



THE STORY
OF
46 DIVISION
1939 - 1945



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As follows is a transcription of the story of the 46th Division 1939-45. (It is in three parts).

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The transcription was carried out in remembrance of those who gave their lives in the service of the 46 Division and in particular the 46th Reconnaissance Regiment.

Mr S M Ager.

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F.O.R W.A.R.D

by

Lieutenant General Sir Richard L. McCreery KCB., KBE., DSO., MC.

No British Infantry Division had in this war a more active or distinguished battle record than the 46th Division. My close association with the Division began when I flew out to take over command of 10th Corps in August 1943, after General Horrocks had been severely wounded in a German air raid on Bizerte, where the Division was assembled ready for the Italian landings. Earlier however, in the bitter winter fighting in Tunisia against some of the Germans best troops, All Ranks of the Division had shown their splendid fighting qualities. In Tunisia the Division was asked to turn, with barely a pause, from grim defensive fighting to the attack.

128th Infantry Brigade played a vallant part with the 6th Armoured Division in the first round of the First Army's - Great final offensive, the breakout into the Kairouan Plain from Fondouk which harassed and upset the withdrawal of Marshal Messe's army, which the Eighth Army was driving Northwards towards Enfidaville.

Soon afterwards the 46th Division took part in the main attack which opened up a way into the Tunis Plain, and which led to the mass surrender of the whole of the enemy's forces in Tunisia.

About the middle of August, General Hawkesworth took over command of the Division, and here I wish to pay my very inadequate tribute to his magnificent qualities as a man, and as a soldier.

Every man in the Division had the greatest confidence in "Ginger", and within a few days of the landings at Salerno he was a familiar figure so all Ranks. Indefatigable, sturdy, and always ready with a word of cheer and sound advise, he was tireless in his visits to the most threatened spots during those days when tire battle at Salerno had developed into a hard pressed defence against heavy odds.

"Ginger" Hawkesworth, throughout his command of the 46th Division, showed himself to be a master of infantry tactics.

He fully appreciated the value of heavy artillery support, but at the same time he realised that Italy was an ideal terrain for the well trained infantry soldier. In the mountainous country which afforded wonderful cover from view, and where the enemy was often not thick on the ground, he varied his methods and was always ready to encourage surprise, a silent night approach, and fieldcraft.

The 46th Division hung on to their wide but shallow beachhead position in the hills around Salerno, and on the night of the 23rd September they turned to the offensive and after several days fighting in precipitous tangled hills they reached the edge of the Naples Plain, enabling the 7th Armoured Division to pass through. The next difficult task for the Division was the assault across the River Volturno on the Western flank near the sea.

By the 12th October the autumn rains had started and the river was a formidable obstacle. That night the Division succeeded in crossing on a wide front; the first of their many opposed river crossings in Italy. Before our tanks could support the infantry on the far side of the river, the enemy counter-attacked fiercely but the stout-hearted men of the 46th Division held firm and the bridgehead was steadily enlarged.

There followed a long period of winter fighting in one of the wettest and coldest winters that Italy had known for many years. On Monte Camino in early December, right up to the banks of the River Rapido and then in the scrub covered rocky hills on the far side of the Garigliano, the 46th Division battled on showing a splendid spirit of determination and endurance.

Throughout these months General Ilawkesworth's training proved its value. Surprise was often achieved and an objective captured at low cost. More than once a captured German officer said: "We never expected any attack; there was no warning, you had no artillery barrage." This winter brought out, under good junior leadership, all the traditional qualities of the British infantryman, determination, endurance, cheerfulness and a tough fighting spirit. Sometimes too much had to be asked of too few.

Why was it necessary to battle on with forces which were barely more numerous than those of the enemy ? The answer was that our Russian Allies were still under great stress, that a Second Front in the West had not yet started, and that it was essential to continue the strongest possible pressure in Italy, the only front where the Western Allies were in a position to fight the Germans.

The bridgehead over the River Garigliano was held by 10th Corps with the 46th Division always on the mountainous right flank. The Division held against repeated counter-attacks just sufficient of the hills to give covered crossings of the river. The dividend was to come some months later when in May from this bridgehead the French Corps, under the command of 5th US. Army, launched a tremendous attack across the mountains with four Divisions, an attack which turned the whole of the enemy's positions in his Hitler Line in the Lid Valley.

The Division now had a brief spell of rest and change in the Middle East. It returned to Italy to take part in another long drawn out and fierce battle, which broke through the enemy's Gothic Line on the Adriatic front, but owing to very early and heavy autumn rains a breakout into the Po Plains was not achieved. During this fighting North of the Gothic Line, the enemy, with good interior lines, along the Via Emilia was able to rush Divisions and much artillery from the Bologna front, which until now had been the most threatened.

The enemy had the advantage of excellent observation on the gradually rising high ground on the Western flank. He had copied our methods of big artillery concentrations, and during the fierce fighting of September 1944, the enemy's artillery and mortar fire was the heaviest experienced at any time during the Italian campaign. After the capture of Cesena, General Hawkesworth took over command of 10th Corps and General Weir, who had had great battle experience with General Freyberg's New Zealand Expeditionary Force, took over command of the Division.

The Division was lucky to have another fine leader as their Commander. The autumn of 1944 was not better than that of 1943. In October eight inches of rain fell; in November nine inches. The rivers sometimes rose some ten feet in a single night with a tremendous current. The valleys became flooded, or a sea of mud, and the hills between the rivers, often with steep eroded sides, were heavy clay. The going for tanks became almost impossible as two consecutive days without rain were extremely rare.

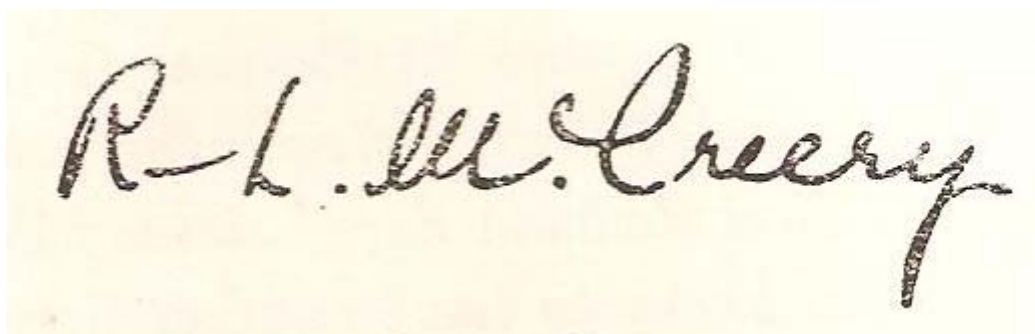
However, during this wet autumn, 46th Division again achieved great things, including the crossing of the River Lamone, in cooperation with Second Polish Corps. As on the Volturno, the enemy soon counter-attacked and the famous 90 P.G. Division launched a Divisional attack, the biggest German attack since Anzio. 46th Division, as ever, stood firm and the Germans suffered exceptionally heavy losses. The Division was now due for a well-earned rest and change, but Christmas dinners were barely over when a move was made to Greece.

Fortunately no large scale fighting followed there, but the first brigade to land did a sterling and difficult job in clearing the Piraeus area. The Division returned to Italy for the final stage of the campaign in April 1945. It moved to join the Eighth Army ready to take part in the attack on the "Venetian Line", North of the River Po. The Germans had been so smashed South of the Po, however, that they were not able to organise any defence North of the river, and the final surrender came on the 2nd May. For a brief time in Greece the Division renewed their association with General Hawkesworth, but their old Commander died suddenly on his way home soon after the end of the last great battle in May. He had worn himself out in the service of his 46th Division.

Every man will remember him only a few months before striding along the narrow, slippery mule tracks up those steep, rocky hills, with his stout stick in his hand, visiting every front line post to see things for himself. He never spared himself, and those Italian hills during the long winter months had sapped his physical strength. In Austria the 46th Division has fully upheld its great reputation in battle.

Since the end of the fighting a great variety of tasks has been undertaken, many of them unfamiliar. The British soldier has once again been a good ambassador for his country. By his cheerfulness, his high standard of soldierly bearing, and his good behaviour to the civil population he has won the respect of the Austrians and has shown why we won the war.

It has been a great privilege to me to have for so long under my command such a fine formation as the 46th Division. The fighting qualities, the teamwork and the loyalty which the Division has always shown, have been outstanding, and the battle record of the Division will live in history.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "R. L. McCreery". The ink is dark and the paper is a light cream color. The signature is written in a fluid, connected style.

Lieut.Gen. Richard L. McCreery

F.O.R W.A.R.D

by

Major General C. E. Weir CB, CBE, DSO.

This little book is an unofficial account of 46 Division's part in the late war. It has been produced by the Division about the Division and for the Division. We make no apology therefore for omitting details of other formation's actions. It is designed as a reminder of the times both good and bad that the members of 46 Division spent together.

Obviously, in a book of this size, a great deal of detail has had to be omitted; there is, however, sufficient to remind all of us of many incidents, and in the future years, when two or more of us are gathered together, sufficient to start a long train of reminiscences.

On the 4th November, 1944, I myself took over command from your very distinguished leader, the late Lieut. General Sir J. L. I. Hawkesworth, KBE, CB, DSO a soldier who had led you with great distinction through your hardest campaigns. I was already familiar with 46 Division's record of outstanding service and hard battling - who, in fact, was not? - and I was a very proud man when I first had Oak Trees sewn on my uniform.

Since I took over command, I have made many calls on the Division; these have always been met cheerfully and carried out with that quiet efficiency for which the Division is famous.

I have always found 46 Division a happy team, and because of that it is difficult to single out units or arms for particular mention, I know, however, that the Infantry and Reconnaissance Regt., who rightly get first place in this history, always had the greatest confidence in and gratitude to the other arms of the Division, the RA, RE, R. Signals, RASC, RAMC, RAOC, REME, CMP, and, of course., the armoured units and formations which supported the Division from time to time.

The Division's casualties were all too heavy, but they were light when we think of all that was done :

THE NORTH AFRICA BATTLES

SALERNO

THE VOLTURNO

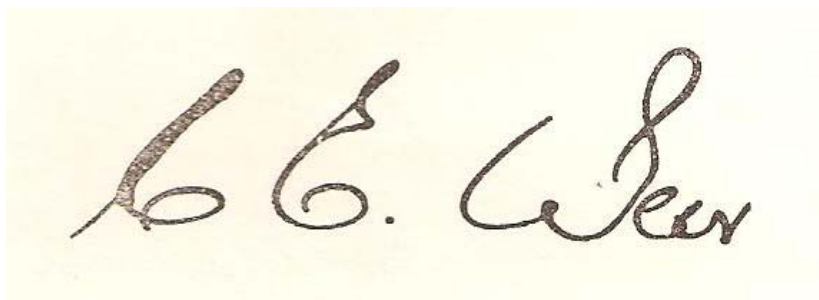
THE GARIGLIANO

THE GOTHIC LINE

and the many equally hard, but perhaps less known battles leading up to **FAENZA**.

I believe that the members of 46 Division both now, and in the future, as they return to civil life, will ensure that these casualties, and all the trials and hardships, will be the foundation on which a better world is built.

If this is so, then 46 Division's active service, with all that is entailed, will not have been in vain.

A handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored background. The signature is written in a cursive style and reads "C. E. Weir".

Major General C. E. Weir

INTRODUCTION

46 Division is a North West Midland and West Riding Territorial Division. In September 1939 it was embodied, under command of Major-General A. L. Ransome, CB, DSO, MC from its peaceful interwar existence . Codeword "Clive", which also put into operation the Civil Defence Scheme, brought about this transformation The scattered battalions spent their early days in their home towns guarding Vulnerable Points; being issued with kit and equipment; drilling and learning to handle the few weapons, other than rifles, which were available at that time.

There was no transport, only a few civilian cars; no RASC companies; a nucleus of signals; one Field Ambulance; a company of Sappers, and a handful of Military Police. In mid-October came the first batch of Army Class recruits, eight hundred of them, who were documented in Doncaster Corn Exchange and fed by the Co-Operative Wholesale Society.

In December the guard duties came to an end, but a comprehensive era of anti-invasion defence, to be put into action on the code-word "Julius Caesar", was compiled. In March 1940 orders were to proceed to France to carry out work on the lines of communication and especially on the St-Nazaire Nantes railway.

The Gunners were left behind in England and took over Sheffield District. It is interesting to note, in view of the subsequent fighting, how battalions were equipped. They took with them four two-inch mortars without ammunition, eighteen Bren guns, ten Anti-tank rifles, one motor-cycle, one four seater car, eight fifteen and three thirty hundredweights, and one water-truck.

So accoutred the Division sailed from Southampton on the 28th April and the following morning landed at Cherbourg, the heart of the British Expeditionary Forces arteries of supply. France, in May 1940, was a not uncomfortable country. Living was cheap, and the people friendly.

If their light beer hardly rivalled Burton Special or Tetley's Dynamite, it was nevertheless only four pence a litre. Eggs and chips in the local estaminets made up for any failure of the Army cooks, who were still unversed in the many variations that can be performed with a tin of stew or bully beef.

The French people rested content in the impregnability of the Maginot Line no one will forget the endless rings and trinkets with representations of the Line and the motto "They shall not pass."

It was on May 12th 1940 that the Germans invaded Belgium, and three days later 46 Division was ordered north to form a reserve on the Belgian frontier. The Division moved in separate Brigades to Rouen, and it was in separate Brigades that they fought and were evacuated. Of that fighting it is possible to give only the barest outline. It was confused, independent and one-sided. Already beyond Rouen the roads and railways were congested with refugees.

138 Bde took up early positions along the River Scarpe and the Canal de la Haute Daule, a stretch of fourteen miles with fourteen bridges. All communication was by despatch rider (battalions had just received ten extra motor-cycles), and they worked day and night without maps in a strange country, with the enemy anywhere and, everywhere. All the bridges were jammed with a constant stream of refugees; the river was a seething mass of barges which had pulled away from Douai. Battalions had to live on the land, for the supply lines had been disrupted. Enemy planes monopolized the air, and strafed and bombed the bridges. It was on 23rd May that the brigade was ordered to withdraw to the Forest of Nieppe - they passed the concrete fortifications of the Hindenburg Line, where the Division's greatest triumph of the last war had been won and after fighting in the thick undergrowth and darkness of the woods, joined up with 137 Bde two days later.

As their trains drew into Abbeville 137 Bde had been caught in a savage raid, which completely split up the Brigade. It was only 2/5 West Yorkshire Regt and the Headquarters which, after a vain attempt to hold La Basse Canal, joined 138 Bde in the long trek back to Dunkirk. That journey, along congested roads, uncertain of the whereabouts of friend or foe, cannot easily be forgotten. It was only a chance encounter with a Staff Officer from 3 Corps that elicited the information that the B. E. F. was falling back on Dunkirk. The latter stages of the withdrawal were made by winding by-roads. Lack of sleep, endless marches and continuous harassing from the air reduced all and sundry to a state of complete exhaustion.

139 Bde, after long peregrinations, also found themselves holding a sector of the La Basse Canal. Four days later the Germans broke through their positions; costly counterattacks failed to do more than delay the advancing enemy and cost the Foresters especially, grievous casualties. It was ironic that their attack had been countermanded, but word of its cancellation had not reached them.

So by 29th May all three brigades found themselves nearing Dunkirk. For two days they manned the Bergues- Furnes Canal while the early evacuation went ahead, and on June 1st they began to withdraw towards the beaches. Through the ruins of Dunkirk they made their way to the Mole, or huddled on the bare expanse of sand waiting their turn for a boat.

Meanwhile the KOYLI and two battalions of the Duke of Wellington's Regt, which had been isolated at Abbeville, were still fighting further south. For a while they guarded Dieppe, and then moved back to the Seine. Here the KOYLI battled gamely to hold the bridges at Pont de l' Arche; but the river was crossed elsewhere and they started on the long road back towards Cherbourg, St. Malo and St. Nazaire. They made their way on foot or in commandeered transport, and even occasionally by train.

Never did men see more gladly the shores of England or settle more contentedly in an English train than did the remnants of the Division who had survived this tragic and unequal fighting.

The Division had to be built up again. This process started in Manchester, but soon there came a move to Scotland. Already the Division had received 49 Division Artillery, and Sappers, Signals and RASC were made up to full strength during the summer. Indeed within little more than a month of Dunkirk Division was better equipped than it had ever been in the dark days in France. In Scotland the Division was visited in quick procession by the Rt. Hon. Anthony Eden and H. R. H. The Duke of Gloucester.

It was in September of that year that the invasion alarm "Cromwell" flashed across England and the Army stood to. All the coastal defences were manned, and the Home Guard were out on their flimsy roadblocks -with their elaborate array of weapons.

From the Fife coast the Division moved in the Autumn to Dumfries, where training commenced in earnest. It was a hard winter with heavy falls of snow, but the warm hospitality the Border towns more than compensated for the coldness of the weather.

It was at Galashiels that 16 D. L. I. joined the Division, replacing 9 Foresters in 139 Ede. With considerable regret the Division left Scotland in January 1941 for Cambridgeshire.

The journey south was used as an exercise in movement by road. It would be interesting to know how many drivers took wrong turnings in the Great North road as it passed through its familiar Yorkshire countryside.

Soon the Division was in Norfolk. Headquarters were Didlington Hall, where unfinished nissen wet concrete floors and continuous rain extended an uninspiring welcome. The division was responsible for anti-invasion preparations; battalions trained their local Home Guards, and some were working on aerodrome defence. Among the Division's many commanders in Norfolk was Major-General M. C. Dempsey, who later commanded the British Second Army in France.

For a brief month, May 1941, the Division took over Norfolk's coast defences. But then training began once more, and many smaller schemes culminated in the momentous "Exercise Bumper", in which the troops in South and East England were swung like pawns over the surprised East Anglian countryside.

It was during this summer that 46 Recce Regt became part and parcel of the Division, and before leaving for Kent in late November Major-General Freeman-Attwood, who was to take the Division abroad, assumed command. On the south-east corner of Kent from Winchelsea to Dymchurch the Division took its station. Battle Schools were now the rage, and at Beachborough, near Folkestone, with its bare surrounding hills, a the of "blood, sweat, toil and tears" was exacted from the now almost trained battalions.

In August 1942 137 Bde left the Division, to be replaced in September by 128 (Hampshire) Brigade. The Division was mobilizing, and soon was up to full strength in men and equipment. It carried out one large field firing exercise on Lewes Downs, which was watched by General Eisenhower, before in December it moved to its final concentration area near Aldershot.

There at the end of the month the Division was inspected by His Majesty King George VI, who wished us all "Good Luck, a victorious campaign and a safe return home".

THE DIVISIONS TRAVEL



CHAPTER ONE

THE TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN

1. THE EARLY DAYS

It was on Christmas Eve 1942 that 139 Bde embarked at Liverpool on the long Odyssey that two and a half years later was to bring them through the eastern Alps into Austria. In the convoy was the "Derbyshire" which was often to be seen in later Mediterranean journeyings.

The Brigade was the first instalment of 46 Division to join the meagre and tired First Army, which at that time consisted of 78 Division, part of 6 Armoured Division, several Commandos and some Parachute Troops and which had been holding on for a month in urgent need of reinforcement since the failure of its ambitious dash to capture Tunis.

In this first convoy were the three Infantry battalions, 70 Field Regt, 229 Anti-Tank Battery, 379 Light AA Battery, 270 Field Coy R. E., 183 Field Ambulance, 139 Bde Coy RASC, 139 Bde REME, and C Squadron 46 Recce Regt. Only a handful of these four thousand men had ever been in action, and many had never before left the shores of England.

On 3rd January, after a wide sweep to avoid submarines, and an inoculation with the discomforts of wartime trooping, the convoy sailed into the blue bay of Algiers with its impressive waterfront facade of modern white buildings.

General Freeman-Attwood was at the docks to meet them, and a fifteen mile march, burdened down under the weight of their kit, took them out to Maison Carree.

There was a general shortage of transport, for all the military vehicles were needed to keep open the long-drawn lines of communication to the distant front, and what civilian trucks there were had already been requisitioned. Maison Carree was in a level plain, a wine growing district cultivated by French farmers.

There were scattered orange groves, and hawking Arabs, airing a basic and utilitarian English vocabulary, bargained over their stolen tangerines.

In Algeria this contrast between the French settlers, who tried to reproduce the civilization of Metropolitan France, and the Arab population, who had left all their finer qualities behind in the desert, was continually forcing itself on the eye.

In the towns white municipal buildings and offices lay back to back with the rude hovels of the native quarter, and in the country districts a primitive scratching agriculture went on alongside modern French cultivation.

The roads were shared by military trucks and creaking oxen-drawn carts. Within a week the Brigade was moving up by road and rail to Ghardimaou on their five hundred mile journey to the front. Crowded cattle trucks jerked their way through the barren brown and buff-coloured hills into the plain of Setif at little more than walking pace, and crowds of ragged children appeared from nowhere and ran beside the train crying "Bis-queet, cigarette".

The last train journey had been the slick trip to Liverpool. Beyond Ghardimaou lay the notorious "Messerschmitt Alley" a ten mile level stretch of straight road, where two familiar planes — Gert and Daisy they were called — daily straffed any vehicles they saw. Aircraft sentries perched on the cabs of the well-spaced trucks. Algeria had been left behind, and cork woods spread a dull green skin over the lower Tunisian hills.

On 17th January the Durhams relieved 5 Buffs in positions beyond Sedjenane on the Tabarka—Mateur road, and the following evening 2/5 Foresters (soon to become 5 Foresters since the 1/5 Battalion had been lost at Singapore) took over from 6 Royal West Kents. The Leicesters were in reserve. Less than ten miles away lay the nearer of the two great inland lakes, and it was under thirty miles to Bizerta. Ahead, the stubborn outlines of "Green Hill" and "Baldy Hill" closed in the winding valley from Sedjenane, and from them the enemy observed our every move.

It was here, six weeks previously, that the enemy had ambushed and halted the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders in their drive on Bizerta. It was not, therefore, a position that had been chosen for its defensive strength in fact, the Brigade was in a large basin over-looked by hills on all sides. The enemy, moreover, had almost a monopoly of the air.

Our fighters were few, and their aerodromes far to the rear. Gert and Daisy were a daily sight. They made it dangerous to move on the road in daytime, and the enemy's commanding ground positions imposed a necessary caution on our forward troops.

The front was lightly held, a brigade being deployed to cover each of the three roads that led to Tunis and Bizerta. Immediately to the south 11 Bde of 78 Division was holding Hunt's Gap and the Beja road, but the twelve miles of intervening hills were unoccupied, and to the north only small horse patrols of the poorly-equipped Corps Franc d'Afrique roamed the ten miles of hills to the sea's limit.

These wide interstices were underlined when a long-range German patrol mined the road below Sedjenane, and incapacitated several vehicles.

But in the main it was Italians, with the waving plumes of the Bersaglieri Regt, who held the hills inoffensively, and made timid patrols in search of food. Under command Brigadier Chichester Contable had two Commandos, two batteries of mountain artillery, and two troops of mediums. But before the end of the month, VI Commando, the Leicesters and part of 70 Field Regt moved south to the Beja sector.

Rain brought the first sample of Tunisian mud, a peculiar variety which clogged the tracks of carriers, and formed a heavy casing round your boots, so that for every few yards of progress you had to shake off the leaden weight. The lightest shower made the hillsides slippery as ice.

It was in such conditions that 139 Bde began a life in slit-trenches, erections of stone and scarce bivouacs, and a few Arab huts. These were loosely built of mud and stone, with roofs that invariably leaked, mud floors and a mixed and thriving population of bugs.

Meanwhile 128 Bde embarked at Gourrock on 6th January. Clydeside flat-dwellers came out on their balconies to cheer the train as it passed. Two battalions were on the "Leopold-ville". Low clouds lay on the Scottish hills.

138 Bde sailed from Liverpool, but the "Duchess of Bedford" was hit by a tug and the sailing delayed. For four days she ploughed unescorted through the indifferent and dangerous Atlantic before a Catalina spotted her and guided her back to the convoy. It was a change from blacked-out England to see the lights of Tangiers strung out along the African shore, as the convoy passed through the Straits of Gibraltar in the darkness.

The Mediterranean calm was welcome to many after stormy Atlantic buffetings. In Sunday morning sun-shine, on 17th January, the convoy pulled into Algiers. 138 Bde moved off on the long, broiling trek to Maison Carree, but 128 Bde were immediately re-embarked on two fast cross-channel packets, and in the evening swung out along the African coast to Bone.

There the battalions hastily disembarked (it was a frequent target for enemy aircraft) and marched to the newly erected No 4 Transit Camp among the sand dunes five miles east of the town. Bone had its French boulevards, its cafes with little to sell, and its out-of-bounds Kasbah.

The Hotel Touring, the Hotel Continental and the Tobacco Factory, which housed some of 128 Bde group, proved in the end less comfortable than the clean sands, from which it was not too cold to bathe. Bone had its air-raids, and AA guns from the hills put up a heavy protective barrage over the harbour.

Transport J51 had been sunk with the loss of its cargo of guns and vehicles, but with little loss of life, for the torpedoes struck her on a calm Mediterranean afternoon. In accordance with convoy orders no ship stopped, and the men in the water watched the vessels steam slowly over the horizon. Later, fishing boats and circling destroyers picked them up.

The material losses were, however, made up, and by 1st February both brigades were well on their way to take over, 128 Bde at Hunt's Gap and 138 Bdc on the Beja-Oued Zarga road. At this time the enemy was estimated to have 35,000 troops in Tunisia, apart from the forces facing General Montgomery's Eighth Army, which had just recently captured Tripoli (in Bone there was a March Past to celebrate this victory).

All but three thousand were German. There was a daily build-up of some 250 - from the higher hills it was possible on a clear day to see the transports coming in low to Tunis airport.

The enemy was judged to have three hundred tanks, and descriptions were circulated of a new giant sixty-ton machine called the "Tiger".

One hundred and fifty fighters and light-bombers operated from ideal airfields within easy distance of the front, and an Air Force of over a thousand planes, more than half of them long-range bombers, was based on Sicily, Sardinia and Southern Italy.

2. THE OPENING MOVES

It was the Leicesters who had the first taste of battle, though already patrols had been out all along the front, and enemy aircraft had caused casualties in Sedjenane and Beja.

On 10th January they carried out a company attack on an Italian position north of "Green Hill" at extreme artillery range up the "Buckshee Road". This track got its name

because there was no one to guard it. French troops were with the Leicesters, but they had disappeared on private enterprises before the Italians were reached. It was a long trek and a successful attack, but its importance lay in the sequel. A German officer was captured in his staff car with a chart of the anti-tank defences of Green Hill.

He turned out to be a tank expert on an important reconnaissance, and the Germans soon showed their anxiety about his fate. Pte Cresswell, who had been wounded and taken prisoner in the attack, was deposited blindfold within twenty yards of one of the Forester positions, with a personal letter addressed to the Brigade Commander, as well as his own medical history sheet and recommendations for his future treatment. The letter asked for information about the captured officer, ostensibly to relieve his parents anxiety (he had high Army connections).

Prisoners who were captured in the later battles were asked what they knew of him. Plans were now made to capture Green Hill, Baldy Hill and Sugar Loaf, and open the road to Bizerta. But before the attack could be mounted, the enemy had launched his general offensive which all but shattered the whole Tunisian front.

It began far to the south where Rommel's Armour rumbled up the Sbiba pass, and broke through the crude American defences of the Kasserine pass — there had only been twenty four hours in which to prepare positions.

To bolster up the weakened defences, and to counter this dangerous threat, the Leicesters, 450 Field Battery and 229 A/T Battery were rushed south a hectic hundred and fifty miles from Sedjenane to Thala.

The Americans had attempted to stem the attack in the nearer end of the pass, but had been driven back in some confusion, and all that day (20th February) the lightly armoured Valentine tanks of the Lothians and the 17/21 Lancers, outgunned and without cover, fought a gallant but costly withdrawal across the rolling plain towards Thala. Stukas wheeled and dived on anything they saw. The Leicesters had dug in on some rising, rocky ground a few miles in front of the town: American transport, tanks, three-tonners and jeeps passed through all afternoon. One jeep with a 37mm anti-tank gun pulled up and the American said "Are you guys stopping?" On being told "Yes" he replied "Well, I guess I'd better stop too." He put his little gun in position, where later it was crushed under a German tank.

Towards dusk the remnants of 26 Armoured Brigade tanks came through, and it was on their tail that the Germans arrived, before the minefield had been closed. They came in led by a captured Valentine, and their crews were sitting on the turrets smoking. They were in amongst the three forward Leicester companies before the hoax was realised. Follow-up infantry overran the surprised Leicesters. Some German tanks got as far as the twenty-five pounders, and the tank gunners fired up the road from their laagers. The leading German tank was hit, and the flames lit up the rest. The enemy gave up for the night. It was a tiny force left in front of Thala.

After the night's confused fighting only two anti-tank guns were still in action; twenty tanks remained; there was little more than two companies of infantry. Only the two field batteries were still intact. At dawn the Lothians attacked with their ten tanks.

This gallant gesture may have deceived the Germans. But the main cause of Rommel's failure to press on to a major victory he had already inflicted grave losses in men and material, especially on the Americans — was a telegram from the Italian Government ordering him to move south, where it was feared that the position of the Italian Divisions was in jeopardy from a forthcoming attack by the Eighth Army

All day the tiny force was subjected to intense shelling, but only one insignificant attack came in about midday.

By the evening reinforcements had arrived, in the of American guns and a battalion of Guards; at the same time his own Government had told Rommel to obey orders. Next morning the enemy had gone.

In this their first battle, the Leicesters lost more than four hundred men; 229 A/T Battery had fifty casualties, while 450 Battery, who had kept their guns in action throughout the engagement, had also suffered considerably. It was a costly and discouraging initiation, and a sudden, disjointed and helter-skelter battle.

3 SIDI NSIR

In the Beja sector 5 Hampshires were holding an outpost position at Sidi Nsir, twelve miles in front of Hunt's Gap. The long road was often mined by roving German patrols. From Sidi Nsir station, where Command Post s were established, the railway led up a rocky to Mateur, but the road branched right through a rough winding valley to Tebourba and

The battalion was disposed on the zsele of hills round the station, with the two troops of 155 Battery echeloned on either side of the Tunis road — it was little more than a rough track. Two miles out along the railway, at the mud village of Sidi Bana, and two miles east, on the jutting rock mass of Hill 609, there were outlying platoon positions. Back down the road to Hunt's Gap a forward administration post was housed in "Hampshire Farm".

There had been earlier patrol clashes, but on the morning of 22nd February a platoon patrol on Djebel M'dalla ran into three companies of the Barenthin Regt, who were making ready to attack Sidi Nsir. There was no cover at the rocky djebels or in the open valleys, ad the enemy had seen them coming.

They were surrounded, but the fight went on all morning. From the nearest positions you could see the Germans calmly mounting their mortars and machine guns. The patrol was lost; but the attack did not come in, the enemy contenting himself with a heavy barrage of mortar and machine gun fire at dusk.

The misty dawn of 26th February came up after a night of intermittent mortaring. The long barrel of a Tiger's eighty-eight millimetre gun was pointing round the edge of Djebel M'dalla.

At seven o'clock a line of tanks began to move slowly down the Tunis road. Our guns engaged them, and the minefield held them up. Three tanks were disabled. At ten o'clock came the news that Hill 609 had fallen.

Half tracks appeared, and enemy infantry. At Sidi Bana the platoon fought a gallant and prolonged battle against two Barenthin companies, until just after midday they were overwhelmed.

The platoon commander's last message was that three men were left and that he was destroying the wireless set. Enemy aircraft were active, shooting up ammunition carriers on their way forward. Shortly after midday two Spitfires appeared, diving and twisting to attack the tanks.

But by early afternoon the tanks were through the minefield, and bearing down on the guns. For two hours Freddie troop held up twenty tanks, disabling three; they were firing over open sights at two hundred yards range. One by one the guns were put out of action.

Then a Mark IV tank advanced towards the gun position. A two-pounder, which till then had held its fire, knocked it out at thirty yards. But the little gun went up in flame under the concentrated fire of the remaining tanks, which then rolled on down the road on top of Easy troop, and on to the station. It was dusk, and enemy infantry came in to attack Hill 374 which was still intact.

They overran the company there. Darkness came down, and heavy rain. The remnants of the battalion collected at Hampshire Farm. At midnight they began to withdraw towards Hunt's Gap.

The left hand company was moving back along the hills north of the road. It was a long, slippery trek and a weary, dishevelled remnant that reached Hunt's Gap in the morning. Little more than two hundred men got back from SidiNsir. But the twenty four hours delay, and the night's rain, were invaluable to the defenders of Hunt's Gap.

4. HUNTS GAP

Hunt's Gap was not very different from Sidi Nsir. There was only one way tanks could approach, down the road between the hills on either side. The heavy night's rain had turned the rich soil of the valley floor into a thick mud paste, and the tanks bogged down when they tried to move off the road. Back at Sidi Nsir there was a long hold-up of tanks and vehicles bedded in the mud. The 27th February was the crucial day of the battle.

There was little in the way of anti-tank defence to hold Hunt's Gap that morning — sixteen twenty-five pounders of 153 and 154 Batteries, the twenty-four guns of 5 Medium Rgt, the six-pounders and solitary seventeen-pounder of 231 A/T Battery, and the Bofors of 457 Light A. A. Battery comprised the artillery.

The enemy could call on as many tanks as we had guns, but he was unable to use them effectively with only the road to advance along.

Two Hampshire battalions and the weary remnants of the Leicesters held the hills astride the road. It was ironic that the infantry, who had been treated to a demonstration of the new secret anti-tank weapon, the FIAT, by a Staff-sergeant from Hythe a few days previously, should have to rely on their useless Boyes anti-tank rifle.

But reinforcements were being gathered up from all along the front. 2 8 2 Battery drove all night through rain and mud from Robaa sixty miles to the south, and by midday had taken up anti-tank positions on the rise in front of Ksar Mezouar station where a sunken road crossed the valley floor.

The Churchill tanks of the North Irish Horse had started their two hundred mile forced march to Beja. It was mainly on his tanks that the enemy was relying this first day, and there was no major infantry attack, though infantry could be seen moving through the hills, and some came up the road in half-tracks.

It appeared that the enemy was building up for a co-ordinated attack, while at the same time his tanks tried to achieve an immediate break-through which would make this attack unnecessary.

He lost eleven tanks during the day, the guns picking them off as they moved in single file down the road or floundered in the muddy fields. The enemy had failed to make any real penetration on the 27th, but the next morning he renewed the attack with determination and infantry.



Churchill tanks go into action near Ksar Mesouar Tunisia 28 February 1943



A 'Pheasant' 17-pounder anti-tank gun in action on the Medenine front. Tunisia, 11 March 1943 (NA1076)

The guns of 282 Battery had to be withdrawn from in front of Ksar Mezouar Station.

The solitary seventeen pounder was knocked out; after its camouflage had un-luckily been set alight it became an easy target for the enemy tanks. Of the three farms across the valley beyond the station, the right hand Guessa Farm, was captured, and the main part of a company of 2/4 Hampshire's overrun. Montaigne Farm was successfully held the Leicesters. Hurri-bombers were up in some number, and there were frequent dog fights, drawing their smoke-patterns across the sky. Their appearance was a fillip to the infantry, who were stuck in their slit-trenches with little idea of the battles course except on their own particular hill.

The brunt of the fighting fell on 2/4 Hampshires, stretched out on either side of Hunt's Gap itself. The battle surged round them, and to the rear but they held on. At night a few men would slip down to the railway Tunnel and sieze some of the "Compo" rations piled there the mud.

The Pioneer platoon went out to blow up some of the disabled enemy tanks. That afternoon brought the Churchill tanks of the North Irish Horse, which had made a two hundred mile forced march, and now moved into hull-down positions across the valley. They were outgunned, and the enemy subsequently made many efforts to entice them into the open. Another great day's shooting had accounted for ten enemy tanks. The following day, the 1st March, saw the crisis of the battle safely passed.

The enemy cut the road from Hunt's Gap to Ksar Mezouar. His infantry attacked our hill positions, where it made some penetrations, but no really important gains.

2 Hampshires had joined the other depleted Hampshire battalions in positions from Chemical Corner in the north across a valley to Montaigne Farm, where a Leicester company was effectively defending itself. At Beja, enemy bombers tried to choke the narrow bottle-neck through which our supplies and reinforcements came up.

The Churchill tanks and the guns co-operated in a day of hectic shooting. With the enemy's failure to gain any major success through Hunt's Gap the battle there settled into a stalemate. For, on 1st March, a fresh attack opened to the north, down the Sedjenane road, and its success drew both sides' attention and available forces, though on our part it was impossible to deplete the defence of Hunt's Gap to any great extent for fear the enemy might renew his effort there, and by a sudden thrust capture Beja. Indeed, on 2nd March, General Alexander, who had recently taken over command of 18th Army Group, visited 128Bde Headquarters, and that evening a battalion of the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders arrived to reinforce the tired and harassed infantry.

They attacked the next morning, with gallantry but only limited success, and the Churchills also moved forward. The main threat to Beja was over.

The defence of Hunt's Gap, for most of the men engaged their first battle, was far-reaching in its effect. The Division was later to fight harder and possibly more skilful battles, but never one where its own action had so great significance to the success of a whole campaign.

It is a trick of war that singals out one battle in the scheme of history, while others, perhaps better fought or distinguished by greater gallantry, live largely in the memory of those who fought them. Hunt's Gap was a confused battle.

It cost the Division a considerable price in casualties and prisoners, for several lonely hill positions were overrun. The rain on the night of Sidi Nsir's fall was of incalculable value. But none of these facts detract from its importance or the many sterling actions that played their part in the holding of the pass.

5. THE FIRST BATTLE OF SEDJENANE

It was German Parachute Engineers and Italian Bersaglieri who carried out the northern attack under Colonel Witzig, a twenty-six year old officer whose rise to high rank had been rapid. In the Sedjenane valley, 139 Bde had been put in Corps reserve, and the front was held by the Lincolns and a Commando.

On 26th February, while the battle of Sidi Nsir was being fought out, the Foresters, 279 Battery and 377 Light A. A. Battery were sent south to Beja, only to be almost immediately recalled as the Sedjenane thrust took shape.

The enemy came from the north, down the "Buckshee Road", through the lightly held front of the Corps Franc d'Afrique. By the night of 27th February they were established on the hills two miles north of Sedjenane station, and the Durhams and two troops of Commandos were rushed up to stem their advance, which threatened completely to cut off the forward position in front of Green Hill. There the Lincolns as yet had not been molested.

There was an unaccountable pause the next day. It may have been that the enemy was having difficulty bringing up his guns, which were usually horse-drawn and often somewhat cumbersome. In the lull the Lincolns were pulled back from Green Hill, but it proved impossible to move the twenty-five pounders of 277 Battery and the Bofors of 379 Battery, which were firmly embedded in the heavy mud.

The Foresters took up positions astride the road where it passed through a narrow gap three miles east of Sedjenane station. Behind was Sapper Corner and the two remaining batteries of 70 Field Regt. It was close shooting to the north where the enemy were less than two miles away.

Sedjenane station was in a broad basin covered with a thick low scrub; further back the hills closed in on the road and the dense cork forests began. With the enemy on the basin's northern lip, the Foresters position was insecure, and even the guns were under threat of encirclement. It was for this reason that the Durhams attacked at dawn on 2nd March.

It was an attack typical of many that had to be made in Tunisia, up a bare hill, and it was without the heavy artillery support that later was employed on similar tasks. The enemy was in some strength and in commanding positions, and the Durhams were forced back with considerable casualties.

But Colonel Witzig had no intention of remaining on the defensive, and before midday the Foresters, to the east, were being heavily attacked. The enemy succeeded in lifting the mines on the road, and armoured cars came through. The battalion two-pounders accounted for two and 279 Battery knocked out the remainder as they rounded Sapper Corner almost on top of the guns. Infantry attacks followed, and were pressed with skill and determination.

The Forester companies, who had no dumps of ammunition on their isolated hill positions and who suffered from faulty communications, were driven in piecemeal, and it was only a remnant that found its way back in darkness through the thick under-growth to Sedjenane. At Sedjenane, the Lincolns and the Durhams were in position on either side of the station, but it was not a place that lent itself naturally to defence. All day on 3rd March they held off enemy attacks from north and east, but during the night the enemy penetrated the Lincoln's defences and got a footing in the village.

The enemy's attacks were made shoulder to shoulder with what appeared to our men, with their battle-school training, a mad courage.

The situation was hourly deteriorating, and at half-past four on 4th March the battalions were ordered to withdraw. Five miles to the rear 2 Coldstream Guards were covering the road and the cork forests north of Tamera, and ten Churchill tanks had been spared from Hunt's Gap. Behind the Guards the Brigade reformed after its series of costly withdrawals, and its five days of unsatisfactory fighting, in which the enemy had constantly outflanked the successive positions we took up.

The Tamera position, though strong enough in itself, was also liable to be outflanked. Enemy infiltration through the dense cork forests or over the tangled scrub-covered hills further south, was hard to counter. The German parachutists showed great ingenuity in this kind of fighting, and their flexible movements had the advantage of our efforts to hold wide stretches of ground with limited forces which could be attacked one at a time. On 6th March 1st Parachute Brigade relieved the Coldstream Guards, and 139 Bde assumed responsibility for the road from Djebel Abiod to Chemical Corner, where they linked up with the defenders of Hunt's Gap.

Thus parachutist faced parachutist in the cork forests and the Tamera hills, which were particularly suited to their individual methods and self-contained organization. A German attack on 8th March was repulsed and thirty prisoners taken. Two days later, further attacks gained some success and the Leicesters, who had had only twelve hours in Beja after their Hunt's Gap fighting, were brought up into the cork forests. By that time our parachutists had counter-attacked and regained their positions. They fought with great dash and their battle-cry "Oh Mahommet" rang out above the crackle of the machine guns.

On 13th March the Foresters attacked with a parachute battalion east of Tamera, but little was gained in hard going through the scrub and in face of heavy machine-gun fire. The mules carrying their three-inch mortars were caught up in the thickets, and finally bolted. Enemy aircraft, Stukas, Focke-Wulfs and Messerschmitts, played a big part throughout the battle for Tamera, and every evening about five o'clock Junkers 52's came over dropping supplies to the enemy.

Our supplies came up the road from Beja, past Chemical Corner and the mine, in a regular convoy which was preceded by an armoured car with a searchlight, for enemy patrols mined the road. It was on 17th March, St. Patrick's Day, that the Germans attacked again. On the left a French company, which was without picks and shovels to dig themselves in, was driven off Frenchman's Hill. In consequence the enemy infiltrated down the Leicester's flank, attacked their headquarters, appeared in their rear as they were about to counter-attack Frenchman's Hill, and generally displayed an alarming ubiquity.

On the right, the main attack had been put in against the Foresters, who were outnumbered and forced back into a tight circle round the small house which served as their head-quarters. A patrol got through with orders for withdrawal, and they slipped out un-noticed. Meanwhile the Leicesters had also withdrawn.

With the French and the parachutists they held an intermediate position three miles back from Tamera throughout the 18th March, and during the night drew back again towards Djebel Abiod. This important road junction, where the coast road from La Calle to Bizerta branched south to Beja, had to be held at all costs, and the order came through from 5 Corps that there would be no further withdrawal.

In fact, the enemy did make one slight gain when that night, in a well-executed pincer attack, they drove two Leicester companies off Leicester Pimple two miles north of Djebel Abiod. But this was the limit of their successful thrust, which had driven us back twenty miles from Green Hill, more by skilful use of ground and clever infiltrations than by weight of numbers.

139 Bde had suffered considerably in this twenty days of withdrawal. It was against a tough and practiced enemy, in a country little suited to defence that they had their first bitter taste of action. On 20th March 138 Bde took over the Djebel Abiod front.

6. THE END OF THE DEFENSIVE

138 Bde had not yet been as heavily involved as the other two brigades. Since early February they had been in the Medjez-el-Bab sector, along the next valley south of Hunt's Gap, through which the main road from Beja ran east to Tebourba and Tunis.

This sector had already seen its share of the early fighting and it was to be the scene of the final battles of the campaign. Medjez-el-Bab, on the Medjerda river, was the market town of a rich farming countryside.

East of the town, out along the Tebourba road, lay the squat humped ridges of Longstop Hill, where the Guards had battled on Christmas Day, while to the south covering the Goubellat road was Banana Ridge.

When the main attack broke at Sidi Nsir and Hunt's Gap, the York and Lancasters were in Medjez-el-Bab in the railway station, where for a fortnight they had led an unpleasant enough existence with their slightest move overlooked from the German hill positions north-west of the town.

The KOYLI were on Grenadier Hill with outposts forward as far as Banana Ridge. On 22nd February a composite force was formed from companies of both battalions. Burrforce was placed on the left flank in the Berber hill villages of Toukabeur and Sidi El M'D Akrene.

The French held a forward position at Chaouch. In all, there were three French and two British battalions strung out along this wide front, which was stretched to such an extent that a company of Sappers were acting as infantry at Sidi Naceur.

Considerable enemy movement was observed everywhere on 26th February, but it was only on Banana Ridge that the KOYLI outpost had to be withdrawn.

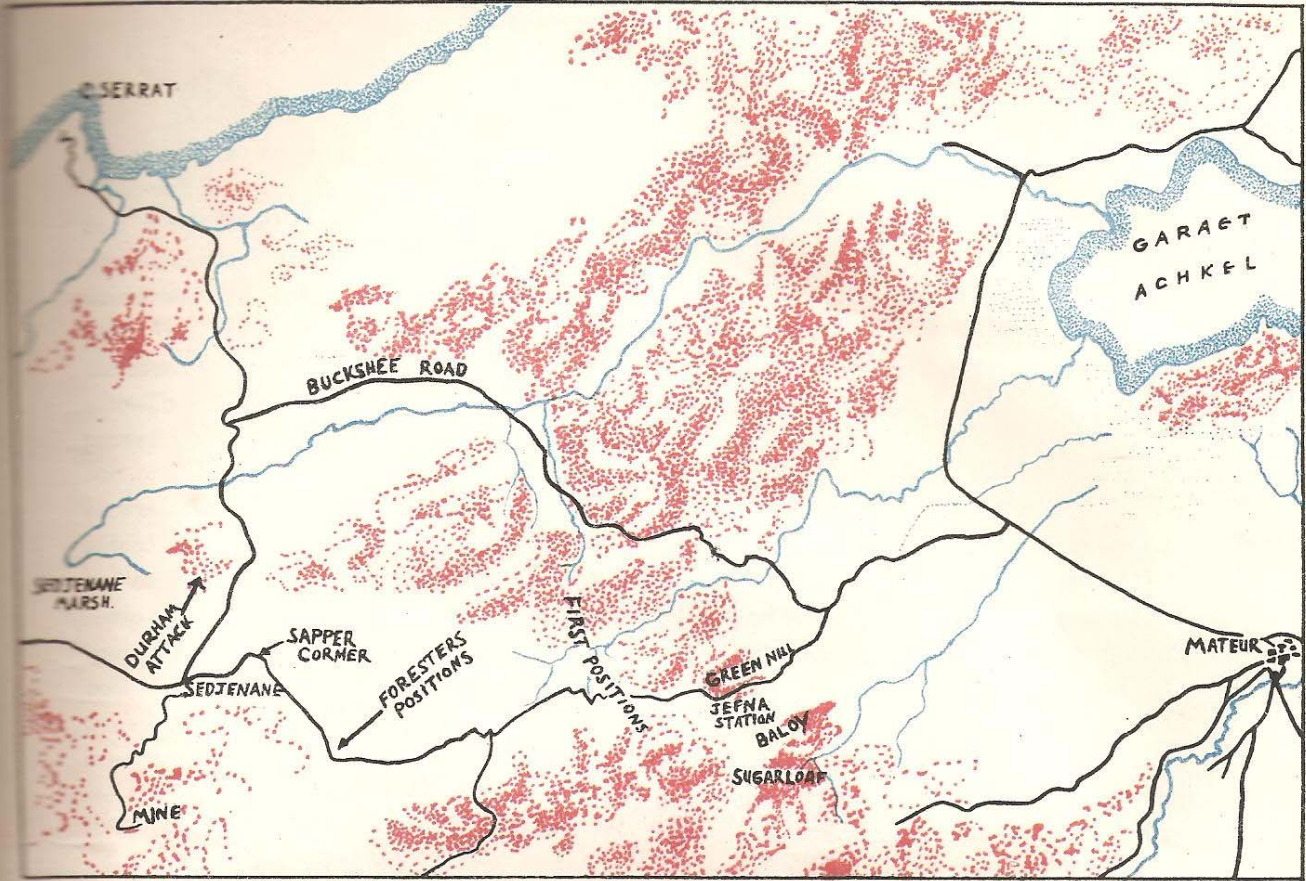
The enemy gains in front of Beja had turned the Medjez-el-Bab sector into a salient, and supplies had to make a seventy mile circuit through Teboursouk and up past Peter's Corner. It was not until the first three days of March that the enemy showed any real offensive intentions.

The French were forced to evacuate Chaouth; they came back on top of Burrforce, which, after some initial infiltration and early losses, was successfully withdrawn on 2nd March.

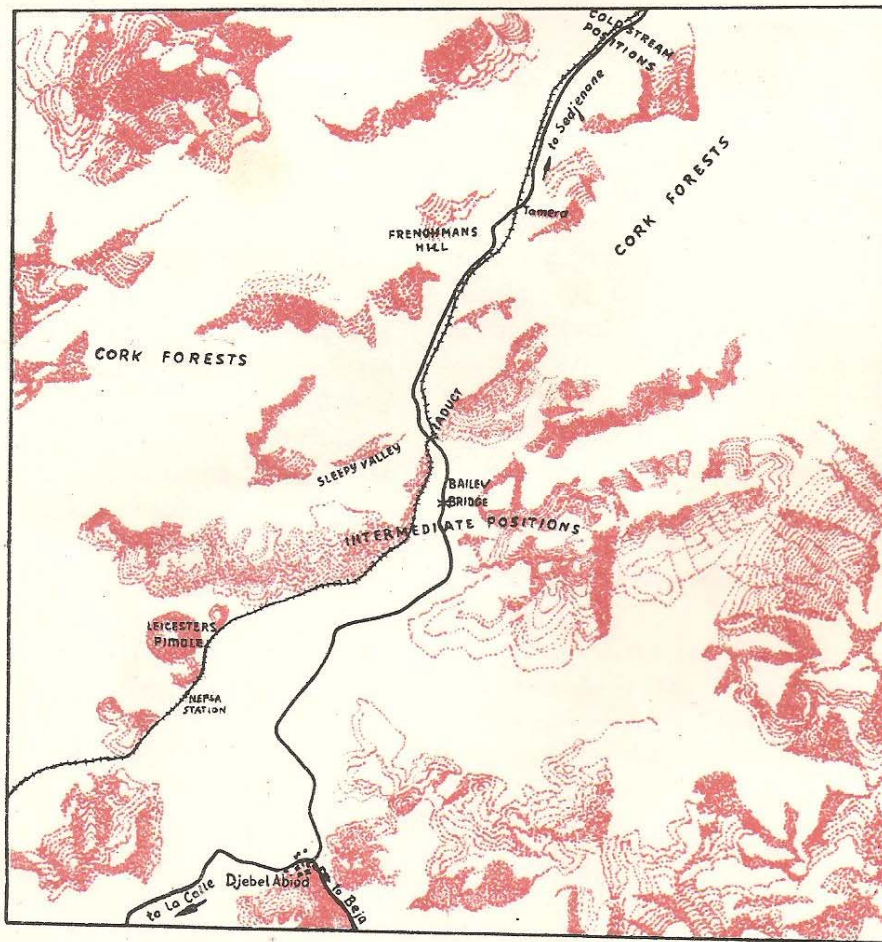
The same day the KOYLI made a fruitless company attack on Banana Ridge, and the York and Lancasters were busy staving off an enemy who made good use of the woods to attack Medjez station. So the situation stabilized, with the enemy indulging in regular shelling, occasional dive-bombing, and some mine-laying patrols. Each brigade had now had its initiation.

Their first battles had been defensive; they had spent considerable periods in close contact without relief. The defence, by a company, of a hill had proved the normal role, and it laid us open to big losses, as these hills were often isolated and overrun. The Germans showed great ingenuity in their use of Arabs, who would come into our lines selling eggs

SEDJENANE



DJEBEL ABIOD



the only addition necessary to make "Compo" rations a fine and satisfying diet and were found later leading the enemy's attacks through the gaps which our lack of manpower left open.

German patrols often used Arab dress, and in our inexperience of the country it was not easy to know who was who. To clear the Arabs from the battleground proved impossible, as they continued to live and tend their flocks in the valleys and hills between the enemy and ourselves. The Arabs, indeed, would work willingly enough for us but they were not used on the low level of company or battalion.

On the whole they could be trusted to carry out a bargain, but once it was done they would without compunction work for the other side. It was their own profit they considered first, and there were many gruesome examples of their rapacity. They would dig up the dead in order to rob them of their boots, and on one occasion were known to strip a wounded officer of all his clothes, so that he died of exposure.

After a battle they descended like vultures on the dead, and in an overrun position were quicker than the enemy in pouncing on blankets, greatcoats and the debris of battle. Perhaps it was the acknowledged price of their services.

Already the countryside had changed; the valleys were green and spangled with bright flowers, white and yellow and orange. It was a surprise for men new to war to note how life went on despite battles and armies.

Arabs scraped their fields and Arab boys drove their sheep and goats, apparently indifferent to the sounds of battle all around. Up above a lark would be singing.

The weather too had changed, though in mid-March there were still torrential rainstorms. The starry African nights had lost some of their bite, though there was always a sharp contrast with the heat of the sun at midday.

7. THE SECOND BATTLE OF SEDJENANE

The enemy's March offensive had won him some useful ground, and dealt a nasty blow to First Army's preparations. But by the twentieth of the month the enemy had been held all along the front. The north had seen his biggest gain of ground, for he had only been stopped at Djebel Abiod after pushing us back twenty miles from Green Hill.

On the Beja front he had been held at Hunt's Gap. These two advances had made Bizerta much more secure, and he had prevented our use of two important roads, the road from La Calle to Beja and that from Beja to Medjez-el-Bab.

He had won several important heights, taken a considerable number of prisoners, and captured some valuable equipment for the hand-to-mouth existence of his army.

On the other hand, our forces were mounting and it was a battalion of the newly arrived I Division which relieved the KOYLI when they moved north to Djebel Abiod on 19th March. The change-over of 6 Armoured Division to Sherman tanks was complete.

To the south, Eighth Army was through the Mareth Line and the Americans were attacking at El Guettar. It was in these circumstances that 46 Division was ordered to recapture Sedjenane.

Available in the north for this attack were three brigades, 138th, 36th, and 1 Parachute, 1 Commando and 1 Thabor of the redoubtable and bloodthirsty French Goums; the Durhams and a battalion of the Corps Franc d'Afrique.

The artillery, which included 70 and 71 Field Regts, disposed of fifty-four twenty-five pounders, twenty-four mediums, and five 3.7 howitzers. The only gun positions that could be found were on the road between the Mine and Djebel Abiod, where 71 Field Regt and a regiment of mediums were bulldozed-in during the three nights before the attack.

No registration was carried out, and the arrival of these fresh guns proved a complete surprise. The plan was for the parachutists to attack on the left, starting just before midnight on the night of 27/28 March, with heavy artillery support, while 36 Bde moved off an hour later and in silence. By this means the right hand prong of the attack would, it was hoped, achieve surprise. 138 Bde was in reserve with the task of pushing out in a wide outflanking movement on the right, through the thick scrub land and over the wooded hills, to come in behind Tamara and complete the pincer attack.

Mediums were to be used to support the final stages of their advance, for the guns could not be got forward over the difficult going and trackless hills; carriers were to tow the howitzers. The opening moves went off according to plan. The parachutists captured their objectives before dawn.

On the extreme left the enemy were Italian Bersaglieri. Captain Dorio, of 16 Battalion, stated when he was taken prisoner that finding his right company overrun by the Goums and his left by the British, he made a rapid appreciation and decided to surrender to the British.

A company commander boasted that he had brought every officer and man of his company safely into custody, unwounded and without firing a shot. But at midday on 28th March Lieut./Col. Witzig launched a determined and desperate counter-attack on the other parachute battalion, which was held only with the greatest difficulty. 36 Bde had also advanced to schedule against only light opposition. For their part in the battle, the battalions of 138 Bde were depending on mules for supplies and to carry their heavy mortars.

It was not yet a case of organized pack companies, with Basuto, Cypriot or Indian porters these became a commonplace in the Italian mountains but the infantry had to provide their own amateur muleteers. It was slow going through the dense shrub, and the machine gun posts that were met took some time to clear as men pushed their way through the undergrowth that came close down to the single track. Steadily and methodically the advance went on, with the Lincolns in the lead. It was made no easier by the heavy rain that began on the night of 28th March and continued all the next day.

Resistance stiffened, and both the KOYLI and the York and Lancasters were engaged in bitter, small skirmishes. Along the road, and on the left, progress was more rapid.

The parachutists had passed the viaduct and taken Tamara, and 270 Field Company started to clear the road. One hundred teller mines had to be lifted, a quarter of them with anti-lifting devices of one sort or another. The Bailey bridge, which had been built in the early days when we were up in front of Green Hill, had been blown and the ford mined. But the enemy's position was confused, and becoming desperate.

He had been forced to throw in his rear echelon personnel in a composite company, and had lost heavily in men and equipment. It was therefore decided to send the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders, a squadron of 46 Recce Regt and a squadron of tanks straight down the road to Sedjenane as soon as the new bridge had been put up.

The bridge was ready by dawn on 30th March, and the mobile force set off in transport up the road to Sedjenane.

Mines alone held them up until a mile short of the village, where an enemy rear-guard was encountered. Fock-a-Wulfs and Messerschmitts swept along the road, catching some of the Argyles still in their trucks, and later causing casualties among the Sappers working on the ford this side of the village. The two Bofors troops of 379 Battery were kept busy, for low cloud and the mud on their aerodromes grounded the RAF and prevented their disputing the air. Meanwhile the York and Lancasters had been fighting hard above the mine and on the south-western approaches to Sedjenane.

The 30th March was a memorable day for them, when over gruelling country and in appalling weather they made no less than eight bayonet charges to clear a stubborn enemy from these final hills. That night a patrol entered the mine and found there a varied assortment of equipment, food and clothing, which included tropical kit and an issue of lemons.

Elsewhere, especially round the place called Sleepy Valley, guns and stores in large quantities had also been overrun. The battle was drawing to a successful close. On 31st March, with the ford complete, C Squadron 46 Recce Regt entered battered Sedjenane.

The following day 36 Bde attacked the hills round Sapper Corner. Thus five days fighting had brought us back within sight of Green Hill; five days fighting had sufficed to regain the ground it had taken the Germans three weeks to win. Bizerta was a prize once more within grasp.

The enemy had yielded nearly a thousand prisoners, suffered considerable casualties besides, and lost valuable equipment. For the battalions of 138 Bde it had been a constant struggle against the inherent difficulties of a rough and tangled countryside, which had been more than doubled by the heavy rains.

One muddy mule track supplied the whole brigade. Feeding was individual and spasmodic, whenever rations turned up. Casualties had to be evacuated long distances back through the mud.

The spasms of sharp fighting came suddenly and without warning in a dense and almost impenetrable scrub where a man was invisible five yards away. In the later stages many of the guns were out of range, and it was always hard to point out a target on ground that was almost devoid of recognizable features.

Communications, also, were stretched to their limit, for the Signals had to control not only the three attacking brigades, but also static headquarters and a defensive front at Beja.

8. PICHON

On April 5th 128 Bde was switched south a hundred miles to El Ala. They were to take part in an attack across the Marguellig river aimed at Pichon, guarding the road to the holy city of Kairouan.

Three nights later the long approach march began, and carried 4 and 2/4 Hampshires across the stream before dawn. Several posts were overrun, but the fighting was not prolonged.

In daylight 5 Hampshires came up in transport and the attack went on through the cactus groves and up the hills towards the attractive French village of Pichon. It was only when they topped the high ground beyond Pichon that

the enemy started his mortaring in earnest, but the vital hills were already taken. In this swift and successful attack, one hundred and fifty prisoners were captured, mainly Austrians with a sprinkling of Italians.

The advance went on to Djebel Cheriehera, while to the south 6 Armoured Division crashed through the Fondouk minefield and on to Kairouan. For 128 Bde there followed a long march north. in an endeavour to cut the enemy's northern escape route from Kairouan. In this days march they were constantly attacked from the air, but there was no more fighting, and on 14th April they re-joined the Division in El Aroussa, where it was preparing for a major attack north of Bou Arada.

9 BOU ARADA

The enemy was by now in a state of siege. And had withdrawn into the mountain box that held Tunis and Bizerta. From the south Eighth Army was pressing relentlessly forward. First Army had been built up and now boasted MO Corps, while the Americans and the French had each a Corps on this northern front.

Where on our first arrival there had been only the battalions of 78 Division strung out along the hills, there were now whole divisions preparing for the knock-out blow. The enemy, also, was packed more closely than ever before, with more than a quarter of a million men within his reduced defences. It was to deliver the final punch that 46 Division moved south under command 9 Corps.

Its task was to gain the hills north-east of Bou Arada and this side of the broad salt lake called Sekret El Kourzia, in order to launch the armour of First and Sixth Armoured Divisions into the Goubellat plain and on towards Tunis. The enemy was the Hermann Goering Division, whom we were later to meet again in Italy.

At this time they were a fine fighting force composed in the main of young and ardent Nazis, who appeared to have been picked for their size. Certainly they were a strapping lot. They were expecting an attack, and their positions were carefully prepared.

In fact, electric drills were found near some of their slit trenches and dug-outs, which had been used to cut a way through the unyielding rock. The plan for this attack, which was the first full-scale divisional attack we had launched with our own brigades, differed from previous battles in the great weight of artillery that was used to support the infantry up the rocky hillsides.

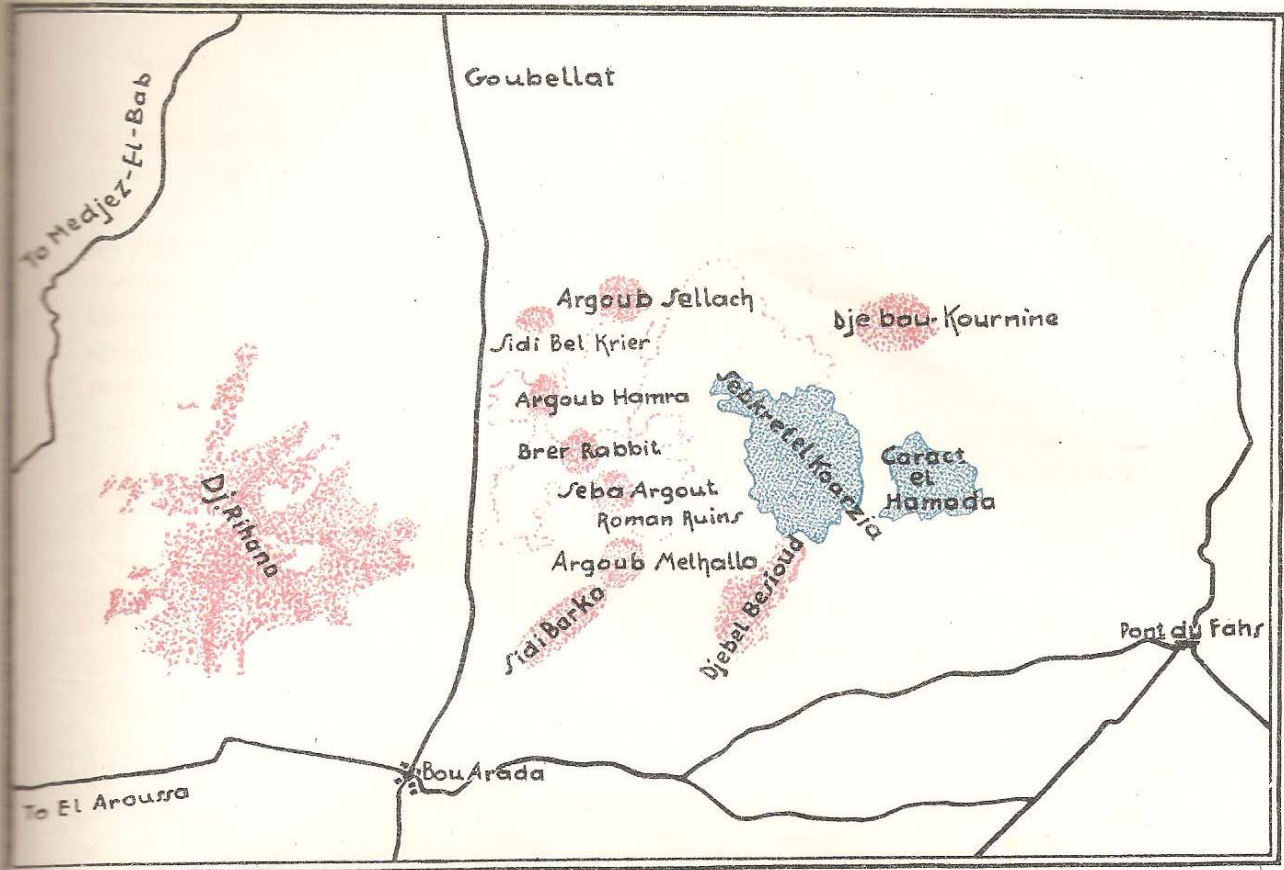
One hundred and twenty twenty-five pounders, a battery of mediums and 231 A/T Battery were supporting 128 Bde, while 138 Bde had seventy-two twenty-five pounders, twenty-four self-propelled guns, a battery of mediums and 229 A/T Battery.

The plan was for a simultaneous attack by 138 Bde on Seba Argout, a scrub-covered rocky feature, and by 138 Bde on Argoub Sellah three miles to the north. The attack was to start at 0200 hrs on 22nd.

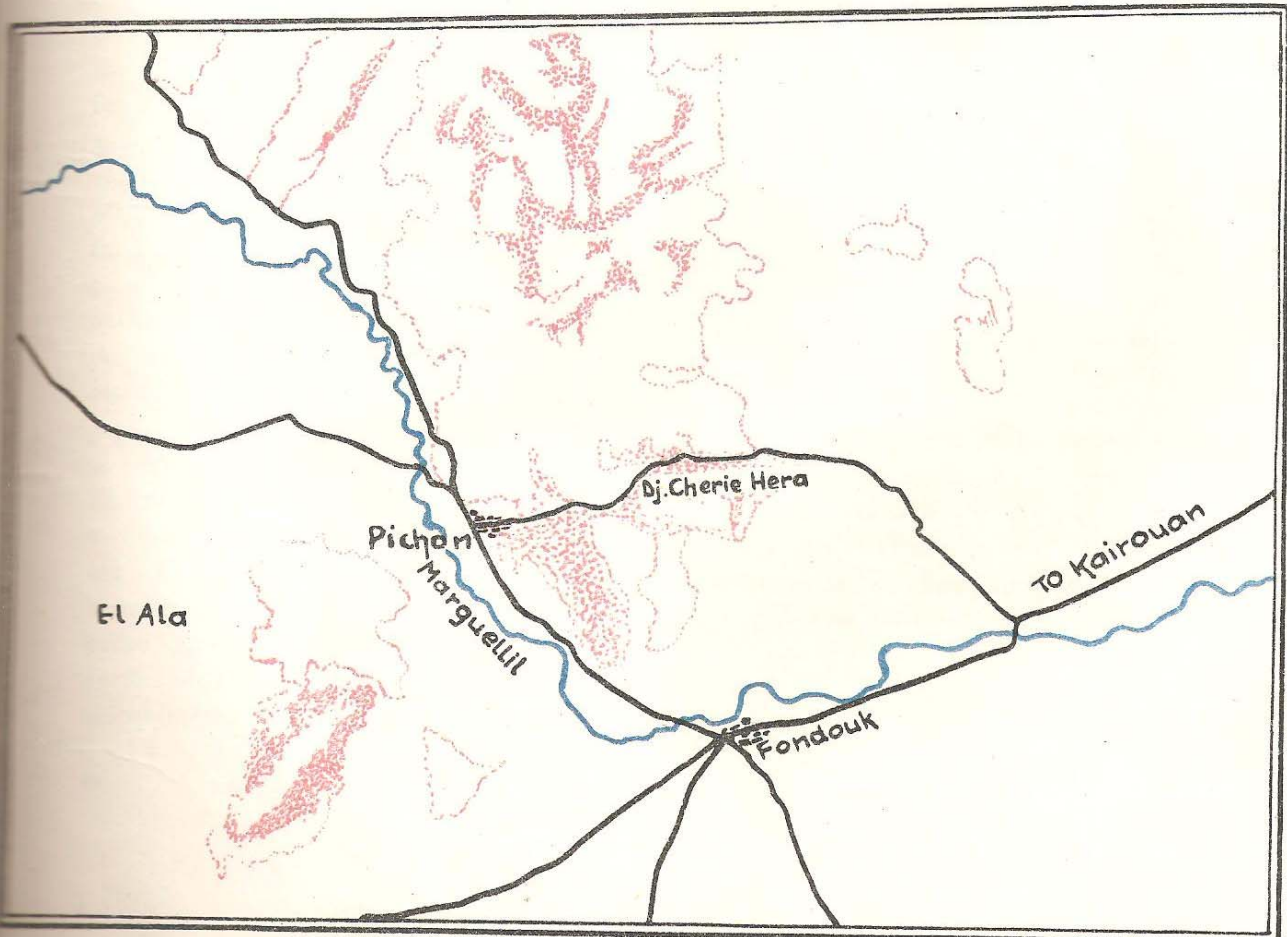
The bringing up of these large forces along the narrow tracks, which had to be used to avoid being seen by the enemy across the main Bou Arada Goubellat road, was no easy business.

It came as somewhat of a shock, therefore, when on the 21st April the KOYLI reported that they were being attacked, for it seemed that the enemy must have become aware of the impending operation and was

BOU ARADA



PICHON



trying to put it out of gear by attacking first with the considerable forces he mustered. At the beginning the KOYLI were hampered by the fact that they had been forbidden to use wireless or to disclose the weight of our artillery, and a company which went to counter the enemy penetration with only mortar support proved insufficient to dislodge the considerable enemy force. But at one o'clock a fully supported attack succeeded in driving the enemy back, with heavy execution and the capture of four anti-tank guns. The KOYLI were unlucky in the number of their officer casualties.

This sharp engagement in no way affected the main plan, except that when 138 Bde moved forward the Guards took over their positions, which it had been previously intended to leave undefended. 128 Bde moved off to time. On the right the Durhams were directed on Sidi Barka, which proved an obstinate place to take, because the apparent top of the hill proved to be a false crest and the enemy had a strong position and commanding observation from the real summit beyond.

The battalion suffered considerably from deadly mortar fire, and were held up on the nearer slopes all day. 1/4 Hampshires were making for Argoub Melhalla and the Roman Ruins beyond, and they also met heavy resistance.

One company was caught in a gully, where they lay out under heavy machine gun fire. But it was the heavy shelling and one strong counter-attack, that held the battalion and its supporting tanks all day in the awkward hills in front of Melhalla. 2/4 Hampshires reached Plough Top but were unable to get forward to Seba Argout, their final objective. On the left 5 Hampshires in the early hours supposed themselves on their final hill, which they had called Brer Rabbit. But Brer Rabbit was further on, and they failed to get up its rocky slopes in face of heavy mortaring and shelling.

So all along their front 128 Bde were held up short of their final objectives. 138 Bde's attack followed a different course. They were late starting, owing to their hand-over to the Guards, and this meant that their attacks, planned for darkness, had to be carried out in daylight.

Nevertheless, they achieved outstanding success. It was a misty morning, and the Lincolns, who led off from Horseshoe Farm, made good progress. The KOYLI following up had a sharp battle to clear a farm which the Lincolns had passed in the darkness, and it was companies of both battalions which eventually crossed the open cornfields to capture Argoub Hamra.

This attack had been put back owing to an unlucky accident. The two battalion commanders with Lt/Col. Bedford of 52 Field Regt were all casualties from one unlucky shell. Despite this grievous mischance, Hamra was cleared by mid-day. Further north the York and Lancasters, having joined up with their tanks in the morning mist, in a determined assault captured Sidi Bel Krier, and shortly after midday had pushed on to take Argoub Sellah and complete the Brigade's tasks. On this last hill they overran eight guns, and found quantities of stores and equipment.

These successes were a menace to the rear of the obstinate forces holding up 128 Bde, and they slipped away during the night. The Hampshire battalions moved forward on the morning of 23rd April on to their final hills. Thus the main infantry battle of Bou Arada was over. It was planned to last five hours, but thirty-three hours elapsed before the last enemy positions were taken.

Nevertheless, taken they were, and the armour passed through into the Goubellat Plain. But this was not to be the final break-through, and the armour failed to make any vital gains.

There was further ground to be cleared. 46 Recce Regt had been making wide sweeps which were designed to give warning of any

enemy counter-thrust on the exposed flanks of the Divisional attack. On 24 April two squadrons, with 172 Field Regt in support, advanced on Djebel Bessioud, from which they were driven by a local counter-attack. The next day 139 Bde attacked with the Leicesters and the Foresters, and after a short sharp morning battle took the hill and twenty prisoners. It was Easter Sunday.

Two days later the battalions of 138 Bde moved north on to Djebel Kournine, more familiarly known as "The Twin Tits", the awkward hill from which the enemy was holding up our armour. But already it had been decided to switch 9 Corps to the Med jez-el-Bab sector, and though the York and Lancasters and the Lincolns fought an unpleasant small battle there on the morning of 27th April, that was the last fighting of all.

Of the battle of Bou Arada the chief memory is of our own tremendous shelling — many of the Hermann Goering prisoners were in an advanced state of shock, though this did not prevent their holding out with stubborn determination — and of the enemy's intense mortar fire. Before the battle was completely over, Quartermasters arrived up with khaki drill.

This was the first time we had seen this dress, which later was donned and cast off with the regularity of the Mediterranean seasons.

10. FINALE

The Division was left in the backwash of the final triumphant descent on Tunis and Bizerta. But 128 Bde moved up towards Cap Bon in time to witness the last incredible sight of German surrender. The Germans drove in in trucks, and marched in orderly ranks along the crowded roads, to give themselves up to the first British soldier they saw. The whole performance was carried out with complete discipline, and all due decorum.

It was a blazing day, and the sandy rocks gave back the sun's heat. Low green shrub and frequent gullies offered little shade. So the vast surrender went on. A quarter of a million prisoners came in, and had to be fed and guarded — for the first days they were their own willing keepers, and their own dumps provided much of their food. In the many camps that were set up the contrast was marked between the German and Italian prisoners.

The former maintained much of the organization and discipline of their normal army life. Many of them appeared to believe that their captivity would soon be over, and the ardent Nazis among them were quite without knowledge of the plight of their troops in Russia, and even thought that German armies were advancing from Oran and Algiers to set them free.

The older men were glad to be out of the fighting, and only feared that they might have to run the gauntlet of their own submarines crossing the Atlantic.

They still sang their marching songs as they went down to bathe. But the Italians had become a disorganized rabble. 2/4 Hampshires had left the Division early in May and their place had been taken by 2 Hampshires, who had won considerable fame in the early days of the campaign by their gallant action at Tebourba.

On 20th May the Division was represented in the great Victory Parade in Tunis. In glaring sun, international contingents marched past General Eisenhower and General Giraud. Aircraft swept overhead, and the citizens of Tunis were wild with excitement,

CHAPTER II

The first Italian Campaign

Salerno

1. NORTH AFRICAN PLANNING

They called it "Avalanche". All summer the various Staffs had been working on the complicated and incredibly detailed planning of the successive jabs at the vulnerable "under-belly of Europe", which culminated on the Salerno beaches. It started with the reduction of the outlying fortified islands of Lampedusa and Pantelleria.

Sicily followed. For some time it was intended to use 46 Division in a proposed 46 Corps landing on the toe of Italy, an undertaking which went under the name "Buttress".

Complete plans were worked out for this operation. But towards the end of August the eventual task of the Division began to emerge from the various possibilities. 46 Division was to be one of the assaulting divisions in General Mark Clark's Fifth Army.

This largely American force, stiffened by the inclusion of the experienced British 10 Corps, was scheduled to undertake the most ambitious amphibious operation of them all, a landing in the bay of Salerno, which was designed to capture the port of Naples, and to cut the retreat of the German forces which had been extricated from The Division had to be trained in combined operations, a most intricate form of warfare which was still in its experimental stage.

Dieppe had been the costly first experiment. The North African landings which followed had been practically unopposed, thanks to the painstaking political jugglery that had preceded them. This had lessened their value as a military test-piece, but valuable experience had been gained in facing the problems of maintenance and in deciding on precedence among the essential supplies. Sicily had seen — on our side — the first large-scale use of airborne forces.

Salerno followed, a landing at the extreme limit of fighter range from the available bases. It was designed to follow the pattern of the North African invasion, and already political machinations, a natural outcome of the fall of Mussolini, were paving the way for Italian surrender.

At the end of June on Exercise "Conqueror" the Division opposed the landing of I (U. S.) Infantry Division in a two day battle of wits.



25-pdr guns and 'Quad' artillery tractors parade through Tunis 20 May 1943



Sgt M Lewis of the 2nd Parachute Battalion examines a memorial to the 1st Parachute Brigade on the Nefza-Sedjenane road in the Tamara Valley, 14 October 1943

A week later 128 Bde moved to Djidjelli to carry out training in the use of landing craft and to grow hard again in constant exercises among the hills overlooking the little harbour. 138 Bde followed, pitching their tents and bivouacs within a few yards of the sea, where bathing involved no effort of will even for the most water-shy.

Senior Officers and Staff Officers attended a course in combined operations. The intricacies of planning commenced; details of light-scale equipment: loading tables: allotment of craft for the assault, follow-up and eventual maintenance of the bridgehead: positioning of tanks, guns and soft vehicles in the convoy: problems of disembarkation: problems of Naval support: problems of control and co-ordination: reports of the beaches: estimates of the enemy's strength and intentions: intimate and protracted study of aerial photographs of the whole area of operations — all these aspects of the plan had to be weighed and pondered in face of a situation that changed from day to day, and in the light of a limited experience.

The Sele plain, which lay south of Salerno and was the selected place for the landings, stretched down to a twenty-three mile long sandy beach, cut up by the broad gravel channels of evenly spaced rivers and streams. Especially to the south, the plain was criss-crossed with irrigation canals and dykes. Moving inland — its greatest depth was sixteen miles — the ground rose in a series of cultivated terraces mounting step-like to the circle of hills.

It was an open countryside, except where thick orchards and olive groves provided a low screen of greenness, and from the hills the whole plain could be seen spread out to view against the blue sea. To the north bare brown hills closed down on the coast behind the flourishing seaside town of Salerno. Through this barrier of hills two steep-sided corridors led north towards Naples, the western corridor from Vietri, a little town jammed between rocky hills and the sea, through Cava, and the second from Salerno itself to Sanseverino.

For three miles south of Salerno there was only a narrow strip of flat, wooded country between the sea and the hills, and then the plain broadened out at the straggling town of Pontecagnano. Beyond Vietri the mountainous Sorrento peninsula jutted out to the west with its fringe of terraces and small resorts along the twisting coast road.

As for the enemy, it was difficult to be sure either of his strength or intentions. His strength was assessed, in August, at five divisions, two of them recent arrivals, with the equivalent of three more which he had evacuated from Sicily. A large proportion of his total force consisted of Panzer and Motorised formations, which could be quickly and effectively switched to deal with any large threat as soon as it had revealed itself.

Though none of these divisions was known to be in the Sele plain, the changed conditions consequent on our capture of Sicily and the dubious trends of Italian politics since the fall of Mussolini made it risky to count on an unopposed landing. Three Italian divisions were known to be stationed in the country between Naples and Rome. With the deterioration in Italian morale, and the increasing threat to the southern bastions of Hitler's "Fortress of Europe" it was felt that the gravitation of German forces towards Italy would continue.

In general, therefore, the plan assumed that only light opposition would be met on the initial landings — there were undoubtedly three or four shore batteries to be overcome — which would soon harden as the German Panzer divisions drove down to counter the threat.

In order to prevent their arrival before the large, essential port of Naples had been captured, it was planned to drop 82 (U. S.) Airborne Division in the Capua district to hold or destroy the Volturno crossings. At the same time by numerous small diversions in the north and by the dropping of groups of

parachutists to carry out vital demolitions, it was hoped to cause the German Command to hesitate to commit its few precious divisions.

General McCreery, whose to Corps had been placed on the left of Fifth Army, planned his assault in two phases. In the first a beachhead was to be established to include Salerno and the hills immediately overlooking Highway 18 as far south-east as Battipaglia, and thereafter to follow Highway 19 to the Sele river.

Thus a useful secondary port would be secured in Salerno, and in Monte Corvine aerodrome a base which was vital if close fighter support was to be maintained. In the second phase, 7 Armoured Division would drive forward and capture Naples. For the assault landing General McCreery had 46 Division on the left and on a wider front on the right, 56 (London) Division. Thus began an association which was to last almost through-out the whole Italian campaign. General Hawkesworth, who on 23rd August had succeeded General Freeman-Attwood in command of 46 Division, was ordered to secure a beachhead between the rivers Picentino and Asa, a front of just over a mile opposite Pontecagnano; to gain the hills which dominated the approaches to Salerno; and to capture the port. In the second phase of the plan 46 Division was to make good the two northern corridors to Cava and Sanseverino.

To assist in the later stages of the operation 2 Commandos were to land at Vietri and hold the nearer end of the Cava defile, the while threatening the northern outskirts of Salerno; and three battalions of American Rangers were to land at Maiora at the foot of the single hilly road across the base of the Sorrento peninsula.

Having destroyed the coastal batteries at Capo d'Orso, they were to advance up this road, menacing the rear of any enemy forces holding up 46 Division in the Cava defile. 56 Division was also to have a brigade ready to assist in forcing the passes.

General Hawkesworth planned to land on a one brigade front on two beaches, which were known as Red Beach and Green Beach. 128 Bde was the assault brigade with the task of destroying the enemy's local defences and capturing the hills overlooking the Salerno road. 138 Bde, coming in behind 128 Bde on the same beaches, were to capture the port of Salerno and make contact with the Commandos.

Both brigades were then to advance and make good the defiles leading north. 139 Bde was in reserve with the possible tasks of holding the beachhead, and later of advancing up either defile. The landing was to be supported by the fire of warships, destroyers, rocket ships and two Hedgerows, which was to reach its peak as the assault craft moved in to the beaches.

From then until dawn fire was to be brought down on the flanks of the landing, and, after it was light, cruisers and destroyers would be at constant call for support. Among the warships were the Warspite, Tartar, Loyal, Roberts, Nubian and Uganda. No one who took part in the landing will forget the password — Mailed Fist: Hearts of Oak.

In the second week in August the Division left for Bizerta, a port which had been laid low by effective (but at the same time indiscriminate) bombing. At Ferryville the inland harbour was crammed with a numerous diversity of Landing craft and here and there the raking lines of a destroyer, and the pleasant town was alive with British and American sailors.

Indeed the whole of this corner of Tunisia was deep in the accumulated paraphernalia of invasion, and German aircraft paid it constant attention and some unfriendly visits. Here, Exercise "Jennifer Dryshod" was carried out as a final rehearsal of an assault landing, the making and extension of a beach-

head, the off-loading of vehicles, tanks, guns and supplies — in fact, the whole intricate business of invasion. Even without opposition, the clockwork assembly of so many parts into a cohesive whole was not easily to be achieved. On 1st September Divisional Headquarters opened on board U. S. S. Biscayne.

The Division was concentrating around Texas Head-quarters, and in the next two days vehicles were loaded and embarked.

These last preparations for Operation "Avalanche" were marred by a fatal accident which occurred while men of 5 Hampshires were loading a truck with mines. Fifteen men were killed and nearly thirty injured when the mines exploded. But by 5th September the embarkation was complete, and the following day the convoy began to form up in Bizerta roadsteads.

That night the enemy made a hundred plane raid on Bizerta, and from the sea men watched the bright fountain of ack-ack fire which cast its reflections on the water, like a seaside resort in carnival. Bombs crashed in and around the town, but the convoy remained untouched. At dawn on 7th September the convoy set sail.

2. THE SALERNO LANDING

It was no calm blue Mediterranean sea the first day out, and the respite from sea-sickness which a call in Sicily afforded was more than welcome. In bays that had been cleared of their inhabitants our troops were fed and accommodated by the American Army. Early next morning the convoy got under way again, and during the day was joined by innumerable others, so that far as the eye could see there were ships of all sizes moving inevitably towards Italy. The four assaulting divisions were on the seas. In the afternoon a lone German reconnaissance plane flew low and fast over the invasion fleet. Later bombers appeared, and intermittent attacks continued through the growing darkness. One LCT was hit, and the glow lit up the night sky, already streaked with lines of tracer which pointed at the attacking aircraft. At dusk, over the ships speakers came the startling BBC announcement of Italy's unconditional surrender, which seemed to accord strangely with the falling bombs.

But it was mid-night before General Hawkesworth received the official notification of surrender, which added that covering fire on the beaches was to proceed as planned, but that the coastal batteries were only to be engaged if they opened fire (these were presumed to be manned by Italians).

Shortly afterwards coastal guns did open fire, and were engaged by the Mendip, Brecon and Blakeney. Hopes of easy success began to wane. With the crash of guns overhead the assault boats began to move shorewards in steady lines. The first wave was exactly to time. In the faint moonlight it was impossible to distinguish any of the landmarks that had been studied on the aerial photographs. The rocket ships opened up for the final five minutes battering of Red and Green beaches. Eighty-eights were joining in the incredible uproar.

For the men of 46 Division it was the central moment of the war. Behind lay North Africa's early losses and eventual, sudden victory; ahead were unknown battles in a new country. As inevitably as Time itself the assault boats moved forward in their appointed order to the Salerno beaches



Salerno, 9 September 1943 (Operation Avalanche): British troops and vehicles from 128 Brigade, 46th Division are unloaded from LST 383 onto the beaches



Salerno, 9 September 1943 (Operation Avalanche): A British mortar crew in action.



British soldiers man a machine gun post on the beach at Salerno, Italy, while a column of smoke rises from a transport ship in the background, 9 September 1943



Men of the 9th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers at an observation post in a ruined house at Salerno, September 1943

Crouched in a crowded, living darkness men were aware more than at any other time of the relentless compulsion of the military machine, which had collected and moulded them and at a fixed hour set them down on the shores of Europe. The rocket ship opposite Green beach unloaded its barrage half a mile south of the Magazzino, and the boats on the right, following up, landed 2 Hampshires on the wrong side of the Asa river.

The beach was raked by machine gun fire from unblasted posts round the Magazzino, and shells tore up the sand. The first wave of men dashed forward across the open beach, and by the time 5 Hampshires landed fifty minutes later only one machine gun was firing out on the right. A mile away on Red beach there was only light opposition, but "S" mines caused 1/4 Hampshires delay and casualties. With clockwork regularity the succeeding waves of landing craft were coming in, and men and early vehicles began to pile up on the two beaches until there was room to move forward. Further north, beyond Salerno, both the Commandos and the Rangers reported successful landings.

Dawn came with a mist over the broad bay, and the thick smoke of many deliberate screens. Landing craft of all kinds churned back and forward, aircraft droned above, and the great warships of the fleet, standing off-shore, added their crashing salvos to the busy confusion.

On shore the situation was obscure. On the left, from their landing on Red beach, 1/4 Hampshires had made good progress through the thick vines and low trees in face of sniping and the occasional surprised appearance of a German half-track. They crossed the main road and occupied their final positions on the low hills beyond. On the right two of their companies were involved in confused and isolated fighting. One hundred and sixty prisoners were taken, mainly Italian artillerymen.

From Green beach, on the other hand, little direct headway had been made. Early in the morning a demand from the beach master brought companies of the KOYLI and the Lincolns ashore. But the sun was up, and from the hills the enemy had observation over the beach.

Accurate shelling scored hits on discharging LST's and as yet no suitable assembly area had yet been gained. It was decided to suspend the disembarkation on Green Beach which already had all the appearance of a battleground with blazing jeeps and here and there a stranded burning LST.

Ahead the main body of 2 and 5 Hampshires had crossed the Asa and were half a mile inland, with 5 Hampshires on the right more or less in their planned forming-up place (they were the reserve battalion).

Touch had been lost with one company which had been detached to deal with opposition on the right, and had advanced inland without crossing the Asa. This company, with little resistance, reached the airfield south of Pontecagnano.

On the other flank a company of 2 Hampshires advanced to Pontecagnano itself, where their appearance surprised several German officers driving down the road in their staff cars and where their continued presence acted as a threat to the rear of the counter-attack which later developed on Green beach.

The KOYLI and the Lincolns were preparing to advance when the counter-attack started. They quickly positioned themselves among the dunes within a few hundred yards of the sea. Tanks came down the narrow stone-walled track — Hampshire lane — and the Hampshires were driven back to the Magazzino, where the two headquarters took up their position with about fifty men.

The remainder had not all by any means been overrun, but contact had been lost with them; small groups held out here and there and later re-joined their battalions, when the confusion of the first day's fighting was over.

Indeed the battle had developed into a series of isolated, independent actions of which headquarters could not pretend to have any control, or even much knowledge

The KOYLI, for instance, were fighting without their headquarters, which had landed with one company on Red beach. While Green beach was the scene of these disjointed battles, and had in fact almost been driven in, disembarkation was proceeding normally on Red beach. There was only one exit from the beach, a narrow road with dykes either side where several of the earlier flights of vehicles were ditched. At this point there was a long patient line of congested traffic.

At one o'clock, in order to clarify the position, General Hawkesworth put all the troops on the right under command 128 Bde (this had in effect already taken place, in face of the enemy's counter-attack).

Brigadier James found himself with the remnants of two Hampshire battalions, and companies of the KOYLI, the Lincolns and later the Leicesters holding a narrow stretch of dunes covering Green beach, and ahead a fluid situation with active enemy tanks and self-propelled guns.

During the afternoon there was little change, until in the early evening the enemy began to withdraw, and the complicated process of sorting out commenced. At the same time General Hawkesworth ordered 138 Bde headquarters to land and take over command of the left sector. There considerable headway had been made and where supporting arms were piling up on Red beach. The situation which greeted Brigadier Harding when he landed an hour later was as follows.

The Commandos and the Rangers were holding fast at Vietri and Maori north of Salerno; 1/4 Harnpshires were in position on the low hills across the Salerno road. On and beyond Red beach were the York and Lancasters, less one company and without transport, B Squadron 46 Recce Regt, which had landed on a limited scale of vehicles, nearly two troops of 71 Field Regt, part of 232 Anti-Tank Battery and part of 271 Field Company. Having gleaned this information Brigadier Harding ordered B Squadron, with the Sappers, to move up the Salerno road and make contact with the Commandos, drop the Sappers to clear the port, and push on through the Vietri defile. Meanwhile the newly formed brigade group was concentrating, and in the late afternoon the York and Lancasters were ordered to advance and take the high ground east of Salerno and block the Sanseverino road.

B Squadron moved off at half past four. The main street of Salerno was blocked by demolitions, but detours were easily found through the side streets. Few civilians were about. At the western end of the town contact was made with 2 Commando, who had had a hard day's fighting, and were glad of this first junction with 46 Division. The Squadron pushed on up the winding road through the Vieth defile, and entered Cava.

A German soldier was picked up wandering about the streets, and he gave information of the first importance: twenty five tanks and five hundred infantry were harboured in the valley a mile and a half beyond the town. As dusk was falling, it was decided to withdraw to Vietri. Before leaving Cava the Squadron was feted by a great crowd of civilians in the main Square, and one officer was asked by the Mayor to make a speech. But it was a fortnight before British troops were again in Cava, and by that time the town was in ruins.

The York and Lancasters in the evening also moved forward into Salerno, and took up positions some miles east of the town on high ground overlooking the Sanseverino road. On Green beach, too, the situation had improved with the gradual withdrawal of the enemy tanks.

The Lincolns and the KOYLI battle had developed into a series of isolated, independent actions of which headquarters could not pretend to have any control, or even much knowledge.

The KOYLI, for instance, were fighting without their headquarters, which had landed with one company on Red beach. While Green beach was the scene of these disjointed battles, and had in fact almost been driven in, disembarkation was proceeding normally on Red beach.

On Green beach, too, the situation had improved with the gradual withdrawal of the enemy tanks. The Lincolns and the KOYLI probed forward up the tracks from the beach towards Pontecagnano, which a KOYLI company reached in time to ambush and capture a small enemy road convoy.

In the evening 139 Bde landed and moved forward to their planned concentration area, which was still outside the firm perimeter of the beachhead. It was found that the wood which was to harbour their vehicles was quite impenetrable, and they came back to pass an uncomfortable night nearer the beach.

So by the evening of D-day the main body was ashore, and the unloading was going ahead. Out of the confusion which the enemy's unexpected strength and determination had brought about, a beginning was being made to reorganize the brigades into cohesive groups. Opposition had temporarily slackened.

3. PAUSE

In order to grasp the course of the subsequent battle, which developed into a major attempt by elements of six divisions to drive in the beachhead and thus secure a notable military, and an even more important propaganda, success for German arms, it is necessary to look beyond Salerno itself and the immediate operations of 46 Division. That the enemy was to some extent prepared for the landing was already apparent enough. 16 Panzer Grenadier Division had been moved into the Sele plain some ten days previously, though this was by no means conclusive evidence that a landing was expected, for the presence of 15 Panzer Grenadier Division round Gaeta might have been supposed, with equal reason, to have been in anticipation of a landing there.

On 8th September, however, the Chief of Staff of the Italian XIX Corps informed Head-quarters, Port Defence, Salerno "From 2330 hrs 7th Sep this zone is declared to be in 'coastal alarm' following the departure of enemy convoy from Sicily heading for Salerno". At 1600 hrs 16 Panzer Grenadier Division was informed that 36 ships escorted by destroyers had been sighted 25 miles south of Capri, and thereupon they put into operation the second alarm phase "ready for battle"

The cancellation of the drop of airborne troops to hold the Volturno crossings, which was partly due to Marshall Badoglio's 'insistence that they should be used to secure airfields and strongpoints in and around Rome (owing to prompt German action in the city these forces were never dropped) and partly to the presence of the Herman Goering Division in the Caserta area, left the road open for large enemy southward moves. In consequence, elements of the Herman Goering Division. were identified on our front on 11th September, of 15 Panzer Grenadier Division the following day and on the 14th September of 3 Panzer Grenadier Division.

Moreover the threat to their rear brought 26 and 28 Panzer Grenadier Divisions racing north from in front of Eighth Army to put in strong determined counter-attacks on the Americans, which all but achieved success.

Though these were the lines on which the battle later developed, on the night of D-day both 56 Division, which had reached Monte-corvino aerodrome and the outskirts of Battipaglia, and the Americans, who at points had penetrated eight or nine miles inland, had achieved considerable success.

Guns landing



“Yorkshire Lass” goes ashore

Moving off the beaches



Some early prisoners

The principal opposition came from tank groups similar to those that attacked our Green beach. On our front, on 10th September, there was the mild beginning of the enemy's counter-attacks from the north. B Squadron 46 Recce Regt, with daylight setting out to return to Cava, made contact at Cava bridge. In face of a superior enemy with strong artillery and mortar support they made an orderly withdrawal on the Commandos at Vietri, who were thus given warning of the impending attack. Further right, in the other defile, the York and Lancasters were attacked time and again, but in bitter, fluid fighting held their positions covering the Sanseverino road.

A Squadron 46 Recce Regt moved out east as far as San Mango, meeting only an enthusiastic welcome in the villages they passed, so that it became obvious that for the moment the main threat was from the north. Here the Commandos were engaged in an arduous and fluctuating struggle to hold the Vietri defile, and Brigadier Harding accordingly ordered the Lincolns to go to their assistance. At the same time 139 Bde began to come in to cover the eastern approaches to Salerno, where the York and Lancasters were to be relieved, and the beach head perimeter gradually assumed a more orderly appearance, with from north to south the Commandos, 138 Bde, 139 Bde and 128 Bde holding the hills round the town.

Meanwhile, the unloading went on. 519 Coy _RASC had landed behind the assault brigade, and on 11th September the first D. A. A. was established. Twice its position had to be changed owing to shelling and mortar fire. Some indication of their difficulties may be given by the story of LCT 365. This LCT came in on the morning of D-day, was hit and its unloading cables put out of action. She pulled out, the cables were repaired and the following morning the unloading started again.

With the first heavy truck the cables snapped. As a last resort another LCT came alongside out in the bay, and the now urgently required ammunition trucks were driven across steel hatchway covers from one ship to the other, each driver seizing the moment when the two ships levelled in the swell. On the night of 11th September enemy air activity reached its peak with one hundred and twenty planes maintaining an almost continuous bombing effort over the beaches.

4. ON THE DEFENSIVE

On 11th September the enemy's major thrusts were down the Sanseverino road. The previous evening the Foresters had taken Taborra on the left of the road, only to be immediately counter-attacked off the hill. During the night two other companies moved to positions near Ponte Fratte astride and on the right of the road. As preparations were being made, in the early afternoon of 11th September, to renew the attack on Taborra, the enemy mounted a strong thrust against the Ponte Fratte position and drove it in.

His audacious infiltrations were held a mile back down the road. Two companies of the Leicesters, who were positioned along the nearer hills, went forward to the assistance of the Foresters at Ponte Fratte. They failed to make contact, and were themselves given up as lost. In fact, they held on for three days to an advanced position, surrounded by the enemy