank as it passed. The last one showed signs of distress and later was found to have broken down about half a mile away. The village was cleared and some prisoners taken. C Company, in rear of A, struggled through vines and across ditches to the **Barbiano-Lugo** road, along which a tank with lights approached slowly in the darkness. Corporal **Pountney**,<sup>1</sup> who sheltered with some men in a ditch, saw four Germans armed with rifles riding on the back of the tank. He sprang up and threatened them with a tommy gun, which induced them to dismount and surrender. The tank continued on its way.

Anticipating that the Poles might not be able to catch up with 6 Brigade's leading infantry, which consequently would be left with an open left flank, Brigadier Parkinson had ordered 26 Battalion to be prepared to despatch companies there when needed. The battalion was committed to this task shortly after midnight. A and B Companies went into position facing west between the river and **Barbiano**, and C and D also crossed the river.

*(iii)*

The engineers, who began work at the bridge sites on the **Senio** soon after the advance began, completed six crossings: a scissors bridge, three low-level Bailey bridges, which were open in time for the tanks and support weapons to reach the infantry before daybreak, and two high-level Bailey bridges.

The sites for these bridges had been selected beforehand with the aid of aerial photography.<sup>2</sup> Despite shell and mortar fire, which knocked out several vehicles and caused others to be ditched on the way, the lorries carrying the bridging materials arrived on time and were unloaded in the correct sequence. The sappers cleared the banks of mines and wire and blew charges to assist the bulldozing of the approaches.

In 5 Brigade's sector 7 Field Company constructed a low-level Bailey

which was open in time for the tanks of 18 Armoured Regiment and the support weapons to reach 21 and 28 Battalions before dawn, and on the right flank, under fire from guns and mortars, a high-level bridge which was ready for traffic at 8 a.m. In 6 Brigade's sector 8 Field Company built a low-level and a high-level Bailey, both of which were ready before daybreak. In the centre, near the inter-brigade boundary, 28 Assault Squadron placed

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<sup>1</sup> Cpl P. R. Pountney, MM; Murupara; born Auckland, 11 Dec 1922; farmhand.

<sup>2</sup> Useful information had been provided by the Mediterranean Air Interpretation Unit (West)—familiarily known as 'Mae West'.

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a Valentine scissors bridge just below the weir, and 6 Field Company erected a low-level Bailey about 300 yards farther downstream. A route suitable for tanks but too boggy for wheeled vehicles was completed from 6 Field Company's bridge to 6 Brigade's axis road before the route was open from 8 Field Company's low-level bridge. Two squadrons of 20 Armoured Regiment, therefore, used 6 Company's bridge. The third squadron used 8 Company's low-level bridge until it was closed temporarily when a tank shed a track. By that time the high-level bridge was available for both tanks and wheeled vehicles.

The newly formed 28 Assault Squadron completed the laying of the scissors bridge before 1.30 a.m., but because of a series of accidents, including the blowing up of a bulldozer, a Sherman dozer and a Kangaroo troop-carrier on mines, this crossing place was abandoned. 'The scissors remained as a standby and a monument to gallant work by a squadron out on operations under difficult conditions for the first time.' <sup>1</sup>

The Poles on the left had not been able to make the same progress as the New Zealanders. They had to cross extensive minefields under fire before reaching the Senio, and had not completed one bridge before

daylight. They therefore sent some of their tanks across the river through 6 Brigade's sector.

The river-crossing technique devised by the New Zealanders had proved highly successful. 'For the type of river and canal encountered from the **SENIO** to the PO,' Colonel Hanson later claimed, the low-level Bailey built in situ at the bottom of the riverbanks, only a few feet above water, was by far the speediest means of getting tanks and Divisional transport forward. These low level bridges were invariably completed in half the time required to build and launch by orthodox means the 100 to 150 feet Bailey bridge at natural (not flood) bank height above water. Furthermore, owing to the greatly reduced span length at the bottom of the banks, a great deal less Bailey bridging was expended, a very important factor when supplies are short and replenishment difficult.

'Another advantage of the low level Bailey is the fact that down at the bottom of the river banks there is considerable cover from enemy fire; there were occasions when work would have been interfered with and delayed had a high level Bailey been under construction whereas on the low level bridge the work went ahead comparatively smoothly.' <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *New Zealand Engineers, Middle East*, p. 690.

<sup>2</sup> 'Engineer Notes and Lessons, 2 NZ Division Campaign in **Po Valley**. 9 April 1945–3 May 1945.'

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(iv)

At daybreak on 10 April, therefore, 21 28, 25 and 24 Battalions were on the Division's objective, 26 Battalion had gone into position protecting the left flank, and the tanks, M10s, 17-pounder anti-tank guns and heavy mortars were across the river in support of the infantry. During the day the self-propelled 105s of 142 Army Field Regiment, the 25-pounders of **4 Field Regiment** and the self-propelled 25-pounders of 1 Royal Horse Artillery completed the crossing.

Everywhere could be seen the evidence of the violence of the bombardment: 'blackened stretches of stopbank scorched by the flame-throwers. ... in the fields beyond [were] thousands of black shell holes with jagged edges, mutilated trees, damaged casas.... Even so, the tempest of fire had left many deep-dug positions in the stopbank intact.'

1

The **Canale di Lugo**, to which the Division was to exploit, ran diagonally from south-west to north-east across its front. Consequently 24 Battalion, on the left flank, had only to pivot to conform with the line of the canal, while 21 Battalion, on the right, had to advance up to about 2000 yards. A and B Companies of the 21st, accompanied by the tanks of C Squadron, 18 Regiment, but without an artillery barrage, set out about 6 a.m. and, meeting only slight opposition on the exposed right flank, in mid-morning reached the **Lugo - Massa Lombarda** railway a quarter of a mile from the canal. Italians said the enemy had gone from **Lugo** during the night. A patrol from 15 Platoon entered the town and found that a group of partisans had taken charge. They handed over 11 Germans. Meanwhile A and B Companies and the tanks pushed on to the **Canale di Lugo**, and were established across it well before midday.

With less distance to go, 28 and 25 Battalions, also with tank support, began their exploitation about 8 a.m. and were reported on the canal about an hour later; 24 Battalion, pivoting on its B Company, conformed by bringing A Company to the line of a track which ran south-westwards from a right-angle bend in the canal.

The Maoris met no opposition, only small groups of Italians looking at the destruction the bombardment had done to their homes. 'Some were very outspoken, but the Italian linguists among the Maoris were equally terse and reminded them that **Italy** had started the war and that they had only themselves to blame for the

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<sup>1</sup> *2nd New Zealand Divisional Artillery*, p. 705.

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devastation.’<sup>1</sup> Some horse-drawn vehicles, including at least two howitzers, were captured by 24 and 25 Battalions.

In the small pocket between the bridgeheads won by the New Zealand Division and **8 Indian Division, 9 Infantry Brigade** had been given the task—its first assignment—of capturing the small town of **Cotignola**. The attacking force of 27 Battalion with Kangaroos and tanks<sup>2</sup> was unable to cross the **Senio** until after daybreak because the support weapons of 21 and 28 Battalions had precedence, and by the time the 27th had assembled on the other side of the river it was no longer required. The 78th Division, opposite **Cotignola**, had seen white flags in the town and had sent troops to investigate. The enemy had gone.

(v)

The near stopbank of the **Senio** was still smouldering from the flames of the Wasps and Crocodiles when the infantry of 8 Indian Division stormed it at the same time as the New Zealanders began their assault.

On the far right 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of 19 Indian Infantry Brigade overcame opposition on both stopbanks and by mid-morning on the 10th had also crossed the Canale di **Lugo**. The 6/13th Frontier Force Rifles of **19 Brigade** had harder fighting. One company quickly secured a foothold on the near stopbank, and another company, passing through, ‘discarded their boats and jumped into the water which was four feet six inches deep at this place. In spite of a withering but somewhat wild fire coming from the far bank, they, too, secured a crossing.’<sup>3</sup>

The exploits of one man, Sepoy Ali Haider, contributed very largely to the Frontier Force Rifles’ progress. He ‘waded into the **Senio** with the left hand section of one of the forward platoons. Almost immediately, German machine gunners opened fire from the posts about sixty yards away on the left flank. Man after man in the platoon fell dead or

wounded. ... Of Ali Haider's section, only two men besides himself succeeded in running the gauntlet of death. The remainder of the platoon and the rest of the company were temporarily held up.' <sup>4</sup> The sepoy, although wounded in the back by a stick grenade, charged a German post and wounded its four occupants. While attacking another post, he was wounded

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<sup>1</sup> *Maori Battalion*, pp. 459–60.

<sup>2</sup> Under 27 Bn's command were A Sqn of **19 Armd Regt**, C Sqn of **4 Hussars** (Kangaroos) and a detachment of E Aslt Sqn, RAC/RE; **4 Fd Regt** was in support.

<sup>3</sup> *Official History of the Indian Forces in the Second World War 1939–45, The Italian Campaign 1943–45*, p. 621.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

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again, this time in the right leg and arm, but crawled towards the Germans and threw a grenade, which seriously wounded two of them; the other two surrendered. The rest of the company then crossed the **Senio** and occupied the far bank, and the advance continued. Ali Haider was awarded the Victoria Cross.

The 21st Indian Infantry Brigade, on the left of the 19th, ran into stiff opposition and suffered many casualties. <sup>1</sup> The enemy had survived the bombardment in deeply dug defences and, 'though badly shaken, was nevertheless very much alive. Too soon a shower of mortar bombs was falling between the floodbanks and close range machine gun fire met the Indians from every quarter.' <sup>2</sup> Nevertheless men from both 1/5 Mahratta Light Infantry and 3/15 Punjab Regiment succeeded in wading to the far side, where 'the most vicious fighting in which 3/15 Punjab [on the left] had ever been engaged took place. ... on both banks of the river the Punjabis were storming dug-out after dug-out with hand grenades, and

tommy-guns, whilst the Germans made desperate sorties to drive them off the banks.’<sup>3</sup>

When the survivors of a Mahratta company were compelled to withdraw to the shelter of the near stopbank, Sepoy Namdeo Jadhao carried back two wounded men from the far bank through the deep water to a place of safety, and then alone charged and wiped out three German posts, which silenced the machine-gun fire on the near bank and enabled his company to cross again and secure the far bank. Namdeo Jadhao was awarded the Victoria Cross.

By daybreak the Mahrattas had advanced beyond the river, the Punjabis had made some progress towards **Lugo**, and 1 Jaipur Infantry had completed the clearing of the enemy from the near stopbank.

In **19 Brigade's** sector the engineers, with scarcely any German interference, built two Bailey bridges; tanks passed over the first at 4.15 a.m. and wheeled vehicles over the second at 11 a.m. on the 10th. In addition six six-pounder anti-tank guns and two jeeps were hauled across a steel cableway before dawn. Bridge-building in 21 Brigade's sector was delayed by the fighting. The Mahratta anti-tank gunners erected a steel cableway under mortar and machine-gun fire, and hauled over four six-pounder guns and two jeeps. The engineers, working in most difficult circumstances, opened

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<sup>1</sup> The Indian official war history does not say how many casualties were sustained by 8 Ind Div while crossing the **Senio**.

<sup>2</sup> *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy*, Part IV, Sec. C, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Official History of the Indian Forces in the Second World War 1939–45, The Italian Campaign 1943–45*, p. 627.

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an Ark-bridge crossing for tanks before 6 a.m. and a trestle bridge for

**light vehicles about three hours later.**

**Undoubtedly 8 Indian Division had far more numerous casualties and took longer than the New Zealand Division to cross the Senio because the enemy had not been cleared from the near stopbank before the attack started.**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## IV: GATE-CRASHING THE SANTERNO LINE

### *IV: Gate-crashing the Santerno Line*

(i)

**General Freyberg** held a conference at 9 a.m. on 10 April in the farmhouse where 5 Brigade had its headquarters. Brigadiers **Bonifant**<sup>1</sup> (5 Brigade) and **Parkinson** (6 Brigade) were able to report that the attack over the **Senio** had been a complete success. Major Cox gave an appreciation of the situation: 'I think there is now a hole in front of 6 Brigade and that 5 Brigade will meet the heaviest resistance.' The enemy 'has been forced over to the right and is probably pulling back along the **Lugo** road.'<sup>2</sup> The General gave orders that the advance was to continue at 12.30 p.m., when the heavy bombing had stopped.

The intention was to gate-crash the **Santerno** line before the enemy manned it. The Santerno River was a more formidable natural barrier than the **Senio**. In the region towards which the Division was heading it presented a double obstacle in front of the town of **Massa Lombarda**: an embanked channel had been cut to carry the water straight across the loops of its original sinuous course (the Santerno Morto). Aerial photographs showed that the old bed was dry, but like the canalised river was a tank obstacle well prepared with defence works.

Later in the morning the GOC told **Bonifant** to 'push on. Withdraw back a bit before the heavy bombing. Then at 12.30 split out using artillery as you want it and get to the **Santerno**.' He also told **Parkinson** to 'push like hell at 12.30... you must get the near flood bank and as much as you can of the far bank but don't push out into the blue without bridges. The limit is the Po.'<sup>3</sup> It was decided to do without the artillery barrage planned for the crossing of the **Scolo Tratturo**, midway between the **Senio** and the **Santerno**, and to support the advance with tanks and artillery concentrations.

<sup>1</sup> **Brig I. L. Bonifant**, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; **Adelaide**; 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; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>3</sup> GOC's diary.

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Cox was correct in his forecast that 5 Brigade would meet stronger resistance than the 6th. The tanks of C Squadron, 18 Regiment, accompanying 21 Battalion, had no difficulty in crossing the almost dry **Canale di Lugo**, which ran on an embankment above the level of the plain. 'But just beyond it Jerry suddenly showed his teeth. As the Shermans were dispersing under the trees by the road [south of **Lugo**], 88-millimetre shells began to come in thick and fast from in front of the right flank.' <sup>1</sup> Almost immediately the self-propelled 25-pounders of 1 Royal Horse Artillery went into action, but their observation-post tank was knocked out, its commander killed and all the crew wounded. The leading tank of C Squadron and the artillery engaged the position from which the enemy was shooting, and later, when the enemy had gone, a Tiger tank was found abandoned with a track broken by shellfire.

The 23rd Battalion, after taking about 10 hours to make its way from its location in reserve through the congestion of traffic on the roads and at the **Senio River** crossing, passed through 21 Battalion about 2 p.m., and with A Squadron of 18 Regiment in support, advanced together with 28 (Maori) Battalion (on its left) towards the **Scolo Tratturo**, half a mile beyond the **Canale di Lugo**. The 21st Battalion remained deployed south-west of **Lugo**.

The 23rd was opposed at the **Scolo Tratturo** by machine-gun and mortar fire, much of which came from the right of the embankment of the **Lugo – Massa Lombarda** railway, which followed the direction of the

advance to the **Santerno River**, a mile and a half away. D Company, on the right, assaulted and reduced a strongpoint, killed some of the enemy and took a few prisoners. As a Tiger tank was concealed behind two houses on the immediate front, and there was much less opposition on the extreme left flank, Lieutenant- Colonel Thomas decided that while D Company advanced along the railway embankment, A Company should make a wide left-hook which would take it some distance behind the strongpoint containing the tank. A Company made contact with the Maoris on the left and continued on as far as a minefield near the **Santerno**, but as this was covered by machine-gun fire, withdrew to a lateral road about 500 yards from the river. D Company occupied a house a similar distance from the river. While going forward to support A Company, C Company attempted to eliminate the strongpoint which A had bypassed, but the enemy still resisted and was left to his fate. <sup>2</sup>

The engineers bulldozed crossings of the **Canale di Lugo**, placed Ark bridges in the **Scolo Tratturo**, and filled demolitions and small

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 618.

<sup>2</sup> Next day the 30-odd Germans at the strongpoint, finding themselves completely cut off, came out under a white flag and surrendered.

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canals, which enabled the tanks of 18 and 20 Armoured Regiments and the support weapons of 5 and 6 Brigades to get through on roads leading towards the **Santerno**. A Squadron of 18 Regiment lost a tank with a broken track at the **Canale di Lugo** and another which slipped off a narrow bridge and ended on its side in the **Scolo Tratturo**. Its other tanks bypassed the German pocket and set out to catch 23 Battalion's leading infantry. 'This was not easy country, mostly thick vines strung on wires and trees cutting across the line of advance, and the tank commanders, advancing blind, had a terrible job keeping in touch with the infantry. On the other hand, it was just as hard for Jerry to see A

**Squadron as it pushed on past his flank.’<sup>1</sup>**

**While advancing to the *Scolo Tratturo* 28 (Maori) Battalion, with B Squadron of 18 Regiment in support, at first passed unmanned strongpoints and dummy guns. When D Company, which was ahead of C on its right, emerged from some trees on to a field of foot-high wheat just short of the *Scolo Tratturo*, it was engaged by four machine guns. Without hesitation Private Nia-Nia<sup>2</sup> led his section in a charge which silenced the four posts, killed 11 Germans, cleared some houses and took four prisoners, at the cost of one man wounded.**

**C Company of 28 Battalion made good progress until it also was held up by machine-gun posts close to the *Scolo Tratturo* and by a 105-millimetre gun at a house beyond it. Lieutenant Tibble<sup>3</sup> brought up a six-pounder anti-tank gun, which was manhandled to a suitable position and with its first shot scattered the German gunners; its second shot, a direct hit, was a knock-out. C Company had lost wireless contact with B Squadron, but Private Maangi<sup>4</sup> crossed open ground swept by fire to guide the tanks. The Maoris, with the tanks in support, then ‘surged forward with their bayonets at the ready. The enemy asked for no quarter and received none. Three Maoris were killed and six wounded, but there were ten nests of rifle pits filled with dead men when the company pushed on.’<sup>5</sup>**

**After a brief halt for reorganisation 28 Battalion resumed the advance about an hour before nightfall. Every house had a white flag waving from the roof, and Italians indicated that the enemy had fled. At the *Santerno* C Company put a post on the near stop-bank, which was not manned by the enemy, and D Company put one on the old bank of a loop of the *Santerno Morto* east of the**

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 619.

<sup>2</sup> **Cpl G. Nia-Nia**, MM; Wairoa; born NZ 7 May 1924; labourer.

<sup>3</sup> **Lt Te R. W. Tibble**, MC, m.i.d.; Te Araroa; born NZ 24 Oct 1913; drover; twice wounded.

<sup>4</sup> **Pte P. Maangi**, DCM; Cape Runaway; born Cape Runaway, 27 Dec 1923; labourer.

<sup>5</sup> *Maori Battalion*, p. 462.

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river. The rest of the battalion came up in rear and the position was secure before midnight.

(ii)

Sixth Brigade was accidentally bombed shortly before it was about to advance to the **Scolo Tratturo**. Flying Fortresses and Liberators, a total of 848 aircraft, dropped 179,190 20-pound fragmentation bombs in front of the **Polish Corps** and **5 Corps** between 11 a.m. and 12.30 p.m. Not all of them found their assigned targets close to the **Santerno River**; many fell in the vicinity of one of **8 Indian Division's** bridges on the **Senio River** and did much damage among the men and vehicles waiting to cross; some others caused 20 or 30 casualties among the foremost troops of **25 Battalion** and other New Zealand units near the **Canale di Lugo**.

Sixth Brigade began to advance about 1 p.m., with **25** and **24** Battalions supported by the tanks of **20 Regiment** and artillery concentrations, and about two hours later had reached the **Scolo Tratturo**. Apart from the sporadic resistance of small isolated groups, the enemy made no attempt to dispute the two battalions' progress. The **25th** discovered—as did the Maoris—that what appeared to be abandoned field guns were wooden dummies.

A and B Companies of **25 Battalion** passed through C and D, which had led to the **Scolo Tratturo**, and continued the advance to a lateral road about 1000 yards short of the **Santerno**, where they halted in the evening. Likewise A and B Companies of **24 Battalion** passed through C

and D at the **Scolo Tratturo**; later after crossing the **Scolo del Fossatone** half a mile past the Tratturo, C and D again took the lead and finally halted in the vicinity of the same lateral road as had 25 Battalion's leading companies.

The 26th Battalion, on the left flank, kept pace with the advance by a method called 'hem-stitching', in which each company in turn circled round on the right to take the lead. This covered the Division's exposed flank. The Poles had crossed the **Senio** in the morning of the 10th and by evening had reached the **Canale di Lugo**, in their sector still about 3000 yards from the **Santerno**.

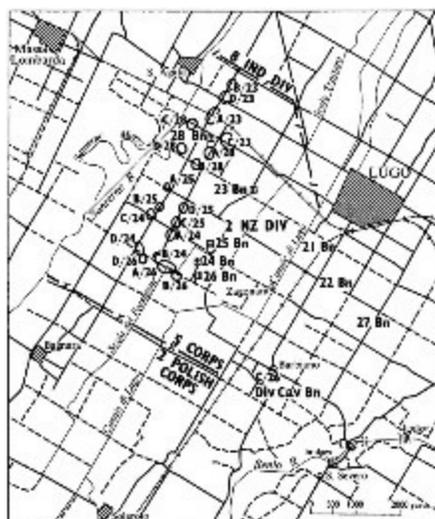
Meanwhile **9 NZ Infantry Brigade** completed its crossing of the **Senio**.

Thus, by the end of 10 April, the New Zealand Division had advanced six miles in 24 hours and was ready to drive across the next obstacle, the **Santerno River**. On the right **8 Indian Division**, which did not cross the **Scolo Tratturo** until nightfall, closed up to the **Santerno River** on the morning of the 11th, 'only 10 hours behind the New Zealanders'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy*, Part IV, Sec. C, p. 38.

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SITUATION ON THE NIGHT OF 10-11 APRIL 1945

Casualties suffered by the New Zealand Division on 9 and 10 April were 28 killed <sup>1</sup> and 153 wounded; the majority of these had occurred during the advance after the crossing of the **Senio River**. Fifth Brigade, with 14 killed and 81 wounded, had lost twice as many men as the 6th, with seven killed and 40 wounded (including the casualties caused by the accidental bombing). The engineers had one killed and 14 wounded, and Divisional Cavalry Battalion, which gave the engineers close protection while they were building bridges and clearing routes beyond the river, also had one killed

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<sup>1</sup> Some men who are shown in the casualty lists as having died of wounds after 10 April have not been included in this total although they may have been wounded on 9 or 10 April. The casualties of British units under **2 NZ Div's** command are not known.

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and 14 wounded. The rest of the Division, including the armour and artillery, had only one man killed and four wounded.

By 6 p.m. on the 10th 591 Germans had passed through the Division's prisoner-of-war cage, and another 36 had been evacuated through medical channels; 24 hours later the total had reached 877. The New Zealanders had encountered only *98 Infantry Division*. The interrogation of the prisoners and study of captured documents proved that the enemy had hoped to check the attack, if not on the **Senio** stopbank, at least among the houses from 1000 to 2000 yards behind it. The defence in depth consisted of two lines of diggings and wiring, behind which were grouped the reserve companies. Six Tiger tanks and some self-propelled guns were to have formed the spearhead of the counter-attacks to regain the **Senio** stopbank. If these failed, **98 Division** was to have fallen back towards the **Santerno** (the Laura Line), pausing or leaving rearguards on the **Canale di Lugo** and **Scolo Tratturo** or on the **Scolo del Fossatone**.

‘The Senio part of the scheme failed completely and the LAURA

outpost part was compromised by the weight of the attack and the tactical surprise it achieved. The bombardment and the flame-throwers, although they apparently did not cause heavy casualties in wounded and dead on most of the line, reduced the garrison on the north [west] bank to a fit state for surrendering in large numbers. The barrage and advance in depth carried the attack through the remaining lines before any counter-attack could be mounted.... The Tigers could not act in the dark, separated from their infantry. The result was that at dawn the enemy found himself not only off the **Senio** but with a large gap in his front, with *I* and *II Bns* of *289 Regt* virtually out of action and *II/290* badly mauled. He had pulled back *I/290* from **Cotignola** and *I/117* from the **Senio** north of it during the night. These and his reserve battalion (*II/117*) provided him with something to delay the advance south of **Lugo** and gave him at least a screen to put on the **Santerno**.... Small units ... sent back two days previously to dig in on the **Scolo Tratturo**, were encountered during the morning, and the Tigers came in on the scene in their delaying role, but they were insufficient to halt the advance to the **Santerno**.<sup>1</sup>

(iii)

The New Zealand Division had outstripped both 8 Indian Division on its right and 3 **Carpathian Division** of the **Polish Corps** on its left; if it was to maintain its momentum, it could not wait

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<sup>1</sup> 2 **NZ Div** Intelligence summary.

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to attack simultaneously with the two flanking divisions to secure bridgeheads over the **Santerno River**. **General Freyberg** therefore decided to keep going and to push across the river at dawn on 11 April.

During the evening of the 10th Lieutenant-Colonel Hutchens had instructed C and D Companies of 24 Battalion to start at 5.45 a.m., test the enemy's strength and, if possible, occupy the near stopbank and attempt a silent crossing. With tank support the two companies reached

the near stopbank unhindered, except for sporadic mortar fire, after an advance of about half a mile. Within half an hour C Company, on the right, had waded through the water, which was about three feet deep. Corporal H. E. Smith's <sup>1</sup> section surprised some Germans on the far bank, killed six of them, and occupied 50 yards of the bank although still under enfilade fire from the left flank. D Company crossed the river not long after C, but one of its platoons was held up by fire from a concealed dugout until Private **Freeman** <sup>2</sup> captured it; although wounded, he escorted eight prisoners back across the river.

A and B Companies of 25 Battalion had been instructed to make a silent attack at dawn. Patrols from both companies reached the river, and shortly after 6.30 a.m., when reports were received that 24 Battalion had men across the river, Lieutenant-Colonel Norman ordered A and B to keep going and C and D to be ready to follow. By 8 a.m. A and B Companies were consolidated on the far bank. Thus, early in the morning of 11 April, 6 Brigade had established four companies on the far side of the **Santerno**—but the banks of the winding Santerno Morto still lay ahead.

Fifth Brigade had not yet crossed the **Santerno**. On the right flank 23 Battalion was astride the **Lugo- Massa Lombarda** railway about 500 yards from the river, and the ground held was thickly sown with mines. Sergeant **Michie** <sup>3</sup> led a patrol from D Company to the bridge site on the **Lugo- Massa Lombarda** road, about a quarter of a mile downstream from the railway, where he reconnoitred the river and the opposite bank despite machine-gun and mortar fire. South of the railway **28 Battalion** had a platoon from C Company on the near stopbank and one from D Company on a loop of the Santerno Morto east of the river; between these two platoons the enemy still occupied the near stopbank of the **Santerno**.

The GOC told an orders group conference at 9 a.m. that the Division could either wait until night to do a set-piece attack or

<sup>1</sup> **Cpl H. E. Smith, MM; Auckland; born NZ 18 Nov 1922; nursery worker.**

<sup>2</sup> **Pte H. C. Freeman, MM; Kakahi, Taumarunui; born Kakahi, 14 Jul 1920; carpenter; wounded 12 Apr 1945.**

<sup>3</sup> **Sgt E. F. Michie, MM; born NZ 8 Apr 1923; linen-flax worker; wounded 15 Dec 1943.**

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try to get over the river during the day. It was to attempt the latter because 'we should exploit the soft spot that is there now.' <sup>1</sup> Fifth and 6th Brigades, therefore, were to secure a bridgehead over the **Santerno**; the engineers were to start bridging the river so that two armoured regiments could cross as soon as possible.

Shortly after the conference Brigadier Bonifant ordered 28 Battalion to cross the **Santerno**, while 23 Battalion remained where it was and gave supporting fire. The Maoris were to start at 2 p.m. on a two-company front and under an artillery barrage, and were to hold ground not more than 500 yards beyond the river; they were to have the support of fighter-bombers, tanks and infantry weapons as well as the artillery. The foremost troops withdrew a safe distance before the barrage opened on the near stopbank. A low-flying fighter-bomber dropped a 500-pound bomb about 100 yards in front of Battalion Headquarters, killing a man and wounding two others. Later a message expressing regret for the error was received from the **RAF**.

A Company, on the right, plunged into the muddy water of the **Santerno**. The first man across, Private **Kira**, <sup>2</sup> alone destroyed two machine-gun posts and a sniper post. B Company crossed a footbridge, 18 inches wide and still intact. Beyond the river 'olive trees and orchards in full bloom gave excellent cover to both companies, but searching fire from the railway embankment, at that point some thirty feet high, was showering the men with leaves and twigs.' <sup>3</sup> The artillery

and heavy mortars responded to a request for defensive fire on the embankment. Both Maori companies were reported on their objective at 3.20 p.m. A Company exploited to a point on the railway less than a mile from **Massa Lombarda**, but was obliged to return to avoid Allied air attacks. Many Germans were seen in full flight towards the town.

The air observation post directed the 5.5-inch guns of 5 Medium Regiment (which had already crossed the **Senio**) on to German tanks beyond the **Santerno**. At a house where three tanks were recognised as Tigers, one was knocked out and a vehicle left burning; the other two tanks made off and were being chased by fighter-bombers when they disappeared from view. Spitfires swept across the front engaging targets in or near **Massa Lombarda**, which 'appeared to be in eruption by the amount of smoke and dust rising from it.' <sup>4</sup>

Lieutenant Tibble had been given the task of finding a way to get at least two anti-tank guns over the river to strengthen the bridgehead before the tanks arrived (which would not be until

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> **Cpl J. Kira**, MM; Matauri Bay, Kaeo; born NZ 10 Mar 1920; labourer.

<sup>3</sup> *Maori Battalion*, p. 464.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 465.

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the engineers had completed a bridge). The Anti-Tank Platoon solved the problem by loading four rafters from a demolished house on the portee which towed the two guns to the river. The Maoris manoeuvred the rafters into place across the water channel and then hauled and pushed the guns over the river and across both stopbanks. By dusk A and B Companies each had an anti-tank gun ready for action.

Enemy tanks were reported at several points, and artillery concentrations were fired against these and other targets. One Tiger actually stopped alongside the house in which A Company had its headquarters. From an upstairs window Captain **Harris**<sup>1</sup> watched it 'nestle in alongside the wall and switch off its engine. The Maoris kept studiously out of sight; the turret top opened and one of the crew sat on the edge for a while and conversed with others in the bowels of the Tiger. Harris told one of his men to slip Hawkins grenades under the tracks as soon as the turret closed. This was done, but when shortly afterwards the unwanted visitor moved away the grenades failed to explode. Probably in the excitement of the moment they had not been primed.'<sup>2</sup>

A horse and cart containing three Germans singing 'Lilli Marlene' came down the road into B Company's lines; they had thought they were bringing rations to their own men on the river line. The Maoris considered the soup unpalatable but liked the black bread. Altogether **28 Battalion** took about 30 prisoners on 11 April.

Meanwhile **23 Battalion** rested in houses, some of which had to be cleared of the enemy—these brought its tally of prisoners for the day to 47. Two patrols from D Company were prevented by small-arms fire from getting near the bridge site on the **Lugo** – Massa Lombarda road, but a patrol from A Company succeeded in silencing a machine-gun post near the railway bridge which had been troubling **28 Battalion**.

(iv)

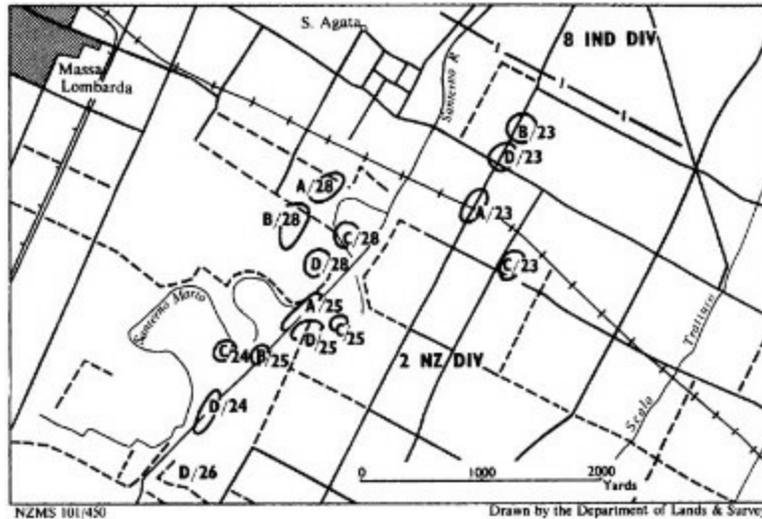
Before 6 Brigade resumed the advance on 11 April, its next objective, the Santerno Morto, was shelled by the medium and field guns. The 24th Battalion, on the left, was to secure the larger of the two loops of the old riverbed on the brigade's front, and 25 Battalion the smaller. Taking advantage of the barrage fired for **28 Battalion's** attack at 2 p.m., A Company of the 25th had no difficulty in reaching its objective; B Company came up on its

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt I. G. Harris, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ 10 Oct 1914; farmer; twice wounded.**

<sup>2</sup> ***Maori Battalion*, p. 466.**

left, and D put two platoons across the river to cover the site of a proposed bridge.



SITUATION ON THE AFTERNOON OF 11 APRIL 1945

SITUATION ON THE AFTERNOON OF 11 APRIL 1945

Meanwhile 24 Battalion was exposed to fire from the left flank, where the Poles had not yet reached the **Santerno**. To counter this, 26 Battalion was brought up towards the river, where it also came under fire from the Poles' sector. Towards evening, however, the Poles closed up to the river, and at 7 p.m. they attacked under a barrage and secured a crossing.

Already, at 6.30 p.m., 24 Battalion had begun its advance to the large loop of the Santerno Morto. D Company reached the banks of the western part of it soon after nightfall, but C Company was forced to ground by machine-gun fire and grenades as it approached the eastern part, and had to retire; consequently B Company, in the middle, did not attempt to occupy the farthest segment. The places still held by the enemy were 'stonked' and harassed by the medium and field guns and

mortars, and next morning, when the **Santerno** had been bridged and tanks had arrived, B and C Companies completed the occupation of the loop. By that time, also, C Company of 26 Battalion was holding a section of the far stop-bank of the **Santerno** on the 24th's left flank.

(v)

**General Freyberg** told Brigadier Parkinson late in the afternoon of the 11th that 'we want to get two regiments of armour across to open the **Lugo – Massa Lombarda** road along which we will have to maintain; then we shall get everybody across in two groups, turn him out of **Massa Lombarda** by going round it, and then I will put Gentry [9 Brigade] through.' He told Brigadier Bonifant that 5 Brigade 'must pass a regiment of tanks across, clear Sandy's [23 Battalion's] front and open up the road—that is tonight's objective.' <sup>1</sup>

The Division was to continue the advance to a line just short of **Massa Lombarda** and on the railway which ran south-westward towards **Imola**, and then to a second line just beyond **Massa Lombarda**. But first 5 Brigade was to be responsible for clearing the village of Sant' Agata, on the right flank, which would permit the construction of a bridge where the **Lugo – Massa Lombarda** road crossed the **Santerno**.

Sappers from **6 Field Company** began work before nightfall on the 11th on a bridge in **28 Battalion's** sector. Despite harassing shell and mortar fire the approaches were bulldozed before it was dark, which allowed the bridging train to get to the site without delay. Because the Maoris' bridgehead was only about 500 yards deep, the enemy could observe the site and interfere with the bridge-building with machine-gun fire from that flank. Lance-Sergeant **Roberts**, <sup>2</sup> who was in charge of the work, placed a sapper with a Bren gun where he could divert some of the hostile fire. A bulldozer driven by Sapper **Strahl** <sup>3</sup> under mortar fire made a gap in the far stopbank, and the construction of a 40-foot low-level Bailey bridge was completed by 1.30 a.m. Within the next two hours two squadrons of **18 Armoured Regiment**, **32 Anti-Tank Battery** and **28 Battalion's** support weapons were safely over the river. A

squadron of **20 Armoured Regiment** crossed just before dawn on the 12th, followed by the third squadron of 18 Regiment. The other two squadrons of the 20th used a crossing in 6 Brigade's sector, where much bulldozing had to be done before one Ark tank was placed on top of another to make a bridge.

The 23rd Battalion was to pass through **28 Battalion's** bridgehead and attack northward to Sant' Agata. The tanks would join the two battalions at dawn, if not earlier, and when the marrying-up of the tanks and support arms with the infantry was complete, they were to begin the westward exploitation north of Massa Lombarda. Sixth Brigade would advance south of the town.

The Maoris' bridgehead was on ground free of mines. By crossing the **Santerno** in that sector, therefore, 23 Battalion would avoid the risk of casualties which certainly would occur in a frontal

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> **Sgt R. J. Roberts**, DCM; **Hamilton**; born Weber, 6 Sep 1910; carpenter; wounded 15 Dec 1944.

<sup>3</sup> **Cpl I. F. Strahl**, MM; **Kaikoura**; born NZ 24 Apr 1921; clerk.

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assault on a defended stopbank and over ground thickly sown with mines. Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas's plan was for C Company to cross the river in **28 Battalion's** bridgehead and wheel to the right to cross the railway embankment; with the aid of the tanks he hoped to get to it, the company was to take a group of houses outside Sant' Agata. A Company, also with tank support, was to pass through in rear of C, and these two companies were to swing in west of the village while D Company engaged the enemy with a limited frontal attack across the river from the east.

C Company attacked from the Maoris' bridgehead about 9 a.m., with

14 and 15 Platoons going towards the railway embankment between the river and a road which passed under the railway, and 13 Platoon, on the right, towards the **Santerno** stopbank south of the railway. After quickly clearing the stopbank 13 Platoon captured the railway station, about a quarter of a mile from the river. The other two platoons, after killing some Germans, dug in on the southern slope of the embankment, where they had lively exchanges with the enemy still holding firmly in places on the other side. At one stage 15 Platoon crossed the embankment in pursuit of a party of Germans, but met a larger group (possibly fresh reinforcements), and when a Tiger emerged from behind a house, the platoon returned to the southern side of the embankment. When 14 Platoon tried to advance beyond the embankment, it also found itself in danger of being cut off by a large party of Germans, so retired.

C Company was joined about 1.30 a.m. by A Company (less 9 Platoon, which had been given another task), and together they made a further attempt to drive the enemy from the embankment. The A Company men tried to capture some houses on the road which ran under the railway towards Sant' Agata about half a mile from the river, and in an assault in which Sergeant **Russell**<sup>1</sup> distinguished himself, killed or drove back the first Germans they met, but were halted and had to be pulled back to C Company. Further progress seemed impossible without tank support.

After crossing the low-level bridge over the **Santerno**, B Squadron of 18 Regiment linked up with the Maoris, and A Squadron went out towards the railway to help 23 Battalion. Because the embankment was too steep for tanks, a bulldozer began to make a diagonal track up the side of it, but this was abandoned when it was realised that the Shermans would be sitting shots as they went over the top. 'Indeed, 88-millimetre shells were whistling low overhead just in that place.' On the other side 'were wide Tiger tracks all over

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<sup>1</sup> **Sgt J. Russell**, MM; Geraldine; born **Temuka**, 22 Mar 1920; farmer; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

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the place, and the infantry reported a group of big tanks not far ahead. It looked as if A Squadron, once across the railway, would run into something tough.’<sup>1</sup>

The tanks might have to use the road which passed under the railway. After a bold assault by 14 and 15 Platoons to clear the defenders from the underpass, one of B Squadron's tanks went through, but ‘was immediately drilled by a small armour-piercing shell from straight ahead.’<sup>2</sup> The bulldozer made a fresh track over the embankment nearer the **Santerno**, and about 10 a.m. a troop of A Squadron crossed and took cover among vines and trees on the outskirts of Sant' Agata. By this time 23 Battalion had crossed the river east of the village, presumably while the enemy was distracted by the outflanking attack at the railway.

Having concluded that his plan to take Sant' Agata from the southwest had failed, Thomas at 2.15 a.m. had sent B Company northwards along the eastern side of the **Santerno**, with orders to cross it where **8 Indian Division** was reported to have done so and then to close in on the village from that side. B Company, however, had found that **8 Indian Division** was not yet over the river, so returned to its houses to await further orders.

Thomas then decided to commit D Company to a frontal attack across the river. The information gained by Sergeant Michie's reconnaissance the previous day now proved valuable. It had not been possible to get D Company's supporting tanks (protected by 9 Platoon) to the place where the company was to cross the river, but without much difficulty 18 Platoon gained a foothold on the far bank; 16 and 17 Platoons passed through and took the enemy completely by surprise. D Company entered Sant' Agata and occupied some houses.

At dawn B Company crossed the river to reinforce D's right flank and, also taking the enemy by surprise, rounded up many prisoners in a few minutes. Fighter-bombers, which were already attacking targets close to 23 Battalion's foremost troops, dislodged a Tiger tank. The New

**Zealand infantry and tanks consolidated in and around Sant' Agata.**

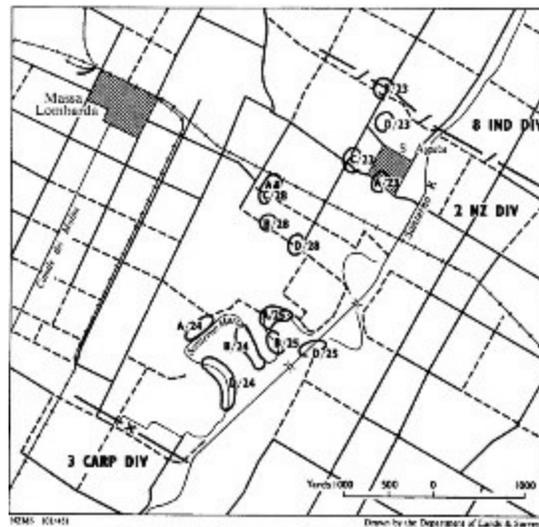
**On 12 April the engineers erected two high-level bridges over the **Santerno**: 7 Field Company built a 120-foot Bailey between the **Lugo – Massa Lombarda** railway and the road near Sant' Agata, and 8 Field Company a 110-foot Bailey where the straightened river course intersected the winding **Santerno Morto**. These bridges, on the route from the **Senio** for each brigade, were essential to the maintenance of the Division beyond the **Santerno**.**

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, pp. 621–2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 621.

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SITUATION AT 1.30 P.M. ON 12 APRIL 1945

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**As at the **Senio**, **8 Indian Division** suffered numerous casualties while crossing the **Santerno**. After a short artillery preparation, which began at 5.30 p.m. on the 11th, the Wasps and Crocodiles—with the exception of one Crocodile—failed to flame the banks of the river. The two assaulting battalions of 17 Indian Infantry Brigade, after being exposed to machine-gun, shell and mortar fire from both flanks on the near stopbank, waded waist-deep through the water, and on the far side came**

under fire from almost every direction. On the right **1/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles** was counter-attacked five or six times and lost many men killed and wounded. On the left **1/12 Frontier Force Regiment** succeeded in occupying some houses beyond the river, but the seven Kangaroos bringing its two reserve companies to the river were all blown up on mines.

The **1st Royal Fusiliers** passed through **1/12 Frontier Force Regiment's** small bridgehead and made some progress until counter-attacked by German infantry and tanks at 6.30 a.m. The enemy fire had delayed the construction of a Bailey bridge, but by dawn three Ark tanks had succeeded in making one crossing, by which some British tanks entered the bridgehead. Later in the day, when two more bridges were thrown across the river, **8 Indian Division** firmly held its bridgehead over the **Santerno**.

(vi)

The **Maori Battalion** resumed the advance from its bridgehead at 6 a.m. on the 12th, with the assistance of a barrage fired by **5 Field Regiment**. The leaders had gone scarcely half a mile when they came under heavy fire from the front and the railway embankment on the right. The tanks of B Squadron, **18 Regiment**, stopped to return the fire, and the infantry took shelter in whatever buildings were handy. C Squadron's tanks were brought up to help; one was hit by a light anti-tank shell, which did only slight damage. The air observation post found four German tanks at a house on the other side of the railway embankment and directed the artillery on to them. Aircraft were 'diving and strafing round **Massa Lombarda** in a most satisfying way.' <sup>1</sup>

The **Maori Battalion's** advance had created a gap of about 1000 yards between it and **25 Battalion**, which was occupying the smaller of the two loops of the **Santerno Morto** in **6 Brigade's** sector. To close this gap, therefore, **26 Battalion** was ordered to pass through the **25th** and occupy a line between **24 Battalion's** foremost positions on the larger loop and the **Maori Battalion**. When **26 Battalion's** leading company (A) was

crossing the Santerno at midday, however, advice was received that the plan had been changed and there was to be an attack by 5 and 6 Brigades in the afternoon.

While 24 Battalion protected the left flank, 23, 28 and 26 Battalions, in that order from right to left, were to advance 1200 yards at the rate of 100 yards in three minutes under a barrage to a line just short of **Massa Lombarda**; later they were to advance under another timed barrage to a line just beyond the town. The Division was then to regroup and continue with 6 Brigade on the right and 9 Brigade on the left.

The barrage, fired by **5 Field Regiment**, **4 Field Regiment** and **1 Royal Horse Artillery**, opened at 3 p.m. and began to lift forward 20 minutes later. The 23rd Battalion attacked with B Company on the right and C on the left, followed by D and A. Tiger tanks which had earlier opposed the battalion still tried to delay its progress. Although stonked by the artillery one of them prevented B Company from leaving the start line on time. The heavy guns (7.2-inch) shelled the Tiger's location, and tanks of A Squadron,

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 622.

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18 Regiment, manoeuvred to deal with it. Finally a Sherman 'bounced a 75-millimetre shell off its hide, and the Tiger, unwilling to take any more, made off at top speed in a cloud of dust. A few hundred yards farther on another big tank held its ground for a while, but pulled out after swapping shots with Mowat's <sup>1</sup> tanks, and was seen no more.' <sup>2</sup> B Company and the tanks then proceeded to the objective, the lateral road just east of **Massa Lombarda** and north of the railway. C Company lost touch with B and was not accompanied by tanks of A Squadron, but was assisted by B Squadron (with **28 Battalion** on the left) in reaching the objective.

Before the advance began the medium guns scored a direct hit which

set fire to a Tiger tank reported by **28 Battalion** near the railway. The leading companies of this battalion (A and B) had difficulty in getting back behind the artillery opening line. A Company called for smoke to cover this move and sheltered in some houses which were shelled by a tank on the other side of the railway. After knocking out a six-pounder anti-tank gun, this German tank was driven off by shell and mortar fire. From a start line which straddled the railway **28 Battalion** advanced with A Company (on the right) and B, followed by C and D. B Squadron's tanks set fire to a Tiger tank which was sitting out in the open—it had probably been disabled by air attack—and 'brewed up' another tank which was camouflaged in a wooden shed. Near a high-walled cemetery a Tiger or Panther was seen in a roadway, but was able to get away in the failing light.

At the cemetery A Company had 'a short sharp fight' with about 30 enemy. 'They fought until they were all killed. The Germans were apparently on the point of pulling out for their gear was neatly stacked and ready for removal.'<sup>3</sup> This was the only infantry clash. While taking the evening meal to B Company at the objective, Staff-Sergeant **Rangitaura**<sup>4</sup> went too far in his jeep and entered the outskirts of **Massa Lombarda**. He took shelter when 18 Germans approached, dashed out behind them and, by pretending to call up others to help him, persuaded them to surrender and hand over their arms.

The 26th Battalion was still crossing the **Santerno** to fill the gap between 5 and 6 Brigades when orders came for the attack. **Lieutenant-Colonel Fairbrother** therefore had very little time to prepare a plan and get his men on the start line. Verbal orders were given for A and B Companies, which were already across

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<sup>1</sup> **Sgt W. A. Mowat**, m.i.d.; born NZ 26 Jun 1922; shepherd; killed in action 13 Apr 1945.

<sup>2</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 624.

<sup>3</sup> *Maori Battalion*, pp. 468–9.

<sup>4</sup> **S-Sgt K. Rangitauira**, MM, m.i.d.; Murupara; born **Rotorua**, 13 Mar 1919; labourer; wounded 3 Jun 1944.

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the river or about to cross, to form up on the start line, with A on the right, and each with a troop of tanks from C Squadron of 20 Regiment in support. D Company, also with a troop of tanks, was to follow and cover the left flank.

Despite such short notice the three companies were in position before the barrage opened. During the advance they met stronger opposition than had been expected—from tanks and machine guns. From a ditch alongside a road Lance-Sergeant Grainger <sup>1</sup> and his assistant disabled a Tiger with two shots from a Piat at close range. The crew was taken prisoner. One of C Squadron's tanks fired smoke and armour-piercing high-explosive shells at another Tiger. A shot aimed at the driver's hatch struck the periscope, ricocheted and exploded inside the tank, which stopped about 50 yards away. Nine Germans, including several spandau gunners, baled out and took shelter in a ditch. One escaped, two died of wounds, and the rest were taken prisoner. C Squadron accounted for another Tiger after the infantry had reached the objective and before the light began to fail. This tank was knocked out in the middle of a crossroads by a 17-pounder Sherman which fired two shots into its rear at a range of 400 yards.

By about 5 p.m. on 12 April the New Zealand Division was firmly on its first objective just short of **Massa Lombarda**. German tanks, horse-drawn transport and motor vehicles, packed with men and gear, could be seen from the air retreating along the roads from the town. The Air Force and artillery attacked these targets.

The Division had captured over 1000 prisoners since the offensive began. Of the 135 Germans who passed through the prisoner-of-war cage on the 12th, half were from *117 Grenadier Regiment of 98 Division* and

(with the notable exception of 28 men from *26 Reconnaissance Battalion of 26 Panzer Division*) most of the others were also from the *98th*. A German officer who had been sent to reconnoitre positions on the *Canale dei Molini* said the New Zealand attack had made it impossible to hold the line of this canal, and in his opinion a withdrawal to the *Sillaro River* was inevitable.

(vii)

When *General Freyberg* learnt of the congestion of vehicles and guns trying to get away from *Massa Lombarda*, he telephoned Brigadiers *Bonifant* and *Parkinson* at 6.45 p.m. and told them to probe ahead; he also rang Brigadier *Gentry* (9 Brigade) and said it appeared the enemy was 'pulling out on rather a big scale. Be

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<sup>1</sup> *WO II B. H. Grainger, MM; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 26 Jun 1922; salesman.*

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prepared to move very fast at first light. This is the time for tanks and Kangaroos as hard as you can get them through.... I think the Hun is a rabble and his tanks have had it.' <sup>1</sup> Later the GOC told General *Keightley* (5 Corps): 'We have written off a certain number of his tanks. I think we will take *Massa Lombarda* tonight and that he will hold an intermediate position tomorrow with tanks and infantry between us and the *Sillaro*.' <sup>2</sup> *Keightley* said General *Leese* would transfer the *Gurkhas* (43 Indian Lorried Infantry Brigade) from the *Polish Corps* to 5 Corps if he could not get the Polish troops up on the left. 'The going for the Poles is slow and sticky and their sappers are not doing their stuff.' <sup>3</sup> *Freyberg* wanted the Poles to get up on the Division's flank in any case.

The Division was to attack to the line of a road on the western side of *Massa Lombarda*. At first it was planned that an artillery barrage, opening at 2 a.m. on 13 April and lifting at the rate of 100 yards in five minutes, was to be fired by five regiments (which were deployed where they could support the advance beyond the *Santerno*), but Brigadier

**Bonifant decided that 5 Brigade did not require a barrage because the leading infantry of 23 Battalion had gone well beyond the objective of the afternoon's attack without meeting resistance and was being troubled already by shells from the Divisional Artillery; further the enemy was known to be withdrawing from [Massa Lombarda](#). It was decided, therefore, that 4 and 6 Field Regiments should fire a barrage for 6 Brigade only.**

**Fifth Brigade attacked with 23 and 21 Battalions. The 21st had left its location near [Lugo](#) in the morning, crossed the [Santerno](#) in the evening, and passed through [28 Battalion](#), which went into reserve at Sant' Agata. Supported by tanks of C Squadron of 18 Regiment, 21 Battalion entered [Massa Lombarda](#) shortly before midnight without meeting the enemy, and reached the objective about 1 a.m. With its men mostly mounted on 18 Regiment's tanks, 23 Battalion pushed on until it also reached the objective about one o' clock; it then bedded down for a few hours'sleep.**

**Because of the lack of opposition Lieutenant-Colonel McPhail decided that 21 Battalion should push on; he asked that there be no artillery fire on the near side of the [Scolo Zaniolo](#), about a mile and a half beyond [Massa Lombarda](#). The battalion made slow progress because of the many tank obstacles, but by 6 a.m. C Company on the right was about half-way to the [Scolo Zaniolo](#), and A Company on the left only about a quarter of a mile from it.**

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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**Patrols found that the bridge had been blown where the road from [Massa Lombarda](#) crossed the canal, and heard enemy tanks and motor**

vehicles in the vicinity.

The leading companies of 6 Brigade, A and B of 26 Battalion on the right and C of the 24th on the left, advancing under the barrage, crossed the **Canale dei Molini** south of **Massa Lombarda** without trouble, and the supporting tanks of 20 Regiment used two bridges which the enemy had left intact. When Tactical Headquarters of 26 Battalion entered the outskirts of **Massa Lombarda** at dawn on 13 April, 'red-eyed civilians emerged from their shelters. ... The town had taken a pounding from the air and civilian casualties had been heavy. Partisans of both sexes were much in evidence.' <sup>1</sup> **Lieutenant-Colonel Fairbrother** ordered A Company, with its platoons travelling on tanks, to continue the advance until contact was made with the enemy. By 6.30 a.m. this company, with seven tanks, was on its way towards the **Scolo Zaniolo**. B Company, also with seven tanks, followed A.

Brigadier Bonifant advised 23 Battalion at 6.15 a.m. of 21 Battalion's progress towards the **Scolo Zaniolo**; 6 Brigade was also pushing on, and he wanted the 23rd to do likewise. Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas therefore ordered A and D Companies to resume the advance immediately, followed by B and C. Again the infantry was mounted on tanks, which took the road leading north-west towards the **Scolo Zaniolo**. While crossing the railway north of **Massa Lombarda** they were fired upon by mortars and machine guns from the vicinity of the **Canale dei Molini**, about 400 yards ahead. This pocket of resistance was soon overcome, and the advance was continued across the flat, open ground between the **Molini** and Zaniolo canals.

For A Squadron, 18 Regiment, this was 'a real tank charge such as had been visualised when 4 Armoured Brigade was formed, but which had very rarely been on the cards in **Italy**... tanks in line abreast blazing away at the enemy on the Zaniolo, who stayed and fought it out to the end. They had no chance. All were either killed or scooped up.' <sup>2</sup> Two bridges were captured intact, and B and C Companies of 23 Battalion and a troop of tanks crossed the **Scolo Zaniolo** and established a bridgehead.

The 23rd Battalion had taken 30-odd prisoners at the cost of only one or two casualties. <sup>3</sup> C and A Companies of 21 Battalion, after taking a further 30-odd prisoners without loss, also crossed the **Scolo Zaniolo**. But despite Thomas's protestation that it was feasible

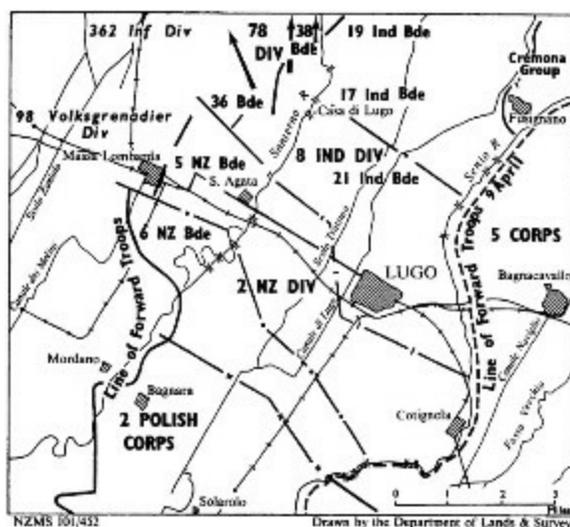
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<sup>1</sup> *26 Battalion*, p. 507.

<sup>2</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 625.

<sup>3</sup> The casualties in 5 Bde's three battalions since the start of the offensive on 9 April were 25 killed and 161 wounded.

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SITUATION AT NIGHTFALL, 12 APRIL 1945

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to go on, 5 Brigade went no farther: it passed into reserve while 6 and 9 Brigades continued the advance.

By this time 2 NZ Division and 8 Indian Division had captured 5 Corps' first objective (the line of the **Canale di Lugo**) and its second (a bridgehead over the **Santerno River**), and had taken well over 2000 prisoners. The intention now was that 78 Division, after passing through 8 Indian Division, should strike northward towards **Bastia** and **Argenta** to link up with the amphibious forces of 5 Corps, and that the New Zealand

**Division should either protect 78 Division's left during this northward drive or continue its own westward advance towards [Budrio](#).**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## CHAPTER 10 – THE WESTWARD THRUST

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## I: THE SILLARO RIVER AND MEDICINA

### *I: The Sillaro River and Medicina*

(i)

ON 13 April **Eighth Army** had completed the first phase of the offensive begun on the 9th; three divisions—8 Indian and 2 New Zealand of **5 Corps** and 3 Carpathian of **2 Polish Corps**— were firmly established across the **Santerno River**, and an amphibious assault by 56 British Division of **5 Corps** across the flooded ground south of Lake Comacchio had made some progress towards the **Argenta Gap**. The German **98th** and **362 Infantry Divisions** had been thrown back from the **Senio River** by the New Zealand and Indian divisions; **1 Parachute Corps**, astride Route 9, had been compelled to pull back **26 Panzer Division**, whose northernmost regiment had been outflanked by **5 Corps**, and **4 Parachute Division**, in the Apennine foothills, had to retire to conform with the **26th Panzer**. Because of the progress made by 56 Division and 8 Indian Division, **42 Light Division** had withdrawn from a salient at **Alfonsine** on Route 16, and the Italian Cremona Group had occupied this town and advanced along the highway to the **Santerno River**.

The enemy had not yet indicated where and when he intended to use his two reserve divisions, **29** and **90 Panzer Grenadier Divisions**. The **90th** was not expected to leave its central position until Fifth Army began its offensive, when General von Vietinghoff would be better able to assess the situation. The results achieved by Eighth Army's offensive so far did not indicate whether it should concentrate on the northward thrust through the **Argenta Gap** or the westward thrust from the **Santerno** bridgehead. General McCreery therefore decided to increase the weight of both thrusts to the limit of his resources. Orders were given for **78 Division** to advance north from **8 Indian Division's** bridgehead to **Bastia**, where Route 16 crosses the Reno River and enters the **Argenta**

Gap, and for 56 Division to make another outflanking move across the flooded ground south of Lake Comacchio. Fifth Corps was to be relieved of participation in the westward thrust and concentrate on the task of breaching the **Argenta** Gap; to give the westward thrust the necessary momentum, Headquarters 13 Corps and 10 Indian Division were to be brought in on the right of **2 Polish Corps**.

Thirteenth Corps, therefore, was ordered on 12 April to hand over its sector in the hills south of Route 9 to **10 Corps** and to proceed into the **Romagna** plain. The boundary between the Polish Corps and **5 Corps** (later between the **Polish Corps** and 13 Corps) was defined on 13 April so as to give the Poles an axis of advance passing through the towns of **Medicina** and **Budrio**, and 2 NZ Division (which transferred from **5 Corps** to 13 Corps at 6 p.m. on the 14th) a parallel axis of advance passing to the north of these two towns.

The 56th Division's first amphibious operation had begun on the night of 10–11 April. Assisted by a Royal Marine commando advancing on its right flank, 169 Brigade had embarked from the Wedge (between the Reno River and Lake Comacchio) in a fleet of Fantails, crossed the floods south of the lake, captured the village of Menate, and linked up early on 12 April with 167 Brigade, which had advanced westward along the Reno River until near its confluence with the **Santerno**. The two brigades, however, made little further progress.

The 78th Division advanced on 13 April towards the **Argenta** Gap from the south, but 36 Brigade, after crossing the Scolo **Fossatone**, was checked at the village of Conselice, while 38 (Irish) Brigade, heading northwards between the **Santerno** and the Scolo **Fossatone**, was halted at the village of Cavamento, about two miles from **Bastia**. The 56th Division's second amphibious operation, which began the same day, met with little success because of the difficulties of the terrain and because the enemy reinforced this sector. The 24th Guards Brigade, using Fantails and with 9 Commando under command, was ordered to cross the floods east of Route 16 and advance on **Argenta** from the north-east. They landed little more than half a mile beyond the positions reached by

**169 Brigade in the earlier amphibious operation, and could go no farther until the evening of 17 April.**

**Apparently the threat of amphibious attack had induced the enemy to commit *15 Panzer Grenadier Regiment of 29 Panzer Grenadier Division* on the Lake Comacchio flank while the remnants of *42 Light Division* defended **Bastia** and the **Argenta** Gap; later he committed *71 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* of the *29th* to the defence of **Argenta**. The opposition already encountered by 56 and 78 Divisions persuaded **5 Corps** to deploy as many troops as possible and attack on a wide front.**

**The 78th Division's northward advance had caught *362 Infantry Division* in the rear and thrown it into confusion, but the remnants of this division and of *42 Light Division*, which had tried to stand against 56 Division, were organised into battle groups. One of these groups defended **Bastia**, which did not fall until early on 16 April. The 11th Brigade of 78 Division then passed through to the line of the Fossa Marina, a watercourse just south of **Argenta**. The assault on this line on the evening of 16 April began 'the decisive battle which was to end nearly forty-eight hours later with the forcing of the **Argenta** Gap. The obstacle was stubbornly defended by the Panzer Grenadiers, but the leading British battalion managed to secure a small foothold on the far bank from which, in the course of several attacks on the morning of the 17th, the remainder of the brigade pressed forward passing by **Argenta** village to the east.' <sup>1</sup>**

**The 78th Division was assisted by 56 Division sending 169 Brigade across the floods to Fossa Marina. The arrival of this brigade and the advance of a commando along the Reno River to the west of the village 'stretched the defenders of **Argenta** to breaking point.' <sup>2</sup> The village was captured before midnight, and on 18 April 36 Brigade of 78 Division began a fresh series of attacks which breached the last of the enemy's prepared defences.**

**Meanwhile **Fifth Army** had opened its offensive towards the **Po valley** on 14 April, and **Eighth Army's** westward thrust from the **Santerno River****

had crossed the **Sillaro River** and on the 17th reached the Gaiana, between **Medicina** and **Budrio** and about 10 miles from **Bologna**.

(ii)

Until the arrival of **10 Indian Division** the westward thrust from the **Santerno** was made by **2 NZ Division** on the right and **2 Polish Corps** on the left. By midday on 13 April the leading New Zealand troops were across the **Scolo Zaniolo** about a mile and a half beyond **Massa Lombarda**; north of the **Massa Lombarda – Medicina** railway **23** and **21** Battalions of **5 Brigade** both had two companies over the canal. At this stage **5 Brigade** was relieved by side-stepping **6 Brigade** to the right and bringing in **9 Brigade** on the left.

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<sup>1</sup> *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy*, Part IV, Sec. B, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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**Ninth Brigade** <sup>1</sup> left positions near **Lugo** on the 12th and, after crossing the **Santerno**, advanced next day with **22 Battalion** on the right, **Divisional Cavalry Battalion** on the left, and **27 Battalion** in reserve with the role of protecting the left flank. Beyond the **Canale dei Molini** the leading companies (A and C) of **22 Battalion** dismounted from the Kangaroos of **4 Hussars** to mop up pockets of resistance in some houses, but brought the Kangaroos into use again when they found that they could not keep pace on foot with the tanks of **C Squadron, 19 Regiment**. The tanks, on the other hand, had difficulty in negotiating the ditches, drains and canals, and had to call on the engineers for assistance.

The **22nd Battalion** and (on the left) **Divisional Cavalry Battalion**, the latter led by **A Squadron** in Kangaroos and supported by **A Squadron** of **19 Regiment**, crossed the **Scolo Zaniolo**, **Scolo Viola** and **Fosso Gambellara**, and by evening were about two and a half miles west of

**Massa Lombarda**. They had very few casualties and took 50-odd prisoners, among them men from **9 Panzer Grenadier Regiment** of **26 Panzer Division**, which suggested that this division was withdrawing north-westward and might offer the main opposition at the **Sillaro River**, where the remnants of **98 Division** could not be expected to hold more than a small sector.

The tanks covering the enemy's withdrawal were engaged during the day by the New Zealand tanks, the artillery and the dive-bombers. A Panther which knocked out a tank in C Squadron of 19 Regiment in turn was set on fire by a direct hit by a 17-pounder Sherman of the same squadron. The medium guns set fire to two Tiger tanks and possibly damaged a third.

To secure a firm base for an attack to the **Sillaro River** (about six miles from the **Santerno**), which was planned for the early hours of 14 April, A and C Companies of 22 Battalion advanced in the evening of the 13th to the line of the next watercourse, the **Fosso Squazzaloca**, a mile and a half short of the river, and later A Squadron of Divisional Cavalry Battalion moved up on the left flank to conform.

Meanwhile, after the relief of 5 Brigade about midday on the 13th by 6 Brigade on the Division's right, 26 Battalion, led by A Company and supported by C Squadron of 20 Regiment, advanced towards the **Scolo Correcchio**, about a mile from the Sillaro. The tanks approached by a single road north of the railway until by mistake the leader turned left after crossing a culvert; the others followed, formed up line abreast and continued across an open paddock until halted by a ditch. In the ensuing exchange of fire

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<sup>1</sup> Under the command of 9 Bde were C Sqn of **4 Hussars** (Kangaroos), **19 Armd Regt**, 31 A-Tk Bty, and a company of **4 Fd Amb**.

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with the enemy along the **Scolo Correcchio** about 1000 yards away,

one of C Squadron's tanks was put out of action and one or two of the others damaged. As it was impossible to go any farther in daylight, the tanks withdrew under a smokescreen to the shelter of some houses near a lateral road, where they stayed with the infantry.

The leading company (B) of 24 Battalion rode on the tanks of A Squadron, 20 Regiment, down the same road and, because of misleading information, went almost too far. 'We careered happily down the road past the flabbergasted 26th to be halted suddenly by enemy tank fire,' wrote Major Turbott, <sup>1</sup> who was on the leading tank. 'AP shells soon caused a quick dismount and hasty scatter for cover.' <sup>2</sup> Turbott made contact with **Lieutenant-Colonel Fairbrother** and arranged for his company to work with 26 Battalion, which it did until later in the day, when D Company of the 24th joined B on the right of the 26th.

At the end of 13 April, therefore, the foremost troops of 6 Brigade were approximately the same distance from the Sillaro River north of the railway as were those of 9 Brigade south of the railway.

The 12th Royal Lancers (Lieutenant-Colonel K. E. Savill), which had come under the command of the New Zealand Division the previous day, was ordered to protect the right flank. Two squadrons of armoured cars set out on the 13th to probe the ground between the New Zealand Division and 78 Division (which of course was heading towards **Bastia**). They were delayed by the congestion of traffic on the roads, and in the afternoon were opposed by self-propelled guns and groups of infantry about two miles north-west of **Massa Lombarda**.

**Divisional Headquarters** had arrived in the morning at the southern outskirts of **Massa Lombarda**. **General Freyberg** ruefully commented on the devastation done by the bombing, 'This place has been liberated by us!' <sup>3</sup> **General Keightley** ( **5 Corps**) called after lunch to discuss the situation and boundaries, but his talk with the GOC was abruptly interrupted by the arrival of some 105- millimetre shells. The two generals were among those who dived into ditches and slit trenches. At least two men were killed and 15 wounded, many of them in **Divisional**

Signals. After an orders group conference in the afternoon the GOC decided to take **Divisional Headquarters** back behind the **Santerno River**.

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj G. G. Turbott**, MC, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 4 Oct 1919; schoolteacher; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *24 Battalion*, p. 324.

<sup>3</sup> GOC's diary.

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The Division was to capture the far stopbank of the Sillaro River on a front of 3200 yards. The attack was to be made by 24 and 26 Battalions of 6 Brigade and 22 and Divisional Cavalry Battalions of 9 Brigade. The artillery barrage was to begin at 2 a.m. on the 14th, pause for half an hour on the opening line (the Scolo Correcchio), advance at the rate of 100 yards in five minutes for 2500 yards, and pause for the final 15 minutes on a straight line 300 yards beyond the farthest bend in the Sillaro just north of the railway. On roads jammed with transport which raised clouds of choking dust, the artillery had succeeded in bringing forward across the **Santerno** five field regiments and two medium regiments with enough ammunition for a set-piece attack.

The GOC was concerned that slow progress by the **Polish Corps** might endanger his left flank. Fifth Brigade, therefore, was to detail a battalion with tanks to protect the flank south of Massa Lombarda if required, and in addition **12 Lancers** was to keep contact between 9 Brigade and the Poles. Keightley told Freyberg by telephone at 9.45 p.m. that the Army Commander had assured him he would push the Poles along.

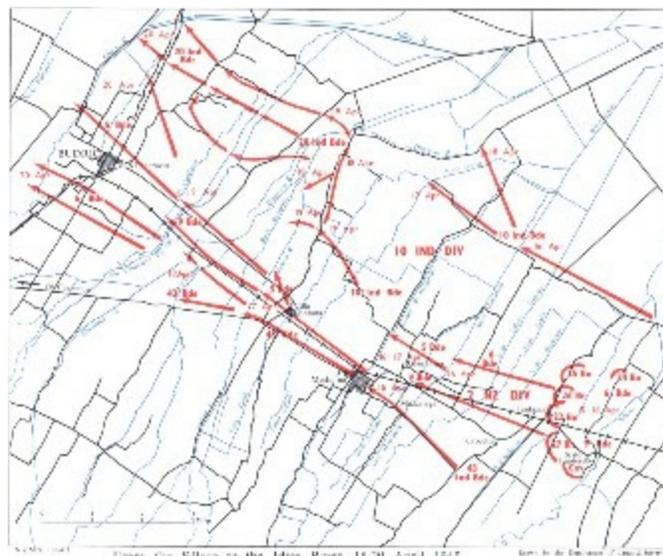
Sixth Brigade met virtually no opposition. On the right 24 Battalion's two or three casualties were believed to have been caused by shells falling short in the barrage. A Company saw no enemy on the way to the river, and occupied the far stopbank about 4.40 a.m. after

overcoming very slight resistance there. C Company by 5 a.m. had reached the river on A's right without opposition.

C and D Companies of 26 Battalion also met only slight resistance. As D (on the left) approached the river it was harassed by tanks hull-down on the far bank, but this stopped when the artillery fired several concentrations. Both companies had very few casualties and were on the far stopbank by 5.30 a.m. They had taken about 20 prisoners from **278 Division**, which had recently been in the mountains south of Route 9 but had arrived at the Sillaro on the morning of the 13th and dug in north of the village of **Sesto Imolese** to allow the battered **98 Division** to pass through during the night.

By dawn on the 14th, therefore, both 24 and 26 Battalions had two companies dug in on the far bank of the Sillaro north of the **Massa Lombarda – Medicina** railway, and the two reserve companies of the 24th were on the flank between the river and the Scolo Correcchio; 25 Battalion guarded the flank between the Scolo Correcchio and the **Scolo Zaniolo**.

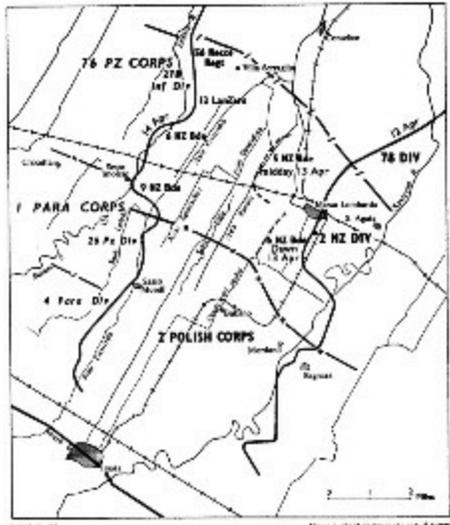
Before the attack started A Company of 22 Battalion, at the **Fosso Squazzaloca**, suffered casualties which it claimed were caused by the Division's artillery. Shortly after the barrage opened, 7 Platoon was shelled, and the company therefore withdrew its



THE ADVANCE TO THE SILLARO RIVER, 12-14 APRIL 1945

platoons. A house in which some of the men took shelter received a direct hit. Altogether A Company had 10 or 12 casualties, apparently inflicted by the Division's guns.

B and D Companies of 22 Battalion, after passing through A and C, crossed the **Scolo Correcchio** against slight opposition, but made slow progress towards the Sillaro against fire which increased between the last lateral road and the river. Stiff small-arms fire came from the vicinity of the railway embankment beyond the river. Both companies reached the near stopbank, B north of the railway and D south of it, but only part of the latter (14 Platoon, led by Lieutenant **Hayter**,<sup>1</sup> with perhaps a few other men) succeeded in



From the Sillaro to the Idice River, 15-20 April 1945

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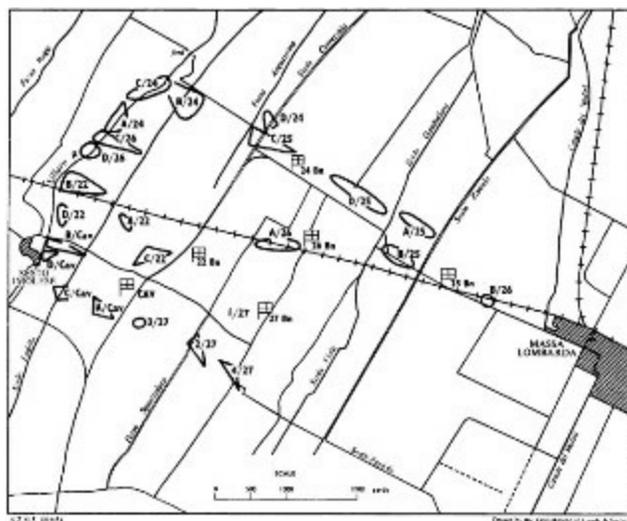
<sup>1</sup> Maj D. G. Hayter, m.i.d.; New Plymouth; born Manaia, 30 May 1912; civil servant.

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crossing the river, and it was soon compelled to retire to the near bank.

On the left B and D Squadrons of Divisional Cavalry Battalion made good progress against little opposition, and by 5 a.m. had occupied the far stopbank of the Sillaro near the village of Sesto Imolese. On the

flank C Squadron was a few hundred yards from the river and A Squadron farther back towards the **Scolo Correcchio**, in rear of which 27 Battalion also took up positions defending the flank. At daybreak, however, only half of both B and D Squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry Battalion were across the Sillaro, and there were no bridges by which tanks could go to their assistance. Men still on the near side of the river discovered that they were overlooked by the Germans in **Sesto Imolese**. In the face of machine-gun and grenade fire **Corporal Rawson**<sup>1</sup> led his section across the river and silenced three enemy posts.



SITUATION ON 14 APRIL 1945

SITUATION ON 14 APRIL 1945

‘Counter-attacks started coming in from 8.30 onwards, but though the positions were rather precarious, they were held, as defensive fire tasks could be called down and the tanks also were able to give help from the near stopbank. Throughout the day, both

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<sup>1</sup> **Cpl F. C. Rawson, MM; Whakatane**; born Taneatua, 4 Nov 1921; grocer; wounded 14 Apr 1945.

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B and D Squadrons had to accept mortar and shell-fire which steadily whittled down their numbers. Snipers, too, were claiming their quota. D Squadron alone lost four killed, three of these to snipers, before tank fire blew up the building from which they were shooting.’<sup>1</sup>

The engineers had opened a route in each brigade sector, and the tanks of 19 and 20 Regiments went into positions where they could support the infantry at dawn or soon afterwards.

(iii)

‘I hear the New Zealand Division has done it again,’ said General Keightley when he called on **General Freyberg** at 7.45 a.m. on 14 April. The GOC replied, ‘All we have tried to do was to anticipate Boche on the river and get our communications through and tanks up....’<sup>2</sup>

At an orders group conference in the morning Brigadier Gentry (9 Brigade) said that if the enemy kept up his mortar fire there could be no question of bridging the Sillaro that day. Colonel Hanson claimed it would require an 80-foot bridge, but it would not be as big a task as bridging the **Santerno**, provided that the engineers could get to the river to work; he believed it could be done that night. Brigadier Parkinson said **20 Armoured Regiment** thought it might be able to get tanks across a ford towards 6 Brigade's right flank. ‘If you can get tanks across and get out on to the road on the far side of the river,’ the GOC told him, ‘then the bridgehead is established and you will have done away with the set-piece attack.’<sup>3</sup> It was agreed to wait until 1.30 p.m. before deciding whether or not to make a set-piece attack.

Keightley called again in the morning; this was his last visit before the Division passed from the command of **5 Corps** to 13 Corps (at 6 p.m. on the 14th). The GOC told him that he wanted an extra 25-pounder regiment and another 5.5-inch regiment. Lieutenant-General Sir John Harding (13 Corps) arrived shortly afterwards and said his policy would be to keep going on the present axis and to feed in **10 Indian Division** on the right or the left of the New Zealand Division depending on how things went.

When the orders group conference resumed at 1.30 p.m., Parkinson said resistance had gradually increased on 6 Brigade's front, and the party trying to make a bridgehead was being engaged by the enemy;

**Gentry said there had been no real change on 9 Brigade's front. The conference then discussed the set-piece**

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<sup>1</sup> *Divisional Cavalry*, p. 401

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>3</sup> GOC's papers.

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**attack, which was to start at 9 p.m. Before this 9 Brigade was to get 22 Battalion on to the far bank of the Sillaro. Later 5 Corps told the GOC that the two extra artillery regiments which the Division was expecting would not be available until next day. Freyberg therefore decided to postpone the Division's set-piece attack for 24 hours. But 22 Battalion was still to cross the river that night.**

**The Division had met less resistance than expected on the Sillaro, but the troops occupying the far bank came under fire from the enemy dug in and occupying strongpoints along the line of a lateral road beyond the river. It seemed that the enemy had purposely kept his main defence line clear of the stopbanks in anticipation of a bombardment and flame attack similar to those employed at the Senio. By not manning the stopbanks, however, he had deprived himself of a chance of halting the attack short of the river.**

**The attempt by infantry from 24 Battalion and tanks from 20 Regiment to ford the river about 400 yards outside the right boundary did not succeed. The first tank, although equipped with 'grousers', <sup>1</sup> could not climb the steep bank on the far side; it remained in the river under desultory fire until another tank towed it out. In the evening about 60 Germans approached the ford but were dispersed by shellfire. Parkinson told the GOC that the enemy had 'found out about his plot ... and that idea has now been given up.' <sup>2</sup>**

**The infantry holding the stopbanks were supported by artillery**

counter-battery and defensive-fire tasks, gunfire from the tanks, and fighter-bomber attacks on targets not far from the river. The 5th Medium Regiment's guns damaged a Tiger tank and started a large fire where two others were located. The enemy's shell and mortar fire exacted retribution. An observation post from 5 Medium Regiment with 9 Brigade received a direct hit which caused several casualties. A battery commander (Major **Macindoe**<sup>3</sup>) and another man from **4 Field Regiment** were mortally wounded when a shell struck the window of the room in which they had an observation post. Two tanks in 19 Regiment were damaged. The severity of the fire retarded the work of the engineers. A reconnaissance party from **6 Field Company** was unable to get within 300 yards of the river to select sites for two bridges in 9 Brigade's sector, but 8 Field Company found a suitable place for a bridge and a possible Ark crossing in 6 Brigade's sector.

Armoured-car patrols of **12 Lancers** on the right of the Division closed up to the Sillaro, where the enemy, conforming with his with-

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<sup>1</sup> Steel extensions to the tank's tracks to widen them and prevent sinking into soft ground.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>3</sup> Maj **R. K. G. Macindoe**; born **Auckland**, 21 Sep 1912; factory manager; died of wounds 14 Apr 1945.

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drawal farther south, had left the east side by nightfall. The Lancers also went out to the south to watch that flank and keep contact with the **Polish Corps**, which captured the town of **Imola** on Route 9 and was approaching the Sillaro.

Ninth Brigade's task on the night of 14–15 April was to complete the occupation of the far stopbank of the Sillaro on its front. The plan was for the artillery and mortars, starting at 8 p.m., to fire concentrations

for half an hour, after which 22 Battalion was to make a silent crossing with B and D Companies. If this attack failed, the battalion was to launch another at 2.30 a.m. with the aid of eight Crocodiles and six Wasps.

Two platoons each from B and D Companies of the 22nd waded or swam the river and dug in on the far bank; they took a handful of prisoners from *278 Division* at very small cost to themselves. The enemy continued his harassing shell and mortar fire, but the New Zealand artillery's 'stonks' and 'murders' dealt severely with self-propelled guns, mortars, vehicles and other targets, helped to drive off a counter-attack on D Company's front by some 30 Germans supported by bazookas and spandaus, and also repelled a party probing towards B Company.

Shortly before 22 Battalion crossed the river, enemy activity was noticed on Divisional Cavalry Battalion's front in the vicinity of *Sesto Imolese*; infantry appeared to be working towards D Squadron, on the left flank. This counter-attack—if it was one—was beaten off with the assistance of the artillery. The battalion adjusted its positions by easing out to the left; it then had troops on the far bank south of *Sesto Imolese*.

Meanwhile, about midnight, 24 Battalion was relieved by the 25th, which put C and D Companies on the stopbanks north of the railway. D Company of the 24th stayed to guard the ford outside the Division's right boundary. The foremost infantry heard the movement of vehicles at dawn on the 15th, but observation was hampered by fog, although C Company caught sight of a tank which withdrew when engaged by a Piat. On several occasions tanks or self-propelled guns were heard a few hundred yards away, apparently moving from south to north.

During the day the enemy's positions beyond the river were 'softened' by continual air attacks and artillery concentrations, which had the effect of diminishing his shelling and mortaring. With the assistance of the air observation post 5 Medium Regiment bombarded

**Sesto Imolese** all afternoon, and demonstrated ‘the great power of the 5.5 shell’.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, 5 Med Regt.

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A gap of 600 yards was discovered between 26 and 22 Battalions, probably the result of a discrepancy in the boundaries given in 6 and 9 Brigades' orders. The two battalions closed up to seal the gap, in which B Company of 22 Battalion took 15 prisoners. A Wasp flamed a house at the bend of the river north of the railway to silence a machine-gun post whose enfilade fire had been troubling the 22nd, and the enemy was seen running away.

On the Division's extreme left flank a troop of C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry Battalion, was counter-attacked and, after a vigorous exchange of grenades, was forced to withdraw from the far side of the river. Supported by tanks of B Squadron, 19 Regiment, the other two troops of C Squadron regained the position. One of the tanks was set on fire by a *nebelwerfer*.

(iv)

**General Freyberg** told an orders group conference on the morning of 15 April that the divisional attack had been called off the previous night because the artillery preparation was too hurried. Now, instead of one, the Division would have three medium regiments, as well as the artillery of 6 British Armoured Division and a 155-millimetre battery. The attack was to start at 9 p.m., and the object was to pass two regiments of tanks through the bridgehead and continue the advance beyond the **Sillaro River**. The artillery barrage was to be 2000 yards in depth, with an extra 600 yards to be taken up in the early stages on 6 Brigade's front (which curved back to the east). The GOC said the brigades were to ‘push on when your armour is over and try to exploit across the open country past the final objective under cover of darkness, otherwise 6 Brigade will be held up by Tigers.’<sup>1</sup>

Opposite the New Zealanders from **Sesto Imolese** northwards was **278 Division**; south of the village were **26 Panzer Division** and then **4 Parachute Division**. The **278th** was believed to have four battalions about 300 to 500 yards from the far stopbank of the Sillaro, another battalion in reserve, and up to 15 Tiger or Panther tanks in support. The GOC told Parkinson that the Division would be attacking with an advantage in men of two and a half to one, 'and I think he is going to hold in depth—hold with infantry or Tiger tanks. If they start to try and get away, I think we can bazooka them.'<sup>2</sup>

The advance, at the rate of 100 yards in five minutes, was to be made by 6 Brigade on the right and 9 Brigade on the left; 5

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

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Brigade was in reserve.<sup>1</sup> The Division was to exploit to the Canale di **Medicina**, north of the small town of **Medicina** (which was the objective of 43 Indian Lorried Infantry Brigade, under the command of the **Polish Corps**). The barrage, which was to last for two hours 50 minutes, was to be fired by seven field regiments, and concentrations, counter-battery and counter-mortar tasks by four medium regiments (including one from the **Polish Corps**) and the heavy and some other guns;<sup>2</sup> in addition the tanks of C Squadron of 18 Regiment were to fire a barrage on a dummy lane on 6 Brigade's right flank. The artillery expended nearly 45,000 rounds, and the tanks 5000. General Harding and the CCRA of 13 Corps had not been easily convinced that such a programme could be planned in the time available. It was a superb feat by the NZA staff and the Divisional Signals.

Sixth Brigade attacked with 25 Battalion on the right and the 26th on the left; 24 Battalion, in reserve, was to be responsible for protection of the right flank.

The 25th encountered German infantry in strongpoints and trenches, supported by tanks or self-propelled guns. Both leading companies (C and D) reported the presence of tanks. D (on the left) claimed at 10.15 p.m. that it had knocked out two. A Company, following in reserve, reported nine minutes later that the supporting tanks were with it, but as the New Zealand tanks had not yet crossed the Sillaro, these obviously were enemy; the company therefore engaged them, and claimed that it knocked out one. C Company also reported that it had engaged tanks and probably knocked out two, which it declared were Tigers. Later, however, these claims were contradicted by a statement that no Tigers had been encountered and that most of the reported tanks were self-propelled or assault guns.<sup>3</sup> One of these had been set on fire by Sergeant **Mitchinson**,<sup>4</sup> who dashed towards it with a Piat and at very short range scored three direct hits. Its crew then fired on him, but he killed three of them with his tommy gun.

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<sup>1</sup> Under 6 Bde's command were 20 Armd Regt, **33 A-Tk Bty**, half of 34 Mor Bty and a company of 6 Fd Amb, and in support were **6 Fd Regt**, **142 Army Fd Regt** and a battery of 5 Med Regt. Under 9 Bde's command were C Sqn **4 Hussars** (Kangaroos), 19 Armd Regt, 31 A-Tk Bty, half of 34 Mor Bty and a company of **4 Fd Amb**, and in support were **4 Fd Regt**, 1 RHA and a battery of 5 Med Regt. Under 5 Bde's command were 18 Armd Regt, **32 A-Tk Bty** and a company of **5 Fd Amb**, and in support was **5 Fd Regt**.

<sup>2</sup> The barrage was fired by the three New Zealand field regiments, 1, 12 and 104 RHA, and 152 Fd Regt; concentrations were fired by **142 Army Fd Regt**, 5 and 75 Med Regts and the Polish medium guns, a counter-battery programme by **76 Med Regt** and 61 Bty (155-mm.) of 32 Hy Regt, and a counter-mortar programme by a battery each of 142 Regt and **55 Hy AA Regt**.

<sup>3</sup> A subsequent search in 6 Bde's sector found no tanks but three self-propelled guns which had been knocked out on the night of 15–16 April.

<sup>4</sup> **Sgt N. H. Mitchinson, MM; Raetihi; born Wellington, 20 Jan 1922; farm labourer; wounded 28 Nov 1943.**

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**Early in the attack 26 Battalion met infantry resistance which soon crumbled, and took so many prisoners that the reserve companies had to assist in escorting them to the rear. German tanks (or self-propelled guns) were heard moving about, but none was seen. Shortly after midnight the leading companies of both 25 Battalion (C and D) and 26 Battalion (B and A) were on the objective, a lateral road north of the village of **Fantazza**. The reserve companies of the 25th took up positions protecting the right flank. About 180 prisoners had been captured, the majority of them by 26 Battalion, and many enemy had been killed by the bombardment or the infantry.**

**The engineers constructed two crossings over the Sillaro for 6 Brigade: 8 Field Company completed a drum and fascine culvert about a quarter of a mile downstream from the railway soon after 1 a.m. and, although hampered by machine-gun, shell and mortar fire, a 40-foot Bailey bridge a quarter of a mile farther downstream three hours later. The tanks crossed the culvert when it was ready, and by 6 a.m. on 16 April C Squadron of 20 Regiment was deployed with 26 Battalion, and B Squadron with the 25th; both battalions also had their support weapons with them.**

**It had been intended to place an Ark bridge at the ford just outside the Division's right boundary. Sappers from 8 Field Company blew a gap in the stopbank in the evening of the 15th, but E Assault Squadron, RAC/RE, was prevented from completing the task. A German counter-attack on this flank was broken up by artillery defensive fire and mortar stonks, but the party from D Company of 24 Battalion, which was to have protected the engineers, was forced off the bank, and (according to a message from 24 Battalion to the 25th at 2.40 a.m.) the Ark 'was last seen heading up North with the tail and arms trailing on the ground as it went'—presumably driven by the enemy.**

(v)

**Ninth Brigade attacked with 22 Battalion on the right and 27 Battalion (which passed through Divisional Cavalry Battalion) on the left. Divisional Cavalry was to cover the flank in rear of the 27th and was to ensure that the enemy was mopped up in Sesto Imolese.**

**The 22nd met moderate opposition, including shell, machine-gun and small-arms fire, while advancing near the railway north of Sesto Imolese. By midnight A Company (on the right) was on the objective in the Fantazza area, but C Company appeared to be held up by enemy infantry at a lateral road about a quarter of a mile short of the objective. At dawn Corporal Anderson <sup>1</sup> left the house which two platoons had occupied and, armed with a tommy gun, walked towards the Germans in their trenches and demanded their surrender. Others from C Company went out to support him. 'As Anderson grabbed at an enemy rifle about thirty Germans rose, dropped their weapons, moved forward, and were collected. Then Anderson fell, his left arm (later amputated) severely shattered by a concealed tommy-gunner.'** <sup>2</sup>

**The 27th Battalion attacked with 1 and 3 Companies leading. On the right 1 Company, after clearing Sesto Imolese, continued the advance 'through grape-vines and their fences slowing things down and causing much cursing when shovels and picks kept getting hung up in the wires. Other than mortaring and shelling we struck nothing until after we crossed a road just short of our objective.'** <sup>3</sup> **At a house where Lieutenant Nicol <sup>4</sup> (who took command when Major Frazer <sup>5</sup> was wounded) intended to set up Company Headquarters, 'we ran into a tank parked in the yard. In the heavy fog I actually walked into the side of it without seeing it. Just as I hit it, its motor started up with a roar and it took off in a tearing hurry out onto the road and disappeared....'** <sup>6</sup>

**After going about three-quarters of the way to the objective 3 Company of 27 Battalion came upon several tanks. One was hit by at least three phosphorus grenades and seemed to burst into flames, but made off towards a house. In the lane in front of this house Lance-**

Corporal Tucker, <sup>7</sup> of 14 Platoon, put two Panther tanks out of action by tossing a high-explosive grenade through the open hatch of one and throwing a phosphorus grenade at the other. Flames shot from the latter, and the crew of four or five rushed towards the house. Tucker and Private McIntyre <sup>8</sup> were looking for these Germans when they heard a tank start up its engine. Tucker immediately raced to the nearby crossroads, where he attacked his third Panther. His phosphorus grenade apparently set fire to the rubber of its tracks for it made off southward along the lateral road whirling smoke and flame like a Catherine wheel. By this time 14 and 13 Platoons had reached a deep ditch alongside the road, and when the tank approached, Private Walker <sup>9</sup> scored a hit on it

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<sup>1</sup> **Cpl A. F. Anderson; Masterton**; born Carterton, 19 Mar 1923; carpenter; wounded 16 Apr 1945.

<sup>2</sup> *22 Battalion*, p. 428.

<sup>3</sup> W. S. Nicol, quoted in *27 (Machine Gun) Battalion*, p. 473.

<sup>4</sup> **Capt W. S. Nicol; Masterton**; born Masterton, 16 Aug 1921; clerk.

<sup>5</sup> **Maj K. J. Frazer**, MC, m.i.d.; Bathurst, Gambia, **West Africa**; born **Auckland**, 28 Jul 1914; bank clerk; wounded 16 Apr 1945.

<sup>6</sup> *27 (Machine Gun) Battalion*, p. 473.

<sup>7</sup> **L-Cpl J. L. Tucker**, m.i.d.; born NZ 18 Apr 1906; carpenter; killed in action 16 Apr 1945.

<sup>8</sup> **Pte D. C. McIntyre**, MM; Bluff; born NZ 23 Dec 1914; slaughterman; wounded 15 Apr 1945.

with a Piat. The tank continued down the road, but was discovered after daybreak in the ditch.

Another tank, probably a Tiger, was found at a house on the far side of the crossroads. 'It seemed to be smoking and appeared to have engine trouble, which led me to believe it had already been attacked,' wrote Corporal Tanner. <sup>1</sup> 'We [three men] hit it and it tore off.... It stopped, we made another strike, whereupon it staggered off as we pursued it with the last of our phosphorus grenades. It took a desperate zigzag course across country and eventually burst into a great sheet of flame, where it could be seen next day, a gutted wreck.' <sup>2</sup>

In 3 Company only 15 Platoon had reached the objective at daybreak, but in its first action as infantry the former machine-gun company definitely had accounted for four German tanks. Tucker, who had attacked three of them single-handed, was found dead at the crossroads.

After 27 Battalion had passed through, B Squadron of Divisional Cavalry Battalion entered **Sesto Imolese** to mop up any enemy who might still be there. Divisional Cavalry then took up positions watching the left flank. The 6th Field Company built two low-level Bailey bridges over the Sillaro for 9 Brigade. One was completed south of **Sesto Imolese** by 1.30 a.m.; the other, north of the railway, took three or four hours longer because of enemy fire. By dawn on the 16th all three squadrons of **19 Armoured Regiment** were across the river, C with 22 Battalion, A with the 27th, and B in reserve with Divisional Cavalry, and the supporting arms were also with the battalions.

The Division was able to report a satisfactory situation to 13 Corps at 6 a.m. The attack had reached its objective; resistance had been strong on both flanks but 'patchy' in the centre; more than 260 Germans had been taken prisoner and seven or eight tanks or self-

propelled guns had been knocked out or captured; four bridges had been constructed and the armour was with the infantry.

At 7 a.m., in a thick mist, the Division began to exploit about 1000 yards to the next bound, which ran south-westwards along the **Scolo Scolatore** and to the crossroads at the village of **Crocetta**. It took 6 Brigade about an hour to get there, but 9 Brigade could not make the same progress. In the **Fantazza** area 22 Battalion ran into heavy shell and mortar fire, and on the left flank 4 and 2 Companies of 27 Battalion (after passing through 1 and 3) encountered enemy, who included men of **4 Parachute Division** more reluctant to surrender than those from the other German divisions.

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<sup>1</sup> **Cpl R. I. Tanner; Auckland; born Auckland, 30 Jan 1920; engraver; wounded Mar 1943.**

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *27 (Machine Gun) Battalion*, p. 476.

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(vi)

Major Cox, in an appreciation of the situation he gave the orders group conference on the morning of 16 April, said that the chief change since the previous day was the definite movement of **4 Parachute Division** to the New Zealand sector. The Poles had crossed the Sillaro, and according to intercepted enemy information, the German parachutists had been told to drop back north-west-wards. The **26th Panzer Division** was being squeezed out and it appeared that the enemy was anxious to get it into reserve. The latest New Zealand attack had practically wiped out a battalion of **278 Division**, which was now left with about one and a half regiments, possibly two. 'We can now expect stronger resistance on the left flank.... We should now run into a belt with less tank interference....' <sup>1</sup>

A captured enemy map showed (in **General Freyberg's** words) 'that the Boche knew where we were and put the whole of his tank battalion

opposite us. I think we are now through the heavy mine belt. Our objective now is to destroy as many of his tanks as possible. It will then be comparatively easy.’<sup>2</sup>

Lieutenant-Colonel Savill reported that armoured cars of 12 Lancers had crossed the Sillaro at 7.30 a.m. and were pushing out to the north. The 10th Indian Division (coming up on the right) also had patrols over the river. The GOC told Savill to ‘keep very closely in touch with 6 Brigade because it looks as though there is more looseness on the right flank than anywhere else.’<sup>3</sup>

It was decided that 5 Brigade should relieve the 6th that night, and that the plan for the 16th would be for 6 Brigade to go as far as the **Scolo Sillaro Menata** and for 9 Brigade to keep on the left flank and try to get around and behind the resistance about **Crocetta**.

Sixth Brigade advanced from the **Scolo Scolatore** on a two-battalion front over flat country ‘with patches of cover for rearguards and snipers and far too many ditches and canals to suit the tanks [of 20 Regiment]. The open ground was far too exposed for an infantry advance without gun support, and the tanks usually softened up likely danger spots before making a dash forward to the next lot of cover. Among the hedges and vines [tank] troops often lost visual contact with each other and with the infantry, but the radio link with the infantry and with the spotter aircraft overhead more than made up for this loss of sight. However, crews sometimes had some anxious moments as their Shermans poked their

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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noses through a hedge on to a road, especially when the spotting plane had reported enemy tanks or anti-tank guns in their neighbourhood.' Several German tanks or self-propelled guns were seen, 'but none stayed to contest the way.' <sup>1</sup>

On the right 25 Battalion reached the **Scolo Fenile** shortly after midday and the **Scolo Sillaro Menata** during the next hour. B Squadron of 20 Regiment lost a tank when an armour-piercing shot set it alight. The assault engineers constructed a fascine crossing over the wide **Sillaro Menata**, which the tanks were able to use by 4 p.m. The tanks and infantry then went on to the **Scolo Montanara**, where they were established about 7 p.m.

Both 26 and 22 Battalions came under shell and mortar fire when the early morning mist lifted. Artillery concentrations were directed on a group of houses which enemy rearguards were suspected to be holding. The 26th did not move again until midday, and then advanced to the **Scolo Sillaro Menata**; when the engineers had completed the crossing for tanks in 25 Battalion's sector, the 26th continued on till about 4.15 p.m. At a lateral road A Company met slight resistance and captured two field guns and some 40-odd Germans from **278 Division**. By 7 p.m. 26 Battalion also was at the **Scolo Montanara**.

After a day's advance of about two and a quarter miles, therefore, both 25 and 26 Battalions were on the line of the **Montanara**, which the enemy had proposed to hold, according to statements from prisoners of war apparently confirmed by earthworks. Meanwhile 24 Battalion, still guarding the right flank, was strung out from the **Scolo Scolatore** back towards the **Sillaro River**. In the gap which had opened up between it and 25 Battalion were two squadrons of **12 Lancers**, whose patrols to the north and north-west bumped into small pockets of enemy which took time to clear without the help of infantry.

Orders had been given for the relief of 6 Brigade by the 5th that night. During the seven days since the crossing of the **Senio River**, 6 Brigade had captured nearly 600 prisoners (out of a total of 2200 who

had passed through the divisional cage) and had destroyed or captured a number of tanks, self-propelled guns and field guns. The brigade's casualties had been 30 killed and 180 wounded.

The shell and mortar fire in the **Fantazza** area had halted 22 Battalion of 9 Brigade in the morning of 16 April. After discussing the situation with **General Freyberg** and Brigadier Gentry, Lieutenant-Colonel Donald gave his company commanders a plan for exploiting with Kangaroos in co-operation with the tanks of

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<sup>1</sup> *20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 571.

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C Squadron, 19 Regiment. The battalion set off after midday, but still made slow progress. Both leading companies (B and A), however, were reported to be up to the **Scolo Sillaro Menata** about 4.30 p.m., and the lateral road beyond it less than an hour later. At nightfall 22 Battalion had not yet reached the **Scolo Montanara**, but was ordered to push on past it to the **Scolo Rondone** with all speed. After some difficulty in negotiating the drains and canals in Kangaroos, A Company was at the Rondone. A patrol which went out to **Ganzanigo**, a village about three-quarters of a mile north-east of the town of **Medicina**, found no enemy and no demolitions.

Two troops of Kangaroos joined 27 Battalion late in the afternoon, after 4 and 2 Companies had reached the **Scolo Sillaro Menata**. The Kangaroos were allotted to 1 and 3 Companies, which went ahead at 5 p.m., followed by 2 and 4 riding on the tanks of A Squadron, 19 Regiment, and on Battalion Headquarters' Kangaroos. The rate of advance was limited only by the time it took the assault engineers to provide crossings over the canals and drains. By 5.45 p.m. the leading companies had reached the **Scolo Montanara** and made contact with the enemy. They debussed and dug in along the canal while the Kangaroos went back a short distance to laager. Patrols later in the night did not meet the enemy, who obviously had gone.

Divisional Cavalry Battalion, still with the role of left flank protection, moved in the late afternoon towards the **Scolo Sillaro** Menata in rear of the 27th. Ninth Brigade advised Divisional Headquarters in the evening that the number of prisoners it had taken in the 24 hours ending at 5 p.m. was 330, plus nearly 50 evacuated through medical channels. The total since the start of the offensive was about 500.

(vii)

At an orders group conference at 5 p.m. on the 16th **General Freyberg** took a very bright view of the prospects: 'I think we are pushing him back and forcing him to withdraw along Route 9 as the Poles have not taken many prisoners. He is on the verge of a very big decision about going back. I think if he does not do it in two or three days it will be too late. The Staff estimate it will take him three weeks to get out of the hills in the West. He will hold at every obstacle on the front to gain time for that. Most people think he has left it too late.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

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Ahead of the New Zealand Division, between **Medicina** and **Budrio**, were several small streams or canals—the **Gaiana**, the **Acquarolo**, the **Quaderna** and its tributary the **Fossatone**, and the **Centonara Vecchia**—and beyond **Budrio** was the more considerable **Idice** River, into which these watercourses drained. It was to the **Idice** that the conference now turned its attention. Preliminary information showed that it was no wider than any other river the Division had crossed, and the stopbanks resembled those on the **Sillaro**. The GOC thought it might need a certain amount of boating, for which they would have to be prepared. The enemy might fight small delaying actions forward of the **Idice**, but the General thought he was going back behind it.

The intentions for the night of 16–17 April were to go as far as the Division reasonably could, then get some sleep and go on again at daylight. 'There is one point—we are getting tired,' said the GOC. 'It is

essential that the reserve brigades and the reserve battalions are out of the battle. We will be going on for another five days.’<sup>1</sup>

After the conference the information was received that 43 Lorried Infantry Brigade had taken **Medicina**. General Freyberg then told Brigadier Bonifant to get 5 Brigade to the **Canale di Medicina**, north of the town. He also advised Brigadier Gentry that 43 Brigade was to be under the New Zealand Division's command and on 9 Brigade's left. The Division would then continue the advance with these two brigades. Ninth Brigade would have an exposed right flank until **10 Indian Division** arrived, whenever that might be. The GOC reiterated his belief that the enemy had ‘taken a very big decision and is going right back. If so then tomorrow we may approach the **Idice**, unless he stays on the **Quaderna....**’<sup>2</sup>

The New Zealand Division was to sidestep to the left by taking over 2000 yards of the **Polish Corps**' sector (to 43 Brigade's left boundary) and handing over about 2000 yards to 10 Indian Division. General Harding informed the GOC in a telephone conversation that he had told **10 Indian Division** ‘to get a move on and take over from your right boundary. There is every indication that the Boche has withdrawn and I do not think Denis [Major- General Reed, GOC **10 Indian Division**] can catch up with you tomorrow.’ The corps commander also asked **Freyberg** to keep his ammunition expenditure low ‘unless there is something really worth throwing it at.’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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The railway line from **Medicina** to **Budrio** was to be the Division's thrust line and inter-brigade boundary. The GOC told the brigade major

of 43 Brigade that 9 Brigade 'will come level with you tomorrow morning. Be ready to start. Tell your Brigadier [Barker] how delighted I am to have him with us. It is the "old firm" again.'<sup>1</sup> The 43rd Brigade came under the command of the Division at midnight.

Fifth Brigade had left **Massa Lombarda** area in the late afternoon of the 16th. The 23rd and 21st Battalions, each with a squadron of **18 Armoured Regiment** in support, passed through 6 Brigade at the **Scolo Montanara** about 9 a.m., and well before midnight had reached the limit for the night's advance without opposition. The **Maori Battalion**, also with a squadron of 18 Regiment in support, replaced 24 Battalion on the right flank, with companies spaced between the **Sillaro River** and 23 Battalion.

Early on the 17th 23 and 21 Battalions set off again, rounded up a few stragglers, reached the lateral road running through **Ganzanigo** about 6 a.m., and the **Canale di Medicina** about half an hour later. The German equipment found in the brigade's sector, most of it apparently knocked out by air attacks, included 13 105-millimetre guns, a Panther tank, a self-propelled gun, five infantry guns and five anti-tank guns. When a brigade of 10 Indian Division passed through about 1.30 p.m., 5 Brigade again went into reserve. By this time the number of prisoners it had captured since the start of the offensive on 9 April had passed 1000.

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## II: THE ACCOUNT SQUARED WITH THE PARACHUTISTS

### *II: The Account Squared with the Parachutists*

(i)

‘If the **Idice** proves tough I want to step back from it, and bomb and shell it. Halt 9 Brigade and 43 Gurkha Brigade, put the other two brigades [5 and 6] through to establish a bridgehead, tidy your two [9 and 43] brigades up and put you through the bridgehead, get right out beyond and try to make a break,’<sup>2</sup> **General Freyberg** told Brigadiers Gentry (9 Brigade), Barker (43 Brigade) and Queree (CRA), and Colonels Gilbert (GSO I) and **Cook**<sup>3</sup> (AA and QMG) at Headquarters 43 Brigade on the morning of 17 April. Queree listed the formidable array of artillery available for the task: six regiments plus a battery of 25-pounder and 105-millimetre

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<sup>2</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>3</sup> **Lt-Col J. P. Cook**, OBE, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born **Wellington**, 3 May 1917; law clerk; **DAQMG 2 NZ Div**, Aug 1943–Jan 1944; **AA & QMG 2 NZ Div**, Dec 1944–Nov 1945.

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guns, five regiments plus a battery of 5.5-inch gun-howitzers, a regiment of 4.5-inch guns, a battery of 7.2-inch guns, a battery of 155-millimetre guns, and eight 3.7-inch anti-aircraft guns.

It did not seem likely that the Division would meet strong opposition before the **Idice River**. Apparently the conference expected no resistance at the **Gaiana**,<sup>1</sup> towards which 9 and 43 Brigades had begun to advance. Pushing on as fast as they could, 22 and 27 Battalions of 9 Brigade were across the **Canale di Medicina** before 8 a.m. The supporting tanks of A and C Squadrons of 19 Regiment had some difficulty in passing this

obstacle, but were assisted by 28 Assault Squadron, which kept close behind the leading troops. Two hours later the two battalions passed the Fosso Sillaro, and about midday they reached the village of **Villa Fontana**, some 1000 yards short of the Gaiana.

Between the village and this small river, which flowed between stopbanks like so many the Division had left behind, a flat approach gave no cover other than a few ditches; from the left of the village the embankment of the **Medicina- Budrio** railway led to a demolished bridge, and from near the right of the village the **Budrio** road led to another demolished bridge. Major **Titchener**,<sup>2</sup> who commanded 2 Company of 27 Battalion on 9 Brigade's left flank, took a foot patrol to the railway station, from which it could be seen quite clearly that the enemy was holding the near stopbank.

The 27th advanced towards the Gaiana with 2 Company alongside the railway embankment and 4 Company (on the right) on the **Budrio** road. At a speed which apparently took the enemy by surprise Headquarters 2 Company and 10 Platoon, in Kangaroos accompanied by a troop of A Squadron's tanks, drove right up to the stopbank, where the men debussed under the shelter of the bank while the tanks held the enemy at bay. Second-Lieutenant **Vazey**<sup>3</sup> left his tank to observe the enemy from the stopbank and returned to direct his troop's shooting until his tank was knocked out and he was wounded. Lance-Corporal **Hutchison**,<sup>4</sup> of 10 Platoon made a solo dash over the crest of the bank, killed a German, wounded another and took a prisoner.

Titchener's plan was that if the first platoon reached the stop-bank the other two were to be called up and the company would cross the Gaiana. All three platoons arrived at the stopbank with

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<sup>1</sup> For simplification the **Torrente Gaiana**, **Torrente Quaderna** and **Torrente Idice** are called rivers. There is no mention of the Gaiana in the reports of the conferences on 16 April and the morning of the 17th.

<sup>2</sup> **Lt-Col W. F. Titchener**, MC and bar; Ahmedabad, India; born Dunedin, 14 Dec 1907; public accountant; CO 27 Bn (J Force) May 1946–Mar 1947; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

<sup>3</sup> **Lt R. A. Vazey**, MC; Awanui; born Awanui, 15 Oct 1917; driver; wounded 17 Apr 1945.

<sup>4</sup> **Sgt C. E. L. Hutchison**, MM; Wellington; born Wellington, 11 Feb 1921; insurance clerk; wounded 2 May 1945.

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very few casualties. At this point, however, Lieutenant-Colonel **Sanders** <sup>1</sup> ordered 2 Company to stop. The men had left their digging tools in the Kangaroos, which had withdrawn and had to be persuaded to return with them. Casualties among the unprotected infantry were caused by the supporting artillery and the tanks supporting the **Gurkhas** on 9 Brigade's left, as well as by the enemy's fire. The company, therefore, was reorganised into two platoons, one with Company Headquarters based at a house in a bend in the stopbank near the railway, and the other on the stop-bank itself farther to the right (north).

From the upper windows of the house the men retaliated against the German snipers and killed or wounded several. 'The rest of the afternoon we spent trying to keep the enemy from using the steep bank as an observation point. We used Artillery, 2" mortars, small arms fire, and also called in the **Air Force** who did particularly good work with close support bombing.... It was only by the grace of God and a lack of aggressiveness on the enemy's part that 2 Company was not overrun. We were stretched in a thin red line along the stopbank with both flanks open and a determined assault may have dealt with us very quickly. In fact I do not think the enemy realised we had [only] one Company in that sector.' <sup>2</sup>

The Germans opened fire with a variety of weapons, including *faustpatronen*, on 4 Company's Kangaroos when they drove along the

**Budrio** road towards the Gaiana. The leading platoon (No. 16) turned off to the right behind a house, where casualties occurred while the men were climbing out of the Kangaroos. Only 17 Platoon reached the stopbank, but left the entrenching tools in the Kangaroos; and as the men could not dig in, their effective strength was reduced to three or four by the enemy's enfilading fire from both flanks and by the fire of the supporting tanks and artillery. Meanwhile 18 Platoon was obliged to take shelter about 150 yards from the stopbank in a lateral ditch, on which the enemy was able to range with his mortars. This platoon also had many casualties.

The officer commanding 4 Company (Major **Bullen** <sup>3</sup>) noticed that the enemy, who apparently had concentrated his force farther north (opposite the approaching 22 Battalion), had quickly switched his infantry to 27 Battalion's front. Through his glasses he could see the Germans diving across the gap in the bank where the bridge

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<sup>1</sup> **Col G. P. Sanders**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born England, 2 Sep 1908; Regular soldier; BM 4 Bde 1940–41; GSO II NZ Div Apr–Dec 1941; CO 26 Bn Jun–Jul 1944; 27 (MG) Bn Nov 1944–Oct 1945; 27 Bn (J Force) Oct 1945–May 1946; Director of Training, Army HQ, 1949–53; Commander, **Fiji Military Forces**, 1956–58.

<sup>2</sup> W. F. Titchener, quoted in *27 (Machine Gun) Battalion*, p. 484.

<sup>3</sup> **Brig A. B. Bullen**, CBE, DSO, ED; **Canberra**; born Otahuhu, 25 Feb 1916; cashier; wounded 30 Apr 1945.

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used to span the river. 'The right flank was wide open and remained so until 22 came up under cover of 25 pdr. smoke.... By the time Kangaroos had removed the wounded we found ourselves theoretically occupying 350 yards of stop-bank with a coy. H.Q. and remnants of 16 Platoon, totalling 9 or 10 men on one flank and about 3 in Jessup's [17 Platoon] <sup>1</sup> position on the other....' <sup>2</sup> All the platoon commanders were

wounded, two sergeants dead and the third wounded.

It was intended that 1 Company should replace 4, but Bullen withdrew his surviving men before the relief arrived. At dusk the enemy had set fire to the house occupied by nine or ten men of 16 Platoon and Company Headquarters, and as he had received no orders from Battalion Headquarters since the start of the attack and no reply to wireless messages relayed through the artillery, Bullen decided 'that there was little purpose in being cooked, so I gave orders for the remaining few troops to make a run for it. Which they did.' <sup>3</sup>

Sanders ordered 1 Company, which had been in reserve near **Villa Fontana**, to occupy the near stopbank when darkness fell. This the company did without interference, with a platoon on each side of the road. Thus 27 Battalion had secured a foothold on the bank. Its casualties on 17 April were 19 killed and 64 wounded. <sup>4</sup>

After passing **Villa Fontana** 22 Battalion planned to push to the Gaiana with B Company leading in Kangaroos accompanied by tanks from C Squadron, 19 Regiment, followed by D in a second line in support, and then by C on foot in reserve. It was intended that B Company, after securing the near stopbank, should establish a bridgehead over the river, and that D should pass through and enlarge the bridgehead or gain the next bound. This plan, however, had to be abandoned: instead, B Company was to gain a strong foothold on the near stopbank.

The mortars laid a smokescreen across the immediate front, and B Company's Kangaroos advanced into intense mortar and small-arms fire. They stopped 30 or 40 yards from the stopbank. 'The first thing we saw as we jumped out of the Kangaroos was a line of paratroopers' heads and shoulders above the bank, firing at us. Not one man in the platoon was hit in the charge to the stop-bank, thanks to the covering fire, small arms, etc., from the Kangaroos and other sources. A hand-grenade battle then followed. Never have I seen anyone dig so fast and furiously in all my life.

<sup>1</sup> **Lt R. W. Jessup; Howick; born Auckland, 1 Jul 1919; schoolteacher; wounded 17 Apr 1945.**

<sup>2</sup> **A. B. Bullen, quoted in *27 (Machine Gun) Battalion*, p. 486.**

<sup>3</sup> **Ibid, p. 487.**

<sup>4</sup> **Of the 78 men of 4 Company who went into the attack, 10 were killed and 36 wounded.**

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**The ground was like concrete. We cursed another crowd who had borrowed our sharp shovels earlier, and never returned them. The paratroopers seemed to have an endless supply of grenades which they rolled over the bank. So to fool and annoy them (and also to save our own supply of grenades) we would occasionally throw over empty bully beef tins or sods of dirt.... The Teds <sup>1</sup> fired two bazookas into a Kangaroo on our left flank which burst into flames, causing the ammunition on board to explode. The noise and heat was terrific.’ <sup>2</sup>**

**One of the Kangaroos did not get near the stopbank. It ‘bumped and jolted along with funereal speed until our Tommy driver ran us into a large ditch. The Kangaroo pitched nose downwards and became immovable. Everyone scrambled out and started to run forward in the open field to the nearest house about 120 yards away. The whole section made it without mishap.’ <sup>3</sup> By 4.30 p.m. B Company of 22 Battalion was strung out along the stopbank for about half a mile or so north of the road. The 22nd's casualties were only one killed and five wounded, and 19 Regiment, whose tanks had supported both 22 and 27 Battalions, had lost one killed and six wounded. Two squadrons of Divisional Cavalry Battalion dug in behind the 22nd to protect 9 Brigade's right flank.**

**(ii)**

**Meanwhile, on the morning of 17 April, 2 Battalion of 6 Gurkha**

Rifles, in Kangaroos, led 43 Lorried Infantry Brigade's advance along the **Medicina- Bologna** road, south of the railway on 9 NZ Brigade's left boundary. The supporting tanks of 2 Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment, went ahead and reported that the Gaiana was held by the enemy. A and D Companies of 2/6 Gurkhas, ordered to cross on a wide front, attacked about midday. They took the enemy by surprise, but suffered many casualties before some of their men reached the objective beyond the river. They began to take prisoners from **4 Parachute Division**, but when the enemy 'saw the state of our men they grabbed up arms again and dived into trenches, and got away.'<sup>4</sup> Late in the afternoon every Gurkha who had crossed the river had been killed or wounded, 'but they held on until no ammo left and came back at last light.'<sup>5</sup>

Major Titchener, whose 2 Company of 27 Battalion was nearest to the **Gurkhas**, was totally unaware of their daylight attack across

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<sup>1</sup> 'Teds': short for the Italian *Tedeschi*, meaning Germans.

<sup>2</sup> Eye-witness account quoted in *22 Battalion*, pp. 429–30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 429.

<sup>4</sup> War diary, **2/6 Gurkha Rifles**.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

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the river. 'Perhaps I was too interested in my own sector but I neither saw nor heard any sound of fighting on my left.'<sup>1</sup>

At a divisional conference in mid-afternoon, just before the **Gurkhas** began their attack, Brigadiers Barker and Gentry reported on the opposition 43 and 9 Brigades already had encountered, but **General Freyberg** was still looking ahead to the **Idice**: 'I think we are up against a screen—a good shelling is what they need. You will both keep pushing on

after dark. You should get through easily at night. Push, but no further than the next ditch during daylight. There will no doubt be a battle on the **Idice**.’<sup>2</sup> He wanted 9 and 43 Brigades to keep going until they were close to the **Idice**, and 5 and 6 Brigades then to ‘go in in a properly coordinated attack after one afternoon at least of proper softening. If we can paste him on that then there will be only the **Reno** and the Po.’<sup>3</sup> Ninth and 43 Brigades were to be made completely mobile; 5 Brigade would be lorry-borne and it and 6 Brigade in turn would have to be shuttled forward in lorries; as many bridges as possible were to be put over the **Idice**; the use of parachutists to secure a bridgehead on the **Reno** or the Po was being studied. ‘I will put the 12 L [Lancers] through and try to find a suitable route to the Po and then push the task forces up quickly.... It will require fast movement and deep recce before we commit you on account of possible demolitions.... If you get a chance to jump the **Idice** do it, but I don't think you will get the chance.’<sup>4</sup>

Later in the afternoon, after 43 Brigade's abortive crossing of the Gaiana, Barker told Gentry that he felt his brigade could not attack that night, but he was reluctant to admit to the GOC that he could not satisfactorily carry out the orders he had been given. Gentry therefore went to **Divisional Headquarters** to explain the situation, as he himself ‘was convinced by this time that it would not be a good attack.... I arrived to find the General having dinner.... He accepted my advice to call the attack off for 24 hours....’<sup>5</sup> It was decided that both 9 and 43 Brigades should do no more that night than send out strong patrols and go forward if they could without fighting and occupy any ground abandoned by the enemy.

Meanwhile **10 Indian Division** was reported level with the New Zealand Division's right flank; it hoped to push on during the night and expected to make fairly good progress because it was opposed only by **278 Division**. A captured map showed that in the

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<sup>1</sup> W. F. Tichener, letter, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Maj-Gen Gentry, letter, 1957.

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sector between the flooded land near Lake Comacchio and the **Apennines** *278 Division, 4 Parachute Division and 1 Parachute Division*, grouped under *1 Parachute Corps*, had swung round in their withdrawal to face south-east instead of east. Seven battalions of *4 Parachute Division* had been identified by prisoners captured on the New Zealand Division's front. The enemy had manned thickly the Gaiana anti-tank obstacle and had fought hard, using *nebelwerfers* and more artillery than the New Zealanders had encountered for some time. This resistance could be expected to continue on the 18th, either on the Gaiana or the **Quaderna**, to delay **Eighth Army's** approach to the **Idice**. Not only did the enemy require time to prepare 'what he has named the "GHENGIS KHAN" line on the **IDICE**, but he must also swing back his flank in the mountains South of Route 9 to link up with it. We may therefore expect him to fight as hard as the morale of his troops and the state of his equipment will allow.' <sup>1</sup>

Major Cox told the GOC that it had been established, after checking, that the Division had destroyed seven Tiger, six Panther and six Mark IV tanks and four self-propelled guns since the start of the offensive. The 161 prisoners taken on 17 April brought the Division's total to 30 officers and 2312 other ranks. Freyberg telephoned the corps commander to give him this information, and added, 'It is going to be a long tough job to get through the paratroopers.' <sup>2</sup> Harding arranged for additional field and medium artillery for the Division, and said he would inquire about extra Crocodiles (of which the Division already had eight). He also confirmed that there was no change in **Fifteenth Army Group's**

plan to destroy the enemy south of the Po. 'I personally think your thrust will pay the best dividend because it is the most immediate threat....' <sup>3</sup>

**General Freyberg** was busy on the telephone that night. He discussed harassing fire with the CRA. The Germans opposing the Division were 'fresh from the mountains and haven't been shelled for some time. We will have to educate them.' He obtained an assurance from Gentry that the enemy had not gone, and told him, 'Do not fight tonight. It is no good having a little bridgehead.' He advised 5 and 6 Brigades to be sure to get plenty of rest, and he assured Barker that it was 'going to be tough, but OK, we will put some solid harassing in front of you tomorrow.' Barker said the enemy had panicked at **Medicina** the previous night, 'but the para boys fought like hell against us today. We gave them everything we had—fought them hard and they still came back on us.'

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<sup>1</sup> **2 NZ Div** Intelligence summary, 17 April.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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We killed a lot of them today because of their sheer bravado. They are really fanatical.' The General replied, 'After we have finished with them they will be in a ripe state to yield us plenty of PW!' <sup>1</sup>

*(iii)*

Before the postponement of the attack that night orders had been given for 9 Brigade's part in it: after the relief of 22 Battalion by Divisional Cavalry Battalion, these two battalions, with Divisional Cavalry on the right and the 22nd (passing through the 27th) on the left, were to have attacked across the Gaiana. Divisional Cavalry, with A and C Squadrons forward, completed the relief of the 22nd before

midnight, and while it was still dark sent out patrols to the river, which in that sector had less than a foot of water in it.

The patrol from A Squadron found that the enemy was not very numerous on the far bank but was well sited and strong in automatic weapons, which responded to the fire put down by the rest of the squadron to cover the patrol. A wounded parachutist, from *3 Company, Sturm Regiment*, was brought back. The patrol from C Squadron, farther downstream, 'ran into trouble from automatic weapons dug in on the same bank and were driven back over the water after suffering a man wounded, whom they were forced to leave behind. But the squadron commander, Major MacIntyre <sup>2</sup> ... immediately organised another patrol, himself in command, which rushed back over the river, silenced the weapons in question, and chopped their crews about properly while the wounded man was being carried back to safety.' <sup>3</sup>

The following afternoon (18 April) the enemy succeeded in infiltrating amongst C Squadron. 'This attack was contained, but not before MacIntyre again had occasion to strike a blow. This time he climbed into a knocked-out Sherman tank and brought its machine gun to bear on the enemy, inflicting casualties, and pinning them down until fire from the supporting tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment could drive the enemy off.' <sup>4</sup>

Otherwise Divisional Cavalry was disturbed only by *nebelwerfer* and mortar stonks. A patrol from 1 Company of 27 Battalion, sent out near the road-bridge site in mid-afternoon on the 18th, went 250 yards along the reverse slope of the stopbank without seeing the enemy but found trenches which had been vacated recently.

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> Brig the Hon. D. MacIntyre, DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Hastings; born Hastings, 10 Nov 1915; sheep-station manager; MP 1960–; CO Div Cav Bn Aug 1945–Jun 1946 (J Force); Associate Member of Army Board, 1960; Minister of Lands,

1966-.

<sup>3</sup> *Divisional Cavalry*, pp. 403-4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 404-5.

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From their house near the stopbank 2 Company's sharpshooters continued their duel with the German snipers and by the end of the day claimed 13 of them. A patrol crossed the river near the demolished railway bridge, where the water was found to be up to the men's chests. The patrol was climbing the far bank when the enemy opened fire, but got back without casualties. After that the enemy remained alert and shot at any movement he could see over the crest of the near stopbank.

(iv)

'It is now clear that his [the enemy's] plan is to fight us to a stand still on each of the three fronts where he is threatened, i.e., in the mountains, here, and at the **Argenta Gap**,' Major Cox told the divisional orders group conference at Headquarters 9 Brigade on the morning of 18 April. 'All his reserves have been committed to this end.'<sup>1</sup> These included **29 Panzer Grenadier Division** at **Argenta** (where already **5 Corps** had begun to breach the gap) and **90 Panzer Grenadier Division** astride Route 64 south of **Bologna**, 'and he has concentrated all he could on our front.'<sup>2</sup> Seven parachute battalions had been identified on the ground, six of them holding the front opposite 9 and 43 Brigades. These were two battalions each of **12 and 10 Parachute Regiments**, and one battalion each of **4 and 11 Parachute Regiments**. Against the whole of the **Polish Corps** there were only five battalions of similar size, and opposite **10 Indian Division** only the weak **278 Division**. Cox said the enemy had put his Tiger tanks on the Indian division's front, and his Panthers, of which there were seven or eight, with the parachutists facing the New Zealand Division. In reserve behind the parachutists was **26 Panzer Division**, which had 50 Mark IV tanks and two fairly weak

regiments of infantry. 'Although the parachutists have fought well against us here, there is plenty of evidence to show that their move across was made in the utmost confusion. Yesterday they passed a message in clear to Para Corps— this was the first time they have done this since **TUNISIA**. There is no sign that they intend to go back from the **GIANA** unless perhaps their flanks go. I think they have 800 to 900 men at the most in the area [extending] 2000 yds each side of the railway.' <sup>3</sup>

The conference then proceeded to discuss the plan for the attack. Brigadier Gentry said the enemy was dug in on the other side of the near stopbank and also on the far bank. 'They apparently have

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> GOC's papers. Later advice was received from 13 Corps which indicated that there were at least 1000 men on this part of the front.

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not got many men but are very strong in weapons. The situation is most suitable for flaming. After discussion with my Bn Comds we all agreed that another **SENIO** technique is what is needed.' <sup>1</sup> Brigadier Barker said 43 Brigade was now firm with 9 Brigade on its right. 'We are on the near bank there—they are having rather a hard time. Further to the left we are about 400 yds back from the bank and patrolling up.... I agree with the technique of withdrawing and then stopping him....' <sup>2</sup> It was decided that the two brigades should withdraw their men 500 yards after nightfall.

The intention, stated in the divisional operation order that afternoon, was to cross the Gaiana and **Quaderna** and continue the advance to the Idice River. The 9th and 43rd Brigades were to attack at 9.30 p.m. in accordance with an artillery programme. The infantry

assault on the Gaiana was to be accompanied by a flame-throwing attack directed on to both stopbanks. The engineers were to construct at least two assault crossings on each brigade front over each obstacle, and 5 and 6 Brigades were each to provide an infantry company as close cover for the sappers working on these crossings. After the capture of the objective the two leading brigades were to exploit with tanks and infantry to the line of the **Idice**; the other two brigades were to be in divisional reserve and were to be prepared to follow up the advance, 5 Brigade in rear of the 9th and 6 Brigade in rear of the 43rd.

The GOC told Gentry by telephone that the artillery support would be 'a total of 192 fd pieces which will fire about 100,000 rds, or 100 rds per individual paratrooper opposite our front. In addition 48 × 5.5s and 24 × 4.5s with a bty of 7.2s and a bty of 155s.'<sup>3</sup> He also advised Barker about the artillery, and said, 'Early news of a withdrawal is very important. Test the market at dusk.' He then warned Gentry to watch out for an enemy withdrawal. 'This is the greatest bombardment we have ever put down.'<sup>4</sup> He also told Cox, 'This will be the most important battle we have fought in **Italy**.... They're worried sick at Corps and Army that we're going to shoot off all their ammunition to-night. So we are. But we are the only ones in position and ready to do so, so why shouldn't we?'<sup>5</sup>

'It was,' thought Cox, 'almost melodramatically appropriate that this battle, which, given good fortune, should be our last major

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> GOC's diary. According to the war diary of HQ **2 NZ Div** Arty, the attack was to be supported by the three New Zealand field regiments, 1 RHA, 23 Army Fd Regt, 142 Army Fd Regt (105-mm.), two batteries of 15 Army Fd Regt, 5, 75, 76 and 78 Med Regts, two batteries of 61 Hy Regt, 307/ **55 Hy AA Regt** and 195/52 Lt AA Regt.

<sup>4</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>5</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, p. 129.

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action in **Italy** and perhaps in the war, was to be waged against the parachutists. They had dropped on to us on the **Corinth Canal** in 1941, and in **Crete**. <sup>1</sup> In **Cassino** 1st Para Division had been our opponents in what was perhaps the ugliest battle of the war. In front of **Florence** we had met 4th Para Division. 12th Para (Sturm) Regiment, which now occupied the left flank of the Giana, had provided the glider-borne troops who had led the assault on **Crete**. On just such a sunny day as this we had stared up through the olive-trees at their slow, wide-winged, silent craft swooping down on to us. The 12th Storm Regiment was something more than just one unit in a big corps. From it had been drawn the cadres to rebuild the parachutists after **Crete**, to transform them into the elite of the German Army under Nazism, brutal, strong, with an almost masochistic willingness to die. <sup>2</sup>

As he waited for the barrage to open, **General Freyberg** paced backwards and forwards in his caravan; he was worried that the enemy might not be there on the stopbanks of the Gaiana. 'He had to justify this tremendous expenditure of shells. He had to show results, German casualties in dead, wounded and prisoners on the morrow. Above all he was gravely worried about our own casualties. Even with the **Gurkhas** to help this must be our last attack, or at the best our last but one. Yet he knew the Division was desperately anxious to be in the open warfare which must come soon, and which had been promised to the **Eighth Army** all the way up **Italy**. He knew too that we were better fitted, from our desert days, for open warfare than anyone else in **Italy**.' <sup>3</sup>

(v)

The guns opened at 9.30 p.m. on 18 April 'in one of the most concentrated bombardments ever fired.' <sup>4</sup> '... The flashes lit and flared

like a hundred thunderstorms. The trees around us changed from lumps of soft, slumbrous darkness to shapes of green and yellow. The whole western sky was alive with bursting shells.’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In *Crete*, the New Zealand history of the campaign, **D. M. Davin** (on pp. 84–5) describes the German *11 Air Corps*, which invaded the island, as consisting of ‘a reconnaissance unit; 10 groups of transport aircraft; the *Assault Regiment*; 7 *Air Division* with its three parachute regiments and divisional troops; 5 *Mountain Division* ... and corps troops.’ He concludes (p. 464): ‘But, in the words of General Student, “*Crete* was the grave of the German parachutist”; and the victory of our defeat was that never again, against *Cyprus* or elsewhere, were the parachutists launched from the air en masse to gain victory at the cost of crippling losses.’ Nevertheless the parachutists continued (on the ground) to be amongst the most formidable opponents who faced the New Zealanders in the Second World War.

<sup>2</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, p. 128.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>5</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, p. 130.

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The artillery expended nearly 72,500 rounds, which brought the total expenditure since the start of the offensive at the *Senio* to over 320,000 rounds. The barrage started with the equivalent of six field regiments and two medium regiments on a frontage of 3600 yards along the *Gaiana*, lifted 500 yards, and at 10.30 p.m. began moving forward at the rate of 100 yards in five minutes to a depth of over 3000 yards, with a half-hour pause on the way. At the same time the heavy and medium guns, heavy anti-aircraft guns and mortars fired counter-battery and counter-mortar programmes and many timed concentrations, and the

light anti-aircraft guns indicated the brigade boundaries and dummy boundaries on both flanks.

The flame-throwers, which went in at 10 p.m., made a profound impression on all who saw them. 'Their spurts of flame, red under the lightning flashes, showed again, again, again. All along the line of the river they glared, red and ugly. The black smoke mounted up into the stars.'<sup>1</sup> 'The fearful molten streams curved through the air and slobbered all over the river. Soon the levees were outlined in sizzling, licking fire and looked like walls of hot lava. At every fresh spout of the flaming fluid, the glare would light up the pillaring clouds of smoke giving the sky the appearance of a display of the southern aurora.'<sup>2</sup> The bank 'was just one sheet of flame, a sight never to be forgotten.'<sup>3</sup>

As soon as the flame-throwers finished, the infantry began to advance, and within a very short time the leading companies of Divisional Cavalry Battalion and 22 Battalion (the latter in the sector from which 27 Battalion had withdrawn) were across the Gaiana.

Divisional Cavalry, attacking with C (on the right) and A Squadrons, and with B and D mopping up in rear, made good progress in spite of hostile shell, mortar and small-arms fire. Mist, smoke and dust so reduced visibility that compasses had to be used to maintain direction. The leading companies were 'virtually unopposed' at the Gaiana 'and covered the next 3000 yards without stopping. But, as soon as they reached the limit of the barrage area, the enemy was there again fighting back stubbornly.... to deny every yard of ground.... But the attackers too, flushed with the success of their advance, were to be denied nothing'<sup>4</sup> and forced their way across the **Quaderna**. By 1.30 a.m. C and A Squadrons were on their objective and digging in round a group of houses just north of the **Medicina- Budrio** railway. The two mopping-up

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<sup>1</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> B. C. H. Moss, quoted in *27 (Machine Gun) Battalion*, p. 489.

<sup>3</sup> R. H. Spicer, quoted in *22 Battalion*, p. 430. *Divisional Cavalry*, pp. 405–6.

<sup>4</sup> *Divisional Cavalry*, pp. 405–6.

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squadrons, B and D, 'also found the poor visibility an embarrassment almost as unpleasant as the continued fighting spirit of those paratroopers who had been bypassed' <sup>1</sup> by the leading companies.

The 22nd Battalion advanced with C (on the right) and A Companies in the lead and with D mopping up enemy pockets. The men had expected to find the Gaiana quite shallow, but in places they waded up to their armpits in water and deep mud. Once clear of the river, however, they made steady progress and about 2 a.m. were reported on their objective beyond the **Quaderna**.

As Divisional Cavalry and 22 Battalion passed each water obstacle in the open flat country west of the Gaiana, 27 Battalion despatched companies to protect 9 Brigade's exposed right flank. Shortly after midnight 4 Company set off down the road from **Villa Fontana** and at the Gaiana turned downstream for about 1000 yards and made contact with the enemy. Later 2 Company crossed the Gaiana and went into position facing north-east astride the **Scolo Acquarolo**; 1 Company kept to the road until just short of the **Quaderna** and then went across country to some houses.

On the right of 43 Brigade two companies of 2/8 Gurkhas met diminished opposition in their advance to the **Fossatone** (between the **Acquarolo** and the **Quaderna**), where they established themselves on the far bank; the other two companies of this battalion passed through, met only disorganised resistance, and by dawn had men on the far bank of the **Quaderna** south of the railway. On the left flank, however, 2/10

Gurkhas met strong resistance and was prevented from reaching its objective. Two companies made good progress as far as the **Scolo Acquarolo**, but the other two companies, after passing through, could not get beyond the **Fossatone**.

The sappers of **6 Field Company**, assisted by the bulldozers of **27 Mechanical Equipment Company**, had difficulty in opening routes for the tanks and supporting arms of **9 Brigade** because of the defensive fire which delayed them at the start and because of the German snipers and machine-gunners who had survived the infantry attack or had infiltrated from the right flank. The first obstacle, the **Gaiana**, had not been cleared in **Divisional Cavalry's** sector by 3.30 a.m. It was decided, therefore, to open the **Budrio** road instead. A crossing of the river was bulldozed at the demolished bridge site, and a party rushed on to the **Acquarolo**, where fortunately the bridge was still intact. The next obstacle, the **Fossatone**, was under defensive fire, and while working there **Captain Keller**<sup>2</sup> was wounded

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<sup>1</sup> *Divisional Cavalry*, p. 406.

<sup>2</sup> **Capt A. A. Keller**, MC; born NZ 8 Oct 1917; engineer cadet; wounded 19 Apr 1945; died **Rotorua**, 24 May 1956.

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and a bulldozer damaged by shellfire. Although very shaken, the bulldozer operator (**Lance-Corporal Blacktopp**<sup>1</sup>) repaired his machine and carried on with the work, which Keller continued to supervise.

Meanwhile, in **22 Battalion's** sector, crossings were bulldozed over the **Gaiana** and **Acquarolo**. This route then converged with the **Budrio** road to connect with the only crossing of the **Fossatone**. The 'soft-skinned' bulldozers were replaced at this point by an armoured **Sherman** dozer from **28 Assault Squadron**, which placed a scissors bridge at the **Quaderna**. The railway bridge over the **Quaderna** was captured intact.

The tanks of the leading squadrons of **19 Regiment** were held up at

the **Fossatone** until the crossing there was completed, but later in the morning joined the infantry, B Squadron in support of Divisional Cavalry and C in support of 22 Battalion; A Squadron co-operated with 27 Battalion in protecting the right flank. In 43 Brigade's sector 255 Field Company, **Royal Engineers**, constructed a 60-foot Bailey bridge over the Gaiana on the **Medicina**- Castenaso road and opened a route for the tanks to the far side of the **Fossatone**.

On the night of 18–19 April and the following morning, C Company of 23 Battalion was responsible for the protection of the engineers working in 43 Gurkha Brigade's sector. 'As the left flank was exposed and the paratroopers had concentrated all the guns, rocket-firing projectors, nebelwerfers and other mortars they could secure in an attempt to stop the advance, C Company found, according to its diary, "the area the most unhealthy of the whole campaign" and suffered casualties of one killed and five wounded. The company RAP men also had a busy time attending to wounded **Gurkhas**. As the paratroopers emerged from hiding when the attacking force had moved on, C Company had more than once to fight to secure the bridging site for the engineers.'

<sup>2</sup>

(vi)

The situation was reviewed at a divisional conference at 8.30 a.m. on 19 April. According to the general tone of the wireless interception the enemy was under considerable strain; typical messages were: 'Enemy tanks in front of me.' 'I am now on new switch line.' 'Have you any further reserves?' Some prisoners were still in a state of collapse caused by the flame-throwing.

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<sup>1</sup> **L-Cpl M. R. Blacktopp**, MM; **Wellington**; born **Greymouth**, 19 Mar 1922; PWD employee.

<sup>2</sup> *23 Battalion*, p. 456.

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Brigadier Gentry reported that 9 Brigade's attack had gone 'according to plan'; <sup>1</sup> both battalions were on their objectives. Brigadier Barker said many casualties had occurred on both sides, but more among the Germans than the **Gurkhas**. The enemy 'definitely was holding in depth; our appreciation was wrong about that.... there was very stiff fighting and we got a bit behind the barrage.... The country is very open and rolling like the Salisbury Plain. The Poles are a very long way behind us and we are still getting fire from our left flank.' <sup>2</sup>

It was decided that 9 and 43 Brigades should stabilise on a line some time that evening and that both should be relieved after dark. In the meantime they were to try to push on if they could.

The Division had carried the Gaiana line and advanced beyond it, 'but ground was not what we wanted,' wrote Cox. 'We wanted to destroy the German Armies in **Italy** this side of the Po, so that they could not get back into the Alps. At first it looked as if this time we had failed.

'It was only when I went forward to the river line itself early the next day that I realised that this was not so. We had indeed hit the enemy as we wished. The first count of enemy casualties [about 200] <sup>3</sup> had been too low. Along these banks in the stream, in their trenches, in houses and holes behind, lay the massed dead. Few battlefields in this war can have presented the picture of carnage which the banks of the Giana showed that day, this spectacle of Germans killed by the barrage, or caught crouching in their holes by the flame-throwers, or slaughtered in a hundred other ways. ... There they lay in all their ghastliness, the youth of **Germany**, the pride of Hitlerism....' <sup>4</sup>

Brigadier Gentry says that when he walked over the ground where the flame-throwers had been used, 'it was quite clear that it had been held in adequate strength to prevent any successful attack in daylight except possibly with very heavy air and artillery support. There were more dead Germans on the battlefield than I saw in any of the preceding operations.' <sup>5</sup>

The tanks going to Divisional Cavalry Battalion's support had not married up with the infantry at daybreak. The enemy threatened

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

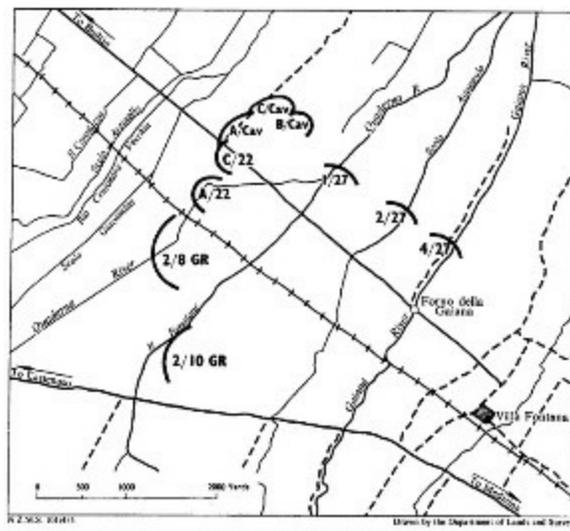
<sup>3</sup> The **2 NZ Div** Intelligence summary based on information received up to 6 p.m. on 19 April says that the attack brought in over 300 prisoners, almost all of them from 4 *Para Div*, and inflicted many other casualties.

<sup>4</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, pp. 130–1.

<sup>5</sup> Letter, 1957.

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to counter-attack at 6.45 a.m., but 'this was beaten off by defensive fire called down on it from the guns behind. Throughout the earlier part of the day, most of A Squadron was in a decidedly delicate position. Enemy troops that had been overrun had manned their positions again on the banks of the **Quaderna** behind them; twice the squadron came close to being shelled by the 25-pounders, while they had also to suffer the enemy's 75-mm. fire. The cabrank planes also gave them several frights, so, until the arrival of B Squadron as reinforcement enabled the position to be held until the tanks did get up, A Squadron's predicament was not to be envied. Then D Squadron also came through and, together with the tanks, managed to push further forward to deepen the position.'



SITUATION ON THE MORNING OF 19 APRIL 1945

SITUATION ON THE MORNING OF 19 APRIL 1945

German mortars, *nebelwerfers* and self-propelled guns were busy on 9 Brigade's front. The enemy's attempts to infiltrate or counter-attack on Divisional Cavalry Battalion's sector were broken up by the artillery; the houses he occupied and his self-propelled guns were shelled by the mediums.

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<sup>1</sup> *Divisional Cavalry*, pp. 406–7.

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On the right flank, between Divisional Cavalry and the Gaiana, 27 Battalion also was in action. Early in the morning 1 Company had turned north off the road on the eastern side of the **Quaderna** and cleared the enemy from a group of houses, but he continued to fire bazookas and small arms from some houses alongside the canal. Tanks of A Squadron, 19 Regiment, shelled these buildings and drove out some 15 Germans, who bolted for the stopbank. Two Wasps then rushed in to flame the bank, which caused panic among the enemy in the vicinity. For 100 yards or so on each side of the flamed ground the Germans discarded their weapons and fled into the open, where a 25-pounder stonk was brought down among them. Later a paratrooper captain walked in and surrendered.

This prisoner must have been the one described in the divisional

**Intelligence summary as ‘the first parachute officer-deserter we have ever had, and probably the first any formation has had in ITALY. ... he was CO of I/10 Para Regt.... He had a long record of soldiering for the Nazis, having been a member of Condor Legion— the German forces sent to gain experience in the Spanish Civil War in 1937–38.... Last night's barrage was the heaviest he had ever experienced. It was worse than at VELLETRI, at the head of the ANZIO bridgehead.... His men had, however, been well dispersed in depth, and well dug in, and did not suffer heavy casualties from the actual barrage. Their fighting spirit was, however, badly impaired by it, and they found the flamethrowers alarming. One PW described what hit his sector last night as “something inhuman”.’<sup>1</sup>**

**The 22nd Battalion was ready to resume the advance in the morning, but waited to conform with Divisional Cavalry, which did not move until the trouble had been settled on the right flank. The two battalions set off about 2.30 p.m. B and D Squadrons of Divisional Cavalry passed through A and C, and, accompanied by the tanks of B Squadron, 19 Regiment, crossed the Rio Centonara Vecchia and reached the il Canalazzo, a short distance beyond, apparently without having met opposition. B and D Companies of 22 Battalion advanced swiftly towards the Rio Centonara Vecchia, but had difficulty in negotiating this obstacle because of mortar fire from the left flank. The tanks of C Squadron, 19 Regiment, went round to the right because self-propelled guns had the open ground on the left well covered. By nightfall the 22nd also was on the il Canalazzo.**

**This water channel, about two miles beyond the Gaiana and more than half-way to Budrio, was the limit of 9 Brigade's advance before it was relieved by 5 Brigade on the night of 19–20 April.**

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<sup>1</sup> **2 NZ Div Intelligence summary, 19 April.**

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**Ninth Brigade's casualties during the period 13–19 April were 80 killed and 317 wounded; <sup>1</sup> it claimed 747 prisoners.**

Meanwhile 43 Gurkha Brigade's advance still was held up on the left flank because the **Polish Corps** was lagging behind the New Zealand Division. Late in the afternoon the Poles were reported on the line of the **Fossatone** about two miles south of 43 Brigade.

Not for the first time the New Zealand Division was ahead of the divisions on both flanks. General Harding telephoned **General Freyberg** at 6.55 p.m. to tell him that a battalion of 10 Indian Infantry Brigade had cleared the right flank up to the **Quaderna**. The GOC replied, 'They nearly attacked us at the rear of 27 Bn— but we saw them off.' In a later telephone conversation Freyberg asked the corps commander whether the Poles had come up into line. 'I cannot find out where they are,' he said. '... while they hang behind us we get shot up from the flanks.... One officer deserter says he thinks the enemy has enough troops to regroup unless we push him hard—that I feel is true.'<sup>2</sup>

*(viii)*

The battle of the Gaiana did not attract much attention at the time. 'Amidst the thunder of blows which were falling on the Third Reich, the hammering which the parachutists of 1st Para Corps got on the Italian front went almost unheard. Yet we can claim, I believe,' wrote Cox, 'that few nails were driven into the coffin of Nazism more thoroughly than this. On the Giana we were able to bring down such a blow on to the best German infantry on the Italian front that from then on, with steadily increasing speed, the way to the Po and the Alps opened up.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Div Cav Bn: 28 killed, 131 wounded; 22 Bn: 18 killed, 76 wounded; 27 Bn: 34 killed, 110 wounded.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>3</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, p. 125.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## III: A CHANCE TO JUMP THE IDICE

### *III: A Chance to Jump the Idice*

(i)

**General Freyberg** had told his brigadiers on the afternoon of 17 April, 'If you get a chance to jump the **Idice** do it, but I don't think you will get the chance.'<sup>4</sup> He could not foresee then that the parachutists' stand on the Gaiana was to delay the advance for a day, but later the chance did occur to 'jump' the Idice River.

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<sup>4</sup> GOC's diary.

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By the 19th **5 Corps** had breached the **Argenta** Gap and was within striking distance of the River Po; the westward thrust by 13 Corps and the **Polish Corps** was approaching the Idice River north-east of **Bologna**; farther west, in **Fifth Army's** sector, the Americans were drawing close to the city from the south. Nevertheless the Allied armies would have to move swiftly if they were to thwart the enemy's attempt to withdraw his armies across the Po in as good order as possible.

Already General McCreery had issued instructions for Eighth Army's pursuit to the Po. Fifth Corps was to continue its advance north-westwards to the city of **Ferrara** (which guarded the bridge across the Po on the main road to **Padua** and **Venice**) and to **Bondeno**; it was also to be prepared to seize a crossing over the Po north or north-east of **Ferrara**. Thirteenth Corps was to establish a bridgehead over the **Idice** north of **Budrio** and continue its advance north-westwards to San Marco and **San Giorgio**, north of **Bologna** (which was to be the Americans' objective). The Polish Corps was to establish a bridgehead over the **Idice**, on the left of 13 Corps, and was to protect **Eighth Army's** left flank and prevent the withdrawal of enemy forces from **Bologna** by the routes east of the Reno

River; it also was to be prepared to occupy **Bologna** (if the opposition was not too strong) and to cross the **Reno**.

For the attack across the **Idice** the Poles were directed to the river south of **Budrio**, and the New Zealanders were to cross north of the town; to the right of the main effort (farther to the north-east) **10 Indian Division** was to cross the **Quaderna** and also engage the enemy on the **Idice**. When the enemy position on the river, the Genghis Khan Line, had been broken, the New Zealand Division was to exploit rapidly across Route 64 (the **Bologna- Ferrara** highway) to **San Giorgio di Piano** and then northwards, and **10 Indian Division** was to despatch a brigade across the New Zealanders' most northerly bridge to the small town of **Minerbio**. The boundary between 13 Corps and the **Polish Corps** was revised so as to be along the railway from **Villa Fontana** to a road junction just south of **Budrio**, and thence north-westwards across the **Idice**. This boundary was to assume unexpected significance.

**General Freyberg** told a divisional conference early in the evening of the 19th that an intercepted message had revealed that the enemy was pulling back to the **Idice** that night. The Division was going to attack with the whole of the available artillery—216 field guns and 120 mediums and heavies—in support, and on a 4000-yard front chosen to open up the two roads leading north-westwards from the **Idice** north of **Budrio**. The left flank, exposed because the Poles were so far in rear, would have to be strongly held.

(ii)

That night 5 and 6 Brigades replaced 9 and 43 Brigades at the head of the Division.

While **28 Battalion** protected the right flank, 23 and 21 Battalions of 5 Brigade continued the advance beyond the il Canalazzo, and by 2 a.m. were on the next bound, about three-quarters of a mile from **Budrio**. After the changeover with the **Gurkhas**, who withdrew east of **Medicina**, 6 Brigade set out to conform with the 5th, with 24 and 26 Battalions in

the lead and the 25th protecting the left flank.

Fifth Brigade resumed the advance at 5.30 a.m. on the 20th, an hour or so before 6 Brigade reached the bound about three-quarters of a mile from **Budrio**. The tanks (C Squadron of 18 Regiment) with 21 Battalion subdued a strongpoint at the **San Pancrazio** crossroads, just short of **Budrio**, and the infantry passed through the northern outskirts of the town. After meeting only scattered resistance they reached the **Idice** about 11 a.m., and found the enemy dug in on both banks.

Meanwhile 23 Battalion had bypassed **Budrio**, approached the **Idice** about three-quarters of a mile downstream (north-west from the town) without opposition, and captured a few Germans who had been unaware that the New Zealanders were anywhere in the vicinity. By 8.30 a.m. the leading infantry and tanks of A Squadron, 18 Regiment, were about 500 yards from the river. Patrols reconnoitred the 15-foot near stopbank and found it wired and mined, but thought the watercourse, about 30 feet wide, could be forded by infantry. Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas sought Brigadier Bonifant's approval for an early daylight crossing.

Bonifant instructed 23 Battalion to send a patrol across. If this was successful, the battalion was to follow. In addition **28 Battalion** was to go to the right flank, where it was to be prepared to occupy the near stopbank.

While the other two platoons of A Company of 23 Battalion held the near stopbank, 9 Platoon (Lieutenant O'Sullivan <sup>1</sup>) crossed the **Idice** shortly after midday and occupied the nearest houses without casualties. Two companies of Germans, 'with stacks of arms and ammunition' were 'totally unprepared for battle. As was discovered later from prisoners, these German troops had marched for two days from the **Bologna** area to take up positions on the **Idice**, where they were supposed to fight to the last round and the last man. Their march had been rendered more than arduous

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<sup>1</sup> Lt W. M. O'Sullivan, m.i.d.; Reefton; born Pleasant Point, 6

Nov 1916; clerk; wounded 10 Apr 1945.

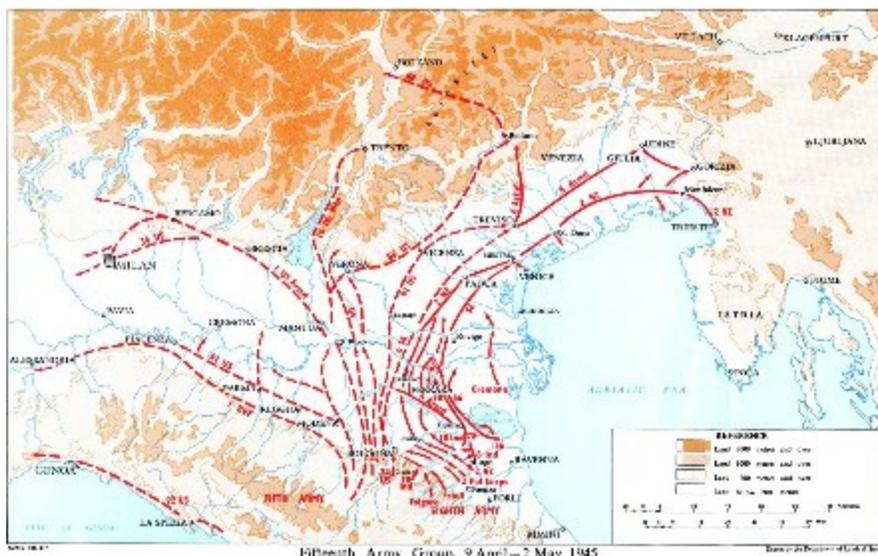
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by the bombing and strafing of the Allied air force. Exhausted, they had arrived that morning an hour or two earlier and, understanding the attacking **Eighth Army** troops to be still miles away, they had taken their boots off and were resting in order to be fit to fight that night or the next day. “They were caught literally with their pants down and boots off,” said the 23rd unit diary. O’Sullivan and his men attacked with vigour, killed 25 and captured 32, and, to quote Major Marett’s <sup>1</sup> report, “shot at and chased Germans too numerous to count—a chance that comes only once in a lifetime.”” <sup>2</sup>

The bridgehead was reinforced by 7 Platoon and ‘within an hour the two platoons were well into the Genghis Khan Line...’ <sup>3</sup> A Company had captured 42 prisoners without the loss of one man. Before sending two platoons across on the right of A Company at one o’clock, D Company, anticipating that the Germans would now be fully alerted, plastered the far bank with fire from Wasps and tanks. The leading section of 18 Platoon met- small-arms fire from a post which had not been eliminated, but Private **MacLeod** <sup>4</sup> stormed it and killed two of the enemy, and the section went far enough ahead to cover the advance of the rest of the platoon. No. 17 Platoon drove the enemy from a large house and had some good shooting with Brens and tommy guns at Germans running from this and other houses in the vicinity. Within a few minutes the two platoons had taken 30 prisoners and killed and wounded others. Some of the dumps of ammunition and weapons—which confirmed that the enemy had intended to make a stand on the Genghis Khan Line—were destroyed so that they could not be recaptured.

The enemy directed intense shell and mortar fire on 23 Battalion’s shallow bridgehead. The two companies were ordered not to go more than 100 yards beyond the river because of the closeness of the Allied Air Force’s bombing and strafing. Germans ‘came marching down the road in single file as if they were quite ignorant of the presence of the 23rd men, who waited to open fire until they were able to shoot up a

dozen or more.’<sup>5</sup> When some enemy emerged from dugouts which had not been cleared, Sergeant Maitland<sup>6</sup> charged forward, firing his tommy gun, and captured several men. With a small party from his platoon he rounded up 18



**Fifteenth Army Group, 9 April – 2 May 1945**

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<sup>1</sup> Maj A. C. Marett, MC; Wellington; born NZ 5 Aug 1916; warehouseman; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

<sup>2</sup> *23 Battalion*, pp. 457–8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 458.

<sup>4</sup> WO II D. G. MacLeod, MM; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 18 Nov 1923; moulder; p.w. 18 Nov 1943; escaped 27 Nov 1943; safe with Allied Forces 6 Mar 1944.

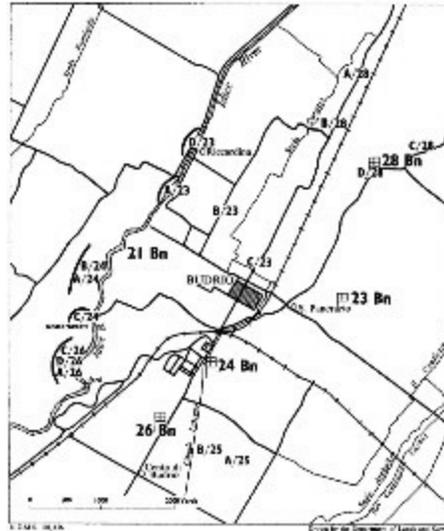
<sup>5</sup> *23 Battalion*, p. 459.

<sup>6</sup> Sgt R. Maitland, MM; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 27 Jul 1922; plumber; wounded 28 Nov 1943.

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prisoners altogether and forced others to flee. The 23rd Battalion took 130 prisoners on 20 April, at a cost of only three men wounded.

Early in the afternoon **28 Battalion**, with B Squadron of 18 Regiment in support, went into position on the right flank astride the railway about two miles north-east of **Budrio**, and made contact with **10 Indian Division** and also with troops of **12 Lancers** who were occupying houses in the vicinity. The Maoris sent out a patrol to test the strength of the enemy on this part of the **Idice**, but the patrol was fired on when within 500 yards of the river and withdrew. On 5 Brigade's other (left) flank 21 Battalion manned the near stopbank but did not cross the river because of the strong defences there.



SITUATION ON EVENING OF 20 APRIL 1945  
SITUATION ON EVENING OF 20 APRIL 1945

Meanwhile, about midday, 6 Brigade crossed the railway south-west of **Budrio** and reached the **Idice** without opposition. D Company of 24 Battalion had little difficulty in getting to the other side, but C Company, on D's left, encountered strongpoints on the far bank and needed the support of A Squadron, 20 Regiment. One of the strongpoints was a sanatorium which the tanks' gunners cleared systematically from top to bottom, one floor at a time, with delayed-action shells. Two platoons of C Company occupied a building on the far side, but later in the afternoon D Company was forced back over the river by German tanks, which left C isolated.

The Germans resisted, mostly with small arms, when 26 Battalion attempted to cross the **Idice** on the left flank, but by mid-afternoon both C and D Companies had platoons on the far side. The battalion did not attempt to enlarge this bridgehead until dusk because of the closeness of the Allied air assaults on the enemy. In the meantime, however, Second-Lieutenant Burland, <sup>1</sup> of C Squadron of 20 Regiment, found that tanks could ford the river outside the Division's boundary—in the Poles' sector—where only a few inches of water flowed over a shingle bottom. A few Germans, who had kept quiet while Burland and his squadron commander (Major Moodie <sup>2</sup>) stood at the water's edge, tried to surrender to the first tank which got over the ford, but the Sherman did not stop for them. C Squadron formed a bridgehead about 600 yards deep, and in the evening 26 Battalion had three companies (C, D and A) over the **Idice**. The 25th Battalion, supported by B Squadron of 20 Regiment, still protected the left flank east of the river.

*(iii)*

The Division had reached the **Idice** south of where it had been intended it should cross. This had been anticipated the previous evening, when it had been decided that the Division should sideslip to the north at the river. At a conference at 5 p.m., however, Brigadier Parkinson objected to relinquishing 6 Brigade's bridgehead in the Poles' sector: 'If we have to shift North then we will have no ford or crossing and we will lose the fruits of the battle we fought against 4 Para Div.' Brigadier Queree pointed out that the Polish artillery was likely to put down harassing fire on the Poles' side of the boundary at any time, and Major L. W. Colmore-Williams, the GSO II (Air), drew attention to the danger of being bombed by aircraft supporting the Poles' advance. But

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Lt R. B. Burland; Waikari, North Canterbury; born Kaikoura, 23 Apr 1922; telegraphist.

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Col J. F. Moodie, MBE, MC, ED; **Christchurch**; born

Dunedin, 13 Jan 1917; student; Sqn Comd 20 Regt Mar-Sep 1945; twice wounded.

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Parkinson held to his opinion 'that the enemy is putting stuff in as quickly as he can and that we must get on before dark... My people are full of running and if we have to give up our brhead then we will have to fall back to "B"; bank [between the near stopbank and the river] and call it a day.' <sup>1</sup> **General Freyberg** said he had taken up the boundary question on an Army level 'and I can't change it'. Brigadier Gentry supported Parkinson: 'The brhead helps the Poles as well as it does us.' Parkinson argued that there was 'only scattered and sporadic opposition. The first man who gets over the river with armour is the important one. After all it was the first man through the HINDENBERG LINE who really broke it.' <sup>2</sup>

'The last-war simile hit home. The General grinned, and slowly gave way,' <sup>3</sup> Major Cox noted.

**Freyberg:** 'If they say you've got to get out then you must do so. We have tried. I thought it would be OK because the Poles were 12 miles behind us. I spoke to General DUCH but he was determined to go ahead and cross over just where we have got our brhead. ... There are two alternatives. Either we do a penetration under Brigadiers tonight or else put in a proper show with arty tomorrow night. Ian [Bonifant] could go ahead to the road parallel with the river under a short arty programme of his own....'

Parkinson: 'I think that if we shove enough stuff through our ford the whole thing will bust.'

**Freyberg:** 'OK then. Ike [Parkinson] will carry on under his own steam and move across to the right and take over his own bde front. 5 Bde will go in at 2400 [hours] with their own arty plan provided Ian decides that it is possible.' <sup>4</sup>

Thus the GOC decided upon a compromise: 6 Brigade was to use the

ford in the Poles' sector while 5 Brigade put in a frontal attack under a barrage. The General conferred with the commander of 13 Corps and with Polish representatives to get the plan accepted, secure the use of the ford, and prevent the Polish artillery from firing on the New Zealanders. 'The great thing,' agreed General Harding, 'is not to delay the battle.'<sup>5</sup> He suggested that the New Zealand Division went ahead, and that 3 Carpathian Division formed up behind it and took no offensive action until next morning. 'If we are going to take full advantage of the situation we must leave the New Zealanders where they are till first light. The Polish troops will have the advantage that the

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, p. 137.

<sup>4</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>5</sup> GOC's diary.

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New Zealanders are clearing the ground for them—if they take over before first light they would take over an untidy situation.'<sup>1</sup> **Freyberg** said he had no objection to the Poles putting troops into the bridgehead if they wanted to do so. The Poles accepted this arrangement and agreed upon a line north of which their artillery would not shoot.

(iv)

After crossing the ford in the Poles' sector the infantry of 26 Battalion and tanks of C Squadron, 20 Regiment, held a bridgehead over the **Idice** about 600 yards deep and 700 wide. The three companies (C, D and A) were harassed by spandaus and mortars and, although the tanks retaliated, the darkness made it difficult to pinpoint the enemy

positions. About 10 p.m. on the 20th the foremost platoons withdrew to slightly better cover.

At five o'clock A and B Companies of 24 Battalion had been ordered to establish a bridgehead on the line of a lateral road 700–800 yards beyond the river. A Company on the left came under fire from two machine-gun posts which hitherto had remained concealed, and the advance might have been halted had not Lance-Corporal **Beckham**<sup>2</sup> attacked and killed the crews of both of them. By eight o'clock the two companies were about midway between the river and the lateral road and had been joined by the tanks of A Squadron, 20 Regiment, which had crossed at the ford.

Sixth Brigade was not to sideslip to the north until both 5 and 6 Brigades held a firm bridgehead. Brigadier Bonifant gave orders at 7.30 p.m. for an attack by 28 and 23 Battalions to expand the bridgehead. On their left 21 Battalion, after crossing the river and occupying ground in the gap between the two brigades, would be squeezed out of the line when 6 Brigade conformed with the 5th, and would go into reserve.

B, C and D Companies of 21 Battalion, starting at 8.30 p.m., crossed the river without difficulty and before midnight were occupying positions beyond the far stopbank astride the road from **Budrio**. Meanwhile, in preparation for the assault, A and B Companies of **28 Battalion**, assisted by B Squadron of 18 Regiment, approached the river on the right of 23 Battalion and were on the near stopbank by 8.40 p.m. The enemy used bazookas and light mortars in an attempt to dislodge them, but without success.

**Divisional Headquarters** issued orders at nine o'clock that, to permit the construction of bridges, 5 Brigade was to extend north-

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> Cpl **H. F. Beckham**, DCM; **Kaitaia**; born Ngongotaha,

wards to the boundary with **10 Indian Division**—which it had done already—and, with artillery support, establish a bridgehead on the general line of a track about 400 yards beyond the **Idice**. Sixth Brigade was to extend its existing bridgehead northwards from the ford with the object of joining up with the 5th west of the river.

Fifth Brigade's orders for the attack by 28 and 23 Battalions, which was to start at midnight on 20–21 April, gave as the objective a track 800 yards from the river, twice the distance set by the divisional orders. The artillery programme was arranged at lightning speed. The 4th and 5th NZ Field Regiments and 23 Field Regiment, RA, were to cover the advance with a barrage on a 2000-yard front; other heavy, medium and field guns and heavy anti-aircraft guns were to fire counter-battery and counter-mortar tasks and concentrations. Sappers of 7 Field Company were to construct a Bailey bridge, and 28 Assault Squadron was to lay an Ark bridge; the tanks of 18 Regiment were to be ready to use the first available crossing.

The assault over the **Idice** by C and D Companies of **28 Battalion** (after passing through A and B) was to have been preceded by a flame attack by Crocodiles, but owing to a misunderstanding the Maoris crossed without this assistance. They pressed on against only slight resistance, but had difficulty in keeping direction because of what was reported to be dense smoke from the artillery barrage but probably was dust raised by the exploding shells. C Company was guided by a road on its right flank, but D had to rely on compass bearings. The presence of German tanks was reported near the final objective, and for this reason C Company pulled back slightly. Much enemy movement in the vicinity of the **Scolo Fiumicello**, only a short distance ahead, was engaged by the artillery.

During the first stage of the attack 23 Battalion reported poor visibility because of river fog. D and C Companies, however, advanced

without opposition and by two o'clock were on their objective. A patrol discovered that a bridge over the **Scolo Fiumicello** was intact and would take tanks.

The construction of 7 Field Company's high-level 100-foot Bailey bridge took longer than expected. Because the bridging train was delayed by a vehicle being ditched and the high banks required much preliminary work, the construction was not begun until after two o'clock, but was completed about six hours later. The assault squadron's attempt to place an Ark bridge about half a mile farther upstream was abandoned when it was found to be impracticable, but 8 Field Company, assisted by bulldozers from 27 Mechanical Equipment Company, opened a ford in the vicinity about 4.30 a.m. and began work shortly afterwards on a 50-foot low-level Bailey near the ford. This was completed by nine o'clock.

Because of these delays it was decided to pass C Squadron of 18 Regiment over the ford in the Poles' sector and direct it northwards through 6 Brigade and 5 Brigade's sector. This squadron was in contact with 21 Battalion by 7 a.m.; A and B Squadrons, using 8 Field Company's crossing, were marrying up with the infantry an hour or two later.

(v)

On the evening of 20 April the German Commander-in-Chief South-West (General von Vietinghoff) ordered a general withdrawal from the **Bologna** area. He had not been allowed by **Berlin** to order a fighting withdrawal to the River Po; he had failed to halt the Allied offensive on the Apennine line, and when retreat 'was forced upon him as the only alternative to annihilation south of the Po, he found that his armies were already battered, he had no reserves and his pace of withdrawal was limited to that of the foot soldier.' <sup>1</sup> Already **Eighth Army** had breached the Genghis Khan Line in the **Argenta** Gap and on the Idice River, and **Fifth Army** had debouched from the mountains into the **Po valley**.

Early on the morning of 21 April troops of 3 Carpathian Division entered Bologna from the south-west, shortly before men of 34 Division, 2 United States Corps, drove into it from the south; later in the day they were joined by the Italian Legnano Group and troops of 91 US Division. To Eighth Army's triumph of having the first troops in the city, the New Zealand Division had contributed not a little by seizing the chance to 'jump' the Idice River. The Poles made good use of the ford captured by the New Zealanders.

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<sup>1</sup> *Operations of British, Indian, and Dominion Forces in Italy*, Part IV, Sec. G, p. 8.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

# CHAPTER 11 – THE RACE TO TRIESTE

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## I: FROM THE IDICE TO THE RENO RIVER

### *I: From the Idice to the Reno River*

(i)

**THE** last stage of the campaign in **Italy** might have taken a different course if General von Vietinghoff had had his way— yet nothing he could have done would have averted the defeat of *Army Group C*. In his appreciation to the **German High Command** as early as 14 April he showed that he was fully alive to the situation, but the answer he received to his request for permission to withdraw was typical of Hitler's uncompromising attitude and total disregard for the facts of the situation. Hitler replied on the 17th through Colonel General Jodl, Chief of the Operational Staff:

**‘All commanders of troops and staff officers will be instructed in the following Fuehrer orders: All further proposals for a change in the present war strategy will be discontinued. I wish to point out particularly that under no circumstances must troops or commanders be allowed to waver or to adopt a defeatist attitude as a result of such ideas apparently held in your headquarters. Where any such danger is likely, the sharpest counter-measures must be employed. The Fuehrer expects now as before the utmost steadfastness in the fulfilment of your present mission, to defend every inch of the north Italian areas entrusted to your command. I desire to point out the serious consequences for all those higher commanders, unit commanders or staff officers who do not carry out the Fuehrer's orders to the last word.**

**‘I request you inform all military formations under your command to this effect and inform the Plenipotentiary General in **Italy** of this reply.**

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On 20 April, when it was too late, Vietinghoff sent a message which revealed his intention to act on his own initiative:

**'My Fuehrer!**

**Resolved by my unshakeable will to hold the Italian front under all circumstances and to carry out your orders to the last, I report to you, my Fuehrer, that as a result of heavy battle losses our forces in the Italian theatre are strained to such an extent that, if we persist in our policy of static defence, an enemy breakthrough at Lake Comacchio, **Bologna** and La **Spezia** can in all probability not be prevented despite the heroic resistance and determination of our officers and men. All available forces have been concentrated in the focal point of the battle, and other sectors of the front, not under direct heavy attack, have consequently been denuded to provide reinforcements. Mobile reserves are no longer available. Thus, the enemy threatens to achieve his object, i.e., to split and subsequently to crush the German front. In a mobile strategy, however, I will still see a possibility of preventing this threat from being carried out and of continuing our resistance with a chance of success. Difficult as it is for me, I consider it my duty, my Fuehrer, to send you this report at this hour and to await your orders....'** <sup>1</sup>

By committing his last reserves against the right wing of Eighth Army, Vietinghoff had denuded the centre, where **Fourteenth Army** could not muster sufficient forces to prevent **Fifth Army** breaking through **14 Panzer Corps** and fanning out into the **Po valley**; and **Tenth Army's** efforts to conduct an orderly withdrawal with **1 Parachute Corps** were nullified by the collapse of **14 Corps** on one flank coinciding with the failure of **76 Panzer Corps** to close the **Argenta Gap** on the other.

After the Poles and Americans entered **Bologna** the city was placed wholly at **Fifth Army's** disposal; the Poles were halted in positions which denied its northern exits to the enemy. Meanwhile, north of the **Argenta Gap**, **5 Corps** deployed its forces to develop two thrusts, one against

**Ferrara** and the crossings of the River Po to the north-east of the town, and the other north-westwards to cut off the retreat of *1 Parachute Corps*. While **6 British Armoured Division** (which had been in **Eighth Army** reserve until 18 April) swept along the north bank of the Reno River to **Poggio Renatico** and severed the enemy's line of communication between **Bologna** and **Ferrara**, **78** and **56 British Infantry Divisions** thrust to the

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34. This message, although not confirmed by documents, was repeated to Allied authorities after the campaign by a high ranking German staff officer who memorised its contents.

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**Po di Volano**, east of **Ferrara** and only six miles from the main river, and **28 Garibaldi Brigade** of partisans pursued the enemy on the coastal flank.

General Keightley decided that **8 Indian Division** should take over the drive on **Ferrara** and thus release **6 Armoured Division** to throw its full weight westwards. This decision was amply rewarded. By the evening of 22 April two brigades of the Indian division were in the outskirts of **Ferrara**, and next morning one of them reached the River Po at **Pontelagoscuro**. A column from **6 Armoured Division** arrived at **Bondeno** on the evening of the 22nd and also reached the Po next day; another armoured group, continuing westward, made contact with **6 South African Armoured Division**, of **Fifth Army**, on 23 April.

These 'lightning advances' by **6 Armoured Division** 'drove deep into the enemy lines of communication, cutting off the escape of his fighting troops, taking base troops by surprise, and throwing the German forces into a high state of confusion.'<sup>1</sup> The threat of encirclement compelled the remnants of *1 Parachute Corps* to retire hurriedly to the north-west; many parachutists were captured, but a number escaped and were next heard of on the **Adige River**, north of the Po. German resistance on **Eighth Army's** front west of **Ferrara** was at an end by midday on 23

April, and east of the town **76 Panzer Corps** was making its final desperate stand south of the Po.

**Ferrara** fell to **Eighth Army**, **Modena** (on Route 9 north-west of **Bologna**) and **Spezia** (on the west coast) to the Fifth. After an advance of 75 miles in eight and a half days, **10 United States Mountain Division** crossed the Po in rubber assault boats just north of San Benedetto at midday on the 23rd and secured the first Allied bridgehead.

(ii)

**General Freyberg** told an orders group conference in the morning of 21 April that 5 and 6 Brigades were to continue the advance to the north-west. Led by the armoured cars of **12 Lancers**, the Division was going to 'do a movement like we used to do in the desert except that it will be done on two roads.'<sup>2</sup> Two brigade groups were to progress by bounds, with **Divisional Headquarters** close behind them, followed by the gun group. Communication would have to be by wireless because it would be impossible to keep in touch by line except during the halt at night.

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<sup>1</sup> *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy*, Part IV, Sec. B, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's papers.

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It soon became apparent that the German rearguards had not dropped back very far from the **Idice**. Probing forward on the 'red' route on the right, C Squadron of the Lancers could not go much farther than a mile and a half from the river without coming under fire from self-propelled guns and *nebelwerfers* in the vicinity of **Cazzano**, a small village from which roads radiated and which appeared to be the hinge of a line the enemy was holding along the **Scolo la Zena**. On the left, however, D Squadron was able to go twice as far along the 'blue' route before meeting opposition on this line, about three miles from the **Idice**.

After A and B Squadrons of 18 Regiment had 'married up' with 23 and 28 Battalions between the **Idice** and the **Scolo Fiumicello**, 5 Brigade resumed the advance in mid-morning. 'At first it looked like being another country jaunt. Part of the time the infantry rode on the tanks, at other times the tanks were out in front. There was even a bridge or two left intact over some of the canals. For a mile there was only the odd German or two waiting to be picked up, plus a few Italians raising a thin cheer.

'Then a sudden fight flared up at **Cazzano**.... Here Jerry had planted a little rearguard—as it turned out later, one Tiger tank, one Panther and one self-propelled gun.... Nos. 7 and 8 Troops [of B Squadron with the **Maori Battalion** on the right flank] ran head-on into this ambush, carefully camouflaged in the farms round **Cazzano**. Suddenly the joyride turned to tragedy.' <sup>1</sup> Four Sherman tanks were knocked out, one of them in flames. British self-propelled guns <sup>2</sup> and the mediums 'smothered the farm buildings with shellbursts, while a "shufti" [air observation post] plane hovering overhead reported targets back to the guns....

'B Squadron, straight out in front of the enemy in the open, could not do much after losing so many tanks, particularly as its right flank was wide open and more trouble could have come from there at any time. A little later it lost a fifth Sherman when our own artillery landed a "stonk" on top of it—the kind of accident that always resulted in much bitterness.' <sup>3</sup> A Squadron also lost a tank to the German self-propelled gun, but being farther to the left had more freedom of movement. A 17-pounder tank hit and set fire to the self-propelled gun, which was hidden in a hedge with a tree attached to its turret.

Despite 'terrible punishment' <sup>4</sup> from fighter-bombers and artillery the rearguard was still at **Cazzano** at nightfall. It hindered 10 Indian

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<sup>1</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 630.

<sup>2</sup> **142 Army Fd Regt (SP)** was under 5 Brigade's command.

<sup>3</sup> *18 Battalion and Armoured Regiment, p. 631.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid., p. 632*

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FROM THE IDICE TO THE PO, 21-24 APRIL 1945

Division, which crossed the Idice River unopposed but was obliged to halt in the vicinity of the **Scolo Fiumicello** and thus leave 5 Brigade with an exposed right flank. On the other flank, the only resistance in 6 Brigade's sector came from isolated spandaus, snipers and mortars, and progress was retarded only by the necessity of conforming with 5 Brigade.

After nightfall, however, 5 Brigade advanced without opposition. While 21 Battalion took up defensive positions on the right, 23 and 28 Battalions crossed the Scolo la Zena about midnight, and saw many signs of the enemy having left in a hurry. At least two bridges were still intact.

The Division had captured 150-odd prisoners during the day, which brought its total since the start of the offensive to nearly 3000. The German force which had been encountered on the **Idice** River had withdrawn in approximately the same order as it had adopted there: the

prisoners had been taken from *4 Parachute Division* on the right, *305 Infantry Division* in the centre, and *1 Parachute Division* on the left.

(iii)

Next day, 22 April, the Division turned to the north. Still in the lead, the armoured cars of **12 Lancers** reported on the state of the bridges, demolitions, and the enemy whenever he was encountered. They entered Castel Maggiore, about four miles north of **Bologna**, made contact with **91 United States Division** of Fifth Army near the Reno River, and cleared pockets of resistance in the vicinity of **Minerbio** (near Route 64, the **Bologna- Ferrara** highway).

Fifth Brigade's leading tanks and infantry had reached Route 64 by 7.15 a.m. The bridge over the Savena, a deep canalised stream alongside the highway, had been demolished, and while the tanks of B Squadron of **18 Regiment** were waiting for an Ark tank and bulldozer to prepare a crossing, the Maoris pushed on towards the village of **Bentivoglio**, on the **Canale Navile**. 'There was no resistance and every house had a white sheet hanging from its windows. Odd parties of Germans were picked up here and there but there was no organisation behind them. Civilians offered hospitality which was regretfully declined, though many a haversack was filled with cold chicken and hard-boiled eggs.' <sup>1</sup> The bridge over the Canale Navile at **Bentivoglio** had been destroyed, but partisans erected a plank footbridge, and the battalion 'took position beyond the canal, scooping up an enemy RAP and directing batches of prisoners, some under escort and some under their own power, back to the

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<sup>1</sup> *Maori Battalion*, p. 473.

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rear.... The troops waited while the engineers worked on the bridge. Rafters from demolished buildings were carried by the enthusiastic populace and by midday the armour and a number of other vehicles were across.' <sup>1</sup>

The 23rd Battalion also crossed the Savena and **Canale Navile**, and rested south of a lateral road which linked **Bentivoglio** with **San Giorgio di Piano**, farther west. Both 28 and 23 Battalions resumed the northward advance in the late afternoon. The GOC directed 5 Brigade to get across the Reno River if possible. By this time 6 British Armoured Division had gone so far westward along the north bank of the river that a crossing on the New Zealand Division's present axis of advance would lead into territory already captured by **Eighth Army**. On the Division's left the South Africans of **Fifth Army** had entered Cento, just across the river.

Although the air observation post advised that there was no sign of the enemy for the next four miles, Lieutenant-Colonel Awatere insisted that **28 Battalion** advance on foot and search every building on the way. About 20 enemy fled from a house before the Maoris could close with them. Elsewhere a Wasp flame-thrower assisted the partisans who were fighting 'a pitched battle'<sup>2</sup> with some Germans. By midnight **28 Battalion** had reached the Fosso Riolo, about seven miles beyond **Bentivoglio** and only one mile from the **Reno**.

After their long march the Maoris 'were wet to the skin through wading so many canals, and because of the mud in their socks were wearing their boots slung over their shoulders. The danger of meeting any opposition now appeared remote and the men were told to climb aboard tanks, portées, and other unit vehicles. This strange mixture of vehicles, with the tanks leading, swept down to the **Reno**, where the forward companies dug in on the side of the river. Awatere was anxious to throw a company over so he waded across and examined the empty trenches. Then he yelled in Maori, "There's no one here. Come over B Company."<sup>3</sup> B Company crossed, and later was joined by the other companies. Fifth Brigade instructed **28 Battalion**, to stand fast until further orders.

In the late afternoon 23 Battalion, on the left of the 28th, had set off with the leading companies (A and D) mounted on tanks and portées. 'The speed and distance of the advance [over 20 miles that day] caught

the imagination of the men, who knew for certain that the “break-through” proper had begun.’<sup>4</sup> D Company, on the left flank, discovered that the small town of **San Pietro** in

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<sup>1</sup> *Maori Battalion*, p. 473.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 475.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *23 Battalion*, p. 461.

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**Casale** was still held by the enemy, but Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas ordered the battalion to bypass it and trust to its surrender once its occupants knew they were completely cut off by the Allied forces. This move saved casualties. A and D Companies reached the **Reno** about midnight, and by the time B and C caught up in RMT trucks, reconnaissance had revealed that an immediate crossing would be unopposed. B and C Companies took the lead to cross. Thomas described an early morning visit to the foremost platoons: ‘The men, of course, were bitterly cold, having been wet through wading waist high, but were making the most of things and were very cheerful and willing. Heavens! But they have done wonders during this show, nothing seems too much to ask of them, yet they often have no sleep for days on end.’<sup>1</sup>

Before dawn on 23 April 5 Brigade was holding a bridgehead over the **Reno** a little more than a mile wide and nearly a mile deep, with the four companies of **28 Battalion** astride the railway between the river and the village of **Poggio Renatico**, two companies of **23 Battalion** on the left of the Maoris, and the other two companies of the 23rd still on the southern bank. Both battalions were fired on by mistake by troops of 6 British Armoured Division, and a man in B Company of the 28th was killed by a patrol from this division. Still in reserve, **21 Battalion** was two or three miles south of the river.

Sixth Brigade's axis of advance crossed the **Canale Navile** and the **Bologna- Ferrara** railway before turning north towards San Giorgio di Piano, about 10 miles from **Bologna**, and followed a bitumen road. The brigade was unopposed as far as **San Giorgio**, which could have been a German headquarters, for many of the buildings still displayed swastikas. 'The town was in an uproar— people crowding the streets, throwing flowers, jumping on vehicles, proffering wine—all the exuberance of liberation,' wrote Major Boord, <sup>2</sup> of 24 Battalion. 'I had no desire to take my trucks in there and have half my men get drunk, so we stayed put till 26 [Battalion] came up and the advance continued.' <sup>3</sup> Apparently the Germans had told the people of **San Giorgio** 'that the New Zealanders were starving, and amid scenes of terrific enthusiasm wine and bread (the former reported good, the latter stale) were heaped on the tank crews [of 20 Regiment].... The partisans were busy and

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *23 Battalion*, p. 462.

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Col R. Boord, m.i.d.; **Hamilton**; born NZ 4 Feb 1908; student; CO 24 Bn Jul-Dec 1945; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

<sup>3</sup> *24 Battalion*, pp. 330–1.

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there were sounds of rifle fire coming from the north of the town....'

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Sixth Brigade was held up in the afternoon two miles north of **San Giorgio**, where A and B Companies of 24 Battalion and A Squadron of 20 Regiment were halted by mortar and machine-gun fire. C Company of 26 Battalion and tanks of C Squadron, which followed 24 Battalion, encountered a strong rearguard on the left flank, where a spirited attempt by a platoon failed to drive the enemy from his well prepared positions. Brigadier Parkinson ordered 26 Battalion to brush the

opposition aside and continue the advance, but agreed to a postponement when **Lieutenant-Colonel Fairbrother** advised him that the enemy was firmly in position and there was no sign yet of 9 Brigade, which was reported to be coming up on 6 Brigade's left.

The 26th Battalion was deployed in positions covering the left flank, and 25 Battalion, when it reached **San Giorgio**,<sup>2</sup> was similarly placed. After nightfall D Company of 24 Battalion went to within about a mile of **San Pietro in Casale** without opposition, and B Company of the 25th sent a patrol to the Scolo Riolo north-west of **San Giorgio** without making contact.

Next day (the 23rd) 6 Brigade resumed the advance. The 24th Battalion paused south of **San Pietro** while the 26th passed through to take the lead, and then followed to Sant' Alberto. With A and B Companies riding on the tanks and C and D following in trucks, 26 Battalion advanced six miles without a check to reach the Scolo Riolo in mid-morning. After a reconnaissance the leading companies waded across the Reno River, which was only about a foot deep in that part, and deployed about a quarter of a mile beyond the north bank. Contact was made with troops of 6 British Armoured Division. Still protecting the left flank, 25 Battalion<sup>3</sup> took up positions between Sant' Alberto and the river.

Ninth Brigade, which had been resting in the **Medicina** area since 20 April, set out to rejoin the Division in mid-morning on the 22nd. The journey through **Villa Fontana**, over the Gaiana, along the **Budrio** road and beyond the **Idice**, was very slow and exceedingly dusty, mostly on secondary roads and tracks and through congested traffic. The brigade advanced along the 'green' route, a system of roads west of 6 Brigade's sector and in the bend of the Reno River north of **Bologna**. A Squadron of 19 Armoured Regiment led on the left with A and D Companies of 22 Battalion in support, and B Squadron on the right with B and C Companies in

<sup>1</sup> *20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 575.

<sup>2</sup> 23 April is St. George's Day, *la festa di San Giorgio*.

<sup>3</sup> The CO 25 Bn (Lt-Col Norman) was wounded when his jeep ran over a mine early in the day, and was succeeded in command by Maj A. W. Barnett.

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support; the infantry was in Kangaroos of C Squadron, 4 Hussars.

In the evening B Squadron encountered the enemy at the Fosso Quadra, a watercourse about two miles north-west of San Giorgio di Piano, and suffered a few casualties from mortar and small-arms fire. That night, also, enemy aircraft (perhaps only one) strafed a mess queue in 22 Battalion, apparently with no worse effect than to induce 'four or five hundred men [to try] simultaneously to dive under trucks or into shelter of any kind... and whole containers of food were upset amid shouts of "Put out those lights! You fools!" It was all over within a minute, and a badly shaken battalion queued up again for what was left of the food.' <sup>1</sup> Divisional Cavalry Battalion was less fortunate: several casualties were caused by butterfly bombs dropped by this or another aircraft.

Ninth Brigade's sector was very quiet after midnight. The advance was resumed at dawn on 23 April and, meeting little or no opposition, the leading tanks and Kangaroos reached the Fosso Riolo, in the bend of the Reno, about midday.

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<sup>1</sup> *22 Battalion*, p. 432.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## II: CROSSING THE RIVER PO

### *II: Crossing the River Po*

(i)

It was necessary for **Eighth Army** to regroup on 23 April. The New Zealand Division of 13 Corps had secured a bridgehead over the Reno River, but 6 Armoured Division of 5 Corps had driven across 13 Corps' front and reached **Bondeno**, on the **Panaro** River. Fifth Corps' was the only part of **Eighth Army** properly in contact with the enemy, but its front was now 50 miles wide, and on the right it was still strongly opposed south of the River Po and east of **Ferrara**. Therefore, to enable 5 Corps to concentrate on the elimination of the enemy still resisting south of the lower reaches of the river and to facilitate 13 Corps' advance from its **Reno** bridgehead, 6 Armoured Division passed to the command of the latter corps, and the inter-corps boundary was adjusted to run directly north from the **Reno**, passing just to the west of **Ferrara** and reaching the Po at **Stienta**. The 10th Indian Division was to take no further part in the battle.

When the break through the **Argenta** Gap was assured on 20 April, General McCreery had decided to make 5 Corps responsible for crossing the Po in the neighbourhood of **Ferrara** and Polesella, and the Po Bridging Task Force and the pontoon equipment had been placed at its disposal. The German *76 Panzer Corps*, however, was still holding the south bank where the crossings had been selected for 5 Corps, whereas on 13 Corps' front there was a wide stretch of river practically undefended. Thus McCreery had the choice of continuing the main drive as originally planned— ignoring the opportunity that appeared to be offering on 13 Corps' front—or switching all the bridging to the most favourable sector and leaving 5 Corps' three divisions to exert pressure on the enemy still south of the Po; a further choice was to divide the

available resources between the two corps.

**Fifteenth Army Group** announced on 23 April that **Eighth Army's** task was to turn north-east, breach the **Adige** (Venetian) Line and capture **Padua**. Route 16, from **Ferrara** to **Padua** through **Rovigo**, was the only road suitable as the main **Eighth Army** axis for maintenance and would have to be opened in any case; but it was liable to disruption because of its many bridges and because it could be easily flooded. The alternative axis, from **Bondeno** across the **Po** to **Ficarolo**, **Trecenta**, **Badia** and **Este**, west of the junction of Routes 10 and 16, was less liable to interruption. While the western route was more attractive tactically, Route 16 was to be preferred from an administrative point of view. In addition, since the extent of the enemy's disorganisation was not yet fully realised, the possibility of his being able to make a stand on the **Venetian Line** had to be considered. **McCreery** decided, therefore, to give the large body of the enemy withdrawing up Route 16 no respite from the pressure being exerted by **5 Corps** and at the same time to press forward with **13 Corps** on the western route. Both corps were to establish bridgeheads over the **Po** and **Adige** rivers, and the bridging equipment was to be distributed accordingly.

Consequently **13 Corps** was to cross the **Po** with **6 Armoured Division** on the right and the **New Zealand Division** on the left; when they had achieved a sufficient build-up on the north bank, they were to continue northward, with the British division directed on **Lendinara** and the **New Zealanders** on **Badia Polesine**, and make every effort to secure bridgeheads over the **Adige River** before the enemy could man the **Venetian Line** in strength.

Already **6 Armoured Division** had reached the **Po** at two points, **1 Derbyshire Yeomanry** (the divisional reconnaissance regiment) north-west of **Ferrara** and **2 Lothians and Border Horse** (of **26 Armoured Brigade**) east of the **Panaro River**, which joins the **Po** north of **Bondeno**. All was quiet along the river front, but much movement was observed on the far bank, and it looked as though the enemy might defend his positions there. The **61st Infantry Brigade** stayed in the **Bondeno** area

until the New Zealand Division took over that sector, and the remainder of 6 Armoured Division regrouped in the evening of 23 April preparatory to launching the assault across the Po. At first it was intended to attack that night, but the necessary assault craft had not yet arrived. The consequent postponement gave time for the New Zealand Division to move up on the left of the armoured division, and made it possible for the two divisions to assault the river defences simultaneously.

*(ii)*

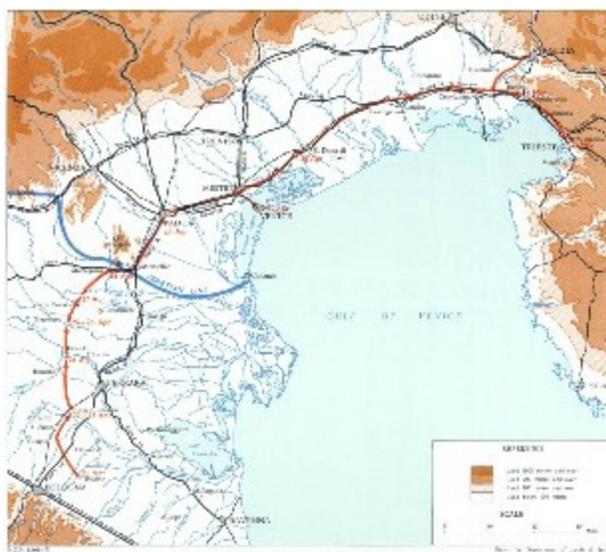
**Divisional Headquarters** gave orders for the advance northwards to be resumed at dawn on the 24th by 5 Brigade on 'red' route and 6 Brigade on 'blue'; **12 Lancers** was to be the first to cross the **Reno** so that its armoured cars could reconnoitre ahead. The 6th Armoured Division was to withdraw its troops from the New Zealand Division's sector; the two divisions were to operate independently and begin their crossing of the Po as soon as they were ready.

A Squadron of the Lancers swept the ground on the New Zealanders' left inside the great horseshoe bend of the **Reno** on 23 April, while C Squadron, having crossed the river south of Cento, was first into that town and began to clear the ground north of it and west of the river. C Squadron overran several pockets of parachutists who had been cut off by 6 Armoured Division farther north, and by nightfall had made contact with that division at **Bondeno**.

Meanwhile the New Zealand Engineers built two bridges across the **Reno**: in 5 Brigade's sector 7 Field Company erected a 170-foot Bailey between the railway and the road south-west of Poggio Renatico; in 6 Brigade's sector 8 Field Company erected a 210-foot Bailey at Passo Barchetta. Before these bridges were completed many of the tanks forded the river. Both brigades concentrated on the north bank in readiness to resume the advance in the morning.

A and B Squadrons of the Lancers reconnoitred the approaches to the River Po above and below its confluence with the **Panaro** River, and

found the south bank clear. The 21st Battalion, in RMT trucks and with C Squadron of 18 Regiment in support, led 5 Brigade to a concentration area east of **Bondeno**. The convoy drove 'across country that was still flat, but with longer intervals between canals. The roads were lined with poplars, and there were occasional plantations of oak and pine trees. In every direction and at every distance the pointed spires of village churches showed above the trees. Clouds of light yellow dust were reminiscent of desert days as the trucks swung through the Italian countryside, lovely in the first spring clothing of lucerne and wheat. Every ditch was gay with yellow buttercups, white daisies and blue



From **Budrio** to **Trieste**, 21 April—2 May 1945

snapdragons, every field fenced with mulberry, poplar, elm, chestnut and oak trees, all supporting grape vines in full leaf. The populace waved to the speeding trucks or crowded around with flowers and wine at the frequent and unpredictable halts.’ <sup>1</sup>

Late in the morning 21 Battalion sent patrols to the River Po, and at midday Second-Lieutenant **Carr** <sup>2</sup> and Corporal **Bisley** <sup>3</sup>, from A Company, paddled across in an assault boat a short distance downstream from Isola Tontola, the small island near the confluence of the Po and **Panaro**. Carr climbed the far bank and almost trod on a sleeping German in a slit trench but did not disturb him. After a quick look around the two men returned; they were not fired on by the enemy, but were strafed

by Allied aircraft while on the way back to their own lines.

The 23rd Battalion, with A Squadron of 18 Regiment in support, followed the 21st towards the Po. A patrol from B Company reconnoitred to the river and reported the near stopbank was 20 to 30 feet high and would hide any movement on the southern side. Enemy defences were seen on the far bank, and some of them were obviously manned. There were good launching sites for boats, and three large enemy barges were moored in the battalion's sector. B and C Companies were told to go up to the stopbank and await orders. Colonels Thomas and McPhail discussed plans for a co-ordinated attack by 21 and 23 Battalions.

Fifth Brigade's reserve, **28 Battalion** accompanied by B Squadron of 18 Regiment, bivouacked east of **Bondeno**. Sixth Brigade, led by 25 Battalion and B Squadron of 20 Regiment, was intended to cross the Panaro River at **Bondeno** and continue northward for about five miles to the Po in the vicinity of Quattrelle, opposite **Ficarolo**. As the enemy had demolished the bridge over the **Panaro**, however, it was decided that 25 Battalion should remain on the eastern side of that river. It therefore dispersed in mid-afternoon near the Po between 23 Battalion and the mouth of the **Panaro**. The 24th and 26 Battalions dispersed south of **Bondeno**, and 20 Armoured Regiment between the town and the Po. The engineers (8 Field Company), using as piers an uncompleted enemy timber bridge, built a 70-foot Bailey over the **Panaro** between **Bondeno** and the Po. A four-man patrol from B Company of 25 Battalion paddled an assault boat to Isola Tontola, but found no trace of the enemy there and could not see him on the far bank of the Po. Men from A and B Companies of 25 Battalion occupied the island before midnight. Meanwhile 9 Brigade crossed the Reno River

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<sup>1</sup> *21 Battalion*, pp. 428–9.

<sup>2</sup> Lt E. F. Carr, DCM, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born NZ 13 Feb 1920; apprentice sheetmetal worker.

<sup>3</sup> **Sgt A. L. Bisley, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ 13 Apr 1923; student.**

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**and closed up in rear of 6 Brigade south of **Bondeno**; 43 Gurkha Brigade stayed south of the **Reno**.**

**The approaches to the River Po ‘were littered with the abandoned material of an army, some blown up and destroyed, some just left, mile upon mile of it. We spent much of that day checking up on it. Under the constant air attack it was clear that a hundred local Dunkirks, each worse in its way than the 1940 evacuation, because here the attackers had held complete control of the air, had taken place. Trucks, horse-drawn wagons, cars, caravans, guns lay abandoned or burnt on the roadside, tipped into ditches, run into fields. Hundreds of supply and artillery horses roamed the fields, the magnificent draught horses of **Hungary** and **Germany**. Amongst the trucks we captured the documents of the 4th Parachute Division, including their own books on the **Crete** campaign and their victory there over the “Neuseelander” in “Einsatz gegen Kreta”.’ <sup>1</sup>**

**Men, ‘with time on their hands, mingled with civilians, all bent on salvaging something of value from the wreckage. Some of the hundreds of horses roaming about were rounded up and the men enjoyed the unexpected pleasure of an afternoon's ride. Bartering went on with the civilians as horses were sold and then resold. After tea impromptu race meetings were held. The war seemed far away. Several German trucks were repaired and on the following day joined the north-bound convoys, each one loaded with salvage.’ <sup>2</sup>**

**The Allied air forces had left no bridges standing over the River Po. It was a completely different proposition from any of the Division's previous river crossings. At its narrowest at this point it was 300 yards wide, and it flowed swiftly. It could not be waded, and a bridge could not be built in less than 24 hours; any tank support would have to be ferried over.**

**General Freyberg** would not agree to **5 Brigade's** plan to attack before nightfall, although **Brigadier Bonifant** told him that both **23** and **21 Battalions** were sure they could do it. **Colonels Thomas** and **McPhail** were asked to report direct to the conference. 'Each made his case with fervour.... But the General held firm. No daylight attack would go in if there was a risk it might mean higher casualties. It was too late in the war for such things. So the two colonels went back to their jeeps outside to cancel, over the air, their orders for the attack. Disappointment was writ large on their faces. The full attack was then duly planned for that night.' <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, p. 141. *Einsatz gegen Kreta: Operation against Crete*. This of course refers to the parachute formations which invaded **Crete**, not *4 Para Div* itself.

<sup>2</sup> *26 Battalion*, pp. 519–20.

<sup>3</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, p. 143.

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(iii)

Dividing the bridging resources between **5** and **13 Corps** absorbed four general transport platoons at a time when the services were feeling the strain of maintaining **Eighth Army's** advance. Each corps was limited to one folding-boat bridge, one Bailey pontoon bridge and a number of rafts.

The first crossings in **5 Corps'** sector were made before midnight on **24–25 April** by **8 Indian Division** at two places north of **Ferrara** against light opposition; **56 Division** crossed farther east about midday on the **25th**. Between **8 Indian Division** and **56 Division**, **78 Division** completed the destruction of **76 Panzer Corps** south of the river.

The best site for bridging the **Po** on **13 Corps'** front was at the bend near **Ficarolo**, where use could be made of **Isola Tontola**, but this

crossing place had been bombed and cratered so heavily that another site was chosen near **Gaiba**, about a mile downstream, where the river was wider than the allotted bridging would span. To compensate for the delay while additional bridging was brought forward, a large proportion of the duplex-drive tanks <sup>1</sup> and Fantails was allotted to 13 Corps, and 12 assault landing craft were hurried up on transporters from Porto Corsini to assist in the work of ferrying troops.

The 6th Armoured Division launched its attack at Palantone, on the extreme left of its front, at 1 a.m. on the 25th. The special equipment allotted for the purpose—seven Fantails, 15 DUKWs, 18 storm boats, a squadron of duplex-drive tanks and two rafts— was sufficient to carry one battalion across. Before daybreak the Grenadier Guards of **1 Guards Brigade** held a bridgehead about a mile square in the vicinity of **Gaiba**. Resistance was slight, scattered and disorganised. The rafts began the long task of ferrying the tanks of the **Derbyshire Yeomanry**. The Welch Regiment occupied the small town of **Stienta** to secure the right flank, and the **Welsh Guards** pushed north to the **Canale Bianco**, some eight miles beyond the Po.

Fifth New Zealand Brigade's assault began at 1.30 a.m. on 25 April under the cover of a hastily arranged artillery programme, the last New Zealand Artillery programme of the war. Four field regiments <sup>2</sup> fired a short 'dragnet' barrage (similar to the gun attacks which started the **Senio** offensive) on the north bank of the river between **Stienta** and **Gaiba**; the medium guns (other than

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<sup>1</sup> Shermans equipped with external buoyancy apparatus. In *The Road to Trieste*, p. 142, Cox describes them as 'amphibious tanks with canvas floats ... against their sides, like children's waders.'

<sup>2</sup> 142 Army Fd Regt, 1 RHA, and 5 and 6 NZ Fd Regts.

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the 5.5s, which were without ammunition at that stage) and the

heavy guns fired deeper into enemy territory, and the heavy mortars also were used.

Special equipment for the crossing had been brought forward by 7 Field Company.<sup>1</sup> The New Zealanders preferred assault boats to storm boats; they considered the engines of the latter unreliable and too noisy, but under the cover of darkness they could paddle their assault craft almost to the far bank before being detected. In less than 20 minutes A Company of 21 Battalion and B of the 23rd reached the far side and were on the stopbank. Here also resistance was very slight. D Company of the 21st and C of the 23rd followed in DUKWs, which gave excellent service in ferrying the infantry. The amphibious tanks, however, failed ignominiously: two of the three attached to 21 Battalion bogged while trying to get into the water, and the third sank a few yards from the shore; one attached to 23 Battalion sank after being rammed by a storm boat, another lost a track, and the third accidentally punctured its buoyancy apparatus by firing its machine gun.

A and D Companies of 21 Battalion pressed forward and cut a lateral road after brisk encounters with a few machine-gun posts, while C Company occupied the stopbank in their rear. B and C Companies of 23 Battalion reached their objective on the left of 21 Battalion, and A and D Companies came across the river in Fantails. A patrol entered **Ficarolo**, which was almost free of the enemy, and by 7.10a.m. A Company completed the capture of the village, together with a German tank, an 88-millimetre gun and two self-propelled guns. A forward observation officer from 5 Field Regiment climbed a tower from which he could see five or six miles in all directions; he reported no targets but many white flags.

Shortly before 6 a.m. A and B Companies of 25 Battalion, which already had occupied Isola Tontola, crossed in assault boats to the far bank of the Po without opposition. The infantry of 5 and 6 Brigades not participating in the crossing closed up to the south bank of the river. 'So we spent an agreeable enough April 25th—the Anzac Day on which, thirty years ago, the original ANZAC Corps had gone ashore at **Gallipoli**—

bridging the Po. In the sunshine it was like a regatta. Motor-driven storm-boats and ducks filled with Kiwi infantry and gunners plied to and fro between the banks. The wide river was blue under the clear sky, and the banks bare but for a fringe of young poplars on the far side.

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<sup>1</sup> The equipment and detachments of RE and RASC were allotted as follows: to 6 Fd Coy—folding-boat bridging equipment and a Bailey raft; to 7 Fd Coy (with 5 Bde)—eight DUKWs (amphibious lorries), six storm boats, a Bailey raft and four Fantails; to 8 Fd Coy (with 6 Bde)—eight DUKWs, three storm boats, one close-support raft and four Fantails.

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Engineers, their brown torsos bare to the sun, hauled pontoons and boats into position. Men off duty swam from the edge of the motor raft, which slowly carried across Sherman after Sherman. The bulldozers snorted and thundered as they tried to make some order out of the chaos of huge bomb craters....' <sup>1</sup>

Since the start of the offensive the engineers had been employed almost continuously bridging rivers, canals and drains, clearing mines from roads and stopbanks, repairing and maintaining roads, and bringing up their heavy equipment. Although the enemy did not interfere with their work at the Po, the strain was beginning to tell: they were very tired by the time they had completed their tasks there.

Aerial photographs had not arrived in time for a proper planning of the crossing, but showed which were the best localities for the delivery of equipment and vehicles. When 5 Brigade crossed, 7 Field Company worked the DUKWs, Fantails and storm boats which ferried troops, anti-tank guns, jeeps and support weapons of 21 and 23 Battalions, and constructed a Bailey pontoon raft, which ferried across the first tank (from C Squadron of 18 Regiment) in mid-morning and later averaged three tanks in the hour.

Near the eastern end of Isola Tontola 8 Field Company worked the DUKWs and Fantails for 6 Brigade and constructed the close-support

raft,<sup>2</sup> which needed much work on the approaches on both sides of the river. This company also used abandoned German equipment farther upstream for the ferrying of 20 Regiment's tanks until the improvised raft grounded with a tank on it.

Early in the day **6 Field Company** began work on the approaches to the 450-foot folding-boat bridge at the narrowest part of the river, a short distance downstream from Isola Tontola. The bulk of the Division's traffic was to use this bridge, but it was not strong enough to support tanks. By late afternoon wheeled vehicles began driving over it at the rate of more than 100 in the hour.

The pontoon Bailey bridge built by the **Royal Engineers** near **Gaiba** was not ready for use until 27 April. This and the folding-boat bridge had to serve the whole of 13 Corps. Consequently there was much congestion of traffic south of the river, and the rate of build up on the north bank was retarded. The ferrying of tanks was so slow that on 26 April only C Squadron of 18 Regiment and half each of A and B Squadrons of the 20th were north of the river. This, however, did not delay the Division's pursuit of the enemy.

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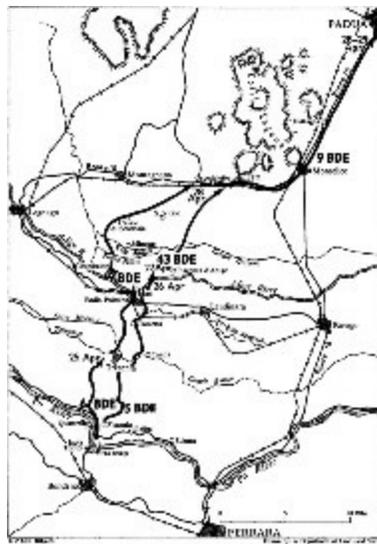
<sup>1</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, pp. 143–4.

<sup>2</sup> This raft was only in the 'Class 9' category; the Bailey pontoon rafts were 'Class 40'. A Class 9 raft could not carry a 33-ton Sherman tank.

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(iv)

On the morning of 25 April 5 and 6 Brigades were ordered to push forward as early as possible to secure a bridgehead based on the general line of several canals about two miles north of the River Po. It had been intended that they should then be relieved by 43 Gurkha Brigade and 9 Brigade, but now it was decided



FROM THE PO TO PADUA, 25-29 APRIL 1945

that they should keep going to the **Adige River**. They met very slight resistance, crossed the canals and continued to the Tartaro River, about midway between the Po and the **Adige**.

As soon as they were across the Po in the afternoon, the armoured cars of C Squadron of **12 Lancers** hurried off to take the lead from the infantry. They surprised and dispersed a German rearguard at **Trecenta**, captured a bridge intact nearby on the Tartaro, and secured another bridge about a mile and a half downstream. Some tanks of B Squadron of 20 Regiment joined 25 Battalion at **Trecenta** and helped to clean out several spandau nests. In the evening A Company of the 25th attempted to cross the Tartaro and secure a bridge over the **Fossa Maestra**, a few hundred yards distant, but stopped when Lieutenant King,<sup>1</sup> leading 7 Platoon, was shot at the far end of the Tartaro bridge. A patrol from D Company found that the enemy had gone from the **Fossa Maestra** before dawn.

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt W. M. King**; born NZ 31 Oct 1922; farmer; killed in action 25 Apr 1945.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## III: CROSSING THE ADIGE RIVER

### *III: Crossing the Adige River*

(i)

The Allied armies had crossed the River Po and were about to split the German forces in two. On **Fifth Army's** front a rapid advance brought **88 Division** of **2 US Corps** to the outskirts of **Verona**, which was in American hands by daybreak on 26 April; **10 Mountain Division** of **4 US Corps** pressed on between **Verona** and **Lake Garda** to close the roads to the **Brenner Pass**. The plan for the completion of the offensive was for **Eighth Army** to cross the **Adige River** and breach the **Venetian Line**, capture **Padua** and advance on the port of **Trieste** in north-east **Italy**, and for **Fifth Army** to assist the **Eighth** in the capture of **Padua** if necessary, close the escape routes into **Germany** by way of the **Brenner Pass** and **Corno** (west of **Lake Garda**), and destroy the enemy remaining in north-west **Italy**.

**General Freyberg** announced at a conference in the late afternoon of the 25th that the Division would have to face the fact that crossing the **Adige River**, the second largest in **Italy**, would be more or less like crossing the **Po**. 'You will have to collect up your equipment.... I think if we don't stop the enemy won't be able to fight again.'<sup>2</sup> It was decided next morning that **5 and 6 Brigades** were to push on to the line of the **Adige** and 'try out the form'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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Early on 26 April **12 Lancers** again took the lead and covered the whole divisional front, with **C Squadron** on the right, **B** in the centre,

and A on the left. B Squadron reached the **Adige** before midday and found that the main bridge, near **Badia Polesine**, had been wrecked. The enemy appeared to be holding in strength on the far side, where a Tiger tank and many infantry were reported. East and west of **Badia** groups of Germans had been cut off south of the river. Bypassing **Lendinara**—where partisans were fighting fascist republican troops—C Squadron headed towards the **Adige** two or three miles from **Badia**. The Italian fascists tried to surround the squadron, which killed or captured many of them and also collected much German equipment, including ordnance dumps, medical supplies, and dozens of vehicles in good running order. Meanwhile A Squadron pushed towards the **Badia**- **Legnago** railway, parallel with the **Adige**, and bypassed large pockets of the enemy. At nightfall this squadron had linked up with **Fifth Army** troops (91 US Division) who had captured **Legnago** and forced a crossing of the river.

**Fifth New Zealand Brigade** resumed the advance at daybreak on the 26th with 21 and 23 Battalions still leading and with C Squadron of 18 Regiment in support. On the right C and B Companies of 21 Battalion crossed the **Canale Bianco** downstream from the confluence of the **Tartaro River** and **Fossa Maestra** and embussed in RMT trucks which carried them to the vicinity of the **Adige** about two miles north-east of **Badia**, where they occupied the near stopbank in the afternoon. On the left B and C Companies of 23 Battalion advanced along roads 'littered with abandoned German equipment; count of guns overrun was lost; the enemy's organised resistance in that part of **Italy** had ended. On the other hand, it was evident that the men of the 23rd were also feeling the strain.... it was very noticeable that the men were suffering from lack of sleep...' <sup>1</sup> Early in the afternoon the battalion reached the stopbank of the **Adige** north of **Badia**. B Company was fired on from the far bank, where the enemy appeared to be dug in in some strength, but this did not prevent a patrol from C Company from obtaining information about the approaches to the river. When the patrol was grounded by small-arms fire, Corporal **Monaghan** <sup>2</sup> went on alone until he had learned all he wanted to know.

Sixth Brigade also resumed the advance early on 26 April. The 25th Battalion, in the lead, was supported by the tanks of A and B Squadrons of 20 Regiment which had crossed the Po. The bridges over the Tartaro and Maestra north of **Trecenta** were still intact,

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<sup>1</sup> *23 Battalion*, p.465.

<sup>2</sup> **L-Sgt C. R. Monaghan**, MM; **Invercargill**; born **Mataura**, 12 Sep 1922; farmhand.

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but craters and trees felled across the road caused delay. The enemy offered resistance near **Badia**, but after shellfire from 6 Field Regiment was brought to bear, the town was taken without casualties. D and B Companies of 25 Battalion occupied positions on the **Adige** stopbank astride the road and canal (Naviglio Adigetto) which passed through **Badia**. Early in the afternoon B and C Companies of 24 Battalion, which had been following the 25th, closed up to the **Adige** and took over from D Company of the 25th the sector on the right of the road.

The prisoners <sup>1</sup> rounded up since the Division crossed the Po were a very mixed bag; they included stragglers from seven divisions, ferry-boat men, a bridging team with five trucks of equipment, veterinary orderlies and army fire-brigade men. A New Zealand NCO, who had been taken prisoner at the **Sillaro River** and returned from the Germans on 26 April, had witnessed their retreat at first hand. 'Petrol was so short that each lorry hauled at least three or four others. Tanks and even horses and oxen were hauling MT. There were horse drawn and oxen drawn carts in great numbers, but few guns.... The enemy ... took to the ditches the moment a plane came over.' The day after his capture the New Zealander was in a column caught in 25-pounder fire on the road west of the **Sillaro**. 'The enemy panicked and ran wildly into the fields or fought to get aboard vehicles which were already packed to overflowing. Those on the vehicles fought savagely to keep the others off.... It was plain that all the German troops felt the war was utterly lost....' <sup>2</sup>

**(ii)**

In the afternoon of 26 April a divisional conference discussed the preparations for the crossing of the **Adige**, which was 100 to 110 yards wide and too deep to wade. Assault boats, storm boats, DUKWs, Fantails and enough folding-boat equipment for a bridge were available. It was decided that 5 and 6 Brigades should launch an assault crossing at 11 p.m. with the support of the artillery already north of the Po. Later, however, when it appeared that the enemy was withdrawing, Brigadiers Bonifant and Parkinson agreed upon an attack without artillery support to start at 10.30 p.m.

The tanks of 18 Regiment engaged the far stopbank with direct fire, and 5 Brigade crossed in assault craft with 21 Battalion on the right and the 23rd on the left. The leading companies were in the vicinity of a lateral road beyond the river before midnight. The 21st Battalion had captured 18 prisoners and much equipment

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<sup>1</sup> In the 24 hours ending at 6 p.m. on 26 April, 282 passed through the **2 NZ Div** cage.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, G Branch, HQ **2 NZ Div**.

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and had had no casualties; the 23rd had taken 39 prisoners, but had five men wounded when the enemy brought down defensive fire on the south bank. Sixth Brigade crossed unopposed with 24 Battalion on the right and the 25th on the left, and reached its objective about half a mile beyond the river without casualties and without taking prisoners.

Heavy rain during the night added to the work of the engineers preparing approaches to the crossing places. Colonel Hanson told **General Freyberg** in a telephone conversation at 9.20 p.m. that he thought it would be late next day before the folding-boat bridge would be ready.

**The crossing place chosen by 8 Field Company in 6 Brigade's sector, near where the Naviglio Adigetto joins the [Adige](#), was unsuitable for DUKWs because of large shoals, the fast current and the very steep bank on the far side, but two amphibious tanks got across, and the Fantails ferried carriers and jeeps. In 5 Brigade's sector 7 Field Company had trouble in launching the DUKWs because of the mud, and decided against the use of amphibious tanks. Two anti-tank guns and two jeeps were ferried to 23 Battalion before dawn.**

**The construction of the 400-foot Class 9 folding-boat bridge by [6 Field Company](#) was delayed at the outset when the Polish bridging train which was to deliver the materials lost its way to the New Zealand Division. Search parties located it in 6 Armoured Division's sector. It arrived at the bridge site, less than half a mile downstream from the demolished road bridge between [Badia](#) and [Masi](#), at 9 a.m. on the 27th, but 14 trucks were missing until after midday. The bridge was completed early in the afternoon, but was damaged when a bulldozer tried to cross it. It was repaired and opened to traffic about 3 p.m.**

**The engineers also had trouble with one of their two pontoon rafts. When 8 Field Company had prepared the access to the river in 6 Brigade's sector and unloaded two pontoons, the rain made it impossible to bring up the rest of the materials. The lorries bogged right down. The sappers returned to camp exhausted and wet to the skin, with the raft still not built at dawn. Then 8 Field Company had to abandon this site because the folding-boat bridge was to be built immediately downstream from it. At an alternative site, upstream from the demolished bridge, bulldozers began preparing the approaches early in the afternoon, and with the help of men from 6 Brigade, the sappers completed the raft at 8.30 p.m.**

**This raft ferried a bulldozer across to construct the landing stage and outlet on the far bank, but when it made its first trip with a tank on board, one of its motors failed and the other three motors were not powerful enough to prevent the current sweeping it on to the demolished**

bridge. The sappers freed the raft and got the tank back on shore by 3 a.m., but as the useless motor could not be replaced, the raft was out of action until after daybreak, when a cable was put across the river and a new offloading stage built. With the aid of the cable the raft was finally ready for traffic about midday on 28 April.

Meanwhile, in mid-morning on the 27th, 7 Field Company began work on a similar raft for 5 Brigade about half a mile downstream from the demolished bridge. This raft, which was operated on cables, was completed early in the evening and began ferrying tanks at the rate of four in the hour. The engineers cut and laid corduroy in the boggy approaches to the river and were assisted by two platoons of Maoris with picks and shovels, which undoubtedly saved much time.

(iii)

**General Freyberg** told an orders group conference on the morning of 27 April that the armoured cars of **12 Lancers** were to have first priority over the folding-boat bridge when it was completed and were to 'push out on a very wide front and carry on right up to the VENETIAN LINE. I don't suppose we will be able to gatecrash it.... this delay with the bridge may allow the Hun to get troops into the line.'<sup>1</sup>

The 43rd Gurkha Brigade and 9 Brigade were to take over from 5 and 6 Brigades on the north bank of the **Adige** and continue the advance. Brigadier Gentry reported that 9 Brigade was completely over the River Po, but Brigadier Barker said the **Gurkhas** had 'got hardly anything across the PO except for my Bde HQ. The rain messed up the approaches to the Class 9 [folding-boat] bridge.'<sup>2</sup> Ninth Brigade, therefore, was to precede the 43rd over the **Adige**.

Fifth Brigade held its positions on the north bank of the **Adige** all day without tank support. Because snipers were giving trouble on 21 Battalion's open right flank, Major **Swanson**,<sup>3</sup> of B Company, took a patrol of three Wasp flame-throwers and two carriers in the direction of Piacenza d' **Adige** early in the afternoon and drove the enemy from

several strongpoints in houses and drains.

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Maj **W. T. Swanson**, MC, m.i.d.; Whata Whata, **Hamilton**; born **Auckland**, 13 May 1914; farmer; twice wounded.

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A 6 Brigade 'flying column', consisting of the anti-tank officer (Lieutenant Hampton <sup>1</sup>) and nine infantrymen from 25 Battalion, a forward observation officer (Captain **Smythe** <sup>2</sup>) and an NCO from **6 Field Regiment**, a six-pounder towed by a jeep, and the two amphibious tanks which had crossed the **Adige**, was given the tasks of reconnoitring bridges and reporting on the state of the roads to the north and—if the bridges were intact—seeing how far it could go. A bridge over the Scolo Manteo near Minotte, about three miles from the **Adige**, was still intact but had been prepared for demolition. The patrol removed the detonators and continued a mile or so farther along the road to a house which it captured, together with 13 prisoners, at the cost of one man killed. The patrol next took five prisoners at a road junction a few hundred yards ahead and, coming under scattered small-arms fire, occupied a position alongside the road. It was joined about 6 p.m. by four armoured cars from **12 Lancers**, which by that time had three squadrons over the river.

Thus reinforced, the patrol was divided into two groups, one under Smythe of one tank, two armoured cars and three jeeps, and the other under Hampton of one tank, two armoured cars and one jeep. Smythe's party had not gone far when the tank was bogged and had to be hauled out while an armoured car gave covering fire against German infantry. Hampton's party turned down a side road to investigate a house, and the jeep, which was reconnoitring ahead, was ambushed by Germans: 'There seemed to be about 150 of them' <sup>3</sup> Corporal **Rentoul** <sup>4</sup> eluded the enemy and made his way back to 25 Battalion; two wounded men were later

collected by the Lancers; four, including Hampton, were killed or died of their wounds. The rest of the patrol was recalled.

Meanwhile, in the afternoon of the 27th, 9 Brigade followed the Lancers over the folding-boat bridge and passed through 6 Brigade on the 'blue' route. The 27th and Divisional Cavalry Battalions reached the **Fiume Fratta** (short of the Scolo Manteo), and by midnight the whole of the brigade was north of the **Adige**. The leading battalion of 43 Brigade passed through 5 Brigade's bridgehead and followed the more easterly 'red' route to the **Fiume Fratta**.

By this time the number of prisoners taken by the Division exceeded 4000. Because many of those captured on 27 April were parachutists it was thought likely that they might be manning the

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<sup>1</sup> Lt **L. Hampton**, MM; born **Dannevirke**, 3 Aug 1918; Regular soldier; killed in action 28 Apr 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Capt **E. R. Smythe**, MC; **Invercargill**; born **Christchurch**, 21 Aug 1916; warehouseman.

<sup>3</sup> *25 Batalion*, p. 614.

<sup>4</sup> Cpl **J. L. Rentoul**, MM; **Auckland**; born **Wellington**, 9 Jun 1922; apprentice tinsmith.

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**Venetian Line** on the Division's front. 'They were getting better organised. We shall have to prepare for an organised scrap,' <sup>1</sup> Cox advised **General Freyberg** late in the evening. The GOC agreed.

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<sup>1</sup> GOCs diary.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## IV: THROUGH THE VENETIAN LINE

### *IV: Through the Venetian Line*

(i)

The **Venetian Line**, designed to close the 40-mile-wide corridor leading into north-eastern **Italy** between the Adriatic Sea and the Dolomites which border the Alps, was believed to be the strongest system of prepared defences constructed by the Germans in **Italy**. From the port of **Chioggia**, at the southern end of the Venetian Lagoon, the line followed the Canale Gozzone south-westward to the **Adige River**, ran along the north bank of that river, swung north-westward to the towns of **Monselice** and **Este** on the southern slopes of the Euganean hills (Colli Euganei), and continued along the northern wall of the great plain of the **Po valley** to **Lake Garda**. In the east the line was protected by floods and swamps, in the west by the formidable hill country; in the centre, where there were no natural obstacles behind the outpost barrier of the **Adige**, the enemy had spent much time and ingenuity on an elaborate defence system.

**Eighth Army's** proposed plan had been for 13 Corps to attack the Euganean hills and **5 Corps** or the **Polish Corps** the centre of the line; these attacks were to have been preceded by two or three daily bombardments of the enemy's positions by the heavy bombers, and when a breakthrough had been assured, 2 Parachute Brigade was to have been despatched by air to capture the bridges over the Brenta River, just beyond **Padua**. The battles south of the River Po, however, had created so much disorganisation and inflicted such losses on *Army Group C* that the enemy was unable to weld together an effective force in time to man his defensive system and stand on the **Venetian Line**. There was, therefore, no occasion to stage an attack on this line, and no need for the aerial assault which was to have started on 29 April.

In 13 Corps the New Zealand Division, having had first use on 25 April of the folding-boat bridge at the River Po, had advanced rapidly to cross the **Adige River** in the evening of the 26th. The first troops of 6 Armoured Division to cross the Po were halted during the night of 25–26 April at the Canale Bianca, and the equipment for bridging this watercourse did not arrive until next day. By the evening of the 27th, therefore, 6 Armoured Division had reached but had not crossed the **Adige**. An attempt to construct a raft did not succeed, but next day a battalion of 61 Infantry Brigade used the New Zealand bridge near **Badia** and advanced to **Monselice**, at the junction of Routes 10 and 16.

Thirteenth Corps was ordered on 28 April to take advantage of the enemy's disorganisation and get to **Trieste** as quickly as possible. Because of the problems of supply and transport the corps decided to continue the advance with one division only, and although the New Zealand Division had been in action continuously since the start of the offensive on 9 April, it was chosen because it had four brigades under its command—and no doubt because of the rapid progress it had made.

On the right of 13 Corps, 56 Division of **5 Corps** was to exploit east of Route 16 to **Stra** and then north-eastward along Route 11 to **Mestre** and **Venice**; on the left **2 United States Corps**, with 91 Division leading, was exploiting north-eastward from **Vicenza** along Route 53 to **Treviso**. Thirteenth Corps was to exploit at top speed to **Trieste** along the axis of **Monselice– Padua – Mestre – San Dona di Piave – Portogruaro – Monfalcone**. The New Zealand Division, retaining **12 Lancers** under command, was to lead this advance; it also was to mop up the corps' sector west of Route 16 as far as **Padua** with 43 Brigade (which was then to concentrate in the **Padua** area and revert to corps command).

(ii)

**General Freyberg** had to decide on the morning of 28 April whether to race towards the **Venetian Line** and try to break through with mobile columns, or whether to shape up to the line and put in a set-piece attack. The Division would have to go alone. In **5 Corps'** sector on the

right 56 Division so far had only a small foothold on the north bank of the **Adige**.

At a planning conference at **Divisional Headquarters** that morning General Harding, the 13 Corps' commander, announced that his object was to 'gatecrash' the **Venetian Line** as soon as possible. **Freyberg** said it depended on the enemy: 'If he is in strength we shall have to decide whether we can get sufficient forces forward to attack.'<sup>1</sup> Harding replied that 13 Corps Intelligence believed that 1 *Parachute Division* was the only reasonably organised formation opposite. When **Freyberg** pointed out that the Division's **Adige** bridge 'is barely sufficient for our own use', Harding promised to 'get one and possibly two Class 40 bridges across. The NZ Division is the only formation in a position to gatecrash the line so far as 13 Corps is concerned and top priority must go to you as regards the bridges.'<sup>2</sup> **Freyberg** then drew attention to the fact that a

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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battalion of 61 Infantry Brigade had caused some trouble at the **Adige** by using the New Zealand bridge during the night, and also that 43 Gurkha Brigade and **Rear Divisional Headquarters** had been held up at the crossing of the Po. He asked 13 Corps to go into the question of whether less urgently needed troops than the **Gurkhas** should be allowed to cross the Po ahead of them. He also wanted the Division to be allowed to control its own bridge and ferry across the **Adige**.

Part of 4 Armoured Brigade was still on the south bank of the Po. 'Feeling cheated, the tank crews ... [had] watched their infantry cross in their assault boats while they waited their turn at the ferry or filled in time while the engineers built a pontoon bridge.'<sup>1</sup> On 27 April C and A Squadrons of 18 Regiment and half each of A and B Squadrons of 20 Regiment had been ferried over the river; of the armour still on the

south bank, a squadron each of 19 Regiment and 2 Royal Tanks, which were to support 9 and 43 Brigades respectively, were to have priority.

Because of the congestion of traffic and the slow progress of wheeled convoys on the roads, C Squadron of 19 Regiment drove across country to the ferry, which by 7 p.m. on the 27th had carried five of its tanks over the river. All work then ceased on the ferry, so Lieutenant-Colonel **Everist**<sup>2</sup> sought permission to use the pontoon bridge, which had just been opened to traffic. He was told that until additional decking was available, Corps' orders were that only wheeled vehicles were to use the bridge. All tank movement across the river was suspended indefinitely when the bridge was wrecked in the centre by an explosion, apparently caused by a mine floating downstream,<sup>3</sup> and the ferry was requisitioned to repair the damage.

Permission was granted for C Squadron of 19 Regiment to use the pontoon bridge in the afternoon of 29 April, and the whole of this regiment was across next day. The rest of the New Zealand tanks followed, but the last did not reach the north bank until 1 May. Thus it took 4 Armoured Brigade a week to complete the crossing of the River Po.

*(iii)*

The armoured cars of **12 Lancers** made spectacular advances on 28 April and by nightfall had penetrated the **Venetian Line**: D Squadron reached **Este** and **Monselice** and later pushed on to **Padua**; A Squadron made contact with 6 South African Armoured Division of **Fifth Army** at **Montagnana**, west of **Este**.

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<sup>1</sup> *20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 579.

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Col A. M. Everist, DSO; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 31 Oct 1912; accountant; wounded 28 Jun 1942; CO **19 Armd Regt** Aug–Nov 1944, Mar–Dec 1945.

<sup>3</sup> This was thought to be the work of saboteurs.

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Ninth Brigade had passed through 6 Brigade north of the **Adige River** in the evening of the 27th and reached the **Fiume Fratta**. A patrol from 27 Battalion went some distance beyond this stream towards **San Vitale** before dawn on the 28th without meeting the enemy. Two companies (2 and 4) followed on foot, but a large demolition blocked the passage of the tanks and wheeled vehicles, which compelled the remainder of the brigade to take an alternative route farther west. Divisional Cavalry Battalion in RMT trucks, with C Squadron in the lead and supported by tanks from 20 Regiment, made a non-stop run along the road from **Masi** past Castelbaldo to **Casale di Scodosia** and then eastward to **Ospedaletto**, on Route 10 between **Este** and **Montagnana**.

‘The previous evening had been miserable. Everybody in the leading squadrons had got wet to the skin clambering through one canal after another, and now, with the rain coming down, had to dig in and suffer a wet night.... At Ospedaletto both A and C Squadrons had to dismount and fight quite a little battle, for the enemy there had taken to using *faustpatronen* against the tanks as well as machine guns.’ <sup>1</sup> The infantry and tanks cleared the enemy from some houses and took about 50 prisoners.

The companies of 27 Battalion which followed Divisional Cavalry Battalion on this route found 2 Company already at San Vitale, where the New Zealanders were given a tumultuous welcome. ‘Rain poured down again while we were there, but all the civilians were out in the streets rejoicing and the band was playing some Italian marches.’ <sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile news of momentous events elsewhere reached the Division. ‘At one o'clock I turned on the wireless for the B.B.C. news. The Russian and American forces had linked up in **Germany**. The partisans in Milan were rumoured to have captured Mussolini. General Dittmar, the German military spokesman, had surrendered and described the situation as hopeless. Then the telephone rang. ... the G. 2 “I” of

13th Corps was on the line. “The Yanks say they are through the **Venetian Line** and north of **Vicenza**.” I started across to the General with this news, when the phone went again. It was the artillery I.O. “The air op. reports that the **Este** bridge is intact and that the armoured cars of the 12th Lancers are almost on it.”

‘This time I sprinted across to the General's caravan. He was already in his jeep, with his A.D.C. climbing in the back holding the General's revolver belt and steel helmet. He had the news

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<sup>1</sup> *Divisional Cavalry*, pp. 410–11.

<sup>2</sup> *27 (Machine Gun) Battalion*, p. 493.

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direct from the C.R.A. “I'm off to **Este**,” he said. “Whips out”<sup>1</sup>

Before he left **Divisional Headquarters** the GOC had a telephone conversation with General Harding, whom he told: ‘We have Gentry [9 Brigade] stamping up there hard and I have directed 12 L [ancers] to concentrate at **ESTE** and push through to **PADUA**. Gentry will go after them and we shall follow afterwards with our HQ.’<sup>2</sup> The Division was to manage with the one bridge at the **Adige**. The GOC intended to get four brigades completely mobile and ready to go when called upon; he would try to get two field regiments and two brigade groups into **Padua** ‘and then we shall consider further’. The corps commander wanted no more than a squadron to be diverted to **Venice**; he felt strongly that ‘the place we want to get most of all is **TRIESTE**’. **Freyberg** answered, ‘Well, we will direct them on to **TRIESTE**—we can get there in a day!’<sup>3</sup> Harding also wanted only a small force of 6 Armoured Division to go beyond the **Adige**, and it was to stop at **Padua** ‘because we cannot give you both petrol’.<sup>4</sup>

From **Este** **9 Infantry Brigade**, still led by **Divisional Cavalry Battalion** and **B Squadron of 20 Regiment**, drove eastward along **Route 10** to **Monselice** and then north-eastward along **Route 16** towards **Padua**.

**'In village after village the crowds had increased, lining the streets to shout "Adios—Viva", and a new word we had not heard before. It sounded like "Chow", was written, we discovered "Ciao", and meant a mixture, so far as we could see, of "Hurrah—Good luck—and Good-bye." Girls threw us flowers hastily gathered from the fields, and white elder blossom torn from the roadside trees. In one village I asked when the Germans had left. "Ieri Sera—last night," and they had left "molti morti." What, dead Germans? No, "molti morti Italiani." The parachutists had wanted bicycles, and had shot down half the men of the village in seizing them....' <sup>5</sup>**

**At Battaglia, on Route 16, the leading tank ran into a road block and was hit by a bazooka, which did negligible damage. The way was cleared by 7 p.m. and the column sped, sometimes at up to 20 miles an hour, towards Padua, which it reached about three hours later. Armoured cars of B Squadron, 12 Lancers, which had passed through the leading troops of 6 Armoured Division at Monselice, had been the first to enter the city.**

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<sup>1</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, pp. 162–3. The 88th US Division had penetrated the Venetian Line and was north of Vicenza. Benito Mussolini was intercepted by partisans while fleeing Italy and executed by a firing squad in a village on Lake Como.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, p. 165.

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**On the way 9 Brigade overtook a German column. The enemy, with horse-drawn transport and estimated to be 300 strong, 'wisely enough, made no attempt to interfere with the [New Zealand] tanks' passage**

north. "We did not shoot and neither did they and we drove past them as they plodded along," says one troop commander. "I will always remember a very excited infantryman who was riding on the back of my tank, hammering me on the back and pointing at the waggons moving along beside us and shouting, 'Those are Jerries!'" <sup>1</sup>

Among the Germans who blundered into the Division was a colonel who was commanding the remnants of *362 Infantry Division*. He showed the New Zealand Intelligence staff the line he had been ordered to take up with his troops. He was escorted with his marked map to Headquarters 9 Brigade, where **General Freyberg** was with Brigadier Gentry. Already the New Zealanders were across the very branch of the canal where the captured colonel was to have taken his stand.

At **Padua** 20 Regiment's tanks entered a large square and took up positions covering the autostrada which ran straight to **Mestre**. As soon as the Italians had identified the New Zealanders, 'Windows were thrown open noisily in every direction, "women were running around in their nighties", partisans fired their weapons, and shouts of greeting and cheers came from all sides.' <sup>2</sup> The whole of 9 Brigade entered the city in the next few hours, and Divisional Cavalry Battalion and 27 Battalion went through to the north-eastern side.

The partisans had gained control of **Padua** on the morning of 27 April and held 5000 German prisoners, including the former commanding officer of the **Ferrara** area, General von Alten. They also declared that **Venice** was under partisan control. In fact, from that stage onwards the partisans were in control of most of the towns along the Division's axis of advance, although many pockets of enemy had not yet surrendered. The large number of prisoners was an embarrassment to 9 Brigade, which could not spare sufficient men to guard them, so they were handed over to the partisans until they could be collected by the following brigades.

The 43rd Gurkha Brigade had completed the relief of 5 Brigade north of the **Adige River**. It met no opposition on the Piacenza- **Este** road, but

was much delayed by demolitions. After clearing the enemy from the area west of Route 16 as far as **Padua**, it passed to the command of 13 Corps on the 29th. In the next day or two the number of prisoners held by the **Gurkhas**, including groups brought in by the partisans, grew prodigiously.

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<sup>1</sup> *20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 581.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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(iv)

Shortly after 3 a.m. on 29 April Brigadier Gentry ordered 27 Battalion to capture intact the two bridges over the Brenta River, about four miles from **Padua**. The more northerly of these bridges was at the small village of **Ponte di Brenta**, where Route 11 crosses the river; the other was on the autostrada, which leaves Route 11 just east of **Padua**, passes over that highway on the far side of the river about half a mile downstream from **Ponte di Brenta** and continues straight to **Mestre**, where it rejoins the winding Route 11. The enemy had damaged the bridge where the autostrada crosses the Brenta sufficiently to prevent vehicles using it. After motoring to within a few hundred yards of the bridge, 1 Company of 27 Battalion advanced on foot with a troop of A Squadron, 20 Regiment in support. The Germans showed little inclination to fight, and after some brief exchanges of small-arms fire about 200 surrendered.

The bridge at **Ponte di Brenta** was still intact but was held by German armoured cars, two 105-millimetre guns on the north bank and a screen of machine-gunners and infantry on the south bank. Before entering the village some men of 3 Company, 27 Battalion, left their trucks to ride on the tanks of Lieutenant Sisam's <sup>1</sup> troop of A Squadron, 20 Regiment, which dashed straight to the bridge and cut off the retreat of two companies of Germans and two or three armoured cars. The

infantry jumped off the tanks right in the middle of the enemy and rounded up many of them before they recovered from their surprise. The tanks knocked out an armoured car and a 105-millimetre gun, and the infantry crossed the bridge and seized ground on the far bank. Further shooting by the tanks helped to put an end to resistance. Altogether about 230 prisoners, both 105-millimetre guns and several vehicles were captured.

Later 27 Battalion collected a further 200 prisoners. Two German officers who surrendered asked if they could return to their battalion and persuade their men to give themselves up. A platoon from 2 Company took these men into custody and continued down the Brenta River as far as **Str** without finding any more.

(v)

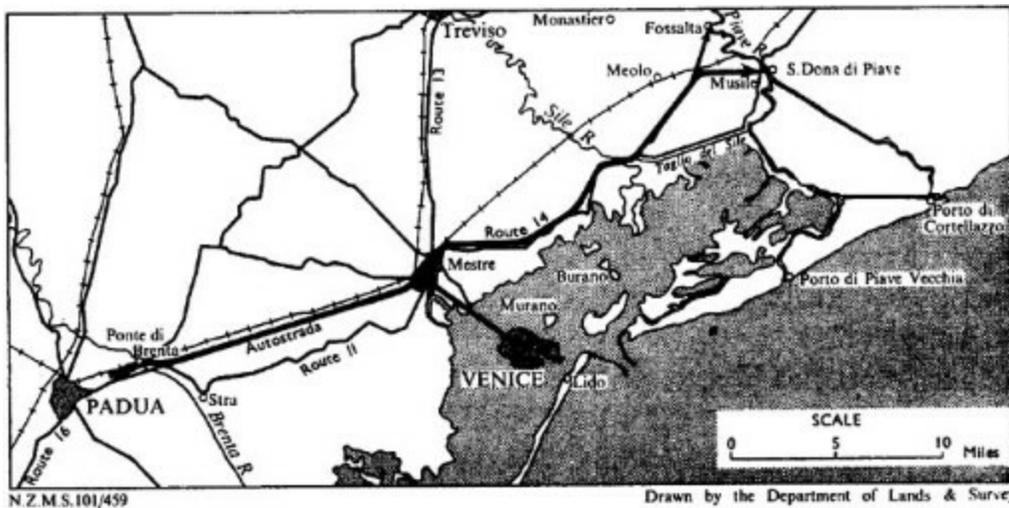
The bold, swift action at **Ponte di Brenta** had saved the bridge for the Division. Orders were issued to continue the advance from **Padua** along the autostrada to **Mestre** and then along Route 14 to the Piave River. The armoured cars of **12 Lancers** were to reconnoitre on each flank and advance at top speed to secure

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt W. J. Sisam**, MC; Tawa, **Wellington**; born NZ 3 Jul 1919; bank clerk.

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the bridge intact over the **Piave**. Ninth Brigade was to detach a small force to capture **Venice**, 20-odd miles from **Padua**. Sixth Brigade, with C Squadron of 18 Regiment under command, was to replace 43 Gurkha Brigade in the order of march, which then was **12 Lancers**, the GOC's tactical headquarters, 9 Brigade, Main **Divisional Headquarters**, the engineers, 6 Brigade, the gun group, and 5 Brigade.



### 9 BRIGADE'S ADVANCE, 29 APRIL 1945

9 BRIGADE'S ADVANCE, 29 APRIL 1945

B Squadron of **12 Lancers** drove on to the autostrada, met and quickly dispersed a few scattered pockets of enemy, turned off along the causeway from **Mestre** into **Venice**, where it was the first Allied unit to arrive, and later pushed on towards the Piave River. C Squadron followed B into **Venice**. A Squadron cleared the ground north of the autostrada, where it captured a column of 600 infantry, six guns, vehicles and horses; on the other flank D Squadron guarded the south-eastern approaches to **Padua** and the autostrada. It was impossible to obtain an accurate count of the Germans who fell into the Lancers' hands during the day, but the regiment's estimate was between 1150 and 1200.

Delay was caused at the start of 9 Brigade's advance from **Padua** by reports of enemy columns approaching from the south and south-east. About 9 a.m., when a message was received that remnants of **26 Panzer Division**<sup>1</sup> were moving towards **Padua** along the road from the south-east, **4 Field Regiment** sited guns of 46 Battery in an anti-tank role, and the rest of the regiment went into action on the road. The 25-pounders were continually in action for about an hour and knocked out three tanks, which ended any threat there might have been to **Padua**. The New Zealanders did

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<sup>1</sup> According to a British narrative, the enemy column consisted mainly of remnants of **362 Division** retreating in front

of **5 Corps** and apparently acting on the assumption that **Padua** was still in German hands.

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not escape casualties. A premature explosion in front of the barrel of one of the 25-pounders killed a man and wounded three others who were cutting down trees which affected the field of fire. Some enemy shells fell in **Padua**, and one which landed in the square wounded the commanding officer (Lieutenant-Colonel J. R. Williams) and the Padre (the Very Rev. A K. Warren <sup>1</sup>) of Divisional Cavalry Battalion, mortally wounded a provost sergeant, and killed another man. Major **Tanner** <sup>2</sup> assumed command of the battalion. When one of **4 Field Regiment's** vehicles was strafed by Allied aircraft ('two Thunderbolts—markings unknown' <sup>3</sup>), an officer was killed and two men were wounded.

Preceded by the Lancers' armoured cars, **27 Battalion** and **B Squadron of 20 Regiment** crossed the captured bridge at Ponte di Brenta and with some difficulty got on to the autostrada, which ran above the surrounding country on a high embankment (through a tunnel in which passed Route 11). The battalion went as fast as the tanks could go. From **Mestre** the causeway led south-eastward to **Venice**, Route 13 northward to **Treviso**, and Route 14 north-eastward to the Piave River. The 27th Battalion took Route 14, and by 3 p.m. had reached Portegrandi, on the Sile River, about half-way to the **Piave**. So far the 27th had been unopposed, but the following Divisional Cavalry Battalion and **22 Battalion** met several groups of enemy, who surrendered willingly enough after the tanks accompanying the infantry had fired a few rounds. One small German column actually passed through a tunnel under the autostrada while **9 Brigade** was speeding along it.

Near the Sile River one of the tanks accompanying **27 Battalion** opened fire on an object which resembled a tank with a camouflaged superstructure but was in fact a German-manned motor launch moving along a nearby canal. 'The third shell landed on the deck creating horrible havoc among the Teds aboard. Immediately a white flag was raised and shortly afterwards more appeared all along the stopbank of

the canal. Other tanks along our column were firing now, and before they could be stopped they dropped a few shells among the surrendering Jerries.... 1 Coy was sent off to round up the prisoners.... The Jerries were Kriegsmarinen of a coast watching unit and were wonderfully equipped.' <sup>4</sup> About 200 surrendered. Although damaged, the launches were not holed.

A mile or two short of the Piave River (which was 23 miles from **Mestre**) the road forked: Route 14 turned eastward to

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<sup>1</sup> Rt. Rev. A. K. Warren, CMG, MC; Bishop of **Christchurch**, 1951–66; born **Wellington**, 23 Sep 1900; Anglican minister; wounded 29 Apr 1945.

<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> War diary, **4 Fd Regt.**

<sup>4</sup> Diary, B.C. H. Moss.

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**Musile di Piave** and **San Dona di Piave**, and the other road continued north-eastward to **Fossalta di Piave**. Directed to Musile, 4 Company of 27 Battalion found the village unoccupied by either civilians or enemy. The bridge over the **Piave** between Musile and San Dona was down, and according to some Italians a ferry service had been operating since Allied bombers wrecked it in September, five months earlier. Partisans informed 2 Company that there were Germans in **Fossalta** who might surrender. Eventually 300 or 400 were taken prisoner there.

The 27th Battalion concentrated at Musile. From 7 p.m. onwards it continually received reports from the partisans about a German force not less than 2000 strong between the village and the coast. This was described as mainly a coastal defence unit with a number of 88-

millimetre guns and many light anti-aircraft guns. At 8.15 p.m. the partisans said the enemy was filtering towards Musile and had occupied Chiesanuova, a small village on the Piave Vecchia about two miles from Musile. Lieutenant-Colonel Sanders despatched 3 Company to the Piave Vecchia to warn of an enemy crossing, but the company did not make contact and was withdrawn at midnight.

That night 22 Battalion and Divisional Cavalry Battalion also reached the Piave River. C Company of the 22nd was ferried across to **San Dona di Piave**, rounded up some 60 prisoners and handed them over to the partisans.

There is no record of how many prisoners were taken by the Division on 28 and 29 April, but the majority of them seem to have come from coastwatching and other non-divisional units. A deserter from *1 Parachute Corps* stated that the parachutists had been told to make for **Verona** after retreating across the River Po. but had been prevented from doing this by the speed of the American advance and consequently had been directed on the Euganean hills and **Vicenza**, with the intention of holding the **Venetian Line** in these hills and along the lower **Adige River**. The American thrust to **Vicenza**, however, had outflanked this part of the line. The Germans had begun a general withdrawal towards the Alps when the New Zealand Division reached **Padua**.

(vi)

From **Mestre** 9 Brigade despatched to **Venice** a small force of armoured cars from **12 Lancers**,<sup>1</sup> a troop of tanks from A Squadron of 20 Regiment, and B Company of 22 Battalion, under the com-

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<sup>1</sup> According to the war diary of **12 Lancers**, B Squadron had arrived in **Venice** soon after 2 p.m., and C Squadron later in the afternoon. The history of the New Zealand Artillery claims that **Lt-Col C. H. Sawyers**, CO of **5 Fd Regt**, was the first Allied soldier to enter **Venice**. He was soon joined by an artillery reconnaissance party.

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mand of Colonel J. I. Thodey. This force was met by a guide from the Lancers at the turn-off to the causeway, and entered the city about 4p.m. on the 29th. Thodey had orders to hold the Albergo Danieli, reputed to be the best hotel in **Venice**, which **General Freyberg** intended to be used as a New Zealand forces club.

The tanks were parked by the railway station at the end of the causeway, and the force assembled in an open space nearby while officers guided by partisans reconnoitred the city. The Venetians gave the New Zealanders a tumultuous welcome; they embraced and kissed them, and made lavish gifts of wines, liqueurs and spirits. It was decided that 10 and 12 Platoons of B Company should occupy the Albergo Santa Chiara, near the assembly area, while 11 Platoon and Company Headquarters went by motor barge and launch through the Grand Canal to the Albergo Danieli. The partisans gave information about the location of German troops, and delivered prisoners to a large garage, where 2730 were collected. Next day the officer commanding B Company (Major **Spicer** <sup>1</sup>) and eight men went in a commandeered ferry boat to the Lido, the long, narrow island between **Venice** and the open sea, to demand the surrender of the garrison there, and brought back six officers and 350 other ranks without trouble. Similar excursions to the islands of Murano and Burano, in the lagoon north of **Venice**, produced no enemy.

The first troops of 56 Division arrived at **Venice** about four hours after **Thodey Force**. Next day (the 30th) 169 Brigade 'formed up and marched impressively to San Marco Square. Several **Thodey Force** men, on the sideline, ironically hailed the "liberators".'<sup>2</sup> B Company transferred 12 Platoon to the Albergo Danieli, and the New Zealanders refused all requests by representatives of the **Allied Military Government** and by 56 Division that they should relinquish the hotel.

' **General Freyberg** was always anxious to have good leave centres for his men, maintaining, "You can't treat a man like a butler and expect him to fight like a gladiator." Denying the story that he spent his

honeymoon at the Danieli in **Venice**, but saying that he had visited the hotel in the late 'twenties and 'thirties, the General writes (2 July 1955): “We were allotted the Excelsior Hotel, as a Club [in **Rome**] and when we arrived there we found Americans with a mounted Guard, who told us to buzz off, and they occupied the hotel themselves for a Club. When we were going up on the way to **Trieste**, we heard that the Americans were coming

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<sup>1</sup> Maj R. H. Spicer, MC; **Palmerston North**; born **Christchurch**, 20 Apr 1910; salesman; CO 22 Bn Aug – Oct 1945.

<sup>2</sup> *22 Battalion*, p. 436.

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up the road, and on their lorries had placards with Danieli Hotel. We were not going to have a repetition of what had happened in **Rome**, and I sent a Company of the 22 Battalion to occupy the **Danieli Hotel**, and made Colonel Thodey personally responsible to me that he kept the Americans out.”

‘The most prominent citizens of **Venice**, including Italian admirals and generals, generously entertained the New Zealanders at their new club. Soldiers quizzically heard how Venetians always had been patriotic to **Italy**, not mere supporters of Mussolini. Some maintained they had suffered much; others obviously were war profiteers.’ <sup>1</sup>

The Division's senior Intelligence officer, Major Cox, obtained much valuable information on 30 April from a group of Italians who had been organised originally by the American Office of Strategic Services and had set up their headquarters in the Danieli. They ‘spent hour after hour collecting information by telephone from behind the German lines. For the Germans in their haste had failed to cut the telephone system. So we phoned to village after village up and down the rivers in our path—the Tagliamento, the Livenza, the **Isonzo**—finding out which bridges still stood and which were blown. We worked out which areas the partisans held and where the Germans were still strong. We even got through to

the C.L.N. <sup>2</sup> at **Trieste**, but before we could do more than identify ourselves the phone went dead.’ <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *22 Battalion*, p. 437.

<sup>2</sup> **CLN: The Italian Committee of National Liberation.**

<sup>3</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, p. 181.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## V: ALONG ROUTE 14

### *V: Along Route 14*

(i)

The ease with which the New Zealand Division had passed through the **Venetian Line** demonstrated how catastrophic had been the enemy's defeat in the **Po valley**. It was obvious by 30 April that the Germans had decided to abandon **Italy**. They no longer had sufficient cohesion to fight delaying actions on the **Piave**, **Tagliamento** and **Isonzo** river lines, which had been contested in the First World War. Disorganised groups of the enemy were trying to make their way north with little transport and practically no communications, and apparently without any plan or central direction. Preference was given to the remnants of the best divisions— *26 Panzer*, *29 Panzer Grenadier*, and *1* and *4 Para- chute*— in the use of the vehicles and the stocks of petrol still available, and these formations were making their way as best they could towards the Alps with the object of continuing the battle in **Austria** and southern **Germany**. The enemy's headlong retreat was harassed not only from the rear; his columns were attacked from the air almost continuously during daylight, and were exposed to the guerilla tactics of the partisans at night.

The objectives of **Fifteenth Army Group** now took on a more political complexion: a rapid and orderly occupation of north-east **Italy** was the only way to forestall the troubles which might spring from the unrestrained assumption of power by groups of partisans. The probability of international disagreement over the fate of the port of **Trieste** and the province of **Venezia Giulia**, where **Italy** and **Yugoslavia** confronted one another, demanded that the Allied forces should enter this territory as soon as possible; it was also essential that they should anticipate rival claimants who were approaching the prescribed British and American

zones of **Austria**.

The original Allied plan for the occupation of northern **Italy** had made **Eighth Army** responsible for the whole of the north-eastern portion, but this had become too formidable an assignment for the number of troops it could maintain in this region. It was agreed, therefore, that the boundary between Fifth and Eighth Armies should extend northward along the road from **Treviso** to Ponte nell' Alpi, which left **Eighth Army** with the Venetian littoral, through which Route 14 led to **Trieste** and Route 13 to **Udine**, farther inland.

The growing burden of maintaining the momentum of the advance as the lines of communication lengthened restricted Eighth Army's pursuit force to two divisions. With the exception of the troops of 56 Division sent to occupy **Venice**, **5 Corps** was halted on the line of the Brenta River, while 13 Corps (with 6 Armoured Division, **2 New Zealand Division**, 43 Gurkha Brigade and some armoured units) undertook the tasks of occupying **Trieste** without delay and cutting off the retreating Germans.

The 6th Armoured Division was to prevent as many as possible of the enemy withdrawing into the Alps. A force which included 61 Brigade, after making contact with 91 US Division at **Treviso** on 30 April, was divided into two mobile groups of infantry and tanks. One column went along the road to Ponte nell' Alpi, crossed the inter-army boundary, and accepted the surrender of a force of German parachutists at Belluna on 1 May; the other column drove along Route 13 to **Udine**, already in the hands of the partisans, and north of the town had a skirmish with a pro-German Cossack force which retired into the mountains.

The New Zealand Division was to continue its advance along Route 14 around the north coast of the Adriatic to **Trieste**. **General Freyberg** explained at a conference at Headquarters 9 Brigade on the morning of 30 April that the object was to open the port as a naval base and also as a base for the Allied forces advancing into **Austria**, but 'there was a somewhat awkward situation' <sup>1</sup> because **Marshal Tito** wanted his

**Yugoslav army to get to Trieste.**

**(ii)**

**Below San Dona di Piave, the limit of the Division's advance on 29 April, the Piave River flows in two divergent channels: Porto di Cortellazzo, where the wider and straighter course reaches the Adriatic Sea, is nine miles from Porto di Piave Vecchia, the mouth of the more southerly course which winds along the fringe of the Venetian Lagoon. German troops withdrawing between Route 14 and the sea were cornered in the pocket between these two branches of the river. They were known to be armed with coast-defence and anti-aircraft artillery.**

**While the leading New Zealand troops and vehicles were being ferried across the Piave River, 27 Battalion engaged the trapped enemy. Early on the morning of the 30th partisans reported that a German force was approaching on the road leading to Musile di Piave from the south. To meet this threat 2 Company was despatched down this road, and after a brief fight captured about 100 men and some vehicles loaded with ammunition, rations and other equipment.**

**About 7.30 a.m. 1 and 4 Companies, supported by tanks of B Squadron of 20 Regiment, were directed to clear the ground between the two branches of the Piave. Guided by partisans, 1 Company followed the more northerly course and by midday had cleared two villages, but while approaching a lateral road six miles downstream from Musile, was shelled by some 88-millimetre guns and came under small-arms fire which pinned down the infantry. The troop commander (Second-Lieutenant McLay<sup>2</sup>) went ahead in his own tank, silenced two spandau posts and a bazooka team and, engaging the 88s behind a house, knocked out two and drove the crews from two more. The infantry closed in, killed or wounded about 60 Germans, and overran the battery. The company's casualties were only one killed and seven wounded.**

**Meanwhile 4 Company's advance was hindered by stubborn resistance from the enemy occupying houses alongside the Piave**

<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> Lt A. R. McLay, MC; Ashburton; born NZ 16 Jan 1915; farmer.

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The accompanying tanks did so much shooting against these houses, as well as on launches and barges, that they expended most of their ammunition. In the afternoon 3 Company was directed to mop up in the gap between 1 and 4 Companies, but met only stragglers and deserters. At nightfall 9 Brigade ordered 27 Battalion to withdraw to Musile at 9p.m. and be ready to resume the advance on Route 14 next day. The battalion, therefore, ordered all three companies to return.

By this time, however, 4 Company was being counter-attacked by a strong German force using anti-aircraft guns and rocket projectors. Unable to support the infantry because of the lack of ammunition, the tanks retired out of bazooka range. The company occupied some disused enemy positions in a bend of the Piave Vecchia about four miles from Musile, but was in danger of being outflanked on the left and called for artillery support. At that stage—about 7 p.m.—the 25-pounders were returning to Musile along the stopbank of the other branch of the river, three miles to the north-east. At first, because the shells came from this direction, the forward observation officer did not realise they were from his own guns. With this protection, however, 4 Company withdrew to the junction of the Piave Vecchia and the Taglio del Sile (a ditch along the northern edge of the Venetian Lagoon), where there was a bridge. The company embussed in RMT trucks and returned by road to Musile, where the whole battalion was concentrated before 11 p.m.

The enemy south of San Dona di Piave had been foiled temporarily in his attempt to break out to the north, and was still in large numbers on the seaward side of Route 14. His resistance had been stiffened by the influx of Germans retreating from Venice.

*(iii)*

While 27 Battalion was thus engaged on 30 April, other troops of 9 Brigade were ferried across the Piave River. First of all D Squadron of 12 Lancers passed through the bridgehead which C Company of 22 Battalion had secured at San Dona the previous night, and went ahead on Route 14. Meeting only slight resistance, the armoured cars took 350 prisoners, destroyed some vehicles, crossed the Livenza River, and in the evening of the 30th were between the town of **Portogruaro** and the Tagliamento River.

Except for C Company at San Dona and B Company in **Venice**, 22 Battalion had spent the night in the vicinity of Musile. In the morning Battalion Headquarters and A and D Companies went about four miles upstream to **Fossalta di Piave**, where they were ferried across, and early in the afternoon the battalion (still without B Company) assembled east of the river. It was followed by Divisional Cavalry Battalion, which completed the crossing in the evening. The tanks of A Squadron of 20 Regiment went about eight miles upstream to a ford which had been found at Ponte di **Piave**, near the **Treviso** – San Vito railway.

The engineers' last major bridging work was at the Piave River. Near the demolished bridge between Musile and San Dona, 6 Field Company constructed a 300-foot folding-boat bridge, which was open to traffic in the evening, and about a quarter of a mile downstream 8 Field Company salvaged and strengthened four Italian barges to use as floating piers for a Bailey bridge, which was ready to carry heavier transport next day.

Meanwhile 5 Brigade, having halted in the vicinity of the crossing of the Sile River, sent out parties to round up the enemy in the surrounding countryside, while 6 Brigade, nearer **Mestre**, permitted a proportion of each battalion to take leave in **Venice**. The area allotted to 23 Battalion for mopping-up was to a depth of five or six miles north of Route 14. Each company, employing an officer and about 10 men with a tank and one or two carriers, had completed the task by evening. C and

**D Companies of 28 Battalion, accompanied by mortars, carriers and flame-throwers, found no enemy in the rectangular piece of ground south of the Sile River between Route 14 and the Venetian Lagoon, but 10 Platoon of 21 Battalion, despatched with a few tanks and carriers from the Sile towards the Piave Vecchia on the seaward side of the highway, cleared several small pockets of enemy and took 31 prisoners, and learnt from 27 Battalion that the enemy in that locality was about 1500 strong. The 21st Battalion was told that it was to take over from the 27th next morning the task of clearing the Division's right flank.**

**The 5th Field Park Company had intended to laager for the night near Mestre, but because it had so many vehicles—between 200 and 300, which included the attached RASC and Polish transport carrying bridge-building material—decided to move closer to the Piave River, where the bridge-building had begun, and stopped on Route 14 near where a road branches northward to Meolo and Monastier. Some of the trucks were unloaded and ready to return to Padua at dawn for more material, and some were dispersed in the fields south of the highway. The engineers' overnight camp, therefore, was exposed on the seaward side where 27 and 21 Battalions had found the enemy in such strength.**

**About 2 a.m. pickets on the road saw a column approaching, but did not open fire because they thought it might be just another group of prisoners. The column, which was German, had gone up a road towards the Piave from the south and then turned south-westward down Route 14, apparently with the intention of crossing the Canale Fossetta by a bridge on the road to Meolo. The Germans opened fire on the engineers' transport and camp with *faustpatronen* and 20-millimetre anti-aircraft guns mounted on bullock wagons, and some of them infiltrated through the fields and attacked the engineers in the rear.**

**A convoy of a platoon of 7 Field Company, coming along Route 14 from the opposite direction, was ambushed. Men were asleep in their vehicles when the enemy opened fire, but most of them jumped out to take cover in a ditch, behind a bank, or in nearby buildings; several were taken prisoner, and three who stayed in a truck were burnt to death**

when a German threw a hand grenade into it. The enemy set fire to the trucks he could not use and drove off in all those he could start in the direction of **Meolo**, with the intention of crossing the **Piave** upstream from San Dona and joining the other Germans in the hills.

The disturbance had wakened a platoon of 1 Ammunition Company which had halted near **5 Field Park Company**. The drivers prepared to defend themselves. 'In the farmyard a quarter of a mile away transport and haystacks were on fire and there was a lot of noise and shouting. Tracers and explosive bullets from bredas, spandaus, and sub-machine guns whistled overhead, and beside these the enemy was using mortars, *panzerfaust*, and 20-millimetre guns. A continual confused shouting in German, Italian, and English made a worry of sound, like a dog-fight, but the drivers could catch a word here and there: "*Avanti!*" "*Raus.*" "Hey Bill!" "*Raus!*"

'Rain fell steadily all the time.... Flame-lit cameos, glimpsed momentarily, appeared and vanished: a figure stooping to pour petrol on and around the **YMCA** van; two bewildered Germans and a blue flash from a tommy gun; a group of soldiers who seemed to be wrestling among the flames.' <sup>1</sup> Captain **Williams** <sup>2</sup> decided that his platoon should take part; he divided his drivers into two groups, one to defend the transport and the other to go to the farmyard. Except for a few stragglers, however, the enemy had gone before the Ammunition Company men arrived on the scene.

The raiders had taken or destroyed about 23 of the engineers' vehicles, and killed eight men, wounded 19, and captured about 40 (some of whom were wounded). Hindered by their ox-drawn carts and their own dead and wounded, however, they failed to get very far from the scene of the attack. The column was fired on by

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<sup>1</sup> S. P. Llewellyn, *Journey Towards Christmas*, p. 435.

<sup>2</sup> Capt **B. J. Williams**, MC; **Auckland**; born Aust., 6 Jun 1905;

hotel manager.

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partisans at **Monastier**, and took about three-quarters of an hour to get through this village. But two Stuart tanks from 18 Armoured Regiment's reconnaissance troop which endeavoured to release the New Zealand prisoners were knocked out by bazooka fire; three of the tank men were killed and five wounded.

Warned by the partisans that a large German force with prisoners was in the neighbourhood, Captain **Stewart**<sup>1</sup> (the transport officer) and two others from Rear Headquarters 9 Brigade in a jeep, followed by Captain **Wilson**<sup>2</sup> and a few men from Headquarters Company of 27 Battalion in a 15-cwt truck, left Musile to investigate. Stewart and his companions stopped their jeep about 150 yards from the enemy, went forward on foot and unarmed, and demanded to see the German commanding officer. Stewart said he had tanks at his command, although there was none in the vicinity, and called on the enemy to surrender. This the German at first refused to consider; he proposed instead to release the New Zealand prisoners with their equipment in return for a safe passage over the Piave River. Stewart continued to bluff, and after some further argument the German consulted his fellow officers and agreed to surrender. The men from Brigade Headquarters and 27 Battalion began to disarm and shepherd the enemy into a nearby field.

The 21st Battalion had been advised at 3.30 a.m. that a large German force had attacked **5 Field Park Company** while attempting to escape inland. When A and D Companies, with tank support, reached **5 Field Park Company's** bivouac area about half an hour later, the enemy had gone. While these two companies proceeded to relieve 27 Battalion, B and C Companies, supported by half of A Squadron of 18 Regiment, set off at 7.30 a.m. to pursue the enemy. Eventually, in the vicinity of **Monastier**, Lieutenant-Colonel McPhail took charge of the 1530 Germans whose commander had surrendered to Captain Stewart. The captured New Zealand engineers were recovered. In addition A and D Companies

rounded up over 1300 enemy along the banks of the **Piave**, which brought 21 Battalion's total of prisoners for the day to nearly 3000.

*(iv)*

Had normal precautions been taken, the attack on 5 Field Park Company might not have occurred. **General Freyberg** told the divisional conference on the morning of 1 May: 'You must pay particular attention to local protection after last night's experience.'

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt R. M. Stewart**, m.i.d.; Apiti; born Feilding, 10 Aug 1920; farmer.

<sup>2</sup> **Capt M. T. Wilson**; **Auckland**; born NZ 16 Jun 1909; insurance inspector.

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Everything should be grouped in such a way that it has infantry protection, and the ordinary measures should be taken of having at least one third of the force properly posted.' <sup>1</sup>

This was the last divisional conference before the cessation of hostilities in **Italy**. The General announced that **12 Lancers** had discovered a bridge intact over the Tagliamento River. 'I have told them to sweep along the coastal area and report any formed bodies of enemy troops.' <sup>2</sup> The whole of 9 Brigade was to cross the Tagliamento and then await further orders. Sixth Brigade was to follow, and 5 Brigade was to mop up the enemy near the Piave River and deal with any enemy pockets found by **12 Lancers**.

D Squadron of the Lancers again led along Route 14, while B Squadron combed the country on its seaward side and C Squadron on the other side. After reporting about 8 a.m. that a one-way wooden bridge over the Tagliamento probably would take all traffic, the armoured cars found that the bridge at Palazzolo, on the next river, the Stella, had been wrecked, but located an alternative crossing about six miles

upstream, near Rivignano. This bridge made it possible to get right through to **Trieste** in the one day.

**General Freyberg** decided that the Division would have to be careful about petrol if it was to reach **Trieste** that day, and for that reason all captured vehicles would have to be left behind. As the traffic came off the bridge over the **Piave**, therefore, the provost diverted to one side the dozens of German cars and motorcycles. Their indignant drivers and passengers, reduced once again to the back of their regulation three-tonners, climbed with their gear on to the nearest passing vehicle. The Division passed through more villages of cheering crowds, along the tree-lined, superbly surfaced Route 14, in country which had not been touched by the war.

B Squadron of 20 Regiment went to the head of 22 Battalion, and the advance continued with the tanks leading A and D Companies, Battalion Headquarters, Brigadier Gentry and **General Freyberg**, C Company and Headquarters Company in that order. They drove at full speed through **Fossalta di Portogruaro** and **Latisana** (on the Tagliamento), around the 12-mile detour to cross the Stella, and reached **San Giorgio** di Nogara (a road junction) at 1.30 p.m. Behind 22 Battalion came A Squadron of 20 Regiment, then Headquarters 9 Brigade, **4 Field Regiment**, and 27 Battalion.

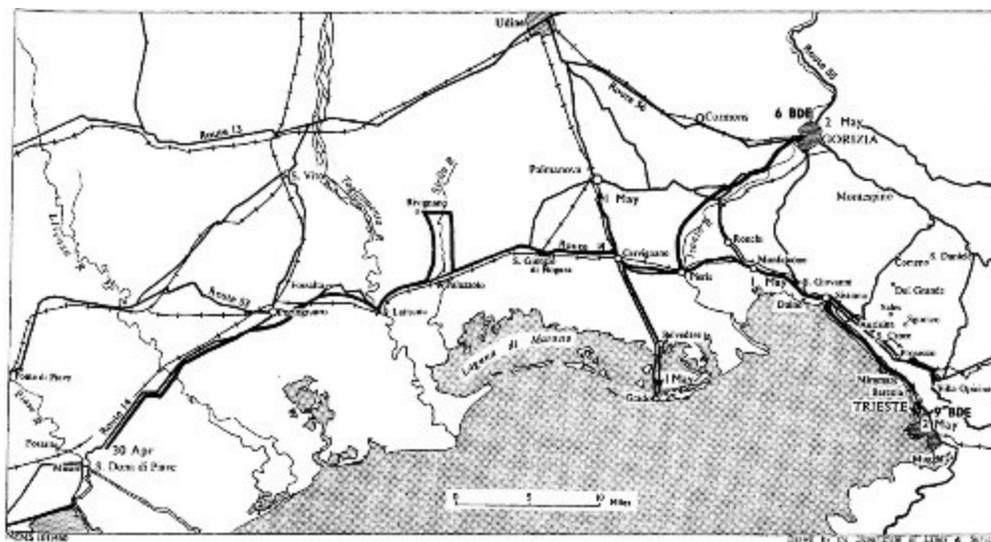
At San Giorgio, some 20 miles short of the Isonzo River, the General spoke with the chief of staff of the Osoppo (right wing) partisan group of the **Udine** area, and with Lieutenant-Colonel

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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FROM THE PIAVE RIVER TO TRIESTE, 30 APRIL-2 MAY 1945

FROM THE PIAVE RIVER TO TRIESTE, 30 APRIL-2 MAY 1945

Wilkinson, who had been sent by Allied Force Headquarters to act as adviser when contact was made with the Yugoslavs. The corps commander (General Harding) also arrived to discuss the moves towards **Gorizia** and **Trieste**. Word came from the Lancers at 2.30 p.m. that the Route 14 bridge on the **Isonzo** (some distance downstream from **Gorizia**) was intact, and the GOC gave orders to resume the advance.

About 3 p.m. D Squadron of the Lancers made contact with the most advanced troops of **Marshal Tito's** Fourth Yugoslav Army near the shipbuilding town of **Monfalcone**, and half an hour later 22 Battalion met Yugoslav troops near **Pieris**, just beyond the long concrete bridge which was still intact over the **Isonzo**. The New Zealanders noticed a change of atmosphere. There were partisans everywhere, with red scarves and red-starred caps. They marched in small columns with Yugoslav flags, and with Italian tricolours with the red star in the centre. On roadside walls were portraits of Tito, and the slogans 'Zivio Tito', 'Zivio Stalin' and 'Tukay je Jugoslavia'— 'This is **Yugoslavia**'. The New Zealanders felt like strangers in a strange land, as if at the **Isonzo** they had passed some unmarked but distinct frontier. They had driven from **Italy** into what was to become a no-man's land between Eastern and Western Europe. Obviously the people here had hoped to welcome Yugoslav forces and not those of the British **Eighth Army**.

Describing this situation three days later, <sup>1</sup> **General Freyberg** said he had understood that Tito was fighting somewhere on the outskirts of **Trieste** 'and one is very nervous of approaching another army, especially when many of the Yugoslav troops wear German uniforms, and on account of the great language difficulty. What we did not know was that Tito had determined to get to the line of the **Isonzo** before us and present us with a fait accompli. The first day when we crossed [the **Isonzo**] we caught him unprepared however—he had not even blown or picketed the bridge over the river....' <sup>2</sup>

(v)

Orders were given for 9 Brigade to advance to the road junction at **San Giovanni**, about three miles beyond **Monfalcone**, and there await further instructions; 6 Brigade was to occupy **Monfalcone** and despatch a column of all arms to capture **Gorizia**, about 10 miles to the north; 5 Brigade was to occupy **San Giorgio** and send a detachment to **Palmanova**, about six miles to the north-east.

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<sup>1</sup> At a conference at Divisional Headquarters.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's papers.

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D Squadron of **12 Lancers** met its first resistance after passing through **Monfalcone**, when it was fired on in the vicinity of **San Giovanni**. The GOC 'saw that some sort of battle was going on along the road ahead. I could not be sure with whom it was going on. So we stopped for the night at **MONFALCONE**, partly because of the danger of fighting with Tito's troops and also because of the heavy rain. There were some soldiers running about round a coastal battery and for all I knew they were partisans. However some of our tanks thought they were enemy and fired at them and they were Hun all right and surrendered.' <sup>1</sup> A Company of 22 Battalion and some tanks from B Squadron of 20 Regiment, after a short exchange of fire, captured 150 Germans. Tanks

of A and B Squadrons joined forces to round up another 50 near **Duino**, on the coast beyond **San Giovanni**.

Meanwhile B Squadron of the Lancers entered the little port of **Grado**, west of the mouth of the **Isonzo**, and discovered eight undamaged sloops and a tug, as well as 200 enemy surrounded by partisans. Beyond **Grado** another 400 enemy had to be left in the hands of the partisans. At **Palmanova**, an old fortress town whose walls show on the map like a nine-pointed star, C Squadron of the Lancers attempted to negotiate the surrender of 600 German marines and 600 Italian fascists, but the German commander declared that he was going to fight his way out. It was impossible to send infantry immediately to **Palmanova**, and consequently the enemy could not be prevented from breaking out to the north during the night. Nevertheless he did not avoid casualties.

**General Freyberg** met two senior Yugoslav officers at **Monfalcone** at 5.30 p.m. and, with the help of Colonel Wilkinson, as interpreter, proclaimed what a proud moment it was to be able to link up with **Marshal Tito's** 'magnificent troops who had fought so long and bravely in the common cause.'<sup>2</sup> He asked the Yugoslavs whether they would be content if his Division stayed overnight in **Monfalcone** pending further discussions, and was told this would be satisfactory. Arrangements were made to meet the commander of the Fourth Yugoslav Army at 7.30 p.m.

The orders given earlier in the afternoon, therefore, were amended so that 9 Brigade disposed 22 Battalion and Divisional Cavalry Battalion on the high ground just beyond **Monfalcone**, while 27 Battalion (in reserve) sheltered from the rain in a capacious power station. Sixth Brigade, which had been delayed at the crossing of the Piave River, was to concentrate in the vicinity of



Beyond the castle on the Miramare peninsula lies the city of Trieste

**Beyond the castle on the [Miramare](#) peninsula lies the city of [Trieste](#)**

The New Zealand Division enters Trieste



**The New Zealand Division enters [Trieste](#)**



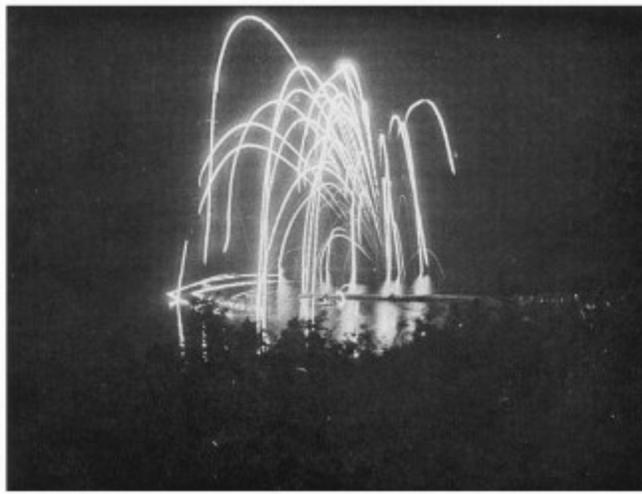
During the occupation of Trieste: General Freyberg, General McCreery and Brigadier Gentry at Headquarters 9 Brigade

**During the occupation of Trieste: General Freyberg, General McCreery and Brigadier Gentry at Headquarters 9 Brigade**

New Zealand tank men fraternise with a Yugoslav tank crew



**New Zealand tank men fraternise with a Yugoslav tank crew**



New Zealanders shoot off flares to celebrate the end of the war with Germany

**New Zealanders shoot off flares to celebrate the end of the war with Germany**

Officers of 22 Battalion and their guests at a dance listen to an item by the battalion band



**Officers of 22 Battalion and their guests at a dance listen to an item by the battalion band**

New Zealand skiers at the alpine leave centre in the Dolomites



**New Zealand skiers at the alpine leave centre in the Dolomites**



On leave in Venice

**On leave in Venice**



In front of the cathedral in Florence

**In front of the cathedral in Florence**

Passing the time at Advanced Base while awaiting repatriation



**Passing the time at Advanced Base while awaiting repatriation**



The Maori choir singing a hymn during the memorial service in Crete

**The Maori choir singing a hymn during the memorial service in Crete**

Veterans of the battle in Crete are entertained by the people of Galatas during their visit to the island for the memorial service



**Veterans of the battle in Crete are entertained by the people of Galatas during their visit to the island for the memorial service**



About to depart from Advanced Base on the first stage of the voyage  
to New Zealand

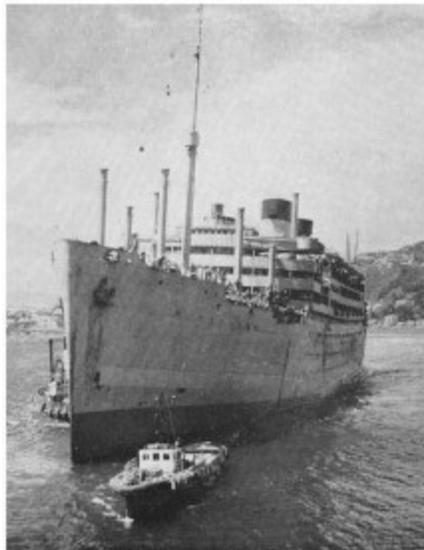
**About to depart from Advanced Base on the first stage of the voyage to New Zealand**

Jayforce parade before leaving Italy for the Far East



**Jayforce parade before leaving Italy for the Far East**

## ***THE HOME-COMING***



*THE HOME-COMING*

The *Dominion Monarch* carrying the Maori Battalion arrives in Wellington

The *Dominion Monarch* carrying the **Maori Battalion** arrives in **Wellington**



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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

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**Pieris** and operate in the direction of **Gorizia** without entering that town. Fifth Brigade still was to occupy **San Giorgio**.

**Freyberg** reported to Harding about 6 p.m. that contact had been made with the Yugoslavs and that the advance had been stopped pending negotiations with their general. The Yugoslav general, however, did not keep his appointment. **Freyberg** concluded that the Yugoslavs were bluffing about how far they had advanced. He sent a message to

Harding about 11 p.m. advising him that he now expected to meet the Yugoslav commander at 8.30 a.m. 'It seems most obvious,' he said, 'that JUGOSLAVS did NOT expect our arrival for at least 48 hrs. Consider doubtful whether **TRIESTE** or **GORIZIA** in fact held by JUGOSLAVS and am continuing adv on both places 2 May.' <sup>1</sup> Already fresh orders had been issued for **12 Lancers** and **9 Brigade** to continue the advance on **Trieste** and for **6 Brigade** to occupy **Gorizia**.

The General went to the **Monfalcone** town hall at half past eight next morning, but the Yugoslav commander did not arrive. **Freyberg** then went to Headquarters **9 Brigade** and directed the brigade to push on towards **Trieste**. 'Do not hand any prisoners you take over to the partisans.' <sup>2</sup> He received a signal from Harding saying that it was most important that the Division should occupy **Gorizia** as early as possible.

**Freyberg** returned to **Monfalcone** and conferred with the commander of **9 Corps** of the Fourth Yugoslav Army. The language presented some difficulty: the GOC's statements were translated into Italian and then into Slav. He explained that **6 British Armoured Division**, 'in numbers about 20,000 with tanks and guns, now has its head in **UDINE** and their main body will continue to arrive there during the next few days. At **MONFALCONE** my troops which have arrived are only an advance guard at present. We have coming up the main body of some 30,000 troops with 150 tanks and many guns. The greater part of the force is at present moving along the road from **VENICE** to **MONFALCONE**. We would welcome the co-operation of your forces in our joint battle against Fascism.'

The Yugoslav corps commander replied: 'That would give us the greatest pleasure.' The ensuing conversation proved that he had not been briefed and could make no decision without consulting his higher authorities, but was anxious that the British should advance no farther eastwards.

**Freyberg**: 'We have not yet effected a junction with your forces in the direction of **TRIESTE**. We are pushing along the

<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

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road until we meet them. Could you give me the dispositions of the Yugoslav Army in this general area?’

The corps commander pointed on the map to the region of the hills north-east of **Udine** down to the hills in a south-easterly direction towards **Trieste**.

**Freyberg:** ‘Our troops will probably make a junction with yours to the East of **UDINE**.’

**Yugoslav:** ‘We shall make contact.’

**Freyberg:** ‘Also we will contact you in **GORIZIA**.’

**Yugoslav:** ‘There is no need for you to send troops towards **GORIZIA**—it will be better to send them towards **Germany**. Our troops are in the hills North-East of **GORIZIA** and **UDINE**.’

**Freyberg:** ‘We must have lines of communication northward for the forces which will be going into **AUSTRIA**.’

**Yugoslav:** ‘Your Army could go along the edge of the plain running North-West along the edges of the hills. I am not in a position to talk about **GORIZIA** as our Fourth Army is there and I would have to speak to the Army Comd.’

**Freyberg:** ‘We will make touch at **GORIZIA** and in the area East and South-East of **MONFALCONE** because there are Germans there.’

**Yugoslav:** ‘It would be better to send your troops Northwards as our troops are in that area.’

**Freyberg:** ‘We only wish to make a junction. There exists a verbal

agreement between **Marshal Tito** and Field Marshal Alexander that we are to take over the Port of **TRIESTE** and use the road running up the coast from **TRIESTE**.’

**Yugoslav**: ‘Perhaps you could stop meanwhile on the line running South-West or just West of **GORIZIA**.’

**Freyberg**: ‘It is of paramount importance that the port of **TRIESTE** is opened up.’

**Yugoslav**: ‘It would be better to wait for my superior commander and also for the General of our Fourth Army.’

The conversation continued a while without making any further progress, and concluded with the New Zealand GOC assuring the corps commander: ‘All English-speaking people have a tremendous admiration for **Marshal Tito** and the great efforts made by the Yugoslav Army.’<sup>1</sup>

An appointment was made for a conference with the Yugoslav army commander at 2.30 p.m. at **Monfalcone**. **Freyberg** found the public square thronged for a pro-Tito demonstration, with placards bearing such inscriptions as *Viva Monfalcone nella nuova Jugo-*

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

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*slavia di Tito*.<sup>1</sup> He waited for about a quarter of an hour in the Committee of Liberation rooms in the town hall, but as there was no sign of the Yugoslav general he returned to Headquarters 9 Brigade.

Whether or not the Yugoslav general had intended to meet **Freyberg** at **Monfalcone**, he probably could not have got there in time from his headquarters in the hills north-east of **Trieste**. A journey over rough mountain tracks requiring half a day at least would have been impracticable for an army commander at the height of battle.

<sup>1</sup> Long live **Monfalcone** in **Tito's new Yugoslavia**.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

# CHAPTER 12 – THE END OF THE WAR

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## I: THE OCCUPATION OF TRIESTE

### *I: The Occupation of Trieste*

(i)

THE campaign in **Italy** ended officially at midday on 2 May, but news of the unconditional surrender of the German *Army Group C* did not reach **Eighth Army** until the evening. This surrender did not apply to the German troops east of the **Isonzo River**; nor did many of those on the other side of the river receive the order to cease fire owing to the disruption of the enemy's communications. **Eighth Army** issued an order at 9.40 p.m. that its troops were to cease fire west of the **Isonzo** unless the enemy committed an overt hostile action, in which case 'normal operational action'<sup>1</sup> would be taken. Throughout 2 May, therefore, **Eighth Army** continued to advance in north-eastern **Italy**, with troops from 6 Armoured Division in the mountains north of **Udine** and with the New Zealanders along the Adriatic coast to **Trieste**, where the German garrison was still holding out against the Fourth Yugoslav Army.

Ninth New Zealand Brigade set off along Route 14 east of **Monfalcone** about 8.30 a.m., with the armoured cars of A Squadron of **12 Lancers** out in front. A little earlier A Company and some carriers from 22 Battalion had brought in 190 Germans who had been occupying gun positions in and around **Duino**, on the coast. Accompanied by tanks from B Squadron of 20 Regiment, 22 Battalion led the brigade to **Sistiana**, about two miles beyond **Duino**, where the enemy was met again. A small force consisting of 7 Platoon, some tanks and carriers at once went ahead, inflicted a few casualties and took eight prisoners. The tanks also engaged

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<sup>1</sup> *Operations of British, Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy*, Part IV, Sec. B, p. 162.

three enemy boats about five miles offshore, and set one on fire; another was abandoned, but the third escaped.

At **Sistiana** the highway forks. While 22 Battalion continued along Route 14 by the coast, Divisional Cavalry Battalion took the more hilly inland route through Aurisina, San Croce di **Trieste** and **Prosecco**. Shortly after midday B Squadron of 20 Regiment and 22 Battalion halted while the air force bombed enemy positions at **Miramare**, on a small peninsula about three miles from **Trieste** When three of the Lancers' armoured cars and Lieutenant-Colonel Donald in his jeep approached **Miramare** about 2.30 p.m., they were met by a German coastal artillery commander, who offered to surrender his garrison. 'He said he had based his surrender on his interpretation of the directive issued by **DOENITZ**.<sup>1</sup> He had not received a copy of this directive himself, but his radio operators had picked up the message containing it being sent to Army Gp C.... He was under the orders of the Naval Commander at , who had refused to approve his decision and ordered him to fight on. This he refused to do....'<sup>2</sup> Fifteen officers and 600 men were disarmed and taken prisoner.

As the day wore on it became increasingly apparent that the enemy preferred to surrender to the New Zealand Division rather than to the Yugoslav Army, which was in control of a large part of **Trieste**. The first risings of the partisans in the city apparently had taken place on the night of 30 April – 1 May, before the New Zealanders had begun their advance from the Piave River. The partisans had been joined in the city on 1 May by Yugoslav tanks. The Germans' reluctance to resist the New Zealanders was shown by their failure to blow the tunnels through which the road passed near **Miramare** and to demolish the road itself.

A road block a mile or two beyond **Miramare** was quickly silenced by some tanks of B Squadron of 20 Regiment, which 'sprayed the pillboxes with their Brownings and then charged straight through.... the tanks were ordered to push on and leave their prisoners to be collected later. The drivers then accelerated, the last few miles were covered at a grand pace, and at three o'clock on that sunny and momentous afternoon the

regiment's first tanks, the spearhead of the Division, entered **Trieste**.'<sup>3</sup>

Donald reached the city about half an hour later and instructed 22 Battalion by radio to enter, which it did at 4 p.m. It received a tumultuous welcome, mixed with odd bursts of rifle and machine-gun fire which failed to disperse the excited crowds. The Germans

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<sup>1</sup> Before committing suicide in his bunker at the Reichschancellery in **Berlin** on 30 April, Adolf Hitler had selected Admiral Karl Doenitz as his successor.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, G Branch, HQ **2 NZ Div**.

<sup>3</sup> *20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 589.

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still held many buildings, and snipers were busy. One man in the battalion was wounded. Large numbers of Yugoslav troops and a column of old Stuart tanks paraded the streets. Amid further cheering, Brigadier Gentry, closely followed by **General Freyberg**, arrived about a quarter past four.

Meanwhile A Squadron of 20 Regiment and Divisional Cavalry Battalion met resistance at **Prosecco** on the longer, winding inland route. The enemy used mortars and a six-pounder anti-tank gun which had been captured from the battalion the previous evening. The anti-tank *portée* had developed engine trouble in the afternoon and its crew had set out to rejoin the battalion at dusk, but had driven past it. 'They had stopped and asked a soldier at the side of the road the inevitable question of the day, "Dove Trieste?", only to realise too late that it was a German who replied in English: "**Trieste** is there; and for you the war is over." That was not quite so. They all escaped the very next day. Two of them seized the first chance, during a dive-bombing raid, and so, in a very short space of time indeed, were able to give valuable information to the leading cars of **12 Lancers** which picked them up as they came along. The rest hid up in a house until things had quietened down....'<sup>1</sup>

A Squadron's tanks engaged some enemy-occupied houses and the infantry took a few prisoners. Divisional Cavalry then proceeded down the road to **Trieste**, which it entered about 6 p.m., and went through to the southern part of the city.

*(ii)*

Colonel Donald, accompanied by two German officers, endeavoured to obtain the surrender of the garrison still holding out in the Tribunale (law courts) in **Trieste**. He also led some armoured cars, tanks, and C Company of 22 Battalion to the 700-year-old fortified castle, the **Castello San Giusto**, on the hill in the centre of the city, where he left Major Cross <sup>2</sup> to accept the surrender of the garrison while he himself returned to the Tribunale.

C Company was greeted at the castle about 5.30 p.m. by much indiscriminate shooting. The Germans fired a bazooka at one of the tanks, but missed. Yugoslav troops threatened to shoot anyone who went into the castle, but C Company passed through the gates and entered the courtyard, where the Germans were waiting. The garrison of 12 officers and 170 men was disarmed, and 13 Platoon took up positions previously occupied by the Germans. The castle was well stocked with ammunition and prepared for siege.

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<sup>1</sup> *Divisional Cavalry*, pp. 415–16.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj L. G. S. Cross**; born Dunedin, 20 Nov 1918; Regular soldier.

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Late in the evening the New Zealanders and Germans shared a meal. 'From time to time members of Tito's partisans had called at the castle gate to demand entrance, but in vain. From houses on higher ground partisan snipers had been shooting at movement within the walls. The captured force now suggested with some enthusiasm uniting with the New Zealanders and fighting side by side if the situation grew worse.

**Major Cross, suddenly immersed in the intricacies and duplicities of peace, replied non-committally. Next morning the garrison, under escort, marched down the road to the waiting three-tonners. Howls of protest and anger rose from the demonstrating partisans and civilians, who demanded the prisoners. The New Zealanders saw the Germans off safely.’<sup>1</sup>**

**At the Tribunale Donald could not persuade the garrison commander to surrender; he was an SS officer who ‘was still humbugging undecidedly and was apparently under the influence of alcohol.’<sup>2</sup> Donald therefore arranged with the Yugoslav commander that tanks of C Squadron of 19 Regiment and C Squadron of the 20th would surround the building and give it a 20-minute pounding with their guns and Brownings. First the square was cleared of all troops and civilians, and at 7 p.m. 18 tanks at ranges of from 20 to 50 yards blew gaping holes in the walls and through the windows of the Tribunale. The Germans took shelter in the cellars and had few casualties, but the Yugoslavs entered the building and by morning had rounded up some 200.**

**Headquarters 22 Battalion was established in the Albergo Regina and the companies disposed in the northern part of the city, including C Company at the castle. The 27th Battalion, which entered the city at dusk, dispersed in the vicinity of the docks. Headquarters 9 Brigade was set up in the Grande Albergo della Citta. **Divisional Headquarters** took over the castle built in 1845–46 for Archduke Maximilian at **Miramare**. ‘Many pairs of Kiwi eyes goggled—the “poor country lads” had never seen anything like it. But notwithstanding several fine suites of rooms with sunny balconies overlooking the Adriatic the GOC would not budge out of his caravan.’<sup>3</sup>**

**About 10 p.m. an Austrian civilian brought a message to Colonel Donald from the German commander of the **Trieste** and north-western coastal area (Lieutenant-General Linkenbach), who wished to surrender his forces to the British. Donald sent the battalion's Intelligence officer (Second-Lieutenant Currie<sup>4</sup>) and a provost sergeant with the Austrian**

and a white flag to the general's villa, which

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<sup>1</sup> *22 Battalion*, pp. 441–2.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, 22 Bn.

<sup>3</sup> GOC's diary. Early in the war the German radio had described the New Zealand soldiers as 'poor country lads'.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Lt C. S. Currie; Taupo; born **Auckland**, 6 Feb 1914; shop assistant.

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commanded a view of the city and the port from the northern outskirts and was guarded by over 700 men. The general agreed to discuss terms of surrender and, with two of his staff, was brought to the **Albergo Regina**. Partisans were met on the way, but on learning that the occupants of the jeep were under British escort, did not interfere.

The discussion at Headquarters 22 Battalion was facilitated by a German-Italian interpreter and an Italian-English one. **Linkenbach** wanted an assurance that his men would not fall into Yugoslav hands. Eventually, after **Donald** had conferred with **General Freyberg**, it was decided to remove all the Germans to a British prisoner-of-war camp. **Currie** took the German general back to his headquarters by jeep, again under a white flag, and **D Company** arrived at the villa about 4 a.m. to disarm the garrison. At daybreak **Currie** led the column down the hill: behind his jeep came eight German staff cars containing **Linkenbach** and his staff, a German truck and motor-cycle, eight **D Company** trucks carrying prisoners, and about 300 Germans on foot. Altogether 24 officers and 800 men were safely escorted to the cages near **Monfalcone**.

About half past eight that morning (3 May), after a message was received from the commander of the 1200-strong German garrison at **Villa Opicina**, a village a couple of miles north of **Trieste**, **A Company** of

22 Battalion and three tanks of A Squadron of 20 Regiment were sent to negotiate the surrender. One of the tanks was ditched on the way, and the infantry three-tonners could not pass a demolition, but the two remaining tanks carried a platoon up the road. Here again the Germans were willing to become prisoners of the New Zealanders but not of the Yugoslavs. While the company commander (Captain **Wells**<sup>1</sup>) was negotiating with the Germans, the Yugoslavs opened up with mortars and small arms. A Company came under fire, 'and to the sorrow and anger of the battalion,'<sup>2</sup> Lance-Corporal **Russell**<sup>3</sup> was killed and another man wounded.

A Company joined the Germans. 'Casualties had been, and continued to be, inflicted on the Germans by Tito's troops.... Here we were, among armed Germans who greatly outnumbered us, and subject to the same dangers in a private war which was being prosecuted after the official cessation of hostilities.... Small groups formed round English-speaking German officers who conversed brightly on the course and ultimate end of the war. Most

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj J. Wells**, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Dargaville**, 4 Jan 1911; bank officer.

<sup>2</sup> *22 Battalion*, p. 444.

<sup>3</sup> **L-Cpl J. N. Russell**, m.i.d.; born NZ 4 Sep 1920; truck driver; wounded 15 Dec 1944; killed in action 3 May 1945.

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were of the opinion that **Germany** and England should have allied themselves to fight against **Russia**—and that that day might even come to pass....'<sup>1</sup>

Wells visited the Yugoslav brigade headquarters and what seemed to be a divisional headquarters in an attempt to reach a settlement, and eventually the commander of 20 Yugoslav Division and a British liaison officer from the Yugoslav headquarters were taken to Headquarters 9

Brigade to confer with Brigadier Gentry. It was decided that, rather than risk more lives, A Company should withdraw and the Yugoslavs would be allowed to take the Germans prisoner.

Meanwhile the New Zealand tank commander (Captain Foley <sup>2</sup>) was attempting to stop the fighting between the Yugoslavs and Germans. 'With a German colonel and a captain on board, "both very scared", he took his tank down the road to the German lines, where he found bitter fighting raging.... His proposal that he was going over to the partisans' lines to speak to them was considered "verr dangerous" by the colonel, but after some parleying in no-man's-land with "some Tito men", carried out in Italian with his gunner's assistance, "we got them to understand that if they stopped firing the war would be over."

'Foley then adopted the role of referee, dashing between the two parties, who had again resumed the fight, "and by much frantic waving, with my heart in my mouth, got them to stop.... Then proceeded further along the line and the same performance went on. **Villa Opicina** was taking an awful pasting so decided to go and stop that too." Negotiations with first a lieutenant, then a major, a brigadier ("a real pirate"), and, last of all, a general only confirmed that the Yugoslavs were determined not to let the Germans—and all their equipment—be surrendered to the New Zealanders.' <sup>3</sup>

By this time the New Zealanders had been ordered to return to their units, and another troop of tanks arrived to ascertain what was delaying them. Two Austrians on a motor-cycle followed them back to **Trieste** and were their only prisoners.

The surrender of the **Villa Opicina** garrison to the Yugoslavs ended hostilities in **Trieste** and its environs. Although the situation in the city was to remain tense and confused for some time, the Division had fired its last shot in the war.

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<sup>1</sup> *22 Battalion*, pp. 444–5.

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Col W.C.T. Foley; **Wellington**; born Stratford, 7 Jul 1916; Regular soldier; 26 Bn, 1940–41; Sqn Comd, 2 Tank Bn (in NZ), 1942–43; LO, Special Tank Sqn, **2 NZEF(IP)**, 1943; 20 Armd Regt, 1945; **2 NZEF ( Japan)** 1945–46; Commander V Force, South **Vietnam**, 1964–66.

<sup>3</sup> *20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 591.

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On the morning of 2 May 6 Brigade was faced with two tasks: the occupation of **Gorizia**, and the sending of a force to **Grado** to capture or drive back into the sea the Germans who were landing there while fleeing from the Yugoslavs. The 26th Battalion was to take **Gorizia**, while 24 Battalion was to go to **Grado**.

Sixth Brigade's progress along Route 14 on 1 May had been exasperatingly slow because of the huge volume of traffic and the delay at the Piave River, where the **Royal Engineers** completed a 340-foot Bailey bridge late that day; 8 Field Company's Bailey on four barges anchored in the river on piers was not open until next day. It was raining heavily when 26 Battalion, in the lead, crossed the **Piave**, and it did not reach its dispersal area just short of the **Isonzo** until 5.30 a.m. on the 2nd. A Company, which had the role of protecting **Divisional Headquarters**, continued along Route 14 beyond the **Isonzo**.

Taking the road on the west bank of the **Isonzo**, 26 Battalion set off about midday in the direction of **Gorizia**. About 12.45 p.m. B Company, at the head of the column, saw evidence of recent fighting at the outskirts of the town, six miles north of **Monfalcone**. Groups of Chetniks (Yugoslav royalist partisans) close to the road obviously belonged to a large force in the hills west of the river. **Colonel Fairbrother** attempted to discuss the situation with one of their officers, but could not do so without an interpreter. The Chetniks were not hostile, however, so he decided to continue into **Gorizia**. Actually 26 Battalion, without knowing it, had driven through the no-man's land of a battle between the Chetniks and Tito's communist forces.

Machine-gun fire could be heard in **Gorizia** when the New Zealanders debussed and prepared to enter the town. The main bridge over the river had been demolished, but a wooden one was wide enough for jeeps and carriers. The shooting died down as B and C Companies and Tactical Headquarters occupied various buildings. D Company stayed with Battalion Headquarters on the west bank of the river to guard the footbridge and the transport assembled there. Two Chetniks were persuaded to lead the Adjutant (Captain **Cox** <sup>1</sup>) to their headquarters a few miles from the **Isonzo**, where the local commander assured him that his men would not resume hostilities while the New Zealanders were in the **Gorizia** area if Tito's forces did not cross the river. Cox also made contact with 6 British Armoured Division, to whom 12,000 Chetniks later surrendered.

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<sup>1</sup> Maj K. F. S. Cox, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born Marton, 30 Aug 1908; accountant.

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**Gorizia** was held by troops whom Tito had ordered to occupy the territory of **Venezia Giulia** as far as the Isonzo River. Throughout the afternoon noisy demonstrators paraded the streets, singing, shouting slogans and waving flags and banners. 'Yugoslav Communist bands carrying red, blue, and white flags with the red star prominent in the centre were shouting "Death to the Fascists. Death to the Italians. Long live Tito. Viva Stalin. Viva the Allies." Parties of Italians answered them with " **Gorizia** for the Italians. Viva **America**. Viva England" and carried the red, white, and green flag of **Italy**. Both factions carried the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes.' <sup>1</sup>

**Divisional Headquarters** ordered 6 Brigade to concentrate two battalions at **Gorizia** until relieved by 56 Division, which was coming under the command of 13 Corps to occupy the town and the **Latisana** area but was not expected to arrive before 3 May. Sixth Brigade, therefore, sent 25 Battalion and C Squadron of 18 Regiment to join the 26th. When these reinforcements arrived in the late afternoon of the

2nd, the New Zealanders at **Gorizia** received a more responsive and attentive hearing from the Yugoslavs.

The 26th Battalion's transport, which was stranded on the western side of the **Isonzo** because of the lack of an adequate bridge at **Gorizia**, was ordered to go back to Route 14 and return by Route 55 (on the eastern side of the river), the road by which 25 Battalion had arrived. While following a Yugoslav car on the way back to Route 14, the New Zealanders' convoy was fired on by the Chetniks, who may have mistaken their identity, and one man was shot. Next day 167 Brigade of 56 Division relieved 25 and 26 Battalions, which withdrew from **Gorizia**. The New Zealand tanks stayed a few days longer until they could be replaced by a British unit.

Meanwhile 24 Battalion cleared the enemy who still lingered between Route 14 and the coast west of the **Isonzo**. Nearly 100 Germans were collected at Belvedere and **Grado**, and 160-odd who had come by sea from **Yugoslavia** gave themselves up between **Grado** and the **Isonzo**.

(iv)

While 21 Battalion completed its task of rounding up the Germans cut off near the Piave River on 1 May, the remainder of 5 Brigade resumed the advance—at a snail's pace—along Route 14. The 28th Battalion, later joined by A Squadron of 18 Regiment, was despatched on an excursion to the north. Leaving Route 14 at San Giorgio in the morning of the 2nd, the Maoris saw no enemy at

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<sup>1</sup> *25 Battalion*, pp. 617–18.

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**Palmanova** or elsewhere, found **Udine** occupied by troops of 6 Armoured Division, spent the night at **Palmanova**, and rejoined 5 Brigade next day.

A small party from 23 Battalion on 2 May secured the surrender near

**Latisana** (where Route 14 crosses the Tagliamento) of some 500 Germans who were willing to give themselves up to the New Zealanders but not to the Italian partisans. When 21 Battalion reached **Latisana**, partisans reported that an enemy force 4000- strong was landing from ships at **Lignano**, near the mouth of the Tagliamento. Lieutenant-Colonel McPhail obtained permission to deal with this, and despatched B, C and D Companies, B Squadron of 18 Regiment and the battalion's carriers to **Lignano**. On the way they met about 200 Germans who were being escorted to **Latisana** by partisans.

Major Swanson, who went ahead with three carriers to investigate, found a large force of Germans landing from 36 ships of various types at the mouth of the Tagliamento, protected by naval craft holding off three British torpedo boats at a range which prevented them from interfering. The Germans were fleeing from the Yugoslavs and believed they were landing in country still held by their own forces and therefore would be able to make their way into **Germany**. **Swanson** saw their commander, who agreed to a truce. The ensuing argument between McPhail, **Swanson** and the battalion Intelligence officer (Second-Lieutenant **Craig**<sup>1</sup>) on one side and three German officers on the other lasted longer than three hours, during which time a large landing barge was beached and vehicles and artillery unloaded. The Germans insisted that they were going back to **Germany**, but McPhail told them they would have to lay down their arms immediately. Eventually the enemy agreed to surrender. The sight of B Squadron's tanks in hull-down positions might have influenced this decision.

A prisoner-of-war cage was set up at **Latisana** and another at **Lignano** to accommodate the 6000 Germans, most of whom were army and navy men who had been employed on coastal defence and port work in and around **Trieste**. Next day they began unloading food from their fleet to feed themselves until other arrangements could be made. While they were doing this they set fire to four ships, but after the naval commander was severely reprimanded, there was no further attempt at sabotage. Several days passed before 21 Battalion was able to hand over

all its prisoners to the divisional cage and return to 5 Brigade.

Between 30,000 and 40,000 Germans were estimated to have been

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt A. Craig; Auckland**; born Roxburgh, 18 Aug 1908; company director; wounded 2 May 1944.

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taken prisoner by the Division between the River Po and **Trieste**. A more precise figure could not be calculated because of the numbers handed over by the New Zealanders to the partisans, and those brought in by the partisans to the Division.

The total German casualties in the last offensive were estimated at 5000 killed, 27,000 wounded and sick, and some 407,000 taken prisoner or accepted as surrendered enemy. The campaign in **Italy** undoubtedly had drained the enemy's strength more than the Allies'. Between 10 July 1943, when the invasion of **Sicily** began, and 9 April 1945, the total German casualties (from figures based on enemy records) were estimated to be 426,339, and the losses to the Allied ground forces in killed, wounded and captured were 304,208. By 2 May the enemy's losses (excluding those in the final capitulation) had increased to 658,339, and those of the Allies to 320,955.

(v)

This, of course, was not the first time **General Freyberg** had participated in the final act of a campaign. At the end of the First World War, as a brigadier commanding 88 Brigade of 29 Division in pursuit of the Germans retreating in **Belgium**, he had been ordered on 11 November 1918 to seize the bridges over the River Dendre at the town of Lessines, 20-odd miles from **Brussels**. With a detachment of 7 Dragoon Guards **Freyberg** had galloped on horseback into the town, and in the last minute before 11 a.m., when the Armistice came into force, had prevented the demolition of the main bridge and the escape of more than 100 Germans. For this exploit he was awarded the second bar to

his DSO.

By the end of the Second World War **Freyberg** had spent altogether ten and a half years fighting the Germans. He had conducted long advances in North Africa and **Italy**. In the last offensive, therefore, he brought an unrivalled background of martial experience to the command of the New Zealand Division, which (while 43 Lorried Indian Infantry Brigade was under command) comprised four infantry brigades and an armoured brigade supported by highly efficient artillery, engineers, and other services.

On 8 May, when the unconditional surrender of all German forces on land and sea and in the air had been announced, **Freyberg** addressed the Division's commanding officers and heads of services and praised the work of all arms during the 23 days of the advance from the **Senio River** to **Trieste**. First he drew attention to what had been achieved in rear of the Division. The NZASC trucks 'were often working the clock round for 36 hours on end during our big ammunition dumping periods.... we functioned as a mobile division with adequate troop carriers and originally had petrol for 300 miles, food for 12 days and sufficient ammunition for two battles.' To provide the necessary troop-carrying transport and still maintain the Division over a distance of 200 miles 'was a truly magnificent performance'. The medical services 'were constantly stepped up behind us—there were complete surgical teams always available and even nursing sisters were moved up well forward so that our casualties had treatment equivalent to that of a general hospital.'

What the engineers had achieved 'in crossing seven rivers and various odd canals was really extraordinary—they too often worked the clock round.' The Division had crossed these water obstacles with 'over 5,000 vehicles and 20,000 men and 165 tanks at a speed very much faster than most and while the other divisions on parallel axes arrived at their objectives with only a coy of a bn we had all these troops there ... because of the engineering work' on bridges and rafts.

The plan in the opening battles had been to smash the enemy and not simply to drive him back, the General said. That had necessitated great speed in planning, and the Division had employed the maximum artillery in the shortest possible time. The Intelligence branch of **Divisional Headquarters**, working in co-operation with the Mediterranean Air Interpretation Unit (West) and the artillery, had kept the most careful intelligence about every position the Division was going to attack. The main outline of the artillery programmes had been settled at the divisional orders group conferences, but all the detailed work in fixing individual targets had to be done during the planning and much movement. 'You owe the fact that you have had relatively few casualties to the work of the "I" section and the whole set up of the Div Arty.' The artillery had fired over 500,000 rounds during the 23 days; this included 20,000 rounds by 5 Medium Regiment, half the total it had fired during the whole of the campaign in **Africa**.

Ninth Infantry Brigade had received 'its first baptism of fire as a brigade.... I think that the way in which they worked was in the fine traditions of the other infantry brigades....' The infantry, 'who after all win the battles', throughout the advance had done 'as well as they usually have done'. The armour 'everybody agrees did very well. Apart from what they did in battle I think great credit is due to the workshop side because of the way the tanks kept going mechanically.'

The General was especially pleased with **12 Lancers'** contribution: 'We can learn much from them—in particular the collecting and sending back of information.... It would have been a risky operation to go 200 miles from the **Adige** without protective recce. That responsibility was taken from me because for 25 miles on either side of our axis they searched for formed bodies of the enemy. The boldness of our move was due to the fact that it was not carried out blindly and the cavalry were able to save many bridges—or where the bridges had been they were able to recce routes round and to search and find out what the opposition was....' <sup>1</sup>

(vi)

Between 1 April and 3 May 1945, from the time of the Division's return to the line on the **Senio River** until the cessation of hostilities at **Trieste**, its losses were 1381 dead and wounded. This total <sup>2</sup> was shared among the formations as follows:

|                           | <i>Dead Wounded Total</i> |             |                        |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| <b>4 Armoured Brigade</b> | <b>24</b>                 | <b>89</b>   | <b>113</b>             |
| <b>5 Infantry Brigade</b> | <b>47</b>                 | <b>279</b>  | <b>326</b>             |
| <b>6 Infantry Brigade</b> | <b>53</b>                 | <b>278</b>  | <b>331</b>             |
| <b>9 Infantry Brigade</b> | <b>86</b>                 | <b>361</b>  | <b>447</b>             |
| <b>Artillery</b>          | <b>10</b>                 | <b>43</b>   | <b>53</b>              |
| <b>Engineers</b>          | <b>13</b>                 | <b>57</b>   | <b>70</b> <sup>3</sup> |
| <b>Others</b>             | <b>8</b>                  | <b>33</b>   | <b>41</b>              |
|                           | <hr/>                     | <hr/>       | <hr/>                  |
|                           | <b>241</b>                | <b>1140</b> | <b>1381</b>            |

This brought the Division's total battle casualties in **Italy** to 8668. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers. To commemorate their service with the New Zealand Division, 12 Lancers and 5 Medium Regiment were granted permission to wear the New Zealand fernleaf badge on their vehicles.

<sup>2</sup> Compiled from 2 **NZEF** lists of casualties.

<sup>3</sup> The engineers' casualties include a man who died of wounds on 7 May, one killed in action and another wounded on 19 May.

<sup>4</sup> See **Appendix I**.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## II: CONFRONTATION WITH THE YUGOSLAVS

### *II: Confrontation with the Yugoslavs*

(i)

After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the First World War, both **Italy** and the newly created state of **Yugoslavia** claimed the province of **Venezia Giulia**, of which the peninsula of **Istria**, the Slovene littoral and the port of **Trieste** form part. As the price of her participation in the war on the side of the Allies, **Italy** was awarded territory which advanced her northern frontier to the **Brenner Pass** and also gave her **Trieste**, **Gorizia**, **Istria**, northern **Dalmatia** (except **Fiume**) and some Adriatic islands. She relinquished **Dalmatia** to **Yugoslavia** in 1920, but annexed **Fiume** four years later.

**Marshal Tito** hoped that when the Germans were defeated his Yugoslav Army would be able to seize all of **Venezia Giulia** east of the Isonzo River. The Western Allies, however, were determined to prevent the settlement of a frontier dispute in this manner; they also intended to secure **Trieste** as a port from which to supply their future occupation zones in **Austria**. During a visit to Belgrade in February 1945 Field Marshal Alexander persuaded Tito to agree that the Supreme Allied Commander should be placed in charge of all operations and forces in **Venezia Giulia**; but he realised that it might be difficult to enforce this arrangement without physical possession of the territory.

The Yugoslav Army, sustained by supplies from the British and Americans, launched its offensive towards **Trieste** on 20 March, three weeks before the Allied armies began their last offensive in **Italy**, and made good progress from the start. The Germans, retreating in **Italy** and before the Russians in **Hungary**, also pulled back as fast as they could in **Yugoslavia**. Tito announced on 30 April that his troops had reached the suburbs of **Trieste**. Already, on the 26th, however, Alexander had

proposed to the Chiefs of Staff in **London** that he should 'seize those parts of **Venezia Giulia** which are of importance to my military operations' <sup>1</sup> as soon as possible, including **Trieste** and Pola (at the southern tip of **Istria**) with their communications to the north, and that he should inform Tito of his intentions. The British Prime Minister and the President of the **United States** had concurred, and the Supreme Commander had been ordered on 28 April to establish Allied military government over the province, including that part of it already occupied by the partisans. Alexander informed Tito of his intentions on the 30th, but the latter's reply, while offering facilities in and from **Trieste** and Pola, showed that, contrary to the Belgrade agreement, the Yugoslavs regarded all the territory east of the Isonzo River as their property. Mr Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff told Alexander to hold firm and, if possible, to concentrate troops in the region with whom he might enforce his authority.

Alexander reported to Churchill on 1 May: 'Tito's regular forces are now fighting in **Trieste**, and have already occupied most of **Istria**. I am quite certain that he will not withdraw his troops if ordered to do so unless the Russians tell him to.

'If I am ordered by the Combined Chiefs of Staff to occupy the whole of **Venezia Giulia** by force if necessary, we shall certainly be committed to a fight with the Yugoslav Army, who will have

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<sup>1</sup> *Grand Strategy*, Vol. VI, p. 130.

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at least the moral backing of the Russians. Before we are committed I think it as well to consider the feelings of our own troops in this matter. They have a profound admiration for Tito's Partisan Army, and a great sympathy for them in their struggle for freedom. We must be very careful therefore before we ask them to turn away from the common enemy to fight an Ally. Of course I should not presume to gauge the reaction of our people at home, whom you know so well.' <sup>1</sup>

(ii)

As has been related, the first formation of **Eighth Army**, the New Zealand Division, entered **Venezia Giulia** on 30 April, met Yugoslav partisan irregulars near **Monfalcone** next day, and reached **Trieste** and **Gorizia** on 2 May. **General Freyberg** advised the commander of 13 Corps (General Harding) in the evening that Tito's forces had not captured **Trieste**. 'I contacted partisan Town Major and tried [to] find a senior Yugoslav officer but was informed no Yugoslav general would arrive until tomorrow. Have therefore taken over town and harbour and all installations....' But the occupation of **Gorizia** by Tito's forces was 'well organised and complete.'<sup>2</sup>

Next day (3 May) contact was made for the first time with the commander of the Fourth Yugoslav Army, General Drapsin. At **San Pietro**, a small town about 20 miles east of **Trieste**, the commander of **37 Military Mission**<sup>3</sup> (Lieutenant-Colonel J. Clarke) and the senior New Zealand Intelligence officer (Major Cox) met Drapsin and Tito's chief of staff (General Jovanovic). The latter protested 'in the name of **Marshal Tito** ... against your troops in crossing into our operational zone.... "I must ask your commander to withdraw his troops at once behind the **Isonzo**. You are getting in the way of operations we are undertaking to the north, and in **Gorizia** your tanks have broken up a partisan demonstration and protected local Fascists. You are interfering, too, with our civilian administration.'"<sup>4</sup>

Clarke reported to **Freyberg** that Drapsin claimed that the Allies had not captured **Trieste** but had merely wiped out certain remaining pockets of resistance, and he therefore could not see the need for such a considerable concentration of forces in the town; he understood that, although the Allies were to have access to the port

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<sup>1</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. VI, pp. 481–2.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's papers.

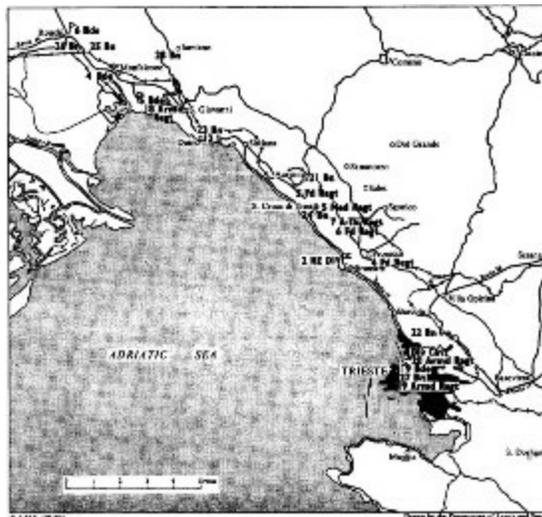
<sup>3</sup> This acted as a channel of communication between the Allied commanders and the Yugoslav headquarters.

<sup>4</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, p. 206.

of Trieste, their troops were not to have gone east of the Isonzo, and he did not see what had been gained by fighting troops going so far; he claimed also that the Italian authorities in Trieste had been definitely fascist and therefore a new administration had been installed and was functioning already.

The New Zealand Division was given a copy of a formal protest from Tito to Alexander which said, 'this moment I have received signal from my 4th Army saying tanks and infantry units of Allied Forces which are under your command have entered , and , cities liberated by the YUGOSLAV Army. Since I do not know what was meant by that, I wish you would give me your immediate explanation of matters: with respects. Signed J. B. TITO.' <sup>1</sup>

The chief of staff of the Fourth Yugoslav Army (General Jaksic) issued what was tantamount to a threat of force: 'In the name



SITUATION, 4 MAY 1945

SITUATION, 4 MAY 1945

of HQ 4 Army we request Allied troops immediately to withdraw to west bank river

and that Allied Military authorities do not mix in our internal affairs. After this warning 4 Army will not be responsible for anything that might happen if our request is not met. This is categorical.' <sup>1</sup> When this was shown to **General Freyberg** on 4 May, he told Colonel Clarke to demand an explanation from the Yugoslavs, and to say that 'we would meet force with force if necessary.' <sup>2</sup> **Freyberg** then conferred with General Harding, who approved of the instructions he had given Clarke, and said that higher authority took the view that Tito was trying a bluff; but Harding agreed that they could not plan on this assumption. The two generals discussed what should be done if their forces had to withdraw to a tactical line.

Clarke reported to **Freyberg** that he had seen Drapsin, who had assured him there was 'no question of their ever using force of arms against us—and gave me a long story to the effect that during 1000 years the Yugoslavs had never laid hand on their allies. I said that that was all right, but it was a threatening signal. He said that it was a question of interpreters and the language difficulty. I said that that was not very satisfactory, and suggested that he explain the whole thing to General Harding tomorrow, and place before General Harding any complaints which he might have. He said he would be delighted to do that. I asked him if he could guarantee that he would not attack our troops and pointed out that if he did we would resist most violently. He said there was no question of their ever attacking us—the blood of Jugoslavia and England had flowed together etc. etc. etc....' <sup>3</sup>

(iii)

Already the Yugoslavs had begun to administer **Venezia Giulia** as an integral part of **Yugoslavia**. Their military government issued decrees

aimed at crushing fascism and securing their grip on **Trieste**. A curfew was imposed on the civilian population, and demonstrations of national sentiment were forbidden, a restriction which gave authority for the suppression of all pro-Italian activity.

Much depended on the demeanour of the New Zealanders who shared the occupation of **Trieste** with the Yugoslavs. At a divisional conference on 4 May **General Freyberg** stressed how important it was to 'establish very firm touch with the various branches of the community.' He suggested that games of soccer be arranged with the Yugoslav Army, that race meetings be held, and 'anything that will help relieve the tension will be to the good.... In the mean-

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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time we must have a policy of defence. I have arranged that if there is any trouble in **Trieste** we should withdraw our troops out of it. If we did not it would mean committing the whole Division and there would be most unwelcome casualties and much acrimony.' <sup>1</sup> The GOC had decided upon a plan for 5 and 6 Brigades to take up a position west of the city behind which 9 Brigade would withdraw, but this was only a precaution 'and there is not much likelihood that we shall have to use it.' <sup>2</sup>

Thirteenth Corps declared that it would continue to occupy the points reached by its leading troops at the time of the German surrender in **Italy** while negotiations were in progress with the Yugoslav Army for the use of the port of **Trieste** and the road and railway from it into **Austria**; thereafter the corps would be responsible for safeguarding these communications. The New Zealand Division was to stay in **Trieste** and **Monfalcone** and the intervening coastal belt, 56 Division was to secure

the corps' access on Route 14 westward over the Isonzo River, and 91 US Division was to take over the territory to the north, including **Gorizia** and **Palmanova**. All troops were to be ready to defend themselves immediately if attacked, and were 'to take all possible action short of actually opening fire'<sup>3</sup> to prevent conflict between local factions. General Harding's intention, 'in the unfortunate event' of the Yugoslav Army starting hostilities, was to withdraw from **Trieste** and hold a bridgehead east of the Isonzo River with the New Zealand Division on the right, 56 Division in the centre, and the American division on the left. Meanwhile, 'minor incidents must be accepted....'<sup>4</sup>

The corps instructions were discussed at a divisional conference in the evening of 4 May. **General Freyberg** warned that 'you must be at fairly short notice and keep your people well in hand. Tito has moved a division in NE of our L of C [lines of communication] with . The country is very difficult—we can't use tanks except on the road. What we have got to be prepared to do if they cut the road is to get some elbow room for ourselves.... If the situation deteriorates we shall have to be prepared to occupy the positions tomorrow night.'<sup>5</sup> An operation order was issued for the action to be taken if this became necessary.

Ninth Brigade was disposed with Divisional Cavalry Battalion in the centre of **Trieste** (where it took over the castle from 22 Battalion), the 22nd in the northern sector, and the 27th in the

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> War diary, G Branch, HQ **2 NZ Div**, May 1945, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> GOC's diary.

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southern, where it was required to prevent interference with the dock installations; tanks of 19 and 20 Regiments were in support. The remainder of the Division was spread out between the city and the Isonzo River.

The New Zealanders and the Yugoslavs both patrolled the streets of **Trieste**, the latter usually in groups of about a dozen, every man carrying an automatic. The Yugoslavs held parades and pro- Tito demonstrations, with their troops fully armed and their weapons loaded. They swiftly dispersed an unarmed mob of Italians who attempted to stage a counter-demonstration. The Italians 'came marching along the waterfront carrying a New Zealand flag, an American flag and numbers of Italian flags. As they marched they chanted over and over "Italia" "Italia" and finally halted in front of Bde HQ where they began singing a patriotic song.... Partisans appeared everywhere and began firing automatics from the hip over the heads of the crowd. No one was hurt in the immediate vicinity.... The crowd panicked and a large proportion fled to the Albergo Citta overwhelming our two sentries on the door.' <sup>1</sup>

After parading through the streets **20 Armoured Regiment** left **Trieste** on 5 May to join 6 Brigade in the **Monfalcone** region, which halved the number of tanks supporting 9 Brigade. Next day, because it had been decided that an international representation of the Allied forces in the city would be preferable to a solely New Zealand one, a battalion from 363 Regiment of 91 US Division and a battalion of the **Scots Guards** from 56 Division relieved Divisional Cavalry Battalion and 27 Battalion respectively, and the two New Zealand units moved to the **Barcola** area, near the northern outskirts. Headquarters 9 Brigade remained in operational command.

(iv)

Field Marshal Alexander had reported to Mr Churchill on 5 May that Tito 'now finds himself in a much stronger military position than he foresaw when I was in Belgrade, and wants to cash in on it. Then he

hoped to step into **Trieste** when finally I stepped out. Now he wants to be installed there and only allow me user's right.

‘We must bear in mind that since our meeting he has been to **Moscow**. I believe he will hold to our original agreement if he can be assured that when I no longer require **Trieste** as a base

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<sup>1</sup> Diary, B. C. H. Moss. As mentioned earlier, HQ 9 Bde was located in the Grande Albergo della Citta.

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for my forces in **Austria** he will be allowed to incorporate it in his **New Yugoslavia**.’ <sup>1</sup>

Churchill replied that he was ‘very glad you got into **Trieste**, **Gorizia**, and **Monfalcone** in time to put your foot in the door. Tito, backed by **Russia**, will push hard, but I do not think that they will dare attack you in your present position. Unless you can make a satisfactory working arrangement with Tito the argument must be taken up by the Governments. There is no question of your making any agreement with him about incorporating **Istria**, or any part of the pre-war **Italy**, in his “**New Yugoslavia**”. The destiny of this part of the world is reserved for the peace table, and you should certainly make him aware of this.’ The Prime Minister added that, ‘to avoid leading Tito or the Yugoslav commanders into any temptation, it would be wise to have a solid mass of troops in this area....’ <sup>2</sup>

Alexander sent his chief of staff (Lieutenant-General W. D. Morgan) to Belgrade on 7 May to seek an agreement with Tito that the Yugoslav forces should withdraw behind a line east of **Trieste** and that the **Allied Military Government** should take over the administration of the territory west of this line. Tito insisted, however, that the region should remain under the political control of **Yugoslavia**. Since this was a matter which could be settled only by the Governments, Alexander informed Tito that it had passed out of his hands, but in the meantime he proposed to use the port of **Trieste** and maintain the lines of communication in north-

east **Italy** and **Austria**.

The news of **Germany's** unconditional surrender was received in the evening of 7 May, and the victory in **Europe** was celebrated next day—VE Day. But there was little jubilation in Venezia Giulia, where the New Zealanders, British and Americans stood to their arms again; for them the victory had brought an uncertain peace.

The Yugoslav forces continued to move north-westwards through **Venezia Giulia**, and occupied towns and villages on both sides of the Isonzo River as far north as Caporetto, but later withdrew from the west bank. Eventually an estimated 57,000 were within the **Trieste-Monfalcone-Gorizia** region, armed with a high proportion of automatic weapons and supported by horse-drawn and some tractor-drawn artillery, including German 88-millimetre, 75-millimetre and 105-millimetre pieces, as well as anti-tank guns and an armoured formation believed to have 52 Stuarts. Their dispositions,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Second World War*, Vol. VI, p. 482.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 482–3.

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strengths and movements were unobtrusively investigated and reported.

As the international negotiations might be protracted indefinitely and the attitude of the Yugoslavs was unpredictable, 13 Corps issued orders for the security of its forces, which were to be organised for immediate local defence in an emergency, and were to hold in reserve petrol for 100 miles, supplies for seven days, and additional quantities of ammunition. The New Zealand Division concentrated with 5 Brigade in the hills east of **Monfalcone**, 6 Brigade farther east again, and the artillery in the proximity of the infantry; 9 Brigade continued to hold **Trieste** with five battalions (including the **Scots Guards** and Americans) in the city and north of it. For the time being the Yugoslavs controlled

the civil administration (but had no jurisdiction over the Allied troops) east of the Isonzo River, and the **Allied Military Government** exercised the same authority west of the river.

(v)

The tension between the Allied and Yugoslav forces was relaxed in the second week of May, when friendly overtures were made by both sides. A party of British and American officers visited **Ljubljana** as the guests of General Drapsin, who was hailed as liberator of the city. The Slovene premier, Drapsin and local officials made speeches from the balcony of a university to a crowd who displayed banners, chanted 'Our **Trieste**, our **Istria**', and applauded any mention of the Allied leaders. A Yugoslav military band advertised, in Slovene, Italian and English a concert at **Monfalcone**, and played music representative of the different nationalities. At **Iamiano**, in the hills east of **Monfalcone**, the Maori Battalion was on friendly terms with the partisans and peasants, who were delighted to discover that some of its men were of Maori-Dalmatian descent, and that the Maoris shared their love of singing.

Except for the Maoris who could overcome the language barrier, however, the New Zealanders did not get to know the Yugoslavs well. They admired Tito's forces for having tied down many German divisions in the **Balkans** and for having fought so courageously for so long. 'But we came up against a barrier of reserve which discouraged any individual mixing in **Venezia Giulia**. We and the Yugoslavs met on the football field or at other sporting events. We got drunk together at formal dinners. We saluted each other's officers. But when the matches were over or the dinner done you realised that, though you might know Yugoslavs better, you did not know any one individual Yugoslav better. There was fraternisation but no friendship, mingling but no meeting. The Tito troops may have had orders to avoid us except on official occasions, or they may have genuinely disliked us as intruders into what they felt was their country. The civilians were either unwilling to mingle with Western troops, and so be singled out as being pro-British or pro-

American, or they disliked us too. As a result it was only towards the end of the first month of Yugoslav administration that any real contact developed at all, and then mostly in the villages and outlying areas. In **Trieste** itself there was never any really close association comparable to that which rapidly grew up between the Italians and the British, American and New Zealand troops.’<sup>1</sup>

The Italians of **Trieste** ‘came more than half-way to meet us. Desire for protection, desire for bully beef and the chance to buy a pair of army boots or an old blanket, friendliness for the troops whose arrival had prevented the city passing completely to the Yugoslavs, natural friendliness (there is more than a touch of the Viennese about the Triestini) and calculated designs to influence our opinions may all have entered into this....

‘As a result the ordinary soldier heard the Italian case from every angle, and heard very little of the Tito case. He had come, moreover, to regard the Italians as full allies, not, as did the Yugoslavs, as very recent enemies who had invaded their country only four years before.’ The New Zealanders saw that there was an Italian majority in **Trieste** itself, and that **Venezia Giulia** was at least mixed in race, ‘and they blamed the Yugoslavs for prolonging the active service period of our armies long beyond the end of the war by claiming the immediate administration of **Trieste** for **Yugoslavia**.’<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Road to Trieste*, pp. 233–4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 236–7.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## III: AN AGREEMENT IS REACHED

### *III: An Agreement Is Reached*

(i)

The New Zealand Division could not be employed in hostilities against **Yugoslavia** without the permission of the Government. On 14 May the Prime Minister, Mr Fraser, who was in San Francisco, consulted with the acting Prime Minister (Mr Walter Nash) and his colleagues in **Wellington**, and advised Mr Churchill that he was 'in entire agreement with the proposed action of the **United Kingdom** and the **United States** to halt aggression on the part of **Yugoslavia**, and consider that it is our duty to assist by making our Division available to Field-Marshal Alexander for that purpose'. Fraser asked for an assurance that the proposed action 'will be strictly confined to the resistance of aggression and will not involve interference in any way with the purely internal affairs of **Yugoslavia**, such as the restoration of the monarchy, and that our troops will not be used for that or similar purposes.' <sup>1</sup> Churchill replied that 'the proposed operations will take place, if they do, on Italian not Yugoslav soil and will be in no way concerned with the internal affairs of **Yugoslavia**, in which we have no desire to interfere.' <sup>2</sup>

Fraser also asked **General Freyberg** for an appreciation of the situation in **Venezia Giulia**. In a comprehensive survey the GOC reported that the situation was 'not only fraught with political complications but even the risk of armed conflict with the Yugoslav Army.... the Allies must be prepared to enforce their will if necessary. I consider that with the shortage of troops here, and feeling as you do, full operational control of your Division should be given [to the Allied Supreme Commander].' <sup>3</sup>

Presumably with the intention of presenting a *fait accompli* of ostensibly popular government, the Yugoslavs were imposing civil

administrations sponsored by themselves in **Venezia Giulia**. Already they had given authority to the CEAIS (the Italo-Slovene Citizens' Executive Committee) in **Trieste**, which was to be ruled as an autonomous city inside the Slovene littoral of a communist **Yugoslavia**.

Field Marshal Alexander, in a special message on 19 May explaining the issues at stake to all the Allied armed forces in the Mediterranean theatre, declared that apparently **Marshal Tito** intended to establish his claims to **Venezia Giulia** and territory around Villach and **Klagenfurt** in **Austria** by force of arms and by military occupation. 'Action of this kind would be all too reminiscent of **HITLER**, **MUSSOLINI** and . It is to prevent such actions that we have been fighting this war.... it is our duty to hold these disputed territories as trustees until their ultimate disposal is settled at the peace conference....'

Tito expressed through the Yugoslav News Agency resentment and surprise at Alexander's statement, and asserted that the presence of Yugoslav troops did not imply conquest. **Yugoslavia** was prepared to cooperate with the Allies but could not allow herself 'to be humiliated and tricked out of her rights.' <sup>4</sup>

The Allied forces prepared for the possibility of the failure of the international negotiations and the start of hostilities. The 2nd

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<sup>1</sup> *Documents*, Vol. II, p. 417.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 420–1.

<sup>4</sup> War diary, G Branch, HQ **2 NZ Div**, May 1945, p. 262.

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United States Corps (rejoined by 91 Division) came under the command of **Eighth Army** and occupied a sector between 13 Corps and 5

**Corps**, which was in **Austria**. In the New Zealand Division 5 Brigade moved to the **Barcola** area near **Trieste**, which enabled Divisional Cavalry Battalion and 27 Battalion to re-enter the city and relieve the **Scots Guards** and the American battalion, which returned to their own divisions.

**General Freyberg** thought it necessary to advise Mr Fraser on 20 May that the situation 'is at the moment most unsatisfactory. There is the makings of trouble both here and in **Austria**. The Yugoslavs have moved a large force into and around **Trieste** and **Gorizia**. We are now following suit.... I want the New Zealand Government to know the fact that we are sitting at the point of greatest tension and that fighting may break out. If it does we must expect a number of casualties....' <sup>1</sup>

**Thirteenth Corps** issued instructions on 20 May that, if all negotiations failed, it was to take 'certain offensive measures' to secure the port of **Trieste** and the lines of communication towards **Udine** so that the Allied forces in **Austria** could be supplied, and was to establish **Allied Military Government** with full authority in the region occupied east of the Isonzo River. As the first phase of what was hoped would be a 'peaceful penetration' to the east, the New Zealand Division on the right, 56 Division in the centre, and **10 Indian Division** on the left were to form a front covering a lateral road and track through **Sgonico – Dol Grande – Comeno – Montespino**, north-north-west of **Trieste**. Later the three divisions were to advance by stages to the 'Blue' (or Morgan) Line, about 17 miles east of **Trieste**.

If the Yugoslavs withdrew before the start of the second stage (which was to secure the lateral road and railway through **Villa Opicina – San Daniele – Montespino**), the Allied troops were to follow up out of contact and complete the whole operation as early as possible; they were to collect *bona-fide* stragglers and deserters and march them under escort to the nearest Yugoslav unit or to the **Morgan Line**, and were to apprehend, disarm and evacuate through prisoner-of-war channels Yugoslavs who offered resistance. If it became necessary to 'mop up' during this phase, the Yugoslav troops were to be surrounded quickly and

unobtrusively, and called on to surrender, while the strongest possible demonstration of strength was made and leaflets printed in Slovene, Serbo-Croat and Italian were distributed. If the Yugoslavs offered resistance, the Allies were to employ naval and artillery bombardment, air

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<sup>1</sup> *Documents*, Vol. II, pp. 422–3.

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support, tanks and other heavy weapons to achieve their object quickly and with as few casualties as possible.

The Allied forces quietly eased forward to the line north-north-west of **Trieste** on 22 May. Whatever perturbation this might have caused among the Yugoslav commanders, there was no reaction among their troops in the localities occupied by 6 NZ Infantry Brigade and **20 Armoured Regiment**, in very stony, scrub-covered hills in the **Sgonico-Sales-Samatorzo** area, only a few miles from **Trieste**. Farther north 56 Division held positions from **Dol Grande** to **Comeno**, and **10 Indian Division** from **Comeno** to **Montespino**.

The Yugoslavs firmly but politely asked the British to withdraw from **Comeno**, which they wanted as a communications centre, and threatened to establish road blocks behind the forward British positions. Eventually it was agreed, however, that both British and Yugoslav troops should remain where they were until they received orders from higher authority.

Many road blocks appeared in the approaches to **Trieste**, and at these the Yugoslav sentries demanded both Yugoslav and New Zealand signatures of authority for vehicles to pass, but soon the control of New Zealand traffic was greatly relaxed; there was only one report of a New Zealand vehicle being stopped after 26 May. When a Sherman tank gently pushed over a Yugoslav barricade in rear of the New Zealand forward positions, the sentries did not try to stop it but resignedly cleared the remnants off the road.

**Fifth Brigade, which was near the coast between Barcola and Prosecco, found that the Yugoslavs still held Villa Opicina in strength. A patrol from 23 Battalion discovered that a wireless station near Barcola was guarded by about 50 armed men, and while reconnoitring towards Trieste met a group of 150–200 Yugoslavs, who politely but firmly refused permission to go farther. The Yugoslavs set up a road block on the Prosecco – Villa Opicina road, and 28 Battalion retaliated with a traffic post on the same road. When a Yugoslav officer in a car travelling towards Villa Opicina failed to stop, the Maori sentry fired his Bren gun into a rear tyre. The irate officer was escorted to Battalion Headquarters, where he was told he was at fault in not obeying the traffic rules, and was then allowed to proceed on his way.**

**A mild sensation occurred on the evening of 21 May when about 25 large Russian-type T34 tanks manned by Yugoslavs entered Trieste and passed along the waterfront in the direction of the docks; about half of them went through the city and were not seen again, and after a day or two the remainder withdrew in the direction of Villa Opicina.**

**Orders were given on the 24th that all social functions were to cease, but the ban was lifted three days later. A party of Yugoslavs approached 28 Battalion and ‘put up a proposal that they would invite the Maoris to their functions if they, the Maoris, would reciprocate.... and the battalion put on a dance every night of the week; civilians, Tito's men, and the troops were soon on the best of terms.’<sup>1</sup> Other units, including 9 Brigade's battalions in Trieste, also held dances. Small parties of Yugoslavs came unarmed into 6 Brigade's lines and fraternised with the New Zealanders.**

**(ii)**

**On 21 May Marshal Tito, in reply to an Allied Note, conceded for the most part the Allied requirements for holding the disputed territory in trusteeship, but made conditions for the retention of Yugoslav troops under the Supreme Allied Commander in the area controlled by the**

**Allied Military Government**, and for the continued use by the Allies of the existing civil administration. This *volte face* might have been dictated by Allied diplomatic pressure, Russian influence, or the Allied preponderance of force in the disputed territory and the obvious firmness of Allied intentions.

**General Freyberg** was able to advise the New Zealand Government on the 23rd that the situation had eased considerably. 'The Yugoslav Government has sent a friendly note and, although there are still divergences of opinion which will require adjustment, I believe that the matter will be solved amicably and it will then be possible for the New Zealand Division to be released from its operational role. This may not be until the end of June....'<sup>2</sup>

Sixth Brigade completed the relief of 9 Brigade in **Trieste** in the afternoon of 1 June, and the 9th occupied the area vacated by the 6th. The troops' quarters in the city hotels and villas were very luxurious in comparison with bivouacs in the hills. If the negotiations with the Yugoslavs broke down, 6 Brigade was to remain as a firm base in **Trieste** for 48 hours, during which time the Navy was to put to sea with the non-fighting vessels, and the 2000 men of 55 Area, which operated the port, were to be given a safe passage out of the city.

The many Yugoslav troops who remained in **Trieste** and the police of the *Difesa Popolare* (an armed partisan organisation) took 'a high handed attitude with the people who were alleged to be Fascists. Many incidents of beating up and looting were reported but our troops were not in a position to interfere as Tito's

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<sup>1</sup> *Maori Battalion*, p. 480.

<sup>2</sup> *Documents*, Vol. II, p. 424.

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Government were administering the city and AMG <sup>1</sup> were unable to operate.'<sup>2</sup> In case the Yugoslavs might attempt to drive the New

**Zealanders from the city, a close watch was kept, artillery tasks prepared, and plans drawn up to meet all eventualities.**

**A demonstration intended to express approval of the Yugoslav-imposed regime took place in the Piazza dell' Unità in Trieste in the evening of 8 June. All British troops were warned in advance to keep clear, and 6 Brigade ordered its men to be in their billets, where they stood by ready to quell any disturbance. But apparently the demonstration did not meet with the response that had been anticipated: the audience, mostly organised parties of factory workers, moderately applauded some 10 speeches, which seemed to give more emphasis to the advantages of communism than to incorporation with Yugoslavia. An Italian band was greeted with greater enthusiasm.**

**Next day the New Zealanders held a trotting meeting at the Montebello course, Trieste, which was attended by Generals McCreery, Harding and Freyberg and a large part of the Division. In case there should be trouble with the Yugoslavs, a plan had been prepared beforehand for evacuating the course, and men carried tommy guns or pistols. The meeting was a social and financial success; the totalisator handled over £20,000, and after all expenses had been paid there was a profit of £800.**

**The same day (9 June) the Yugoslav Government signed an agreement accepting the Allies' requirements for the withdrawal of Yugoslav troops and administration east of the Morgan Line by 10 a.m. on the 12th. Some 2000 Yugoslavs were to remain in the territory under Allied control.**

**The Yugoslavs did not go empty-handed: they stripped machinery and accessories from garages, and emptied some barracks, hotels and houses of their contents; the amount of loot seemed to be limited only by the paucity of transport. By the morning of 11 June 16,000 troops on foot, 400 vehicles, 28 guns and over 1000 horses were seen straggling along the roads from Trieste to Fiume; the roads east of the Isonzo River also carried much horse-drawn, motor and foot traffic. The retreating**

Yugoslavs appeared to be 'angry and humiliated'.<sup>3</sup> The exodus continued throughout the next night, and by the morning of the 12th jubilant crowds were shouting 'Viva Trieste' in the streets of the city. The **Allied Military Government** assumed control and began distributing supplies the same day. The shortage of food had become critical.

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<sup>1</sup> **Allied Military Government.**

<sup>2</sup> War diary, HQ 6 Inf Bde.

<sup>3</sup> War diary, G Branch, HQ 2 NZ Div, June 1945, p 196.

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Obviously to impede the AMG administration and discredit Allied efficiency, the *Difesa Popolare* and organised bands, including Yugoslav troops in civilian clothes, conducted a campaign of intimidation. Italian flags were forcibly removed, people visiting the AMG offices were molested, members of the new police force (volunteers in civilian clothes with armbands) had to be accompanied by military police for their own protection, and the *Guardia del Popolo* (an arm of the *Difesa Popolare*), although ordered to cease its activities, made many arrests. Demonstrators acclaimed communism and advocated local control—without directly challenging the assumption of Allied control. About 25,000 attended such a demonstration in **Trieste** on 15 June.

Meanwhile the New Zealand, British and Indian troops followed up the Yugoslav forces withdrawing to the **Morgan Line**. In 5 NZ Brigade's sector **28 Battalion** occupied **Villa Opicina** on 12 June, but 21 Battalion did not secure the wireless station near **Barcola** until the departure two days later of a detachment of *Difesa Popolare*. On the **Muggia peninsula** south of **Trieste** 23 Battalion was involved in a dispute with the Yugoslavs about the exact location of the **Morgan Line**. The Yugoslavs set up road blocks behind some of the New Zealand positions and temporarily severed their communications, but a few days later adjustments were made by both sides, and 23 Battalion kept road blocks

where the **Morgan Line** crossed Route 15 and other roads.

Ninth Brigade found the Yugoslavs reluctant to go from the sector east of **Trieste**. A Yugoslav brigade 1500 strong did not leave **Basovizza**, on Route 14, until the evening of 13 June, and a battalion lingered until the 15th at San Dorligo, south of the highway. The civilians in this region were obviously sympathetic towards the Yugoslav Army. In some villages the New Zealanders were aware of an atmosphere of hostility.

(iii)

Because the establishment of **Allied Military Government** in the Anglo-American sector of **Venezia Giulia** and the return to a normal way of life for the civilian population were being impeded by the activities of the *Difesa Popolare*, it was decided to disarm and disband this force. Its members were to be called upon to parade and hand in their arms on 24 June; or if they preferred, they were to be escorted to the east of the **Morgan Line** with their arms. If the parades were not well attended, 13 Corps would order the cordoning of the barracks and billets of the *Difesa Popolare* while the police, assisted by troops if necessary, went in and arrested all the men, who were to be taken to a camp east of the Isonzo River.

At the specified time, 2 p.m., 1435 members of the *Difesa Popolare* paraded at the **Trieste** infantry barracks in an orderly manner and with their own band. Fifty-five of them chose to be taken to the Yugoslav side of the **Morgan Line**, and 620 volunteered for the new police force under AMG control; the remainder were allowed to go home next morning, when 6 Brigade had taken over the barracks and posts which the *Difesa Popolare* had held. About 20 truckloads of arms and ammunition were collected.

The *Difesa Popolare* co-operated elsewhere in the Division's sector: men paraded as requested and weapons and ammunition were collected. Altogether some 2280 members of the organisation paraded for 13 Corps, and of these 792 volunteered for police duty and 97 chose to be escorted

across the line. No resistance was offered, and the whole procedure was conducted without incident.

A strike on 25 June, evidently instigated by the communists as a protest against disarming the *Difesa Popolare*, affected Trieste's trams, buses, shipbuilders, shops, post offices and dock workers. Fourth Armoured Brigade supplied working parties to assist with the operating of the public services and the docks. Next day, however, the city returned to normal. Apparently the majority of those who had taken part in the strike had done so because of the fear of reprisals.

The Yugoslav News Agency claimed in a press report on 27 June that the Trieste trade unions had sent cables to the British, Russian, French, and Italian trade union organisations protesting that the British and American military government was confiscating and requisitioning trade union property. The New Zealanders were said to have searched the Slovene Home of Culture in Trieste and made arrests.

These allegations prompted the New Zealand Government to ask General Freyberg for the facts and his comments, and also to inquire about the operational employment of the Division and the immediate prospects. In his reply, despatched on 3 July, the General said that the incident of the trade union cables appeared to be part of a general Yugoslav press and radio campaign to discredit the Allied Military Government in the occupation zone of Venezia Giulia. He gave an account of the disbandment of the *Difesa Popolare*, and said that the 'so-called Slovene Home of Culture was, in fact, the former Italian Fascist headquarters in Trieste and is now in use as Allied Military Government offices. It was one of the buildings searched without incident by the Allied military police on 24 June.'

'In these difficult and often aggravating circumstances the conduct of the New Zealand troops was at all times exemplary.' <sup>1</sup>

The General also advised the Government that the situation in Trieste and Venezia Giulia had improved. The Yugoslav forces had moved

out of the immediate **Trieste- Gorizia** area and the original line of communication had been made safe for the Allied forces occupying **Austria**. 'I consider that we could now be relieved from our present operational role whenever our move is necessary. It is doubtful, however, if we will be relieved until the policy of the **New Zealand Government** as to future employment is finally announced....' <sup>2</sup>

(iv)

The Peace Treaty between **Italy** and the Allied and Associated Powers in 1947 provided for the creation of the Free Port of **Trieste**, 'wherein all nations would enjoy freedom of transit and be exempt from customs charges', <sup>3</sup> but another seven years elapsed before the occupying powers were relieved of responsibility in **Venezia Giulia**. **Trieste** continued to be 'a bone of contention in international politics'; it even proved impossible for the United Nations Security Council to agree upon a governor. 'The Allied Powers and **Italy** long found themselves at odds on every issue with **Yugoslavia**, which was supported, until the deterioration of relations between the two communist powers, by the Soviet Union.' <sup>4</sup> When it became clear that the original plan would not work, the **United States** and **Britain** sought unsuccessfully to obtain agreement for the return of the Free Territory to **Italy**. Finally, in 1954, **Britain**, the **United States**, **Italy** and **Yugoslavia** signed an agreement whereby the zone garrisoned by the Yugoslav troops and a small section of the Anglo-American zone were ceded to **Yugoslavia**, and the remainder of the Anglo-American zone, including the city of **Trieste**, was given to **Italy**.

It is conceivable that the destiny of **Trieste** might have been different had the New Zealand Division not arrived there—as Mr Churchill told Field Marshal Alexander— 'in time to put your foot in the door.' The occupation of all the territory east of the Isonzo River, which no doubt his forces could have accomplished, would have strengthened Tito's hand, especially if supported by **Russia**, when the time came for the settlement at the peace table.

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<sup>1</sup> *Documents*, Vol. II, pp. 425–6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426.

<sup>3</sup> Coles and Weinberg, *Civil Affairs: Soldiers Become Governors*, p. 612.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 613.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## IV: THE DIVISION RETIRES

### *IV: The Division Retires*

(i)

The New Zealand Division continued to perform garrison duties in **Venezia Giulia** until late in July. Fifth Brigade took over from 6 Brigade on the 7th the responsibility for the vital points in **Trieste**, where 21 Battalion provided guards and pickets until relieved by 28 Battalion a week later. Sixth Brigade concentrated north-east of the city, with its battalions astride the roads between **Villa Opicina** and **Basovizza**. Ninth Brigade was still covering Route 14 east of the city, and 23 Battalion was in the Muggia area to the south; other troops, including artillery and armour, were in the vicinity of **Villa Opicina** or farther to the north-west.

The behaviour of New Zealanders in **Trieste** and **Villa Opicina** caused concern. As a disciplinary measure all leave was cancelled in 21 Battalion for almost a week; all social activities were suspended, and every man was to perform a minimum of eight hours' work or duty each day. Similar measures were adopted in 28 Battalion. Lieutenant-Colonel **Henare**<sup>1</sup> spoke to his men after a church parade on the subject of bad behaviour, and emphasized that reports of incidents between New Zealand troops and civilians were being broadcast by the Yugoslav radio. Wharf and guard duties in **Trieste**, controlling check posts on roads, sport and social activities were 'not enough to keep the Maoris busy and the adage about Satan finding mischief for idle hands to do was countered to some extent by putting all vino bars out of bounds, restricting leave for all junior officers, and by the institution of a tough training programme.'<sup>2</sup>

One group of New Zealanders was kept very busy until the middle of the month: the NZASC transport worked the docks on a 24-hour

schedule with all the vehicles available. Twelve platoons were employed at the one time, and altogether they carried 60,000 tons.

Meanwhile 9 Brigade settled down in its sector 'to a life of comparative indolence', <sup>3</sup> its only operational duties being the maintenance of three road blocks, the manning of which was taken over by 27 Battalion from Divisional Cavalry. Night after night telephone lines were cut deliberately, but despite vigilant patrolling, the offenders were not apprehended. Similar but less determined line-cutting was reported by 23 Battalion in the Muggia sector.

On the whole these last few weeks were peaceful and pleasant,

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<sup>1</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 23 Oct 1942.

<sup>2</sup> *Maori Battalion*, p. 482.

<sup>3</sup> War diary, HQ 9 Inf Bde.

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especially for the troops in the hills above **Trieste**, where the hot weather caused little discomfort. Men went on short sightseeing tours in **Austria** and northern **Italy**, stayed at rest camps, an alpine leave centre at Madonna di Campiglio in the southern Dolomites, or at the Forces Club in **Venice**. They participated in a wide range of sport—cricket, athletics, swimming, water polo, rowing, yachting, tennis and boxing. Divisional athletic and swimming championships and a rowing regatta were held. New Zealanders won all 12 events at a 13 Corps track and field meeting in **Trieste**, and eight of 13 events at an **Eighth Army** meeting at **Udine**.

' **TRIESTE** is as good almost as a dream, no one will mind remaining,' wrote a unit diarist. 'We have swimming, good company in our comrades and many beautiful women. Leave is not greatly sought

after as **TRIESTE** is so very handy with its many iced drinks, opera, pictures and trotting race meetings.... Weather almost monotonously pleasant....' <sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the period the Division spent in **Venezia Giulia** was marred by the highest incidence of venereal disease in its history, and by the number of men killed and injured and vehicles damaged in road accidents. <sup>2</sup>

(ii)

**General Freyberg** had advised Field Marshal Alexander on 6 May that the redeployment of New Zealand forces in the **Pacific** was under consideration by the **New Zealand Government**. He understood that the Division was not to take part in any garrison duties in **Europe**, and therefore suggested that it should give up its garrison role in **Venezia Giulia** and withdraw to an area from which the long-service men could be sent home.

Alexander had indicated that the Division would be released in the second half of June, and it had been assumed for the purpose of planning—including the provision of shipping for the repatriation of long-service men—that the Division might leave **Venezia Giulia** about 20 June. This assumption, however, was wrong. A month later, after the **New Zealand Government** had expressed concern to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs about the delay, orders were received for the Division's relief by 56 Division and withdrawal to central **Italy**, in the vicinity of **Lake Trasimene**. Its departure coincided with the redesignation (on 29 July) of Head-

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, 28 Aslt Sqn.

<sup>2</sup> In May, June and July 695 fresh cases of VD and 56 relapses were recorded; there was a very much higher incidence of gonorrhoea than syphilis. In *War Surgery and Medicine*, p. 606, T. D. M. Stout says that during this period **2 NZEF** had the worst VD rate in its history.

Between 31 May and 4 July 11 men were killed and 72 injured, and 59 vehicles evacuated as the result of road accidents.

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quarters **Eighth Army** as Headquarters British Troops in **Austria**. The New Zealand Division was the only original formation of **Eighth Army** still with it when it ceased to exist. <sup>1</sup>

Flattering farewell messages were published by the Italian newspaper *La Voce Libera* when the Division left **Trieste**. One concluded: ‘Goodbye, our New Zealand brothers, we are fond of you and you know it, but—perhaps because we are so fond of you—we are pleased that you are leaving us to return to your healthy country and that you are going away from this old and sick place which is called **Europe**, and which, if you had to stay here, would infect you all with its evil. How it has corrupted us all, we Europeans!’ <sup>2</sup>

Not a few New Zealanders were sorry to go. ‘It was with genuine regret on all sides that the departure was made. Many close friendships had been formed and the hospitality and good times enjoyed here will undoubtedly be one of the pleasantest memories of **ITALY**.’ <sup>3</sup>

The first formation to move, 9 Brigade, set off on 22 July on the 400-mile journey. From the **Basovizza** area its 370-odd vehicles (not including the carriers, which went by rail) passed through **Trieste** and along Route 14 to **Mestre**, the first staging area. During the next three days the brigade motored along Route 11 to **Padua** and Routes 16 and 64 to the next staging area near **Bologna**, where the troops were given leave; then along Route 9 across the familiar **Romagna** plain to **Rimini**, by Route 16 down the coast and Route 76 inland to the **Fabriano** staging area, and along Route 3 to **Foligno** and the destination near **Perugia**. The other formations, the last leaving on 31 July, followed the same route and stopped overnight at the same places.

Before leaving for central **Italy** 4 Armoured Brigade and 28 Assault Squadron despatched most of their tracked vehicles and scout cars to

**Udine**; 74 Sherman tanks, 13 Stuart tanks, 15 Humber scout cars and three armoured recovery vehicles were retained for training the armoured regiment of a force which might be formed to serve in South-East Asia or the **Pacific**. A rear party, comprising **20 Armoured Regiment** and men of 18 and 19 Regiments, 28 Assault Squadron, the brigade workshops and other detachments, spent a month in barracks at **Villa Opicina** awaiting instructions for the disposal or movement of these vehicles. During the last week of August the tanks were transported by rail to **Bologna**. The rear

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<sup>1</sup> Headquarters Western Army was formed in **Cairo** early in September 1941, moved to the **Western Desert**, and at midnight on 26–27 September was redesignated Headquarters **Eighth Army**.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>3</sup> War diary, HQ 4 Armd Bde

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party left **Trieste** on the 31st, reached **Bologna** next day and, after disposing of the tanks (but still retaining the scout cars), rejoined 4 Brigade on 7 September.

(iii)

The war against **Japan** ended abruptly. On 6 August an American B-29 bomber dropped an atomic bomb on **Hiroshima**; two days later the **USSR** declared war on **Japan**; on the 9th the Americans released an atomic bomb on **Nagasaki**; on the 14th **Japan** accepted the Allied terms of unconditional surrender, and next day all hostilities ceased.

This sudden and bewildering plunge into the atomic age, with the introduction of a weapon capable of incalculable destruction and harm to mankind, has dominated politics, military planning and international relations ever since. But in August 1945 the consequences of these

momentous events were scarcely uppermost in the minds of the troops in **Italy**; they were glad that the war had finished in the **Pacific** as well as in **Europe**, and they thought about going home.

The Division spent two months in the vicinity of **Lake Trasimene**. **Divisional Headquarters** was at Villa Pischella, on the northern side of the lake, the engineers and army service corps on the eastern side, 6 Brigade and the medical units on the southern side, 5 Brigade and the artillery on the western side, 9 Brigade just east of **Perugia**, and 4 Brigade about midway between **Perugia** and **Assisi**. The countryside was dry and dusty and in places bare and shadeless; the troops found much to complain about: 'As hot as hades and no shade.... Place alive with millions of insects.... Men very restless with heat and insects.'<sup>1</sup> 'There has been no rain in the area for 5 months.... altogether the men were rather "browned off" as they can see no apparent reason for putting the Division in such an isolated and waterless area. The consumption of wine will no doubt increase as other recreations are lacking.'<sup>2</sup>

Because the local population's supply was very meagre, the troops were warned not to draw water which might be needed by civilians, and because of the risk of typhoid they were not to use any source which had not been approved by a medical officer. The engineers tried to improve the supply by experimenting with the filtering of lake water and excavating a ground reservoir into which water seeped from the lake, but this 'turned out not so good'.<sup>3</sup> It was necessary, therefore, to transport 18,000 gallons daily from **Foligno**.

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, **7 Fd Coy**.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, **5 Fd Regt**.

<sup>3</sup> War diary, **5 Fd Pk Coy**.

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Although the weather continued to be hot, the dry spell ended in

August with thunderstorms and downpours. It was mostly fine and mild in September, but became colder towards the end of the month. Light training was continued for the first fortnight of August, and the afternoons were given over to sport, but after the news of **Japan's** acceptance of the Allied surrender terms—announced by **Rome** radio on 14 August—more time was devoted to sport. Swimming in the lake was popular, although the depth was shallow and the water stagnant; the River Tiber was placed out of bounds (after Divisional Cavalry Battalion had swum in it) because of its typhoid contamination. The facilities for entertainment in camp were limited, although the **YMCA** mobile cinema showed films regularly, the **Kiwi Concert Party** gave performances, and the Education and Rehabilitation Service library offered a wide range of books. Liberal leave was granted to the forces clubs in **Florence, Rome** and **Venice**, and to the alpine leave centre in the Dolomites. From mid-August to mid-September each formation was able to send about a third of its strength (the equivalent of a battalion or regiment) each week in turn to a divisional rest camp at the **Mondolfo** airfield on the Adriatic coast just north of **Senigallia**. There the men could rest, swim, play various sports, enjoy such entertainments as dances and films, and make excursions to **Ancona, Pesaro, Rimini, Forli, Faenza**, and the tiny republic of **San Marino**.

Despite these diversions, however, the weeks following the cessation of hostilities with **Japan** were for most troops a period of marking time. ‘We are all just waiting to hear when and how we may go home.’<sup>1</sup> ‘This was not a happy period in the Division's history. Among the men there was a general feeling of restlessness at the apparent slowness of repatriation and at delays in Government decisions on the composition of the force to go to **Japan**. Most men were bored, many “broke”, and official efforts to amuse and entertain were often uncooperatively received. Discipline was relaxed, the *mercato nero* a temptation to the unscrupulous; absence without leave and the “flogging” of army stores and equipment were regrettably common. Ample leave, conducted tours, and later the provision of leave in the **United Kingdom** for men awaiting repatriation helped to pass the time during this barren wait, but those

without the money to go farther afield killed time in the bars and cafeAs ... and sometimes got into trouble.' <sup>2</sup>

Like other units, 28 (Maori) Battalion had its problems. Colonel Henare conferred with his officers on 24 August on such topics

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, 28 Aslt Sqn.

<sup>2</sup> *20 Battalion and Armoured Regiment*, p. 601.

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as discipline, road accidents, and health. Later he addressed a battalion parade on recent unsatisfactory behaviour, and threatened that further incidents with the local people would result in the battalion route-marching from sunrise to sunset for each case reported. About three weeks later, however, Henare was able to compliment his men on their good behaviour.

(iv)

The employment of the New Zealand Division against **Japan** after the defeat of **Germany** had been discussed before the start of the final offensive in **Italy**. <sup>1</sup> Mr Churchill had suggested to the **New Zealand Government** that the Division might operate in the **South-East Asia Command** under Admiral Mountbatten, or return to New Zealand and reform for operations in the **Pacific** under **United States** command, either in conjunction with Australian divisions or in a **United States** force. Mr Fraser had asked **General Freyberg** for his views in February. The GOC's opinion was that, from a purely military point of view, the most effective role for the Division would be with the **Australian Imperial Force** under **United States** command against the main Japanese Army in **China** or **Japan**, but if participation in the **Pacific** theatre was not practicable, the Division could be used in the **South-East Asia Command** theatre, for which its basic training and equipment were quite suitable. If the Division were to serve in the **Pacific**, it would be difficult to justify to

the troops that it should be reorganised overseas, but the difficulty of retaining its organisation if it returned to New Zealand after the defeat of **Germany** might be a determining factor. If no suitable employment of New Zealand forces was possible with the AIF under American command, or if the Government should decide against bringing the Division back to New Zealand for other reasons and should choose the SEAC theatre, reorganisation in **Egypt**, where **2 NZEF** already possessed the base organisation and training facilities, would save time and shipping.

The Government had intended that when hostilities ended in **Europe** the country should contribute land, sea and air forces for the war against **Japan**, but envisaged a division of no more than two brigades. The Chief of the General Staff (Lieutenant-General Puttick), however, had emphasized the disadvantages of a two-brigade force. It was suggested that the **United Kingdom** might find an additional brigade, or that a Fijian brigade might be available. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For these and earlier discussions on the employment of the Division and the replacement scheme, see *Documents*, Vol. II.

<sup>2</sup> In July the Governor of **Fiji** approved a proposal that a Fijian infantry brigade should serve with the New Zealand force.

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The Government preferred that the force should function under British command in South-East Asia or with the Australians, but had reached no conclusion as to whether it should be reorganised in the **Middle East** or New Zealand.

**General Freyberg** received this information shortly before the start of the Allied offensive in **Italy** in April. He agreed with Puttick about a two-brigade division: 'To commit a smaller than normal [three-brigade] division might result in our being given a role too great for our force or else we might be given mopping up jobs to do. In either case high record of NZ forces during this war could not be maintained.' <sup>1</sup>

**Freyberg** cabled the Government on 6 May to say that, as further battle casualties in **Europe** seemed unlikely and the 15th Reinforcements <sup>2</sup> would be available in **Egypt** after six weeks' training, it appeared opportune for him to accelerate the Government's replacement scheme by sending back the 6th and 7th Reinforcements. Consequently the 6th Reinforcements, who had served close on four years overseas, and men who qualified by having served an equivalent time in the **Pacific** and **Italy**, were withdrawn from the Division in the last week of May to be sent home.

**Freyberg** proposed to the Government on 15 May that, because casualties had been fewer than anticipated and further wastage in 1945 would be limited to loss by sickness, the Division could be ready to take the field in November or December. This depended upon the return to New Zealand of the long-service men up to but not including the 10th Reinforcements and the early arrival in the **Middle East** of the 16th Reinforcements. He calculated that the Division would then have a strength of approximately 23,000, which would be just sufficient to start a campaign.

About a week later the Government asked **Freyberg** to comment on an appreciation by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Field Marshal Brooke) on the future employment of the Division. The CIGS had concluded that the Division could not be maintained at its present strength, but if reduced to two brigades could be used most effectively against the Japanese in South-East Asia and possibly later as part of a British Empire force against **Japan**; he said it would be an advantage if the Division could be reorganised in the **Middle East** and go direct to the theatre where it was to operate. Again **Freyberg** urged the Government not to send a two-brigade division, but conceded that if it should decide to do so, the reorganisation would present no difficulty.

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> The 15th Reinforcements, the last draft to leave New Zealand

for the **Middle East**, numbered about 3500 and arrived at **Suez** on 15 May.

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At this stage the acting Prime Minister (Mr Nash), in a speech at **Hamilton**, announced that men of **2 NZEF** up to the 10th Reinforcements were to return 'at the earliest moment at which shipping can be made available without interfering with the deployment of forces to take up the war against **Japan**. On present evidence, 20,000 will be coming to New Zealand as soon as shipping can be provided.' <sup>1</sup> This announcement went much further than the GOC's 'interim statement' to all ranks on 19 May that the '7th Reinforcements will follow [the 6th] as soon as practicable but NOT until the Division has been released from its present op[erational] commitment.' <sup>2</sup>

It was estimated that if officers up to the **10th Reinforcements** and those who qualified by having served in the **Pacific** were repatriated, a total of 1362 would go, which would leave the Division with virtually only 174. The Government therefore concurred with the GOC's proposal that most of the officers of the 6th, 7th and 8th Reinforcements should be released, but some should be retained as key men, and those of later reinforcements should not go until others had been trained to take their place.

The **7th Reinforcements** and men with equivalent service left the Division in mid-June to embark for New Zealand when the shipping was available, and after the Division had moved from Venezia Giulia to central **Italy**, the **8th Reinforcements** and others who were eligible followed in the first week of August.

Meanwhile, on 30 July, the GOC and GSO I (Colonel Gilbert) left **Italy** by air for the **United Kingdom** to confer at the War Office about the redeployment of New Zealand forces for the war against **Japan**. While he was in **London** **Freyberg** received the information from **Wellington** that Parliament had approved proposals for New Zealand's participation in the Commonwealth Land Force in the **Pacific**, and that a two-brigade

division with an establishment of 16,000 would be available. This number would be made up from approximately 12,000 men remaining with **2 NZEF** overseas and 4000 in the 16th Reinforcements, who would sail about early September; 2000 in the 17th Reinforcements would follow later that year, and 3000 in the 18th early next year.

**Freyberg** cabled New Zealand on 7 August: 'I find that military opinion here is hardening against SEAC as a main theatre of operations for **UK** war effort against the Japanese. It is now proposed to send a mixed Empire Force equipped with American equipment to fight under General MacArthur's command in operations against mainland of **Japan**.... In conversations in **War Office**, it is clear

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, G Branch, HQ **2 NZ Div**, May 1945, p. 468.

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that they want the New Zealand Force to take part in the new proposed operations....' <sup>1</sup> The proposed project, 'Coronet', visualised three divisions, one each from **Australia**, **Canada** and the **United Kingdom**, and possibly the New Zealand Division as a fourth, but this would have to have General MacArthur's approval. This proposal appeared 'to have much to recommend it from a New Zealand point of view. It enables us to get clear of jungle fighting and we will be used in our traditional role together with all our guns and heavy equipment....' <sup>2</sup>

The **2 NZEF**'s participation in the 'Coronet' project was discussed at the **War Office** on 10 August. Subject to confirmation by the New Zealand Government of its agreement to the use of the Division for 'Coronet' and by General MacArthur to the Division's inclusion in the British Commonwealth Corps to fight under his command, provisional plans were prepared for the concentration of **2 NZEF** in the **United Kingdom** for a short period of leave before proceeding to the **United States** for equipping and final training. The planning ended the same

day, however, when the news was received of a Japanese surrender offer.

**Freyberg** returned to the Division in **Italy** on 3 September—the sixth anniversary of the declaration of war against **Germany**—and within a few days was receiving cables congratulating him on his choice as the next Governor-General of New Zealand.

(v)

The New Zealand Government decided to make a brigade group available for service with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in **Japan**. It was to assemble in **Italy** and comprise, as far as possible, single officers from the **10th Reinforcements** onwards and single men of the 13th, 14th and **15th Reinforcements**; certain key men were needed, and volunteers who had served longer overseas were accepted. It was proposed that the men from **2 NZEF** should be replaced at the end of six months by volunteers from New Zealand. <sup>3</sup>

Headquarters **9 Infantry Brigade** became Headquarters Jayforce— as the brigade group was to be known—on 15 October. Brigadier Gentry retained command until 16 November, when he handed over to Brigadier K. L. Stewart, who had been repatriated from a prisoner-of-war camp in **Germany**. Most of the organisation was completed in October, when the men eligible for the force, which

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<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See *Documents*, Vol. III, for messages between the New Zealand and **United Kingdom** Governments and **2 NZEF** relating to the formation of the force for **Japan**; also O. A. Gillespie, *The Pacific*, for an account of the occupation of **Japan**.

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was under canvas near **Florence**, were marched in from Advanced

Base at **Bari** and from units of the Division, and those not going to **Japan** were marched out to Advanced Base to await their return home.

The GOC proposed to the Government that all Maoris should be repatriated, but was told that the Maori people wished to be represented in **Jayforce**. Divisional Cavalry, which resumed the title of regiment, therefore included a D Squadron composed of 270 Maoris from the latest reinforcements. 'This was a delight to the regiment because nobody could really come up to the Maoris in plain parade-ground drill.' <sup>1</sup>

Eventually Jayforce, 4000 strong, included a brigade headquarters, 2 Divisional Cavalry Regiment, 22 Battalion, 27 Battalion, 25 Field Battery, 5 Field Company, Signal Company, 19 ASC Company, 16 Workshops, 4 Base Ordnance Depot, 11 Provost Company, 6 General Hospital, 7 Camp Hospital, 5 Field Hygiene Section, a band, a port detachment, and other services. Before the end of the year the force was fully self-contained and accommodated in the university buildings in **Florence**. The carriers, guns, transport and stores were despatched to **Bari** in mid-January 1946 to be loaded on the ships that were to take them to **Japan**, and a month later the troops left by train for **Naples** and embarked on the *Strathmore*, which sailed on 21 February and reached **Kure**, the port of destination, on 19 March.

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<sup>1</sup> *Divisional Cavalry*, p. 420.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## V: DISBANDMENT OF 2 NZEF

### *V: Disbandment of 2 NZEF*

(i)

**Japan's** surrender had caused a change in shipping plans; vessels which were to have been available for the early repatriation of the NZEF were diverted elsewhere. The first priority was the repatriation of prisoners of war from the **Far East**, the next the transportation of occupation forces to the **Far East**, and then came the repatriation of the British troops in **Burma** and Dominion troops in **Europe**. The New Zealanders in **Italy** and **Egypt** waiting their turn to go home became progressively more bored and discontented, despite the facilities for sport and entertainment, and the opportunities offered by the ERS <sup>2</sup> to assist men to re-establish themselves when they returned to civilian life and to further their education.

Towards the end of September and early in October 1945 the Division—except the artillery, which occupied barracks in **Siena**—moved from its tented camps in the **Lake Trasimene – Perugia**

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<sup>2</sup> Education and Rehabilitation Service.

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region to winter quarters at **Florence**, where Divisional Headquarters was established on 4 October. Headquarters **2 NZEF** was transferred from **Senigallia** to **Florence** and combined with Headquarters 2 NZ Division a week later.

While they were waiting to go home men went on leave to the **United Kingdom**. From 10 October onwards 105 officers and men were despatched daily and accommodated overnight at six staging posts staffed by New Zealanders; they stayed at British transit camps at Calais

and a New Zealand transit camp at **Folkestone**. The journey to Calais took a week, and with 14 days' leave in the **United Kingdom**, the time spent away was about a month. Because of the wintry conditions which prevailed after mid-November, subsequent leave parties went overland by rail.

A Rugby football camp was set up at **Klagenfurt** in **Austria** to train players and select the 2 NZEF Rugby team, which began its successful tour of the **British Isles** in October.

Memorial services were held in **Crete** and at the **Sangro River**, **Cassino** and **F1 Alamein**. Probably the most impressive of these was in **Crete**. About 50 New Zealand officers and men who had served in **Crete**, a guard of honour from the **Maori Battalion**, and 5 Brigade's band sailed from **Naples** to **Suda Bay** in the cruiser *Ajax*—which had evacuated New Zealanders from **Greece** and **Crete** in 1941—and were joined by a party which came by air from **Egypt**. Representatives of the **Royal Navy**, the Australian Imperial Force, the Greek army and navy, the *Andartes* (Cretan guerillas who had continued the struggle against the Germans during the occupation) and a very large crowd of civilians were also present at the service at the British military cemetery at **Suda Bay** on 30 September. **General Freyberg** was accompanied by **Major-General Kippenberger** and Captain John Cuthbert, RN, commander of the *Ajax*.

Wherever the New Zealanders went in **Crete** their reception was overwhelming. The General reported to the Government that it was obvious that the **Cretans** 'deeply appreciated our coming back to their island. I feel that visit here has been more than worth while and has impressed on Cretan people our deep gratitude and affection towards them.' <sup>1</sup>

(ii)

While **Freyberg** was at the **War Office** in **London** he discussed the disposal of the equipment of 2 NZEF. The New Zealand force which went to **Japan** was fully equipped in **Italy**. Apart from personal arms and some

<sup>1</sup> GOC's papers.

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of **2 NZEF** would be of no further use to New Zealand; the disposal of vehicles in New Zealand, for example, would not repay shipping charges. It was agreed, therefore, that the surplus equipment of **2 NZEF** should be disposed of in the same way as proposed for surplus British equipment: some items, particularly vehicles, were to go to UNRRA, and the remainder to the British Ministry of Supply for ultimate disposal, probably to the Italian authorities, for its scrap value.

The ownership of the equipment was complicated: some of it was 'lend-lease' from the **United States** and therefore had to be returned ultimately to the Americans; some was in excess of the G1098 <sup>1</sup> equipment of a normal British division and belonged to the United Kingdom Government. The remainder, however, was the initial equipment of **2 NZEF**, brought up to date during the war, and paid for by the **New Zealand Government**. 'It was definitely our own,' wrote Major-General Stevens. <sup>2</sup> 'The New Zealand Government specified some items which were to be sent to New Zealand; but with this exception we handed everything over to British depots, leaving any adjustments in cost to be settled between the Governments of the **United Kingdom** and New Zealand at a later date. For a while the **New Zealand Government** was inclined to stand on the strict letter of the law about ownership of equipment; but we pointed out that throughout the war we had always had the best of it when it came to issuing equipment, that for all our new units the British authorities had always found the equipment without more than a brief delay, that when it came to a settlement we were sure that New Zealand would be treated with the greatest generosity, and altogether that it ill became us to haggle at this or any stage. The Government was faintly surprised at this outburst, but accepted it in good grace, and all was well.' <sup>3</sup>

The New Zealand Ordnance Corps opened a vehicle park at an

airfield near **Assisi** to hold all the vehicles and artillery equipment which were to be disposed of to UNRRA and the Ministry of Supply, and a stores depot at **Perugia** to hold the G1098 equipment. As units were reduced by the departure of drafts for New Zealand, they handed in their equipment. Towards the end, however, the ordnance staff was kept extremely busy by units which 'panicked

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<sup>1</sup> G1098: synopsis of the complete equipment of a unit or formation, itemised and enumerated.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj-Gen W. G. Stevens**, CB, CBE, m.i.d.; **Richmond, Nelson**; born **London**, 11 Dec 1893; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1915–19 (Maj); AA & QMG, **2 NZ Div**, 1940; Officer in Charge of Administration, **2 NZEF**, 1940–45; GOC **2 NZEF**, 22 Nov 1945–6 Jul 1946.

<sup>3</sup> *Problems of 2 NZEF*, p. 88.

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over their disbandments and were handing in equipment right and left, most of it with little or no forethought.' <sup>1</sup>

The open nature of the airfield made the vehicle park very difficult to guard, and the release of men for repatriation compelled the Ordnance Corps to find staff from other corps and to employ Italian labour. The lack of security, the Assistant Director of Ordnance Services (Lieutenant-Colonel **Lewis** <sup>2</sup>) complained, was responsible for 'the biggest headache of the NZOC, as the changing of staff every week or two creates a great deal of confusion and the situation is not improved by deteriorating weather and wholesale thefts. One could expect a reasonable amount of thieving and pilfering being done by the local population which is very hard to check, but this could be kept down to reasonable limits if our own soldiers at the Park, particularly the Guard, did their duty. It is quite obvious at this stage ... that the moral scruples of the average soldier, particularly with regard to WD <sup>3</sup> property, are absolutely nil and it is difficult no matter what regulations and rules are

laid down to find an answer to it. Every endeavour has been made by the Officers at the Park to cope with this growing problem but I am afraid it is almost impossible.’<sup>4</sup> The theft of such articles as jeep tyres, which could be sold for over £100 on the black market, was too strong a temptation. ‘All we could do about the black-market activities was to refuse to handle the large sums of money that so many troops accumulated,’<sup>5</sup> says Stevens.

Near the end of January 1946 the stores depot at **Perugia** was handed over to the Ministry of Supply, and in mid-February the vehicle park also was transferred. Meanwhile 2 Base Ordnance Depot at **Bari** completed the packing of the equipment intended for New Zealand, and 1 Base Ordnance Depot at **Maadi** disposed of the equipment and stores handed in by the **2 NZEF** units in **Egypt**.

*(iii)*

**Lieutenant-General Freyberg** relinquished command of **2 NZEF** and **2 New Zealand Division** on 22 November 1945, the sixth anniversary of his appointment, and was succeeded by Major-General Stevens, who was responsible for the completion of the disbandment of the force and the return of its members to New Zealand.

Before relinquishing command **Freyberg** made a round of visits

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, ADOS **2 NZEF** and **2 NZ Div**.

<sup>2</sup> **Lt-Col E. G. Lewis**, MBE, m.i.d.; Nigeria; born NZ 26 Sep 1918; clerk; wounded 18 Apr 1941; DAQMG **2 NZ Div**, 1943–45; ADOS **2 NZEF** and **2 NZ Div**, 1945.

<sup>3</sup> WD: War Department.

<sup>4</sup> War diary, ADOS **2 NZEF** and **2 NZ Div**.

to say farewell. In **Egypt** he thanked the voluntary workers who had given so much of their time to the welfare of the New Zealanders at **Maadi** and **Cairo**. Subsequently an obelisk was erected in the township of **Maadi** bearing this inscription: 'This pylon records the fact that between 1940 and 1946 76,000 members of the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force trained in **Maadi** Camp; and expresses the gratitude of the Force for the kindness and hospitality received during those years from the residents of **Maadi**.' <sup>1</sup>

The General made farewell inspections of the dwindling formations of the Division at **Florence** and **Siena**. Many men already had been repatriated or had left their units and were awaiting shipping; hundreds were on leave in the **United Kingdom** or on guard or camp duties.

When Stevens assumed command of **2 NZEF**, approximately 15,000 men were still waiting to be repatriated; these included single men of the **9th Reinforcements**, the married and single men of the **10th**, **11th** and **12th Reinforcements**, and the married men of the **13th**, **14th** and **15th Reinforcements**; <sup>2</sup> they also included about 870 men of the **Maori Battalion** and its reinforcements who were to embark as a complete unit. At that stage it was anticipated that the last man of **2 NZEF** would leave the **Mediterranean** in March 1946, but the shipping arrived with such unexpected speed that Headquarters **2 NZEF** had to take energetic steps to collect sufficient men to fill the vessels. Men were assembled in Advanced Base over Christmas and New Year, and because the camp was holding two or three times its normal number, conditions were most unpleasant. By early January, however, the bulk of **2 NZEF** had departed.

The **Maori Battalion** embarked on the *Dominion Monarch* at **Taranto** on 26 December; it was joined by a party of Maoris from **Egypt** at Port Tewfik, and arrived at **Wellington** on 23 January 1946. The other units of **2 NZEF** were disbanded overseas, most of them in December and

January. When the last 2000 officers and other ranks still in **Italy** were withdrawn to the **Bari– Taranto** region to await repatriation, Headquarters **2 NZEF** was closed at **Florence** and reopened at **Bari** in January. In February the last New Zealanders left **Italy** for **Egypt**, except those required for the Rear Party to attend to the final details of the disposal of equipment and the winding-up procedure, and the graves registration and concentration units.

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<sup>1</sup> The ground on which the obelisk was erected had been given by the **Maadi** Land Company with the approval of the Egyptian Government, and the obelisk had been paid for out of the central regimental funds of **2 NZEF**.

<sup>2</sup> The single men of the last three drafts were with **Jayforce**.

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## VI: CONCLUSION

### *VI: Conclusion*

(i)

At **Trieste** the New Zealand Division ended its pursuit of a defeated enemy in the last of a series of campaigns which had begun in **Greece** four years earlier in a time of stress and anxiety but of unwavering conviction in the justice of the cause and in the inevitability of victory. After the withdrawal from **Greece**, where there had been little opportunity of coming properly to grips with the enemy, the Division had suffered grievous casualties in men killed, wounded and captured, but had gone on unfalteringly to survive the holocaust of **Crete**, the alternate elation and bitter disappointment of the ebb and flow of battle in the deserts of North Africa, and the relentless drive, despite rebuff and war-weariness, in winter and summer, over mountain and plain in **Italy**.

The New Zealand Division was moulded, nurtured and commanded for six years—except for a few brief periods of absence imposed by wounds or while in the command of a corps—by **General Freyberg**, an indomitable warrior of English birth, New Zealand boyhood and education, and distinguished service with British forces in the First World War. Upon the Division he stamped his personality; with it he became absolutely identified; without his leadership it most likely would not have earned its reputation as a ‘ball of fire’. In battle after battle **Freyberg** led the Division with the wisdom born of experience in the field unsurpassed by that of any of his contemporary commanders. At all times he attended to the welfare and material needs of his men with an understanding, tact and devotion which set him apart from other commanders. Sustained by a charter prescribed by the New Zealand Government, he displayed invaluable qualities as a soldier-diplomat, who maintained an essential but sometimes precarious balance between the

overall demands of Allied strategy and the vital interests of a small country whose major war effort was involved in the Division.

**Freyberg** expressed his pride in the Division in a farewell message on 22 November 1945. He felt that ‘the important part we played was far in excess of the size of our Force. Looking back over the long years of the war, it seems to me that we have been present at most of the vital moments, such as the disasters of **Greece** and **Crete**, the battle to save **Tobruk** in 1941, the battle to save **Egypt** in 1942, **El Alamein**, the turning of **El Agheila**, the **Mareth Line**, the battle for **Cassino** and the final advance across the **Po Valley** to **Trieste**. Always, as I see it, the Second New Zealand Division has been in the forefront of battle.... I am sure there is no finer fighting force amongst the armies of the Allies. I realise how privileged I have been, for no commander ever went into battle with greater confidence than I have done during the last six years, and no confidence has been better justified....’

(ii)

The Division was praised by Field Marshal Alexander, General Mark Clark and Lieutenant-General McCreery, and also by the Commander-in-Chief of the German forces in **Italy**, Field Marshal Kesselring. When the United States Historical Branch asked Kesselring for the enemy's opinion of the various Allied troops who had taken part in the battles for **Cassino**, he said that the New Zealand Division was a formation of very high fighting value which ‘always tried to take its opponents by surprise when it attacked. It was very inventive in the tactics it used, and not stereotyped. It attacked by day or night, either with or without a preliminary bombardment, sometimes on a wide front and sometimes in a very narrow spearhead, often trying to hit our positions where we did not expect it.’

Kesselring, however, was critical of junior leadership in the Division: ‘At times the commanders of *smaller* formations failed to exploit opportunities which might have led to local successes, because they had been given no orders to cover this eventuality— contrary to German

policy, which always strove to bring out initiative in junior commanders.' But he thought that the co-operation of the artillery and tanks with the infantry was always very good. The Division's most noticeable individual trait was its fondness for reconnaissance. 'As a rule both recon and fighting patrols were very active before an attack. This certainly made the German soldiers jittery, but on the other hand it enabled them to identify their opponents very quickly.' The New Zealand soldier 'was well trained in the use of his weapon and in the use of ground.... brave and tough, very good in single combat and on patrols, equally fearless in attack and in the defence of newly-won ground.' Kesselring believed the Division 'had a large number of excellent snipers.'

The New Zealanders, when they arrived in **Italy**, had to adjust themselves to a kind of warfare unlike that in which they had excelled in the deserts of North Africa; they had to acquire new skills for the mountainous terrain and house-to-house and street fighting. This they accomplished in the battles fought among the farm buildings and villages in the hills south of **Florence** and amid the canals and ditches of **Romagna**. The departure of long-service men, many of them senior NCOs, made way for the well-earned promotion of experienced men eager to prove themselves. The absorption of reinforcements, including officers who had dropped rank and others from the **Pacific**, was a beneficial infusion of new blood.

In the final offensive in 1945 the resolute infantry, supported by the weight, flexibility and mobility of the artillery, by the fighter-bombers and tanks, by the speed and ingenuity of the engineers, and by the self-sufficient supply and maintenance services, took one position after another without crippling losses, despite the enemy's naturally strong and well-prepared defences, his Tiger and Panther tanks, guns, mortars, machine guns and rocket projectors, his minefields and wire entanglements.

The fighting spirit of the men, the enterprise and skill of their

**commanders (including the junior leaders), combined with the superb efficiency and co-operation of all arms, enabled the New Zealand Division to overcome a series of obstacles, from the [Senio](#) onwards, more quickly than all other divisions. This was ‘probably the finest battle you ever fought—and you have fought some pretty useful ones,’ declared Field Marshal Alexander in an address to some 150 officers of the Division at [Miramare](#) on 1 June 1945. He was particularly gratified that the Division, which had seen the campaigns through from 1941 onwards, should be ‘the spearhead of the attack in 1945. It is a matter of great pride to me that I should have had you under my command.’**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## APPENDIX I – CASUALTIES IN 2 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION IN ITALY

### *Appendix I*

### **CASUALTIES IN 2 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION IN ITALY**

**THE following table of casualties in 2 New Zealand Division has been compiled from 2 NZEF casualty lists, which are divided into seven parts:**

**Italy I, 12 November 1943 – 31 January 1944 (the Sangro River and Orsogna).**

**Italy II, 1 February – 10 April 1944 ( Cassino).**

**Italy III, 11 April – 16 June 1944 (occupation of the Apennine position near Cassino and advance to Sora and Avezzano).**

**Italy IV, 17 June – 24 August 1944 ( Monte Lignano, advance to Florence, and the south bank of the River Arno).**

**Italy V, 25 August – 26 October 1944 (return to the Adriatic coast near Rimini and advance to the Savio River).**

**Italy VI, 27 October 1944 – 31 March 1945 ( Faenza area and the Senio River).**

**Italy VII, 1 April–2 May 1945 (advance from the Senio River to Trieste).**

|              | <b>Killed and<br/>Died of<br/>Wounds</b> | <b>Wounded</b> |              | <b>Prisoners<br/>of War</b> |              | <b>Total</b> |              |              |
|--------------|--|----------------|--------------|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|              | <i>Offrs</i>                             | <i>ORs</i>     | <i>Offrs</i> | <i>ORs</i>                  | <i>Offrs</i> | <i>ORs</i>   | <i>Offrs</i> | <i>ORs</i>   |
| <b>Italy</b> | <b>I 38</b>                              | <b>375</b>     | <b>87</b>    | <b>1,045</b>                | <b>2</b>     | <b>87</b>    | <b>127</b>   | <b>1,507</b> |
|              |  |                |              |                             |              | <b>(a)</b>   |              |              |
| <b>Italy</b> | <b>II 25</b>                             | <b>318</b>     | <b>87</b>    | <b>1,117</b>                | <b>3</b>     | <b>46</b>    | <b>115</b>   | <b>1,481</b> |
|              |  |                |              |                             |              | <b>(b)</b>   |              |              |

|               |               |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |
|---------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>Italy</b>  | <b>III 16</b> | <b>105</b>   | <b>45</b>    | <b>555</b>   |              | <b>2</b>     | <b>61</b>    | <b>662</b>   |
| <b>Italy</b>  | <b>IV 26</b>  | <b>259</b>   | <b>71</b>    | <b>824</b>   | <b>1</b>     | <b>29</b>    | <b>98</b>    | <b>1,112</b> |
|               |               |              |              |              |              | <b>(c)</b>   |              |              |
| <b>Italy</b>  | <b>V 17</b>   | <b>211</b>   | <b>53</b>    | <b>804</b>   |              | <b>23</b>    | <b>70</b>    | <b>1,038</b> |
|               |               |              |              |              |              | <b>(d)</b>   |              |              |
| <b>Italy</b>  | <b>VI 12</b>  | <b>182</b>   | <b>46</b>    | <b>758</b>   | <b>1</b>     | <b>17</b>    | <b>59</b>    | <b>957</b>   |
| <b>Italy</b>  | <b>VII 17</b> | <b>224</b>   | <b>73</b>    | <b>1,067</b> |              |              | <b>90</b>    | <b>1,291</b> |
|               | <b>_____</b>  | <b>_____</b> | <b>_____</b> | <b>_____</b> | <b>_____</b> | <b>_____</b> | <b>_____</b> | <b>_____</b> |
| <b>Totals</b> | <b>151</b>    | <b>1,674</b> | <b>462</b>   | <b>6,170</b> | <b>7</b>     | <b>204</b>   | <b>620</b>   | <b>8,048</b> |

**(a) Includes 18 wounded. (b) Includes 7 wounded. (c) Includes 4 wounded.**

**(d) Includes 6 wounded.**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## APPENDIX II – CASUALTIES IN 2 NZEF, 1939-46

### *Appendix II*

### *CASUALTIES IN 2 NZEF, 1939-46*

**A Statement of Strengths and Losses in the Armed Services and Mercantile Marine in the 1939–45 War**, presented to Parliament by the Minister of Defence in 1948, gives the following **2 NZEF** casualties in the **Middle East** and **Mediterranean** theatre between 3 September 1939 and 31 December 1946: 5,363 killed (including 37 listed as missing and subsequently reclassified), 15,108 wounded, and 8,369 prisoners, a total of 28,840.

The killed include those who were killed in action or died of wounds; the prisoners include 1,219 who were wounded when captured, and 503 who were killed or died of wounds, sickness, accident or other cause after capture. Prisoners who regained their liberty before notification are not included. In addition the statement gives a total of 705 (including nine women) who died on active service (through sickness, accident, and causes not otherwise classified). The total casualties in **2 NZEF** in this theatre, therefore, were 29,545.

In the **Pacific** theatre the casualties in **2 NZEF** were 111 killed in action or died of wounds, 92 deaths on active service, 213 wounded, and 26 prisoners (of whom 19 died), a total of 442. In addition, casualties in the **United Kingdom** were three killed in action, 33 deaths on active service, and three wounded, a total of 39. Thus, the casualties in **2 NZEF** in all theatres during the Second World War were:

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| <b>Killed in action and died of wounds</b> | <b>5,477</b> |
| <b>Died while prisoner of war</b>          | <b>522</b>   |
| <b>Deaths from other causes</b>            | <b>830</b>   |
|  | <hr/>        |
| <b>Total deaths</b>                        | <b>6,829</b> |

|                                    |               |               |
|------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| <b>Wounded</b>                     | <b>15,324</b> |               |
| <b>Wounded and prisoner of war</b> | <b>1,219</b>  |               |
|                                    | <b>—</b>      |               |
| <b>Total wounded</b>               |               | <b>16,543</b> |
| <b>Total prisoners of war</b>      | <b>8,395</b>  |               |
| <b>less wounded when captured</b>  | <b>1,219</b>  |               |
| <b>less died while prisoner</b>    | <b>522</b>    |               |
|                                    | <b>—</b>      |               |
|                                    |               | <b>6,654</b>  |
|                                    |               | <b>—</b>      |
| <b>Total</b>                       |               | <b>30,026</b> |

**The Government Statistician has estimated that the number who served overseas in [2 NZEF](#) was 104,988.**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## APPENDIX III — 2 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION — ORDER OF BATTLE AS AT 11 MAY 1944

### *Appendix III*

### *2 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION*

### *Order of Battle as at 11 May 1944*

#### **HQ 2 NZ Division**

**2 NZ Divisional Protective Troop**

**2 NZ Divisional Defence Platoon**

**2 NZ Divisional Cipher Section**

**2 NZ Divisional Field Security Section**

#### **2 NZ Divisional Cavalry**

**C Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**

**13 Light Aid Detachment**

#### **HQ 4 Armoured Brigade**

**4 Squadron, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**

**18 Armoured Regiment**

- **38 Light Aid Detachment**

**19 Armoured Regiment**

- **39 Light Aid Detachment**

**20 Armoured Regiment**

- **40 Light Aid Detachment**

## **22 (Motor) Battalion**

### **Forward Delivery Squadron**

### **4 Armoured Brigade Band**

## **HQ 2 NZ Divisional Artillery**

### **4 Field Regiment**

- **E Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**
- **9 Light Aid Detachment**

### **5 Field Regiment**

- **F Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**
- **16 Light Aid Detachment**

### **6 Field Regiment**

- **G Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**
- **18 Light Aid Detachment**

### **7 Anti-Tank Regiment**

- **H Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**
- **15 Light Aid Detachment**

### **14 Light And-Aircraft Regiment**

- **14 Light Anti-Aircraft Workshop Section**

### **36 Survey Battery**

## **HQ 2 NZ Divisional Engineers**

## **5 Field Park Company**

- **10 Light Aid Detachment**

## **6 Field Company**

## **7 Field Company**

## **8 Field Company**

## **2 NZ Divisional Signals (less detached sections)**

## **14 Light Aid Detachment**

## **HQ 5 Infantry Brigade**

### **5 Infantry Brigade Defence Platoon**

### **K Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**

### **21 Battalion**

### **23 Battalion**

### **28 (Maori) Battalion**

### **5 Infantry Brigade Band**

## **HQ 6 Infantry Brigade**

### **6 Infantry Brigade Defence Platoon**

### **L Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**

### **24 Battalion**

### **25 Battalion**

### **26 Battalion**

### **6 Infantry Brigade Band**

## **27 (Machine Gun) Battalion**

### **HQ Command NZ Army Service Corps**

**1 Ammunition Company**

**2 Ammunition Company**

**1 Petrol Company**

**1 Supply Company**

**4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company**

**6 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company**

**18 Tank Transporter Company**

**Water Issue Section**

**NZ Section, Motor Ambulance Convoy**

### **Medical**

**4 Field Ambulance**

**5 Field Ambulance**

**6 Field Ambulance**

**4 Field Hygiene Section**

**1 Mobile Casualty Clearing Station**

**2 Field Transfusion Unit**

**1 Field Surgical Unit**

**2 Anti-Malarial Control Unit**

**3 Anti-Malarial Control Unit**

# **102 Mobile Venereal Disease Treatment Centre**

## **Dental**

**1 Mobile Dental Unit**

## **Ordnance**

**2 NZ Divisional Ordnance Field Park**

**Mobile Laundry and Bath Unit**

## **Electrical and Mechanical Engineers**

**2 NZ Divisional Workshops**

**4 Armoured Brigade Workshops**

**5 Infantry Brigade Workshop Section**

**6 Infantry Brigade Workshop Section**

**1 Armoured Troops Recovery Unit**

**2 NZ Divisional Provost Company**

**1 Field Cash Office**

**2 NZ Divisional Postal Unit**

**Reinforcement Transit Unit**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## APPENDIX IV – 2 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION – ORDER OF BATTLE AS AT 9 APRIL 1945

### *Appendix IV*

### *2 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION*

### *Order of Battle as at 9 April 1945*

#### **HQ 2 NZ Division**

**2 NZ Divisional Defence Platoon**

**2 NZ Divisional Cipher Section**

**2 NZ Divisional Field Security Section**

#### **HQ 4 Armoured Brigade**

**4 Squadron, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**

#### **18 Armoured Regiment**

- **38 Light Aid Detachment**

#### **19 Armoured Regiment**

- **39 Light Aid Detachment**

#### **20 Armoured Regiment**

- **40 Light Aid Detachment**

#### **Forward Delivery Squadron**

#### **4 Armoured Brigade Band**

#### **HQ 2 NZ Divisional Artillery**

## **4 Field Regiment**

- **E Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**
- **9 Light Aid Detachment**

## **5 Field Regiment**

- **F Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**
- **16 Light Aid Detachment**

## **6 Field Regiment**

- **G Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**
- **18 Light Aid Detachment**

## **7 Anti-Tank Regiment**

- **H Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**
- **15 Light Aid Detachment**

## **Artillery Pipe Band**

## **HQ 2 NZ Divisional Engineers**

### **5 Field Park Company**

- **10 Light Aid Detachment**

### **6 Field Company**

### **7 Field Company**

### **8 Field Company**

### **27 Mechanical Equipment Company**

### **28 Assault Squadron**

## **2 NZ Divisional Signals (less detached sections)**

**14 Light Aid Detachment**

## **HQ 5 Infantry Brigade**

**5 Infantry Brigade Defence Platoon**

**K Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**

**21 Battalion**

**23 Battalion**

**28 (Maori) Battalion**

**5 Infantry Brigade Band**

## **HQ 6 Infantry Brigade**

**6 Infantry Brigade Defence Platoon**

**L Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**

**24 Battalion**

**25 Battalion**

**26 Battalion**

**6 Infantry Brigade Band**

## **HQ 9 Infantry Brigade**

**9 Infantry Brigade Defence Platoon**

**J Section, 2 NZ Divisional Signals**

**Divisional Cavalry Battalion**

**22 Battalion**

## **27 Battalion**

### **HQ Command NZ Army Service Corps**

**1 Ammunition Company**

**2 Ammunition Company**

**1 Petrol Company**

**1 Supply Company**

**4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company**

**NZ Section, Motor Ambulance Convoy**

**Jeep Platoon**

**Field Bakery Section**

### **Medical**

**4 Field Ambulance**

**5 Field Ambulance**

**6 Field Ambulance**

**4 Field Hygiene Company**

**1 Mobile Casualty Clearing Station**

**2 Field Transfusion Unit**

**3 Field Surgical Unit**

**14 Optician Unit**

**102 Mobile Venereal Disease Treatment Centre**

### **Dental**

**1 Mobile Dental Unit**

**Ordnance**

**2 NZ Divisional Ordnance Field Park**

**Mobile Laundry and Bath Unit**

**Electrical and Mechanical Engineers**

**2 NZ Divisional Workshops**

**1 Heavy Recovery Section**

**4 Armoured Brigade Workshops**

**5 Infantry Brigade Workshop Section**

**6 Infantry Brigade Workshop Section**

**9 Infantry Brigade Workshop Section**

**2 NZ Divisional Provost Company**

**1 Field Cash Office**

**2 NZ Divisional Postal Unit**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## APPENDIX V – 2 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION – PRINCIPAL APPOINTMENTS AS AT 1 APRIL 1945

### *Appendix V*

### *2 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION*

### *Principal Appointments as at 1 April 1945*

#### *Divisional Headquarters*

**General Officer Commanding: Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg**, VC, KCB, KBE, CMG, DSO, LL D

**General Staff Officer, Class I: Colonel H. E. Gilbert**, DSO

**Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General: Lieutenant-Colonel J. P. Cook**, QBE

**Chief Signal Officer: Lieutenant-Colonel R. W. Foubister**

**Assistant Provost Marshal: Major W. Brown-Bayliss**

#### *4 Armoured Brigade*

**Commander: Colonel T. C. Campbell**, MC

**Commanding Officer, 18 Armoured Regiment: Lieutenant-Colonel H. H. Parata**

**Commanding Officer, 19 Armoured Regiment: Lieutenant-Colonel A. M. Everist**, DSO

**Commanding Officer, 20 Armoured Regiment: Lieutenant-Colonel H. A. Robinson**, MC

#### *Divisional Artillery*

**Commander, Royal Artillery: Brigadier R. C. Queree, CBE**

**Commanding Officer, 4 Field Regiment: Lieutenant-Colonel H. T. W. Nolan**

**Commanding Officer, 5 Field Regiment: Lieutenant-Colonel C. H. Sawyers, DSO**

**Commanding Officer, 6 Field Regiment: Lieutenant-Colonel S. W. Nicholson**

**Commanding Officer, 7 Anti-Tank Regiment: Lieutenant-Colonel W. C. Savage**

### ***Divisional Engineers***

**Commander, Royal Engineers: Colonel F. M. H. Hanson, DSO, OBE, MM**

**Officer Commanding, 5 Field Park Company: Major L. C. E. Malt**

**Officer Commanding, 6 Field Company: Major P. W. de B. Morgan, MC**

**Officer Commanding, 7 Field Company: Major G. A. Lindell**

**Officer Commanding, 8 Field Company: Major C. Clark**

**Officer Commanding, 27 Mechanical Equipment Company: Major G. K. Armstrong, MC**

**Officer Commanding, 28 Assault Squadron: Major J. Brooke-White**

### ***5 Infantry Brigade***

**Commander: Brigadier I. L. Bonifant, DSO**

**Commanding Officer, 21 Battalion: Lieutenant-Colonel E. A. McPhail, MC**

**Commanding Officer, 23 Battalion: Lieutenant-Colonel W. B. Thomas, DSO, MC**

**Commanding Officer, 28 (Maori) Battalion: Lieutenant-Colonel A. Awatere, MC**

### ***6 Infantry Brigade***

**Commander: Brigadier G. B. Parkinson, DSO**

**Commanding Officer, 24 Battalion: Lieutenant-Colonel R. L. Hutchens**

**Commanding Officer, 25 Battalion: Lieutenant-Colonel E. K. Norman, MC**

**Commanding Officer, 26 Battalion: **Lieutenant-Colonel M. C. Fairbrother, OBE****

### ***9 Infantry Brigade***

**Commander: Brigadier W. G. Gentry, DSO, OBE**

**Commanding Officer, Divisional Cavalry Battalion: Lieutenant-Colonel J. R. Williams, DSO**

**Commanding Officer, 22 Battalion: Lieutenant-Colonel H. V. Donald, DSO, MC**

**Commanding Officer, 27 Battalion: Lieutenant-Colonel G. P. Sanders**

### ***Army Service Corps***

**Commander: Brigadier S. H. Crump, DSO, OBE**

**Second-in-command and Senior Supply Officer: Lieutenant-Colonel O. Bracegirdle, DSO**

**Officer Commanding, **1 Ammunition Company**: Major P. E. Courts,**

## **MBE**

**Officer Commanding, 2 Ammunition Company: Major R. L. Dow**

**Officer Commanding, 1 Petrol Company: Major H. W. Barnett**

**Officer Commanding, 1 Supply Company: Major L. Bean**

**Officer Commanding, 4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company:  
Major R. O. Pearse, MBE**

## ***Medical Corps***

**Assistant Director of **Medical Services**: Colonel R. A. Elliott**

**Officer Commanding, 4 Field Ambulance: Lieutenant-Colonel A. W.  
Owen-Johnston, ED**

**Officer Commanding, 5 Field Ambulance: Lieutenant-Colonel J. M.  
Coutts**

**Officer Commanding, 6 Field Ambulance: Lieutenant-Colonel W.  
Hawksworth**

**Officer Commanding, 4 Field Hygiene Company: Major D. P.  
Kennedy**

**Officer Commanding, 1 Mobile Casualty Clearing Station:  
Lieutenant- Colonel A. G. Clark, MC**

**Officer Commanding, 2 Field Transfusion Unit: Major P. F. Howden**

**Officer Commanding, 3 Field Surgical Unit: Major W. I. Cawkwell**

## ***Dental Corps***

**Officer Commanding, 1 Mobile Dental Unit: Major H. C. Colson**

## ***Ordnance Corps***

**Assistant Director of Ordnance Services: Lieutenant-Colonel J. O. Kelsey, MBE**

**Officer Commanding, Divisional Ordnance Field Park: Major H. L. McLaren**

***Electrical and Mechanical Engineers***

**Commander, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers:  
Lieutenant- Colonel A. H. Andrews, QBE**

**Officer Commanding, Divisional Workshops: Major N. J. Rollinson,  
MBE**

**Officer Commanding, 4 Armoured Brigade Workshops: Major C. K. Fleming**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## APPENDIX VI – ALLIED ARMIES IN ITALY – ORDER OF BATTLE AS AT 11 MAY 1944

### *Appendix VI*

### *ALLIED ARMIES IN ITALY*

### *Order of Battle as at 11 May 1944*

#### HEADQUARTERS ALLIED ARMIES IN ITALY

#### *5 Corps*

- **4 Indian Infantry Division**
- **10 Indian Infantry Division**
- **'D' Force**
- **23 British Armoured Brigade**
- **7 British Armoured Brigade (not yet in corps area)**

#### FIFTH ARMY

#### **Headquarters 4 United States Corps**

**36 United States Infantry Division (in army reserve; with 6 United States Corps on 22 May)**

#### *2 United States Corps*

- **85 United States Infantry Division**
- **88 United States Infantry Division**
- **1 United States Armoured Group**

#### *6 United States Corps*

- **1 United States Armoured Division**
- **3 United States Infantry Division**
- **34 United States Infantry Division**
- **45 United States Infantry Division**
- **1 British Infantry Division**
- **5 British Infantry Division**
- **1 Special Service Force**

### ***French Expeditionary Corps***

- **1 Motorised Infantry Division**
- **2 Moroccan Infantry Division**
- **3 Algerian Infantry Division**
- **4 Moroccan Mountain Division**
- **Goum Headquarters**
  - **1, 3 and 4 Groups of Tabors (Moroccan)**
- **2 United States Armoured Group**

### **EIGHTH ARMY**

**6 South African Armoured Division (less 12 South African Motor Brigade)**

### ***10 Corps***

- **2 New Zealand Division**
- **12 South African Motor Brigade**

- **24 Guards Brigade**
- **2 British Independent Parachute Brigade**
- **Hermon Force (King's Dragoon Guards, 12 Lancers)**
- **Italian Motor Group**

### ***13 Corps***

- **6 British Armoured Division**
- **4 British Infantry Division**
- **78 British Infantry Division**
- **8 Indian Infantry Division**
- **1 Canadian Armoured Brigade**
- **1 Guards Brigade**

### ***1 Canadian Corps***

- **5 Canadian Armoured Division**
- **1 Canadian Infantry Division (under 13 Corps until 16 May)**
- **25 British Tank Brigade**

### ***2 Polish Corps***

- **3 Carpathian Infantry Division**
- **5 Kresowa Infantry Division**
- **2 Polish Armoured Brigade**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## APPENDIX VII – FIFTEENTH ARMY GROUP – ORDER OF BATTLE AS AT 9 APRIL 1945

### *Appendix VII*

### *FIFTEENTH ARMY GROUP*

### *Order of Battle as at 9 April 1945*

#### FIFTH ARMY

#### *Under Army command*

- **85 United States Infantry Division (army reserve)**
  - **337, 338 and 339 Regimental Combat Teams**
- **92 United States Infantry Division**
  - **370 Regimental Combat Team**
  - **442 (Japanese-American) Regimental Combat Team (attached)**
  - **473 Regimental Combat Team (attached)**

#### *2 United States Corps*

- **Legnano Combat Team**
  - **68 and 69 Italian Infantry Regiments**
- **34 United States Infantry Division**
  - **133, 135 and 168 Regimental Combat Teams**
- **88 United States Infantry Division**
  - **349, 350 and 351 Regimental Combat Teams**

- **91 United States Infantry Division**
  - **361, 362 and 363 Regimental Combat Teams**
- **6 South African Armoured Division**
  - **11 South African Armoured Brigade**
  - **12 and 13 South African Motor Brigades**

#### ***4 United States Corps***

- **1 United States Armoured Division**
  - **6, 11 and 14 Armoured Infantry Battalions**
  - **1, 4 and 13 Tank Battalions**
- **10 United States Mountain Division**
  - **85, 86 and 87 Mountain Infantry Brigades**
- **1 Brazilian Infantry Division**
  - **1, 6 and 11 Brazilian Infantry Regiments**
- **365 Regimental Combat Team detached from 92 United States Infantry Division**
- **371 Regimental Combat Team**

#### **EIGHTH ARMY**

#### ***5 Corps***

- **56 British Infantry Division**
  - **24 (Guards) Infantry Brigade**
  - **167 and 169 ( **London**) Infantry Brigades**

- **Cremona Combat Group**
- **21 and 22 Italian Infantry Regiments**
- **8 Indian Infantry Division**
  - **17, 19 and 21 Indian Infantry Brigades**
- **78 British Infantry Division**
  - **11 and 36 Infantry Brigades**
  - **38 (Irish) Infantry Brigade**
- **2 New Zealand Division**
  - **4 New Zealand Armoured Brigade**
  - **5, 6 and 9 New Zealand Infantry Brigades**
- **2 Armoured Brigade**
- **9 Armoured Brigade (landing vehicles, tracked—Fantails)**
- **21 Tank Brigade**
- **2 Commando Brigade**

## ***2 Polish Corps***

- **3 Carpathian Division**
  - **1, 2 and 3 Carpathian Rifle Brigades**
- **5 Kresowa Division**
  - **4, 5 and 6 Wolynska Infantry Brigades**
- **2 Polish Armoured Brigade**
- **7 British Armoured Brigade**

- **43 Indian Lorried Infantry Brigade**

### ***10 Corps***

- **Jewish Infantry Brigade Group**
  - **Palestine Regiment**
- **Friuli Combat Group**
  - **87 and 88 Italian Infantry Regiments**

### ***13 Corps***

- **Folgore Combat Group**
  - **Nembo Regiment**
  - **San Marco Regiment**
- **10 Indian Infantry Division**
  - **10, 20 and 25 Indian Infantry Brigades**

### ***Army Reserve***

- **6 British Armoured Division**
  - **26 Armoured Brigade**
  - **1 (Guards) Infantry Brigade**
  - **61 Infantry Brigade**
- **2 Parachute Brigade**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## APPENDIX VIII – GERMAN ARMY GROUP C – ORDER OF BATTLE AS AT 11 MAY 1944

### *Appendix VIII*

### *GERMAN ARMY GROUP C*

### *Order of Battle as at 11 May 1944*

#### TENTH ARMY

#### *14 Panzer Corps*

- **15 Panzer Grenadier Division (mostly in reserve)**
- **71 Infantry Division**
- **94 Infantry Division**

#### *51 Mountain Corps*

- **1 Parachute Division**
- **5 Mountain Division**
- **44 Infantry Division**

#### *Hauck Group*

- **114 Light Division**
- **305 Infantry Division**
- **334 Infantry Division**

#### *Army Reserve*

- **90 Panzer Grenadier Division**

## ***76 Panzer Corps***

- **362 Infantry Division**
- **715 Infantry Division**
- **26 Panzer Division (in corps reserve)**

## ***1 Parachute Corps***

- **4 Parachute Division**
- **3 Panzer Grenadier Division**
- **65 Infantry Division**

## ***Army Reserve***

- **29 Panzer Grenadier Division**
- **92 Infantry Division**

## ARMY GROUP VON ZANGEN

## ***75 Corps***

- **Hermann Goering Division**
- **162 (Turcoman) Infantry Division**
- **356 Infantry Division**
- **135 Fortress Brigade**

## ***Corps Witthoeft***

- **Elements 278 Infantry Division**
- **Lines of Communication units**

## ***Adriatic Coast Command***

- **Bulk of 278 Infantry Division**
- **188 Reserve Mountain Division**

# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## APPENDIX IX – GERMAN ARMY GROUP C – ORDER OF BATTLE AS AT 9 APRIL 1945

### *Appendix IX*

### *GERMAN ARMY GROUP C*

### *Order of Battle as at 9 April 1945*

#### TENTH ARMY

#### ***76 Panzer Corps***

- **42 Light Division**
- **98 Infantry Division**
- **362 Infantry Division**
- **162 (Turcoman) Infantry Division**

#### ***1 Parachute Corps***

- **26 Panzer Division**
- **1 Parachute Division**
- **4 Parachute Division**
- **278 Infantry Division**
- **305 Infantry Division**

#### ***73 Corps***

- **Minor coast defence units only**

#### ***97 Corps (transferred to Army Group E on 10 April)***

- **188 Mountain Division**

- **237 Infantry Division**

### ***Army Reserve***

- **29 Panzer Grenadier Division**

- **155 Infantry Division**

## **FOURTEENTH ARMY**

### ***14 Panzer Corps***

- **8 Mountain Division**

- **65 Infantry Division**

- **94 Infantry Division**

### ***51 Mountain Corps***

- **114 Light Division**

- **148 Infantry Division**

- **232 Infantry Division**

- **334 Infantry Division**

- **Italia Infantry Division**

### ***Army Group Reserve***

- **90 Panzer Grenadier Division**

## **ARMY LIGURIA**

### ***Corps Lombardy***

- **San Marco Infantry Division**

- **Battle Group Meinhold**

## ***75 Corps***

- **5 Mountain Division**
- **34 Infantry Division**
- **Monte Rosa Mountain Division**
- **Littorio Infantry Division**

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**These preliminary narratives are based on the divisional, brigade, and unit war diaries of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force, supplemented by miscellaneous reports, records of interviews, eyewitness accounts, signal messages, strength states, sketches, citations, and unofficial material yielded by correspondence and interviews with participants.**

**GOC's Papers: a diary kept by Lieutenant-General Freyberg (or for him by his Personal Assistant), supplemented by relevant papers and reports grouped in files.**

**File 46. GOC's Diary, Part IV, 3 September 1943–17 October 1944.**

**File 52, Cassino, Terelle and Atina.**

**File 53, Sora – Rome – Arezzo.**

**File 54, Florence advance – Across to the Adriatic.**

**File 55, Attack on the Gothic Line.**

**File 56, Rimini- Pisciarello, and out of the line. Major-General Weir's diary, 5 September to 13 October 1944.**

**File 57, At Matelica.**

**File 58, Faenza operations.**

**File 59, Static period on Senio River line.**

**File 60, Static on Senio – Exercise 'Ubique'. Visit of General Mark Clark.**

**File 61, Relief of 2 New Zealand Division by 5 Kresowa (Polish) Division and withdrawal to Matelica area. Planning and training for coming offensive. Move forward to line again.**

**File 62, Orders for Operation BUCKLAND. Crossings of the Senio, Santerno, Sillaro, Gaiana, Idice, Reno, Po and Adige – capture of Padua and Venice – crossing the Piave.**

**File 63, Crossing of Isonzo and first contact with troops of Marshal Tito. Advance to Trieste. Surrender of German Armies in Italy. Defensive measures in Trieste. Visit of General Mark Clark. Visit of General McCreery.**

**File 64, Visit of Field Marshal Alexander. Yugoslav troubles at Trieste. Conference, future policy on war in Far East.**

**File 65, Farewell message to 2 New Zealand Division from Eighth Army Commander. Final days in Trieste-move to Trasimene – farewell articles in Trieste newspapers.**

**File 66, Conference on force for Japan. Move to Florence.**

**File 67, GOC's Diary, Part V, 18 October 1944–January 1945.**

**File 68, GOC's Diary, Part VI, 1 January- 17 October 1945.**

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**File 70, Furlough Scheme – RUAPEHU, WAKATIPU and reinforcements.**

**File 71, Furlough Scheme – TAUPO. Release of 4th Reinforcements.**

**File 72, Replacement Scheme – TONGARIRO. Use of 3 Division as replacements.**

**File 73, Replacement Scheme – HAWEA, WAIKATO, TEKAPO, APARIMA. Release of 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th Reinforcements.**

**File 75, Employment of Division. Effect of future policy on replacement of long-service personnel.**

**File 76, 3 Greek Mountain Brigade under command of 2 New Zealand Division.**

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**File 80, Occupation force for Far East (file labelled 'Jayforce').**

**File 81, Difficulties in obtaining shipping for repatriation of remainder of NZEF to New Zealand.**

**File 82, Disposal of equipment.**

**File 83, Leave scheme to United Kingdom.**

**File 84, Hand over of command of 2 NZEF. Report on various funds under control of GOC.**

**File 85, Memorial services – Crete, Sangro, Cassino and Alamein.**

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Documents from which extracts were translated:

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*Tenth Army* reports and conversations.

*Fourteenth Army* war diary and appendices.

*Fourteenth Army* reports.

*51 Mountain Corps* war diary and appendices.

*14 Panzer Corps* reports.

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

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**' Cassino – Sora – Avezzano.'** War History Branch narrative by R. Walker.

**' From the Arce Rest Area to Monte Lignano'**, by A. G. Protheroe.

**' Florence'**, by R. Walker.

**'The Italian Campaign, August – November 1944'**, by A. G. Protheroe.

**'The Italian Campaign, November 1944–May 1945'**, by R. L. Kay.

**' The End of the War and Disbandment of 2 NZEF'**, by R. L. Kay.

These preliminary narratives are based on the divisional, brigade, and unit war diaries of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force, supplemented by miscellaneous reports, records of interviews, eyewitness accounts, signal messages, strength states, sketches, citations, and unofficial material yielded by correspondence and interviews with participants.

GOC's Papers: a diary kept by **Lieutenant-General Freyberg** (or for him by his Personal Assistant), supplemented by relevant papers and reports grouped in files.

**File 46. GOC's Diary, Part IV, 3 September 1943–17 October 1944.**

**File 52, Cassino, Terelle and Atina.**

**File 53, Sora – Rome – Arezzo.**

**File 54, Florence advance – Across to the Adriatic.**

**File 55, Attack on the Gothic Line.**

**File 56, Rimini- Pisciattello, and out of the line. Major-General Weir's diary, 5 September to 13 October 1944.**

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# ITALY VOLUME II : FROM CASSINO TO TRIESTE

## GLOSSARY

### *Glossary*

|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>AA</b>                   | <b>anti-aircraft</b>   |
| <b>AA &amp; QMG</b>         | <b>Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General</b>  |
| <b>AAI</b>                  | <b>Allied Armies in <i>Italy</i></b>   |
| <b>A Branch (Office)</b>    | <b>staff of division or higher formation or command devoted to administration</b>              |
| <b>ACV</b>                  | <b>Armoured Command Vehicle</b>  |
| <i>acqua</i>                | <b>water</b>   |
| <b>ADC</b>                  | <i>aide-de-camp</i>  |
| <b>Adm, Admin</b>           | <b>Administration</b>  |
| <b>ADMS</b>                 | <b>Assistant Director of <i>Medical Services</i></b>   |
| <b>ADOS</b>                 | <b>Assistant Director of Ordnance Services</b>   |
| <b>ADS</b>                  | <b>Advanced Dressing Station</b>   |
| <b>adv</b>                  | <b>advance(d)</b>  |
| <b>AFHQ</b>                 | <b>Allied Forces Headquarters</b>  |
| <b>AFV</b>                  | <b>Armoured Fighting Vehicle (tank or armoured car)</b>  |
| <b>AGRA</b>                 | <b>Army Group, <i>Royal Artillery</i></b>  |
| <b>Air OP</b>               |  |
| <b>AOP</b>                  | <b>Air Observation Post</b>  |
| <i>alpe; alpi</i>           | <b>high mountain, summer pasture</b>   |
| <b>amn</b>                  | <b>ammunition</b>  |
| <b>ANVIL (later DRAGON)</b> | <b>code-name for Allied landing in southern <i>France</i></b>                                  |
| <b>AP</b>                   | <b>armour-piercing</b>   |
| <b>AQMG</b>                 | <b>Assistant Quartermaster-General</b>   |
| <i>arco; archi</i>          | <b>arch</b>  |
| <b>Ark</b>                  | <b>turretless Sherman or Churchill tank with hinged ramps for the bridging of canals, etc.</b> |
| <b>armd</b>                 | <b>armoured</b>  |
| <b>armoured brigade</b>     | <b>formation of fast cruiser tanks, etc.</b>   |
| <b>army tank brigade</b>    | <b>formation of slow infantry tanks, etc.</b>  |
| <b>arty</b>                 | <b>artillery</b>   |
| <b>ASC</b>                  | <b><i>Army Service Corps</i></b>   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>aslt</b>   | <b>assault</b>   |
| <b>A-Tk</b>   |  |
| <b>a-tk</b>   | <b>anti-tank</b>   |
| <b>autostrada;</b><br><b>autostrade</b>                   | <b>State motor-road</b>  |
| <b>AVRE</b>   | <b>Armoured Vehicle Royal Engineers (a Churchill tank with a large calibre mortar for demolition work, also carrier of fascine)</b>  |
| <b>Bde</b>  | <b>brigade (British or Allied formation, normally three tank or infantry battalions)</b>   |
| <b>B Ech(elon)</b>  | <b>non-fighting elements of unit or formation which can temporarily be dispensed with in battle; or transport for same</b>   |
| <b>bel or bello, bella;</b><br><b>bei or hegli, belle</b> | <b>beautiful</b>   |
| <b>BEM</b>  | <b>British Empire Medal</b>  |
| <b>BGS</b>  | <b>Brigadier, General Staff (chief staff officer at Corps or Army HQ)</b>  |
| <b>bianc-o, -a; bianch-</b><br><b>i, -e</b>               | <b>white</b>   |
| <b>BM</b>   | <b>Brigade Major (chief staff officer at Bde HQ)</b>   |
| <b>Bn</b>   | <b>battalion (a unit of tanks or reconnaissance troops, normally three squadrons plus HQ; of infantry, four rifle companies plus HQ company; of machine-gunners, four companies of Vickers guns)</b> |
| <b>Bn</b>   | <b><i>Battalion</i> (German unit of tanks, anti-tank or anti-aircraft guns, engineers, infantry, machine-gunners, or motor-cyclists)</b>   |
| <b>bocca; bocche</b>                                      | <b>mouth, estuary; pass; volcanic vent</b>   |
| <b>Bofors</b>   | <b>40-millimetre light anti-aircraft gun of Swedish design</b>   |
| <b>bonifica</b>   | <b>reclaimed land</b>  |
| <b>borgo; borghi</b>                                      | <b>market-town; suburb</b>   |
| <b>borro</b>  | <b>ravine, watercourse</b>   |
| <b>Breda</b>  | <b>Italian heavy machine gun or light automatic cannon</b>   |
| <b>Bren</b>   | <b>standard British light machine gun</b>  |
| <b>Bren-carrier</b>                                       | <b>light armoured tracked vehicle intended to carry Bren gun, but also used for reconnaissance, carrying ammunition or wounded under fire, etc.</b>  |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>brhead</b>                             | <b>bridgehead</b>   |
| <b>Brig</b>                               | <b>Brigadier</b>  |
| <b>Bty</b>                                | <b>battery (two, three or four troops of guns)</b>  |
| <b>BUCKLAND</b>                           | <b>code-name for <b>Eighth Army's</b> attack across the <b>Senio River</b>, April 1945</b>                |
| <i>campanile</i>                          | <b>bell-tower, belfry</b>   |
| <i>campo; campi</i>                       | <b>field</b>  |
| <i>canale; canali</i>                     | <b>canal, channel</b>   |
| <b>Capt</b>                               | <b>Captain</b>  |
| <b>carrier</b>                            | <b>see Bren-carrier</b>   |
| <i>carabiniere;</i><br><i>carabinieri</i> | <b>policeman, gendarme</b>  |
| <i>casa; case</i>                         | <b>house</b>  |
| <i>casale; casali</i>                     | <b>hamlet, outlying houses</b>  |
| <i>cascina; cascine</i>                   | <b>farm-building</b>  |
| <i>casella, caselle</i>                   | <b>small house</b>  |
| <i>casetta</i>                            | <b>diminutive of <i>casa</i></b>  |
| <i>casino; casini</i>                     | <b>small house; casino</b>  |
| <i>casone; casoni</i>                     | <b>hut, blockhouse</b>  |
| <i>casotto</i>                            | <b>cottage, hut</b>   |
| <i>castel or castello</i>                 | <b>castle, keep; fortified village</b>  |
| <b>Cav</b>                                | <b>Cavalry (light tanks, armoured cars, carriers)</b>   |
| <b>CAVALCADE</b>                          | <b>code-name for operation for advance to <b>Ravenna</b></b>  |
| <b>CB</b>                                 | <b>Companion of the Order of the Bath; counter-battery (fire), locating and silencing of hostile guns</b> |
| <b>CBE</b>                                | <b>Commander of the Order of the British Empire</b>   |
| <b>CCRA</b>                               | <b>Corps Commander, <b>Royal Artillery</b></b>  |
| <b>CCS</b>                                | <b>Casualty Clearing Station (large medical establishment between MDS and field hospital)</b>             |
| <b>Cdn</b>                                | <b>Canadian</b>   |
| <b>CE</b>                                 | <b>Chief Engineer (Corps or Army)</b>   |
| <i>cerro; cerri</i>                       | <b><b>Turkey</b> (southern European) oak</b>  |
| <b>CGS</b>                                | <b>Chief of the General Staff</b>   |
| <i>chiat-o, -a; -i, -e</i>                | <b>clear</b>  |
| <i>chiesa; chiese</i>                     | <b>church</b>   |
| <b>CIGS</b>                               | <b>Chief of the Imperial General Staff</b>  |
| <b>C-in-C</b>                             | <b>Commander-in-Chief</b>   |

|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| <b>CM</b>                 | <b>counter-mortar (fire)</b>  |
| <b>CMF</b>                | <b>Central Mediterranean Force</b>  |
| <b>CMG</b>                | <b>Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George</b>   |
| <b>CO</b>                 | <b>Commanding Officer (usually of a unit)</b>   |
| <b>Col</b>                | <b>Colonel</b>  |
| <i>colle; colli (col)</i> | <b>rising ground, hill</b>  |
| <b>Coln</b>               | <b>Column</b>   |
| <b>Comd</b>               | <b>Commander; Commanding</b>  |
| <b>comn</b>               | <b>communication(s)</b>   |
| <b>company</b>            |   |
| <b>coy</b>                | <b>(own) sub-unit of engineers, infantry or ASC troops (in infantry, three platoons; in other units, three or four sections); (enemy) sub-unit of tanks (=squadron), anti-tank or anti-aircraft guns, engineers, signals, infantry, service or medical troops</b> |
| <b>corduroy</b>           | <b>a method of covering unmetalled road with timber for the passage of wheeled vehicles</b>   |
| <i>cornio; corni</i>      | <b>horn, peak</b>   |
| <b>COS</b>                |   |
| <b>C of S</b>             | <b>Chief of Staff</b>   |
| <b>Cpl</b>                | <b>Corporal</b>   |
| <b>CRA</b>                | <b>Commander, <b>Royal Artillery</b> (of a division)</b>  |
| <b>CRASC</b>              | <b>Commander, Royal Army Service Corps (of a division; became CNZASC in <b>2 NZEF</b>)</b>  |
| <b>CRE</b>                | <b>Commander, Royal Engineers (of a division)</b>   |
| <b>CREME</b>              | <b>Commander, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers</b>   |
| <i>croce; croci</i>       | <b>cross</b>  |
| <b>Crocodile</b>          | <b>flame-throwing tank</b>  |
| <b>CSM</b>                | <b>Company Sergeant-Major</b>   |
| <b>CSO</b>                | <b>Chief Signal Officer</b>   |
| <b>DAF</b>                | <b><b>Desert Air Force</b></b>  |
| <b>DAQMG</b>              | <b>Deputy Assistant Quartermaster-General</b>   |
| <b>DCGS</b>               | <b>Deputy Chief of the General Staff</b>  |
| <b>DCIGS</b>              | <b>Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff</b>   |
| <b>DCM</b>                | <b>Distinguished Conduct Medal</b>  |

|                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <i>del or dello, della;</i>    | of the  |
| <i>die or degli, delle</i>     | of  |
| DICKENS                        | code-name for the operation by NZ Corps to capture <b>Cassino</b>           |
| Div                            |   |
| Division                       | formation above brigade or <i>Regiment</i> , below corps                    |
| Div Arty                       | Divisional Artillery (or NZA)   |
| Divisional Workshops           | Ordnance unit for maintaining guns, vehicles and other equipment            |
| DR                             | despatch rider (usually motor-cyclist)                                      |
| DRAGOON (formerly ANVIL)       | code-name for Allied landing in southern <b>France</b>                      |
| DSO                            | Distinguished Service Order   |
| DUKW                           | buoyant lorry driven over land on six wheels and through water by propeller |
| Dvr                            | Driver  |
| Echelon (First, Second, Third) | First, Second and Third Contingents of <b>2 NZEF</b> to go overseas         |
| ED                             | Efficiency Decoration   |
| engr(s)                        | engineer(s)   |
| <i>en portée</i>               | (of two-pounder gun) carried on special lorry, ready to fire                |
| ENSA                           | Entertainments National Services Association                                |
| ERS                            | Education and Rehabilitation Services                                       |
| <i>fabbrica; fabbriche</i>     | factory   |
| <i>faggio; faggi</i>           | beech   |
| Fantail                        | amphibious tracked vehicle  |
| fascine                        | bundle of logs used for filling ditches, etc.                               |
| FC/CTH                         | First City/The Cape Town Highlanders  |
| fd                             | field   |
| Fd Amb                         | Field Ambulance (medical unit)  |
| Fd Coy                         | Field Company (of engineers)  |
| FDL(s)                         | forward defended locality (localities)                                      |
| Fd Pk Coy                      | Field Park Company (of engineers)   |
| Fd Regt                        | Field Regiment (unit of artillery)  |
| <i>fiume; fiumi</i>            | river   |
| <i>fondo</i>                   | bottom; farm, estate  |
| <i>fontana; fontane</i>        | fountain; regulated spring  |

|                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| <i>fonte; fonti</i>        | spring, source   |
| <b>FOO</b>                 | <b>Forward Observation Officer (field or medium artillery)</b>   |
| <b>formation</b>           | <b>any group higher than unit</b>  |
| <i>fossa; fosse</i>        | <b>pit, ditch; watercourse</b>   |
| <i>fosso; fossi</i>        | <b>large pit or ditch</b>  |
| <b>fwd</b>                 | <b>forward</b>   |
| <b>GAF</b>                 | <b>German Air Force</b>  |
| <b>G Branch (Office)</b>   | <b>staff of division or higher formation or command devoted to operations</b>  |
| <b>GCB</b>                 | <b>Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath</b>   |
| <b>GCMG</b>                | <b>Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St. Michael and St. George</b>   |
| <b>Gds</b>                 | <b>Guards</b>  |
| <b>Gen</b>                 | <b>General</b>   |
| <b>Gen Tpt Coy</b>         | <b>General Transport Company, <b>RASC</b></b>  |
| <b>GHQ</b>                 | <b>General Headquarters</b>  |
| <b>Gk</b>                  | <b>Greek</b>   |
| <b>GOC(-in-C)</b>          | <b>General Officer Commanding (-in-Chief)</b>  |
| <i>gora</i>                | <b>conduit, irrigation channel, stream</b>   |
| <i>Goumiers</i>            | <b>North African tribesmen organised in <i>Tabors</i> (approximately battalions) of <i>Goums</i> (or companies) in the <b>French Expeditionary Corps</b></b>   |
| <b>Gp</b>                  |  |
| <b>Group</b>               | <b>(battalion or brigade) force of all arms; ( <b>RAF</b>) major formation, above Wing</b>   |
| <i>grand-e; -i</i>         | <b>great</b>   |
| <i>Gren</i>                | <b><i>Grenadier</i></b>  |
| <b>Grid (line)</b>         | <b>numbered map ruling, part of pattern usually of one or ten kilometre squares</b>  |
| <i>gross-o, -a; -i, -e</i> | <b>big, thick, coarse</b>  |
| <b>grousers</b>            | <b>metal plates bolted on to Sherman tank tracks to increase the area of the bearing surface and thus improve the performance of the tank over soft ground</b> |
| <b>GSO (I, II, III)</b>    | <b>General Staff Officer (Class 1, 2, 3)</b>   |
| <b>H</b>                   | <b>Hussars</b>   |
| <b>HE</b>                  | <b>high explosive</b>  |

|                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <i>Herbstnebel</i>          | autumn mist – German code-name for plan of withdrawal.  |
| HF                          | harassing fire  |
| HMG                         | heavy machine gun   |
| HMS                         | His Majesty's Ship  |
| Honey tank                  | nickname for General Stuart tank (American Mark III)  |
| HQ                          | headquarters  |
| hy mor                      | heavy mortar  |
| I                           |   |
| Int                         | Intelligence (of the enemy)   |
| 2 i/c                       | second-in-command   |
| <i>il; i</i>                | the   |
| Ind                         | Indian  |
| inf                         | infantry  |
| <i>inferiore; inferiori</i> | lower   |
| IO                          | Intelligence Officer  |
| <i>isola; isole</i>         | island  |
| Kangaroo                    | turretless tank used to carry infantry or stores  |
| KBE                         | Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire   |
| KCB                         | Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath   |
| KDG                         | King's Dragoon Guards   |
| KG                          | Knight of the Order of the Garter   |
| <i>la</i>                   | the   |
| LAD                         | Light Aid Detachment (Ordnance establishment for repairing guns, transport, etc., within brigade or unit) |
| <i>lago; laghi</i>          | lake  |
| <i>laguna; lagune</i>       | lagoon  |
| L-Cpl                       | Lance-Corporal  |
| <i>lido</i>                 | shore (at <b>Venice</b> , long low islands bounding the lagoon)   |
| line (transport)            |   |
| 1st                         | unit  |
| 2nd                         | divisional (carrying between field maintenance centre and division)                                       |
| 3rd                         | rear (carrying between railhead and field maintenance centre)   |

|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Littlejohn</b>                | <b>two-pounder anti-tank gun with a tapered-bore muzzle attachment</b>                                  |
| <b>LMG</b>                       | <b>light machine gun</b>  |
| <b>LO</b>                        | <b>liaison officer</b>  |
| <b>LOB</b>                       | <b>left out of battle</b>   |
| <b>L of C</b>                    | <b>Line(s) of Communication</b>   |
| <b>LRDG</b>                      | <b>Long Range Desert Group</b>  |
| <b>Lt</b>                        | <b>Lieutenant; light</b>  |
| <b><i>Luftwaffe</i></b>          | <b>German Air Force</b>   |
| <b>M10</b>                       | <b>self-propelled anti-tank gun</b>   |
| <b>MAAF</b>                      | <b>Mediterranean Allied Air Forces</b>  |
| <b><i>maggiore; maggiori</i></b> | <b>greater</b>  |
| <b>Maj</b>                       | <b>Major</b>  |
| <b><i>mare</i></b>               | <b>sea</b>  |
| <b><i>marina</i></b>             | <b>surface of the sea; sea coast; port of an inland village</b>   |
| <b>Mark (I, II, etc.)</b>        | <b>designation of production type, especially of tanks</b>  |
| <b><i>masseria; masserie</i></b> | <b>tenancy including a number of farms</b>  |
| <b>MBE</b>                       | <b>Member of the Order of the British Empire</b>  |
| <b>MC</b>                        | <b>Military Cross</b>   |
| <b>MDS</b>                       | <b>Medical Dressing Station (divisional medical establishment usually situated between ADS and CCS)</b> |
| <b>Med</b>                       | <b>medium</b>   |
| <b>ME(F)</b>                     | <b>Middle East (Forces)</b>   |
| <b><i>mezz-o, -a; i, -e</i></b>  | <b>half, medium, middle</b>   |
| <b>m.i.d.</b>                    | <b>mentioned in despatches</b>  |
| <b>(M) MG</b>                    | <b>(medium) machine gun</b>   |
| <b>MM</b>                        | <b>Military Medal</b>   |
| <b>MO</b>                        | <b>Medical Officer</b>  |
| <b><i>montagna;</i></b>          | <b>mountain</b>   |
| <b><i>montagne</i></b>           |   |
| <b><i>monte; monti</i></b>       | <b>mound, height, mountain; spring and autumn pastures</b>  |
| <b>MT</b>                        | <b>mechanical transport</b>   |
| <b>mtn</b>                       | <b>mountain</b>   |
| <b>NAAFI</b>                     | <b>Navy, Army, Air Force Institutes</b>   |
| <b><i>naviglio</i></b>           | <b>navigable canal, ship canal</b>  |

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| <b>NCO</b>                | <b>non-commissioned officer</b>  |
| <i>Nebelwerfer</i>        | <b>German six-barrelled rocket-projector</b>   |
| <i>ner-o, -a; -i, -e</i>  | <b>black</b>   |
| <i>nuov-o, -a; -i, -e</i> | <b>new</b>   |
| <b>NZA</b>                | <b>New Zealand Artillery</b>   |
| <b>NZE</b>                | <b>New Zealand Engineers</b>   |
| <b>NZEF</b>               | <b>New Zealand Expeditionary Force</b>   |
| <b>NZEME</b>              | <b>New Zealand Electrical and Mechanical Engineers</b>   |
| <b>NZOC</b>               | <b>New Zealand Ordnance Corps</b>  |
| <b>OBE</b>                | <b>Officer of the Order of the British Empire</b>  |
| <b>OC</b>                 | <b>Officer Commanding (squadron, battery, company)</b>   |
| <i>Ofenrohr</i>           | <b>German rocket launcher similar to the American bazooka</b>                                      |
| <b>offrs</b>              | <b>officers</b>  |
| <b>OKH</b>                | <b><i>Oberkommando des Heeres</i> (Army General Headquarters, War Ministry)</b>                    |
| <b>OKW</b>                | <b><i>Oberkommando des Wehrmacht</i> (Supreme Command of the Armed Forces, Defence Ministry)</b>   |
| <b>OP</b>                 | <b>observation post</b>  |
| <b>Ops</b>                | <b>operations; staff branch dealing with operations</b>  |
| <b>Ord (Fd Pk)</b>        | <b>Ordnance (Field Park, unit for supplying and maintaining equipment issued through Ordnance)</b> |
| <b>ORs</b>                | <b>other ranks (not officers)</b>  |
| <i>ospedale</i>           | <b>hospital</b>  |
| <i>osteria; osterie</i>   | <b>inn, tavern</b>   |
| <b>OVERLORD</b>           | <b>code-name for Allied cross-Channel invasion of western <b>Europe</b></b>                        |
| <b>PA</b>                 | <b>Personal Assistant (to GOC)</b>   |
| <i>palazzo</i>            | <b>palace, palatial house</b>  |
| <i>Panzer</i>             |  |
| <b>PZ</b>                 | <b>armour; armour plate</b>  |
| <i>Panzerfaust</i>        | <b>recoilless anti-tank grenade launcher</b>   |
| <i>Panzerkampfwagen</i>   | <b>German tank</b>   |
| <b>para</b>               | <b>parachute</b>   |
| <i>passo</i>              | <b>pass, passage, strait</b>   |
| <b>pdr</b>                |  |
| <b>pr</b>                 | <b>pounder</b>   |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <i>piana (pian)</i>                        | plain, small plain   |
| <i>piano (pian)</i>                        | plain, plateau   |
| <b>Piat</b>                                | projector, infantry, anti-tank                                 |
| <i>piazza</i>                              | public square, market place                                    |
| <i>piccol-o, -a; -i, -e</i>                | small, little  |
| <i>pino; pini</i>                          | pine   |
| <b>PLDG</b>                                | Princess Louise Dragoon Guards                                 |
| <i>podere; poderi</i>                      | peasant-farm or holding  |
| <i>poggio; poggi</i>                       | height, hill   |
| <b>Point</b>                               | height marked on map, usually in metres above sea level        |
| <b>Pt</b>                                  |  |
| <i>ponte; ponti</i>                        | bridge   |
| <i>portée</i>                              | see <i>en portée</i>   |
| <i>porto</i>                               | port, harbour; ferry-boat                                      |
| <b>posn</b>                                | position   |
| <i>posta</i>                               | post, post office  |
| <i>pozzo, pozzi</i>                        | well   |
| <i>prato; prati</i>                        | meadow   |
| <b>Pte</b>                                 | Private  |
| <b>PW(s)</b>                               | prisoner(s) of war   |
| <b>Q</b>                                   | Quartermaster; (broadly) administration                        |
| <b>QM(G)</b>                               | Quartermaster(-General)  |
| <b>quad</b>                                | lorry for towing British field gun or 18-pounder anti-tank gun |
| <i>querce or quercia; querci or querce</i> | oak  |
| <b>RA</b>                                  | <b>Royal Artillery</b>   |
| <b>RAC</b>                                 | <b>Royal Armoured Corps</b>                                    |
| <b>RAF</b>                                 | <b>Royal Air Force</b>   |
| <b>RASC</b>                                | <b>Royal Army Service Corps</b>                                |
| <b>RCD</b>                                 | <b>Royal Canadian Dragoons (1 Armoured Car Regiment)</b>       |
| <b>RCR</b>                                 | <b>Royal Canadian Regiment</b>                                 |
| <b>rd(s)</b>                               | round(s)   |
| <b>RE</b>                                  | <b>Royal Engineers</b>   |
| <b>Recce</b>                               | <b>Reconnaissance</b>  |
| <b>Regt</b>                                | <b>regiment (unit of tanks, reconnaissance troops, or</b>      |

artillery; in British Army also groups of tank, artillery or infantry units, e.g., RTR, RHA, King's Dragoon Guards)

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Regt</i>                       | (enemy) <i>Regiment</i> (formation of armoured troops or infantry, roughly equivalent to a brigade; also unit of field or medium artillery) |
| Reinforcements (4th, 5th, etc.)   | successive contingents of <b>2 NZEF</b> which went overseas after <b>Third Echelon</b>  |
| REME                              | Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers   |
| Res                               | reserve   |
| RHA                               | Royal Horse Artillery   |
| RHQ                               | Regimental Headquarters   |
| <i>rio</i>                        | stream  |
| <i>ripa</i>                       | bank, shore   |
| <i>riviera</i>                    | strip of land between the hills and the sea; river  |
| RMO                               | Regimental Medical Officer (of a unit)  |
| RMT                               | Reserve Mechanical Transport (general carrier when not taking infantry into or out of action)   |
| Res MT                            |   |
| RN                                | <b>Royal Navy</b>   |
| RNZA                              | Royal New Zealand Artillery (Regular Force only)  |
| <i>rocca; rocche</i>              | rock; crag; tower, keep   |
| <i>ross-o, -a; -i, -e</i>         | red   |
| <i>rotond-o, -a; -i, -e</i>       | round   |
| Royals                            | The Royal Dragoons  |
| RSM                               | Regimental Sergeant-Major   |
| R/T                               | radio-telephony (wireless transmission of speech)   |
| RTR                               | <b>Royal Tank Regiment</b>  |
| R Tks                             |   |
| 'Ruatoria' ('Charing Cross')      | a road junction near <b>Faenza</b>  |
| SA                                | South African(s)  |
| SAA                               | small-arms ammunition   |
| <i>San or Santo, Santa, Sant'</i> | Saint, Holy   |
| sangar                            | rocks piled up for protection in lieu of slit trench where ground too hard to dig   |
| <i>sasso; sassi ( sass)</i>       | stone, crag   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>SC</b>                                       | <b>Staff Captain (administrative staff officer at Bde HQ)</b>  |
| <b>Schmeisser</b>                               | <b>German machine carbine</b>  |
| <b>scolo; scoli</b>                             | <b>drain</b>   |
| <b>scuola; scuole</b>                           | <b>school</b>  |
| <b>sec</b>                                      | <b>section (2–3 guns; detachment of Signals; third of infantry platoon; third of ASC company, etc)</b> |
| <b>secc-o, -a; secch-i, -e</b>                  | <b>dry</b>   |
| <b>selva; selve</b>                             | <b>wood (usually of cultivated trees)</b>  |
| <b>serra</b>                                    | <b>ravine, defile; barricade; cross-range of mountains; height</b>                                     |
| <b>Sgt</b>                                      | <b>Sergeant</b>  |
| <b>Sigs</b>                                     | <b>Signals (responsible for R/T, W/T, Dr, telephone and other communications)</b>                      |
| <b>sitrep</b>                                   | <b>situation report</b>  |
| <b>slit trench</b>                              | <b>one- or two-man trench for fire position or protection</b>  |
| <b>sopra</b>                                    | <b>above</b>   |
| <b>sotto</b>                                    | <b>below</b>   |
| <b>SP</b>                                       | <b>self-propelled (guns); starting point</b>   |
| <b>spandau</b>                                  | <b>nickname for standard German light and medium machine gun</b>                                       |
| <b>Spr</b>                                      | <b>Sapper</b>  |
| <b>sqn</b>                                      | <b>squadron (of tanks, reconnaissance troops, or aircraft)</b>   |
| <b>SS ( Schutzstaffel)</b>                      | <b>corps d'élite of Nazi Party, security force with embodied military formations</b>                   |
| <b>ST</b>                                       | <b>starting time</b>   |
| <b>stazione; stazioni</b>                       | <b>station</b>   |
| <b>strada; strade</b>                           | <b>road</b>  |
| <b>Stuart (General)</b>                         | <b>American Mark III light cruiser tank</b>  |
| <b>sul or sullo, sulla; sui or sugli, sulle</b> | <b>on the</b>  |
| <b>superior-e; -i</b>                           | <b>upper</b>   |
| <b>Svy</b>                                      | <b>Survey</b>  |
| <b>Tac HQ</b>                                   | <b>Tactical Headquarters</b>   |
| <b>Tac/R</b>                                    | <b>(aerial) Tactical Reconnaissance</b>  |

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| <i>taverna</i>               | <b>tavern, inn</b>  |
| <i>Tedes-co, chi</i>         | <b>German</b>   |
| <b>Tentacle</b>              | <b>wireless detachment, usually of Air Support Control</b>  |
| <b>Tk</b>                    | <b>tank</b>   |
| <b>Tommy gun</b>             | <b>Thompson sub-machine gun</b>   |
| <i>torre; torri ( tor)</i>   | <b>tower; summit</b>  |
| <i>torrente; torrenti</i>    | <b>mountain torrent</b>   |
| <b>Tpr</b>                   | <b>Trooper</b>  |
| <b>tp(s)</b>                 | <b>troop(s); part of squadron (usually four tanks or armoured cars); part of battery (4–6 guns)</b> |
| <i>tribunale</i>             | <b>law-court</b>  |
| <i>ufficio or uffizio</i>    | <b>office</b>   |
| <b>UNRRA</b>                 | <b>United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration</b>                                      |
| <b>USAAF</b>                 | <b>United States Army Air Force</b>   |
| <i>valle; valli ( val)</i>   | <b>valley; lagoon, broadwater</b>   |
| <b>VC</b>                    | <b>Victoria Cross</b>   |
| <b>VD</b>                    | <b>Volunteer Officers' Decoration</b>   |
| <i>vecch-io, -ia;-i, -ie</i> | <b>old</b>  |
| <i>via; vie</i>              | <b>way</b>  |
| <i>villa; ville</i>          | <b>house with gardens</b>   |
| <i>Voralpenstellung</i>      | <b>Prealpine Defence Position</b>   |
| <b>Wasp</b>                  | <b>flame-throwing Bren carrier</b>  |
| <b>wastage</b>               | <b>reduction in manpower</b>  |
| <b>WE, war establishment</b> | <b>authorised full allotment (of men, weapons, etc.)</b>  |
| <i>Wehrmacht</i>             | <b>German Armed Forces</b>  |
| <b>WO</b>                    | <b>Warrant Officer</b>  |
| <b>W/T</b>                   | <b>wireless telegraphy</b>  |

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## [BACKMATTER]

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