



THE STORY
OF
46 DIVISION
1939 - 1945

As follows is a transcription of the story of the 46th Division 1939-45 (Part 2 of 3)

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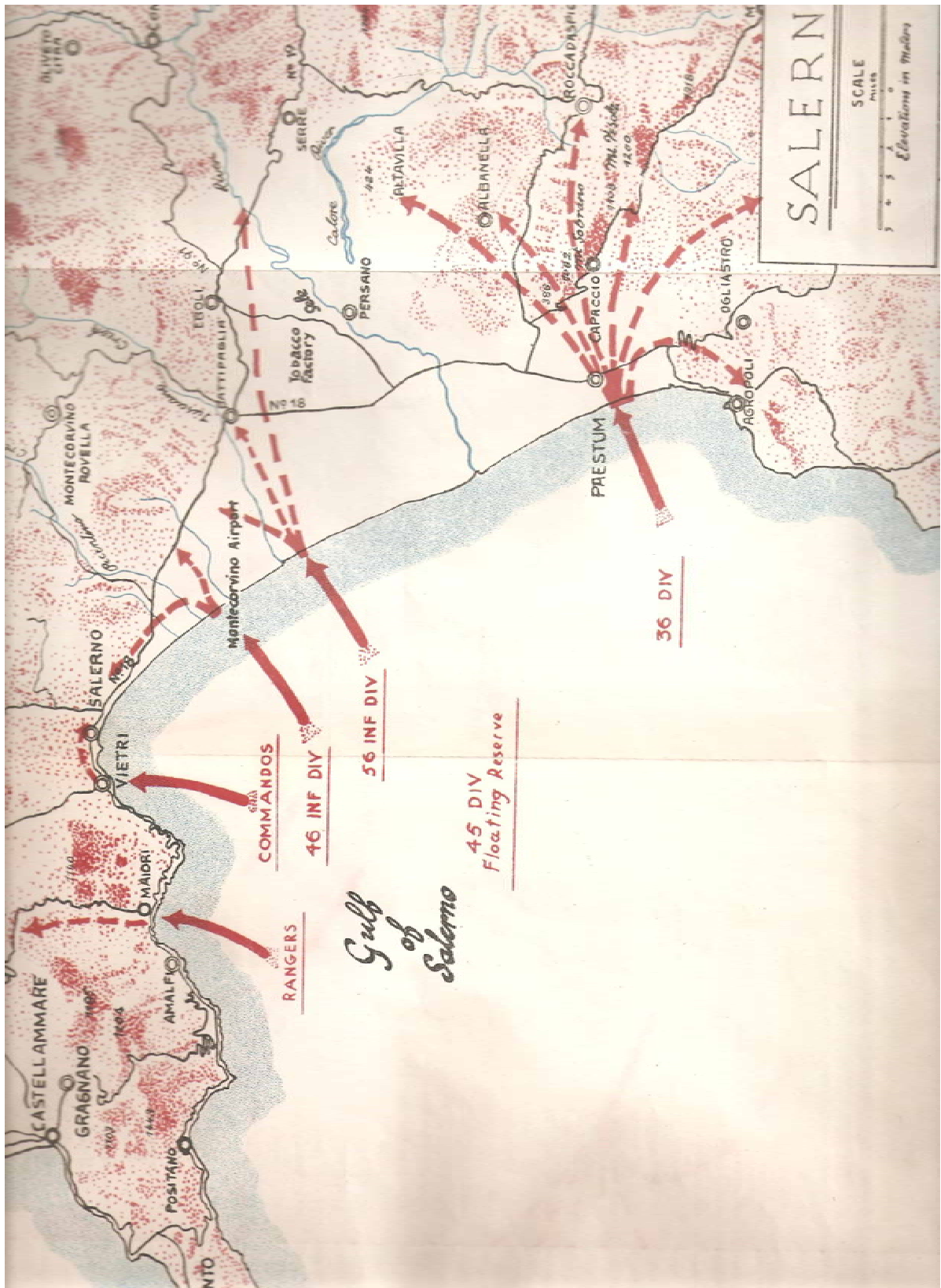
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The transcription was carried out in remembrance of those who gave their lives in the service of the 46 Division and in particular the 46th Reconnaissance Regiment.

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CHAPTER TWO THE ITALIAN CAMPAIGN



4. ON THE DEFENSIVE Continued.....

and at one time even drawing water from the same well. No major attack was, however, launched against them, and they eventually regained our lines, shelled by our own guns as they came in. Meanwhile the Durhams were taking up positions on Hospital Hill on the northern outskirts of Salerno as a final buffer to protect the town. In the Vietri defile the Commandos had a quieter day. The Lincolns captured Commando Hill west of the town, and pushed up the defile. The KOYLI also made a brief appearance on this front, having been brought up in transport, but were whisked back to put in an attack on the hills above Pante Fra, the next day: Already the York and Lancasters had been ordered to send two companies to this same area to bolster up the depleted Leicester positions. Further south 5 Hampshires joined 1/4 Hampshires on White Cross Hill, which was called after the survey mark on the summit and which was later the scene of desperate and bloody fighting. Such was the position when the enemy's general offensive began on 9th September. To the south 56 Division were driven out of Battapaglia and the Americans were forced to withdraw from Altavilla. On 13th September an even more critical situation arose when the enemy succeeded in driving in the left flank of VI (U. S.) Corps on the Sele river, and was only stopped by the desperate expedient of flinging every available man into the hastily improvised defence. Naval guns were used, and that night 504 Parachute Infantry were dropped to reinforce the line. On our own front it came to such a pass that Sapper, mortar and machine gun companies were used as infantry, administrative groups took up defensive positions, and reinforcements went straight into action as they landed. In an effort to disrupt the enemy's communications a battalion of parachutists was dropped at Avellino. The strands of this fluctuating defensive fighting, which in the next three days turned

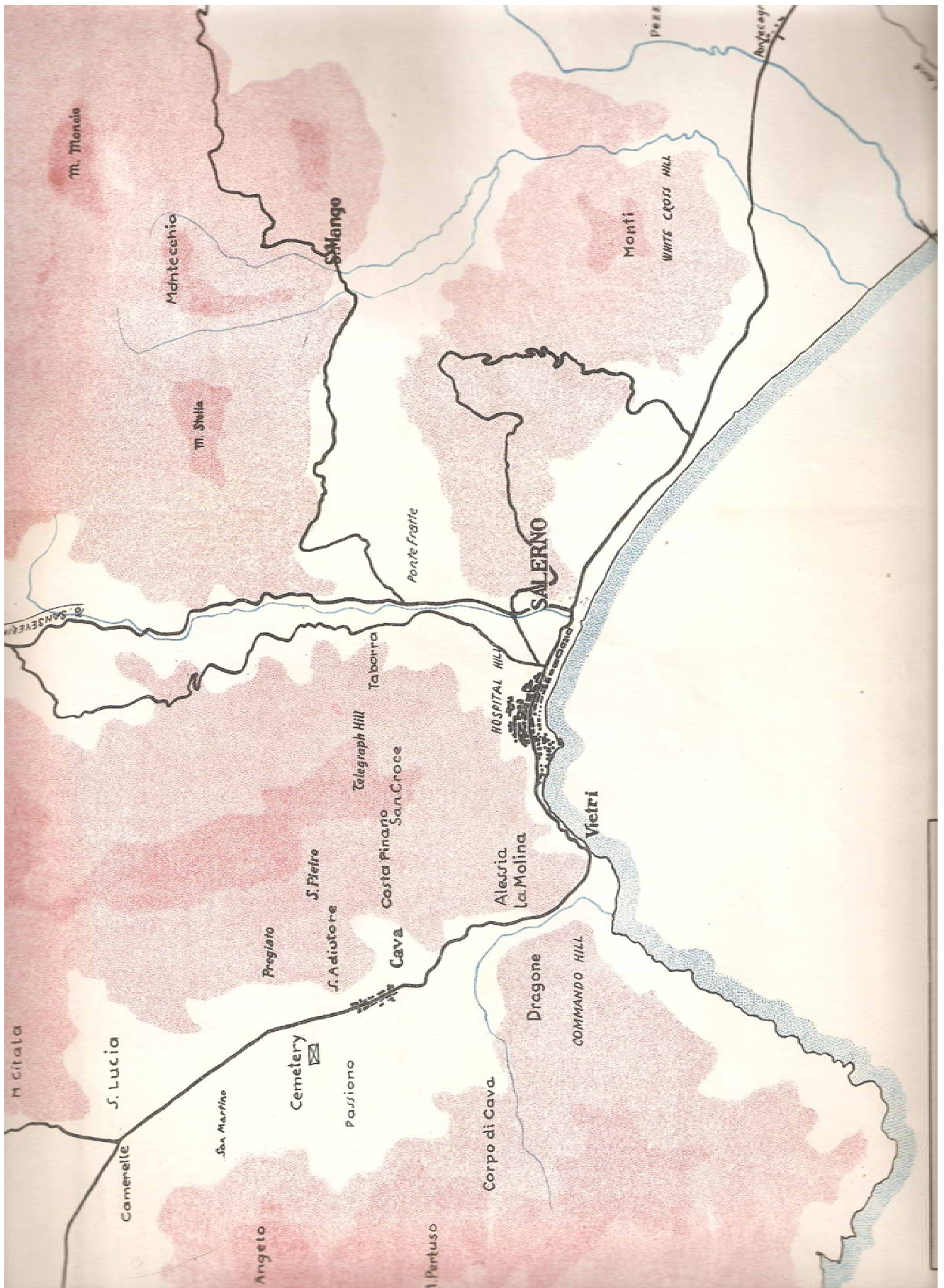
the scale in our favour, are hard to unravel. It was centred, as far as 46 Division was concerned, in three main areas, in the Vietri defile, on the Sanseverino road and especially round Hospital Hill, and later to the south on White Cross Hill. On the right of the Vietri defile the Lincolns were subjected to probing attacks throughout 12th September, and the following day the Commandos across the road were engaged in bitter hand to hand fighting and forced to give ground. All the officers of 2 Commando were killed or wounded. Two companies of the York and Lancasters later attacked and recaptured Commando Hill, and the Commandos regained the rest of the lost ground. On 14th September the Commandos were relieved by the York and Lancasters and came into divisional reserve after their six days of continuous fighting, which had played a vital part in the capture of Salerno and its defence. The Lincolns and the York and Lancasters held these positions for the next week under constant shell and mortar fire. The enemy's attacks ceased, but patrols found that he had dug in on Telegraph Hill, and in the villages of Dragone and Alessia. In the centre, on the Sanseverino road, the enemy used clever infiltration tactics down the river-bed and through the orchards. On the afternoon of 9th September the KOYLI had advanced towards the high ground east of Zonte Franc and in six hours of plodding progress over the difficult wooded country gained these hills. But to their right rear the enemy had made deft probings into the Leicesters and Foresters positions, and the following day it was decided to withdraw the KOYLI to form a tighter perimeter round Salerno, 'They centred their new positions on the Hospital, from which the occupants were evacuated and the Red Crosses removed. The Leicesters, after a sharp attack and sharper counter which dislodged the enemy, also drew back to the inner perimeter. An enemy attack

as they were eating their evening meal pre-preparatory to withdrawing — it was called the "Steak and Kidney battle" — was repulsed. The Durhams on the left of Hospital Hill were also hotly engaged on two successive nights. 'Indeed, on the night of 14th September, they were forced to give ground but a bayonet charge in the early hours restored the position. For his part in this arduous defensive fighting C. S. M. Wilson was awarded a D. C. M. Shelling and mortaring was heavy, and on our side naval guns were used with great effect. The battle for White Cross Hill flared up on the night of 14th 11 September, when a company of Hampshire was overrun shortly before midnight. This surprise attack came after a period of comparative inactivity, just as Hampshire were preparing to move over to the central front. For the next week many costly attacks were put in up the terraced sides of White Cross Hill, from which the enemy had observation over the beaches. All three Hampshire battalions and a company of the Leicesters, at one time or another, attempted to take the hill from the opposite mound, which was known as the Crag. On 15th September the Commandos attacked up the valley from the south, but after vicious fighting, which cost both sides a heavy price, were stopped short of White Cross. In the succeeding days several of our attacks reached the crest, but no one was able to stay there. There were many acts of individual gallantry in this confused battle. Sgt Carter and Pte Towler were prominent in putting out of action obstinate machine gun posts, and Cpl Minnigan in repeated daring patrols. There was a considerable co-mingling of battalions, and newly arrived reinforcements who could hardly as yet be said to belong to any particular battalion, in these later assaults. Like the Gemmano fighting a year later, the battle for White Cross Hill in the end petered out with the beginning of a general German withdrawal on 20th September. Rumours of the impending arrival of Eighth Army, and even reports of the distant swirl of the pipes of the Highland Division, were frequently circulated, though only patrols of the two armies had met, and the main body of Eighth Army was still sixty miles away. Further east, in an outpost position near Pezzano C Squadron 46 Recce Regt on 15th September fought an unequal battle against ten or more tanks and some supporting infantry, in which they succeeded in cushioning a strong enemy attack at some cost in vehicles and anti-tank guns. So all along the front the fighting died down, and by 22nd September the Division was ready to undertake the second phase of the plan, the opening of the northern passes to allow 7 Armoured Division, which had started to land on 14th September, to sweep forward into the Naples plain.

5. CAVA AND BEYOND

The German High Command had ordered XIV Panzer Corps to fall back in front of Fifth Army in a vast pivotal movement based on the Sorrento Peninsula. The forces on this

flank were to hold the mountain passes as long as possible to permit a thorough wrecking of the port of Naples and to safeguard the evacuation of the Campagna Plain. It was



therefore through their determined rearguards in the strong natural positions overlooking the twisting Cava road that a passage was forced in the next five days of arduous and often confused fighting. On the right, 56 Division was thrusting up the Sanseverino road. It began on the night of 22nd September with 139 Bde probing northward through the terraced rocky hills and scattered villages on either side of the Cava road. It was the intention to establish a base from Corp° di Cava on the left, through La Molina to San Croce and Telegraph Hill, for the main attack by 138 Bde the following night. But the battle did not develop as planned, and in the event became a general advance by both brigades with varying battalions under command. On the right the Foresters, after losing their way the previous night, occupied most of San Croce early on the night of 23rd September. But the KOYLI, who were to put in the main attack from there against San Pietro and Adiutore Hill, two miles away to the north-west, were unable to get under way in face of extremely heavy mortar and shell fire, and suffered considerable losses. The following evening the Foresters attacked and cleared Telegraph Hill. The KOYLI then got off to a better start, and in a difficult advance in pitch darkness up and down steep stone terraces one company made good use of a ladder — had established themselves in San Pietro and on Adiutore Hill by the morning of 25th September. The Foresters also pushed on, and b-5t that evening had a company forward at the village of Pregiato. This useful advance, which outflanked the enemy's main positions nearer the Cava road, had through-out to be maintained by porters bringing up rations and water. On their left the Lincolns, with equal difficulties of maintenance, overcame early set-backs to get a footing on the eastern end of the Costa Piano spur, a success which was

largely due to the initiative of Cpl Lyons, who led his section to the Water Tower and held it until reinforcements arrived. The Leicesters invested Alessia without attempting to capture the village. But it was along the road itself that surprising headway was made. Early in the morning of 3rd September the York and Lancasters pushed into La Molina, where they established a company north of the viaduct, cutting off an enemy tank and some infantry in the defile. Under cover of smoke Sappers of 271 Field Coy began to clear the mines along the road, and in the afternoon the first tank edged up toward the village, where the situation was still somewhat involved with our troops in the enemy's end and theirs in our end. On the left the Durhams were pushing forward from Corpo di Cava, which a platoon of the York and Lancasters, commanded by Sgt Skeates, had captured and held for nearly fortyeight hours without food or support, on to the hills beyond. Opposition was slight except for mortaring which caught them as they topped Monte Arnica. Again the York and Lancasters made notable progress, and the following morning fought their way into Cava, taking in all eighty prisoners. The Sappers, under mortar and sometimes machine gun fire, made quick work of repairing the bridge, which was ready by the afternoon. On the left the Durhams advanced to Passiano during the night, so that when dawn came on 25th September and 128 Bde began to pass through Cava, two prongs had been thrust out a mile on either side of the road. But the ground had not been fully cleared. The Durhams, in their advance on the left, had platoons cut off at the rear of their winding column, and the Hampshires were heavily shelled when they arrived in close formation in Cava Square. Beyond the town the Hampshires were held up at the cemetery on the left of the road and their supporting tanks had

difficulty working their way round. On the road itself 1/4 Hampshires were slowed down by constant sniping, which took a toll of casualties. On the night of 25th September the cemetery was cleared, and the following day 5 Hampshires joined in the advance on the right of the road, and against the same awkward opposition reached the outskirts of San Lucia by nightfall. On the left, resistance hardened round the terraced hill of San Martino, and there was a considerable battle for the church perched on the top. The enemy succeeded in knocking out several of our tanks. It seemed to the infantry, who had had little rest in the three weeks since the landing, that there was always one more hill to be taken before the Armour could pass through. But the decision was finally made to launch 7 Armoured Division on the morning of 28th September, though there were still numerous pockets to be cleared. The previous night, in a final effort to give them a flying start, the York and Lancasters advanced to Canaerelle, and on the right the Leicesters were established on Monte Citala before dawn.

So the Armour passed through and three days later, on 1st October, 1 Kings Dragoon Guards entered Naples. The same day, away to the east, 78 Division completed the capture of Foggia's airfields, so that the two immediate objects of the campaign had been accomplished. Naples, certainly, was a battered shell; along the waterfront docks and storehouses had been bombed by us and blown up by the Germans; ships had been scuttled at the piers and sunk in the harbour.

But within twelve days the port was handling three thousand five hundred tons daily, nearly half its normal capacity. In an effort to force a crisis within the city which would distract Allied attention from the urgent prosecution of the campaign the retreating Germans had destroyed the aqueduct which supplied most of the city's water.

Guards had to be put at the few remaining hydrants. Electricity installations had been wrecked, and the sewage system disrupted. Not content with this, they left time bombs in public buildings and places likely to be occupied by troops. One such, in Naples Post Office, took a horrible toll of civilians.

THE VOLTURNO

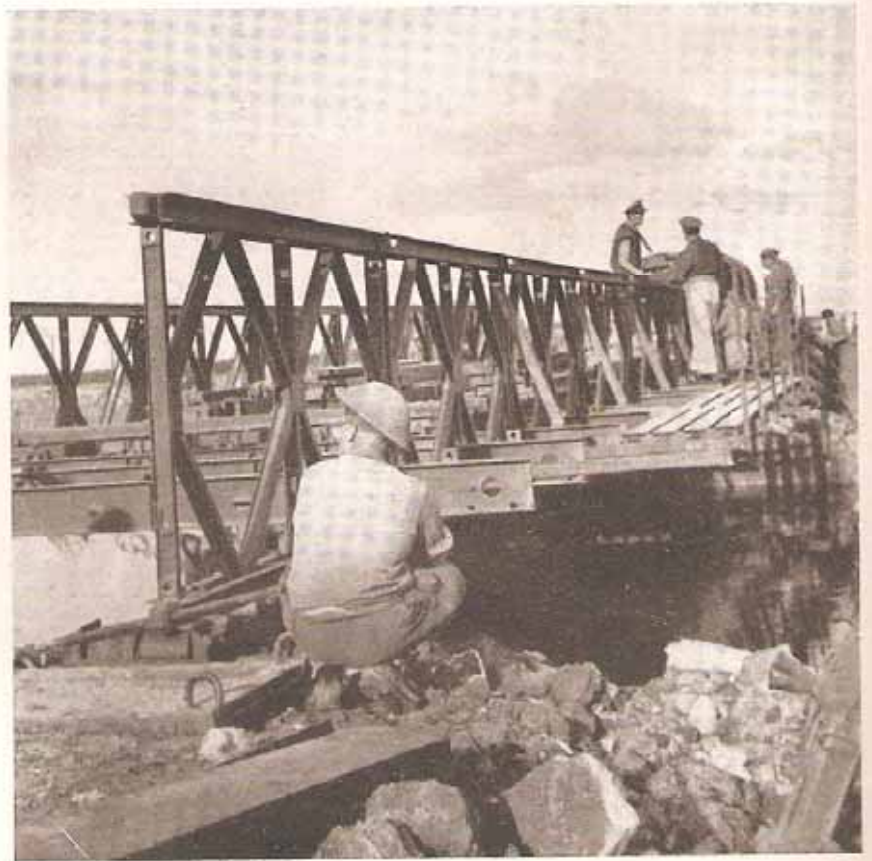
1. REPARATIONS FOR THE CROSSING

With the end of September came a brief respite. For three or four days the Division waited among the terraced hills in the broadening valley north-west of Cava, until the northern suburbs of Naples, where it was to concentrate, had been cleared of remaining small pockets of Germans.

This pleasant country of orchards and vineyards was un-scarred by battle. On 5th October the Division moved forward, and two days later, when the German withdrawal across the Volturno was complete, except for a solitary pocket at Grazzanise, 139 Bde took over a front stretching inland for eight miles from the mouth of the Volturno.

Salerno's heavy casualties had absorbed the Division's immediate reserves, and towards the end of September further large-scale reinforcements came from North Africa to fill the depleted ranks

*Manhandling an anti-tank
gun*



Building a Bailey Bridge

“Cleanliness comes next . .



.. to Godliness“

Some of these were men from 50 and 51 Divisions, both of which were leaving for England. Naturally they would have preferred to be going home with their own divisions and the short rest before the Volturno crossing was little enough for them to get to know the strangers among whom they had been thrown.

The enemy was holding the line of the Volturno, from Capua to the sea, with two good divisions, i 5 Panzer Grenadiers and the Herman Goering Division. Along the river the obvious crossing places were held in some strength, and in reserve he had sufficient tanks and infantry to launch effective local counter-attacks. The river banks were steep and wooded, and the river itself broad and unfordable.

All the bridges had been completely demolished, and the soft going off the roads made it necessary to use the existing approaches, a fact of which the enemy showed himself completely aware by keeping small pockets on the near bank at these points as long as possible, and by sending strong patrols across the river. But the paramount consideration in the planning of the crossing was the shortage of bridging equipment, which was only sufficient for one Class 30 and one Class 9 bridge on the whole Corps front.

To avoid a strong armoured counter-attack on small obvious bridgeheads the Corps Commander, General McCreery, decided to cross on a broad front from Capua to the sea, with the main weight on the left, where the open sea made it possible to use LCTs and DUKWs to land tanks and supplies round the mouth of the river, and where the support of naval guns, which had proved so effective at Salerno, could be put to account. It fell to 46 Division to make the bridgehead on this flank. General Hawkesworth was faced with the task of covering the building of a Class 30 bridge over the Volturno.

It appeared from the reconnaissances which could be made in face of strong German patrols, that Canello afforded the only site for this bridge. That the bridgehead must be firm before the bridging started was obvious as no risk could be taken with the irreplaceable Bailey equipment, and General Hawkesworth therefore planned to send a squadron of tanks and two troops of anti-tank guns round by sea.

The beaches were known to be mined, but a preliminary look around by a patrol, which swam the river, revealed that there was a reasonable prospect of finding a way inland once the mines had been cleared. The two roads in the divisional sector led to the Volturno at the villages of Canello, about six miles inland on the northern bank, and of Castel Volturno, on the nearer bank close to the river mouth, and at both these places the enemy appeared to be fully prepared for crossing attempts. Indeed he clung hard to Castel Volturno.

It was General Hawkesworth's plan, knowing that the enemy was fully accustomed to our habit of attacking under a storm of artillery, to bring heavy concentrations down at these obvious crossing places, while making the actual crossings, silently, well out to a flank.

This involved carrying the assault boats distances of over a mile along muddy paths and across open fields. The crossing was to be made on a front of six miles with 139 Bde on the right and 12.8 Bde on the left, while further north at Grazzanise, 7th Armoured Division were to establish a small bridgehead and protect our right flank with all their available fire power.

The other major crossing was to be made by 56 Division at Capua. As soon as 139 Bde were in position, patrols began to push forward to the river. The ruins of the road and railway bridges opposite Canello were investigated by Sapper officers with covering patrols, and reconnaissance's were made of the river banks to the east and

west. German patrols were met on our side of the river, and the Leicesters took four prisoners from 129 Panzer Grenadier Regt. On 6th October a Durham company on its way to Castel Volturno, where a small patrol two days previously had seen no enemy, ran into a strong party four miles south of the river mouth, where a Sapper platoon was bridging the Regi Lagni canal.

After some initial con-fusion in which they suffered casualties — the enemy's appearance there was quite unexpected - the Durhams established a bridge-head, and the brigde-building went ahead.

The following day Recce carriers reached the outskirts of Castel Volturno, where they came under fire. 1/4 Hampshires were moving up, and in the evening entered Castel Volturno. just before midnight the village was heavily shelled. When the shelling lifted it was found that about fifty enemy had landed from boats.

There was confused fighting in the darkness before the enemy withdrew. Six rubber boats and one large boat were sunk, and consider-able casualties inflicted. The same night our patrols crossed the river, near the mouth.

2. THE VOLTURNO CROSSINGS

The time for close reconnaissance, especially for 128 Bde, had been very limited, for the attack was due to go in on the night of 12th October. The success of the operation, after the initial crossing, depended on the quick move of tanks and anti-tank guns from the sea east across the whole six mile front.

The extent of enemy mining was unknown. The "ONC" country — so called from the initials of an Italian organisation which had planted ex-soldiers in pattern farms on this drab plain, dotted with stunted trees and cut by ditches and canals — was both a new experience, for, except on the Salerno beaches, the Division had never fought anywhere but in the hills, and an unknown quantity.

A lateral road, which the tanks could use, was to be the limit of the original bridgehead. The bridgehead was then to be extended as quickly as possible to the Regialignena canal, three miles from the Volturno. Raft-ferries were to be got working, at both brigade crossings, at the earliest possible moment.

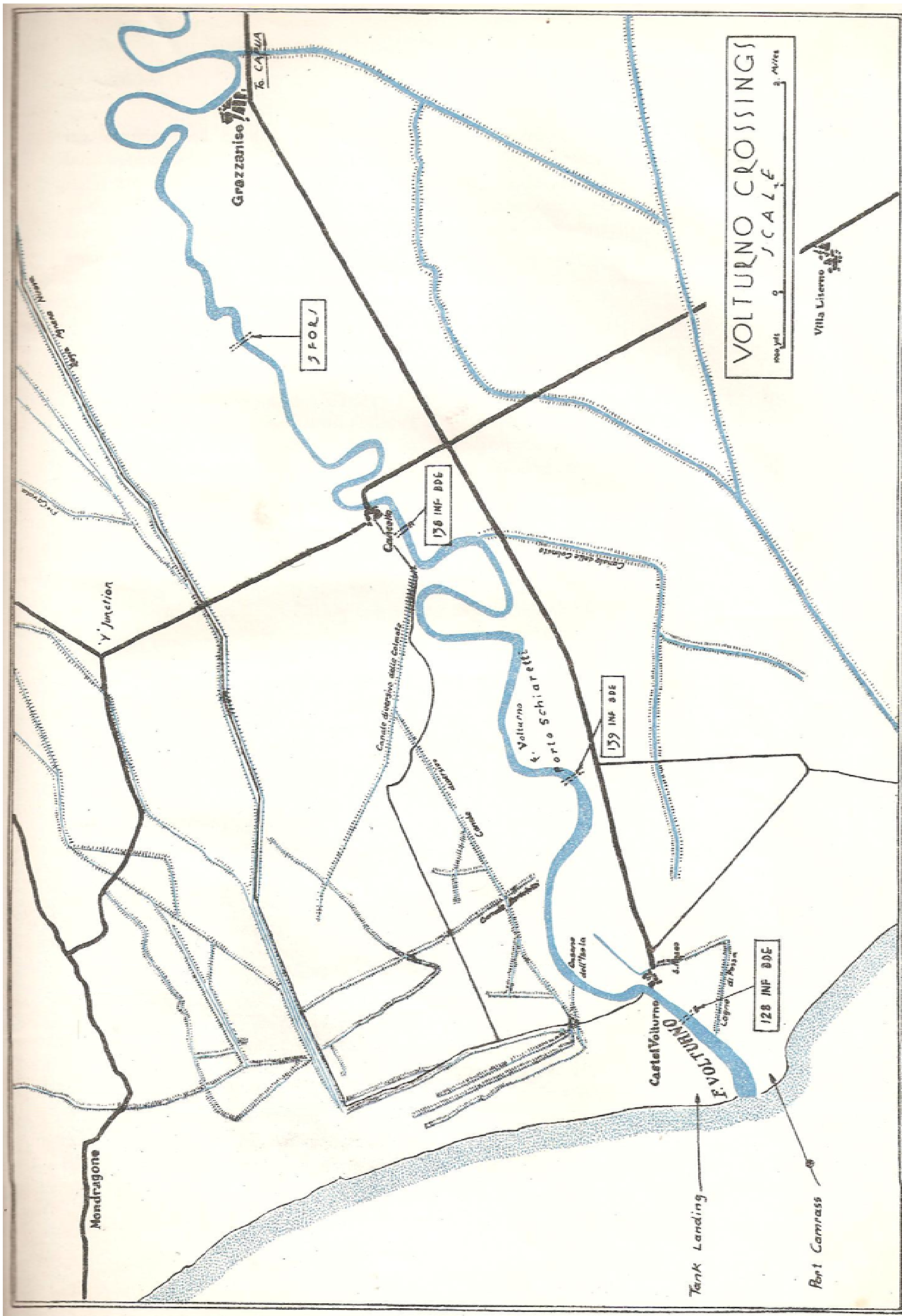
The stars were shining in a clear sky when the attack began, silently, at nine o'clock.

On the left, in the flats between Castel Vol-turno and the sea, 1/4 Hampshires, the assault battalion of 128 Bde, pushed out from two points. There was no sound from the far bank.

But, though there was no opposition, the crossing was slow. It was two hours before the two leading companies were across; the swift current carried boats down towards the sea — there is a story that the Navy picked up one a mile out, still paddling furiously, one was overturned, and its occupants drowned. With only six boats left, permission was asked to use 139 Bde crossing.

This was at midnight. Two hours later, with a battalion and a half across, it was decided to carry on at the original crossings.

The plan, once across, was for 1/4 Hampshires to make good the lateral road, then clear the mouth of the Volturno for the tanks to come in. 2 Hampshires were to push forward to the Regia Agnena canal on the seaward flank, while 5 Hampshires who had provided carrying, covering and boating parties, crossing last, were to advance to the canal on their right.



VOLTURNO CROSSINGS
 0 1 2 3 Miles
 0 1 2 3 Kilometers

Villa Literno

128 INF BDE

159 INF BDE

178 INF BDE

3 FOR

Grazzanise

Castel Volturno

Porto Schiarette

Volturno

Mondragone

Y Junction

Tank Landing

Port Camrass

Canale di diversione delle acque

Canale di Porto Schiarette

Canale di Porto Schiarette

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But, though 1/4 Hampshires had advanced, there was some confusion among the dykes, ditches and scattered enemy groups, and the other two battalions were not properly clear of the river when daylight came. Companies that attempted to advance were caught in the open fields and suffered considerable casualties from one or two enemy tanks that appeared with day-light, so that, in the main, the brigade was strung out within a few hundred yards of the river, and on the right were in the thick reeds on the bank.

But a beach had been found, and the LCTs came in just before dawn. Meanwhile the raft, which was to have begun a ferry service at Castel Volturno, had been sunk by an uncleared enemy post across the river. On the right, where 139 Bde were making their main crossing in the gentle loop of the river two miles east of Castel Volturno, a ford had been found, and the Durhams waded across. Assault boats were used to carry the heavier weapons. Soon the enemy was mortar-ing the crossing places, and machine guns opened up inland. But within half an hour the Durhams had reached their first objective, Plum, a track joining the two tips of the river loop. Opposition stiffened, and their right-handed advance to the subsidiary canal beyond the lateral road was slow, with awkward embankments which had to be fought for, and with odd posts in the ONC farms which had to be cleared.

The Leicesters, who had been covering the crossing, moved up on their left. Two companies, having rushed a post near the river, worked their way forward before dawn to the Regia Agnena canal. But none of the other six battalions across the river had reached the canal, and they were engaged by machine guns from Hank and rear, and had to be withdrawn under heavy mortaring. The

position remained the same throughout the day, with the two battalions lining the wide "V" of the subsidiary canal, three-quarters of a mile from the river. Five miles upstream, east of Canoello, the Foresters crossed the river with the task of clearing the village and forming a defensive right flank for the brigade. Canello itself was being heavily shelled, and the initial crossing went unnoticed for a while, though it was not long before enemy mortars found the crossing place. Small local posts were overrun. Two companies started to fight their way west towards the village. All touch was lost with them. The remainder of the battalion held on to the extended bridgehead. Thus two separate and unconnected battles were fought out, and it was only twelve hours later that Lt/Col. Hefford had news of his two other companies from a signaller who had twice swum the river to bring it. And it was not good news. One company had been forced back from the out-skirts of Canello, and, with daylight, enemy attacks developed on the exposed positions which the two companies had taken up a mile from the village. Attacks from both sides were beaten off, but both company commanders were among the casualties.

An attempt to get through to the rest of the battalion failed. The enemy Were- closing in, and the position had become untenable. At three o'clock the remnants of the two companies waded back across the river, fired on as they went. Two officers and six men, with six bren guns, covered their withdrawal. Things were going little better with the rest of the battalion. A counter-attack at dawn, with infantry and three tanks, drove back one company with the loss of nearly fifty men. 'The tanks were engaged by our artillery, but remained unpleasantly close. Six pounders were being dismantled for ferrying in an effort to thicken the anti-tank defence. Between ten and eleven o'clock frontal attacks on the reduced

“Demolitions of characteristic thoroughness”



“The main bridge was transferred to Capua”

"The tracks were a sea of mud"



A flooded hospital tent

bridgehead were beaten off. Two strong patrols to fight their way to the other companies were forced back with heavy losses. After a preliminary feint, at half past four a major attack with tanks and infantry was put in, and in confused and unequal fighting the Foresters positions were driven in.

The remnants of the battalion re-crossed the river, covered by the carrier platoon, and a Recce troop from the near bank, as the enemy tanks came up on the far side. In this eighteen-hour battle the Foresters lost two hundred men, apart from the casual-ties in the KOYLI company which was ferrying ammunition across and which took part in the later stages of the battle.

At Capua 56 Division's crossing had failed, after a German counter-crossing had caused confusion at the outset; at Grazzanise, after several unsuccessful attempts, the Queens had established a small bridgehead.

So the Corps interest now centred on 46 Division's two main crossings, where little progress was made during a day of small but continuous counter-attacks. The enemy's attention was largely devoted to the right flank, where the Durhams were subjected to heavy mortaring, and frequent probing's by tanks and infantry, all of which were repulsed. Our guns were busy breaking up attacks along the whole front.

During the afternoon enemy aircraft, flying low, strafed the leading troops. But it was our own tanks on which the issue hung, and they were in difficulty. Wooden box mines, which were only to be detected by prodding, had disabled five, and the embankments and canals, as well as enemy tanks on their flank, prevented their moving across to the support of 139 Bde.

Indeed the two bridgeheads had not yet linked up. The second squadron of tanks loading up on the beach west of Castel Volturno — later to be known as "Port Compass" — was held up by mines, and the beach was heavily shelled, so that it was not till nightfall that the tanks could be embarked.

Out to sea, one of the LCTs was blazing fiercely. By six o'clock that night the Sappers had got ferries in commission at Castel Volturno and at the eastern crossing, and during the night the build-up within the bridgehead went on apace.

3. THE CANALS

At last light on the 13th October the York and Lancasters, who had been put under command 139 Bde, waded the river to come in in the gap between the Leicesters and the Hampshires.

Against opposition which consisted largely of rather wild outbursts of tracer they made considerable progress, but later withdrew to positions on the left of the Leicesters along the subsidiary canal. The second squadron of tanks landed, and in the morning tanks reached the Durhams on the extreme right.

Anti-tank guns had come across by the ferries. The fighting of the next four days was confused and difficult. The weather broke, turning the tracks into mud. Enemy tanks, now less frequently encountered, were a sufficient threat to compel a slow, methodical progress.

The ONC farms had to be cleared one by one of odd machine gun posts. The flat fields offered little cover; on the other hand observation was limited to a few hundred yards

Some fifty enemy planes were operating on the front, and air battles were an occasional distraction from the muddy sameness of the countryside. Now that tanks and anti-tank guns were across the river in some numbers, there was no longer any likelihood of the bridgehead being driven in. In the slow advance to the Regia Agnena canal there was no major engagement, but a series of probing patrols and platoon and company attacks, which made limited gains. Enemy shelling and mortaring was on a considerable scale. On the left, where the opposition, though awkward, was not in strength, 2 Hampshires got forward to the lateral road on the night of 13th October, and the following night patrols from the three Hampshire battalions, with companies coming up behind, reached the Regia Agnena canal.

On 15th October the Leicesters, with a squadron of tanks, also began to push on towards this canal, clearing houses along the road as they went. In a methodical advance they took twenty prisoners, but darkness fell before they had reached the canal, and only patrols were sent forward. In the morning, in face of continued resistance, no real progress was made, a platoon that had gone ahead having to be extricated under smoke. 138 Bde, meanwhile, were ordered to form a firm bridgehead round Canello, which 46 Recce Regt had occupied the previous night. Accordingly the York and Lancasters side-stepped four miles to positions north-east of the village, and the KOYLI crossed the river by the wrecked railway bridge, where the day before a small patrol of theirs had been ambushed. Canello itself was by now a battered shell, putrid with dead bodies and alive with rats. There were numerous clever booby traps, and no less than seven jeeps went up on mines.

Assault boats were used to supply these two battalions, but the Sappers had already started on the bridge, which was left a Class 9 structure when orders were received that the main bridge was to be built at Capua. Up till then 139 Bde had been entirely dependent on their ferry, which had been transporting, often under shellfire, anti-tank guns, jeeps and supplies.

The round-the-river-mouth service had to some extent kept 128 Bde supplied, though their ferry was also in constant use. On 16 October the KOYLI relieved the Leicesters, and the following night attacked towards the canal, which they had made good by midnight after an advance through ankle-deep mud and heavy shelling.

A platoon crossed, making a rope of rifle slings. Both the road and the railway bridges had been blown, but it was possible to scramble across the ruins. Patrols probing northwards during the day made contact. In the evening the enemy reacted strongly, and bitter hand to hand fighting took place, in which they succeeded in grabbing a few prisoners from a forward platoon.

The attack was successfully staved off. Further attacks on 20th October were broken up by artillery and mortar fire, and that night the Lincoln's came up to relieve the battalion, which had suffered considerable casualties in the heavy shelling and the close-quarter fighting of the last four days. Along the line of the canal, on the 128 Bde front, the situation was tricky. From Mondragone the enemy had observation over the open approaches to the canal, and his mortars were very active.

Small clashes occurred as both sides looked at each other over the triple canals. Patrols swum across. On 20th October German officers appeared with a white flag on the bridge opposite 2 Hampshires.

They had come to discuss the return of medical prisoners. To smooth the course of discussion the Germans set up a table with wines and cigarettes, and the parley lasted several hours.

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German troops strolled along the canal banks while the discussions were going on. On 23rd October the York and Lancasters and the Lincolns, who had been patrolling forward of the canals on their front, mounted an attack to gain the lateral road a mile ahead.

Opposition was determined and continuous, and tanks came up to the canals to engage a pillbox on the "Y" junction on the main north-ward road. The York and Lancasters in a two company attack captured it in the late afternoon.

The Lincolns, in face of dug-in machine guns, had not drawn level on their left, and it was the following morning before they had made good the lateral road. By this time the Sappers had bridged the canals.

Patrols pushed forward in daylight without contact. But by this time General McCreery had decided to abandon the slow and costly thrust on the seaward flank, and to make the most of the successes which had been gained further inland. And so on 25th October the over to the axis of the main advance along Highway 7 began with the mutual relief of 7 Armoured Division on our right.

They were given a holding role, and the impetus of the advance passed to 46 and 56 Divisions pushing forward astride Highway 7. It was good to get away from the Volturno and the canals.

The unaccustomed difficulty of the country; rain which turned the desolate fields into a sea of mud; mosquitoes which seemed to be having a last fling before succumbing to the winter — all these contributed to a general depression.

The enemy made the most of the natural advantages of the defence among the embankments and farmhouses. Above all, there was the feeling that there was little to show for the considerable effort and the heavy losses involved in this slow, scrambling battle.

4. THE ADVANCE TO THE GARIGLIANO

139 Bde was the first • to go into the line on the new front. They squared up to the Teano river south of Highway 7, and after two days of patrolling were ready to cross it. At dusk on 29 October the attack went in. The Durhams were on the right, and the Leicesters on the left directed on the village of Nocoletto.

The Durhams, mopping up some posts on their way, advanced steadily, though mines and booby-traps in the thick woods caused delay and casualties. The Leicesters, attacking along the general line of the road, made little headway on the right, where a company was caught crossing the river by enemy machine gun fire. But on the left they pushed on, and by dawn a bridge had been built at Ciamprisco, and tanks came up. With tank support the Leicesters moved forward, and were soon in Nocelletto. Explosions to the north were eloquent of the enemy's withdrawal.

Tanks had also waded the river to join the Durhams, who thrust out to Highway 7 a mile and a half north-west of Franco-Use. From the line of hills dividing the Volturno plain from the coastal plain of the Garigliano, the enemy looked down on all these movements, and shelling was heavy.

That night 128 Bde came in on the left to continue the advance to Carinola. It was probably due to the difficulty of an eventual withdrawal across the Garigliano plain, overlooked by us from these self-same hills, that the enemy made little attempt to hold them. Both brigades edged steadily forward

with only random contact, but some mortar and shell fire. In many villages the people turned out with wine to welcome them. The KOYLI eventually occupied Sessa, where their headquarters was established in the castle, which had previously housed Prince Umberto's Army headquarters and later sheltered Di-vision and Corps HQs. It was strongly built of stone, and from the roof a wide stretch of country, across the plain and the river to the hills beyond, spread out to the view.

Enemy demolitions had been thorough, and parties were called on to help the Sappers in their work on the roads. On 6th November 138 Bde took over the divisional front, and patrols were out in the low country between Sessa and the Garigliano. Further back the other two brigades had a much needed rest. Training started. The newly formed dance band went the rounds.

There was a first instalment of leave to the rocky Sorrento peninsula.

THE GARIGIANO

1. PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK ON MONTE CAMINO

November was a quiet month. Fifth Army came to a temporary halt opposite the lower reaches of the Garigliano and on the head-waters of the Volturno. In mid-October the German Command had taken the important decision to defend Rome, and by early November two fresh divisions had come south, bringing XIV Panzer Corps up to a total of seven divisions.

Fifth Army, on its part, could muster only six infantry divisions, all of which had been engaged in arduous and costly fighting since the landing at Salerno. Six battalions of Commandos were in process of arriving at the front; against this, in mid-November 7 Armoured Division was withdrawn to join the invasion forces piling up in England.

Ahead the mountains presented a series of strong natural defensive positions to an enemy who was no longer greatly, if at all, outnumbered. Ingenious, thorough demolitions (even the smallest culvert was blown) had created

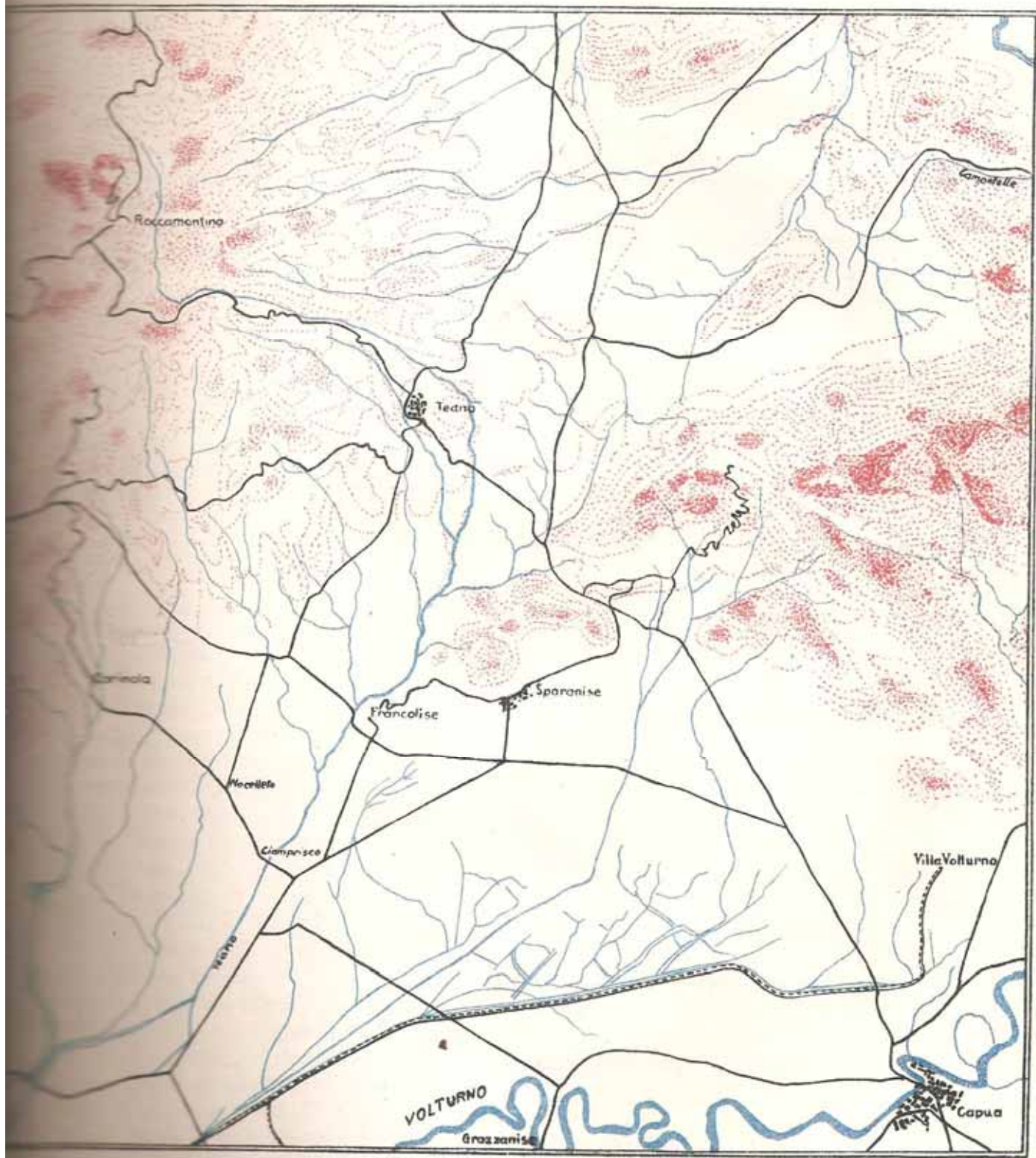
considerable problems of supply. Moreover the weather was beginning to deteriorate into the Italian winter with its heavy additional strain on the troops and its burden of mud on the tracks. It was for these reasons that, on 5th November, General Clark called a halt in order to rest, reinforce and regroup his divisions, and to establish supply routes and build up reserves.

The new balance of forces entailed a change of policy when the offensive was resumed in early December.

So far advances had been made simultaneously on a wide front, but now the strength and depth of the enemy's defences, and the increase in the number of his troops, made it necessary to attack his positions in turn, concentrating at the selected point superior forces, and supporting the assault with the full weight of Fifth Army's available artillery and air power.

With the enemy installed on the commanding heights it was not easy to assemble a large force unobserved, and fog often kept the Air Force grounded. Monte Camino and the heights to the north of it were the objective in the opening phase of the new offensive.

TEANO



Monte Camino is a massive outer guardian of the entrance to the Uri Valley, the so-called "gateway to Rome". To the west the Garigliano flows through a narrow valley between the opposing hills, and to the north Highway 6 leads on to Cassino, ten miles away. In the Corps plan 56, Division. was assigned the task of capturing Monte Camino with its two long narrow ridges, familiarly known as "Razor-Back" and "Bare-Arse", which rose in a steep rocky ascent from the valley at Galluccio.

From the summit, to which the lonely white monastery gave the obvious name "Monastery Hill", they were to attack west to Colle Acquapendola. As a preliminary to this difficult assault and to cover the concentration of 56 Division, General Hawkesworth was ordered to capture Calabritto, and there-after foothills stretching west to the Garigliano - Cocuruzzo, Monte di Mortla, and Colic le Croci.

There was an elaborate cover plan for the attack. The enemy had always to be on the watch for a sea-borne landing behind his mountain defences, and the cover plan was designed to make him apprehensive of a landing in the Gulf of Gaeta. At Mondragone on the coast tanks from 23 Armoured Bde, as well as dummy tanks, vehicles and installations were massed, and LSTs staged fake testings of the Mondragone beaches. At Naples landing craft sufficient to carry a brigade were assembled, and the "Desert Rats", on their homeward way, took part in a spurious embarkation. Naval and air bombardment of the coast from Minturno to Gaeta was hampered by bad weather, but the artillery confined the weight of its counter-battery fire, until just before the attack was due to start, to the lower reaches of the Garigliano.

Here 46 Division's Gunners dug dummy positions and used roving guns to create an impression of great activity. In order to reach their place on the left of 56 Division, troops and guns, ammunition and supplies had to be moved north up the winding road from Sessa through Ponte and Sipicciano, a road which for most of its length was in full view of the enemy on the opposite hills. All the big moves had therefore to be made at night, and convoys, without lights, laboriously wound along the narrow road, which the enemy spasmodically shelled.

Holding the Camino massif was 15 Panzer Grenadier Division, a division with a fine record of continuous action since the days of Salerno. Its six infantry battalions were stretched in strong hill positions from Monte Maggiore to the Garigliano dam. III En 129 Panzer Grenadier Regt. held Calabritto and the Cocuruzzo spur, while the II Bn was south-west in the broken country covering Monte de Monola, and the hamlet itself was reported to be strongly defended.

On our part 39 Bde, which was to make the attack on Calabritto, had been moved from its positions in the broadening plain of the Garigliano west of Sessa on the night of 23rd November, and the Durhams were holding Sipicciano, with the Foresters and the Leicesters further south in the dull straggling villages of Carlo and Ponte. On the night of 27th November 28 Bde established a tactical headquarters north of Carlo, where 5 Hampshires relieved the Foresters.

The Foresters went back to San Pietro, hard by Roccamonfina, where the rear echelons of two divisions were crowded in muddy desolation, and where the rough, hastily dug cemetery was usually under water. The same night a company of a Hampshires relieved the Leicesters forward company at Corigliano among the terraced olive-groves below Ponce. Routine patrols, and a protracted platoon patrol from the Durhams made no

contact. Every precaution was taken to prevent the enemy obtaining an identification which would disclose the northward move of the Division. The Leicesters reported that Garbo Giuseppe of Carlo, a well-known Fascist, was passing information to the enemy. The following day AMG assistance was enlisted to clear the three villages, and one hundred and fifty villagers were removed in transport on the night of 28th November.

Heavy guns shelled Carlo and Sipicciano with occasional viciousness. Lt/Col. Robinson with his company commanders had an encounter with a roving enemy patrol, but after an exchange of shots parted company. The regular mists that filled the Garigliano valley created a strange uncertainty even in daylight. Further south the KOYLI had established a patrol base at Lauro, with its single narrow street of overhanging houses and its queer, taciturn gypsy people.

From the German reactions to two patrols it was clear that we were up against disciplined and experienced fighters. An officer patrol to the Garigliano dam was not fired on till it had crossed the canal, and was at point-blank range. All but the officer got away under cover of smoke, A CSM swam half way across the river without being fired on.

The enemy was giving nothing away. On the night of 30th November the Leicesters and the Foresters began to move up to La Morata and San Clemente, nondescript villages just over a mile south-east of Calabritto. The Durhams moved forward to Vandria. At dusk on the 1st December the concentration of 139 Bde was completed, the remainder of the Foresters coming up in transport from San Pietro, while the Leicesters moved up from Ponte.

93 CALABRITTO AND COCURUZZO

The attack went in on the night of 1st December with the Foresters on the right and the Leicesters on the left. The Foresters had been ordered to capture Calabritto and the woods to the north of it, while the Leicesters were to capture "Terrace Hill" west of the village.

The Foresters had under command one hundred and forty men of 146 Pioneer Coy, and each battalion had a troop of tanks. As darkness fell a company of the Foresters moved forward unopposed on to "Pillbox Spur". From this base the main attack was to be made along the ridge to the Calabritto woods.

Deep, clinging mud delayed the two assaulting companies, and while mines and enfilade machine gun fire eventually forced them back to the start line. At dawn the attack was resumed with three companies and a troop of tanks.

Sappers rode on the tanks, and cleared the minefields in the path of the advance, while the tanks engaged the stone houses in Calabritto. The Foresters reached positions east of the village, but on the exposed hillside were heavily mortared and engaged by machine guns from Terrace Hill across the dip, and the companies were finally ordered to withdraw.

The battalion clung to Pillbox Spur, where they were subjected to heavy mortar and shell fire throughout the rest of the day. At dusk a company of the Durhams, which had been put under command, advanced to the point reached by the morning

*Preparing for a patrol
on the Garigliano*



Erecting an assault boat

San Clemente



Gemmano

attack, and held on through the night despite severe casualties, while three battalions of 56 Division passed through in the rear to assault Monte Camino itself. On the left the Leicesters encountered equal difficulties.

As they passed through San Clemente heavy guns shelled the village, and, though the left company got through to the forming-up place below Terrace Hill, the right company suffered casualties, which were later increased when it ran on an unexpected minefield. A third company attempted to push forward, but made little headway in face of mines, mortars and machine guns. At one o'clock on 3rd December a company attack was made on Terrace Hill.

The ground was thick with "S" mines and, when the barrage was lifted machine gun fire from three sides pinned the infantry down. Only the descent of darkness enabled the company to extricate itself. But the limited gains that had been made were sufficient to cover the deployment of 56 Division. By 3rd December they had completed the capture of "Bare-Arse" and on "Razor-Back." only the Monastery remained in enemy hands. This building was taken on 4th December and lost again the following night.

Confused fighting also went on at for Mielli, at the head of the only track up Monte Camino from Mielli, the bottom of which had been made secure by the dogged persistence of the Foresters and the Leicesters in holding on to their exposed positions through foul weather and constant shelling. To the south the battle patrol of the KOYLI, which had been ordered to make a diversion by crossing the Garigliano near the lower dam, met strong opposition on the spit between the canal and the river, and the crossing was abandoned after an attempt to clear the spit by fire.

Patrols were also out from 128 Bde: at first these were only small reconnaissance and nuisance patrol's, but on 4th December companies of 2 and 5 Hampshires probed towards La Valle, half way along the wooded ridge to Iviortola.

Opposition was met after some obscure nocturnal perambulations. The following night a patrol reached La Valle, and positions were established this side of it. On 4th December it was decided, in view of the stalemate at Calabritto, to attack the Cocuruzzo spur from the north using 56 Division's track to Formelli.

The following day, after the position at the head of the track had been cleared up, the Durhams, and a company of the York and Lancasters, climbed Monte Camino its bare rocky face was littered with the debris of battle and at dusk began to move forward from Formelli.

It was slow going, owing to the number of ravines that had to be crossed, though there was no enemy reaction. Indeed the enemy did not appear to be expecting attack from this side, and during daylight the Durhams made good progress, and by dark were on the Cocuruzzo spur with eighteen prisoners in their hands.

During the afternoon the Leicesters again assaulted Terrace Hill, and following close behind the barrage, in a headlong charge carried the position before the enemy could recover. At the same time the York and Lancasters, who had been put under command 139 Bde, drove into the woods north of Calabritto, to capture which the Foresters had four days previously made their gallant but unsuccessful attacks.

By midnight they had captured Hill 360 further to the west and taken forty-five prisoners, These successes, which crowned four days of passive endurance, opened a direct route to the Durhams on the Cocuruzzo spur. In the morning the Durhams entered Cocuruzzo village.

The mopping up in the olive groves and caves round Calabritto continued, and the Leicesters brought their haul of prisoners up to eighty-seven. The York and Lancasters continued their advance over the low hills towards the river, and, reaching Luce, threatened the rear of the

enemy's last position at Martola. That night 138 Bde took over from the weary 139 Bde, and the Lincolns moved north to occupy Cone la Croce before midnight, and soon afterwards cut the road below, sealing off the remnants of the German forces to the south.

The Hampshires then advanced on TvTortola without opposition. Guns, mines and equipment had been abandoned in the enemy's hasty retreat from this strong position. Some prisoners were taken, but the greater part had got away by swimming the flooded river. By dawn on 7th December 56 Division had completed the capture of the Camino massif, but below at the grey hillside village of Rocca d'Evandro the enemy was holding firm to cover the extrication of his remaining troops.

The Lincolns moved north, and after being held up throughout the night by heavy machine gun fire from numerous posts in San Nicola, entered this village in the grey light of morning. Rocca d'Evandro itself was captured by 56 Division at midday on 9th December.

The Camino battle was at an end. The capture of this commanding hill was a fine achievement, though its results were not as far-reaching as had been expected at one stage of the battle when it seemed possible that the flooding of the Garigliano would cut off the enemy's retreat. 139 Bde earned special praise from the Corps Commander for its stubborn holding on in the early stages, and for its crowning success in capturing the Cocuruzzo spur on 6th December. The Division suffered just over four hundred casualties and took one hundred and eighty prisoners.

3. HOLDING DECEMBER

After the capture of Monte Camino, in accordance with the Army plan, the main effort passed to II (U. S.) Corps attacking further north along Highway 6 towards the Liri valley and Cassino. 10 Corps had a holding role until American progress in early January called for offensive operations to protect their left flank. A regrouping of the Corps put 46 Division on the right, from the rugged heights of Monte Maggiore along the hills west of Camino and south as far as Carlo.

138 Bde were furthest north where they relieved the closely-packed Americans on Monte Maggiore after an eight hour struggle up and down the steep gullies; even three-inch mortars had to be carried. 128 Bde held from San Nicola south almost to Carlo, with 46 Recce Regt on a short front on their left. The Recce Regt had been brought north from their long, uneventful watch on the lower Garigliano, where in mid-November they had taken over the front of the departing 7 Armoured Division. Ducks haunted this sombre land of flat sodden fields and scattered farm-houses.

Reconnaissances were made round the mouth of the Garigliano using a fishing smack and a DUKW. During the practice the fishing smack was swamped in rough seas, and in the event the DUKW hit a mine.

The task of supplying the two brigades was a desperate one. 270 and 271 Field Goyos worked on the notorious Cocuruzzo track, with assistance from the infantry, and with a hundred Italian civilians providing unskilled labour. The track wound for five miles over low hills, and the ground varied from rock to mud. After nearly a month's work its first mile and a half was fit for three-tonners, and the remainder for jeeps and trailers, with several passing places

Part of the track was under observation from the hills across the river, and as a result Calabritto came in for heavy shelling when traffic passed in daylight. Hessian screens were erected there with apparently good effect. Mixed platoons of Sappers were also working with the Americans clearing "Express Highway", which was the name given to the railway line south of Highway 6, of rails, and mines, so that it could be used up and supply our guns and the guns of II Corps.

On Monte Maggiore the KOYLI and the York and Lancasters built sangars among the rocks and ledges. Patrols were out, but the Steep muddy slopes and sudden rock faces made night movement a hazardous affair.

Rain and sleet brought raw discomfort. In the mornings dank mists filled the Garigliano valley. An unending stream of mules and porters, Italians and Basutos without a word of English, made the long ascent of Monte Camino from the huge dump at Mieli. Lincoln patrols from Rocca d'Evandro — Brigade Headquarters was established in the castle examined the Peccia river, and their battle patrol fought a successful small engagement west of the blown bridge there on the night 15th December.

On 19th December enemy aircraft, making one of their rare appearances, bombed and machine gunned the ICOYLI and the York and Lancasters on Camino and Maggiore.

Two days later a strong enemy patrol, taking 0 advantage of the, thick morning mist, overran a forward platoon of the Lincolns, killing the platoon commander and taking fourteen prisoners. Without question there was something eerie about these days on the Garigliano. The continual mists strained eyes and nerves. Mystery surrounded the operations of daring German patrols.

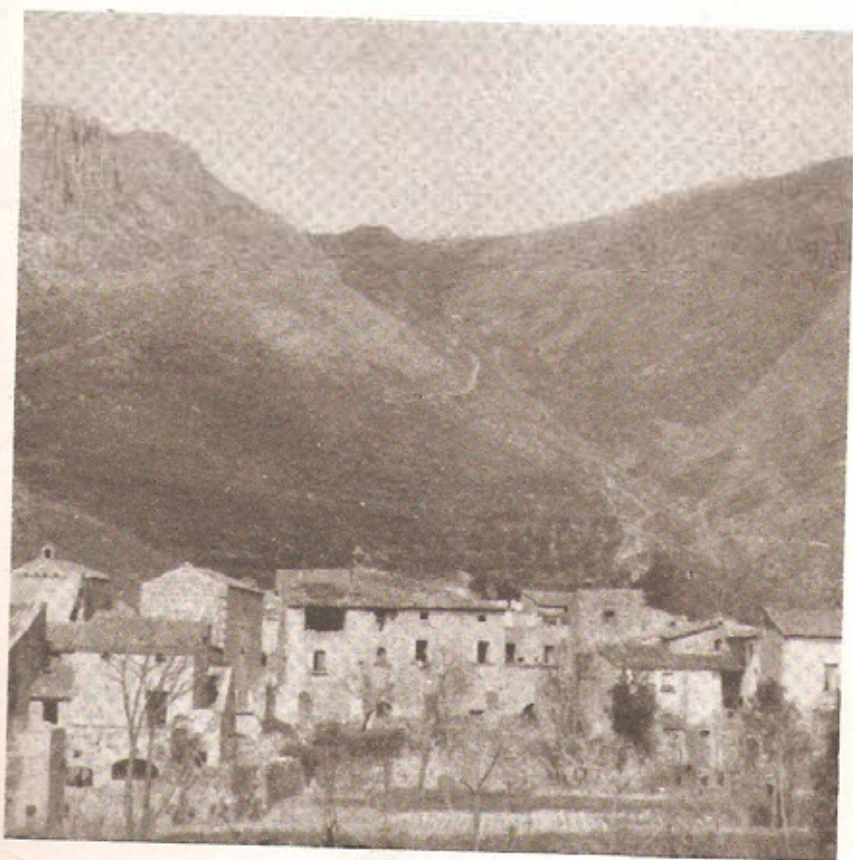
Two men had been whisked away from the Hampshires; the Lincolns had had a post overrun; Brigadier Scott had a narrow escape on the road below San Nicola. Yet our attempts to cross the Garigliano usually failed. Whether their patrols came down from the north across the Peccia, or crossed the Garigliano itself was never discovered. There were rumours of underwater bridges. On 19th December a civilian ferry was found bringing Italians across the Garigliano at 150 lira a passage.

No evidence could be found that the enemy used it, but when two days later we tried to put civilian agents across there the enemy opened fire from the far bank. So Christmas came round and was celebrated by the battalions as they got the opportunity between 25th December and 10th January. Christmas Day itself was one of the few fine days in weeks of sleet and rain, At Campo, Galluccio and Vandria, drab villages in the valley behind Camino, men did their best to forget their bare surroundings. Outside the guns crashed. There were more battles ahead.

4. THE PECCIA AND COLLE CEDHO

On 16th December the Americans captured Monte Lung^o, a long smooth hill adjoining Highway 6 across the valley north of Maggiorc. 46 Division artillery supported the attack. The following day the operations on Monte Sammuero north of the highway were completed with the capture of the bitterly contested village of San Pietro.

The despatch rider



*Mieli with Camino
behind*



*Lieut. General R.L. McCreery
KBE., DSO., MC., and Major-
General J.L.I. Hawkesworth
CB., CBE., DSO.*



On Camino

By the beginning of January the Americans were ready to resume their offensive against the next German defence line through Monte Porchia and Vittorio del Lazio, three miles to the rear. 46 Division was ordered to protect their left flank by crossing the Peccia and capturing Colic Cedro. This solitary hill, amid the rolling wooded farmland across the Peccia, was reputed to be held by a company of III Bn 15 Panzer Grenadier Regt, with outposts forward on the river.

To the north it was dominated by Monte Porchia, and the plan was therefore to clear to the parallel road when the American attack started, but to delay the assault on the hill itself until Monte Porthia had been taken. It was not intended to undertake a major battle across the Peccia, as the Division was scheduled for further operations later in the month.

138 Bde was earmarked for the attack, and at the end of December a series of complicated reliefs was carried out in order to rest their battalions; 128 Bde side-stepped to the north, and established its headquarters in Rocca d'Evandro castle; 139 Bde, who had come in to the south, were relieved by 23 Armoured Bde on the night of 4 January, and moved into divisional reserve.

The New Year came in with a gale and the first fall of snow, which played havoc with communications. Patrols, reliefs and moves went on in biting cold. Damp penetrated the bone. For the coming attack Brigadier I-larding put the Lincolns on the left and the York and Lancasters on the right: he had a squadron of tanks and a platoon of 272 Field Coy under command, and massed artillery was available in support. During the night of 3rd January the Sappers working on the Peccia ford had casualties from mortar fire, and the

bad weather had made the track from Piacoma so muddy that it was impossible to complete a route for tanks. A platoon of the York and Lancasters, which had been ordered to make a diversionary attack on a wood across the river to support the opening of the American assault, met fierce resistance.

The Americans also encountered strong opposition and frequent counter-attacks. At dusk on 4th January our attack began. The York and Lancasters made swift progress; they quickly captured one of the farms where their platoon had been repelled the previous night, and pushed on to take a well-shed position on Hill 65; later they cleared the second farm and occupied the tongue of the wood between. But on the left the situation of the Lincolns was obscure for some time.

Later they reported one company across the river, having lost a platoon, and a second company about to cross. But the second company was caught in intense shelling in a gully this side of the river; the company commander was among the many casualties, and the company failed to get over.

All along the river the shelling and mortar fire was vicious, and the Sappers had seven men killed at the ford, and were forced to suspend work. The Lin-coins RAP received a direct hit. In a lull the Sappers resumed work on the ford. All but four of the tanks were bogged on the quagmire of a track from Piacomo; none was able to cross the river.

Shortly after dawn the York and Lancasters beat off a strong counter-attack with an immediate bayonet charge, which accounted for thirty five of the enemy. Jeeps were unable to get forward to the river, and porters had to be organized to hump ammunition. The KOYLI were brought up to hold a gap, which had developed between 138 Bde and the Americans. The Americans had made little headway from Monte Lungo, so that the two forward battalions of 138 Bde were in a precarious

position. They were attracting a main part of the enemy's attention, when theirs was only intended as a supporting attack, and their casualties were mounting from the incessant shelling. The American Liaison Officer said that the American Task Force Allen would attack Rocca d'Evandro station in the after-noon; and that they would then take over Hill 65.

Orders were therefore sent by two separate runners from the Lincolns to Lt/Col. Kendrew, who was commanding all the forces across the river, to withdraw that night. Already casualties were with difficulty being got back. Shortly after midnight the York and Lancasters commenced to withdraw.

Their withdrawal was conducted in good order and without incident, and by four o'clock the battalion was back across the Peccia. Seventy five prisoners had been taken, and it was clear that two battalions, and not a solitary company, as had been reckoned in the beginning, were holding the approaches to Colic Cedro. REME worked all night in an attempt to extricate the bogged tanks. The four forward tanks had to be immobilised, de-gunned and left: only the nearest could be recovered with the available equipment. Because of this stubborn fighting, and their heavy losses,

General Hawkesworth gave instructions for 138 Bde to be relieved by 139 Bde. But during the night the Americans advanced to the foot of Monte Porchia, and in the morning, before the relief had taken place, the KOYLI were warned, in view of this success, to be ready to attack Colic Cedro. The battle patrol was sent forward, and the battalion prepared to follow if the Americans succeeded in capturing Monte Porchia. The battle patrol reached Cedro, and found the forward slopes clear. They overran a machine gun post on the crest. Two platoons were dug in on the rear slopes, and there were signs of further positions on the outlying southern hillock. During the night the patrol returned with a wounded prisoner.

On the morning of 7th January medium bombers blasted Colle Cedro, and in the evening the Foresters moved forward to the attack. A company of the Durhams was to protect their left flank by securing positions between the river and the road. The Durham company experienced no difficulty, and the Foresters reached the road unmolested. The assaulting company, making a wide movement round the right, came in on the hill from the north.

Two platoons, overrunning five machine gun posts in their assault up the rocky slopes, reached the top, but were unable to dig in on the stony ground, and were later forced to withdraw. The reserve company had been split up by the heavy shelling. Battalion head-quarters, near the road, was hit, and the gunner F. O. O. killed, so that it was difficult to obtain supporting fire. To the rear our gun areas were being heavily engaged. It was hoped to renew the attack with tank support, but the leading tank fouled the diversion at Rocca d'Evandro station and blocked Express Highway.

Brigadier Block had a plan under consideration for an attack that night by the Leicesters, but in the afternoon General Hawkesworth decided to make no move until the Americans had cleared Monte Porchia, where confused and fluid fighting was still going on. The Foresters were mortared and shelled throughout the day. On 9th January the Americans cleared the last enemy pockets on Monte Porchia, and later Forester patrols found the enemy positions on Cedro abandoned, so that the Durhams, when they came up to relieve them after dark, moved on and occupied Colle Cedro without opposition. Intended as a minor operation in support of the Americans, the battle had developed into a stubborn, costly struggle.

A hundred prisoners were taken, but our own casualties were over two hundred and fifty, and 138 Bde was considerably effected by its unreplaced losses.

„Post early for Christmas“



The Dance Band

Jerusalem



Beirut

5. THE ATTEMPTED ^{&52 66,1} * OF THE GARGLIANO

After these protracted preliminary battles, the next phase of the Army plan was the main assault on the German Winter Line. 6 Corps was to cross the lower Garigliano, and advancing up the Ausente valley behind Castelforte, to threaten the rear of the Liri valley defences; 2 (U. S.) Corps were then to mount a frontal attack towards Cassino.

When both these attacks were under way, and the enemy's reserves had been committed to stem them, 6 Corps was to land at Anzio. Loss of troops to 6 Corps reduced the American Second Corps on our right to two infantry divisions, and 46 Division was ordered to force a crossing of the Garigliano below San Ambrogio conjunction with their attack, in order to protect their left flank.

128 Bde, which for the last fortnight had had only patrol activity to break the monotony of routine existence, was set aside for the crossing. On the night of 6th January they were relieved by 138 Bde in order to have four days rest before the attack. Battalions in turn went back to the Volturno, where 272 Field Coy gave them brief instruction in watermanship. Rocca d'Evandro and San Nicola from long familiarity had become a sort of home from home to both brigades.

But the difficult Cocuruzzo track was incapable of coping with the supply of the coming attack, and 276 Field Coy were ordered to build bridges over the twin branches of the Peccia so that the reasonable road from Rocca d'Evandro station, which had been secured in the last attack, might be utilized. Leicester patrols covered the operation. But the area was thick with mines the first night one of the bridging trucks went up and the bridging site was the target of enemy mortars and guns.

In four nights work the Sappers suffered severe casualties. Assault boats for the crossing came down this way. The truck was wrecked by a mine, but the boats were undamaged, and were carried and ferried to their place.

To the south the offensive had opened on the night of 7th January when 56 Division established a bridgehead opposite Castelforte in face of considerable opposition. 46 Division's crossing was fixed for two nights later. Brigadier Scott planned to cross on a two battalion front with 2 Hampshires right and 1/4 Hampshires left. For three nights previous to the attack machine gun and mortar concentrations were staged on San Ambrogio with the idea of worrying the enemy into a premature disclosure of his defensive fire programme.

But the enemy was not to be hustled. There was a thick fog on the night of 9th January, with a moon occasionally showing through. The enemy was strangely silent. 1/4 Hampshires watched their rubber boat swept downstream; a swimmer with a line could get no more than half way across.

2 Hampshires were crossing in two places. On the left a few men got over, but the signal cable snapped under the strain, the boats got out of control, and the crossing had to be abandoned. Only on the right, at the junction of the Peccia and the Garigliano, was any success achieved.

Here the boats were swept across by the force of the Peccia waters. Two trips were made and a company of Hampshires reached the far side. But the boats were now waterlogged and could not be got back. Fresh boats were sent for. 114 Hampshires moved north to use this crossing. By this time

the enemy had located the crossing place and fighting was going on on the far bank. Another attempt was made to get a line across. But dawn was approaching and the crossing had to be abandoned, leaving the company that had crossed on the far side. Under cover of fog and smoke one or two of them got back in waterlogged, leaking boats.

After this failure, which was due to the opening of the sluice gates at San Giovanni and the consequent flooding of the river, it was decided that 138 Bde should cross into the 56 Division bridgehead, and that the Division should build up there, subject to its commitments in the north on the American flank. where the enemy was still active.

They surprised a section of the Durhams below Cedro on the night of 12th January, and further south all the Durham patrols made contact. OPs were put out at Campo Fiore and at Vandra on a low hill overlooking the junction of the Rapido and the Garigliano. From there it was possible to see the German guns and mortars in the dip behind San Ambrogio.

But sometime on 13th January the Vandra OP was overrun the enemy was sensitive about his northern flank and later strong patrols to the battered village were met by heavy fire from several machine gun posts.

The Foresters sent a company to Campo Fiore, and the Leicesters began to edge in on Vandra. It was not until the night of 20th January that the Foresters finally captured the village. A company and the battle patrol took the battered hamlet after some stiff skirmishes in the houses and caves, and after losing eleven men in a minefield. Indeed this whole neighbourhood was strewn with mines, which continued to cause casualties.

On 23rd January 139 Bde relieved 128 Bde, and took over the whole divisional front east of the Garigliano. Two days later 128 Bde moved across the river under command of 56 Division. The same night the Foresters and the Durhams came under command of 138 Bde, so that Brigadier Block was left holding an extended front with 46 Recce Regt, the Leicesters and the Kings Dragoon Guards.

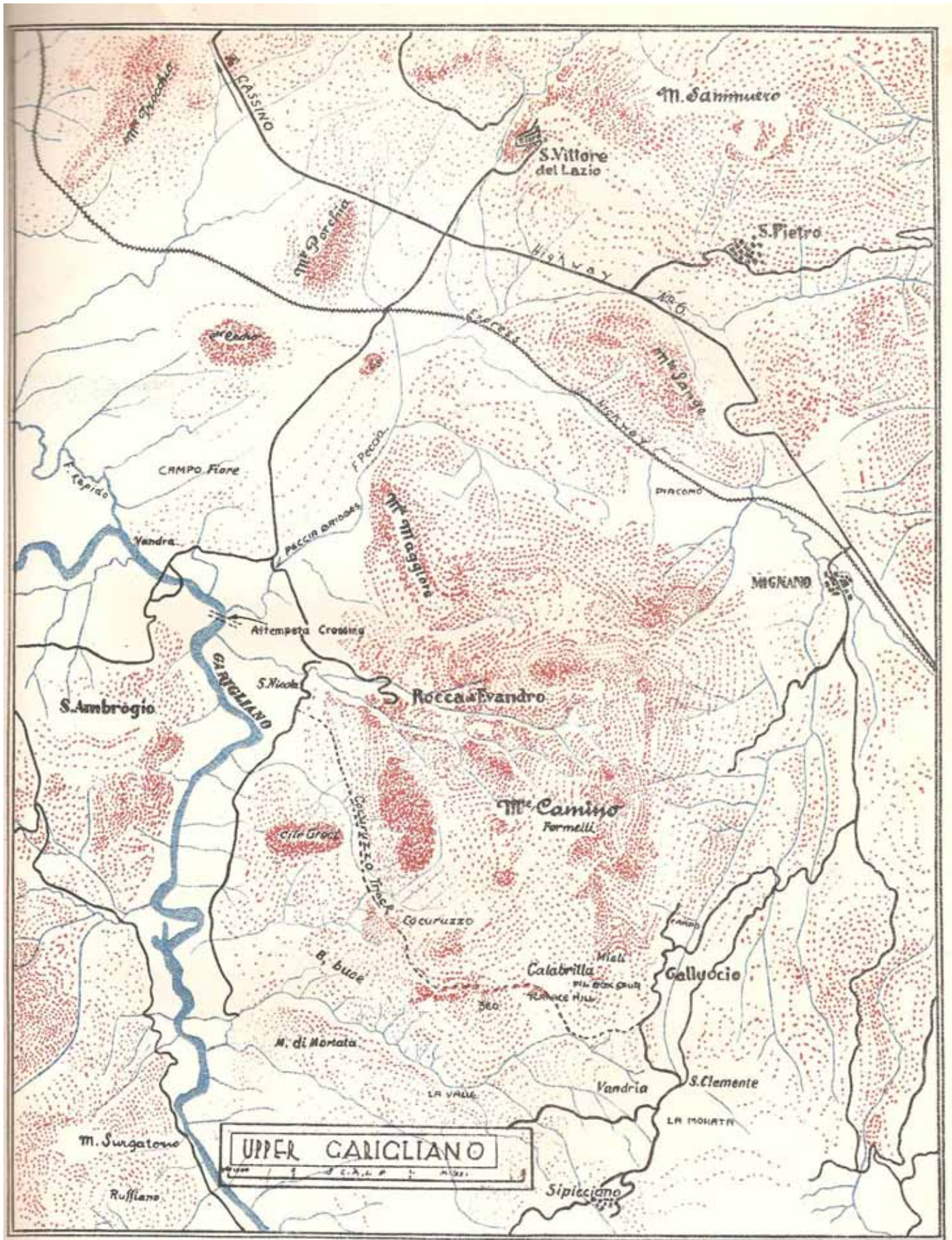
6. TAIL PIECE

The Division never really got clear of the Garigliano. Even in the later battles in the hills north of Castelforte, battalions would make the long march back across Skipton or Pateley bridge for their brief rest in Campo and Galluccio. In these villages everybody came to have a place of his own, and they were as familiar as home.

Indeed no battle-field on which the Division fought can have impressed itself so indelibly on the memory. Yet despite this familiarity there was always a strange eeriness about the Garigliano days. German patrols reached their most daring when they ambushed a jeep near "Half-way House" on the Cocuruzzo track, and carried off an officer and his batman.

But such incidents were not unusual. Along the road below Rocca d'Evandro — the Ghost road men disappeared without trace. It was a world in which patrols loomed without warning out of the mist or the night. Both sides of the river were heavily mined.

Patrols laid mines on roads where none had been before, and many of the orange groves were booby-trapped. Sometimes the enemy went as far as to booby-trap his own dead.



THE MOUNTAINS

1. INTERLUDE

Little attempt has been made, up to now, to indicate the hardships which the Italian winter imposed on the troops in these desolate mountains on either side of the Garigliano.

Since November the strain had been increasing week by week until on Ornito, Tuga and Ceasola it all but reached the limits of endurance. Even in October, on the Volturno, the physical discomfort of water-logged slit-trenches and the maddening persistence of mosquitoes were not lightly to be dismissed. Monte Camino and Monte Maggiore, in December, were bitter fore-tastes of the later trials across the river.

At a height of over two thousand feet, in rain and snow, with only a rock-built sangar for protection, and a leather jerkin, gascape and greatcoat for warmth and dryness, living became as compelling a problem as fighting. Cooking, in these conditions, was an independent operation, the capabilities of "Compo" rations a commonplace, and frequent brews of tea the best guarantee of survival.

Sometimes the rations were increased with extra chocolate, margarine and biscuits and became "High Altitude Rations"; more attractive increments often came from the discovery of American leavings or the finding of an abandoned dump. In any case, indents usually erred on the side of generosity, and it was seldom, despite the incredible difficulties of portering, that the forward troops went hungry.

Not only was supply a recurrent twenty four hour operation on these narrow mountain tracks, but the evacuation of casualties, who had to be carried many weary miles, sometimes took the better part of two days.

Except for the dribble of men returning from hospital there had been practically no reinforcements since before the Volturno crossing, and though there had been considerable periods of comparative inactivity, there had been none of complete rest. It was on men who had been fighting continuously for four or five months that the exceptional demands of these last battles in the mountains were imposed.

The low rate of sickness; the cheerfulness of men under appalling circumstances of weather and battle; the stoic suffering of the wounded; the endurance of men buoyed up mainly by their own self-respect all these things were a tribute to the ancient qualities of the British Soldier.

2. MONTE TUGA

Operation Panther, the crossing of the Garigliano, had achieved initial surprise.

But the enemy swiftly reinforced 94 Panzer Grenadier Division and on 21st January, when 138 Bde was just established on the far side of the river, began to launch strong counter-attacks on 56 Division's positions near Castelforte.

To the north II (U. S.) Corps had suffered a costly repulse at San Angelo, but before the end of the month both the American 34 Division and the French Expeditionary Corps had succeeded in crossing the Rapid^o north of Cassino and denting the Gustav Line at Cairo village and at Monte Belvedere,

On 22nd January VI Corps made an almost unopposed landing at Anzio. To contain this landing, and later to launch an all-out offensive to drive it back into the sea, the German High Command did not deplete the Liri valley defences to any extent, but rushed three divisions from the quiescent Adriatic front and four from the north.

These latter came by rail, road and air from places as far removed as Avignon, Istria, Genoa and Florence. It is against this back-ground of hardening resistance, with here and there a limited early success, that the battles of the next month have to be viewed. By the first week of February it had become clear that the enemy had successfully countered our effort to smash the Winter Line and capture Rome.

Only at Cassino did II (U. S.) Corps and later the NZW Zealand Corps continue to make costly attempts to batter a way through. After a long night march and a crossing by assault boat and ferry, the morning of 21st January found 138 Bde established in the loop of the Garigliano east of Castelforte, where they relieved two battalions of 169 Bde.

On the right were the KOYLI, and on the left the Lincolns with the York and Lancasters in reserve at Suja. None of the battalions' positions were far up the tangled mass of bare hills that lay north-west of Castelforte, but stretched in a rough quarter-circle three miles from the pivot of Monte Tuga.

That day 2/7 Queens were driven from their forward positions near Castelforte by a determined counter-attack, and 138 Bde began to edge forward to better their defences by occupying the nearer hills in case the enemy's attack should be pressed on against them. During

this regrouping occasional clashes occurred, and in the evening a half-hearted attack on Suja was beaten off. By 22nd January "Skipton" bridge had been built across the river east of Suja. Two days later the Durhams relieved the York and Lancaster's preparatory to a general attack towards Monte Tuga, and on 26th January 138 Bde came once more under command 46 Division.

The narrow road from Sessa through Lauro was the sole supply route, and as it wound its way over the low hills towards the river it was in full view of the remaining enemy positions at Damian^o and Castelforte, so that traffic had to be rigidly controlled. From Lauro to the bridge the notorious "Sun Track" was developed to take jeeps, which were the only vehicles allowed across the river.

It was strange to remember that the jeep, without which the Italian campaign could hardly have been fought, had been a rare new toy during the summer in North Africa. On the night of 26th January the KOYLI opened the attack by capturing Stab. della Provincia after a stiff climb and a noisy battle, which was remarkable for the panicking of their Basuto porters.

The Lincolns, moving forward against Hill 334 south of Monte Rotundo, scored an early success by surprising and capturing an officer and his command of forty men, and by dark were firmly dug in on the hill. On 28th January further successes and a number of prisoners fell to the KOYLI, who captured Mass. Ruffian, and the Lincolns, who later in the day took Monte Rotund^o.

With these gains, which were made up craggy uncharted. hill-faces (maps were unreliable guides in that trackless mountain mass), the stage was set for the final attack by the York and Lancasters on Monte Turlito and Monte Tuga. A long, hazardous night march took the York and Lancasters up Turlito's precipitous slopes, and dawn found them in amongst a surprised enemy.

Sharp fighting captured the hill, but mortar and artillery fire prevented their moving on against Monte Tuga until nightfall. With darkness they attacked again, and within three hours Tuga had fallen, and the greater part of its garrison had been captured.

These remarkable and comparatively easy successes of 138 Bde in three days resulted in the capture of a series of bare defensible hills and over two hundred prisoners, and on 30 January the KOYLI carried on by clearing Monte Purgatorio and its numerous caves.

But nowhere else on the wide 10 Corps front had progress been made, and the Durhams, when they attempted to capture Monte Siela, a bare round hill overlooking Castelforte from the east, found the opposition determined and unyielding. In two days of fighting in which they suffered considerable casualties and were strongly counter-attacked, they failed to make much impression on the stout defenders of Castelforte.

On the other side of the village 128 Bde had found them equally unimpressible.

3. DAMIANO

The battle for Hill 411 and Damiano village below and beyond was fought under command 56 Division. On 24th January 5 Hampshires had relieved 2/5 Queens in the small battered village of San Lorenzo which straggled round the road junction below Castelforte. Enemy self-propelled guns fired down the road. Two days later 1/4 Hampshires took over positions on the nearer flank of Monte Cianelli.

The enemy held the crest (Hill 411) less than two hundred yards away, and the rocky slopes were strewn with unburied bodies sticking out from half-completed sangars. In the early afternoon of 29th January 1/4 Hampshires assaulted under cover of the smoke of their brigaded mortars. Withering fire broke up their attack, and despite heroic efforts on the part of Sgt Fry and CSM McAllister who repeatedly led the depleted companies forward, no success was achieved.

After 2 Hampshires had also failed in darkness to capture the hill-top, from which an enemy machine gun kept up a derisive fire throughout the night, this costly attack was abandoned. With their later repulse of the Durham's prolonged and determined efforts to capture Monte Siola, the enemy could fairly claim to have defeated our attempted pincer movement round their stronghold of Castelforte. With the failure of the attacks on either side of Castelforte, an extensive re-shuffle took place.

128 Bde came back across the river under command 46 Division, but after a mere twenty four hours moved across again to take over the left sector, which comprised the Foresters and the Durhams.

On the same day, 1st February, 2 and 5 Hampshires crossed "Skipton" bridge and came under command 138 Bde, which with a Commando Brigade also under command, was preparing to exploit its recent gains. Meanwhile, on the northern sector across the Peccia,

139 Bde had been busy staging diversions to support the attacks that were being made on either flank, and to create an impression of strength on their thinly held front. Enemy patrols were active, and their impertinence reached its height when they blew up the Peccia bridge. The Sappers had lost heavily while building it.

4. ORNITO AND CERASOLA

The main attack was to be made on the night of 2nd February by the Commandos against Hill 803 and Monte Faito, prominent heights across the valley north-west of Monte Tuga. An intermediate saddle, with Hill 711 and Monte Ornito as cante and pommel, lay between Tuga and Faito.

The whole range was bleak and desolate, with an occasional shepherd's hut the only sign of habitation and rare winding tracks the only trace of human passage. Even sheep, in summertime, must have found it poor pasturage, and in the winter all life seemed to have deserted the place.

The two Commandos went into their attack in small groups, so that throughout 3rd February it was difficult to be certain how they were progressing except from the rearward traffic of casualties and prisoners, and from reports from our forward troops looking out towards Faito. By the evening it had become clear that they had failed to take Hill 803 and Faito, but both Hill 711 and Ornito were in their hands.

Accordingly 5 Hampshires moved up to relieve them there. Enemy troops had been seen withdrawing towards Cerasola, a long sharp ridge on the right flank of any further advance, and so that night, patrols were sent there and to Hill 807, but no further attacks were made. Indeed, from the number of Commando casualties, and the small gains of a day's hard fighting, it was apparent that new life had been infused into the dispirited defence.

There followed a lull of three days, during which the build-up for a further attack and the relief and regrouping of battalions went on in the rear, and forward patrols were out. By 4th February "Pateley" bridge was open, and somewhat eased the supply of 5 Hampshires who were now on the extreme right. Nevertheless, supply was an operation of some magnitude.

The jeep train, which ran from Lauro up the "Sun Track" to Skipton bridge, was shelled constantly in daylight and intermittently at night. Across the river, mules and porters brought up rations and ammunition from the growing "Cheshire" and "Harrogate" dumps. It took the round of the clock to make the rough journey up to Ornito, the most advanced position held by our troops.

Here 5 Hampshires repulsed a heavy counter-attack in the early morning mist on 6th February, when a German company got up close without being recognized (it was mistaken for some of our own troops). Sgt Cooke's cool courage, when he advanced up three hundred yards of open hillside, was largely instrumental in dislodging three enemy machine gun posts from the slopes of the outlying hill.

For the new attack General Hawkesworth had 138 Ede, which now consisted of 5 Hampshires, the Lincolns, the KOYLI and later the York and Lancasters and which he directed to capture first Cerasola and Faito, and then Monte Feuci half a mile to the west; and also 1 Guards Brigade, which he planned to use to follow through and capture Monte Ganni and Colle Avrito.

These hills formed a continuous mass overlooking Castelforte from the north, and their capture would complete the encirclement of that obstinate strongpoint. At dawn on 7th February 5 Hampshires repulsed a further counter-attack with considerable loss to the enemy, and some to themselves.

It was impossible in the rocks and the mortar fire to bury the dead whose bodies marked the path of the many attacks and

counter-attacks that had rolled across the bleak slopes of Ornito.

That night the main attack started. 5 Hampshires, after a slow night of clearing the few posts that defended Cerasola, had by the morning taken up their positions on the long narrow ridge, which was overlooked by enemy-held hills to the north and west. But the Lincoins, who were directed on Fait°, twice captured and were twice driven off the barren summit of Hill 803.

The second counter-attack extended as far south as Hill 711, where the KOYLI were now in position. At this time an enemy message was intercepted "Fait must be held at all costs", and the weight of mortar fire and the frequent counter-attacks were eloquent of his determination to carry out this order.

A company of the Lincoins were pinned in the gully below Hill 803, and it was decided at midday to postpone the attack on Faito. Instead the KOYLI were to attack north from Cerasola, and the Lincoins were then to capture Hill 803. But neither attack took place, for the KOYLI "O" group was put out of action in the heavy evening shelling of Cerasola, and almost immediately afterwards the, enemy, following up the Lincoln company when in the evening it with-drew from below Hill 803, developed a dangerous threat to Ornito.

At midnight 2 Coldstream Guards relieved both the Lincoins and the KOYLI bn Ornito. Cerasola was the only gain of this attack, and with the capture of Cerasola all major offensive operations came to an end. There followed a period of grim holding in the mountain mass north of Castelforte. Cerasola, Hill 711 and Ornito were the key points in this defence, and against them the enemy made repeated attacks, and his mortaring was regular and heavy.

On Cerasola there was no water, and gas capes were used to catch rain for extra brews of tea. Rain, sleet and snow turned the

tracks and the hill faces into mud. Mist filled the gullies. Porters brought up ten-man packs, water and ammunition to the heavily shelled dip behind the hill. Here in a stone hut the RAP functioned; it sometimes took six hours to get casualties back as far as that, and more than twenty four to make the descent to Pateley bridge through a succession of posts of Indian porters which had been established along the slippery track.

In the eight days they spent on Ornito and Cerasola, before their relief by 3 Welsh Guards on loth February, 5 Hampshires suffered nearly two hundred casualties from incessant mortaring and determined counter-attacks, the last and fiercest of which was driven off by a bayonet charge on the day of their relief.

The Welsh Guards, with full strength companies and six-foot men, found it difficult to fit in the sangars and slit-trenches on the hill. For the next ten days i Guards Brigade held the vital ground against all the enemy's at-temps to dislodge them. A major attack by more than two battalions on .

19th February was repulsed with heavy losses in. dead and wounded and more than a hundred prisoners. Indeed during the succeeding days the enemy made several appearances with a white flag asking for a truce to bury their dead.

On 20th February 128 Ede took over from the Guards Brigade, with the York and Lancasters on Cerasola, 2 Hampshires on Ornito and 1/4 Hampshires on Tuga. Sporadic raids, and occasional vicious shelling were incidents in the general discomfort, but neither the enemy nor ourselves were in a position to undertake any further large attack.

On 28 February 10 Bde of 4 British Division, which had recently arrived in Italy (the ships that had brought them the same day embarked 139 Bde on their way to the Middle East), took over the central sector, and 128 Bde moved to the quieter Valle di Suja.

5. OPERATION "PITCHFORK"

"Pitchfork" was the pseudonym of the most popular operation ever undertaken by 46 Division. Already the departure of 139 Bde, who had embarked from Naples on 21st February, marked its opening phase. On 1st March 138 Bde were relieved by r Guards Bde and six days later left Taranto in MS Batory.

On 7th March 128 Bde, after a week of minor patrol clashes in the hills above Suja Valle, were relieved by 12 Bde of 4 British Division. As they moved out the thousand bomber raid was beginning on Cassino. A week later they sailed from Naples with Divisional Head-quarters. So ended the first Italian campaign. It was the hardest of them all, though it comprised only four major battles — Salerno, the Volturno crossing, the Camino operation and the battles round Castelforte.

But though the battles, after October, were separated by long intervals of static defence, the strain was continuous. Patrolling, especially in the misty uncertainty of the Garigliano valley, produced a constant nervous tension, which made the grim battles almost a relief.

There were long periods of a monotonous routine, of morning and evening "stand-to", of constantly recurring sentry-duty, and of patrols, which taxed endurance by its endlessness (the Durharns were twenty one days without relief in the hills above Suja). Rests were usually short, and the available villages, though familiar, had few other attractions.

The mud, the cruel mountains and the penetrating clamp cold of the Italian winter in a bleak countryside which could barely support its drab, scattered villages, came as an unpleasant shock to strangers whose ideas of Italy were founded on holiday advertisements praising the "Sunny South".

During the campaign the Division sustained 5173 (4116) casualties; 71 (68) Officers and 683 (624) Men were killed; 194 (200) Officers and 3091 (2991) Men were wounded; 45 (12.) Officers and 1399 (500) Men were reported missing. The prisoners taken amounted to 1657 (2850).

1 The figures in brackets are the corresponding figures for the Gothic Line campaign.

INTERLUDE

THE MIDDLE EAST

The Division was certainly in need of a rest. Since the landing at Salerno, nearly six months past, there had been little respite. The last three months, in the snow and rain of a bitter Italian winter with often only a sangar were faced for shelter on the bleak hillsides, had taxed endurance to the limit.

Even the periods of rest out of the line entailed long marches, burdened with kit, to reach the cheerless haven of some battered hill village, where after a few days of doubtful comfort men were faced with the long trek back. Casualties had been

heavy; most battalions were reduced to half their proper strength; reinforcements, especially just after the landing, had been thrust straight into battle. The barrels of the field Guns were worn smooth with constant &MG and their accuracy impaired. The Division sailed from Naples and Taranto — Taranto, which we were to pass through four times in the next year, with its square streets, Italian barrack like buildings and straight with its empty shops and animated sailors and its miles of docks and waterfront.

For the first time we got entangled in the maze of transit camps and staging areas -which seemed to infest the outskirts of the city. Naples had become the chief supply base for the Fifth Army. The empty shells of tenements and warehouses beside the docks still gazed vacantly at the unloading ships, but the Via Roma was full of chattering crowds.

A vicious Black Market had sprung up and prices, refreshingly low to the first arrivals, had soared to an absurd level. Importunate touts and beggars plied their calling, and theft had been brought to a fine art, so that to leave anything unattended was to lose it. Still, what better preparation could there have been for the Middle East, where begging and stealing are the only popular pursuit of so many? The voyage was pleasant and uneventful.

At Alexandria and Port Said inhabitants of the Mysterious East were jabbering and gesticulating on the quayside. Their thin bodies and long dirty robes contrasted with the occasional fat uniformed Egyptian official.

At Quassasin Camp, after a crowded uncomfortable truck ride, the sweeping sands offered a gritty welcome. When the wind got up, as it often did, the place was blanketed in clouds of biting sand which left a fine deposit on food and clothes.

The torrid heat of midday made battledress uncomfortable, but in the cold evenings it was welcome enough. The NAAFI clubs were well organized, but Shafto's cinema monopoly did not necessitate either good films or clean picture-houses. While at Quassasin four days leave was granted to Cairo.

Accumulated credits — for in the Italian mountains there was little but the Weekly NAAFI to buy were drawn, and the Manager of Barclay's Bank must have had a headache interviewing scores of clamouring officers waving cheque books and bank statements. It was indeed wonderful how much money could be spent in a short four days in a city which ever since the start of the war in the Mediterranean had set itself out to provide the comforts of civilization to the soldier fresh from the desert — at a price.

Memories of Cairo are of well-stocked shops, affluent Egyptians, a round of cabarets, and in the background the insistent clamour of motor-horns.

To escape to the ancient in-human majesty of the Pyramids and the Sphinx at Mena was only again to be besieged by camel owners, photographers, postcard sellers, beggars and hawkers.

Then there was the fortune-teller who drew mystic figures in the sand in the shadow of the Sphinx. Mena House and the Gezira Sporting Club, especially the latter, afforded an endless variety of entertainment for four days at any rate. It was not to be wondered at that charges came in from the Military Police, most of them for minor infringements of local etiquette.

A certain commander in the Division was one day presented with a pile of these 252's and feeling rather strongly on the subject in the column marked "punishment awarded" he wrote "beheaded" and returned them to higher authority. But there was no doubt that, in one way and another, 46 Division left its mark on Cairo. 139 Bde had already gone ahead to Palestine, and shortly after the termination of this leave the remainder of the Division moved by road and rail to the lines of hutted and tented camps round Nathanya. This was the

goal of the five hundred mile journey across the Suez Canal and through the blazing barrenness of the Sinai desert. In this boundless waste it was surprising to see several small encampments of skin tents alongside the route where the Arabs lived who had a lifetime's job clearing the road of drifting sand. In this lonely existence the passage of a convoy was an important event and they all turned out to raise the cry "Cigarette, Johnnie" as the trucks streamed past.

At the vacant staging places no sooner had a convoy stopped and begun to brew up than dozens of Arabs appeared. Where they came from no one knew but they must have had an infallible system of look-outs, Entering Palestine, it was easy to understand how to eyes strained with the endless miles of shimmering sand its patches of rich green should have betokened a promised land.

Nathanya was pleasantly situated on the shores of the Mediterranean. Its population was predominantly Jewish. Here on the long stretches of sand dunes the Infantry sweated and toiled in intensive battle training and the quiet of early morning was rent by the clatter of Bren guns and the occasional crump of mortars. The Division had been brought up to strength by men from the Anti-Aircraft Regiments which were being gradually dis-banded throughout the Middle East.

Many disliked this last-minute separation from the guns and the job which they had worked at from the outbreak of war. But as far as Possible groups were kept together and every effort was made to make them feel at home as infantrymen. Their performance in the following autumn did credit to themselves and their instructors. High up in the hills near Safad, Officers and NCOs went through strenuous courses, which culminated in the final test of fitness, exercise "Aggression".

Training was hard and unremitting, but there was ample opportunity for recreation. Football was in full swing. At Nathanya there was an excellent bathing beach and in the single street of white house's there were several cafes. But Tel Aviv and Haifa, both of which were not far away, offered every sort of at-traction. Tel Aviv was thoroughly organized, and no one need have been without a party or a house to go to. Both were clean modern cities on the shores of the blue, phosphorescent sea.

It was also possible to visit Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and many availed themselves of this unique opportunity, and some were dis-appointed in the present aspect of the Mount of Olives and the commercialized churches.

Palestine was still the scene of ill-feeling between the nomadic or restlessly settled Arabs and the Jews with their plans for commercial development and a national home. On several occasions there were stand tos, for the Division was charged with the task of keeping the peace, and at Haifa and Tel Aviv curfews were imposed and patrols toured the streets. No clashes occurred, and considerable hospitality was offered the patrols.

From Palestine the Division moved up into Syria, which still bore some marks of the fighting between our forces and the Vichy French. Here a final polish was put to training and "djebel bashing" was a daily performance. Damascus and Beirut were the two principal cities, though not everyone was able to make the long glorious journey through the Lebanon, where even then the mountains were capped with snow and where colour ran riot on the wooded hillsides, to the delightfully French city of Beirut.

Damascus was a mixture of old and new; it had been the richest trading centre of the Middle East and the focal point of innumerable caravan routes. Even then the Bazaar was a blaze of golden ornaments, rich carpets and the rare sheen of pure silk.

The heat was intense. Training continued. The Gunners were on their own at Harasta, five miles outside Damascus, where, before shooting, they had to consult the French Camel

Corps, who had daily camel trains winding across the Dmeir ranges to and from Baghdad. There was no doubt that the Division was as fit as it had ever been.

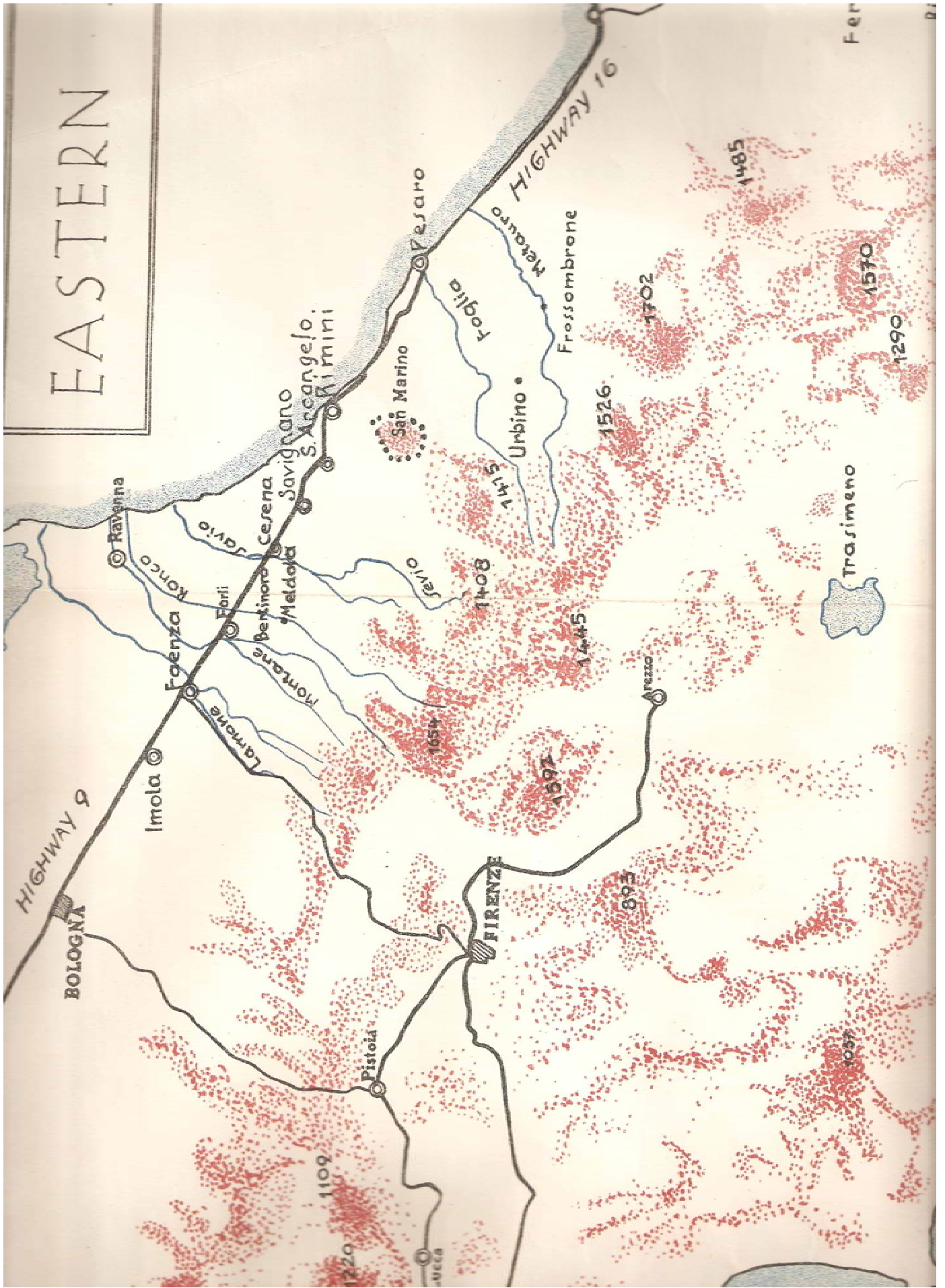
After this ceaseless grind of training it was hoped that a further short spell of leave would be forthcoming, but already the long arm of AFHQ was reaching out to bring us back within its clutches.

The long trek back to Egypt and Quassasin began, the majority of the road moves being made at night to avoid the day's relentless heat, and

in due course the familiar tents in their rolling sea of sand hove in sight. The news was good. Rome had fallen; there would be no more battles in the too well-- known hills across the Garigliano. The invasion had got a firm footing on the Normandy coast.

There were high hopes that we were destined for home and then France — anywhere but Italy — and so it almost happened.

But when the Division sailed from Alexandria Taranto was its destination.



CHAPTER THREE

The second Italian campaign

The Gothic Line

1. INTO BATTLE

The "Derbyshire" was still on the same run, and Taranto's twin harbours received the incoming ships with open arms. History had left only a dirty fingerprint on the home of the Italian Navy. In such an atmosphere it was no wonder that the gentle breath of improvement had not stirred the tent flaps of the Transit Camps since part of the Division had embarked from there for the Middle East.

In the crowded cattle trucks on the two day journey to Capua, those who had come down that way before could almost detect the marks of their brew-cans. Capua itself was a place of memories, for in the prison camp there many officers and men of 46 Division, who had been captured in the North African campaign, endeavoured to while away the time and eke out their meagre rations in wild experiments in cooking on stoves made out of the tins in their Red Cross parcels.

The sleepy Roman ruins of the town, battered by the recent battles, seemed coeval with the transport which was there received from Fifth Division. It was a short stay in Capua, and then the Division moved north through the rubble of Cassino, over which the smell of death still brooded, through Rome and northwards till it lost itself, albeit deliberately, in the rolling country round Bevagna.

There hard training took place, and sweating soldiers scrambled up the steep hillsides with bullets whistling in their ears, and Spoleto witnessed street fighting such as the passage of battle had not brought to its placid squares.

From Bevagna men of the Division went to line the route at Perugia for the King's visit, and there, on the 1st August the Hampshire and the KOYLI celebrated their fifth Minden Day of the war. Above it all, Assisi, with its surprising Franciscan Monastery, stood aloof and unruffled by the rumours of war below, though its peace was not entirely undisturbed by visiting soldiery.

Whilst we had been in the Middle East, the armies in Italy had taken a great leap forward. The massive offensive of May 11th had smashed the Gustave Line and in a continuous sweep had broken into the Hitler Line, outflanking Cassino. On the 4th June the prize of imperial Rome fell to the advancing armies, a fitting prelude to the invasion of Western Europe. The battle of pursuit went

on, and strong German rear guards on Lake Trasimene succeeding in imposing a week's delay. In early August hard battles on the approaches to Florence gave way to an ambiguous situation in the city. All this while unspectacular progress was being made on the east coast, and 2 Polish Corps had captured Ancona, so that the enemy was being forced back on to the obvious and natural defensive line formed by the Appenines where that range swung west and barred entry into the great plain of Northern Italy.

This position the enemy was known to have been preparing over a considerable period, especially on the coastal flanks where the going was less difficult. From Florence there were passes north-wards through the mountains, but it was Field Marshal Alexander's eventual plan, by a secret concentration of the Eighth Army on the Adriatic Coast, where the narrow maritime plain broadened out into the Po Valley, to turn the left flank of the enemy's defences.

These had been dubbed the Gothic Line. On the 10th August 46 Division became part of 5 Corps, under whom we had fought in North Africa. Both 5 Corps and 1 Canadian Corps had been ordered to concentrate behind 2 Polish Corps with the intention of breaking through the enemy's Adriatic defences and entering the valley of the Po.

Great things were expected of the offensive, and the Army Commander and Lieut-General Keightley, commander of 5 Corps, both of whom visited the Division during this period of waiting, were full of confidence. General Keightley, with four Infantry and one Armoured Division and one Armoured Brigade under his command, had the strongest Corps in the British Army.

It was his plan to advance through the more hilly country which was assigned to 5 Corps with 4 Indian Division on the left and 46 Division on the right, and with unchecked momentum to break through the prepared defences of the Gothic Line.

Such was the plan, and so the Division prepared to move forward on the 15th August. Sasso Ferrato was the area chosen for the concentration, but the move had to be postponed until the 19th August to allow the Germans time completely to vacate the selected site. For the enemy were not being, greatly hurried by the Italian brigade, which had been operating on the left of the Poles throughout their advance up the Adriatic coast.

The whole success of the Army plan hinged on the secrecy of the preliminary moves. Accordingly the Division was tucked away in the numerous dips and hollows in the rolling country round Sasso Ferrato, after a journey northwards which had been made at night and without lights, and which was successfully completed by the 23rd August.

Great clouds of dust billowed up behind every vehicle on these loose dry roads; only essential traffic was permitted and severe speed limits were enforced. All communication with civilians was forbidden. Reconnaissances were limited by the fact that it was vital that the presence of a large force should not be disclosed before the hour of the attack, and the dust and the somewhat obscure situation of the Italians, who alone stood between us and the enemy, restricted the range of movement. Ahead the enemy disposed three battalions of their 71 Division, which, after suffering heavy losses north of the Garigliano in the May offensive, had been transferred to the east coast, where they had conducted an orderly enough withdrawal from Ortona.

On the 23rd August they were reported to have continued their withdrawal across the Metauro, a river which lay about fifteen miles ahead. The Gothic position itself followed the line of the river Foglia, a dozen miles beyond the Metauro, and all reports were agreed in attributing a most formidable character to its defences. Italians who had worked on its

construction gave voluble accounts of their work, and there was also a series of aerial photographs from which it was possible to form a more accurate picture of its strength.

The mass of Monte Gridolfo was the objective given to 46 Division, and in this part of the line the enemy seemed to be relying mainly on the natural advantages of the ground, for beyond the river the hills rose very sharply to a height of a thousand feet and the river banks were high and steep except in one or two places, though the river itself, with its bed of mud and rock, could be crossed by Infantry without undue difficulty.

The Todt organisation had not completed its work, and in the neighbourhood of Monte Gridolfo the defences were only half a mile in depth, but there were reports of considerable minefields and of concrete emplacements and wire obstacles. Just as secrecy was vital before the attacks started, so speed was essential once battle was joined, in order to cross the hilly ground between the Metauro and the Foglia and assault the bastions of the Gothic Line itself before the enemy could bring more troops from the north to man it.

Available on his Adriatic flank he had only a slender reserve and that already earmarked to guard the coast against a landing in the north, and to hold the coastal road which offered the only good line of communication northwards. Between the Metauro and the Foglia there were only two poor roads north within the boundary allotted to this Division. That on the right led along the western slopes of a series of hills of which Monte Bartolo was the highest. Its bare summit reached a height of sixteen hundred feet, but it had worthy rivals in Monte Albullo and Monte Busseto beyond.

The left hand route was not so high, though it topped a thousand feet in the little village of Petriano. Between the two roads Monte Grosso's rounded slopes rose to a height of fourteen hundred feet. Not only were these hills impressive enough in themselves, but also they were cut by frequent valleys, so that progress was bound to be very much of an up and down affair.

Brevity is always accounted an excellent virtue in an operation order, and certainly no complaint could be laid against General Hawkesworth's order for this battle: "46 Division will BUST the Gothic Line." His plan was to advance with 128 Bde on the right, directed on Monte Bartolo, and 46 Recce Regt on the left, with 139 Bde close up behind ready to take over from them at one hour's notice.

Speed was vital, and the momentum was to be maintained by "violent and sustained armour and infantry by day, and fresh infantry by night." With this high purpose the Division began to move up to forward concentration areas in the remote villages of Isola di Fano and San Ippolito on the evening of the 24th August. News of immense successes in France gave a reasonable basis to the hope that we were about to enter the last great offensive of the war.

The attack was due to start an hour before midnight on the 25th, when the Canadians on the right were also crossing the Metauro.

The actual crossing was not expected to be difficult and was to be made without the revelation of our strength by any display of artillery. As they moved forward 128 Bde advance parties had to run the gauntlet of a self-propelled gun which was trained on a corner of the road near San Ippolito. It was their first taste of enemy shelling since the last winter. On our part, 172 Field Regt. were first into action. In the hilly going they supported 128 Bde with heavy concentrations on selected targets.

It Was mid-day on the 29th August before 2 Hampshires were in Colbordolo and 5 For-esters on Monte Fabbri looking across the river Foglia at the menacing prospect of the Gothic Line. Of the fighting that had brought them there the dominant memory is of endless hills to be slogged up, and of long night advances in single file when men dropped off to sleep at every halt, so tired were they.

Then there would be the surprising appearance of a Churchill tank on the crest of what looked a sheer slope. To z Hampshires had fallen the lot of first crossing the Metauro, and the North Irish Horse were not long in moving over to support them.

But craters and demolitions put a brake on the first day's advance, which the light enemy resistance had failed to do. On the left 46 Recce Regt gave way to 139 Bde after the first twenty four hours. The next day the Leicesters had an unpleasant time from shelling and mortaring as they advanced against Monte Tomba.

This hill they captured in the evening after a battalion attack, in which the tanks and infantry harmoniously combined. At the same time a gallant and successful assault by a company of 5 Hampshires gained Monte Grosso.

TWO hours later 2 Hampshires were in possession of Monte Al-ban. On the 28th August the Durhams entered Petriano with shelling as their main hindrance, but 1/4 Hampshires had a sticky day's fighting in the shell-torn village of Montegaudio, where the bombed headquarters of 1 Bn 191 Grenadier Regiment yielded some valuable documents. There followed the immense relief of finding Monte Busseto virtually undefended, so that a swift final advance brought both brigades face to face with the main defences of the Gothic Line.

Twelve miles had been covered as the crow flies, but to the infantry who had made the attack this had meant closer to thirty miles marching, mainly through the night, and the scaling of many a steep hill-face. Our own casualties had been light, whilst the enemy had lost a fair proportion of the three battalions of 71 Division, and civilians reported that his troops withdrawing through the villages were tired and dejected. According to prisoners' accounts he had been driven back to the shelter of the Gothic Line three days before he had intended.

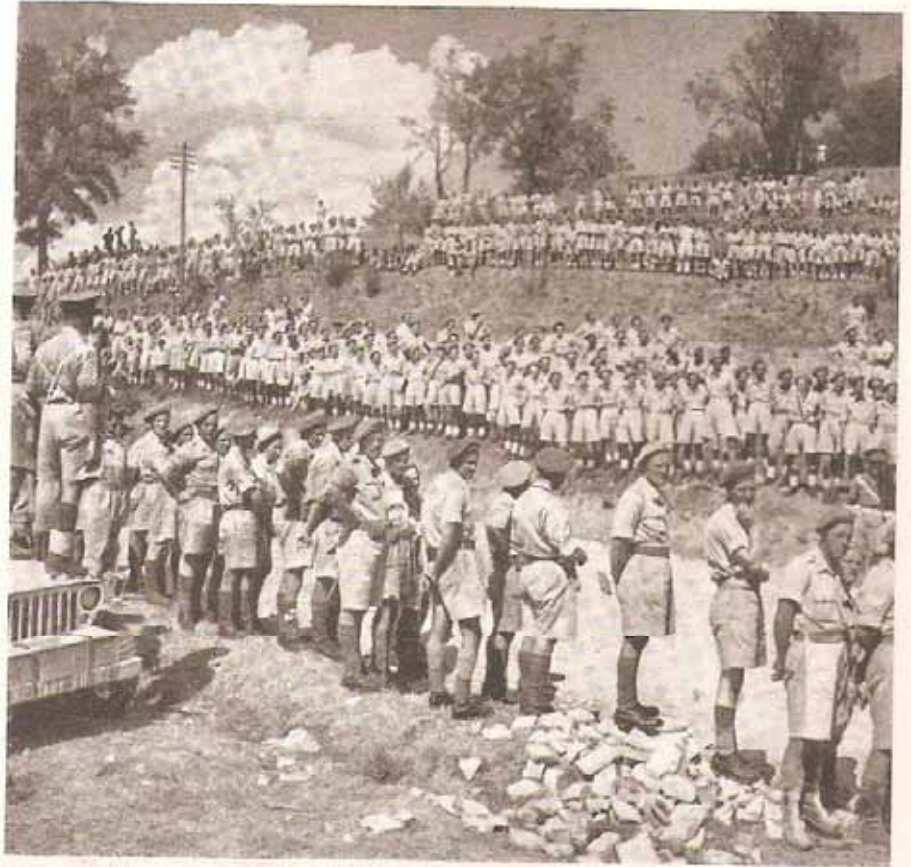
2. MONTE GRIDOLFO

Viewed from Colbordolo or Monte Fabbri the Gothic Line presented a formidable appearance. The first ridge, on which stood the village of Monte Vecchio, rose steeply five hundred feet above the river, and behind could be seen a higher ridge with Mondairio perched on the skyline.

On the right Monte Gridolfo village was hidden behind the spur which pointed from there towards the Foglia, and a narrowing valley lay on the left between it and Mondaino.

Extensive minefields were discernible on the lower stretches by the river, and on the slopes houses had been demolished and trees felled to clear a field of fire. Patrols, with Sapper officer nonchalantly clad in khaki drill, investigated the Foglia on the night of the 29th August, and the next morning General Hawkesworth ordered both brigades to cross the Foglia immediately.

“Men of the Division lined the route for the King’s visit”



*Crossing the Metauro
26th August 1944*

View from Monte Gridolfo



Gothic Line country

This decision, which was amply justified by the event, was in accordance with the overriding necessity of breaching the Gothic Line before it could be fully manned. It required courage of no mean order to assault those repelling slopes in the broad light of an August day. On the left the Leicesters led off with a patrol towards San Giorgio.

By the early afternoon a company was across the river, only to be pinned down by heavy fire and faced by an extensive minefield. Tanks crossed later in the afternoon, but were held up by mines. As they moved down the steep slopes from Monte Fabbri the remaining companies came under constant shelling, but by darkness the whole battalion was across the river.

The Foresters, who were directed on the fortress village of Monte Vecchio, had somewhat similar fortune. No tanks were with them, and the enemy had machine-gun posts in five houses on the steep hillside. Phosphorous smoke, which had been used to set alight some suspicious haystacks and to create confusion, enabled the leading platoon to get into the first of these houses. Sgt Hunter and Sgt Ste-venson showed great dash and initiative in clearing the other strongpoints, and only the forbidding mass of Monte Vecchio remained.

On the right a Flampshires after successfully crossing the river, had both its leading companies held up on the lateral road, where mortar and machine-gun fire kept them under any cover that could be found until darkness came down. It was during this night and the next morn-ing that the hill defences were breached. The Foresters, intending to attack Monte Vecchio from the left, despatched a company round that flank but touch was lost with it, and it felrto the two companies lying up on the steep slope south of the village to put in a frontal assault.

At dawn, an intense artillery concentration, perilously near to the Infantry waiting on the hillside below, was closely followed up and the village successfully entered. The clearing went on methodically; many dead were found and seventy five prisoners taken. Timely bombing and artillery fire prevented five enemy tanks, which were reported to the north, from interfering. It was now known that the other company had walked on to a minefield, and losing many of its leaders had become disorganised.

On the left, the Leicesters had captured La Cantina and were moving against Mondaino, the final village on this spur. Tanks could not get across the Salsa river, but nevertheless the advance continued,. prisoners were taken, and parties of the enemy routed out from their slit trenches.

The tanks got forward as darkness began. to fall but could take no part in the night. attack on Mondaino, which towered above in the moonlight. In stiff close-quarter fighting and in a confusion of grenades and small arms fire the village was cleared before dawn, after having been cut off by the capture of the cross roads to the north. L/Sgt Leadbetter won a D.C.M. for his work in clearing machine-gun posts in this close fighting. On the right, battles at least as severe had been fought.

On the night of 30th August 2 Hampshires had gallantly and effectively cleared the fortified houses on the first ridge, and in the morning 1/4 Hampshires passed through a gruesome 'scene of devastation which was capped by two blazing haystacks, like torches, on the skyline. Many dashing assaults, against prepared machine-gun posts in houses and trenches cleared the whole spur in the course of the day.

Outstanding were the exploits of Lieut Norton, for which he later received the first Victoria Cross to be won by 46 Division. In the evening, a skilfully led attack, preceded by a heavy artillery concentration and a thick smoke screen, took the defenders of Monte Gridolfo completely by surprise and resulted in its capture with hardly a shot fired. The enemy was manning his guns courageously enough, but facing in the wrong direction.

Half an hour before midnight a heavy counter-attack developed but was beaten off; Pte Page seizing a Bren gun from its wounded owner and firing from the hip as he dashed into the street killed or put to flight a party of the enemy which threatened to overrun the forward platoon.

Thus by the early hours of 1st September the breaching of the Gothic Line was complete, with the Leicesters firmly in Mondaino and 1/4 Hampshires in undisputed possession of Monte Gridolfo, where the castle provided silver and the other accoutrements for a banquet when the rations came up. Moreover the capture of Monte Gridolfo gave the gunners a varied and extensive range of observation. OP officers gave immediate response to calls for fire against many ground targets and put down smoke to point the way for the fighter-bombers who were now giving valuable support.

It would be impossible to rate too highly the gallantry displayed in these daylight assaults on a heavily defended ridge. Three German divisions had been badly mauled. 71 Division had been in from the beginning, but 26 Panzer Division had been brought from the Arno and 98 Division had marched from Forli to arrive just too late to be of decisive influence' in the Monte Gridolfo battle.

The infantry of both these divisions was rushed into battle piecemeal as they arrived, and suffered heavy casualties in fighting to which they were committed without an inkling of what was happening. Thus it was undoubtedly the speed and vigour of the attack which forestalled a large and costly battle for the Gothic Line.

3. SAN CLEMENTE

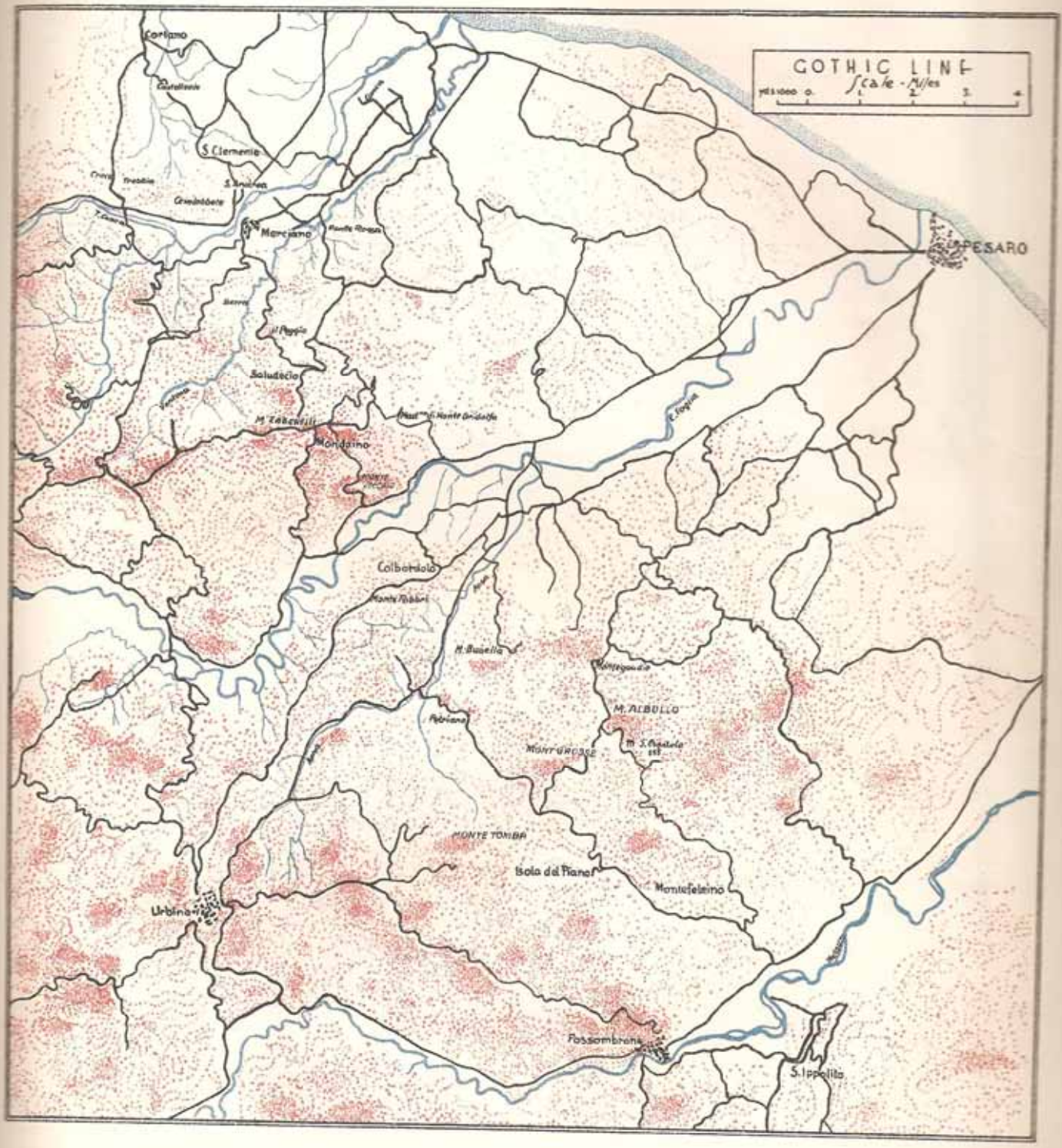
Fighting went on for the triangle of roads northwest of Mondaino in which stood Monte Zagarelli. The Durhams had a company on this hill in the early hours of 1st September, but it was forced to withdraw before daylight.

They attacked again in the morning, but failed to make headway in face of a reinforced enemy and heavy shelling and mortar fire. Tanks were held up by a thick stone wall. In the afternoon the Foresters were brought up, and put in an attack round the left. They, too, met stiff resistance, while prisoners stated that a whole battalion was holding the hill. Our own aircraft bombed Mondaino, and one of our tanks was knocked out.

Though some ground had been gained, when darkness fell the attacking company was withdrawn from its exposed and dangerous position. But next morning the attack was resumed, the tanks having nosed a way for-ward, and shortly before mid-day the triangle was cleared. It was found that the main body of the enemy had withdrawn, and only a few stragglers were captured.

From the very first General Hawkesworth had intended to bypass the Gridolfo ridge with a semi-mobile force which could take advantage of the lower ground on the right, and might succeed in cutting off the whole Gridolfo feature.

GOTHIC LINE
Scale - Miles
0 1 2 3 4
Miles 0 1 2 3 4



On the night of 30th August 46 Recce Regt and 5 Hampshires were lined up to carry out this sweep, but it proved impossible to get across the river, and the success achieved on the hill itself during that night called for reinforcement. So it was 1st September when this plan was put into effect with 138 Bde, 46 Recce Regt and 142. RAC entrusted with the task of capturing the bridge at Ponte Rosso, over the next water obstacle, the Ventena, a somewhat insignificant stream, which was found to be all but dry, when it was reached on the night 2/3 September.

At the beginning tanks could not be released owing to the congestion at the existing ford, and a second crossing place for them had to be captured by the Lincolns, so that it was midday before the advance got under way, and early on two tanks were lost to self-propelled guns.

The undulating country and pockets of stubborn resistance — the enemy had concrete and steel pillboxes to give him stomach for the battle — slowed down what was intended to be a swift advance. Both the Lincolns and the KOYLI were forced to commit infantry and tanks in awkward attacks before the Ventena was reached by the latter on the night 2/3 September, The York and Lancasters were then ordered to pass through and capture Morcianc and San Clemente. Supported by tanks, they drove in the enemy outposts and reached the rising ground overlooking the Conca.

The river had a wide shingle bed with only a trickle of water. Heavy enemy fire, which knocked out five tanks, broke up the first attempt to cross this open ground. The battalion reformed and within an hour attacked again, covered by artillery smoke and a considerable bombardment. Two companies swept across the open river-bed, and up the slopes beyond to capture the village and church of San Andrea. Over sixty prisoners and four anti-tank guns were captured, and one tank knocked out. The two remaining companies

followed up on tanks, making for the village of San Clemente hidden behind the ridge. To the west a strong patrol entered the low-lying town of Morciano. Meanwhile, 128 Bde had concentrated in the straggling fields round Pond. Rossa, and in the afternoon 2 Hampshires and 46 Recce Regt also crossed the Conca, and despite heavy shelling and mortar fire made considerable advances up the opposite ridge. That night General Hawkesworth called for a final effort from 128 Bde, who were by this time well-nigh exhausted by their ten days continuous fighting.

They were ordered to seize the bridge over the next river, the Marano, at Ospedalleto, more than five miles ahead. This was to speed the passage of Armoured Division which was scheduled to go through the following morning. This news, with all it portended of relief, and exploitation of the successes which had been gained with so much effort, gave the necessary spark of exhilaration to the weary infantry of 128 Bde. All day long the artillery had been harassing the bridge at Mercian° in order to prevent demolition charges being put in place, and just after dark the KOYLI entered the town and found the bridge intact. But, as the night progressed, reports began to come in of stiff enemy opposition.

1/4 Hampshires leading company was engaged in a ding-dong struggle through-out the night. In daylight, a second company, infringing on the Canadians, with the aid of Canadian tanks overcame some deter-mined resistance in houses two miles north of San Clemente.

This position, a mile east of the fateful Coriano ridge, was the furthest point reached in the advance. In San Clemente the York and Lancasters were occupied by occasional snipers. 5 Hampshires, who had been attempting to pass through during the night, in the morning had one company at Castelleale, but were unable to advance any

further in face of shelling. of all sorts and: strong ground Opposition, and the company was later withdrawn. In the meantime considerable progress had been made on the left. In the early hours of 3rd September the Durhams entered Saludecio and by shortly before mid-day had pushed on to Pogg, too where they came in for attention from the dominating Serra ridge. The carrier platoon attacked this awkward height.

They were later counter-attacked off the hill, but with the arrival of a company the position was soon restored, and prisoners and a Mark IV tank captured. The Foresters then took over the advance, and crossing the Conca in the early morning of 4th September, captured Cevolabbete after 'minor brushes with scattered parties of the enemy.

Advancing towards li Trebbio the leading company was suddenly engaged by an enemy who had cleverly held his fire. In the first minutes there were fifteen casualties, but with the aid of tanks the village was soon cleared and some forty prisoners taken. During the night repeated counter-attacks were made by the enemy, but in con-fused and awkward fighting all our positions were held.

In the morning 9 Royal Fusiliers attempted to capture Croce on the hill beyond, but met a superior defence, and in the con-fusion of their withdrawal one of the Forester platoons was over-run. In face of the threat of a strong attack by large forces from Croce, the depleted company was withdrawn towards Cevolabbete, where the remaining battalions of 139 Bde were now firmly entrenched. The night's fighting had cost the enemy a further forty prisoners. But the German command had managed to rush up reinforcements, and especially anti-tank guns. The tanks of 1 Armoured Division met intense fire and were unable to advance beyond the positions gained by the infantry of 46 Division, and in these positions our men

were relieved on the 5th September. Everybody was dog-tired. It was no uncommon thing for the lightly wounded to sleep for twenty-four hours on the jolting ambulance journey back to hospital. Thus ended the battle of the Gothic Line proper, possibly the greatest triumph in the Division's varied history. Behind lay a proud record of achievement. From the infantry the battle had exacted great feats of endurance, and many tough encounters had taken place.

The Sappers had had many craters and demolitions to cope with, besides clearing minefields and making crossings over the four rivers that had been over-run. For the Gunners the speed of the advance had involved a daily change of gun positions to keep within shooting distance. Constant dumping of ammunition, a heavy programme of daylight shooting and almost invariable night moves had entailed a heavy strain.

In the course of twelve days fighting three German divisions had been severely battered, and in an advance of twenty five miles over ideal defensive country eight hundred and thirty prisoners had been taken, while our casualties numbered just over one thousand. Fourteen officers and one hundred and forty-nine men had been killed. This was a heavy price to pay, but less than the cost of many less spectacular battles.

For the Gothic Line had been successfully rushed before it could be fully manned, and the enemy, if he was to hold the rich plain of Northern Italy, would have to fall back on some other line, as yet unprepared, for the winter. Many congratulations were received for this fine feat of arms.

The B. B. C. gave it notice among the big headlines that were flooding in from France, and the Eighth Army News recalled that other line-breaching achievement of the Division, when the Hindenburg Line was smashed in. 1918.

4, GEMMANO

While the Division was resting near Morciano and Saludecio, reports were coming of stiff fighting all along the hills from Gemmano to Coriano. Torrential rain had fallen for two days, and the Armoured Division had been unable to break through. Rivers rose out of nothing, fords became impassable and many bridges were washed away, until at one time only the coast road remained in use. The Gunners found conditions warranted the continuous service of a bulldozer to assist in getting the guns in and out of the many positions they were called upon to occupy.

The enemy, encouraged by the arrival of Army batteries and fresh divisions, was putting up a stout resistance.

Every evening a few planes would come over dropping incendiary and anti-personnel bombs. From Morciano it was possible to see, away to the west and in the rear, the mass of Gemmano towering up, a target for the artillery of both sides. There on the 9th September '38 Bde were ordered to relieve 169 Bde of 56 Division. The rest had been a short one, and the KOYLI who had found a piano accordion factory in Morciano had not had time to become proficient on these instruments. Gemmano was a large, outstanding ridge south of the river Conca.

On the main lump of Gemmano were many hills and dips which achieved notoriety in the subsequent fighting. Four villages perched on the bare slopes along the line of the road from east to west; Villa at the eastern end, then Gemmano and Borgo, which were almost one, and finally further west the lonely village of Zollara. Just west of Borao a rounded hill with a large single farmhouse on its summit was known as Hill 414, and across a dip with a cemetery in it, the bare ridge surmounted by a large rusting cross was Hill 449.

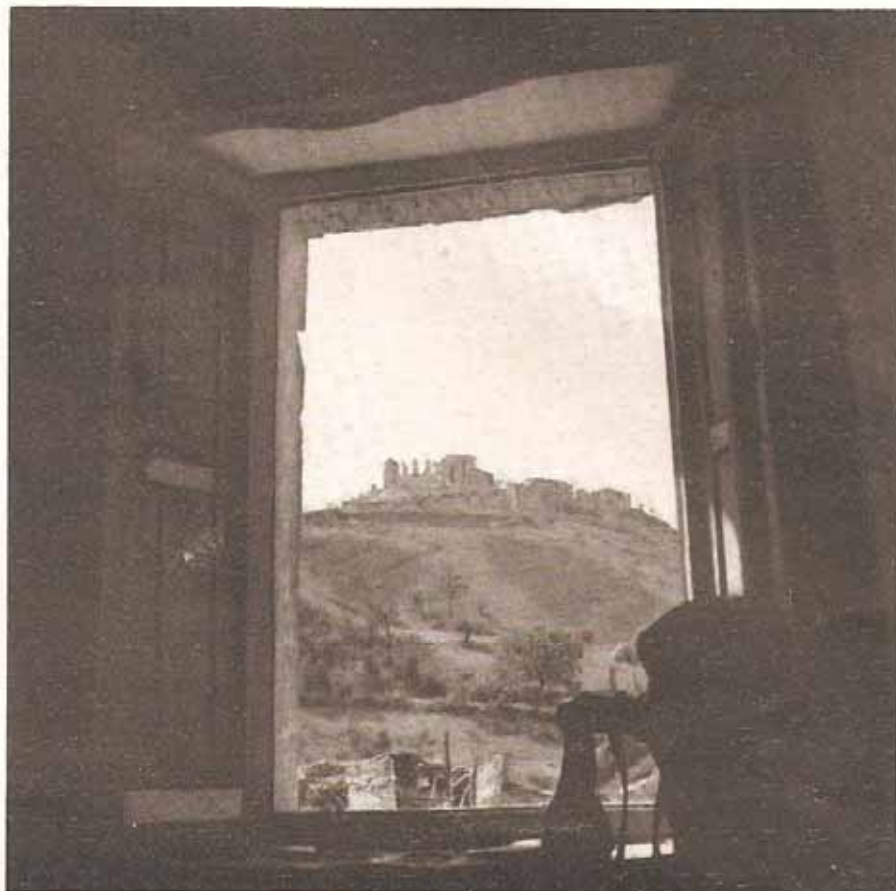
To the south a spur jutted out to Farneto. The relief of the Queen's Brigade, which had had a sticky time there, was somewhat involved. The plan had been for the KOYLI to relieve the remnants of two battalions which were holding Gemmano and Villa, while the third battalion attacked north through Farneto. The Lincolns were then, after the success of this attack, to pass through and capture Hill 449.

But the Queen's attack failed, and in the morning the KOYLI were on Hill 414 with two companies in Gemmano and one in Villa, while the Lincolns were waiting below. A platoon of the KOYLI attempting to clear the western end of Borgo lost half its men in bloody, gallant but abortive house fighting.

Meanwhile plans had been made for the Lincolns to capture in succession Hill 449, Zollara and the southern spur. As the companies moved forward through Villa towards Gemmano they were met by intense artillery and mortar fire, and suffered many casualties before they even reached Hill 414 from which the attack was to be launched. Shortly after mid-day, under a blanket of smoke, one depleted company put in a dashing assault and reached the lonely cross. But the bare hillside was exposed to enemy fire from the right flank, and four hours later attempts were still being made to dislodge the Lincolns from their hard-won positions.

That night the Durhams and 46 Recce Regt were brought up, 46 Recce Regt to relieve the remaining battalion of the Queen's, and the Durhams to take part in the stepping up of battalions by taking over Gemmano. The KOYLI, thus relieved of their commitment in the village, were to move on to Hill 449 and the Lincolns would then clear the spur south-wards as far as Farneto.

*View from a window in the
Gothic Line*



*Hill 449 with the cemetery
below*

In the ruins of Gemmano



"Italian mud"

But enemy infiltration during the night caused considerable confusion, and in the morning Brigadier Harding, who had had some most alarming messages in the early hours, was greatly relieved to find the position substantially unchanged, though groups of the enemy who had managed to work their way back on to Hill 449 and into Borg() were a thorn in the flesh.

During nth September the KOYLI were engaged in continuous efforts to restore the position on the hill, which changed hands frequently in the course of a bitter day's fighting, but was still in enemy possession in the evening, with a company of KOYLI in the cemetery below.

The intensity of the shelling had increased, and bloody actions took place as company after company was committed in attack and counter-attack on this stubbornly contested hill. A lull followed in all but shelling, which continued on the same lavish scale. There were now three headquarters in the neighbourhood of Villa, and a co-mingling of battalions in the crowded village of Gemmano, which afforded almost the only protection from the constant heavy shelling.

The Durhams worked round on the right on the ridges and valleys that led down to the riverbed. On the night of 12/13th September the York and Lancasters joined in the effort to clear Gemmano. This was part of an Army plan to break the enemy's successful resistance along the semi-circular line of hills from Coriano to Gemmano.

The hill village of Montescudo, on the opposite ridge across the river, was the Division's objective, and a desperate task it seemed on the early morning of 13th September when the Yorks and Lancasters had to report indecisive fighting and little headway during the night.

But across the river the Queens Brigade had scored a notable success at Croce, and the plan was changed, so that with the clearing of the northern spurs during the afternoon by the Foresters and a squadron of tank and during the night the beginning of the relief of 138 Bgd by II Indian Bde, the bitter struggle for Gemmano began to peter out.

Battalions of 100 Mountain Regt, Austrian troops of high morale and skilled and determined fighters, who were proud to wear their Edelweiss devices, had put up this stubborn defence. In the bitter, confused and indecisive fighting casualties on both sides had been very heavy, and were mostly caused by artillery and mortar fire when infantry were caught in the open on slopes which offered no cover.

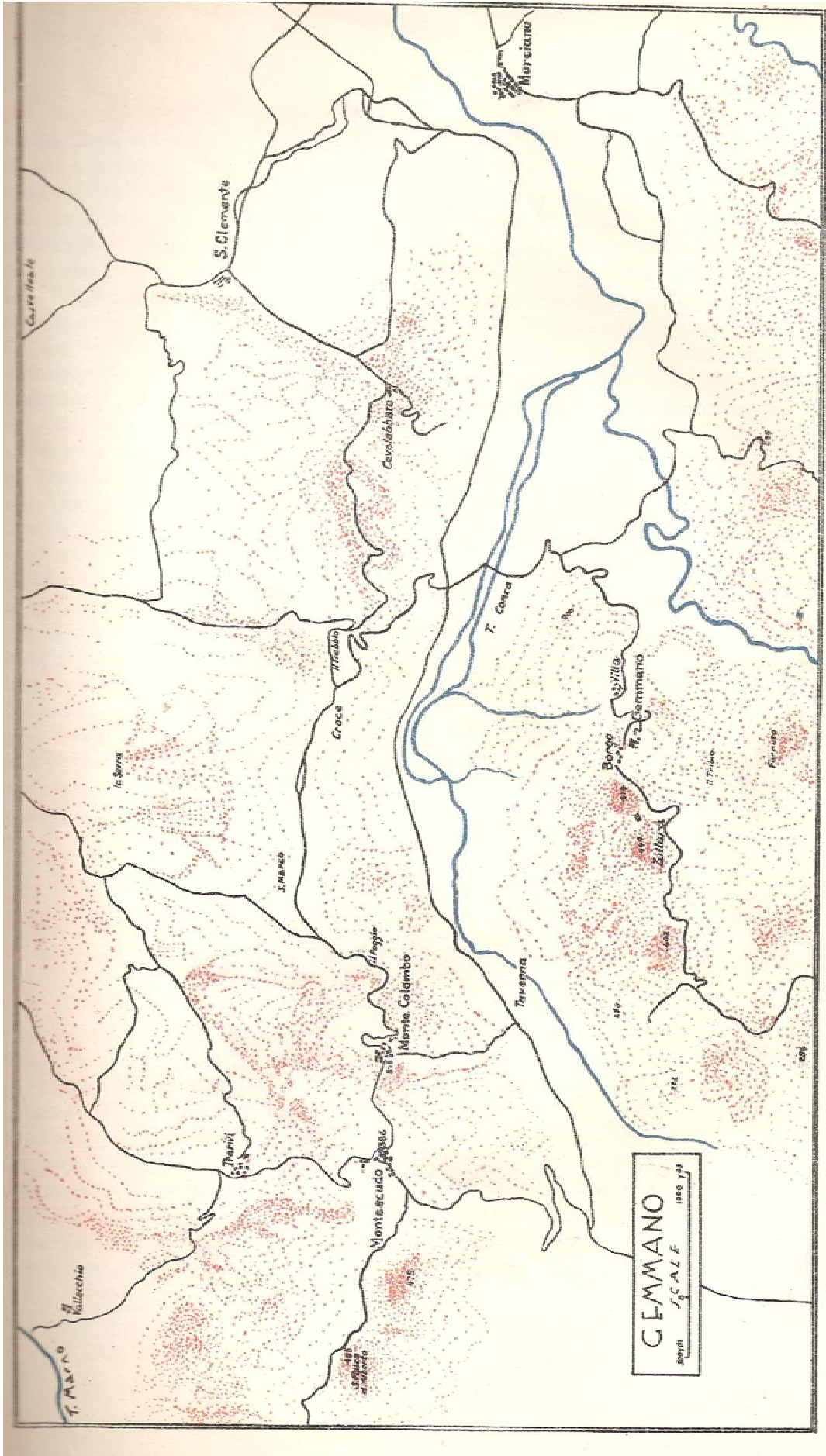
The enemy was never completely dislodged from Hill 449, and, in the glorious sunshine, observation from this point of vantage enabled him to bring down heavy artillery and mortar fire on our attacks in the initial stages. Moreover it was impossible to prevent infiltration during the night, and the enemy was most active in making counter attacks.

When the battlefield was being cleared, a soldier of the Lincolns was found with clenched fingers gripping the cross on Hill 449, where he had fallen in the first attack. The changing fortunes of battle had not moved him from the place he had won at the cost of his life.

5. MONTE COLOMBO

The German 98 Division had had a nasty set-back, when on the morning of 13th September they lost Croce and three hundred

prisoners to the Queens Brigade. This division was facing eastwards on a front of two miles and was holding the long sharp spine that rose



From the Conca valley north of the river and culminating in Hill 475, beyond Monete Scudo village

And like a large smooth boil at the end of the dorsal ridge the main road ran down the valley bed beside the river, and a second

Parallel road led along the spine itself through Crose, Poggio and Monte Colombo to Monte Scudo.

As a result of the 56th division's success the new plan was to form up behind Croce and attack along the line of the upper road through Monte Colombo.

These were two typical Italian villages built on hills around a church which dominated all their other buildings. Beyond Monte Scudo, Hill 475 like hill 449 was capped by a conspicuous cross.

During the night of 12/13 September a battalion of the 56 Division had captured the insignificant hamlet of San Marco a mile northeast of Monte Colombo on the road from Croce.

The Leicesters with a squadron of tanks assembled behind Croce in the bright morning light and at nine o'clock the attack began

The leading company advanced along the grassy slopes south of the road. It was a deceptively easy looking approach, and a quarter of a mile three of the tanks were out of action, one belied one ditched and the third having cast a track

But Poggio was taken, and a second company passed through and at mid-day were fighting in the outskirts of Monte Colombo.

From this springboard the plan was for the remaining companies to assault the village; but heavy shelling made their moving up a hazardous matter, though Gemmano on the left was a pall of smoke as our mortars and guns attempted to blind the enemy's eyes on that notorious hill, and on the high ground to the west.

The company outside Monte Colombo was forced to make a slight withdrawal, and several German prisoners penned in a house in Poggio were killed by their own guns; but by three o'clock in the afternoon everything was ready for the final assault. Two hours later the codeword "Triumph" announced that Monte Colombo had been taken.

There was a large haul of prisoners, and two Panther tanks were abandoned by their crews as soon as attack threatened them. The enemy, having lost the village, subjected the whole area to the most vicious shelling until darkness brought some respite.

Among other souvenirs of this fierce fighting the Fascist flag of Monte Colombo joined that of Mondaino among the Leicesters' trophies.

6. MONTESCUDO AND TRARIVI

Before midnight 5 Hampshires passed through the Leicesters at Monte Colombo bound for Mantescudo and Hill 475.

The road up where now a ruined house and now an abandoned tank stood out in the semi-dark-mess, and the dead still lay by the roadside, with everywhere the stench of the rotting amasses of oxen and horses, told the story of time day's bitter battle.

5 Hampshires first took eat cemetery on the right of the road, and then a company swung right to come in against Montescudo from the north.

Soon the noise of the enemy talking became audible, and a platoon was surprised standing on the Trarivi cross-roads. Many were killed: the rest ran wildly, and the sound of half-tracks could be heard shunting back up the street.

From the tower of Montescudo, and from houses on the right of the main street, our men took heavy toll of the enemy scuttling without apparent