

# 24 BATTALION

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## *About the electronic version*

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The digital edition of this book was sponsored by Mary Weston, daughter of General Sir Howard Kippenberger who served as one of the Editors-in-Chief of the Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War.

All unambiguous end-of-line hyphens have been removed, and the trailing part of a word has been joined to the preceding line. Every effort has been made to preserve the Māori macron using unicode.

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# 24 BATTALION

[COVERS]



Official History of the Canadian  
Armed Forces in Europe

## 24 Battalion

by  
R. M. BURNIN

WAR HISTORY BRANCH  
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE, OTTAWA  
WALLINGTON AND TORONTO  
1964



**24 BATTALION**

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***24 Battalion***

# 24 BATTALION

## [FRONTISPIECE]



The church at San Michele where D Company  
24 Battalion fought a hard action

The church at **San Michele** where D Company 24 Battalion fought a hard action

# 24 BATTALION

## [TITLE PAGE]

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# 24 BATTALION

## FOREWORD

### *Foreword*



windsor castle

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

The publication of these unit histories gives me the opportunity of paying a well-earned tribute to the officers and men of the 2 NZ Division for their services in the [Middle East](#) and [Italy](#). This book is a record of one of our most battleworthy Infantry Battalions, and as such I hope and trust that it will have a wide appeal. It tells the story of great bravery and endurance over a period of six years overseas, during which time the Division fought in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#), the Western Desert, [Tunis](#) and [Italy](#), where it finished the War on the 2nd May 1945 at [Trieste](#).

I am often asked what made the New Zealanders such a great fighting Division. In my opinion there were many factors, the most important of which was the quality of our men, inherited from their pioneer forbears. In my day to day dealings, I had the great advantage of not only being a New Zealander but of knowing their country and their people all my life. I knew also the great record of the First New Zealand Division in World War I. It is always said that they went into battle on the beaches of [Gallipoli](#) with a prayer on their lips:

That they would measure up in battle  
and be a credit to their country.

They not only did well but they also established a tradition, and when their sons had their baptism of fire in the Greek Campaign, they fought like veterans.

The New Zealanders had a further quality that made them easy to command. They were the most practical people, and in War it took the form of knowing how to tackle any new problem that they were to encounter. In our operations in the [Western Desert](#), especially in the turning movements, they only had to be told what to do, never how to do it. This made the question of command very simple.

In this volume the historian deals with the raising, training and command in battle of the 24th Battalion. As you read you will gather it owed much to its first commanding officer, the late Colonel Shuttleworth, DSO, who with his Battalion fought a memorable Battle at [Sidi Rezegh](#), in November 1941. I have always looked on that campaign as the high light of the New Zealand forces in this war.

The 24th Battalion took their full part in our 'Triumphs and Disasters', both before, during and after the Battle of [Alamein](#). They distinguished themselves at the [Tebaga Gap](#) during the turning of the [Mareth](#) line. Later when the Division crossed over to [Italy](#), they fought valiantly at [Cassino](#) and in the advance to [Florence](#) and the final battle from the River [Senio](#) to the capture of [Trieste](#).

This is a wonderful story. I hope many will study these pages and learn the deeds of heroism of this great unit.

Bernard Fryberg

Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor

Windsor Castle

# 24 BATTALION

## [ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS]

Among the many officers and men of 24 Battalion who have helped me in writing this history I am specially indebted to Lieutenant-Colonels R. G. Webb, J. Conolly, R. L. Hutchens and E. W. Aked, Majors A. C. W. Mantell-Harding, E. R. Andrews, A. W. H. Borrie, [NZMC](#), and D. H. Lloyd; also to Sergeant R. H. Parker who generously handed me the notes he had made while working on the early part of the Battalion's history, and to Brigadier G. H. Clifton who allowed me access to those parts of his diary which describe the attack on El Mreir.

The occupations given in the biographical footnotes are those on enlistment. The ranks are those held on discharge or at the date of death.

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# 24 BATTALION

# CHAPTER 1 – FORMATION AND TRAINING

## CHAPTER 1

### *Formation and Training*

The 24th Auckland Battalion grew from a small nucleus of 158 men who assembled at [Narrow Neck](#), the Northern District School of Instruction, on 1 February 1940. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel [Shuttleworth](#)<sup>1</sup> of the New Zealand Staff Corps, had under him, in addition to his Adjutant, Regimental Sergeant-Major, and Regimental Quartermaster- Sergeant, a team of four sergeant instructors. All of these men were soldiers of the regular New Zealand Army who had been allotted the task of training other officers and non-commissioned officers till they, in their turn, should be fit to instruct.

Apart from the staff of instructors, there were 32 officers and 124 prospective NCOs at the school. A few of the officers were veterans of the First World War, the majority had served in the Territorials, and others had been chosen from the First, Second, and Third Echelons. Of the prospective NCOs, some already had acting rank, while the remainder, though still privates, were all regarded as men likely to be worthy of promotion later on. Four squads, throughout which the officers were evenly distributed, were formed to work under the permanent staff. Since those of the instructed who should prove fit for the task were to instruct others in a short time, all training was designed with this end in view. Progressive stages of squad drill, musketry, extended-order drill, night operations, range firing, and field engineering were gone through rapidly, and the men, bearing in mind their own future responsibilities, applied themselves keenly even to the most wearisome preliminaries. In the evenings lectures were given on such subjects as map reading, and some attempt was made to bridge the gap between reality and make-believe — a gap made yawning wide by the absence of modern weapons — by showing films which demonstrated methods of tank hunting and anti-tank protection.

Meanwhile, all went on under the eye of Colonel Shuttleworth. Ability to excel in the preparatory practices of war is no sure guide in the choice of leaders for war itself, but with this reservation he was in a position to select the most promising NCOs for promotion. His battalion began to assume its own identity on 4 March, when the first routine orders appeared, signed by the Adjutant, Lieutenant [McDonald](#),<sup>2</sup> announcing the promotion of 40 acting corporals to be temporary



sergeants, and 57 acting corporals to be temporary corporals. The four squads became A, B, C, and D Companies. Preparations were made to move to [Papakura Camp](#), where the nucleus of 24 Battalion would soon be joined by its main draft of the [Third Echelon](#). On 2 April a farewell celebration was held in the canteen. Each officer was brought in by a press gang and greeted with the cry, 'Sing or Shout!' The evening grew riotous, but the habit of discipline was already having its effect, and punctually at 11 p.m. silence fell over the camp. Next day 24 Battalion's march through the [Auckland](#) streets, headed by the [Papakura Camp](#) band, was described by an [Auckland](#) newspaper: 'Bronzed and in magnificent physical condition, the officers and non-commissioned officers moved with precision and the spring of fitness along the sunshine-flooded streets, arousing the admiration of the pavement crowds, which, as usual, preserved a most hearty silence.'<sup>3</sup> To many who had taken part in the previous night's carousal these phrases sounded faintly ironical. Whatever their outward appearance, they had not been feeling in 'magnificent physical condition', and the 'spring of fitness' arose out of nothing but grim determination to conceal their discomfort.

At Papakura training continued on the same lines as at [Narrow Neck](#) until 15 May, when the main draft arrived. Throughout the day trains brought in parties of recruits from the various districts of [Auckland](#) province. A few officers, eager to know what manner of men they were to command, went down to the railway station and saw emerging from the trains a strangely diverse collection of human beings in all conditions ranging from complete sobriety to advanced intoxication. These men were facing the ordeal of a totally new experience; the whole course of their lives was in process of disruption; they had recently said goodbye to friends and relations whom they might see no more. If ever an occasion might be said to excuse some excess, it was this. Apart from all else, their appearance was noticeably shabby—in some cases positively eccentric. Under the mistaken impression that their clothes would be taken away and not restored, they had been at some pains to arrive in garments they could well afford to lose. In the rough they were not impressive, and the watching officers must have suffered vague misgivings as to how such a rabble could possibly be transformed into soldiers. Trucks were sent to trail the line of their march to [Papakura](#) and pick up any who fell by the way. It was not till after dark that all recruits composing the draft had arrived in camp. They had not long to wait for their first experience of military discipline, which came when RSM [Kennedy](#)<sup>4</sup> hauled them

all out on parade at 11 p.m. and explained that the strip of asphalt on which they were standing (in some cases sitting) was their regimental parade ground, and that thenceforward they should never stroll but always march across it.

The era of marching set in next day, and on Sunday, 19 May, there was a church parade for the full battalion. The issuing of uniforms was the main concern at first; on the 25th the companies were inspected in their new battle dress, and then granted general leave the same evening. A remarkable change had come over the recruits since their disorderly arrival. Already the formerly demoralised, bewildered civilians were beginning to feel pride not only in their own soldierly appearance but also in the unit which now claimed their loyalty. There could be no further doubt whether or not they would make soldiers; it was merely a question of how long it would take.

The initiated from [Narrow Neck](#) turned with enthusiasm to the task. Formerly the led, they were now to be leaders themselves, but their keenness was soon put to the test and their progress hindered at every turn by a general shortage of equipment. Light machine guns, mortars, grenades, to mention only a fraction of the total requirements, were all in short supply. Only two vehicles were available for the training of drivers for Bren carriers. Both of them had been in continuous use for a long time without having been overhauled, and as a result were showing every sign of wear and tear. When the first Bren gun arrived, the men crowded round eagerly to get a view of the strange object. For various reasons the range course had to be fired only two weeks after rifles had been issued. It was a course intended for trained soldiers, and high scoring could scarcely have been expected of raw recruits firing for the most part in showers of heavy rain or wind of gale force. Moreover, there were no armourers available to inspect and adjust faulty weapons. In more leisured circumstances, specialists such as signallers, cooks, or drivers of Bren carriers could have undergone the ordinary recruit course before taking up their special duties, but under the existing urgency they had to be hurried through the preliminaries with insufficient grounding. No allowance had been made for the time that must necessarily be given up for inoculation, dental treatment, X-ray, and the making of wills, while a number of men applied for special leave on the grounds of having been called up without sufficient notice to allow the winding up of their affairs.

Such were a few of the items in the long account now being paid for the short-sightedness of men in high places. While protesting vigorously at this shortage, Shuttleworth made shift to carry on with what was available. As nearly as possible he divided his battalion into companies on a territorial basis as follows: A Company (Auckland City), under Major [Dill](#); <sup>5</sup> B Company (Hauraki), Captain [Collins](#); <sup>6</sup> C Company (North [Auckland](#)), Captain [Morrison](#); <sup>7</sup> D Company ( [Waikato](#)), Major [Closey](#). <sup>8</sup> Headquarters Company, under Captain [Hedge](#) <sup>9</sup> and composed mainly of specialists from all provincial districts, could not of course be given any territorial designation. The company commanders grouped their platoons on the geographical pattern so that, wherever possible, those who had been neighbours in time of peace might not be separated when they marched to war.

The troops were quartered in well appointed but somewhat overcrowded huts, and when an epidemic of mild influenza broke out in mid-June it spread rapidly. All things considered, discipline had been excellent during the first month, but a sense of grievance arose when all leave had to be cancelled—a grievance which a large number of men chose to redress on their own account by going absent without leave. The supposed injustice loomed larger in face of the fact that another unit had allowed its men leave in spite of the ban. No visitors were allowed in the camp. The weather had broken and June was miserably wet. When the camp hospital was full to overflowing, auxiliary hospitals were opened at the Ellerslie racecourse, and students from the Teachers' Training College were sent away to make room for the sick. It was a time of stress which gradually ended as the weather improved and more advanced field operations replaced the dull grind of preliminary training. Route marches, field schemes, ceremonial parades, night operations, marching in respirators, defence and concealment from aircraft—these were exercises which had some air of reality in their performance.

Reality and purpose were further emphasized when final leave began on 1 August, and a flood of rumour was unloosed. The issue of drill uniforms pointed to some tropical country as a destination. No conjecture seemed too unlikely. The time between final leave and embarkation was a period of suspended animation interspersed with ceremonial parades and farewells to friends and relations. 'We said goodbye on two successive weekends', says the battalion diary. <sup>10</sup> 'After the third week- end we didn't bother about goodbye. Strangely enough we went after that.'

The battalion entrained at [Papakura](#) on 26 August, and ran the gauntlet southward through stations where crowds were gathered waiting to fill the troops with beer. [Te Kuiti](#) had turned out in force, but the train did not stop. At Taumarunui the bagpipes played, the crowd sang songs, and a certain amount of liquor was smuggled on to the train, but temptations occurred less frequently as the borders of the King Country were left behind. Next morning the train passed through [Wellington](#) with windows closed and drew up at the quayside. On like occasions in earlier days there had been indignant comments regarding the shamefaced stealth with which our troops slunk away to defend their country, but by now New Zealanders were becoming inured to the demands of security. Thus, with none of the time-honoured pomp and circumstance of departure, 24 Battalion was met by its own advance party and escorted on board the Empress of [Japan](#). The ship's one-time status as a luxury liner had led the men to expect cabins and bunks for sleeping quarters, but she had since been fitted up as a troop transport. Hammocks were certainly a disappointment; and it was felt to be inherently wrong that the ship of an Empire said to rule the waves should be manned largely by a Chinese crew. Before long, however, the [China](#)-men became generally popular; not so the hammocks.

The Empress of [Japan](#) sailed from [Wellington](#) on 28 August together with the [Mauretania](#), while the [Orcades](#), with South Island troops on board, left [Lyttelton](#) a few hours earlier and joined the other two ships in Cook Strait. Colonel Shuttleworth had been placed in command of all the troops on the Empress of [Japan](#), and command of 24 Battalion devolved upon Major [Mantell-Harding](#),<sup>11</sup> who had arrived at [Papakura](#) early in May to take over the duties of second-in-command. The Empress of [Japan](#) carried a total of 2635, of which 33 officers and 638 other ranks were from the 24th. Accommodation provided for no more than 2250 and the ship was considerably overcrowded. There were cases of mumps, influenza and measles; vaccination was carried out at sea, and sore arms were not easy to nurse while sleeping in hammocks. As for training, the chronic shortage of equipment was still in evidence, but now among the other things lacking was space for movement. There were, however, certain kinds of technical instruction which would have required no great space. For instance, even on narrow decks the ways and workings of the Bren gun might have been demonstrated, but there were no Bren guns. For want of greater scope, military activity assumed two forms, one consisting of lectures and the other of physical training and route marches round and round the promenade

deck. This latter exercise, though scarcely inspiring, had the merit of keeping the men's feet hard. As for amusement, concerts were arranged, films were shown, and a ship's daily paper called *Serial Waves* began to appear seven days after leaving port; but sports and deck games were limited by the cramped conditions. Lack of living room led to the continual mislaying of possessions, which entailed the constant recurrence of 'Lost and Found' notices in routine orders. Insufficient occupation, boredom, and strange environment were responsible for a number of small breaches of discipline.

The convoy had its first taste of bad weather in the Australian Bight, but after [Fremantle](#) the seas were calm and the over-crowding was eased to some extent when troops were given permission to sleep on deck. [Bombay](#), the next port of call, provided most men with their first glimpse of the East, and also with the less fortunate experience of having their money changed into a different currency. They arrived on 15 September and were given shore leave. Fascinated by the sights of the great city, they were at the same time dismayed to find that no native shopkeeper would accept the [Ceylon](#) rupees into which their money had been changed while on board. Banks and some of the larger stores were ready to convert at face value, but many of the soldiers fell among native money changers who charged a commission of anything up to seven per cent. All these transactions entailed much coming and going—an unnecessary annoyance and waste of time for which some of the troops applied their own remedy by overstaying leave.

Meanwhile the affairs of the convoy were not without complication. Troops from the [Mauretania](#) and [Orcades](#) were being transferred to the [Ormonde](#) and *Orion*, but conditions on the former vessel were such that the men refused to allow her to sail. Before arriving at [Bombay](#) Shuttleworth had been warned that his men should be ready to disembark, but on arrival he was informed that two Forestry companies only, numbering in all 324, would leave the ship. This was satisfactory in that the *Empress of Japan* would have been left with approximately the number for which her accommodation provided. While in port, however, Shuttleworth was told that the Forestry companies were to be replaced by no fewer than 600 men of another formation. In view of the fact that the hottest and potentially most dangerous part of the voyage was yet to come, the intention expressed was positively alarming, and Shuttleworth, supported by a strong protest sent by the ship's Medical Officer to the

embarkation medical authorities, refused to accept the additional 600. Eventually he consented to receive 65 men only in place of the Forestry companies. In the light of what followed it seems that his action was fully justified. The diminished numbers on board made it possible to provide more sick-bay accommodation, which was soon filled up when cases of measles, mumps and tonsillitis, in numbers greater than any hitherto, broke out while crossing the [Indian Ocean](#).

Ten very hot days after leaving [Bombay](#), the Empress of [Japan](#) arrived on 29 September at Port Tewfik, the convoy's destination. Next day the battalion disembarked and moved by rail to [Maadi Camp](#), near [Cairo](#). Having arrived in darkness, the men had no idea of their surroundings until dawn broke and revealed a vast camp, several miles in extent, overlooking the [Nile](#) valley—'a blurred maze of tents and huts staggered to present a difficult air target'. <sup>12</sup>

Another of the ever-recurring demands of active service was now made on the troops' capacity to adapt themselves to a new environment. The tents were sunk below sand level, and sand was an all-pervading substance. It was not actively aggressive, however—a claim which could hardly be made on behalf of the flies. The men had received copious warning of what they might have to fear in the nature of sickness. A numerous array of prohibitions instilled into their minds by medical authorities held out the threat of a perpetual menace, and the selection of dread diseases to which carelessness might render them liable made a formidable list. To a major degree flies were the agents of infection, and flies were ubiquitous.

Not least among the problems which confront the creators of a citizen army is that of deciding to what extent natural initiative and self reliance shall be made subservient to discipline. Even under the best regulated conditions, periods of intense boredom are inseparable from life on active service; and it is during these that men are most prone to perpetrate minor offences (which the Army in its wisdom describes as crimes) by way of protest against restrictions which gall their sense of independence. As a counter measure authority finds itself obliged to regulate, by an endless series of prohibitions, the behaviour of men who, as individuals, would be perfectly capable of ordering their own lives wisely. The case in point may be illustrated by quoting a few of the warnings and injunctions which appeared from time to time in 24 Battalion's routine and administration orders. While at sea troops must not collect pieces of the ship's cutlery, silver, or crockery as souvenirs. They



must not use the ship's wash-basins for washing their socks, and they must be careful to remove their false teeth before being sick over the side. While in Egypt they must not refuse to pay tram fares, nor should they raise violent objection to producing their pay-books when requested to do so by the Military Police, or give fictitious names. They must not wear Egyptian tarbooshes when walking out in the streets, and they must—the importance of it was continually being emphasized—salute all officers of other corps and nationalities.

Naturally enough, offences less trivial than those mentioned above were committed—especially after first arriving in Egypt, when the men had plenty of money brought over from New Zealand—and the nature of these offences may be inferred from the orders designed to check them. Only a few days after the landing at Port Tewfik it was found necessary to publish a forthright warning that the ingenious excuse that liquor had been drugged would on no account be accepted as valid in cases of drunkenness. As to gambling, it began on board the transport and was prosecuted, with what can only be described as admirable perseverance in the face of every discouragement, throughout the whole course of the war. Some concern was aroused during the early Egyptian period when it was discovered that certain Crown and Anchor bankers had remitted sums of several hundred pounds to New Zealand. The hollow thunder of official denunciation rolled over typewritten sheets, but the gravest admonitions, even when issued by the highest military authority, were not competent to deal with a prevalent national disorder.

Indissolubly linked with the incidence of conduct, good or bad, were the provisions made for recreation and amusement. In [Maadi](#) Camp were the [NAAFI](#) and [YMCA](#) huts, and one cinema which was invariably overcrowded. The camp was only some ten miles from [Cairo](#). Leave was granted on a generous scale, and camp and city were connected by a diesel railcar service. In Cairo, before the New Zealand Forces Club came into existence in February 1941, there were only British forces clubs, but for those with more catholic tastes there were restaurants, bars, and cinemas. With their own country so poor in antiquities, the New Zealanders took a special interest in the historic monuments which are Egypt's unique possession. Visits to historic sites were arranged by several of the clubs, and civilians with special knowledge offered their services as guides. A certain loquacious but well-informed Mr. Goldhaber organised special tours for the New Zealanders, and

Egyptian drago- men were always ready, for a consideration, to 'impart a minimum of incredibly inaccurate information'.<sup>13</sup> Sports equipment, being an ordinary requirement of peacetime rather than a special necessity of war, was in fairly good supply. Cricket was organised almost immediately after arrival and an opening match played against 25 Battalion. Later on, in cooler weather, a football committee was formed, but conditions for this game, which has its origin in colder, wetter climates, were by no means ideal, and when the first match was played early in December the players were immediately enveloped in a cloud of dust. Hockey and basketball both had their followers, and there was a nine-hole golf course on the outskirts of Maadi Camp. Books were scarce. Small bookshops were attached to the Naafi units and there was a library at the central YMCA, but these were not adequate to cope with all demands. Bab el Look, a battalion periodical edited by Lieutenant Halstead,<sup>14</sup> was brought out on 15 January, but most unfortunately, from the historian's point of view, it was not continued after the first number.

More serious work was afoot and intensive training began at once. Colonel Shuttleworth lost no time in pointing out to his battalion that 'The inevitable result of the voyage has been a deterioration in the standard of drill, bearing, and general appearance of all ranks',<sup>15</sup> but, being either unable or unwilling to see themselves as others saw them, the troops still preserved a rather unjustifiably exalted idea of their own smartness. Sixth New Zealand Infantry Brigade, formed of the newly arrived 24, 25, and 26 Battalions, was reviewed by Lieutenant- General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, GOC-in-C British Troops in Egypt, on 12 October. Realising, in all probability, that the men were but recently landed, Wilson was not critical, but when Brigadier Barrowclough<sup>16</sup> took over command of the brigade a week later he inspected 24 Battalion, and afterwards, in brief but incisive language, dispelled any illusion the men might have entertained as to their soldierly bearing on parade. Thoroughly roused, all ranks bestirred themselves. Much drilling and hustling brought about a complete transformation within an incredibly short space of time, and when on 25 October the battalion marched past Mr. Anthony Eden, then Secretary of State for War, and General Sir Archibald Wavell, GOC- in-C Middle East Forces, there was nothing but praise for its performance.

Shortage of equipment was still acute, but Shuttleworth, having protested vigorously on a former occasion at being required to make bricks without straw, now



warned his men that they would have to rise superior to all material deficiencies. 'The attitude that duties cannot be carried out because the full scale of equipment has not been provided is a defeatist one. In war, full scale equipment will be the exception.'<sup>17</sup> Resort was had to a variety of expedients, and the troops, like an audience at a Chinese play, were called upon to use their imagination in recognising objects and situations that did not actually exist. The generosity of British units, who showed themselves ready to lend whenever possible, was a great help in the early stages.

For reasons already given the results of range firing at Papa-kura had been unsatisfactory, so the course was fired again in Egypt by all who had not qualified as first-class shots. Those who had done so fired battle practices, and 74 men were specially chosen to be trained as snipers. Every man in the battalion was required to fire the light machine-gun course. At first only three two-inch mortars were available, and the few experts in this weapon gave instruction to the NCOs of each company in turn, so that they might be ready to instruct the rank and file as soon as full issues should be made. The same procedure applied to anti-tank rifles. In fact, no pains were spared to ensure that every man knew how to use all weapons which infantry might be called upon to employ, so that these weapons might never be rendered ineffective by heavy casualties among specialists.

This was an age when for the most part armies moved rapidly on wheels, yet dared not depend unduly on a means of locomotion of which they might be suddenly deprived by the chances of war. Infantry was still infantry and, as such, had to be prepared to cover great distances in time-honoured fashion. With this in view, 'Very long route marches were a feature of training. Beginning on a modest scale, they were increased in length until, by the end of December 1940, marches of twenty miles or over were at least a weekly occurrence. It was found that desert marching tended to leave the feet soft, and about the middle of January 1941, instructions were issued by HQ NZ Div for all units to include in their training programme road marching on the tar sealed roads of the Nile Valley.'<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, as supplies began to arrive in ever-increasing quantities, the preparations for war grew more nearly to resemble the reality of war itself. If interest had ever slackened on the parade ground, it revived in the course of field operations. More and more time was devoted to field training, especially after the

battalion moved from [Maadi](#) to [Helwan](#) Camp on 11 December. First by companies, then as a battalion and finally as a brigade, the troops were inured to conditions under which it was supposed they would actually fight in the near future. The exercises laid down for performance, of which we may mention a few examples, comprehended a wide and varied field of operation. Under the direction of the New Zealand Engineers, 24 Battalion made a night crossing of the [Nile](#) with portable assault bridges and light assault boats, while the instructors fired explosive charges on land and water to give some slight imitation of an enemy barrage. Afterwards the engineers gave a demonstration of ferrying Bren carriers across the river on heavier craft. Then, for five days, 6 Brigade went out into the desert on manoeuvres designed not only to train the rank and file but also to test the administrative capacity of commanders and staffs. Mock attacks were made on the columns by low-flying planes of the [RAF](#). In columns of motor transport the brigade practised moving in desert formation, with flank guards thrown out and tank-hunting parties organised to deal with the light armoured vehicles of the Divisional Cavalry, which acted as a hostile force. A large wadi, representing the sea, was crossed at night by [25 Battalion](#), which landed on an open beach—in this case the wadi's further bank—and established a bridgehead. The 24th and 26th Battalions then moved through to capture an imaginary port, carrying all their fighting equipment and manhandling their anti-tank guns across wide stretches of desert. This was indeed the image of war, but perhaps the nearest approach to reality was reached on 21 January 1941, when 24 Battalion carried out an attack with live ammunition and live artillery support. First the men lay under cover while guns laid down a barrage on enemy positions. The barrage lifted. The infantry advanced. Bren carriers with light machine guns gave covering fire from a flank, and mortars came forward to blast enemy pockets of resistance. Finally the infantry made their assault with bayonets fixed and Bren guns firing from the hip. Nothing was lacking from conditions of actual warfare except an enemy who was also using live ammunition.

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<sup>1</sup> [Lt-Col C. Shuttleworth](#), DSO, m.i.d.; born Wakefield, [Nelson](#), 19 Jan 1907; Regular soldier; CO 24 Bn 1 Feb 1940-30 Nov 1941; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; died in [UK15](#) May 1945.

<sup>2</sup> [Capt H. H. McDonald](#); born [Whangarei](#), 18 Jul 1902; Regular soldier; killed

in action 23 Nov 1941.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in 24 Bn diary.

<sup>4</sup> WO I F. J. Kennedy; Toronto, Canada; born Prague, Czechoslovakia, 16 Apr 1913; clerk.

<sup>5</sup> Maj F. G. Dill, ED; Kaipara Flats, North Auckland; born NZ 18 Sep 1893; farmer; CO Northern Infantry Training Depot Nov 1941-Jan 1942.

<sup>6</sup> Maj W. J. Collins, MM, ED; Auckland; born NZ 27 Oct 1896; farmer; NZ Rifle Bde, 1915-19; CO 25 Bn Oct-Dec 1945.

<sup>7</sup> Lt-Col D. G. Morrison, ED, m.i.d.; Whangarei; born Gisborne, 26 Jun 1904; farmer; O i/c 2 Ech 2 NZEF, Jun 1944-Aug 1945.

<sup>8</sup> Lt-Col R. V. Closey, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Papatoetoe, Auckland; born Bury, England, 14 Nov 1897; builder; OC NZ Reception Depot, Mar-Oct 1941; OC 1 NZ Fd Maint Unit, Libya, Nov 1941-Apr 1942; OC 1 NZ PW Repat Unit, Italy, 1945.

<sup>9</sup> Lt-Col S. J. Hedge, ED; Paeroa; born Waiuku, 25 Nov 1896; chemist and optician; Wellington Regt 1 NZEF 1917-19; 2 i/c 24 Bn 30 Nov 1941-15 Jan 1942; CO Northern Inf Training Depot Mar-Apr 1942; CO NZ Reception Depot Feb- May 1943; CO 1 Bn Hauraki Regt 1944-49.

<sup>10</sup> Kept while the battalion was in New Zealand, before the official war diary was begun.

<sup>11</sup> Maj A. C. W. Mantell-Harding, ED; Wellington; born Christchurch, 28 Oct 1896; solicitor; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; released 28 Mar 1945.

<sup>12</sup> Bab el Look, 24 Bn magazine.

<sup>13</sup> Notes to 24 Bn chronology.

<sup>14</sup> Maj E. H. Halstead, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 26 May 1912; schoolmaster; Official Archivist 2 NZEF, 1941-43, 1944-45; MP (Tamaki) 1949-.

<sup>15</sup> Training directive, 24 Bn, 7-12 Oct 1940.

<sup>16</sup> Maj-Gen H. E. Barrowclough, CB, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US), Croix de Guerre; Auckland; born Masterton, 23 Jun 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde 1915-19 (CO 4 Bn); commanded 7 NZ Inf Bde in UK, 1940; 6 Bde, 1 May 1940-21 Feb 1942; GOC 2 NZEF in Pacific and GOC 3 NZ Div, 8 Aug 1942-20 Oct 1944.

<sup>17</sup> Training directive, 24 Bn, 17 Oct 1940.

<sup>18</sup> Notes to 24 Bn chronology.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 2 – CAMPAIGN IN GREECE

## CHAPTER 2

### *Campaign in Greece*

In detached units, as engineers, signalmen, transport drivers, or members of the [Long Range Desert Group](#), New Zealanders had taken part in the campaigns of the [Western Desert](#) and [Cyrenaica](#), but the Second World War had not yet seen a New Zealand division in the field. Events leading to the appearance of such a force were already in train. Two invading Italian armies had been driven out of [Greece](#) by patriot forces vastly inferior in all but courage. [Italy](#) was shaken to the foundations of her somewhat insecure structure, but her more powerful partner was preparing to strike. Early in February 1941 German armies moved into [Bulgaria](#). [Greece](#) sought British aid, and [Britain](#) decided on a course which policy favoured and national honour demanded, but which expert military opinion viewed with considerable misgiving.

Meanwhile, preparations set on foot by the decisions of statesmen, as they expanded in detail and became less easily concealed, sent a ripple of expectation coursing through all ranks of the army in Egypt. The portents were many and obvious. At the end of February bayonets were sharpened by the armourers. Reinforcements arrived from the training camp at [Maadi](#), and the battalions were equipped on a war establishment. The tommy gun made its first appearance, one being issued to each section leader, and a check was made on the fitting of respirators. When 24 Battalion moved from [Helwan](#) to [Amiriya](#) transit camp, near [Alexandria](#), by motor transport on 5 and 6 March, there was no longer any doubt in the men's minds that they were at least going somewhere. The question of their eventual destination was the subject of much conjecture. [Greece](#) was high in the betting list, but there were takers for [Libya](#), and even [Singapore](#) was included among the outsiders. Indulgence in such speculations was a welcome pastime—possibly the only one in a place where comforts were so few. [Amiriya](#) was a place of transit in every sense of the word, and units passing through had had to evacuate their quarters at such short notice that no one had had time to clean up. To make matters worse, a succession of sandstorms broke over the [Western Desert](#) with such severity that for a time both road and rail traffic were halted. Dust, which was said to have been blown 100 miles out to sea, seeped into every nook and corner. Routine work in the camp almost came to an end. The general misery was alleviated for a brief

interval when the men were taken for a swim in the sea, but even this entailed a march of 14 miles.

On 13 March the battalion's transport vehicles and Carrier Platoon moved off in advance to [Alexandria](#) and embarked on SS [Thermopylae](#), which sailed two days later. On the 17th the main body left [Amiriya](#) for the same destination. Excitement grew as their train drew up at the wharf, for the men had had some experience of troopships and were anxious to know on what kind of vessel they were about to sail. At the wharf lay an old tramp steamer and a cruiser. The general delight on being told they were to sail on the cruiser increased still further when they found that she was no other than the [Ajax](#) of River Plate fame. The battalion embarked; [Ajax](#) moved out into the stream, waited there till joined by the [Perth](#) and the Orion, and then steamed out of the harbour. Travelling at high speed across the [Mediterranean](#), the men had their first experience of what it is like to be looked after by the [Royal Navy](#). Both officers and crew of the [Ajax](#) insisted on giving up their sleeping quarters, whenever possible, to the New Zealanders, whom they seemed to regard as honoured guests. Even before embarkation little doubt remained as to where the convoy was bound, but soon after reaching the open sea Colonel Shuttleworth told his men, what most of them had already guessed, that [Greece](#) was their destination. Next morning land was in sight; escort planes flew out to meet the ships, and in less than twenty-four hours from her time of sailing the [Ajax](#) was berthed at [Piraeus](#). As they disembarked the New Zealanders thanked their hosts in no uncertain terms and expressed a wish that they might meet them again before long. Fortunately there were none present with the prophetic gift who might have foretold how soon this wish was to be fulfilled.





**GREECE**

Then began a march which few who took part in will ever forget. The reception camp was on the slopes of Mount [Hymettus](#), about ten miles distant from [Piraeus](#), and the route to it passed through the streets of [Athens](#). 'The people lined the streets all the way,' writes Sergeant Bell, <sup>1</sup> 'cheering, clapping their hands and bedecking us with flowers as we wended our way to [Hymettus](#) Camp. The little children ran out and clasped our hands, pretty girls kissed us and offered us glasses of cool water, and all the way we could hear the cry, "British", "English", and even "New Zealand". At every halt we were besieged by crowds of people, everybody talking together in Greek and we in English, but the sign language seems universal, and so we had lots of fun making ourselves understood by grins, frowns and gestures.' Major Mantell- Harding's experience was of much the same kind. Honours were heaped upon him to an embarrassing extent. 'By the time I arrived in [Athens](#) proper I was like a walking flower garden.'<sup>2</sup> Twice during the march a batch of Italian prisoners, 1500 to 2000 in each party, passed the New Zealanders on the opposite side of the road. The Greeks were delighted at the contrast between the high-spirited, soldierly looking allies come to fight on their side and the wretched creatures shambling along in captivity.

The camp at Mount [Hymettus](#) stood amid groves of pine trees and commanded a magnificent view of the city. It was open to visitors who arrived and departed continuously in large numbers. Among them came the German consul, ostensibly to perform a conventional duty, but actually, no doubt, to do some spying on his own account. Only the fact that [Germany](#) and [Greece](#) were not yet at war allowed a

situation so grotesque. During the three days' stay at [Hymettus](#) leave was given to all men who could be spared, but there was much work to be done. The [Thermopylae](#), carrying the battalion's transport, had arrived at [Piraeus](#) late on the 18th. The vehicles had been driven to [Hymettus](#) and were now being loaded ready for the impending northward move.

Soon after dawn on 21 March the transport, accompanied by the Anti-Aircraft Platoon, started off on its 300-mile journey, leaving the main body of troops to follow by train. The convoy, of which 24 Battalion's transport formed only a part, consisted of 220 vehicles in all under the command of Major Mantell- Harding. Moving off along the [Athens- Corinth](#) road, they took three-quarters of an hour to pass the starting point and stretched out for a distance of 22 miles. The first day the column covered 100 miles and stayed for the night at [Kamena Voula](#), a village near the Aegean coast south-east of [Lamia](#). Scarcely were the vehicles parked under cover in an olive grove when peasants began to appear with gifts of cheese and a heavy, sweet wine known as mavrodaphne. Mantell-Harding and his officers were seized upon and lavishly entertained by the staff of a neighbouring military hospital, and escaped only with difficulty to snatch a few hours' sleep before resuming the journey at dawn. The route now led over rolling hills north of [Lamia](#) and out on to the plains of [Larissa](#). Small belts of green crop spaced among ploughed soil of varying colours gave the cultivated slopes the appearance of a patchwork quilt. Villages nestled in unlikely, scarcely accessible spots. The land was open and unfenced; there seemed to be a complete absence of stock; but apart from effects wrought by usage to which they were strange, the New Zealanders saw many points of likeness between this country and their own. The hills south of [Elasson](#), soon to be revisited under more arduous conditions, were bare of cover, and vehicles had to be widely dispersed when they halted there on the night of 22-23 March. Snow-capped [Mount Olympus](#) was not far away and there was a frosty nip in the air. Next day the first 15 miles were fairly good going, and then the convoy began a steep climb over the pass that ran west of the summit of [Olympus](#) and down on to the seaward plains to the north of it. Though the road was a severe test for drivers there were no accidents, but the convoy got strung out over a great distance. The first vehicles, which had not been expected till the afternoon, arrived in [Katerine](#) at 11.30 a.m., and the last not until 4.30 p.m. The main body of 24 Battalion was already there awaiting them.

After the transport had begun its overland journey on 21 March, the battalion's rifle companies and Bren carriers had been accorded something in the nature of a Roman triumph as they marched to the railway station through the streets of [Athens](#). To their surprise the troops were entrained in horse vans, while the carriers were loaded in flat trucks, one man riding with each carrier. The horse vans were clean and not overcrowded, but in any case the novelty of this mode of travel and the wayside scenery with its ever-changing landscapes made amends for any slight discomfort. At every station on the way Greeks crowded round the train to welcome their new allies. Rail and road followed the same general line of direction as far north as [Larissa](#), but beyond that town the railway continued on through the [Peneios Gorge](#) and out on to the narrow coastal strip east of [Mount Olympus](#), while the road branched off westwards. North of [Olympus](#) the country opened out into an undulating, partially wooded plain, in the centre of which stood the little town of [Katerine](#); and there the battalion detrained after a journey of rather more than twenty-four hours. The men were billeted in the town and the transport dispersed in an adjacent orchard. Here they remained for two days, and here the first life was lost when Private [McKay](#),<sup>3</sup> of A Company, was accidentally shot. The Greeks gave a plot in their local cemetery, and several hundred people, both soldiers and civilians, came to attend the funeral. There could be little doubt in the minds of those present that many more lives would be lost before the war should end, and the occasion was no less solemn and impressive on this account.

At the time of 24 Battalion's arrival at [Katerine](#) a German army, estimated at 19 divisions, was concentrated in [Bulgaria](#). Faced by the threat of surprise attack, the Allies took up their position along a general line stretching from the mouth of the [Aliakmon River](#) in the Gulf of [Salonika](#), westwards through Veria and Edessa, and thence to the frontier of [Yugoslavia](#), at this time an unknown quantity as regards military assistance. The right sector of this, the Aliakmon Line, extending from the coast at [Neon Elevtherokhorion](#) about 16 miles due east to [Elafina](#), was held by 19 Greek Division. It was at first intended that the New Zealand Division, gradually concentrating north of [Katerine](#), should occupy a defensive position between the 19th and the 12th and 20th Greek Divisions which were farther inland. Later it was decided that the 19th would be released for operations farther north, and that the New Zealand Division should hold the sector between the coast and [12 Division](#). First to move into the line, 4 Brigade was already in position by 27 March, while 6 Brigade

was still moving up. Fifth Brigade, last to sail from Egypt, was only now arriving and beginning to concentrate in the [Olympus Pass](#), south of [Katerine](#).

Sixth Brigade was to occupy the right or coastal sector of the New Zealand Division's front. In conformity with this intention, 24 Battalion left [Katerine](#) on 24 March and came to Stavros, a small village some five miles to the north, where the men bivouacked in scrub-covered country for two days, and then moved again on the 26th to the vicinity of [Sphendami](#). This village lay only a few miles south of the line on which it was intended to fight a delaying action, and Colonel Shuttleworth went forward next day to reconnoitre the position his men would shortly take over from a battalion of 19 Greek Division. The Greek battalion commander, however, for reasons that never clearly emerged, was unwilling that any other troops should move into the area for which he was responsible. His attitude caused some bewilderment and was the subject of a message from 6 Brigade to [Divisional Headquarters](#), but when finally the New Zealanders advanced to take over, he and his men had evacuated their positions and moved forward into [Thrace](#).

Scarcely more than a mile apart, the three villages—Neon [Elevtherokhorion](#), Skala Elevtherokhorion, and Pal Elevtherokhorion—lay close to the railway line running along the eastern seaboard of [Greece](#), fronting the Gulf of [Salonika](#). Shuttleworth took up his headquarters in the school at Pal, southernmost of the three, with Headquarters Company billeted close by. The rifle companies took up positions astride the railway and main north road, with their right flank on the sea coast and their left at a point about four miles inland, where a junction was made with [25 Battalion](#). On its left the 25th made contact with 4 Brigade. The 19th and 26th Battalions (each less one company) had been sent back to the [Olympus Pass](#) on 27 March to begin digging defensive positions for 5 Brigade. The sector for which the New Zealand Division was responsible was of immense length, about 28,000 yards. To hold this front, 4 and 6 Brigades had seven battalions less three detached companies. The battalions took up positions for all-round defence on spurs and high ground, with companies in reserve, ready to counter-attack if necessary. The left or inland portion of this sector was convenient for defence. A sharp ridge ran parallel to the front, and from this ridge well-wooded spurs and gullies branched out to the north. On the right, however, the country was open and suitable for the deployment of armoured vehicles. To meet such an emergency an anti-tank ditch was being dug

along the line of the Toponitsa stream, behind which lay 6 Brigade's defence lines, supported by the guns of 4 and 5 Field Regiments. Some miles to the north of this position flowed the [Aliakmon River](#), winding and twisting across an open plain till it lost itself in a morass before emptying into the Gulf of [Salonika](#). Its bridges and crossings were mined ready for demolition by [1 British Armoured Brigade](#).

Thus, at the beginning of April, British forces consisting of the New Zealand Division and 1 Armoured Brigade awaited a German attack on [Greece](#) from the north-east. On their left was the Greek Central Macedonian Army. The 6th Australian Division, which was beginning to arrive, relieved part of 12 Greek Division in Veria Pass. The 19th Greek Division had moved up to the Bulgarian frontier on what was surely a forlorn hope, to defend the passes leading into [Thrace](#) against odds likely to be overwhelming. Throughout the greater part of its extent, from the mouth of the Aliakmon to Mount Kaimakchalan on [Yugoslavia's](#) frontier, the Aliakmon Line was one of great natural strength. There were but four routes by which an invading army might enter [Greece](#)—the passes of Edessa, Veria and [Katerine](#), and along the east coast. So long as each route was held advantage lay with the defenders, but if one were penetrated all forces occupying the others must speedily withdraw to avoid being outflanked. A chain of formidable strength with here and there a weak link, the line was vulnerable to a degree in one respect. If [Greece's](#) front door was barred and shuttered, her back door was doubtfully closed. From Yugoslavia into the heart of [Greece](#), a way lay open through the mountains. Should the [Monastir Gap](#) be forced, a hostile army might advance by way of [Florina](#) and Kozane, outflanking the line and cutting off the retreat of its defenders.

The first few days of April were spent by 24 Battalion in fortifying and wiring its position. The anti-tank ditch forward of its lines was now complete, and 6 Brigade was supported by two anti-tank batteries and a machine-gun company. The 26th Battalion had been relieved at the [Olympus Pass](#) by [23 Battalion](#), and was in position between the 24th and 25th. The New Zealand Divisional Cavalry was deployed along the [Aliakmon River](#), prepared to fight a delaying action at its crossings. Meanwhile the troops were enjoying themselves. As one of their number remarked, 'We could have stood a lot of active service under those conditions'.<sup>4</sup> As usual Greek civilians vied with each other in offering hospitality. Wine was cheap in the villages, and it was said that one might get drunk for a shilling. For those who were willing to try

anything once there was 'ouzo', a highly intoxicating liquid which tasted of peppermint and turned milky when mixed with water. A shortage of tobacco was remedied by the inhabitants, who came to the rescue with their own locally grown dried leaves. The sea was close at hand and it was possible to bathe when off duty.

Even in time of peace, periods when life seems to assume an aspect of inviolable tranquillity are of short duration. In war these periods are still more brief. On 6 April [Germany](#) declared war on [Greece](#), and next day fires in [Salonika](#) could be seen clearly through field glasses from 6 Brigade's position. The 24th Battalion was at once warned to stand by ready to occupy its battle positions. Early in the morning of 8 April the bridge over the anti-tank ditch north of Skala Elevation was blown, and late that same night the Divisional Cavalry, which had taken over responsibility from 1 Armoured Brigade, blew up the Aliakmon crossings. Refugees from beyond the river were beginning to come through the New Zealand lines. As time went on their numbers increased, and among them appeared many stragglers from the Greek Army. 'In spite of all efforts to divert them', writes Sergeant Bell, 'since early morning refugees had been blocking the roads from the villages further north, and as the day wore on the problem became more acute. One could not help feeling sorry for them. They were really pitiful to see as they came limping along the road behind waggons of all descriptions loaded with everything they could get on to them, drawn by horses, donkeys, bullocks and even by hand. They had their sheep and goats with them too. There was no room on the waggons for passengers and so everybody had to walk, old women, children, mothers with babies in their arms, and every one of them looked despondent, footsore and weary to the point of exhaustion. Even the animals looked tired out, for some of them must have been dragging those heavy waggons unceasingly for days. The people were so hungry too and thanked us with tears in their eyes for any food we were able to give them. I wish to God we had had more for them. One cart drawn by oxen had both wheels stripped of their outer rims and was actually running on the spokes.'<sup>5</sup>

Infected by the prevailing fear, the local villagers gathered in anxious groups to discuss whether they should go or stay. Fear got the better of them; they were about to pack up and leave when Shuttleworth, realising how disastrously their straggling, disorderly columns would cumber the roads, sent for the village priest and persuaded the people through his influence to stay in their homes. The 24th



Battalion was now in its battle positions, apparently to stay, but B Echelon was already moving back over the [Olympus Pass](#), and that same evening orders came for the battalion to retire.

By 8 April Greek resistance on the Bulgarian frontier had almost completely broken down. [Salonika](#) and the whole of Western Thrace were in German hands. Further west the Allied forces had fared no better. Yugoslav resistance had also collapsed and German armour was driving through the [Monastir Gap](#). British and Australian forces had been detached to meet this threat, but so serious had the situation become that 4 Brigade was ordered to their support, thus leaving 6 Brigade's flank in the air. Nor was this the only factor to cause a weakening of the Aliakmon Line. Once again [26 Battalion](#) had been sent back to the [Olympus Pass](#), and the gap thus exposed had to be filled by detachments from the two remaining battalions. All advanced forces were dangerously extended and a retreat to some shorter line had become imperative.

In the small hours of the morning (10 April), leaving two rifle platoons and the Carrier Platoon as rearguard, 24 Battalion began a 15-mile march to Gannokhora, some three miles north of [Katerine](#). After a long wait it was picked up by motor transport and taken over the pass—a fearsome journey over zigzag roads that crawled along cliff sides—to a valley on the southern slopes near the village of [Ag Demetrios](#). The men had not seen rain for months, but a heavy downpour began as they arrived and camp was pitched under circumstances of great discomfort. The transport had overtaken the marching troops and crossed the pass before them, 'doing it in spasms, about 200 yards at a time'<sup>6</sup> on account of some Greek heavy guns which were being hauled laboriously round the sharp corners. Sixth Brigade was now in rear of the 5th, which held the pass with three battalions and guarded the coastline with another. No troops remained forward of [Olympus](#) except the Divisional Cavalry and a detachment of engineers.

Of the two days passed at [Ag Demetrios](#), the first was spent in getting wet and the second in getting dry. The rearguard platoons came in and the Anti-Aircraft Platoon was sent to protect B Echelon, some miles to the rear at [Dolikhe](#). Soon afterwards the battalion was called upon to make a gruelling march into the high country west of the pass road. [Livadhion](#) was the destination, a large village marvellously blended with its natural surroundings. Its slate-covered roofs were all of

a colour, indistinguishable from the mountain itself and the out-crops of rock from which its houses were fashioned. Isolated and self contained from time immemorial, [Livadhion](#) had remained unmolested by the turmoil of politics or war, and the inhabitants at first showed some alarm at being invaded by strangers whose intentions they distrusted. As the troops arrived it began to snow, and by the time their tents were brought up some hours later the ground was covered three inches deep. Pitching camp was a dismal proceeding, and the Aucklanders, before being able to spread their blankets on the ground, were obliged to spend time and trouble in shovelling away a substance which few of them had ever seen or touched before.

After a day of roadmending near [Livadhion](#), the battalion was ordered forward to a position near [Skotina](#), between [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#) and 16 Australian Brigade—a somewhat inaccessible spot, west of the pass summit. For this journey motor transport was of no avail; only on the backs of mules or donkeys could loads be carried over the narrow mountain tracks, but mules and donkeys were hard to come by, for no sooner did the peasants realise what was afoot than they disappeared into the hills, taking their livestock with them. A sufficient number was procured, but even so all difficulties were not at an end. The men were not accustomed to loading equipment on mules, nor were the mules accustomed to being loaded with infantry equipment; but at length, after much pulling back and jibbing, the pack trains started off. Heavily burdened with full marching order, the companies climbed a steep ridge and then, dropping down the other side, camped late that night in a vast beech forest. The final stage of their march was to take place next day, and two officers and some NCOs had gone on to reconnoitre positions, but at midnight orders arrived for the battalion to return to [Livadhion](#) as soon as possible. All efforts had been made in vain, and to the weary men, called upon to retrace their steps over the ground they had so recently, so laboriously covered, it almost seemed that they were being made game of by irresponsible authority. But the reasons for their recall were more than adequate, as they were soon to realise.

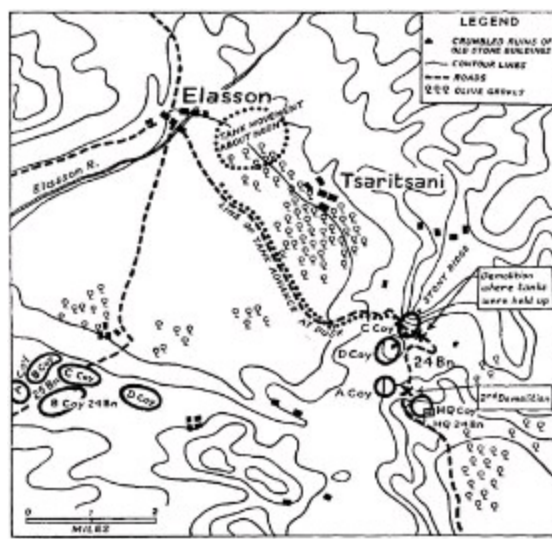
The Divisional Cavalry had fought a delaying action on the Aliakmon and then retreated in good order behind the [Olympus](#) Pass defence lines. German forces followed hard on this withdrawal and by 15 April 5 Brigade was being heavily attacked, not only in the pass itself but also on the sea coast, where [21 Battalion](#) held the [Platamon](#) tunnel. Danger threatened this brigade from both front and rear.



Driving through the Monastir Gap, the enemy had taken [Florina](#) and Kozane and, though firmly held in check for the time being by [6 Australian Division](#) and 4 New Zealand Brigade, was threatening to cut the only line of retreat for our troops engaged in the [Olympus Pass](#). Still farther west the Greek Army, with sadly outmoded equipment, fought a desperate battle of men against machines. Its defeat—and this was inevitable—would mean yet another threat to the British flank. Such was the state of affairs that made further retreat a necessity.

The Anzac Corps <sup>7</sup> was being withdrawn to a new and shorter line astride the narrow strip of mountainous country lying between the gulfs of [Corinth](#) and Euboea, but the problem remained of how to get there without being overwhelmed in course of withdrawal. The Anzac Corps' line of retreat from the [Olympus](#) and [Portas](#) passes lay along two roads which converged a few miles north of [Elasson](#). At the village itself the road forked into two branches which formed a wide loop and then joined each other again at [Tyrnavos](#), about 15 miles to the south. Sixth Brigade's task was to cover the [Anzac Corps'](#) retreat by fighting a delaying action astride these forked roads.

The reconnaissance party having been recalled, 24 Battalion's companies left the [Skotina](#) woods early next morning and marched back to [Livadhion](#), whence they were directed to continue on in small groups to [Dolikhe](#) and wait for motor transport. It was on this march that the troops first began to be haunted by what was to become a familiar and permanent nuisance—a German observation plane which circled above them in leisurely fashion. From that time onward they were seldom to escape its vigilance. Day by day it would seek them out, and its appearance was almost invariably followed by some kind of unwelcome attention from hostile aircraft. At the moment air attack was being concentrated on [Elasson](#), where Shuttleworth and his company commanders had gone, so it was supposed, to attend a brigade conference. Large flights were passing over and returning again after plastering the village with high explosive. After a wait of some hours at [Dolikhe](#), the battalion was picked up by motor transport and driven through [Elasson](#) on a pitch-black night. The village was fearfully battered, but it transpired that the Colonel and his officers had been elsewhere during the worst of the bombing. A few miles south of [Elasson](#) the convoy halted; companies bivouacked on the plain and moved next morning to their battle positions.



DELAYING ACTION SOUTH OF ELASSON  
**delaying action south of elasson**

After leaving [Ellasson](#) the forked roads already mentioned ran for nearly three miles across a level plain. The eastern branch then began to climb abruptly by a zigzag route over a steep, stony ridge. The western branch made a wider loop to reach [Tyrnavos](#), but, since its bends and gradients were far less acute, it was more easily passable by armoured vehicles. It was regarded, therefore, as the more dangerous, and B Company was detached under command of the 25th to assist in its defence, while the Aucklanders' three remaining rifle companies took up a position commanding the east road. With C Company (Captain Morrison) right, D (Captain McDonald<sup>8</sup>) centre, and A (Major Dill) left, the battalion lined a rugged ridge overlooking the plain of [Ellasson](#). 'This position', writes Major Dill, 'was so rocky that it was impossible to dig trenches, and we could only build rock walls to lie behind and fire over. I don't think anyone was very happy about having to fight here as the splinter effect from bombs and shell fire would have been great.'<sup>9</sup> The slope leading up to Stony Ridge, as the position was called, was gradual at first but grew rapidly steeper towards the summit. The road by which it was approached—the only possible route for tanks—was full of hairpin bends and finally crossed the ridge at a deep saddle. Morrison's company held a position immediately north of this saddle, on the highest point of which stood the crumbled ruins of an old Turkish fort. Supporting C Company was a detachment of three-inch mortars and a section of anti-tank guns, which, however, were sent away to the [Peneios Gorge](#) before any action took place. McDonald's platoons lay south of the saddle on the summit of a ridge jutting out to the west, with Dill's company on their south-west flank. Colonel Shuttleworth established his headquarters at a farmhouse on the southern side of the ridge, about

two miles in rear of the forward defended localities. Though the guns, field, medium and anti-tank, were sited with scarcely an exception to cover [25 Battalion's](#) front, they also commanded certain exposed portions of ground forward of the 24th's positions. Demolitions, both in front and rear of the position, were prepared by engineers. At first there was no brigade reserve, [26 Battalion](#) having been detached to support [19 Australian Brigade](#) near the [Portas Pass](#), but on 16 April this unit arrived, weary after a long march, and took up a position in rear at [Domenikon](#), on the west road. After acting as rearguard during the retreat from the Aliakmon Line, [24 Battalion's](#) carrier platoon had rejoined at [Ag Demetrios](#), but on the following day had been brigaded and sent as part of an anti-paratroop force to the plains south of [Olympus](#). There it had the honour of drawing first blood for its battalion when an enemy plane, while bombing road transport, came in too low and received a burst of Bren-gun fire in its tail, which sent it crashing into an adjacent hillside. <sup>10</sup> As the 24th passed through [Elasson](#), the Carrier Platoon followed on behind and eventually joined Battalion Headquarters south of Stony Ridge. On the 17th three carrier sections were sent back to [Tyrnavos](#) to protect a troop of 25-pounders, and only one remained with the battalion.

While these dispositions were being made the fortune of war was varying hourly in other places. On 16 April 5 Brigade withdrew from [Olympus Pass](#) under cover of mist and moved back through [Larissa](#). That same night 4 Brigade disengaged and accomplished a hazardous retreat from [Servia](#) in the north-west. But these movements, which are now historical facts, could not be followed closely at the time, and Brigadier Barrow- clough, commanding 6 Brigade, was faced with a somewhat obscure situation. If his left flank was doubtfully secure, his right was in considerable danger. Forced back from the Plata- mon tunnel, [21 Battalion](#), now reinforced by an Australian brigade, was being hard pressed in the [Peneios Gorge](#). Report said the enemy was already at Gonnos. Should he succeed in opening a way to [Larissa](#) and [Tyrnavos](#), 6 Brigade would indeed be in a parlous condition. By 18 April, however, all doubts were resolved as to what had become of the advanced formations, as these were now known to have withdrawn behind 6 Brigade's lines. Only the Divisional Cavalry remained forward, and in the course of the morning it also withdrew along the western road.

The one remaining carrier section, under Sergeant McDonald, <sup>11</sup> was deployed

on the plain as a protective screen, but it was recalled when enemy tanks began to appear in the defile north of [Elasson](#) about 11.20 a.m. For a while it halted at the foot of the ridge below C Company and then began to make its way up the slope, only to become a target for friend and foe alike. Shelled first by enemy guns from [Elasson](#) and then by one of the Australian batteries, it was fortunate to get back behind our lines unharmed.

Once the carriers had got back the demolition on the road leading to 24 Battalion's position was blown by a party of engineers. The explosion made a great noise but produced little effect. An inspection showed that the crater could be crossed by Bren carriers and that half an hour's work would make the road passable for almost any kind of wheeled traffic. As there was no time to bring up more explosive and lay another charge, the road had to be left inadequately blocked.

In spite of heavy fire from the Australian guns, enemy tanks and lorried infantry moved down towards [Elasson](#) continuously in increasing numbers throughout the early part of the afternoon. Obviously something was about to happen; it only remained to be seen what line of attack the enemy would choose. His choice lay between the west road, comparatively easy of approach but more strongly defended, and the eastern branch, far more difficult of access but flanked by woods that might serve as cover. Having weighed these factors in the balance, he decided upon the eastern approach.

At 2 p.m. a few German tanks moved forward below the foothills between [Elasson](#) and [Tsaritsani](#) to reconnoitre the latter village, and, having done so, retired. Enemy shells began to fall in 24 Battalion's lines late in the afternoon, causing C Company's first battle casualty. The mortars and carriers withdrew behind the demolition prepared in rear of our position, so that it might be blown whenever necessary. Instructions had also been received by the companies to withdraw in the order A, C, and D. Just before dusk about 40 tanks followed by 20 troop-carrying lorries moved out from [Elasson](#) along the east road. Reaching the end of the three-mile straight they turned right and at once came under fire from the Australian guns, which forced the troop-carriers to disperse. The tanks, however, kept on till they reached the demolition, 'which, although ineffective in daylight, would look to be a deep yawning chasm in the gathering darkness when viewed through the periscope or driving slits of a tank'.<sup>12</sup> While C Company withdrew just before nine o'clock, the

German armour made no attempt to advance further but shelled our positions, 'many of their shots going over the crest of the ridge and falling behind the Coy position. Tracer was flying in all directions. It was apparently becoming too dark for aimed fire inside a tank, and their intention was to confuse and terrorise rather than inflict casualties.' <sup>13</sup>

Since the battalion's withdrawal was made by a gradual process of thinning out, the position had to be held with ever-decreasing fire power. Lest its explosion should betray our intention of withdrawing, the second demolition was not blown till soon after eight o'clock. McDonald's company, the last to leave, was treated to a magnificent display of coloured flares and tracer bullets that might have been better appreciated under other circumstances. One of its platoons lay on the reverse of a slope; another faced west to a flank. Only the third platoon, No. 17, was in a position to see exactly what was going on or to fire upon the halted tanks. Its commander, Second-Lieutenant [Reynolds](#), <sup>14</sup> describes the action:

Fortunately I had verified the range to the nearest and last portion of the road on which I could see the tanks, and this was 350 yards. The right-hand section had possession of the Anti-tank rifle, and I made them hold their fire until the leading tank reached this point. Pte Frank [Turner](#) <sup>15</sup> fired four times and the last round appeared to halt the tank. At any rate it stopped, and Turner fired the one round remaining in the magazine. At this stage a man climbed out of the second tank, and holding something in his hand ran for cover. Pte [Adam](#), <sup>16</sup> who was Bren gunner in the left hand section and was ready for action, fired, and in the excitement fired in one burst the whole magazine which was loaded with tracer 1 in 2 for ack-ack. The fire was easily observed and the enemy received the whole magazine in what was easily the best burst I have ever seen. A second man however ran out carrying further bundles, relieved the deceased of his, and safely made cover. Then the trouble started.

A mortar, which is no doubt what was being prepared for action, opened up. The second round demolished the parapet of Turner's sangar and rendered him unconscious, although amazingly, unwounded. Corporal G. [Budd](#), <sup>17</sup> the section commander, then assumed command of the Anti-tank rifle. The next mortar round however hit the rifle itself in front of the magazine, and put both Budd and the

weapon out of action. Remarkably Budd was only slightly wounded.

The tanks continued to pile up, and became nose to tail back down the hill. Then they all turned their turrets towards the ridge, and opened fire with everything they had—tank guns and small arms—using tracer entirely. This heavy fire was maintained on the two sections which had revealed their positions from about 7.30 to 9.15 p.m. and was a most inspiring sight. <sup>18</sup>

The tanks stayed where they were, without trying to pass the demolition, and the men of 17 Platoon lay low, withholding their fire. D Company withdrew successfully under cover of darkness, to find Colonel Shuttleworth waiting at his headquarters to see the last of his men safely away.

'No German vehicles were destroyed in this area', writes Captain Morrison 'and probably few if any casualties were inflicted on their personnel, although had any anti-tank guns been available a very different story would have been told. However we had accomplished the task given us of holding the enemy until darkness, and it was very unlikely that he would make any attempt to move before daylight.'

In the meantime Major Mantell-Harding had already set off with the main body, heading south-east for [Tyrnavos](#) and [Larissa](#). He was uneasy about the bridges over the Xerias and Peneois rivers, not being at all sure of finding them intact. Well aware that both [21 Battalion](#) and the Australians sent to their support had been overwhelmed in the [Peneios Gorge](#), he was still ignorant of how far the pursuing forces had penetrated. Having passed through [Tyrnavos](#), he came to much-bombed [Larissa](#) and found the town in flames but the bridges undamaged. Away to the left flares and tracer bullets showed how dangerously close the enemy was pressing upon the line of retreat. A few miles farther on a line of blazing lights was seen approaching rapidly from the east—the same direction from which the enemy's thrust might be expected. As the column was brought to a halt by a traffic jam ahead, the lights swung on to the road and proved to be those of an Australian convoy retreating from the [Peneios Gorge](#). Its sudden irruption disorganised the column, but any annoyance caused was soon forgotten in the general relief at meeting friends instead of a hostile vanguard intent on cutting the line of retreat. The night was dark and vehicles carrying the 24th were being driven without lights. 'We pushed on', writes Mantell-Harding, and were getting along nicely when I heard



a voice call out "Who are you?" I gave our code name and someone called —"Put on your lights and go like hell." The voice belonged to [General Freyberg](#), whose presence was no less encouraging than his instructions were welcome. Expert as the drivers had become through much practice, moving in darkness was an added strain upon tired men.

The original intention of making the retreat to [Thermopylae](#) in a single bound had been discarded, since only half the journey could be performed under cover of night; and travelling by day was unhealthy while [Germany](#) ruled the air. The 6th Brigade column, therefore, had been ordered to halt and lie up by day at [Nea Ankhialos](#), where the main road skirted the Gulf of [Volos](#). Mantell-Harding arrived there at dawn, and Shuttleworth, with D Company, an hour or so later. An assortment of the retreating Allies was gathered here—Englishmen, Greeks, Australians, and a few survivors from [21 Battalion](#) —all in various stages of exhaustion. No move was expected until nightfall, and Shuttleworth, having sent away the transport as being no longer necessary,<sup>19</sup> disposed his companies for defence. Under shady trees in fields of red poppies, all men not actually on duty lay down thankfully to make up for lost sleep, but their rest was soon broken. The Luftwaffe having made no reconnaissance in this direction, [General Freyberg](#) decided that the retreat should be continued by day, and orders to this effect reached Colonel Shuttleworth about 10 a.m. By that time, however, the transport was miles away, beyond possibility of recall. There was no choice but to set off on foot, and this was done at once; but at the same time Lieutenant [Carnachan](#),<sup>20</sup> the Intelligence Officer, was sent off in a truck with orders to collect transport from anywhere in southern [Greece](#) and return with all speed. As the battalion marched off, a flight of German dive-bombers was seen to attack a ship anchored off the coast. Within five minutes it was ablaze from stem to stern. In full marching order on a boiling hot day, the men marched from 10 a.m. till 12.30, halted for lunch, and then continued on till 2.30 p.m., when Shuttleworth decided to halt once more. He was a little way north of [Almiros](#), and the remaining distance of nearly a hundred miles obviously could not be covered on foot. How close were the pursuing Germans no one knew, but if no transport came, then this was as good a place to fight them as any other. Meanwhile Carnachan had gone right back to [Molos](#), meeting on his way first Major [Brooke](#),<sup>21</sup> Brigade Major 6 Brigade, and then the Brigadier, whom he informed of the difficulty. Finally he went on to [Divisional Headquarters](#), where he

was provided with the transport required. The stranded battalion, though left without means of conveyance, was never allowed to feel itself deserted. A rearguard of the Divisional Cavalry closed in round it, and the 2/3rd Australian Field Regiment promised artillery support, while the Brigadier himself arrived on the scene at 5 p.m. Carnachan appeared with transport an hour later, and the men at once embussed, but darkness had not yet fallen and the movement was observed by enemy aircraft. 'Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a German fighter swooped down over the convoy with guns belching fire at our trucks. There was a wild scatter for shelter and from the safety of a ditch we had a splendid display of strafing. Up and down the convoy Jerry dived, spraying bullets and explosive cannon shells in all directions. He kept it up for some time, but eventually tired of the game and made off over the hills, leaving two bullet holes through the windscreen of one truck—his net result for the expenditure of several thousand rounds of ammunition.'<sup>22</sup> Throughout the night exhausted men slept fitfully in jolting trucks, which passed through blazing [Lamia](#) and then turned south-east, skirting the shores of the Maliac Gulf. Four miles beyond [Molos](#) they halted at dawn, comparatively safe under cover of the [RAF](#), and in rear of 5 Brigade's positions at [Thermopylae](#). B Company, lately detached under command of [25 Battalion](#) at [Elasson](#), had already arrived. Travelling by the shorter inland route via [Pharsala](#) and [Dhomokos](#), it had made the journey in a single night and was waiting to guide the rest of the battalion to its dispersal area.

While the position at [Elasson](#) was being held, [24 Battalion's](#) B Echelon had remained about a mile south of [Stony Ridge](#) until the morning of 18 April, when most of the administrative transport started off for [Molos](#) under Captain [Brown](#),<sup>23</sup> the Quartermaster—a composite unit amidst the huge stream of traffic making its way southward. The coastal road through [Volos](#) was under repair, and as yet there was no alternative to taking the overcrowded inland route through [Pharsala](#) and [Dhomokos](#). The convoy moved without serious check as far as [Larissa](#), but there its peaceful progress ended. 'The town itself was a ruin—telephone and telegraph wires down, fires burning everywhere, and the roads blocked and in places obliterated by rubble and bomb craters. Many of the Australian Military Police on traffic control duties had been killed, but with the help of the few who remained a route (partly by way of the wrecked streets and partly over broken down fences, and through yards and gardens behind the houses) was found for the convoy to pass through to the main road....,'<sup>24</sup> Scarcely had the town been left behind when the convoy was



attacked by hostile aircraft, and 'From this time (about 1200 hrs) until dark the longest period without attack from the air was to be less than a quarter of an hour.'

<sup>25</sup> Trucks of other formations cut in on the line, and before long the battalion convoy was broken up into disconnected groups. Some drivers stopped their vehicles on the road and made for cover when aircraft dived to attack them. 'Behind the blockage caused by this the whole mass of transport silted up into a gigantic traffic jam, the road's width across and almost twenty miles long, and for the most part stationary or barely creeping forward. An ideal target for the enemy who was now bombing as well as machine-gunning, and whose attacks had become almost continuous. The bombs fell for the most part to the sides of the road, some of them two hundred yards out, and very few on the road itself which was, however, continually swept by machine gun fire.'

<sup>26</sup> At first these attacks were suffered without reprisal, but later a few men began to turn their rifles on the aircraft, and thereafter the volume of this fire increased with each attack. Armoured cars ran their front wheels up road banks and brought their Vickers guns to bear on the raiders. If the fire had little result, it at least kept up the men's spirits and discouraged the enemy from coming in too low. The Anti- Aircraft Platoon's truck was hit by bomb splinters. One man was killed, one seriously and others lightly wounded, but all things considered the total damage done was remarkably slight. Regular halts for meals being out of the question, the troops ate bully beef and drank from their water bottles while sitting in the trucks. Now and then conflicting orders were passed back. One of these directed that no attempt should be made to pass halted traffic, but a few moments later Captain Brown sent back word that this order should be disregarded. The 24th Battalion convoy was to keep together and push on towards [Molos](#) whenever possible until stopped by the Quartermaster himself. [Lamia](#) had been crowded with refugees when the bombers arrived, and corpses, some of them horribly mutilated, lay where they had fallen in the streets. South of the town the convoy had a fairly clear run, and at nightfall the leading trucks passed through [Molos](#). Straggling groups which continued to arrive throughout the night found Brown waiting on the road to direct them to their own parking area. All next day the Quartermaster waited anxiously, for disturbing rumours were coming to hand, but towards evening he gave orders for a hot meal to be cooked and stored in insulated containers—a precaution much appreciated by the tired, hungry men who arrived next morning.

It will be remembered that three sections of the Carrier Platoon had been sent

back from Stony Ridge to [Tyrnavos](#) on 17 April, and the remaining section had withdrawn shortly before the companies began to thin out on the following evening. This section was sent on a special mission with orders to occupy the northern outskirts of [Tyrnavos](#) and cover the withdrawal through the village. No move was to be made from this position without orders from the officer commanding the rearguard. After waiting there for some time the section was directed by the officer in question to move into the village square and hold it for one and a half hours. The other three sections now withdrew and then, one after another, units of 6 Brigade retreated through [Tyrnavos](#), followed eventually by the rearguard. In ominous stillness Sergeant McDonald and his men waited for the interminable hour and a half to pass, wondering at the same time how close the enemy had come, and whether they would find the Xerias bridge destroyed. Flares were still going up close by to the east, but there was no sound of fighting. At length, just before time was up, the Divisional Cavalry appeared and the carriers tacked on to the end of its column, 'pulling out as the enemy in force entered the village on its farther side'.<sup>27</sup>

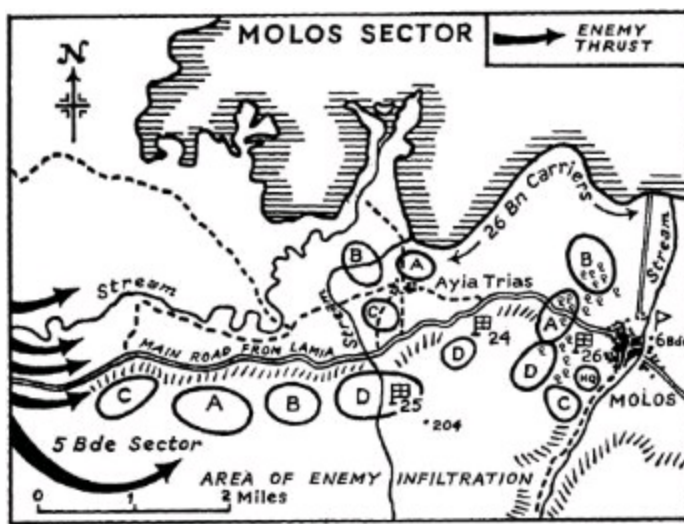
Next day, while the 24th waited for transport at [Almiros](#), the section caught up, but did not rejoin as it still formed part of the rearguard. On the way to [Molos](#) the steering gear of one of the three carriers broke down. The vehicle was pushed over a cliff and its crew were picked up later by the Divisional Cavalry. Meanwhile one of the remaining carriers had gone back to look for the missing one, and in doing so had broken down as well. This crew was not so fortunate in getting picked up, but the men arrived back next day to join the rest of the platoon halted near the hot springs of [Thermopylae](#). The platoon, or what was left of it, being once more assembled, moved into the battalion lying-up area and concealed the carriers under trees.

There, beyond [Molos](#), the battalion rested on 20 April, but before long an observation plane was circling above like a familiar spirit. As usual its presence spelt trouble and bombers soon flew over, after which there was little peace until six Hurricanes appeared later in the day. They cleared the sky for the time being, and the sight of them was infinitely cheering to men who had lately seen so much of the [Luftwaffe](#) and so little of their own air force. Early on the 21st the battalion made its first forward move since advancing to the Aliakmon, when motor transport took it to positions in the [Thermopylae](#) Line.

Broadly speaking, this line ran westward from the coast near [Molos](#) between the river Sperkheios and the Brailos Pass, after which it bent south-west, covering Mount Giona, and then turned south through Lidhorikion to Eratini on the Gulf of [Corinth](#). On the right the New Zealand Division held seven miles of front from the coast at [Ayia Trias](#) along the southern bank of the Sperkheios River; on the left was 6 Australian Division. The whole New Zealand sector was held by 5 Brigade alone until 21 April, when 6 Brigade moved in on its right and became responsible for the coastal sector. Fourth Brigade remained in reserve, spaced out along the coastline from [Molos](#) to [Cape Knimis](#).

These dispositions, however, were not maintained for long. On the day of their completion the Greek Army of Epirus capitulated, and on 22 April the British forces received orders to evacuate [Greece](#). This involved an immediate alteration in all plans. It was now decided that on the night of 22-23 April 4 Brigade should move to a position on the main [Athens](#) road, south of [Thebes](#), to cover [Anzac Corps'](#) withdrawal, while 5 Brigade, leaving a skeleton force to hold its line, should move out on the same night to the coast road near [Cape Knimis](#), lie concealed there all day on the 23rd, and then go on to [Athens](#) and embark from the neighbouring beaches. Sixth Brigade, supported by the whole of the Divisional Artillery, would hold the [Thermopylae](#) Line for 48 hours (until the night of the 24th), and then disengage and embark from [Khalkis](#).

Running in a general line from west to east across the New Zealanders' front, the Sperkheios River branched into two streams before reaching the sea. It was an adequate tank obstacle, but unfortunately the ground on its southern banks was swampy and without cover, so that it was found necessary to choose a defence line some little way back along the foothills of the Kalidhromon Mountains. The river crossings, however, could be kept under artillery fire and watched by strong patrols at night. The principal bridge at Alamanas, south of [Lamia](#), was blown on 20 April.



SIXTH BRIGADE POSITIONS, 21-24 APRIL 1941

### sixth brigade positions, 21-24 april 1941

During the course of many centuries the Maliac Gulf had been gradually filling up, and a flat, swampy, alluvial plain, some thirty square miles in extent, had risen out of the sea. In the days of Leonidas and his Spartans, [Thermopylae](#) had been a narrow defile between mountains and sea, supremely advantageous to a small band of heroes bent on holding it against an army, but since then it had been widened into a narrow flat by a gradual process of silting.<sup>28</sup> Where once the sea had rolled there was now dry land, and on part of this naturally reclaimed area stood the little village of [Aya Trias](#). There, on the extreme right of the line, 24 Battalion took up its battle positions. A Company between village and coast, B slightly forward in the western outskirts of the village, with C on the left and a little in rear of B, immediately north of the [Lamia- Molos](#) road, united in forming a triangle with its apex pointing north-west towards the Sperkheios. D Company had its position in reserve on the unit's left rear, close to Battalion Headquarters. The 25th Battalion's positions extended westward for about three miles on the southern side of the road. Astride the road just west of [Molos](#), 26 Battalion was in reserve with the additional duty of watching the coastline, for it was thought possible that the enemy might attempt a landing behind our forward positions.

A powerful concentration of guns supported 6 Brigade. The 2nd Regiment of [Royal Horse Artillery](#), 102 Anti-Tank Regiment (both less one battery), and 155 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery all added their fire power to that of the New Zealand Divisional Artillery. There was some difficulty in siting these guns so that the [Alamanas Bridge](#) and Sperkheios River to the east of it came within their range. Most of them were

grouped in the foothills west and south of [Molos](#), but some were placed almost in the front line. Two 25-pounders were moved into 24 Battalion's sector between A and B Companies, as it was thought likely the enemy might make a tank attack across the flat country lying between the two streams of the Sperkheios.

The 22nd of April was spent in digging in and camouflaging, practically without molestation; the observation plane did indeed appear, yet no attack followed. In front of the battalion position the ground was covered with scrub and a species of pampas grass, similar to the New Zealand toi-toi, which had to be cut away to make a field of fire. A bridge over a swampy creek on B Company's front was discovered and blown up. [Ayia Trias](#) was deserted, but its gardens were full of vegetables which made a welcome addition to bully beef and hard biscuit. 'In Coy HQ', writes Major Dill, 'we had the CSM detailed to milk the goat which we had tethered, feed the hens, and gather the eggs, while the OC's driver and two HQ batmen became experts at cooking all sorts of things on the primus.' Coming as it did after much hardship, the short spell of ease was pleasant beyond description, but it was not to last. That night the headlights of an endless transport column could be seen moving through the hills on the opposite shore of the Maliac Gulf. That night also 5 Brigade withdrew, leaving a small force known as the [Hart Detachment](#) to bridge the gap that now intervened between the Australian and New Zealand divisions.

Respite from air attack did not extend to the 23rd—a day of annoyance and tribulation. A remnant of the Royal Air Force, hopelessly outnumbered and deprived of any safe base of operations, was about to leave for Crete. Henceforward the wide sky belonged to the [Luftwaffe](#). The infantry were well concealed, but the slightest move on their part drew attention. As instructed, they opened heavy fire with small arms upon every target that presented itself, but their tracer bullets could be seen glancing harmlessly off the plane's armour, and their efforts had little result other than disclosing their positions.

After dark the [Hart Detachment](#) withdrew, leaving 25 Battalion's left flank to look after itself; yet at all costs 6 Brigade had to hold its line for another 24 hours lest the whole evacuation should be endangered. Nothing was certain but that an attack would come; only the time of its coming and the tactics that might be employed were still matters of conjecture. The situation was tense; nerves were strained, and every strange sight or sound was a signal to be on the alert. 'On guard

that night proved an eerie business. We were expecting and were continually on the lookout for parachute troops. Having a little knowledge of their methods we knew of the manner in which they use whistles and cries to signal from group to group. About midnight, away in the distance on the right, we heard a weird call that was immediately answered faintly from the distant left. It was a creepy cat-call—sounded like a tomcat in its last agony. It made one's flesh creep and we were certain that we would have parachute troops on our hands at any moment. Once again that eerie call, this time closer and from a direction between the first two. We piquets kept mighty close together, our rifles cocked and ready to open up at the first sign of trouble. A war of nerves! Jerry up to old tricks we thought. But next day—enlightenment. We were told by some nature-loving bloke who had taken the trouble to enquire from the Greeks, that the cries we heard were actually made by a species of bat that abounded in that part of [Greece](#).<sup>29</sup>

It was naturally a matter of the utmost importance to make sure that the [Alamanas Bridge](#), blown on 20 April, was not repaired by night. Each morning at dawn one of the three battalions, taking the duty by turns, sent a carrier section to reconnoitre the demolition and see that it remained in a satisfactory state of disrepair. On 24 April it was 24 Battalion's turn, and on approaching the bridge the carrier section, with Lieutenant [Yeoman](#)<sup>30</sup> in charge, found repairs in progress. There was little time for detailed observation, however, as 'at this point of the proceedings [Sgt McDonald] spotted an enemy armoured patrol of some strength advancing from the hill on the south (that is the Allied) side of the river, and at the same time three fighters took off from the enemy's forward landing ground near [Lamia](#), and made towards the carriers'.<sup>31</sup> The party was hunted home by machine-gunning aircraft and one carrier was hit, but there were no casualties. Soon after its return, shells from our guns were landing amongst the ruins where the enemy party had been at work.

Before proceeding further the enemy sought to reduce our formidable gun power by counter-battery fire, and by bombing and machine-gunning from the air. There was no longer any [RAF](#); anti-aircraft fire was ineffectual and concealment never more necessary, but the [Luftwaffe](#) could not attend simultaneously and continuously to each battery. Once the sky was clear gun crews emerged from cover and gave the enemy an ample demonstration that on this occasion at least there



was no shortage of ammunition.

Fortunately German judgment was not infallible. The 24th Battalion might have expected to bear the brunt of an attack delivered across the swampy though quite passable flat lying to its front, but the attempt, when finally made towards mid-afternoon, assumed the nature of a narrow-pointed thrust along the [Lamia](#) road, across the front held by [25 Battalion](#) and into the mouths of the guns sited round [Molos](#) and [Ayia Trias](#). Throughout the morning armoured vehicles had been gathering out of range beyond the [Sperkheios](#), and towards 3.30 p.m. tanks, followed by lorried infantry and preceded by motor cyclists, could be seen from 24 Battalion's lines advancing along the [Lamia](#) road. The tanks were either destroyed by artillery fire or forced to turn back, but the lorried infantry began to infiltrate into the hills around 25 Battalion's left company, formerly but now no longer guarded by the [Hart Detachment](#). The company drew back a flank to meet them. A second attack followed the first along the [Lamia](#) road, which twisted and undulated so that at times the tanks' fire bore upon 24 Battalion's positions. C Company, being nearest the road, was also nearest the scene of action. A single tank, survivor of several, ran the gauntlet to within a few hundred yards of the company's lines before being knocked out. But the main danger lay elsewhere. Pressure on [25 Battalion's](#) left flank increased until the left company had to give ground. An encircling movement through the hills, such as had once been fatal to the Spartans, might cut off the greater part of 6 Brigade, and to meet this threat 24 Battalion's companies were realigned late in the afternoon. Abandoning everything except actual fighting equipment, A Company moved into the hills south of where D and Battalion Headquarters were situated close by the [Molos](#) road, while B and C extended their lines to cover the gap left by A. As it turned out this precaution was unnecessary. The 25th Battalion held its readjusted line firmly, and the time was drawing near when 6 Brigade, having held out for the specified time, might evacuate the position.

During the latter part of the day troops had been busy destroying everything that could not be carried away—everything with the exception of weapons and one blanket for each man. When the 24th's companies began to thin out after dark, in what was becoming a familiar movement, they had suffered no casualties, and C Company alone had opened fire; yet the extent of what they had endured could scarcely be measured in terms so precise. Some of our guns were still firing and

others were being dismantled ready for destruction as A, B, and D Companies pulled out at 9 p.m., leaving C to follow later. From across the Maliac Gulf a German battery was shelling the road, but the companies got safely back to [Molos](#) and boarded transport which waited to carry them away on yet another lap of their long retreat.

The Carrier Platoon moved in advance, but before long two more vehicles broke down and had to be destroyed. Skirting the coast for 20 miles, the road followed by the convoy turned sharply west at Atalante, exposing the brigade's right flank to any enemy forces that might conceivably have filtered through from the Brailos Pass. To protect the exposed flank Lieutenant Yeoman, with part of his command, occupied a branch road leading in from the north-west, while Sergeant McDonald went on with his section in search of a point where the two main roads from Brailos Pass and the coast formed a junction. His orders were to hold up the New Zealand convoy until the Australians retreating from Brailos had all passed through, so that confusion might be avoided. In the darkness, without either map or route card, he could only guess at the position, which did not appear to be exactly as described. Uncertain whether he had chosen the right crossroads, he was further perplexed when 6 Brigade arrived before the Australians.<sup>32</sup> In some trepidation he allowed them through, but all went well, and at the tail of the convoy Brigadier Barrowclough turned aside to give orders that the remaining carriers be destroyed and abandoned. The dismounted men then boarded two trucks reserved for their use and followed on behind the convoy. Crowded in vehicles of all descriptions, riding where necessary on hoods, bonnets, and mudguards, the battalion travelled throughout the night and arrived on the morning of Anzac Day among wooded hills north-west of Eleusis. There, immediately in rear of 4 Brigade, it remained till darkness fell, hidden beneath oak groves, with lookouts posted to watch for hostile aircraft which constantly flew over at low altitudes without discovering any sign of the retreating troops.

Most of 5 Brigade had embarked from the beaches of Porto Rafti on the night of 24-25 April, and it had been intended that all remaining New Zealand troops should embark from the same or nearby places on the following night, but it now became evident that enemy pressure on land, and, above all, enemy command of the air, would make it necessary that further embarkations should be more widely dispersed and the time for the operation extended. Fresh plans were made accordingly. While



4 Brigade held its position astride the [Thebes](#)-Eleusis road, 6 Brigade would cross the Isthmus of [Corinth](#), move on from there to [Tripolis](#), and hold the north-western approaches to that town. Fourth Brigade would then follow across the Isthmus—to be held meanwhile by a small mixed force—and embark from the beaches of the Peloponnese on the night of 26-27 April. Sixth Brigade was to embark two nights later. The commanding officers of the three battalions had already gone with Brigadier Barrowclough to reconnoitre a position covering the beaches near [Marathon](#), when they were met by [General Freyberg](#) who explained that the centres for embarkation had been shifted from the eastern to the southern coastline; in consequence, 6 Brigade would cross into the [Peloponnese](#) that night (25 April) and spend the next day under cover in a position to be chosen somewhere south of the [Corinth Canal](#).

The 24th Battalion left its camp near Eleusis late on the night of Anzac Day, crossed the Isthmus of [Corinth](#) early Next morning, and came to [Milo](#) at the head of the Gulf of [Argos](#). Before starting, it was discovered that Second-Lieutenant [Carroll](#) <sup>33</sup> and 28 men were missing. There was no choice but to leave them and proceed. Actually they were safe, though nothing more was heard of them till they reappeared in Egypt a week later. Their vehicle having broken down on the way back from [Molos](#), they had been picked up by passing transport and carried on through [Athens](#) to be embarked at [Porto Rafti](#) with elements of 5 Brigade.

The halting place at [Milo](#), a dried-up riverbed, was not specially suitable for concealment, but during the last few days camouflage had taken its place among the fine arts. Trucks were made invisible from the air and would doubtless have remained so but for an unfortunate circumstance. Several truckloads of Australians, who should have embarked the previous night at [Megara](#) but for various reasons had been unable to do so, were pushing on through the [Peloponnese](#), and, seeing a friendly camp, made towards it most imprudently in broad daylight. As the trucks drew close they were seen by enemy aircraft approaching from the north. The drivers at once turned off the road and the men got out and ran for cover, leaving the vehicles standing in the open—a target that cried aloud for the [Luftwaffe](#)'s attention. Before the trucks could be moved away and concealed dive-bombers arrived on the scene, and at intervals for the next hour they plastered the whole area with high explosive. For 24 Battalion the chief danger lay not in the precision of

their bombing but in the lack of it. Bombs intended for the trucks fell in the riverbed, where flying fragments of rock made every explosion more deadly. After two bloodless actions at [Elasson](#) and [Molos](#), the battalion suffered four fatal casualties through the carelessness or ignorance of friends.

While these events were taking place, the Germans had already begun to land paratroops around the [Corinth Canal](#) and attack the small detachment defending the Isthmus. At this stage it was still intended that 4 Brigade should cross into the [Peloponnese](#),<sup>34</sup> and to keep its line of retreat open, two companies of [26 Battalion](#) were sent back to assist in defending the canal bridge. The 25th remained in reserve at [Miloi](#), while the 24th was ordered to start off at once in broad daylight and take up a position around [Tripolis](#).

The battalion moved off at 1 p.m. with vehicles widely dispersed for safety, but the convoy was soon joined not only by the Australians who had so recently brought disaster upon it, but also by all the human debris of retreat which clung for guidance and protection to any well ordered formation that came in sight. Reinforcements under no command, British troops whose officers had been killed, Australians, members of the Palestinian Labour Corps, most of them heading for [Kalamata](#) on the south coast, all tacked on to the convoy as opportunity offered and made their contribution towards retarding its orderly progress. Between [Miloi](#) and [Tripolis](#) a high mountain range supervened. 'It was an eventful trip climbing up thousands of feet on a road which zig-zagged and wound over the sides of the mountains. As we climbed higher and higher we could look down and see the road below us as a series of steps banked by stone walls. The road was really a marvellous feat of engineering and under any other circumstances the journey would have been an enjoyable experience. As it was it proved to be just the reverse. Every now and again a number of Messerschmitts dived down over the truck with machine guns and cannon blazing, which sent us scrambling off the truck, diving for shelter. All along the route abandoned trucks could be seen overturned, wrecked at the bottom of valleys, or hanging on the brink of the road with terrific drops beneath them. I don't think human beings could move faster than we when the lookout shouted his warning, "Aircraft!" We had learned how dangerous it was to lie in the deep watercourses at the side of the road, for it was a favourite pastime of Jerry's to sweep along the side of the road with a murderous hail of fire. So it was that we had to scatter very

smartly for yards around and dive for the first tree or shelter off the road. We also had to wait until the planes were well clear before coming out of shelter, but many a man lost his life in [Greece](#) after the planes had passed overhead, when he had stood up and been promptly mowed down by the rear gunner.’<sup>35</sup>

Under such circumstances it was indeed strange there should have been scarcely any casualties, but narrow escapes were many, and among them that of Colonel Shuttleworth. ‘The CO had gone on ahead of us to do a recce’, writes Major Mantell-Harding, ‘and you can imagine how I felt when about two miles from [Tripolis](#) I saw ahead of me his car lying on the side of the road in a ditch. I stopped but could not see anyone, but on investigation found three bullet holes in the car. His batman came running towards me and told me that the CO was all right, but the Adjutant had been hit in the head. I found [Morrison](#)<sup>36</sup> sitting in a field with his field dressing on and he seemed quite happy. I pushed on to [Tripolis](#) and met the CO who was all in one piece.’

The troubles of this unfortunate day were not yet over. Travelling in rear of B Company as second-in-command, Captain [Webb](#)<sup>37</sup> arrived on the outskirts of [Tripolis](#) to discover that a military policeman was directing all traffic to [Kalamata](#). Having carefully instructed the man that 24 Battalion traffic must on no account be sent there but to Battalion Headquarters in [Tripolis](#), he went on to join his own company but found subsequently that his precautions were too late. Two entire platoons, with their commanders and portions of two others, were found to be missing from A and B Companies. It was surmised they had gone to [Kalamata](#), and a despatch rider was sent there with orders for their immediate recall, but either they lacked the means by which to return or were forbidden to do so. It was a mischance that cost the battalion dearly. Out of the 130-odd prisoners of war lost in [Greece](#), a large proportion came from these platoons so unfortunately misdirected; but not all were captured. Sergeant [Grimmond](#)<sup>38</sup> and a party of seven others seized a caique and sailed it to [Crete](#), finally arriving back in Egypt and there rejoining the battalion, while Sergeant [Flett](#)<sup>39</sup> and Private [Donald](#)<sup>40</sup> were at large on the mainland for more than a year before being taken prisoner.

On the evening of 26 April, 24 Battalion's companies were spread defensively on all sides of [Tripolis](#), while the 25th still remained at [Milo](#). Before the two companies of the 26th, driving to the scene of action at [Corinth](#), had reached their destination

and joined battle, word came that the canal bridge had been blown to prevent reinforcements from reaching the enemy's airborne troops. The bridge no longer requiring their protection, the two companies were ordered to return and follow the main body of their unit over the passes into the low valleys lying north of [Tripolis](#). That same night [25 Battalion](#) moved to the summit of the pass between [Argos](#) and [Tripolis](#).

Thus the last New Zealand brigade to leave [Greece](#) lay concentrated for withdrawal, while yet remaining ready to strike at whatever pursuing forces might seek to hinder its operation. The principal threat seemed likely to come from the north-western [Peloponnese](#). Enemy forces were said to have crossed the Gulf of [Corinth](#) at Patrai and might soon be expected in the vicinity of [Tripolis](#), or even farther south- towards [Kalamata](#), from whose adjacent beaches it was intended that a large number of our troops should embark. So seriously indeed was this threat regarded that the place of embarkation was changed from [Kalamata](#) to [Monemvasia](#) in the far south-east, which from one point of view had the considerable disadvantage of being much farther away. In the event, there was no choice but to undertake a long night journey, which must in all urgency be contrived without hitch or hindrance. From dawn till dusk on 27 April the brigade would lie concealed; it would then travel throughout the night to lie up once again on the 28th in the vicinity of [Monemvasia](#), and would embark from there as soon as darkness fell.

After taking up positions around [Tripolis](#), [24 Battalion](#)'s companies sent out patrols north and west to discover how far the enemy had probed southward. All of these patrols returned without incident. Although it must have been painfully evident to the local Greeks that their allies faced withdrawal or inevitable defeat, yet they did not hold them cheap on that account, but still continued to offer whatever hospitality lay in their power. 'The inhabitants... treated us royally', writes Major Dill, 'and when they found that we had no blankets, these having been abandoned at [Thermopylae](#), the head man of the village produced a blanket for every man we had there; some of these were lovely handwoven blankets, the best they had; they also gave us bread and wine, and we suspect went without themselves to do so.'

No sooner had darkness fallen on 27 April than the plan described above was put into operation. The battalions were to move in the following order: 26th, 25th,

24th, with the last-named providing the rearguard. The extrication of the 25th from its position astride the high pass in time to conform with the general programme promised to be an affair of some difficulty. The unit's transport could not with safety start from Tripolis till 9 p.m., after which it would have to negotiate a steep, winding road to the summit of the pass, for there and there only was a spot to be found where the vehicles could be turned. Should 25 Battalion fail for any reason to pass through Tripolis as arranged and be clear of the town by midnight, the 24th would be delayed in starting, and a delay that would prevent it reaching its destination by dawn might prove a disaster beyond redemption. Meanwhile the companies dispersed around Tripolis were withdrawn into the town and formed into columns of motor transport, the heads of which converged on the principal square, where they waited in painful suspense.

An air-raid siren wailed. Transport massed in narrow streets courted destruction, but no air raid followed. Midnight came, but no 25 Battalion. The fate of all present depended on its prompt arrival. The time would soon come when hope of life and freedom would diminish with every passing moment. Ten minutes after midnight, however, the lights of an approaching convoy were seen, and before long the anxiously awaited force was driving through Tripolis at speed with vehicles closely spaced. By 12.30 the last of them was through, and 24 Battalion had begun to move off in their wake.

Travelling in the order C, A, and B Companies, Battalion Headquarters, D Company, the battalion now began its fastest night drive of the whole retreat. Traffic control sentries had been posted at all dubious crossroads to guard against trucks missing the way and running into enemy forces, which were now rapidly advancing parallel to our line of retreat. Much of the road was winding, dusty, and hilly; drivers had lived under great strain for days past but they won the race against time by a narrow margin. At 6.40 a.m., with day breaking,



Future officers and NCOs marching through Auckland to entrain for Papakura after training at Narrow Neck.

**Future officers and NCOs marching through Auckland to entrain for Papakura after training at Narrow Neck**



En route to Papakura Camp

**En route to Papakura Camp**



Recruits cleaning rifles



**Recruits cleaning rifles**



Farewell parade in the Auckland Domain

**Farewell parade in the Auckland Domain**

On the *Empress of Japan*—crossing the line



**On the Empress of [Japan](#)—crossing the line**



A Company men in Athens watch Italian prisoners from the Albanian front

**A Company men in Athens watch Italian prisoners from the Albanian front**



At Mount Hymettus

**At Mount Hymettus**

the convoy pulled into an olive grove at [Molaoi](#), twelve miles inland from [Monemvasia](#), and at once began to camouflage the vehicles. Expeditiously as this task was performed, the last vehicle was scarcely hidden before an observation plane was circling overhead. Later three dive-bombers flew over at low altitudes, obviously in search of the lost column, but with skill born of necessity every advantage had been taken of the giant spreading trees, and the instinct of self preservation told each man more plainly than the sternest command that safety lay in keeping still. All day, then, the brigade lay successfully concealed, its immunity from attack being due, no doubt, partly to its own precautions and partly to the enemy's belief that the New Zealanders had taken the road to [Kalamata](#).



That afternoon (28th) Colonel Shuttleworth attended a conference at [Divisional Headquarters](#) and returned to inform his men that as rearguard to 6 Brigade they would be the last to leave; and not only this—it was possible they might not go at all that night because of a shortage of small craft for ferrying troops out to the warships. In such a case they would be required to stay a further 24 hours, the only complete British fighting unit on Greek soil, and make head as best they could against odds without limit. These were grim tidings, for the time could not be far away when the Navy would no longer be able to come close inshore, and if the present opportunity of embarking were lost, no other might occur. But by this time adversity had taught the Aucklanders to accept the direst mischance with equanimity. 'If we don't get off tonight it is just too bad', they said, while Shuttleworth went to reconnoitre a defensive position that would have to be held with nothing but rifles and machine guns against an enemy far more lavishly equipped.

Prospects became less gloomy, however, when a number of small Greek craft, capable of being used for carrying troops, were found on an adjacent beach; though there still remained some doubt as to whether all the men could be embarked, since the ships could not afford to stay close inshore later than 3 a.m. owing to risk of attack by hostile aircraft. At 11 p.m. the battalion left [Molaoi](#) in motor transport and drove to within two miles of the jetty at [Monemvasia](#). Here it debussed, and all trucks were pushed over a cliff, while the troops stood by and watched with sentimental concern the destruction of vehicles they had come to regard with feelings almost amounting to affection. Till past midnight the battalion's fate still hung in the balance, for some of the ships were late in arriving; but as the troops marched down to the jetty [General Freyberg](#) greeted them in person, and then, with feelings of profound relief, they heard that 24 Battalion was to go after all. Embarkation began at 2 a.m. Forming up in parties of fifty, the men were taken off successively in small boats to the warships, the majority being received by HMS [Ajax](#), which had carried them to [Greece](#) some six weeks previously, and the remainder boarding the destroyers [Hotspur](#) and [Havock](#).<sup>41</sup>

At 4 a.m. the ships sailed, their decks packed with tired, unwashed bodies, and at dawn they steamed into [Suda Bay](#) on the north coast of Crete. But Egypt, not [Crete](#), was 6 Brigade's destination, and all troops aboard the [Ajax](#) not belonging to

24 Battalion were landed on the island as soon as possible. The cruiser then sailed at midday, arriving at [Alexandria](#) on the afternoon of 30 April, when the men were disembarked and driven to [Amiriya Camp](#), a place they had once been glad to leave but were still more glad to see again. [Hotspur](#) and [Havock](#) transhipped their complement to the transport [Comliebank](#), which made a much slower voyage and did not reach [Port Said](#) till 2 May. The separate parties were eventually reunited as a battalion at [Helwan Camp](#) on 6 May —exactly two calendar months after having marched out of that same place with high hope and boundless enterprise for an unknown destination.

Apart from the heavy toll taken in prisoners, casualties had been surprisingly few. While effecting a retreat of some 400 miles, closely pressed by an enemy vastly superior in numbers and armament, 24 Battalion had twice stood firm and checked its pursuers, had twice successfully broken off an engagement to withdraw unscathed. Successive withdrawals with their irrefutable implication of defeat might well have tested the morale of veterans. But these men, who with few exceptions were seeing war for the first time, rose superior to the occasion of apparent failure and discerned the fine point of difference between victory won on equal terms and victory as the inevitable consequence of purely material advantage. At some future time they might confidently expect to reverse the fortune of war that had been so heavily loaded against them.

The battalion's casualties for the campaign in [Greece](#) were:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	–	6
Died of wounds	–	2
Wounded	2	4
Prisoners of war (includes 6 ORs wounded and p.w. and 1 officer and 1 OR died of wounds while p.w.)	4	134
Total	6	146

<sup>1</sup> [Sgt N. C. Bell](#), m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 14 Sep 1915; traffic officer.

<sup>2</sup> Letter, Maj Mantell-Harding.

<sup>3</sup> Pte S. E. McKay; born NZ 30 May 1910; brewery hand; died on active service 24 Mar 1941.

<sup>4</sup> Letter, Sgt Bell.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Letter, Maj Mantell-Harding.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Aust Corps, consisting of 6 Aust Div and 2 NZ Div, was renamed Anzac Corps on 12 April.

<sup>8</sup> Capt W. R. K. Morrison became Adjutant at the end of February 1941 in place of Capt H. H. McDonald, who took command of D Coy.

<sup>9</sup> Letter, Maj Dill.

<sup>10</sup> This claim is made by Sgt J. L. McDonald.

<sup>11</sup> Sgt J. L. McDonald; Auckland; born Morrinsville, 12 Jul 1902; farmer; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; repatriated Jun 1943.

<sup>12</sup> Letter, Capt D. G. Morrison.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Maj J. W. Reynolds, DSO; Hamilton; born Hamilton, 15 Jan 1919; bank clerk; GSO 3 (Ops) 2 NZ Div Mar-Aug 1943; BM 6 Bde Nov 1944-Jun 1945; wounded 28 Jun 1942.

<sup>15</sup> WO II F. Turner; Frankton Junction; born NZ 21 May 1919; driver; wounded 25 Nov 1941.

<sup>16</sup> Sgt G. D. Adam; Mokauiti, Te Kuiti; born Marton, 1 Jan 1918; labourer.

<sup>17</sup> Cpl G. W. L. Budd, m.i.d.; Horokino, Mangapehi; born Aria, 6 Dec 1918; bush worker; wounded 18 Apr 1941.

<sup>18</sup> Letter, Maj Reynolds, 11 Jan 1949.

<sup>19</sup> 'The troop-carrying vehicles of 24 Bn, however, had been ordered to the rear when the battalion put itself in a posture of defence. This was a natural and very proper precaution.'—Narrative, 6 Bde war diary.

<sup>20</sup> Capt J. L. G. Carnachan; Auckland; born Waihi, 4 Dec 1903; school-teacher; IO 24 Bn 1941; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

<sup>21</sup> Col J. I. Brooke, OBE; m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Waiouru Military Camp; born Dunedin, 20 Nov 1897; Regular soldier; BM 6 Bde 1940-41; GSO 1 3 NZ Div 1942-44; Camp Commandant, Waiouru, 1951-53.

<sup>22</sup> Letter, Sgt Bell.

<sup>23</sup> Capt C. D. Brown, MM; born Raglan, 24 Dec 1897; hardware merchant; 1 NZEF (3 Bn NZ Rifle Bde); died of wounds 25 Nov 1941.

<sup>24</sup> Letter, WO 1 K. J. H. Cohen (then CQMS, A Coy).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Letter, Sgt McDonald.

<sup>28</sup> Grote's History of Greece, Vol 4.

<sup>29</sup> Letter, Sgt Bell.

<sup>30</sup> Capt A. C. Yeoman, MC; Auckland; born Taneatua, 8 Sep 1904; farmer; twice wounded.

<sup>31</sup> Letter, Sgt McDonald.

<sup>32</sup> It seems probable that McDonald had gone to the wrong place, and that the Australian column had already passed through on its correct route.

<sup>33</sup> Capt J. A. Carroll; Mangaweka; born Hastings, 7 Feb 1915; commercial traveller; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; released 8 May 1945.

<sup>34</sup> 4 Bde was still north of the canal when the bridge was blown. It embarked at Porto Rafti on the night 26-27 April.

<sup>35</sup> Letter, Sgt Bell

<sup>36</sup> Lt-Col W. R. K. Morrison, DSO; Waiouru Military Camp; born NZ 23 Jan 1914; Regular soldier; GSO 32 NZ Div Jan-Feb 1942; GSO 3 GHQ MEF Feb-Apr 1942; GSO 2 (Ops) GHQ MEF Apr-Aug 1942; twice wounded; OC Central District Training Depot, May 1952-.

<sup>37</sup> Lt-Col R. G. Webb, ED, m.i.d.; Pukehou; born Stratford, 5 Aug 1906; schoolmaster; OC 2 NZ Fd Maint Unit Nov 1941-Jan 1942; 2 i/c 24 Bn 26 Apr-22 Nov 1942; CO 24 Bn 22 Nov-16 Dec 1942; wounded and p.w. 16 Dec 1942; released 10 May 1945; headmaster, Te Aute College.

<sup>38</sup> Sgt A. J. Grimmond, BEM; Auckland; born Australia, 9 Dec 1910; plasterer.

<sup>39</sup> L-Sgt A. V. D. Flett; Auckland; born NZ 29 Mar 1917; hotel manager; p.w. 1942.

<sup>40</sup> Pte D. W. Donald; Morrinsville; born NZ 12 Dec 1918; farmhand; p.w. 1942.

<sup>41</sup> Both destroyers had been in action at Narvik.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 3 – SIDI REZEGH



## CHAPTER 3

### *Sidi Rezegh*

A heatwave heralded the month of May, and for a while there was a high rate of sickness at [Helwan](#) among the troops back from [Greece](#) with constitutions weakened by prolonged strain and exhaustion. The month passed uneventfully except for a sudden alarm which sent 24 Battalion posting off to [Suez](#) to cope with an airborne attack that never took place. A few days later the battalion moved to [Spinney Wood](#) camp, near [Ismailia](#). There, as part of a force prepared to deal with the somewhat remote possibility of an airborne attack on the Canal, it carried out routine training and dug defensive positions. No airborne attack but an air raid came early in August. Its impact on 24 Battalion was indirect yet severe, for the Aucklanders were required to provide a working party 500 strong at [El Kirsh](#) supply depot to replace Egyptians frightened away by the bombing.

Reinforcements arrived early in July and for a while the battalion was over strength. Possibly the high spirits of these newly-joined men were responsible for some falling off in discipline; at all events, a notice appeared in 24 Battalion routine orders soon after their arrival, deploring and at the same time prohibiting the practice of throwing bombs and firing small arms from train windows. Gambling was also mentioned with disfavour on more than one occasion.

Back at [Helwan](#) in August the training syllabus gradually expanded, taking on a more realistic form, and even before [2 NZ Division](#) returned to the [Western Desert](#) in the middle of September, there were brigade tactical exercises with artillery and air co-operation. [Baggush](#) Box, to which the 24th moved on 18 September, was a fortress or chain of earthworks close by the [Mediterranean](#) coastline, begun in 1940 by the first contingent to leave New Zealand. Lying approximately thirty miles south-west of [Mersa Matruh](#), it contained extensive underground shelters, the whole being skilfully camouflaged against aerial observation. The climate of this region was typical of the [Western Desert](#), and dust-storms were a prevailing nuisance. Sixth Brigade now took over the eastern of those sectors into which the Box was subdivided, and 24 Battalion moved into a position in the south-east corner of the perimeter that had formerly been occupied by a battalion of the Essex Regiment.

At [Baggush](#) training was adapted to a special rather than a general purpose. Moving in desert formation, after the manner evolved by 4 Brigade in 1940, was practised extensively. Just as infantry had once advanced in column and assumed artillery formation, so now vehicles were moved in column and deployed for protection against air attack. Principles were much the same, though means and methods had changed. In modern warfare infantry was transported over the initial stages of advance, but debussed and made the final assault on foot as in days gone by. For the rest, training consisted largely in practising attack over minefields or crossing wire obstacles. Dummy fortresses modelled on air photographs of German defences on the Libyan frontier were assaulted by infantry co-operating with [Valentine](#) tanks and artillery. All these exercises portended aggressive intention in the near future.

The intention was actual as well as apparent. Protected by a chain of isolated forts masked in depth by minefields and extending from [Sidi Omar](#) northwards along the Libyan frontier to [Halfaya](#) and [Sollum](#), General Rommel had concentrated his forces for a third attack on [Tobruk](#). So long as this place remained strongly held as a perpetual threat to the enemy's left flank, invasion of Egypt was impracticable. In any case, since British forces were now superior to those of the enemy, invasion was about to move in the opposite direction. It was General Auchinleck's intention that the [Eighth Army](#) should drive the enemy from [Cyrenaica](#) and at the same time relieve [Tobruk](#). His plan, in brief, was that [30 Corps](#), comprising most of the armour, should threaten the approaches of [Tobruk](#) and force an armoured encounter, while [13 Corps](#), in which [2 NZ Division](#) was included, should isolate the frontier fortress line and later mop it up from the west. With this accomplished, [13 Corps](#) would move west to unite with [30 Corps](#) in the region of [Tobruk](#). Meanwhile it was not to be committed until the result of the armoured battle should be known.

By the beginning of November all was complete. Effort had been concentrated on preparing for a special operation, and training directed towards the accomplishment of a well-defined purpose. Battalion and company commanders had been made well acquainted with the lie of the land between [Tobruk](#) and the Libyan frontier by means of a large relief model in plaster, which they were able to study in comparison with maps. From all sides came unmistakable evidence that something was afoot, and when orders were received on 9 November for [2 NZ Division](#) to

assemble in the desert at Qaret el [Kanayis](#), no one was deceived by the official pretence that nothing more than an exercise was contemplated. Starting on 11 November, the Division moved by brigade groups on successive days. Last to leave [Baggush](#), 6 Brigade resembled a miniature division when judged by standards of the 1914-18 war. A field regiment, anti-tank and anti-aircraft batteries, a machine-gun company, and a field company of engineers were among the units under its command, and since it was eventually to come under direct control of [30 Corps](#) its administrative arrangements were those of an entirely self-contained formation. Travelling via the [Baggush- Matruh](#) road and thence south-west along the [Siwa](#) track, the group convoy, comprising about a thousand vehicles spaced out ten to the mile, was nearly 100 miles long and took six hours and a half to pass a given point. As Qaret el [Kanayis](#) was 70 miles away, the first vehicles of the column were arriving at their destination while the last were leaving the starting point. Time was lost early in the move. There was some disorganisation, with the result that units in the rear did not arrive in the concentration area till nearly midnight, but 24 Battalion was fortunate in being well up near the head of the column. All its vehicles had arrived by 5.30 p.m. and the men had made themselves comfortable for the night before darkness fell.

The Division being now assembled, [General Freyberg](#) called a conference at his headquarters of all officers down to the rank of company commander and gave them an outline of the general situation. Since returning from [Greece](#) there had been some changes in the battalion. D and Headquarters Companies were still commanded as before by Captain McDonald and Major Hedge, but A was now under Captain [Forder](#),<sup>1</sup> B had been taken over by Captain Brown, whose former position as Quartermaster was filled by Captain [Robertson](#),<sup>2</sup> while Captain [Tomlinson](#)<sup>3</sup> had succeeded Captain Morrison in command of C Company. Captain Carnachan, Intelligence Officer in [Greece](#), had been appointed Adjutant, and his former position filled by Captain [Thompson](#).<sup>4</sup> Six officers and 80 other ranks were left out of battle at [Sidi Haneish](#), in the [Baggush](#) Box.

Having rested a day at El Kanayis, the whole division moved 50 miles west by daylight on 15 November, in a mass of widely spaced vehicles covering an immensity of ground, to a point about half-way between its place of assembly and the Libyan frontier. Here another short halt was made, and the men spent their hours of leisure

playing football, thereby illustrating the aphorism that rest is merely a change of occupation. Much to everyone's surprise no air attack had yet been made, but henceforward moves took place by night along an axis of advance marked every 1000 yards by green lights, shaded and facing to the rear. Advancing in a westerly direction by stages of 25 or 30 miles nightly, with vehicles dispersed at wide intervals during daylight, [2 NZ Division](#) arrived on the night of 18 November at the great barbed-wire barrier built by the Italians and stretching from the [Mediterranean](#) coast southward along the Libyan frontier, deep into the desert. In their anxiety to be eye-witnesses of an historical event, many men of 24 Battalion stayed awake till 1.30 a.m., at which time their unit passed through the barrier. Lightning flashes lit the northern sky as they entered [Cyrenaica](#) and camped in the divisional area a few miles beyond the frontier.

On the morning of 19 November the Division was assembled some short distance to the south of Libyan Sheferzen. The 4th Indian Division had begun investing the frontier fortresses and the armoured encounter appeared imminent. Early in the afternoon orders came from [13 Corps](#) directing [2 NZ Division](#) to move north to the line of the Trigh el Abd, a desert highway crossing the frontier at Bir Sheferzen. The New Zealanders arrived after dark at their new position, ten miles south-west of [Sidi Omar](#), and remained there throughout the following day. By 21 November enemy tanks were retiring westward and it appeared that the armoured encounter was going in our favour. The battle's second phase was due to begin. Crossing the Trigh el Abd, [2 NZ Division](#), led by its Divisional Cavalry and with 5, 4, and 6 Brigades following in that order, moved north-west towards the [Trigh Capuzzo](#). A few shells fell close to [26 Battalion](#)'s vehicles as they were passing east of [Sidi Omar](#), but did no damage. At dusk 5 Brigade was swinging east to bottle up enemy forces in [Sollum](#) and [Bardia](#), while 4 Brigade held its former line of advance with the object of cutting the [Bardia- Tobruk](#) road. Sixth Brigade was near Bir Tgheit, still some way south of the [Trigh Capuzzo](#), when orders arrived for it to incline left and move to Bir el Hariga. Thereafter, passing under command of [30 Corps](#), it would advance westward towards [Gambut](#) and [Bir el Chleta](#) to clear that region of the enemy.

Sixth Brigade moved on throughout the night with 24 Battalion leading, screened by the carriers of [25 Battalion](#), while its own carrier platoon guarded the

left flank. The surprise was mutual when [25 Battalion](#) carriers encountered 20 Germans and took them prisoner without a shot being fired. Heavy rain had fallen, and an hour before midnight the brigade ran into a patch of soft mud in which most of its vehicles stuck fast. Daylight would have found them a helpless, sitting target for hostile aircraft, but two hours' hard work saw them extricated from the bog and on firm ground beyond. At dawn they were approaching the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) and, since Bir el Hariga might still be occupied, the battalion's carrier platoon was sent forward as a protective screen. No enemy was found, but a few artillery vehicles which had lost touch during the night had gone on separately and were waiting in occupation of the position.

A squadron of Valentine tanks was due to join the Brigade Group at this point, but no tanks appeared and an officer sent in search of them found that they also had struck a muddy patch in the night. Of the squadron's 16 tanks, four were still stuck—one hopelessly. The runners having been guided in, 6 Brigade started off along the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) for [Bir el Chleta](#) at 3 p.m. on 22 November, with 24 Battalion still acting as advanced guard. The Carrier Platoon moved ahead as a protective screen and at 5 p.m. saw an enemy convoy astride the road south of [Gambut](#). Word was at once sent back, but as preparations were being made to attack them the enemy vehicles moved off. A few Germans belonging to the staff of the [Gambut](#) aerodrome were surprised and taken prisoner and the aerodrome itself was reconnoitred by a carrier patrol. The dugouts were all found to be empty, but everywhere there were signs of recent occupation. When 6 Brigade halted for the night at dusk it was still some way east of [Bir el Chleta](#).

Meanwhile it was fast becoming obvious that the armoured encounter was not going entirely in our favour. Early in the afternoon of 22 November a message from [30 Corps](#) reached 6 Brigade, asking that the attached squadron of Valentine tanks be sent forward at once to [Sidi Rezegh](#), where 5 South African Brigade and 7 Support Group of [7 Armoured Division](#) were being hard-pressed, but the tank commander said he was unable to increase the speed at which his vehicles were already moving. At 8 p.m. definite instructions arrived from the same quarter. Sixth Brigade Group would continue its advance along the [Trigh Capuzzo](#) with all possible speed to [Point 175](#) (some ten miles west of its present position south of [Gambut](#)), where it would take up an all-round defensive position, and then get in touch with 5 South African

## Brigade and 7 Support Group at [Sidi Rezegh](#).

A start was made at 3 a.m., with 25 and 26 Battalions forward on the right and left respectively and the 24th in rear on the brigade's right flank. Since it was essential that no time be wasted in reaching [Point 175](#), Brigadier Barrowclough decided to make a detour south of [Bir el Chleta](#) and thus avoid the delay that must ensue should his brigade run into the enemy. In the darkness 24 Battalion lost touch with 6 Field Ambulance, by which it was immediately preceded. Though somewhat concerned at hearing the rumble of vehicles away on his right, Colonel Shuttleworth continued to steer his own course in the hope of regaining contact at daybreak. Just before dawn the lights of what appeared at first to be an approaching convoy came into view. Since lights were not being used on our vehicles it seemed likely that the convoy was part of an enemy force, but the true state of affairs soon became apparent when the lights turned out to be fires over which the remainder of the brigade was cooking breakfast. There was, however, something strange about the position occupied. According to plan it should have been on top of the escarpment along which 24 Battalion was moving, whereas in fact the fires were down in a valley. At this juncture Colonel Shuttleworth was called to a conference, and Major Mantell- Harding, who took over command, describes the events that followed.

As I led the Bn down the face of the escarpment on the south, to my amazement I saw through my glasses a convoy of six Hun vehicles moving down the face of the northern escarpment and into the same wadi as our Bde was in. They did not appreciate who we were and we both continued on our way. I made a left wheel and they made one to the right, and we were then moving parallel in the same direction about 600 yards apart. There was a certain amount of firing going on from our Arty which I could not quite understand, and I decided to lead the Bn up in rear of a troop of guns who were shelling somebody or something. Just before reaching my final position I was standing in my truck with my head through the 'sunshine' roof when phst, phst, and bullets began flying uncomfortably close in front of my truck. Just at that moment two guns of the troop in front of me turned right and fired point blank at two Hun Cars which had come down the escarpment opposite us. They blew one into the air but the other managed to hare away out of trouble. They realised now that they had come into the wrong camp, and the troops in the vehicles quickly bit the dust with the result that Harry McDonald's Coy took about 150 prisoners and



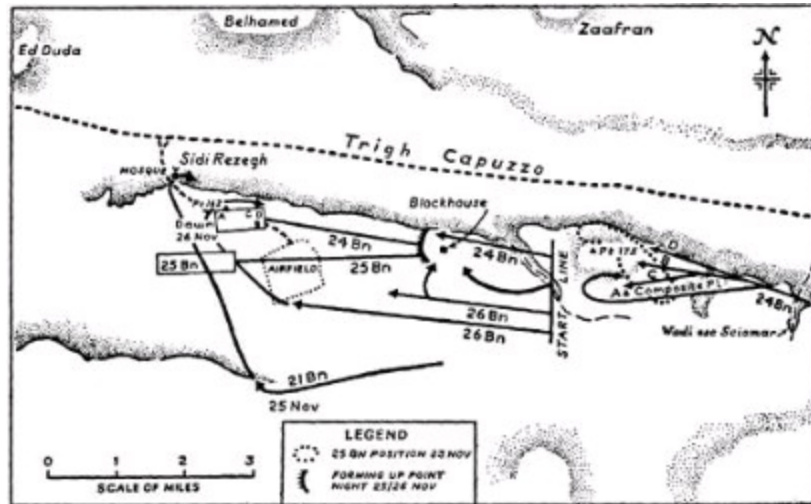
six 3-ton lorries full of petrol and water. <sup>5</sup>

The carriers, having been out in advance of the battalion, were the first to run into the convoy. As they approached, still doubtful whether they were encountering friend or foe, they saw men get out of the trucks and hide among bushes but soon distinguished their uniforms and opened fire. Lying flat on the ground, the Germans tried to raise their hands in the air. '[Sgt McDonald] stood up in his carrier and waved them up on to their feet. All stood up with their hands up, and it was found that they had debussed in such a hurry that they had left their arms behind them and didn't have a rifle among the lot.... The twenty-six prisoners were counted and handed over to B Coy. Of the enemy convoy only the anti-tank gun had escaped. It was on the extreme right of the small column and far enough off to take advantage of the bad light and make a dash for it. All this time a general action of considerable proportions was going on in front.' <sup>6</sup>

It transpired that, while 24 Battalion alone had steered along the right course, the remainder of 6 Brigade, through an error in navigation, had arrived at dawn astride the Trigh [Capuzzo](#) at [Bir el Chleta](#), instead of well to the south of it. The 25th Battalion had run into part of the German Afrika Korps, and the ensuing battle was in full swing when 24 Battalion arrived on the scene to collect in all about 200 prisoners. Not wishing to waste strength on a diversionary operation, and having in mind the main purpose of getting as quickly as possible to [Point 175](#), Brigadier Barrowclough took the earliest opportunity of breaking off the engagement, and before long his command was again moving westward.

From [Bir el Chleta](#) a long, low, stony ridge, running east and west, extended some two miles beyond [Sidi Rezegh](#). [Point 175](#) lay between these two places on top of the escarpment. The southern approaches to [Tobruk](#) were dominated by this and a similar ridge running parallel to it on the northern side, on which [Ed Duda](#) and [Belhamed](#) were situated. As has been already mentioned, the battle for these vital features had gone against us. Driven back from [Sidi Rezegh](#), 7 Armoured Division had been unable to make contact with the garrison of [Tobruk](#) as it sallied out towards [Ed Duda](#). Thus, while 6 New Zealand Brigade moved rapidly to its support, 7 Armoured Division had withdrawn behind 5 South African Brigade, which was being heavily attacked south of [Sidi Rezegh](#). Fifth Brigade was still engaged in bottling up

enemy forces in Bardia and Sollum, while 4 Brigade was moving on Gambut, north of the Trigh Capuzzo. Such in brief was the general situation on the morning of 23 November.



THE ADVANCE TO SIDI REZEGH, 23-26 NOVEMBER 1942  
**the advance to sidi rezegh, 23–26 november 1942**

Sixth Brigade arrived within striking distance of Point 175, only to find it held by the enemy in considerable strength. Without delay 25 Battalion was ordered to attack, with two troops of anti-tank guns under command, while at the same time 26 Battalion, with one battery of 6 Field Regiment and one troop from 33 Anti-Tank Battery, was sent to make contact with the South Africans, whose position had been pointed out by a liaison officer recently arrived from Corps Headquarters. The 24th remained in reserve on the escarpment near Wadi esc Sciomar.

Soon after crossing the start line 25 Battalion was halted and reinforced by a squadron of Valentine tanks, as it had become apparent that an armoured force formed part of the defence. Accompanied by the battalion's carriers, the Valentines advanced on Point 175 at full speed, leaving the infantry, who had debussed to attack, far behind. All attempts to get in touch with the squadron commander and order him to check the pace were ineffectual. The tanks pushed on over the summit of their objective and ran into nests of anti-tank guns, which took so heavy a toll of them that only four returned from the action. When the infantry arrived it was opposed by various strongpoints overrun by the armour, and had to fight its way to the objective unsupported in face of stubborn resistance. By failing to co-operate the two arms had denied each other mutual support, and for this they paid dearly. A



deep wadi entered the escarpment on its northern side and ran south-eastward along the forward slopes of [Point 175](#), and on the right of the position the ground fell away steeply. The enemy now gathered out of sight in the wadi and sent lorried infantry round [25 Battalion's](#) right flank under cover of the steep slope, so that within a short time the New Zealanders were being counter-attacked in front, on their right flank, and even in their right rear. Pressure increased; the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel [McNaught](#),<sup>7</sup> was wounded and, having no alternative, he sent back asking for assistance. Colonel Shuttleworth was at once ordered forward with C and D Companies of his battalion to take charge of the situation and reinforce the hard-pressed defenders, who had been forced to give some ground and were now about 400 yards east of the hill summit.

D Company, under Captain McDonald, was first to arrive on the scene. Wounded a second time but still remaining with his men, McNaught directed McDonald to push on to the right of the cairn on the summit of [Point 175](#). The situation was obscure; [25 Battalion](#) was unavoidably disorganised, and as D Company advanced it was fired upon by men of the 25th who were farther forward than had been imagined. The fire was returned and several men of both units were killed or wounded. Fire also came from the enemy in front and, while disposing his company in position on the edge of the steep declivity that sloped northwards, McDonald was killed, together with his orderly, Private [Absolum](#).<sup>8</sup> By nightfall D Company had lost 27 men killed and wounded.

Captain Tomlinson, with C Company, arrived forward about half an hour later than D Company to find no one in charge of [25 Battalion](#) headquarters. McNaught had been evacuated and Major [Burton](#),<sup>9</sup> who had taken over command, was out on the right flank reorganising his unit. Seeing a number of [25 Battalion](#) men 'streaming off [Point 175](#) hotly pursued by the enemy', Tomlinson decided on his own initiative to attack the position and thereby enable the hard-pressed remnants of the 25th to rally and reorganise. 'On going back to my Coy', he writes, 'I noticed the enemy A.F.Vs in a waddy over to the left, grouped together and apparently refuelling. We were lucky in this as we were not seriously attacked by their armour on our move to the objective. However the enemy's ground troops were now in full possession of [Point 175](#) and, casualties becoming heavy, we went to ground about 300 yards from that point and managed to beat an attack which they staged with our own fire

Before Tomlinson managed to get in touch with D Company, there was a gap in the centre of the line which he filled with men of [25 Battalion](#). In the evening Shuttleworth moved up with his headquarters and, having examined the position, decided to bring up the remaining two companies of [24 Battalion](#) during the night.

Activity died down as darkness fell, bringing relief to our troops, whose situation left much to be desired. A bitterly cold wind was blowing and many wounded men lay out in the open. On widely separated fronts the brigade was simultaneously fighting two distinct actions, neither of which had been entirely successful. Word had come from Lieutenant-Colonel [Page](#),<sup>11</sup> commanding [26 Battalion](#), that the South Africans had been overrun and his own men were being hard-pressed. Orders were sent back for him to disengage under cover of darkness and rejoin the main body. Meanwhile [4 Brigade](#) was more than twenty miles in rear; strong enemy forces were in the offing to the south-west, and more were known to be somewhere north of the [Trigh Capuzzo](#). The only troops not yet committed to action were A and B Companies of [24 Battalion](#). A message from [30 Corps](#) to the effect that [6 Brigade](#) might expect a tank attack the following morning was not conducive to cheerfulness; in any case, the possibility had already been only too well realised.

In Colonel Shuttleworth's absence Major Mantell-Harding had taken over command of the remainder of [24 Battalion](#). At 7 p.m. he was instructed to move forward with all available fighting troops so as to arrive at the front line by dawn. A platoon of A Company had left in the morning to escort prisoners to the rear; another platoon was formed to replace it, consisting of motor transport drivers, batmen, cooks, storemen, the armourer-sergeant, pioneers, and men of the Anti-Aircraft Platoon. The [26th Battalion](#) came in about 9 p.m., and a little later Captain Carnachan returned from the front line, gave the first really reliable information that had come to hand since the reorganisation, and asked that B Company be sent forward as soon as possible. Captain Brown got his men away about midnight and the Carrier Platoon occupied the position he had evacuated on the right flank. Mantell-Harding was ready to move off with his mixed company at 4 a.m. He had been promised the services of a liaison officer to guide him, but as no officer had turned up by a quarter past four he decided to start, since there were three miles to

go and most of the troops had to march. Carnachan had pointed out a burning tank as a guide to steer by, but the tank was burned out when the party had covered two-thirds of the distance. Growing uneasy about his direction, Mantell-Harding decided to halt until dawn should disclose his whereabouts. His driver walked away a short distance to the left and returned to say he had heard the sound of digging and voices talking in what might be Afrikaans. Acting Company Sergeant-Major [Ranum](#),<sup>12</sup> of A Company, offered to investigate, and with one other man moved off into the darkness. Two minutes later came the sound of guttural shouts, followed by three rifle shots. Ranum and his companion did not return, so Mantell-Harding turned away to the right, and presently dawn revealed the outline of 24 Battalion's vehicles on his right rear. Having gone too far south, he had arrived between our own forward lines and those of the enemy. Fortunately the Germans into whom he had so nearly run did not open fire, and his party moved back unharmed to the 24th's position, covered at first by the rifles of C Company, whose men were suspicious because of the direction from which they came.

At 10 a.m. on the 24th B Company was sent forward through C and D to capture the summit of [Point 175](#), from which our troops had been forced back the previous day. Captain Brown was instructed not to attempt a frontal attack, but to infiltrate under cover of the desert scrub and accomplish what he could with as few casualties as possible. His company reached the objective without much difficulty, but once in position came under heavy fire from a blockhouse and adjacent entrenchments west of [Point 175](#). By nightfall there were about thirty casualties, among them Brown himself, who insisted, against all advice, on leaving the dressing station and limping back into action, only to be fatally wounded next day. Corporal [Simpson](#)<sup>13</sup> describes the action as follows:

At the appointed time we moved forward under our OC, Captain Brown, who throughout the day was a marvellous example of courage and leadership to us all. He did not seem to know what fear was, and his display carried us through that first day. The going was pretty hard, but you could always hear his cheery voice urging you on and directing operations. In a very short time we reached our objective, having driven the old Hun well on ahead of us. We had just enough time to settle in as best we could. After a while he (the enemy) started to machine gun and shell us fairly heavily, so we just lay doggo watching for him to come and try to push us back

again, but apparently he wasn't game enough. <sup>14</sup>

While B Company advanced, the carriers investigated a deserted German camp below the escarpment on the right. '[Sgt McDonald] drove his carrier through the camp to make sure there were no snipers concealed among the tents. In one tent he found enough lager beer to allow two bottles for each man in the platoon. Returning to the platoon he allowed his men to go down in pairs to "rat" the camp. Towards evening Pte Odlum <sup>15</sup> (Dad of "Dad and Dave") found a cave the other searchers had missed. The cave was very dark but contained a lot of Jerry gear, and "Dad" had set his heart on a German blade razor. He had been inside about a quarter of an hour poking round and striking matches when quite unexpectedly he stumbled on four Jerries asleep in a corner. A moment later he appeared at the mouth of the cave preceded by four sleepy looking Germans and stood waving his arms in excitement and shouting "Oi! Oi!" in the general direction of the platoon.' <sup>16</sup>

The general outlook had now become brighter. At noon (24 November) word came from 22 Armoured Brigade that it was covering 6 Brigade's southern flank and rear. Headquarters [2 NZ Division](#) sent news of an intended advance by 4 Brigade along the north side of the escarpment. Though it was not yet generally known, Rommel had already sent his armour to raid the frontier and disrupt our communications. Its absence meant a slackening of pressure upon our advanced forces.

Although we now held [Point 175](#), enemy troops were still in the wadi running into the escarpment from the north-east —the same troops that had been such a thorn in [25 Battalion's](#) side the previous day. Besides this, on the high ground west of the wadi stood a blockhouse, round which the enemy was strongly entrenched. The troops on [Point 175](#) were continually under fire from this strongpoint, and the ground they occupied was too stony to allow digging in. Concluding that the obvious and only remedy for conditions so unfavourable was a further advance, Brigadier Barrowclough issued orders for a night attack along the escarpment to capture the blockhouse and dig in on its further side.

By the evening of 24 November 4 Brigade Group had arrived along the north side of the escarpment. The 20th Battalion was in touch with 24 Battalion's right rear and held the line of the [Trigh Capuzzo](#). [Divisional Headquarters](#) group, with [21](#)

[Battalion](#), had arrived at [Bir el Chleta](#), while 5 Brigade still contained the frontier garrisons.

At midnight Colonel Shuttleworth held a company commander's conference and explained that the attack would be made with D and C Companies right and left forward, and with B and A right and left rear. The axis of advance pointed straight at the blockhouse, and [26 Battalion](#) would move forward simultaneously on the left of this line. The 25th was being withdrawn into reserve. At 4.30 a.m. the companies formed up 400 yards east of [Point 175](#) and the advance began. The 26th went forward with only slight opposition for nearly five miles and reached the edge of [Sidi Rezegh](#) aerodrome, where it dug in. The 24th Battalion's path was not so smooth. Opposition was encountered early on in the wadi, but this was soon overcome, though pockets of resistance were passed by in the darkness and remained to harass the transport that followed up later in the morning. Having crossed the wadi, the leading companies were approaching the blockhouse when heavy fire from behind the building itself pinned them to the ground. No. 13 Platoon of C Company advanced upon the blockhouse but met with murderous fire and was practically wiped out. Sergeant [McKay](#),<sup>17</sup> the platoon commander, was among those killed. Frontal attack bid fair to prove a costly business. Some other expedient must be employed if heavy losses were to be avoided. Brigadier Barrowclough, who had come upon the scene, directed that an attempt be made upon the open left flank, and 7 Platoon of A Company, under Second-Lieutenant [Cutler](#),<sup>18</sup> began to move round the southern side of the blockhouse. Meanwhile the carriers, under Captain Yeoman, had been employed in escorting the transport forward and clearing up pockets of enemy resistance overrun by the advancing troops in the darkness. Having accomplished this task, they moved up along the battalion's left flank, where 7 Platoon appeared on their right front, 'going forward as if the war were over'.<sup>19</sup> As it skirted the southern side of the blockhouse, a line of enemy troops stood up to surrender, but as they did so their comrades concealed further back opened fire. Without a moment's hesitation Yeoman tore in ahead of the infantry, drawing all fire upon his vehicles. The enemy held scattered points on the escarpment west of the blockhouse and, as Yeoman arrived on the southern flank of his position, began to surrender in large numbers; all the more willingly because a small force detached from [26 Battalion](#) was starting to harass his position from the south-west.

At this juncture the artillery of 4 Brigade started to shell the whole area from positions north of the [Trigh Capuzzo](#). Friend and foe alike came under this fire and little could be done till it ceased, but as soon as opportunity offered Yeoman pushed on with five carriers until held up by three anti-tank guns about a mile beyond the blockhouse. He fired on the crews, who were well concealed and difficult to dislodge. An artillery officer now arrived and soon brought the guns of his battery into action. The third round of shells fell right in the enemy gun positions, and the carriers moved forward unopposed to find nothing but a burning truck where the anti-tank guns had been. It was time to call a halt, as the enemy were likely to be in strength further ahead. Sergeant McDonald remained on the ground with his section while Captain Yeoman returned to report. All remaining strongpoints around the blockhouse had now been captured, together with some 200 prisoners. The latter were handed over to the right rear company of [26 Battalion](#), which had assisted in the operation with flanking fire.

With the whole objective gained by 9.30 a.m., 24 and 26 Battalions now held a line running north and south, facing along the ridge towards [Sidi Rezegh](#), with the blockhouse immediately in rear. On their left [21 Battalion](#), recently placed under command of 6 Brigade, occupied a position close to that in which the South Africans had been overrun on the afternoon of 23 November. Major Mantell-Harding moved B Echelon transport close up to Battalion Headquarters, and at the same time sent orders for A Echelon (under Major Hedge), which was sheltering in the wadi between [Point 175](#) and the blockhouse, to join him there as soon as possible. B Echelon was shelled and eventually obliged to move some way back, where it remained till late in the afternoon, when orders came for it to go forward once more to a position in rear of the blockhouse. As A Echelon still remained in the wadi, Mantell-Harding went there personally to show its commander the new position. Just as he arrived Hedge's transport began to emerge, and at the same moment the enemy began to shell the area. A few men were hit, but all vehicles were brought forward without loss.

It was now more than ever essential to gain possession of the three vital ridges that overlooked the main German line of communications and dominated the southern approaches to [Tobruk](#). The safety of our own supply lines depended very largely on our ability to gain and hold [Sidi Rezegh](#) and Ed Duda. Ammunition was running low; there remained only 60 rounds per gun for the 25-pounders, with no



immediate prospect of more arriving. Moreover, some depot, preferably [Tobruk](#), was urgently needed to receive our wounded and a considerable number of prisoners.

Sixth Brigade lay astride the central escarpment facing Sidi Rezegh; 4 Brigade occupied [Zaafran](#) to the north, threatening [Belhamed](#), while on the left flank [21 Battalion](#) faced westward along the southernmost of the three ridges; but though these forces held part of the key position, their grip upon the whole was as yet incomplete. The door had been forced ajar; until it should be burst wide open there could be no slackening of effort.

Darkness had already fallen when Brigadier Barrowclough returned from a divisional conference to his own headquarters on 25 November, and at once called his unit commanders together to explain the forthcoming operation. While 4 Brigade attacked [Belhamed](#) on the right, 6 Brigade would first take [Sidi Rezegh](#) and then [Ed Duda](#) beyond, where contact would be made with the [Tobruk](#) garrison already poised for a sortie at dawn. A night attack with the bayonet, without artillery support, was likely to serve two purposes—the saving of both time and ammunition, neither of which could be wasted at this juncture. Moreover, incalculable advantage might derive from the element of surprise. Zero hour had been fixed for 9 p.m., but time for preparation was short, and it was not until two hours later that the first lines of attacking troops were formed up on the airfield a mile west of the blockhouse.

The 24th and 25th Battalions, the latter reduced almost to company strength, were to capture [Sidi Rezegh](#) and form a defensive perimeter ready for occupation by the brigade's transport on the following morning. With this objective taken, 21 and 26 Battalions were to advance to [Ed Duda](#) and there join forces with the garrison of [Tobruk](#).

From a starting point immediately south of the blockhouse 24 and 25 Battalions moved off at 11 p.m., accompanied by their fighting transport only. While going forward the leading companies of the 24th (A and B) encountered several pockets of resistance manned by Italian troops. Some of them fought to the last, while others fired a few token rounds and then surrendered. In one of these encounters Second-Lieutenant Cutler, of A Company, was killed, but on the whole our casualties were not heavy. The Italians taken prisoner were a source of some embarrassment as it was not possible at that time to escort them to the rear. Passing to the north of Sidi

Rezegh aerodrome, the battalion advanced about three miles and, having gained the objective, formed a perimeter with B Company, reinforced by a platoon of machine-gunners, facing west; A and C looked north over the escarpment, and D Company was at the perimeter's eastern end. The southern side was occupied by [25 Battalion](#). The 24th Battalion's headquarters took up a position inside the perimeter.

The perimeter, however, did not last long. At dawn A and C Companies came under withering fire and were forced back south-eastwards. The machine-gun platoon was also obliged to withdraw. Colonel Shuttleworth had not been able to report the complete capture of his objective, and in the darkness there was some difficulty in fixing his exact position, but in spite of this Brigadier Barrowclough decided to send 21 and 26 Battalions, under Colonel Page, to their prearranged rendez- vous just south of [Sidi Rezegh](#), so that they might be in a position to advance as soon as circumstances should permit. Colonel Page moved off with his own battalion (the 26th) and arrived in course of time on the east or right flank of 24 Battalion, but nothing had been heard of the 21st (under Lieutenant-Colonel [Allen](#)<sup>20</sup>) which appeared to have vanished; nor had any sign of it come to light by 5 a.m., at which time Barrowclough cancelled Phase 2 of the operation, since it was manifestly no longer possible for the second wave of attacking troops to reach [Ed Duda](#) by dawn. It transpired later that [21 Battalion](#), having moved up from the southernmost escarpment, as directed, to join forces with those of Colonel Page and come under that officer's command, had failed to make contact because of the darkness, whereupon Colonel Allen had decided to go forward alone to the mosque of [Sidi Rezegh](#). Crossing the escarpment from south to north, with the mosque on his right hand, he had passed, by a disastrous miscalculation, right through the enemy forces confronting 24 Battalion and had arrived on the [Trigh Capuzzo](#). Dawn found his men surrounded, with retreat up the escarpment presenting the only chance of safety. One entire company succeeded in reaching the 24th's lines. A remnant under the Commanding Officer held out in a wadi for the rest of the day. Many men were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner, and a few made their way back to Brigade Headquarters.

Having captured [Belhamed](#) soon after midnight, 4 Brigade was preparing to hold an exposed, featureless ridge against inevitable counter-attack. Colonel Shuttleworth's perimeter, with the 26th on its right flank, had been battered in on



the northern side, and the task of rendering it secure was beset with difficulty. The whole area was under direct observation and every movement drew fire, while any attempt to dig in disclosed a layer of solid rock six or eight inches below the surface. Thus the only means of obtaining protection was to build weapon pits above ground level with walls of loose stones. Around [Sidi Rezegh](#) mosque a strip of the escarpment, here and there indented with wadis, was still held by the enemy, who kept up an harassing fire. At first light the strongest resistance had come from the direction of [Ed Duda](#). A and C Companies had been forced back, and later in the morning enemy forces began to gather in the west in obvious preparation for a counter-attack, which soon developed. Supported by artillery fire, infantry and a few tanks assaulted the western face of our position and succeeded in overrunning some of our infantry and a platoon of machine-gunners, who were obliged to surrender, but the rest of the line held firmly. A troop of 18-pounder anti-tank guns did considerable execution, and guns of 33 Anti-Tank Battery were up forward with the infantry. With the same clear-headed skill shown on former occasions, in [Greece](#), on [Point 175](#), and before the blockhouse, Colonel Shuttleworth directed the defence and inspired confidence in the defenders.

If the ridge of [Sidi Rezegh](#) was a commanding feature of the utmost importance, its value depended to an extraordinary degree upon whether its possession was partial or absolute. Nests of opposition maintained themselves as constant sources of annoyance in the numerous wadis that gashed its northern face, making all movement dangerous for the New Zealanders and taking a steady toll of casualties. Present gains being insufficient to afford security, it was essentially a case of the whole or nothing, and in spite of the fact that his men were exhausted after days of continuous fighting, Brigadier Barrowclough was directed to renew the attack with a view to driving the enemy from every part of the escarpment. At a unit commanders' conference late that afternoon, the attending officers lay flat on open ground under shell and mortar fire, with maps spread before them, while any movement such as a raising of the head drew rifle and machine-gun fire upon them as well. Under these distracting conditions Colonels Page and Shuttleworth pointed out to the Brigadier that their troops were exhausted and their casualties severe; at the same time they recognised and accepted the dire necessity of the contemplated operation.

Once again the New Zealand soldier's peculiar aptitude for fighting by night with

the bayonet was to be used to advantage, not only at [Sidi Rezegh](#) but also on the northern ridge, where 4 Brigade prepared to advance on [Ed Duda](#) and join forces with the garrison of [Tobruk](#). At 11 p.m. on 26 November B and D Companies of 24 Battalion swept westward across the perimeter and beyond the line formerly occupied by the machine-gun platoon. The remaining companies followed, A coming up in rear of B, and C moving to the southern end of the battalion's front. The advance was resolutely opposed by German and Italian troops, especially those of 9 Bersaglieri Regiment. On the right [26 Battalion](#) crossed the summit of the escarpment and dug in facing north, with its left flank almost opposite the mosque. Mopping up parties were now sent forward to clear up pockets of resistance still holding out in the wadis. 'I just got there in time to take my platoon out on a mopping up patrol', writes Corporal Simpson, of B Company. 'We went forward for some considerable distance, investigating all the little gullies etc on the side of the escarpment, and landed back with about 30 prisoners, nearly twice as many as there was left in the platoon by this time.'

Before dawn reports had been received that 4 Brigade had taken [Ed Duda](#) and had relieved the garrison of [Tobruk](#). This was glad news, but around [Sidi Rezegh](#) daylight revealed a battlefield strewn with dead. Our men lay at the very muzzles of enemy machine and anti-tank guns, the bodies of those hit by the latter being horribly mangled. Nevertheless, sadly depleted though it was, 6 Brigade now held the field as unchallenged victors. At noon on 27 November it occupied an all-round defensive position on the western end of the escarpment, with good observation over all quarters. [Belhamed](#) and [Ed Duda](#) were both clearly visible; only to the south-west could any movement of the enemy be seen. A lattice mast had been set up by the enemy as an observation post on the highest part of the ridge south-west of the mosque, and a line running north and south of this mast divided the areas for which 24 and 25 Battalions were responsible. Guarding the position's western approaches, 24 Battalion formed the segment of a circle with its companies facing outwards—B on the right close by [Sidi Rezegh](#) mosque, then A, D, and C on the left of the line, turning its front towards the south-west. In the state of affairs now existing, this was the position most liable to counter-attack. The 25th Battalion had been withdrawn at midnight and remained in brigade reserve throughout the 27th.

Colonel Page having been wounded and his second-in-command (Major [Milliken](#)

<sup>21</sup>) killed, Major Mantell-Harding was sent for early in the afternoon and directed to assume command of [26 Battalion](#), after first handing over the 24th's transport to Major Hedge. Mantell-Harding at once went forward and conferred with Shuttleworth about their joint preparations for defence. Brigadier Barrowclough proposed relieving the two forward battalions on successive nights, but both COs were of the opinion that the hours of darkness would be better spent in resting than in moving about. Thus 24 and 26 Battalions remained in position, the former still having under command the company of the 21st that had joined it on the previous day. For the time being, 25 and the remainder of [21 Battalion](#) stayed in brigade reserve as a composite force.

The rest of the day (27 November) was relatively peaceful, and that night the exhausted troops were able to enjoy the sleep they needed so badly. Though weary, they were not discouraged by the sufficiently obvious trend of events, and a few bold spirits still regarded the whole proceeding as an adventure likely to provide both interest and amusement for those taking part in it. With the enemy driven from the escarpment, prisoners were sent to the rear and their captors turned to other pursuits. Corporal Simpson describes his own personal experience:

After getting rid of this cargo [prisoners] we settled down to a bit of good solid scrounging. There were about 30 motor bikes in one clump so needless to say this interested yours truly—I wasn't the only one either. Well, that day passed and we enjoyed ourselves thoroughly; we also had a peaceful night, the first since the show began. Next morning we got plenty of fresh water and were able to get a real good wash, and later had breakfast, then set out for our amusements again. We had a lot of fun this morning [28th] but unfortunately it was too good to last, for just as we were having lunch old Jerry opened up with his mortar and artillery fire. Well we just took our lunch and made for our trenches and tin hats, knowing by the amount he was plastering us with that it was only a start of something.

The corporal's conclusions were correct. It was indeed 'a start of something', to the origin of which we must now revert.

About 9 a.m. on 28 November, a convoy of vehicles was seen moving in a westerly direction at the foot of the southern escarpment, but its identity could not be distinguished. It might possibly have belonged to 1 South African Brigade, which

was expected to arrive from the same direction. Another convoy followed along the same route shortly afterwards. The vehicles passed within range of our guns, but, even supposing there had been no doubts as to their identity, 6 Brigade's artillery had already been committed elsewhere in support of 4 Brigade, which was attacking westward along the Trigh [Capuzzo](#) to crush all remaining resistance between the ridges of [Sidi Rezegh](#) and [Belhamed](#). At midday the Germans were seen to be placing heavy guns in position on high ground beyond the western extremity of [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment. Early in the afternoon these guns came into action and shelled 6 Brigade's defence lines. Soon afterwards a convoy of about twenty-five lorries approached from the west and troops debussed. Though shelled and forced to disperse for the time being, they remained close at hand under cover.

We come, then, to the time of which Corporal Simpson speaks, when signs were not wanting that an attack of some sort was imminent, though as yet there were no means of knowing on what scale it was likely to develop. At 2.30 p.m. another enemy column of 40 or 50 vehicles was seen three miles west of 24 Battalion's positions. The attack was coming in real earnest and Colonel Shuttleworth prepared his forces to meet it.

Supporting his infantry were a few two-pounders of 33 Anti- Tank Battery, in position on the high ground south of Sidi Rezegh mosque. These guns were spaced out at intervals of 40 or 50 yards, but owing to the hardness of the ground they were not properly dug in. The 24th Battalion carriers had not been employed in the night attack of 26-27 November, as Shuttleworth had decided that their noise and lack of vision in the darkness would detract from their usefulness. At one time he had considered dismounting the men and sending them forward as infantry, but second thoughts had convinced him that they had better be reserved for an emergency. Throughout the 27th the carriers had been a mark for enemy guns on the exposed ridge. 'Each time we stopped the machines in a different position', writes Captain Yeoman, 'it was only a matter of moments before a troop of guns would drop 4 shells too close for comfort. Finally, while quite close to Bn HQ, I gave it up, much to the amusement of the Colonel. I dismounted to go and report to him and told Sgt McDonald to take the machines right back to a dead area if he could find one. Col. Shuttleworth, disdaining to wear a tin hat, laughingly remarked: "Well, they shot you out of it at last."' When the carriers eventually found cover in dead ground, a

telephone line was run back to their new position, where they remained until the attack began in the afternoon of 28 November.

On the Aucklanders' right flank [26 Battalion](#) was now under the command of Major Mantell-Harding, who describes what he saw of the ensuing action:

About 3.30 p.m., the enemy commenced to move forward down the slope of the feature behind which they had assembled. They presented a wonderful target again for our gunners, but our luck was out as communications from the OP to the batteries had been severed, and also the whole of the guns were on a regimental shoot in support of an attack which was being carried out to the north by the 4th Bde. Hence another golden opportunity was lost... The enemy continued to press forward but by this time his barrage had slackened considerably in intensity as contact had been made with the forward elements of the 24 Bn. After a bit of desultory fighting I intercepted a radio message to the effect that A and D Coys 24 Bn had surrendered. This seemed unbelievable as the fighting had not been severe. I looked forward and saw troops moving with hands up, but through my glasses they appeared to me to be Huns. The next moment I noticed troops moving towards them also with their hands up. The position seemed most confused but I was able to determine that the latter troops were our own. It transpired that Jerry had pulled his old trick of moving forward behind some of our troops whom he had taken prisoner. These had their hands up and when he was close enough he turned on the works. Unfortunately our boys fell for it. In all about 100 of 24 Bn and 70 of 21 Bn who were attached to the former were collected. Lt.-Col. Shuttleworth, immediately realising the position, went forward and reorganised his front line. Also realising there was a weakness in the centre I called in two of my platoons—one from D and one from C Coys—and sent them forward to the 24 Bn to help fill the gap.

When it became obvious that the attack was developing into a serious threat, Barrowclough sent a squadron of Valentine tanks under Major Sutton to take position 2000 yards south of [Sidi Rezegh](#) and remain there in readiness for a counter-attack. No sooner had the Valentines reached this destination than a mixed column of enemy vehicles came into view farther south, and Sutton was ordered to engage this column at once before taking action against the forces opposing 24 Battalion. Thus it came about that our tanks were not available at the critical moment, but meanwhile [6 Field Regiment](#) had been ordered (at 3.5 p.m.) to switch from support of 4 Brigade

and concentrate on dealing with the local attack. A few minutes later seven tanks were seen advancing behind the attacking infantry, and then took place that strange occurrence described by Major Mantell-Harding.

An account given by one who was present on the spot throws further light on the incident.

'Late in the afternoon', writes Corporal Opie, <sup>22</sup> of D Company, 'we were in the process of shifting to better defensive positions when troops appeared on our front. The forward sections immediately fired on them, whereupon the approaching infantry gave our "friendly troops" sign—the raising of tin hats on their rifles—and continued their leisurely approach. This was somewhat confusing and by now there was heavy machine-gun fire from one flank. It was at this stage that I was seriously wounded by MG fire and immediately after this the approaching infantry gave up their pretence and attacked in earnest. The forward sections had not had time to prepare their positions and the enemy simply over-ran them and forced them to stand up. This of course cramped the style of the supporting sections, who could not fire without hitting their own men, and they in turn were over-run. I was lying in a shell hole while this was going on, having been hit while taking ammo up to the forward sections. The Germans took little interest in me after ascertaining that I could not walk. After they passed me they came under heavy fire from the Vickers guns and I noticed that a German officer was having some trouble in getting his men to advance in the face of it. I saw the enemy reach Coy HQ and take Capt. Jones <sup>23</sup> prisoner, and it was at this stage that the Coy runner, Pte Bill Friday, <sup>24</sup> began the actions which earned him the award of the DCM. Instead of surrendering with Capt. Jones he dashed back over a small ridge, and the rest of his exploit is recorded in the citation.'

The whole truth of this strange affair is likely to remain a mystery since the various eye-witness accounts extant do not coincide in every respect. To summarise briefly: it appears that the remnants of A and D Companies under Captain Jones had made a slight change of position and were digging in on new ground. Jones had just received a message by wireless telephone, apparently from Battalion Headquarters, telling him that the South Africans were about to pass through his lines and that he should take care not to fire upon them. A number of men wearing khaki and shorts

then approached, either with their hands up or making friendly signs of some description. The South Africans were believed to be in the offing and, besides, there had been rumours of a relief by 4 Brigade. The false message,<sup>25</sup> whether or not it was accepted without reserve as being genuine, must have contributed towards bringing about the temporary lack of vigilance that proved disastrous to so many of our troops. Caught off their guard, the New Zealanders calmly watched the enemy come on, only to find themselves suddenly covered by firearms and forced to surrender. The great majority of A and D Companies, or what remained of them, fell victims to this ruse.

It proved fortunate indeed at this juncture that Colonel Shuttleworth had decided to reserve his carriers for an emergency. Between 24 and 26 Battalions there was now an open gap and the situation was critical. Captain Yeoman was waiting for a call from Battalion Headquarters, but after a while he concluded the line had been cut and moved his command forward to make a reconnaissance.

'I was in a quandary as to where I could best put the carriers to use', he writes. 'I could not quite see where the action was most severe, and was on the point of going to Bn. for information when I saw some men of one of our forward companies standing up to surrender. This decided me and I called to my section commanders that I was going to recce the position, and to get going and follow me. We were by this time under severe machine gun fire as well as being shelled by the Bofors, but had still suffered no casualties. I headed towards where the men were standing up, with the intention of trying to prevent a breakdown there. However an anti-tank gun was waiting for just such a target and my machine was a sitting shot. Waiting until we were too close to get away he opened fire. Two or three shots hit the carrier broadside on with no apparent damage, but the next got my driver, Pte Johnson,<sup>26</sup> through the left foot. I yelled to him to turn away and try to drop into dead ground. Even with his clutch foot out of action he managed to change gears and make the turn. Another shell hit the rear of the machine without apparent effect; the next struck the front plate between my driver and myself. Being an explosive shell we both received the back blast, he receiving several splinters in his left shoulder and I getting some in both legs, my abdomen and one hand.

'We then managed to get clear and met the remaining carriers coming up. I took a quick survey of the set up and decided I had better pull out of it and hand over to



Sgt McDonald. I suggested he go right round Bn HQ to right and try to cut in on the show from there. He moved off in that direction and we drove back to the RAP.' <sup>27</sup>

Captain Yeoman's story is well and clearly told, but it obviously does less than justice to a performance which earned him the MC. <sup>28</sup> The loss of his services at this critical moment was a sad blow, although his place was most ably filled by Sergeant McDonald. As the carriers went into action one of the few survivors of A Company, Private Friday, jumped on one of them and thereafter became the life and soul of his special party, directing the carrier's fire and shouting words of encouragement to the hard-pressed infantry. Major Mantell- Harding now sent two platoons of [26 Battalion](#) to fill the gap, and the position became more stable. Five enemy tanks were out of action.

Meanwhile Major Sutton's Valentines, having returned to Brigade Headquarters after a successful engagement, were sent off in a westerly direction with orders to turn north at a given point and overrun the troops attacking Shuttleworth's forward defences. Sutton went too far west before turning, with the result that he missed the German infantry and ran into anti-tank guns which immobilised most of his vehicles. His manoeuvre was of no avail, but at 5 p.m. six more Valentines arrived and were sent on a similar errand by the Brigadier. This latter force, it appears, instead of going too far west did not go far enough, so that when it turned north its fire was directed, not upon the enemy, but upon the sorely tried 24 Battalion. Sergeant McDonald's section was chased home by three tanks which then shot up the RAP (Regimental Aid Post), and might have continued doing so had it not been for an act of gallantry by a soldier of the battalion. Private [Muir](#), <sup>29</sup> of the Medical Section, ran across 30 yards of open ground under close-range fire, climbed on the leading tank, opened its turret, and told the commander in no very polite terms exactly what he was doing. A tank officer then came over to Battalion Headquarters and apologised. Muir survived without a scratch and was awarded the MM for his courage and presence of mind.

The enemy withdrew as darkness fell, leaving 6 Brigade still in possession of the ridge but in a situation that had been growing hourly less secure, with forces diminished by the loss of two entire companies, besides other casualties. Fourth Brigade's attack between the ridges of [Sidi Rezegh](#) and Belhamed had been



completely successful, but elsewhere the signs and portents were ominous. Rommel's armour was rumbling back from the Libyan frontier and beginning to manifest its presence in more than one quarter. The 21st and 25th Battalions had reported enemy columns moving along the Sidi Rezegh ridge from the east. Another column was observed on the ridge south of the airfield. Sixth Brigade was now threatened from the east, west, and south; its vehicle park on the airfield was overlooked and in danger of coming under gunfire at dawn. The 1st South African Brigade was expected to arrive from the south next day, but unforeseen chance might delay its coming. Under these circumstances Brigadier Barrowclough suggested that his transport be moved within the [Tobruk](#) perimeter, but the Divisional Commander demurred, consenting, however, to allow 6 Brigade Headquarters and all B Echelon vehicles to be shifted on to low ground north of the escarpment. Still intent on advancing further west towards [El Adem](#) and widening the [Tobruk](#) corridor, the commander of [13 Corps](#) insisted that present positions at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and [Belhamed](#) must be maintained at all costs. No course remained, therefore, but for Barrowclough to distribute his depleted forces to the best possible advantage.

Fourth Brigade's successful advance in the north had relieved pressure from one direction at least, but attack threatened from all remaining points of the compass, and dispositions for defence were made as follows. The 24th and 26th Battalions, under Colonel Shuttleworth, were to hold their present positions, the high ground adjacent to [Sidi Rezegh](#) mosque, and dispose their weapon pits to face south and west. The 8th Field Company, New Zealand Engineers, guarded the airfield; [25 Battalion](#) took over defence of the blockhouse captured on 25 November, while [21 Battalion](#) was to reoccupy [Point 175](#), taken during the westward move on 23 November. The two last-named battalions, which had been temporarily amalgamated, were once again organised as independent units. The strength of the 24th's rifle companies had been reduced to little more than a hundred men, but the 26th could still muster more than twice that number. For these troops, wearied by five days and nights of constant fighting, all chance of respite seemed almost



Mount Olympus from Katerine  
**Mount Olympus from Katerine**



A group in Katerine—Lt J. A. Carroll on the left

**A group in Katerine—Lt J. A. Carroll on the left**



In Pal Elevtherokhorion village

**In Pal Elevtherokhorion village**



Digging defences on the Aliakmon line  
—Pal Elevation in the distance

**Digging defences on the Aliakmon line —Pal Elevation in the distance**



The monastery above Livadhion

**The monastery above Livadhion**



Livadhion village

**Livadhion village**



A German reconnaissance plane in the Molos area

### A German reconnaissance plane in the Molos area



infinitely remote. As far as could be foreseen, the immediate future held nothing but heavy fighting in store.

The foregoing changes and realignments were carried out during the night of 28-29 November. In the morning, when Colonel Shuttleworth made a tour of inspection, he found his men still in good heart and ready for whatever might befall. There was sporadic shelling later in the day, and Padre [Watson](#),<sup>30</sup> of 24 Battalion, aroused the admiration of an observant corporal who watched him carefully while he was reading the burial service under fire to see whether he hurried unduly or missed out any of the prayers.

Complete plans for the annihilation of our forces by Rommel's returning armour had been captured—together with the person of General von Ravenstein,



commander of 21 Panzer Division—by the 'I' section of [21 Battalion](#). Forewarned of the exact method by which their destruction was contemplated, the New Zealanders were now able to make what preparations their diminished strength allowed. Generally speaking, the day of 29 November was uneventful for [24](#) and [26](#) Battalions, but misfortune, which had visited them so severely on the 28th, was now about to overtake another unit of the brigade.

The South Africans were really coming at last and all units had been warned to expect their appearance. At intervals during the morning columns of motor transport were seen moving on the southernmost ridge, but they invariably turned out to be those of the enemy. At 10.50 a.m. [21 Battalion](#) repulsed an attack on [Point 175](#). Early in the afternoon a second and more determined assault was beaten off. Later a fierce tank battle began to rage round [Ed Duda](#), but as far as could be ascertained [4](#) Brigade was holding its own. A South African officer arrived by armoured car at Brigadier Barrowclough's headquarters, informing him that [1](#) South African Brigade (beginning, by this time, to be regarded as a mythical formation) was actually advancing on [Point 175](#). For a while it seemed that the situation was improving. The impression was illusory.

At 5.10 p.m., with startling suddenness, the voice of Major [Fitzpatrick](#),<sup>31</sup> commanding [21 Battalion](#), came over the brigade telephone, saying, 'They are into my lines with three tanks and are taking prisoners. Artillery support at once for God's sake.'<sup>32</sup> Brigade at once called upon [6 Field Regiment](#), but it was already too late. Fitzpatrick's voice was heard once again, but his sentence broke off unfinished—'Everyone has left, what shall I do? They are right on top of me....'<sup>33</sup>

The mystery enveloping this disaster was explained when stragglers began to make their way down the escarpment into the brigade transport lines. Expectantly awaiting the South Africans, the men of [21 Battalion](#) had seen tanks approaching with open turrets and crews waving a friendly greeting. All unawares, they had allowed the tanks to come right in amongst them. The crews then slammed down their turrets and opened fire.

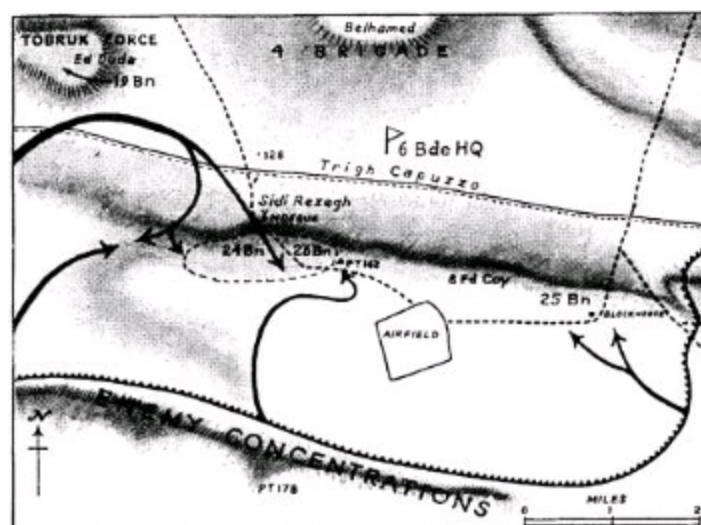
At nightfall word came that the enemy had captured [Ed Duda](#).

The morning of 30 November dawned gloriously fine, but the tactical situation

promised conditions of storm and stress. Sixth Brigade was now virtually surrounded. Some faint hope was at first entertained that **Point 175** might be in South African hands, but patrols sent out by **25 Battalion** soon proved the contrary. The enemy's way along the escarpment from the east now lay open. The 15th Panzer Division was concentrating south-west of **Sidi Rezegh**. In the absence of 1 South African Brigade the New Zealanders' southern flank was exposed. **Ed Duda** had been recaptured, but our hold on the **Tobruk** corridor could only be described as precarious. Not least disquieting of all adverse circumstances was the fact of 6 Brigade's diminished strength. The 24th Battalion consisted of four officers and 159 other ranks. The 25th and 26th Battalions had been less severely mauled, but the 21st was reduced below company strength.

From 10 a.m. onwards almost continual movement was observed along the southern escarpment, giving rise to the

usual speculations as to whether the South Africans were coming at last. Soon after midday troop-carrying vehicles began to assemble on the ridge and a considerable number of tanks were seen concentrated and partially hidden in a wadi. Our guns shelled them at extreme range with but little effect, and the enemy began to retaliate upon our defence lines with 5.9s and long-range mortars. About 2.30 p.m. enemy infantry were



SIDI REZEGH LOST, DUSK 30 NOVEMBER

**sidi rezegh lost, dusk 30 november**

observed to have debussed from the lorries, and 40 or 50 tanks moved across

our front from south-west to north-east, while the bombardment grew more intense. Suddenly the leading tank turned east and made towards the [Sidi Rezegh](#) mosque, on [26 Battalion](#)'s right flank. Those following turned as they reached the same spot, so that when the leader had arrived immediately opposite the mosque the tank formation had assumed the shape of an inverted L. 'Apparently at the command given over R/T, they all turned inwards in a beautiful drill movement and were facing us in front and on our right. Then hell was let loose.' <sup>34</sup>

Hearing what was afoot, Brigadier Barrowclough at once ordered [25 Battalion](#) to support the troops under attack and sent lorries to carry its men forward to the scene of action, but before it could move the battalion was attacked from the south-east and pinned to its position. The remnant of the 21st was sent to extend Colonel Shuttleworth's line to the north. Away behind the German tanks, infantry could be seen manhandling guns down the slopes of the southern escarpment.

The gunners of 33 Anti-Tank Battery replied to the tanks' fire with some effect, but their two-pounders were outranged and the sinking sun glared in their faces. Hard, rocky ground still hindered the building of adequate gun emplacements and casualties were heavy in consequence. The 25-pounders had expended much ammunition firing on the tank concentration as the attack developed, and could give little further support. Failing other reserves, Barrowclough sent up a troop of portée anti-tank guns which arrived upon the scene when the German tanks were all in position and blazing away. 'There they are. Do your best', <sup>35</sup> said Colonel Shuttleworth, indicating what he considered the best position, which was actually nothing more than an expanse of open ground. The guns were swung smartly into action by men who could scarcely have failed to realise how slender were their chances of survival; a few shots were got away; a few hits were obtained, and then the crews were wiped out.

About 4.30 p.m. the tanks began to move forward, some frontally along the escarpment and others from the right flank as the inverted L closed in its sides. By now all our anti-tank guns were out of action and there was nothing to stop the armour. While our men's attention had been concentrated on the tanks, German infantry had been moving up in rear. The situation was hopeless. A last report came through to Brigade from [26 Battalion](#) that tanks were right on top of its position, milling round and shooting everything up.

The 24th Battalion now ceased to exist as such for the time being. Only those who were fortunate enough to remain concealed had any chance of escape. Mantell-Harding's 26 Battalion headquarters was overrun by a tank and he and his adjutant were taken prisoner. Colonel Shuttleworth shared his fate and was last seen being taken away but refusing to acknowledge defeat by putting up his hands. The Adjutant, Intelligence Officer, and all four commanders of the rifle companies of 24 Battalion were either killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. Having rounded up what survivors could be found, the tanks pulled out at dusk, and only then did the German infantry come on in mass, 'kicking up a hell of a row'.<sup>36</sup> This was the moment when a number of our men who had been lying low seized the opportunity of making their escape.

Disposed in rear of the unit's headquarters, the 24th's nine remaining carriers were all knocked out by the tanks within a few minutes. The crews scattered for safety and took cover while their vehicles burned out. A few of them, together with about thirty other survivors, including Regimental Sergeant-Major [Wilson](#)<sup>37</sup> and Padre Watson, got back to B Echelon, north of the [Trigh Capuzzo](#), and dug in round the trucks, but were overwhelmed and captured next day (1 December), when the enemy's armour moved on [Belhamed](#) from [Sidi Rezegh](#).

A larger body of the 24th managed to reach Brigade Headquarters, north of the escarpment, and formed part of a remnant which still showed a bold front next day in face of a threatened attack that could scarcely have been withstood unaided. While launching his assault on [Belhamed](#) from Sidi Rezegh, the enemy exposed a flank to 6 Brigade, which in its weakened state could only partially exploit the advantage presented. Its hastily prepared lines were being shelled continually; vehicles were hit and set on fire; blazing ammunition trucks exploded periodically. [Belhamed](#) fell and the enemy returned to [Sidi Rezegh](#) to regroup for another assault.

Supported by infantry, tanks were already moving forward against the devoted remnant of 6 Brigade when another large armoured force of doubtful identity began to move down the escarpment, coming from a southerly direction. Should these new arrivals prove hostile there could be no alternative to disaster, but all doubts were resolved when enemy guns fired on them as they approached, flying the double pennant by which British tanks might be recognised. No sooner was this force



revealed as friendly than the fortune of war on this special sector of the battlefield was at once reversed. As the British tanks moved forward the enemy wavered, and the survivors of 6 Brigade, whose morale neither weariness nor defeat could diminish, advanced with the armour without waiting for orders. The tank commander, however, had instructions merely to cover 6 Brigade's withdrawal and was unwilling to become further involved, though Barrowclough urged him to attack at once, pointing out that the moment was opportune and that his own handful of men were still eager to come to grips with the enemy. Rightly or wrongly, the Brigadier was overruled; a withdrawal to the north-east was made along a route that passed unnecessarily close to German guns on [Point 175](#), and later in the day a junction was made at [Zaafran](#) with 4 Brigade and Advanced Divisional Headquarters.

Of 24 Battalion, three officers and 60 other ranks, who had succeeded in reaching Brigade Headquarters on the night of 30 November, took part in this last action. They then moved back with 6 Brigade across the Libyan frontier and eventually arrived at [Baggush](#) on 5 December. Fortunately they were not the only survivors. A party of 23 had made its way into [Tobruk](#). Corporal Simpson describes their manner of doing so:

[We] lay doggo for the day [30 November] and as luck would have it the tanks didn't come right down to us, although one lot of three stood off about 75 yards in front and peppered our trenches with machine gun fire, then ambled round to the side, only about 50 yards off this time, and gave us another dose; but we were all quite safe so just kept down and out of sight. They must have satisfied' themselves that there was nobody at home because they turned and ambled off further along where a few chaps gave themselves up, and this probably saved our bacon. We just stopped where we were until darkness fell when we got the whole platoon together intact, also 2 mortar crews, and made our way out of it. We only just got out too when his infantry moved up and filled the positions we had just left—the beds must have still been warm. We had our plans made as to where we would head for, so set out. En route, some of the chaps under a mortar sgt. apparently didn't like the tracks we were taking so set out on their own, (incidentally these 9 men haven't as yet turned up) leaving us what was left of the platoon and two of their men who preferred to come with us—in all 23 of us. We hiked for about an hour and a half and then we heard a convoy moving. We made our way up to it in the darkness, but

couldn't make out whose it was, ours or Jerries, so a pair of us went to find out from one of the drivers as they passed. On seeing us on a mighty desolate desert the drivers naturally wouldn't stop, but rather sped up to get out of our way. We eventually managed to board one and were very relieved to find them English and bound for [Tobruk](#). This suited us so we called the other chaps up and we all piled on. The drivers had plenty of rations and gave us as much as we wanted to eat and drink. They also shared their blankets with us as all we got away with was our fighting equipment and great coats. We all had plenty of souvenirs in our packs, but could not carry them out with us, but we weren't worried very much as we got ourselves out, and, after all, I think that's the best souvenir of the lot.

The battalion's casualties in the battles for [Sidi Rezegh](#) were:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	5	67
Presumed killed	–	10
Died of wounds	3	14
Presumed died of wounds	–	2
Wounded	5	140
Prisoners of war (includes 1 officer and 20 ORs wounded and p.w. and 10 ORs died while p.w.)	10	267
total	23	500

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<sup>1</sup> [Capt R. H. Forder](#), ED; [Auckland](#); born [London](#), 13 Jan 1906; solicitor; wounded 26 Nov 1941; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; released 28 Mar 1945.

<sup>2</sup> [Maj A. G. J. Robertson](#), ED; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 11 Jun 1908; accountant.

<sup>3</sup> [Maj E. K. Tomlinson](#), MC, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Ashburton](#), 6 Sep 1909; bank clerk; p.w. Dec 1941; released 25 Mar 1945.

<sup>4</sup> [Capt H. Thompson](#); [Hamilton](#); born [Auckland](#), 29 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; IO 24 Bn 1941; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; released 28 Mar 1945.

<sup>5</sup> Report on 24 and 26 Bns in 2nd Libyan Campaign, 13–30 Nov 1941, by Maj Mantell-Harding.

<sup>6</sup> Account of 24 Bn Bren carriers at [Sidi Rezegh](#), November 1941, by Sgt McDonald.

<sup>7</sup> Lt-Col [G. J. McNaught](#), DSO, ED; [New Plymouth](#); born [Wanganui](#), 26 Nov 1896; schoolmaster; NZ MG Bn 1916–19; CO 29 Bn [2 NZEF \( UK\)](#) Jun 1940–Mar 1941; CO 25 Bn Sep–Dec 1941; GSO 1 HQ [Maadi Camp](#), Apr 1942; wounded 23 Nov 1941; headmaster, [New Plymouth Boys' High School](#).

<sup>8</sup> Pte [G. Absolum](#); born [Napier](#), 1 Oct 1912; mercer; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

<sup>9</sup> Lt-Col [H. G. Burton](#), ED, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [Christchurch](#), 1 Dec 1899; company manager; CO 25 Bn Jul–Sep 1942.

<sup>10</sup> Letter, Capt Tomlinson, 13 May 1951.

<sup>11</sup> Brig [J. R. Page](#), DSO, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [Dunedin](#), 10 May 1908; Regular soldier; CO 26 Bn 15 May 1940–27 Nov 1941; wounded 27 Nov 1941; Commandant, Northern Military District 1950–52; Adjutant-General, Army HQ 1952–.

<sup>12</sup> Sgt [C. L. Ranum](#); born NZ 3 Sep 1911; herd tester; killed in action 24 Nov 1941.

<sup>13</sup> Cpl [J. G. Simpson](#); born [Scotland](#), 4 Dec 1915; baker's labourer; p.w. Jul 1942; died while p.w. 17 Aug 1942.

<sup>14</sup> Letter, Cpl Simpson.

<sup>15</sup> Cpl [W. G. Odlum](#); [Morrinsville](#); born NZ 15 May 1911; labourer; wounded 28 Nov 1941.

<sup>16</sup> Account of 24 Bn Bren carriers at [Sidi Rezegh](#), November 1941, by Sgt McDonald.

<sup>17</sup> [Sgt J. M. McKay](#); born NZ 9 Aug 1907; farmer; killed in action 25 Nov 1941.

<sup>18</sup> [2 Lt J. G. Cutler](#); born NZ 2 Mar 1916; law clerk; killed in action 25 Nov 1941.

<sup>19</sup> Account by Sgt McDonald.

<sup>20</sup> [Lt-Col J. M. Allen](#), m.i.d.; born [Cheadle](#), England, 3 Aug 1901; farmer; MP (Hauraki) 1938–41; CO 21 Bn May-Nov 1941; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.

<sup>21</sup> [Maj T. Milliken](#), m.i.d.; born NZ 3 Jul 1896; solicitor; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.

<sup>22</sup> [Cpl A. C. Opie](#); Mokouiti, [Te Kuiti](#); born Eltham, 2 Jun 1916; farmer; wounded 28 Nov 1941.

<sup>23</sup> [Capt B. T. J. Jones](#), m.i.d.; born [Dargaville](#), 16 Aug 1904; advertising manager; p.w. 28 Nov 1941; died on active service 17 May 1945. Capt Jones had taken over D Coy when Capt McDonald was killed.

<sup>24</sup> [Sgt W. D. Friday](#), DCM; [Rotorua](#); born Kawhia, 16 Aug 1917; timber yardman; wounded 22 Nov 1943.

<sup>25</sup> It seems probable that the false message was sent by the Germans from a wireless truck captured from the South Africans.

<sup>26</sup> [Pte T. N. Johnson](#); [Auckland](#); born NZ 15 Jun 1910; labourer; wounded 28 Nov 1941.

<sup>27</sup> Account of 24 Bn Bren carriers at [Sidi Rezegh](#), by Capt Yeoman.

<sup>28</sup> Yeoman's conduct before the blockhouse on 25 November was also taken into account in the bestowal of his award.

<sup>29</sup> Pte M. Muir, MM; Mangakino; born Liverpool, England, 31 Jan 1911; line erector; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>30</sup> Rev K. J. Watson, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 18 Apr 1904; Presbyterian minister; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

<sup>31</sup> Lt-Col T. V. Fitzpatrick, ED; Auckland; born Waihi, 27 Nov 1909; solicitor; CO 21 Bn Nov 1941; CO 1 Bn Hauraki Regt, 1942-44, 1 Bn Waikato Regt, 1943; wounded 30 Nov 1941.

<sup>32</sup> Log Diary, 6 NZ Inf Bde, November 1941.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Report on 24 and 26 Bns in 2nd Libyan Campaign by Maj Mantell-Harding.

<sup>35</sup> Draft narrative, 7 A-Tk Regt.

<sup>36</sup> Account by Sgt McDonald.

<sup>37</sup> Capt C. V. Wilson, MBE; Southern Military District, Christchurch; born Lyttelton, 4 May 1911; Regular soldier; p.w. 1 Dec. 1941; released 15 Mar 1945.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 4 – SYRIA

## CHAPTER 4

### Syria

When the survivors of [Sidi Rezegh](#) arrived back in their old lines at [Baggush](#) they were joined by that portion of the battalion which had been left behind at [Sidi Haneish](#)—a group so chosen that it might form the nucleus of a new battalion in the event of disaster. Under the circumstances this had proved to be a wise precaution. The LOB (Left Out of Battle) personnel, as they were termed, were horrified to discover how many of their comrades were missing, for till now they had not been aware of the extent of the losses. But regrets have no place in the atmosphere of war; all that is required is that the damage be remedied, the gaps filled, and a bold front reassumed at the earliest possible moment. Reinforcements of both officers and men began to arrive while casualty lists were still being compiled. Lieutenant-Colonel [Greville](#) <sup>1</sup> took over command on 10 December and chose Lieutenant Reynolds as his adjutant in place of Captain Carnachan, who had been taken prisoner. A fortnight later it was known that Lieutenant Yeoman and Private Friday were to receive respectively the MC and DCM as immediate awards for gallantry in the Libyan campaign. Reorganisation and training proceeded apace until Christmas, when a certain seasonal relaxation was permitted. Christmas dinners were made to resemble those of tradition as closely as circumstances would permit. [General Freyberg](#) visited the messes and announced, somewhat obscurely, that quarters would be more comfortable at the next place to be visited. Various interpretations were placed upon these words, but for the time being nothing happened. Towards the end of January a move was made to [Maadi](#) Camp; then for a few days 6 Brigade was held in readiness to suppress civil commotion in [Cairo](#), should such take place. King Farouk of Egypt was to be coerced by a show of force into a more amenable frame of mind. The 24th Battalion's part in this operation was to maintain order in the suburb of Sharia Shubra. Taking up quarters in [Abbassia](#) barracks, it staged a series of marches through the streets with bayonets fixed, the men having been previously instructed to look as grim as possible. After four days of this procedure, when Farouk had been reduced to a more pliable mood, the battalion returned once more to [Maadi](#).

At this period of the war Egypt was threatened actually and immediately by way of the North African coastline, and potentially by a thrust through [Turkey](#) or southern



**Russia**. In the event of one or both of these last-named operations being attempted, the enemy's southward advance must come by way of **Syria**, of which country the Vichy French had lately been dispossessed. To guard against such a possibility, the Ninth Army moved into positions covering the approaches that led into Palestine through the ranges of **Syria**. The 2nd New Zealand Division formed part of this army.

While 5 Brigade remained for the time being in the Western Desert, 4 and 6 Brigades began to move into **Syria** at the end of February and beginning of March, stage by stage, unit after unit. The 24th Battalion crossed the **Suez Canal** by ferry on 12 March and continued its journey alternately by train and motor transport via El Kehir, **Haifa**, **Beirut**, **Rayak**, and **Aleppo**, finally arriving late on the night of 14 March at **Afrine** camp.

The Division's main line of defence lay astride the **Bekaa** valley, between **Beirut** and **Damascus**, but 6 Brigade moved 150 miles to the north and formed a chain of outposts along the marches of **Syria**. The greater part of the Turkish frontier was masked by the Taurus mountains, but two lines of approach were open to a mechanised army—one along the coastline bordering the Gulf of **Alexandretta**, and another down the Kara Sou valley, which opened a way to **Antioch** and **Aleppo**. The former route lay entirely within Turkish territory and could not be directly guarded, but a measure of surveillance could be exercised over the Kara Sou valley from behind the Syrian border. With this task in view 6 Brigade established its headquarters at **Aleppo**, maintaining one battalion (the 26th) in the immediate vicinity, either to form a reserve in case of attack or to deal with civil commotion should such arise. The 25th was grouped west of **Aleppo**, between that town and **Antioch**, while the 24th occupied the salient of Syrian territory jutting north-west towards **Anatolia**, and commanding the most likely way of approach for a hostile army. Dispersed as they were over a vast expanse of territory, the units of 6 Brigade could not expect to hold an invading army in check for long. The enemy might, however, be delayed by



various means. Roads, railways, and bridges were mined, and preparations made to guard the demolitions till the last possible moment. When retreat finally became a matter of necessity, all demolitions would be blown and the brigade would withdraw on the main line of defence. This strategy was aptly termed one of 'Blow and Go'.<sup>2</sup>

The 24th Battalion had its headquarters at [Afrine](#), a large village 35 miles north-west of [Aleppo](#), where there was a well-appointed camp of corrugated iron huts, but only a small portion of the unit remained there. A control post, one platoon strong, was maintained at Meidane Ekbis, where the railway entered [Syria](#) at the north-westerly salient of its territory. South of this point there were three railway demolitions to be guarded—all some considerable distance apart—at the North Tunnel, the Viaduct, and the Saddle. Of these the Viaduct was considered most important, not only on account of the length of time it would take to repair if properly demolished, but also because, being impossible of approach by wheeled vehicles of any kind, it could be less easily attacked. Two rifle companies with mortar and signal detachments were required to man these outposts, and for the sake of convenience a forward headquarters was established at [Radjou](#), another village 20 miles north-west of [Afrine](#), under command of Major Webb. At an equal distance to the south-west another control post was stationed at [El Hamman](#), where the main road from [Afrine](#) crossed into Turkish territory, and due east of this point, eight miles within the Syrian border, another company was maintained to supply detachments in this part of 24 Battalion's zone. It was thought probable that hostile enterprise would assume one of two forms: either an attempt to tamper with demolitions through the agency of spies or fifth columnists, or a surprise attack by

light forces. An airborne operation was regarded as barely practicable. To deal with whatever emergency might arise, a mobile column was held in readiness, consisting of a rifle company, the battalion's carrier platoon, and supporting artillery. <sup>3</sup>

The concentration of troops on the frontiers of an independent state is an act capable of more than one interpretation, and it is not to be wondered at that the attitude of the Turks was one of friendliness tempered with suspicion. Their frontier patrols paid official visits to our control posts, but when 24 Battalion carried out a tactical exercise near El Hamman with what strength it could muster after providing for the numerous routine duties, the Turks showed symptoms of alarm. Their sentries in this region were doubled, and they began to question civilians about the number of our troops, tanks, and guns.

Relations with the civil population, being of necessity more intimate, were also more complex. Scene of an early civilisation long since decayed, [Syria](#) had suffered centuries of mis- rule. After the fashion of mediaeval times, her people were constrained to seek safety by living in communities. There were no isolated houses in the [Afrine](#) district, and the inhabitants, mainly Kurds, were congregated in villages containing usually from 150 to 300 families. Till very lately [Radjou](#) had had an evil reputation as a happy hunting ground for bandits, and the local population had special permission from their government to go about armed. The attitude of these people was for the most part friendly, but, as might be expected of men who carried knives in their belts, their manners were by no means obsequious. They were not likely to tolerate being treated as an inferior race—a fact to which terse allusion was made in a document emanating from Battalion Headquarters: 'The chief fact to remember is, in short, that the Syrian is not a "Wog", but is a much tougher proposition.' <sup>4</sup>

Among such a people, inured to robbery from time immemorial, it was scarcely to be expected that the property of Christian unbelievers would be regarded as inviolable. Arms were in the greatest demand, but almost any kind of army stores was liable to be pilfered. Removable fittings of trucks were stolen from vehicles left unattended even for a few moments, and stores were lifted, by some ingenious expedient, from the backs of trucks travelling the roads. Drivers were enjoined to be vigilant, and at the same time were forbidden on any account to give rides to civilians; besides which they were further harassed by demands that more than

usual care be taken on the roads, as the local Syrians, being entirely unaccustomed to fast-moving traffic, showed an amazing aptitude for getting run over.

In all probability the greater part of the population was not so much either hostile or friendly as merely opportunist, but in many cases the same officials who had served Vichy France remained in office under the present regime. Some of these men, no doubt, were politically apathetic, but others remained secretly loyal to their former masters. In time of war every neutral country whose frontiers march with those of the belligerents becomes a field of activity for spies, and [Turkey](#) was no exception to this rule. It was not difficult for Syrians specially trained as German agents to cross the border into their native country. In such a state of affairs it was no easy matter to distinguish between the friendly advances of well-wishers and the subtle approaches of those whose business it was to gather information of military significance. Anyone whose behaviour seemed even remotely suspicious had to be treated as an enemy until his goodwill should be proved beyond all doubt. The Australians, from whom 24 Battalion took over, had endeavoured to separate sheep from goats by preparing an 'index of district personalities'.<sup>5</sup> The index was kept up to date, and before long it included the names of the local doctor and schoolmaster at [Radjou](#), both of whom had appeared somewhat unduly anxious to buy drinks for the troops. The telephone system offered a less direct but possibly more effective means of discovering official secrets, since all the lines connecting companies to Battalion Headquarters, and Battalion Headquarters to Brigade, were operated through civilian exchanges. The lines between [Afrine](#) and [Radjou](#) were cut in two places soon after the battalion arrived, and a week later the performance was repeated, but this may have been a mere gesture of independence on the part of some self-conscious patriot rather than a calculated act of sabotage.

Land and people might have formed the background for a work of sensational fiction. Wickedness flourished in all its more exotic forms. In addition to banditry and espionage, smuggling was also an important local industry. Indeed it was doubtful whether all three were not interdependent activities breeding fear and hatred which occasionally broke out in acts of violence. For example, one day word came to Battalion Headquarters that a villager in [Radjou](#) had been shot dead. A party sent forthwith to investigate found that three more villagers had been killed in the meantime. The crimes, it transpired, were committed by a customs official

supposedly involved in the smuggling trade. The murderer, however, succeeded in escaping, and inquiries only served to call forth a mass of conflicting evidence which could neither be disproved nor substantiated. In spite of all obstacles in the way of successful detection, the failure of our authorities to arrest and punish the criminal was regarded by the local inhabitants as a sign of weakness. [Radjou](#), which the troops were not immediately anxious to visit in any case, was placed out of bounds for 24 hours—a step scarcely liable to enhance the temporarily diminished prestige of the occupying army.

Prestige is an abstract value of untold worth that nations contend for; it may serve to emphasize the threats or sustain the assurances of statesmen; its influence may be used to avert unnecessary war; its possession can only arise out of past reputation or derive from existing strength and merit. But strength is only impressive when actually put into effect or ostentatiously displayed, and in recognition of this fact the New Zealanders were ordered to adopt a policy of 'showing the flag' whenever and wherever possible. The culminating stage of this policy was a ceremonial march through the streets of [Aleppo](#) by New Zealand infantry and artillery, the Royal [Air Force](#) and Free French cavalry, in which A and B Companies of 24 Battalion took part. Prestige of another variety was sought after by enjoining all ranks to do their best to maintain good relations with the local inhabitants. In the belief that smartness of appearance would enhance popularity, troops were exhorted to appear correctly dressed in public and, above all, to ensure that their jackets were fastened at the neck.

Rations were lean in [Syria](#). In fact this was probably the only period of the war when the men were really hungry. The mountain sheep from which their meat came were chiefly notable for a wealth of inedible by-products. Bone, skin, and gristle they grew in abundance, but very little meat. The vegetable was mainly native spinach, a large amount of which would boil down to almost nothing. Attempts were made to supplement rations by using grenades to kill fish in the streams, but on the whole there was little to be drawn from a country bordering upon a state of famine. Inhabitants of outlying villages were crowding into the larger centres, where they believed grain was stored. British and American Red Cross authorities were arranging for food to be sent to famine-threatened areas, and one of the first duties the New Zealanders were required to undertake after arriving in [Syria](#) was the

equitable distribution of these supplies. On 17 March 5000 pounds of flour were distributed at [Radjou](#), and a larger amount at [Afrine](#) a few days later. From outlying villages came men with scores of small donkeys to collect their share and pack-load it home. The ceremony of distribution, though organised by the methodical West, was thoroughly oriental in tone and atmosphere. Stately elders and headmen of villages vouched for each man and the number of his dependants as he came forward to collect his share. There was some chattering and delay—for here in the East time is neither valued nor measured—and then the loaded donkeys, guided or driven by men, moved off to return to their own places. Thus might the scene have appeared in a pageant of some ancient, patriarchal period; thus it might actually have taken place in the days when Joseph's brethren went to buy corn in Egypt.

Heavy rain deluged northern [Syria](#) when 6 Brigade first arrived there; then came frosts and cold winds by day. Not until towards the end of March did the sodden ground become passable for motor vehicles. Though the climate was invigorating, the country was far from healthy. Malaria was always rife in the hot season, and this inflicted the necessity for irksome precautions. The men slept under mosquito nets, carefully tucked in to avoid leaving gaps which might admit mosquitoes; huts and tents were sprayed at dawn and dusk; boots and anklets had to be worn after dark; hands and faces were smeared with mosquito ointment, which lost its effectiveness after two hours and had to be reapplied. A battalion malarial squad was formed to see that all preventive measures were carried out, but even so there were omissions and oversights. Many of A Company's men went down with high fever and malarial symptoms after having been on duty guarding the demolition at the North Tunnel. Research and inquiry revealed that these men, when actually inside the tunnel, had observed the usual precautions between dawn and dusk; but as semi-darkness prevailed there throughout the day, the mosquitoes had extended their activities to include what would normally have been hours of daylight.

A few cases of typhus had appeared among refugees fleeing to [Syria](#) from [Balkan](#) countries, and in consequence all ranks were warned to be on guard against lice and to report their condition at once should they chance to become infested. This was a condition to which the most cautious and cleanly persons might find themselves suddenly reduced through no fault of their own. On one occasion two men came upon a tortoise and picked the creature up. Shortly afterwards both found



themselves infested. An examination of tortoises in general revealed that 90 per cent of them were lousy.

Venereal disease was immensely prevalent among the people of [Syria](#), but neither at this nor at any other time of the war was 24 Battalion seriously affected by it.

Early in April A and B Companies, which had been guarding the frontier demolitions, were relieved by C and D and returned to the vicinity of [Afrine](#); but a few days later 6 Brigade, after relief by 5 Brigade, was ordered to move south and take up positions in the [Djedeide Fortress](#). This consisted of a chain of defensive works covering the northern entrance to the [Bekaa](#) valley, between the [Lebanon](#) and Anti-[Lebanon](#) ranges. On the way south the motor transport columns halted before Hama, where the troops debussed, formed up behind a band, and carried out a 'flag march' through the main street. The same performance was repeated later at [Homs](#), and though on both occasions the townspeople seemed unimpressed, it was noticed that they became better disposed towards the British thereafter.

Half of April was past when 6 Brigade arrived at [Zabboud](#) camp, in the [Bekaa](#) valley, where a short stay was made before the battalions dispersed to take up a series of isolated positions in the [Lebanon](#) range. Undulating foothills rose out of the valley floor, gradually piling up into mountains and forming a great natural bastion which overlooked and dominated the northern approaches. In the eastern, or Anti-[Lebanon](#) range, units of 4 Brigade were similarly distributed. From [Zabboud](#), then, B Company of 24 Battalion moved out to camp at Hotham, twelve miles to the north-west, to dig and occupy defensive positions. C Company was employed in improving a pack track close by at Little Hotham. D remained at Zabboud to carry out training, while A moved 20 miles up the valley to perform guard duties at the Divisional Ammunition Depot at [Baalbek](#). There were periodical reliefs so that each company in turn might have a respite from manual labour and a spell of training at [Zabboud](#).

Before the move to [Syria](#) Brigadier [Clifton](#)<sup>6</sup>- had taken over command of 6 Brigade from Brigadier Barrowclough. While B Company of 24 Battalion dug defensive positions under camouflage nets on the summit of a 6000-foot mountain at Hotham, the new Brigade Commander made a practice of inspecting the works through powerful field glasses from the summit of a neighbouring hill. On those

occasions when he could see nothing going on, he would complain of the lack of activity; to which reply was made that his inability to see any work in progress, far from being cause for complaint, merely proved that the camouflage was effective. While searching for some variety of diet, the company commander's cook had succeeded in tapping a supply of oysters. From these he made excellent fritters. One day the Brigadier arrived at lunchtime and, having partaken, made a practice thereafter of timing his visits for the same hour and requesting that oyster fritters be supplied for the meal. This hospitality, it would appear, led to some contravention of the tenth commandment, for the cook was afterwards removed to Brigade Headquarters.

Meanwhile, whichever company happened to be at Zabboud carried out training of the most enterprising kind. Long treks into the mountains with pack mules were the order of the day. Made either by companies or platoons, always fully self-contained, these long marches usually lasted two or three days. Towards the end of May a brigade marching competition was held, one company from each of the three battalions being competitors. The route lay from Zabboud up a long steep climb to Hotham, thence to Wadi Fara, down into the valley again, and so back to Zabboud—a total distance of about 35 miles. Full-scale equipment was carried on mules, two to a section, supplied by the Royal Indian Army Service Corps. The competing companies set out at half-hour intervals, B Company, representing the 24th, being the last to start. The 25th Battalion put up the fastest time, but had lost many men and mules en route and was considered to have arrived back in a state unfit for action. The 26th arrived almost without loss, but its time was very much slower. Striking a happy medium between these two performances, with the loss of only two mules, 24 Battalion was adjudged the winner, with 117 points as against 115 for the runner-up.

The defence works at Djedeide being now practically complete, 24 Battalion's companies were gathered once more at Zabboud. At the end of May 6 Brigade moved out into open country at the head of the Bekaa valley to take part in divisional manoeuvres. On Friday the 29th, 'at 0750 hrs the transport was drawn up and the troops embussed. The manoeuvre, which was to be a battle practice, was to be carried out under normal war conditions and consequently a number of personnel, in accordance with instructions laid down in Divisional Standing Orders, were



detailed to remain back at Camp as "Left out of Battle". At 0801 hrs the first truck moved off closely followed by a long stream of vehicles in column of route. All the troops were happily looking forward to the exercise, for it would indeed be a break from normal routine and the rather monotonous work of digging defences and building roads. The Bn headed in the direction of [Homs](#), and after leaving the road the vehicles dispersed and reformed up into desert formation. In this formation a number of exercises were carried out until 1330 hours when a halt was called for lunch. Lunch over, the Bn pitched camp and erected bivouac tents in the area which was an extensive level plain rising into more undulating country in the distance. Several vivid mirages were seen, some of which gave the appearance of a seashore with islands and headlands rising from the water. Despite the heat and the lateness of the season snow could still be seen in patches on the lofty peaks of the [Lebanon](#) mountains in the West. Another phenomenon that amazed many who had previously had little or no experience of the Desert, was a remarkable whirlwind which whirled a huge spiral of dust many hundreds of feet into the air. Until 2000 hrs the Bn rested, when a night compass march was commenced. To a number of recent arrivals who had never taken part in big manoeuvres at night such a march in the dark over the featureless plain was a novel experience, and some were not a little amazed when after seemingly wandering round over the Desert in circles for a fairly long time, the Intelligence Officer had done a clever piece of navigation and had led them home into the centre of their bivvy lines.<sup>7</sup>

So passed the first day. The remainder of the time was spent in practising movements in formation, in co-operation with the [RAF](#). Finally, on 2 June, the manoeuvres ended with an infantry advance and a live shoot by artillery, machine guns, and three-inch mortars.

Owing to various causes, to the manner of men who fill its ranks and the conduct and character of those by whom it is commanded, a military formation assumes, within a very short space of time, certain characteristics which make or mar its reputation. The 24th Battalion, being now two years of age, could claim to have passed through this formative period with credit. Neither the long, disheartening retreat through [Greece](#) nor the disastrous overrunning at [Sidi Rezegh](#) had bred discouragement; a good name having been earned by performance rather than inherited by tradition, it was with justifiable pride that the battalion's second

birthday was celebrated on 15 May. No combined festivities were possible since the companies were widely separated, but cooks and quarter-masters rose magnificently to the occasion, and a great quantity of provisions was destroyed.

The Syrian interlude was fast drawing to a close. These were dark days in the [Western Desert](#), where Rommel struck hard at the end of May. In the second week of June, while 6 Brigade moved north again to [Afrine](#), the [Eighth Army](#) had begun a withdrawal that was only to end at the lines of El [Alamein](#).

The 24th arrived at [Afrine](#) on 10 June, but the camp to be taken over was occupied by [22 Battalion](#), which moved out, somewhat reluctantly it would appear, two days later. A and B Companies had taken over the frontier posts, while C had gone to [Latakia](#) on the coast to spend four days at a rest camp, when the Division received orders to return to Egypt. C Company was at once recalled and shortly afterwards arrived back at [Afrine](#), both disappointed and mystified. In preparing to leave, every conceivable precaution was taken to ensure that the move should be kept secret. Unit signs remained in position and tents were left standing. Shoulder titles were removed and the divisional signs on all vehicles painted over. No leave was to be granted during the journey and all large towns would be avoided wherever possible. But secrets are hard to preserve in the East and, by the time 2/17 Australian Infantry Battalion arrived to take over from the 24th, the civil population was as well or better informed about the New Zealanders' destination than were the troops themselves.

The five-day journey began on 19 June. Travelling south through [Aleppo](#), Hama, [Homs](#) and [Rayak](#), the columns crawled over the Anti-Lebanons and ran into an intense heat wave on the frontiers of Palestine. The temperature rose until 'without warning serious tyre trouble occurred throughout the entire convoy. Not just punctures but tremendous blow-outs were normal experiences rather than exceptional, and the loud explosion that could be heard from time to time denoted another torn mass of shapeless rubber that was once a good tyre. Shortly after the trouble commenced an order was passed down to all drivers, "Check tyre pressures at all halts." Then the source of all the blow-outs was traced. The trucks were maintaining a good speed, the roads were hot and the temperatures abnormal, and these three factors combined caused the air in the tyres to heat up and expand, with a result that the tyres were carrying a pressure far in excess of that originally placed

in them. After two hours' running it was found that air pressure had doubled itself, and usually as much as 20 pounds had to be let out of the rear tyres. From the time that a regular check on pressures was ordered, tyre trouble was negligible.'<sup>8</sup>

In abnormal heat machines behaved abnormally, and scarcely was this problem solved when another presented itself. 'In the trucks the temperature gauges showed only too clearly the effect of this terrific heat on the engines—the needles rocketed over to boiling point and stayed there. The benzine heated up in the tanks, vaporized before it reached the petrol pumps, and, one by one, trucks which had been running so sweetly faltered, coughed, and finally stopped. No matter what the drivers tried to do, it was in vain. Only one thing could be done, and that was to wait for the engines to cool down.'<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately for the drivers many of these breakdowns occurred on the level road skirting the Sea of Galilee, and while the engines cooled the men bathed. Next day a small quantity of oil was added to the benzine, and thenceforward breakdowns were few as the columns moved on through Palestine and [Sinai](#). They finally arrived at [Amiriya](#) on 24 June. The haste of the recent journey had given everyone to expect a rapid march into the [Western Desert](#), and the troops were surprised to hear that, since in all probability they would not be wanted for the next fortnight, they were to go for the present to a rest camp at [Sidi Bishr](#), near [Alexandria](#).<sup>10</sup> Having moved there and made preparations to stay, the men of 24 Battalion were granted leave to [Alexandria](#) on 27 June —25 per cent of them until 11 p.m. and the remainder till 5.30 p.m. Some made for the city; others went to bathe and idle on the beaches. Every man according to his own peculiar tastes prepared to enjoy a holiday free from the atmosphere of war. But war is a state in being from which escape is not easy. Scarcely had the troops left camp when orders came for their immediate recall. Military police in [Alexandria](#) were directed to send back all 24 Battalion personnel to [Sidi Bishr](#), while those officers who had remained in camp went off in trucks to look for their men. As they came in, gradually, by small parties, grumbling at being thus suddenly deprived of an expected pleasure, they were packed into trucks with their equipment, regardless of the company to which they belonged, and taken forthwith to [Amiriya](#). By midnight all were not present but the occasion allowed no delay. Stragglers were left to rejoin as best they might, and the battalion set out for the lines of [El Alamein](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Lt-Col A. W. Greville, m.i.d.; born NZ 5 Aug 1897; Regular soldier; comd Advanced Party 2 NZEF1939; DAQMG 1940–41; CO 24 Bn 8 Dec 1941-22 Jul 1942; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

<sup>2</sup> War diary, 6 Bde.

<sup>3</sup> 'My strength is a Bn Gp consisting of 24 NZ Bn with under comd. one Bty Fd Arty, one Tp A-Tk Arty, one Pl MMG.'—Appreciation of the situation at Afrine, 21 Mar 1942, by Lt-Col Greville, in 24 Bn war diary.

<sup>4</sup> 24 Bn administration order, 16 Mar 1942.

<sup>5</sup> 24 Bn Intelligence summary, 21 March.

<sup>6</sup> Brig G. H. Clifton, DSO and two bars, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Greenmeadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; CRE 2 NZ Div 1940-41; CE 30 Corps 1941-42; comd 6 Bde Feb-Sep 1942; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; escaped in Germany Mar 1945; seconded to HQ BCOF ( Japan) 1946-47; NZ Military Liaison Officer, London, 1949-Jan 1952; Commandant, Northern Military District, Mar 1952-

<sup>7</sup> War diary, 24 Bn, May 1942.

<sup>8</sup> War diary, 24 Bn, June 1942.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> It had been decided by the High Command that there were too many infantry in a division.-2 NZEF Weekly Narrative.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 5 – EL MREIR

## CHAPTER 5

### *El Mreir*

Disaster hung like a storm cloud over the [Eighth Army](#) as the black month of June 1942 drew to a close. The battle of [Gazala](#) had been fought and lost, leaving no choice but retreat. [Tobruk's](#) hastily improvised garrison was overwhelmed, and the enemy, having crossed the frontiers of Egypt, advanced swiftly along the coastal railway. The 4th and 5th New Zealand Brigades moved south into the desert from Mersa [Matruh](#) to check the invader's progress. June the 26th found them at [Minqar Qaim](#), and next day the enemy deployed round their perimeter; but they proved dangerous game for the hunter, and a trail of destruction marked the way they won through to safety in the small hours of the 28th. That same evening, with much honour and about 700 casualties, they halted close by the defences of [El Alamein](#).

While the outcome of this hazardous exploit was still in doubt, 6 Brigade, hitherto held in reserve in accordance with the new policy of using less infantry, was ordered to man the fortress of Bab el [Qattara](#), central strongpoint of the [Alamein Line](#). Starting at midnight, 24 Battalion moved out across the desert and arrived at midday on the 28th at the fortress familiarly known as the [Kaponga Box](#), situated on a small rock plateau that rose 30 feet above the flat surrounding desert. This was no great height, but it sufficed in a land of level open spaces to give observation over a great distance in every direction, and from outside no one could see within the fortress except through two small gaps. The defences were incomplete; water was stored in good supply, but there was no reserve of food. Apart from weapons brought in by the infantry, there were neither guns and ammunition nor mines. The enemy was not expected to arrive in any force before the morning of 30 June, though reconnaissance parties might well appear much earlier. Meanwhile remnants of the [Eighth Army](#) flowed past [Kaponga Box](#). 'The next 36 hours', wrote Brigadier Clifton in his diary, 'went like a snowball in Hades with a crazy mixture of hard work, extraordinary visitors, unanswerable problems, and, very far from least, amazing rumours, mostly left by the thickening stream of stragglers who rushed up in a cloud of dust, told their horrid news, grabbed a meal and a drink, then expressed regrets that urgent business took them further towards Alex.'

While these symptoms of retreat were being cured by reorganisation, it was

imperative that focal points of resistance should be made secure, and to this end 6 Brigade applied strenuous efforts. The 24th Battalion was made responsible for the northern side of the fortress, while the 25th and 26th faced west and south. At the end of June 28 (Maori) Battalion arrived to take over the remaining eastern sector, by which time 6 Field Regiment and 33 Anti-Tank Battery were in position supporting the infantry. A supply of mines was obtained and laid without delay. Assisted by a large squad of South African Basutos, the New Zealanders toiled at making bomb-proof shelters, at wiring and camouflaging. By the time an attack might be expected the Kaponga Box was reasonably secure, but the troops within had not been entirely unmolested. Just before dusk on the day of arrival a lone enemy aircraft, cruising low, dropped a bomb near a truck loaded with mortar bombs, which began to explode one after another. The truck itself caught fire; periodical explosions prevented it from being put out, and it remained a flaming beacon to guide other bombers to the spot. These duly appeared and one of them released a stick which straddled the battalion's position, wounding three men and the Adjutant, Captain Reynolds. Nor were these the only casualties. While moving out of Amiriya a section of carriers had been misdirected to Mersa Matruh, where a near miss on one of the vehicles had killed four men. The survivors found their way to the fortress and rejoined the battalion a few days later.

The black month of June was over at last, and the first day of July broke to discover a thick haze which increased towards the afternoon. From the north came the sound of heavy gunfire. The passing throng of stragglers had first thinned to a mere trickle and then faded completely away. For a while nothing moved within sight. Suddenly into the empty foreground raced three carriers, firing back into the haze at some object invisible from the fortress. Our gunners stood by to fire at their pursuers as soon as these should appear. At this moment the haze thinned, and German tanks came in sight at extreme range but sheered off unharmed when the guns opened fire. The carriers passed rapidly into the fortress by the north gap and out again at the opposite side without stopping. Not till weeks later was it learned that they had manoeuvred thus designedly to lure the tanks within range of our guns.

Enemy armour passed by to the north and overran 18 Indian Brigade before being hunted back from Alam Nayil. The flank of this force was exposed to the



fortress but at a distance too great for any but occasional harassing operations to be undertaken. The sight of enemy columns streaming past along the skyline with impunity was especially painful to the aggressively minded Colonel Greville, who had to be restrained by the Brigadier from leading out a force in person to shoot them up. Nevertheless there were occasional opportunities of cutting off stragglers. In the afternoon of 2 July the battalion's carriers and anti-tank guns went out to destroy two apparently deserted vehicles three miles away to the north. No sooner had the anti-tank guns opened fire, however, than enemy troops promptly emerged with their hands up; and a little later an enemy mortar section found sheltering in a shallow wadi was also taken prisoner. The bag was so unexpectedly large that there was some difficulty in transporting the prisoners home. Next day the battalion enjoyed a grandstand view of our guns going into action and a lorried infantry attack by 5 Brigade on enemy positions five or six miles away, near the western end of the [El Mreir Depression](#).

The Eighth Army sorted itself out on the lines of [El Alamein](#), fighting for time till Rommel should begin to feel the pinch of lessening supplies. Nevertheless the High Command had no intention of losing initiative by establishing permanent garrisons, and in pursuance of this strategy 6 Brigade moved out of [Kaponga Box](#) on 3 July to Qaret el [Himeimat](#), some twelve miles to the south-east. From there A Company (Captain [Aked](#) <sup>1</sup>), whose men were still falling victims to the over- time put in by mosquitoes in the North Tunnel at [Radjou](#), was sent back to [Maadi](#) as LOB troops. At this time there was some idea of using the New Zealand Division for operations farther north, but nothing came of the plan, and while 4 and 5 Brigades took part in desultory fighting the 6th moved back again to [Kaponga Box](#). There it remained from 5 to 8 July, and then, having received orders to leave the battle area for [Amiriya](#), it moved out on the first stage to its former position at El Himeimat, trekked eighty miles next day over heavy going in desert country to camp where the track led south from Burg el Arab, and finally arrived at [Amiriya](#) on 10 July.

At this point it may be mentioned that there had recently been an important change in the battalion's establishment. The Pioneer Platoon (No. 5) became the Anti-Tank Platoon, armed with eight two-pounder anti-tank guns. Previously the battalion had been armed with anti-tank rifles only. The new guns arrived on 30 June and the men at once applied themselves to learn the use of a weapon that it

was hoped might assist in preserving them from another [Sidi Rezegh](#).

After a week at [Amiriya](#) the battalion was sent off at short notice to that same part of the line it had so recently left, 6 Brigade relieving 4 Brigade, which had been overrun and badly mauled at [Ruweisat Ridge](#) on 15 July. The Aucklanders harboured in the desert east of El Qattara on the night of 16 July and moved forward next day to positions in the line, five miles south-east of a long, shallow tongue of sunken ground, stretching east and west, known as the [El Mreir Depression](#). While 24 Battalion occupied one of the hollows or depressions with which this part of the desert is studded, the 26th held a similar position two miles farther north; and the 25th, which had left [Amiriya](#) a day later, came to [Alam Nayil](#), some way in rear of the rest of 6 Brigade, and sent its anti-tank guns and a section of carriers to sit on 24 Battalion's left flank. The brigade was now concentrated, facing north-west.

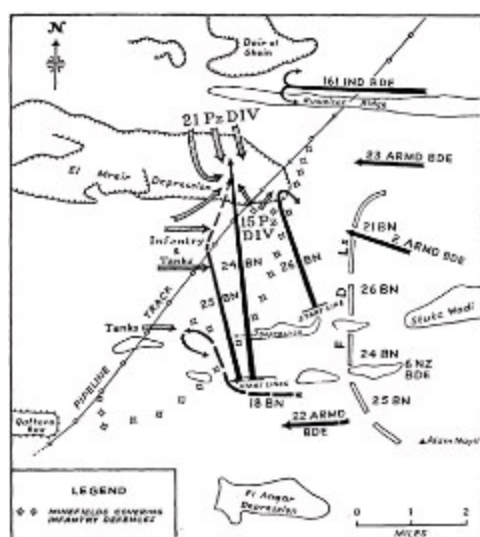
Viewing events in perspective, one can scarcely avoid the conclusion that certain operations undertaken at this period of the campaign were ill conceived and ineptly planned. Of such a description at least was the attempt now contemplated in which 6 Brigade was to capture the eastern tongue of the [El Mreir Depression](#) as a preliminary to further advance and exploitation westward by [1 Armoured Division](#). At [Ruweisat Ridge](#) a week previously it had been amply, disastrously, demonstrated that infantry, on first gaining an objective, are peculiarly vulnerable to counter-attack unless immediately supported by their own tanks—more especially so after a night advance when dawn should find them in strange surroundings, imperfectly reconnoitred, with guns not yet sited. The only valid precaution was armoured support timed to arrive without fail at the critical moment; lacking which no infantry on earth could be expected to withstand the shock of a Panzer assault. A lesson had been given at 4 Brigade's expense. Was not one lesson enough?

Since the attack had to approach its objective along a course running obliquely to the enemy's line of defence, thus exposing 6 Brigade's flank to enfilade fire, it was decided to test and probe the enemy's position south of [El Mreir](#). On the night of arrival a small patrol from C Company (Captain [Beesley](#)<sup>2</sup>) advanced three miles north-west and then withdrew after hearing voices speaking in Italian. Two nights later a far more ambitious operation was undertaken when a fighting patrol under Major [Beyer](#)<sup>3</sup> (commanding D Company), consisting of 30 men from B Company (under Captain [Conolly](#)<sup>4</sup>, the Carrier Platoon, a troop of six-pounder anti-tank guns

and a party of engineers, raided the enemy lines at Deir Umm Khawabir—a small depression three miles due south of [El Mreir](#), and immediately in rear of a minefield by which the whole position was covered. The patrol left its start line at 8.30 p.m. with supporting fire from the Divisional Artillery. As the infantry broke into the hollow, the half light of dusk revealed enemy weapon pits, built up above ground. Throwing No. 69 grenades to stir up dust and create confusion, the patrol moved forward towards the pits to find Italians waiting with their hands up. Meanwhile the carriers followed through a gap in the minefield made by the engineers and fired upon anti-tank and machine guns to the left, silencing some of them at once. While prisoners were being rounded up and sent back, the engineers blew up a gun, believed to be an 88-millimetre, and two anti-tank guns; but resistance was stiffening. A carrier was completely wrecked by an anti-tank shell, and one of its occupants (Corporal [Easterbrook](#)<sup>5</sup>) killed. Enemy tanks were beginning to come up from the rear and fire, as yet ineffectively, upon men and vehicles of the raiding party. The patrol's object had been accomplished and it was high time to withdraw. So far everything had gone smoothly, but on the way back two more carriers were destroyed while recrossing the minefield and had to be abandoned, the driver of one of them being killed. All things considered, the infantry escaped lightly with one man missing and one wounded. Two 3-ton lorries were sent out towards the depression to help bring in the troops and prisoners, but when the party got back there were still some men missing who could not be accounted for. Major Webb and the engineer officer promptly set out in search of them with two Bantams, but as they approached the enemy's wire there were so many Very lights going up that they thought it wiser to leave the vehicles and proceed on foot. Striking the wire at a point about a mile north of where the raiding party had passed through, they made their way cautiously towards the gap, fully expecting to find patrols out and repairs in progress. To their surprise they found the gap still open and unguarded. The Italians were talking and calling out to each other as though 'they fully expected the incidents of the night were finished. I am of the opinion from what I saw', wrote Major Webb, 'that had a second attack been delivered at between 0200 and 0400 hours, it would have met with a considerable measure of success.' The tally of prisoners was eventually found to be 42, all belonging to 8 Bersaglieri Regiment of the [Ariete Division](#), whose headgear, decorated with cocks' feather plumes, made excellent souvenirs with which most of the raiding party seemed to have provided

themselves.

The night of 19–20 July was devoted to inflicting a series of minor alarms upon the enemy. As soon as darkness fell Captain Beesley, of C Company, took out four Bren guns to the scene of the previous night's raid and fired into the enemy lines for ten minutes. Next on the list of performers, the Mortar Platoon went forward at 1 a.m. and plastered a strongpoint some little way farther north. Actually this was intended to divert attention from a platoon-strength raid, undertaken mainly with the object of bringing in prisoners. The raid duly took place, but the party, on reaching the spot selected, found there was no



ATTACK ON EL MREIR DEPRESSION, NIGHT 21-22 JULY 1942

### attack on el mreir depression, night 21-22 july 1942

enemy to be captured and was obliged to return empty-handed.

The attack was planned to take place on the evening of 21 July, while to the north **5 Indian Division** would make a simultaneous assault upon Deir el Shein. The 22nd Armoured Brigade would protect the New Zealand Division's southern flank by fire and, if necessary, by action, while 2 Armoured Brigade would stand prepared to frustrate any counter-attack that might develop against the infantry. Phase 1 of the operation was the capture by infantry of the eastern tongue of **El Mreir**, after which **23 Armoured Brigade** would carry out Phase 2 by advancing westward along the northern lip of the Depression. Sixth Brigade's left flank would be covered by **18 Battalion**, while on the right 5 Brigade would give supporting fire with its mortars and send one battalion (the 21st) to maintain contact with the right attacking

battalion. This was the 26th, whose task it was to capture the eastern end of [El Mreir](#). On its left was the 24th, which had been allotted a lion's share of work in the coming operation. Lying farther to the west, its objective must inevitably be more exposed; not only was it farthest away—a distance of three and a half miles from the forming-up point—but before it could be reached a succession of enemy strongpoints would have to be overcome. To the left of 24 Battalion and with its start line slightly in rear, the 25th was to advance half-way to the Depression and remain there in brigade reserve. All three battalions had under command two guns of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion mounted on carriers, while the 24th and 25th had each a troop of 32 Anti-Tank Battery.

The light was beginning to fade, but all movement was still clearly visible from the enemy lines as 24 Battalion began at 8 p.m. to trickle forward by sections to the forming-up point, some 2000 yards in advance of the defence lines, in one of the many shallow depressions. There was no longer any possibility of surprise, for the intention had been made plainly evident; enemy shell and machine-gun fire opened up while the men waiting for zero hour scratched out shelters as best they might. D Company (Major Beyer) was on the right and B (Captain Conolly) on the left, while C (Captain Beesley) was in rear of B. In this order the battalion moved forward in extended formation at the same moment that our artillery concentration came down in front of the enemy's minefield at 8.30 p.m. Behind Beesley's company came the machine guns mounted on carriers. Sections of the newly-formed anti-tank platoon followed the carriers, while behind them again came 32 Anti-Tank Battery's six-pounders.

In what was still only semi-darkness, tracer bullets rained fiery streaks through the advancing waves of men, though casualties at this stage were almost miraculously few. First resistance came a thousand yards forward, close around two isolated cairns where the bombardment had first come down, but it did not long survive the Aucklanders' charge. [El Mreir](#) Depression was masked by a minefield running from north-east to south-west, which the advancing troops encountered when they had covered a third of the distance to their final objective. The infantry crossed without difficulty but ran into machine-gun posts on the other side. While dealing with one of these Captain Connolly was wounded, but managed to go forward with his company for another thousand yards. Raking fire came from the left,

for [25 Battalion](#) was not yet up and, since the attack was being delivered diagonally across the enemy's front, this flank was exposed. The adjacent Deir Umm Khawabir had been held by Italians, but the troops now encountered were Germans of 382 Regiment, lately flown from [Crete](#), who fought with the stubbornness to be expected from men of their race. All the way from the minefield to [El Mreir](#) were isolated strongpoints, echeloned in depth, each requiring to be captured in turn. Assault followed assault, made with the bayonet and led either by one of the company officers or Colonel Greville himself. Over a hundred Germans were killed during this advance, but the losses were not all on one side. Captain Beesley was killed and Major Beyer badly wounded before Greville, with his adjutant and no more than 15 men, arrived at 2 a.m. on the final objective.

About sixty more men came in during the next hour, and the battalion's fighting transport, having passed through a gap in the minefield cleared by engineers, arrived in the Depression at half past two. Thus, of the three companies that had left the start line well up to strength, there remained 70 or 80 rifle-men, supported by four six-pounder anti-tank guns, seven two-pounders, ten Bren carriers, two machine guns on carriers, and four mortars. A counter-attack by Panzers at dawn or soon after was something more than a possibility. What hope had this small force of survival if by any chance [2 Armoured Brigade](#) should fail to come to its aid at the time of utmost need!

As yet there was no contact with flank or rear. Actually [26 Battalion](#) had occupied the eastern tip of the Depression some time previously, but Colonel Greville, knowing nothing of this unit's progress and having no other means of discovering its position, sent his Adjutant, Captain [Turtill](#),<sup>6</sup> to reconnoitre eastward in a carrier and find out if possible where it lay. Turtill moved off into the darkness and was not seen or heard of again that night.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile Greville disposed his force for defence. From the south, whence the advance had come, the land sloped gradually down into the lowest part of the Depression, from the floor of which a low cliff, some 15 feet high, rose sharply, extending some way both east and west. Each company had been allotted a special position to occupy and consolidate, but companies could scarcely be said to exist any longer; forming up for all-round defence, the survivors scraped out shallow slit trenches in the sand, with the cliff lying 300 or 400 yards to their north. It was too



dark to site the anti-tank guns. By this time Greville had got in touch with Brigade Headquarters.

On account of the difficulty likely to be experienced in maintaining communication with his forward troops between the hours of 3 and 4 a.m.—always recognised in the desert as the least reliable period for WT <sup>8</sup>—Brigadier Clifton moved forward with his headquarters in rear of the attacking lines. Arriving at the minefield he found a gap successfully cleared, through which 24 Battalion's fighting transport was hurrying in single file, packed nose to tail. This was as it should be, but a threat was developing close by where a company of 18 Battalion, guarding the gap on its western side, was being pushed back into the minefield by German tanks. A closed gap might well mean disaster, so Clifton left three six-pounders behind to assist the harassed company and then passed on through the minefield. Captain Sutherland, <sup>9</sup> 24 Battalion's Medical Officer, now appeared with a truckload of wounded. Clifton directed him towards the gap, but thereafter found himself in need of direction. Since the battalion commanders' WT sets were all on carriers still moving forward with the fighting transport, he could only communicate with the transport officers, who could tell him no more of the battle's progress or the battalions' whereabouts than he knew himself. His perplexity was at length relieved when Greville, being joined by his transport, at once called up Brigade Headquarters, announcing his position and arranging to guide Clifton thither by sending up green flares.

The Brigadier arrived in the El Mreir Depression at 3.30 a.m., bringing a few more six-pounders and machine guns to reinforce the defence. The situation was now fairly clear. Between 24 and 26 Battalions lay a gap of 1000 yards which somehow would have to be cleared before dawn—an undertaking obviously beyond the capacity of the sorely depleted 24th. Contact was now established with the 25th, which had reached its objective on the left but was unable to dig in because of hard rock. Clifton ordered this unit forward into the Depression, calculating that it would take an hour to get there. Attached to his headquarters were two liaison officers of 1 Armoured Division, one of them from 6 Royal Tank Regiment of 2 Armoured Brigade, specially detailed for immediate counter-attack. The Brigadier now ordered this officer to call his unit, report the New Zealanders' perilous situation, and request immediate support. The officer did so, with Clifton standing beside his tank. He

afterwards assured the Brigadier that the message had been received, though subsequently no record of it could be traced.

Anxiety had long since been aroused at Divisional Headquarters, but on account of 26 Battalion rather than the 24th, whose position was not known till later. At 12.13 a.m. the GSO 1 New Zealand Division spoke to 13 Corps by telephone, explaining that 26 Battalion had run into tanks, and that it was absolutely essential that our armour should be on the edge of El Mreir Depression by first light. Thereafter further attempts were made at intervals to ensure support, at first for the 26th and later for the other two battalions. At 1.25 the Divisional Commander himself, Major-General Inglis,<sup>10</sup> explained the situation to 13 Corps in greater detail. At 2.15 his GSO 1 spoke to 2 Armoured Brigade, stressing the urgent necessity for supporting tanks to be on the edge of El Mreir at dawn if a repetition of the affair at Ruweisat Ridge was to be avoided. Five minutes later the same officer got through to 1 Armoured Division and made the same urgent request. At 2.50 Inglis was again in touch with 13 Corps, giving the information that both battalions were now on their objectives,<sup>11</sup> eight or nine enemy tanks were roaming about the Depression, and that 18 Battalion had run into five tanks just east of the brigade axis near the minefield. These, it might have been expected, would be dealt with by 22 Armoured Brigade, whose task it was to protect the New Zealanders' southern flank.

While requests and assurances were being exchanged between the higher commands, 24 Battalion, battered, exhausted, depleted, lay in a sandy hollow presenting scarcely any natural features likely to aid in its defence. All unknown to the New Zealanders, a Panzer division was harboured a few hundred yards away, behind the low cliff in front. Arriving at 4.45 a.m., 25 Battalion was directed by the Brigadier to move east at dawn and try to link up with the 26th; meanwhile the men might rest. The moon had gone down and it was too dark either to site the guns or reconnoitre the position. For the necessary defensive preparation an hour of daylight was needed. Would so long a respite be granted? The answer was not long coming.

At five o'clock a carrier charged across the hollow and a voice shouted the alarm—'Stand to! Tanks! Lots of the





Larissa

## Larissa

Lt-Col Shuttleworth's car was machine-gunned by a German aircraft on 26 April 1941, south of the Corinth canal. The hole in the back window was made by the bullet that wounded the Adjutant, Capt W. R. K. Morrison (*page 47*)



Lt-Col Shuttleworth's car was machine-gunned by a German aircraft on 26 April 1941, south of the [Corinth](#) canal. The hole in the back window was made by the bullet that wounded the Adjutant, Capt W. R. K. Morrison ( [page 47](#))



Return from Greece:  
L-Cpl J. Dempsey at  
Helwan with a Vickers  
gun he salvaged in  
Greece—this was used  
until it was lost in action  
at Sidi Rezegh

**Return from Greece: L-Cpl J. Dempsey at Helwan with a Vickers gun he salvaged in Greece—this was used until it was lost in action at Sidi Rezegh**

Escaped from Greece: Sgt A. J. Grimmond (centre) and  
party sailed a caique to Crete



**Escaped from Greece: Sgt A. J. Grimmond (centre) and party sailed a caique to Crete**



General Freyberg inspecting 24 Battalion at Helwan  
Lt-Col Shuttleworth is on the left

**General Freyberg inspecting 24 Battalion at Helwan**  
**Lt-Col Shuttleworth is on the left**

Crossing the Wire into Libya, November 1941



**Crossing the Wire into Libya, November 1941**



Smoke of battle, Libya, as seen from a slit trench

**Smoke of battle, [Libya](#), as seen from a slit trench**



On Sidi Rezegh escarpment, east of the blockhouse

**On [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment, east of the blockhouse**

Bastards!' <sup>12</sup> It was true enough. The Panzers had come to life and were rolling forward to the cliff's edge, where they stopped and let fly into the Depression. Shooting blind at first, they chanced to hit and set on fire a six-pounder portée, which flared up and illumined the whole scene. Then they saw the liaison officers' tanks, 'and the red hot solid shot tore through them with thuds like hammer on anvil. A modern version of the Wild West attack on a caravan—flaming trucks, tracer bouncing—men dying—ammo blowing up.... Some of our anti-tank guns fired back at the flashes on the skyline, only to be deluged with heavy Machine-gun fire and knocked out. Their shields couldn't take it.' <sup>13</sup> The newly-arrived [25 Battalion](#) was not yet dispersed, nor had its men had time to dig in. The hollow was crowded with troops caught unprepared. Gunner observation officers were up forward, but the

distance had been too great for them to get in touch with their batteries by WT; moreover they also were handicapped by darkness, and most of the wireless trucks were knocked out before light came. Unable to hit back for the moment, the New Zealanders knew that a chance might come as the attack developed further. In this expectation Colonel Greville was calling to his men to keep down and wait for the infantry, when he was shot through the head and killed instantly. The German tanks stayed firing from the cliff top for some time before coming on. The bank could be descended only in certain places, and the Germans had evidently mistaken the liaison officers' tanks for an armoured force. Indeed it was a natural conclusion on their part that no infantry would be placed designedly in so suicidal a position without armoured support. But the climax was not long delayed. Daylight had come; the anti-tank guns were all silenced and the infantry cut to pieces by gunfire at close range, when the Panzers poured over the bank and rolled forward. Passing straight on, they took little notice of the infantry at first, being still convinced that they had an armoured force to deal with. Some of our men contrived to escape in vehicles, while others not so fortunate made off on foot, but in broad daylight with two miles of rising ground to cover they had little chance of reaching safety.

Lorried infantry followed the German armour, and so ended this disastrous fiasco.

Meanwhile the Commander of [2 NZ Division](#) was explaining to the Commander of [1 Armoured Division](#) that supporting tanks had not appeared on the edge of [El Mreir Depression](#) at daylight—to which the latter replied that he had not been asked for support through the correct channels. <sup>14</sup>

Including killed, wounded, missing and prisoners of war, 24 Battalion's casualties added up to 280—a huge total when the fact is taken in consideration that only three companies, consisting of 440 officers and men, made the attack, and that a number of men belonging to the non-fighting transport had remained in rear with B Echelon. Notable among the officers killed was Lieutenant-Colonel Greville, of the New Zealand Staff Corps, a member of that select minority for whom personal danger is a stimulant, battle an opportunity, and war itself a not wholly undesirable state. But many others, far less distinguished, died as bravely that night; not only adventurous spirits revelling in strife, but men peaceably inclined, for whom war was

a necessary evil. More than a few of these performed acts of heroism which, being unseen, will go unrecorded.

On 24 July Brigadier Clifton, who among other adventures experienced during the previous forty-eight hours had been taken prisoner and afterwards escaped, addressed survivors of 24 Battalion where they were encamped a few miles behind the line. One hundred and forty were present, bitterly aggrieved at having been left so badly in the lurch. That evening they were taken in trucks to [Amiriya](#), and thence next day to [Maadi](#).

Casualties were:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	4	42
Died of wounds	–	7
Wounded	3	54
Prisoners of war (includes 2 officers and 19 ORs wounded and p.w.)	13	157
Total	20	260

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

<sup>2</sup> [Capt J. Beesley](#); born England, 7 Mar 1909; hairdresser; killed in action 21 Jul 1942.

<sup>3</sup> [Maj A. E. Beyer](#), MC; [Auckland](#); born [Adelaide, Australia](#), 1 Feb 1909; storeman; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

<sup>4</sup> [Lt-Col J. Conolly](#), DSO, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Waihi](#), 15 Aug 1908; school-teacher; CO 24 Bn 16 Dec 1942-5 Feb 1944, 20 Mar-22 Apr 1944; wounded 21 Jul 1942.

<sup>5</sup> [Cpl J. H. Easterbrook](#); born NZ 29 Oct 1914; labourer; killed in action 19 Jul 1942.

<sup>6</sup> Capt K. S. Turtill; Auckland; born England, 20 Feb 1914; schoolmaster; wounded and p.w. 22 Jul 1942; released Mar 1945.

<sup>7</sup> Capt Turtill had become Adjutant when Capt J. W. Reynolds was wounded at the end of June. He was afterwards found to have been taken prisoner.

<sup>8</sup> Wireless telegraphy.

<sup>9</sup> Maj A. W. Sutherland, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 21 Dec 1915; medical practitioner; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

<sup>10</sup> Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, VD, ED, m.i.d., MC (Greek); Timaru; born Mosgiel, 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn, 1915-19; CO 27 (MG) Bn Jan-Aug 1940; commanded 4 Inf Bde 1941-42 and 4 Armd Bde 1942-44; commanded 2 NZ Div 27 Jun-16 Aug 1942 and 6 Jun-31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, Germany, 1947-50.

<sup>11</sup> Presumably 24 and 25 Bns.

<sup>12</sup> Diary, Brig Clifton.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> War Diary, HQ 2 NZ Division.

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# 24 BATTALION



## CHAPTER 6 – EL ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 6

### *El Alamein*

After ten days at **Maadi** Camp 135 other ranks of 24 Battalion were transferred to 9 Training Brigade, leaving only Battalion Headquarters, Headquarters Company, and skeleton rifle companies reduced to an average strength of seven. Activity was necessarily restricted to fatigues, lectures, and purely specialist training.

Lieutenant-Colonel **Gwilliam** <sup>1</sup> took command on 26 July. Captain **Clarke**, <sup>2</sup> Lieutenant **Turnbull**, <sup>3</sup> and Second-Lieutenant **Boord** <sup>4</sup> all acted as Adjutant for short periods during the months of August and September. The Medical Officer, Captain Sutherland, had been assisting a wounded man from an ambulance during the action at **El Mreir** when a bakelite grenade fell from the soldier's pouch and exploded at his feet. Sutherland was wounded and evacuated to hospital, his place being taken by Captain **Borrie**. <sup>5</sup>

As far as the shattered 24 Battalion was concerned, war against the officially recognised enemy was in abeyance, but the men were now called upon to fight a subsidiary campaign against a less obviously formidable though more insidious foe. The contamination of food by flies was responsible for most of the dysentery and diarrhoea which were never wholly absent. The Western Desert had always bred flies in abundance, but the presence of armies, more especially along the railway line in the coastal region, had converted a pest into a plague. 'Flies are at present Enemy No. 2', read the warning in battalion routine orders, <sup>6</sup> 'but they can easily become Enemy No. 1 and cause casualties accordingly.' Members of the Division's Field Hygiene Section visited each unit and gave instruction in anti-fly precautions, while a medical officer with a flair for the subliminal pointed out that 'the psychological effect of killing flies and seeing them die is a great one'. <sup>7</sup>

It was only natural that some resentment should be felt by the New Zealanders at having been let down by British armour. Their criticism was directed against British generals, and they were inclined to think that the burden of war had been allowed to rest with undue weight upon Dominion troops. Anxiety for the safety of their homeland had been to some extent dispelled by the American Navy, but the presence of American troops in New Zealand gave rise to anxieties of another kind.

While they fought abroad, strangers might consort with their women-folk. Sentiments, fears, or wishes that may not be more directly expressed are apt to be translated into rumour. It was whispered that the NZEF had been sold to Britain to raise money or reduce the national debt. When Mr. Churchill visited the Middle East and prophesied brighter days ahead, his words were taken by many of the troops to mean that 2 NZ Division would shortly return home; but all these symptoms of uneasiness were soon to disappear before the prospect of an action in which hope of victory rested on surer foundations than ever before.

In the second week of September the Division, having been relieved by 44 Division, left the line and moved to the coast near El Hammam, where it was rejoined some days later by 24 Battalion. By this time reinforcements had arrived, most of the men transferred to 9 Brigade had returned, many of the lightly wounded had rejoined for duty, and base units had been combed out to supply the combatant forces. As a result, 24 Battalion had a strength of 29 officers and 619 other ranks by the end of September. There were now three companies only in place of the previous four—A, commanded by Captain Aked, B by Captain Conolly, and C by Captain Yeoman. Major Webb was second-in-command; Major Stringer<sup>8</sup> had taken over Headquarters Company, while Captain Clarke was Adjutant. Brigadier Clifton having been captured on 4 September, his place was taken by Brigadier Gentry.<sup>9</sup> Sixth Brigade, reunited under its new commander, moved out into the desert in mid-September to take part in divisional manoeuvres.

The influence of a new commander, of striking personality and obvious ability, was already making itself felt throughout the Eighth Army. It was General Montgomery's declared intention to forgo all other forms of training in order to concentrate on rehearsing for a single vital operation, now imminent. He was concerned about the fitness of his men for the gruelling enterprise on hand, and made no secret of his doubts. 'I am not convinced that our soldiers are really tough and hard', he announced. 'They are sunburnt and brown, and look very well, but they seldom move anywhere on foot and have led a static life for many weeks. During the next month, therefore, it is essential to make our officers and men really fit.'<sup>10</sup>

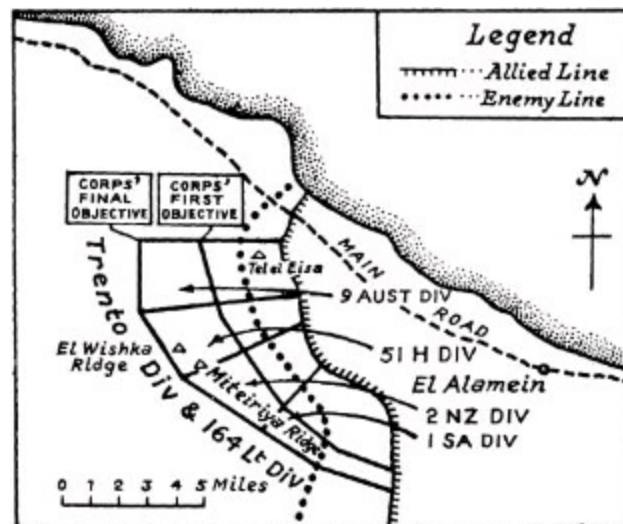
The process of being made 'really fit' was undertaken with drastic thoroughness and continued throughout the latter half of September. The manoeuvres culminated in an infantry attack, planned as nearly as possible to resemble the actual operation

that the Division might be called upon to undertake. Artillery played upon an objective to which 24 Battalion advanced behind a barrage on a two-company front, with one company in reserve; 25 and 26 Battalions then passed through to a second objective. It was a reasonably accurate foreshadowing of what was to take place in a month's time. Safety was sacrificed in the interests of reality. A live barrage was used and, as is usual on such occasions, a few shells dropped short, but there were no casualties in the 24th. Sappers cleared gaps in the minefields and at dawn supporting armour moved up to support the infantry. A counter-attack then developed, to be met by tanks and anti-tank fire, after which 24 Battalion moved back to the coastal area in its own transport. So far as the troops were concerned 'exhibit A' had been the Sherman tanks, newly arrived on the scene of action, and sent out at the personal intervention of President Roosevelt.

We must now return for a moment to gather the threads of history on a larger field, and give a brief outline of events that led up to the battle of [El Alamein](#). On the last day of August Rommel's forces had swept round [2 NZ Division's](#) southern flank, confident in their General's assurance that two or three days would see them in [Alexandria](#). Repulsed from the ridge of [Alam Halfa](#) as they turned north, the enemy had retreated under severe pressure to the western edge of our minefield belt, from which position General Montgomery had made no early attempt to dislodge him, being anxious to build up his own striking force rather than give battle before his preparations were complete. Foiled in this attempt to seize the [Nile Delta](#), Rommel strengthened his defences, especially in the coastal region. From Mersa el Hamra on the western shore of Arab's Gulf, his lines ran south-west across coastal road and railway, bulged into a salient before the long, narrow ridge of Sanyet el Miteiriya, and then continued in a general southerly direction through Deir el Dhib and Deir el Shein, passing east of [El Mreir](#), till his right flank was closed by the impassable [Qattara Depression](#). The northern part of this line consisted of three defensive belts masked by minefields—the whole varying in depth from 5000 to 9000 yards. South of Deir el Shein the defences had been less systematically developed.

Reversing the procedure of accepted strategical method, Montgomery decided to destroy the enemy's holding forces first and deal with his armour subsequently. The 13th Corps would make two diversionary attacks in the far south, while [30 Corps](#) delivered the main assault in the form of a two-handed punch between Tell el Eisa

and [Miteiriya Ridge](#). The northern, or right-handed blow was to be struck by 9 Australian and 51 Highland Divisions, advancing due west below the Tell el Eisa Ridge, while 2 New Zealand and 1 South African Divisions would drive south-west against the northern flank of the Miteiriya salient. The two armoured divisions forming [10 Corps](#) would then pass through the corridors opened for their passage to meet and destroy the enemy armour. A gap of some two miles separated the northern and southern thrust lines. The battle was expected to assume three successive phases—‘the break in’, ‘the dog-fight’, and ‘the break out’. With the first phase accomplished, [2 NZ Division](#) would revert to command of [10 Corps](#) as part of the forces of pursuit. Such, in brief, was the plan of action that heralded the victory of [Alamein](#).



30 CORPS' OBJECTIVES, MITEIRIYA RIDGE, 23 OCTOBER 1942

### 30 corps' objectives, miteiriya ridge, 23 october 1942

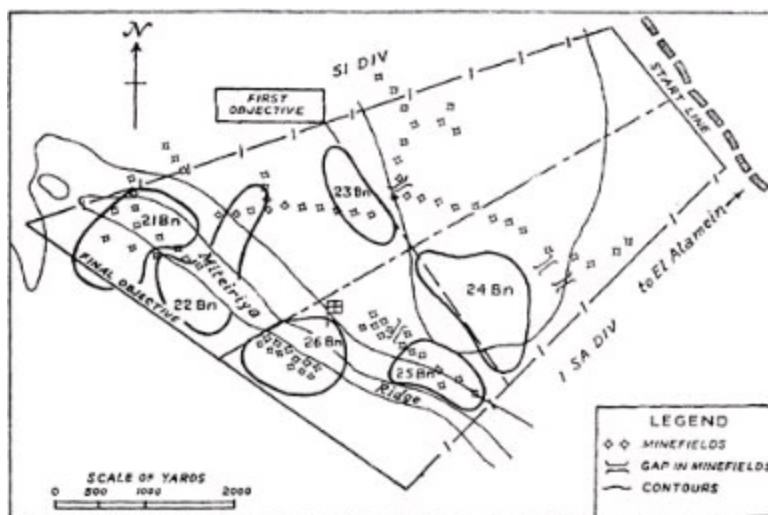
Jaded spirits soon revived after Rommel's repulse from Alam Halfa, and the confidence inspired by a commander of genius increased almost daily as munitions of war poured into Egypt on a greater scale than ever before. Rumours of going home went out of circulation to be replaced by rumours of what was afoot behind the enemy lines. The Eighth Army had not only grown immeasurably stronger; it had come to realise its strength.

The decision to transform [4 NZ Infantry Brigade](#) into an armoured formation was extremely popular among the New Zealanders, who felt that on occasions such as that of [El Mreir](#) they might expect more reliable support from armour operated by their own countrymen. Meanwhile, the British 9th Armoured Brigade was to take 4

Brigade's place in [2 NZ Division](#) for the coming offensive.

The 24th Battalion remained in the S  
wordfish

area, south of Burg el Arab, and continued its intensive training throughout the first half of October, after which it moved to the coast, where company training and swimming were the main occupations. On the 17th Brigadier Gentry called a conference of unit commanders and intelligence officers and gave an address



BATTALION POSITIONS, DAWN 24 OCTOBER  
**battalion positions, dawn 24 october**

on the coming operation, using a plaster model of the battlefield to illustrate his instructions. With one company short, there were to be no troops left out of battle, and on 21 October the whole battalion moved by motor transport to Alam el Onsol, some fifteen miles behind the front line, where the men dug in for the night. All the following day they lay up concealed, and at nightfall started on foot on a gruelling march which brought them at 1.30 a.m. to a position about three-quarters of a mile behind the start line.

For the 'break in' phase [2 NZ Division](#) was to capture and hold part of the [Miteiriya Ridge](#), starting its attack from a point immediately west of the [Qattara](#) track, with 5 and 6 Brigades on the right and left respectively. Advancing on a two-company front, 24 Battalion would capture the first objective in 6 Brigade's sector, 3000 yards forward of the start line, after which 25 and 26 Battalions would pass

through its position and move to the final objective on a gradually expanding front. Contact would be maintained with 5 Brigade advancing simultaneously on the right, but on the left the South Africans were working on a different time programme and it could not be expected that 6 Brigade would get in touch with them till later in the operation. <sup>11</sup> The final objective having been captured, the Divisional Cavalry would pass through 6 Brigade's forward positions and exploit to the south and south-east. The 9th Armoured Brigade would also pass through to exploit south or, if necessary, to help resist a counter-attack.

All day on 23 October the men of 24 Battalion lay hidden in slit trenches, covered over with groundsheet to prevent detection by aircraft. It was a trying ordeal, but they were tired after the long night march and, seeing what lay ahead, it was only wise to conserve energy. At 9 p.m. they left the lying-up area and advanced under a bright moon towards the start line over gently sloping, shingly ground, sparsely covered with scrub. About 9.30 the companies crossed the start line, marked with white tapes, and advanced to the opening line of the artillery barrage. At ten o'clock the guns switched from counter-battery, which they had been firing for a quarter of an hour, to open up on the enemy forward positions, the infantry lying flat while the change took place. The din of bombardment was terrific, and it seemed to the waiting troops that nothing could survive under so fearful a blasting; nevertheless, numerous flares were going up from the enemy's lines.

Behind the barrage, which lifted 100 yards every three minutes from 10.23 p.m. onwards, A and B Companies moved forward on the right and left, with C following in support along the axis of advance. The fighting transport had moved up from Alam el Onsol to come under direct control of Battalion Headquarters. Two companies of [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#), temporarily attached to 6 Brigade, followed 24 Battalion to mop up whatever strongpoints should be overrun. A minefield and barbed-wire belt crossed the front laterally a mile or so beyond the start line, and towards it the battalion advanced, maintaining perfect order and direction over the journey's early stages. The ground was flat, bare of vegetation except for a few patches of scrub bush, and in many places covered with loose gravel. Generally speaking, opposition was slight until the vicinity of the minefield was reached, when shell and small-arms fire became increasingly severe. The enemy fought hard in small detached posts, firing till the last moment with machine and anti-tank guns and then trying to make



his escape. As an indication of the line of advance, smoke and tracer shells were fired at short intervals along inter-brigade boundaries. The latter were exceedingly helpful, but the smoke bursts were hard to discern amid the dust raised by the bombardment.

On the right A Company, under Captain Aked, maintaining its correct direction, reached the objective with no great loss or difficulty, and advanced 200 yards beyond to clear up an enemy strongpoint. Lance-Sergeant Marshall <sup>12</sup> was wounded early in the attack, but carried on to take command of 7 Platoon when its commander, Second-Lieutenant Butler, <sup>13</sup> was also hit. Having led his men through the minefield, he was wounded a second time, and was eventually found sitting on the ground but still covering a small party of enemy prisoners in spite of his exhaustion. He was awarded the DCM.

On the battalion's left flank the South Africans had not yet come forward, and Captain Conolly's company (B) was exposed to the fire of an enemy unembarrassed by frontal attack. As a result, this company unconsciously edged away to the right and crowded on to Aked's men as it reached the objective. C Company, coming up in support, also drifted some way to the right, and left Battalion Headquarters advancing with no troops ahead of it. Regimental Sergeant-Major Cohen, <sup>14</sup> who noticed the tendency and sent back word to Colonel Gwilliam of what was taking place, describes the incident:

This [loss of direction] most probably was produced by a combination of the lay out of the enemy's wire and defences and the lack of contact on the left which exposed our left flank to harassing fire and at the same time left it floating and unanchored. After observing this drift for a time on his compass and confirming the result by reference to the 'I' section compass in front, the RSM informed the CO who had also noticed the tendency. The RSM asked whether he should instruct the 'I' section guides to stick to the compass bearing or tell them to follow C Coy who were now coming on to the right front of Bn HQ. That is, whether to carry out the original instructions, even though this disorganised the Bn formation, or to return to station in the Bn formation and risk reaching the objective with the whole Bn seriously out of position. The CO decided to stick to the compass and sent a runner to C Coy to direct them to return to their correct position. The Bofors' tracer fired along 6 NZ Inf Bde's left boundary was at this time going over just to the left of Bn HQ (which was



correct and confirmed the CO in his opinion) and continued to do so throughout the attack. Bn HQ thus continued to move on the line laid down in the original orders, in spite of the general drift to the right which became more and more marked as the attack progressed. Thus Bn HQ gradually shifted from its position in centre rear of Bn formation and became instead the left flank, and so exposed to an harassing fire from enemy positions in front of the Africans who had dropped well back, and with whom no contact was made until the following morning.

C Company's left flank now began to run into opposition. No. 13 Platoon encountered a machine-gun post and eventually destroyed it, assisted by men of the [Maori Battalion](#), whose two companies were following on in rear. Sergeant-Major Cohen, who had come forward to see how the advance was going, was wounded in this action. The German survivors made off in the darkness and passed close to 14 Platoon, which mistook them for men of the [Maori Battalion](#) and allowed them to go by unmolested. At the time 14 Platoon was engaging the crew of an anti-tank gun, who joined the machine-gunners in their hasty retreat. The platoon commander, Lieutenant [Ramsay](#),<sup>15</sup> then went to the right with two of his men to discover exactly where the leading companies had got to. He writes: 'We found A and B concentrated together, B at that time hotly denying they were off their course. Realising suddenly that the whole of the left flank of the Bn was open, I sent the runner back to advise Capt Yeoman and to let my sergeant, Alan Wetherill,<sup>16</sup> know the position. Due to the fog-like smoke, the general confusion of the battlefield, and the shifting of Capt Yeoman's HQ, the runner got lost. After a delay Cpl [Wishart](#)<sup>17</sup> and I set out but had a like fate and did not succeed in contacting Capt Yeoman until about 0200 hrs.

Meanwhile 25 and 26 Battalions moved up the brigade axis towards their start lines on 24 Battalion's objective, but visibility being very low owing to dust, smoke, and darkness, they both had great difficulty in finding the position. The 24th Battalion's leading companies were still slightly off the line and, moreover, had both exploited forward of their objective. As the barrage for Phase 2 of the attack came down, these companies drew back and a few of their men encountered the oncoming troops, but apart from this the second wave went through without making contact. 'I personally did not see the second S L', wrote Lieutenant-Colonel Fountaine<sup>18</sup> of 26 Battalion in his report on the attack, 'and very little of the 24 Bn when we passed through them owing to the dense smoke and dust. Visibility was very bad, about 20

yards at most, and maintaining contact was very difficult.'

While the second wave went on to capture the final objective, A and B Companies of 24 Battalion were redispersed on their correct alignment. C Company moved to its proper position in support, but when Captain Yeoman made a reconnaissance at dawn he discovered that his men were occupying a minefield. 'During that recce we followed Capt Yeoman walking about over the minefield, and it was not until a Carrier Cpl was blown up a hundred yards in front of us that we decided to take precautions. At the OC's request we did not commence digging until the engineers had had a day to clear most of the mines and set off the booby traps. It was not until we inspected the effect of these booby traps that we realised what might have happened! Some of them were made from a combination of teller-mine and captured British 500 lb bombs. One crater was 10 ft across.'<sup>19</sup>

On the morning of 24 October the forward battalions of 6 Brigade were on [Miteiriya Ridge](#) and contact had been made with the South Africans. Sappers came to clear 24 Battalion's company areas of mines, and when this was accomplished the work of digging in began. So far the total of casualties was eight killed and 72 wounded—a fairly high percentage when taking into account the fact that the battalion had been 180 below strength before going into action. Among the wounded were Second-Lieutenants Butler and Rawson<sup>20</sup> of A and B Companies.

Only a few tanks succeeded in crossing the [Miteiriya Ridge](#) (on 5 Brigade's front) at dawn on 24 October, and these were soon withdrawn to rejoin the main body of the armour, which remained in hull-down positions behind the ridge all day. The attempt to break out was renewed the following night, when [9 Armoured Brigade](#) advanced beyond the ridge, but the leading formation of [10 Armoured Division](#) was caught at the minefield gaps by night-flying bombers and artillery. Several vehicles were set on fire and only a few tanks got through. The 9th Brigade remained forward next day, but the opposition was considered too strong for it to exploit to the south and it was withdrawn at last light. Farther north 1 Armoured Division was through the minefields in 9 Australian and 51 Highland Divisions' sector, but was also held up by the enemy anti-tank screen and made little progress. There was danger that the momentum of the attack would slow down and allow the enemy to consolidate in positions farther west. In view of this, General Montgomery decided to transfer his main effort to the north. Meanwhile, on the night 26-27 October, 25 and 26 New

Zealand Battalions, in conjunction with the South Africans on their left, pushed well beyond the summit of [Miteiriya Ridge](#) to complete the capture of [30 Corps'](#) final objective.

For 24 Battalion the three days succeeding the initial attack were comparatively uneventful. The reverse slope of Miteiriya Ridge was crowded with tanks and vehicles of 10 Armoured Division and [9 Armoured Brigade](#). Shellfire was heavy at times, but the battalion sustained no more than a dozen casualties, none of which were fatal. On 26 October the unit's area was heavily bombed but surprisingly little damage was done. Alarms were frequent. 'One night from this position we saw a lucky strike of a stick of bombs on a long string of vehicles lined up nose to tail and ready with tank support to make a raid into the enemy held territory on our left. These vehicles were a few hundred yards in front of us, and a great many "bomb happy" soldiers made their way back from them through us to spread break-through rumours in the rear.'<sup>21</sup>

The time was now approaching for [2 NZ Division](#) to be transferred to reserve, pending its move to the north, where General Montgomery had decided to make his breakthrough. On the night of 27 October 24 Battalion was relieved by South Africans and then taken in lorries twelve miles to the rear. For the next two days, during intervals of eating and sleeping, swimming parties were taken to the coast by motor transport.

The rest, however, was short. At 6.30 p.m. on 30 October 24 Battalion boarded lorries and was driven north-west across the desert to relieve a battalion of [Cameron Highlanders](#) of 152 Brigade, which lay facing the Sidi Abd el Rahman track, a few miles west of Tell el Eisa. 'The drive was a nightmare. Through a breakdown my vehicle became the last in a hurrying convoy. It was dusk when we started and the dust of so many vehicles made visibility practically nil. The track was ill defined on the ground but signposted by cairns built along the side of the route. We cannoned off cairns, we bumped into the truck ahead, we bucked and banged our way uncomfortably but safely to the rendezvous where a guide led us through a gap in the minefield. Then our troubles started. Still last in the convoy, we lurched after the disappearing truck in front, lost it, crashed through the wire and ended up in two slit trenches. We got out and got back on to the road well lost. We got going again and

a barrage of mortar fire opened up on our tail. Still we arrived. A little Scottie guide met us and led us out into the darkness. He said "a quarter o' a mile" to his Coy HQ and we were warned to "keep silent". We carried everything—boxes of ammo and grenades, picks, shovels, and greatcoats. We marched half an hour and a whispered conference with the guide made it clear it was now only a "quarter o' a mile" to his Coy HQ. We had marched on for another long spell when another whispered conference established the fact that we were only "a quarter o' a mile" from his Coy HQ. At length we halted in the darkness by a large truck and waited while the guide disappeared bent double into the mysterious dark mouth of a dugout. A few minutes later a Scottie officer materialised and told us firstly that we were to be prepared for sudden bursts of machine-gun fire fired on fixed lines from two sides; secondly that the truck we were standing by was on a fixed line; thirdly that we really ought to lie down. We lay down.' <sup>22</sup>

Since the Camerons had four companies it was found necessary for 24 Battalion to form an additional one, and this was done by taking away a platoon from each of the existing companies. The extra company thus formed was placed under the command of Captain Seal. <sup>23</sup>

The relief was not completed until well after midnight, when the Aucklanders at once applied themselves to the essential task of deepening their slit trenches, the shallowness of which had been largely responsible for the heavy losses suffered by the Camerons at the hands of snipers. A Company occupied the central position, slightly forward, with B on its left and the composite company on its right. C was in rear on the extreme right. Deposited amid completely strange surroundings during the hours of darkness, both officers and men had lost their sense of direction and were doubtful of the exact position of either friend or foe. Dawn revealed an extent of apparently flat country covered with stunted scrub, but careful scrutiny disclosed the fact that, while our troops occupied the forward slope of a very gentle incline, the enemy held a low ridge just high enough to give him all the advantages of direct observation. The neighbourhood of his lines was littered with partially destroyed tanks, trucks, or carriers, and our men soon realised the extent to which these derelicts were infested with machine guns or snipers. The least movement in what came to be christened 'Snipers Hollow' drew instant fire upon the New Zealanders. Nor was the enemy alone to be reckoned with. While endeavouring to regain fire

superiority Captain Akerd noticed movement on his right front on ground that he had been given to understand was occupied by the enemy. Two B Company mortars were under his command and he at once ordered them to open fire. 'At the first shot', he writes, 'two figures in gray shorts immediately started running and the mortar crew gave them a bit more hurry up. My phone then went mad and on answering I found Seal going mad. Bad show. However no one was hit, and at least it taught men not to wear enemy clothes.'

The situation was not without irony in that the men fired upon by B Company's mortars belonged to the platoon lately transferred from B to make up the composite company.

On the night of 28-29 October 9 Australian Division struck northwards towards the coast and drove a narrow wedge into the enemy's line that penetrated as far as the railway between Tell el Eisa and Sidi Abd el Rahman. Repulsing numerous counter-attacks against the newly-formed salient, the Australians made further progress towards the coast, threatening to cut off the retreat of a large body of German troops and giving the enemy to believe that the [Eighth Army's](#) main attempt was being made on the extreme right flank. General Montgomery then shifted the line of his thrust farther south. The operation known as Supercharge, <sup>24</sup> presently to be undertaken, was designed to bore a hole in the enemy defences seven or eight miles south of Sidi Abd el Rahman, through which three armoured divisions would pass out into open desert, destroy the [Afrika Korps](#), and then operate on the enemy's lines of communication. The 151st and 152nd Infantry Brigades, which now joined [9 Armoured Brigade](#) under command of [2 NZ Division](#), were to carry out the actual attack, and it was on this account that 6 NZ Brigade had relieved 152 Brigade in the front line. The battalions of 6 Brigade, with their rifle companies now far below strength, were to form a firm base for the attack, but in order to be clear of the artillery opening line they would withdraw a sufficient distance to the rear some time before zero hour, and reoccupy their former positions after the barrage had moved on. The 9th Australian Division on the right and 51 Division on the left were to co-operate with subsidiary attacks.

During their two days spent in holding the line the men of 24 Battalion did not exist under the happiest conditions. Their trenches were filthy and infested with flies, having been previously occupied by several different units whose time and energy

had been almost entirely devoted to fighting rather than cleaning. The position, as has already been stated, was overlooked by day, and by night enemy machine guns fired on fixed lines. German working parties could be heard plainly during the hours of darkness. These were fired upon, with results that could not be ascertained, though on one occasion a truck carrying a load of mines was set alight.

The night of 31 October-1 November had been originally fixed upon for Operation Supercharge, but at the last moment it had to be postponed for 24 hours, and not until 12.35 a.m. on 2 November did the companies of 24 Battalion begin their withdrawal to distances varying between 500 and 1000 yards. Flares fell round them as they moved out, and machine guns opened fire, but there were scarcely any casualties. Since zero hour was at five minutes past one, there was very little time in which to dig in. The ground was hard and few of the men had got down more than a matter of inches when our barrage opened. With the enemy's guns replying vigorously, they lay partially exposed, squeezing their bodies hard against the earth. The 24th Battalion was required to reoccupy its former position not later than 2.45 a.m., and fortunately when the time arrived for its return there was a slight lull in the shelling. In the darkness and confusion of battle it was no easy task for each unit to discover the identical position it had formerly occupied. The distance had to be carefully paced out, and compass bearings checked continually, but even so some of the platoons were still busy sorting themselves out at dawn. Armour of 9 Brigade was already moving forward behind the assaulting troops. 'Dust thickened the air', writes Second-Lieutenant Boord, describing the period of waiting and subsequent return. 'Ahead was nothing but a thick pall and the air was thick with the smell of cordite. The flashes of the guns dimmed as the pall increased. The minutes ticked on. The world was just one thunder of noise.... I remember the buzz of bullets whipping over my head and thinking "well the Scotties must be in". The next thing the Sgt was shouting "Come on chaps". I got up and yelled to him. It was 2.45 a.m. and we were due to return to our old positions. I tried to find Coy HQ and the other pln but they had moved off.... I set the compass, checked the lads, and then led them out back to our positions—no time to get lost this—the countryside seemed strangely altered—ghostly outlines of iron monsters showed up—squeaking and panting as they moved forward. Already tracks for transport were being established. We moved quickly and contacted the other pln just as it hit Coy HQ. The country looked very different under the glare of the gun flashes. What looked like tall shrubs

in the dark were only stunted bushes.'

On the left 152 Brigade reached its objective by dawn; on the right affairs did not go so smoothly, and 151 Brigade was temporarily held up, but in spite of this [9 Armoured Brigade](#) passed through the corridor and advanced to the track running south-west from Sidi Abd el Rahman. The 1st Armoured Division then came through, and bitter fighting took place in which the tanks both inflicted and suffered heavy losses.

Having regained its former position, 24 Battalion occupied a firm base while the battle raged. There was little chance of sleep while the guns still hammered away, and in shallow slit trenches there was always the risk of being run over by a passing tank. At dawn the guns suddenly ceased firing and the silence seemed profound, though only by contrast with the previous din, as motor transport still rumbled by and the fire of small arms rattled continuously. Wounded Highlanders and batches of prisoners, mostly Italian, moved back to the rear. German shells now burst well forward of the position, and our men might walk about freely over ground where it had once been dangerous to show so much as a finger. Captains Aked and Yeoman had started off to explore the hidden machine-gun positions from which they had been so severely harassed when Yeoman was badly wounded by 'an over from the tank scrap forward,' <sup>25</sup> and the battalion lost an officer both capable and courageous. The armour still poured by; a sense of exultation was abroad; nor was it misplaced. By the evening of 2 November there were signs that the enemy's resistance was cracking at last.

Rumours of a move that night were confirmed when 6 Brigade was ordered to relieve 151 Brigade in the Division's northern sector. Having handed over to 7 Battalion Black Watch about midnight on 2-3 November, 24 Battalion started off on foot for its new destination. The actual distance was little more than two miles, but to avoid open country it was decided to move along tracks by a somewhat circuitous route. The arrangements for guides went awry and the companies had to find their own way as best they could. The five-mile march took nearly five hours owing to mistakes and losses of direction. At one time A Company was headed back just in time to prevent it marching into the enemy lines. The men were exhausted, having had little sleep in the past forty-eight hours, and during the numerous halts, while



enquiries about the way were being made, they fell asleep where they lay. Then they kicked each other awake and moved on. It was nearly 5 a.m. when they reached the position held by 6 Battalion [Durham Light Infantry](#), whom they were to relieve, and here also there was no little confusion. Not only were the guides provided for the incoming companies incapable of finding their way about, but the New Zealanders found their North Country speech hard to understand. The Durhams' slit trenches being inadequate and not well sited, the time allowed for rest could only be short, and digging began soon after dawn. The rather alarming discovery was made that a gap of 2000 yards existed between 24 Battalion and the unit on its right. During the morning some of our tanks appeared on the scene and drew down shellfire from German 88-millimetre guns, which killed two men of the battalion and wounded several others.

By this time the British High Command knew for certain that the enemy retreat had begun, and on 3 November our air force turned all its attention to the columns of transport moving west. But a screen of anti-tank guns still covered the withdrawal, and that night 5 Indian Brigade, under 51 Division, struck south-west below Tell el Aqqaqir. The attack went through; morning saw the salient widening and deepening; the day of rout and pursuit had arrived, with the New Zealand Division preparing to swing across the Rahman track well south of Tell el Aqqaqir, turn north-westward, avoiding battle if possible, and seal up the enemy's line of retreat through the bottleneck at [Fuka](#).

Relieved in position at midday on 4 November, 24 Battalion marched back a mile or so to be picked up by motor transport and taken to 6 Brigade assembly area east of Tell el Aqqaqir. That afternoon the Division moved out through the minefield gap, heading south-west, with the armour leading and 6 Brigade in rear of the column. 'Just before lunch we moved off and marched back about a mile in the thick dust of transport moving out. The RMT picked us up. We picked up our packs and blankets, had a drink of tea and then set off down the track past where we had lain under the barrage while the Highland Division <sup>26</sup> had attacked. We formed into desert formation and about an hour before sundown rolled slowly forward over the battlefield of a day or so before. The first few miles were tough going—dodging slit trenches and soft sand. We passed wrecked Jerry tanks and blown ammunition pits—he must have had dozens of 88 mm guns—and then just as it got really dark we



struck the Indian outposts and the open desert. We closed to maintain contact and rolled on into the night.... Morning found us beside a mass of vehicles including armour. We quickly sorted ourselves out and got into desert formation—5th Brigade preceded by the armour and then 6th Brigade. Desultory firing was taking place out in front, and soon batches of 10 to 30 prisoners began to stream in. Where they were sent to I don't know, but we soon moved. [Fuka](#) was our destination and the interception of the 90th Light Div. our object.' <sup>27</sup>

The old battlefield held pitfalls not always possible to avoid, and there were several minor mishaps. A Company's ammunition truck drove over a rise and dropped into a gunpit six feet deep, smashing its sump by the fall. The Company Sergeant-Major, who stayed behind with the driver, rejoined 36 hours later with the truck repaired, and described how, while they had been at work on the damaged vehicle, hundreds of Italians had come up to them asking to be taken prisoner.

During the night 5-6 November the enemy retreated from [Fuka](#), but there was still a chance of cutting his line of escape at [Charing Cross](#), in the hilly country southwest of Mersa [Matruh](#). All day on the 5th the advance had continued with tanks in action away in the van, and at 8 p.m., when 6 Brigade halted for the night, it had arrived south of [Fuka](#). The 6th of November saw no slackening in the pursuit; 50 miles were covered that day and by nightfall the brigade was close to the coastal escarpment south of [Baggush](#). The armour had passed through [Baggush](#) itself. [Charing Cross](#) was little more than thirty miles ahead; only some stroke of fortune could save the fast-retreating German 90 Light Division, but at this juncture fortune intervened. Heavy showers came on in the late afternoon, and that night the men slept in trucks—cramped and uncomfortable. Next day the desert was a quagmire; 2 NZ Division was bogged down, unable to move, while the enemy continued his withdrawal along the road. The weather having cleared on 8 November, the Division moved forward once more, arriving in the afternoon at the southern approaches of [Mersa Matruh](#). At first the place was thought to be still occupied by the enemy and preparations were made for attack, but reconnaissance proved that the birds had flown. The German rearguards had some cause for being grateful to the weather.

While the pursuit rolled on, 6 Brigade was ordered to remain for the present at [Mersa Matruh](#), and early in the morning of 9 November A Company 24 Battalion marched into the town. Of the few Germans still remaining, some were busily

engaged in setting booby traps, of which the place was found to be full, while others, doctors and orderlies, continued their work at the hospital as though nothing had happened. Some Basuto prisoners of war, members of an African labour corps captured earlier in the year, had already broken out and were looting and smashing indiscriminately. Intoxicated by sudden freedom, they at first defied all orders and only submitted eventually to a show of force. Colonel Gwilliam assumed the office of Town Major, and the battalion's remaining companies moved in the same evening. It was necessary to get rid of the large number of Axis prisoners as soon as possible, and a party from B Company left almost immediately to escort them to the rear.

For the next ten days the men of 24 Battalion spent their time in clearing up the wreckage of war and in routine training, swimming, and resting. Throughout this period, however, 6 Brigade was kept in a perpetual state of suspended animation by a series of messages from [Divisional Headquarters](#). On 12 November warning orders were received to rejoin the Division. Next day Division was asked to say when movement orders were likely to arrive. No answer being received, the question was repeated two days later, eliciting the reply that no move was likely in the near future. That same night another message came to say that a move was probable on 18 November. On that date no confirmation of this warning was received, and having become sceptical concerning the whole affair, the Brigadier appointed a sports committee to organise a football tournament. The 19th of November came, and with it a message from Division asking whether orders to move had yet been received. A reply in the negative was returned, and the following day definite orders really did arrive from 91 Sub- Area, directing 6 Brigade to rejoin [2 NZ Division](#) via the desert route.

Casualties for [El Alamein](#) were:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	1	16
Died of wounds	–	4
Wounded	4	86
Total	5	106

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<sup>1</sup> [Lt-Col F. J. Gwilliam](#), ED, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 9 May 1904; clerk; CO 27 (MG) Bn Jan 1941-Jul 1942; CO 24 Bn 26 Jul-22 Nov 1942.

<sup>2</sup> Maj E. S. Clarke; born Auckland, 18 Jun 1905; school-teacher; wounded 7 Dec 1943; died of wounds 20 Dec 1943.

<sup>3</sup> Maj G. V. Turnbull; England; born England, 24 Sep 1907; farmer; NZ Military Representative, PWX Branch, No. 30 Military Mission to Russia, 1945.

<sup>4</sup> Lt-Col R. Boord, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born NZ 4 Feb 1908; student; CO 24 Bn 5 Jul 1945 until disbandment; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

<sup>5</sup> Maj A. W. H. Borrie, MC; Dunedin; born Port Chalmers, 10 May 1917; medical practitioner; RMO 24 Bn Jul 1942-Oct 1944.

<sup>6</sup> 24 Bn RO, 4 Aug 1942.

<sup>7</sup> 2 NZEF Weekly Narrative.

<sup>8</sup> Lt-Col R. G. Stringer, m.i.d.; Nelson; born NZ 24 Oct 1902; hotel proprietor; CO NZ School of Instruction Sep 1943-Jan 1944; 2 i/c Adv Base 2 NZEF, Oct 1944-Mar 1945.

<sup>9</sup> Maj-Gen W. G. Gentry, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Greek), US Bronze Star; Lower Hutt; born London, 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; commanded 6 Bde 5 Sep 1942-22 Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of General Staff (NZ) 15 Jul 1943-21 Jul 1944; commanded 9 NZ Bde ( Italy) 11 Feb 1945-14 Jan 1946; Deputy Chief of General Staff 8 Jul 1946-20 Nov 1947; Adjutant-General 1 April 1949-31 Mar 1952; Chief of the General Staff 1 April 1952-.

<sup>10</sup> General plan of Eighth Army, war diary, HQ 2 NZ Div.

<sup>11</sup> 'On the day prior to the attack I conferred with the Officer Commanding the South African troops, and he advised me that they did not intend to attack under cover of a barrage, but were going to place heavy artillery concentrations at certain known strong points of the enemy and then endeavour to dislodge the enemy from these strong points by an infantry

attack. The attack therefor was not on a time basis, and meant that the infantry had to move backwards and forwards across their frontage in order to cope with the enemy's strong points in their sector. '—Letter by Lt-Col F. J. Gwilliam.

[The south Africans on 24 Bn's left flank, the [Cape Town Highlanders](#), were ordered to capture three strongpoints at times should have kept them parallel with the New Zealanders' advance.—Narrator's note.]

<sup>12</sup> [WO II F. M. J. Marshall, DCM](#); born NZ 21 Dec 1910; farmer; twice wounded; killed in action 24 Sep 1944.

<sup>13</sup> [Capt G. Butler](#); Paengaroa; born England, 2 Dec 1912; farmhand; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

<sup>14</sup> [WO I K. J. H. Cohen](#); Henderson, born England, 24 Jun 1907; ladies' hairdresser; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

<sup>15</sup> [Capt A. H. Ramsay](#); [Auckland](#); born [China](#), 27 Mar 1907; clerk; wounded 19 Mar 1944.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Lt A. Wetherill, m.i.d.; born England, 14 Dec 1916; carpenter; killed in action 18 Oct 1944.

<sup>17</sup> [Cpl A. D. Wishart](#); [Helensville](#); born [Auckland](#), 8 Jan 1908; farmer; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

<sup>18</sup> [Col D. J. Fountaine](#), DSO, MC, m.i.d.; [Westport](#); born [Westport](#), 4 Jul 1914; company secretary; CO 26 Bn 11 Sep 1942-30 Dec 1943, 8 Jun-16 Oct 1944; comd Adv Base 2 [NZEF](#), Oct 1944-Sep 1945; wounded 19 Nov 1941.

<sup>19</sup> Eye-witness account, Maj Ramsay.

<sup>20</sup> [Lt B. C. D. Rawson](#); [Invercargill](#); born [Temuka](#), 26 Nov 1908; bank officer; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

<sup>21</sup> Eye-witness account, Maj Ramsay.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Maj R. J. H. Seal; Auckland; born London, 20 Feb 1912; public accountant; NZ LO GHQ MEF 1944; GSO 2 HQ Allied Military Liaison, Yugoslavia, 1944; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

<sup>24</sup> The preceding operation had been given the code-name Lightfoot.

<sup>25</sup> Letter, Lt-Col Aked.

<sup>26</sup> The infantry attack had been made by 151 Bde from 50 (British) Division and 152 Bde from 51 (Highland) Division, with both brigades under the command of 2 NZ Division.

<sup>27</sup> Letter, 2 Lt Boord, 13 Nov 1942.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 7 – EL AGHEILA



## CHAPTER 7

### *El Agheila*

Leaving [Mersa Matruh](#) on 20 November, 6 Brigade moved west by long stages and came to [Sidi Azeiz](#) beyond the Libyan frontier on the night of the 22nd. Here, some ten miles south-west of [Bardia](#), the Division was assembled and here it remained for the next twelve days. As on previous occasions the troops showed a remarkable aptitude for making themselves at home in fresh surroundings, though well aware that their stay could only be a short one. The idea of a brigade football tournament, conceived just before the departure from [Mersa Matruh](#), was put into execution at [Sidi Azeiz](#), and inter-unit matches were played. The 24th Battalion's A team beat 7 [Anti-Tank Regiment](#) by nine points to nil, and then received a tremendous drubbing at the hands of the Divisional Petrol Company.

It was at this time that Colonel Gwilliam contracted pneumonia and retired to hospital, his place being taken by Major Webb. <sup>1</sup>

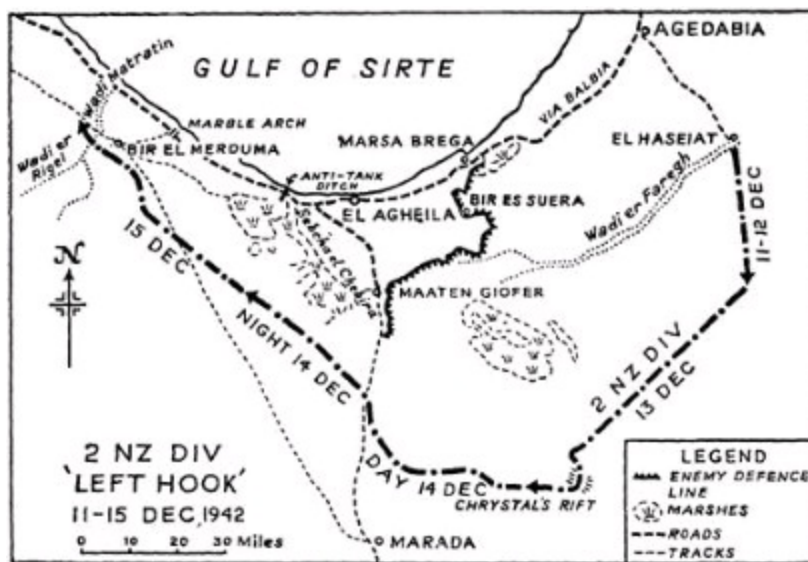
On 4 December the Division again moved westwards. On the first day 6 Brigade passed close to the [Sidi Rezegh](#) blockhouse and halted for the night south of [El Adem](#) airfield. Of survivors able to recognise old landmarks few remained, but there was a profound satisfaction in moving thus rapidly, and with complete impunity, over ground so recently held by hostile armies. Continuing its westward course and averaging some eighty miles a day, 6 Brigade reached the vicinity of [Msus](#) on the 7th, turned south next day, and arrived on the 8th at [El Haseiat](#), 20 miles south-east of [Agedabia](#).

Pursued by our armour along the North African coastline, the enemy had been given no respite. [Tobruk](#), [Derna](#), [Benghazi](#), and [Agedabia](#) had fallen in rapid succession during the month of November. By the beginning of December Rommel's army stood at bay before [El Agheila](#), in the Gulf of [Sirte](#), from which position our forces had twice previously had to retire. At first General Montgomery had hoped to bluff the enemy into further retreat by a threat to his flank, but when it became apparent that he intended to stand and fight there remained no choice but to displace him by force. The position of [El Agheila](#) was naturally strong by reason of its difficulty of approach. From [Marsa Brega](#), lying on the coast 30 miles to the east, a

salt marsh, impassable in wet weather, extended south as far as Bir es Suera. South of this again the Wadi Faregh, running east and west, was a formidable obstacle surrounded by country unsuitable for manoeuvre which bordered upon yet another extensive salt marsh. All approaches leading through this difficult terrain were known to be heavily mined. A frontal assault might prove unduly expensive; casualties had been heavy and reinforcements were in short supply; but a frontal assault combined with a threat to the only line of retreat along the coastal road to [Tripoli](#) might achieve results at a lesser price. In order to make this threat, a wide cast to the south over soft and treacherous going would have to be made by the outflanking formations.

The 51st Division and [7 Armoured Division](#) had already begun to probe the enemy's defences when [30 Corps](#), in which [2 NZ Division](#) was once again included, issued orders for Operation Guillotine, directing 51 Division to attack along the coastal road while [7 Armoured Division](#) advanced south of the salt marsh abutting on [Marsa Brega](#), via Bir es Suera. The task of turning the enemy's flank and cutting off his retreat fell to the New Zealand Division, which would swing out wide to the south, cross the [Agheila- Marada](#) track, and then move north-west to block the enemy's escape line along the coastal road to [Tripoli](#).

With [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) under command, 2 NZ Division left [El Haseiat](#) on 11 December and moved 40 miles due south. It was suspected that the enemy was beginning to withdraw, and plans for attack were hastened on lest he should succeed in escaping unharmed. Rain had hardened the desert's surface and laid its dust as the Division approached the toughest obstacle of its march on 13 December, with [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) in the lead followed by 6 Brigade. Chrystal's Rift was a sea of soft undulating sand several miles wide, to negotiate which the units diminished their front to a width of three columns. Having passed safely through it with no great delay, the Division turned due west for the first time, and halted in the desert with [El Agheila](#) lying 70 miles to the north-west. On this same day the enemy withdrew from [Marsa Brega](#) and Bir es Suera, while 51 and 7 Armoured Divisions closed in towards [El Agheila](#).



**2 NZ DIV 'LEFT HOOK' 11-15 DEC 1942**

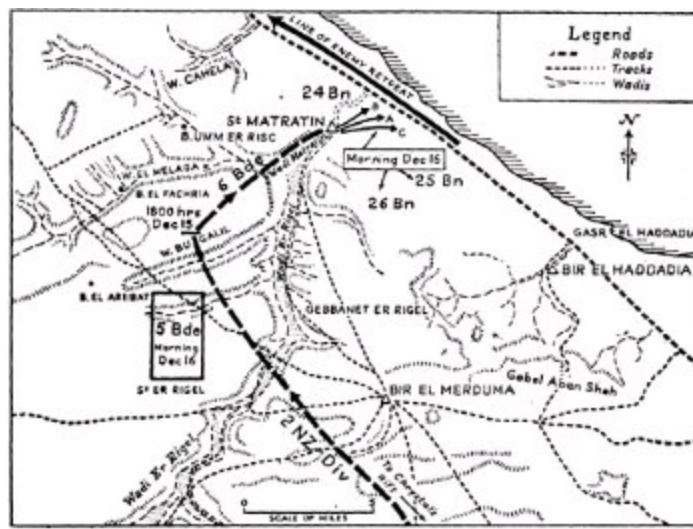
Starting off in a thick fog which cleared later, 6 Brigade travelled on through the morning of 14 December, turning north-west and halting at midday a few miles on the hither side of the [Agheila- Marada](#) track, while 4 Light Armoured Brigade was astride the track itself. [El Agheila](#) now lay due north. The enemy's withdrawal appeared to be continuing, but for the moment his movements were somewhat obscure. To the right of the New Zealanders' present line of advance and west of the [Marada](#) track, a vast salt marsh, Sebcha el Chebira, extended to within a few miles of the coastline almost thirty miles west of [El Agheila](#). The New Zealand Division was making for the high ground bordering the north-western tip of this marsh, from where it would be able to overlook the enemy's withdrawal along the coastal road. Sixth Brigade moved on again in the afternoon. Having covered a distance of 40 miles by 11 p.m., its vehicles were dispersed and the troops bedded down for the night. From their halting place the coast was little more than twenty miles off.

Just before dawn next morning the men of 24 Battalion, much to their surprise, saw numerous camp fires burning along the line of advance to their front. Since every effort was being made to conceal the outflanking march, this lighting of fires was scarcely a wise proceeding, apart from the fact that it was strictly forbidden. About this time [General Freyberg](#) himself arrived upon the scene and asked Lieutenant-Colonel Webb whether the fires were those of his men. Webb replied in the negative and the General hurried off in a mood that promised trouble for the offenders. The fires proved to be those of [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#), which led the column and was supposed to move at 8 a.m., but when that time arrived it was

found that the [Royal Scots Greys'](#) tanks were out of petrol. Two valuable hours were wasted before they could be refuelled, during which time 6 Brigade perforce waited idly by. Eventually a start was made, and an armoured reconnaissance revealed that the high country west of the Sebcha el Chebira salt marsh which 6 Brigade proposed to occupy was held by the enemy. Since the object was to encircle rather than to fight Rommel's men on ground of their own choosing, the Division swung away a few points to the west, changing the line of its advance towards Bir el Merduma. The 51st Division now occupied [El Agheila](#) and [7 Armoured Division](#) was in action at the anti-tank ditch west of the town.

Having eventually started off at 10.15 a.m., 6 Brigade pressed on throughout the day, passed to the left of Merduma late in the afternoon, crossed Wadi er Rigel and halted some miles beyond it about four o'clock. Orders now arrived from Division directing 6 Brigade to advance to the coastal road and attempt to cut off the enemy's retreat, while 5 Brigade remained in reserve. The Royals of [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) were already close to Bir el Haddadia overlooking the coastal road, along which they saw little movement though a number of enemy vehicles were descried, stationary but facing west.

Brigadier Gentry at once called the officers comprising his orders group to the head of the column. No hard and fast plan could be made for attacking an enemy whose whereabouts was not yet known, but with unit commanders assembled he was in a position to direct personally the opening stages of whatever operation should be found necessary. [General Freyberg](#) met them as the column moved off, greeting them with



BRIGADE POSITIONS, WADI MATRATIN, MORNING 16 DECEMBER 1942

**brigade positions, wadi matratin, morning 16 december 1942**

the words, 'Gentlemen, we have a chance to make history'.

Sixth Brigade inclined north-east to encounter going that grew progressively worse. As dusk fell six carriers of 24 Battalion, under Second-Lieutenant Lewis,<sup>2</sup> were sent ahead to reconnoitre the coastal road. Meanwhile the main column went very slowly forward. Almost nose to tail in the pitch darkness, the trucks moved in low gear with engines roaring, sometimes diving suddenly into a dry watercourse and rearing up over the further bank, sometimes clinging precariously to steep hillsides or bucking violently over hummocks. Under such circumstances navigation was not easy, and a mistake was made which took the brigade towards the east off its right course. Eventually the error was discovered and the column swung left to regain its proper direction. Meanwhile Lewis's carriers had advanced north-west of Wadi Matratin to a point near the coastal road, along which the rumble of vehicles could be heard clearly. Having accomplished his purpose Lewis set off to return along the brigade axis of advance, but it was at this time that the column had deviated from its course. As a result Lewis passed it by in the darkness and continued on for five more miles before making quite certain that something was wrong. He then swung about and made haste to rejoin, but in the meantime a second carrier patrol had been sent out with instructions to report back by wireless at the end of every mile.

When the column halted to take stock of the position and get its bearings, it was in a somewhat disordered state. 'Of my A Coy trucks', writes Captain Aked, 'I

had only 4—2 troop carriers, ammo truck, and my Pick-up. Companies were mixed up with MG trucks, and even 25-Pounders of [6 Fd Regt](#) were up with the leading elements of Bde Group.' Brigadier Gentry now went forward with his unit commanders in three carriers to reconnoitre, but when they had advanced a few hundred yards they were fired on by an anti-tank gun which put one of the carriers out of action and compelled the party to return. Gentry then reported to the GOC that he was in contact with the enemy about one and a half miles from the coastal road. On being told to use his own discretion as to whether to attack, he decided to do so at once. The time was now nearly half past eleven.

If the orders for attack were somewhat vague, the enemy's position and strength were also both obscure. Moreover, there was little time for preparation. On the brigade's left, 24 Battalion was to attack the position from which Gentry's patrol had been fired upon, with [25 Battalion](#) on the right and the 26th in reserve. With C and B Companies on the right and left respectively and A following in reserve, the Aucklanders began their advance three-quarters of an hour after midnight. Men who took part in that strange invisible battle still recall the smell of night-scented stocks that grew in profusion along the sides of [Wadi Matratin](#), but their minds were soon diverted to other things when, almost at the beginning of the advance, enemy mortars opened fire, most of the shells dropping between A Company and Battalion Headquarters following on in rear. In the darkness the leading companies lost contact. Advancing through the gap opening out between them, A Company bumped into the German strongpoint which had fired upon Gentry's patrol, wiping out the crews of several spandaus and also that of the 50-millimetre gun which had recently put one of our carriers out of action. The carrier itself was found only twelve paces from the gun's muzzle. A Company came up in line with B, but neither was in touch with C on the right. Arriving on the crest of a ridge some 1000 yards from the start line, the attacking waves came under machine-gun fire, while mortar shells fell close to Battalion Headquarters, wounding Colonel Webb in the face. As the assaulting troops advanced the enemy's fire grew wild, and before our men could come to grips with them the Germans made off in trucks, most of which were well shot up as they departed.

It was after 2 a.m. when 24 Battalion's companies had consolidated their position. B was now in touch with C, but C had no contact with [25 Battalion](#), which



appeared to have diverged to the right. The rumble of motor transport moving along the coastal road could be heard clearly. Patrols were sent out to the north, and it soon became evident that the road was farther away than had previously been imagined. Colonel Webb went back to the RAP, expecting to return within an hour, but his wound proved more serious on examination and he was sent down the line. The ambulance which took him away was captured by the enemy and he was made prisoner. His place was taken by Major Conolly.

It seemed fairly certain that the best part of three German divisions—90 Light, 15 and 21 Panzer—were still east of 6 Brigade's position. Our armour was pressing on their rear and the New Zealand Division made ready to intercept their retreat. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade concentrated its heavy tanks west of Bir el Merduma. Fifth Brigade extended its forces some distance north to lessen the gap between it and 6 Brigade, which stood facing east, north-east, and south-east. Without doubt the trapped enemy would make desperate efforts to break out; by which route only daylight would disclose.

In the darkness Conolly had imagined that his battalion was in a position to overlook the road, but dawn revealed another ridge, higher than the one his men occupied, between them and the sea. Taking Captain Aked and Lieutenant [Masefield](#)<sup>3</sup> with him, Conolly walked forward to the intervening ridge and saw enemy transport moving westward in three columns both on and off the highway. And not only this. To ensure against flank attack, enemy infantry followed by tanks were advancing to occupy the very ridge on which he and his officers were standing. He at once ordered Masefield to occupy and hold the forward ridge with his platoon, at the same time telling Aked to bring up his company.

Masefield lost no time in getting to work, but the enemy, having started first, beat him to the ridge crest by about twenty yards. In spite of this he coped successfully with the German infantry until four tanks and three 20-millimetre anti-tank guns arrived on the scene. Masefield behaved with great gallantry, calling on his men to stand fast and fire at the slits of the tanks, but he himself was badly wounded in the hand and his platoon forced to retire. An artillery Forward Observation Officer came up to Battalion Headquarters, but all observation over the road was lost for the time being. Though asked for, armoured support was not forthcoming. Enemy tanks and anti-tank guns now came into action on the forward

ridge, but were driven off by the fire of our own anti-tank guns. About ten o'clock an attack under cover of smoke developed on C Company's front. Two platoons of A Company took position in support in case the enemy should break through, but the forward troops were well able to deal with the situation. This proved to be the enemy's last aggressive attempt. It was found soon afterwards that the forward ridge was no longer occupied, and when 24 Battalion moved up to take possession and looked down over the coastal road it was only to discover that the birds had flown. All movement to the west had ceased. The carriers went forward to investigate and found the [Wadi Matratin](#) bridge blown, but it was possible for motor transport to cross on either side of it.

Though a portion of the trapped divisions had escaped along the main road, another force had broken out through the gap between 5 and 6 Brigades. The enemy had probed westward, withdrawing whenever he encountered opposition, and then probing again in a fresh place, till at length he came upon a hole in the encircling line. But he had not gone unscathed. Since the start of the [El Agheila](#) operation twenty of his tanks had been destroyed or captured, and about 500 prisoners remained in [Eighth Army's](#) hands, of which 13 were taken by 24 Battalion from 200 Panzer Grenadier Regiment.

At 5 p.m. 6 Brigade moved off towards Merduma and camped for the night. Its casualties had not been severe. The 24th Battalion, the unit most heavily engaged, had had two officers and twelve other ranks wounded. Next morning (17 December), for the first time since Operation Guillotine began, fires were allowed for cooking breakfast, and before dawn the darkness was lit up by countless flares. Moving on westwards, [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) led the pursuit, with 6 Brigade bringing up the rear. During the afternoon our armour attacked the enemy outside [Nofilia](#), while 6 Brigade passed south of the town and took up a position in reserve to the south-west. Fifth Brigade went farther on and tried to cross the coastal road, but was checked after sharp fighting and forced to remain on its southern side. As darkness fell the armour lay close outside [Nofilia](#) itself, on the western side, to contain the enemy rearguard which, however, in spite of these precautions, broke away during the night.

In due course the Aucklanders reaped a reward of two decorations for the action



at **Wadi Matratin**. The exploit which earned Lieutenant Masefield an MC has already been mentioned. Corporal **Howat**<sup>4</sup> of B Company, now awarded the MM, had been one of an adventurous few who had made



Breaking camp at Kabrit en route to Syria

**Breaking camp at Kabrit en route to Syria**



Syrians watching a distribution of flour to their men  
by 24 Battalion from American Red Cross supplies

**Syrians watching a distribution of flour to their men by 24 Battalion from American Red Cross supplies**



El Mreir Depression

**El Mreir Depression**



Lt K. S. Turtill, Lt-Col A. W. Greville, and Maj A. E. Beyer  
studying a map, July 1942

**Lt K. S. Turtill, Lt-Col A. W. Greville, and Maj A. E. Beyer studying a map, July 1942**



Reunion dinner in Cairo—this group includes (from left to right)  
Lt J. W. Reynolds, Maj S. J. Hedge, Lt-Col F. J. Gwilliam,  
Maj R. G. Webb, 2 Lt R. Boord, and Sgt. M. Clarke

Reunion dinner in **Cairo**—this group includes (from left to right) Lt J. W. Reynolds, Maj S. J. Hedge, **Lt-Col F. J. Gwilliam**, Maj R. G. Webb, 2 Lt R. Boord, and Sgt. M. Clarke



A group in the Western Desert  
Back row (from left to right): Maj R. G. Stringer, Maj J. Conolly, Capt R. J. H. Seal, Lt J. F. Coleman, two unnamed. Front row: 2 Lt I. S. Walters, Capt T. G. Santon, Maj E. R. Andrews, Capt E. W. Aked, Lt R. L. Pratt, and Lt G. V. Turnbull

A group in the **Western Desert**

Back row (from left to right): Maj R. G. Stringer, Maj J. Conolly, Capt R. J. H. Seal, Lt J. F. Coleman, two unnamed. Front row: 2 Lt I. S. Walters, Capt T. G. Santon, **Maj E. R. Andrews**, Capt E. W. Aked, Lt R. L. Pratt, and Lt G. V. Turnbull



Training with tanks near Wadi Natrun

**Training with tanks near Wadi Natrun**



A Crusader tank passing 24 Battalion positions at Alamein

**A Crusader tank passing 24 Battalion positions at Alamein**



their escape from Greece in an open boat. He had also been among the

survivors of [Sidi Rezegh](#) who found their way to [Tobruk](#). His conduct on [Miteiriya Ridge](#) had been at one with the skill and daring he showed while leading his section in the night attack on [Wadi Matratin](#).

For the present no more was required of 24 Battalion, which remained in its position west of [Nofilia](#) performing the usual feats of recuperation that necessarily form the aftermath of every battle.

Casualties were:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Wounded	2	12
Prisoners of war (includes 1 officer wounded and p.w.)	1	2
Total	3	14

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<sup>1</sup> Promoted temporary lieutenant-colonel as from 22 Nov 1942.

<sup>2</sup> [Capt J. R. D. Lewis](#); Taotaoroa, [Cambridge](#); born England, 5 Mar 1915; farmhand; wounded 2 Dec 1943.

<sup>3</sup> [Lt R. T. Masefield](#), MC; [Hamilton](#); born NZ 1 Jun 1918; clerk; wounded 16 Dec 1942.

<sup>4</sup> [Cpl G. W. Howat](#), MM; [Whakatane](#); born Pahiatua, 30 May 1917; paper packer; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

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# 24 BATTALION



## CHAPTER 8 – TRIPOLI AND MEDENINE

## CHAPTER 8

### *Tripoli and Medenine*

After a fortnight's rest close to one of the beaches on the Gulf of [Sirte](#), 6 Brigade moved out into the desert south of [Nofilia](#). On the way 24 Battalion marched past the Army Commander, who took the salute 'just as we were jumping a wadi', and that same night addressed the assembled officers of 6 Brigade. Five more days of the routine of preparation, and then the brigade was heading westward once again.

The enemy had made a rapid retreat of more than 200 miles during the latter part of December, and his forces now held a defensive line running south-west from [Buerat](#) on the coast to the junction of two wadis south of [Gheddahia](#). The position was not naturally as strong as that of [El Agheila](#), nor had there been much time in which to strengthen it artificially; moreover it lent itself readily to an outflanking movement. In view of these considerations it was doubtful whether Rommel would attempt more than a delaying action, but our own communications had been unduly lengthened by the long advance from [El Alamein](#), and an attack on [Buerat](#) was not immediately practicable. Nor were preparations facilitated by a disastrous storm which struck [Benghazi](#) on 4 January and raged for two days, creating havoc among the shipping. Once [Eighth Army](#) was committed to an attack on the [Buerat](#) position, the burning question of supplies made it essential that our forces should move straight on to [Tripoli](#) with the greatest possible rapidity. Any serious check in the advance might entail grave consequences.

By 14 January [2 NZ Division](#) was concentrated in the desert some thirty miles south of [Buerat](#), preparatory to embarking once again on an outflanking march. While 51 Division pressed forward along the coast, the New Zealanders, with 7 Armoured Division on their right, were to move round the enemy's southern flank and make for [Tripoli](#), via [Sedada](#), [Beni Ulid](#), and [Tarhuna](#).

Practising the rapid formation of an anti-tank gunline en route, 6 Brigade started from the vicinity of [Nofilia](#) on 9 January, crossed [Wadi Tamet](#) on the 12th, and reached the assembly area next day. The country was more than usually desolate and sparsely populated, being cut up here and there by intersecting wadis which formed obstacles to the advance and provided positions in which the enemy might



fight delaying actions. Early on 15 January the Division moved off towards Wadi Zemzem with its Divisional Cavalry in advance, followed by 6 Brigade in desert formation, with 24 Battalion leading on the left. Gunfire was heard in front and our armour encountered the enemy rearguard astride the [Gheddahia- Bu Ngem](#) track.

After making a stand for which he paid a price in tanks, the enemy withdrew, but a few of his shells landed among 24 Battalion's vehicles, wounding Lieutenant [Carr](#).<sup>1</sup> That night the battalion halted west of the [Gheddahia](#) track, taking up a defensive position on the brigade's left flank. Next day the advance continued across [Wadi Zemzem](#) without opposition until the approaches of [Sedada](#) were reached, but the enemy was merely using delaying tactics, shelling our armour and then retiring before a regular attack could be mounted. On 17 January 6 Brigade entered the defile of [Sedada](#), with 24 Battalion immediately behind the [Royal Scots Greys](#). In open country on the further side, Lieutenant-Colonel Conolly and his adjutant, Second-Lieutenant [Boord](#),<sup>2</sup> who were travelling in rear of their battalion, watched the traffic diverge into two streams—those of the armour and their own transport. Headquarters 6 Brigade now appeared on the scene and began to follow the course taken by the armour. Conolly conferred with the Brigade Major, maintaining that his own battalion had gone the right way, but he was overruled and [Boord](#) raced to the head of 24 Battalion to stop it. Captain [Aked](#) and Second-Lieutenant [Friend](#),<sup>3</sup> the Intelligence Officer, who were leading the advance, both assured him that there was no mistake about the route. [Boord](#) then got in touch with Divisional Headquarters, explained his position, and was told that it was correct. Conolly himself now came up to say that the Brigade Major had realised his mistake, and that the remainder of 6 Brigade was following on. That night 24 Battalion formed a protective screen for the Divisional Cavalry, and on the following morning received a graceful acknowledgement from the Brigadier that its course had been correct from the beginning.

Along the coast 51 Division was making rapid progress. More than two-thirds of the way to [Tripoli](#) had been covered, but owing to the enemy's rapid withdrawal and the skilful manner in which he had placed road demolitions, [2 NZ Division](#) did not make contact on either 18 or 19 January. On the latter date 24 Battalion passed through [Beni Ulid](#) in the wake of our armour and artillery.

'We... found ourselves on the lip of a deep ravine', writes Second-Lieutenant

Boord, 'looking down on the palms and green fields of the oasis of [Beni Ulid](#). It certainly was a change after the desert and the nearest approach to the oasis of my imagination. The surrounding desert for miles in every direction was destitute of all growth—a wilderness strewn with stone—and suddenly without any warning one comes upon this fertile spot. The valley was only about a third of a mile wide, girt by steep brown sandstone walls. The floor was flat—dotted with palm and olive trees and green patches of clover. On the further side of the valley close against the steep sandstone cliffs was the age old village of [Beni Ulid](#)— square flat low houses of the brown sandstone of the cliffs.... We travelled down the steep slope and across the flat to climb steeply again on the further side, over a rough track to avoid the mine-riddled road, and then as we reached the top and the desert plain again back to the main road to travel at a good 30 miles an hour through the billowing clouds of dust....

'About 20 miles past [Beni Ulid](#) we left the road and formed up in our desert formation. The rest of the day we remained stationary —transport roared along the road and gradually the Bde took shape. We were told we would not move till the next day. To the north and north-west we could see the steep forbidding hills through which we must pass to strike at [Tripoli](#). Out in front was the armour, pushing slowly into the hills. Once or twice dull detonations and large clouds of dust told of bombing raids on the forward elements. We did nothing—just basked in the sunshine and drank tea—then to bed while the transport still roared in endless monotony along the road. 'Next morning we packed up but did not move till lunch time —5 Brigade had gone through and now much to our disgust we were in reserve.'

The 51st Division had entered [Homs](#) and exploited beyond as far as [Corradini](#). The 7th Armoured Division was approaching [Tarhuna](#), while 6 Brigade prepared to struggle over the Djebel Nefusa range in the wake of 5 Brigade. On 22 January the enemy fought a delaying action at [Azizia](#) and succeeded in holding up 5 Brigade's advance. Meanwhile 6 Brigade toiled over the range through Italian colonist settlements—the first that had so far been seen. Houses surrounded by gardens lined the roads that wound among hills covered with green tussock. Windmills pumped up water from the wells. Many of the houses were deserted, but from some of them bewildered, nervous Italians peered out at the passing troops. Next day, when 6 Brigade debouched on to the coastal plain, a pall of smoke appeared on the

northern horizon. [Tripoli](#) had fallen and the long advance was at an end.

Since the march had begun on 15 January 24 Battalion could scarcely be said to have been in action. Soft going and the difficulties of desert navigation had been the principal enemies. A few miles south of [Azizia](#) the unit halted and bivouacked for two days before moving on to the outskirts of [Bianchi](#), a new Italian colonial settlement, geometrically planned and laid out, with green shutters on its white houses. The settlers turned out to watch the troops pass through and thankfully accepted gifts of cigarettes and biscuits. Trees with star-shaped leaves and red berries aroused the New Zealanders' interest, and Captain Borrie procured some seeds to plant in his Dunedin garden, only to discover later that he was dealing with a product well known in his own profession. Ornamental as the trees might appear, they were grown not for the sake of appearance but for the production of castor oil.

The local Italian police having had their rifles taken away, certain Arabs improved the occasion by searching out old blunderbusses and intimidating the Italian civil population. Nervous tension ran high and on 26 January reports were received that disturbances had broken out. A Company sent out a patrol supported by carriers, but it transpired that the report was without foundation. At the beginning of February a move was made to [Suani Ben Adem](#) and there for the next fortnight the battalion remained. It was a pleasant spot as may be gathered from the extract from an officer's letter quoted below:

About a week ago we moved to this new area—a beautiful place—evidently a district that has been colonized for some considerable time. Rows of tall eucalyptus trees line the roads and the boundaries of the farms and hide the farm buildings. The fields have been levelled and are planted as orchards—rows of apple and plum trees, and, just where my bivouac is situated, alternate olives and almonds. The latter are a great show—all bursting into blossom—wonderful delicate white blossoms with a faint pink centre. Between the trees corn is generally planted but in some places vegetables flourish. The farm buildings were in rather a mess. The Germans had been through the houses, pulled open all the drawers and cupboards and strewn the contents in every direction. However we quickly established satisfactory relations with the owners....

The parade for Mr. Churchill was an impressive affair—the first time the Div. has

paraded as a Div., and believe me we have a lot of men. However the weather was fine and it went off well. We were all keyed up to hear what the PM had to say, hoping we would hear something of our future once the Tunisian campaign is completed, but we were disappointed. Beyond congratulations and promises of more hard fighting we heard nothing. <sup>4</sup>

Men who got leave to visit [Tripoli](#) admired the town's fine esplanade and modern buildings surrounded by sub-tropical gardens. The harbour full of shipping destroyed by the Desert [Air Force](#) was a sight to be seen, but no trams or buses ran, the shops were empty, and visitors were obliged to take their own rations. On 12 February 24 Battalion moved into the town and supplied parties for work on the wharves, returning to [Suani Ben Adem](#) at the end of the month. A further stay in this pleasant spot would have been more than welcome, but all such hopes were almost immediately disappointed.

When [Tripoli](#) fell the Axis forces had no choice but to continue their withdrawal westwards. By the beginning of February [Italy](#) had lost the whole of her African empire. Rommel had retreated into [Tunisia](#) and was preparing to make a stand at [Mareth](#), on the Gulf of [Gabes](#). [Ben Gardane](#), an outpost of his line, fell on 15 February, [Foum Tatahouine](#) and [Medenine](#) a few days later. The main position was now unmasked. General Montgomery had planned to attack it on or about 20 March, but on 15 February the enemy struck at [2 United States Corps](#) in western [Tunisia](#) and drove it back upon [Tebessa](#). For a while the situation was serious, and the [Eighth Army](#) was called upon to exert pressure in the [Mareth](#) sector in order to draw off Axis forces from the north. Montgomery at once sent 51 Division and [7 Armoured Division](#) along the coast and the [Gabes](#) road respectively to probe towards [Mareth](#), fully realising at the same time that, should Rommel break off his northern offensive and transfer his forces rapidly to the south, these two divisions would run the risk of being overwhelmed. The Army Commander's anticipations were at least partially fulfilled. When 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions appeared behind the [Mareth Line](#) late in February, the New Zealand Division was ordered forward to redress the balance of strength and prepare to meet the attack which now appeared imminent.

Having received warning orders the previous day, 24 Battalion left [Suani Ben Adem](#) at 11 a.m. on 2 March and travelled in column of route along the main coastal road. After halting for an hour at 5 p.m., the column resumed the journey and moved

on throughout the night. In Tripolitania the road was good, but beyond the Tunisian frontier it was very bad and, unfortunately, it was this latter part of the journey that had to be made in darkness. Having covered 170 miles in something less than 24 hours, the battalion debussed and at once took up its battle position. Between the [Mareth](#) road and the sea coast the three infantry brigades of 51 Division held an extended line, with [23 Armoured Brigade](#) slightly retired and situated close to [Divisional Headquarters](#). The 7th Armoured Division lay astride the road itself north-west of [Medenine](#). In its centre an isolated, dominating hill, Point 270, better known as Edinburgh Castle, was held by the Guards Brigade, with [131 Brigade](#) on its left and two armoured brigades in rear. The New Zealand Division screened the village of Medenine, with the three battalions of 5 Brigade forward and [4 Light Armoured Brigade](#) drawn back on the left to guard that flank against attack along the [Foum Tatahouine](#) road. Sixth Brigade remained in reserve with its battalions grouped two or three miles north-east of [Medenine](#), in a position from which 5 Brigade's line might be reinforced or a counter-attack delivered if such should prove necessary. Little wire and few minefields covered the British front, but the defenders were exceptionally strong in armour and artillery. Included among the 500 anti-tank guns sited round [Medenine](#) were some of the new 17-pounders recently issued in [Tripoli](#).

The 4th and 5th of March were days of expectation. Lieutenant-Colonel Conolly and his company commanders reconnoitred Hill 270 as there was some idea at one time that they might take over the Guards' -position. This, however, they were not required to do. Early in the morning of 6 March a mist enveloped the whole front, and before it lifted the enemy guns opened fire. Then, as the mist cleared away, tanks appeared advancing in three columns, one from [Mareth](#), one from the hills east of [Toujane](#), and another from between the Hallouf defile and [Kreddache](#). Early in the proceedings tanks appeared before the lines of 21 and 28 Battalions, but it soon became clear that the main thrust was being delivered further north against Hill 270.

The ensuing battle was one between artillery in position and advancing armour. Holding their fire till the tanks had arrived within a few hundred yards of the infantry positions, our anti-tank guns opened up on the advancing armour, while field guns dealt with the enemy's soft-skinned vehicles coming up in rear. By ten o'clock the attack had been beaten off with negligible loss to the defenders.

Sporadic fighting broke out again in the afternoon, culminating in a full-scale attack by tanks and infantry towards evening. This also was broken up by gunfire without our infantry coming into action. At dusk the enemy withdrew to the north-west with heavy losses in tanks, having accomplished nothing.

Throughout the day the Aucklanders had enjoyed a view of the battle, taking no part in the engagement, though at times they were put to some inconvenience by enemy fighter-bombers which swooped down out of the sun and dropped bombs in the lines. That night they remained on the battlefield.

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<sup>1</sup> Maj S. E. Carr; Rotorua; born Feilding, 11 Mar 1903; company director; OC Discharge Depot 1943; Camp Commandant 2 NZEF1944; CO Northern Inf Trng Depot 1944; twice wounded.

<sup>2</sup> He had taken the place of Capt E. S. Clarke, invalided back to Cairo from Nofilia.

<sup>3</sup> Capt L. C. Friend, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Suva, 3 Nov 1913; bank officer; IO 24 Bn 1943; GSO 3 (SD) HQ 2 NZEF1943; OC 1 NZ Interrogation Sec 1944; OC Allied Interrogation Det, Italy, 1944; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

<sup>4</sup> Letter, 2 Lt Boord, 10 Feb 1943.

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# 24 BATTALION



## CHAPTER 9 – TEBAGA GAP

## CHAPTER 9

### *Tebaga Gap*

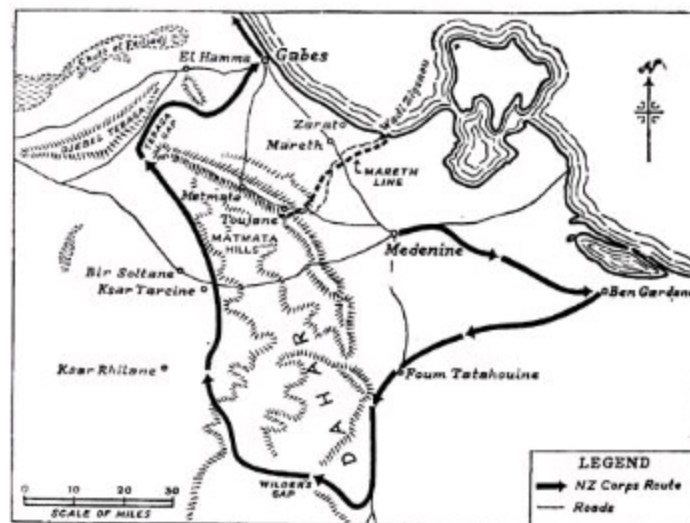
During the two days succeeding the action at [Medenine](#) 200 reinforcements reached 24 Battalion while it still remained in its battle positions. This added strength made possible the formation of four rifle companies in place of the three to which the unit had been reduced at [El Alamein](#). Intensive training of the newcomers began at once but was cut short by orders to move on 11 March. Immediately before the battalion left [Medenine](#) about eighty other ranks, all of whom had seen much service, were sent back to [Tripoli](#) as LOB troops under Major Stringer.

Starting at 8.30 p.m. the battalion journeyed back to Ben Gardane, turned sharply to the south-west, and halted from mid-afternoon till nightfall. Under way once more, it passed through [Foum Tatahouine](#) in darkness and on southward, leaving the main road at daybreak to strike due west and emerge two hours later on the landward side of the [Matmata](#) range. Needless to say this journey was not undertaken merely for the sake of covering vast stretches of desert in the least possible time, but in conformity with a long contemplated plan of action.

General Montgomery's intention, already formed before the end of February, of attacking the [Mareth Line](#) on 20 March was not modified by the action at [Medenine](#). Indeed the Army Commander had welcomed Rommel's offensive as being likely to weaken the enemy forces and render them less capable of sustaining a British counter-blow. Traversed almost at right angles by the [Medenine- Gabes](#) road, the Axis main line of defence lay along the [Wadi Zigzaou](#) between the coast and the [Matmata](#) hills. The right flank of the position was secured by this range, which had on its landward side a wide expanse of waterless desert which the French believed to be impassable for motor transport. Nearly sixty miles due west of [Mareth](#), a gap between the [Djebel Melab](#) and [Djebel Tebaga](#) ranges

led into the rear of the Axis position. Should it prove possible, therefore, to send an outflanking force over the [Matmata](#) range and across the desert, the [Mareth Line](#) might be assailed not only frontally but also in its right rear, via the [Tebaga Gap](#); though it had to be recognised that the enemy, working on interior lines, would be able to reinforce his threatened flank with little delay. Confident that his transport

would be found capable of making a journey the French declared impossible,



LEFT HOOK AT MARETH

### left hook at mareth

Montgomery decided to attack along the coast with **30 Corps**, at the same time sending a heavily reinforced New Zealand Division on a long forced march round the enemy's western flank. While **30 Corps** disposed of the **Mareth Line's** outlying defences on 16, 17, and 18 March, **2 NZ Division**, swollen to corps status by the inclusion of an armoured brigade, an armoured regiment, and General Leclerc's Free French, assembled in the desert east of Wilder's Gap, the passage which led through the **Matmata** range. It was to join this concentration that 24 Battalion made its long, rapid journey on 11 and 12 March.

Within the perimeter of the assembly area all vehicles were camouflaged; movement by day was restricted to a minimum and training was carried out by night. Enemy aircraft did not appear, and the only hostile action was that of wandering Arabs who indulged their predatory instincts by stealing a surprisingly large number of lamps. Local fauna consisted mainly of large, green scorpions, so abundant in rocky ground that a party of amateur naturalists was able to collect a petrol tin full of them.

Conolly, 24 Battalion's commanding officer since **El Agheila**, had had his rank of temporary lieutenant-colonel made substantive on 20 February. Boord, confirmed in his position as Adjutant; had become a temporary captain. A Company was still under Captain Aked, while C had been taken over by Captain Seal in succession to

Captain Yeoman, wounded at [El Alamein](#). B and D were now commanded respectively by Major [Andrews](#) <sup>1</sup> and Captain [Dew](#), <sup>2</sup> the latter having recently joined the battalion. The field returns of 20 March showed a strength of 26 officers and 613 other ranks.

At dusk on 19 March, with 24 Battalion leading in desert formation of nine columns, 6 Brigade moved off behind the armour and artillery. Having covered nearly forty miles by 11 p.m., the column halted. There was a moon, and difficulties of navigation did not arise on the march as the tracks of the leading vehicles were easily followed; but to reach its place of dispersal 24 Battalion was required to swing left and take position on the brigade perimeter's left flank. Passing over gently rolling downs with occasional patches of soft sand, the companies became separated and lost their bearings, with the result that Colonel Conolly and his adjutant reached their unit's destination to find only C Company present. D and A Companies came in during the night, but B and Headquarters Companies made no appearance till dawn.

It had been intended to lie up concealed during the day of 20 March, but the movements of 27,000 men and 1700 vehicles are not to be easily concealed. The enemy having got wind of our outflanking movement, [General Freyberg](#) was ordered to continue his march by day, and instead of lying up the column moved on.

Low sand dunes made the going difficult; vehicles stuck fast and had to be pulled out; before long 24 Battalion had lost all semblance of formation. At midday progress was held up by a minefield, but lanes through it had been made by engineers and the traffic poured across with little delay. Beyond this obstacle the going improved by degrees and gradually 24 Battalion resumed its correct formation. Early in the afternoon the column came upon a formed road, and, turning along it to the west, arrived at [Bir Soltane](#), a small oasis around which were deserted enemy fortifications—the first to be encountered. Beyond this place a large herd of camels stampeded at the terrifying sight of a modern army on the move. 'They ran clumsily in front of the convoy for several miles before swerving to the left and coming to a standstill to watch us pass with stupid eyes. A ragged, bare-foot Arab boy ran after them, wailing every now and then in his native tongue.'<sup>3</sup>

Without warning American fighter-bombers came out of the sun and dropped their bombs before realising the New Zealanders' identity. One bomb landed close

beside Sergeant Trevelion's <sup>4</sup> jeep, sending aloft a column of earth and stones which buried the vehicle as it subsided. But suddenly, before the onlookers' horrified gaze, the entombed jeep's engine started up and out of the mass of rubble it came, with no one hurt. In an instant the supposed tragedy became an uproarious comedy.

Away on the left appeared white sandhills of the inner desert, and towards evening a range of rugged hills appeared on the northern skyline. This was the [Djebel Tebaga](#), the western wall of the vital gap leading in towards the coast, through which it was designed to force a passage.

The [New Zealand Corps](#) dispersed its vehicles and settled in for the night. Some hours after it had done so, [30 Corps](#) began its assault on the [Mareth Line](#).

Twenty miles north-west of where the New Zealanders lay, two low, narrow ranges approached to within five or six thousand yards of each other, leaving a passage between them scarcely five miles long that gave on to open desert beyond. Roman legionnaires had fortified this gateway to their African territory against barbarian inroad by building a wall across its southern entrance. Frenchmen and Italians had both thrown up earthworks on the same spot in later days. It was now guarded by Italian infantry.

After a clash with enemy armour on the morning of 21 March our tanks advanced to the [El Hamma](#) road, some 2000 yards from the enemy's defence lines. Moving forward battery by battery, the Corps artillery took up positions south of the road and began to engage the enemy guns. The Brigadier and the commanding officers of 25 and 26 Battalions went forward with [General Freyberg](#) to reconnoitre, while 6 Brigade remained halted.

It was now clear that Axis forces held the line of the Roman Wall, in front of which rose Hill 201, a feature commanding the valley's southern entrance. A minefield, an anti-tank ditch, and a line of wire masked the ruined Roman Wall, bulging forward in the centre to include Hill 201. Since the capture of this hill must obviously precede further operations, 6 Brigade was ordered to attack and capture it at 9.30 p.m. on 21 March. The 25th and 26th Battalions were to carry out the assault.

That morning 24 Battalion moved three miles north-west, passing through fields of wheat a foot high, to the left of where the medium batteries had taken position. The scent of wild flowers filled the air, while away in front tanks of 8 Armoured Brigade fired at targets invisible to the infantry, and as the Aucklanders watched them they crawled slowly over a ridge and disappeared. Early in the afternoon the battalion again moved a few miles forward. From their new positions the troops could see some way into the gap which appeared to be 'about three miles wide, rimmed with high hills'. Two miles or more beyond its entrance several high hills rose up on the floor of the valley—a geographical feature that the Aucklanders would have cause to remember in days to come. Already our tanks could be seen trying to move forward in face of gunfire from German batteries and tanks. Colonel Conolly, who had attended a brigade conference, returned later in the afternoon, bringing news of the coming night's operation, and at the same time informing his officers that their battalion was to remain in reserve. For the present there was nothing to be done but wait upon events.

The attack on Hill 201 succeeded. Long before dawn both battalions were on their objectives and a large number of Italian prisoners had been taken. The 8th Armoured Brigade and New Zealand Divisional Cavalry followed through the minefield gap at dawn to exploit north and north-west. The Divisional Cavalry swung left in an attempt to get behind the enemy's position but was held up before reaching the El Hamma road. The 8th Armoured Brigade advanced 1000 yards beyond the Roman Wall and engaged the enemy from hull-down positions, but could get no further. After the initial success resistance had stiffened. At dusk 26 Battalion moved forward to take over ground occupied by the armour during daylight. On its left 25 Battalion remained in occupation of Hill 201.

The men of 24 Battalion were enjoying the spectacle of long columns of prisoners being marched to the rear, when orders were received to move up on the left of the field artillery's positions. The battalion sat down practically among the guns and remained there till next day (23rd), when the Colonel went forward with the Brigadier to reconnoitre the ground on 25 Battalion's left. Conolly returned with the news that his unit would extend 6 Brigade's front to the left that night, and then went forward again with his company commanders to show them how the land lay. Captain Neal <sup>5</sup> of the Anti-Tank Platoon and Second-Lieutenant Stead, <sup>6</sup> Intelligence

Officer, were both wounded on this reconnaissance. On the night of 22-23 March **26 Battalion** had advanced north of the Roman Wall and extended its right towards the foothills. The 25th Battalion had taken ground to the west without opposition, while the Divisional Cavalry patrolled along the foothills of **Djebel Tebaga**, but as yet no infantry was in position on the Roman Wall west of the **El Hamma** road.

The 24th Battalion embussed at 7 p.m. and was driven through the minefield gap to a point on the **El Hamma** road east of Hill 201. From there it moved on foot and took up position just forward of the Roman Wall, between road and foothills. With D Company left, C Centre, B right and A in reserve, the battalion was strung out over a front of 3000 yards or more. By midnight it was fairly in position.

Trucks from B Echelon brought up hot breakfast before dawn (24th), as the new position was overlooked from the north and east. Batteries on 24 Battalion's left opened fire at sunrise and drew a certain amount of retaliation. The enemy's artillery had obviously been reinforced. Towards midday tanks of **8 Armoured Brigade** and the Divisional Cavalry began to concentrate on the battalion's left flank. In attempting to shell a bottleneck through which the armour would have to pass, enemy guns plastered A Company's area heavily and continuously, causing several casualties. In the afternoon, when the shelling had died down, Captain Aked arrived at Battalion Headquarters, furiously angry at having been pinned down in his own lines for two and a half hours. His battle dress was torn by shell splinters in several places, but he himself was unhurt. Hurricane tank-busters flew over to deal with German armour and 'one of them came back slowly on our left, crash landed on top of the ridge and turned over on its back. Our fellows soon had the pilot out—an Aussie, unhurt except for scalds—cursing like a trooper. He was quickly rushed to an ambulance.' <sup>7</sup>

'About 4.30 p.m.', writes Captain Boord, 'I went up to the OP to have a look. Our armour like squat black beetles was hull down on a hill some 500 yards out—firing occasionally at some Jerry tanks also hull down about 1500 yards from them. I could only see one enemy tank in full—a Mark 6 <sup>8</sup>—a terrific thing with the 88 protruding right out over the front of the tank, firing occasionally at our chaps who could only see his gun and turret, though from our position we could see practically the whole of the body—too far away to do any good with our anti-tank guns.'



Enjoying excellent observation from high ground on both flanks, the enemy appeared to be digging in about 3000 yards forward. He had lately been reinforced by 164 German Division and, at our present rate of advance, seemed likely to hold his ground for some time. Having come so far so fast, our troops were becoming slightly puzzled at what seemed hesitation on the part of their leaders. As yet the general situation was unknown to them.

On the night of 20 March 50 Division had assaulted the [Mareth Line](#), crossing the [Wadi Zigzaou](#) on the coastal sector and establishing three strongpoints on its further side. The wadi, however, was a formidable obstacle which the supporting armour had great difficulty in crossing. On 21 March, while 6 Brigade was capturing Hill 201, 50 Division expanded its bridgehead, but heavy rain on the 22nd demolished the tank bridge over the wadi and grounded the light bombers preparing to deal with the tanks of [15 Panzer Division](#). An armoured counter-attack recovered some of the ground so dearly bought, and although a portion of the bridgehead was still maintained, General Montgomery decided to withdraw across the [Wadi Zigzaou](#) and reinforce [New Zealand Corps](#) at [Tebaga Gap](#). The 1st Armoured Division of [10 Corps](#) lay to the west of [Medenine](#) as Army reserve. It was now ordered to cross the range and move round in the track of New Zealand Corps. The drive through [Tebaga Gap](#) awaited its arrival.

Returning from a brigade conference at midday on 25 March, Colonel Conolly at once told his company commanders the news that the main effort was being switched from [Mareth](#) to [Tebaga](#). With the arrival of [1 Armoured Division](#), now well on its way and due the following afternoon, the New Zealand Corps would attack behind its own tanks, form a bridgehead, and pass the armoured division through to [El Hamma](#).

A preparatory reshuffle was necessary, and company commanders spent most of the afternoon reconnoitring their new positions. That night (25th) 24 Battalion moved to its start line 1000 yards forward of the Roman Wall, sidestepping to the right and shortening its frontage to 1500 yards. When this realignment was accomplished, C Company's right flank rested on the [El Hamma](#) road, joining up with [23 Battalion](#), while D, the other forward company, was on its left, with A Company 500 yards to the rear in support. B, the reserve company, occupied a detached

position on the left. The battalion carriers were concealed in rear of the Roman Wall.

East of the [El Hamma](#) road the positions occupied by 25 and 26 Battalions were closely overlooked by Hill 184, the capture of which was an essential preliminary to the occupation of start lines forward of the Roman Wall. An attempt by A Company [26 Battalion](#) to take this feature on the night of 24 March had been unsuccessful, and it still remained in enemy hands. Fifth Brigade, which had been occupying a position in rear on the Corps' left flank to guard against possible attack by 10 Panzer Division, was now required to move forward into line with 6 Brigade east of the [El Hamma](#) road, but before it could do so with any degree of safety, Hill 184 had to be disposed of. The task was allotted to [21 Battalion](#), which attacked at 1 a.m. on 26 March and, two hours later, was able to announce its capture of the vital high ground. Now that the coast was clear, 28 and 23 Battalions took over on 6 Brigade's right from the 26th, which in turn relieved 25 Battalion on Hill 201. The 25th Battalion then moved out to the extreme left and relieved the Buffs, a unit of 8 Armoured Brigade, which had recently occupied ground in the Tebaga foothills captured by armoured patrols. At dawn on 26 March the two New Zealand infantry brigades lay well concealed on their start lines with both flanks secured.

The attack was planned to take place at 4 p.m., by which time the armoured division would be in readiness. The 8th Armoured Brigade, with each of its three tank regiments leading one of the infantry battalions, would cross the Roman Wall as the barrage came down on its opening lines, and would then move behind the barrage with heavy tanks in the lead, followed by light tanks, after which would come the infantry carriers. The infantry would follow on behind the armour as it crossed their start lines and make for the first objective, which lay 2000 yards ahead along a line running at right angles to the [El Hamma](#) road. The final objective was 3000 yards beyond the first, along the line of the Wadi Hernel and beyond the summit of the pass. The [El Hamma](#) road was the right boundary of 24 Battalion's advance, and its point of contact with [23 Battalion's](#) left. On 6 Brigade's western flank, [25 Battalion](#) was to give supporting fire to the advancing troops and also assist the Divisional Cavalry in mopping up the [Djebel Tebaga](#) foothills. The 1st Armoured Division would move up in rear of the assaulting lines, pass through [New Zealand Corps](#) on its final objective at dusk, and wait there till the moon rose soon after 11 p.m. before going on to capture [El Hamma](#).

A dust-storm was blowing on the morning of 26 March, but it abated to some extent after midday and the air cleared. This was fortunate as a concentrated air attack was to be made on the enemy lines half an hour before zero by fighter-bombers and tank-busters. Tanks of **8 Armoured Brigade** lay concealed in wadis and behind spurs on the high ground to right and left. Under a continual rain of fine blown sand the men of 24 Battalion had to lie close, as their trenches were on an open flat. Gradually the day wore on, and early in the afternoon the period of suspense merged into one of sustained action. Captain Boord describes the battle's opening phase:

At 2.30 p.m. I started clock watching. We packed our fighting kit. At 3 p.m. the mediums opened with smoke on the Jerry OPs —not very effective in blinding them as there was a strong cross wind blowing. At 3.15<sup>9</sup> the tanks started to move out of the hills. We could sense the excited murmur which swept through the lads and heads began to show above the parapets. A magnificent sight, two lines of them, Shermans and Crusaders, steaming slowly out of the hills towards us—grim, squat, powerful and businesslike they looked moving along with the effortless motion of ships of the line. As they approached us Jerry opened up with Field guns and 88s, and shrapnel began to whip over our pit. We sat in the bottom and looked at each other. Slowly the minutes dragged by. At 3.30 p.m. the first fighter sweep put in an appearance, patrolling overhead and swooping down to strafe German positions. A big flight of heavy enemy bombers put in an appearance but were frightened off and dropped their eggs behind their own lines, much to our amusement and satisfaction as we saw many smoke columns denoting burning trucks.

The tanks were in position and swung to face the enemy; then at 4 p.m. down came the barrage a mile away—a roaring, crashing hell of dust, smoke and red hot steel splinters. The tanks moved slowly forward, first the Shermans, then 150 yards behind the Crusaders, some of which had our chaps on their backs à la Russe, and as they passed the forward troop positions more scrambled aboard. Then another hundred yards behind went our carriers. Slowly they all moved forward while the barrage still pounded the earth out in front. The CO hopped into his carrier and moved off, leaving me to bring on Bn HQ at Zero hr. I moved up to the crest of the small ridge behind which we were dug in. An odd shell or two was still falling in our area but most of the enemy fire was concentrated on the armour ahead and to our

right. The minutes passed slowly and then at 4.23 the barrage made its first lift and the forward troops rose out of their slit trenches and moved forward. I watched A Company which was in support, and when I saw Ted Aked get his chaps up I gave a yell to our blokes and out of the ground they came. We had to move slightly left to jockey ourselves into position. and then we settled down for the advance. In front was an amazing sight. Away in the distance through the dust and smoke we could see the fires of Jerry's burning vehicles and our planes strafing up and down his lines. Our vision was mainly limited by the barrage—a curtain of grey dust and black smoke churning the earth as it crept forward. Close in behind it was the line of Shermans, then the Crusaders, and following them the Bren Carriers—each armoured vehicle spaced out with equal distances, and all moving slowly forward. Behind them [came] the infantry, the forward coys with their forward platoons, the men strung out in lines, each man 6-10 yards from his neighbour—miniature figures in the distance, all walking steadily onward. A Coy, because it was nearer me, looked bigger, and it followed half way between and in rear of the two forward coys, and behind their (A Company's) rear platoon came our first section. Over all raged the clamour of the planes and the shriek of shells, but the whole set piece moved steadily forward—not a man nor a vehicle out of place—a magnificent sight, giving one the impression of irresistible force.

From A, C, and D Companies men armed with grenades and tommy guns scrambled aboard tanks of 3 Royal Tank Regiment as they passed through the battalion start line. From there the armour was slow in moving off and lagged behind the barrage, with the unfortunate result that the infantry, following on in rear, fell still further behind and lost  
head-



24 BATTALION'S PART IN TERAGA GAP ATTACK

## 24 battalion's part in tebaga gap attack

way

that could never be made up. 'This was a pity, as with the sun and wind behind us, and the sun, smoke and dust in the face of the enemy, we had everything in our favour.' <sup>10</sup> Colonel Conolly directed his battalion's advance from a carrier equipped with a No. 22 wireless set linked to 6 Brigade, and a No. 18 set linked to the companies and other carriers.

Beyond the start line the ground dipped and then rose gently towards the first objective. In the base of the shallow depression thus formed a few stunted bushes grew amongst low hummocks. Across this arid expanse 24 Battalion's right forward company, C, advanced in extended order with little check or hindrance, the few casualties suffered being caused by mortar fire. Reaching the first objective and continuing on without a pause, the company at once ran into stiff opposition. On its left the ground rose sharply, culminating in a ridge which commanded the whole line of advance. The slopes of this ridge offered little cover; along its crest lay the enemy's main line of defence, with infantry well entrenched and anti-tank guns sited on its reverse slopes ready to deal with any armoured vehicle crossing the skyline. The two highest points were also the most strongly fortified. Held by German troops with Italians on their right, these twin summits rose up in the centre of 24 Battalion's line of advance. A minefield covered the position but did not extend across C Company's front to the [El Hamma](#) road.

Passing two troops of abandoned field guns, C Company came under mortar and

machine-gun fire from the ridge. The tanks in front had increased their speed to catch up with the barrage and were moving at a pace too fast for infantry. Several enemy posts were overrun but came into action again when the armour had passed, causing much delay and many casualties to the troops who encountered them later. Passing to the right of the minefield, C Company continued to advance; from now onwards its left flank was in the air, but the infantry were under positive orders to press on at all costs regardless of armoured support or any other consideration.

On first encountering the minefield some of the leading tanks were blown up. Those following swung inwards towards the [El Hamma](#) road, leaving the strongly defended ridge still in enemy hands. Advancing on C Company's left, D Company ran into this powerful nest of opposition and, without armoured support or artillery barrage, could make no immediate headway. On the right of the [El Hamma](#) road [23 Battalion](#) was advancing steadily towards its final objective, while 1 Armoured Division, a formidable phalanx of throbbing steel, rumbled slowly forward along the Corps axis. Farther still to the right, [28 Battalion](#) was deploying to the east to attack Hill 209, from which the tanks had been forced to turn away. Along the valley floor the attack was going through, but resistance from high ground on either flank hindered the [New Zealand Corps'](#) advance.

Harassed by fire from strongpoints which should have been dealt with by a parallel advance on its left, C Company suffered most of its casualties at this time. While the company was mopping up pockets of resistance overrun by the armour, the men with automatic weapons who had ridden forward on the tanks were sorely missed. The company's strength being diminished and the situation somewhat critical, it was not possible to spare men for escorting the large number of prisoners taken, who in most cases were merely disarmed and sent back down the axis. Some of them, however, picked up weapons later on and attacked our troops from the rear. Alone among the companies of [24 Battalion](#), Captain Seal's men had reached the vicinity of their final objective by 6 p.m. The company commander sent patrols forward to the Wadi Hernel, and some of the battalion's carriers, ordered forward by Conolly for this purpose, extended his left towards the position that should have been occupied by D Company. He expected a counter-attack from the north, 'and several times from about 2000 to 2200 hrs what appeared to be light attacks did in fact eventuate. In all cases, however, they turned out to be small parties of enemy

troops which were lost and confused and were attempting to find their way back to their own lines.... These small parties were easily dealt with, and showed little inclination to fight when they realised their position.' <sup>11</sup>

On the left of C, D Company also reached the first objective without difficulty and, passing beyond it, arrived opposite the minefield from which the tanks had turned away. Nos. 16 and 18 Platoons crossed the minefield and advanced under heavy fire against the ridge. As they diverged to either flank, 17 Platoon came up into line between them. Twenty prisoners were taken, disarmed, and sent to the rear without escort. The advance continued, though from now onward the three platoons lost touch with each other and acted as independent units. On the left Second-Lieutenant [Cater](#), <sup>12</sup> of 16 Platoon, was killed while carrying a wounded corporal to safety. His place was taken by Sergeant [Gabolinsky](#), <sup>13</sup> who led the platoon forward till every one of its men, including himself, had become casualties.

In the centre Lieutenant Friend led 17 Platoon towards the strongpoints on the ridge's summit, but finding himself separated from the rest of the company he halted 'behind three Sherman tanks which were stationary and close together in line ahead'. <sup>14</sup> The best course, it seemed, was to swing right, join up with C, and if possible reduce the troublesome strongpoints by an attack from the rear. Captain Dew came up at this moment and concurred with the decision, which was then put into effect as described by Lieutenant Friend:

After a survey of the position we proceeded up the hill, engaging groups of enemy slit trenches by fire and movement. Upon each rush, however, we were subject to automatic fire from the strongpoint on top of the hill, from the positions on elevated ground behind us and also from the erstwhile PW to our right who had regained their slit trenches and weapons. Although we killed and wounded a number of the enemy our own casualties were heavy, including [Cpl H. M. Hill](#) <sup>15</sup> killed, and Cpl W. Howat severely wounded. About three-quarters of the way up to the strongpoint we went to ground while I sent a man to the rear to request that the three Sherman tanks in the wadi advance behind us to provide fire in hull down position to cover our further advance on the strongpoint. They refused to do this and ended any argument by proceeding up the wadi toward the final objective. I considered the possibility of communicating with A Coy but this course seemed out of the question in view of the fact that they were some 400 yards to the rear at that



junction.

Before we were about to make a final effort some dozen Huns broke and ran from a position about 30 feet ahead. While firing at these myself I must have come into view of the strongpoint, and was wounded by a burst of Spandau fire. Our strength by then (1750 hrs) was reduced to Cpl L. P. [Atkin](#)<sup>16</sup> and about eight or nine men whom I ordered to go to ground in cleared slit trenches in the vicinity.

We remained in that position until about 2030 hrs when the strongpoint was eventually taken in an attack by A Coy.

On D Company's right, 18 Platoon had reached the enemy's defences on the high ridge before being finally pinned down. 'It was reported to me later', writes Lieutenant Friend in his report, 'that 2-Lieut Woodhouse [[Woodcock](#)]<sup>17</sup> and his runner got right up to the strongpoint, the occupants of which offered to surrender. Before the Huns could be put in the bag, however, both New Zealanders were treacherously killed by a burst from an enemy automatic located a short distance to the flank.'

Many of D Company's men hoped for a chance of returning to settle accounts with these foes who surrendered and shot simultaneously, but battles provide neither for leisure nor for independent expeditions.

The supporting company, A, advancing at an interval of 500 yards behind C and D, came under heavy machine-gun fire when once beyond the first objective. Nos. 7 and 8 Platoons were forward on the left and right respectively when it was reported back to Captain Aked that several tanks were out of action in front of the minefield. Ordering 9 Platoon to ground, Aked went forward to see for himself. Several tanks were burning and D Company's mortars were also knocked out. There was no sign of either of the forward companies and heavy fire came from the high ridge. Aked now sent 7 Platoon round the minefield's western edge to capture a low hill from which he hoped it might be possible to turn the strongpoints on the ridge's summit. The remaining two platoons he sent forward further to the left under the lee of the ridge, and he then brought his mortars into action against the ridge itself. Under their fire the platoons worked their way slowly forward.

Shortly before 5.30 Captain Boord, who had been following on with Battalion Headquarters, joined A Company and conferred with Captain Aked. Boord then went forward alone to reconnoitre. As he climbed to a point of vantage a Crusader tank backed past him into dead ground. From beyond the summit he was making for an enemy tank appeared to be firing on the reserve company (B). Boord could see the two strongpoints on the ridge occupied by Germans, while at the same moment smoke bursts in the barrage announced that our guns were about to cease firing; but at this instant he was hit by rifle fire from the left. While Aked went out and helped him back, the Germans held their fire till he was once more under cover.

No. 7 Platoon was recalled as it could make no progress, but 8 Platoon, with No. 9 on its right, was edging slowly forward. Captain Dew appeared on the scene, announcing the heavy losses and obscure situation of his company. Shortly afterwards Colonel Conolly arrived and at once gave orders for A Company to capture the strongpoints on the high ridge. The sun had set and Aked decided to attack at dusk with the bayonet, in a single line as his numbers were much reduced and 7 Platoon had not yet come in. Under cover of mortar fire 8 and 9 Platoons advanced on the left and right, with Company Headquarters in the centre. For the first hundred yards the enemy made no response, being evidently taken unawares, and when eventually he opened up, his fire was high and ragged. Numbers of rifle grenades fell among the attackers but did them little harm. Holding their fire till within fifty yards of the objective, the Aucklanders let fly with all they had and took the position at the bayonet's point, killing or capturing all Germans found in occupation. They then exploited forward for 300 yards down the ridge's reverse slope, but the enemy they encountered appeared to have lost heart and offered only slight resistance.

The positions on the ridge were found to be of great strength and lavishly manned, but knowing that they faced a division notoriously addicted to attacking by night, the Germans had sited most of their machine guns on the reverse slopes, which fact accounted very largely for the ineffectiveness of their fire during the final assault. Strangely enough, the position had been untouched either by artillery fire or aerial bombing. When A Company rallied after the attack, it was found that over ninety prisoners had been taken, together with 32 spandaus and four 75-millimetre anti-tank guns.

The Aucklanders had not been alone in their exploit. While returning from the final advance down the reverse slopes, Captain Aked had asked some question of a man walking beside him. To his surprise the reply came in an unmistakably English voice. 'Who the hell are you?' Aked demanded, and the answer came, 'I'm a tankey, sir.' It transpired that seven men of the [Royal Tank Regiment](#), whose vehicles had been knocked out, had gone forward as unannounced volunteers with A Company to finish off affairs with the bayonet.

As battalion reserve, B Company was last to leave the start line. Moving 500 yards in rear of Battalion Headquarters, it reached the first objective and paused while Major Andrews went forward to discover the situation. Boord had just been brought back wounded to A Company headquarters, while the company's platoons were edging forward as previously described. Colonel Conolly was up forward, directing the battle from his tactical headquarters. Throughout the action he experienced difficulty in maintaining contact not only with Brigade Headquarters but also with the [Royal Tank Regiment](#). 'I had to resort to climbing into tanks and sending messages over the tank wireless network.'<sup>18</sup> Conolly now sent a signal by radio to B Company, ordering Andrews to move forward on the line of C Company's attack, over ground clear of the enemy, and take the troublesome strongpoints in rear. B Company's signaller, however, failed to deliver the message, and Andrews was left to his own devices. Conolly had previously impressed upon his subordinates the absolute necessity of pushing on in face of all odds. Bearing this in mind, and believing a frontal advance to be suicidal, Andrews decided, after consultation with Aked, to move his company out to the left, link up if possible with [25 Battalion](#), which was operating in conjunction with the Divisional Cavalry in the Tebaga foothills, and then take the enemy's strongpoints from the west. Had Conolly's signal been received, B Company would have moved forward along a route already fairly well cleared by Seal's men. In the event, Andrews chose a dangerous line of advance when a far safer one lay open.

B Company now moved out some way to the west before swinging right and advancing in extended order across the minefield. Emerging from dead ground over the crest of a rise, the company was brought to a standstill by heavy small-arms fire. 'The action', writes Major Andrews in his report, 'resolved itself into a straight out shooting match with the range only 100 to 200 yards, and was fought between

groups and individuals. The air was thick with smoke and dust with a hot wind in our faces, and the enemy was clearly rattled by our sudden appearance, as they kept jumping about and running to and fro.

'On my immediate front, our accurate fire bowled most of them and some Italians began yelling and throwing up their hands, but were rallied by two Germans, a sergt. and a Red Cross chap, both of whom we killed. (The sergt. had on him the Iron Cross and Italian Croce di Guerra so must have been a hot number.) On my immediate left was a knoll and some enemy appeared on it. I yelled to men behind me to watch it and Sgt Sisterson <sup>19</sup> very coolly shot five of them with his rifle, all through the head. Others accounted for some, and Sgt Mjr [Bowman](#) <sup>20</sup> and Cpl Dallard <sup>21</sup> led a rush up it (the knoll) from the rear and cleared it. (This was, though we didn't know it till next day, the extreme flank of the enemy position, so we had almost achieved our object.)

'On our front, an enemy tank churned its way over the crest. Having nothing to have it on with, we all ceased firing and kept down. It did not advance further and shortly after made off. No doubt their own minefield, just behind us, was the reason it stopped.

'On my right, 11 Platoon had a fierce fire fight with the enemy and actually used grenades, Sgt Exon <sup>22</sup> and Pte Crockett <sup>23</sup> being prominent. 12 Platoon were not involved to any great extent and gave covering fire. I was pinned down till dusk (about 1800 hrs). It was clear the enemy was too strong for clearing in daylight, but I extricated my coy at 1830 hrs, formed them up and went back to Bn HQ to see what the state of the poll was.'

It was after dusk when Andrews reached Battalion Headquarters. By that time A Company had stormed the strongpoints and Colonel Conolly had arrived on the scene. Finding that B Company was still strong and capable of further action, the Commanding Officer gave orders for it to move round the left flank once more and try if possible to get in touch with D Company and [25 Battalion](#). In case the troublesome tank should still be in its former position, he also sent a few men with sticky bombs. Andrews formed up his command as for a night attack and swung out to the left, making a slightly wider sweep than on the first occasion. Meanwhile the enemy had withdrawn, and B Company passed on west of the strongpoints that A

had reduced with scarcely a check to its progress. Many German dead lay in the track of its former advance, and the wreck of a 24 Battalion carrier stood within twenty yards of a 75-millimetre anti-tank gun by which it had been knocked out. On the way B Company was joined by a few survivors of D, who had broken into the heart of the enemy position and stayed there, isolated, until relieved by the eventual success of our attack. Round about midnight Andrews' men consolidated their position close to the battalion's final objective on C Company's left flank.

The 1st Armoured Division had long since passed through the gap made by [New Zealand Corps](#) and was preparing to advance on [El Hamma](#). On the right Hill 209 still held out and continued to do so till next day, but so far as 24 Battalion was concerned the battle of [Tebaga Gap](#), an engagement that may come to rank with Austerlitz and Salamanca as models of its kind, had been fought and won with no little credit to the Aucklanders. Between 400 and 500 prisoners had been taken, together with a large and varied assortment of war material. Most of the prisoners were Germans of a crack corps, as the strongpoints on the ridge had been manned by 1/125 Panzer Grenadier Regiment. The Italians had been mainly on their right in the line of B Company's attack. The 24th Battalion's casualties on 26 March numbered 50 killed and 62 wounded. D Company had suffered most heavily, but A Company's losses were also severe. At one time nine men were believed to be missing but they all came in later.

In course of time a number of decorations were distributed among the Aucklanders in recognition of their fine showing on 26 March. Colonel Conolly received a DSO for his masterly handling of the affair, while Captain Aked was given an MC for an accumulation of distinguished services performed at [El Alamein](#), [El Agheila](#), and [El Hamma](#). The latter award was also bestowed on Lieutenant [Walters](#),<sup>24</sup> of A Company, for his leading of 8 Platoon in its first attack on the strongpoints. Private O'Brien,<sup>25</sup> Corporal Campbell,<sup>26</sup> and Corporal Rabarts<sup>27</sup> all received MMs for bravery and presence of mind displayed at such moments of danger or crisis as bring natural leaders of men to the fore. The occasion may not be untimely for pointing out that awards for gallantry are to some extent a question of good fortune as well as distinguished conduct. The fact that many brave deeds must go unrewarded by authority and unrecorded by the historian is a matter for regret, but one for which there is no present remedy.

The battalion's casualties for the period 20-28 March were:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	4	50
Died of wounds –		8
Wounded	9	72
Total	13	130

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<sup>1</sup> Maj E. R. Andrews, ED, m.i.d.; Pukearuhe, Taranaki; born New Plymouth, 17 Jul 1913; farmer; 2 i/c 24 Bn 8 Jun 1944-23 Jun 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Maj M. T. S. Dew; Wellington; born Nelson, 27 Apr 1916; Regular soldier; GSO 3 HQ 2 NZEF ( UK) 1940; LO 210 British Military Mission 1942; 2 i/c 24 Bn 8 Dec 1943-27 Jan 1944.

<sup>3</sup> Letter, Capt Boord, 18 Apr 1943.

<sup>4</sup> Sgt. G. J. Trevelion; South Australia; born Adelaide, 29 Nov 1914; carpenter; provost sergeant, 24 Bn.

<sup>5</sup> Capt H. W. Neal; Wellsford, North Auckland; born New Plymouth, 18 Mar 1917; farmer; wounded 23 Mar 1943.

<sup>6</sup> Capt H. C. Stead; London; born Gibraltar, 30 Dec 1917; clerk; IO 24 Bn 1943. Stead remained on duty though wounded in the hand by a shell splinter.

<sup>7</sup> Letter, Capt Boord, 16 Jun 1943.

<sup>8</sup> Probably a Mark 4 Special.—Narrator's note.

<sup>9</sup> According to orders and other observers, Boord's timings are a little out. Tanks moved at 3.30 p.m. to cross start line at four o'clock. But some may have moved earlier.—Note by Editor-in-Chief.

<sup>10</sup> Report on Supercharge II, Lt-Col Conolly.

<sup>11</sup> Report on Supercharge II, Capt Seal.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Lt W. P. Cater; born NZ 21 Jan 1919; dairy factory assistant; wounded 5 Jun 1941; killed in action 26 Mar 1943.

<sup>13</sup> Sgt J. A. C. Gabolinsky; Rotorua; born NZ 18 Oct 1918; bushman; twice wounded; murdered 18 Dec 1951.

<sup>14</sup> Report, Lt Friend.

<sup>15</sup> Cpl H. M. Hill; born Rangiora, 20 Feb 1912; electric welder; killed in action 26 Mar 1943.

<sup>16</sup> WO II L. E. P. Atkin, m.i.d.; Kaitaia; born Whangarei, 20 Apr 1919; grocer's assistant; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Lt F. C. Woodcock; born England, 3 Apr 1909; orchardist and motor mechanic; wounded 27 Nov 1941; killed in action 26 Mar 1943.

<sup>18</sup> Report by Lt-Col Conolly.

<sup>19</sup> Sgt N. M. Sisterson; Wairakau, Te Aroha; born Gisborne, 15 Nov 1911; dairy farmer.

<sup>20</sup> WO II E. A. Bowman, Auckland; born Warkworth, 14 May 1909; machinist.

<sup>21</sup> 2 Lt S. N. Dallard; Dunedin; born Christchurch, 8 Jan 1919; clerk.

<sup>22</sup> Sgt F. Exon, m.i.d.; Warkworth; born Manchester, England, 30 Sep 1913; clerk; wounded 20 Apr 1943.



<sup>23</sup> Cpl M. H. Crockett, MM; Auckland; born NZ 26 Nov 1919; engineer.

<sup>24</sup> Lt I. S. Walters, MC; Auckland; born NZ 19 Dec 1914; motor driver.

<sup>25</sup> Pte R. A. T. O'Brien, MM; Tuatapere; born Invercargill, 14 Dec 1913; farmhand; twice wounded.

<sup>26</sup> Cpl D. Campbell, MM; born Dunedin, 28 Oct 1915; labourer; wounded 28 Nov 1941; died of wounds 20 Apr 1943.

<sup>27</sup> 2 Lt A. J. Rabarts, MM; born England, 16 May 1915; farm manager; prisoner of war 21 Mar 1944.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 10 – ENFIDAVILLE

## CHAPTER 10

### Enfidaville

The 24th Battalion had finished mopping up before dawn on 27 March and the day was spent burying dead in a cemetery half-way between the start line and first objective. Fifth Brigade cleared up resistance on the right flank, while I Armoured Division was brought to a check before [El Hamma](#) by the enemy's gunline. Sixth Brigade remained under notice to move, with the head of its column by the Wadi Hernel, but no orders came. Meanwhile Rommel contrived a withdrawal from the [Mareth Line](#) and disposed his forces along the [Wadi Akarit](#), between the coast and the wide salt marsh of Chott el Fedjadj.

It was nearly midday on the 28th before 6 Brigade moved off, with the tanks of [8 Armoured Brigade](#) and the Divisional Cavalry fanned out in front. The great mass of vehicles stirred up clouds of dust through which it was impossible to see for a distance of more than fifty yards. Sorry-looking Italian prisoners trudged back to the rear as the column passed an abandoned enemy gunline and then, diverging from the El Hamma road, turned east towards [Gabes](#). While halting for the midday meal, 24 Battalion suffered a minor disaster which Major Andrews describes in his diary:

We swung east and halted in a shallow wadi in which the centre of the Battalion bunched badly. I spread my chaps out a bit. A few slitties about—also some fresh bomb craters. All of a sudden the AA open up and 6 or 8 twin-engined Hun planes, about 10,000 feet up flying south, appear. They spot us, swing east, and dive Hell, we scattered, five of us squeezed in a bomb crater, luckily I was in the middle. I looked up and saw the bombs leave the planes, realising they would land fair in us. Fascinated I watched the bombs coming down, then buried my face in the earth, arms round my head. 'Whoom! Whoom! Whoom!' Fair among us. Clouds of dust, black smoke, stink of HE, and whine of fragments of shrapnel About five or six bombs. We got up, the planes past—a truck blazing over by the CO's car, the boys shovelling sand on it to get it out. The men running with stretchers and bandages. Bn HQ got most of it, also A Coy. I ran over—Bn HQ, busy dispersing and men everywhere digging like hell. Five killed and eight or nine wounded.

Another air attack later in the afternoon wounded three more men, and nerves

long strained began to grow frayed, but a column of nearly a thousand Italian prisoners passing by under the escort of two Tommies, one marching in front, the other in rear, reminded the New Zealanders that from a general point of view the fortune of war was going very much in their favour. That night news came through that [Gabes](#) had fallen; that night also the men enjoyed their first unbroken sleep for nearly a week.

The next three days were passed in a series of slow advances alternating between long periods of waiting for traffic jams to clear. Fifth Brigade moved on ahead through [Gabes](#) on its way to the [Wadi Akarit](#), while 6 Brigade camped a few miles north-west of the town. A few reinforcements for 24 Battalion arrived and were posted to D Company to build up its depleted strength. General Montgomery addressed officers and sergeants of 6 Brigade and spoke in high praise of the men whom he called his 'left hookers'.

The 1st Armoured Division and 5 New Zealand Brigade were now in contact with the enemy along the line of the [Wadi Akarit](#), and as the enemy had obviously decided to make a stand in this position [30 Corps](#) prepared to attack. The New Zealand Corps had been disbanded now that its task of forcing the [Tebaga Gap](#) had been carried out. On the night of 6 April [30 Corps](#) assaulted and pierced the [Wadi Akarit](#) line, allowing [10 Corps](#), which now included [2 NZ Division](#), to pass through the bridgehead and throw the Axis forces back towards the north. The following day (7 April) contact was made with [2 United States Corps](#) moving in from [Gafsa](#), and that same night 6 Brigade, moving in rear of the Division, passed through the enemy minefields beyond [Wadi Akarit](#).

For the next two days the brigade moved north towards the [Sfax- Sbeitla](#) road and then swung east towards [La Hencha](#). [Sfax](#) fell on the 10th; 24 Battalion travelled on through carpets of wild flowers, passed [Triaga](#) into a country of olive groves, and then, turning north towards [Sousse](#), moved parallel with and inland of the main [Sfax](#) road. Tenth Corps' armour entered [Sousse](#) on 12 April, while 6 Brigade passed to the west of El Djem and, pushing on next day, arrived in the evening at [Sidi Bou Ali](#), half-way between [Sousse](#) and [Enfidaville](#). In front of the last-named place the armour had run up against an anti-tank ditch.



### **gabes to enfidaville**

Nearly 2000 miles from [El Alamein](#), the Axis forces were now hedged in around [Bizerta](#) and [Tunis](#), where [Africa](#)'s northern coastline juts out in a broad promontory towards [Sicily](#) and the Italian mainland. The and US Corps threatened [Bizerta](#) and the British First Army was closing in on [Tunis](#), but to the south the coastal plain was narrowed to a mere strip by a difficult mountain range lying athwart the Eighth Army's line of advance. At the foot of this range lay Enfidaville, still occupied by the enemy, though it was doubtful whether he would make any very determined attempt to hold it. The plain west of [Tunis](#), being suitable for the deployment of armoured forces, was chosen by General Alexander as the sector on which to deliver his main thrust; at the same time he directed the [Eighth Army](#) to exert pressure on the southern front and pin down as many of the enemy forces as possible. For the execution of this plan [30 Corps](#) remained in reserve, and [10 Corps](#), consisting of 7 Armoured, 4 Indian, 50 British, and 2 New Zealand Divisions, squared up to the [Enfidaville](#) positions.

By 14 April 25 and 26 Battalions, right and left respectively, faced [Enfidaville](#) at a distance of between 2000 and 3000 yards Patrols from [25 Battalion](#) attempted to enter the town but found it occupied, while an outflanking movement by 8 Armoured Brigade was also brought to a check. As 50 Division came up on the coastal sector, 201 Guards Brigade relieved [25 Battalion](#) and the right company of [26 Battalion](#), which then sidestepped and took over ground from 5 Brigade on the left, in process of aligning itself for an assault on the forbidding massif dominated by [Takrouna](#). On being relieved, 25 Battalion returned to a position some ten miles south of

## Enfidaville.

The three days' stay made by 24 Battalion at [Sidi Bou Ali](#) was chiefly notable for the wealth of fresh vegetables available, but on 17 April the unit moved forward to less fertile surroundings and lay beside [25 Battalion](#). Next day Colonel Conolly and his company commanders went forward to reconnoitre the position they were about to take over, 3000 yards west of [Enfidaville](#) on [26 Battalion's](#) left, where crops of wheat and barley grew shoulder high on either side of an ancient Roman aqueduct. The reconnaissance had to be made with



The road into Mersa Matruh, November 1942

The road into [Mersa Matruh](#), November 1942



In desert formation across Wadi Zemzem

In desert formation across [Wadi Zemzem](#)





At Tripoli—General Freyberg, Brig H. K. Kippenberger, Mr Churchill, Brig W. G. Gentry, and the three commanding officers of 6 Brigade: Lt-Col D. J. Fountaine (26 Bn), Lt-Col J. Conolly (24 Bn), and Lt-Col T. B. Morten (25 Bn)

At Tripoli— General Freyberg, Brig H. K. Kippenberger, Mr Churchill, Brig W. G. Gentry, and the three commanding officers of 6 Brigade: Lt- Col D. J. Fountaine (26 Bn), Lt-Col J. Conolly (24 Bn), and Lt-Col T. B. Morten (25 Bn)



A bivouac area near Medenine  
**A bivouac area near Medenine**



8 Armoured Brigade Sherman tank moving through B Company  
on 26 March 1943 at Tebaga Gap

**8 Armoured Brigade Sherman tank moving through B Company on 26 March 1943 at Tebaga Gap**



HQ B Company after the battle of Tebaga Gap  
—the gun is a German 75 mm

**HQ B Company after the battle of Tebaga Gap —the gun is a German 75 mm**



German and Italian prisoners after the action at the Roman Wall

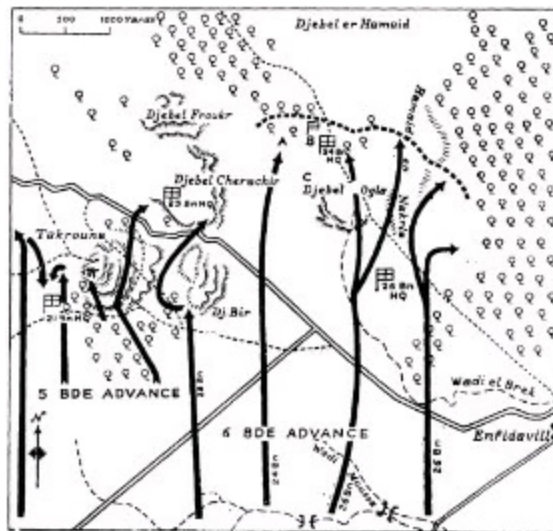
**German and Italian prisoners after the action at the Roman Wall**



Advance through the desert to Gabes

### Advance through the desert to Gabes

some care, as the flat plain was completely overlooked by mountains. High among them on a lone peak stood the white village of **Takrouna**. That night B Company went, forward and occupied a position immediately behind the aqueduct, which was found later to be sown with box mines. It was a Sunday. Back in rear the remaining companies attended a moonlight service conducted by Padre Judson, <sup>1</sup> at which the



### the takrouna-enfidaville action

men sat in a semi-circle and sang hymns, but whether lifting box mines by the Roman aqueduct or singing hymns in camp, all men alike were tortured by hordes of mosquitoes.

The task allotted [2 NZ Division](#) was that of capturing the mountain positions of Djebel el Froukr and Djebel el Oglā, lying north-west of [Enfidaville](#), preparatory to exploiting up the valleys beyond. Faced with the natural hill fortress of [Takrouna](#), 5 Brigade had by far the most difficult country to negotiate. On its right 24 Battalion's line of advance towards its final objective, between Djebel el Froukr on the left and Djebel er Hamaid on the right, lay up an open valley, so that should 5 Brigade experience any check, the battalion's left flank would be exposed and overlooked. The same disadvantage might be expected should [26 Battalion](#) be held up on the right, although this unit had less formidable hills to traverse.

Colonel Conolly issued his orders for the attack verbally at 2 2 p.m., and at eight o'clock the battalion left camp for the assembly area by motor transport. Captain Aked had gone down the line with a fractured foot; otherwise the company commanders were as at [El Hamma](#). Major Andrews had guides waiting when the battalion arrived and companies were shown to their start lines just beyond the aqueduct. A and B were forward on the left and right, with C in support and D in reserve. The carriers were to follow later, moving forward on the left on the battalion axis. Throughout these operations mosquitoes were in constant attendance.

As the barrage opened at 11 p.m., the men at once moved forward through standing crops and long grass, waist-high and soaking wet, but the going soon improved when they emerged on to an open space cleared by the enemy for use as a temporary landing ground. Catching up with the barrage, they crossed the [Enfidaville- Takrouna](#) road, beyond which an anti-tank ditch extended more than half-way across the battalion front. To the left loomed the mountains north-east of [Takrouna](#). On the right some Arab huts, set alight by shells, blazed away merrily. The enemy opened up with shell and mortar fire as our men crossed the landing ground; gradually this fire increased in intensity.

Under machine-gun fire from the high ground on their left, A and B Companies passed to the right of the anti-tank ditch and, running into an enemy mortar barrage which they mis- took for our own, swung sharply away to their right. Both companies were somewhat disorganised as they crossed the Wadi el Brek—a dry watercourse with high, steep banks. Moving north-east up the bed of another wadi, B Company

ran into the left platoon of [26 Battalion](#) and halted to reorganise south of Djebel el Ogla. By now it was well into 26 Battalion's sector and out of touch with A Company, but Major Andrews believed he had reached the intermediate objective and fired his first success signal, which brought down more mortar fire. It had, however, the effect of disclosing his whereabouts to A Company, and contact was soon established. A radio message from Battalion Headquarters asked for another signal, and this time Andrews took the precaution of going back some distance to the rear before firing. Twice B Company moved north to occupy the Djebel el Ogla, but on each occasion was obliged to fall back on account of shellfire.

Followed by Battalion Headquarters, C Company advanced up the battalion axis, maintaining its direction, and having passed the anti-tank ditch, arrived on the line of a wadi 500 yards beyond it. Colonel Conolly sent out runners to ascertain the position of his two forward companies, but the runners returned without having been able to find them. He then sent an order to A by radio to send up a flare, expecting it to appear somewhere on his left front. To his surprise it went up on his right and some way in rear. Realising the extent to which his leading companies had lost direction, he at once ordered them to resume their advance towards the final objective.

A and B Companies then pushed on round the eastern side of Djebel el Ogla, making contact on the way with B Company [26 Battalion](#), whose commander believed he had reached his objective. Andrews and Walters, however, knew that their journey should end in an olive grove and pushed steadily on till they reached a belt of trees.

While waiting for this move to be carried out, C Company and Battalion Headquarters were heavily shelled. Conolly received a slight head wound; the No. 11 set was destroyed and both operators wounded, with the result that radio communication with Brigade was temporarily lost. As soon as A and B Companies reported their final objective taken, Conolly led his men forward to the olive grove, advancing along the beds of wadis, with which the valley floor was indented, as a protective measure against the shellfire that still persisted.

Resistance by enemy infantry had been almost negligible and the operation resembled a night advance under shellfire rather than an infantry encounter. Except



for machine-gun fire from the left flank, there had been no opposition between start lines and the first objective. Beyond the latter point a few isolated posts had been encountered and a few prisoners taken, but most of these were men wounded by our barrage. The 24th Battalion's sector was the obvious line of advance for infantry attack, and in appreciation of this fact the enemy had decided to withdraw to high ground from which he could dominate our position while at the same time conserving his own strength.

By 3 a.m. A and B Companies were astride the dividing line between 24 and 26 Battalion sectors, still a little short of their final objective. C was in rear of A, while D remained in reserve at the aqueduct. So far losses amounted to five killed and 40 wounded. Stragglers lost during the advance kept coming in throughout the day. By dawn the battalion's anti-tank guns were up in position and sited; a forward RAP was also established. The carriers and mortars did not arrive until nightfall. Contact had been made with 26 Battalion on the right; further right again, Enfidaville had fallen to 201 Guards Brigade. Troops of 5 Brigade were seen around Takrouna during the day, but a fierce battle raged there, and as yet there was a wide gap between 24 Battalion and the 23rd on its left. So long as the saw-toothed Djebel Froukr remained in enemy hands, the Aucklanders could make no forward movement by day. Indeed their existing position was far from comfortable, and although the olive trees provided a measure of cover, their branches often detonated shells in the air and thereby caused several serious casualties. That evening (20 April) 25 Battalion came under command of 5 Brigade and moved up on its right flank to relieve 23 Battalion, while D Company of the 24th moved forward to fill the gap between 5 and 6 Brigades.

Next day Takrouna fell, but 24 Battalion's sector was relatively quiet. There was some shelling; the mosquitoes were omnipresent; a patch of broad beans provided its discoverers with a change of diet; but the principal news item was provided by Major Andrews, who took a night patrol of eight men to some Arab huts 800 yards in front of his company's lines. An Italian box mine was placed in one of the huts which was then set alight. There was a great blaze and soon afterwards the mine went off, blowing the hut to pieces and bringing urgent calls to Battalion Headquarters from adjacent units who wanted to know what was happening. The operation had been undertaken with the idea of inducing the enemy to fire his guns and disclose his

positions. The enemy, however, made no response. No member of the patrol was actually hurt, but all those who had been inside the huts soon found themselves infested with fleas.

Brigadier Gentry, who was being succeeded by Brigadier [Parkinson](#),<sup>2</sup> came up to the front line to say goodbye to 24 Battalion on 22 April. The same day it was announced that 6 Brigade would take over the whole divisional front, and much labour by way of preparation turned out to have been unnecessary when the move was cancelled. The question was how the greatest number of enemy forces could be pinned down on the southern front without incurring undue casualties ourselves. The best means of doing this was to jab spasmodically at weak spots in the enemy's line in order to increase the area of hill country held and enable [10 Corps](#) to advance along the coast. It was now 6 Brigade's turn to make a thrust. Before dawn on the 23rd an officers' patrol from A Company 24 Battalion, without coming across any enemy troops on its way, found a track accessible for motor transport along the eastern side of Djebel er Hamaid. That afternoon orders were issued for a silent night attack at ten o'clock, to be carried out by A Company with one platoon of B on its left. The objective was Djebel er Hamaid, but should this feature be found unoccupied A Company would exploit 500 yards farther north and arrange protection for its own left flank. The 26th Battalion was to advance on the right while, to the right again, 201 Guards Brigade operated north of [Enfidaville](#).

Having formed up at the northern end of an olive grove some few hundred yards beyond the line held by B Company, the attacking force advanced over the slopes of Djebel er Hamaid, a wide, undulating ridge. By 1 a.m. the B Company platoon had reached its objective on Point 114 at the northern end of the ridge, while A Company had gone farther on towards Djebel dar Djaje. So far there had been no opposition. The 26th Battalion had also reached its objective without incident. Major Andrews had gone forward with the platoon of his company and, having placed it in position, went out to reconnoitre. 'All was quiet', he writes, 'so Cpl Tappin,<sup>3</sup> the commander of 12 Platoon, and I went for a look down the far side of 114 to see how the ground lay.

'It was very dark and we kept stumbling on the rocky surface. Suddenly there was a flash and a stunning explosion right in our faces. Thinking Tappin had accidentally fired his Tommy Gun in my face, I yelled at him to quit it. He yelled back

something, when there was another flash and blast, and just after it we heard someone clank on the rocks out in front. Then things happened fast. We both let go at the noise with our Tommy Guns and Tappin hurled a bakelite grenade. I got going with my pocket full of little red I tie grenades and the Huns were hurling their potato mashers and both parties were firing at sounds and flashes. We got separated and in a lull I yelled for Steve [Tappin]. He replied, whereupon a Teutonic voice out in front called, "Come out here Steve". "Righto you b—" was the reply, and bang went another grenade. Cursing the CO's order to leave all Very pistols behind I let go into the dark again with a grenade. We could now hear them running off and chased them along the spur running west until we lost them.

'We ran back to 114 and I got Cpl Ching <sup>4</sup> and his section, and we ran back but could not find them. To overawe any other enemy stragglers who might be about I took the section right around our front, halting them every fifty yards or so, and all shouting and firing a volley while I chucked the rest of my grenades out in front.

'We got back to 114 to find my GSM and the rest of 12 Platoon in a state of great excitement at the row we made. Added to which they had a man shot through the leg by some tracer coming from out in front.

'The CO came up shortly after and we got 12 Platoon dug in. Tappin <sup>5</sup> came in for a lot of chaff at letting the Huns get so familiar with him as to use his Christian name.'

The incident described above was the only one of any importance. All objectives had been taken without check or delay, and with the loss of only one casualty.

At the same hour as on the previous night, [26 Battalion](#) moved forward on 24 April in a silent attack on Djebel es Srafi and [Djebel Terhouna](#)—two commanding hills 1000 yards apart and about the same distance from the unit's forward defended lines, which joined those of 24 Battalion in the vicinity of Point 107. The axis of advance was now in a north-westerly direction. At r a.m. 6 Brigade received a report, evidently incorrect, that a platoon of the left company was on Srafi, but that the other two platoons had lost direction. The right company was held up at Terhouna. All the mortars of 24 and 26 Battalions were now placed under command of Major Andrews for a bombardment of Srafi, preparatory to an attack on that feature by [26](#)



[Battalion](#)'s reserve company supported by A Company of the 24th. Andrews was ready with his mortars in position behind Point 114 at 3.30, and Srafi was plastered with telling effect. The 26th Battalion captured the position but was forced to evacuate it a few hours later. The enemy retaliated against the mortar bombardment by shelling Hill 114 heavily, and 24 Battalion suffered a few casualties. Srafi was finally captured later on in the morning and held with the assistance of 3 Royal Tank Regiment.

In the afternoon (25th) the Officer Commanding 2/6 Queens of 56 Division, accompanied by his Intelligence Officer, came up to 24 Battalion's position with a view to taking over. Early on the following morning his company commanders appeared, but a few hours later Colonel Conolly was told that 5 Seaforth Highlanders, and not the Queens, would relieve his battalion. The relief duly took place before midnight on 26 April, and next morning 24 Battalion arrived back at [Sidi Bou Ali](#), close to the spot it had left ten days previously.

There was swimming in the sea, cleaning of equipment, route marching and resting, but even a visit from the Minister of Defence, the Hon. F. Jones, failed to promote enthusiasm for another attack in the near future, for which warning orders had just been received. The men were exhausted after a week of arduous fighting. They believed themselves due for a spell, but the Minister's announcement that his Government was in a position to provide reinforcements sufficient for twelve more months did not seem to promise respite in the future.

Captain Boord rejoined at the beginning of May and took over the duties of Adjutant from Captain Turnbull, who had been acting temporarily in his place.

On 5 May the battalion moved out 15 miles west of Enfidaville and camped with a French Algerian division on one side of them and General Leclerc's force on the other. It was while here that news came of the fall of [Tunis](#)—news also of Colonel Conolly's DSO and the other awards for [Tebaga Gap](#). The occasion was celebrated by a formal dinner in the officers' mess. Conolly and Walters were toasted. There were several speeches. Battles were fought over again and old memories recalled. At length one of the new reinforcements, Second- Lieutenant [Stewart](#),<sup>6</sup> was called upon to compare his expectations before joining with his actual subsequent experiences. His speech was voted the best of the whole evening.

On 8 May 6 Brigade moved to the [Enfidaville](#) area and lay waiting to support and exploit an attack by 167 Brigade of 56 Division on the ridge of Hammadet es Soura, beyond Terhouna, where [26 Battalion](#) had been held up on 26 April. The 24th Battalion was eight miles south of the town on the [Enfidaville- Kairouan](#) road. The attack, however, was not successful. The assaulting force returned to its original position, covered by [23 Armoured Brigade](#), and 24 Battalion remained where it was.

Meanwhile events had been moving rapidly farther north. The assault on the southern mountain barrier having proved expensive without adequate results, 7 Armoured and 4 Indian Divisions, together with 201 Guards Brigade, had been sent north to join the [First Army](#) on 30 April. The beginning of the end came on 6 May with a combined attack by British and American forces. When Tunis fell and Allied armour swept across the [Cape Bon](#) peninsula, the situation of the Axis forces in North Africa became impossible. On 13 May Marshal Messe surrendered unconditionally.

Soon after news of the surrender arrived, 24 Battalion was informed that it would shortly be returning to Egypt. The occasion was one that called for special celebration. After some discussion as to what form this should take, it was decided to hold a donkey Derby, and Captain Borrie was asked to organise the affair. His first attempt to procure mounts from I New Zealand Mule Transport Company was unsuccessful, as the company was being broken up and the mules sent away. A transport sergeant told him that donkeys might be bought locally at a high price, but that an arrangement to hire them cheaply might be made with the Sheikh of [Sidi Bou Ali](#)—a despot with power to call upon his people's donkeys in the hour of need. 'He was a delightful old man', writes Captain Borrie, 'with a very pleasant smile on his face, and warmth and good nature in his manner. We spoke in French but I found it easier to get the Sgt. Major to do the interpreting, and the Sheikh said that he would be only too pleased to let me have 12 and some wogs to look after them. Did I want all donkeys, or some mules? Did I want males or females? What time would I call for them? I said we would send along two three-tonners at 9 a.m. The next day when Harold Stead went for them the Sheikh was waiting in [Sidi Bou Ali](#) with the donkeys and 9 wogs.'

The donkey Derby was held on 15 May. Judges and stewards from the battalion

had already been appointed. Orderly-room clerks took over the task of running the totalisator, which was set up in the RAP tent. Local inhabitants showed great interest in the proceedings and gave tips as to their donkey's form. Captain Borrie describes the meeting as follows:

The first eight horses then entered the ring and the Totalizator opened.... A five minute closing warning was rung on a tin for the first race but for all other races a ship's bell indicated the five minute warning and the closing. Excitement was tense, when a burst of laughter came forth as Major Andrews arrived in grey German riding pants with a I finch broad red seam down the side, and a running singlet with a German air force insignia on it. The horses went down the field and lined up. As may be expected, balancing the first tote took a long time and the screamer was just about to be fired to show all was ready when cheers indicated that the first race had started. Violent gesticulations at the finishing line had worried the starter and he fired his gun and set the donkeys off too soon. However all went well and the winner paid 330 francs for 50.

Of course once someone has won money they spend more; losers try and retrieve money and everyone has some idea of the horses, so the tote ran its normal course and the clerks had a very busy afternoon. I hear that over £600 went through the tote.

The second race went off well—no hitches, and it also saw the arrival of Brigadier Parkinson—also the 6 Infantry Brigade Band which supplied instrumental items throughout the afternoon, greatly adding to the success of the meeting.

I arranged with Bob Seal that we would dress up for the officers' race, so he got into pyjamas and a crash helmet, and I changed into bright pyjamas, a cape white outside with red lining, and a red Arab head dress with a white bandage round. I caused quite a stir when I walked down (legs well bowed) and greeted Herman Andrews. Cameras clicked, and then we saw the third race. My horse ADR ran first.

I then became confident and put 50 francs on myself on the tote; then we led the horses round the enclosure and away off to the start. The gun went and I got a great start and crouched low, jabbing the donkey on the right side of his neck. I increased my lead and when about 40 yards from home I slowed up. I saw others

catching up, so started jabbing again, and almost fell off, but luckily regained my balance to the relief of many betters and crossed the finishing line over a length ahead. It was a great race and I was led up and received a bakelite dish from the Colonel....

I had put a film in my stocking as I had no pockets, and had shown this to Major Andrews, so after the race (as a joke) I was accused of having a battery down my leg and spurring my donkey on by electrical impulses.

The fifth race ADR ran first but ran off the course and was disqualified. In the final invitation race three Arabs ran, but did not like being given any horses so they rode their own donkeys. No. 3 was the favourite but Mahomet fell off just after the start and chased his donkey past the finishing post before catching it, so Performing Seal came in first.

It was a wonderful afternoon, and 24 hours after the boys are still talking about it and laughing. It will go down in the history of the Bn I feel sure.

The battalion's casualties in the fighting of 20-26 April were:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed		5
Died of wounds		5
Wounded	3	49
Total	3	59

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. R. F. Judson, MC; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 25 Mar 19:1; Presbyterian minister.

<sup>2</sup> [Maj-Gen G. B. Parkinson](#), CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); [Christchurch](#); born [Wellington](#), 5 Nov 1896; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty, I NZEF, 1917-19; CO 4 Fd Regt Jan 1940-Aug 1941; commanded I Army Tank Bde 1941-42 and 7 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1942; 6 Inf Bde Apr 1943-Jun 1944; commanded a NZ Div 3-27 Mar 1944; CRA s NZ Div, Jun-Aug 1944; commanded 6 Bde Aug 1944-Jun 1945; Quartermaster-General, Army HQ., Jan-Sep 1946; NZ Military Liaison Officer, [London](#), 1946-49; Commandant, Southern Military District 1949-51.

<sup>3</sup> WO II R. S. Tappin, MM; born Te Kuiti, 23 Nov 1913; farmhand; wounded three times.

<sup>4</sup> Cpl T. J. D. Ching; born NZ 5 Dec 1909; labourer; killed in action 16 Mar 1944.

<sup>5</sup> He was awarded the MM for this exploit.

<sup>6</sup> Capt A. R. Stewart; Auckland; born NZ 12 Sep 1910; public accountant; wounded 23 Mar 1944.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 11 – LAST DAYS IN AFRICA



## CHAPTER 11

### *Last Days in Africa*

The battalion arrived at [Maadi](#) Camp on 1 June. So far as possible the ensuing month was to be a time of rest. All officers and men were given 14 days' leave in two batches, the second lot going away as soon as the first returned. There was no training—only necessary fatigues and camp duties.

Some few breaches of rules and regulations were only to be expected after the long period of strain and hardship. A tendency to wear brown suede shoes in the unit lines had to be officially discouraged. It was found difficult to put down gambling in the beer bar of the New Zealand Forces Club 'owing to the protective attitude of troops in the Bar' <sup>1</sup> Early in July it was thought necessary to point out that 'The time has now come when the excuse that troops had just returned from [Tunisia](#) and were not acquainted with "out of bounds" areas, can no longer be tolerated.' <sup>2</sup> Apart from certain venial offences such as those mentioned, the conduct of the troops was excellent.

Taking into consideration the trying conditions of climate and general environment, it may also be said that their health had been good throughout the war in North Africa. Colds and minor mouth-spread infections were rare in the desert so long as there were enough bivouacs to avoid overcrowded sleeping room; but whenever the battalion was in the vicinity of [Cairo](#), there was always an outbreak of colds picked up in picture theatres or other crowded public places. Diarrhoea was always present, either more or less. Every case had to be reported to the Medical Officer, and a weekly list of numbers in each company was compiled and sent to the Assistant Director of [Medical Services](#). If caught within 24 hours, the complaint would usually be cleared up within a day or so by a dose of castor oil, but if severe and accompanied by a temperature, the case had to be evacuated. Prior to the war it was generally believed that crab lice were picked up through contact with women, but 24 Battalion had its largest number of cases from [El Alamein](#) onwards, in places where women were remarkably scarce. It soon became obvious that Italian clothing was the source of infection. While waiting for dawn after a night attack, shivering soldiers would wrap themselves up in whatever garments or blankets they happened to find, only to discover themselves infected a few days later. At [Mersa Matruh](#) one

of B Company's cooks reported sick with crab lice in his groin, chest, and armpits. He was treated and declared clear, but next day he was back again at the RAP. Inquiry elicited the fact that he was sleeping in a captured Italian sleeping bag. Malaria had not been troublesome since the battalion's sojourn in [Syria](#), when the men of A Company had been on guard over the North Tunnel. These men, however, had continued to suffer periodical relapses until the end of the Tunisian campaign. As has already been mentioned, the battalion was never seriously affected by venereal disease at any stage of the war. This partial freedom from most of the complaints to which armies in the field are normally subject must be largely attributed to Captain Borrie's ceaseless vigilance, and his insistence on all possible sanitary and hygienic precautions.

Towards the end of May an arrangement had been made for allowing a certain number of officers and men who had come out with the first three echelons to return to New Zealand for three months' leave on full pay. This furlough was known as the Ruapehu scheme, that being the code-name for the first draft of men to leave the [Middle East](#). Men married at the time of embarkation were given preference of selection, but a certain number of unmarried men were chosen by ballot. While the selection was in process all those under consideration had to remain with their units. They might not be transferred or attached, nor might they go on leave, though it was recognised that should the necessity arise they would have to be allowed to go to hospital. Unit commanders were advised to begin training substitutes for men liable to be chosen who held important positions, as once the ballot had been drawn it would be accepted as final. Four officers and 96 other ranks of 24 Battalion were chosen to go under this scheme. On 15 June they went to a special repatriation depot and remained there until they sailed.

Three weeks later, on 7 and 8 July, two reinforcement drafts arrived, numbering 202 in all, and the battalion strength rose from 422 other ranks to 623.

July and August were mainly devoted to company and battalion training. On 6 September the battalion left [Maadi](#) for Sheikh Salamah, near the shores of the [Red Sea](#), to participate in brigade manoeuvres, the object of which, so it was announced, was to study the conduct of operations in close country. The area in question was to be considered similar in nature to European countries. It was also to be treated as captured enemy territory, in which every precaution must be taken against ambush

or night attack by hostile guerrilla bands. Since British and American forces had already invaded the island of [Sicily](#) and [13 Corps](#) had recently crossed the Straits of Messina, it required no great powers of deduction on the troops' part to grasp the fact that they were being specially trained for a campaign in [Italy](#).

After four days in the desert the battalion returned to [Maadi](#), remained there till the 15th, and then marched via [Mena](#) to Burg el Arab. The troops were seven days on the road. Feet began to blister early in the proceedings and as time went on old injuries began to give trouble, especially in the knees and ankles. For most of the journey 24 Battalion maintained a record for having the least number of casualties through men falling out on the march, but on the last day its colours were lowered by [25 Battalion](#). Burg el Arab was reached on the 21st, and next day the troops went to the polling booths to record their votes for the general election. Towards the end of September 24 Battalion moved out into the desert as a unit of 6 Brigade to take part in three days of divisional manoeuvres. This was the last occasion of its kind. The African period was fast drawing to a close and the beginning of October found 24 Battalion back at Burg el Arab, preparing for a long and momentous journey.

The planning of an invasion of [Sicily](#) had begun as early as January 1943, but not until 10 July did the Eighth British and Seventh United States Armies carry out their seaborne assault on the island, and not until the middle of August was its conquest complete. The 13th Corps crossed the Straits of Messina on 3 and 4 September; a week later the Fifth United States Army landed at [Salerno](#). Meanwhile an armistice with [Italy](#) was announced, but [Germany](#) soon showed herself determined to hold a part at least of her late ally's country. A British airborne division landed at [Taranto](#) and 78 Division at [Bari](#) on the Adriatic, while [13 Corps](#) moved north-east up the toe of [Italy](#) and crossed the Southern Apennines on to the plains of [Foggia](#). By the beginning of October the Americans had secured their bridgehead at [Salerno](#); [Naples](#) had fallen, the [Eighth Army](#) was driving two spearheads into the province of Abruzzi, and [2 NZ Division](#) was about to concentrate in the vicinity of [Taranto](#).

On 3 October 24 Battalion moved in two groups, A and B, to [Ikingi Maryut](#) transit camp, [Amiriya](#), and thence, two days later, to [Alexandria](#). Though loaded like packhorses, the troops were in high spirits as they embarked the same afternoon—A

group on the Reina del Pacifico and B group on the Dunottar Castle. Escorted by destroyers and corvettes of the Royal and Greek navies, the ships sailed at 9 a.m. on 6 October. Shortly afterwards the convoy's destination was officially announced to the troops on board.

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<sup>1</sup> 24 Bn routine order, 24 Jun 1943.

<sup>2</sup> 24 Bn routine order, 3 Jul 1943.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 12 – THE SANGRO AND BEYOND

## CHAPTER 12

### *The Sangro and Beyond*

A mere handful of those men who had sailed for [Greece](#) in the spring of 1941 were still serving with the battalion in October 1943. The intervening period had seen the balance of military power shifting slowly but relentlessly in favour of the Allies, and if the first abortive invasion of Southern Europe was little more than a desperate gamble, the second was an operation born of calculated strength, already in the initial phases of success.

After a calm, uneventful voyage the convoy reached [Taranto](#) on the morning of 9 October. The troops landed by lighters and marched to their camping area a few miles north of [Taranto](#), where they settled in—not very comfortably the first night, as neither bivouacs nor blankets arrived till the following morning. Swarms of Italian hawkers soon appeared on the scene, 'vendors of everything from grapes to boot polish'.<sup>1</sup> The proper attitude to be adopted towards the civil population presented the authorities with a problem of some complexity, for although the Italians were neither allies nor enemies, many of them were giving us whatever assistance lay in their power. Since the only solution of this difficulty seemed to lie in a compromise, the troops were ordered to be polite but not friendly.

At first [Taranto](#) was placed out of bounds; so were the wine factories of Masseria Tedesco and Giranda that lay close by the camp; but an arrangement was made under which wine was purchased in bulk by the Quartermaster and retailed through the company canteens. All drinking had to stop at 10 p.m., and after that an hour was allowed in which all those who had partaken freely were expected to quieten down.

In this country malarial precautions were essential. Atebrin tablets were taken nightly and exposed portions of skin protected by smearing on repellent cream. Each company had an anti-malarial squad whose duty it was to spray bivouacs every evening, and in general to see that all precautions were strictly carried out.

Training for close-country warfare took place in surroundings very different from those of the African scene. Inter-company and inter-platoon football matches were played on green fields from which the stones were gradually cleared away by a

system of emu parades'. Towards the end of October the weather broke; torrential rains brought lower temperatures, but for the most part the troops enjoyed excellent health, and sick parades were attended mainly by sufferers from football injuries.

A few changes in command had taken place since Enfidaville. Major Thomson<sup>2</sup> had taken over B Company from Major Andrews, while Major Clarke commanded C Company in place of Major Seal. Major Aked was again in charge of A, and Captain Turnbull had Headquarters Company. Captain Howden<sup>3</sup> was Quartermaster, and Second-Lieutenant Lendrum<sup>4</sup> was Intelligence Officer until succeeded by Second-Lieutenant Jepson<sup>5</sup> towards the end of November.

While 2 NZ Division lay concentrated near Taranto, 5 Corps had advanced beyond the plains of Foggia, crossed the Biferno and Trigno rivers, and reached the southern bank of the Sangro. On the coastal sector 78 Division had already established a bridgehead across the stream; 5 Corps was preparing to force the Sangro line and advance along the coast to Pescara when heavy rain, coming on in mid-November, reduced all roads to so deplorable a state that the original plan had to be abandoned in favour of a less ambitious design—that of securing as an immediate objective the dominating ridge lying along the Sangro's north bank. In order that 5 Corps might diminish the width of its front and concentrate nearer the coast, the New Zealand Division was ordered to move up on its left flank and occupy the sector held by 8 Indian Division.

In anticipation of this the New Zealanders had already begun to move north from the Taranto area. The newly-equipped 4 NZ Armoured Brigade and Divisional Headquarters had arrived in the vicinity of Lucera when 6 Brigade started its journey on 13 November. The 24th Battalion staged at Altamura the first night and next day went on to La Torre, ten miles west of Lucera. There it remained for two days, starting off again on the 17th and moving towards the coast via San Severo. From the hill of Serracapriola the troops had their first view of the Adriatic. Beyond Termoli the winding, dangerous road was badly congested and the speed of all traffic was slowed down, chiefly on account of the numerous deviations made necessary by demolished bridges. At 11 p.m. 24 Battalion had not yet reached its destination and was obliged to halt for the night by the roadside near the village of Furci. To the west the snow-clad Maiella peak glittered coldly in the moonlight. The pace was still slower next day; besides having to cope with road deviations, the convoy came



under shellfire near [Casalanguida](#), as a result of which only 15 miles were covered in 14 hours. That night the men left their trucks behind and marched forward five miles to halt and camp in an olive grove. Another short march the following night brought the battalion close to the [Sangro's](#) bank, where it took position slightly forward of the [Strada Sangritana](#), a road running parallel with the stream. In spite of sporadic shelling, bivouacs were pitched with B and C Companies forward on the right and left respectively, while A and D occupied similar positions in rear.

A memorable incident took place at one of the halts on the approach march when two men of the 24th, who had been captured at [Sidi Rezegh](#), paid the battalion a visit, having escaped from a prisoner-of-war camp in northern [Italy](#) and made their way back through the enemy's lines.

Sixth Brigade's three battalions were now in line facing the [Sangro](#), with the 24th on the left, 25th in the centre, and 26th on the right. On the Aucklanders' left 19 Indian Brigade, supported by 19 NZ Armoured Regiment, was pushing steadily westward and had captured [Perano](#) and [Archi](#).

In its upper reaches the [Sangro River](#) ran due north through mountainous country and debouched on to a narrow flat at its confluence with the [Aventino](#). Thence it flowed north-east for ten miles through a narrow valley overlooked by high hills, before finally discharging its waters into the Adriatic. Numerous mountain streams joined it at intervals, and here and there it diverged into several channels over a shingle bed with an average width of some 900 yards. Below the [Aventino](#) junction, where 6 Brigade was aligned in position, a narrow alluvial flat extended some way along the river's south bank, while on the opposite side the flat ground was a mere strip which merged into rolling foothills or occasionally into vertical cliffs.

When 6 Brigade received orders to cross the [Sangro](#) on the night 21-22 November and seize the cliff summits on its farther bank, patrols from A and D Companies had already crossed the river opposite 24 Battalion's front. They reported it as being in five separate streams, running with a strong current and about 3 ft 6 ins deep—not fordable by motor transport. No enemy was encountered on the other side, but box mines with trip wires were found sown along the river bank. Heavy rain, however, caused the attack to be postponed, and indeed the succeeding week was one of continual postponements because of bad weather. During that time

patrols from all three battalions of 6 Brigade crossed the river at least once every twenty-four hours, except at one stage when it rose too high to wade. It is unnecessary to describe the progress of each patrol in detail, but three of those sent out by 24 Battalion are worth mentioning.

At 8 a.m. on 21 November, Corporal [Berry](#)<sup>6</sup> and two men of A Company crossed the [Sangro](#). Arriving on the further bank Berry left his men behind and went on alone to the foot of a cliff, where he left his tommy gun and then, apparently, climbed the cliff unarmed. He did not return, and nothing more was heard of him till months later when his grave was discovered near [Chieti](#).

Before dawn the same morning Second-Lieutenant [Lea](#),<sup>7</sup> of D Company, led a reconnaissance patrol across to Pylon Hill, close to where the [Gogna](#) stream joins the [Sangro](#). The hill was found occupied, with enemy weapon pits on its crest; the night mist lifted at sunrise and the patrol was fired upon as it returned. Lea himself had a narrow escape and arrived back at Battalion Headquarters soaked and shivering after having remained hidden for some time half immersed in icy water.

After dark on the 21st an A Company patrol of twelve men accompanied an engineers' reconnaissance party along the [Sangro's](#) near bank. By a disastrous mischance three of these men were killed, including the sergeant in charge, and three wounded by an exploding mine.

Bogged roads and flooded rivers had dissolved all ambitious hopes of thrusting on through [Lanciano](#) to the [Pescara](#) line. Plan after plan had had to be modified in compliance with the appalling weather conditions till at length General Montgomery was obliged to content himself with an objective limited to the German Winter Line, extending from Fossacesia near the coast along a high ridge through [Lanciano](#) and Castelfrentano and thence to Route 84, following that highway as it turned south towards the [Sangro-Aventino](#) junction. While [5 Corps](#), on the right, attacked towards Fossacesia and Mozzagrogna, [2 New Zealand Division](#) was ordered to thrust in a north-westerly direction with its left flank on Route 84. The initial part of this plan, so far as the New Zealanders were concerned, involved the capture by 5 Brigade of a high ridge immediately dominating the river flat, while 6 Brigade, operating on a three-battalion front, pushed out to the west until its left flank faced along the railway line running from San Eusanio to [Casoli](#). On the latter brigade's right flank 26

Battalion had as its objective the Colle Scorticacane; in the centre, **25 Battalion**, after taking **Castellata**, would go on to capture Point 171 farther to the north-west, while the 24th, on reaching its objective, would find itself on the Division's extreme left, facing westward from the slopes of **Colle Barone**.

After a week of being shelled, soaked, and disappointed, no one was sorry when at length, on 27 November, the **Sangro's** level fell to an extent that made it fordable by infantry. The 24th Battalion left its lines at half past ten that night and moved forward across the flat. The ford in its own sector not being

as good as that further down stream, the battalion was to cross the river at the place allocated to the 25th. The artillery was keeping to its usual night programme of intermittent fire. The 25th Battalion's two leading companies crossed successfully, followed by the Aucklanders in the order of D, A, Battalion Headquarters, C, and B Companies. Then came the remainder of **25 Battalion**. The water was waist deep, swift-flowing and icy cold. It was easy enough to slip on the stony



SANGRO-ORSOGNA BATTLE, 27 NOVEMBER 1943-2 JANUARY 1944

### **sangro-orsogna battle, 27 november 1943-2 january 1944**

bottom, especially when carrying ammunition for the attached platoon of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion in addition to full battle equipment; but, overloaded as they were, the troops were all safely across ten minutes before our barrage came down at 2.45 a.m. The enemy's counter-barrage opened up almost at once but fell harmlessly in rear along the riverbed. A Company of **25 Battalion** moved up a gully on the right of steep cliffs opposite the crossing place, to turn left again and assault

[Castellata](#) above the cliffs' summit, while D Company of the same unit turned southwest along the river road and made for Point 122, also known as Pylon Hill. This last-named feature rose abruptly above the [Sangro](#) immediately east of where that river was joined by a tributary stream, the [Gogna](#), which wound its way down through high hills from the north. Pylon Hill was soon in our hands; once it was taken, D Company 24 Battalion passed on beyond it, crossed the [Gogna](#), and occupied Tavernanova and the adjacent hills almost without opposition. C Company followed A and took up a position in

sup- sport

between Pylon Hill and Tavernanova. It had been intended that A Company should follow D, moving north of the river road, but on finding the ground there sown with box mines Major Aked decided to keep his men on the highway. Time was running short, and the concentration on his objective of Marabella Hill was almost due to begin. He pushed on at the best possible pace, intending to cross the [Gogna](#), move 500 yards upstream on its further bank, and then deploy for attack, but his leading platoon mistook a culvert for the [Gogna](#) bridge and turned off too soon. After correcting the error in direction. Aked took the lead himself with his company headquarters. Crossing the [Gogna](#) bridge, he suddenly saw a few of the enemy standing under the shadow of some trees that grew by the roadside. When fired upon they threw grenades, the explosion of which knocked Aked down and wounded his runner. The enemy made off under cover of darkness and A Company went forward again till Marabella Hill loomed out against the skyline. The artillery had already stopped firing when the platoons deployed for attack. Burning haystacks shed an unwelcome light on the advancing lines, which bore away to the right so as to remain in darkness. Some opposition was

encountered on the extreme right flank from a party of infantry protecting three anti-tank guns, but this was soon dealt with and there was no more fighting until the crest of the hill was reached, where another small body of the enemy put up a brief resistance. When this was overcome, two platoons moved on downhill to the northwest and cut demolition wires attached to a bridge on Route 84. Before 5 a.m. the company had taken and consolidated its objective with the loss of only four wounded. A few prisoners and a fair assortment of material had been captured.

The 24th Battalion had now carried out the first instalment of its task with little

loss or delay. Its headquarters was established 100 yards north of Pylon Hill, and a white house close by was allotted to Captain Borrie as an aid post, but before being used for this purpose it had necessarily to be cleared of whatever booby traps it might contain. The minesweepers detailed to clear it found their electric torch too weak and decided to wait for daylight. This did not suit Borrie, who at once mobilised a small force consisting of himself, his sergeant, and two other men, one of whom was armed with a tommy gun. The party entered the house and searched some of the rooms without finding any booby traps, but one of the interior rooms was locked—a suspicious circumstance, as shots had previously been fired from within the house. 'I then decided to open the door', writes Borrie, 'and gave it a mighty kick which made it fly open, human squeals piercing the air. I flashed on my torch, calling "Where is the man with the Tommy gun?" He was not about, but Sgt Thompson <sup>8</sup> was beside me, though we were both unarmed. We proceeded across the room, shining the light into the eyes of two Germans. I took the officer on the left, and Sgt Thompson the private on the right. Both Germans now had their hands above their heads, and I heard our man with the Tommy gun returning. I bent down to pick up the officer's Tommy gun, which was still warm, while Sgt Thompson picked up a Luger. With the pioneer covering the two Germans I asked the officer how he unloaded his Tommy gun; he showed me, so as soon as I saw how it worked I rammed the magazine back and thrust the muzzle of the gun into the officer's back. He was now markedly afraid as he was not sure if it might accidentally go off, so checking that Sgt Thompson had his man secure, we marched the two POW down to Bn HQ, duly handing them over to the Sgt. Major.'

The 65th Infantry Division opposing the New Zealanders in this battle of the [Sangro](#) consisted largely of Poles with no great enthusiasm for the cause in which they fought, or of young Germans incompletely trained. It held a front of nearly 15 miles with two regiments only; its transport was horse drawn, and most of its equipment second-rate. 'The enemy', writes Major Aked, 'were not up to the usual German standard we had met in [Africa](#), and very many were found skulking in camouflaged positions on the crest [of Marabella]. They were scared stiff. One of them could have easily wiped out [A] Coy HQ. Right on the crest was a conical shaped erection. While waiting for my exploiting platoons to return I went out to this to investigate. I found it to be branches, and pulling a few aside, found myself looking into the muzzle of a spandau, complete with gunner.'<sup>9</sup>

West of Marabella and towering above it rose [Colle Barone](#), directly overlooking the [Sangro](#) fords and bridges. At dawn A Company was fired upon from its lower slopes, and later an enemy platoon attempting to reach and demolish the [Gogna](#) bridge on Route 84 was driven off by machine-gun fire. Motor transport was then seen moving along the highway that led forward from the enemy's main position. As it halted south of [San Eusanio](#) for troops to debuss, a 'stonk' called for by Major Aked fell among vehicles and men, successfully dispersing the whole party. No more attempts were made in this quarter and the remainder of the day was more or less uneventful. Prisoners had been passing through Battalion Headquarters at intervals during the morning and now added up to a total of 106.

Provision had been made that, in case of delay in bridging the [Sangro](#), rations and ammunition should be carried up by an Italian mule pack company. A Bailey bridge had been constructed and maintained on 5 Brigade's sector, but the folding-boat bridge further upstream had been demolished by gunfire. A carrying party brought up a hot meal for 24 Battalion on the night of 28 November, but next morning neither mule train nor porters arrived till 11 a.m., in consequence of which there was no breakfast.

Further progress along Route 84 was impossible until [Colle Barone](#) should be captured. From Marabella Aked's men had seen the enemy drawing back his lines on 28 November, and the following morning civilians reported that the position was only lightly held. The 19th Armoured Regiment had crossed the [Sangro](#) after the infantry, but many of its vehicles had got bogged in transit, and moreover, the river road was not yet cleared of mines. The tanks, therefore, were not immediately available for co-operation with infantry, but the regiment was soon reorganised and the road cleared. At midday on the 29th B Company 24 Battalion formed up west of Route 84, preparatory to climbing the steep slopes of [Colle Barone](#) under cover of an artillery barrage and accompanied by a squadron of [19 Armoured Regiment](#). A platoon of D Company moved forward simultaneously on the left, while the whole of C followed on 500 yards in rear of the forward troops. Barone was found undefended, but when more than half-way to the crest B Company was caught by mortar fire and suffered several casualties. The summit was reached at 1.45 p.m.; shelling continued for a while, but B Company was soon dug in and the men remained unmolested in their position, enjoying a magnificent view of the surrounding country. While this advance



was taking place, a patrol from A Company moved up on the right and found the village of [San Eusanio](#) unoccupied.

Since the enemy was drawing back on to the [Guardiagrele- Lanciano](#) road, 6 Brigade was ordered on 30 November to move forward by a process of infiltration. The 26th Battalion, which had reached the hills beyond Colle Scorticacane, with 5 Brigade on its right and slightly in rear, was directed to occupy the bend in Route 84 west of [Castelfrentano](#). The 25th Battalion lay astride the [Lanciano- Casoli](#) railway line where it crossed the main road, and from that position prepared to push on beyond [San Eusanio](#). The 24th Battalion's task was to move up the east bank of the [Gogna](#) and plant two companies immediately in front of [Castelfrentano](#), thereby transferring itself from the left to the centre of 6 Brigade. After relieving B and C Companies of 24 Battalion at [Colle Barone](#), 22 (Motor) Battalion would advance along Route 84 in conjunction with [18 Armoured Regiment](#).

Colonel Conolly summoned his orders group at 8 p.m. and soon afterwards D Company left Marabella and crossed the [Gogna](#), thence moving due north with A in close support. Over steep ploughed slopes the going was very difficult from the start, but the force pressed on without opposition till it arrived at the railway loop immediately south of [Castelfrentano](#), where it halted for the night. A patrol from A Company reported that the track ahead was mined and blocked with fallen trees. The two remaining companies were moving up in rear with Battalion Headquarters. The 26th Battalion was in rear and to the right; [25 Battalion](#) had reached [San Eusanio](#) railway station.

South of [Castelfrentano](#), about 100 yards below Route 84, a hotel two stories high and built of stone stood on a small eminence facing the road. To the west of it a track led into [Castelfrentano](#) itself, and on either side of the track were several smaller buildings. Before any further advance could be made towards the village, it was essential that this hotel should be occupied.

On the return of A Company's patrol Major Aked and Major Dew discussed their plan of action and decided that D Company, supported by A, should attempt the hotel at dawn the following morning. Just before Dew's men moved off (1 December), Lieutenant [Turbott](#)<sup>10</sup> arrived on the scene with two 3-inch mortars to support the infantry. During the previous afternoon's advance and throughout the

night there had been no contact with the rear, but at 8 a.m. signallers brought a telephone line forward. Aked then spoke to his commanding officer, who instructed him, if possible, to avoid becoming heavily involved; but by this time D Company was already in action.

Dew sent 16 Platoon up the track leading to [Castelfrentano](#) and 17 Platoon to the right along the railway, so that they might converge on the hotel from either flank. No. 18 Platoon remained in reserve and moved along the track in rear with Company Headquarters. A warning was received from Italian civilians that two houses in front of the hotel were occupied by Germans. The warning was fully justified, and ten prisoners were taken when 16 Platoon captured the houses. In this attack Corporal [Robertshawe](#) <sup>11</sup> was brought down by a wound in the leg, and though unable to go further, he continued to give supporting fire with his tommy gun. He then tried to escort the walking wounded and prisoners to the rear but got held up by machine-gun fire before going very far. Meanwhile 16 Platoon went on to seize the hotel. One of its sections, led by Corporal [Southward](#), <sup>12</sup> moved out to the left, but was fired upon from the main road. Southward had already twice been wounded, but he led his men on till receiving a third and fatal wound. The rest of the platoon had gone round the other side of the building and collected a few more prisoners from an outhouse. Since it was obvious that no more ground would be gained without heavy loss, the hotel itself was occupied and consolidated. In the meantime 17 Platoon had run into opposition and was held up, but one of its sections reached the main road, where it remained till nightfall.

Aked had sent out a platoon on either flank of D Company to give supporting fire. Of two anti-tank guns which arrived forward at midday and came under his command, one had to be used against enemy machine guns, but the other was kept hidden in case tanks should put in an appearance. Late in the morning a forward observation officer arrived at D Company's headquarters and brought his guns into action against enemy observation posts. Colonel Conolly also came up and visited the scene of action, 'being helped on his way by a squadron of ground-strafting Messerschmidts which added wings to his jeep and nearly to the occupants'. <sup>13</sup>

It was well that all possible defensive precautions had been taken without delay, for scarcely had the hotel position been consolidated when the enemy counter-attacked twice in quick succession. The second of these assaults was beaten



off only with difficulty, and 18 Platoon came forward to reinforce 16 Platoon. Sergeants [Kane](#)<sup>14</sup> and [Williams](#)<sup>15</sup> conducted the defence with skill and courage, and the indomitable [Robertshawe](#)<sup>16</sup> crawled back to their assistance, despite the pain of his wounded leg. A third attack was beaten off early in the afternoon (1 December), after which the enemy contented himself by shelling the hotel heavily with mortars. Before long the building began to crumble and the defenders were obliged to withdraw from its upper story. At dusk the shelling died down. Nothing further happened during the night, but enemy motor transport could be heard continually moving along the road.

Although on a small scale, the engagement had been sharp while it lasted and somewhat costly, too, with a casualty list of four killed and 18 wounded in the two companies, whose bold thrust into the enemy's position undoubtedly hastened and embarrassed his retreat from the [Castelfrentano](#) Ridge.

On either flank the pressure of infiltration was being exerted. Early in the morning of 1 December 4 Armoured Brigade moved up Route 84 from Marabella to the road junction by [San Eusanio](#), beyond which it deployed its squadrons, whose further advance, however, was checked by the fire of concealed batteries. A Company of [25 Battalion](#) threatened to cut the road west of [Castelfrentano](#), while on the right a company of the 26th came up on the east side of D Company's position in the hotel building. Farther still to the right, 21 and 23 Battalions of 5 Brigade were pressing on towards Route 84 on its northward bend in the direction of [Lanciano](#).

Before dawn on 2 December 24 Battalion went forward to occupy [Castelfrentano](#), which was found to have been evacuated during the night, and instead of opposition the troops met with an enthusiastic welcome from the Italian population. A Company followed on and searched the village systematically, while C and B moved down into the [Moro](#) valley along an old Roman road. A and D followed later and took up positions eastward of the other companies. A section of 14 Platoon (C Company), patrolling towards [Orsogna](#), met a single German on horseback who managed to get away and avoid capture. The patrol was fired upon from the town's approaches and forced to withdraw. Subsequently, a half-hearted counter-attack by about seventy of the enemy on C Company's position was repulsed without difficulty.

While consolidation was in progress on [Brecciarola Ridge](#), seven of the enemy

were discovered hiding in A Company's area, and soon after nightfall three escaped British prisoners of war reported at Major Aked's headquarters, informing him that three more of their number were in a house some way beyond our forward lines. Aked at once sent out a patrol to fetch them in, and at the same time to make some attempt at establishing contact with the enemy. Guided by one of the escaped men, the patrol not only picked up the British soldiers but also brought in two more German prisoners. No other enemy troops were encountered, although the patrol went on towards the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road, along which a great quantity of motor transport could be heard moving.

The 19th Armoured Regiment had moved through Castelfrentano in the wake of 24 Battalion and advanced along the winding hill road through Taverna on 6 Brigade's right flank until held up by a blown bridge over the [Moro](#). Several German posts having surrendered, there were a number of prisoners, but no infantry to take them over, so some of 24 Battalion's carriers went to the spot to give assistance. While they were thus engaged Captain Lewis, the officer commanding, was severely wounded. The remainder of 4 Armoured Brigade moved west along the two roads from [Castelfrentano](#) and [San Eusanio](#) to the vicinity of [Salarola](#), from where it threatened [Guardiagrele](#). The 26th Battalion lay immediately to the east of Castelfrentano, and some distance away, on the other side of the town, [25 Battalion](#) faced due west. But the enemy had not yet declared the exact extent of his retreat and the whole divisional front was still in a state of movement. Soon after midnight on 2 December, [25 Battalion](#) moved forward through 24 Battalion's lines and advanced upon [Orsogna](#). Its leading company was half-way through the town when it was suddenly attacked by enemy tanks, which were joined by their infantry soon afterwards. Lacking armoured support, the whole unit was obliged to withdraw behind 24 Battalion. The 26th had begun to move up from [Castelfrentano](#) at dawn, but on hearing that the attack had failed it halted and dug in 1000 yards south of the [Orsogna- Lanciano](#) road. Tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment passed through 24 Battalion's lines towards [Orsogna](#) later in the morning (3 December) and drew down heavy shellfire on the Aucklanders. C Company, whose lines were furthest advanced, received most of the attention.

Before dawn on 4 December a patrol of B Company reported [Orsogna](#) still strongly held. Later another patrol of A Company went north-west towards Pascuccio

to discover, if possible, where the enemy's forward defences were situated. The platoon was fired upon from the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road and, having reported the fact by wireless, received orders to return. This was done, but one badly wounded man had to be left behind in an Italian farmhouse. Private [Williams](#)<sup>17</sup> volunteered to go back and look after him and earned the MM by his conduct. When he arrived at the farmhouse the enemy was digging in some 200 yards away. In the intervals of doing what he could for the wounded man, Williams made sketches of the enemy positions and sent them back to Company Headquarters, using an Italian boy as his messenger. The artillery took advantage of this information and brought down fire on some of the points indicated by their unofficial observer. The wounded man was brought in by a stretcher party at nightfall.

An officer's patrol from C Company, sent out the same morning, reached a pink house on the main road near the outskirts of [Orsogna](#), beyond which an enemy tank stood among some cypress trees. Men of the patrol approached to within fifty yards of it and saw the tank commander observing from an open turret. The approaches to the town were well protected by earthworks, and little doubt remained that the place would prove a hard nut to crack.

The 26th Panzer Division and several parachute battalions having been brought up by the enemy in support of the much-battered 65 Infantry Division, there were indications that resistance was stiffening in more than one part of the line. [Lanciano](#) and San Vito had fallen to [5 Corps](#) on the right, but 4 Armoured Brigade's attack on [Guardiagrele](#) was held up by road demolitions and gunfire. The 25th Battalion attempted to occupy [Sfasciata Ridge](#) before dawn on 5 December, but found it too strongly held and was obliged to withdraw. Thus on 6 December the battalions of 6 Brigade were strung out along the [Orsogna- Lanciano](#) road, with the 25th close to [San Felice Ridge](#), and the 26th in position east of the 24th, which still faced westward along the [Brecciarola Ridge](#).

[Orsogna](#) was a key position on the main ridge that ran north-east from [Guardiagrele](#), and, since its retention by the enemy must seriously embarrass any further attempt by 2 NZ Division to advance, [General Freyberg](#) decided to capture the town by daylight assault on 7 December. It could be approached only from the east and on a front so constricted as to deny all possibility of manoeuvre. On its south side, the ridge on which the town stood fell away sharply into steep,

impracticable slopes or sheer cliffs. The ridge's northern face was less precipitous, but troops advancing on this side would be exposed to flanking fire from [Cemetery Ridge](#) extending towards [Poggiofiorito](#). In general, the way to [Orsogna](#) was narrow and easy to defend. Moreover the enemy could be in no doubt as to the exact route along which attacking troops must advance.

The 5th and 6th Brigades were each directed to attack on a one-battalion front, [28 Battalion](#) having as its objective [Cemetery Ridge](#) beyond Pascuccio, while [24 Battalion](#) was to assault the town of [Orsogna](#) and consolidate beyond its western outskirts. The 18th Armoured Regiment, less one squadron, would provide support. An artillery barrage was timed to come down at 1.30 p.m. 300 yards beyond the infantry start line, stand there for an hour, and then move forward at the rate of 100 yards in six minutes. The afternoon attack was designed to allow the assaulting troops to consolidate before dark, while at the same time denying the enemy an opportunity of counter-attacking by daylight. Whether conceived with the soundest judgment or not, the plan was unpopular with officers and men long inured to night fighting (a form of operation in which they held a proud record), and who regarded a preparatory bombardment as a mere warning to the enemy that they were coming. According to Major Aked, 'We would have preferred a silent approach and a rush at first light. We had proved by patrolling that we could get into the outskirts of the village at night. However, we attacked at 1600 hours, knowing there must be some reason for it.'

Since 2 December C Company had occupied the most advanced position, closest to [Orsogna](#). Soon after 1 p.m. on 7 December it was joined by B Company, and as the bombardment opened the troops took cover in slit trenches. These two companies, C on the right and B on the left, following 300 yards behind the barrage, were to advance into the village until they reached a point where the main street branched out to form three sides of a square. With this objective gained, A Company would pass on through to the western end of [Orsogna](#) and occupy a small hill close by the railway which dominated the roads on either side of it. D Company was detailed as battalion reserve. At 2.15 p.m. B and C Companies began moving forward under heavy shellfire to their start lines three-quarters of a mile east of the town, while at the same time [26 Battalion](#) prepared to occupy the Aucklanders' former position and provide a firm base for the attack. Nearly a mile to the north-

east, [28 Battalion](#) was arriving on its start line facing [Cemetery Ridge](#). At half past two the barrage lifted, and as B and C Companies of the 24th moved forward on either side of the [Orsogna- Lanciano](#) road, the enemy concentrated shell and mortar fire on the narrow line of advance.

About three o'clock a shellburst killed Major Thomson, commanding B Company, close by the Pink House on the town's outskirts. His place was taken by Second-Lieutenant Genge. <sup>18</sup> Heavy spandau fire came from outlying houses, but 11 Platoon, moving out to the left, worked its way up the further side of a ravine entering the southern face of the ridge and outflanked the machine-gun posts, only to be shelled out of its position by our own 25-pounders. No. 10 Platoon advanced up the hither side of the same ravine, passed by a cave, and reached the back of some buildings which fronted



Support weapons of 24 Battalion waiting to cross the Sangro  
**Support weapons of 24 Battalion waiting to cross the Sangro**

The Brickworks near Castelfrentano under enemy shellfire



**The Brickworks near [Castelfrentano](#) under enemy shellfire**



An aerial view of Orsogna from the south

**An aerial view of [Orsogna](#) from the south**



The breastworks, Orsogna; also shown in the above photograph

**The breastworks, [Orsogna](#); also shown in the above photograph**





Ruins of the Continental Hotel, Cassino

**Ruins of the Continental Hotel, Cassino**



Looking on to the valley south of Cassino from near Point 202, 19-24 March 1944, showing part of inundated area along the railway embankment

**Looking on to the valley south of Cassino from near Point 202, 19-24 March 1944, showing part of inundated area along the railway embankment**

Some of the men of C Company who were isolated for six days on Point 202



Some of the men of C Company who were isolated for six days on Point 202



ITALY MAP NO. 1

on the main street not far from the centre of the town. By this time darkness had fallen. Suddenly a German officer appeared close by and was at once shot down by the New Zealanders. Enemy flares went up, revealing three tanks at close quarters. The men of 10 Platoon had no choice but to take refuge in one of the neighbouring houses, from which the tanks tried to dislodge them by close-range fire. This was bad enough, but when one of the tanks began trying to force its way into the house the party withdrew, leaving two casualties behind, and took shelter in the cave they had previously passed by. Guards were posted at the cave's entrance while an endeavour was made to get in touch with Battalion Headquarters by wireless telephone. This proving unsuccessful, a runner was sent off. All the while sounds of the searching tank could be heard overhead. Midnight was long past when



the platoon's hiding place was discovered by prowling Germans, who threw grenades and fired with a spandau at the cave mouth. It was a question of either breaking out or surrendering. Four of the party were wounded and unable to travel, but the remainder blasted their way out with grenades, finally succeeding in getting back to the reserve company. Meanwhile 11 Platoon, having got in touch with Battalion Headquarters by runner, had been ordered back to the Pink House. The reserve platoon, No. 12, was also withdrawn. Its commander, Second-Lieutenant Williams,<sup>19</sup> had been wounded earlier in the action at the outskirts of the village.

C Company, under Major Clarke, moved forward north of the road to encounter not only shell and mortar fire of the enemy's defensive barrage but also a galling enfilade from scattered farmhouses on the ridge west of Pascuccio. Progress under these circumstances was naturally slow, and when the company reached Orsogna itself at 5 p.m. it was only to discover that the open slopes facing north were thickly sown with S-mines. Moreover, the whole area was covered by spandaus posted in the town's outskirts which opened fire on the spot as soon as a mine exploded. Corporal Carr<sup>20</sup> of 13 Platoon won the DCM for leading his section against these machine-gun nests with great gallantry and putting several of the spandaus out of action. His shouts for more and more grenades rose above the din of battle and inspired all who heard them with fresh courage. From away to the north came sounds of Maori activity, and the Aucklanders laughed outright to hear distant yells of 'Come out you bastards!' Curious spurts of flame flared out in the darkness. At the time no one in C Company knew what they were, and not until next day did they hear that 28 Battalion had been attacked by a German tank armed with flame-throwers. Casualties increased. At seven o'clock Major Clarke was seriously wounded and his command devolved upon Second-Lieutenant Watt.<sup>21</sup> Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons again tried to work round the northern outskirts of Orsogna, but the S-mine field proved an unsurmountable obstacle and more losses were sustained before the attempt was abandoned. No. 13 Platoon broke into the town itself and came upon a German tank firing into the main street. Lance-Corporal Huggins<sup>22</sup> approached it stealthily and was about to throw a sticky bomb when he felt the muzzle of a pistol prodding his back. His captor marched him away into the town, but somehow he managed to overpower the German and make his escape, in the course of which he received a bullet through the hand. In spite of this and other gallant actions no further progress was made, and C Company was withdrawn early in the morning of 8

December.

Seeing that all was not well, Colonel Conolly had sent A Company forward at 4 p.m. to assist in capturing the first objectives. As it went into action, tanks of B Squadron 18 Armoured Regiment followed in support. Soon after passing the start lines A Company was fired upon from houses north of the road, overrun but neglected by the first attacking wave. Second-Lieutenant Kelly <sup>23</sup> led 8 Platoon out to the right and dealt with the machine guns that had been causing trouble. With this nuisance abated, A Company pushed on towards the Pink House, which stood about 150 yards short of the town, picking up a few stragglers on the way. Wireless contact with the forward troops had broken down, but news was passed back that Major Thomson had been killed and that C Company was held up by S-mines. Having established his headquarters in the Pink House, Aked disposed his company with 7 and 8 Platoons right and left of the road and 9 Platoon in rear, supporting No. 8. The tanks now moved forward, but their progress was held up by a demolition on the road at the outskirts of Orsogna. A bulldozer came up to fill in the crater while 7 Platoon formed a protective screen. The bulldozer was knocked out, and Second-Lieutenant Ingle <sup>24</sup> of 7 Platoon was killed while leading his men against a fortified house. A second bulldozer came on the scene and succeeded in filling the crater, while 9 Platoon moved up to help cover the engineer party.

Meanwhile Aked had been receiving a somewhat puzzling wireless message from Battalion Headquarters, repeated again and again, 'Are Hermans with you?' The only Hermans he knew of were out in front and very obviously hostile. Later, when the battle was over, he learned that the officer in charge of the engineers was named Hermans. <sup>25</sup> More messages were coming through from Battalion Headquarters, urging further attempts on the village and sending the encouraging report that our friends on the right were doing well. Here 28 Battalion had secured its objective but was waiting for supporting arms to arrive by the only route, through Orsogna. Accompanied by his runner, Aked made a reconnaissance to the right, believing that one of C Company's platoons must be just forward of his position, but on arriving within 75 yards of the line of houses he was met by a burst of machine-gun fire followed by a blazing spurt from a flame-throwing tank.

By this time there were a number of wounded. Padre Judson, whose conduct on this occasion earned him the MC, had come up to the Pink House with a party of

stretcher-bearers and cleared away the rubble from a partially demolished room which they made into a forward aid post. He was by no means unfamiliar with situations of this kind, having performed similar tasks at Tebaga and in other engagements. After organising the stretcher party, he helped personally to carry in the wounded. The Pink House was not a healthy spot and the aid post suffered more than one direct hit, but he stayed there till orders came for a general withdrawal. Before that time, however, Captain Borrie had come up with a truck and taken away all the wounded men, though in order to do so he was obliged to make two stretcher cases walk.

The demolition having been repaired, our tanks now attempted to enter the village, but a German Mark IV, well protected by houses, commanded the only approach so effectively that no further advance was possible; neither was the enemy able to mount a counter-attack—the bottleneck was a deathtrap for whoever should seek either to break into the town or out of it.

Colonel Conolly arrived on the scene to find affairs at a deadlock. His men could only expect to suffer heavily without hope of gaining any advantage by remaining where they were. Moreover, [28 Battalion](#) was already being withdrawn on the right. Judging the situation to be hopeless, he returned with the intention of reporting to Brigadier Parkinson but found that [General Freyberg](#) was also present at Brigade Headquarters. The General was anxious to persevere with the attack, but Conolly, with the advantage of having been personally on the scene of action, stoutly maintained that such a course would be disastrous. Fully realising the extent to which his own military career might be at stake, he was bent on doing everything possible to save 24 Battalion from unnecessary loss. At length, to his great relief, the GOC accepted the situation and agreed to the assaulting troops being withdrawn. Conolly at once went forward again and sent his Intelligence Officer, Second-Lieutenant Jepson, with instructions for Major Aked to pull out B and C Companies. Having done so, Aked was to withdraw his own company last and occupy a defensive position behind the reserve company. Parties from B and C Companies had already made their way back to Aked's lines when orders came to withdraw. The troops remaining forward were eventually extricated from their advanced positions; all wounded still in the aid post were evacuated, and A Company covered the withdrawal.

Thus ended an unfortunate but in no way discreditable episode in 24 Battalion's history. Failure was something to which its men had become more or less strangers. They resented the implication of defeat, but found some consolation in the belief that they had been set a task verging on the impossible.

All considered, with two officers and seven other ranks killed, fatal casualties had not been heavy; but in addition to three officers and 57 other ranks wounded, 14 men were posted as missing, making in all a total of 80 casualties. When account is taken of the fact that only three companies were engaged, these losses appear considerable.

D Company occupied the battalion's old forward defence lines on [Brecciarola Ridge](#), with A in close support, from which position they enjoyed an excellent view of [Orsogna](#) being bombed by Kittyhawks on 8 December. On coming out of action B and C Companies moved back to the southern slopes of [San Felice Ridge](#), where the other two companies rejoined them the following night after having been relieved by 26 Battalion.

The 23rd Battalion had secured a foothold on [Sfasciata Ridge](#), lying in the fork of the [Ortona- Castelfrentano](#) roads—the only territorial gain of a somewhat disastrous battle. Preparations were made to exploit this small success on a larger scale, and the infantry of [2 New Zealand Division](#) began to push out patrols to the north-west. By turns, the companies of 24 Battalion sent out patrols a platoon strong every night from 7 p.m. till 5 a.m., leaving a standing patrol close to the [Ortona](#) road during the daytime. No contact was made with the enemy, though much varied activity was heard on and about the road. Once or twice our men met patrols from [2 Parachute Brigade](#), which had come into the line on 2 NZ Division's left.

After being twice postponed, the attack took place in the early hours of 15 December. Supported by 18 Armoured Regiment, 5 Brigade succeeded in cutting the [Orsogna- Ortona](#) road on a mile-wide front north-east of [Pascuccio Ridge](#). The 17th Brigade of 5 British Division co-operated on the right, and 6 NZ Brigade on the left. A company of [25 Battalion](#) attacked [Cemetery Ridge](#), while the 24th stood in readiness to move through [Orsogna](#) if the armour should succeed in exploiting along the [Ortona](#) road and entering it from the east. But the tanks were held up as they passed [Cemetery Ridge](#) and the battalion remained in position.

On 18 December it took up a position as the forward unit of 6 Brigade on [Brecciarola Ridge](#), with its companies strung out from west to east along the line of the road. Two battalions were to remain in the line and one back at [Castelfrentano](#), with a system of reliefs that would ensure each unit of the brigade a rest of three days after six days in forward positions. As before, a standing patrol was maintained near the [Ortona](#) road during daylight, each company undertaking this duty by turn. On the 20th [Orsogna](#) was again bombed by Kittyhawks, and 24 Battalion was warned to lie low but not to withdraw from its forward lines. C Company sent out an officer's patrol the same night to harass the enemy and discover, if possible, whether the place was still strongly held. A German standing patrol was discovered close by two knocked-out tanks at the village entrance. Our men did not engage it, but waited till after midnight and then fired mortars and flares up the main street. One spandau replied from well in rear; otherwise the enemy made no response. D Company sent out a patrol the following night with the object of bringing back prisoners, but this party also, although it fired Bren guns, threw grenades, and generally behaved in a provocative manner, called forth no retaliation and returned empty handed.

After 5 British Division had captured [Arielli](#) (four miles north of [Orsogna](#)) on 23 December, another attempt on the following day was made by [2 NZ Division](#) to break through the enemy defences beyond [Cemetery Ridge](#). Once again 5 Brigade, this time assisted by [26 Battalion](#), was to carry out the operation, and once again 24 Battalion was to stand in readiness to occupy [Orsogna](#) should the attack go through. Fifth Brigade succeeded in widening and deepening its bridgehead on the [Ortona](#) road; our armour stood by to exploit west and south-west, but German reinforcements and Italian mud combined to prevent a breakthrough. With plans complete for clearing and occupying [Orsogna](#), 24 Battalion awaited news of success from the Maoris, whose task it was to outflank the village from the north. When a warning order to move was received in the middle of the morning, it seemed that success must be in sight, but the order was never confirmed. The 24th Battalion gave supporting fire but was not called upon to move from its position. Its mortars were established south of [Brecciarola Ridge](#) and their part in the action is briefly described in the unit's war diary:

0800 hrs (24 Dec) 28 Bn asked for support from our mortars during attack. A B C

tasks given....

1000 hrs. Warning order Bn on half hour's notice to move.

1030 hrs. A Coy being mortared by the enemy. Mortars falling in wadi to north of C Coy.

1215 hrs. 28 Bn again called for A and B mortar tasks. Results very satisfactory.

1325 hrs. 3-inch mortar amm. taken up to forward positions by man pack.

1400 hrs. 28 Bn counter attacked. Called for A B C tasks. Attack smashed.

Christmas Day saw the Aucklanders still on Brecciarola Ridge, but [4 Parachute Battalion](#) relieved them that night and they moved back to the line of the [Moro River](#). They were under orders to go forward again on the 26th, in which case all patriotic parcels were to be withheld till some period of leisure should intervene, but when the message 'no move today' arrived from Brigade everything was at once set in train for a delayed celebration. A Christmas dinner of turkey, pork, green peas, potatoes, and plum pudding, with two bottles of beer a head, was served to the men by officers and sergeants in traditional fashion. That night films were shown in a barn; but the interlude was brief indeed, and forty-eight hours later the battalion was back in the line—this time on [Cemetery Ridge](#).

With B and D Companies forward and A and C in reserve, the battalion lay astride the [Ortona](#) road, its defence lines fronting west and its left flank swung back so as to face [Orsogna](#). Shelling was fairly constant and there were several casualties, more especially in B Company. At one time a German deserter walked into the lines and gave himself up. According to his information [Orsogna](#) was still strongly held. After a few days the forward companies were relieved by those in rear. Living conditions were not ideal and the whole scene was one of depressing desolation. Rations, which were brought up from the vicinity of [Castelfrentano](#) by mules and Algerian muleteers under a British corporal, had to be prepared in the line. The troops occupied houses by day and manned slit trenches some way in advance by night. Many of the buildings were less commodious than could have been desired. At first 11 Platoon of B Company occupied two houses, but the party in one of them left it and crowded into the other, having been unable to put up with the stench of



several dead horses lying in the vicinity.

The mud and misery of an Italian winter were producing a certain amount of unavoidable sickness. Much of it was of a mild description, and cases not severe enough for evacuation were treated regimentally—sometimes under conditions not altogether ideal. 'Today Padre is ill in bed with a temperature', records Captain Borrie. 'He is lying in a manger, and there are 8 sheep, 2 lambs and 2 rabbits in the same room.'

On first arriving in [Italy](#) the troops had preferred to dig slit trenches after the African manner, rather than rely upon buildings for purposes of defence. Life in the [Western Desert](#) had laid its impress on their habits and ways of speech. They still spoke of wadis instead of ravines and generally applied African phrases to Italian conditions or surroundings. But fresh environment was having its effect. If houses were scarce in North Africa they were plentiful in Southern Europe, and the New Zealanders soon began to rely upon them more and more when preparing defensive positions.

Driving rain turned into a blizzard on the night of New Year's Eve, and snow lay two feet deep next day, with heavy drifts in places. Most of the men, being Aucklanders, had never seen snow before at close quarters. The experience was novel and even exciting, the scene picturesque and in keeping with old world tradition, but living conditions were made acutely uncomfortable. Snow filled the slit trenches and drifted through shell holes into the houses. Clearing and shovelling it away was an additional and burdensome task. All movement became not only difficult but dangerous, as every object showed up clearly against the white surface. To avoid being seen by the enemy, parties visiting the forward posts dressed themselves in camouflage suits made from sheets. But the [Sangro- Orsogna](#) phase was drawing to a close, and after two more unpleasant days in the line 24 Battalion was relieved by the Maoris. Blanket rolls were packed down to the [Moro](#) bridge by the Algerian mule train. Following later, the companies were picked up by motor transport and taken back to the vicinity of [Castelfrentano](#), where the men settled into houses with some approach to comfort. There they remained during the next fortnight.

The losses at [Orsogna](#) and elsewhere had been practically replaced by nearly



one hundred reinforcements, which had arrived at intervals during the month of December. The battalion's casualties from the advance to the [Sangro](#) till the end of the [Orsogna](#) battles were:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	5	33
Died of wounds	1	16
Wounded	6	119
Prisoners of war (includes 6 ORs wounded and p.w.)–		8
Total	12	176

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, B Coy 24 Bn.

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

<sup>3</sup> [Maj I. G. Howden](#); [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 27 Dec 1914; broker; QM 24 Bn 1943.

<sup>4</sup> [Capt B. S. Lendrum](#); [Ottawa, Canada](#); born [Auckland](#), 27 Mar 1921; university student.

<sup>5</sup> [Capt J. D. Jepson](#), m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Scotland](#), 22 Oct 1912; school-teacher; wounded 28 Jul 1944.

<sup>6</sup> [Cpl J. W. Berry](#); born [Invercargill](#), 2 Jul 1920; clerk; died while p.w. 21 Nov 1943.

<sup>7</sup> [Maj F. J. Lea](#), MC, m.i.d., US Silver Star; Waitakere, [North Auckland](#); born England, 27 Apr 1921; clerk; twice wounded.

<sup>8</sup> [S-Sgt R. J. Thompson](#); born [Ireland](#), 25 Aug 1912; farm labourer.

<sup>9</sup> Letter, Lt-Col Aked, 25 Jul 1948.

<sup>10</sup> Maj G. G. Turbott, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 4 Oct 1919; school-teacher; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

<sup>11</sup> Lt N. J. Robertshawe, MM; Dannevirke; born Dannevirke, 13 Nov 1921; farmhand; wounded 1 Dec 1943.

<sup>12</sup> L-Cpl R. G. Southward; born NZ 9 Dec 1920; farmhand; killed in action 1 Dec 1943.

<sup>13</sup> Comment by Lt-Col Conolly.

<sup>14</sup> Lt P. J. Kane, MM; Hamilton; born Westport, 16 Mar 1913; secondary-school teacher; twice wounded.

<sup>15</sup> Capt J. R. Williams, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Gisborne, 13 May 1922; shipping clerk.

<sup>16</sup> L-Sgt Kane and Cpl Robertshawe were both awarded the MM.

<sup>17</sup> Sgt R. Williams, MM; born England, 10 Mar 1922; labourer; wounded 24 Feb 1944.

<sup>18</sup> Lt. R. Genge; Police Headquarters; Suva; born NZ 16 Dec 1918; labourer.

<sup>19</sup> 2 Lt P. Williams; Paeroa; born NZ 7 Dec 1909; draper; wounded 7 Dec 1943.

<sup>20</sup> 2 Lt E. F. Carr, DCM, m.i.d.; Waiuku; born NZ 13 Feb 1920; apprentice sheetmetal worker; twice wounded.

<sup>21</sup> Capt C. C. Watt; Wellington; born Hamilton, 29 Nov 1911; school-teacher.

<sup>22</sup> L-Cpl J. S. Huggins; Auckland; born NZ 23 Apr 1913; motor-body builder; wounded 7 Dec 1943.

<sup>23</sup> Lt B. F. E. Kelly, m.i.d.; born [Hamilton](#), 12 Jan 1917; school-teacher.

<sup>24</sup> 2 Lt D. G. McE. Ingle; born NZ 24 Apr 1910; company manager; killed in action 7 Dec 1943.

<sup>25</sup> Lt R. E. Hermans, MC; Mangakino; born Ranganui, 29 Aug 1918; civil engineer; wounded 7 Dec 1943.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 13 – CASSINO

## CHAPTER 13

### Cassino

In January 1944 a shift of the main Allied effort from east to west called for 2 New Zealand Division's presence on the other coast, and after being relieved by 4 Indian Division its units began their long journey over Italy's great central mountain barrier. Starting late on 14 January, 24 Battalion camped for a few hours on the roadside and then, moving off again before dawn, arrived at the staging area near Lucera, to be entertained that night by a mobile cinema. Till now the troops had been under the impression that they were going to San Severo to be trained as motorised infantry, but all such expectations vanished next day when the column turned along the Naples road, passed through Ariano Irpino and Avellino, and then swung north-west to halt just south of Cancello. That night tongues of flame could be seen bursting from the crater of Vesuvius, twelve or fifteen miles to the south. Naples and the coastline were not far off, and 17 January saw the Aucklanders' journey end at a camp among pleasant woodlands near Piedimonte d' Alife, in the Volturno valley.

American troops were much in evidence hereabouts and their weapons and equipment were a source of great interest to our men, as also were their sports and pastimes—especially when an American basketball team visited 24 Battalion and badly defeated the previously uninstructed New Zealanders. Naples being out of bounds, leave parties had to be content with visits to Pompeii. The usual accumulation of courts of inquiry and courts martial had to be disposed of while the chance presented itself. Training was adapted to local conditions. In Italy the crossing of rivers was a necessary accomplishment, and a novel form of exercise was carried out in the use of collapsible canvas boats and kapok pontoon bridges. The latter were tricky things to walk upon, and there were several spills into ice-cold water.

On the whole life was very pleasant in the Volturno valley, but from the nature of things it could not be expected to last. Not only in the east but also in the west a state of deadlock had developed. Stretching across the Liri valley and extending coastwards along the line of the Garigliano, the Gustav Line barred the Fifth Army's way to Rome. A French African corps faced the enemy in the alpine region north of Cassino; 10 British Corps' lines extended southwards from the Liri- Rapido

confluence, while in the central sector the forward movement of 2 United States Corps was stemmed by a fortress both natural and artificial which effectually commanded the Liri valley. Lying on the edge of a marshy plain, the town of Cassino was dominated by mountains on its western side and overlooked by the ancient, massively-built Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino. Route 6, the main highway between Rome and Naples, passed through the town itself, while the railway ran south of it at a distance of less than a mile. In January an American division had crossed the Rapido five miles south of Cassino, only to be counter-attacked and driven back over the river. A few days later the attack had been renewed in the mountain region north of the town, where some progress had been made, but with town and monastery both remaining firmly in the enemy's grasp no general forward movement was possible.

On 3 February 2 New Zealand Division and 4 Indian Division were formed into a corps under the command of General Freyberg, who handed over the New Zealand Division to Major-General Kippenberger.<sup>1</sup> The new corps' task was to support the American forces attacking Cassino and, in the event of their objective not having been captured by 12 February, to take over their sector and continue the offensive. Meanwhile the New Zealand infantry brigades began to move forward.

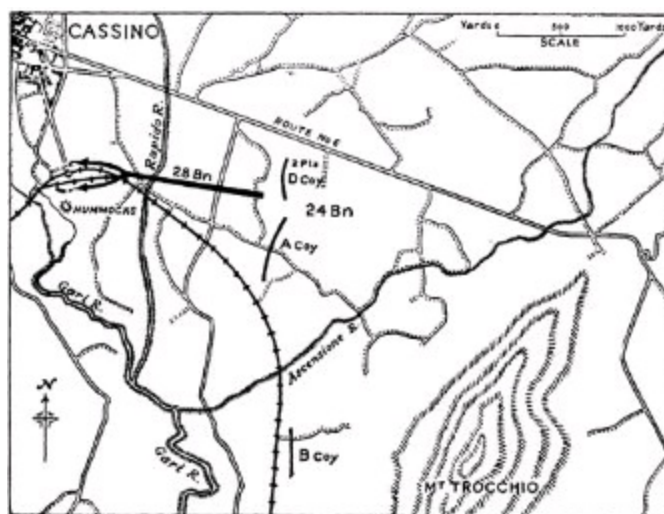
On the night of 5 February 24 Battalion left its quarters in the Volturno valley and moved to a camp beside the railway line, seven or eight miles west of the Garigliano River. Once more in a forward area the battalion lost no time in camouflaging tents and digging slit trenches. As usual casualties, sickness, and other causes had brought about several changes. Soon after the battalion's arrival in its new position, Colonel Conolly was evacuated to hospital and his command devolved upon Major Pike,<sup>2</sup> Major Dew becoming second-in-command. For the past 21 months A Company had gone into action under Major Aked, but whatever his own views on the subject this officer was due for a peaceful interlude and he was placed in charge of the LOB troops, who were to remain for the time being at Capua on the Volturno. His company<sup>3</sup> was taken over by Captain Schofield,<sup>4</sup> while B was now commanded by Major Turnbull. Major J. W. Reynolds, who had been a subaltern with the battalion in Greece, was back in charge of C after a long absence, and Captain A. H. Ramsay, wounded when a platoon commander at El Alamein, now commanded D Company. Captain Boord was training reinforcements at Maadi Camp before going



on leave to New Zealand, and his place as Adjutant was being taken by Captain Phillips.<sup>5</sup>

The 2nd United States Corps had not succeeded in capturing [Cassino](#) by 12 February and, consequently, the task devolved upon the newly-formed [New Zealand Corps](#). [General Freyberg](#)'s operational plan directed the Indian Division to attack [Monte Cassino](#) from the north, and, having captured it, to cut Route 6 south-west of the monastery. Meanwhile 5 Brigade was to cross the Rapido at the railway bridge south-east of the town, and then go on to cross the Garigliano beyond. With these two bridgeheads established, the remainder of the New Zealand Division would be free to deploy and advance up the [Liri](#) valley.

Fifth Brigade had already relieved 36 United States Division along the line of the Rapido and Garigliano rivers when, on the night of 16 February, 24 Battalion came under command of 5 Brigade. Two of its companies, A and B, moved forward to relieve [28 Battalion](#) in its position between Route 6 and the railway, beyond the forward slopes of [Monte Trocchio](#). C Company took over from A Company [23 Battalion](#) south of the railway, while D remained in reserve in its old position. The Maoris had been ordered to capture the railway station, and A and B Companies of the 24th had taken up the position described above to form a firm base for the attack and provide a smoke screen for the engineers while they threw a bridge across the Rapido.



MAORIS' ATTACK ON RAILWAY STATION, 17-18 FEBRUARY 1944

**maoris' attack on railway station, 17-18 february 1944**

After dark on 17 February A and B Companies of 28 Battalion formed up on their start line beyond the Rapido, after an approach march through heavy going over waterlogged fields. The attack began at 9.30 p.m., and the lines advanced over more flooded ground, sown with anti-personnel mines, in face of heavy fire from [Cassino](#) and the slopes immediately above it. On the right B Company seized the station, but A Company failed to capture its objective, consisting of a hummock immediately south of the railway line. With the coming of daylight the Maoris were in an evil case, but they held on until afternoon, when a determined counter-attack by infantry and tanks forced them to withdraw.

While this engagement continued, A and B Companies of 24 Battalion had been firing smoke canisters intermittently since dawn on the 18th. They had not been heavily shelled, but had suffered casualties from anti-personnel mines of a new type, described as follows in B Company's war diary:

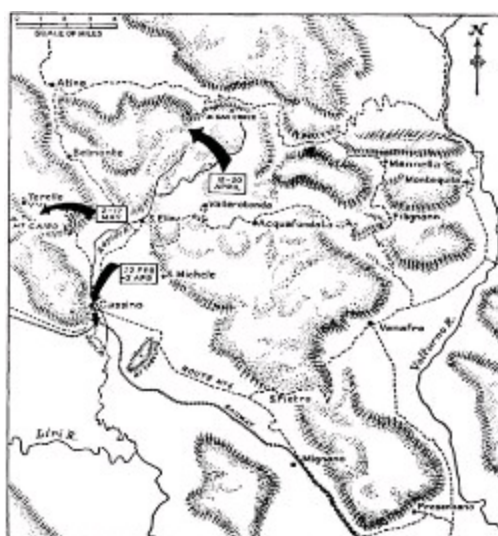
Number 10 Platoon had to pass through a minefield and suffered some casualties. This was our first meeting with the shoe [Schu] mine, a small anti-personnel mine made of wood, about 6 inches long by 4 wide and three deep. Made entirely of wood with a push pull igniter set and a small block of composition explosive, they are a very deadly piece of mechanism. Two mines were trodden on, and Ptes Dorney and Morris both lost a foot each.

Two hours after the withdrawal began, 24 Battalion moved two platoons of D (Reserve) Company out on to its right flank on Route 6, and sent three anti-tank guns to cover the railway line, while a patrol went forward to discover whether the enemy was attempting to follow up the Maoris' retreat. This patrol crossed the Rapido and got close to the station before being fired upon. The enemy was repairing his wire and appeared to have no intention of following up his success. In the evening of 19 February 24 Battalion withdrew to its former position, at the same time reverting to the command of 6 Brigade.

The Indian Division's attack on Monte [Cassino](#) having also failed, [General Freyberg](#) gave up all idea of persevering with his pincer movement, deciding instead to assault the town by day from its northern side after air and artillery bombardment. In accord with this intention, [2 NZ Division](#) moved round to the north of [Cassino](#) and relieved the American forces occupying that sector.

The 24th Battalion was picked up by motor transport on the night of 21 February and taken along Route 6 to within about 3000 yards of [Cassino](#), after which the convoy turned north and eventually deposited the Aucklanders beside a main road leading out of the town in a north-easterly direction. Thence, by a circuitous route, the troops finished their journey on foot and before daybreak had taken over the positions occupied by 133 United States Regiment.

Two parallel roads, scarcely more than a few hundred yards apart, ran due north from [Cassino](#), one of them skirting the foothills and the other traversing a swampy plain. D Company's lines were situated west of the first-mentioned road, about 500 yards north of the town's outskirts, while C, on its right, occupied a position on the slopes below [Point 175](#). To their front, two companies of [25 Battalion](#) held a line on the fringes of [Cassino](#) itself. The 24th Battalion's other companies, A and



**cassino sector, 22 february-17 may 1944**

B, were about a mile in rear of C and D, in a narrow valley that entered the hills above the Villa Barracks—a large rectangular block of buildings lying astride the western road. Battalion Headquarters was situated well forward of A and B Companies. The remaining two companies of [25 Battalion](#) were camped further up the valley, and [26 Battalion](#) was in position close to Brigade Headquarters on the [Pasquale Road](#), some two miles east of the Barracks.

Thus 6 Brigade, detailed as the assaulting formation, lay poised north of [Cassino](#) ready to attack the town; it would be supported by the Indians, who would bring

neutralising fire to bear on the hill positions overlooking it from the east and take over Point 193 as soon as it should be captured. The Indian Division was then to sweep forward over the eastern slopes of Monte [Cassino](#). The 5th NZ Brigade would move close up along Route 6 and bring fire to bear on fortified houses and other enemy positions south of that highway. Once the town was in 6 Brigade's possession, [4 NZ Armoured Brigade](#) would exploit south-west and cross the Garigliano. Such, in brief, was the plan known as Operation DICKENS, which only awaited fine weather to be put into effect; but fine weather was a long time coming.

The attack had been tentatively fixed for 24 February, but rain began to fall a few days previously and persisted with only short intervals for the next three weeks. During that time the waiting troops lived not only in great discomfort from mud and slush, but also under direct observation from enemy batteries on higher ground. A and B Companies suffered especially, and one gathers some idea of their plight from the following extract taken from B Company's war diary:

The rain which followed led to the designation of this congested area as 'Mud Valley'. Bivvyless for the first few days, many and varied were the shelter contraptions devised. 12 Platoon were chased by intermittent shelling from one side of the gulley to the other, and the Indian roadmakers above us were chased down into the creek bed. The night of 28-29 [February] was a particularly wet one, and a roaring torrent took bivvies and all kinds of gear with it, salvaging of Vickers guns and our 2 inch mortars being quite the order of the day.

Under these trying conditions the usual sanitary arrangements lapsed into abeyance. Rations were brought up by mule train, and some of the carcasses of animals killed by shellfire were allowed to remain unburied. An epidemic of diarrhoea broke out but ceased as soon as the mules were buried and proper sanitation insisted upon.

The defence of [Cassino](#) had been taken over late in February by battalions of 1 German Parachute Division, a crack corps, and when Operation DICKENS finally took place on 15 March they still held the town. Orders were issued for all our forward troops to move back behind a safety line well in rear of front-line positions before the aerial bombardment preceding the attack should begin. C and D Companies withdrew accordingly before dawn, leaving anti-tank guns and mortars behind with

sights and firing mechanism removed. Only a volunteer gun crew of the Anti-Tank Platoon, under Second-Lieutenant O'Brien, <sup>6</sup> remained in their forward position. Battalion Headquarters moved up in front of the Villa Barracks.

March the 15th dawned with a clear sky, and at half past eight, in bright sunshine, the first wave of bombers flew over [Cassino](#) to drop their lethal cargoes, and thereafter until midday squadron followed squadron in successive waves, raining high explosive on the town. The wisdom of moving all troops back behind a safety line was amply demonstrated by the number of bombs which fell near C and D Companies' former positions. During intervals in the aerial attack O'Brien's gun crew, consisting of Corporals Stanaway <sup>7</sup> and [Bryant](#), <sup>8</sup> fired on enemy pillboxes around Point 193 and then went to ground again as soon as the bombing was renewed. Eventually the platform of loose stones which served as an emplacement was shaken down by the concussion of the bombing, and they were obliged to cease fire. Since nothing more could be done, the crew retreated to B Echelon, leaving their gun behind, and were subsequently employed in the arduous and dangerous duty of carrying supplies to forward troops. Stanaway received the MM as an immediate award for his conduct on this occasion.

Supported by a squadron of [19 Armoured Regiment](#), 25 Battalion attacked [Cassino](#) and [Castle Hill](#) at 12.30 p.m. behind an artillery barrage, while 24 Battalion stood by, either to assist if necessary in capturing the objective or to occupy the



**The 6 NZ Infantry Brigade ATTACK on CASSINO 15 TO 24 MARCH 1944**

town. In full view of C Company, which gave supporting fire, [Castle Hill](#), or Point 193, was captured early in the afternoon and subsequently taken over by 5 Indian Brigade, but progress through the town was slow and difficult. The supporting tanks had to operate in a congested jumble of ruins, rubble, and bomb craters. Concealed in partly demolished buildings, German machine-gunners and snipers fought desperately to check and harry our advance. The destruction wrought by bombing was proving a two-edged weapon, but in spite of all obstacles [25 Battalion](#) succeeded in capturing the whole northern part of [Cassino](#), and only when attempting to advance along Route 6, the highway which cut through the town from east to west, were the attackers brought to a halt.

Soon after the action began, B Company of 24 Battalion moved up to the south end of Villa Barracks and waited there till 5 p.m., when orders were received to come under command of [25 Battalion](#). Having duly reported to Lieutenant-Colonel [MacDuff](#),<sup>9</sup> Major Turnbull was directed to pass through the captured part of the town and get in touch with [25 Battalion's](#) A Company, which at that time occupied the most advanced position. Keeping under cover by wading along the bed of a creek that ran beside the right-hand parallel road, Turnbull's men made their way into the town and, being directed forward from one company headquarters to another, at length found A Company. Turnbull then established his own headquarters in the Post Office, just north of Route 6, with his men in position between that building and the church standing at the crossroads.

Meanwhile [26 Battalion](#) had come forward along the Pasquale Road, crossed the Rapido, and passed through the town. Arriving at the church, it moved on down the marginal road leading towards the railway station, but was pinned down by machine-gun fire a little way south of Route 6.

C and D Companies of 24 Battalion had returned to their original lines when the bombing was over, but after nightfall C was sent to a reserve position behind the Villa Barracks, and A moved into the lines it had previously occupied.

On the night of 15 March only the south-west corner of [Cassino](#) was left in German hands, and this remaining portion might soon have been captured also had it not been for a change of weather. Moonlight would have helped the attackers, but rain came on and brought a pitch-black night. Runners lost their way and companies



lost touch with each other, while the enemy, with better knowledge of his surroundings, reorganised defensive posts and recovered from his state of confusion.

After passing through the town, Route 6 turned sharply southwards at the foot of [Monastery Hill](#). On the corner stood a large building, the Continental Hotel, and a few hundred yards south of it, the Hotel des Roses. These two buildings in the south-western end of [Cassino](#) remained as centres of resistance, and at dawn on 16 March 11 and 12 Platoons of B Company 24 Battalion, under Second-Lieutenant [McCorquindale](#),<sup>10</sup> were ordered to attack along the line of Route 6 towards the Continental Hotel, while detachments of [25 Battalion](#) advanced on their right. Heavy fire came from the hill face, and the platoons lost three men killed and seven wounded before reaching the shelter of a house at the foot of the slope. No. 12 Platoon occupied the first floor, while No. 11 took up quarters in the cellar. Two prisoners were taken. The house was under heavy and continuous fire. Without going outside there was no communication between the first floor and cellar, and to overcome this disadvantage McCorquindale ordered his men to drive a passage through the intervening floor, a task which took them more than five hours. While working, the men called out to each other frequently, using christian names, and their exchanges of conversation were overheard by other unknown listeners.

'During the afternoon', writes McCorquindale, 'we prepared the first floor as a defensive position. Just on last light, when the troops were standing to, a voice from the rear of the house was heard shouting, "Are you there, Mac?" I answered "Yes", and the voice continued, saying, "Two fife are on your left". Private G. C. Brown, who was standing by me, said "That's no Kiwi, Mac". Realising it was the voice of the enemy I ordered grenades to be thrown in the direction of the voice, and one of my men opened fire with a light machine gun. A voice then called on us to surrender as we were surrounded, and we were attacked by grenades and automatic weapons from south, west and north. We vigorously retaliated with grenades and light machine guns, and after this the enemy abandoned pretence and we could hear them in the darkness shouting to one another in German. When we were almost out of grenades the enemy patrol moved southward and we could hear them engaging another position.'

Nos 11 and 12 Platoons held the house until the early hours of 17 March and then withdrew on orders from Company Headquarters. The wounded especially, who

were got away at the same time, had passed through a grim ordeal, which McCorquindale goes on to describe. 'Conditions during our stay of five or six hours in the cellar were extremely trying, the water being about six feet deep in places, and we were forced to stand throughout this period on submerged tables etc., but even then we were standing in several inches of water. The only relief from these conditions could be obtained by four men squeezing on to a broad shelf against the north wall. The plight of our seven wounded who could not be evacuated until after last light was particularly wretched.'

On the night of 16-17 March 6 Brigade reorganised for a fresh effort. Little respite was allowed the platoons of B Company, and at dawn they formed up at the church corner preparatory to making another attempt along Route 6, supported this time by a troop of [19 Armoured Regiment](#). Elements of [25 Battalion](#) attacked simultaneously on the right across an open space planted with trees and shrubs, known as the Botanical Gardens, which lay between Route 6 and another road branching off to the north. The attack began at 6.30 a.m., but before it had covered much distance one of the tanks got bogged at the south-east corner of the Botanical Gardens, and each of the other two cast a track some little way farther on. Unsupported by armour, B Company pressed on and reached a point 200 yards from the Continental Hotel, where it encountered intense fire and was obliged to withdraw. The three platoons then established a defensive position in a block of buildings close to where the last tank had broken down. Meanwhile, on the right, [25 Battalion](#) had succeeded in clearing the Botanical Gardens.

If this action was only partially successful, it had at least the effect of securing the right flank of [26 Battalion](#), which now struck south towards the railway station, supported by A Squadron [19 Armoured Regiment](#). By mid-afternoon not only the station but also the Hummocks on its south side were firmly in our hands, and A and D Companies of [24 Battalion](#) had begun moving into the town with the intention of seizing Route 6 south of the Continental Hotel.

Having got safely past the gaol at the northern end of [Cassino](#), A Company was held up by a sniper and obliged to move forward for some way in single file along the bottom of a ditch. Progress was slow, and not until long after dark did the company arrive at Route 6, intending to pass along that highway towards its



objective. On being informed at B Company headquarters that the Continental Hotel was still firmly held by the enemy, Captain Schofield turned back and led his men south along the marginal road.

Following on in rear, D Company at first tried to move through the centre of [Cassino](#) but was held up in a narrow defile by a sniper who could not be located. There was nothing for it but to turn back and try farther east. Reaching the marginal road beyond the gaol, the company pushed on and, skirting the town, crossed Route 6, eventually arriving at a point near some crossroads immediately north of the railway station.

On the morning of 18 March B Company held the south-west corner of the Botanical Gardens, with A on its left and D on the left of A, facing the Hotel des Roses. It soon became apparent, however, that the enemy had been reinforced during the night. The houses lying along the foot of the hill were more strongly held than ever. Snipers had crept round to the rear of our company positions, and Captain Schofield (A Company) was badly wounded early in the morning, his command devolving upon Second-Lieutenant [Armstrong](#).<sup>11</sup> Even so, B Company was preparing for another attempt on the Continental Hotel when the upper floor of the building, occupied by more than half its men, suddenly collapsed under the weight of rubble that had fallen down on to it from the superstructure. One man was hopelessly crushed and buried under tons of masonry. Private [Taylor](#)<sup>12</sup> was pinned down at the edge of the fallen pile, but behaved with such courage during the half hour it took to extricate him that he was awarded the MM. Corporal [Rockell](#)<sup>13</sup> earned the same decoration by making his way back to Company Headquarters at great personal risk and returning with a rescue party. In spite of being hit on the head by a stone, Second-Lieutenant McCorquindale remained master of the situation and got the survivors out to safety without a suspicion of panic, before having to go down the line himself with concussion. A number of rifles and other equipment were buried under the debris. The men, having been badly shaken, were in no condition to undertake a somewhat desperate venture, and the contemplated attempt along Route 6 was cancelled.

The general situation of our infantry in [Cassino](#) at this time is aptly and briefly expressed in a message from B Company to 24 Battalion headquarters. The following extract may be quoted:

B Coy is 33 strong. Have one mobile tank with us. No word of D Coy, should be somewhere left of A Coy. Town literally full of enemy snipers and spandaus. They inhabit rubble and ruined houses. We are being as aggressive as possible.... Until Monastery hill is in our hands sniping problem will continue. It is not to be under-rated.... Tanks find it difficult to operate. Movement in daylight nil. 18 and 38 sets can not contact you and line is out. Am trying to rest troops today, sleep has been nil so far. Morale high.... <sup>14</sup>

The Continental Hotel, the Hotel des Roses, and the intervening houses along Route 6 were still the centre of enemy resistance, and although these positions seemed almost impregnable to attack from the north or west they might yet be taken successfully from the rear. Since the night of 15 March C Company had been waiting behind the Villa Barracks, 'cold, wet, and shelled', <sup>15</sup> but late on the 17th Major Reynolds and his platoon commanders were summoned to Battalion Headquarters and instructed in the enterprise they were to undertake. Having moved by night to Point 165 beyond Castle Hill, arriving there at 5 a.m., C Company would proceed to clear the slopes of [Monastery Hill](#) as far as Point 202, from where it would sweep down on the rear of enemy positions along Route 6. The men were to travel as lightly as possible, with twenty-four hours' rations and an extra supply of grenades, but without blankets.

After its capture, the Castle on Point 193 had been taken over from [25 Battalion](#) by  $\frac{1}{4}$  [Essex Regiment](#), and although the Indian Division's subsequent attempt to advance had failed, a company of  $\frac{1}{9}$  Gurkhas had bypassed several enemy strongpoints and occupied Hangman's Hill, below the monastery. But at the time of which we are speaking the Indians' positions were very imperfectly known, and C Company's platoon commanders were specially warned to be careful not to mistake them for the enemy.

The night was pitch black; many landmarks had been obliterated by bombing, and finding the way to the Castle under such conditions promised to be no easy task. But actually the first part of C Company's journey was uneventful, and the Castle was reached by way of a steep track leading up from the north-east end of [Cassino](#). After making contact with the Castle garrison, Major Reynolds took his company on to Point 165, arriving there at the specified time of 5 a.m., and his officers, having

already been instructed as to the plan of attack, proceeded to carry out their appointed tasks. It was still dark when the platoons moved off again, coming under spandau fire for a brief interval as they did so. No. 14, under Second-Lieutenant [Lloyd](#),<sup>16</sup> advanced southward across the slope, without becoming involved in action, till it arrived at Point 202, where the troops began to build rock sangars for cover. While the position was being prepared, Lloyd took one man with him and went off in the direction of Hangman's Hill to get in touch with the isolated [Gurkhas](#). He came first upon some wounded men sheltering in a culvert some 200 yards above his own position, and then found the remainder of the company occupying bomb craters farther up the slope. The officer in command told him that during the night advance to Point 202 the New Zealanders had passed within a few yards of a Gurkha patrol, which had refrained from firing, being uncertain of the strangers' identity. Having now ascertained that C Company's rear was secure, Lloyd returned to his own position and found Reynolds' headquarters established close by.

By this time the other two platoons had already started off downhill towards Route 6. According to plan, 15 Platoon, under Second-Lieutenant [Matheson](#),<sup>17</sup> made straight towards the Hotel des Roses from the north-east, and 13 Platoon, commanded by Second-Lieutenant [Klaus](#),<sup>18</sup> having made a wide cast via Point 202, approached the same objective from a south-easterly direction. [Matheson's](#) men got to within 100 yards of the hotel before being held up by fire which kept them pinned down in the same spot till nightfall, while Klaus led a most determined assault which almost reached the hotel walls. Throwing a grenade into a doorway, he ran forward to break in in the wake of its explosion, but the grenade failed to explode and he himself was killed by a shot from the same doorway. Heavy fire came from every window, and his men retreated as best they could towards Company Headquarters at Point 202. No. 15 Platoon also withdrew after dark and was placed so as to guard the left flank. No. 14 remained in the centre, and 13, now under Sergeant [Tracy](#),<sup>19</sup> was posted on the right.

Reduced in strength and finding the opposition far stronger than expected, C Company could hope to do little more than maintain its somewhat precarious position. That night the first carrying party with rations arrived under Lieutenant O'Brien. As events were to prove it was also the last.

Before dawn on 19 March, ¼ [Essex Regiment](#) was on its way from the Castle to reinforce Hangman's Hill when it was caught in the open by a German counter-attack. The battalion was badly mauled; the counter-attack swept on to recapture Point 165 and penetrate almost to the Castle walls. First light revealed to the men of C Company that their retreat was cut off.

Yet, if the way by which they had come was barred, it seemed likely that another way out would soon be opened when [28 Battalion](#), which had entered [Cassino](#) the previous night in support of 6 Brigade, attacked in concert with 25 Battalion along Route 6 from the east. Early in the morning the Maoris could be heard calling on the Germans to surrender, while confused fighting went on all day around the Continental Hotel. Before dusk a message came through from 24 Battalion headquarters, saying that our troops had reached the Hotel des Roses and might soon be moving on towards Point 202. After dark, acting on the strength of this information, Reynolds sent Lloyd with 14 Platoon to try and make contact with the New Zealanders who were supposed to be in the vicinity of Route 6. Lloyd's men approached the Hotel des Roses, expecting to find friends, but were fired upon as soon as their identity was disclosed. All night they probed the town for an opening, but in vain. Before dawn they took shelter behind a low stone wall about twenty yards above the hotel and remained there all day, withdrawing to Point 202 on the night of 20-21 March, having taken one prisoner and had two men wounded.

In the morning of 19 March one of our own mortar shells had landed on C Company headquarters, wounding five men and putting the No. 18 radio-telephone set out of action. Reynolds at once abandoned his company net and called in all No. 38 sets, but these had to be sparingly used because of a shortage of batteries. Six wounded Indians had come from higher up the hill, and altogether there were now twelve disabled men at Company Headquarters.

Practically no headway was made in [Cassino](#) during 19 March, and that night a reorganisation of forces began, 5 Brigade assuming responsibility for all ground lying north of Route 6. The same evening Major Pike held a company commanders' conference at his headquarters east of the town, but the enemy attacked B and D Companies' positions in the meantime. Thus the company commanders had difficulty in getting back to their own headquarters, and in attempting to do so Captain

Ramsay was wounded. Captain [Macdonald](#)<sup>20</sup> arrived forward next day to take over command.

When Colonel Conolly returned to duty on the morning of 20 March, it was to find his battalion's strength in [Cassino](#) reduced to 144 men. B Company had suffered worst of all, but while its commander (Major Turnbull) still survived, A Company, with twice as many men, was in charge of a subaltern (Second-Lieutenant Armstrong). Conolly, therefore, amalgamated the two companies into a single unit under Turnbull's command. D Company still had three officers.

When the readjustments and reliefs consequent on 5 Brigade's move into [Cassino](#) were complete, 24 Battalion was facing across the Gari stream towards Route 6 and the Hotel des Roses, with its composite company left and D Company right. The 26th Battalion, which had been relieved in its position at the railway station by the 5th Buffs of 78 Division, now lay on the Aucklanders' right flank.

The attempts made by 21 and 23 Battalions to clear [Cassino](#)'s south-western corner were no more successful than those previously made by 6 Brigade. More enemy reinforcements had entered the town and the initial momentum of our attack had been lost. All troops both north and south of Route 6 were continually embroiled in a bitter dogfight which produced scarcely any result other than casualties. This condition of stalemate had at length to be acknowledged, and on 23 March it was decided to abandon the offensive and hold present gains. Since this might be done with fewer troops in advanced positions, the process of thinning out the front line began forthwith. Sixth Brigade was to take over the whole of [Cassino](#) from Castle Hill down to a line immediately south of the railway. The 4th Indian Division would remain on its right flank, while 5 Brigade would relieve 78 Division on the Garigliano.

In accordance with general strategy, 24 Battalion headquarters moved from north to south of Route 6 early on the night of 23 March, and later A and B Companies were relieved by a company of the 5th Buffs. D Company remained behind in [Cassino](#) for the time being. Reliefs were complicated and dangerous operations, only to be undertaken at night. In some cases our men and the enemy occupied adjoining houses, and nothing was easier than to lose one's way in the darkness amid the tumble of ruined buildings. Yet, although troop movements in and out of [Cassino](#) on its eastern side were sufficiently hazardous, it seemed possible

that even greater danger and difficulty might attend the withdrawal of C Company, still isolated on Point 202.

O'Brien <sup>21</sup> had made nightly attempts to get through with more rations, but this having proved impossible, Reynolds' men were threatened with a shortage of food. Attempts were made to drop supplies by parachute, but although some ammunition was obtained in this way, most of the foodstuffs fell too far away and too near enemy positions to be picked up. Two packages containing chocolate and 'K' rations were gathered in on 22 March, but otherwise no food reached C Company by parachute till the day before final withdrawal.

Enemy mortars soon got the range of C Company's position round Point 202, and 15 Platoon, lying farthest north, received an almost daily complement of shells from our own 25-pounders when a 'stonk' on Point 165 overlapped that area. Complaints by radio-telephone failed either to get the range adjusted or to stop the smoke, which now became an even less bearable nuisance, as may be gathered from the following extracts taken from C Company's day-to-day report:

March 20: Smoke from our own guns is landing in Company positions.

March 21: We were completely smoked out again today. It is just like a continuous night as double picquets must be maintained and there are continual stand to's.

March 22: The LO (from 1/9 Gurkhas) had to remain till dark because of our own smoke which was so intense in the area as to make movement there almost impossible without casualties. Despite protests from Company it kept up.

March 23: Still being smoked out despite protests. <sup>22</sup>

From 20 to 23 March a British officer of 1/9 Gurkhas came down from Hangman's Hill every morning to C Company headquarters to maintain contact. More Indian wounded came down too at intervals, until 18 casualties were waiting to be evacuated from Point 202. A medical officer was reported to be coming from the Castle to attend to them on 22 March, but he failed to put in an appearance. Everyone present, whether wounded or not, was suffering from hunger and exposure. The cold at night was severe, and there were neither groundsheets nor blankets.

Meanwhile, in accordance with the newly adopted strategy of standing on the defensive at [Cassino](#), it had been decided to withdraw C Company. The operation, which was carried out on 24 March, is described below by Major Reynolds:

The LO from 1/9 Gurkhas arrived at about 0330 hrs [24th] and said his CO had instructions for me. They were in possession of a 22 set netted to their Brigade Headquarters. I went to HQ 1/9 [Gurkhas](#) and was told that if a certain codeword were received that afternoon we were both to withdraw during night. A barrage would run up the hill between us and the Castle and would commence on a lesser contour than that which I occupied. What plan did I think we should follow? There were two considerations from his point of view, I thought.

1. The enemy may follow him out and harry his rear.
2. Someone may require to punch a hole in the encirclement for both of us to pass through.

I told him I thought it more tactically correct for him to withdraw through me, and I would do his rearguard. He would make any necessary gap. He agreed and said he would be through my area by 2100 hours. He would send his LO when the codeword arrived. I returned to HQ and gave the picture to the platoon commanders and told them not to tell their men. We waited. The LO and codeword came. Also came some rations by air—tinned milk, Indian chapatties (a kerosene tin full) and two two-gallon jars of rum. I called the platoon commanders, gave the orders for withdrawal—we were to merge as a large patrol—and allowed platoon commanders to take away as much milk as they desired. I would not allow the men to eat chapatties on empty stomachs. I told the wounded that I would not be able to take them, explaining our tactical role. A few walking wounded did accompany us. I had only about 32 unwounded left, and these might have to fight hard. I promised the wounded that I would return for them in the morning under a [Red Cross](#) flag,<sup>23</sup> as the enemy could do nothing with them, and probably would be glad for us to remove them. I left them about one gallon of rum and poured the remainder on the rocks. Again, rum on an empty stomach may have had an undesired effect.

We erected a [Red Cross](#) flag over the wounded and prepared to withdraw. When the barrage commenced at 2100 hours I sent out patrols to contact the Indians but [without success]. At 2200 hours I made up my mind to give them one hour more, and at 2300 hours moved off, leaving the wounded. Lloyd led as a fighting patrol and



we followed. We saw no one until we passed the Castle, where I spoke to the sentry on duty. We then moved to the quarry where we embussed at 0045 hours for B Echelon. The vehicles we travelled in belonged to the 1/9 Gurkhas who had at this juncture all passed through. I still don't know how we missed them.

For the manner in which he conducted the operations of a company completely isolated for six days under the most trying circumstances, Major Reynolds was awarded the DSO.

After being relieved on the night of 23 March, A and B Companies had moved back to a point south-west of the railway station. Twenty-four hours later their position was taken over by the newly formed Support Company, composed of signallers, anti-tank gunners, and men from the carrier and mortar platoons. A and B then went back to B Echelon for a few days' rest, during which time they were reorganised as separate companies. Last of all, D Company was relieved on the night of 25-26 March by 22 (Motor) Battalion of 4 Armoured Brigade.

Of the C Company wounded left behind at Point 202, all those who were able to walk had made their own way out the following morning (25 March) under [Red Cross](#) flag, but five serious cases remained behind, and an attempt was now made to get them away. Sergeant Thompson, of 24 Battalion's RAP, was sent off with a party of 14 men and was instructed to get in touch first of all with the medical officer of the Royal West Kent Regiment, which had recently taken over the [Castle Hill](#) sector. The party left B Echelon at 8.30 a.m. and found the medical officer at the Quarries, north of [Cassino](#). He explained to Thompson that the wounded could only be evacuated if the Germans would consent to let his party through, and warned him at the same time that, since all his men might possibly be taken prisoner, it was essential that only volunteers should go. The whole party volunteered at once and, having been provided with [Red Cross](#) flags, started off for the Castle, where Private [Clifton](#),<sup>24</sup> a lightly wounded man of C Company, had been left behind to act as guide. On arriving there, however, Thompson was informed that Clifton had been evacuated, the Indians being confident that they themselves could find the way. The party, therefore, left the Castle, led by an Indian guide and accompanied by four Indian stretcher-bearers who hoped to find Gurkha wounded on the slopes beyond Castle Hill. Approaching Point 165, they were met by two German orderlies carrying [Red](#)

Cross flags who allowed them to pass on. Arriving at the place where they thought C Company headquarters must have been, they searched caves and dugouts, at the same time calling out loudly 'Kiwi wounded!' Five Indian casualties were found but no New Zealanders.

Sgt. Thompson (so runs an eye-witness account) felt the task was hopeless without a C Company guide and decided to return to get one. We set out for the Castle taking the five Indian wounded with us—two stretcher and three walking cases. The German orderlies accompanied us, turning us off the road as we neared the enemy lines and leading us by a route which would not disclose the lay out of his defences. At the enemy forward defended localities the German orderlies said goodbye and shook hands. Our party went in a straight line to the Castle from the enemy's forward positions and reported to the Medical Officer at the Castle. He told us that our wounded had probably been picked up by the enemy.

Sgt. Thompson was not satisfied with this reply. He returned, the rest of us with him, to 24 NZ Battalion's B Echelon and reported to Major Dew, who ordered another attempt to be made after lunch with one of the C Company medical orderlies as a guide. Capt. Borrie, MC,<sup>25</sup> the 24 NZ Battalion's Medical Officer, decided to accompany the party.<sup>26</sup>

From this point the story may be continued in Borrie's own words:

We went down past where my original RAP had been, and I checked with an ADS and RAP to see that the boys hadn't got out. At the last RAP they warned me not to go with the party, but I put on my Driver Tim's coat and became a private, and off we trudged—three red cross flags flying and armbands on. A camera man now took our photos, and when we had gone 100 yards he got hit. [We went] up to the Castle with a marvellous view of [Cassino](#) below, [Cassino](#) and its few remaining derelict houses. The Sgt. in the Castle told us we could go out in parties of 12 only, so we set off, keeping below Jerry's stronghold. We could see some people with a red cross flag on the road, and when we got near them we realised they were our wounded. They had rum dropped by parachute the day before, and at 2 p.m. decided that they were not going to be collected so they had started to walk—all lying cases who had been hit in the legs. They were an amazing sight on the road. Two pairs were leaning up against one another, and the other was sitting on the

wall. They were very slow moving. We had two stretchers and I decided to try and take all of them. I put the two worst on stretchers, and got 3 men to carry each, and gave the others a two man carriage. Circus <sup>27</sup> had led the party in and I directed it from the middle, and also going out. However a Jerry appeared on the road with a red cross flag by Pt. 165, and the boys seemed a bit perplexed so I took the lead and when half way to him I turned down off the road. The Jerry came down to meet us and said 'Retournez'. He kept repeating 'Retournez' and said the Commandant had ordered it. I argued, without avail, but I got the boys to close in. He then told me to come and see the Commandant, but as I had no pips on and was a captain in my paybook I thought it best to send others, and sent Circus [Worth](#) <sup>28</sup> and Bob Thompson. This meant I could contemplate ways of escape in daylight and in dark.

<sup>29</sup>

While Borrie pursued his meditations, Thompson and Worth accompanied the German to his headquarters. After they had waited there for about twenty minutes, a German officer came out and asked if they spoke 'Deutsch'. Thompson said they did not, upon which the officer produced a written message and asked that it should be given to the 'English Commander'. He then said that the party might proceed on their way to the Castle, but that after this no more wounded might be evacuated. Having shaken hands with Thompson and Worth, the German asked them for a cigarette. Only too readily they gave him a packet and then returned to their party.

'I didn't dare to turn round', writes Borrie, 'until I heard footsteps, and then I saw Circus's long face.

"We can go but it's the last party."

'What relief! Bob and I picked up our man and almost ran with him, but the others kept close behind. I collected the others, got more men on the stretchers, and went down and got Denis Wood <sup>30</sup> just as he was trying to get me. We got the patients <sup>31</sup> on my jeep and came riding victoriously home to the ADS.'

Major Aked was back again with the battalion and in charge of his old company when it went back into the line on the night of 26-27 March to relieve [28 Battalion](#) in [Cassino](#) north of Route 6. The Support Company under Captain [Pratt](#) <sup>32</sup> relieved [23 Battalion](#) immediately to the right, astride the road branching north from Route 6,

but Aked was in charge of all 24 Battalion troops in [Cassino](#). The 22nd (Motor) Battalion lay on his left and [25 Battalion](#) was on the Support Company's right. B and D Companies remained close to Battalion Headquarters by the cemetery at San Bartolomeo, a mile or more due east of [Cassino](#), while C Company stayed at B Echelon.

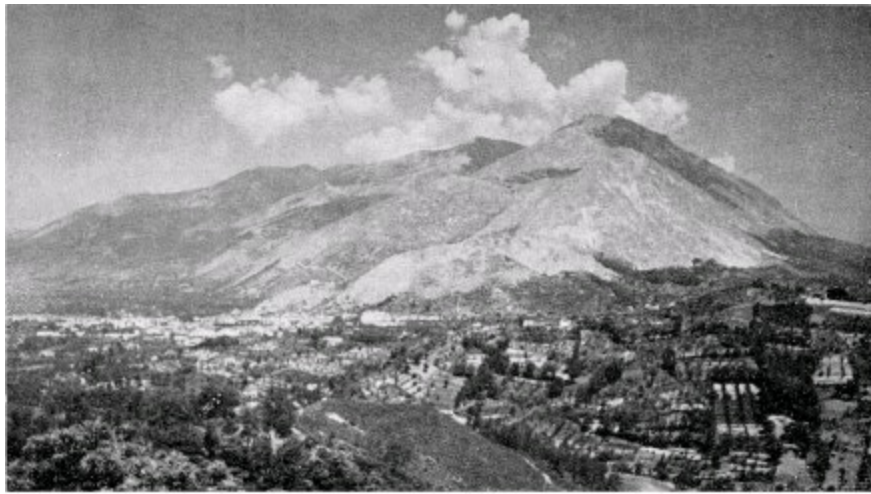
Active defence was to be the watchword of the troops in forward positions. They were to harass the enemy with patrols, to lay mines, and generally do what damage they could, employing the smallest possible number of men. No major operation was undertaken either by ourselves or the enemy during the week in which 24 Battalion held a front-line sector. The Support Company had one platoon on either side of the north branch road, and another in close support, with Company Headquarters in a house some 200 yards in rear. A Company's dispositions north of Route 6 are explained in Aked's account, quoted below, of this period of warfare in a ruined town.

A Coy Commander (myself) went in early with a runner and at HQ, which was in the Crypt, <sup>33</sup> learned as much as possible about the situation. Then when the Company marched in [he] led them into the positions. En route forward a mortar stonk landed in one platoon, and two men were killed and several wounded.

The position in [Cassino](#) was grim—just a wilderness of ruins—not a house or building could be called anything more than a heap of rubble. Huge bomb craters everywhere, and movement at night was difficult.

The position occupied by 28 Bn lacked depth, and, instead of keeping the platoons forward, A Coy Commander placed two forward, and moved the third platoon and Coy HQ to a new position approximately 400 yards in rear. This was the cellar of the Hospital, and the only part intact was a room approximately 50 ft by 20 divided in two. The remainder was a pile of rubble and a number of Jerries must have been buried under parts of the cellar which had collapsed. The atmosphere inside wasn't pleasant but it was at least safe from shells, etc.

It was impossible to move anywhere in the area by daylight. Any sign of movement brought machine gun fire immediately, and mortars and nebblewerfers [sic] engaged any area for about ten minutes at a time.



Colle Sant' Angelo, to the right of the town of Sora,  
was captured by 24 Battalion on 1 June 1944

**Colle Sant' Angelo, to the right of the town of [Sora](#), was captured by 24 Battalion on 1 June 1944**



The Aquatic Derby on the Liri River

**The Aquatic Derby on the Liri River**



Mortar carrier burnt out by enemy fire in the San Michele area  
Lt B. F. E. Kelly is on the right

**Mortar carrier burnt out by enemy fire in the [San Michele](#) area  
Lt B. F. E. Kelly is on the right**



Anti-Tank Platoon's jeep after running over a mine



**Anti-Tank Platoon's jeep after running over a mine**



Men and transport at Forli

**Men and transport at Forli**

Move to the Faenza front



**Move to the Faenza front**



The banks of the Lamone River—an assault pontoon bridge ready for a crossing exercise, February 1945

**The banks of the Lamone River—an assault pontoon bridge ready for a crossing exercise, February 1945**



Exercise for flame-throwing equipment

**Exercise for flame-throwing equipment**

HQ (Support) Coy, commanded by Capt. Bob Pratt, were allocated the right sector joining up with 25 Bn, I think. A Coy and HQ Coy for the next six nights carried out a large-scale wiring and mining programme, as A Coy Commander felt that a determined attack by Jerry would be difficult to stop. Working at times no further than 30 yards from an enemy position made things difficult, but both coys managed it and strengthened the defence line. Though Jerry several times attempted to raid positions at night he failed each time.

Artillery stonks at first had a bad habit of falling short, but this was gradually righted by coys reporting the number of shorts landing.



The safest area was in forward platoon localities as here the Hun was so close that he or we could not mortar or shell one another. Coy and Reserve Platoon HQs, however, received a lot of attention, and life at times was unpleasant, especially when a 210 MM consistently shelled our pile of rubble. However it was safe inside.

Every evening at last light Jerry occupied his night positions. The whole Div Artillery waited for our call to stonk the area immediately forward, and caused quite a few casualties. However, one night Jerry tricked us and occupied 7 Platoon night positions under cover of our stonk. 7 Platoon, led by their Commander, Sgt. Roger Smith,<sup>34</sup> had a lively few minutes kicking out the unwanted tenants. The Hun lost several men; our casualties were one wounded.

In under a house numbered 21 on the aerial photo we located, by following its movements, an enemy tank which used to roam at night, blazing away at the Castle and down towards HQ at the Crypt. The artillery, however, put a stop to this. A stonk named 21 was registered. A few minutes before the tank made its appearance our 38 set to Coys always received a lot of static. We therefore took notice and, whenever this happened, called for 21. The time lag was five minutes, and after about three times running the tank appeared and ran into the stonk immediately. He was either disabled or buried for we heard no more from him.

We also received a lot of unpleasant attention from Spandaus in the Hotel des Roses, but Brig. Steve Weir,<sup>35</sup> himself using a 155 MM American gun, knocked it about so much that fire from this quarter was very much subdued.

Actually life in [Cassino](#) was not bad except for living conditions. The smell of dead and explosives together with the smoke which enveloped us all day was hard on stomachs, but casualties were few. One soon learned to keep one's head down and use periscopes to keep watch. The chaps who had a really sticky job and to whom great credit is due are the personnel of HQ Coy, Coy QMS and storemen who nightly carried in rations, ammunition, wire, mines, etc. A trek along the mad mile<sup>36</sup> into the town laden with a heavy load was a trip to be feared, but these men did it night after night. Casualties occurred every night but they kept us supplied.<sup>37</sup>

The two companies of the 24th were relieved by the Maori Battalion on the night of 2-3 April. 'The noise they [the Maoris] made', writes Aked, 'drew a lot of

machine gun and mortar fire. The relief took longer than it should have done owing to the enemy's activity. All platoons of both coys were relieved, however, by 0200 hours, except 8 Platoon. To change over this platoon I had to call for two artillery stonks on the area immediately forward, and under cover of this the relief was completed.

'Coy HQ moved out last, and, after reporting to HQ in the Crypt that relief was complete, started out along the mad mile for the last time very hurriedly. Both Baillies <sup>38</sup> had been completely destroyed since our move in, and the road was, if possible, in a worse mess.

'To all of us in the Bn, I am sure Highway 6, or the mad mile is one piece of road we will always remember. Just a mile straight of road bordered by shell torn stumps of trees and a convenient ditch. Every yard a crater, and, on the side, blanket covered bodies of chaps who had stopped one. This time we were lucky and received no casualties.'

After this relief the battalion moved out of action for a spell near [Presenzano](#), eight miles south of [Venafro](#) in the upper [Volturno](#) valley.

The battalion's casualties in [Cassino](#) were:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	1	27
Died of wounds –		3
Wounded	5	105
Total	6	135

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<sup>1</sup> [Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger](#), KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); [Wellington](#); born [Ladbrooks](#), 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; 1 [NZEf](#) 1916-17; wounded Mar 1917; CO 20 Bn Sep 1941-Apr 1941, Jun-Dec 1941; commanded 10 Inf Bde ( [Crete](#)) May 1941; 5 NZ Inf Bde Jan 1942-Jun 1943, Nov 1943-Feb 1944; 2 NZ Div 30 Apr-14 May 1943 and Feb-2 Mar 1944; twice wounded; commanded 2 [NZEf](#) PW Repatriation Unit ( [UK](#)) 1944-45; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories.

<sup>2</sup> [Lt-Col P. R. Pike](#), MC; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 1 Oct 1913; accountant

clerk; 2 i/c 24 Bn 28 Jan 1943-22 Apr 1944; CO 24 Bn 22 Apr-4 Jun 1944; twice wounded.

<sup>3</sup> Captain Steele took over from Major Aked but remained in command for a few days only before being evacuated to hospital.

<sup>4</sup> Capt S. C. Schofield; Auckland; born NZ 20 Aug 1920; clerk; wounded 18 Mar 1944.

<sup>5</sup> Capt F. L. Phillips; Otorohanga; born Otorohanga, 18 Dec 1916; law clerk.

<sup>6</sup> Lt W. R. O'Brien, MC; Ohaupo; born NZ 14 Feb 1922; motor mechanic; wounded 29 Jul 1944.

<sup>7</sup> Sgt V. Stanaway, MM; Helensville; born Auckland, 28 Jul 1918; grocer.

<sup>8</sup> Sgt J. H. Bryant, m.i.d.; Taueru, Masterton; born Wellington, 8 Sep 1918; labourer; wounded 3 Apr 1944.

<sup>9</sup> Col J. L. MacDuff, MC, m.i.d.; Lautoka, Fiji; born NZ 11 Dec 1905; barrister and solicitor; CO 27 (MG) Bn 24 Sep 1943-29 Feb 1944; CO 25 Bn 29 Feb-15 Jun 1944; CO Adv Base 2 NZEF Jun-Jul 1944; Chief Magistrate, Fiji.

<sup>10</sup> Capt J. R. McCorquindale; Auckland; born Kawakawa, 19 Jul 1921; clerk; wounded 18 Mar 1944.

<sup>11</sup> Capt J. B. Armstrong, m.i.d.; New Plymouth; born Cowra, New South Wales, 7 Oct 1912; bank clerk; twice wounded.

<sup>12</sup> L-Cpl M. H. Taylor, MM; Wainui, Kaukapakapa; born Wainui, 19 Oct 1920; farm labourer; wounded 18 Mar 1944.

<sup>13</sup> Lt A. D. Rockell, MM; Taihape; born Hawera, 30 Jan 1910; shepherd; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

<sup>14</sup> Message received at HQ 24 Bn from B Coy at 9 a.m. 18 Mar 1944.—War diary, 24 Bn.

<sup>15</sup> War diary, 24 Bn.

<sup>16</sup> Maj D. H. Lloyd; Dunedin; born Dargaville, 29 Mar 1922; clerk.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Lt D. K. Matheson; Huntly West; born Nelson, 2 Dec 1915; clerk; wounded Nov 1941.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Lt C. D. M. Klaus, MM; born Waihi, 20 Oct 1916; freezing-worker; killed in action 18 Mar 1944.

<sup>19</sup> Sgt A. J. Tracy; Auckland; born NZ 16 Feb 1902; carpenter's labourer; wounded 25 Nov 1941.

<sup>20</sup> Lt-Col K. H. Macdonald, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 25 Nov 1916; 2 i/c 24 Bn 25 Feb-12 May 1945; CO 24 Bn 12 May-5 Jul 1945; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

<sup>21</sup> For his conduct while commanding an anti-tank gun crew within the bomb line and leading ration parties to forward positions, this officer received the MC as an immediate award.

<sup>22</sup> War Diary, 24 Bn. Major Reynolds also writes: 'Owing to the direction of the wind we were the point of origin for air burst smoke for our troops in the town... smoke cannisters and empty shell cases... dropped all over us most of the daylight hours.'—Letter, 27 Jan 1950.

<sup>23</sup> Maj Reynolds was forbidden to go back personally by the GOC. The evacuation of wounded is described later.

<sup>24</sup> Pte N. C. Clifton; born NZ 28 Mar 1908; dairy farmer.

- <sup>25</sup> Capt Borrie was not in possession of the MC at this time. He received it for services performed, not only on the present occasion but throughout the battle of [Cassino](#).
- <sup>26</sup> Eye-witness account of evacuation of C Coy wounded from Point 202.—War diary, 24 Bn.
- <sup>27</sup> Nickname for Pte Worth, the C Coy medical orderly, who was acting as guide.
- <sup>28</sup> [Pte H. C. Worth](#), MM; [Auckland](#); born NZ 8 Nov 1919; seaman.
- <sup>29</sup> Letter, Capt Borrie, 25 Mar 1944.
- <sup>30</sup> [Maj D. L. Wood](#), MC, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 15 Aug 1915; barrister and solicitor; SC 6 Inf Bde 1943-44; BM 9 Bde 1945; wounded Dec 1943.
- <sup>31</sup> 'The nature of the casualties was normal for a battle fought on granite-like rock, mostly caused by splinters in the limbs and body. Unfortunately gangrene set in and some of the poor beggars were smelling badly when we left them. As far as I know none of them died, although at least one lost his leg through gangrene.' —Letter, Maj Reynolds.
- <sup>32</sup> [Maj R. L. Pratt](#); Tokoroa; born NZ 7 Oct 1916; floorman; wounded 20 Apr 1943.
- <sup>33</sup> The crypt was under the church, which stood where the eastern marginal road cut Route 6.
- <sup>34</sup> 2 Lt R. N. Smith; [Hamilton](#); born Hagley, England, 17 Apr 1919; farmer.
- <sup>35</sup> [Maj-Gen C. E. Weir](#), CB, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born NZ 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO [6 Fd Regt](#) Sep 1939-Dec 1941; CRA 2 NZ Div Dec 1941-Jun 1944; commanded 2 NZ Div 4 Sep-17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div

Nov 1944-Sep 1946; Commandant, Southern Military District, 1948-49; QMG  
Army HQ Nov 1951.

<sup>36</sup> Along Route 6 from the direction of the cemetery at San Bartolomeo.

<sup>37</sup> Letter, Lt-Col Aked, 25 Jul 1948.

<sup>38</sup> Bailey bridges.

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# 24 BATTALION



## CHAPTER 14 – MOUNTAIN WARFARE—THE PURSUIT

## CHAPTER 14

### *Mountain Warfare—The Pursuit*

A donkey Derby held near Brigade Headquarters was the salient event of the ten days spent in the [Presenzano](#) area; but the afternoon was wet, and as an entertainment the affair was scarcely to be compared with the race meeting organised by Captain Borrie at [Sidi Bou Ali](#).

On 11 April the battalion moved via [Venafro](#) and [Filignano](#) to take over from 6 Polish Brigade a quiet mountain sector near [Cardito](#), ten miles north-east of [Cassino](#). Reaching the staging area near [Filignano](#) at 11.30 a.m., the companies spent a busy afternoon packing their gear ready for loading on to mules at the debussing point east of Cerre Grosso. They arrived there shortly before midnight, and by 3 a.m. the relief was complete. Details of the operation are to be found in B Company's war diary:

The journey per RMT terminated at the mule point. Although stores had previously been tied in mule loads, quite an exciting period was experienced during loading. The main difficulty lay in distinguishing mules from men, there being practically no difference in loads. There was much milling around and gnashing of teeth, mules included. The Indian master muleteers aided the boys greatly by looking on, but for all this we were soon on our way.... Sometimes the mud was up to our ankles. The nocturnal trippings of the mules had churned our narrow path into a heavy mire, and, because the enemy minefields were undefined, we followed our tracks religiously.

Taking over from the Poles was by no means a simple process. The diary goes on to describe it. 'Versatile as the Kiwi has become in the use of languages not his own, or a smattering thereof plus the sign language of gesticulation, waving and weaving, staring and glaring, never has he been so taxed as during this change over in darkness on a mountain side with an ally whose chief strength appeared to lie in his patience, and the fact that he was prepared to spend all night under enemy shell fire rather than relinquish the position with one bullet or grenade pin less than his establishment of weapons and ammo. However, the thing was done.'<sup>1</sup>

Sixth Brigade now lay astride the [Cardito- San Biagio](#) road, defending the

eastern end of San Croce Ridge, with 11 Canadian Brigade on its right and an Italian formation on its left. Its three battalions were all forward, with the 24th holding a central position opposite the height of San Croce. From left to right, B, D, and C Companies held a front line that was manned by night and partially evacuated during the daytime, only a few troops being left behind as observers while the remainder sheltered on the reverse slopes. A was the reserve company. 'Mule country and mortar country' was the description applied to this mountainous region by an officer of the battalion. The enemy lines were some 400 yards distant, and there was little activity except on those occasions when the supporting mortar batteries were called upon to harass German working parties. Enemy shelling was never intense; dugouts were reasonably comfortable, and life was pleasant in comparison to what it had been in [Cassino](#).

This was the last occasion on which Colonel Conolly commanded 24 Battalion under fire. After being relieved by a unit of 2 Independent Parachute Brigade, the 24th went back to the vicinity of Colle Volturmo, where a few days later the Colonel said goodbye to the men he had commanded for so long and with such outstanding success. The influence of his character, so firmly impressed on the minds of his subordinates, was not likely to disappear at the instant of his departure. An organiser of the first rank, sternly intolerant of inefficiency, he had earned his men's regard by sparing no pains in seeing to their welfare; he had won their respect by his conduct in time of crisis, for troops in the field, however well trained and disciplined, are still ordinary human beings, more readily influenced by example than by any amount of instruction.

Summer clothing was issued at the same time that Major Pike took over command, and all the tiresome precautions against malaria were resumed. Day leave was granted to [Naples](#), [Pompeii](#), [Sorrento](#), and [Caserta](#); then, after ten days' spell, the battalion moved westward via [Acquafondata](#) to a debussing point south-east of Sant' Elia, from where the men marched to a lying-up area five miles further on and bedded down for the night. The object in view was to relieve 5 Brigade, which held a mountain sector facing [Terelle](#), about five miles north of [Cassino](#), sandwiched in between 11 Canadian Brigade and 5 Polish Division. After resting under cover during daylight on 1 May, the companies climbed to their position after dark and relieved 5 Brigade's right battalion, the 23rd. Along the crest of a high ridge

facing north-west, B, A and C Companies were now aligned from left to right, with D Company in reserve. The whole position was overlooked from Monte [Cairo](#), and no movement was possible during the day, but German sangars were only fifty yards away and in consequence neither side dared shell the other's front line. According to B Company's war diary, 'the days seemed to pass with monotonous regularity, with picket and water carrying parties at night, and nothing to do in the day'.

There was an exception to this monotony when the bombardment of [Cassino](#) began late on 11 May, and the battalion enjoyed a grandstand view of more than a thousand guns in action by night. Small diversionary attacks were undertaken to test the enemy defences, and on the night of 13 May a fighting patrol from B Company moved out to seize Point 856, an enemy post 150 yards in front of the battalion lines. No. 10 Platoon, which formed the patrol, was made up to strength for the occasion by the addition of a few extra men. Supported by the fire of two-inch mortars, the platoon advanced on its objective; but the position was found to be strongly held, and after losing six men wounded the patrol was ordered to return.

The comparatively easy time enjoyed by front-line troops was not shared by the battalion's transport drivers, who spent most of the daytime packing rations and ammunition into mule loads, and most of the night taking them up in jeeps to a mule point. Beyond the village of [Acquafondata](#) it was dangerous for motor transport to travel by daylight along the main road leading to Sant' Elia, but another less exposed road had been constructed over the mountains farther south. Known as the '[Inferno Track](#)', it led to a forward supply point, hidden in a cliff-walled gully at the edge of [Cassino](#) plain and christened [Hove Dump](#). It was from [Hove Dump](#) that the jeep drivers of B Echelon made their nightly journey up the [Terelle](#) zigzag, every corner of which was covered by enemy machine guns. 'A trip over and back was pretty nerve-shaking', writes Major Aked, who was then second-in-command and in charge of B Echelon. 'My most vivid recollection of these trips, and I had to make a few, is of hanging on for dear life and dodging what appeared to be streaks of light—no, not tracer, but fire- flies. It seems silly but one ducked, and ducked fast—habit perhaps.

'From the mule point, mule parties loaded and then went forward to Battalion Headquarters—thence out to companies and returned. These parties also did great work and were under mortar fire all and every night.'<sup>2</sup>

During the first few days of 24 Battalion's spell in the line arrangements worked fairly well. The forward supply point remained undiscovered and unmolested by the enemy, but on the afternoon of 7 May an unfortunate mischance led to its disclosure, with consequences that Major Aked relates from his own painful experience.

This [ [Hove Dump](#)] was all right until the Poles also moved B Echelon in, but slightly further down. They tore up and down [Inferno Track](#) all day and drew the enemy's attention. We knew we would get a packet sooner or later, and asked permission to shift but this was not granted. Finally one day the Hun commenced — just a couple of ranging shells up the slopes, and then one landed alongside 24 Bn water truck. It holed the petrol tins which immediately poured petrol everywhere and it ran under my 15-cwt. As luck would have it the next landed on the nose of my bus and she immediately brewed up. I was under the tail but didn't stay. All hands dived for cover. Immediately the smoke thickened, the fire spread to the water truck, thus increasing the volume of smoke, and Jerry went to town. Every damn gun, 88s, 75s, and 11 os started pouring in shells. In no time the Div reserves were all burning, petrol, ammo etc., and what with Jerry shells landing and exploding cases at a time [Hove Dump](#) was just Hell let loose.

All 24, 25 and 26 Bns' jeeps were loaded ready to carry out our normal night's work of carrying rations and ammo forward... It soon became obvious that unless they were taken out of it we would lose them all, and all our rations. The drivers were yelled at to get moving and get their vehicles out of it. They jumped to it, dived out of cover into their jeeps and away. They had to pass within yards of the ammo etc., and more than one vehicle was burning as it was driven away.

I cannot speak highly enough of the work of these men and their complete disregard of danger—also of WO 2 Jim Reid <sup>3</sup> who assisted and directed in every way possible. No man of our unit shirked, and it was damn dangerous. We were extremely fortunate and only superficial wounds were received. This was to my mind a miracle. It was the hottest spot (in more ways than one) that I was in during the war....

When the shelling finally stopped and the fire burned out, Hove Dump was just a mass of burned out tins and vehicles. The few dead were all Poles, killed while

looting. All our drivers had kept together and RV'd near [Acquafondata](#), a village near the head of [Inferno Track](#). I joined them with the remainder of B Echelon personnel, who had remained in the dump, about midnight. Reid had replaced what stores had been lost; and then the drivers went forward on their usual run.

The 28th Battalion came up and relieved the 24th on the night of 16 May. By dawn the companies were back at the foot of the [Terelle](#) zigzag, where they lay up till dusk and then marched to an embussing point. Next day they were once more in the [Volturno](#) valley, but only to remain there 24 hours before taking over a sector east of the [Belmonte- Cassino](#) road from 12 South African Motor Brigade. There they spent a few uneventful days until relieved by 5 Battalion Essex Regiment, after which the 24th returned once again to the vicinity of Colle Volturno.

On 28 May the Prime Minister of New Zealand, the Rt. Hon. Peter Fraser, arrived. Having addressed the assembled troops, he then visited each company, prepared to answer any question that might be asked, after which he was entertained in the officers' mess.

Meanwhile the enemy was beginning to retreat. Route 6 had been cut, and British and Canadian forces pressed forward up the [Liri](#) valley, while evacuated [Cassino](#) was occupied and Polish troops entered the monastery. In the mountains to the north, explosions behind the enemy lines warned 5 Brigade that demolitions were in process and that a retreat was imminent. When patrols on 25 May found the enemy gone, a pursuit through the mountain front began. [Terelle](#), [Belmonte](#), and then [Atina](#) fell. Beyond Atina the hills opened out into a wide flat valley.

Major Aked took over command of the battalion from Colonel Pike (left out of battle) on 31 May, the day on which it moved forward to [Atina](#) in the wake of 5 Brigade. Before dawn it advanced again along the upper [Liri](#) valley and arrived late in the afternoon within three miles of [Sora](#), then being occupied by [28 Battalion](#).

Next morning, after some delay, 24 Battalion advanced through [Sora](#) itself, occupying the western half of the town, through the centre of which flowed the Liri River. D Company (Major Macdonald) passed on to the north-east and sent a patrol forward to Colle Sant' Angelo. A Company (Captain Hepburn) <sup>4</sup> took up a position astride the road running parallel with the river, while C (Captain McGruther) <sup>5</sup>

occupied a castle dominating [Sora](#) and lying immediately to the north of it. B Company, still under Major Turnbull, remained in the south-west corner of the town for the time being. At 2.30 p.m. D Company reported having seen a body of the enemy about 200 strong some two miles north of its own position, moving towards the summit of Faggio Rotondo. When fired upon by our guns, this party at once retreated out of sight. Later in the afternoon B Company advanced towards Colle Sant' Angelo and occupied ground on D Company's left flank. A patrol from A Company went out after dark and reached [Le Compre](#), two miles north of Colle Sant' Angelo. No enemy was seen, though local inhabitants alleged that he had spent the previous night there.

By evening all was quiet, except at the RAP which Captain Borrie had established in the town hospital. More than once already the battalion Medical Officer had shown a range of accomplishment extending far beyond the bounds of his profession;



**advance to balsorano**

having no casualties to deal with on the present occasion, his energies were directed into other channels, with results described by himself in a letter as follows:

When I came back from dinner Bob Thompson said that an Iti who had been to [America](#) said he could arrange a small dance. I suggested that we use the RAP and ask as many as we could. Well, about 8 p.m. they started rolling up, and the pianist arrived with his guitar, and later other pianists came, a violinist, a ukelele, and a



drummer who clacked three spoons—a very clever and effective instrument. The entire population seemed to turn out, and the dance went with a bang. There was no wine in the town—it was all in the country—and it just showed that we could have great fun without alcohol. Iti lads also came and danced with the girls. It was the first dance they had had for four years. There were so many girls that we rang up the Sigs. and asked Jack Woodhouse <sup>6</sup> and some signallers to come up....

We turned on a supper of 'K' rations which we had picked up at [Cassino](#), and gave them the biscuits, loaf sugar, etc. Unfortunately they were all terribly hungry and rushed Robbie when he came out with the boxfull. Robbie ended up in the middle of the floor separated from the box, with one scrum of Itis on top of him, and one on top of the box.... Later in the evening I got a few of the Italians to dance a Tarantella, which was loudly applauded, and later we got in the centre and sang 'We are the boys from way down under', which also went down well. We stopped at 11 p.m., of course when it was really going at full swing, but that is the best time to stop when everyone is happy. The boys were all very thrilled, and I bet it is a bit of a rarity, a dance in the front line.

Next day (2 June) patrols failed to get in touch with the enemy, who appeared to have the intention of making a stand at [Balsorano](#), a small town six miles further up the [Liri](#) valley. The 24th Battalion at once began to advance up the left bank of the [Liri](#), with A Company leading, followed by C and D, while B Company moved forward along the high ground on the left. At the same time [28 \(Maori\) Battalion](#) of 5 Brigade advanced in conformity with the Aucklanders along the river's right bank. Tanks of [20 Armoured Regiment](#) operated on the easier ground near the railway which ran along the valley floor.

Throughout the day A Company moved forward steadily without opposition, but towards evening it was fired upon when within about three miles of [Balsorano](#), and several men were hit, including the company commander, Captain Hepburn. At this time Major Aked, accompanied by his Intelligence Officer and a signaller, was only a few hundred yards behind the forward troops. Having reported back to Brigade, he was told to fight the engagement with fire not with movement. To increase his fire power he at once ordered D Company to come up on A Company's right, and sent back for the Carrier Platoon to move up in support of the tanks. B Company was withdrawn from the high country on the left flank and brought up in rear of the other

companies.

While Aked was giving the necessary directions over a No. 38 radio-telephone set, a German officer cut in on his conversation.

'I had not finished speaking', writes Aked, 'when Jerry cut in. I'll try and give you an idea of the conversation as it went.

"Hello Sunray (code-name for unit comdrs). Jerry here. I have a message for you. Over."

"Hello Jerry. Sunray here. Over."

"Sunray we have shot a number of your forward elements including your company commander who is now a prisoner. If you will let us know where to bring him to we will arrange to carry him there. Over."

"Hello Jerry. I will call you later giving a map reference and pick officer mentioned up. Over."

"Hello Sunray. Off."

Aked continues: 'The German spoke excellent English but the trap didn't work. I am certain he thought I would immediately give Bn HQ map reference, and then we would have copped a packet.'

That night A Company, now under Captain Marshall- Inman,<sup>7</sup> withdrew slightly and dug in with D on its right flank. C was a short distance to the rear, but one of its platoons, No. 14, under Second-Lieutenant [Perry](#),<sup>8</sup> had been sent off in the afternoon to occupy a high hill on the left flank. After a hard climb the platoon arrived there at dawn and remained acting as a screen for artillery observers until the morning of 4 June. The 21st Battalion passed through the 28th on the night of 2-3 June, but failing to make further headway it consolidated on a line east of the [Liri](#), opposite the position held by Aked's men.

An attack along the [Liri](#)'s west bank, to be carried out by 24 and 26 Battalions, was ordered for 4 June. A few reinforcements came up in the afternoon, but perceiving that serious trouble was in store for him the enemy retreated, after first

using up his supply of shells on our positions. The following night 24 Battalion, having lost two men killed and four wounded in the preceding engagement, went back to rest behind [Sora](#), while the 26th led 6 Brigade into [Balsorano](#) after the Divisional Cavalry had found it evacuated. On 6 June (it was D Day in [Normandy](#) and Rome had fallen two days before) 24 Battalion returned through its old battle positions to Colle Piano, and thence through [Balsorano](#) to a point seven miles north-west of the town. Here Lieutenant-Colonel [Hutchens](#)<sup>9</sup> took over command from Major Aked, and here the battalion remained until 15 June, when it moved to a rest area near [Arce](#), half-way between [Cassino](#) and [Frosinone](#).

Casualties in the battalion for the period April to June were as follows:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	–	9
Died of wounds	–	3
Wounded	4	35
Total	4	47

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<sup>1</sup> War diary, B Coy 24 Bn.

<sup>2</sup> Letter, 7 Oct 1948.

<sup>3</sup> WO I [J. F. Reid](#), m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [Palmerston North](#), 4 Jun 1907; bank clerk; wounded 28 Nov 1941.

<sup>4</sup> [Capt J. C. Hepburn](#), ED; [Hamilton](#); born [Ashburton](#), 18 Dec 1907; farmer; wounded 2 Jun 1944.

<sup>5</sup> [Maj J. R. McGruther](#); born NZ 25 Jun 1915; farmer; killed in action 14 Jul 1944.

<sup>6</sup> [Capt W. J. Woodhouse](#), m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 31 May 1912; bank clerk.

<sup>7</sup> [Maj R. A. Marshall-Inman](#); [Tokoroa](#); born [Te Mata](#), 9 May 1914; linesman;

wounded 27 Jun 1942.

<sup>8</sup> Lt S. W. Perry; Dunedin; born [Gisborne](#), 27 Oct 1916; divinity student.

<sup>9</sup> Lt-Col R. L. Hutchens, DSO, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); [Canberra](#), Australia; born [Hawera](#), 26 Nov 1914; civil servant; CO 27 (MG) Bn 29 Feb-8 May 1944; 26 Bn 8 May-8 Jun 1944; 24 Bn 8 Jun 1944-12 May 1945; wounded 21 Jul 1942.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 15 – MONTE CAMURCINA AND SAN MICHELE

## CHAPTER 15

### *Monte Camurcina and San Michele*

From [Arce](#), Rome leave was granted on a fairly liberal scale, but the outstanding event of the four weeks' stay was an 'Aquatic Derby' held on the Liri River. Races for canvas assault boats with crews of nine were taken more or less seriously, but the 'Napoli Nebelwerfers Nudge' (thus described on the programme) was an event for 18-crew barges, with no holds barred, in which the spirit of comedy prevailed. Naval engagements on the grand scale took place, and various modes of aggression came into play. 'At the end of one race', writes Captain Borrie, 'an orange smoke grenade landed in one boat, and there was rapid evacuation of everyone as fumes filled the [vessel].'

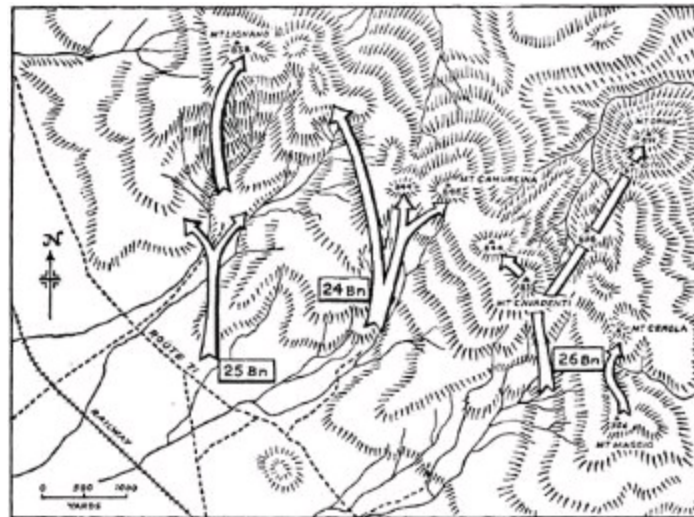
Meanwhile the enemy was standing firm south of [Arezzo](#) in order to delay our advance up the [Arno](#) valley and gain time to consolidate the [Gothic Line](#), which ran from the Gulf of Genoa, passing north of [Florence](#), to [Pesaro](#) on the Adriatic. The 13th Corps, now including [2 NZ Division](#), was to displace the enemy from his position and advance upon [Florence](#). On 10 July 6 Brigade began its northward journey to join the concentration of forces. Passing by the outskirts of Rome, 24 Battalion arrived close by the southern shores of Lake Trasimene on the 11th and moved on forty-eight hours later to the vicinity of [Castiglion Fiorentino](#), where a conference was held and instructions given for the coming operation.

A composite British force known as Sackforce protected the right flank of 6 British Armoured Division, which was preparing to advance through [Arezzo](#) into the [Arno](#) valley. Having relieved Sackforce, 6 Brigade was to capture the wooded heights dominating Route 71, from which the enemy might threaten the right flank of any force advancing towards [Arezzo](#). The 25th Battalion had already relieved 1 King's Royal Rifle Corps (of Sackforce) and its companies were strung out in depth on the slopes rising towards the summit of [Monte Lignano](#), while three miles to the south-east, [26 Battalion](#) had relieved the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders on the ridge south of Monte Cavadenti, towards which feature patrols were being sent forward.

The 24th Battalion was in reserve at a point about 15 miles south of [Arezzo](#) in the Panicale area, when, on the night of 13 July, G and A Companies began moving



forward towards [Monte Camurcina](#), half-way between [Lignano](#) and Cavadenti.



MONTE CAMURCINA, 14-16 JULY 1944

### **monte camurcina, 14-16 july 1944**

Battalion tactical headquarters was set up a few hundred yards west of Route 71, and A Company halted some way farther south while C took the lead. No. 15 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Crawshaw <sup>1</sup>) went straight on up the ridge rising towards Camurcina and relieved a platoon of [25 Battalion](#) in a house about three-quarters of a mile from the mountain's summit. Later Major McGruther came to install his advanced company headquarters in the same house, and 14 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Lloyd) also arrived before dawn on 14 July.

[Monte Camurcina](#) had twin summits, joined by a low saddle and thickly covered with scrub. Crawshaw had learned from the platoon commander he relieved that Point 844, nearest of the twin summits, was either unoccupied or very thinly held. Nevertheless, when setting out at 5.30 a.m. to discover whether or not it was clear of the enemy, he took every precaution, deploying one section on either side of the ridge with scouts in advance, and keeping the remaining section some way in rear. All went smoothly until one of the scouts was fired upon from an enemy weapon pit about 200 yards from the summit of Point 844. Crawshaw ordered his right and left sections to make an encircling movement, but on attempting to advance they were fired upon from newly-disclosed enemy positions and sent to ground. The reserve section moved forward to assist but was also pinned down before making much progress. Concluding from the volume of enemy fire that the position would be too strong for a single platoon to assault, Crawshaw reported his situation to Company

Headquarters and was ordered to await the arrival of 14 Platoon, then on its way to his assistance.

Company advanced headquarters was being heavily mortared when Lloyd set off with his platoon at 7.30 a.m. The men were heavily loaded for this kind of country, with blankets and gas capes in addition to full battle order. On nearing Point 844 Lloyd came upon three men of 15 Platoon, who were unable, however, to give him any exact information about the position of their comrades. Lloyd went on ahead with a runner to try to find Crawshaw, and found instead a section-leader who gave him 15 Platoon's position, saying at the same time that there had been some casualties and that Crawshaw's men were pinned down. Lloyd then sent the runner back to bring his men forward, but as they came on they were fired at, in consequence of which he withdrew them farther down the ridge and reported back to Company Headquarters. He also was told to consolidate; while he was doing so, Crawshaw's men came down the ridge to the vicinity of his position. Some while after having gone to ground, 15 Platoon had been counter-attacked by the enemy with grenades and automatic weapons. The attack had been beaten off, but with the loss of two killed and five wounded. Crawshaw then gave orders for the withdrawal, in the course of which he lost three more men killed and one wounded. There were not enough stretchers, and an extra one had to be made from the branches of a tree and a blanket. The journey back to the RAP took over three hours.

Shortly before 10 a.m. Major McGruther had been badly wounded by shellfire. Sergeant Thompson promptly came up from the RAP to carry him out, only to find on arrival that he had died in the meantime. The second-in-command, Captain [Casling-Cottle](#),<sup>2</sup> then went forward to take over the company.

No. 13 Platoon remained at rear company headquarters during the attack, its men acting as stretcher-bearers and providing ration-carrying parties. The other two platoons of C Company maintained their positions below Point 844 throughout 14 July. That night [25 Battalion](#) captured Monte [Lignano](#), while [26 Battalion](#), which had pushed on to the east of Cavadenti, was counter-attacked and forced to give some ground. The 1st Guards Brigade was pressing northward towards the junction of Routes 71 and 73; but Camurcina was likely to be a thorn in the side of any advancing force, and at 7 p.m. A Company of [24 Battalion](#) was ordered to move up

the ridge through C Company's position and dislodge the enemy from the mountain summit. Captain Howden, now commanding A Company, sent back word at 3.30 a.m. (15th) that he was moving steadily forward without opposition and hoped to be on his objective by dawn, but after passing through 14 and 15 Platoons his men were fired upon by spandaus from the summit and held up in the identical spot from which the C Company troops had lately withdrawn. Howden thought it possible to capture the position with the aid of an artillery concentration, but certainly not without casualties. Otherwise the only alternative would be to wait until darkness and put in a night attack in concert with C Company. However, nothing more was done for the time being and Howden's men lay up all day before Camurcina, forward of the two C Company platoons. B Company had gone to support [25 Battalion](#) on [Monte Lignano](#), when orders were received for a brigade attack on Camurcina and the adjacent Point 832, to be carried out by 24 Battalion with the 26th on its right. A Company withdrew 400 yards below Point 844 before the artillery opened up at 2 a.m. on 16 July, and it began to move forward half an hour later. By half past three Point 844 had been occupied without opposition, and soon afterwards D Company passed through to take possession of Point 846, also found to be deserted. On the right [26 Battalion](#) met with no resistance on Point 832. There were signs that German casualties, caused no doubt by our bombardment, had been evacuated from Camurcina. A patrol from A Company, sent to make contact with [25 Battalion](#), came in later with two prisoners. The whole mountain was now in our hands, and [Arezzo](#), entered by our tanks a few hours later, could be clearly seen from the summit.

At midday 24 Battalion withdrew from the line and went back to an area west of [Castiglion](#), where it remained resting for the next few days.

On 22 July it was again on the move. Passing by stages through [Siena](#), [Castellina](#), and [San Donato](#), it arrived on the 26th in the vicinity of [San Pancrazio](#) and debussed on a forward slope with little cover, in full view of the enemy. The men were told to dig trenches, but no sooner had they begun than German artillery opened fire, causing in all eleven casualties, one officer and one other rank being killed. All three battalions of 6 Brigade were now grouped in this area, west of the Pesa River and three or four miles south of [San Casciano](#), a small town lying on the main north road to [Florence](#).

The 13th Corps' main thrust to the [Arno](#) had shifted westward into easier

country, and 2 New Zealand and 6 South African Divisions were being employed to break the enemy's defence line traversing the low range of hills between the Greve and Pesa rivers. For the past three days 5 Brigade had been fighting its way north-east along the Pesa's left bank, and by 26 July had reached a point west of Casciano, while a composite armoured force ( Armcav) was east of the river threatening Casciano itself. The line of this advance was directed north-west and away from Florence, but 6 Brigade now received orders to establish a bridgehead at Cerbaia as soon as 5 Brigade should have reached La Ripa and Casciano should have fallen to Armcav. Once across the Pesa, 6 Brigade, having swung to the north-east, would move up the ridges of La Romola and San Michele in a straight line towards Florence.

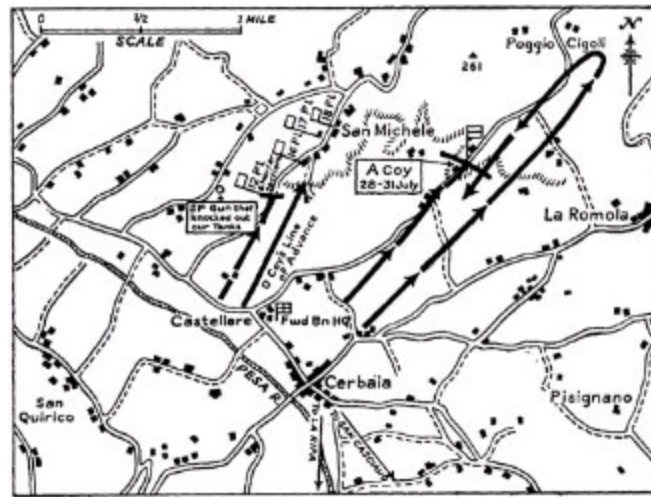
At 1.30 a.m. on 27 July A Company of 26 Battalion, with tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment in support, advanced from its position in the region of San Pancrazio, passed beyond 5 Brigade's right flank at La Ripa, and by 6.20 was moving towards Cerbaia along the left bank of the Pesa. By ten minutes to nine the company had crossed the river south of Cerbaia, only to be met by small-arms and mortar fire. The tanks had found the bridge west of the town to be demolished and at first were unable to cross, but later four Stuarts and twelve Shermans of B Squadron managed to cross lower down the stream. Thence they moved north-west, clearing houses and pockets of resistance. On the left 5 Brigade had reached San Quirico and Poppiano. B Company 24 Battalion started at 4.15 a.m. for La Ripa and, on arriving there, joined up with three companies of the 26th which were putting the village in a state of defence. D Company set off an hour later and halted 1000 yards south of the same village. Before midday both these companies received orders to move on up the Pesa's left bank and take up a position west of Cerbaia, thus filling the gap between 5 Brigade on the left and A Company of 26 Battalion, which was now north of the village. Early in the afternoon they were both in position, with B right and D left. A and C Companies still remained at Pancrazio. San Casciano fell to Armcav at 11 a.m. (27th) and 4 Armoured Brigade was sent across the river preparatory to thrusting towards Faltignano and Giogoli along the Division's right flank. The Divisional Cavalry was to cross at the Cerbaia bridgehead and exploit along the river's north bank.

For the operation in hand both 24 and 26 Battalions had under command a

squadron of 19 Armoured Regiment less one troop, a platoon of 2 Machine Gun Company, a troop of six-pounders and a section of 17-pounders of 33 Anti-Tank Battery, a troop of 39 Heavy Mortar Battery, and a detachment of 8 Field Company.

A Company had already suffered losses from shellfire when it left Pancrazio at 4 p.m. (27th). Its approach march had

brought it to a point south-west of Cerbaia when operation orders were received at Battalion Headquarters after darkness had fallen. First intentions were to mount a two-battalion attack in two phases, the final objective being the high ground lying two and a half miles north-east of Cerbaia, beyond the village of San Michele and west of Santa Maria, between Point 382 on the right and Point 395 on the left. This plan, however, was afterwards modified and capture of the final



CAPTURE OF SAN MICHELE

The 26th Battalion company's attack is shown at right

**capture of san michele The 26th Battalion company's attack is shown at right**

objective postponed until 4 Armoured Brigade should have made further progress on the right flank. For the present, A Company 24 Battalion was detailed to capture Point 261 on the ridge running parallel to that on which San Michele was situated, while on the right B Company of the 26th had Point 281 as its objective. According to the original intention, B and D Companies of the 24th were to have passed on through A in a second wave of attack, but under latest developments

they were not called upon to move from their present positions for the time being. Battalion Headquarters was established at Castellare, half a mile north-west



of [Cerbaia](#). The artillery was to open fire on Points 261 and 281 at 1 a.m. on 28 July, by which time the attacking infantry should have been ready on the start line, running half a mile beyond the [Pesa](#) and parallel with its course, north-west of [Cerbaia](#). But A Company's crossing of the river was delayed by shellfire, and having at length arrived on the further bank, it turned right towards [Cerbaia](#) instead of moving on in a north-easterly direction. On account of these misadventures Howden's men arrived late on the start line and did not begin their attack till one and a half hours after the scheduled time.

Nos. 9 and 7 Platoons advanced up the line of the road leading from [Castellare](#) towards the hamlet of Poggio Cigoli. On their right was [La Romola](#) and on their left the ridge of [San Michele](#). Company Headquarters and 8 Platoon came next, followed by engineers who swept the road for mines to allow the passage of the supporting tanks. A thousand yards had been covered when Lance-Sergeant [New](#),<sup>3</sup> a section leader of 9 Platoon, ran into an enemy machine-gun post near a house by the road. A veteran of almost every battle in which his unit had been engaged, he at once opened fire with his tommy gun, but the weapon jammed. The mischance might have daunted a man of ordinary courage, but, quite undismayed, New attacked the enemy in the darkness with only his fists and then escaped in the turmoil to warn his own men of their presence.<sup>4</sup> No. 9 Platoon at once attacked, while 7 Platoon moved round behind the house to prevent the enemy escaping. Rather unaccountably, the Germans appear to have been taken by surprise and made little resistance. Five of them were made prisoner, and at the same time two recently captured men of [26 Battalion](#) were released. As dawn was approaching, Howden decided to go no further towards Point 261 for the time being. Directing 7 and 8 Platoons to dig in in a semicircle 100 yards forward of the house, he planted Company Headquarters and 9 Platoon in the building itself. An officer of the [Royal Artillery](#) set up his observation post in the same place—a fortunate chance for A Company, as his guns gave invaluable support later in the day. Supporting tanks, which came close up to the house and began firing on [San Michele](#), soon drew down such heavy mortar fire in reply that the two forward platoons had to be withdrawn, but not before several of their men had been killed or wounded. The whole company now occupied the house, which was fortified as strongly as possible.

Having left its start line one and a half hours before Howden's men, the [26](#)

[Battalion](#) company on the right had moved forward alone, passed well beyond its objective, and reached a point north-east of Poggio Cigoli; but after daylight this isolated position became untenable and the company withdrew to Howden's defence line. As the house was already crowded, the [26 Battalion](#) men dug in further down the ridge, leaving the attached machine guns to increase A Company's fire power. A counter-attack threatened to develop late in the morning, but the concentration of enemy infantry was broken up by gunfire. A real counter-attack came at 2.30 p.m. and was beaten off with considerable loss to the enemy, while A Company escaped without casualties. Later in the afternoon the house was badly knocked about by a self-propelled gun, and two of the supporting tanks were put out of action. Holes had to be picked through the ground floor walls to avoid using exposed doorways, and two Browning guns from the knocked out tanks were added to A Company's already considerable fire power. Undoubtedly Howden's men passed a trying day, but when night fell they still presented a bold, unshaken front to the enemy.

On [2 NZ Division's](#) left [8 Indian Division](#) had reached Pulica and Bottinaccio; on its right [6 South African Armoured Division](#) moved up the Greve valley, while [4 NZ Armoured Brigade](#), advancing from [San Casciano](#), seized the ridge of [Faltignano](#). The South Africans, however, could expect to make little further progress until the heights on their left should be cleared. The New Zealand Division prepared to assault on a three-brigade front, but this operation could scarcely be undertaken with hope of success while the [Pesa](#) crossings near [Cerbaia](#) were still dominated by the high ridge of [San Michele](#).

As a preliminary measure, then, the front required to be straightened, and D Company (Major Macdonald) crossed the [Pesa](#) on the night of 28 July with orders to capture and hold [San Michele](#). In addition to the battalion's anti-tank mortar platoon, [12 Platoon](#) of B Company (Lieutenant [Rawley](#) <sup>5</sup>) also came under Macdonald's command and was given the task of taking the first objective—a house about 400 yards short of the village itself. The line of advance followed a ridge rising north-eastward from the [Pesa](#); bestriding the ridge's narrow back at its highest point stood [San Michele](#), a mere clump of houses scattered sparsely along either side of a road. On its eastern side more especially the ground fell away steeply and was not practicable for tanks. At the further end of the village a road junction formed the shape of a badly crossed T. A Company occupied a parallel ridge to the east, and the



German positions could be brought under its fire across the intervening valley.

The artillery opened up at 1 a.m. (29th) on the first objective, and 12 Platoon moved forward close behind the barrage until obliged by one of the guns firing short to stop for a time under cover. Eventually the house was taken without much difficulty. Fortunately for Rawley's men the German machine-gunner covering their line of advance had been wounded by the barrage and his gun did not come into action. Two Germans were killed and five made prisoner. An hour or so later two sections of the Mortar Platoon under Lieutenant Kelly came forward and took up positions from which to fire in support of D Company.

While 12 Platoon attacked the house, D Company moved forward on the right of the road. The enemy troops holding [San Michele](#) were all occupying houses lying on the forward slopes of the ridge. In spite of the warning barrage they were taken unawares by 16 Platoon (Lieutenant Lea) and after a short resistance the houses were taken. Six Germans were killed and five captured, while three of Lea's men were wounded. No further opposition was encountered and D Company moved into the village, where strongpoints were set up. No. 18 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant Smith) occupied the church at the north-eastern end of the village; 17 Platoon (Sergeant [Dynes](#) <sup>6</sup>) held the school some way farther back, and 16 Platoon was posted at the southern extremity, where Lea made strongpoints of three houses. On first reaching the church Smith had intended advancing to the crossroads at the north end of the village, some 250 yards farther on, as soon as the supporting tanks should come up. When they arrived, however, the troop commander flatly refused to move beyond the church. Major Macdonald, who came on the scene with Company Headquarters soon afterwards, agreed with Smith's idea of occupying the crossroads, but having also failed to persuade the tank commander to go further forward, he moved his headquarters into the crypt of the church occupied by 18 Platoon.

During the night Colonel Hutchens moved his headquarters back some two miles beyond the [Pesa](#), leaving Major Aked at [Castellare](#) with the support weapons, in immediate control of A and D Companies' operations. Just before dawn four 6-pounder anti-tank guns and two guns of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, together with the two Sherman tanks of 19 Armoured Regiment, arrived in [San Michele](#) to strengthen the forces of D Company.

Having got his guns sited, Second-Lieutenant O'Brien, the Anti-Tank Platoon commander, started to return to [Castellare](#). Calling on his way at 12 Platoon's position, he offered to take Rawley's five prisoners down with him in his jeep. He already had two wounded men of D Company, and with himself and his driver the jeep was crammed with passengers. It had gone scarcely more than thirty yards down the road when it struck a Teller mine, everyone in it being killed with the exception of O'Brien. The road, which had been previously reported safe, was thoroughly searched, but nothing was found and it could only be concluded that a German patrol had drawn the mine over the road by means of a wire.

Soon after it grew light the enemy began to plaster the village with shell and mortar fire, damaging some of the houses and forcing the garrisons to move out. Headquarters of 16 Platoon and one of its sections were driven to leave the houses they occupied and shift into a concrete barn nearby. There, at midday, they were attacked by a small body of Germans, two or three of whom climbed up a ladder into the barn loft. For a time these Germans had it all their own way, as they could not be reached from inside the building and were able to drop grenades on anyone attempting to move out from below. Two more Sherman tanks had advanced into [San Michele](#) and one of them came to 16 Platoon's assistance, but while manoeuvring so as to fire at the loft it overturned down a bank. Lea, however, contrived to release his imprisoned section by directing a machine gun in the remaining house to keep the Germans' heads down while his men made their exit, and soon afterwards another Sherman blasted away the barn's loft by gunfire. The whole platoon now occupied a single house, where it remained for the rest of the day. At 3 p.m. Lea sent out a patrol to seize a wrecked building fifty yards away so that one of the tanks might take up its position there. The patrol was successful, capturing the house and three prisoners, but no sooner had the tank arrived upon the scene than it was knocked out by a self-propelled gun firing from the ridge west of 12 Platoon's position.

The shelling died down for a while but broke out again with renewed intensity at 7.15 p.m., and soon afterwards Lea saw our two remaining tanks retreating past his position. As communication with Company Headquarters had been off since three o'clock, he decided to go personally and visit Macdonald. Posting his men in the basement of the house with only sentries above, he set off accompanied by a

runner. Throughout the day enemy patrols, coming mainly from the north-east, had been making attempts on the village under cover of heavy shell and mortar fire, but all these attempts had been defeated, largely by flanking fire from A Company's position. But enemy mortar fire had driven our anti-tank crews with their guns into the church for shelter, and at 7.15, in spite of the thickness of its walls, the church began to collapse under the renewed bombardment. The anti-tank guns were already out of action when Tiger tanks were reported to be approaching, and our two remaining Shermans moved back. An enemy Mark IV came close and fired at point-blank range, driving 18 Platoon into the church crypt. It was at this stage that Lea arrived. Concluding that the village could no longer be held, Macdonald ordered him to rejoin his men and withdraw them. Soon afterwards Smith began to lead 18 Platoon out of the crypt. On gaining the courtyard behind the church he was fired upon by a spandau; his men stayed behind in the building, but Smith himself, accompanied by one man only, made his way safely back to the house occupied by 12 Platoon. Lea had also got away unhurt from the church, but on reaching the house his platoon was holding he found it covered at close range by an enemy tank. Since it was impossible to rejoin his men, he also went down to 12 Platoon's house, expecting to find the remainder of D Company, but Smith and one man were all who had arrived. After waiting half an hour the party returned to [Castellare](#), taking with them a section of 17 Platoon that had been left to guard prisoners.

Returning to an earlier period of the battle, at 9 a.m. Lieutenant Kelly's mortar sections in position near 12 Platoon were called upon for a defensive shoot. As the area was already under enemy shellfire, Kelly decided to fire a mortar from one of the carriers so as to afford some protection for the gun crew. Three groups of ten rounds rapid were fired thus when enemy mortar shells began to fall round the carrier, and before long the crew was driven to take shelter in a barn nearby. The carrier was hit and caught fire. Corporal [Jones](#)<sup>7</sup> made a brave attempt to drive it away, but the heat was too intense. Next, the hayloft of the barn was set alight, and our tanks in rear began to fire on it, imagining for some reason that it was held by the enemy. When the walls began to fall in Kelly withdrew his men and equipment to the house occupied by 12 Platoon. Nevertheless, the remaining mortar was not allowed to be silenced and an ingenious method for keeping it in action was soon devised. 'The enemy shooting, which was very accurate', writes Kelly, 'made it impossible to mount and fire the mortar on the ground as its crew would have been

exposed to shell fire. The carrier was therefore driven under the lee of 12 Platoon's house and the mortar mounted upon it. When a request for a shoot was received an NCO, driver, and one man would take the carrier into the courtyard of the house, line the mortar up, fire the required number of rounds, and then pull back to the house.' By nightfall only ten rounds were unspent, and these were kept in reserve against some possible emergency.

Two sections of 17 Platoon, with two machine guns and an anti-tank gun, under command of Sergeant Dynes, held the school situated near the centre of [San Michele](#). The anti-tank gun was knocked out by a shell early in the morning, and soon afterwards a light mortar opened fire on the building. This was soon silenced, but at 7 a.m. enemy self-propelled guns and tanks put down a heavy concentration, after which a body of Germans approached from the north-east, only to be dispersed by fire from A Company and the troops holding the church. Throughout the day 17 Platoon suffered the same sporadic shelling as the rest of D Company, and after the intense bombardment beginning at 7.15 the school was attacked persistently by infantry coming in from the west. All assaults were beaten off, but at nine o'clock, when ammunition was running low, New Zealand troops were seen running down the road from the church. <sup>8</sup> Communication with Company Headquarters had broken down and Dynes could only assume that the village was being evacuated, but as shelling was still heavy and he had several wounded men on his hands he decided to hold on. Meanwhile Corporal [Haar](#), <sup>9</sup> who had behaved with great courage all day, undertook to go back to [Castellare](#) for instructions.

After Lea and Smith had gone Macdonald decided that it would not be possible to get his men out of the church. The only alternative being to stay and fight, he ordered everyone back to his post. An infantry attack was beaten off, and a Mark IV tank that came close in to fire was dealt with by an astonishing exploit. Private [Swann](#) <sup>10</sup> had been badly concussed earlier in the day and at the time in question was lying in the basement, apparently helpless, but on the tank's approach he at once became alert in every faculty. Manning a Piat gun he fired four shots at the tank at a few yards' range, damaging it to an extent that sent it backing away out of sight. Again and again the church was hit by shells. Infantry made two more attempts to get in but on each occasion were driven off. Eventually the front of the building collapsed, forming a barricade across the doorway so effectually that when

the Germans finally drew off at 11 p.m. it was no longer possible for Macdonald's men to get out.

Back at [Castellare](#) the responsibility for co-ordinating all supporting arms fell upon Major Aked. For two days and nights he had been without sleep or rest, as the officer detailed to relieve him had been unable to do so. Assuming from reports coming in that [San Michele](#) must be in German hands, he proposed to organise a counter-attack with the battalion's carrier platoon and Lea's men who had recently got back to [Castellare](#). A liaison officer, however, arrived from 6 Brigade and told Aked that the counter-attack would be carried out by a company of [25 Battalion](#). Accordingly, at 1 a.m. on 30 July this company went forward after a preliminary bombardment and occupied [San Michele](#) without meeting any resistance.

Our bombardment fell heavily on the house occupied by 17 Platoon, whose men left the second story and sheltered as best they might in the ground floor. The house soon began to collapse, and several men were buried by falling rubble. Already wounded earlier in the day, Corporal [Court](#) <sup>11</sup> performed gallant work in digging them out, and only desisted when knocked unconscious by a shell burst. He was awarded the MM. When at length B Company of [25 Battalion](#) arrived on the scene, two men had been buried and killed by falling masonry.

When released from the church crypt Macdonald returned with his men to [Castellare](#), and two hours later Turnbull led B Company forward into [San Michele](#) to share in its defence. Having held its advanced position since 28 July, A Company had suffered a number of casualties, and Private De [Lury](#), <sup>12</sup> an attached medical orderly, had risen magnificently to the occasion, tending wounded men under fire and carrying them to safety in a manner that earned him the MM. After being relieved by a company of [26 Battalion](#) on 31 July, Howden took over from C Company at [Castellare](#), thus allowing it to move up into [San Michele](#) and relieve the [25 Battalion](#) company that had counter-attacked the village.

Meanwhile the Division had regrouped for the attack about to be undertaken now that [San Michele](#) was ours. Fifth Brigade had moved round to the right flank and now lay west of Route 2, slightly in advance of [Cigliano](#) and Casa Vecchia. Fourth Armoured Brigade was in the centre at [La Romola](#), on the right of [26 Battalion](#), which still held the ground captured by A Company. B and C Companies of 24

Battalion held San Michele with the Divisional Cavalry on 6 Brigade's left. An hour before midnight on 1 August the attack went in. Next day 25 Battalion stormed Point 382, and with the capture of commanding heights on either side by other units of the Division on 3 August, the rampart of fortified hills protecting Florence was pierced. The high country lying west of the Greve valley was no longer tenable, and South African armour, moving along the line of Route 2, entered Florence on the morning of 4 August. The 24th Battalion, having had its share of action for the time being, was not engaged in the attack, its allotted task being that of establishing a collecting post for prisoners of war at Cerbaia.

On the fall of Florence the Division moved down the Pesa valley to the south of Montelupo, where 6 Brigade relieved 17 Indian Brigade. The enemy had withdrawn beyond the Arno, but he still sent fighting patrols across the river periodically. Sixth Brigade held the Division's central sector, and 24 Battalion had its headquarters at Villanova. The immediate object was to dominate all ground as far as the Arno's banks by means of strong fighting patrols, and at the same time to reconnoiter the river crossings. During the succeeding week this was successfully accomplished, and when 85 United States Division relieved the New Zealanders in mid-August, German patrols and listening posts had all been harried back across the Arno.

For ten days 6 Brigade stayed in the region of Siena, from where 24 Battalion sent off its men in three successive parties to a rest area at Cecina on the coast. Then, towards the end of August, the New Zealand Division left Siena at short notice, taking the usual unavailing precautions to ensure secrecy, crossed the Apennines in two long days' journey, and came to Iesi, near Ancona, on the Adriatic.

In the actions at Monte Camurcina and San Michele the battalion's casualties were:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	2	15
Died of wounds	–	1
Wounded	4	71
Prisoners of war	–	5
Total	6	92

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Lt K. S. Crawshaw; [Auckland](#); born NZ 14 Aug 1921; student teacher.

<sup>2</sup> Maj T. J. Casling-Cottle; [Levuka, Fiji](#); born [Bristol, England](#), 23 Apr 1909; insurance agent; wounded 22 Sep 1944.

<sup>3</sup> S-Sgt A. E. New, MM; born [Pahiatua](#), 7 Jul 1911; painter; wounded Nov 1941; accidentally killed 4 Jan 1946.

<sup>4</sup> He was awarded the MM for this exploit.

<sup>5</sup> Maj L. Rawley; [Wellington](#); born NZ 3 Jan 1915; Regular soldier; wounded 25 Nov 1941.)

<sup>6</sup> S-Sgt B. W. Dynes; [Thames](#); born [Thames](#), 17 Jun 1921; school-teacher; wounded 11 Apr 1945. Sgt Dynes had taken over from 2 Lt N. P. Scott, who was wounded on 28 July.

<sup>7</sup> Cpl F. A. Jones; [Pukeroro, Hamilton](#); born [Hamilton](#), 8 Dec 1914; farmhand.

<sup>8</sup> Presumably [Lea, Smith](#), and the two men with them.

<sup>9</sup> Cpl F. Haar; [Ongarue, King Country](#); born [Ongarue](#), 6 May 1922; millhand; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

<sup>10</sup> Pte A. G. Swann, MM; [Te Aroha](#); born [Frankton](#), 8 Aug 1914; wounded 30 Jul 1944.

<sup>11</sup> Cpl R. B. Court, MM; [Palmerston North](#); born [Tikokino](#), 3 May 1915; salesman; twice wounded.

<sup>12</sup> L-Cpl A. F. De Lury, MM; [Christchurch](#); born NZ 27 Sep 1922; sailor; p.w. 17 Dec 1944.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 16 – RIMINI TO THE SENIO

## CHAPTER 16

### *Rimini to the Senio*

The manner in which troops out of the line contrive to enjoy themselves can be gathered to some extent by studying the things they are forbidden to do. Thus we find the men of 24 Battalion being commanded, through the medium of routine orders, to refrain from wearing civilian head-dress or killing fish in the rivers with hand grenades, and being cautioned that a litre of Italian wine contained nearly as much alcohol as a pint of whisky.

After eight days at [Iesi](#), the battalion moved to within a few miles of the coast south of [Fano](#), where it went through exercises in embarking in small landing craft known as DUKWs. Here also Sergeant-Major [Lane](#)<sup>1</sup> and Sergeants [Rockell](#) and [Graham](#)<sup>2</sup> were granted immediate commissions for service in the field. Two more short moves made at intervals of a few days only brought the battalion to a point five miles south of [Rimini](#), close by the main coastal road. It was about this time that Major [Aked](#) left the unit with which he had served so long and with such distinction, to act as chief liaison officer to 3 Greek Mountain Brigade. When Captain [Borrie](#) met him in the outskirts of [Rimini](#) later in the month, he professed a great liking for the Greeks, whom he had already disabused of the idea that they could not fight before breakfast.

To explain the presence of New Zealanders once again on the Adriatic coast, a glance at the general situation is necessary. On its eastern flank the so-called [Gothic Line](#) terminated at [Pesaro](#), at the mouth of the Foglia River. Between this stream and the Conca River, some six or seven miles farther north, the ground was well fortified in depth. Late in August the [Eighth Army](#) prepared to reduce these positions with a view to drawing enemy strength eastwards, thus facilitating the Fifth Army's move on [Bologna](#). About a week later the Poles captured [Pesaro](#), while [1 Canadian Corps](#) and [5 British Corps](#) were breaking through the [Gothic Line](#) further inland. The Canadians made further progress up the coast to [Riccione](#), but other Canadian troops and [5 British Corps](#) met determined opposition on the [Coriano Ridge](#), where they were held up till 13 September. By the 18th [1 Canadian Corps](#) was preparing to break through the [Rimini](#) gap, cross the Marecchia River, and advance on [Ravenna](#). The New Zealand Division was to be the force of pursuit.

The 20th of September saw the Canadians pushing forward on to the ridge of [San Fortunato](#) and the enemy beginning to withdraw from [Rimini](#), which was entered soon afterwards by part of [4 NZ Armoured Brigade](#) and 3 Greek Mountain Brigade. The Canadians were about to cross the [Marecchia](#); once their bridgehead was secure, 5 NZ Brigade would pass through to capture the line of a stream three miles beyond. Then, if all went well, 6 Brigade would carry out the pursuit of a retreating enemy over the flat country lying between [Rimini](#) and [Ravenna](#).

When 24 Battalion moved up to the western outskirts of [Rimini](#) on the morning of 22 September, 4 Armoured Brigade was advancing on Viserba Marina and the Molini Canal, and 5 Brigade on its left was pushing up Route 16 and on the ground west of the highway. During the afternoon it was decided that 5 Brigade should attack to the Rio Fontanaccia that night, with 4 Brigade conforming on the coastal sector on the right. The Scolo Brancona, the intermediate objective, was later chosen as the final objective for the night advance. The troops on the coast and on Route 16 made an easy advance, but the Maoris further inland struck opposition near the stream. The pursuit had not yet begun when 6 Brigade went forward into action. The headquarters of C Company 24 Battalion came under shellfire, which accounted for six casualties, among them Major Casling-Cottle, whose place was taken by Captain [Stuart](#).<sup>3</sup> B Company (Captain [Pirrie](#)<sup>4</sup>) and D (Captain Marshall-



D Company moving up to the Senio

**D Company moving up to the [Senio](#)**



The Senio stopbank and D Company positions

**The Senio stopbank and D Company positions**



16 Platoon starts to consolidate a few minutes after reaching the Santerno, 11 April 1945

**16 Platoon starts to consolidate a few minutes after reaching the [Santerno](#), 11 April 1945**



Smoke ring made by nebelwerfer on Santerno River

**Smoke ring made by nebelwerfer on [Santerno River](#)**



D Company under fire in an unfinished  
German dugout across the Santerno.  
2 Lt D. C. Reid is on the left

**D Company under fire in an unfinished German dugout across the [Santerno](#). 2 Lt D. C. Reid is on the left**



Oil bomb dropped by Thunderbolt aircraft bursting on the Idice

**Oil bomb dropped by Thunderbolt aircraft bursting on the [Idice](#)**





An anti-tank gun crossing the Po River

**An anti-tank gun crossing the Po River**



Maj P. R. Pike

**Maj P. R. Pike**



Lt-Col R. L. Hutchens

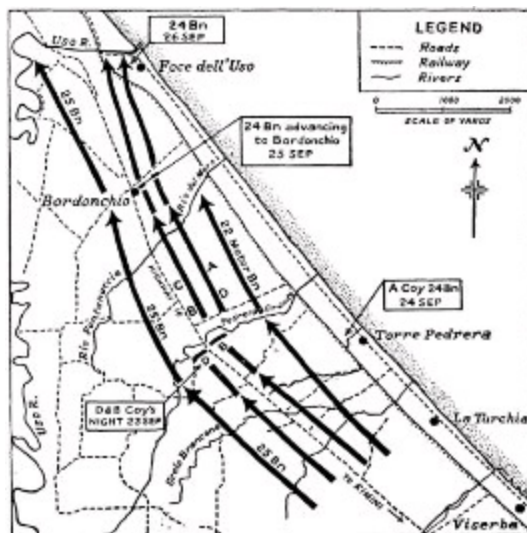
**Lt-Col R. L. Hutchens**



**ITALY MAP NO. 2**

Inman) were also going into action under new commanders.

At 5.30 a.m. on 23 September 24 Battalion began to move up along Route 16 in column of motor transport towards 21 Battalion's position on the Brancona. Passing through the suburbs of Rimini, with B Company leading, the column was brought to a halt at nine o'clock, when 21 Battalion's patrols met with resistance beyond the Brancona. A 'set piece' attack was found necessary, and following an artillery barrage Colonel Hutchens sent B and D Companies forward on the right and left of Route 16 to seize the line of the Fontanaccia Canal. The 22nd (Motor) Battalion was on their right flank, 25 Battalion on their left, and beyond the latter was 12 Canadian Brigade. The 26th Battalion was in brigade reserve.



**advance to the uso river**

B Company went steadily ahead under fairly heavy shellfire but without being otherwise opposed until it arrived within 500 yards of the canal, at which point it came under machine-gun fire. The country was unusually bare of cover and the advance was slowed down, but at dusk the platoons were withdrawn to a lateral road, where they dug in for the night only a short way from their actual objective.

D Company also came under shellfire soon after starting, and machine guns firing from [25 Battalion's](#) front were a source of much annoyance until silenced by one of the supporting tanks. The advance was carried forward to a point about 500 yards from the canal where the leading platoon, No. 17, was pinned down by close-range machine-gun and mortar fire and one of the company's supporting tanks knocked out. The platoon was obliged to withdraw under cover of a smoke screen. Marshall-Inman's headquarters, in a house not far behind the forward position, was shelled by an enemy self-propelled gun or tank, and also machine-gunned. The top floor of the house was blown off, machine-gun bullets came through all the windows on the ground floor, and wireless communication was lost. The company pulled back to a line along a road about 500 yards ahead of the Brancona, where it got in touch with B Company and [25 Battalion](#). The Carrier Platoon moved up on B Company's right flank at dusk, while A and C Companies took no part in the action but remained dispersed along Route 16, north-west of [Rimini](#). During the night the advanced troops heard a roving tank about 200 yards forward of their positions. An artillery 'stonk' was put down on the area, and next day the tank was found to have been knocked out.

At dawn 11 and 12 Platoons of B Company passed beyond the objective, a dry canal 12-15 feet deep, and advanced a few hundred yards farther on, when they were suddenly fired upon by spandaus. No. 12 Platoon took refuge in a house, while 11 Platoon went to ground among grape vines. A smoke screen was put down by the artillery at 10.15 a.m. to cover their withdrawal, but this operation seemed so hazardous to Captain Pirrie that he ordered them to stay where they were for the time being. Eventually, at 2 p.m., they made their getaway by crawling along the bottom of a half-filled ditch, followed, to their intense annoyance, by a large dog which barked at them from above ground, giving away their exact position to the enemy. The dog was shot and the retreat at length accomplished, but casualties had been so heavy among 11 and 12 Platoons that when they were once more behind

the canal they were amalgamated into a single unit. During the morning A Company had moved out on to the brigade's right flank, close to the sea coast north-west of the village of Torre Pedrera.

After returning from a brigade conference, Colonel Hutchens sent for his company commanders in the evening and explained the details of an attack to be undertaken that night on the lateral road cutting Route 16 at [Bordonchio](#), about 3000 yards beyond the dry canal. Advancing on the right and left of Route 16, 24 and 25 Battalions would leave their start lines on the [Fontanaccia Canal](#) at 8 p.m. behind a creeping barrage. The 22nd Battalion still remained on 6 Brigade's right, while protection for its left flank would be afforded by a company of [26 Battalion](#) with supporting tanks.

The attack was a hurriedly organised affair, and A, the right forward company, was barely able to reach the start line in time for Major Howden to confer with Captain Stuart of C Company, which had moved up on to the battalion's left front. B and D Companies were to mop up behind C and A, whose task was to keep up with the barrage and reach the objective, rather than divert their strength to cope with small points of resistance.

Grape vines and ditches made it difficult for A Company's platoons to keep in touch over the first 600 yards. Before reaching the Rio del [Moro](#) they ran into a nest of strongpoints, which checked their progress and caused them to lose the barrage. Nos. 7 and 8 Platoons had a stiff fight for the possession of a house, which they eventually captured together with eight German prisoners. Here about twenty Italian civilians, embroiled in the action much against their will, greeted their liberators with garlic-scented embraces, and then offered them a welcome gift of wine. By midnight A Company was close upon the Rio del [Moro](#), but, having little idea of the whereabouts of troops on his flank or rear, Howden sent out patrols right and left. One of these got in touch with D Company, which then came forward to consolidate the existing line, while A pushed forward and crossed the Rio del [Moro](#) just before dawn. Here, however, a strong point of resistance came into action on the left flank, and Howden decided to await the arrival of supporting tanks. The armour came up three-quarters of an hour later, enabling the infantry to push on to within 200 yards of the [Bordonchio](#) lateral road.

Sergeant-Major Marshall, DCM, was killed by shell splinters soon after C Company left the start line. Later the advancing troops came upon a disabled Tiger tank being towed away by another tank. A third tank was heard approaching, but this was allowed to go by in the hope that it might be dealt with by our supporting armour. The advance continued and, having arrived close to their objective at 4.30 a.m., Stuart's men dug in on A Company's left.

D Company's progress in rear of A was without major incident. In the afternoon of 25 September it moved out on 6 Brigade's right flank and relieved two companies of [26 Battalion](#).

On the left B Company had a rather more eventful journey. In the hurry of getting away, twelve reinforcements who arrived on the start line at the last moment had to be posted to the combined platoon without so much as having their names taken. Moving along the left of Route 16, 10 Platoon captured the disabled tank overrun by C Company. The sound vehicle which had been trying to tow it made off, but was found later knocked out a short distance away. Several houses were cleared of the enemy and prisoners taken. Passing a ditch, Captain Pirrie fired at something he heard moving, only to discover that he had killed a calf. Private Worth, the company medical orderly, happened to be in the ditch at the time attending to some wounded, and the sound of a shot close by brought him out with the news that a body of Germans were digging in only about twenty yards away. A section sent to dislodge them was beaten off, and two platoons were organised to deal with what promised to be formidable resistance, but when the assault was made the enemy were found to have gone. After passing beyond the Rio del [Moro](#), Pirrie was directed to withdraw again behind it. By dawn his company was dug in, and in that position it remained throughout the day (25th).

Soon after midday on 25 September A and C Companies sent out patrols along the right of Route 16 to discover the enemy's disposition and strength. The question whether a further advance should be attempted depended on what information these patrols should obtain, as it was not intended at this juncture to press home an attack against strong opposition. The patrols returned early the following morning with the encouraging report that they had been fired upon only from a few isolated posts. At 9 a.m., therefore, having side-stepped to the coastal sector, 24 Battalion



began moving towards the Uso River with C, A and D Companies aligned from left to right, and B following on in rear of C. Scarcely any resistance was met with, the only incident of note being the capture of 20 prisoners from a Russian Turcoman division which had been persuaded to join the enemy and fight against its own allies. B Company, mopping up in rear, encountered no resistance other than that of an Italian woman driven to desperation by repeated searchings of her house. Italian civilians affirmed that the enemy had retreated at daybreak, leaving the coastal region clear for some miles. That night a Greek battalion came up and relieved the 24th, which returned to [Bordonchio](#), where its men had a hot meal and part of a night's rest—two luxuries they had not enjoyed since the advance began.

Meanwhile the other battalions of 6 Brigade, with the Greeks on their right, gained the line of the Vena, a small stream a mile or more beyond the Uso. Having rested the best part of twelve hours, 24 Battalion was ordered to pass through the 25th and occupy the line of a road 700 yards short of the Fiumicino River. The advance, which began early in the afternoon, inclined slightly to the west and away from the coastline. On the battalion's left D Company moved steadily forward under fire till its progress was checked by a large house, strongly fortified. Armoured support was called for, but at first the tanks hesitated to operate on account of the deep ditches that had to be crossed. Lieutenant Lea, of 16 Platoon, then climbed into one of the tanks and directed its fire from the turret as it went forward. The house was captured and nine prisoners taken, but enemy shellfire was so heavy that, although his objective was still distant, Captain Marshall-Inman decided to stay where he was and consolidate the house.

In the centre A Company advanced along the left of a main road running inland of Route 16. Scarcely 300 yards had been covered when its men came under heavy fire from concealed machine guns and snipers on the tops of haystacks, the latter making themselves scarce with alacrity when smoke shells from our supporting tanks set alight to their hiding places. Hard fighting ensued, and 7 Platoon made two determined attempts to capture a house on its left flank but was driven off on each occasion. Ahead lay a large expanse of bare ground, which Major Howden decided could best be crossed after darkness had fallen, and with that intention he halted his company for the time being.

With the Greeks on its right, B Company had an easy passage for the first half

mile, at the end of which it came under heavy fire from a group of houses 300 yards ahead. Supported by our armour, the Combined Platoon <sup>5</sup> advanced upon the largest house, coming as it did so under mortar fire with phosphorus bombs, which set alight to a number of haystacks nearby. The Carrier Platoon, which was operating on this flank, did great service in giving additional fire and evacuating wounded. As the attacking lines converged on the house, an Italian and his wife made their way out towards the New Zealanders under cover of a ditch, and told Lieutenant [Hulton](#) <sup>6</sup> that the Germans had gone but that a large number of Italian civilians still remained in each of the buildings. Hulton at once ordered his men to rush the position. The houses were found to contain about 150 Italians, all suffering demonstrably from the experiences they had undergone. 'The noise made by the half hysterical Ities was terrific', says B Company's diary. 'Cries for "silenzio" [only] made things worse.' The liberated ones were got rid of as soon as possible, and at dusk orders came from Hutchens for all companies, none of which had reached its objective, to consolidate on the ground they then occupied and to send guides back to the Vena. Late that night [21 Battalion](#) came up to relieve them, after which they moved back to a beach near the mouth of the Uso.

The pursuit, it must be admitted, had been partially foiled by an enemy who skilfully adopted his tactics to country scored and furrowed with watercourses. Standing firm on every natural line of defence, the Germans had inflicted upon their pursuers the delay of organising set-piece attacks, and had then in every case withdrawn before the attack went in. In these operations [24 Battalion](#) had had 17 men killed and upwards of sixty wounded, nearly half of these casualties occurring in B Company; but if losses had been more severe than expected, it seemed for a time as though the enemy was being hustled into a less orderly retreat. These hopes, however, were soon dispelled by a change of weather, seasonal but disastrous. Relieved from the pressure of pursuit by impassable roads and flooded streams, the enemy formed a defence line north of the Scolo Rigosso, protected by an outpost screen along the Fiumicino River. The Eighth Army prepared to reduce this line as soon as the weather should permit. On the right of 5 British Corps, [1 Canadian Corps](#) awaited the favourable moment, with [2 New Zealand Division](#) on its eastern flank.

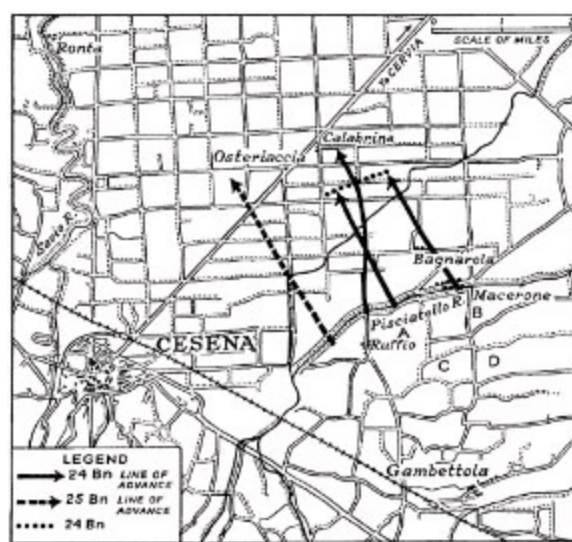
The 24th Battalion remained resting on the coast with its four rifle companies housed in a large orphanage building until 5 October, when it relieved [23 Battalion](#)



of 5 Brigade, whose units were dispersed west of the Uso. Two days later orders were issued for a general attack in which 6 Brigade was to capture the line of the Scolo Rigosso, but after continued postponement the New Zealanders were relieved by a regiment of Canadian Dragoons and 24 Battalion moved back to Viserba, two or three miles north of Rimini. Here Captain Borrie left the unit with which he had served for more than two years, to join the staff of 3 NZ General Hospital. Much could be written of this officer's army career, but a number of incidents already recorded throw light upon the qualities that had earned him so generous a measure of both popularity and respect. His place was taken by Lieutenant Blain,<sup>7</sup> of the New Zealand Medical Corps.

Bad weather had delayed but not stopped the Eighth Army's advance, and when 24 Battalion returned to the fighting line after a week's rest at Viserba the Fiumicino had been crossed,

and on both sides of the Rimini- Bologna railway New Zealanders and Canadians pressed steadily on towards the Savio. With 25 Battalion and 22 (Motor) Battalion on its left and right respectively, 21 Battalion lay north of the railway, facing the Pisciatello River between Ruffio and Bagnarola, when the 24th came up to relieve it on 17 October. Rain fell as the changeover took place, and when this was complete A (now



**crossing the pisciatello**

under Captain Pratt) and B Companies were forward on the left and right, with C

and D in support. The last-named was once again under Major Macdonald's command, while Captain Marshall-Inman had taken over C from Captain Stuart. Major Howden was left out of the action on this occasion. Between midnight and dawn (18 October) the forward companies sent out patrols to discover whether the enemy had withdrawn and

what state the river was in. B Company's men were fired upon and checked before reaching the stream, but A Company's patrol got close up to the banks, which were found to be sown with mines and so exposed as to be unapproachable by daylight.

Sixth Brigade now prepared to cross the [Pisciatiello](#) and form a bridgehead for the armour. The weather had cleared, and at 11 p.m. on 18 October A and B Companies of the 24th advanced under cover of a barrage to cross the river, with D in support and C in reserve. The 25th Battalion moved forward simultaneously on the left. By 1.30 a.m. A Company had reached its objective—a lateral road 1000 yards beyond the river. Resistance had been slight and most of the nine stretcher casualties had been caused by shellfire. Soon after midnight engineers had laid a scissors bridge <sup>8</sup> at the western end of the battalion's sector. This was used by tanks of 4 Armoured Brigade until the structure was damaged, and for a time all traffic had to be diverted to another bridge farther up stream. A line of barbed-wire entanglement was found to cut right across B Company's start line, and Captain Pirrie moved his men up to the river in column instead of deploying beforehand. Shellfire caused a few casualties and Second-Lieutenant Wetherill, of 10 Platoon, was killed, but having once crossed over the company reached its objective without a check. Following up closely, D Company mopped up the small village of [Macerone](#) on the river's further bank, while a platoon of C Company protected the engineers working on the scissors bridge. By midday on 19 October the bridgehead was secure and tanks of 4 Armoured Brigade were pressing forward to the north-west over boggy ground.

The infantry of 6 Brigade followed, but a setback came later when [25 Battalion](#), advancing towards [Osteriaccia](#), came under heavy shellfire, and [20 Armoured Regiment](#) was driven back from beyond [Calabrina](#). As a result the companies of 24 Battalion were ordered to form a firm base for the armour south-east of the [Cesena-Cervia](#) road, instead of passing beyond it to the north of [Osteriaccia](#) as originally

intended. There, sheltering in houses, they spent a cold night without blankets. Starting from this firm base at dawn on 20 October, 4 Armoured Brigade swung west towards the [Savio](#), while the infantry of 6 Brigade followed on a one-battalion front, with the 26th leading. Our armour reached the [Savio](#) at dusk. The 24th Battalion, bringing up the rear of 6 Brigade, did not arrive there till next day, when it relieved [22 Battalion](#) near the small village of Ronta. That night its three-inch mortars, anti-tank guns, and machine guns fired to create a diversion while Canadian infantry attempted a crossing upstream. The firing drew down heavy retaliation in the shape of mortar fire on our lines, and the Canadians were not successful.

After being relieved in the afternoon of 22 October, 24 Battalion went back to the [Pisciarello](#) and started next day for a rest area at [Castelraimondo](#), near [Fabriano](#) in the [Apennines](#), but being held up on the road by working parties it was obliged to halt for the night at [Iesi](#). The country round [Fabriano](#) was mountainous, peaceful, and unravaged by war. There was no training in the afternoons and football was played almost every day. On one occasion some hockey enthusiasts from B Company challenged C to produce a team to meet them. The match duly took place. Many of the players had never had a stick in their hands before, but fortunately no one was badly hurt. Leave was granted to Rome and [Florence](#), and 40 men under an officer went for a few days to a newly-opened rest camp in a disused wing of Perugia University. This camp was run on lines specially designed to give the troops attending it a complete rest from all duties. To that end, the daily odd jobs were performed by Italian labour. Snow fell on 10 November—seven weeks earlier than in the previous year. As usual the battalion contained a number of men for whom the experience was entirely new. 'Many had never handled snow before', notes B Company's diary, 'but this was early remedied.' The fall, however, was not heavy enough to interfere with football, and an inter-company game was played the same afternoon. Sixty-three reinforcements arrived during the rest period, and before leaving [Castelraimondo](#) the battalion's strength stood at 32 officers and 767 other ranks.

Though the season was far advanced, efforts to contain the enemy's reserves in [Italy](#) were not relaxed. On the [Bologna](#) and Adriatic fronts the Fifth and Eighth Armies maintained their pressure. When 6 Brigade returned to the line late in November the Canadian Corps was moving slowly towards [Ravenna](#), while 5 British

Corps was already west of [Forli](#) and preparing to advance on [Faenza](#). The 4th Division, from which the New Zealanders were about to take over, lay astride Route 9, facing [Faenza](#) and the line of the Lamone River.

Half an hour after midnight on 25 November the battalion set off on what must have been one of its fastest journeys. Travelling back through [Iesi](#) on to the coastal road, and turning west along Route 9 at [Rimini](#), it reached [Forli](#) at 8.30 a.m. The brigade sector taken over was being held on a one-battalion front, and next day [26 Battalion](#) relieved the 2nd Bedfords north of Route 9, astride the railway and close to the [Lamone's](#) banks. The 24th Battalion remained in [Forli](#) on two hours' notice to move. The men of A Company were housed in a palace, those of B in a three-storied school, while C and D Companies shared a large stove factory. Billets were comfortable, if somewhat overcrowded. Fireplaces were remarkably scarce and a brisk trade was done by the stove factory. As the stoves were without proper chimneys some arrangement had to be made for getting rid of the smoke, and many a noble pile was rendered unsightly by the improvised tin chimneys that projected from its windows. Three picture theatres and an Ensa show offered entertainment, but all were crowded nightly and a visit to any one of them entailed a long wait in a queue. When a Vermont factory over which the battle had rolled was discovered more or less intact north of the town, jeeps and trailers were sent to collect a supply, and the companies 'had one glorious session by platoons'.<sup>9</sup> [Forli](#) itself was not greatly damaged, but its old-fashioned streets were narrow for motor transport. Congested with troops, it would have been vulnerable to air attack, but the only attempts made by the enemy were sporadic and half-hearted. On one occasion a building near Battalion Headquarters was set alight by incendiary bombs. The fire was soon extinguished, and an hour later the [Forli](#) fire brigade arrived upon the scene.

Training was mainly confined to route marching, but since it was intended to force the passage of the [Lamone](#) as soon as possible there were exercises in the use of assault boats and Mae West life-jackets. The 24th Battalion's experiment in the procedure was carried out on the Montone River, north of [Forli](#), on 1 December. 'In the afternoon C and D Coys put on a demonstration of river crossing with full equipment.... Each coy put a section over by means of swimming with the assistance of a Mae West float. The water was bitterly cold and progress was naturally slow.

The next method was by far the most successful, though there was some disorganisation owing to the inexperience of the boatmen. Assault boats were used with ropes to pull them from bank to bank.' <sup>10</sup> A very short time was to elapse before the same procedure was tried out again under still more realistic circumstances.

On the night of 3 December 46 Division of 5 Corps bridged and crossed the Lamone three or four miles south-west of Faenza. Sixth Brigade supported the attack by firing across the river with all arms. The Divisional Cavalry, now serving as infantry, was in the line at this time, and all that 24 Battalion was required to do was to send dummy messages to Brigade. Ravenna fell to the Canadians on 5 December. The 46th Division expanded its bridgehead, while the New Zealanders awaited their opportunity to seize Faenza and go on to the Senio, but determined counter-attacks showed the enemy to be stronger than expected. The original plan was modified and 2 NZ Division regrouped on the night of 10 December, 5 Brigade moving down from the right flank to cross the Lamone on 46 Division's front, while 6 Brigade side-stepped from north to south of Route 9.

C and D Companies of 24 Battalion now moved up from Forli into the fork of the Lamone and Marzeno rivers, C to make a general reconnaissance of the Lamone's banks, and D to find a suitable place from which to launch a kapok bridge. It was intended by this means to get supplies across to 5 Brigade, which was about to take up a position on 46 Division's right flank. The spot chosen by D Company was about two miles south of Route 9, where the river formed a great loop. The 28th Battalion was the unit of 5 Brigade with which contact was to be made, but there was no sign of it across the river on 11 December. The bridging train of five jeeps and trailers, however, arrived from Forli in the evening. Two bridges were ready for launching by midnight, but the party in charge ran into mines, one man being killed and another wounded. As a consequence the company commander decided to wait till dawn before doing anything more. This was just as well, for daylight showed the whole area to be thickly mined, and another spot was chosen a little way downstream. Foothills rose up almost immediately west of Faenza, and emerging therefrom the river ran far too rapidly to be easily bridged; nevertheless the newly-chosen place proved more suitable for the purpose than that first selected. The 28th Battalion had appeared within shouting distance on the opposite bank when a second attempt was made the following night. A signal, to which there was no reply, was fired as the

bridge was launched, but before morning the whole affair had been washed away. At last, on the third successive night, the D Company men got a rope over the river by which to pull across an assault boat. The craft was found very difficult to handle on account of the current, but in any case the progress of events had rendered it no longer necessary.

A and B Companies also moved forward into the river forks early on 12 December, A (Major Howden) taking up a position overlooking the Bailey bridge on 46 Division's front over which the armour was to pass next day. The hours of darkness were spent in carrying 720 smoke canisters to the river bank. On the 13th all was ready, and at 11.30 a.m. word came through from Battalion Headquarters that the armour was about to make its passage over the [Lamone](#). The canisters were lighted and heavy clouds of smoke drifted down towards the bridge, obscuring it from view as the tanks passed over. Early in the afternoon they were all across, in spite of the heavy fire attracted by the smoke screen. The supply of canisters was exhausted by 3.30 p.m. The men operating them had come under a certain amount of machine-gun fire, and one platoon was pinned down in its position on the bank till after dark.

North-east of [Faenza](#) [1 Canadian Corps](#), having crossed the [Lamone](#) on 14 December, was establishing a bridgehead over the Naviglio Canal. The Polish Corps and [10 Indian Division](#) were making steady progress in the foothills west of [Faenza](#). After relieving 46 Division, 5 Brigade attacked north-east towards the [Senio](#) an hour after midnight, with the village of [Celle](#) in the centre of its line of advance. At the same time 56 London Division, lining the [Lamone](#) north of Route 9, made a false attack to create a diversion. While 5 Brigade captured [Celle](#) and fought its way on to the [Senio](#), two companies of [25 Battalion](#) crossed over on the night of 15 December to relieve two companies of [28 Battalion](#) on 5 Brigade's right flank. A battalion of 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade, which had come under command of [2 NZ Division](#) for that special purpose, also crossed over to clean up [Faenza](#). The remainder of 6 Brigade prepared to cross the [Lamone](#) next day, move north of Route 9 and the railway, and then swing north-west along the railway line towards the [Senio](#).

D, B, C and A Companies of [24 Battalion](#) crossed over in that order on the afternoon of 16 December. By nightfall they were grouped between the railway and Route 9, immediately north-west of [Faenza](#) and on the right flank of [25 Battalion](#).



The Ghurkas and the Divisional Cavalry were in the northern environs of **Faenza** itself. On the battalion's left C Company (Captain Stuart) pushed forward during the night. No. 13 Platoon seized a house beside the railway, and the company moved on towards **Pasotta**, a group of houses lying further to the north-west. These were also captured after a sharp fight, but no further advance could be made until both flanks were secure. D and B Companies reached the railway on C Company's right but could make no progress beyond it. A, being nearest to the outskirts of **Faenza**, occupied a large factory building close to Route 9 and continued its northward advance soon after midnight. No. 9 Platoon ran into opposition at a point where the railway was crossed by a road at right angles. After a brisk engagement the enemy was driven back and Major Howden decided to dig in just beyond the railway.

Colonel Hutchens now called a conference (1.30 p.m. on 17 December) at his headquarters west of **Faenza**, and instructed A and B Companies to clear the railway line by making an advance to the north. Starting off at four o'clock next morning,



**faenza sector**

A Company moved forward under heavy machine-gun fire and captured two houses lying 300 yards north of the line. While occupying these it was counter-attacked by tanks and infantry two hours later. Its platoons held on in the hope of armoured support, but this was not forthcoming, and at 7.30 a.m. the company was obliged to withdraw to its former positions, several men of 9 Platoon having to be left behind. Private **Walker**,<sup>11</sup> a medical orderly, volunteered to remain with them,



and was afterwards taken prisoner together with the casualties in his charge. Two other medical orderlies, Lance-Corporal De Lury and Private [Short](#),<sup>12</sup> who went back after the company had withdrawn to try to remove the wounded, were also made prisoner.

B Company reached its objective soon after 7 a.m.—a ruined house well beyond the railway, which it succeeded in holding. Our own tanks had moved up in support of this two-company attack, but declined to cross the railway line in the belief that it was mined.

Meanwhile C Company had remained where it was, with 13 and 15 Platoons in [Pasotta](#), and 14 Platoon, together with Company Headquarters, in a building south of the railway line. On the night of 17 December infantry counter-attacked this position supported by a Tiger tank, which fortunately forbore to open fire on the houses, presumably in the hope of reoccupying them intact. The attack was beaten off while blazing haystacks lit up the scene; but next morning at dawn enemy infantry returned and, for some unaccountable reason, began to dig in in front of [Pasotta](#), without troubling to find out whether it was occupied. Nos. 13 and 15 Platoons suddenly opened fire on the startled Germans, killing a captain and wounding two others, while the rest succeeded in escaping. 'Upon the dead German officer was found a Slidex complete with a key to the code words, maps with marked enemy positions, and an escape road route from [Bologna](#) showing roads to be used by the various types of vehicles, tanks, etc.'<sup>13</sup> For the rest of the day and well into the night 13 and 15 Platoons were heavily mort-ared. No. 14 Platoon made a forward reconnaissance and was pinned down by fire until our tanks laid a smoke screen to cover its withdrawal.

By 18 December [10 Indian Division](#) was across the [Senio](#) on the left, with 5 New Zealand Brigade up to the river line, its right flank close to Route 9, beyond which [25 Battalion](#) pressed steadily forwards. The 24th Battalion maintained its somewhat tenuous hold on the railway, with the [Gurkhas](#) on its right working round the northern outskirts of [Faenza](#). The time having come to clear Route 9 and the railway, 2 NZ Division prepared to attack on a two-brigade front between the [Senio River](#) and Naviglio Canal. Sixth Brigade formed up along the railway line, with its right flank 600 yards west of the junction north of [Faenza](#) and its left on the [Senio](#). The 26th, 25th and 24th Battalions, all attacking due north-east on a two-company front, were

aligned in that order from left to right. On the right of 24 Battalion, 43 Gurkha Brigade prepared to assault the villages of [San Silvestro](#) and San Rocco.

C Company on the left and D on the right, with B and A in rear, formed up on the railway line, 300 yards beyond which the barrage came down at 11 p.m. on 19 December. Each of the four companies had a troop of tanks in support. The objective was a road running south-eastward from the [Senio](#) through the village of [San Pietro in Laguna](#), about 3000 yards from the start line.

Disaster attended D Company at the outset when 17 Platoon ran into a minefield, suffering no fewer than 15 casualties, among whom were Second-Lieutenant [Ball](#),<sup>14</sup> killed, and Sergeant [Kennedy](#),<sup>15</sup> wounded. Corporal [McKenzie](#)<sup>16</sup> assumed command of the survivors, whose place in the forward line was taken by 18 Platoon under Lieutenant [Titchener](#),<sup>17</sup> of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, an officer temporarily attached to the 24th for instruction in infantry tactics, who took charge of a platoon and did excellent service throughout the operation. After this initial mishap, the company met with little resistance in gaining its objective. No. 16 Platoon patrolled 500 yards to its front to capture a house believed to be occupied, but on arriving there found that the enemy had withdrawn. In the afternoon 17 reinforcements who arrived at Battalion Headquarters were at once posted to D Company to replace its casualties.

On the left front C Company was unopposed up to the artillery pause line, a lateral road half-way to the final objective. Resuming their advance as the barrage lifted, the forward platoons were held up at Casa Busa before being ordered to bypass the position and leave it for B Company to mop up. During the advance Second-Lieutenant [Price](#),<sup>18</sup> of 14 Platoon, stumbled upon four Germans while moving out alone to one of his sections. He threatened them with a tommy gun and they promptly surrendered, but while escorting them back he fell into a shell hole, and one of the prisoners seized the opportunity to throw a hand grenade, which ripped open his steel helmet. Getting on to his knees, he opened fire on his escaping prisoners, killing three, while the one survivor returned with his hands up to be recaptured. Having got to its objective at 1.30 a.m., the company consolidated in and around [San Pietro](#) in Laguna. No. 14 Platoon moved some little way out in advance of the main defence line, as the Germans had demolished practically every

building in its sector.

Mopping up behind the leading troops, B Company captured Casa Busa, taking 13 prisoners. A Company also cleared up several pockets of resistance overrun during the advance. Supporting arms arrived forward at dawn. The battalion settled into its new position without being molested and spent two fairly quiet days before being relieved by the 25th on 22 December. Casualties in the foregoing action were nine killed, 44 wounded, and seven missing. Sixty-two prisoners had been taken.

Back in billets at [Forli](#) preparations were made for celebrating Christmas. Snow fell two days previously and it was bitterly cold, but as usual 24 Battalion's cooks rose splendidly to the occasion. A description of the festivities survives in the Mortar Platoon's war diary:

It was fairly well on in the morning before the boys got moving about, but we were up in time to have a few stiff noggins to put us in good spirits for Christmas dinner. Our mess room was in the top floor of a large factory a little way down the road. It was a long winding road up the stairs, and the room would have been hard to find had it not been for a bright idea given birth by Mick [Kilduff](#),<sup>19</sup> who, finding a huge roll of white crepe paper ... rolled a large white line up the stairs and through numerous rooms to the mess room.

The cooks surpassed themselves with the dinner, the first course being Toheroa soup, followed by pork, baked potatoes and other vegetables, and then came the plum duff.

The Colonel, 2 I/c and Adjutant paid us a visit. The 2 I/c, Major Andrews, blowing one of those trumpet affairs similar to those they use on Wog trains in [Cairo](#), tried to quieten the crowd so that he could make a speech, but it was rather a hopeless task for him. In the first place he had lost his voice for some reason or other, and in the second place the boys were in such high spirits that they couldn't be bothered listening to speeches....

The afternoon was spent in celebrating and rejoicing, and after a very good tea we carried on the good work. A number of the platoon were invited along to a party run by Tommies.... We toddled along to the Tommy Casa and had a rip roaring time. We had no crayfish, balloons and top hats to come home with but we did our best to

arrive home in the real festive spirit.

The battalion's casualties from 1 September to 25 December 1944 were:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	3	25
Died of wounds –		6
Wounded	4	146
Prisoners of war	1	7
Total	8	184

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<sup>1</sup> Lt L. W. Lane, m.i.d.; Katikati; born Hastings, 24 Feb 1922; civil servant.

<sup>2</sup> Lt T. M. Graham, m.i.d.; born Scotland, 23 Jun 1919; bank clerk; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Maj A. Stuart, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 27 Jul 1920; clerk; wounded 24 Dec 1944.

<sup>4</sup> Maj R. Pirrie, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Scotland, 10 Mar 1914; male nurse; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

<sup>5</sup> Consisting of 11 and 12 Platoons.

<sup>6</sup> Lt D. W. Hulton; Rotorua; born NZ 8 Sep 1918; shop assistant.

<sup>7</sup> Capt L. W. Blain; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 2 Jun 1919; medical student; RMO 24 Bn, Oct 1944-1945.

<sup>8</sup> The bridge, opening like a giant pair of scissors, is placed in position by a Valentine tank.

<sup>9</sup> B Coy war diary.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Pte J. M. Walker, MM; born Christchurch, 12 Dec 1912; labourer; p.w. 17 Dec 1944.

<sup>12</sup> Pte H. Short; born Auckland, 11 Sep 1923; farmer; p.w. 17 Dec 1944.

<sup>13</sup> Eye-witness account by 2 Lt J. P. Price, 14 Pl.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Lt S. W. Ball; born NZ 16 Sep 1915; motor-wrecker; killed in action 19 Dec 1944.

<sup>15</sup> L-Sgt B. Kennedy, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Brunner, 14 Mar 1921; civil servant; twice wounded.

<sup>16</sup> L-Sgt I. L. McKenzie; Waimate; born Timaru, 4 Jan 1918; sheepfarmer; wounded 31 Jan 1945.

<sup>17</sup> Lt-Col W. F. Titchener, MC and bar; born Dunedin, 14 Dec 1907; public accountant; CO 27 Bn, Japan, 1946; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Lt J. P. Price; Auckland; born Auckland, 8 Dec 1915; clerk; OC Fd Censor Unit 1945.

<sup>19</sup> Sgt M. Kilduff, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ 20 Nov 1918; carpenter.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 17 – WINTER ON THE SENIO



## CHAPTER 17

### *Winter on the Senio*

The ensuing period of winter warfare now became an affair of regulated spells of duty in the front line, followed by intervals of rest at [Forli](#) or [Faenza](#). Veterans of [France](#) and [Flanders](#) might have recalled days when such conditions were the invariable rule, but for soldiers of the present war they were novel and exceptional.

Christmas celebrations were scarcely over when 24 Battalion received warning orders to relieve [25 Battalion](#) in the same positions that it had recently handed over. B Company was caught by shellfire while waiting in a large house at the debussing point near [Faenza](#), but apart from this the relief went off without incident. Before daylight on 29 December the battalion was settled in with all four companies forward—A on the left between [La Palazza](#) and the [Senio](#), B on its right holding the line of a road running south-east, C in and around [San Pietro](#) in Laguna, and D on the battalion's right, south-east of the village, in touch on its flank with the London Irish Regiment of 56 Division.

A Company faced the enemy on two fronts—towards Casa [Galanouna](#), a strongpoint to the north-east, and also towards the [Senio River](#) on the battalion's left flank. On this side the Germans were so close that at night they could easily be heard talking or digging. Every night at eight o'clock came the sound of a horse-drawn cart rumbling down a road that led towards the river, stopping at each of the houses to deliver rations. This conveyance appears to have been invulnerable to a degree. 'It soon became a nightly vigil to wait for the first sound of the approach of the horse and then ring up for the mortars to lay down a concentration on the spot. It is not known if the beast was merely a phantom horse or that it bore a charmed life, but no matter how much trouble was brought down around the unfortunate animal's ears, he, or some other horse, was always back on the job the following night.'<sup>1</sup> On the same road, near [Benedetta](#), a [nebelwerfer](#) was seen firing and its position reported. Spitfires shot up the vicinity, and although it was not known whether the gun was definitely put out of action, it did not fire again from that same spot. Facing towards their other front, the men of A Company could see the enemy changing his pickets by daylight near Casa [Galanouna](#), but so many trees grew in the intervening space that small-arms fire was of no avail and the mortars had to be

called upon again.

Colonel Hutchens wasted no time in taking steps to discover exactly where the enemy lay in front of his other three companies. Snow fell on 31 December, and the ground was lightly covered when a patrol from B Company went forward 800 yards the same night to find Casa Nova unoccupied. No. 10 Platoon at once went out and took possession. Next morning Lance-Corporal [McDonald](#)<sup>2</sup>. and two men went further forward to investigate a wine factory building. After covering about 200 yards they were fired upon by snipers and sent to ground, McDonald himself being badly wounded in the head. A smoke screen called for by Captain Pirrie was laid down to allow them to retreat, but although the two men got safely away they could not bring McDonald in without a stretcher. Later a stretcher-party went out under protection of a [Red Cross](#) flag and brought the corporal in, but he died of wounds some days afterwards.

Moving north-east along the road leading from [San Pietro](#) in Laguna to discover whether it was safe for the passage of tanks, 15 Platoon of C Company advanced nearly 1000 yards without being fired upon or coming across any mines. On the right D Company had much the same experience, finding both Casa San Domenica and Casa Quattrina to be clear of the enemy. Reports sent back by these patrols convinced Hutchens that a large space of ground was his for the taking, and on the night of 30-31 December three companies moved forward at his orders. Before dawn D and C Companies had advanced 1000 yards north-east, with B Company guarding a flank drawn back to face the [Senio](#) and maintain touch with A. Two new roads were thus thrown open to the supporting tanks, which also moved up before daylight.

It now seemed probable that the enemy had moved his guns and armour back behind the [Senio](#), leaving no more than an infantry screen on the hither bank, and on this supposition 24 Battalion was directed to improve its position by taking ground towards the river—an operation which entailed a swing round of its front from north-east to north-west. On the left flank A Company (Major Howden) had naturally the shortest distance to go in gaining its objective at [Galanouna](#). B Company (Captain Pirrie) was to capture the wine factory at Pasolini, while C (Captain Turbott) took over its existing positions. D (Major Macdonald) had the longest journey, its task being the capture of [Palazzo Toli](#), after which posts were to

be established at Villa Gessi and Claretta, a quarter of a mile from the [Senio's](#) banks. Zero hour was at 12.30 a.m. on 1 January, and while assembled ready for the barrage to open 'the waiting men witnessed a really splendid sight.... The Germans were celebrating the birth of the New Year in the good old fashioned way, and along the whole front, as far as the eye could see, streams of tracer bullets, light anti-aircraft shells and coloured flares weaved across the midnight sky'. <sup>3</sup>

A Company attacked with one platoon only, No. 7, which advanced on [Galanouna](#) under fire, not only from its own objective but also from Pasolini on B Company's front. A tank came forward to assist, escorted by a section of 9 Platoon, and [Galanouna](#) was captured with the loss of six wounded. The Germans, nine of whom were taken prisoner, had apparently been caught in the act of throwing a New Year party, for a variety of food and drink was found set out on a table, in the centre of which stood a Christmas tree.

B Company was decidedly less fortunate. Advancing towards the wine factory in bright moonlight with 10 and 12 Platoons forward, it ran into heavy fire when still a long way from its objective. Four men were killed and three wounded. On asking for direction from Battalion Headquarters, Captain Pirrie was ordered to withdraw his company.

Nor was D Company more successful. As 17 Platoon approached a house in front of [Palazzo Toli](#), it ran into a semi-circle of fire directed from close range by an enemy obviously well prepared. Leaving three men killed, the survivors withdrew, carrying off six wounded. Meanwhile 18 Platoon had rushed [Palazzo Toli](#), but once in possession its men found themselves under fire from three sides. Two of them were wounded, and in response to a call for stretcher-bearers, Private Kirk, <sup>4</sup> a medical orderly, led a party of three towards the house. Kirk was intercepted and taken prisoner, but the others managed to get away. Though practically surrounded, 18 Platoon succeeded in holding off the enemy, but since our attack had failed elsewhere the platoon's predicament was precarious in the extreme, and steps were at once taken to relieve it. No. 16 Platoon and the troop of tanks supporting D Company moved close in and opened up with everything they possessed on the German positions around [Palazzo Toli](#), producing such a volume of fire that the enemy, whether he withdrew or merely kept quiet, did nothing to impede the

evacuation of 18 Platoon and its two wounded men, who were brought away on improvised stretchers.

No. 7 Platoon was withdrawn from [Galanouna](#) when it became evident that the attack had failed. Before dawn the battalion was back again in its former positions. D Company was relieved the same night by a company of [25 Battalion](#), after which it went back to a position in battalion reserve.

It was on this night that the Bn had its first experience of the enemy's new rocket gun and several shells fell in the area. There were many ears cocked at the unfamiliar sound when the gun first opened fire with a noise like the gargantuan grunt of the nebelwerfer, though pitched in a higher tone. The period spent in flight of the projectile consisted of an eerie silence, as the usual wail of the multiple mortar was missing, but the shell, on landing, created a terrific blast effect which [was] felt for a large radius around the point of impact. One man, who was about a hundred yards away, had a sensation similar to being struck violently in the back by a log and was blown to the ground, while several other shells of a similar type, which landed some fifty yards from C Company HQ, knocked the 48 radio set from the table several times, and an armchair down the stairs from the room above. <sup>5</sup>

On the night of 2 January 13 Platoon of C Company patrolled forward to [Palazzo Toli](#), from which D Company had recently been driven. A solitary German was taken prisoner, but otherwise the building was untenanted. The news was wirelessly back to Company Headquarters, and soon afterwards the other two platoons arrived. Two more stray Germans were captured in a dug out some way forward of the position. Twenty-four hours later 13 Platoon sent out another patrol to reconnoitre Pasolini, near the wine factory that had been B Company's objective. No enemy was to be found, and the remainder of 13 Platoon moved up to find that 11 Platoon of B Company was already in process of occupying the wine factory. This building, however, had been so greatly damaged by our bombing that both platoons spent the night in Pasolini. Next day, at dawn, [7 Armoured Brigade](#) passed through the battalion lines to clear the enemy from the [Senio's](#) eastern bank. Three hundred prisoners were captured and many pockets of resistance destroyed. Taking advantage of the enemy's discomfiture 14 Platoon occupied Gessi, and two sections of D Company, temporarily attached to C, went on to Claretta, where they found the ground thickly sown with mines. The whole of the battalion's original objective was

now captured and contact made with the [London Irish](#) at Claretta. Snow fell on the afternoon of 6 January, and next day [26 Battalion](#) came up to take over. The 24th went back to [Forli](#), having lost nine men killed, 20 wounded, and one prisoner. Thirty-two Germans had been captured.

Recent concentrations of enemy troops in this part of the line suggested the possibility of a counter-attack, and 24 Battalion moved back to [Faenza](#) after spending only three days in [Forli](#). Civilians were evacuated from a wide strip of land along the [Senio's](#) eastern bank, positions were reconnoitred north of [Faenza](#), and our troops were warned to think in terms of defence for the time being. Two small bodies of reinforcements had joined the battalion when it relieved the 26th on 17 January in very much the same positions that had been handed over ten days previously. The ensuing spell in the line, which lasted ten days, was more or less uneventful, the troops being employed in wiring, laying mines, and all the usual activities of positional warfare. Snow lay six inches deep and the men wore white smocks while moving about in forward areas. This was a fairly satisfactory form of camouflage, although care had to be taken not to stand against a dark background of trees or vines. At night the frozen snow crackled loudly underfoot, and it seemed to those whose business took them near the German lines that they must be making noise enough to wake the dead.

Back in [Faenza](#) once more, a persistent rumour took shape when men of the 5th Reinforcements, and those of the sixth who had seen service in [Fiji](#), were drafted out and sent back to [Forli](#) on the first stage of their journey to New Zealand. On the 3rd of February, the day of the leave party's departure, the battalion returned to the line to relieve the 25th in a sector north of that previously occupied, opposite [Felisio](#), a village held by the enemy on the [Senio's](#) western bank.

A Company, under Captain A. G. J. Robertson now that Major Howden was second-in-command, had its headquarters at Casa Bolesia on the battalion's right flank, with two platoons forward and one in support. In the centre B Company straddled a road leading to the [Senio's](#) banks, while C Company, with headquarters at Casa Benina, looked straight across the river towards [Felisio](#). D Company was in reserve in rear of C.

Most of the houses in this area had been systematically destroyed or badly

damaged by enemy shellfire, and living conditions were trying, more especially so as rain accompanied by milder temperatures thawed out the snow, bringing mud and slush in its place. The enemy had excellent observation over all our positions from the church tower of [Felisio](#), and moving about during hours of daylight was not to be lightly undertaken. In this sector too the German troops were confident to the point of carelessness, revelling noisily by night and exposing themselves recklessly by day until taught that New Zealanders were not opponents to be trifled with. Sound carried far in the still winter nights and shooting up the horse-drawn ration cart again became a nightly practice. Once, after a specially vigorous strafing, the horse could be heard galloping furiously away into the distance.

'An unusual incident', writes Captain Robertson, 'which brought a touch of colour into the normal front line existence, was the arrival one day of an English girl in the forward areas. She parked her truck behind the house occupied by 9 Platoon and then trotted away to the Tommy sector <sup>6</sup> to deliver cakes from the [YMCA](#). On her return journey she called in to 9 Platoon and issued cakes to several members there. We thought she was rather plucky, as the road had been under fire during most of the time we were there.'

On a sunken road running parallel with and a few hundred yards from the river, 10 Platoon maintained an outpost which was visited nightly by a patrol. One of these patrols had a curious experience, described as follows in 24 Battalion's narrative of the period:

It wasn't easy going at all through the ooze which clung to the boots, and Pte Blain was silently wishing himself somewhere else at the moment instead of slithering about there in dark with a container of tea strapped on his back. He brought up the rear of the little party and his thoughts were many miles away when he heard a sound which made the hair rise at the back of his neck. From somewhere in the darkness behind him came the sound of footsteps swishing through the mud—stealthy footsteps, whose owner was apparently keeping just out of range of vision.

He stopped and listened. The footsteps ceased also. Still not certain of his hearing he moved on again to catch up with his comrades, and those weird and ghostly footsteps resumed their patient following.

Pte Blain caressed his tommy gun and the feeling of it gave him confidence. He caught up with the next man and whispered, 'Hoi, there's someone following us.' They both stopped and listened. Not a sound. They stopped three times to listen and each time the prowler followed suit, until later, as the silent party continued to paddle their way along the track, they were amazed to hear Pte Blain chuckling to himself. 'That bloke following us', he whispered, 'is the tea swishing around in the container on my back, but it sounded like fifty Jerries after us.'

Since spring would surely herald our passage of the [Senio](#) and many another stream beside, river crossing became more than ever an essential part of training, and soon after 24 Battalion had been relieved in the line on 17 February an exercise was held on the [Lamone](#). This river was the nearest obtainable replica of the [Senio](#), with high flood protection earthworks or stopbanks on either side. After C and D Companies had carried out a preliminary practice south-east of [Faenza](#), 'the whole battalion made the crossing, and it was really a splendid performance which proved to be the forerunner of future events destined to play a large part in bringing about the downfall of the German armies in [Italy](#). In the morning everything seemed to go all awry. Boats were swinging crosswise in the river, men were falling into the water, and altogether there was a fine mess, though it was secretly thought that there was a very large dose of skylarking going on, but nobody knows for sure. In the afternoon, however, the story was vastly different. The troops were in position under shelter of the stop-bank. Assault boats and kapok bridging were all in readiness and the men waited for the signal to move. It was just before the signal was given that [General Freyberg](#) arrived to witness the performance. He stood on the stop-bank with Brigadier Parkinson and Lieut-Col Hutchens and waited for the flare which was the signal for the assault to begin.

'As soon as the flare went up, the first wave dragged the boats up the high bank and down into the water, paddling furiously across, while covered by men lining the bank behind them. Once on the far side, they advanced to the top of the bank while the second wave came over, running out the light bridging as they came. The third and final wave came over in shorter time, as they had everything to aid them across. It was a very smart piece of work, and the whole battalion was over in seven and a half minutes. One company claimed that all their men were over in six minutes.'<sup>7</sup>



The part of the line to which 24 Battalion returned on 24 February was well known to most of its men, for had they not themselves captured it all piecemeal during the first few days of January? B Company (Captain Turbott) lay astride the road leading towards the [Senio](#) from [San Pietro in Laguna](#). The platoons of D Company (Major Macdonald) were grouped round Pasolini and the wine factory. A (Captain Robertson) held Claretta and Gessi, while C was in reserve at Borgo Liverani. This company was now under command of Captain Boord, whose long and successful career as Adjutant had come to an end when he left the battalion after operations on the [Sangro](#) to join the staff of a school of instruction in Egypt before returning to New Zealand on furlough. Most of the personnel of the Carrier Platoon, now partly disbanded, had been formed into a medium machine-gun platoon, which took its place in the firing line for the first time on this occasion.

The ensuing ten days spent in the line were comparatively uneventful and casualties were few. A series of countless small incidents, vital to those immediately concerned but only of importance in the aggregate, contribute to make up the history of positional warfare; of these no more than a few may be mentioned.

Close to the river bank on the battalion's left flank stood a house known as the 'Rubble', and occupied by the enemy, which proved so great a source of annoyance that after a few days Captain Turbott decided to take drastic measures. Having arranged for a tank to come forward, he took the driver's spare seat and directed its advance. The 'Rubble' was protected by a wall, still more or less intact, from the shelter of which the enemy conducted his harassing operations. The tank moved to within a hundred yards of this wall and then thoroughly demolished it with 31 armour-piercing shells. That night the sound of bricks being moved could be heard plainly. Possibly the enemy was removing dead or wounded, but no further trouble came from the house in question.

On 5 March, when the battalion was waiting to be relieved by Poles of [5 Kresowa Division](#), an enemy soldier came towards 10 Platoon waving a white flag. He announced himself as a Pole and said that four of his comrades also wanted to surrender but feared to come over by daylight. Representatives of the incoming Polish Battalion, who had come on in advance to take over, told the man to shout to his friends, telling them they might approach our lines in safety. One more Pole ran

the gauntlet and gave himself up, to be received warmly by his fellow countrymen.

The Polish Battalion came up that night and took over. The 24th embussed behind the line and went back for the night to [Forli](#).

A spell of three or four weeks out of the line lay ahead, and from [Forli](#) the battalion passed through the old coastal battle- fields around [Rimini](#) to [San Severino](#) in the Potenza valley—a small town eight or nine miles from [Castelraimondo](#), where billets were good and the civil population hospitable.

Training, which began after a few days' rest, was largely directed to river crossing and co-operation with armour. On 16 March 6 Brigade assembled at [Castelraimondo](#) for a ceremonial parade. Before the march past [General Freyberg](#) presented decorations and awards, ten of them falling to 24 Battalion. The majority of these had been earned at [San Michele](#). Later in the month came the 'organised raid' on [21 Battalion](#), described as follows in B Company's war diary:

Trucks were waiting at the school at 8.30, and about that time we set off on the hour and a half journey to 21 playing fields. This journey was uneventful; most of us had seen the countryside previously but it was new to others. The change in temperature as we approached the valley was noticed by all. Our arrival at the ground coincided with the arrival of some of the 21 Coys and it became quite a problem trying to coax players to leave the presence of old cobbles of [Papakura](#), [Maadi](#), or [Bari](#) days in order to dress for battle.

This eventually accomplished, our Rugby team looked very neat in its new jerseys and white shorts. Unfortunately the boots were not so new, and those that were, advertised 'Wog Trash'. Whether having our photo taken had unnerved us or not, the fact is that it took us some time to settle down, and for the first few minutes we had great difficulty keeping 21 off our goal line. But as the game progressed we seemed to gain momentum, and towards the end of the first half Lewis broke away to score near the posts and Jack Apps converted. The game seemed to lack coherence for the rest of the half, but the second half saw our backs going into action in good style. Whereas in the first half, 21 forwards had troubled our half by breaking quickly, our forwards now packed better and protected the half, thus enabling him to send away clear passes which, taken on the run, set our backs

going. Play now became open and varied, and Garea, Williams and Lewis scored. The game finished with the score in our favour by 14 points to 4—the 4 points being a timely field goal by 21. <sup>8</sup>

After the game 21 players were invited to imbibe a few vinos from the 24 Bn store, and some thrifty persons even produced one or two bottles of real beer.

While the Rugby game was still being fought out a game of hockey was also in progress. This was a very evenly matched game and the score of nil all showed it.

The game between 24 and 21 Bns was rather scrappy but we were unanimous in our opinion that this was no fault of the representatives from B Company....

It was noticed at this time that camaraderie was overcoming temperance, and that some were imbibing to an extent where they were taking their responsibilities as barrackers for 24 Bn much too light heartedly.... Fortunately what the sidelines lacked in spontaneous enthusiasm was made up by the spirited contest between the officers of 21 and 24 Bns. This game lacked nothing in the way of enthusiasm, even if at times it was misdirected. Even the spectators began to show signs of real spirit. The game ended with the score at 6–5 in favour of 21.

The day was now wearing on and as 1600 hrs approached, we began wishing our old cobbles the usual 'Look after yourself' or 'Keep your head down', and separated to our various trucks. At least some obeyed orders to this extent, but it was noticeable that most trucks did not have as many occupants as when they arrived. [The only possible conclusion] was that those missing were being entertained a little longer by 21.... But we cannot explain how such persons eventually got back to [San Severino](#), although the pallid faces and tired eyes of the morning after testified to the state in which they arrived.

Most of those who had returned spent a very enjoyable evening at the Opera House where the [Loreto](#) orchestral show entertained them.

Three days later, 24 Battalion left [San Severino](#) at 6 p.m. and moved back to [Forli](#) by motor transport. On the night of 1 April it was once more on the [Senio](#), having relieved the 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers of 78 Division.

The battalion's casualties from 28 December 1944 to 10 March 1945 were:

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	–	9
Died of wounds	–	5
Wounded	3	38
Prisoner of war	–	1
Total	3	53

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<sup>1</sup> 24 Bn Narrative of Events from 28 Dec 1944 to 2 May 1945.

<sup>2</sup> [L-Cpl H. W. McDonald](#); born NZ 10 Apr 1922; assistant storeman; wounded 26 Jul 1944; died of wounds 2 Jan 1945

<sup>3</sup> 24 Bn narrative.

<sup>4</sup> Pte G.S. Kirk; [Mosgiel](#); born Dunedin, 9 Jan 1920; farm labourer; wounded 26 Mar 1943; p.w. 1 Jan 1945; repatriated Apr 1945.

<sup>5</sup> 24 Bn narrative.

<sup>6</sup> For the first week 44 British Reconnaissance Group was on A Coy's right. This unit was then relieved by the London Scottish.

<sup>7</sup> 24 Bn narrative.

<sup>8</sup> Each company of one battalion played the corresponding company of the other.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 18 – FROM THE SENIO TO TRIESTE

## CHAPTER 18

### *From the Senio to Trieste*

Between the Adriatic and the Apennines the Eighth Army lay along the Senio's southern bank, prepared to strike north-westwards across the wide alluvial plain that surrounds Ferrara. On its left the Fifth Army made ready to debouch from the mountains upon Bologna and sweep north towards the Alps through Italy's main industrial area. On the extreme right 5 Corps, including 2 New Zealand Division, occupied a sector from the Adriatic coast to a point five miles south of Lugo. Then came 2 Polish, 10 and 13 Corps, extending from right to left up to the boundary between the Eighth and Fifth armies south-west of Imola. The 2nd New Zealand Division had moved into the left sector of 5 Corps' front, with 78 Division on its right and 3 Carpathian Division of the Polish Corps on its left. Five German divisions opposed the Eighth Army. Of these the 98th faced the New Zealanders. Such, in brief, were the Allied and enemy dispositions when 24 Battalion returned from San Severino to enact the last phase of a story that had begun five eventful years ago at Narrow Neck.

The sector taken over by 6 Brigade at the beginning of April lay some three miles north-east of that previously held at Felisio. By the village of San Severo, where the Senio turned directly seaward before bending north at Cotignola, 24 Battalion joined up with the Poles on its left and 25 Battalion on its right. A and B Companies, under Majors Rawley and Turbott, were forward on the right and left respectively, with C and D in support, the former still commanded by Major Boord, while D Company had lately been taken over by Major Conder.<sup>1</sup> On this front the enemy still occupied a strip of the near bank about 300 yards long, thus retaining a toehold over part of what was to be the jumping-off ground for our coming offensive. It was essential that this strip should be captured without delay, and 24 Battalion's forward troops prepared for the attempt. The Senio ran deep and narrow between artificial banks or earthworks raised to protect the surrounding country against floods. The outer wall of these stopbanks sloped steeply upwards to a narrow, flat surface on their summit, between which and the actual river bank a flat ledge extended inwards. The ledge was protected and hidden by the outer wall of earth, and under this wall the enemy had burrowed for safety, building dugouts and machine-gun emplacements. Even if driven off the near bank, he would still be able



to make it barely tenable for attacking troops by concentrating fire upon them at close range from the further bank. Altogether the [Senio](#) and its protective earthworks constituted a most formidable barrier.

On the night of 2 April A Company sent out a patrol to cross the river and discover to what extent its approaches were mined and wired. The patrol crossed over without being opposed. The water was 4 ft 6 ins deep near the banks and six feet deep in midstream. Neither wire nor mines were encountered.

Preparatory measures having been taken, A and B Companies attacked and captured the enemy-occupied stopbank on the night of 3 April. The first part of this operation was comparatively simple, but the ground gained was far from easy to hold. It happened that an enemy raiding party some fifty strong had emerged to attack us just as A and B Companies' assault went in, and although our men lined the near slopes of the stop-bank, the enemy still remained on the other side at a distance of only a few yards. A duel at close quarters ensued, in which each of our companies tossed more than a thousand grenades over the bank within a space of twenty-four hours. When it became apparent that many of these were rolling down the bank to explode harmlessly in the river, the New Zealanders devised an ingenious expedient. Dropping two or three grenades into a bag, having previously removed the pins, they hurled the whole contraption over in among the enemy. Thus prevented from rolling too far, the grenades exploded opposite the mouths of the German dugouts.

On A Company's front the banks formed an angle with its apex pointing south, the lie of the land enabling Major Rawley to plant machine guns on either flank so as to enfilade the front with intersecting fire. As the Poles had not occupied the stopbank, B Company's flank was not only exposed but confined in width, so that it was not possible to bring much fire power to bear on an attack coming in from the west. And counter-attacks did come in continually, some against the left arm of the angle opposite A Company's front, but most of them against B Company's exposed flank, where the Germans were dug in on our side of the stopbank. Our men could hear the enemy burrowing about beneath their feet, and once or twice Germans emerged from the ground in their midst. But all this under-mining of the stopbank had seriously weakened it, and when one of our tanks came close up to fire in support its shells tore right through the upper portion of the earthwork, demolishing enemy

dugouts and killing the occupants. Eventually the enemy was literally blasted from his position, but, as may be imagined, this was not accomplished without loss or damage. Besides suffering a number of casualties, our forward troops were obliged to remain so constantly on the alert that sleep was practically impossible. The strain of living cheek by jowl with the enemy was beginning to tell upon the men of A and B Companies when C and D took over the line on 6 April, to continue fighting at close quarters right up to the moment of withdrawal before the general barrage. Each forward company still used on an average 1000 grenades every 24 hours.

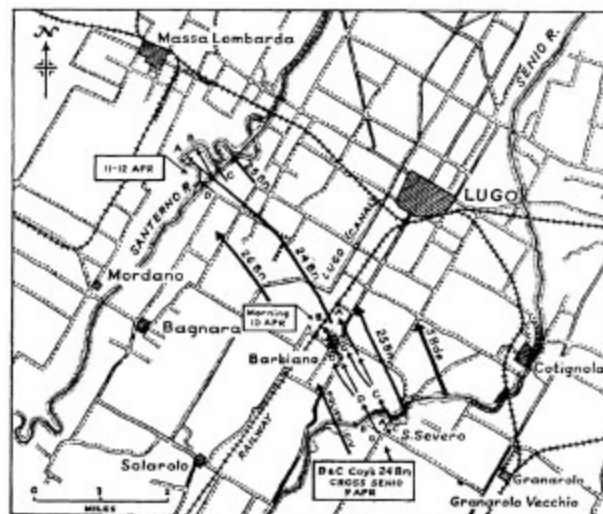
As D-day drew near the knowledge that force had been concentrated on so massive a scale, combined with good news coming from other fronts, bred the same confidence in our troops as had been felt before [Alamein](#) and [El Hamma](#). 'We'll go through them like a knife through butter', said an officer who had been present at both those actions, when asked his opinion. His words expressed a general conviction, but this time the expectation of a mere local victory had given place to a feeling of certainty that the German armies in [Italy](#) would be finally destroyed.

While [8 Indian Division](#) and [2 New Zealand Division](#) prepared to attack north and south of [Lugo](#), thereby pinching out the [Cotignola](#) salient, some anxiety was felt by the higher command as to whether the enemy might not seek to delay the coming blow by withdrawing to the [Santerno](#); but the infantry, more concerned with preliminary details than with strategical problems, were too fully occupied to think of anything but the work in hand. The 5th and 6th Brigades, right and left respectively, were to carry out the initial assault—6 Brigade attacking with 24 Battalion left, [25 Battalion](#) right, and [26 Battalion](#) in reserve. The 9th Brigade, a new formation lately added to the divisional strength, was to cross the [Senio](#) in rear of the assaulting wave, capture [Cotignola](#), and protect 5 Brigade's open right flank. After an artillery and aerial bombardment lasting four hours, the further stopbanks were to be deluged by flame-throwers immediately before the infantry assault went in. The near banks, however, being too steep for flame-throwing tanks or Wasps<sup>2</sup> to mount, ramps had to be made and adjusted so that the muzzles of the flame-throwers should protrude exactly over the summit. The task of constructing these ramps fell to C and D Companies, holding the right and left sectors of 24 Battalion's front line, preparatory to forming the first attacking wave. Naturally there could be no measuring and testing with the enemy so close, and the work had to be carried out

by judgment and estimate. Tracks were cut and carefully flagged out through rows of vines, which grew especially thick on the right front. Drivers of flame-throwing tanks were each taken personally and shown the exact route to be followed, to avoid all danger of their getting lost on D-day. Tracks were also cut for the boat and bridge parties. Both boats and kapok bridges were dug in and covered over a quarter of a mile behind the stopbank.

April the 9th dawned gloriously fine, and early in the afternoon, under a clear sky, American heavy bombers plastered the enemy rear till a huge pall of dust and smoke towered high above the line of the **Santerno**. Our troops began to thin out from the front line and by 3 p.m. were sheltering in trenches 500 yards back. Twenty minutes later a vast concentration of guns came into action, and both far and near stopbanks erupted into a state of violent, continuous upheaval. After half an hour the guns ceased. For ten minutes fighter-bombers circled above the river, bombing and machine-gunning the enemy defence lines and firing rockets at known strongpoints. Then the artillery started again.

This process of alternate blasting by shell and bomb continued throughout the afternoon. At 7 p.m. the medium guns lengthened their range, a sign for the infantry to climb from their slit trenches and go forward to dig out boats and kapok bridges from the places where they were buried. The men were ready waiting 200 yards from the bank, when sudden silence fell at twenty minutes past seven. Flame-throwing tanks and carriers trundled forward into position, while fighter-bombers



SENIO AND SANTERNO CROSSINGS, 9-12 APRIL 1945

### senio and santerno crossings, 9-12 april 1945

did their final run—this time a dummy run—along the enemy front line. Then the far bank was being squirted with flame that set it ablaze, and the assaulting troops were launching their boats, covered by the protecting fire of two platoons from A and B Companies.

Each assaulting company had two fighting platoons forward and one working platoon in support to launch the kapok bridges. Except for one platoon of C Company which found a footbridge intact, the forward troops crossed over in boats without a check, a few casualties being caused by mines. Before long a number of half-stupefied prisoners with no fight left in them were being gathered in from dugouts on the reverse slopes of the far bank. While mopping up still went on, the kapok bridges were launched and fixed in position. Then, with the far bank cleared, C and D Companies moved a little way forward and waited for A and B to pass through them. At 7.47 p.m. a barrage opened up along a line some 400 yards north of the river, where it played for 30 minutes in order that the second assaulting wave might form up behind it. A and B Companies had filed up from behind [San Severo](#) to where the kapok bridges had been laid. Smoke was fired to cover their somewhat hazardous operation of forming up in the open. Before the barrage lifted they had crossed the river, passed through the advanced companies, and were ready to advance through [Barbiano](#) towards the [Lugo Canal](#).

Meanwhile [25 Battalion](#) had crossed over on the right, and 5 Brigade had also made its passage although [21 Battalion](#), on its right flank, was meeting some opposition. Four battalions of [8 Indian Division](#) were across north of [Lugo](#), but the Poles were having difficulty on the left, and one of their assaulting battalions was still on the [Senio's](#) eastern bank.

When the barrage lifted at five past eight, [24 Battalion's](#) advance proceeded. Enemy resistance had broken down for the time being, and the outstanding difficulty was that of keeping direction. The whole country was laid out in rectangular fields, bounded by roads, hedges, and ditches and planted with rows of vines. The axis of advance led diagonally across the line of all these natural obstacles; and matters were not improved by smoke from the barrage, which hung low like a ground mist, adding to the darkness of night and reducing visibility to a few feet. Marking shots fired by Bofors guns were of some assistance, but for the most part direction could

be maintained only by compass bearing and contact between platoons and sections by continual shouting. Before long most of the men were wet to the skin from having fallen into muddy ditches. Lastly, a few Tiger tanks were still roving about in the darkness, seeking some way of escape.

During the advance Conder's men had relieved B Company of its prisoners, besides collecting a few on their own account. These were placed in charge of Sergeant-Major [Kingsford](#),<sup>3</sup> who might have found them difficult to control in the darkness had they been determined to escape, but the bombardment had left them well content to remain in custody.

Groping on towards the pause line south-east of [Barbiano](#), A and B Companies performed the astonishing feat of changing places without any contact being made between the troops of either unit. Reforming on their correct lines just before midnight, they went on past the village to reach their objectives well before dawn. Patrols sent forward to the [Lugo Canal](#) came back to report that it was undefended and that its bridges had not been demolished. So far no contact had been established with [25 Battalion](#) on the right. New Zealand engineers were working manfully to bridge the [Senio](#). The Poles were still held up, and two companies of [26 Battalion](#) moved forward on to 6 Brigade's flank to seal the widening gap between the New Zealand and Polish divisions.

Many strange things happened on that pitch-black night. A soldier of B Company, trudging forward in the darkness, suddenly realised that the man walking beside him was wearing a German helmet. Unfortunately he was carrying 10 Platoon's Piat gun—scarcely the right kind of weapon for dealing with a situation of this kind. A warning shout brought other men to the spot, but the German dropped into a ditch and made his escape. Another incident that took place soon after Major Turbott's men had reached their objective with their left flank on the [Lugo Canal](#) is described as under in the company's war diary:

Two and Three Sections were still searching their casa when movement was heard down the road to the right leading from the divisional front. Positioning themselves along the side of the road members of Three Section opened fire, at almost point-blank range, upon a horse-drawn vehicle which loomed out of the night, moving as slowly and silently as was possible. As the vehicle did not stop it was

necessary to chase down the road after it, but it had not gone far as it was found that two of the four horses drawing a 6 [inch] calibre field gun and carriage were dead and the remaining two very close to being so.

Having shot the remaining horses in order to prevent their making a noise, and also providing an effective road block, Two and Three Sections were not to be undisturbed very long. Once again movement was reported coming down the road, but this time the horses were travelling much faster and not so quietly as previously. The reception committee, however, were all ready and waiting as the horses neared the casa.... The silence was broken as the vehicle's shape could be made out distinctly. This time fire was maintained for some time so that anybody trying to escape over the far side of the road stood a good chance of being killed. A call from Jack Riddell <sup>4</sup> was answered, and seven frightened Teds <sup>5</sup> stepped out from the position they had taken up on the far side of the road. Ushering these prisoners along the road in front of the casa, another Ted was collected as he stood opposite the rear window from which a Bren and Tommy covered him. He had been riding the leading horse, and had been dismounted when the team had telescoped into the first field gun and carriage. All the horses were dead, and again the prize was one field gun.

Twice at intervals later in the morning parties of Germans returned to demolish a small bridge on the road in front of 10 Platoon, but on each occasion they were driven off before their intention could be carried out.

When the leading troops passed through its eastern outskirts, [Barbiano](#) had appeared like a place of the dead, but as D Company came through to mop up the village three Tiger tanks emerged from among its ruins. The Piat gunners waited on either side of the road and fired into the rear of each tank as it passed. The last one showed signs of distress and was later found broken down about half a mile away. The village was a maze of barbed wire, but it was cleared with little delay and a number of prisoners taken. While the excitement was at its height, Major Conder found that in addition to all other troubles he had a confinement on his hands. Fortunately [Andy Whitson](#), <sup>6</sup> C Company's medical orderly, was also a medical student. In response to a frantic call for assistance, Major Boord despatched Andy to attend the case. He returned an hour later to announce 'a seven-pound boy, both doing well', adding that few men could claim to have helped life into the world and



out of it on the same night.

Struggling through vines and across ditches in rear of A Company, Boord's men emerged on to the [Barbiano](#) road, along which a Tiger tank with lights on moved slowly towards them through the dense fog and darkness. Corporal [Pountney](#)<sup>7</sup> at once got his men into a ditch. Since it was impossible to see more than a few feet, the Piat gun was of little use, but as the tank passed by Pountney noticed four Germans armed with rifles riding on the back. Springing up, he threatened them with his tommy gun, upon which they dismounted and were made prisoner, while the tank went on its way.<sup>8</sup> As the company moved on to its objective east of [Barbiano](#), three more Tiger tanks passed the crossroads and disappeared towards [Lugo](#).

By dawn the leading troops were in position 500 yards north-west of [Barbiano](#), with C and D Companies in rear on either side of the village. Contact had been made with [25 Battalion](#), and tanks of [20 Armoured Regiment](#) had come forward. The Poles were making slow progress, but [26 Battalion](#) was deployed facing outwards on 6 Brigade's flank, with its forward companies south-west of [Barbiano](#). Away to the right on 5 Brigade's front [21 Battalion](#) was meeting tough opposition, but the Maoris on [25 Battalion](#)'s flank had made good progress. White flags were appearing in [Cotignola](#) as troops of 9 Brigade and 78 Division converged on either side of it. Two-thirds of the German 98th Division had been destroyed; nor was there any other enemy formation available for its relief. It remained to be seen whether the battered remnants would effectively dispute our crossing of the [Santerno](#).

At 9 a.m. on 10 April orders came through for a further move that same afternoon. Shifting its line of advance slightly to the west, [24 Battalion](#) pivoted on B Company as it swung left to form up on the [Lugo Canal](#). Proof of the enemy's complete disorganisation was given during the morning when two Germans on bicycles rode into B Company lines. On being made prisoner they explained that they had been to the dentist and thought they were returning to their unit. With C and D Companies right and left forward, the advance began at 1.30 p.m. Tanks of [20 Armoured Regiment](#) followed, though checked continually by the numerous waterways, while the infantry did everything in their power to find crossings as an alternative to going forward unsupported. An hour later [24 Battalion](#)'s leading troops had gained 2000 yards to reach the [Scolo Tratturo](#)—one of the many canals by which



this country was traversed from north-east to south-west. No. 14 Platoon of C Company had bumped into a pocket of resistance, killed three Germans, and taken 16 prisoners. Corporal Hosking,<sup>9</sup> of D Company, had gone forward with three men and seized a small bridge beyond the [Scolo Tratturo](#). The bridge was defended by four Germans, two of whom were killed and two made prisoner. Hosking was awarded the MM for this and other exploits performed at the [Senio](#) and [Santerno](#) crossings. Apart from the sporadic resistance of small isolated parties, no organised attempt by any sizeable body of troops had been made to dispute 24 Battalion's progress.

At this point there was a pause, after which A and B Companies passed through C and D on the second bound, arriving at half past one on the line of a lateral road some 1500 yards south-east of the [Santerno](#). There they remained for the night, while C and D Companies passed through them at dusk to camp within half a mile of the river.

The Santerno's winding course had been straightened by a canal, and opposite the point at which 24 Battalion now faced it a great loop bulged out nearly 1000 yards north-west, where the river had formerly run. Though still carrying water, it was known as the Santerno Morto.

Colonel Hutchens called a conference on the night of 11 April, directing C and D Companies to attempt the canal crossing at dawn. Moving quietly forward with tanks in support, the attacking force reached the river bank unhindered except for sporadic mortar fire. Within less than an hour C Company had all three platoons across, with the loss of eight wounded. Corporal [Smith](#)<sup>10</sup> earned the MM for the dash and courage with which he led his section, and Private [Gwilliam](#),<sup>11</sup> a medical orderly, won the same award for carrying back wounded under fire. D Company was on its objective soon after C. One of its leading platoons was held up on the far bank by fire from a concealed dugout, but Private [Freeman](#)<sup>12</sup> went forward alone and captured the position with eight prisoners. Though wounded in the shoulder, he escorted them back across the river and handed them over personally before consenting to go down the line. He also was awarded the MM.

The 25th Battalion now crossed on C Company's right, showing a tendency to shoot up anything on sight that caused Boord's men a few anxious moments. Fifth

Brigade went over early in the afternoon behind an artillery barrage. As strong as the [Senio](#), the [Santerno](#) line had been breached with a mere skirmish, but ahead lay the loop of the Santerno Morto, and without its capture the bridgehead could not be effectively established. Thinking to seize it without delay, Hutchens sent three companies forward—D to occupy the western side of the loop, B to move into the end of the bulge, and C to advance along its eastern limits. Our tanks, however, were not yet across the canal, and as it happened the bulge was strongly held. D Company got to its objective soon after dark, but C ran into strong opposition and had to retreat with one man killed and five wounded. Having crossed the canal as this setback took place, B Company made no attempt to go any further for the time being.

Throughout the night engineers worked hard to bridge the [Santerno](#). Before dawn two troops of tanks had crossed over on 5 Brigade's front and swung left to make contact with 24 Battalion. At 7.30 a.m. 10 and 11 Platoons of B Company advanced towards the end of the bulge, with tanks in support, to gain their objective without much difficulty. But once there a galling fire came from their left rear. A Company had not yet come up and in consequence this flank was exposed. For a time it seemed that a counter-attack was coming, and the position of the two platoons was somewhat precarious till A Company arrived forward and cleared the left side of the bulge.

With this operation completed, C Company was sent back to relieve the right company of [26 Battalion](#), which guarded the wide gap between 6 Brigade and the Poles. But by the time C Company arrived at its destination after a tiring, circuitous march, the Poles had advanced, the gap had narrowed, and Boord was ordered back to his former position.

The whole [Eighth Army](#) was in motion. With 56 Division pressing forward along the shores of Lake Comacchio and 78 Division storming the [Argenta Gap](#), 5 New Zealand Brigade had advanced along the railway line towards [Massa Lombarda](#), while the Poles were up to the [Santerno](#). The bulge being firmly in our hands, [26 Battalion](#) took the lead for 6 Brigade and went on to link up with the Maoris, who threatened the approaches to [Massa Lombarda](#).

The 24th Battalion was now ordered to move forward by bounds, the

companies, two abreast, passing through one another as each successive objective was reached. On the afternoon of 12 April A and B Companies, left and right, advanced 1200 yards beyond the Santerno Morto, with D following. Rawley's men met with successive checks at two large cement buildings several hundred yards apart. It appeared at first that each of them was held in strength, but actually they were defended by no more than four or five German officers armed with spandaus who fought desperately to the end. At this stage **Massa Lombarda** lay on the battalion's north-eastern flank. Starting at midnight, Boord's tired men had had some difficulty in catching up, being hindered on their way by the traffic of 9 Brigade, which was assembling to carry out the pursuit. It was believed that **Massa Lombarda** and its environs had been evacuated. An attack was to take place at 2 a.m., with C Company moving through B on **26 Battalion's** left; the decision whether or not a barrage should be used was left to Major Boord. He decided in favour and the barrage was fired, but the intelligence proved correct and no enemy was encountered. Tanks were up with the infantry, and Boord asked Hutchens for leave to push on beyond the Molini Canal. Permission being granted, C Company advanced 1000 yards through country thick with orchards, vines, hedges and ditches, to what was known as the Retriever line, arriving there just before dawn. At 7.30 a.m. on 13 April, 9 Brigade steamed through the position with its men mounted on Kangaroo tanks.



SIXTH BRIGADE'S ADVANCE FROM THE SENIO, 9-29 APRIL 1945

**sixth brigade's advance from the senio, 9-29 april 1945**

Meanwhile Rawley's and Turbott's men had reached the Molini Canal soon after

3 a.m., a quarter of an hour later than C Company, claiming to have fallen into more ditches than at any other stage of the advance. While waiting on that line a patrol under Corporal Riddell of B Company surprised and captured a German wireless operator at work. <sup>13</sup>

Making enquiries on the way from Italian residents, Ted's hide-out was pointed out and we entered a casa on the left of the road to find a blond headed youth of about twenty-one. For company he had two powerful radio sets.... Realising that the game was up, Ted came quietly, but [being] conscious of the nature of his activities he was very concerned lest we should shoot him. As he was marched up the road the enemy artillery began to do the area over, and he confessed to having summoned it. This did not give us reason to have feelings of goodwill towards him, but we were pleased with his capture which included Div. codes and other valuable information. <sup>14</sup>

The 26th Battalion, which had forged ahead to reach the [Scolo Zaniolo](#), now side-stepped right to let 9 Brigade pass through, and 24 Battalion moved round on to 6 Brigade's right flank. At 10 a.m. B and D Companies rode forward on tanks, the latter halting in rear of the 26th, which had advanced to Ghina Vecchia, half-way between [Massa Lombarda](#) and the [Sillaro River](#). Major Turbott, however, overshot the mark and had to retreat with some haste. He writes:

I was riding on the back of the leading tank of B Company, and, acting on the faulty intelligence reports I had been given, I gave the tank commander instructions to move to a certain position which turned out to be forward of the 26th Battalion's line. We careered happily down the road past the flabbergasted 26th to be halted suddenly by enemy tank fire. AP shells soon caused a quick dismount and hasty scatter for cover. We came back on foot and I contacted [Col. Fairbrother](#) <sup>15</sup> and arranged to work with him, which we did until later in the day. <sup>16</sup>

A and C Companies rested for a short time in a factory building north-west of [Massa Lombarda](#) and moved forward again on foot in the afternoon. The defeat had not yet developed into a pursuit. The German 98th Infantry Division had practically ceased to exist as such, but a fresh division, the 278th, stood firm on the Sillaro, a river with floodbanks like those of the [Senio](#), though less high and difficult.

Ninth Brigade, on the left, and 6 Brigade, on the right, squared up to attack the river line, with A Company of 24 Battalion on the 26th's right and C Company guarding A Company's flank. Major Rawley had been obliged to go sick at [Massa Lombarda](#), and Captain [Forster](#)<sup>17</sup> had taken his place when A Company moved off from its start line behind a barrage at 2 a.m. on 14 April. 'About 200 yards after the line was passed', writes Forster, 'we had reported one fatal casualty, apparently caused by one gun firing short. As this gun continued to drop short throughout the advance 8 Pl. was moved to the left and followed 7 Pl. along the Coy's left boundary. No enemy were sighted during the advance—the Coy being right up on the barrage throughout. During the barrage pause on the stopbanks the troops had a breather, crossed A and B banks without meeting any resistance and occupied the far bank after very slight resistance had been overcome. 7 Pl. and 9 Pl. began to dig in when the coy from 25 came up and moved over the stopbank. Jerries, apparently still taking cover from the barrage when 7 and 9 crossed the river, opened fire. There was a short skirmish along the bank, with 8 Pl. mixed up in it, for ten minutes or so, about half a dozen casualties in 25 and a dozen prisoners rounded up at our HQ. These last were sent back to 25 Bn. carrying the wounded.

'A check of the Coy area showed that we were right on a Jerry tank crossing which our planes had tried to bomb. The approaches were still in good order, although bombs had fallen very close. 7 Pl. reported an enemy tank moving in front; a call for an arty stonk was made, after which the tank sheered off without attempting anything tough.

'We could hear 9 Brigade having bother out to the left, while a spandau out beyond C Coy made a nuisance of itself on the right. One or two snipers kept our heads respectfully low, but otherwise the situation was quiet. Tim New (CQMS) arrived with breakfast in the small containers and while half a dozen of us prepared to issue the food a mortar stonk made us dive for cover into a ditch. A close one landed first, and we were very lucky to have only one casualty as we were clustered round the containers. I was unlucky in that I had to be the casualty.'<sup>18</sup>

Coming up on the exposed right flank, C Company had been ordered to move 400 yards behind the barrage, which was not, however, to extend beyond A Company's right flank; but when the barrage came down, Major Boord, finding that it

did in fact cover his own front, at once moved forward to get behind it. One gun was firing short; after it had caused two casualties the men opened out to avoid its line of fire and soon arrived on the river bank. A ford that appeared passable for tanks was discovered 400 yards downstream. Having eventually obtained permission to seize it, Boord crossed over with a platoon borrowed from B Company and chased away a few Germans who disputed his passage, but the accompanying tank was unable to negotiate the further stopbank and the platoon had to be withdrawn later.

Supported by a squadron of [20 Armoured Regiment](#), B Company tried to retake the position in the afternoon, but once again the tanks were unable to climb the further stopbank. After Turbott's men had withdrawn, D Company tried later in the afternoon but with no better success. Enemy shelling and mortaring had now increased, and over on the left A Company was getting its full share; farther still to the south-west, 9 Brigade was held up astride the railway line. In the evening an enemy force about sixty strong was seen approaching the ford, but when shelled it promptly dispersed. At 9 p.m. Hutchens' tired men were relieved by [25 Battalion](#), after which they moved back towards [Massa Lombarda](#) for a short rest.

While 24 Battalion bathed, cleaned equipment, and doctored blistered feet, 9 and 6 Brigades crossed the Sillaro in force, broke out of the bridgehead, and penetrated far into the enemy's line, reaching [Scolo Montanara](#) the following evening. Patrols sent out towards [Medicina](#) found that town already in possession of 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade. As brigade reserve, 24 Battalion was not engaged, its task being that of flank protection. At dusk its companies were strung out from Scolo Scolatore back to within 1000 yards of the Sillaro, and there they remained for the next forty-eight hours while 5 Brigade passed through to continue the advance.

The Fifth Army had begun its offensive on the left and was shortly to emerge from the [Apennines](#) on to the [Bologna](#) plain. The 278th German Division had been badly smashed on the Sillaro and it seemed that the enemy was breaking at last. But resistance was not yet over. After fighting a stubborn rearguard action against the Poles, 4 German Parachute Division had moved across to the New Zealanders' front, and now stood firm in strong entrenchments along the [Gaiana River](#). An assault by 9 New Zealand Brigade and 43 Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade behind one of the heaviest known barrages captured this position on the night of 18-19



April, with crippling loss to the defenders. Twenty-four hours later the attacking troops were on the [Quaderna Canal](#), where 5 Brigade came up to relieve 9 Brigade on the right, and 6 Brigade took over from the [Gurkhas](#). The 24th and 26th Battalions, right and left, with [25 Battalion](#) in reserve, began to push on before dawn.

Ahead lay another of those interminable rivers—the [Idice](#)— on which stood the much-vaunted Genghis Khan Line. The 24th Battalion's companies advanced bound by bound, with B and C leading, right and left. By midday the leading troops were on the railway line running south from [Budrio](#), a few hundred yards from the [Idice](#) banks. Fifth Brigade already had a foothold on the other side when Conder's men passed through B Company and came up on Boord's right to make the crossing. Conder got his company over without much difficulty, but C Company encountered three strongpoints on the far bank and had to make use of supporting armour. Two platoons then made the passage. At this point the river had no floodbanks to give protection, but the platoons seized and fortified a large solidly built hospital. In the afternoon German tanks appeared and drove D Company, together with elements of [23 Battalion](#) on the right, back across the river. Though fairly secure in the hospital building, C Company's platoons were left isolated on the far bank.

At 5 p.m. A and B Companies, left and right, were ordered to attack and form a bridgehead half a mile beyond the [Idice](#). Anxious to gain the confidence of men to whom he was a stranger, Major Lea <sup>19</sup> made a point of exposing himself to the enemy's fire, though the reputation he already enjoyed might have precluded the necessity for any special display of courage. All went well until his right forward platoon came under fire from two machine guns which had hitherto remained concealed. There were several casualties, and the advance would have been held up if Lance-Corporal [Beckham](#), <sup>20</sup> of C Company, had not immediately come to the rescue. Accompanied by two others, he tackled the first post under covering fire and killed the German machine-gunners. No covering fire could be given to support his attack on the second gun, but, approaching it by way of a communication trench, he dealt with it in the same fashion before returning to the fortified hospital building. He was awarded the DCM. Its left flank being no longer embarrassed, A Company occupied the far bank and then extended its lines to form a bridgehead.



While B Company was approaching the [Idice](#) a mortar bomb landed squarely among the personnel of its headquarters, slightly wounding Major Turbott <sup>21</sup>, who, though shaken, had continued to direct operations. An incident less discouraging took place soon afterwards, when an 18-year-old German prisoner, passed back by the forward troops, explained that he hated both [Hitler](#) and Goering. By dusk all three of B Company's platoons were across, to be joined an hour later by three tanks of [20 Armoured Regiment](#). At one time 11 Platoon found itself with a number of the enemy still in rear on the stopbank, in possession of several large dugouts, 'but', says the company war diary, 'Ted was in a submissive mood and came quietly.' Second-Lieutenant Yarnton <sup>22</sup> displayed the qualities of leadership that had come to be expected of him ever since the [Senio](#) crossing, and led 10 Platoon to its objective on B Company's left front.

While the foregoing events were in process 5 Brigade had extended its bridgehead on the right. On the left [26 Battalion](#) had discovered a ford, and its companies were passing over with armoured support. By nightfall the Genghis Khan Line no longer existed as a barrier to our progress.

So far as [24 Battalion](#) was concerned, the [Idice](#) crossing had been the sharpest engagement of the whole advance and the most costly. Since 9 April there had been a total of 97 casualties, and the strain of fighting day and night was telling upon all ranks. But the knowledge that victory was at hand was a powerful antidote to exhaustion. [Bologna](#) had fallen. The South African Armoured Division had emerged from the Apennines and was moving out on to the plain. The 12th Lancers, having recently come under the command of the New Zealand Division, were probing forward in Staghound armoured cars and were soon to make contact with 91 United States Division. Away on the right 6 British Armoured Division was pouring through the [Argenta Gap](#).

Meanwhile our troops in the [Idice](#) bridgehead were unmolested during the night of 21-22 April. Daylight having revealed the enemy's withdrawal, [24 Battalion](#) moved a mile downstream and then began to advance, with A and B Companies leading. The 26th Battalion followed on the left, with [25 Battalion](#) protecting its flank. Fifth Brigade was still on the right. Throughout the day all four companies plodded forward, crossing canals and ditches and coming every now and then upon very

recent traces of the fleeing enemy. Soon after midnight they were five miles beyond the [Idice](#), close upon the Savena Abbandonata. Only a few hours were allowed for rest, but foot-slogging was nearly over. Next day, after crossing Route 64, the main highway between [Bologna](#) and [Ferrara](#), the leading companies competed for the honour of being first into San Giorgio. B Company 'mounted on tanks and raced along for about two miles, only to run into road blocks. In an effort to avoid these one tank left the road and entered a minefield, but backed out again without mishap. From here we advanced on foot while the tanks took another route, joining us again at a canal bridged by a very frail looking wooden bridge. It was with apprehension that we watched the first Sherman across, and it was with wonderment that we saw a Sherman mounted bulldozer follow it.' <sup>23</sup>

This check lost the race for B Company. Once over the Navile Canal, its men were again taken aboard to be raced onward, past Italian houses flying white flags, on a line of advance that swung due north into the River Reno's horseshoe bend. But A Company was already in [San Giorgio](#), being welcomed by partisans who alleged that a number of German troops in the vicinity were waiting to give themselves up. None appeared, but in any case their fate was sealed. On its arrival B Company took up a position on the right of the village, and spent an unpleasant afternoon under shell and mortar fire which caused five casualties.

C and D Companies followed behind the forward troops. A letter written at the time by Major Boord describes their progress:

I received orders to move forward which I did, up a road crammed with [26 Battalion](#) transport. However, we shook them clear, crossed Route 64 and bowled along 2000 yards to the canal Navile.... I whipped my group over, trucks, tanks and A/tk guns. Out of contact with Bn and no sign of A Coy, but I met Col Robinson <sup>24</sup> of the tanks and he told me that A was headed flat out for San Giorgio some seven miles away.... Evidently Sam Lea had piled his troops on tanks to make an advance at speed.... Half a mile from [San Giorgio](#) we stopped and contacted Bn through tanks and received orders to wait. A was holding the far edge of the village with [12 Lancers](#) (an attached recce unit) probing forward. The town was in an uproar—people crowding the streets, throwing flowers, jumping on vehicles, proffering wine—all the exuberance of liberation. I had no desire to take my trucks in there and have half my men get drunk, so we stayed put till [26](#) came up and the advance

continued. We passed through the town and 1000 yards beyond when the forward troops came under heavy fire from mortars and machine guns and were held up. Opposition was also coming from the left flank, and [25 Battalion](#), which had had the flank protection role, had had casualties. Their CO was wounded. The opposition held and the show halted for the night.

Late that afternoon A and B Companies were two miles or more beyond [San Giorgio](#) and had come under shell and mortar fire. The 26th Battalion had encountered fairly determined opposition on the left, while on its flank [25 Battalion](#) and 9 Brigade were making slower progress still. On the other hand 5 Brigade had forged ahead to reach the eastern outskirts of [San Pietro](#) in [Casale](#).

C and D Companies passed through A and B early on the 23rd, arriving soon afterwards on a line south of [San Pietro](#), where a halt was called. At this point [26 Battalion](#) steamed past without a check, to take the lead of 6 Brigade. Having received orders to resume their advance, C and D Companies moved on to Sant' Alberto, but on arriving there Boord found himself out of touch with Battalion Headquarters and decided to make straight for the [Reno](#). Outstripping Conder's company, he succeeded in overtaking [26 Battalion](#) at the river, where he arranged with [Colonel Fairbrother](#) to co-operate in crossing. By 10 a.m. our troops were on the far bank, with C Company on [26 Battalion](#)'s right. The water was only knee-deep and there was no opposition, though a number of derelict enemy guns lay scattered about. Tanks followed the infantry and a bridgehead was formed. D Company crossed soon after C. Lea and Turbott came up with their men early in the afternoon and lay along the south bank. Fifth Brigade had already crossed on the right some time before any 6 Brigade troops put in an appearance. Elements of the Guards Brigade and 6 British Armoured Division, which had driven through the [Argenta Gap](#), also appeared upon the scene. That night 24 Battalion moved to a brigade concentration area, a mile north of the river.

Next morning 6 Brigade moved towards the Po, the men riding in motor transport, with [25 Battalion](#) leading. After being delayed for a while by demolitions south of [Bondeno](#), 24 Battalion camped south-west of that town early in the afternoon, while [25 Battalion](#) went on to occupy an island in the river opposite its junction with the [Panaro](#). The whole vicinity was littered with German trucks, guns,

and tanks knocked out by South African armour. The early hours of Anzac Day saw 24 Battalion crossing the Po in assault boats, with A and B Companies leading. While a pontoon bridge was being set up in the afternoon, tanks and trucks were being ferried across on rafts. Then, mounted once more on motor transport, the battalion swung east along the river bank and turned north for a few miles, to camp for the night at Sariano.

Prisoners were being collected in large numbers as the pursuit went on next day (27 April) through [Trecenta](#), across the Tartaro and Maestra rivers (whose bridges had been captured intact by [25 Battalion](#)) to Badia Polesine on the [Adige](#). B and C Companies halted close to the banks. A few snipers were in evidence on the far side, but tanks which were up with the infantry soon blasted them out. Wide, deep, and rapid, with dangerous swirling eddies, the stream was obviously unfordable, but at nightfall tanks and mortars plastered the further bank while B and C Companies crossed in assault boats. The other companies followed. Then, with [25 Battalion](#) on the left and [23 Battalion](#) on the right, a bridgehead was formed soon after midnight, with all the usual precautions against possible counter-attack.

American divisions were approaching the Alpine foothills, turning the [Venetian Line](#) and driving a wedge between the German armies in [Italy](#). The Partisans had risen and were seizing bridges behind the enemy lines to prevent their destruction. In the meantime 6 Brigade enjoyed a short spell while 9 Brigade took up the pursuit. A patrol sent out by 24 Battalion to investigate Castel Baldo, a few miles to the north-west, returned later to report the place empty of Germans. Once more under way, 6 Brigade stayed for a short time at [Este](#) and then moved on through [Padua](#), passed by the outskirts of [Venice](#), and halted ten miles short of the Piave River on the evening of 29 April. On the way a large number of prisoners fell to B Company, whose diarist recounts the incident in detail.

It was about ten miles from [Padua](#) that Gordon [Blackledge](#) <sup>25</sup> and Les [Poole](#), <sup>26</sup> driving along in convoy in the B Coy pick-up, were approached by Italian Partisans who explained that there were about two hundred Teds in the vicinity very anxious to give themselves up, but not prepared to surrender to the Partisans.

So pulling out from the convoy, accompanied by 2-Lt Reidpath, <sup>27</sup> 2-Lt McDermott, <sup>28</sup> [both officers of D Company], Sgt [Cavanagh](#), <sup>29</sup> and with the Partisans

as guides, Blackie and Poole drove about ten miles to a small village where they received a great welcome from the Partisans, who swarmed on to the sides of the pick-up. This sort of welcome was reassuring but thoughts of possible minefields, a trap, a natural suspicion of the unknown, passed through the minds of the party.

However they reached the village where the Germans were reported to be, and, leaving the truck about two hundred yards back, three members of the party advanced on foot, their only weapons being a couple of pistols. After waiting about ten minutes Pte Blackledge became anxious and drove to the village where he learned that the fifty Teds already in the casa entered by the recce party of three, were being increased by Germans from the surrounding area. He parked the truck and advanced to meet one of the incoming groups who proceeded to gather in the courtyard of a casa occupied by a German colonel.

The numbers of incoming Teds increased the initial amount until there were about five hundred.<sup>30</sup> All were carrying their weapons and ammunition. The German colonel decided to hold a parade, and, standing on the balcony of the casa, accompanied by our two officers, a parade was held. This was inspected and addressed by the colonel who appeared to become very emotional.

In platoon lots all arms were brought out at the double to the front of the parade where they were laid down neatly in their respective heaps. All Spandaus together, etc. When this was completed the Colonel handed over to 2-Lt Reidpath and preparations were made to depart. For this the Germans loaded their trucks with the weapons, ammunition etc., and with the Colonel, three other German officers, and Mr Reidpath in the lead, the convoy of German vehicles, loaded with all they could carry, moved out of the village. Mr McDermott brought up the rear with a car load of the enemy who were obviously happy and in good spirits, knowing that the war for them was over and that at least they would receive fair treatment.

After driving about four miles looking for a POW cage we met a company of Tommies in armoured cars accompanied by Partisans. This task force was apparently on its way to accept the surrender of the prisoners we had already taken, and so they were handed over to the officer in charge with a certain amount of relief, as five men were hardly enough to handle three hundred prisoners. Besides the Tommies were armed and dressed for the occasion.

The Piave bridge having been blown, the battalion remained where it was throughout 30 April. The weather had held fine for some time, but now it broke, and heavy showers fell during the next few days. During the 24-hour halt as many men as possible were given leave in [Venice](#), and for some account of their holiday-making we may again refer to B Company's war diary:

We reached the entrance to the drive out to the island on which [Venice](#) is built, only to be stopped by a provost who informed us that [Venice](#) was 56th Div area, and that we could not enter without formal permission. So we despatched emissaries to the Colonel [sic] of the 56th Div and to the Town Major. But in the meantime, the boys becoming a little impatient as time was very limited, were soon past the provost, first on foot and then on top of the 56th Div Bren Carriers, and finally our own trucks nosed past the barrier, and then it was a case of non-stop to [Venice](#). Arriving there, there was a rush for Gondolas, and Kiwis began swarming through the town. Places of interest were visited, and it was found that the Lira was still valued at 85 to the pound, and consequently everything buyable was in demand, but unfortunately there was little on the market. The hammer and sickle was conspicuous on the walls of many buildings, and occasional shots could be heard up side streets and canals as Partisans and Fascists, who were still holding out, exchanged shots.

Rumours were abroad that Yugoslav partisans had occupied [Trieste](#) when 24 Battalion crossed the [Piave](#) and Tagliamento rivers on 1 May, to arrive early the following morning at Villa Vicentina on the west bank of the [Isonzo](#). From there the companies dispersed to collect prisoners, A going out to the island of [Grado](#), while B and D covered the area between Belvedere and the [Isonzo](#). 'B Company had a special job here', writes Major Turbott. 'We had to make contact with what was known to be a fairly large pocket of Germans on the coast. We moved towards them, whereupon they deployed and gave indication of resisting, but no shots were fired. A German officer came over and, on being sent to me, said that he had come with an offer to surrender 150 men, but that this did not constitute the whole party. He would not believe that we had come up through [Italy](#) but tried to convince me that we had come down through [France](#) and [Austria](#). He thought that the Germans were still holding well in [Italy](#) and would not believe that the war was as good as over. It appeared that he and his comrades had come by sea from [Yugoslavia](#). Included in



the party were several naval officers who were not in favour of surrendering but wished to fight. I received permission from Brigade to handle the matter (having sent the German officer there with his tale). We, of course, had no idea of the total number since our German officer would not disclose this. I sent him back with the order for all to surrender by a certain hour. This they did, having kept us waiting until the last minute, arrogantly and on the part of some, notably the naval section, with obvious reluctance. On being told to hand over their arms they were harangued by a senior officer and then, after some angry interchanges, to a man hurled their weapons, binoculars and valuable equipment into a nearby canal.' <sup>31</sup>

That same evening (2 May) the battalion moved over the [Isonzo](#) to a brigade concentration area at [Ronchi](#), and thence next day to Aurisina. The advance had been moving due east; over this last lap it veered towards the south, pointing in the direction of [Trieste](#).

The German armies in [Italy](#) surrendered on 2 May and the garrison of [Trieste](#) the same night; but relations between New Zealanders and Yugoslavs had become strained, the latter resenting the presence of foreign troops in what they regarded as their own conquered territory. A, B, and D Companies of 24 Battalion moved down to [Santa Croce](#), five miles from [Trieste](#), to protect our gunline should such necessity arise, while C Company returned for twenty-four hours to guard the [Isonzo](#) bridge near [Villa Vicentina](#).

[Santa Croce](#) was surrounded with stony, rolling hills, something like those of [Greece](#) but not so high. Patches of cultivation lay among groves of olive, oak, ash and elm, bright with wild flowers. The cliff-lined coast nearby had numerous pleasant coves, easily accessible, to which parties went down daily to bathe.

It was at [Santa Croce](#) that news of peace reached the men of 24 Battalion; but coming thus as a somewhat belated epilogue to victory, the announcement caused less excitement than might have been expected. For months, or even years, the ultimate issue had never been in doubt. That victory was drawing closer with every passing hour had long been plainly evident. Its official announcement could only seal a conviction universally held. And just as the attainment of an ambition long cherished, the acquisition of an object long desired, brings reaction and satiety in its train, so the surrender of [Hitler's](#) Third Reich left the men who had fought so long to



destroy it with a vague sense of grievance that fulfilment had fallen short of anticipation.

For the period of just over four weeks from its return to the line on 1 April to the end of the campaign, the battalion had lost 15 men killed and 130 wounded. A third of these casualties had been suffered in the actions against the [Senio](#) stopbanks before the final assault on 9 April. Detailed figures for the period were:

	1-9 April	
	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	–	5
Died of wounds	–	1
Wounded	1	49
Total	1	55
9 April - 2 May		
Killed	–	9
Wounded	3	77
Total	3	86

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<sup>1</sup> [Maj N. M. Conder](#); [Cambridge](#); born [Masterton](#), 24 Dec 1913; stock agent.

<sup>2</sup> Some of 24 Bn's carriers, driven by battalion personnel, were used as Wasps, or flame-throwers.

<sup>3</sup> [WO II W. F. Kingsford](#), m.i.d.; [Waihi](#); born [Waihi](#), 22 Apr 1918; bullion assayer; twice wounded.

<sup>4</sup> [L-Sgt J. V. Riddell](#), MM; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 18 Sep 1920; engineer.

<sup>5</sup> Short for *tedesco*, the Italian for German.

<sup>6</sup> [S-Sgt A. Whitson](#); [Auckland](#); born [Scotland](#), 17 Mar 1915; butcher.

<sup>7</sup> [Cpl P. R. Pountney](#), MM; [Murupara](#); born [Auckland](#), 11 Dec 1922; farmhand.

<sup>8</sup> Pountney received the MM for this action and for gallant work at the [Senio](#) crossing.

<sup>9</sup> [Cpl J. T. Hosking](#), MM; [Auckland](#); born NZ 18 Sep 1917; labourer; wounded 24 Sep 1944.

<sup>10</sup> [Cpl H. E. Smith](#), MM; [Auckland](#); born NZ 18 Nov 1922; nursery worker.

<sup>11</sup> [Pte J. W. Gwilliam](#), MM; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 5 Oct 1921; clothing presser.

<sup>12</sup> [Pte H. C. Freeman](#), MM; [Kakahi](#), King Country; born [Kakahi](#), 14 Jul 1920; carpenter; wounded 12 Apr 1945.

<sup>13</sup> Riddell had been chiefly responsible for shooting up the two horse-drawn gun teams on the night of 9-10 April. For this and the exploit mentioned above he was awarded the MM.

<sup>14</sup> B Coy war diary.

<sup>15</sup> [Col M. C. Fairbrother](#), DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [Carterton](#), 21 Sep 1907; accountant; BM 5 Bde 1942-43; commanded in turn 21, 23, and 28 (Maori) Bns, Apr-Dec 1943; CO 26 Bn Oct 1944-Sep 1945; Associate Editor, NZ War Histories.

<sup>16</sup> Letter, 14 Aug 1950.

<sup>17</sup> [Maj F. C. Forster](#); [Hamilton](#); born [Hamilton](#), 18 Feb 1913; school-teacher; wounded 14 Apr 1945.

<sup>18</sup> Letter, 22 Aug 1950.

<sup>19</sup> Lea was awarded the MC for his conduct on this occasion and on 22 April when his company captured [San Giorgio](#).

<sup>20</sup> Cpl H. F. Beckham, DCM; Kaitaia; born Ngongotaha, Rotorua, 4 May 1922; farm labourer; wounded 9 Feb 1945.

<sup>21</sup> Turbott received the MC for consistent distinguished service while leading his company from the Senio to Trieste.

<sup>22</sup> 2 Lt G. K. Yarnton, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Australia, 30 Jan 1914; clerk; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

<sup>23</sup> B Coy war diary.

<sup>24</sup> Lt-Col H. A. Robinson, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Waipukurau; born New Plymouth, 29 Sep 1912; farmhand; CO 18 Armd Regt Mar-Jul 1944; 20 Armd Regt May-Oct 1945; twice wounded.

<sup>25</sup> Pte G. G. Blackledge; Pukekohe; born NZ 18 Dec 1921; plumber; twice wounded.

<sup>26</sup> Pte L. R. Poole; Morrinsville; born NZ 21 Sep 1920; farmhand.

<sup>27</sup> 2 Lt C. P. Reidpath; Hamilton; born NZ 30 Jan 1922; draper's assistant.

<sup>28</sup> 2 Lt M. P. McDermott; born Auckland, 25 Dec 1921; clerk.

<sup>29</sup> Sgt H. A. Cavanagh; Apiti; born NZ 1 Aug 1919; yard foreman.

<sup>30</sup> The figure is mentioned below as being 300.

<sup>31</sup> Letter, 14 Aug 1950.

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# 24 BATTALION

## CHAPTER 19 – CONCLUSION

## CHAPTER 19

### Conclusion

Events of the next few months were not strictly in accordance with the hopes and expectations of those who had imagined that the declaration of peace would bring to an immediate close the whole period of stress and strain. The Yugoslavs resented our presence in [Trieste](#); unlike that of the Italians, their attitude was surly to the point of hostility, and towards the end of May the men of 24 Battalion found themselves once again in battle positions, facing their late allies as potential enemies. After a day or so the tension eased sufficiently for a soccer match to be arranged in which 24 Battalion's team, energetic though untaught, was badly defeated by the more skilful Yugoslavs, whose well fitting shorts and smart white jerseys displayed our own men's haphazard gear to some disadvantage.

At the end of May 6 Brigade moved into [Trieste](#) with instructions to impress the local inhabitants. Rumours were afoot of an armed uprising, and a company of the 24th was detailed to protect VIPs at the divisional sports meeting. When Marshal Tito's troops evacuated the city, the Italian Guardia del Popolo presented another problem until eventually its men were disarmed.

In July things brightened up considerably. Yugoslav civilians were still distrustful, but the Italians showed themselves eager enough to be friendly. Dances were arranged and leave to [Venice](#) was granted. From [Trieste](#) 24 Battalion moved out into the country near Villa Opicina, and the companies went by turn to spend four days at [Santa Croce](#) rest camp.

Lieutenant-Colonel Hutchens had left early in May to join the New Zealand Prisoner-of-War Repatriation Unit in England, his place being taken by Lieutenant-Colonel Macdonald, who handed over to Lieutenant-Colonel Boord at the beginning of July. Late in that same month 24 Battalion moved to a sun-baked plain near [Lake Trasimene](#). Naturally enough, the men were eager to get home now that the war was over. Demobilisation proceeded by reinforcements, those with the longest service being repatriated first, but shortage of shipping caused delay and delay bred some discontent. No longer fortified by the stimulating atmosphere of war, all ranks were faced with the boredom and depression inseparable from a state of anti-climax.

A number of men volunteered for or were transferred to J Force for the occupation of [Japan](#), and when the battalion went to winter near [Florence](#) successive leave parties began taking their departure for England. When shipping became available towards the end of the year, 24 Battalion began to dwindle rapidly away, and by New Year's Day 1946 none of its officers or men remained on Italian soil.

Called into being by the dire necessity of national crisis, lacking the inspiration of long military tradition, 24 Battalion had seen the early creation of a standard of excellence which all who joined it might seek to emulate or surpass. Its men dispersed and went to their own places to face the problems of peace, richer by far in experience, but poorer by the loss of a unique fellowship they would not know again.



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# 24 BATTALION

## ROLL OF HONOUR

### *ROLL OF HONOUR*

#### Killed in Action

Lt-Col A. W. Greville, m.i.d.	22 July 1942
Maj J. R. McGruther	14 July 1944
Maj I. M. Thomson	7 December 1943
Capt J. Beesley	21 July 1942
Capt H. H. McDonald	23 November 1941
Capt T. Wallace, m.i.d.	28 November 1941
Lt E. C. Baker	28 March 1943
Lt C. R. Capp	28 November 1943
Lt T. V. Mitchell	22 July 1942
Lt J. M. Swarbrick	22 July 1942
Lt R. R. Wright	2 November 1942
2 Lt H. B. Ashton	24 November 1941
2 Lt S. W. Ball	19 December 1944
2 Lt K. J. Barling	26 March 1943
2 Lt W. P. Cater	26 March 1943
2 Lt J. G. Cutler	25 November 1941
2 Lt A. B. Dale	24 December 1943
2 Lt D. G. McE. Ingle	7 December 1943
2 Lt C. D. M. Klaus, MM	18 March 1944
2 Lt L. B. Morrison	24 November 1941
2 Lt H. J. Paris	26 July 1944
2 Lt R. H. Shaw	1 December 1943
2 Lt L. A. Steiner, DCM	23 September 1944
2 Lt A. Wetherill, m.i.d.	18 October 1944
2 Lt F. C. Woodcock	26 March 1943
WO II J. A. M. Derbyshire	28 November 1941
WO II F. M. J. Marshall, DCM	24 September 1944
WO II J. L. Wall	26 November 1941
WO II J. S. Wills	15 June 1944
Sgt N. Anderson	November 1941

Sgt A. Butler	24 November 1941
Sgt M. J. Campbell	5 June 1944
Sgt F. H. Constable	27 November 1941
Sgt T. E. Fitzgerald	7 December 1943
Sgt A. R. Gee	25 November 1941
Sgt H. T. Henderson	22 July 1942
Sgt R. J. Holloway	22 July 1942
Sgt M. J. Jarvis	2 December 1943
Sgt J. F. King	26 March 1943
Sgt D. S. Livingstone, m.i.d.	26 March 1943
Sgt L. H. McAlpine	22 July 1942
Sgt J. M. McKay	25 November 1941
Sgt J. McI. Pepperell	20 December 1944
Sgt C. L. Ranum	24 November 1941
Sgt A. D. Stretch	28 November 1941
Sgt G. H. Terry	28 July 1944
Sgt H. Walker	22 July 1942
Sgt W. S. Wilson	26 March 1943
L-Sgt B. A. Johnstone	17 March 1944
L-Sgt N. J. O'Brien	14 July 1944
L-Sgt R. J. Sutherland	18 March 1944
L-Sgt A. J. Taylor	16 March 1944
L-Sgt M. E. G. Yearbury	21 November 1943
Cpl M. N. Anderson	26 March 1943
Cpl T. D. Atkinson	15 May 1944
Cpl D. A. Blackman	November 1941
Cpl J. F. Budd	26 November 1941
Cpl R. D. Bunn	November 1941
Cpl T. J. D. Ching	16 March 1944
Cpl R. Clark	20 April 1943
Cpl G. V. Coleman	25 November 1941
Cpl B. H. G. Curry	1 January 1945
Cpl J. H. Easterbrook	19 July 1942
Cpl D. W. F. Gillmore	23 October 1942
Cpl A. O. Gray	30 July 1944
Cpl A. R. Guy	27 September 1944
Cpl J. A. Hall	19 October 1944

Cpl L. C. Haydon	20 December 1944
Cpl H. M. Hill	26 March 1943
Cpl A. D. A. Kennedy	18 March 1944
Cpl E. K. Knox	18 March 1944
Cpl A. J. Lewis	19 March 1944
Cpl N. J. Newbold	1 November 1942
Cpl F. S. Norris	23 September 1944
Cpl M. G. Peake	26 March 1943
Cpl A. D. Pearson	7 December 1943
Cpl R. A. Russell	25 November 1941
Cpl R. F. Scott	28 July 1944
Cpl L. R. Thode	28 November 1943
Cpl L. H. Upton	22 July 1942
Cpl N. S. Walker	20 April 1945
Cpl W. K. Whittingham	15 March 1944
Cpl H. Widdup	22 July 1942
Cpl R. J. Wigmore	19 December 1944
Cpl J. S. Withers	26 November 1941
Cpl M. S. Withers	22 July 1942
L-Cpl W. V. Bonnar	25 November 1941
L-Cpl L. A. W. Brown	1 December 1941
L-Cpl N. Brown	3 April 1945
L-Cpl C. R. Coates	8 March 1944
L-Cpl G. W. Coulson	1 December 1943
L-Cpl I. S. Currie	26 April 1943
L-Cpl R. F. Dunne	26 March 1943
L-Cpl A. W. Fell	22 July 1942
L-Cpl A. E. Fisher	26 March 1943
L-Cpl C. W. Good	1 November 1942
L-Cpl T. A. Goodall, m.i.d.	23 October 1942
L-Cpl D. K. Gutberlet	26 March 1943
L-Cpl K. R. Jackson	5 June 1944
L-Cpl R. A. Jackson	26 April 1941
L-Cpl I. Jenkins	22 July 1942
L-Cpl D. A. Kelly	2 April 1945
L-Cpl W. J. Levy	7 December 1943
L-Cpl K. W. Lloyd	12 April 1945

L-Cpl D. M. Mackay	23 October 1942
L-Cpl J. W. Mainland	25 November 1941
L-Cpl D. B. Mason	20 April 1945
L-Cpl J. L. Montgomery	26 March 1943
L-Cpl L. F. Pester	1 January 1945
L-Cpl R. R. Ralph	20 April 1945
L-Cpl M. K. Sillars	25 November 1941
L-Cpl R. T. Smith	16 December 1944
L-Cpl A. C. Snelgar	25 November 1941
L-Cpl R. G. Southward	1 December 1943
L-Cpl W. E. Steel	22 July 1942
L-Cpl M. DeC. Thomson	22 July 1942
Pte G. Absolum	23 November 1941
Pte P. M. Alexander	22 July 1942
Pte R. Amooore	26 March 1943
Pte A. W. Anderson	13 May 1944
Pte J. W. Anderson	24 September 1944
Pte R. W. Anderson	22 July 1942
Pte W. A. Anderson	24 September 1944
Pte A. Aspden	24 September 1944
Pte F. B. Bagshaw	20 April 1945
Pte C. S. Bailey	18 July 1942
Pte R. McK. Bain	21 November 1943
Pte V. G. Bakalich	26 March 1943
Pte G. R. Baker	26 March 1943
Pte O. G. Ball	28 March 1943
Pte C. W. Barker	27 November 1941
Pte J. E. Barnes	21 November 1943
Pte J. M. Beckroft	25 November 1941
Pte T. J. Beer	28 November 1943
Pte J. Belcher	25 April 1943
Pte J. R. W. Bell	26 November 1941
Pte D. C. Benton	26 November 1941
Pte I. E. Blackburn	7 December 1943
Pte W. R. G. Blair	26 July 1944
Pte N. Board	28 March 1943
Pte N. J. Boswell	28 June 1942

Pte A. C. Bowman	26 March 1943
Pte W. R. Bradnam	25 November 1941
Pte W. W. Brocklebank	26 March 1943
Pte R. R. Buckeridge	26 April 1941
Pte R. D. Burgess	26 October 1942
Pte R. S. Caddy	9 August 1944
Pte E. W. Cains	27 November 1941
Pte A. B. Calcott	23 October 1942
Pte L. Cameron	22 July 1942
Pte G. A. Campbell	26 March 1944
Pte J. Carroll	28 November 1941
Pte J. S. Carter	25 November 1941
Pte E. H. Chapman	29 July 1944
Pte P. Child	November 1941
Pte R. T. Christensen	28 June 1942
Pte F. S. Clark	7 December 1943
Pte W. G. Clarke	28 November 1941
Pte V. M. Coker	19 February 1944
Pte N. Coley	18 April 1941
Pte E. A. S. Collins	26 March 1943
Pte S. A. Collins	26 March 1943
Pte R. A. Connolly	17 March 1944
Pte A. B. Cox	26 March 1943
Pte F. E. Creasy	18 March 1944
Pte J. Crossman	25 November 1941
Pte G. G. Cummings	26 March 1943
Pte J. H. R. Cunningham	24 November 1941
Pte D. J. Curtin	22 July 1942
Pte R. J. Dalglish	1 January 1945
Pte C. C. Davey	24 November 1941
Pte A. Day	November 1941
Pte E. R. Deaker	27 November 1941
Pte D. B. Donovan	22 July 1942
Pte L. J. Donovan	26 March 1943
Pte T. W. Druce, m.i.d.	14 July 1944
Pte W. J. Dunn	22 July 1942
Pte S. J. Eade	18 March 1944

Pte G. E. Edwards	29 December 1943
Pte R. W. Evans	24 September 1944
Pte N. G. File	26 March 1943
Pte R. Finlayson	24 September 1944
Pte N. Foley	26 March 1943
Pte J. A. Forbes	21 November 1943
Pte J. I. Franklin	26 March 1943
Pte I. A. Fraser	26 March 1943
Pte A. N. French	26 November 1941
Pte A. Gibson	24 November 1941
Pte E. C. Gichard	3 December 1943
Pte F. Glanfield	24 November 1941
Pte F. Glendinning	26 March 1943
Pte R. Gooding	25 November 1941
Pte D. L. Gould	3 December 1943
Pte H. G. Grant	26 March 1943
Pte M. C. Green	22 July 1942
Pte T. Green	24 November 1941
Pte N. Griffin	19 January 1945
Pte E. A. Hagenson	29 November 1941
Pte E. Hague	25 November 1941
Pte J. A. Hamilton	7 December 1943
Pte C. J. Harding	1 January 1944
Pte B. J. Harris	20 April 1943
Pte G. D. Harris	26 March 1943
Pte I. A. Harris	22 July 1942
Pte M. G. Harris	11 April 1945
Pte A. W. Harrison	17 December 1944
Pte J. L. Harrison	18 March 1944
Pte J. Hawkins	22 July 1942
Pte J. Hazlehurst	7 December 1943
Pte P. T. Heath	24 November 1941
Pte K. Henderson	26 March 1943
Pte R. F. J. Henderson	24 September 1944
Pte T. Hercock	26 March 1943
Pte S. J. Hey	27 November 1941
Pte L. G. Hill	24 November 1941



Pte A. B. Hodgkinson	14 July 1944
Pte F. A. Hogan	26 April 1941
Pte C. T. Holley	13 May 1944
Pte J. R. Holloway	20 November 1943
Pte H. H. Hopkins	7 December 1943
Pte M. A. Hume	19 July 1942
Pte F. R. Hunt	26 March 1943
Pte B. G. Hurst	19 December 1944
Pte S. Hyde	25 November 1941
Pte B. W. Ingram	22 July 1942
Pte G. C. Jackson	30 November 1941
Pte A. H. James	26 March 1943
Pte S. J. Jensen	30 July 1944
Pte A. Jones	17 March 1944
Pte F. J. Jones	26 March 1944
Pte R. O. Jones	7 December 1943
Pte J. A. Johnson	November 1941
Pte R. H. Johnston	22 July 1942
Pte W. A. Kelly	22 July 1942
Pte E. C. Keyte	22 July 1942
Pte F. King	1 December 1941
Pte J. S. Kirk	29 November 1941
Pte S. N. Kirkwood	19 March 1944
Pte E. H. Kitchen	25 November 1941
Pte R. G. Lake	1 March 1944
Pte J. R. Langton	22 July 1942
Pte P. F. Langton	1 November 1942
Pte J. L. Lansbury	23 October 1942
Pte M. E. Lawes	22 April 1943
Pte L. M. Lewis	24 November 1941
Pte G. H. Lovell	17 March 1944
Pte A. N. Lynch	1 January 1945
Pte L. McAleer	25 November 1943
Pte S. R. McAllister	28 March 1943
Pte H. T. McGougan	28 June 1942
Pte D. McGrath	27 September 1944

Pte G. S. F. McKelvey	27 September 1944
Pte F. J. G. Mackereth	30 November 1941
Pte A. P. McManemin	28 November 1941
Pte D. F. Marychurch	1 January 1945
Pte J. E. Mason	25 November 1941
Pte B. M. Maxwell	25 November 1943
Pte S. J. Middlemiss	22 July 1942
Pte W. H. Millstead	4 June 1944
Pte F. G. Mitchell	24 September 1944
Pte J. J. Mitchell	27 September 1944
Pte G. C. Monaghan	27 November 1941
Pte H. H. Monaghan	22 July 1942
Pte J. V. Morgan	24 November 1941
Pte B. Mottram	24 November 1941
Pte E. R. Murdoch	26 March 1943
Pte C. J. Nicol	25 November 1941
Pte H. F. W. Northcott	22 July 1942
Pte M. K. O'Brien	26 March 1943
Pte H. V. O'Connor	November 1941
Pte J. L. Old	2 November 1942
Pte R. J. O'Neill	7 December 1943
Pte E. Osbaldiston	26 March 1943
Pte N. F. Owens	22 July 1942
Pte W. Patterson	18 March 1944
Pte R. G. J. Phillips	13 May 1944
Pte H. L. Philp	22 July 1942
Pte J. E. Pike	24 November 1941
Pte N. E. Pollock	17 March 1944
Pte H. W. G. Porter	18 March 1944
Pte T. E. Porter	23 October 1942
Pte E. J. Prince	22 July 1942
Pte W. M. Quirke	26 March 1943
Pte R. W. Rainham	4 April 1945
Pte A. L. Robinson	10 April 1945
Pte C. W. Rodgers	31 December 1943
Pte F. B. Rogers	14 April 1945
Pte J. Rogers	24 November 1941

Pte J. M. Ross	26 March 1943
Pte H. A. J. Rouse	24 September 1944
Pte E. M. Rowe	26 March 1943
Pte P. E. Ruddick	November 1941
Pte G. Rushton	26 November 1941
Pte E. F. K. Sanders	8 March 1944
Pte C. C. Schmidt	22 July 1942
Pte L. S. Schwamm	23 October 1942
Pte L. F. Scott	22 July 1942
Pte L. M. Seed	29 July 1944
Pte H. G. Senior	26 November 1941
Pte J. S. Sexton	25 November 1941
Pte B. C. A. Sharplin	19 February 1944
Pte J. G. Shearer	18 May 1941
Pte D. A. Smith	1 January 1945
Pte C. M. Smith	14 July 1944
Pte T. C. Smith	26 March 1943
Pte V. H. Soper	20 April 1945
Pte L. Spinley	27 November 1941
Pte R. A. Starr	22 July 1942
Pte H. K. Stedman	16 March 1944
Pte R. J. Stent	3 December 1941
Pte R. P. Stuart	7 December 1943
Pte W. J. Sullivan	7 December 1943
Pte J. Suttie	22 July 1942
Pte L. R. Swale	28 March 1943
Pte A. E. Taylor	6 April 1945
Pte T. H. Taylor	30 November 1941
Pte W. H. Taylor	22 July 1942
Pte A. Teague	24 November 1941
Pte T. Teriaki	1 January 1945
Pte D. E. Terry	26 March 1943
Pte H. C. Teutenberg	26 March 1943
Pte R. Thompson	November 1941
Pte F. L. Thorburn	30 December 1943
Pte L. J. Todd	10 February 1945
Pte E. E. F. Tucker	29 July 1944

Pte F. Turner	7 April 1945
Pte F. G. Veale	16 March 1944
Pte J. J. Vulinovich	24 November 1941
Pte J. Waldron	28 November 1943
Pte E. B. Walker	23 October 1942
Pte H. Wallace	30 July 1944
Pte H. S. Wallace	November 1941
Pte W. D. Waller	22 July 1942
Pte A. S. Walsh	23 September 1944
Pte J. G. Watkin	14 July 1944
Pte L. G. Watt	25 November 1941
Pte E. Weir	23 October 1942
Pte T. A. Wells	26 March 1943
Pte L. G. Wenzlick	23 October 1942
Pte E. R. J. White	26 March 1943
Pte M. G. White	22 July 1942
Pte W. Whittaker	18 March 1944
Pte J. Whyte	27 November 1941
Pte J. G. Willacy	26 March 1943
Pte E. H. L. Williams	28 June 1942
Pte J. J. Williams	21 November 1943
Pte L. R. M. Williams	19 October 1944
Pte S. L. Williams	17 March 1944
Pte F. Wintle	25 November 1941
Pte P. Wiseman	24 September 1944
Pte R. S. Wrathall	8 December 1943
Pte R. F. Wright	22 July 1942
Pte R. G. Woods	26 April 1941
Pte A. E. F. Yardley	26 March 1943
Pte R. Yardley	1 November 1942
Pte S. Yerkovich	11 December 1944
Pte A. J. Young	26 March 1943

#### Died of Wounds

Maj E. S. Clarke	20 December 1943
Capt C. D. Brown	25 November 1941
Lt C. R. Nathan	10 December 1941
Lt A. J. Trubshaw	3 July 1942

2 Lt R. K. Anderson	28 November 1941
2 Lt F. P. A. Chapman	25 May 1941
WO II R. J. Webster	13 May 1941
Sgt H. W. Harland	26 October 1942
Sgt A. T. Philip	24 March 1943
L-Sgt L. G. Mitchell	7 April 1943
L-Sgt G. R. Oldfield	1 December 1943
Cpl D. Campbell, MM	20 April 1943
Cpl F. W. Hall	27 March 1943
Cpl A. J. Horne	25 November 1941
Cpl A. E. Osborne	27 November 1941
Cpl T. C. W. Powell	29 July 1944
Cpl G. O. Werner	7 December 1943
L-Cpl L. A. Derecourt	9 June 1944
L-Cpl N. A. Gibson	30 November 1943
L-Cpl F. C. Hansen	20 April 1943
L-Cpl H. W. McDonald	2 January 1945
L-Cpl C. H. P. Malone	24 March 1943
L-Cpl J. Robertson	27 October 1942
Pte D. Anderson	27 November 1941
Pte R. H. Barber	24 September 1944
Pte P. Botherway	2 December 1943
Pte A. W. Branch	20 April 1943
Pte R. I. Brown	26 April 1944
Pte S. I. C. Chuck	3 December 1943
Pte E. J. Colwill	22 July 1942
Pte J. F. Cooke	26 March 1943
Pte L. Dawson	27 November 1941
Pte J. Dungey	18 March 1944
Pte W. G. Giles	23 November 1941
Pte J. L. B. Godkin	4 October 1944
Pte C. Gracie	22 July 1942
Pte D. I. Haggitt	6 February 1944
Pte C. C. Hill	1 January 1945
Pte J. R. Hunter	20 November 1943
Pte J. L. Hutt	20 December 1944
Pte J. A. Johnson	1 January 1945

Pte E. H. Keighley	28 November 1941
Pte H. Kiernan	11 December 1943
Pte J. B. Logan	9 December 1941
Pte S. Lloyd	24 October 1942
Pte I. Lukashefski	20 December 1944
Pte J. A. S. McCrann	28 March 1943
Pte K. D. McKay	7 December 1943
Pte A. N. McKenzie	7 December 1943
Pte J. J. W. McKoy	8 December 1943
Pte F. L. Manning	25 October 1942
Pte H. Milner	20 April 1943
Pte G. T. Mitchell	6 April 1943
Pte D. H. Moloney	25 November 1941
Pte H. J. Murray	19 November 1944
Pte E. C. Nelley	27 November 1941
Pte R. J. Nolan	8 March 1944
Pte A. O'Halloran	29 April 1941
Pte C. L. Parker	4 March 1944
Pte H. D. Parsons	2 December 1943
Pte R. N. Paton	27 March 1943
Pte K. Poi	18 August 1942
Pte H. J. Riddell	17 November 1944
Pte M. L. Ridling	2 December 1943
Pte J. H. Rush	28 April 1943
Pte S. J. Rye	28 November 1941
Pte W. R. Shannon	April 1941
Pte K. S. Sifleet	11 December 1941
Pte W. K. Skinner	21 July 1942
Pte J. Sloan	29 November 1941
Pte J. Speight	10 March 1945
Pte G. A. Spice	25 November 1941
Pte J. F. Taplin	22 July 1942
Pte J. A. Thomas	22 December 1941
Pte N. C. Tudor	13 December 1943
Pte T. E. Underwood	22 July 1942
Pte A. R. H. Ushaw	May 1944
Pte W. Way	24 November 1941

Pte S. R. Whellan	4 April 1945
Pte C. H. White	22 July 1942
Pte R. S. Whiting	2 March 1945
Pte A. G. A. Williams	27 November 1941
Pte F. E. Williams	2 December 1943
Pte F. J. Wornall	20 November 1943
Pte D. H. Young	25 July 1942
Killed or Died while Prisoners of War	
WO II R. McLauchlan	9 October 1942
Sgt D. A. J. Moores	17 August 1942
Sgt D. McF. McKenzie	17 August 1942
Sgt D. M. Ryder	9 September 1943
Cpl J. W. Berry	21 November 1943
Cpl A. J. Cantrill	9 December 1941
Cpl D. H. Player	17 August 1942
Cpl R. A. Ripley	17 August 1942
Cpl F. H. Thomson	17 August 1942
Cpl J. G. Simpson	17 August 1942
L-Cpl T. R. Mock	25 September 1942
L-Cpl V. C. Woisin	17 August 1942
Pte K. W. S. Adams	8 July 1943
Pte R. I. Bartlett	9 December 1941
Pte P. H. Bartrum	31 March 1944
Pte S. S. Bennett	9 December 1941
Pte R. B. Clark	9 December 1941
Pte P. J. Dragicevich	22 July 1942
Pte H. R. Foy	9 December 1941
Pte M. E. Frost	2 April 1942
Pte F. C. Fuller	9 December 1941
Pte R. J. M. Gallon	9 December 1941
Pte J. H. Gray	13 July 1941
Pte C. T. Green	9 December 1941
Pte K. E. Hall	17 February 1943
Pte S. W. Hoey	16 August 1943
Pte A. J. Hook	9 December 1941
Pte S. R. Humm	9 December 1941
Pte D. J. Hurley	9 December 1941



Pte G. G. Lang	22 August 1942
Pte H. W. Le Bailly	17 August 1942
Pte J. L. Marshall	17 August 1942
Pte P. Marx	9 December 1941
Pte F. H. G. May	17 August 1942
Pte L. L. Miller	17 August 1942
Pte W. L. Moorhead	17 August 1942
Pte J. R. Moran	5 October 1942
Pte W. Morrice	17 August 1942
Pte D. T. S. Morrison	9 December 1941
Pte J. D. McAlpine	17 August 1942
Pte D. McDonald	17 August 1942
Pte N. R. McKay	19 August 1942
Pte A. McKenzie	17 August 1942
Pte J. McLean	17 August 1942
Pte G. W. McMillian	9 December 1941
Pte J. McNamara	17 August 1942
Pte D. L. Neal	17 August 1942
Pte A. J. F. Notman	17 August 1942
Pte H. E. J. Packer	9 December 1941
Pte W. R. Pamplin	17 August 1942
Pte J. A. Parsons	17 August 1942
Pte I. G. Pavicic	17 August 1942
Pte J. Pederson	30 March 1942
Pte R. L. Peters	17 August 1942
Pte G. H. Plummer	17 August 1942
Pte P. Randle	17 August 1942
Pte A. B. S. Razey	9 December 1941
Pte L. D. Reader	17 August 1942
Pte R. D. B. Reece	29 July 1942
Pte S. Rippon	31 October 1942
Pte E. C. Robertson	17 August 1942
Pte R. Rodgers	9 December 1941
Pte H. M. Skinner	17 August 1942
Pte L. G. Smith	17 August 1942
Pte W. G. Sola	17 August 1942
Pte J. A. Staines	22 February 1942

Pte R. J. Stanton	17 August 1942
Pte G. Steed	17 August 1942
Pte T. V. Symes	17 August 1942
Pte H. H. Taylor	9 December 1941
Pte A. A. Thompson	17 August 1942
Pte K. W. J. Thomson	17 August 1942
Pte J. R. Tonks	17 August 1942
Pte D. C. Tooth	17 August 1942
Pte E. M. Van Dyke	23 August 1942
Pte L. O. Wakelin	17 August 1942
Pte G. F. Watts	17 August 1942
Pte J. White	17 August 1942
Pte L. F. Wilson	17 August 1942
Pte N. W. Wilson	17 August 1942
Pte R. H. Wilson	17 August 1942
Pte N. C. Wright	12 September 1942

On 17 August 1942 an Axis ship carrying New Zealand prisoners of war was torpedoed and sunk with heavy loss of life.

#### Died on Active Service

Lt-Col C. Shuttleworth, DSO, m.i.d.	15 May 1945
Capt B. T. J. Jones	17 May 1945
S-Sgt A. E. A. Wilkes	20 December 1941
L-Cpl P. G. T. Donovan	10 March 1945
Pte D. F. Bagshaw	25 August 1944
Pte C. Bernie	28 February 1941
Pte F. A. Bullock	12 June 1942
Pte D. A. Everett	17 April 1944
Pte F. G. Galloway	5 June 1945
Pte J. M. Gray	15 January 1941
Pte P. Green	4 March 1943
Pte P. E. Jones	26 June 1945
Pte P. W. Kirk	4 March 1944
Pte S. E. McKay	24 March 1941
Pte C. J. O'Donnell	9 April 1945
Pte T. Rickit	13 May 1942
Pte W. H. Stubbs	14 November 1941

Pte R. K. Thom

30 January 1945

Pte E. J. Thomson

22 April 1944

Pte F. E. Wakelin

7 June 1941

# 24 BATTALION

## SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

### *Summary of Casualties*

	Killed		Wounded		Prisoners of War	
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs
Greece	–	8	2	4	4	134
Libya 1941	8	93	5	140	10	267
Egypt 1942	6	74	9	165	13	157
Tripolitania and Tunisia	4	68	14	135	1	2
Italy	12	167	30	640	1	21
Total	30	410	60	1084	29	581

The killed include men who were killed in action or who died of wounds and those presumed to have been killed in action or to have died of wounds; the prisoners of war include those who were wounded before capture. Two officers and 18 other ranks who died on active service are not included in the above casualties.

# 24 BATTALION

## HONOURS AND AWARDS

### *HONOURS AND AWARDS*

#### Distinguished Service Order

Lt-Col J. Conolly

Lt-Col R. L. Hutchens

Lt-Col C. Shuttleworth

Maj J. W. Reynolds

#### Military Cross

Maj A. E. Beyer

Maj F. J. Lea

Maj K. H. Macdonald

Maj R. Pirrie

Capt E. W. Aked

Capt A. W. H. Borrie ( [NZMC](#) attached)

Capt E. K. Tomlinson

Capt G. G. Turbott

Lt R. T. Masefield

Lt W. R. O'Brien

Lt A. C. Yeoman

2 Lt I. S. Walters

Rev. R. F. Judson (Chaplain attached)

## Distinguished Conduct Medal

WO II M. Wickman

L-Sgt F. M. J. Marshall

Cpl E. F. Carr

L-Cpl H. F. Beckham

L-Cpl S. Yates

Pte W. D. Friday

## Military Medal

S-Sgt E. B. Gladding

Sgt L. A. Chisholm

Sgt J. A. Herd

Sgt P. J. Kane

Sgt A. E. New

Sgt A. D. Rockell

Sgt R. S. Tappin

L-Sgt V. Stanaway

Cpl G. B. Allen

Cpl D. Campbell

Cpl R. B. Court

Cpl J. B. Fletcher

Cpl J. T. Hosking

Cpl G. W. Howat

Cpl E. Mills

Cpl P. R. Pountney

Cpl A. J. Rabarts

Cpl J. V. Riddell

Cpl N. J. Robertshawe

Cpl H. E. Smith

Cpl M. H. Taylor

L-Cpl A. W. Scott (while prisoner of war)

Pte M. H. Crockett

Pte A. F. De Lury

Pte H. C. Freeman

Pte A. C. Goodhew

Pte W. E. Gundry

Pte J. W. Gwilliam

Pte B. V. Kitson

Pte R. S. Mead

Pte M. Muir

Pte B. Murcott



Pte R. A. T. O'Brien

Pte W. J. Pirimona

Pte R. H. Stevenson

Pte A. G. Swann

Pte R. Williams

Pte H. C. Worth

Member of the Order of the British Empire

WO I C. V. Wilson (while prisoner of war)

British Empire Medal

Sgt A. J. Grimmond

Cpl J. S. Sexton (NZEME attached)

# 24 BATTALION

## COMMANDING OFFICERS

### *Commanding Officers*

Lt-Col C. Shuttleworth	1 Feb 1940-30 Nov 1941
Maj S. J. Hedge	30 Nov 1941- 8 Dec 1941
Lt-Col A. W. Greville	8 Dec 1941-22 Jul 1942
Maj R. G. Webb	22 Jul 1942-26 Jul 1942
Lt-Col F. J. Gwilliam	26 Jul 1942-22 Nov 1942
Lt-Col R. G. Webb	22 Nov 1942-16 Dec 1942
Lt-Col J. Conolly	16 Dec 1942- 5 Feb 1944
Maj P. R. Pike	5 Feb 1944-20 Mar 1944
Lt-Col J. Conolly	20 Mar 1944-22 Apr 1944
Lt-Col P. R. Pike	22 Apr 1944- 4 Jun 1944
Maj E. W. Aked	4 Jun 1944- 8 Jun 1944
Lt-Col R. L. Hutchens	8 Jun 1944-12 May 1945
Lt-Col K. H. Macdonald	12 May 1945- 5 Jul 1945
Lt-Col R. Boord	5 Jul 1945 till disbandment

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## [BACKMATTER]

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